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The Skeptical Life in Hume's Political Thought*

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David Hume's political thought is shaped by an expansively conceived skepticism. For Hume, "mitigated skepticism" is a way of life rather than a mere philosophical conclusion. It entails not only philosophical doubt, but also a variety of practical, methodological, ethical, and political commitments. Skeptics acquire these commitments by living a life devoted to philosophy, reading, learned conversation, and ordinary business in a modern society. They in turn may profoundly influence political practice in their societies, though in severely restricted ways. Hume's mitigated skeptics may discover practical political maxims, but they will be loath to act on them. They will tell politicians what to do, but only in order to diminish political conflict. And they will prefer to live in liberal commercial republics, while only defending them obliquely. Despite these limitations, however, Hume thinks mitigated skepticism holds an important place in modern moral and political life.

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I. Introduction

David Hume is frequently identified as one of the first modern, "scientific" political philosophers.¹ There is also an extensive literature that reveals him to be a thoroughgoing skeptic.² Yet if Hume is indeed a skeptic, how could he be a political scientist? A skeptic is someone who doubts that our rational and sensory faculties

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1. See Richard H. Dees, "Hume and the Contexts of Politics," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30 (April 1992): 219, 242; and James Farr, "Political Science and the Enlightenment of Enthusiasm" *American Political Science Review* 82 (March 1988): 52-54.

2. See Richard H. Popkin, "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism" (1951) reprinted in *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); David Fate Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Skeptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Barry Stroud, "Hume's Skepticism: Natural Instincts and Philosophical Reflection" (1991) reprinted in *Skepticism in the History of Philosophy: A Pan-American Dialogue*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996); and Donald W. Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

are capable of furnishing us with knowledge about God, nature, morality, history, society, or even the mundane details of daily life. The potentially radical consequences of skepticism are illustrated by Diogenes Laertius, who claimed that the skeptic Pyrrho of Elis "followed [skeptical] principles in his actual way of living, avoiding nothing and taking no precautions, facing everything as it came, wagons, precipices, dogs, and entrusting nothing whatsoever to his sensations."³ Pyrrho and his followers refused to accede to the judgments of reason and even their own senses. Not surprisingly, they viewed philosophy as futile, and had little to say about politics.⁴

Hume leaves many of his readers with the impression that philosophy is useless and self-defeating. Shirley Letwin even claims that Hume "involved philosophy in dilemmas from which it has not managed to escape." Among these dilemmas are philosophy's inability to provide a certain foundation for knowledge in natural science, ethics, theology, history, and politics.⁵ Yet Letwin exaggerates Hume's complicity in creating these dilemmas. His work represents only a single moment in a skeptical tradition that emerged in the Sixteenth Century and only recently culminated in what could be called "the crisis of Western rationalism"—the belief that enduring truths and meaning can never be discovered because reason subverts its own efforts.⁶ Moreover, Hume's skepticism didn't dissuade him from making philosophical investigations into politics and other matters. The crisis of reason was not an irresolvable crisis for David Hume.

Given the epistemological obstacles that confront political scientists and philosophers today, it may be instructive to examine how Hume manages to get on with studying politics while operating in the shadow of epistemological uncertainty. However, the question of how or whether Hume prevents his skepticism from undermining the rest of his philosophy remains in dispute. Hume was long supposed to have evaded his youthful skepticism by simply abandoning philosophy (understood to mean epistemology) in favor of writing popular screeds on morals, politics, history, and economics. Scholars long dismissed Hume's later works as "on the whole sustained at a somewhat lower intellectual level" than his early, epistemological works.⁷ Many recent studies have examined the role of skepticism in Hume's later works more seriously, but still treat that skepticism as something Hume "overcame" or as something that he thought only logically delimits what phi-

3. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, eds. and trans., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Vol. 1: 13. Laertius' account exaggerates the doctrines of the early Pyrrhonists, but it illustrates a view of the skeptics that was popular in antiquity.

4. John Christian Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism in the Ancients, Montaigne, Hume, and Kant* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992): 8.

5. Shirley Robin Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965): 3.

6. See John W. Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason: Recovering the Human Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

7. Henry Aiken, ed. *Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy* (New York: Hafner, 1948), pp. xi-ii.

losophy can be expected to accomplish.⁸ These studies point to significant moments in Hume's writings, but overlook the role skepticism plays in his thought.⁹

It is hoped that this essay will contribute to a better understanding of the role of skepticism in Hume's philosophy by examining the relationship between his skepticism and several components of his political thought. This essay will argue that Hume tried to get on with political philosophy by devising a unique understanding of philosophical skepticism.¹⁰ This "mitigated" skepticism entails both philosophical doubt and a peculiar skeptical disposition. Hume believed that a life devoted to skeptical philosophy, reading, learned conversation, and ordinary business instills this disposition in people. Skepticism is therefore a way of life for Hume, and not merely a philosophical doctrine. Its characteristic methods, disposition, and activities are also "relevant" to political life, though in severely restricted ways. Hume's mitigated skeptics may discover practical political maxims, but they will be loath to act on them. They will tell politicians what to do, but only in order to diminish political conflict. And they will be inclined to defend liberal commercial republics against criticism, but only obliquely. Yet despite these limitations, Hume supposed

8. See Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*: 10; Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty*: 86.

9. There are a few excellent studies, most notably those by Popkin, Norton, and Stroud, which meticulously examine how Hume's skepticism informs the rest of his philosophy. Yet those studies devote little attention to the role of skepticism in Hume's political thought; they also do not explain the complex relationship between Hume's skepticism, his empirical political "maxims," his classical moralism, and his sympathy for liberal commercial republics. Yet it is essential to understand the relationship among these components of his political thought if one wishes to make sense of the components themselves. The few studies that do focus on the role of skepticism in Hume's political writings mischaracterize Hume's approach to politics because they mischaracterize the relationship between his skepticism and the disparate components of his political thought. See Geoffrey Marshall, "David Hume and Political Skepticism," *Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1954); and Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*: 164. Donald Livingston's *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* is the only existing work that touches on this relationship. The present essay was written without the benefit of Livingston's analysis, as it was submitted for publication before Livingston's book became available, and consequently views the Humean terrain in a very different manner. Some notes have nevertheless been added to indicate where this essay touches on or clashes with Livingston's arguments.

10. It is difficult to accurately label Hume's brand of skepticism. Scholars have frequently debated whether Hume is a Pyrrhonist or an Academic, in the sense that his philosophy resembles one of the ancient philosophical schools that bore those names. (See Popkin, "David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism": 89; Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*: 159, 163; and Yves Michaud, "How to Become a Moderate Skeptic: Hume's Way Out of Pyrrhonism," *Hume Studies* 7 (April 1985): 42-44.) As these distinctions are unimportant to this essay, I will hereafter use Hume's term, "mitigated skepticism," to refer to his recommended empirical-skeptical method and disposition (see section II). Livingston would dispute this classification, arguing that Hume is not an empiricist (1) because he is a skeptic, (2) because he does not share the social, political, and scientific commitments historically associated with empiricism, and (3) because the term "empiricist" exaggerates the importance of epistemology in Hume's thought. (Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*: 3-7, 11-13). The first argument wrongly presupposes that all empiricists are dogmatic. The second commits a genetic fallacy, damning contemporary usage of a philosophical term because of the term's historical baggage. The third goes too far in combatting a current philosophical foible, downplaying Hume's epistemological thought by dismissing it. Hume does have an epistemology (although he has much more than that). Calling Hume an empiricist is accurate, and it is also necessary to distinguish Hume from non-empiricist skeptics such as F. H. Bradley and Michael Oakeshott.

that skepticism can play an important role in political life, and even show us how to achieve the good life and a good society.

