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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (Dec., 1954), pp. 999-1016

Published by: [American Political Science Association](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1951007>

Accessed: 12/09/2012 21:38

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HUME AND CONSERVATISM

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Although David Hume's stature as a philosopher has rarely been questioned, his claims as a political theorist have fared less well. Jefferson showed deep hostility towards Hume's ideas, while John Adams could find agreement with only a few points.¹ Later opinion has been less vehement but still reserved. Thomas Huxley thought Hume's political writings suggestive, but on the whole marred by an unabashed desire for literary success.² In Sir Leslie Stephen's judgment Hume was guilty of a "cynical conservatism" that was at once superficial and unhistorical.³

More recent studies, such as those of Sabine and Halévy, have established more securely Hume's place in political thought but have left certain ambiguities. Sabine has coupled Hume with Burke as an opponent of eighteenth-century rationalism, while Halévy viewed him as a forerunner of the "philosophical radicalism" of Bentham, Adam Smith, James Mill, and Ricardo.⁴ To have fathered squabbling children is always something of an embarrassment, but particularly so when one is, like Hume, temperamentally averse to taking sides. It is true, nonetheless, that if a temporary distinction is made between Hume's doctrine and his influence, it is possible to maintain that his influence worked in two quite different directions. His inquiries into causation, the role of reason, and the nature of moral judgments helped eventually to undermine the natural law structure of eighteenth-century liberalism, while his emphasis on utility as the test of institutions contributed an important ingredient to Benthamite liberalism. On the other hand, his attack on reason and its claims to universal truths helped to relieve eighteenth-century conservatives of a potent enemy and prepared the way for the authority of sentiment and feeling. Hume's labors, then, worked to alter the future course of both liberalism and conservatism.

This double aspect of Hume's influence, however, has served to obscure his

¹ *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston, 1865), Vol. 4, pp. 466-68; Adrienne Koch and William Peden, *Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams* (New York, 1946), p. 120; *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, 1903), Vol. 11, p. 223; Vol. 12, pp. 405-7; Vol. 16, pp. 44, 125-26. John Stuart Mill declared Hume to be "the profoundest negative thinker on record," *Mill on Bentham and Coleridge*, ed. F. R. Leavis (New York, 1950), p. 43.

² Thomas Huxley, *Hume* (New York, n.d.), pp. 10-11.

³ Leslie Stephen, *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1949), Vol. 2, p. 181.

⁴ George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1950), pp. 597-606; Elie Halévy, *Growth of Philosophic Radicalism* (London, 1934), pp. 9-13, 42-45, 131-33; John Plamenatz, *The English Utilitarians* (Oxford, 1949), pp. 22-44; *Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Henry D. Aiken (New York, 1948), Introduction; *David Hume, Theory of Politics*, ed. Frederick M. Watkins (Edinburgh, 1951), Introduction.

own political doctrines. The latter warrant some attention because in doctrine, as well as in personal inclination, he was a conservative, but of a distinctive kind. While the character of his conservatism was somewhat colored by its being formulated in the more placid era which preceded the French Revolution, its distinctiveness had its roots in Hume's peculiar relationship to the Enlightenment. Later conservatives tended to lump together the Enlightenment with the Revolution and to damn the former because of its presumed relation to the latter. Rationalism and *sans-culottism* were viewed as two sides of the same coin. "The eighteenth century," declared De Maistre, "which distrusted itself in nothing, hesitated at nothing."

The so-called "crisis of the eighteenth century," when the full impact of seventeenth-century rationalist and scientific modes of thought was felt, constituted a watershed for modern political thought. And the attack on the authority of accepted ideas was soon accompanied by an attack on the legitimacy of accepted institutions. "Rude establishments," wrote Bentham, must be brought "to the test of polished reason." Under the impress of revolutionary events set in motion in America and Europe, modern conservatism was formed. In its origins, conservatism was not so much a defense of the existing order, which had been breached by the establishment of revolutionary regimes, as a sustained attack on the rationalist currents which had come to dominate much of European thinking since the days of Hobbes, Descartes, and Newton. Whatever else may be said of the conservative response, it cannot be held to have disagreed about the identity of its enemy. Burke's strictures against "men of theory," Hegel's condemnation of the "abstract reason" of the French revolutionaries, and Metternich's sarcasms about the "presumptuous man" were all testimony to an almost unanimous rejection of the claims of reason to be the ultimate arbiter in political questions. According to the conservative indictment, the Enlightenment, inspired by a destructive rationalism, had succeeded in loosening the cohesive ties of society; it had insisted that slumbering beliefs and institutions, which men had unthinkingly and naturally "accepted," be made to undergo the ordeal of conscious, rational acceptance.

Given this view of the Enlightenment as a kind of extended orgy of rationalism, conservatives were irresistibly drawn to some form of political supernaturalism. For, as De Maistre put it, the rationalist has engaged in "an insurrection against God" whereby "the trowel believes himself the architect." The political community, according to the conservatives, was part of the time dimension of history to which "political geometry" could never do justice. History, in turn, was "the great drama of an ever-unfolding Providence,"⁵ or, in Burke's phrase, an expression of the "divine tactic" which men could only faintly comprehend. Of the political community, men could only know that it was part of a providential pattern; they could not know its ultimate basis. The last resort of conservatism, then, was to invoke a veil of mystery and to warn that men plumb the origins of society at their peril; the "natural"

⁵ *The Political Thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. R. J. White (London, 1938), p. 93.

forces of society, in response to a divine imperative, worked in a wondrous fashion beside which the cleverest political contrivances stood as pale imitations.

