

DAVID HUME ON THE PUBLIC INTEREST

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INTRODUCTION

The notions of interest and the public interest appear early on in the first act of Hume's moral, political, and historical writings. And not only do these notions make an early appearance, but they are the lead characters in almost every scene. Some of these scenes are of monumental importance, for example, Hume's account of the origin of justice; some scenes are of lesser importance, for example, Hume's account of the need for ecclesiastical establishments. Regardless of the magnitude of the scene, however, the various appeals to interest and to the public interest are ubiquitous.

The principal object of this essay is to try to make clear some of the things that Hume means by the public interest. In order to do so, it is first necessary to say something about how the notion of interest fits into Hume's moral philosophy; thus it is to that subject that I now turn.

I

My approach to Hume's view of interest begins by looking at four of Hume's most remarkable essays: "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," "The Platonist," and "The Sceptic." Hume makes it clear that he does not intend that this series of portraits provide a precise historical analysis of the ancient sects; instead, his aim,

in part, is to show dispositions that “naturally form themselves in the world, and [to] entertain different ideas of human life and of happiness” (*E*, p. 138). Hume, of course, endorses the position set forth in the finale of this set of essays. His chief reason for rejecting the preceding three theories of morals is made clear at the outset of “The Sceptic.”

There is one mistake, to which [philosophers] seem liable, almost without exception; they confine too much their principles and make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations. When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning. (*E*, p. 159)

In the engagement of theorizing about morals, as Hume sees it, philosophers tend to universalize their passions or inclinations; they magnify their own pursuits in such a way that they see them as being of the utmost value for all. Anyone who fails to recognize these “philosophically defensible” ends is simply being unreasonable. Furthermore, these philosophers are entirely myopic to the possibility that what is totally indifferent to them, can be of genuine value to others. Such philosophers do not comprehend “the vast variety of inclinations and pursuits among our species” (*E*, p. 160).

Hume proceeds to ask the question whether or not there truly is one course of life that is proper, one determinate set of ends worthy of one’s endeavors. He responds by suggesting that if one wants to be rich, one should be diligent in one’s profession, and so on; and if one wants the esteem of others, one should not exhibit arrogance. One might respond, however, that Hume is merely expressing the maxims of common sense and prudence, and ignoring the question asked. To this Hume remarks:

What is it then you desire more? Do you come to a philosopher as to a *cunning man*, to learn something by magic or witchcraft, beyond what can be known by common prudence and discretion?—Yes; we come to a philosopher to be instructed, how we shall chuse our ends, more than the means for attaining these ends: We want to know what desire we shall gratify, what passion we shall comply with, what appetite we shall indulge. As to the rest, we trust to common sense, and the general maxims of the world for our instruction. I am sorry then, that I have pretended to be a philosopher. (*E*, p. 161)

For Hume, it is not the job of the philosopher, or any one else for that matter, to elucidate a course of life that is appropriate for all: there is no single path to be found. The ends that are worthy of a person's endorsement vary from person to person, depending on the individual's inclinations, education, practices of the person's society, and so forth. In rejecting the theories of "The Epicurean," "The Stoic," and "The Platonist," Hume is rejecting what he sees as the heavy-handed monism of eudaimonism: there is no *telos* to be discovered toward which all should direct their conduct. Instructive in this regard is a letter of Hume's to Francis Hutcheson: "For pray, what is the End of Man? Is he created for Happiness or for Virtue? For this Life or for the next? For himself or for his Maker? [T]hese Questions...are endless and quite wide of my Purpose" (*L*, I, p. 33). For Hume, morals does not provide a consideration of the ends of life—and in this way Hume is thus repudiating the conception of morals as a maker of souls.

Putting some of this in the idiom of this essay, in sanctioning the relative character of individual ends, Hume is sanctioning the pursuit of interest, the pursuit of an individual's private interest, that is, action motivated by "the expectation of particular rewards" for oneself (*E*, p. 34). "The private interest of every one is different," (*T*, p. 555) and the institution of morals must be reflective of this. It is probably wise to emphasize that I am not claiming that, for Hume, the pursuit of private interest is the only important part of an individual's life, although it is of great import, and I am not claiming that the passion of interest (cf. *T*, p. 491; *E*, p. 97) is all consuming, although its influence scarcely can be overestimated: "Nothing is more certain, than that men are, in a great measure, govern'd by interest, and that even when they extend their concern beyond themselves, 'tis not to any great distance" (*T*, p. 534).