"Mitigated skepticism" therefore informs at least four related components of Hume's political philosophy. Hume's political maxims, his attempts to quell party strife, his fondness for liberal commercial republics, and his understanding of the good life are united by a common thread of mitigated skepticism. This common thread allows Hume to remain at once both a skeptical philosopher and a political scientist.

II. Mitigated Skepticism as Method, Disposition, and Way of Life

In order to understand the relationship between Hume's skepticism and his political thought, one must begin by understanding his skepticism. Hume ostensibly sought to establish a "science of man" following the empirical method Bacon recommended for the natural sciences (*T*, xvi-xvii).¹¹ Hume begins his *Treatise of Human Nature* by claiming that all knowledge must be obtained through either sensory impressions or the mental manipulation of those impressions (*T*, xvi, 4, 10). General principles in turn must be drawn from patterns observed in perceived phenomena. In order to deduce general scientific principles about a class of phenomena, we must observe many instances of that class of phenomena. As Hume later explains, we form general beliefs due to the mind's predilection for what it has experienced most often (*Enq*, 57). One must therefore base the "science of man" on the recurrent patterns one observes in human behavior (*T*, 18).

Hume argues, however, that it is impossible to infer scientific laws from observed patterns. He understands scientific laws to be descriptions of the necessary succession of causes and their effects.¹² Yet the necessity of these causal relations can never be observed or demonstrated: we can imagine that any given effect might exist without its cause, or vice versa.¹³ Hume concludes that the pursuit of scientific knowledge must be elusive. If we cannot know that the causal patterns we observe in the past obtain by necessity, we cannot demonstrate that the same causes will continue to

11. References to David Hume's works are cited in the text using the following abbreviations:

T *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge. 2d. edition, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

Enq *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge. 3rd edition, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

E *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

12. While Hume is often considered a forebear of positivism, he understood the scope of "science" in classical terms.

13. For example, we might be tempted to assert that flames necessarily cause heat because, in our experience, they always do (*T*, 73, 79, 87). Yet we can certainly imagine a cold flame, one that absorbs heat rather than producing it. What we call the law of cause and effect is in fact nothing more than a prejudice we acquire from having witnessed recurrent and constant causal relationships. Hume would conclude that we learn to expect flames to be hot when touched just because they always are (*T*, 98-105).

produce the same effects in the future. We are therefore in no position to develop the kinds of necessary causal generalizations that constitute scientific knowledge. Moreover, Hume points out that even commonplace knowledge is called into question by the uncertainty of our sensory faculties. While we normally assume that our sensory impressions are caused by the objects they appear to represent, the dubiousness of causation suggests that our senses must “convey [our] impressions as those [objects’] existences, by a kind of fallacy and illusion.” Our belief that the objects we perceive really exist is based on nothing more than the consistency of our past perceptions with our belief in the reality of objects (*T*, 199-204).

Reflecting on how these philosophical reasonings undermine the presuppositions of both the sciences and our common sense understanding of the world, Hume despairs that “the understanding, when it acts alone . . . entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or common life.” He argues, however, that we need not fear completely losing our bearings to philosophical skepticism; our habits and instincts compel us to accept the world as it appears and to act accordingly. He observes from his own experience that the philosopher can never distrust his senses as much as Pyrrho was said to have done. Even committed skeptics cannot help but flinch from oncoming wagons and snarling curs. Hence the common conclusion that Hume is a “naturalist”: he supposes that our natural inclination to accept the beliefs of “common life”—an unphilosophical life of mundane occupations, social interaction, and perhaps unabstruse studies—will rescue us from skeptical paralysis. Hume concludes his account of skeptical “delirium” by describing philosophy as merely a safe, if useless, alternative to indulging the imagination with religious superstition (*T*, 268-72).

In his later writings, however, Hume portrays both unreflective religious belief and skeptically prone philosophy as sources of moral and political danger. He writes that “abstruse” philosophy is not merely “painful and fatiguing,” but may also serve to strengthen superstition and bigotry. In its less thoroughgoing forms, philosophy may elevate political biases into high-minded principles. It may also radicalize those principles by drawing them to their most extreme logical conclusions (*Enq*, 11). In its most thoroughgoing form, radical skepticism, philosophy promotes irrationalism by undermining the claims of moderate reason. Because natural inclination prevents us from living a radically skeptical life, the only practicable way of life that survives skepticism’s criticism of common sense is the life of abject superstition, which rejects reason altogether.¹⁴ Philosophy thereby promotes rationalist or irrationalist political extremism by delegitimizing common sense.

14. Livingston reads Hume in Burkean terms, suggesting that Hume thinks radical philosophy is inherently dangerous (*Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*: 31). Danford, however, argues that Hume sees philosophy as most threatening in its role as a handmaiden to religious, rather than philosophical, superstition (*David Hume and the Problem of Reason*: 182-184).

Hume's worries about the political dangers posed by skepticism are well addressed by existing studies. However, the fact that Hume's response to these dangers is substantially informed by skepticism is largely ignored in the literature addressing his politics. Scholars typically explain the moral and political arguments presented in the last two books of Hume's *Treatise* by pointing to the psychology of habit described in the first book.¹⁵ This is understandable, given that Hume's solution to radical skepticism in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries* is to recommend returning to "common life" and relying on custom or habit for guidance. Yet there is reason to think Hume intended his skepticism to be more than just a hurdle one must vault before getting on with philosophy, or an untraversable boundary where philosophy ends and the unexamined life begins. Hume writes that while the dogmatic philosopher "is a character, which is commonly but little acceptable in the world . . . the mere ignorant is still more despised." For Hume, the appropriate kind of common life is not one of unreflective habit, but rather one informed by a philosophy that is "just."