I

These constitute some of the main elements in the conservative tradition as it developed near the end of the eighteenth century. It is against this background that the earlier conservatism of Hume assumes some significance. The first fundamental respect in which his position differed from that outlined above was that his was a conservatism without benefit of mystery. There was no recourse to a "divine tactic," a *Weltgeist*; nor any disposition, such as displayed by Coleridge, to revive Scripture as a "statesman's manual." Hume's conclusions were stubbornly rooted in a strictly secular analysis with experience as the final court of appeal. Secondly, Hume's conservatism was constructed from the very materials of the Enlightenment: its quest for objective analysis, its distrust of obscurantism, its faith in empirical data, its disdain for the *a priori*, and its strong emphasis on the criterion of utility. He employed the Enlightenment methods of analysis to probe the roots of established pieties and institutions, and he carried it out with the sort of dispassion that Coleridge was to call "cold-blooded." Thirdly, his was a conservatism which owed no inspiration to catastrophe, impending or past, but rather reflected the "peace of the Augustans." Consequently, Hume exhibited none of the heightened sensitivity of later conservatives to the necessity for strong authority as the main guarantor of unity. Where later De Bonald was to assert that "outside religious and political unity man can find no truth and society no salvation," Hume was content with the matter-of-fact judgment that society was a product of human interests whose satisfaction provided the requisite amount of social cohesion.

Nevertheless, Hume was something more than the Enlightenment incarnate, for his significance is that he turned against the Enlightenment its own weapons. And herein lies his importance as a conservative thinker. His starting-point is to be found in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) which bears the subtitle "An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects." The first book illustrates Hume's tactic: to whittle down the claims of reason by the use of rational analysis. Reason, he contended, was admittedly an instrument for advancing our knowledge, but it was an instrument with a circumscribed sphere of activity:

Reason is the discovery of truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood consists in an agreement or disagreement either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact. Whatever, therefore, is not susceptible of this agreement or disagreement is incapable of being true or false, and can never be an object of reason.⁶

The consequence of this conclusion was to stake off an important realm either impervious to reason or within which reason played only a derivative role. Thus what men described as cause-and-effect was not a deductive conclusion

⁶ *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. III, Pt. I, sec. 1. Hereafter this will be cited as *Human Nature*.

of reason but the product of experience: we have become accustomed to seeing a certain effect follow from a given cause, but, strictly speaking, there existed no logically necessary connection between the two. Facts were derived from observation, not from reason; hence reason could not be employed to prove or disprove the existence of a fact. Human behavior, in turn, was governed largely by unanalyzed experience or habits. "Custom," Hume concluded, "is the great guide of human life."⁷

The significance of Hume's argument was not merely that it greatly extended the reign of custom at the expense of reason, but that it undercut the whole idea of an underlying rational harmony in nature, a harmony from which eighteenth-century rationalists had deduced the existence of universal moral imperatives. Hume destroyed this assumption, not by a frontal assault, but by the contention that the external order was not a discovery of reason but was rooted in "the principles of human nature." The 'order' that we attribute to the phenomenal world rests really on a conviction and not on a process of logical validation; it is the "force and vivacity" which the idea of an 'order' exerts on our imagination that explains its hold.⁸

Equally modest was the role assigned reason by Hume in matters of morals. Reason functioned as a calculator, an instrument of analysis. It was "perfectly inert" in the sense that it provided neither the springs of human action nor the final judgment in questions of moral controversy. In Hume's view, human actions were stimulated initially by the passions, which were a response to a direct emotional experience. The passions, in short, were the active, generating factor in human behavior. Consequently, they could not be yoked or restrained by reason, as the rationalists maintained, because this would be to argue that an inert principle could control an active one. Hence the famous conclusion: "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."⁹ Passions were thus outside the range of rational criticism, except as they might be based on a false supposition about objects which had no existence, or as the passions selected inadequate means for the fulfillment of their ends. Reason could indicate the tendencies and consequences of certain actions, but sentiment or feeling alone could actively stimulate us to follow one choice rather than another. Again, reason dealt with facts and relations, but moral concepts, such as 'crime' or 'ingratitude,' were not analyzable as facts or relations except by ignoring the original source of the concept itself in our sentiments or feelings. For example, certain elements of a 'crime' could be analyzed by the understanding into components, but the totality of these did not equal a 'crime'; it was only as our feelings affixed such a designation that certain actions took on a moral meaning. "The approbation or blame which then ensues cannot be the work of judg-

⁷ *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, sec. 5. Hereafter this will be cited as *Human Understanding*.

⁸ *Human Nature*, Bk. I, Pt. III, secs. 7-8.

⁹ *Human Nature*, Bk. II, Pt. III, sec. 3.

ment, but of the heart. . . ."¹⁰ Thus, since morals were linked to the passions or feelings, and since reason was unable to master the latter, it followed that morals could never be designated true or false, reasonable or unreasonable.

The net effect of this argument was, of course, to undermine the whole theory of natural law with its immutable values discoverable by rational inquiry. Having withdrawn morals from the jurisdiction of reason, Hume was prepared to maintain that morality was "more properly felt than judged of."¹¹ Morality derived from a moral sense which received impressions; these might be either pleasing or displeasing. Actions or situations which cause pleasing impressions men have identified as good or virtuous, their contraries as bad. When it is asked, what is it that renders some impressions pleasurable and others painful, Hume's reply was that in some instances it was "natural" for men to feel delight or aversion; in other cases the response was due to habit or conditioning. Morals were, then, a product of nature *or* convention, but, as Hume pointed out in his discussion of justice:

Mankind is an inventive species; and where an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as anything that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought and reflection. Though the rules of justice be *artificial*, they are not *arbitrary*.¹²

Thus art could be fused with nature, and when innovation became overlain with habit the distinction between the artificial and the natural vanished.

