

## Hume's Way of Reasonableness in Epistemology, in Politics, and in Political Economy

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**Abstract:** Early in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, epistemology leads Hume to famously reconfigure reason. The reconfiguration of reason leads him towards skepticism in that he finds that what is generally considered to be *reason* is an operation on ideas that proceeds on the basis of custom. Despite his skepticism, Hume resolves to presuppose the soundness of reason and to use reason to study things which appear natural and agreeable from the perspective of common life. Hume continues on in the *Treatise* to study human things, among which politics looms large. Hume's application of reason to politics arrives at a presumption of liberty, which cashes out in terms of policy debates. When choosing between two policy options, the presumption of liberty inclines him towards the option that least impinges upon individual liberty. Hume's presumption of liberty stems both from his understanding of the usefulness and agreeableness of liberty, the usefulness understood by way of his theory of property and his conceptual developments in political economy. Hume's reconfiguration of reason leads him to arrive at a second presumption in politics: the presumption of the status quo. The presumption of the status quo would require reform efforts to bear the burden of proof. The presumption of the status quo in Hume stems from his epistemology, which emphasizes the necessity of prudence in light of the problems of reason, and from his view of the usefulness of political authority more generally. Thus, Hume's way of reasonableness leads him to presuppose the soundness of reason in human matters but to nonetheless tread with care and prudence in reason's application. In politics, his way of reasonableness leads him to two presumptions, presumptions which in fact conflict in cases of reforms that would liberalize social arrangements.

**Keywords:** David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, political economy, property rights, epistemology, liberty

**JEL Codes:** B12, B31, P14

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**Note:** References in this study marked with a T are to Book, Part, Section, and Paragraph; references marked with EHU or EPM are to Section, Part, and Paragraph; references marked with EMPL are to Page; references marked with H are to Volume and Page; references marked with TMS are to Part, Section, Chapter, and Paragraph; references marked with WN are to Page; references marked with ECHU are to Book, Chapter, and Section in the following works:

T.....	A Treatise of Human Nature (Hume 2000)
EHU .....	An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (Hume 2000b)
EPM.....	An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (Hume 1998)
EMPL.....	Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary (Hume 1994)
H .....	The History of England (Hume 1983)
TMS .....	The Theory of Moral Sentiments (Smith 1982)
WN .....	An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (Smith 1976)
ECHU.....	An Essay Concerning Human Understanding (Locke 1975)

I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me.

...*this* is the origin of my philosophy.

– David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (T 1.4.7.12; italics added)

## 1. Introduction

In 1739, David Hume published Books I and II of his famous *Treatise of Human Nature*. A year later, he published Book III of the *Treatise*. The *Treatise* was ill-received, falling, as Hume put it, “*dead-born from the press*” (Hume 1987, xxxiv; italics original). After the disappointing reception of the *Treatise*, Hume moved on to other projects. He became particularly well-known for his contributions to the social studies, becoming a recognized authority in matters of morals, politics, political economy, and history. He was perhaps most famous in his day for his celebrated six-volume *History of England*.

It is a mistake to think, as some have argued,<sup>1</sup> that Hume’s post-*Treatise* career and shifting focus towards the social studies marked an end to his philosophy. I agree with John Danford (1990, 9) that “Hume’s career as a writer and thinker was all of a piece and that the writings for which he was most renowned in his own lifetime are neither less important nor, with some qualifications, less philosophical than the works which are studied in philosophy courses.”

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<sup>1</sup> In their introductory remarks to Volume 3 of the 1889 edition of *The Philosophical Works of David Hume*, T.H. Grose and T.H. Green (1889, 75) comment on Hume’s movement from epistemology to social studies, speaking of “the suddenness with which [Hume’s] labours in philosophy came to an end.” Such thinking, although not uncommon among some of Hume’s earlier interpreters, is wrongheaded (see Miller 1987, xviii n18).

Hume's post-*Treatise* developments in social studies should be viewed as a manifestation, reformulation, or revision of the epistemological, moral, and political conclusions reached in that original volume. Hume's emphasis on the social studies – particularly politics and political economy – should be viewed as an implication of, not a departure from or abandonment of, his conceptual developments in the *Treatise*. Such an interpretation of Hume's thinking has been articulated by a number of scholars, e.g., Duncan Forbes (1975), Donald Livingston (1984), Eugene (Miller 1987), John Danford (1990), and Thomas Merrill (2015).