What is the nature of this "just" philosophy? Hume makes this clear in the *Enquiries*, where he recommends "a more *mitigated* skepticism or *academical* philosophy" as a "durable and useful" alternative to both dogmatism and radical skepticism (*Enq*, 161). He explains that nature and habit play an important role in mitigating skepticism. This does not mean, however, that he views "mitigated" skepticism as simply a subspecies of habit. Barry Stroud argues (I think persuasively) that Hume's mitigated skepticism "is not just a passing mood; it can be a way of life" that requires both "the startling effects of . . . excessive [Pyrrhonic skepticism]" and the "natural inclinations" which tame those effects.¹⁶ Indeed, Hume writes that "the most perfect character is supposed to lie between" the extremes of abstruse philosophy and untutored ignorance. This character "retain[s] an equal ability and taste for books, company, and business; preserving in conversation that discernment and delicacy which arise from polite letters; and in business, that pro-

15. See Aiken, *Hume's Moral and Political Philosophy*. Most commentators who do pay heed to Hume's skepticism use his comments about natural inclination and common life to "naturalize" Hume out of his skepticism (See Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* [London: Macmillan, 1941]) or suggest that his writings on morals, politics, and economics are unphilosophical. Geoffrey Marshall suggests that Hume's *Political Discourses* reveal him to be a "philosopher newly turned political economist" ("David Hume and Political Skepticism": 247). Shirley Letwin, one of Hume's most insightful commentators, writes that "Hume solves the problem he had created in the simplest fashion, by retiring from the field and turning essayist and historian" (*The Pursuit of Certainty*: 3). John Danford (*David Hume and the Problem of Reason*) addresses Hume's views on the political implications of radical skepticism, but doesn't relate those views to Hume's own mitigated skeptical political project. Even John Christian Laursen (*The Politics of Skepticism*), who explicitly seeks to examine the influence of Hume's skepticism on his politics, primarily uses Hume's skepticism to get to his theory of habit and custom, and uses *this*, rather than his mitigated skepticism, to explain his political writings. Laursen's chapter on Hume's "Politics of Manners and Opinion," though presumably intended to stem from Laursen's preceding discussion of Hume's skepticism, barely mentions that skepticism. (See footnote 22 below).

16. Stroud, "Hume's Skepticism," 125.

bity and accuracy which are the natural result of a just philosophy" (*Enq*, 8). Hence the best life is one where philosophical activity is *grounded* in the common pursuits of life, rather than *abandoned* in favor of a life of unreflective habit. But why does Hume recommend grounding philosophical activity in a life devoted to literature, conversation, and business? His recommendation can be understood in reference to two features that he thinks mitigated skepticism requires: first, a particular methodology; and second, a particular disposition.

In order to understand Hume's recommended methodology, one must return to his explanation of beliefs about causation. Hume argues that we have no certain basis for recognizing causal events. He concludes that we only believe some phenomena cause other phenomena because we have experienced the "constant conjunction" of the former preceding the latter (*T*, 102). This suggests that our beliefs have no verifiable foundations; they might be based on merely coincidental patterns in our experiences. Yet Hume's account of our beliefs is not intended to convince us that they are groundless. He seeks only to show that we cannot have *certain knowledge* regarding causation and other principles that seem to govern experienced phenomena.¹⁷ Hume allows for a kind of *practical reliability* in our beliefs. Although he insists that causality and other constant phenomena cannot be known as certainly as "demonstrative" (i.e. a priori) knowledge, as can principles of arithmetic and geometry, he argues that they do merit the title "proof" when they are so constant that we literally cannot help but believe in them (except in the rare moments when we can maintain an abstract philosophical doubt) (*Enq*, 56n). We rely on the empirical maxim that effects always proceed from their causes, because we experience that they always have on innumerable occasions, even though we cannot demonstrate that they never can or never will do otherwise.

Hume extends the possibility of such maxims not only to epistemological and metaphysical principles, but also to natural science, morals, theology, history, politics, and other subjects that he thinks can be investigated empirically (*Enq*, 164-5). Far from "dropping" philosophy to pursue other fields of knowledge, then, Hume tries to resume his philosophical investigations with an essentially positivist method for discovering practically reliable knowledge. He believes this method enables philosophers to promulgate empirical maxims based on patterns they observe in nature and society: it follows from Hume's psychological maxim that when these patterns are sufficiently consistent, we cannot help but believe in generalizations about them.

17. As Shirley Letwin has suggested, Hume probably only intends to use his account of causation to attack his idealist predecessors, who accounted for ideas that could not be derived from experience by supposing that God had implanted those ideas in our minds (*The Pursuit of Certainty*: 41, 50). Hume remarks that "to have recourse to the veracity of the supreme Being, in order to prove the veracity of our senses, is surely making a very unexpected circuit" (*Enq*, 153). For Hume, it is also a dangerous circuit, given his suspicions of the uses religion makes of philosophy (*Enq*, 11).

Hume's theory obviously relies on a fairly naive positivism. Hume seems to have believed that scientific research was simply a matter of exposing oneself to phenomena, without the aid of hypotheses. Nevertheless, Hume recognizes that his method is limited in three important ways: First, all philosophical inquiries must be limited to "such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding" (*Enq*, 162). We can only know about causal relationships that we can observe. This permits making generalizations about observed phenomena, but rules out making inferences regarding their "ultimate causes" (*Enq*, 30). For example, philosophers may propose maxims describing the acceleration of falling objects, but they have no basis for determining the metaphysical or divine causes underlying acceleration. Second, because these maxims are only generalizations of what has happened in the past, rather than laws governing what must always happen, exceptions cannot be ruled out.¹⁸ This is not simply to say that we can never be sure that our maxims are correct; unlike scientific laws, Hume's maxims may be said to remain true even when counterfactuals appear. Third, the philosopher must limit his inquiries to patterned phenomena. He cannot discover maxims governing unique, patternless, or exceptional occurrences in a class of phenomena. Hence "it is the chief business of philosophers to regard the general course of things," rather than the exceptions (*E*, 254). Philosophers may point out exceptions to their maxims, but they cannot explain those exceptions unless the exceptions themselves form a pattern.

Thus far Hume's method might seem only marginally more skeptical than that of his positivist heirs. Yet his method is much more thoroughly informed by skepticism than his rules governing the discovery of empirical maxims would suggest. While Hume recommends a way to overcome radical skepticism, he does not "abandon" skepticism. In addition to the positivist elements of his method, Hume also expects philosophers to adopt a particular disposition toward their subjects. He suggests that this disposition will be formed through a life devoted to both philosophical activity and everyday business. In the *Enquiries*, he announces that practicing two varieties of radically skeptical philosophy can have a salutary influence on both one's disposition and the quality of one's philosophical investigations. He writes that although "Cartesian" skepticism is dangerous, "this species of skepticism, when more moderate . . . is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgments, and weaning our mind from all those prejudices, which we may have imbibed from education or rash opinion" (*Enq*, 150). He claims that a moderated form of "Pyrrhonist" skepticism is also socially beneficial because reflection on the "strange infirmities of human

18. For example, Hume asserts that a man who has experienced every shade of blue but one could derive an idea of the "missing shade" from what he has already seen. Hume concedes that this violates his maxim that people can only have ideas of phenomena they have observed. But he states that "this instance is so singular, that it . . . does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim" (*Enq*, 21).

understanding . . . would naturally inspire [people] with more modesty and reserve, and diminish . . . their prejudice against antagonists" (*Enq*, 161). While skepticism may not provide reasons for refraining from hostilities, it undermines the disposition to engage in them.

The philosopher's social environment is also important if one is to acquire an appropriate philosophical disposition. Both Hume's recommended method and his recommended disposition require the philosopher to lead a life devoted to learning, conversation, and everyday business. Regarding his recommended method, Hume believes that the empirical evidence that philosophers ought to use can only "be found, in common Life and Conversation" (*E*, 535). He often admits books as a source of empirical evidence, but he never allows that good philosophy can be practiced when its practitioners are "shut up in Colleges and Cells, and excluded from the World and good Company" (*T*, 270; *E*, 535). He assumes that personal observations stemming from business and good company will provide the philosopher with most of his evidence.¹⁹ He also thinks that this environment has a salutary effect on the philosopher's disposition, curing him of the delirium, fanaticism, and errors that result from chasing abstract principles to their most ridiculous conclusions. He concludes from his own experience that once the philosopher tears himself away from his work and immerses himself in business and good company, he will see how exorbitant and unnatural his speculative conclusions had been (*T*, 269). For Hume, then, the philosopher must immerse himself in the company and business of daily life, as well as study, in order to acquire the evidence and disposition appropriate for practicing a just philosophy.