There existed, in this line of argument, a subtle difference between Hume and later conservatives. Some conservatives, Sir William Blackstone for example, were to maintain that a rational institution or law could be declared "natural" on the grounds that its long existence demonstrated its rationality and naturalness. Hume, however, in denying the relationship between the rational and the natural, was asserting quite another basis for the validity of institutions: an arrangement might, through usage, become habitual and therefore "natural," but this had nothing to do with its rationality and rationality had nothing to do with it.

The full implications of Hume's analysis were not to be realized until after the revolutionary events in America and France had made their mark. Prior to that time little difference existed between conservative and radical theorists in the approach taken to political problems. The points of disagreement between John Adams and Jefferson in America, Blackstone and Priestley in England, or D'Argenson and Diderot in France were less striking than the degree to which they shared a common premise that the test of a political system or a particular policy was a matter of rational demonstration. The influence of Hume's iconoclasm, however, was to dissolve this area of agreement by show-

¹⁰ *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Open Court ed. (La Salle, Ill., n.d.), Appendix I, p. 131.

¹¹ *Human Nature*, Bk. III, Pt. I, sec. 2. See also the discussion in D. G. C. MacNabb, *David Hume, His Theory of Knowledge and Morality* (London, 1951), pp. 159 ff.

¹² *Human Nature*, Bk. III, Pt. II, sec. 1.

ing that ultimate truths could not be proven by rational methods. And after 1789 both sides were to become increasingly preoccupied with ultimate truths. By restricting reason to a narrow zone between experience and the passions, Hume cleared the way for political romanticism. "Nothing is freer," he wrote, "than the imagination of man. . . . The difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure."¹³

In fairness to Hume it should be noted that his remarks cannot be turned into a justification for some of the later extravagances of the romantics. Habit, emotion, and imagination did not constitute political values in his system, but belonged to the catalog of descriptive facts concerning human behavior. They might, and often did, have valuable consequences, yet they were not values in themselves. It was true that on occasion Hume might casually remark that in philosophy, as in music and poetry, "we must follow our taste and sentiment,"¹⁴ but he was aware that this might prove too much. After all, he cautioned, there was a clear difference between "a poetical enthusiasm" and "a serious conviction" resting on "reflexion and general rules."¹⁵ Negatively, however, Hume's labors worked towards the alteration of the future course of conservatism. With reason discredited, new premises could be fashioned from custom and sentiment.

II

The quest for a science of politics was one of the great intellectual adventures of the Enlightenment.¹⁶ It was believed, perhaps not logically, that a science of this kind would be a natural ally of reform and progress. It was almost inevitable, given the cautious disposition of conservatives towards political and social change, that a deep hostility towards a science of politics should color conservative thought of the late eighteenth century. Here again Hume took a different tack. While sharing the conservative distrust of reform, he was still convinced that the study of politics could achieve the status of a science. At the same time, he demonstrated that there was no inherent necessity that such a science led to radical conclusions.

Although Hume remarked in one place that "the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics which will remain true to the latest posterity,"¹⁷ his works were studded with references to "causes and principles eternal and immutable" and to "universal axioms." While he admitted that social sciences, dealing as they did with matters of fact, could not aspire to the same degree of certitude as mathematics, dealing as it did with relations between

¹³ *Human Understanding*, sec. V, pts. I-II.

¹⁴ *Human Nature*, Bk. I, Pt. III, sec. 8.

¹⁵ John Arthur Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 10.

¹⁶ On this point see John H. Randall, *The Making of the Modern Mind*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1940), pp. 334 ff.; Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951), pp. 253 ff.

¹⁷ "Of Civil Liberty," *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 vols. (London, 1875), Vol. 3, p. 156. Hereafter this will be cited as *Works*.

ideas, Hume did go so far as to assert that the social sciences were capable of the same degree of certitude as the physical sciences. He further maintained that "politics, natural philosophy, physics, chemistry, etc.," which employ "moral reasoning," were more securely grounded than the study of morals or aesthetics; the latter were "not so properly objects of the understanding as of taste and sentiment." This was not to imply that politics, any more than the other sciences, could transcend experience or explain "ultimate principles."¹⁸ Nor was it meant to deny that "irregular and extraordinary appearances" might defy attempts to reduce political phenomena to near-mathematical axioms.¹⁹

Despite these qualifications, Hume's conviction remained unshaken that, as the title of one of his essays suggested, "politics may be reduced to a science" if it adheres to "experimental" procedures rather than the methods of traditional logic. Logic, which relied on demonstrations founded on the understanding, was useless for dealing with the probabilities which were of the essence of man's actual life in society. A science of politics, therefore, must be grounded in experience supplied by historical inquiry and observation of existing societies. Essentially, it was to be an investigation into the interaction between institutions and human nature. From an historical point of view, the function of political institutions had been to channel and control human behavior. Institutions were, in short, artificial contrivances which exerted an independent force and were not merely a reflex or simple reaction to human drives. "So great is the force of laws and 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."²⁰

Hume's method of political analysis, as noted earlier, was grounded in the typical Enlightenment technique of "analytic dissection," which, to borrow Cassirer's description, "dissolves everything merely factual . . . and everything believed on the evidence of revelation, tradition and authority" as preliminary to the ultimate goal of "synthetic reconstruction."²¹ Hume pressed this approach with devastating effect against the state-of-nature hypothesis present in some social contract theorizing. He pointed out the slippery logic which sought to justify rebellion against authority on the basis of a "mere philosophical fiction" like the state of nature; he denied that society was simply the product of a voluntary agreement aimed at eliminating certain "inconveniences" present in the pre-social condition. The arrangement called society represented an accumulated set of responses to human needs and drives: to the "natural appetite betwixt the sexes" and to man's oscillation between altruism—which diminishes in force as it is extended through the concentric circles of self, family, friends, and strangers—and selfishness—which increases as socie-

¹⁸ *Human Nature*, Introduction.