In the present study, I seek to further elaborate the connectedness between Hume's thinking in epistemology, politics, and political economy in order to help illustrate the broad continuity of his thought. Understanding the connectedness in Hume nests his epistemological, historical, political, and economic discourse within a wider philosophical framework. I proceed by partly reconstructing a conceptual narrative from the *Treatise*, showing how Hume moves in and between epistemology, politics, and political economy. My thesis, simply put, is that Hume's epistemological developments in the *Treatise*, through his reconfiguration of the faculty of reason, drive him to study politics and political economy and continue to speak to the prudential manner in which he applies his reconfigured reason in these areas.

### 1.1 *Outlining the Narrative*

Hume begins the *Treatise* by searching for an independent, epistemological foundation for his ambitious “science of man,” a science which aims to “thoroughly [acquaint us] with the extent and force of human understanding...and explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations of our reasoning” (T Intro.4). Hume begins the search in Book I of the *Treatise* by formulating and employing a narrow concept of reason taken largely from Locke and Descartes.

As he moves forward with his project, Hume finds that the narrow concept of reason cannot account for our reliance on probable reasoning and our ideas of causation. Narrow reason – or “traditional reason,” as Barbara Winters (1979) has called it – cannot work on matters of experience. Hume’s finding marks a distinct departure from Locke, among others, who articulated a difference between a narrower and a wider mode of reason but neglected to see the major conceptual discontinuity between these two modes. In response to the limitations of narrow reason, Hume seeks to broaden the scope of reason to better align with what reason is practically or commonly understood to be. Hume’s broadening of reason, which includes an important semantic shift in his talk on reason, yields a more experiential and usable concept of reason. But the new version of reason only coheres by presupposing the soundness of the belief in the uniformity of experience. Hume finds that the belief in the uniformity of experience proceeds only on the basis of custom. It cannot be verified from the perspective of narrow reason. Thus, from the perspective of narrow reason, the broader sort of practical reason employed in most areas of life is not reasonable!

Hume struggles concerning the integrity of his new version of reason and leans towards skepticism. But towards the end of the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*, he resolves to move forward with his philosophy and apply his new sort of practical reason to things that appear meaningful from the perspective of common life, life outside of the closet of speculative philosophy. He reflectively accepts the perspective of common life as the only way to move forward in philosophy without collapsing under the weight of skepticism. He determines to “be a philosopher; but, amidst all [his] philosophy, to be still a man” (EHU 1.7). From the perspective of common life, morals and politics emerge as focal subjects on which to reason. Hume decides that henceforth he shall presuppose the soundness of his broader concept of reason, and that he

shall use this reason to consider better and worse interpretations and practices in morals and politics.

Hume's application of reason to politics arrives at a presumption of liberty. Hume's presumption of liberty cashes out in concrete policy issues. Given a choice between two policy options, the presumption of liberty inclines Hume towards the policy option that least impinges on individual liberty. The presumption of liberty in Hume stems from his thinking on the usefulness and agreeableness of liberty. The usefulness of liberty is illustrated throughout Book III of the *Treatise* in terms of his account of the origins of property and his theory of justice. The usefulness of liberty is further illustrated by Hume's political economy. In political economy, Hume illustrates the usefulness of liberty by speaking to the spontaneous order that results from private individuals pursuing their interests, showing the mutual benefits of exchange, and elaborating a chain of connection between liberty, industry, knowledge, and virtue.

Hume's reasoning in politics and political economy arrives at a second presumption: the presumption of the status quo. The presumption of the status quo would require reforms to bear the burden of proof. The presumption of the status quo in Hume is informed by his view of the looseness and uncertainty of his new configuration of reason. Towards the end of the *Treatise*, in light of such uncertainty, Hume moves to make the intellectual virtue of prudence internal to a just application of reason. Successful reason is prudent reason. Coupled with his understanding of the complexity of the social order, Hume's thinking on the constitution of reason encourages prudence in policy deliberations. He is leery of reforms that could threaten the established political order in that he sees established political order as a precondition for liberty. When considering policy options, one must prudently consider the implications for existing social

arrangements and weigh “the general course of things,” the long-run implications for liberty (EMPL, 254).