It should now be clear what Hume means when he recommends grounding philosophy in common life. He is not simply recommending that philosophers follow their natural inclinations in practicing philosophy, or that they get on with ordinary business and leave philosophy behind. Nor is he suggesting that philosophy alone contains the resources to overcome philosophical delirium.²⁰ He is recommending

19. Livingston goes even further, arguing that for Hume, "impressions perceived by passionate agents in culture are shaped by general rules, judgments, customs, and conventions" (*Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*: 16). However, Hume appears to be more naively empiricist than this suggests. He thinks custom and disposition will guide the true philosopher's *use* of empirical maxims, but he does not suppose that they should color the *content* of the philosopher's knowledge. Indeed, for Hume a philosopher's judgment is unclouded by interest, passion, or interpretation. It is radically (and dubiously) unsituated. (See the preceding paragraph).

20. Don Garrett argues that Hume's commitments to both science and skeptical philosophy are philosophically reconcilable. He shows that Hume's most radically skeptical conclusions are descriptions of cognitive psychology rather than necessary epistemological commitments. He further shows that Hume can reasonably avoid such commitments, because radical skepticism erodes its own foundations equally as well as it does the foundations of dogmatic claims. [Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 10]. However, Garrett's argument is a reconstruction rather than an historical interpretation; as this essay has shown, Hume's own way out of the skeptical dilemma presupposes and concludes with an empirical account of cognitive psychology. It is therefore self-consistent, but only because it is circular. (Livingston, on the other hand, downplays Hume's scientific

that philosophers practice a very peculiar kind of mitigated skepticism that avoids taking its most radically skeptical conclusions to heart; seeks only to generalize what people observe in conversation, business, and literature; is situated in polite society; and is tempered by modest aims and a disposition moderated through a life devoted to business and social interaction. These recommendations regarding the philosopher's character development and social occupations have significant political ramifications, as will be shown in sections IV and V below. The more obvious consequences of mitigated skepticism for politics, to which I will turn first, concern how the skeptical philosopher discovers and utilizes "general maxims" about observed phenomena in political life.

III. Maxims of Political Science

Hume's political empiricism is widely discussed in the existing scholarly literature.²¹ Yet the relationship between his skepticism and his empirical political maxims, which are most clearly presented in his *Essays*, is rarely examined.²² This is not surprising, given the seeming incompatibility of his recommended methodological caution with sweeping political generalizations. Indeed, in one of his essays Hume writes that he is "apt . . . to entertain a suspicion, that the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics" (*E*, 87). Yet in other essays he pronounces and defends maxims concerning the means of balancing mixed constitutions, the causes and dangers of political parties, the advantages of liberty and luxury, the balance of trade, public debt, trade restrictions, and the consequences of high taxes (*E*, 42-5, 54-72, 268-80, 308-65). In his essay, "That Politics may be

empiricism altogether, suggesting that Hume's main concern in the *Treatise* is self-understanding, rather than creating a foundation for scientific claims. See *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*: 12-14.)

21. See Aiken, Hume's *Moral and Political Philosophy*; Dees, "Hume and the Contexts of Politics"; Farr, "Political Science and the Enlightenment of Enthusiasm."

22. Even writers who focus on Hume's political skepticism tend to focus on the accounts of justice, property, and political obligation described in the *Treatise*, which can be indirectly derived from skepticism through Hume's psychological account of habit and custom. Marshall criticizes others who explain Hume's politics in a series of "easy steps" from his psychology, but he doesn't substantively challenge this account ("David Hume and Political Skepticism": 249-52). Laursen makes a number of intriguing observations on material in Hume's *History of England*, and alludes to the *Essays*, but he too neglects Hume's empirical maxims and mostly seeks to inform the issues raised in the *Treatise* through Hume's other works. And he too only gets at Hume's politics through the theory of habit, although he recognizes the importance of skepticism in Hume's development of that theory (*The Politics of Skepticism*: 169-70). Yet Hume's political tracts in the *Essays* are much more representative of the empirical-skeptical method he describes in his earlier works than are the political discussions in those works. Hume's accounts of justice, property, and political obligation in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries* were no doubt informed by empirical observation, but his arguments in those works are largely presented as consequences of his theory of habit. Some scholars have focused more closely on Hume's empirical political maxims, but for the most part they have not been concerned with examining how those maxims are informed by Hume's philosophical skepticism. See Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty*; Robert J. Roth, "The Empiricism of Hume's Political Theory," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (December 1991).

Reduced to a Science,” he even asserts that “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” (*E*, 16).

Why Hume makes these seemingly conflicting assertions can be understood in terms of his mitigated skepticism. Just as this skepticism permits him to propose empirical maxims in epistemology, metaphysics, psychology, and moral philosophy, it provides a method through which he can concoct empirical political maxims. Yet at the same time it restricts the application of those maxims by circumscribing the range of their conclusions and by instilling a cautious disposition toward the means by which these maxims are discovered and utilized.

Mitigated skepticism provides Hume with a method for generating political maxims by combining an empirical analysis of evidence with moderate skepticism regarding the reliability of the conclusions of that analysis. For example, Hume often proposes a political maxim based on recurrent happenings in political history, and then limits its application to a narrow range of similar cases. Hume’s maxims regarding political parties are largely drawn from the history of Britain, and are applied solely to British political issues (*E*, 54-72). However, Hume is more willing to propose sweeping political maxims when he suspects that the circumstances responsible for the patterns he observes are universal. For example, he proposes bold maxims regarding the rise and progress of commerce in countries, because he thinks experience shows this phenomenon is driven by “avarice, or the desire for gain [which is] an universal passion, which operates at all times, in all places” (*E*, 112-5).

Hume supposes that mitigated skepticism imposes even broader limits on what one may get out of political philosophy by prohibiting all conclusions not drawn from empirical observation. He rules out all merely *a priori* investigations in fields besides mathematics, and denies that “our reason, unassisted by experience, [can] ever draw inferences concerning real existence and matter of fact” (*Enq*, 27). Philosophers should therefore refrain from idle speculation about politics when historical documents or personal experience provide scant empirical evidence. For example, Hume argues that because the revolutions of human progress are so slow, and the history of which we are aware so short relative to those slow cycles, “it must still be uncertain, whether, at present, [mankind is] advancing to its point of perfection, or declining from it[:] we cannot thence presuppose any decay in human nature” (*E*, 378). Hume believes this question of whether humanity is progressing could in principle be solved empirically, but he concludes that the data provided by history are too sketchy.