¹⁹ "Of Some Remarkable Customs," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 374.

²⁰ "That Politics may be reduced to a Science," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 99.

²¹ Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, pp. 13-16.

tal demands become more abstract and remote. Furthermore, as man found himself situated amidst circumstances of material scarcity his insecurity deepened, leading him to invade the material possessions of his fellows. This "natural" condition could be overcome by artificial arrangements which would restrain man's "heedless and impetuous passion" and gratify his instinct for self-interest.²² "After that interest is once established and acknowledged, the sense of morality in the observance of these rules follows naturally and of itself."²³

In his explanation Hume made no sharp distinction between government and society. Government was viewed as the instrument whereby society's arrangements were protected and society's purposes executed. Consequently, when Hume came to discuss the problem of political obligation his argument paralleled to a large extent his explanation of society. His aim, in both cases, was to demonstrate that neither society nor government had emerged full-blown from a sudden agreement. The basis of government was traceable to consent only in the sense that every government required that its subjects agree to its existence. To label this obvious truism a contractual agreement only worked to distort the element of truth contained in the idea of contract, namely, that "it is on opinion only . . . that government is founded. . . ."²⁴ "Opinion," in turn, was composed of several aspects. First, there was "opinion of interest" which referred to the "sense of the general advantage which is reaped from government, together with the persuasion that the particular government which is established is equally advantageous with any other that could easily be settled." Second, there was "opinion of right" which comprehended (a) the "right to power" or the prevalent disposition of men to believe that governments which have endured over a long period of time were legitimate governments; and (b) the "right to property" or the general desire of men to secure their possessions.

Such were the "principles" which supported government. Viewed from this perspective, the "ought" element in political obligation was reduced to a secondary consequence following from certain naturalistic considerations. Men obeyed because the interests which they sought to protect and promote necessitated obedience to authority. "Society could not otherwise subsist."²⁵

According to Hume's view, all of the rules of society were "artificial" in that they represented conscious contrivances designed to meet human needs and problems. As rules of convenience they could not be expected to satisfy the demands of morality or strict logic. For example, the rules of justice might result in a wicked miser winning a legal judgment against a virtuous peasant, yet the necessity and value of a general rule excludes consideration of the "fitness or unfitness of objects to particular persons."²⁶ The essential point was that there was no sharp contrast between an "artificial" rule and a "natural" one.

²² *Human Nature*, Bk. III, Pt. II, sec. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, sec. 6.

²⁴ "Of the First Principles of Government," *Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 110 ff.

²⁵ "Of the Original Contract," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 456.

²⁶ *Human Nature*, Bk. III, Pt. II, sec. 3.

Through the passage of time men became accustomed to social expedients, and what was once artificial soon became natural. It followed that the "natural" was not necessarily the primitive or the original condition. Hume strongly inferred that the opposite was more likely: that the truly unnatural situation was to be found in the state of nature.

The significant element in Hume's political ideas lies not so much in the particular arguments employed, but rather in the sensitivity displayed towards the workings of actual institutions. Like his contemporaries, he appeared to use the analytical method to dissect institutions, to peel off layer after layer of historical accretion. Yet, unlike that of many of his contemporaries, Hume's method proceeded on the belief that a particular institution was to be viewed as a whole possessing subtle interconnections with other institutional wholes.

Implicit in this approach were two ideas which were to play a central role in later conservative thinking in England. Institutions were to be understood in terms of human needs, but institutions were not merely the product of human needs. The two elements became intertwined and inseparable by virtue of their common root in historical time. It followed that there was no necessary opposition between what was useful and what existed; the desirable and the factual were not out of joint. In this way Hume indicated to later conservatives that the strongest arguments for the existing order were to be found within the facts of that order; that under an empirical approach utility could be located as an immanent value dwelling within the interstices of actual social arrangements, not as a grim measuring rod contrived to reveal the shortcomings of institutions.

Moreover, institutions were developments over a period of time. Their purpose and nature could not be correctly understood without a sense of time. The concept of time, then, was closely associated with the blending of fact and utility. Historical time imparted to social arrangements a qualitative element. Time implied experience, and experience in turn provided the motive for gradual adjustment. Conversely, the greatest calamity was violent change, which worked to snap the close union which history had fashioned between an institution, its utility, and its duration. In contradicting the nature of time and experience, sweeping change could not adapt institutions according to utility; for utility, in political matters, was inseparable from time and experience.

Students of political theory have, as yet, paid insufficient attention to the concept of time and the part that it has played in the shaping of political theory. To the eighteenth-century liberal reformer, time appeared as a kind of quantitative duration, a series of succeeding points without any particular value, except of a negative character. Future time alone held the promise of a qualitative character. To the conservatives who followed Burke, however, time lent an essentially qualitative element to existing arrangements. Past time had not really been superseded, but merged into the present in the form of institutions and values. Drastic change, in the same way that it had contradicted utility, contradicted time. In seeking to sever past time from present and future time, in order to impute a negative value to the past and a positive value only

to the present or future, drastic change stood condemned of being unhistorical and therefore unavailing.

