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When Bad Things Happen From Good People (and Vice-Versa): Hume's Political Ethics of Revolution*

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In the first Stuart volume of his History of England, David Hume provides ample evidence for his self-proclaimed "Whig principles" regarding "things" and "Tory prejudices" regarding "persons." Hume praises kings and royalists who obstructed laudable reforms and despises the revolutionary politicians who forced their adoption. The paper draws from this apparent paradox lessons for political theory and political ethics. Hume's complex judgments, it argues, follow from his view of political science as potentially progressive but constantly imperfect; his approach to what we would now call moral pluralism, which he saw as the basis of party politics; and his hope that history could lend vividness and motivating force to moral theory. Some general conclusions suggest themselves. Political actors ought to study, and rely on, the best political science available. Partisans in serious political disputes should acknowledge both the valid moral points of all sides and the need to choose sides. And history can be a source of ethical instruction as well as theoretical and factual knowledge.

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David Hume's *History of England* should be regarded as his most important work of political theory. Although most people (in Hume's time as now) get their main impressions of Hume's political positions from his *Essays*, the essays' accessibility comes at a price. In their topicality and brevity they often represent little more than summaries and applications of conclusions that Hume sets forth in the *History*

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after treatments rich in rigor, scientific understanding, and historical detail. These treatments reveal Hume as above all concerned with particular decisions and their consequences. But Hume's treatment of such decisions always aimed to go beyond the particular, judging individual decisions in terms of all he knew about history, morals, and political life. In other words, Hume's political theory is political ethics, of a kind both worldly and scientific—with a subtle, often tragic understanding of the limits of a single person's choice in times of war and revolution when mass armies and an increasingly communicable public opinion have begun conclusively to count for more than the reflective judgment of key individuals.

This paper discusses one instance of this understanding. It does so by unpacking a well-known controversy over the first volume of the *History* that Hume wrote, beginning with the accession of James I and ending with the execution of Charles I.¹ In defending as “moderate” his own assessment of these events, Hume wrote to a friend, “My views of *things* are more conformable to Whig principles; my representations of *persons* to Tory prejudices”—and that his being taken as a Tory proved that “men commonly regard more persons than things.”² This opposition between Hume's assessment of persons and his assessment of principles is striking.³ In Hume's time as well as ours, all common systems of political ethics take it as an axiom that good character and action according to proper principles go together: whether the former is a shorthand for a tendency to the latter, as in Kant, or the latter is derived from the existence of the former, as in Aristotle.

Unraveling this apparent paradox requires understanding the relationship between Hume's theoretical positions and his practical judgments. Hume's political ethics cannot be separated from his conception of political science (or the “philosophical” study of politics as he would call it), his view of moral pluralism, and his conception of the peculiar task of history in understanding political and moral life. Hume's assessment of character necessarily differs from his assessment of principle because he regards political science rather than party enthusiasm as the proper basis for social reform, feels that easy moral condemnation mocks the complexity of causes and values that are found in real-world decisions; and hopes in his vivid portrayal of individual nobility and the suffering of innocents to chasten our attach-

1. David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983 [1778]), Volume V (henceforth *History*). Hume wrote the *History* out of chronological order but it was later published in its logical sequence. The fifth volume in the present edition is the one Hume wrote first.

2. J.Y.T., Grieg, ed., *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), I.237.

3. Given the context, Duncan Forbes' apparent assumption (in *Hume's Philosophical Politics* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978], 292) that the opposition between “principles” and *prejudices* is the main one Hume is stressing seems to miss the mark, as does his consequent conclusion that the whole quotation “is superficial” given Hume's historical subtlety and independence from common party-prejudice. In the same letter Hume clearly mentions “politics” and “the character of princes and great men” as two separate though related subjects.

ment to dangerous political principles even when they might be worth following in particular cases.

Hume's view of history was in one sense "negative": it sought to "annihilat[e]" the partisan appeals to history of his time by refuting both Tory belief in an ancient and unquestioned divine right of kings and Whig belief in "ancient" English liberties and constitutional forms. (The latter belief Hume famously called "ridiculous": the constitution before the English Civil War was a mess of contradictory principles and was less favorable to liberty and the rule of law the further back one looked.)⁴ And Hume indeed endorsed something like the constitutional status quo of his time (though for philosophical and skeptical rather than "conservative" reasons) and saw no reason to challenge it root and branch.⁵ Hume was no utopian and no zealous partisan in historical writing: his goal was not "to teach his readers a particular system of society or of government for the ultimate betterment of mankind."⁶

But this does not mean that Hume's only goal was to "clarify the present."⁷ His aim was practical, though not transformative. Though he distrusted revolutions in general and thought that philosophy was precisely unqualified to give us blueprints for new political orders,⁸ the same was not true of particular actions. While his writings proclaim constitutional questions to be so potentially dangerous that one should sometimes bracket the substance of the issue and ask merely "*What is*

4. The term "ridiculous" is found in David Hume, "ridiculous": David Hume, "My Own Life," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987 [1777]), xxxviii (henceforth *Essays*). The idea that Hume's project was "negative" and "antihistorical" in its attempt to "annihilat[e]" partisan appeals to historical precedent is found in John B. Stewart, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of David Hume* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), 298-301, and partially endorsed by Forbes, *Philosophical Politics*, 264, who however questions Stewart's stress on the practical and political aims of the work. Hume's substantive opposition to both Whig and Tory philosophical doctrines is voiced clearly and at length in the *Essays* "Of the Original Contract" and "Of Passive Obedience" (*Essays* 465-87, 488-92), which in turn summarize points made throughout the *History*. Filmer's "patristical scheme" is called "absurd" yet recurrent among zealous monarchists in *History* V.563, Note Q.

5. Hume's "conservatism" in this minimal sense gains clear support from Hume's own writings (particularly *History* VI.533 and the Essay "Of the Coalition of Parties," in *Essays* 493-501), and is stressed in various modes and with various degrees of sympathy by Ernest Campbell Mossner, "An Apology for David Hume, Historian," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 56 (1941): 657-90, and "Was Hume a Tory Historian? Facts and Reconsiderations," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2 (April 1941): 225-36; Sheldon Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism," *American Political Science Review* 48 (December 1954): 999-1016; H.R. Trevor-Roper, "Hume as a Historian," in *David Hume: A Symposium*, ed. D.F. Pears (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1963), 89-100; and David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981). This does not of course prove that Hume was a Tory in the party politics of his time, or would be a conservative today. The stance was a matter of circumstance and judgment: Hume expressed support, for instance, for the American revolution that was beginning at the time of his death.