Moreover, Hume recommends a skeptic’s caution toward even the most durable political maxims, because (as we have seen) his empirical method must allow for exceptions. His essay “Of Some Remarkable Customs” is about exceptions to well-

established maxims. Hume argues that the tumultuous nature of ancient Athenian government required the Athenians to prosecute demagogues for instigating unjust laws, a practice which violates the otherwise sensible maxim that "after a motion was made, which was voted and approved by that assembly in which the legislative power is lodged, the member who made the motion must for ever be exempted from future trial or enquiry." Likewise, Hume exempts British press gangs from the maxim, "that a power . . . when granted by law to an eminent magistrate, is not so dangerous to liberty, as an authority . . . which he acquires from violence and usurpation." Hume does so because he thinks press gangs are necessary to man the navy, yet legalizing them would set a terrible precedent for "ministerial tyranny" (*E*, 367-74).

While Hume acknowledges these exceptions, he thinks they do not in any way affect the legitimacy of the maxims they violate. Nevertheless, he thinks they confirm the mitigated skeptics' own maxim, "that all general maxims in politics ought to be established with great caution; and that irregular and extraordinary appearances are frequently discovered" (*E*, 266).

This recommendation of caution points to another requirement of Hume's mitigated skepticism concerning political maxims: it not only requires the skeptic's research methods, it also instills a cautious disposition concerning the means through which maxims are disseminated and acted upon. Hume suggests that in politics, the philosopher must be cautious not only with regard to the potential errors involved in proposing political maxims, but also with regard to the ways those maxims may influence political practice. He worries that philosophy can become dangerous when it transforms people's preexisting biases into ideological principles. He expresses this concern in the *Treatise*, where he argues that while the doctrine of passive political obedience is absurd, one must nevertheless be scrupulous in adducing the appropriate conditions for rebellion because "the common rule requires submission; and 'tis only in cases of grievous tyranny and oppression, that the exception can take place" (*E*, 562, 554). In the *Essays*, he further explains why one should avoid transforming the exception to obedience into a maxim governing when rebellion is permissible: "would [a preacher or causer] not be better employed in inculcating the general doctrine, than in displaying the particular exceptions, which we are, perhaps, but too much inclined, of ourselves, to embrace and extend?" (*E*, 491).

As Letwin has argued, what Hume is recommending here is not philosophical mendacity, but rather occasional discreet silence. "Hume was not asking any man to betray his convictions, but only to consider the consequences of his public acts and utterances." In the *History*, for example, Hume argues that the common people were so unruly under Charles I that philosophers should have remained cautiously silent regarding the right of resistance. Similar motives may explain why Hume sometimes expresses great skepticism regarding the possibility of general maxims in political philosophy. As Letwin suggests, he expresses greater or lesser degrees of optimism about the reliability of political maxim depending on whether

he thinks promulgating a given maxim would be benign or dangerous under given circumstances.²³

Hume's caution when dealing with political maxims reveals that the disposition he recommends for mitigated skepticism is not simply intellectual caution against the possibility of error, but also emotional trepidation regarding the social consequences of philosophical activity. His worries concerning the practical effects of espousing particular philosophical doctrines, and his efforts to promote the kind of doctrines that would have a salutary rather than a destructive effect on political life, point to another kind of influence that Hume thinks mitigated skepticism can have on politics: moderation.

IV. Moderation in Politics

Hume conceives of his mitigated skepticism as moderating politics in two different ways: (1) by moderating political discourse and (2) by moderating the dispositions of political actors. It is evident that he aims to moderate political discourse through his own writings. In "Of the Coalition of Parties," he reports that his intent in writing two previous essays was 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 [party] that its antagonist may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance of praise and blame, which we bestow on either side" (*E*, 494). He suggests that other political philosophers ought to adopt this strategy too, rather than providing intellectual fodder for one party or another; indeed, he asserts that the phrase "philosophers who have embraced a party" may pose a "contradiction in terms" (*E*, 469).

Clearly this moderating strategy reflects the disposition Hume ascribes to mitigated skepticism. Hume is cautious about advancing his own political maxims, and claims to enter partisan debate only in order to deflate the dogmatic principles of party philosophers. In the *Enquiries*, he broadly asserts that only philosophers are qualified to adjudicate some political issues, because they are free of prejudice; yet he further asserts that only the mitigated skeptic's style of philosophy serves to remove one's prejudices. Furthermore, the disposition he recommends to the adjudicating philosopher in the *Essays* reflects the circumspect manner he earlier attributes to the mitigated skeptic: "hesitation, and reserve, and suspense, are . . . the only sentiments he brings to [an] essay or trial" (*E*, 507; *Enq*, 161). Hume's recommendation that philosophers moderate politics should therefore be understood to mean that mitigated skeptics should serve this function. Hume thinks mitigated skepticism should infuse itself into political discourse by seeking the middle ground between potentially radical philosophy and the unreflective sensibilities of common life.

23. Letwin, pp. 106-8.

The clearest example of Hume's strategy of deflating dogmatic political principles can be found in his essays "Of the Original Contract" and "Of Passive Obedience." There Hume identifies two conflicting parties: "the one party, by tracing up government to the DEITY, [render] it so sacred and inviolate, that it must be little less than sacrilege . . . to touch or invade it. . . . The other party, by founding government altogether on the consent of the PEOPLE, suppose that there is a kind of original contract, by which the subjects have tacitly reserved the power of resisting the sovereign." Hume attributes these principles to the Tories and Whigs.

He concedes that "both these systems of speculative principles are just; though not in the sense, intended by the parties: And, That both the schemes of practical consequences are prudent; though not in the extremes, to which each party, in opposition to the other, has commonly endeavored to carry them" (*E*, 466 [italics omitted]). He offers some superficial examples of how each of the parties' principles could be correct, but then devotes the bulk of two essays to demonstrating that both are essentially wrong. In "Of the Original Contract," he attacks the Whig's social contract theories by observing that political obligation is almost invariably founded on habitual deference to customary authority, and that no state could stand if unanimous consent were required of its subjects. In "Of Passive Obedience," he criticizes the Tories' insistence on a principle of absolute deference to customary authority by arguing that governments are only legitimized by the utility they provide to their subjects. He argues that where governments fail to serve the common good, and where rebellion would likely increase the utility of government, rebellion may be justified (*E*, 469-92). In short, he suggests that both parties are right to a certain extent, but not to the extent that their theories either demand tolerance for the worst tyrants or threaten to unsettle useful but undemocratic governments.

Another example of Hume's strategy for moderating party strife can be found in his essay, "Of the Parties of Great Britain." Hume writes that the Whigs and Tories differ greatly in principle, but do not differ nearly so much as their Round-Head and Cavalier predecessors. He writes that unlike the Cavaliers, "the TORIES, as men, were enemies to oppression; and also as ENGLISHMEN, they were enemies to arbitrary power." The Whigs, in turn, only preferred a greater degree of liberty than the Tories; and while they differed from the Tories in supporting the House of Hanover, they did not challenge the monarchy as such. Hume concludes that "a TORY . . . may be defined . . . to be a lover of monarchy, though without abandoning liberty; and a partizan of the family STUART. As a WHIG may be defined to be a lover of liberty though without renouncing monarchy; and a friend to the settlement in the PROTESTANT line" (*E*, 65, 70-1 [italics omitted]).