In Section 2, I discuss Hume’s epistemological developments in Book I of the *Treatise* in terms of what I call his “dual account of reason.” In Section 3, I illustrate how the dual account of reason drives Hume to human things, among which politics and political economy loom large. In Section 4, I speak to the nature of Hume’s presumption of liberty which stems from his view of the usefulness and agreeableness of liberty, the usefulness understood by his thinking about property and political economy. In Section 5, I illustrate how Hume’s epistemology returns to influence his attitude in politics and political economy by way of the presumption of status quo. Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Epistemology and the Dual Account of Reason<sup>2</sup>**

Hume’s innovation in his thinking on reason in the *Treatise* does not simply consist in a dividing of the faculty of reason into a narrow concept and a wider concept; such a division has a long history stretching back at least to Aristotle (e.g., 1999, 89). Hume’s innovation, rather, is his *reconfiguration* of the narrow-wide reason distinction. Hume articulates that narrow reason, when properly understood, is almost entirely subsumed by a wide, practical, and experiential kind of reason. Narrow reason cannot work on matters of experience – it is limited to statements

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<sup>2</sup> This section is largely a summary of my first dissertation chapter, “The Dual Account of Reason and the Spirit of Philosophy in Hume’s *Treatise*.”

and demonstrations of analytic truths – because it has no way of verifying the idea that experience proceeds uniformly, i.e., that the future will resemble the past.

All matters of experience are a matter of some wider sort of practical reason for Hume. Hume's conception of the sort of reason that works on experience is different than that of some others that came before him in that it doesn't seem to contain any rational necessity; Hume's broad concept of practical reason rests upon unverifiable beliefs and a disposition to view one's experience as reliable.

It is Hume's recognition of the (1) dramatic limitations of narrow reason and (2) the non-foundational character of wide, experiential reason that leads him towards skepticism and characterizes the trajectory of his philosophy.

In developing his thinking on reason in the *Treatise*, Hume uses the word *reason* in three ways. These three ways correspond to his narrow conception reason, his wide conception of reason, and the general activity of reasoning, i.e., the activity of deliberation and of having reasons. I call the first use of *reason* "R1." R1 is a narrow inferential faculty that operates logically or demonstratively upon intuitive ideas. I call the second use of *reason* "R2." R2 is a wide, practical faculty that envelops R1 and augments it with a mode of probable reasoning and some settled principles of the imagination of which probable reasoning is comprised. Hume's third use of *reason* corresponds simply to the general activity of *reasoning*. In the third sense, *reason* as a noun means *warrant* or *argument*; if used as a verb, *reason* in this sense means *to consciously deliberate or infer*. There is a dynamic between these different concepts of *reason* in Hume that is central to his epistemological outlook and his developments in the *Treatise*. I call this dynamic and its implications 'the dual account of reason.'



Early in the *Treatise*, Hume almost exclusively confines himself to employing the word *reason* to mean R1, argument, or the general act of deliberation. Apart from some passages in the introduction of the work, Hume seems to mean R1 almost every time he refers to *reason* (qua faculty) up until around T 1.3.11.1. Hume's conception of R1 is largely taken from Locke – although unlike Lockean reason, R1 importantly does not account for probable reasoning (i.e., it does not work on matters of experience). We can look to Locke's development of reason and his conception of demonstration in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* to better understand the nature of Hume's R1 and its limitations.

Locke has one concept of reason with two modes (as opposed to Hume who has two *concepts* of reason): demonstrative reasoning and probable reasoning. R1 corresponds to the Lockean mode of demonstrative reasoning. It does not, again, correspond to the Lockean mode of probable reasoning (see Millican 1998, 145). Demonstrative reasoning in Locke begins with intuitive premises. To Locke, intuition is the mind's "native Faculty to perceive the Coherence, or Incoherence of its *Ideas*" (ECHU 4.17.2). Lockean demonstrative reasoning then proceeds by perceiving intuitive connections between different intuitive ideas. Demonstrative reasoning forms a chain of intuitively-connected-intuitive ideas (see Owen 1999, Chapter 3, especially p. 40). As Locke puts it, demonstrations show "the Agreement, or Disagreement of two *Ideas*, by the intervention of one or more Proofs, which have a constant, immutable [i.e. intuitive], and visible connection with one another" (ECHU 4.15.1).

Hume's R1 leads to certainty in that demonstrations are true by the law of non-contradiction. "They depend solely on the [intuitive] ideas that make them up. Since they depend on nothing else, nothing can make them false" (Owen 1999, 97). The conclusion of a demonstration is presupposed by the very perception of the ideas that make it up. In illustrating

the ideas of intuition and demonstration, Locke gives the example of a triangle (ECHU 4.15.1). We can clearly perceive or intuit the idea of a triangle: a closed figure made up of three straight lines. We can intuit the idea of a right angle as the angle made by perpendicular straight lines. Given the idea of a triangle and a right angle, we can demonstrate – intuitively perceive the connection between a number of intuitive, intermediate ideas – that the sum of the angles in a triangle equals the sum of two right angles. Such a demonstration is certain by perception and cannot be subject to question. Hume elaborates R1 in one of the first significant passages on the faculty of reason in the *Treatise*:

A demonstration, if just, admits of no opposite difficulty; and if not just, 'tis a mere sophism, and consequently can never be of difficulty... To talk therefore of objections and replies, and ballancing of arguments in such a question as this, is to confess, either that *human reason* [R1] is nothing but a play of words, or that the person himself, who talks so, has not a capacity equal to such subjects. (T 1.2.2.6; italics added)

Hume's development of R1 comes to a head during his treatment of the mode of probable reasoning and the idea of causation. In Locke, probable reasoning is one of the two modes of the faculty of reason (see ECHU 4.17.2). Locke's probable reasoning works on matters of experience by probabilistically inferring from past to present experience (i.e., "if X occurred like *that* in the past, X will, under similar conditions, probably happen like *that* in the future"). Hume similarly conceives of probable reasoning. It is probable reasoning that works on matters of experience. But Hume does not call probable reasoning *reason*, nor initially suggest that it is a part of the faculty of *reason*. To the contrary, in the early parts of Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume

explicitly notes that probable reasoning cannot possibly be a mode of his working conception of *reason*, R1. R1 cannot possibly explain our reliance upon experience and cannot justify causal propositions. Thus, Hume's semantics on *reason* are different than Locke's.

The basis for probable reasoning – and, moreover, the very idea of probability – is the idea that experience proceeds uniformly, i.e., that the future will resemble the past. But the uniformity of experience cannot be demonstrated; it can't be proven with certainty. As Hume says at T 1.2.2.6, a demonstration does not entail, and cannot possibly entail, objections or counter arguments. It is impossible to dispute the demonstration that a triangle has one-hundred and eighty degrees unless one misapprehends the idea of a triangle or a degree. It is impossible to conceive the contrary of any just demonstration. In other words, if we can conceive an idea contrary to X, then X is non-demonstrable. The connectedness of past and future cannot be verified by R1 simply because, as Hume articulates, we can “at least conceive a change in the course of nature” (T 1.3.6.5).

Hume clearly argues that R1 cannot determine probable reasoning:

Thus not only our reason [R1] fails us in the discovery of the *ultimate connexion* of causes and effects, but even after experience has inform'd us of their *constant conjunction*, 'tis impossible for us to satisfy ourselves by our reason [R1], why we shou'd extend that experience beyond those particular instances, which have fallen under our observation. (T 1.3.6.11; italics original)

Reason in this passage can only be understood as R1, the narrow demonstrative sort of reason partially borrowed from Locke. If *reason* here included probable reasoning, there would be no

problem for Hume to address in that probable reasoning by definition operates upon the assumption that the experience will proceed uniformly. In straightforward terms, the problem Hume finds concerning R1 and probable reasoning – which is commonly referred to as “the problem of induction” – can be stated as follows: in order to argue that the future will resemble the past, thus justifying the soundness of probable reasoning, one might say, “the future has resembled the past in my experience.” But such a statement merely pushes the problem back a level, begging the question, “what is the reliability of one’s experience and why should experience predict the future?” Hume makes it clear that one cannot reason *experientially* regarding the reliability of experience. Such a circular mode of argumentation presupposes the thing it is attempting to explain (cf. EHU 4.1.19).

Hume admits that no one actually denies the province of probable reasoning. His point is simply that probable reasoning is not determined by and cannot be justified by R1. Probable reasoning, rather, is a matter of custom or natural belief. The imagination elevates the mind to assent to the mode of probable reasoning despite its unverifiable nature (unverifiable, at least from an R1 perspective). The mind assents to probable reasoning and, accordingly, to belief in the uniform procedure of experience because it *feels* it to be a just belief. “Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation. ‘Tis not solely in poetry and music, we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy” (T 1.3.8.12).

Hume does not wish to undermine probable reasoning, or to dismiss all ideas of causation. Thus, he proceeds to envelop probable reasoning into a new broader sort of practical reason: R2. The move from R1 to R2 entails a semantic shift, a shift which Hume makes explicit:

Those philosophers [including Locke], who have divided human reason into *knowledge* and *probability*, and have defin'd the first to be *that evidence, which arise from the comparison of ideas*, are oblig'd to comprehend all our arguments from causes or effects under the general term of *probability*. But tho' every one be free to use his term in what sense he pleases; and accordingly in the precedent part of this discourse, I have follow'd **this method of expression**; 'tis however certain, that in common discourse we readily affirm, that many arguments from causation exceed probability, and may be receiv'd as a superior kind of evidence. (T 1.3.11.2; italics original, bold added)