6. Mossner, "An Apology," 665.

7. Mossner, "An Apology," 665.

8. See esp. the scathing remarks in *History* VI. 3f., and the discussion of Hume's anti-utopian (and proto-anti-totalitarian) tendencies in Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 306f.

established?" they maintain in contrast that "in the particular exertions of power, the question ought never to be forgotten, *What is best?*"⁹ Hume hoped that inserting "philosophy of government" into a history of "revolutions" would render the latter not just "intelligible" but "instructive."¹⁰ He held that "History, the great mistress of wisdom, furnishes examples of all kinds; and every prudential, as well as moral precept, may be authorised by those events, which her enlarged mirror is able to present to us."¹¹ The rest of this paper explains how an intentionally "moderate" and nonpartisan history that excuses apparently blameworthy actions by reference to their circumstances can still teach "prudential and moral" precepts. The program of explaining why well-intentioned people do apparently evil things certainly has implications for political ethics—but an inability to make clear judgments is not among them.

I. Political Science: The Limits of Law and the Tragedy of Innovation

When it comes to what we would now call political science (what he called the "philosophical" treatment of politics and history), Hume had apparently sweeping hopes. He wrote, after all, an essay called "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," in which he appeared to call politics as lawlike as math and physics in its operations:

So great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government, and so little dependence have they on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us.¹²

9. *History* IV.354 (Appendix III). Contemporary commentators tend to read this passage with a stress opposite to the one given in the text: they consider Hume a "conservative" because he thinks that established opinion is a strong consideration in constitutional questions, sometimes outweighing considerations of which regime would be ideally best. Whether a thinker's conservatism (in contemporary terms) should be judged solely according to his or her view of institutions begs the question of the current paper.

10. This is from the original (1754) edition of the early Stuart volume of the *History*, most conveniently available as David Hume, *The History of Great Britain: The Reigns of James I and Charles I* (Harmondsworth, England: Pelican Classics, 1970), 391. This passage does not appear in later editions; for mentions of it see Mossner, "Tory Historian," 234, and Forbes, *Philosophical Politics*, 285. Compare Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste": "The object of eloquence is to persuade, of history to instruct, of poetry to please by means of the passions and the imagination" (*Essays*, 240).

11. *History* V.545. A similar sentiment appears in the Essay "Of the Coalition of Parties," where Hume's aim is also explicitly practical: "promoting" a coalition or compromise between moderate Whigs and Tories through an effort "to prevent all unreasonable insult and triumph of the one party over the other, to encourage moderate opinions, to find the proper medium in all disputes, to persuade each that its antagonist may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance in the praise and blame, which we bestow on either side" (*Essays*, 494).

12. Hume, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," *Essays*, 16.

The main general “consequence” political science could discover (this discovery being its useful contribution) was that certain institutions predictably compensated for human flaws: under a “wisely constituted” government, Hume wrote, it is “the interest, even of bad men, to act for the public good.”¹³

This sounds very confident, almost stereotypically representative of what some take to be a characteristically Enlightenment faith in political progress and scientific explanation. But things are far from this simple. Even in the above quotation, after all, Hume is hedging: he writes of political consequences *almost* as general as in mathematics and physics, which may only *sometimes* be deduced. And while Hume thinks that “wisely constituted” forms of government can do great things, small errors have great costs: forms very similar to the right ones “are the source of all disorder, and of the blackest crimes, where either skill or honesty has been wanting in their original frame and institution.”¹⁴ In other *Essays*, Hume stresses that even a science as respectable as medicine does not dare give definitive predictions in particular cases; that it is very hard to fix settled constitutional rules for a single executive because the proper limits on executive power depend too much on the person holding it; that history involves both interpretive and moral questions that are as hard to figure out as any *unsolved* problem in “the most abstract sciences”; that problems of terminology make it hard to state laws in political science even when one has discovered them; that political science in Hume’s day has seen a few good attempts but “not any standard-book, which we can transmit to posterity”; and that “the science of politics affords few rules, which will not admit of some exception, and which may not sometimes be controuled by fortune and accident.”¹⁵

13. Hume, “That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,” *Essays*, 16. In “The Independency of Parliament” (*Essays*, 42f.), Hume stresses that selfishness is a pragmatic rather than a theoretical assumption: not all men are selfish, but since selfishness is sufficiently prevalent to undermine any institution that assumes altruism, and is in any case reinforced by the perverse incentives of factional strife, to assume selfishness is a good idea when generalizing about political institutions. For Hume’s debt to Harrington on this point, see David Wootton, “David Hume, ‘the historian,’” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 290-91.

14. Hume, “That Politics May be Reduced,” 16.

15. Hume, “Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic,” *Essays*, 47; “Of the Independency of Parliament,” *Essays*, 46; “Of the Parties of Great Britain,” *Essays*, 69; “Of Civil Liberty,” *Essays*, 92; “Of the Original Contract,” *Essays*, 477. According to a suggestive analysis by J.G.A. Pocock (*Barbarism and Religion. Volume Two: Narratives of Civil Government* [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1999], Chaps. 12-13 [henceforth *Barbarism*]), Hume’s political history cannot help but be less lawlike than what we would now call his social history, because Hume admits (in his essay “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” *Essays*, 112-13) that events like revolutions and diplomatic maneuvers depend on the choices of a few people whose personal idiosyncrasies might outweigh general tendencies.

Note that these limits, which Hume places on his own theory, operate whether or not Hume believed that the mix of human sentiments or springs of action differs greatly over time and is profoundly affected by social circumstances—though it has been argued that Hume believed this too. (See Forbes, *Philosophical Politics*, 102-121; also Livingston, who however reads Hume more radically and less persuasively as believing human actions to exist in “narrative” and intersubjective modes that resist analytic categories more or less completely [see esp. *Common Life*, Chapters 7-8]).

Hume's *caveats* about the limits of political science, however, go beyond these commonsensical (if accurate) reminders that political laws involve only probabilities, that individuals matter, and that political terms are not subject to mathematical precision. A far more fundamental limitation is that of *data*. Hume thinks that in order to reach solid conclusions we need many more facts to work with than human history at his time affords. In "Of Civil Liberty" (1741) Hume admits to entertaining

a suspicion, that the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity. We have not as yet had experience of three thousand years; so that not only the art of reasoning is still imperfect in this science as in all others, but we even want sufficient materials upon which we can reason.¹⁶

It is precisely based on this lack of data that Hume tends to forgive James and Charles for opposing moves to limit their power. Given the political science of the time, based on the limited examples of their time, they simply had no way of knowing that civil liberty could possibly *work*: in fact, all the best evidence they had available showed, or seemed to show, that the liberties demanded tended to produce violent anarchy and were absolutely incompatible with good government.