Hume's strategy in writing these essays was to quell party strife by pointing out that the two parties were not irreconcilable in principle. Hume claims that both parties are motivated by the same principles; they merely differ in their preferences among those principles. He adopts a similar strategy in his essays, "Of the Protestant Succession" and "That Politics may be Reduced to a Science." In the first essay,

he reviews the respective advantages and disadvantages of the Stuart and Hanover successions to the British throne. Having cataloged his observations on these heads, he concludes that "these advantages and disadvantages are allowed on both sides; at least, by every one who is at all susceptible of argument or reasoning." He then suggests that this mixture of advantages and disadvantages ought to remind readers that "there scarcely ever occurs, in any deliberation, a choice, which is either purely good, or purely evil. . . . Hesitation, and reserve, and suspense, are, therefore, the only sentiments [the philosopher] brings to this essay or trial" (*E*, 506-7). In the second essay, he proposes a similar lesson after refuting both the inflated praise and scorn rained upon Horace Walpole. Here he draws a more explicitly political lesson from the relative agreement between the parties, and the fallaciousness of the principles that lead them to extreme differences: "let us therefore try, if it be possible, from the foregoing doctrine, to draw a lesson of moderation with regard to the parties, into which our country is at present divided" (*E*, 27).

These essays make Hume's intention of moderating political discourse evident, yet they do not clarify whether Hume thinks he and other mitigated skeptics can or should moderate politics by telling political actors what to do. On the one hand, Hume asserts that the relative merits of the Hanover and Stuart successions are so complex and evenly distributed, that "it belongs . . . to a philosopher alone, who is of neither party, to put all the circumstances in the scale, and assign to each of them its proper poise and influence." Given that Hume's strategy is to cast *all* political disputes as being more complex and balanced than the parties suppose, this would seem to make the philosopher the rightful arbiter of all political disputes.

Yet Hume's frequently expressed suspicion of philosophers suggests otherwise. Even his "just" philosophy of mitigated skepticism is ill-suited to rendering political decisions. Hume identifies only himself as the kind of philosopher who reasons justly, yet even he expresses great reluctance when describing how he would resolve the succession issue. Indeed, he presents his own argument as an example of how a philosopher ought to think, rather than as a practicable recommendation: he begins by expressing his hope that "the following reflections will . . . show the temper, if not the understanding of a philosopher" (*E*, 507). Moreover, he insinuates that judgment and experience are what is most essential to political leadership (*E*, 124). It stands to reason that seasoned politicians would have more experience of the intricacies of governance than all but the most politically active philosophers. And Hume never suggests that philosophers are fit to rule. In fact, he portrays them as working at some distance from political affairs (*E*, 10). His description of the mitigated skeptic's engagement in common life is always restricted to business and company; he never mentions political office. At most, he describes just philosophers as mediators, rather than leaders. In his own work at least, Hume only seeks to clarify political issues and show reasons why politicians should act moderately (*E*, 494).

Moreover, Hume recognizes that politicians are not likely to harken to philosophers' recommendations. First, he observes that philosophical principles are often

simply masks for political actors' interests and ambitions (*E*, 62). Principles that do not justify the pursuit of those ambitions will go unheeded. Second, Hume despairs that politicians will never behave so reasonably that they might make concessions to their adversaries. "Such moderation is not to be expected in party-men of any kind" (*E*, 45). Yet the essays described in this section show that Hume thought his arguments could have some impact on political practices in his day. His explicit purpose in writing his essays on social contract theory and passive obedience was to moderate political discourse. A similar purpose can be inferred from the frequent prudential revisions he made to his texts. For example, Hume responded to the rise of radical Wilkesite republicanism in England by revising his 1742 essay "Of Eloquence." Hume's later versions of this essay subordinate its republican sympathies in favor of an ideology of politeness.²⁴ Similarly, later editions of Hume's essay "Of the Liberty of the Press" lay greater stress on the potential dangers to order posed by the press and the people, and omit a large section that portrays both as essentially benign (*E*, 13, 604-5). Hume further suggests in the *History* that philosophers should not mention the grounds for rebellion at all. These precautions indicate that for Hume, philosophers can have a negative influence on political discourse and practice by inciting people who are already predisposed to political radicalism. But they do not indicate how the mitigated skeptic can promote political moderation.

Perhaps Hume believes that the mitigated skeptic cannot effectively dictate political decisions to politicians, but can have a more indirect influence on political behavior by showing others how to think more philosophically. Hume suggests in the *Enquiries* that the philosopher's influence is precisely of this sort. "Though a philosopher may live remote from business, the genius of philosophy, if carefully cultivated by several, must gradually diffuse itself throughout the whole society, and bestow a similar correctness on every art and calling. The politician will acquire greater foresight and subtlety, in the subdividing and balancing of power; the lawyer more method and finer principles in his reasonings; and the general more regularity in his discipline, and more caution in his plans and operations" (*Enq*, 10). Yet in the *Treatise* Hume argues that mere speculation can never directly influence the will. How then can practicing philosophy moderate people's political actions?

One way is through the influence that studying philosophy has on people's characters. In the *Essays*, Hume writes that "serious attention to the sciences and liberal arts" can mold one's character. This attention "softens and humanizes the temper [because] speculative studies must mortify . . . the passions of interest and ambition, and must, at the same time, give [a man] a greater sensibility of all the decencies and duties of life." Thus education acclimates men to viewing matters from a disinterested perspective (*E*, 170). For Hume, this education is more than just formal

24. Adam Potkay, "Classical Eloquence and Polite Style in the Age of Hume," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 25 (Fall 1991): 50.

schooling. It is a result of the same kind of life that he thinks should ground skeptical philosophy: a life divided between business, social discourse, and study. History is one example of the kind of studies that can have these effects. Hume writes that business alone may not improve virtue, as it encourages people to view others only in relation to their own interests; abstruse philosophy fails to improve virtue too, as it is too cold to move the mind; but the study of history improves virtue, because its readers and writers "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." Hence they acquire a capacity for disinterested judgment (*E*, 568).

Hume views mitigated skepticism as another kind of study that can encourage virtue. As we have seen, he supposes that a properly grounded and moderated skeptical philosophy can affect one's character by mortifying the passions and instilling a more disinterested perspective.²⁵ He suggests that when mitigated skepticism is combined with other studies, such as history, poetry, and politics, it can also reveal how one might attain the good life. Hume concedes that a person who is not already inclined to virtue cannot aspire to have the kind of character necessary for the best kind of life. "Where one is born of so perverse a frame of mind . . . as to have no relish for virtue and humanity . . . such a one must be allowed entirely incurable, nor is there any remedy in philosophy." Nevertheless, Hume argues that philosophy can show people how to mold themselves into the kinds of characters they desire. "Let a man propose the model of a character, which he approves: let him be well acquainted with those particulars, in which his own character deviates and bend his mind, by continual effort, from the vices, towards the virtues; and I doubt not but, in time, he will find, in his temper, an alteration for the better." Those disinclined to virtue can never be convinced to be virtuous by philosophy. But those who *are* inclined to virtue, though they may not fully possess it, can become more virtuous when guided by philosophy (*E*, 169-70).