That all of this is so should hardly come as any surprise. It is only a poor moralist, something Hume was not, who invents his own version of the human character. As his essays "Of Commerce," and "Of Refinement in the Arts," make abundantly clear, Hume recognized that the character that had fully emerged in Europe by the eighteenth century was the character of an independent, enterprising individual in pursuit of his own private interests. And it is the nature and origins of the virtues of such a character that Hume is at pains to explore in his moral and political writings.¹

II

Since at least the time of Bentham's encomium of Hume in his *A Fragment of Government in 1776*,² the standard reading of Hume has been one which sees him as a utilitarian in his moral and political philosophy. There is, however, nothing greater standing in the way of understanding Hume's conception of the public interest than that interpretation. On that view of Hume, one is led to expect that by "the public interest," Hume means the aggregate of the satisfaction of individual private interests, and in the absence of any systematic or detailed analysis of the public interest in Hume's writings—and there is none to be found—that conception can be read somewhat easily into the text, especially given the frequency with which the notion of utility appears. However, careful attention to the myriad references to the public interest in Hume's moral, political, and historical writings, and the context in which these references appear, suggest an entirely different view.

The place to start is with what Hume means by "the public"; and we will be best served in this regard by examining the contrast that Hume draws between the individual or private person on the one hand, and the public on the other.

That Hume draws such a contrast is clear: his writings reveal any number of remarks such as, "private, as well as public," (*E*, p. 19) "individuals, as well as the public," (*E*, p. 263) and "both to private persons and to the public" (*E*, p. 280). The point that comes out in these passages and innumerable others is that the public is distinct from the private in some important respect, suggesting that it is not simply a sum of that which is private.

There are two passages in particular in Hume's *Essays* that are especially lucid in leading us to reflect on the difference between the public and the private. First, in "Of Commerce," Hume writes:

The greatness of a state, and the happiness of its subjects, how independent soever they may be supposed in some respects, are commonly allowed to be inseparable with regard to commerce; and as private men receive greater security in the possession of their trade and riches, from the power of the public, so the public becomes powerful in proportion to the opulence and extensive commerce of private men. This maxim is true in general[.] (*E*, p. 255)

Second, in his essay, "Of Refinement in the Arts," Hume writes:

[I]ndustry, knowledge, and humanity, are not advantageous in private life alone: They diffuse their beneficial influence on the *public*, and render the government as great and flourishing as they make individuals happy and prosperous. (*E*, p. 272)

As these quotations seemingly make clear, by "the public," Hume means the government. This reading is supported by various other passages in Hume's writings. For example, while discussing the usefulness of paper securities with good backing, Hume remarks, "If the public provide not a bank, private bankers will take advantage of this circumstance" (*E*, p. 284); also, Hume's various comments about the public debt are apposite in this context (*E*, pp. 349-365; pp. 95-96). Thus, it would seem that in referring to the public interest, Hume is referring to governmental interest exclusively; and, thus, in referring to public utility, Hume is referring to usefulness to the government. This claim is only partially true, however, for there is another sense of "public" and, therefore, another, and indeed more robust, sense of "public interest" in Hume's writings, a sense that contains within it this (narrower) sense of the public as government. However, I shall treat these two senses *as if* they were distinct until section III where I discuss the constitutive elements of the public interest on Hume's conception. That one sense of the public and, therefore, the public interest, is contained within the other, will become clear then. For now there is value in keeping these two senses apart.