There is a certain relativist or historicist lesson we can take from Hume's conviction, as he puts it, that "it seems unreasonable to judge of the measures, embraced during one period, by the maxims, which prevail in another."¹⁷ But the precise character of the lesson should be noted: Hume excuses Stuart monarchs not because their ideas were characteristic of their times, but because they acted according to the laws governing political life that could be induced from *facts available* at the time. He criticizes fanatical libertarians of the Stuart age (and excuses the Stuarts) not because new ideas were not comprehensible then—on the contrary, they were in the air everywhere—but because the political plans of liberty's partisans were utopian, or at least idealist and heedless of consequences, rather than based on any *evidence* that they might redound to the public good.¹⁸ Hume does not endorse adherence to any custom or prejudice that exists in a given age (in fact,

16. Hume, "Of Civil Liberty," *Essays*, 87.

17. *History* V.240. An uncompromising version of the historicist/relativist interpretation is pushed by Forbes, *Philosophical Politics*, 286. Forbes draws from this exaggerated reading the consistent conclusion that Hume had little interest in ethical assessments: "philosophical" history concerns "the necessary progress of human affairs" and is therefore "beyond right and wrong, good and evil" (292).

18. "The event, if that can be admitted as a reason, has shown, that the arguments of the popular party were better founded; but perhaps, according to the established maxims of lawyers and politicians, the views of the royalists ought, before-hand, to have appeared more solid, more safe, and more legal." Hume, "Of the Coalition of Parties," *Essays* 500; see also *History* VI.3f. The reference to legality and legal maxims is probably rhetorical and a bit of a red herring. Hume stresses (see below) the concrete harms that innovations in favor of liberty could have been expected to result in. He is most concerned with the "maxims of politicians," not those of lawyers.

he is quite admiring of those who advocate clearly salutary reforms in society or government): he endorses adherence to the best *maxims* of an age, the best general rules of political action then known.¹⁹

Hume's determination to use political science in this way might seem ethically unmotivated or quietist—the hallmark of someone so eager to forgive persons or parties, for admittedly political purposes (promoting compromise or coalition in his own time²⁰), that he is willing to postulate ignorance or good intentions in unlimited amounts. This is where the detail of the *History* is crucial to flesh out the abstract conclusions of the *Essays*: Hume's view of political science becomes not just plausible but vivid and convincing to the extent that he shows us how it works in particular cases.

The three cases Hume treats are Stuart-era demands for liberty of the press, for freedom of religion, and for the abolition of arbitrary tribunals. Hume notes that a free press was totally unknown everywhere in the seventeenth century, and universally considered an all-but-certain road to anarchy. Like religious toleration, it was considered "incompatible with all good government. No age or nation, among the moderns, had ever set an example of such an indulgence." This is where Hume concludes that "it seems unreasonable to judge of the measures, embraced during one period, by the maxims, which prevail in another."²¹ Even in his own day, Hume writes, liberty of the press is practiced only in England, is among the necessary "evils," and is justifiable only as a strange byproduct of England's bizarre mixed government, which is kept in balance only by perpetual jealousy between the people and the magistrates.²² If this is true, the rulers of an earlier age can hardly be judged as bad people for failing to foresee a set of fortuitous circumstances that rendered a general rule inapplicable under exceptional circumstances in one country.

19. Hume's use of the word "maxims" in this precise context is striking. It clearly means something strong like social-scientific "law" in *History* V.316 and V.329-330. Prominent examples where Hume uses it to mean "general rule of political action pointing towards the most public good" include *History* II.525 ("maxims of administration," a passage cited by Forbes [*Philosophical Politics*, 271] who however fails to note the significance of the word "maxims"); V.83-4; V.90-91, 222 ("maxims of government"); V.121-22; V.236 ("maxims" synonymous with "principles of government"); V.291; V.329; V.337; V.361 ("most established maxims of civil policy"); and most clearly V.130: "The liberty of the press was incompatible with such maxims and such principles of government, as then prevailed, and was therefore quite unknown in that age."

20. See above, note 11.

21. Hume, *History* V.240.

22. Hume, "On the Liberty of the Press," *Essays*, 9-13. Hume initially—before his experience of the virulently anti-Scottish "Wilkes and Liberty" movement (for the effects of which on Hume's view of politics see Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2d ed. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1980], 421, 469, 491, 552-53, 637, and Pocock, "Hume and the American Revolution: The dying thoughts of a North Briton," in *Virtue, Commerce, and History* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], esp. 137-41)—wrote some more sanguine conclusions about the liberty of the press (reprinted as a variant in *Essays* 604-5). Wootton ("David Hume, 'the historian,'" 306) quotes from the earlier rather than the final versions, thus making the mature version of Hume's proto-liberal constitutionalism seem less ambivalent than it was.

The second example is freedom of religion. While Hume believed liberty of the press to be foreign to the practice even of most "modern" nations, toleration of diverse religious beliefs was, though praised by advanced thinkers in Hume's day, a very recent discovery. It was regarded as "dangerous, if not pernicious to civil government" in the ancient world, even in Greece and Rome.²³ It was even unknown through the early seventeenth century: in the time of James I religious freedom was allowed only in France, and there only partially (towards Huguenots).²⁴ Religious toleration was "universally, by statesmen and ecclesiastics, philosophers and zealots, regarded as subversive of civil society," even by thinkers like Bacon whom Hume praises for their insight.²⁵ In fact, Hume invites us to consider at length just how counterintuitive the practice was: toleration, by allowing each citizen to form a different opinion on the ultimate basis of all moral action and political allegiance, seems to guarantee sectarian hatred and civil strife.²⁶ As far as the early Stuarts could know, it had always made sense to preserve social peace by simply outlawing all religions except the official one. Protestantism turned out to be a bizarre exception, not because it was harmless to social order but because it was so fanatical that repressing it was more dangerous than tolerating it. Once observers discovered this through bitter experience of religious wars, there arose "though late, the paradoxical principle and salutary practice of toleration."²⁷ (Even so, as Hume's account of the religious wars in France stresses,²⁸ the "salutary practice" takes decades to work properly, and meanwhile causes war and slaughter.) Religious toleration, then, is not an obvious moral imperative but a complex policy decision, based on evidence that only appeared "after spilling an ocean of blood."²⁹

The third example is arbitrary tribunals, a favorite enforcement mechanism in the Tudor age. (The Star Chamber is the most famous, but Hume counts more than twenty different modes of arbitrary government in operation under Elizabeth.³⁰) Under the Tudors, people took these tribunals largely for granted, regarding their arbitrariness as consistent with a regime seen as strongly monarchical (and rightly so). Starting with the Stuarts, however, they began to grate on a new spirit of civil liberty; Charles I under pressure from parliament finally signed a bill abolishing them. Hume describes the result as a conflict of crucial principles, in words worth quoting at length:

23. Hume, *History* V.130.

24. *History* V.206

25. *History* V.130.