While it would be claiming too much to attribute the whole of the conservative conceptions of time and utility to Hume, it is important to recognize that, within the limits imposed by his own methods and temper, he had glimpsed something of the conservative case.

III

Hume's conservatism was given more concrete expression when he turned from his philosophical writings to his informal essays on society, government, and economics. His detachment was, if anything, reenforced by the complexities which he pronounced present in any political question.²⁷

Although his temperament made him unwilling to join in the party battles of the period, it did not prevent him from making thrusts at both sides, at Tory sentiments about divine right and the royal prerogative, as well as at the precious tenets of Whiggism. But in common with the conservatives of the period Hume had a hearty disdain for that type of radical reformer who thought that every morning the world was an open question:

Did one generation of men go off the stage at once, and another succeed, as in the case with silkworms 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 necessarily have place in every human institution . . . but violent innovations no individual is entitled to make.²⁸

Hume's scorn of "novelties" also rested on the conviction that settled forms and institutions carried a momentum which often nullified the efforts of evil men and happily compensated for the meager talents of others:

In the smallest court or office, the stated forms and methods by which business must be conducted are found to be a considerable check on the natural depravity of mankind. . . . And so little dependence has this affair on the humours and education of particular men that one part of the same republic may be wisely conducted and another weakly by the same men, merely on account of the differences of the forms and institutions by which these parts are regulated. . . . Good laws may beget order and moderation in the government where the manners and customs have instilled little humanity or justice into the tempers of men.²⁹

But where Burke would have looked for some divine cunning to account for these phenomena, Hume was content to point out the utilitarian basis of institutions and the strong support which they found in human habits. He was at one with Burke in being sceptical of man's ability to effect reforms that

²⁷ For a statement about the detached observer, see "Of the Protestant Succession," *Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 474-75.

²⁸ "Of the Original Contract," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 452.

²⁹ "That Politics may be reduced to a Science," *Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 105-6.

would be both wide-sweeping and beneficial, but where Burke, at the time of the French Revolution, inveighed against "men of theory" who sought political solutions by "geometrical demonstration,"³⁰ Hume, writing during the calm of the Augustan age, reserved his contempt for what the age called "enthusiasm." In his eyes religious "enthusiasm" or fanaticism had split seventeenth-century England into warring sects and had paved the way for rebellion, a state of affairs which Hume abhorred even more than tyranny.³¹

This fear and distrust of violent antagonisms underlay Hume's analysis of party politics, for this analysis was motivated by a practical purpose: to prevent in his time the recrudescence of the seventeenth-century struggles by showing the many points of agreement between Tories and Whigs, or, as he more accurately called them, the "court" and "country" parties. Although the method which he adopted, which was to apportion praise and blame impartially to both sides, rested on the hope that sweet reasonableness would prevent both parties from adopting mutually exclusive positions, this was of less significance than the realistic analysis of the nature of parties which preceded his conclusions. To be sure, earlier political writers, like Halifax, Bolingbroke, Swift, and Defoe, had all been aware of the increasingly important role played by "factions" or parties in the constitutional system. Yet among these writers there remained a lingering reluctance to accept "party" as anything but a distasteful necessity. "The best Party," wrote Halifax, "is but a kind of Conspiracy against the rest of the Nation."³²

In his discussion of parties or factions—the terms were used interchangeably—Hume began from a position similar to that of James Madison in Number 10 of the *Federalist Papers*: since it was not possible to eliminate parties under a free government, some means must be found of limiting their disruptive and predatory tendencies. It was necessary, then, to draw a distinction between those parties which posed a threat to the very existence of a political system and those whose activities, while not always salutary, were confined within reasonable bounds. In the former category Hume placed the fanatical group with uncompromising tenets, a type which had been spawned in abundance during the bitter religious controversies of the last century. Extremist groups, reflecting the dogmatic tempers of their members, were perfectly willing to sacrifice peace and order for the achievement of their objectives: *fiat justitia, ruat caelum*. Furthermore, the tendency to exaggerate principles into unyielding absolutes was a peculiarly modern phenomenon: "Parties from *principle*, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon that has yet appeared in human affairs."³³ Although such parties constituted the exception,

³⁰ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the French Revolution*, Everyman ed. (London, 1910), pp. 38, 170.

³¹ "Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic?", *Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 124–26.

³² *The Complete Works of George Savile, First Marquis of Halifax*, ed. Walter Raleigh (Oxford, 1912), p. 225.

³³ "Of Parties in General," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 130.

they represented a pathological condition to which all parties were susceptible. Traces of these symptoms could be found in both the Whigs and Tories. Hume, writing in a period when the uproar over the Hanoverian succession had not completely died down and when Jacobite memories and hopes were still strong, repeatedly warned of the consequences that would follow if party distinctions were allowed to harden. That this eventuality need not come about was the whole lesson of Hume's analysis of parties.