In the first sense of "the public," the term is synonymous with government. In the second sense of "the public," a sense to which I now turn, the term is synonymous with society at a certain level of development. Here "the public" refers to a large-scale association of individuals, an association held together by *certain* shared practices, including morals and manners, a shared history, and existing under the authority of a government. Thus, on this second sense of "the public," the public interest means the interest or interests of society. This reading is confirmed when one compares Hume's claim in the *Treatise* that, "a sympathy with public interest is the source of the moral approbation which attends [justice]," (pp. 499-500) with his statement that, "the obligation

to justice is founded entirely on the interests of society" (*E*, p. 489). There is no difference, that is, between sympathizing with the public interest and sympathizing with the interests of society.³

It is apparent that the first sense of "the public interest," which involves the conception of the public as government, does not involve any claim to an aggregation of individual interests. It is also the case that in the second sense of "the public interest," which involves the conception of the public as society, Hume is not making reference to such an aggregation, for we find many cases in which Hume differentiates between the interests of society and individual interests. In the *Treatise*, for example, he remarks of justice that, "The whole scheme...of law and justice is advantageous to the society *and* to every individual," (p. 579; my emphasis) implying that the interest of society is a distinct phenomenon from the set of individual interests. In the second *Enquiry*, Hume writes, "a particular act of justice may be hurtful to the public [in the second sense under discussion] *as well as* to individuals" (*EM*, p. 306; my emphasis), again implying that by the public interest Hume means something other than an aggregation of individual interest. Most compelling of all, however, is a passage from the third volume of Hume's *The History of England*, where he asserts:

Most of the arts and professions in a state are of such a nature, that, while they promote the interest of the society, *they are also* useful or agreeable to *some* individuals; and in that case, the constant rule of the magistrate, except, perhaps, on the first introduction of any art, is, to leave the profession to itself, and trust its encouragement to those who reap the benefit of it. (*H*, III, p. 135; my emphasis)

Thus, the promotion of the interests of society is, in some important respect, a distinct enterprise from the promotion of individual private interests, and the reason is that the interests of society, on Hume's account, are not constituted by an aggregate of individual private interests.

I have been attempting gradually to mount the simplest textual case that I can within a short compass that Hume's position is that the public interest is not simply the aggregate of individual interests. I shall add to this case in the next section when I turn to the constitutive elements of the public interest, presenting an interpretation of these elements in support of the claim in question. However, in concluding this section, it is important

to emphasize that, in some manner, the public interest or the interest of society must have some bearing on private interests for, after all, the public *qua* society all too obviously consists of individuals. The question is what is the exact character of the connection between the public and private interests.

I shall now consider the issue of what Hume takes the interests of the public to be.

III

It is wise to begin with our second conception of the public interest, wherein this notion refers to the interests of society. And in considering what is to the interests of society, that is, what is the good for society, Hume is considering that which is necessary for the maintenance and well-being of a society, the *minimal conditions* that are called for if a society is to persevere, and persevere well. The principal requirement here is peace and order: "all men are sensible of the necessity of peace and order for the maintenance of society" (*E*, p. 38). Society cannot be maintained under a lengthy regime of violence, nor can it be maintained in circumstances where, because individuals do not know what to expect of one another, they cannot adjust their actions to one another accordingly.

For Hume, there are two institutional arrangements that are most responsible for the maintenance of peace and order in society, and hence most responsible for maintaining the interests of society, namely, justice (rules for the allocation of property) and government.

The general character of Hume's analysis of justice is too well known to necessitate my recounting most of its details in this essay;⁴ however, there is one feature of Hume's analysis that does require mention, for it has an especially deep bearing on Hume's understanding of the public interest.

The feature I want to mention and consider is Hume's account of the origin of justice. Of the utmost importance here is that, for Hume, justice—both as a virtue and as an institutional arrangement—came into existence as a result of individuals pursuing their interests in a world of scarcity, a world in which the possessions of a person could be taken from him without "any loss or alteration" (*T*, p. 488) in the possession. And even though justice

is a moral virtue because it is "absolutely requisite...to the support of society" (*T*, p. 497). "The Inventors of [justice] had chiefly in view their own Interest,"⁵ and not that of the public. Justice is a consequence of human action, but not of human design.

The pursuit of interest led to the establishment of justice, for men ultimately were capable of realizing that they could pursue their interests best if they refrained from taking the possessions of others. Thus, justice provides a matrix in which individuals can act in pursuit of their own ends. In particular, it does this by providing a matrix or framework of protected domains which define a range of expectations, allowing for an orderly correspondence to be established amongst individuals, thus giving rise to a circumstance in which individuals can pursue their own ends without colliding with one another. It is exactly in this manner that justice serves to maintain society, by providing conditions in which individuals can pursue their own ends, their private interests, in a peaceful and orderly way; and it is exactly in this manner that justice serves or constitutes the public interest. One should also note that in specifying these procedural conditions, Hume is also specifying certain private interests or ends that are not and cannot be countenanced—for example, the thrill of one's own thievery—because they violate the procedures at hand.