26. Hume does not endorse this argument against toleration. But according to his narrative practice of presenting the most plausible argument that each side of a dispute made (or ought to have made) in a historical conflict, he puts some rather convincing points against toleration in the mouth of Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, in the reign of Queen Mary (*History* III.433-4).

27. *History* V.130.

28. *History* IV.52f.

29. *History* IV.52f.

30. *History* IV.367 (Appendix III).

[T]he experiment here made by the parliament, was not a little rash and adventurous. No government, at that time, appeared in the world, nor is perhaps to be found in the records of any history, which subsisted without the mixture of some arbitrary authority, committed to some magistrate; and it might reasonably, beforehand, appear doubtful, whether human society could ever reach that state of perfection, as to support itself with no other controul than the general and rigid maxims of law and equity. But the parliament justly thought, that the king was too eminent a magistrate to be trusted with discretionary power, which he might so easily turn to the destruction of liberty. And in the event it has hitherto been found, that, though some sensible inconveniences arise from the maxim of adhering strictly to law, yet the advantages overbalance them, and should render the English grateful to the memory of their ancestors, who, after repeated contests, at last established that noble, though dangerous, principle.³¹

This passage admits of many interpretations. David Miller describes it as “even-handed” and characteristic of Hume’s arch-moderation.³² Hayek, in an influential article, portrays Hume as taking an optimistic progress-oriented view of social science: once we did not know that the best government operated by general laws, but now we do.³³ In fact, the core issue here is more complex and more troubling. Hume calls the abolition of the star chamber a “rash” and “dangerous” measure: it turned out to have good consequences *that nobody could have expected*. This means, however, that the innovation was not based on science or prudence or custom but had much less congenial motives: a fanatical and totally unreasoned belief in civil liberty, a hysterical fear of monarchy, and a hatred of Catholics.³⁴ In a letter, Hume grants that the cause of liberty promoted by “the Pymms and Hampdens” was “noble and generous; but most of the partizans of that cause, in the last century disgraced it, by their violence, and also by their cant, hypocrisy, and bigotry, which, more than the principles of civil liberty, seem to have been the motive of all their actions.”³⁵ Their actions in fact *had* to be a leap of faith of one stripe or

31. *History* V. 329-30.

32. Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology*, 170, 180; compare Sheldon Wolin’s comment, meant as a criticism, that Hume was “temperamentally averse to taking sides” (“Hume and Conservatism,” 999).

33. F.A. Hayek, “The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume,” in *The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume*, ed. V.C. Chappell (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc. [Anchor Books], 1966), 355.

34. “The two ruling passions of this parliament, were zeal for liberty, and an aversion to the church; and to both of these, nothing could appear more exceptionable, than the court of high commission, whose institution rendered it entirely arbitrary, and assigned to it the defence of the ecclesiastical establishment” (Hume, *History* V.328). For the anti-Catholicism of British parliaments during the early Stuart monarchies see *History* V.23, 82, 115, 201, 304, 305. Hume in general stressed the close connection in seventeenth-century British politics between zeal for liberty and Puritan religious fanaticism. Particularly relevant citations include *History* IV.403; V.67-68, 80, 303; “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” *Essays*, 78-79.

35. Hume to Catherine Macaulay, 29 March 1764, in *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1954), 81.

another. For though civil liberty was the cause of great blessings in the event, this could not have been known beforehand. There was therefore no evidence that would have given its partisans good *reasons* to act had their motives been more reflective and philosophical.³⁶

This may be called the “tragedy of innovation”. given that science requires data that will never be present when things are done for the first time, proper “maxims of politics” can only develop as an unintended byproduct of zealous and fanatical actions by people who do not weigh evidence or think about distant consequences at all. Hume in his first *Enquiry* likens “wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions” to “experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science.”³⁷ He clearly intends a comparison to the “experiments” of natural science, but there is an obvious difference: in politics, unlike physics, it can be morally praiseworthy to study “experiments” that we would not be morally allowed to bring about. This provides a principled basis for the “Whiggish” or conservative-liberal tendency to value past revolutions and distrust future ones.³⁸ The evidence we need in order to value past innovations—including salutary ones—is simply unavailable in the case of proposed innovations that have never been tried.

II. Moral Theory: Conflict and Consolation

Hume's moral theory is sometimes called utilitarian. This is correct if it means that he evaluated acts and moral qualities according to their tendency to public and private happiness in the broadest sense.³⁹ But Hume never believed in “utility” as a single and ultimate yardstick against which everything could be measured. His moral outlook was that of the moral pluralist: one who believes that there are plural, competing and incommensurable goods or values, and that we cannot hope that either individuals or political and social systems will be able to maximize all of them at once.⁴⁰ Hume defends moral pluralism in all of its many formulations: he

36. Hume, “Of the Coalition of Parties,” *Essays*, 495.

37. Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,” in *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 [1777]), 83-84.

38. Wolin writes that Hume was “representative” of a temper of his time that “prized the gains made possible by the upheavals of the previous century, and sought to preserve both the institutional achievements and their social undergirding” (“Hume and Conservatism,” 1016). This excellent insight provokes a question that Wolin does not discuss: how can a serious theory of politics, ethics, or both go about justifying revolution as a method in the past but not in the present?

39. To be sure, actions (and, more important, motives) can rightly be praised, in Hume's view, if they are inherently “agreeable” without being *useful* (in the narrow sense of tending to have good outcomes). I regard this as consistent with utilitarianism in a more contemporary sense, though the text argument does not turn on this point. I thank a reviewer for this journal for forcing clarification here.

40. Influential treatments of pluralism include Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake* (London: Routledge, 1995), *Liberalism*, 2d ed.

believes that everything good comes with disadvantages, that everything bad comes with consolations, and that given the diversity of human morals and dispositions, the expectation that all societies will value similar things is most unwise.⁴¹ Finally, he nowhere countenances belief in the various *dei ex machina* that let us hope that all moral values will be reconciled in the end. On the contrary, his skeptical and empirical outlook consistently undercut belief in the Christian God and would have done something similar to the Kantian hope, free of evidence, that history will embody moral progress.