In his dissection of the anatomy of party, Hume found a compound of interests, principles, and sentimental attachment to certain leaders. Two broad types of parties existed: those founded on the personal attraction of a particular leader or group of leaders, and those founded on "real" differences of opinions or of interests.³⁴ Most parties were a compound of the two and this was fortunate, for it meant that principles, interests, and personal ambitions tended to offset each other. In particular, the tugs of personal rivalry and economic interests lessened the possibility of conflicts over questions of political or religious principles. To a sceptic and a moderate like Hume, the disputes over principle were largely meaningless, because the historic quarrels which had given birth to the conflicting ideas had long since been settled. The Whigs, Hume noted, regarded themselves as the sole heirs of the revolutionary traditions of 1688 and their arguments implied that the revolutionary settlement stood in constant danger of being overthrown. The Tories, on the other side, responded in the opposite vein: they represented the sole defenders of a monarchy that had been temporarily abolished by the forerunners of the Whigs; it was the Tory mission to insist on the primacy of the allegiance owed by subject to sovereign. In actuality, Hume commented, these antics were largely absurd because of the fundamental similarity between both parties. Both had accepted the results of 1688; neither wanted to abolish the monarchy. The division between them rested on a matter of emphasis. It lay in the shades of meaning which each side attached to certain accepted fundamentals. "A TORY, therefore, since the revolution . . . [is] a lover of monarchy, though without abandoning liberty; and a partisan of the family of Stuart. A WHIG may be defined to be a lover of liberty without renouncing monarchy, and a friend to the settlement in the Protestant line."³⁵ His advice to both parties was to be moderate, accept the present situation, and pursue the public good. There were, he remarked dryly, "enough zealots on both sides."³⁶

In emphasizing that a substantial area of agreement existed between the two parties Hume put his finger on the most singular aspect of the modern British party system. From it he drew the conclusion that it was both desirable and possible to create "a coalition of parties" which would govern England with a minimum of discord. "The transition from a moderate opposition against an establishment, to an entire acquiescence in it, is easy and insensible."³⁷ "Coali-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-30.

³⁵ "Of the Parties of Great Britain," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 139.

³⁶ "That Politics may be reduced to a Science," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 107.

³⁷ "Of the Coalition of Parties," *Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 469-70.

tion" thus implied an agreement between the parties to exclude the fundamentals of the system from the range of controversy. As Hume acutely noted, "the only dangerous parties are such as entertain opposite views with regard to the essentials of government."³⁸ His hope was that the area of friction between the parties could be reduced once they had recognized their agreement on fundamentals. When this actually became the case in Britain a century and a half later, Hume would have welcomed Balfour's remark that the nation "is so at one that we can safely afford to bicker."

IV

From the death of Queen Anne in 1714 until the outbreak of the American Revolution, England enjoyed a period of comparative harmony unruffled by any deep antagonisms or sharp controversies. The Jacobite uprisings were the only major exceptions. The stability of England had become one of the wonders of Europe, for such had not been her reputation in the preceding century, when the turmoil of revolutionary events had made her name a by-word for political instability. The era of good feeling prevalent at this time received its intellectual expression in the admiration for balance and proportion. The classic lines with which Newton had sketched in his picture of an harmonious universe were duplicated in the ordered couplets of Pope. English political writers, not unmindful of the almost universal praise for their institutions, explained that the key to the riddle of stability was in the balanced nature of the system. The idea of balance became the central starting point, the key concept in British constitutional thought until the appearance of Bentham's *Fragment on Government* in 1776.³⁹ Its classic formulation was to be found in Blackstone's *Commentaries*:

And herein indeed consists the true excellence of the English government, that all the parts of it form a mutual check upon each other. In the Legislature the people are a check upon the nobility, and the nobility a check upon the people; by the mutual privilege of rejecting what the other has resolved: while the king is a check upon both, which preserves the executive power from encroachments. . . . Thus every branch of our civil polity supports and is supported, regulates and is regulated, by the rest: for the two houses naturally drawing in two directions of opposite interest, and the prerogative in another still different from them both, they mutually keep each other from exceeding their proper limits; while the whole is prevented from separation, and artificially connected together by the mixed nature of the Crown, which is a part of the legislative, and the sole executive magistrate. Like three distinct powers in mechanics, they jointly impel the machinery of government in a direction different from what either, acting by itself, would have done; but at the same time in a direction partaking of each, and formed out of all; a direction which constitutes the true line of the liberty and happiness of the community.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 464.

³⁹ Examples of this concept can be found in the following: *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. Temple Scott, 12 vols. (London, 1898), Vol. 1, pp. 231-235; Chancellor Hardwicke in Lord John Campbell's, *Lives of the Lord Chancellors*, 7 vols., 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1851), Vol. 5, p. 127; *Parliamentary History of England*, ed. William Cobbett (London, 1813-20), Vol. 15, cols. 481-82, 506; Vol. 66, cols. 43-44.

⁴⁰ William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, ed. Christian, 4 vols., 12th ed. (London, 1793), Vol. 1, Bk. I, ch. 2, pp. 154-55.

Although the importance of the concept of balance might be admitted for the realm of constitutional theory, the query arises: how much was this idea a creation existing solely in the minds of closet philosophers and how closely did it correspond to the actual workings of the constitution of the time? Although the dominant theme of parliamentary supremacy was obtrusive at certain times,⁴¹ there was, by and large, an implicit cooperation between the various branches of government. Hence, there is no paradox in the statement by Sir William Holdsworth that during the period of Whig supremacy from roughly 1720 until 1760 the constitutional system resembled a partnership, but not on equal terms, of King, Lords, and Commons.⁴²

When it is asked, by what means was this semblance of balance maintained, the answer is to be found largely in the conventions interwoven in the general constitutional fabric.⁴³ As contemporary British historians, under the inspiration of Sir Lewis Namier, have demonstrated, the nucleus about which these conventions clustered was the system of "influence," that is, the ties of family, patronage, contracts, bribes, and corruption through which the King and his ministers managed the parliamentary machinery.⁴⁴ This system, developed by Walpole and Newcastle and perfected later by George III, was not incidental to the politics of the period, but was a crucial element. Without it, the British constitution would have too closely resembled the nicely compartmented separation of powers that Montesquieu imagined in his *Esprit des Lois*. The conventions of the period, including the system of "influence," supplied the lubrication necessary to insure that the machinery of government would work in co-ordinated fashion and with a degree of central direction provided by the Crown.