In considering certain aspects of Hume's analysis of the origins of justice, we were inexorably led to consider certain elements of the relationship between justice, private interest, and the public interest. More needs to be said on this subject; however, before doing so we will serve ourselves well if first we briefly consider that second institutional arrangement which is so vital to the public interest, namely, government.

For Hume, the principal purpose of government is to protect people in their property and persons: "We are, therefore, to look upon all the vast apparatus of our government, as having ultimately no other object or purpose but the distribution of justice" (*E*, p. 37). Human beings easily can be overcome by the seductive desire for present goods, so much so that even the recognition of the importance of justice to their well-being fails to prevent their injustice. And "This great weakness is incurable in human nature" (*E*, p. 38); thus, governments are necessary to maintain justice and, as such, a regime of peace and order. Governments,

therefore, are charged with maintaining certain conditions under which individuals can pursue their private interests. To maintain these conditions and protect their citizens, governments require fleets, armies, magistrates, *et cetera*; hence, governments must tax their citizens in order to acquire the necessary revenue. In addition to this task, Hume makes governments responsible for the provision of certain public goods, for example, canals, harbors, roads, and the like. These are goods that although a considerable number of individuals desire them, the market, in Hume's estimation, fails to provide for them.⁶ What is important in this case is that most individuals have an actual interest in such goods, and they recognize this interest. Government, in this context, is not acting paternalistically. It is, instead, aiding the pursuit of individuals' self-conscious interests and, therefore, it is in no way setting forth or initiating what those interests should be.

In examining certain features of Hume's analysis of justice and government, a certain picture of the public interest keeps coming into view, namely, that what is in the public interest is a framework or matrix that allows individuals to pursue their private interests. We must consider this more carefully, but before doing so we would be wise to return to two issues we have already broached: first, the connection between our two senses of the public interest; and second, the relationship between justice, interest, and the public interest.

In section II we saw that by the notion of the public, Hume sometimes means government and sometimes society; hence on first inspection it appeared as if Hume were working with two senses of the public interest. However, at this point in my essay it is, I hope, somewhat clear that ultimately Hume has only one sense of the public interest at hand. It is the case that more than occasionally Hume will use the term 'public' to refer to government and the term 'public interest' to the interests of government; however, we must recognize that, on Hume's analysis, government is part of society, and indeed one of those institutions that most provides for the interests of society. Thus, government is in the interest of the public in the same manner as justice is. One important difference, however, is that government is an agent capable of acting in a way that justice obviously is not; for this reason, government can act for the public interest as justice

cannot, and therefore the propriety in occasionally identifying government with the public. Moreover, by identifying government with the public, and thus identifying the interests of the two, Hume is attempting to limit revolutionary, political activity by suggesting that an attack on government is an attack on the public. Nevertheless, the important point to bear in mind is that there is only one sense of the public interest in Hume's moral, political, and historical writings, and in this sense public means society, and the public interest refers to the interests of society.

It is now appropriate to turn back to our earlier discussion of justice, and to examine from a somewhat different angle the relationship between justice, private interest, and the public interest. And the place to begin is with a well known quotation from Hume's *Treatise*:

A single act of justice is frequently contrary to *public interest*; and were it to stand alone, without being follow'd by other acts, may in itself, be very prejudicial to society. When a man of great merit, of a beneficent disposition, restores a great fortune to a miser, or a seditious bigot, he has acted justly and laudably, but the public is a real sufferer. Nor is every single act of justice, consider'd apart, more conducive to private interest, than to public[.] ...But however single acts of justice may be contrary, either to public or private interest, 'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite, both to the support of society, and the well-being of every individual. (*T*, p. 497)

That single acts of justice may be contrary to a person's private interests is not difficult to understand. Less understandable is how single acts of justice can be frequently contrary to the public interest. In considering this, I shall begin with the two examples that Hume presents.