If pluralism is at least a plausible account of moral value, what follows for politics and political theory? Contemporary pluralists provide a variety of answers. Some draw from pluralism an argument for individual liberty: if various human goods cannot be rationally weighed against one another, each individual must be allowed to find his or her own path.⁴² Some conclude almost the opposite: given the difficulty of sorting out moral problems and values, we must perhaps entrust the most important of such decisions to state experts who have access to expert moral advice,⁴³ or to social and cultural elites who understand a particular tradition's ways of resolving moral conflicts and can develop these ways further.⁴⁴ Some moral pluralists become *cultural* pluralists: given that no moral value is overriding, different cultures will stress different ones and we must respect all reasonable attempts to do so.⁴⁵ Finally, and most commonly, those who claim to be pluralists often abandon

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), and *Isaiah Berlin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Stuart Hampshire, *Morality and Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983); John Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

41. See (inter alia) *History* I.160-69, 296, III.368-69, V.154, 250; "Of Polygamy and Divorces," *Essays* 181-90, "Of the Origin of Government," *Essays*, 40-41; the alternative ideals presented in "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Skeptic," *Essays*, 138-80 (though these essays, especially the last, should be read carefully given their jocular tone); and the quotations above. A particularly clear case appears in the "Dialogue" in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (in *Enquiries*, ed. Selby-Bigge—see note 37 above): "The consequence of a very free commerce between the sexes, and of their living much together, will often terminate in intrigues and gallantry. We must sacrifice somewhat of the *useful*, if we be very anxious to obtain all the *agreeable* qualities; and cannot pretend to reach alike every kind of advantage" (339). Hume's being a pluralist does not necessarily rule out his being broadly "universalist" or even scientific. It can be always and everywhere the case—and I suspect Hume thought it was—that praiseworthy human dispositions and the values they embody are multiple, conflicting, and incommensurable, and that human beings in all times and places must judge characters and actions in ways that involve tradeoffs among these dispositions and values, without having a single standard or measure for doing this. One can even maintain, though I am less willing to either endorse the belief or attribute it to Hume, that empirical observation and generalization will produce over time better and better accounts of what is at stake in these judgments and how we should reach them. I thank a reader for this journal for comments on this point and for suggesting the passage from the second *Enquiry*.

42. See Berlin, and on one reading, John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971).

43. Thomas Nagel "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 128-41.

44. John Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998).

45. See Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake* and *Isaiah Berlin*.

the attempt: while many values might be incommensurable, one value (common choices include liberty, justice, equality, and autonomy) is clearly the most important and must be allowed to win out in cases of conflict.⁴⁶

One political conclusion that is not commonly articulated is to understand moral pluralism as a *problem of party politics*. This is Hume's position. Unlike contemporary liberals, Hume believes that the most interesting clashes among incommensurable values involve collective decisions (for instance on laws and institutions) that cannot be left to individuals. Unlike contemporary cultural pluralists, he believes that nothing is less likely than cultural consensus on such matters: within each country and each culture, people will disagree, arguing in the best case and going to war in the worst.

Thus, David Miller's portrayal of Hume as a complacent optimist and believer in steady progress is quite misleading on this point. On the central question of the English Civil War, that of executive authority vs. political and civil liberty, Hume's conclusion is deeply tragic: "there were on both sides wise men, who meant well to their country"—yet the wise men on both sides, sincere and principled, could find no way to resolve their differences, their attachments to real and incommensurable values, short of civil war.⁴⁷ This is optimism only if one believes that we will always be living in a placid age like Hume's in which such disputes are negotiable. (Even then, as Miller points out, Hume regarded the contemporary balance of the English system as very fragile and unlikely to last.⁴⁸) If we assume that another type of political situation is more usual—say the situation of the parties in Britain before or during the Civil War—there is no comforting moral theory that will guarantee, or even suggest, that moral conflicts will either be easily resolvable or will decrease over time.

Despite these tragic conclusions, Hume gives us two sources of consolation. First, moral conflicts that cannot be resolved through logic or intellectual weighing, and that will not *necessarily* decrease through the workings of some providential force, can be made to decrease in intensity over time if we properly employ experience and evidence. People often get tired of violence and may become willing to embrace peace if convincing alternatives are put forth. Hume believes that in his own time extreme political positions are in decline and compromise is possible, even natural, between monarchists tolerant of liberty and Whigs accepting of authority.⁴⁹ Here too, however, J.G.A. Pocock is right to see Hume's tone as pessimistic. Since Hume portrays the coalition in question as contingent on historical circumstance, based on

46. For example Brian Barry, "John Rawls and the Search for Stability," *Ethics* 105 (July 1995): 874-915, and see the criticism of liberals on this point by John Kekes, *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

47. Hume, "Of the Coalition of Parties," *Essays*, 494.

48. Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology*, 191.

49. Hume, "Of the Coalition of Parties," *Essays*, 500-01.

momentary political congruence rather than logical compatibility among values, he gives us little reason to hope for its durability.⁵⁰ Beyond this, we should note that Hume does not think his suggested coalition among moderate partisans is necessarily a *good* compromise. It is likely to preserve peace, but this is the most that can apparently be said for it: Hume suggests that either consistent order under a strong monarchy or consistent liberty under a decentralized republic would be ideally better than the British status quo that this coalition would preserve.⁵¹

But further consolation is possible if we turn from parties to individuals. Even in his chronicle of a brutal and increasingly fanatical civil war, Hume portrays some individuals with the proper character to ameliorate party passions even as they fight. The clearest example is that of Falkland, Charles I's Secretary of State. Falkland, whose love of ancient texts made him a fearless champion of liberty, had been "foremost in all attacks on the high prerogatives of the crown," but when the Civil War started he supported the King with a hope of preserving limited monarchical powers. His sympathy for both sides made him neither cowardly nor vacillating: once he chose the King's side he fought hard and risked himself more than his position might have warranted, precisely to avoid charges of cowardice. However, since he knew that both sides had valid claims and that too clear a victory by his own side might harm the country greatly, his sense of tragedy deepened as the war went on. "His natural chearfulness and vivacity became clouded; and even his usual attention to dress, required by his birth and station, gave way to a negligence, which was easily observable." He professed himself "weary . . . of the times," and feared for England's future: "among his intimate friends, often after a deep silence, and frequent sighs, he would, with a sad accent, re-iterate the word, *Peace*."⁵² When he died in battle, "every lover of ingenuity and virtue throughout the kingdom" mourned.⁵³

This is how a Humean hero reacts when moral pluralism becomes violent. Falkland acted with courage but without fanaticism. He sought a balance between (ordered) liberty and (limited) authority, and was not afraid to switch sides from the partisans of liberty to the partisans of authority as the struggle evolved and his judgment of the value most endangered by the conflict changed. Wootton reads this as confirming Hume's propensity to switch sides as judgment requires it, and to choose as his "true heroes" others who did the same.⁵⁴ This is true as far as it goes, but underrates the importance of Falkland's state of mind *as* he switched sides: no erratic partisan, he preserved at all times a sense of the moral complexity of the situation, and retained "love of peace" as his "ruling passion" (to quote Hume's praise

50. Pocock, *Barbarism*, 196-98.

51. Hume, "On the Coalition of Parties," *Essays*, 493-501.

52. *History* V.416-17.