Although many writers and politicians were aware of the part played by "influence" in preserving an area of royal initiative, Hume, perhaps alone, had grasped the tactical role of this system in preserving the constitutional balance.⁴⁵ He began by raising doubts about the validity of Harrington's widely-accepted thesis that political stability depended upon a coincidence between

⁴¹ *E.g.*, the Act of Settlement, the Regency Bill (1788-89), and the dispute over parliamentary privileges during the Wilkes affair.

⁴² William Holdsworth, *A History of English Law*, 12 vols., 3rd ed. (London, 1922-38), Vol. 10, p. 55; Sir David Keir, *The Constitutional History of Modern Britain*, 3rd ed. (London, 1948), pp. 293-99.

⁴³ Holdsworth, p. 464.

⁴⁴ Sir Lewis B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*, 2 vols. (London, 1922); *England in the Age of the American Revolution* (London, 1930); *The Parliamentary Papers of John Robinson, 1774-1784*, ed. William T. Laprade (London, 1922); Richard Pares, *King George III and the Politicians* (Oxford, 1953); George H. Guttridge, *English Whiggism and the American Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1942).

⁴⁵ In this connection it should be noted that Burke, for all of his concern for the "nice equipoise" of the Constitution, was unaware of the degree to which the system of "influence" contributed towards that result. See his proposals for "economical reform" designed to implement Dunning's resolution of 1780 which warned against the Crown's system of "influence." *Works*, 12 vols. (London, 1815), Vol. 2, pp. 69-70.

property and political power.⁴⁶ The paradox of the British system, Hume contended, was that although property and power had gravitated from the King to the House of Commons, there was no evident disposition on the part of the House to usurp all the powers of government so as to leave the King helpless. It was apparent that the House could not be considered as a kind of passive funnel through which the propertied interests exerted overwhelming mastery. The question then became: what were the means by which the dominant partner of the constitution was confined within its proper limits? His answer was that

the interest of the body is here restrained by that of the individuals, and that of the house of commons stretches not its power, because such an usurpation would be contrary to the interest of the majority of its members. The crown has so many offices at its disposal, that, when assisted by the honest and disinterested part of the house, it will always command the resolutions of the whole, so far, at least, as to preserve the ancient constitution from danger.⁴⁷

Rail as men may at the "invidious appellations of *corruption* and *dependence*," it must not be forgotten, as men are apt to do in the heat of party strife, that "some degree and some kind of it are inseparable from the very nature of the constitution, and necessary to the preservation of our mixed government."⁴⁸ The proper course for the zealots of liberty and parliamentary independence was not one of demanding a root-and-branch extirpation of patronage and its attendant evils, but of exercising prudent vigilance over "the proper degree of this dependence, beyond which it became dangerous to liberty."⁴⁹

More than any other observer, Hume saw that whatever balance there was in the constitution resembled less the mechanical equipoise of Newtonian forces than a restless equilibrium whose components were hidden from the prevailing formal and legalistic types of analysis. It followed that it was unrealistic to define rigidly the boundaries of power between the three main participants of the constitutional system.⁵⁰ Custom and expediency, not speculative reason, had shaped the constitution. Accordingly, these highly artificial political arrangements could not be measured by the rigors of abstract theory. Furthermore, as the system had demonstrated its ability to combine both liberty and order and had behind it the inertia of the settled habits of a nation, it was folly "to tamper . . . or try experiments upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy. . . ." The "wise magistrate . . . though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjust his innovations as much as possible to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution."⁵¹

⁴⁶ Hume's criticisms of Harrington are scattered throughout the following essays: "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," "On the Independence of Parliament," and "Whether the British Monarchy inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic?"

⁴⁷ "Of the Independence of Parliament," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 120.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 121-22.

⁵¹ "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," *Works*, Vol. 3, p. 480. Hume was careful to preface this admittedly utopian essay with several remarks intended to underline his own affection for an established system which worked tolerably well.

V

Hume's "analytical conservatism" prepared the way for Burke in many respects. Although the latter possessed a conviction and passion which Hume lacked, many of the same materials had been worked over in Hume's writings. The emphasis on traditionalism, the importance of habit and sentiment, a disdain for "political projectors" (as Hume called them), and a fine feeling for the complexities of government were all to be found in Hume. Yet Hume's true uniqueness rested on his analysis of parties and the hidden conventions of the constitution. It was by far the keenest discussion of the century and far overshadowed in insight the partisan tracts of Bolingbroke and Burke. At the same time, his critique struck a note of realism that contributed in an important way to the decline of Locke's influence. Hume saw clearly, as the later philosophic radicals did not, that the arena of practical politics was not peopled by individuals pursuing their own aims in the splendid isolation of self-interest. Rather, the basic elements were political groups held together by individual leaders and by the cement of common interests and professed principles. This approach, reminiscent of the sociological methods of Montesquieu, also differed significantly from the legalism which pervaded the political thought of England at that time. The dominant tendency was to argue issues like electoral reform, representation, and colonial matters on the basis of law and precedent. The influence of Hardwicke, Mansfield, and Blackstone symbolized the alliance that had sprung up between law and politics.