This suggests that for Hume, the politician can acquire foresight, the lawyer finer principles, and the general regularity and caution if they are well educated in history, politics, poetry, skeptical philosophy, and other branches of liberal learning. Of course, these salutary effects of philosophy and other studies presuppose certain social and political preconditions. The business, company, and studies presupposed by Hume's notion of "common life" can only be cultivated in particular kinds of societies. They require commerce, wealth, leisure, a republic of letters, and freedom of a sort that Hume discovered in the liberal commercial republics that were emerging in his own time. Yet in presupposing the conditions found in such republics, Hume was not merely taking the conditions of his own time for granted. Much of his philosophy can be explained in terms of his rejection of the poor, barren, xeno-

25. See section II.

phobic, and superstitious Scotland that he experienced in his youth, in favor of the more sophisticated, wealthy, and liberal Scotland that he witnessed emerging over the course of his life.²⁶ Indeed, Hume's endorsement of mitigated skepticism, as a philosophy that can only thrive in a liberal commercial republic, ought to be viewed as a subtle endorsement of liberal commercial republics.

V. Defense of Liberal Commercial Republics

Hume's conception of mitigated skepticism implies such an endorsement in at least two ways. First, it suggests that liberal commercial republics are more likely than other regimes to instill the disposition appropriate for mitigated skeptics in their middle-class citizens. Second, it suggests that those regimes are more likely to enable their citizens to achieve the good life, as it is defined by mitigated skepticism. In these roundabout ways, Hume provides substantial reasons for those who follow his recommendations to choose to live in a liberal commercial republic, as he did.

The idea that liberal commercial republics can provide their citizens with an education in mitigated skepticism reveals a common thread running through several of Hume's essays. The preceding section described Hume's argument that mitigated skeptics ought to instill moderation in political discourse and behavior. It further argued that in Hume's view, philosophers can only instill moderation indirectly, through their contributions to learning and polite conversation. The political implications of this stipulation become apparent if one considers Hume's argument that learning and polite conversation thrive best in liberal commercial republics. It stands to reason that if liberal commercial societies encourage the learning, business, and polite conversation that Hume suggests are necessary to produce mitigated skeptics and moderate politicians, those who believe politics should be moderated by mitigated skepticism would prefer to live in liberal commercial republics.

Several of Hume's essays suggest that liberal commercial republics provide the best environment for promoting learning, business, and polite conversation. In "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," Hume proposes the maxim, "it is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise, at first, among any people unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government." He reasons that where there are no limits to arbitrary rule, there is no law, security, property, or any foundation for learning. At the birth of a republic, however, "the necessity of restraining the magistrates, in order to preserve liberty, must at last appear, and give rise to laws and statutes. . . . From law arises security: From security curiosity: And from curiosity knowledge." The arts and sciences must therefore first develop in a liberal republic.

Moreover, liberal republics can best encourage learning when they are engaged in extensive commerce. Hume writes, "nothing is more favorable to the rise of

26. Letwin, *The Pursuit of Certainty*: 19.

politeness and learning, than a number of neighboring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy. The emulation, which naturally arises among those neighboring states, is an obvious source of improvement. But what I would chiefly insist on is the stop, which such limited territories give both to *power* and to *authority*." Hume thinks this point is best illustrated by the distinction between China on the one hand, and ancient Greece and modern Europe on the other. The geographic expanse of the Chinese state permitted political force and popular opinion to rule throughout the range of commercial exchange. In Greece and Europe frequent exchanges of goods and ideas took place over an area controlled by neither a single sovereign nor a single public. Hume thinks this indicates that learning and letters are most likely to flourish among small, commercial states (*E*, 115-21).

As John Christian Laursen has pointed out, these observations do not prevent Hume from supposing that "civilized monarchies" might obtain good laws and flourishing trade. Hume argues that in his day France had learned the advantages of protecting commerce and the rule of law. He even suggests that the courtier societies of civilized monarchies promote the "polite arts" better than do the commercial societies of republics, because the former encourage a man to "render himself *agreeable*, by his wit, complaisance, or civility," while the latter make it "necessary for a man to make himself useful, by his industry, capacity, or knowledge" (*E*, 126). This leads Laursen to conclude that Hume is more sympathetic to courtier society than to liberal commercial republics. Laursen concludes that Hume's skepticism implies a preference for the kind of polite society once found in absolutist France.²⁷

Hume is certainly an ambivalent republican. Nevertheless, he maintains that even civilized monarchies will discourage the commercial culture that he thinks must undergird polite society. In "Of Civil Liberty," he writes that "commerce . . . is apt to decay in [civilized] absolute governments, not because it is there less *secure*, but because it is less *honourable*." This is so because "a subordination of ranks is absolutely necessary to the support of monarchy. Birth, titles, and place, must be honoured above industry and riches. And while these notions prevail, all the considerable traders will be tempted to throw up their commerce, in order to purchase some of these employments" (*E*, 93).

Hume's preference for commercial society over courtier society is also evident in his rejection of the courtly virtues of aristocratic honor and martial glory, in favor of more profane concerns with industry, plenty, and social utility. In his essay, "Of Refinement in the Arts," he says this of societies that honor courtly indolence above commercial pursuits: "In times when industry and the arts flourish, men are kept in perpetual occupation. . . . Banish those arts from society, you deprive men both of action and of pleasure." He suggests that anti-commercial snobbery cannot be

27. Laursen, *The Politics of Skepticism*: 175-76.

compensated by the development of courtly manners. It is only in the presence of "industry and refinements in the mechanical arts" that the liberal arts flourish. "The same age, which produces great philosophers and politicians, renowned generals and poets, usually abounds with skillful weavers and ship-carpenters" (*E*, 270-1).

Hume's respect for the commercial and professional classes is further evinced by his essay "Of the Middle Station of Life," where he writes that men who fill the middling social ranks "form the most numerous Rank of Men, that can be suppos'd susceptible of Philosophy." He argues that aristocrats are too thoroughly immersed in pleasure to hearken to reason, while the poor are too pre-occupied with scrounging for the necessities of life to engage in learning. The middling ranks, however, are made habitually friendly and virtuous by rendering services to their fellows as a matter of business, and they acquire wisdom and ability through their constant industry (*E*, 446-9).

Hume is willing to recognize the cultural achievements of modern monarchies, where men of the commercial and professional ranks could be found, but he believes that liberal commercial republics are more reliable nests for the kind of society that fosters mitigated skepticism. His solution to the dilemma of choosing between monarchy and republicanism is to support the mixed constitution that he thinks had developed in Britain. Yet he describes this constitution as one in which "the republican part of the government prevails . . . though with a great mixture of monarchy." Moreover, he approves of the republican element's domination so long as the constitution remains mixed (*E*, 12). Consequently, given the mitigated skeptics' preference for a particular kind of political character, and Hume's description of the kind of political and social institutions that produce that character, it would seem that those disposed to moderation in politics and mitigated skepticism in philosophy would prefer liberal commercial republics to other sorts of regimes, so long as those republics retain constitutional restraints.