53. *History* V.416.

54. Wootton, "David Hume, 'the historian,'" 302.

of James I⁵⁵). He did not switch sides because his changeable judgment told him that the side he was on at the time was right and should win, but did so on the contrary in the persistent belief that *neither* side was sufficiently aware of the competing values involved to be a safe winner. Naturally cheerful—no devotee of the “monkish virtues” that Hume finds so perverse—he was intellectually honest enough to feel pessimistic when the political prospects were grim. One of the few historical figures whom Hume praises without reservation, Falkland serves as a model for how an individual moral pluralist can act nobly and well in the midst of zealots who see victory for their own cause as the only goal worth considering. Of course, this did not prevent Falkland’s death in battle: the final lesson for a reader to draw from Hume’s exemplar is that war has simple and sad costs.

III. History: School of Political Ethics

When Hume in middle age abandoned abstract philosophy for history, he did so self-consciously, and set forth what he hoped to accomplish. His reflections on history appear in many places and are not easy to reconcile; every commentator has a favorite passage where Hume reveals what he is “really” doing. In the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Hume speaks of the “great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages” and proclaims that “human nature remains still the same” regardless of place and time. “Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places,” Hume writes there,

that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by shewing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour.⁵⁶

Centuries of critics have used this passage (sometimes adding one from the *Essays* in which Hume briefly praises history for furnishing “material for the sciences”⁵⁷) to paint Hume as a naïve positivist and universalist lacking proper historical sense: David Fischer uses Hume as his paradigm example of a historian who upholds the “fallacy of the universal man.”⁵⁸ On the other hand, passages from the essay “Of the

55. *History* V.7

56. Hume, *Human Understanding* VIII.I.65, p. 83.

57. Hume, “Of the Study of History,” in *Essays*, 566. The quotation is out of context—see text below.

58. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 203-07; and more ambiguously George H. Sabine, “Hume’s Historical Method,” *Philosophical Review* 15 (January 1906): 32-33. Sabine is charitable, admitting that Hume took steps in the direction of acknowledging human “plasticity.” The accusation against Hume’s alleged lack of historical sense is an old (and often Romantic) one: see the citations in Forbes, *Philosophical Politics*, 102f.; Livingston, *Common Life*, 210-11; and Mossner, “An

Study of History," in which Hume describes history as engaging and pleasing because it lets one observe the arts and sciences progress,⁵⁹ have engaged those who stress Hume as humanist historian and man of letters: they rather please, for instance, Pocock, who praises Hume both as a visionary of the new historical sensibility and as a partial feminist for recommending this sort of learning for women to read (but not write).⁶⁰

Without denying the importance of these passages, those who regard Hume's *History* as concerned with the interplay between human character and political circumstances can appeal instead to Hume's statement that "historians have been, almost without exception, the true friends of virtue."⁶¹ History plays this role because it reaches a mean in the degree to which it engages our passions. Historical judgment lies between the "warped" and passionate judgments of those active in politics and the "general abstract" view characteristic of the philosopher who "contemplates characters and manners in his closet"—which "leaves the mind so cold and unmoved, that the sentiments of nature have no room to play, and he scarce feels the difference between vice and virtue." "The writers of history, as well as the readers," Hume concludes, "are sufficiently interested in the characters and events, to have a lively sentiment of blame or praise; and at the same time, have no particular interest or concern to pervert their judgment."⁶² Though Hume's theory of history may in other places be naïvely universalist or unduly optimistic (his *practice* of history shows little sign of either), this passage shows that Hume's historical ambitions go beyond teaching a complacent doctrine of optimism or Progress. Whether historical events are progressing or not, Hume hopes in recounting them to evoke a respect for concrete individuals and appreciation of their joy and suffering.

Apology," 657-59. A recent exemplar is Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 42-57. [I thank an anonymous reviewer for *Political Theory* for pointing out this work.]). Pompa accuses Hume of having a uniform view of human nature and human consciousness—partly because he portrays Hume's goal as one of discovering *deductive* and uniform laws, rather than inductive ones subject to revision as we learn more. Pompa also seems to take as given that in some ages and places such Humean sentiments as generosity and vanity may not have existed at all (45). In general, Pompa does not successfully refute Forbes's and Livingston's view (see note 15 above) that Hume regards the laws of nature as operating only at a very high level of abstraction.

59. Hume, "Study of History," *Essays*, 565-66.

60. Pocock, *Barbarism*, Chapter 12.

61. Hume, "Study of History," *Essays*, 567.

62. Hume, "Study of History," *Essays*, 568. It must be added that there is little reason to think Hume wanted this sort of appreciation of vice or virtue to be passive—to allow us to feel pleasant emotions through the appreciation of others' suffering—as Wootton ("David Hume, 'the historian,'" 282) suggests. The project of someone aiming to teach vice and virtue is generally to influence conduct, and there is no evidence that Hume's aim was otherwise. This is not to say that all of Hume's readers were expected to apply his lessons on vice and virtue directly in *political* action: for one thing, all of his female readers, and a great many male ones with insufficient property, could not have voted (though both might have expected some influence if revolutions were contemplated). I thank an anonymous reader for *Political Theory* for forcing clarification on this point.

More concretely, Hume's *History* aims to teach a practical lesson about the harm zealots cause when they seek to foist their ideas of moral order on people who dissent from them.⁶³ Here Hume's focus on painting particular characters, especially the character of the Stuart monarchs, is neither accidental, meant as mere diversion,⁶⁴ the result of mere personal sympathy between Hume and the Stuart monarchs,⁶⁵ nor part of an "neoclassical" story of battles and political actions that (in contrast to Hume's social and cultural history) assumes ineffable motives and accidental causes and teaches no general lessons.⁶⁶ Through the painting of admittedly unique characters, we learn the seriousness of the moral dilemmas that result when conscientious political actors, sincere in their desire to do good, face bold, impatient souls determined to sweep them from the political stage.