Although Hume's appreciation of existing institutions and his realization of the long, painful, and largely unconscious process by which society is shaped led him in the same general direction as the lawyers, the journey was accomplished by his effecting a minor revolution in political thought. Politics was now to be conceived in psychological rather than juridical categories. Earlier writers, like Locke and Hobbes, while emphasizing the importance of human nature for the understanding of politics, had nevertheless approached this element as preliminary to the central juridical concept of contract. In this way, the political categories of allegiance, obligation, and justice assumed the status of logical derivatives from the basic concept of sovereignty (or as Locke preferred to call it, "supreme power") established by the contract. Hume, on the other hand, turned the procedure around: justice, obligation, and authority were consequences of human attitudes and expectations. These concepts were to be explained on psychological, not juridical grounds.

The psychologism of Hume was part of his general legacy to later conservatism, a legacy of empiricism in which the useful and the factual were made to cohere in subtle fashion. Yet it was also a legacy which later events superseded. Hume, appropriately enough, died in 1776, and from this point on revolutionary events worked to make a mockery of Hume's comfortable conclusions. The realm of fact provided cold comfort for conservatives; it was now controlled by the revolutionaries. The central fact of revolution could not be explained away, although a Burke might attribute it to intellectual perversity and a De Maistre to an avenging Deity. But if it could not be ignored, it could be transcended. So it

was that conservatives began to turn to transcendental norms in order to combat the revolutionary appeal to reason; to weave from the diverse elements of irrationalism, romanticism, religion, and history a new vision of an older order; to replace an analytical conservatism by a metaphysical conservatism. In so doing they rejected much of Hume's naturalistic approach and substituted in its stead a philosophy of history, the idea that history had a "course" whose main outlines were determined by a divine hand operating from outside the confines of human time.

The final assessment of Hume raises certain difficulties. In some respects he typified conservatism, in others liberalism, and in still others he belonged to no school but his own. His conclusions in political matters carried strong overtones of conservatism, yet most conservatives of the period felt too uncomfortable with Hume's scepticism to welcome him as one of their own. Nevertheless, his conclusions were conservative for the reason that Hume never probed past a certain point nor carried his scepticism to its ultimate conclusions. He held too much respect for custom and tradition, and for their importance as social cements, to subject them to the kind of devastating critique which Voltaire and his allies were employing in France. With later conservatives he shared a distrust of reform, an hostility toward abstractions, and a scepticism of the claims of reason.

On the other hand, Hume stood close to the liberals of the century in the respect he accorded to liberty and property, and in his decided coolness toward religion and anything bordering on obscurantism. Above all, his political thought contained no traces of the particularist bent which was to play such an important role in later conservative thought. National history, national peculiarities and values had not yet replaced the universalist or European assumptions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rationalism.⁵²

It would be easy to conclude from these remarks that the categories of "liberal" and "conservative" were irrelevant when applied to Hume. This, however, would be misleading. The significant point is that Hume's position was symptomatic of the change that was taking place in English liberalism around the middle of the eighteenth century. Liberalism was becoming conservatized. Seventeenth-century liberalism, which had been compounded from the criticisms and protests of the Civil War period and then reshaped in more moderate fashion by the Glorious Revolution, had been transformed. It had lost its status as a challenge to the established order and had become the order itself. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, England was commit-

⁵² The exception to this point was Hume's interest in "national character." Although he suggested that certain common traits, such as similar manners and habits, could be discovered in a people who had been associated over a long period of time, this idea was not employed to prove any qualitative differences among peoples. Note also the statement in *Human Understanding*, sec. 8, pt. 1: "Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular."

ted to the idea of government under law, the superiority of Parliament, and the rights of Englishmen. The incorporation of liberal elements into the political structure worked to rid liberal thought of one of its central themes: its revolt against the idea of the organic community. The idea of a corporate society—compact, graded, deeply-niched by place and privilege—had been a commonplace in Tudor thought, as well as in the royalist doctrines of the seventeenth century.⁵³ The reaction to this belief in a close community, with all that it implied in social and political policies, can be traced not only in the radical doctrines of the Civil War, but also in such diverse thinkers as Hobbes and Locke. The systems of Hobbes and Locke began with abstractions which cut through the communal bonds of class, status, and hierarchy, leaving only unattached and undifferentiated individuals. In neither system was there a “sense of community.”

Once English society was modified by the revolutionary changes of the seventeenth century, the theme of revolt was gradually replaced by a growing “sense of society,” a quickening appreciation of the extent to which the values established by protest and revolt had become deeply dependent on communal arrangements of an unwritten and informal nature. Hume was representative of this changing temper, which prized the gains made possible by the upheavals of the previous century, and sought to preserve both the institutional achievements and their social undergirding. In this way, the assumption of an organic community, which had been cast aside during the seventeenth century, was being recaptured.

These developments form a background for Hume, as well as for English conservatism. For the uniqueness of this form of conservatism lies in the extent to which it had incorporated the results of the revolutionary experience of the seventeenth century. The master example here was Burke's pamphlet, *An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs*; in it he conservatized the revolution of 1688, while at the same time liberalizing conservatism.

⁵³ John W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (London, 1940), pp. 134ff; Christopher Morris, *Political Thought in England: Tyndale to Hooker* (London, 1953), pp. 68–126; Sheldon S. Wolin, “Richard Hooker and English Conservatism,” *Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 6, pp. 28–47 (March, 1953); Francis D. Wormuth, *The Royal Prerogative, 1603–1649* (Ithaca, 1939), pp. 83 ff.