We must note at the outset that the examples that Hume uses to illustrate his point have to do with restoration—thus, the focus seems to be on the actions of a magistrate. This does have some importance as I shall show shortly; however, the essence of the point that Hume is getting at could be made with an example involving private persons. And the beginning of that point is this: that there will be circumstances in which an individual who has a lawful right to property—either land or chattel—will make a use of that property that is either directly opposed to the public

interest—the seditious bigot—or not as beneficial to the public interest as other uses—the miser. In the former case, the seditious bigot will use his money to attempt to undermine the present government, creating an instability that is deleterious to the public interest; in the latter case, the miser does not further commerce—of which more shortly—thus not increasing the wealth of a society and, therefore, among other things, not increasing the tax base. In this way, everything else notwithstanding, the funds that government has at its disposal are not as much as perhaps they could be, and in this way the public interest is damaged. Irrespective of the particulars, however, Hume's point is that even if there are cases in which there is a better known use to which property can be put, it is best not to violate the present rules of justice in pursuit of that end.

The seditious bigot and the miser must be granted all that is legally theirs under the rules of justice, for all institutional arrangements require some hardship. One cannot, as Hume frequently remarks, separate the good from the ill: "Good and ill are universally intermingled and confounded; happiness and misery, wisdom and folly, virtue and vice. Nothing is pure and entirely of a piece. All advantages are attended with disadvantages" (*NHR*, p. 92). It is impossible, Hume believes, to arrive at a set of rules the application of which will always be for the good in every particular case. However, it is by only inflexibly observing or applying the rules of justice that the whole scheme of justice becomes useful, thus establishing a regime of peace and order and serving the public interest.

Public utility requires that property should be regulated by general *inflexible* rules; and though such rules are adopted as best serve the same end of public utility, it is impossible for them...to make beneficial consequences result from every individual case. (*EM*, p. 305; my emphasis)⁷

The question at which we have arrived is why the rules of justice have to be inflexibly applied, if the public interest is to be served. We can best approach an answer by turning over certain passages in Hume's *The History of England*, particularly those that deal with the Star Chamber.

In his *History*, Hume recounts both the evil character of the Star Chamber court, and the importance of its removal by Parliament in 1641. Its heinous character was due to the fact that it

possessed an unlimited discretionary authority of fining, imprisoning, and inflicting corporal punishment[.]... [It] had no precise rule or limit, either with regard to the causes which came under its jurisdiction, or the decisions which it formed.... There needed but this one court in any government, to put an end to all regular, legal, and exact plans of liberty. For who durst set himself to the character of being a patron of freedom, while exposed to so arbitrary a jurisdiction. (*H*, vol. IV, p. 356; vol. V, p. 328; vol. IV, p. 356)

By removing the Star Chamber, Parliament greatly limited the discretionary power of the King:

The star-chamber alone was accustomed to punish infractions of the king's edicts: But as no courts of judicature now remained, except those in Westminsterhall, which take cognizance only of common and statute law, the king may thenceforth issue proclamations, but no man is bound to obey them. (*H*, vol. V, p. 329)

Following this passage, Hume suggests that perhaps no government can be entirely without arbitrary authority of some kind, however,

[T]he parliament justly thought, that the king was too eminent a magistrate to be trusted with discretionary power, which he might so easily turn to the destruction of liberty. And in the event it has hitherto been found, that, *though some sensible inconveniences arise from the maxim of adhering strictly to law, yet the advantages overbalance them*, and should render the English grateful to the memory of their ancestors, who, after repeated contests, at last established that noble, though dangerous, principle. (*H*, vol. V, pp. 329-30; my emphasis)

In his discussion of the Star Chamber, Hume presents two different conceptions of law and government: the rule of man and the rule of law. He views the latter as involving laws being applied inflexibly to the particulars of a case.⁸ These two conceptions are incompatible with one another, and institutionally provide—broadly speaking—the only alternatives; for once discretion enters the scene, Pandora's box is opened. And we can see here in the lengthy quotation cited above from the *Treatise* why Hume is interested in the question of restoration, for Hume has history and historical contingency very much before his mind—as he almost always does.

The rule of law provides the only alternative that is consonant with the interests of the public, for it is only the rule of law that

provides a matrix or framework that allows individuals to know—as completely as possible—when their actions are legally sanctioned; that is, the rule of law is the alternative that best allows individuals to coordinate their activities with one another, leading to a society of peace and order. Peace and order, that which principally constitutes the public interest, requires that the rules of justice be applied inflexibly, for it is only this kind of application that ultimately defines a clear range of expectations for an individual's conduct.