To illustrate this, consider a crucial passage from Hume's "Of the Original Contract":

Did one generation of men go off the stage at once, and another succeed, as is the case with silk-worms and butterflies, the new race, if they had sense enough to choose their government, which surely is never the case with men, might voluntarily, and by general consent, establish their own form of civil polity, without any regard to the laws or precedents, which prevailed among their ancestors. But as human society is in perpetual flux, one man every hour going out of the world, another coming into it, it is necessary, in order to preserve stability in government, that the new brood should conform themselves to the established constitution, and nearly follow the path which their fathers, treading in the footsteps of theirs, had marked out to them. Some innovations must nec-

63. The "prudential, as well as moral" lessons that Hume intends in the passage quoted above—in direct reference to the story of Charles I—are first, that princes court danger when they "assume more authority, than the laws have allowed them," and second a "no less useful" lesson "concerning the madness of the people, the furies of fanaticism, and the danger of mercenary armies" (*History* V.546).

64. As implied by Wootton, who claims that "Hume's *History*, as it was finally written, places little emphasis upon court intrigues and military prowess. It sees events, above all, from the point of view of the intelligent spectator, not the participant, just as its readers are expected to be spectators" ("David Hume, 'the historian,'" 284). This is indeed consistent with Wootton's focus on Hume's quick claim in "On the Study of History" that history's main purpose was to aid polite conversation. But Wootton's characterization does not capture the actual content of the *History*—which in fact consists *predominantly* of "battles and court intrigues," though readers in Hume's time may have been struck by the much shorter treatments of social conditions in the appendices, as are contemporary scholars who focus on Hume's effect on British history-writing. One may therefore contest Wootton's premise, and conclude that Hume's *History* was meant to affect both political and nonpolitical conduct, and the public's judgment of both, as well as conversation. Hume himself wrote that "On the Study of History" was "too frivolous" and "trifling" and should not be considered one of his finished essays (*Letters of David Hume*, ed. Grieg, I.168, a point noted by Mossner, "An Apology," 660). A look at the essay's tone reveals why Hume thought this: it is openly (and self-proclaimedly) flirtatious, and almost gives the impression of being written to please a particular woman who likes history and belles-lettres (of whom Hume knew many). The other essay Hume wanted to discard was "Of Love and Marriage," which has a similar tone.

65. As claimed by Mossner, "Tory Historian," 228f.

66. As claimed by Pocock, *Barbarism*, 208.

essarily have place in every human institution, and it is happy where the enlightened genius of the age give these a direction to the side of reason, liberty, and justice: but violent innovations no individual is entitled to make: they are even dangerous to be attempted by the legislature: more ill than good is ever to be expected from them: and if history affords examples to the contrary, they are not to be drawn into precedent, and are only to be regarded as proofs, that the science of politics affords few rules, which will not admit of some exceptions, and which may not sometimes be controuled by fortune and accident.⁶⁷

Wolin reads this passage as conservative or quietist: he takes Hume to be extolling existing practices as embodying the results of long social learning.⁶⁸ Sabine reads it as a strong doctrine of sociological continuity: "Human society is thus necessarily stable, just because each generation is the heir to the institutions and customs already established by its predecessors."⁶⁹ Both interpretations slight Hume's preoccupation with political science, which he hopes will result in a knowledge superior to conventional wisdom and potentially critical of it, and with individual choice and reflection. They also ignore the substance of Hume's example: Hume is stressing, after all, not the fact that we have ancestors but the fact that these ancestors are *still around* (unlike silkworms who are gone once they breed).

The key words of this passage occur towards the end: "entitled," "individual," "violent." Hume's point is ethical: it is about what individuals may *morally* do. Given that one's fellow citizens are attached to existing principles, Hume is saying, changing these principles violently will require eliminating many people: through death, exile, or enough political terror to cow the opponents of the new regime into inaction.⁷⁰ (Hume in another essay stresses the costs of regime change in Athens: upon the victory of one form of government, the partisans of the previous form faced death or exile *en masse*.⁷¹) Combining this point with the above arguments regarding the uncertainty of political science and the existence of pluralism, we might note that the people thus harmed are bound to be *innocent* people, in the elementary

67. Hume, "Of the Original Contract," *Essays*, 476-77.

68. Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism," 1008.

69. Sabine, "Hume's Historical Method," 23.

70. To be sure, a usage of "violent" to mean simply "operating with great or sudden force"—not necessarily involving physical injury—was (as pointed out by a reader for *Political Theory*) current in Hume's time. But in the passage cited, Hume seems to intend the sense at least of sudden physical intervention (as with Hobbes' "violent death"), or even the contemporary meaning. (Both of the latter meanings were also current in Hume's time.) Even if Hume intends the less specific sense, this would not necessarily affect the current point: Hume's argument implies that sudden innovations that completely upset established notions of legitimacy tend to result in the harms of civil war or revolution, whatever their intended means. As his examples in the *History* demonstrate, those who pursue such innovations will not be able to count on the peaceful submission of their opponents, even if they would prefer it.

71. Hume, "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," *Essays*, 406f.

but morally significant sense that they will have acted in the sincere belief that their acts were morally good and to the public benefit.

These ethical points are necessary precisely because social stability is *not* inevitable: violent revolutions are very tempting and far from uncommon, and we need constant reminders that they almost always do "more ill than good." "Conservative" history (for want of a better label for authors who could also be called liberals, both terms being anachronistic applied to Hume) shows a marked tendency to dwell on the victims of revolution. In Burke's outraged eulogy of Marie Antoinette, Hume's own lengthy praise of Charles I in prison and on the scaffold,⁷² and Richard Pipes' more recent chronicle of the murder of Czar Nicolas and his family by the Bolsheviks,⁷³ we see deliberately vivid portrayals of just what "revolution" means for those formerly in power. While the stylistic excesses involved are rightly lampooned, the instinct to describe executions in detail is in fact sound, whether or not one finds the ancient regime or its leaders worthy of praise. Only vivid description forces us to face what the abstract phrase "violent revolution" involves: killing, terror, and masses of people made refugees.