Hume's account of the good life suggests a second way in which his conception of mitigated skepticism commends liberal commercial republics. Hume examines the good life in four related essays, "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic." He models the first three essays on what he takes to be the three main interpretations of the good life. The Epicurean is devoted to "elegance and pleasure;" the Stoic to "action and virtue," and the Platonist to "contemplation, and philosophical devotion" (*E*, 138, 146, 155). The fourth essay describes Hume's mitigated skeptical response to the first three essays and the skeptic's conception of the good life. Not surprisingly, it is an account of the good life that is most compatible with Hume's account of life in a liberal commercial republic.

In "The Sceptic," Hume criticizes an assumption he attributes to the other three ethical "schools," that each of their accounts of the good life is best for all people. He observes that "there is a considerable diversity in the sentiments of beauty and worth, and that education, custom, prejudice, caprice, and humour, frequently vary our taste of this kind." Because philosophy cannot impel us to change the objects

of our passions, it is useless for philosophers to prescribe a single conception of the good life to all people. Where men's upbringing has accustomed them to seeking pleasure, the pursuit of virtue or eternal truth can only lead them away from what makes them happiest. Following the usual method of his mitigated skepticism, then, Hume rejects the notion that philosophy can produce a universally applicable and *a priori* prescription for the good life (*E*, 163).

Nevertheless, Hume reasons that one can compare conceptions of the good life in terms of the empirical likelihood of their achievement. He concludes from what he takes to be common experience that the conception of the good life that he attributes to "the Skeptic" is most readily achieved. He observes that "some passions or inclinations, in the *enjoyment* of their objects, are not so steady or constant as others, nor convey such durable pleasure and satisfaction. *Philosophical devotion*, for instance, like the enthusiasm of a poet, is the transitory effect of high spirits [which] cannot long actuate the mind." As for the life of pleasure, "where the temper is the best disposed to any *enjoyment*, the object is often found wanting [because] the passions, which pursue external objects, contribute not so much to happiness, as those which rest in ourselves." Hume concludes that the best life is one that is constant and is not dependent on circumstances that one cannot readily control. "The happiest disposition of mind is the virtuous; or in other words, that which leads to action and employment, renders us sensible to the social passions, steels the heart against the assaults of fortune, reduces the affections to a just moderation, makes our thoughts an entertainment to us, and inclines us rather to the pleasures of society and conversation than to those of the senses" (*E*, 168). Hume describes this life primarily as one filled with activity, but allows for the pleasures of philosophy when the mind is disposed to them. He suggests that our thoughts can provide entertainment, so long as we are inclined to the pleasures of business and conversation too. Hume supposes that an inconstant activity like philosophy can be enjoyed when it is grounded in a life of more constant activities like business and company. Under these conditions philosophy can be "to some tempers . . . one of the most amusing [occupations] in which life could possibly be employed" (*E*, 180).

Marie Martin has shown that Hume's skeptical conception of the good life is largely borrowed from the Stoics. She points to the similarity of the virtues Hume often mentions to those cataloged by Cicero, and reports that Hume was "schooled in the classical moral tradition [and] enamored with Ciceronian humanism."²⁸ However, Martin also notes that Hume's conception of virtue differs in important ways from that of the Stoics. She points to Hume's praise of "benevolent" virtues as an important addition to the Ciceronian catalog.²⁹ Hume writes that "the virtuous and

28. Marie A. Martin, "Hume as Classical Moralism," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24 (September 1994): 323-324.

29. Marie A. Martin, "Hume on Human Excellence," *Hume Studies* 8 (November 1992), 389.

tender Sentiments . . . suffered mightily" in the hands of the stern and austere Stoics. (*E*, 539). Just as he rejects the vainglorious pursuits of courtier society, he rejects the ancient obsession with masculine virtues and glory. "We may observe, that the ancient republics were almost in perpetual war, a natural effect of their martial spirit." He laments that this "barbarity . . . must have banished every merchant and manufacturer" (*E*, 404, 419). He does not intend, however, merely to attack honor in the name of luxury, as did Mandeville. Hume writes, "exalted capacity, undaunted courage, prosperous success; these may only expose a hero or politicians to the envy and ill-will of the public." Nevertheless, "as soon as the praises are added of humane and beneficent; when instances are displayed of lenity, tenderness, or friendship; envy itself is silent, or joins the general voice of approbation and applause" (*E*, 176). Hume does not intend to disparage courage and honor. He only insists that they be combined with beneficence rather than with a bloodlust for glory.

The essential difference between the mitigated skeptic and the ancient Stoics, however, can be found in Hume's account of how the best life is achieved. Martin writes that Hume departs from the Stoics most significantly in that the Stoics "assume that philosophical knowledge guarantees happiness, and philosophical ignorance guarantees unhappiness." Martin argues that Hume's skeptic, in contrast, "denies that the knowledge of the type of life you should lead, the type of person you should be to be happy, has any power to change or transform you into that sort of person."³⁰ For Hume, character is largely shaped by the kind of education and institutions one experiences in life. If people are to achieve the best life as Hume defines it—that is, if people are to achieve the mitigated skeptic's life of moderate philosophy and the expression of virtuous action in business and social life—they must receive a particular kind of education.

This essay has shown that Hume views a common life steeped in business, learning, and conversation as the kind of education best suited to mitigated skepticism. It has further shown that, according to Hume, living in a liberal commercial republic best promotes these activities. It would seem to follow that for Hume, liberal commercial republics are the regimes where people have the greatest chance of living the good life. Insofar as mitigated skepticism recommends a particular manner of living, then, it subtly recommends liberal commercial republics.

VI. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the conclusions reached in this essay reveal that Hume's political thought is deeply indebted to a unique understanding of skepticism. This debt is probably overlooked because Hume uses the term "skepticism" in a sense that may seem unusual to contemporary readers. Hume's "mitigated skepticism" is far

30. Martin, "Hume as Classical Moralist": 328-29.

more than just an epistemological stance or the inescapable outcome of an argument. It is a form of character, a character whose disposition is encouraged by, but not wholly dependent on, philosophical argument. It is also a way of life, a life devoted to study, conversation, and ordinary business. Finally, it is a way of life that not only predisposes one toward particular political and social arrangements, but indeed presupposes and includes those arrangements.

For the sake of clarity, this essay has discussed Hume's views on political science, political practice, the best regime, and the best life as distinct matters. It should be apparent by now, however, that these elements of Hume's thought are indelibly intertwined. Hume's conclusions about the best life, the best regime, and the skeptic's inclination to moderate political practice are ostensibly based on common observations rather than *a priori* reasoning. Hume advances his moral and political maxims by appealing to "many obvious instances" drawn from history and common experience (though in practice he frequently relies on speculation as well) (*E*, 160). The skeptic's way of life, in turn, is in Hume's view essential to the development of the skeptical disposition, personal experience, and disinterestedness which are themselves essential to the proper formulation of moral and political maxims. Finally, life in a liberal commercial republic provides the financial, literary, and social environment in which political science and the skeptical way of life become possible for significant numbers of people.

This is not to say that Hume views the various elements of his mitigated skepticism as strict prerequisites for one another. That would involve him in too many obviously circular arguments. His account of the connections between those elements suggests that they develop in tandem, historically rather than logically. For Hume mitigated skepticism is an inextricably intertwined admixture of disparate beliefs, behaviors, circumstances, and political commitments that emerged in his own time. It is as much a product of modernity as of philosophy.