Even though an inflexible application of the rules of justice may in particular cases be contrary to both the public and private interest, it is, as Hume claims, that which ultimately serves both interests—and an inflexible application serves private interests by providing for the public interest: by making a regime of peace and order possible, justice provides a matrix in which individuals can best approach their own interests. And Hume can make this claim without any analysis of the projected aggregation of individual private interests—even if such an analysis could be done, which Hume would think quite fantastic. Indeed, Hume shows no concern at all that the rules of justice *directly* better the private interests of any particular individual or set of individuals; instead, his concern is with a set of conditions that best provide for peace and order, a set of conditions that provide a social order in which individuals can satisfy their ends, yet with no guarantee that they will.

IV

I now want to turn to different terrain, and to examine two other aspects of the public interest, beginning with a brief look at the relationship between the public interest and certain economic matters.

All of Hume's economic writings are contained in that collection of essays first published in 1752 under the title of "Political Discourses."⁹ This collection consists of twelve essays, the first eight of which are on economics. The first essay in that series, "Of Commerce," contains a brief introduction to the whole; and therein Hume states that, "The chief business of politicians[,] especially in the domestic government of the state [is] the public good" (*E*, p. 254). Hume then goes on to say that he "thought this

introduction necessary before the following discourses on *commerce, money, interest, balance of trade, etc*" (*E*, p. 255). We are, in other words, more or less to understand his analyses of these economic matters to be analyses of what economic conditions contribute to the public interest.

A detailed examination of Hume's economic thought is beyond the pale of this discussion; however, it is important to briefly comment on the spirit of Hume's various analyses, and I can do so best by focusing on commerce and luxury.

Commerce and luxury contribute to the public interest in at least four ways. First, by contributing to the wealth of a country, they provide—through taxation—increased support for that country's fleets, armies, judiciary system, *et cetera*; second, by encouraging industry and ambition, and discouraging sloth and indolence, commerce and luxury contribute in establishing a certain bent of mind that can be used by the government in time of conflict; third, they increase the number of "innocent gratifications" that are available for any given individual's disposal; and finally, by increasing the knowledge and wealth of a country generally, commerce and luxury increase the chances of any given individual's achieving his ends.¹⁰

In these four ways, then, commerce and luxury provide for the public interest by aiding in the establishing of conditions in which individuals can seek their own ends. The appeal to the public interest in Hume's economic writings, as in his work on justice and government, is not an appeal to an aggregate of individual private interests, but rather to a matrix or conditions under which individuals can pursue their ends in a peaceful and orderly manner. It is to Hume's contention that the philosopher, the true philosopher, is the *guardian of the public interest* that I now turn. Consider here Hume's famous discussion of factions in his essay, "Of Parties in General." There he tells us that (Real) factions can be divided into three kinds: those of interest, affection, and principle. It is the party of principle that Hume finds most astonishing and dangerous.

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. Where different principles beget a contrariety of conduct...the matter may be more easily

explained.... But where the difference of principle is attended with no contrariety of action, but every one may follow his own way, without interfering with his neighbour...what madness, what fury can beget such unhappy and such fatal divisions? (*E*, p. 60)

As intrinsically dangerous as such parties are, according to Hume, they are especially so when one such party begins to dominate. That this could happen, and was always in danger of happening, is what might be called "Hume's Nightmare." A moderating force is required, and this force is to be provided by the true philosopher. In his essay "Of the Protestant Succession," Hume writes, "It belongs therefore, to a philosopher alone, who is of neither party, to put all the circumstance in the scale, and assign to each of them its proper poise and influence" (*E*, p. 507). It is for this reason that Hume goes to great pains in his essays "Of the Original Contract," "Of Passive Obedience," and "Of the Coalition of Parties," to argue that neither Social Contract Theory—the principle of the Whigs—nor Divine Right of Kings theory—the principle of the Tories—has the upper hand either philosophically, practically, or historically (cf. *E*, p. 494). Most important here is Hume's claim to have shown that speculative systems of politics, systems that appeal to transcendent, timeless, ahistorical principles, are incoherent.¹¹ Critical arguments to this effect, Hume believes, serve to diffuse the attempt to overturn—in this instance—the moral, social, and political order of England. Hume suggests that revolutionary politics, the attempt to remake the normative order on the basis of some transcendent principle, are typically attempts to substitute one set of interests for the public interest; revolutionary politics, that is, typically attempt to impose one set of ends upon individuals, rather than providing a somewhat "neutral" framework in which individuals can seek their own ends (cf. *EU*, pp. 11, 132-48).