This is not to say that we should oppose all revolutions, or that Hume did. Hume knew that his rule of preferring peaceful change had "exceptions"; he knew that in cases of real and determined tyranny there was often no alternative.⁷⁴ But the general rule that revolutions cause much more suffering than they cure remains. And where Hume's "general and abstract" *Treatise of Human Nature* might leave "cold and unmoved" those who tend to favor revolution, history—as opposed to philosophy—does the service of reminding us why we should not like revolution too much.

The contrast with Kant's *Contest of Faculties* is all but complete. Where Kant condemns the French Revolution on moral grounds but rejoices at our instinctive sympathy for its love of human freedom because such sympathy gives evidence of our sublime attachment to ideals of moral progress,⁷⁵ Hume's judgment is precisely the opposite. One reacts to his portrait of civil war with immediate revulsion at the cruelty of the instigators and the suffering of the many victims. *All* revolutionaries, as his his-

72. *History* V.511-48.

73. Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1991), Chapter 17 ("The Murder of the Imperial Family"). The link between the three stories has not escaped attention. Pipes (*Russian Revolution*, 745) quotes the executions of Charles I and Louis XVI as the only near-precedents to the secret murder of the Romanoffs; Louis reportedly read Hume's account of Charles' fortitude for consolation after hearing of his own death sentence (Livingston, *Common Life*, 317). Wootton ("David Hume, 'the historian,'" 282) cites evidence that Hume intended to "move his audience to tears" with his account of Charles' execution, and often succeeded.

74. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977 [1739]), Book III Section X, 563; Hume, "Of Passive Obedience," *Essays*, 488-92, which carefully says that the necessity of revolution "is frequently supposed to be the case" with Charles I and "was" the case "with truth" in the case of James II (492); and *History* VI.293f.

75. Immanuel Kant, "The Contest of Faculties," in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1970), esp. 182-83.

tory reminds us, consider themselves the sole representatives of human freedom, as well as the sole representatives of moral goodness in a corrupt society: their passionate defense of their own motives establishes only their sincerity, not their good moral judgment. When distant spectators sympathize immediately with revolutionary violence, such spectators show not primarily that they have unimpeachable moral purposes (though they may), but that they lack the acquaintance with the real meaning of political violence that either personal experience or the right sort of history can provide. Only critical, clear-sighted moral and political analysis can sometimes justify—as Hume *ultimately* justifies the English Revolution of the seventeenth century—what all experience and a well-tutored sympathy should in general condemn.

IV. Conclusion: Political Ethics and the Moral Sciences

Political ethics is a strange topic of study. It seems neither part of political science, which seeks general rules for how politics operates and proclaims itself agnostic on moral questions, nor part of moral philosophy, which tends to be more comfortable when considering general principles than when weighing the agonizing alternatives that practical political dilemmas call forth. Both these separations have merit. While political science may not be “objective,” it does not and should not claim competence to settle moral questions: “is” does not produce “ought.” And while moral philosophy can clarify concepts, provide key moral insights, and force us to face the consequences of our inarticulate moral premises, it rightly considers itself hard pressed to address deep conflicts among moral premises—the “prephilosophical” disagreements on which serious political crises are based.

That said, Hume’s work gives us clues to how political ethics can draw from both political science and moral theory. Political science helps mostly through its negative warnings: by insisting that political predictions be based on evidence, it teaches us not to condemn people who acted in ignorance of the evidence they needed to predict well. Hume’s paradoxical judgments are based on both his political science and his awareness of the preconditions for political science. Whig principles are admirable because they are true. Tory politicians are admirable because they correctly evaluated the existing evidence, all of which pointed to their *not* being true. A moral fanatic, of course, can condemn anyone in any age for failing to promote moral principles that are “self-evident” to all. Hume, in his determination to “introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects,”⁷⁶ avoids such fanaticism. He reminds us of how unjust (and politically dangerous) the results can be when people condemn their enemies for acting in ways that the latter had every reason to think would benefit everyone.⁷⁷

76. See the subtitle of Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*.

77. My resolution of the Tory person/Whig principle problem therefore differs sharply from Livingston’s (*Common Life*, 263 and 255–65 *passim*). Livingston claims that Hume intended to attribute to the Puritans

In a similar way, moral theory teaches political ethics the most when it can do the least. When it comes to moral conflicts, theory can do an immense amount. It can help us understand what is really at stake: many apparent conflicts reflect conceptual confusion. It can sometimes perform the “dialectical” task of showing how two values can be reconciled as parts of a higher ideal or standard. But sometimes the conflict really is irresolvable, and the people who plan to fight over principle know exactly what is at stake. In such cases, the moral-theory position known as pluralism helps us put aside spurious certainty and face the true implications of uncertainty. Chief among these implications are first, that character matters—those who by temperament can see the complexity of the world are better than those who cannot—and second, that what good political characters will tend to sigh for when strife becomes extreme is the cardinal political (and not distinctively moral) value: peace.

Finally, there is the discipline of history, which, however “philosophic” or scientific Hume hoped to make it, claimed in Hume’s day as well as ours less objectivity than political science and less authority than moral philosophy. While Judith Shklar has described political theory as “between history and ethics,”⁷⁸ Hume’s reflections on history tend to alter this arrangement. For Hume, we might say, history lies between ethics and political theory, and serves as a bridge between the two. The cold and abstract conclusions of ethics do not move us.⁷⁹ History provides the “force,” “strength,” “liveliness” or “vivacity” that Hume astutely characterized as the only difference between what we feel as mere belief and what we take to be knowledge.⁸⁰ Beyond this, it reminds us that partisans are fighting not only over how the world should work but over how it does and will work. And it teaches us that moral theses that seem clear in a textbook should yield to greater skepticism, and greater attachment to toleration, when we acknowledge the real possibility that parties defined by disagreements on these theses will soon settle their differences on a battlefield.

“external narrative dignity” based on a “new narrative order” that Hume intended to construct through writing history, and to the Stuarts “internal moral dignity” on the grounds that they defended “the ancient constitution” and could not have known that this constitution relied on a fragile narrative that was breaking down. Livingston’s “post-Pyrrhonian” Hume honors two good players of an antirational narrative game (one of whom Hume favored in his role as ultimate referee). The Hume presented here favors instead systematic empirical observation, and government that makes use of the best known social laws. He praises the Stuarts for being the most conscientious political scientists of their time—and the Puritans for being, by accident, the best ones.

78. Judith Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 16.

79. We might add that they may mislead us with their tendency to assume “for the sake of argument” that factual premises are agreed upon (when disagreement on them is often at the heart of ideological battle), and to discuss only one side of multifaceted moral situations.

80. Hume, *Treatise*, passim.