The philosopher is thus a guardian of the public interest and, given Hume's approach, his work in the philosophy of politics will be of a much narrower scope than has traditionally been assigned to the political philosopher. It is for this reason that Hume's political essays deal with particular, historical matters of fact. Moreover, in a curious way, it is also one reason why interest in Hume's political philosophy has never been bullish: he was offering an entirely new way of doing political philosophy, one that

would not, by simply presenting a new principle or a new theory, add fuel to the fires burning within parties of principle.

V

In concluding, I would like to bring many of the threads of this essay together. And to do so I shall begin with two quotations, the first from the *Treatise*: "moral distinctions arise, in great measure, from the tendency of qualities and characters to the interest of society" (p. 579). This quotation should be read in conjunction with Hume's comment in his essay, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," that, "a man, who is only susceptible of friendship, without *public spirit*, or a regard to the community, is deficient in the most material part of virtue" (*E*, p. 27; my emphasis). What emerges here is the position that the predominant stage on which morals is played out, is the stage of the public interest. The virtuous individual is in some very large measure the person whose actions are in accord with the public interest, that is, whose actions lead to the achievement of, and do not violate, the peace and order of society, that is, the framework that makes it possible for individuals to successfully pursue their own interests. The virtuous individual can act perfectly virtuously in pursuit of his own ends, and by doing so, contribute, in various ways to the public interest. The public interest does not provide instructions on how to live; instead, it provides a shelter in which one can.

1. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1962), pp. 250-51.

2. Jeremy Bentham, *A Fragment on Government*, by J. H. Burns and H. L. A. Hart, eds., with an intro. by Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 51 n. 1.

3. My claim here does not rest on the view that Hume's doctrine of sympathy remained unchanged through his writings, as the same claim could be made *mutatis mutandis* without any reference to sympathy.

4. For an excellent discussion, however, see Nicholas Capaldi, "Hume's Account of Property," in this issue.

5. From Hume's manuscript alterations to Book III of the *Treatise*. Cf. *Treatise*, p. 672.

6. For a more Humean treatment of the problem of public goods than Hume's own, cf. Anthony de Jasay, *Social Contract, Free Rider* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1989).

7. In this context, by 'utility,' Hume means 'interest.'
8. However, for one important exception to this, cf. *Essays*, "Of Passive Obedience," p. 489.
9. For a discussion of when Hume published what essays, cf. Eugene Miller's "Foreword" to his edition of Hume's *Essays* (cited in abbreviations); and Ernest C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1980). The reader may want to note that although the second edition of Mossner's *Life* is to be preferred because of some small alterations and additions in the text, the first edition of this work, published by Nelson of London, 1954, contains many plates that are of great interest, plates that were not reproduced in the Oxford 1970 reprint of the Nelson edition.
10. For Hume's most spirited defense of free trade generally, cf. *Essays*, "Of the Balance of Trade," pp. 308-26; and, "Of the Jealousy of Trade," pp. 327-31.
11. The details of Hume's argument for this cannot be taken up here. Cf. James King's very important essay, "The Virtue of Political Skepticism," in this issue; and Donald Livingston's seminal work, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1984).

**Abbreviations for David Hume's Works
Used Throughout This Volume**

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

EU *David Hume's Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

I *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. C. W. Hendel. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955; *EM* *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

H *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second, 1688*, based on the edition of 1778 with the author's last corrections and improvements. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983.

L *The Letters of David Hume*, J. Y. T. Grieg. 2 Vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

NHR *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. A. Wayne Colver and *DHR* *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. John Valdimir Price. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.

T *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition with text revised and variant readings by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

Reason Papers

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies

**Essays to Commemorate the 250th Anniversary
of the Completion of David Hume's
*A Treatise of Human Nature***

Edited by Stuart D. Warner

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