The bolded phrase, by my interpretation, suggests that Hume has been using *reason* in the preceding pages of the *Treatise* “in what sense he pleases.” That is, he has been using *reason* in a sense that differs from Locke and “those philosophers.” That sense is R1, which differs from Locke and the others precisely because it excludes probable reasoning from the province of *reason*. But Hume continues here to say that common sense forcefully tells us that probable reasoning is a superior sort of evidence to other “whimsies and prejudices” of the imagination, which probable reasoning at least partially resembles (see T 1.3.9.19 n22). The conclusions of probable reasoning have a higher degree of epistemic merit, a merit that can approach a kind of certainty.<sup>3</sup> Hume moves to bring probable reasoning into the fold, as it were, and offers a new

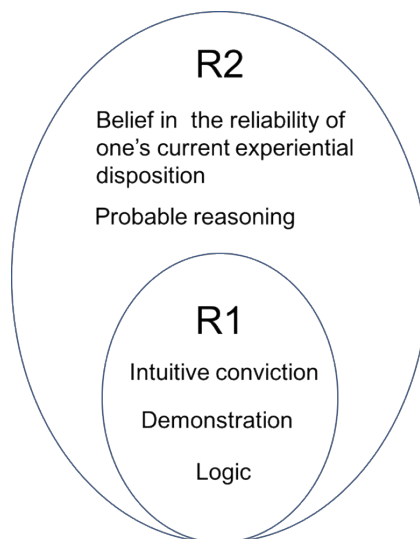
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<sup>3</sup> In a letter to John Stewart, who attacked Hume for his view on the idea of causation, Hume speaks of different sorts of certainty. He says that the certainty that results from R2 deliberations is more sure than other kinds of certainty, but less sure than the demonstrative kind: “...allow me to tell you, that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that any thing might arise without a Cause*: I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falseness of that Proposition proceeded neither from intuition nor Demonstration; but from another source. *That Caesar existed, that there is such an Island as Sicily*; for these Propositions, I affirm, we have no demonstrative nor intuitive Proof. Would you infer that I deny their Truth, or even their Certainty? There are many different kinds of Certainty; and some of them as satisfactory to the

concept of reason: R2. R1 does not go away when R2 appears. Rather, it is subsumed by R2. Simply put, R2 equals R1 plus probable reasoning. As probable reasoning is a matter of habit, stemming from the imagination, R2 is much more a matter of instinct than of strict cognition. R2 reasoning is “*more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*” (T 1.4.1.8; italics original).

When Hume finally gives an explicit definition of *reason* at the end of Book I, Part 3 – the first explicit definition of *reason* in the *Treatise* –, he speaks of R2: “To consider the matter aright, reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls, which carries us along a certain train of ideas, and endows them with particular qualities, according to their particular situations and relations” (T 1.3.16.9). R2 is a composite of R1 and probable reasoning, which is itself a composite of some natural beliefs that center on the presupposition of the regularity of experience.

**Figure 1: Illustrating the R1-R2 Relationship**



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Mind, tho' perhaps not so regular, as the demonstrative kind” (quoted in Mossner 2001, 260; italics original).

### 3. The Turn of R2

Hume's acceptance of R2 as a concept of reason is not without difficulty. The difficulty is most clearly expressed in the famous conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise* (hereafter, "Conclusion"). Hume expresses anxiety in the Conclusion on account of the fact that R2 can never be reasonable from an R1 perspective. He comments on his concern regarding the soundness of R2 and voices reservations about using R2 for future inquiries: "Methinks I am like a man, who having struck on many shoals, and having narrowly escap'd shipwreck in passing a small firth [i.e., progressing through his analysis of the understanding in Book I despite his reasons for skepticism], has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel [i.e., to use R2 for future philosophical inquiries]" (T 1.4.7.1). He understands that R2 is a cornerstone of common sense but is nonetheless troubled from an R1 perspective: the R1 view of R2 exposes the unverifiable and even contradictory habits and feelings on which R2 proceeds.<sup>4</sup> Hume finds himself held at an impasse between "a false reason [R2] and none at all" (T 1.4.7.6). R2 corresponds to "a false reason" in that it cannot demonstrate the soundness of the principles of the imagination on which it proceeds. As for R1, it represents "no reason" in that it is limited in application to demonstrations and the statement of analytic truths. Without moving beyond R1, one cannot increase one's knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> When one accepts the soundness of R2 and assents to the practice of causal reasoning, contradictions in common beliefs appear. For example, the idea of the existence of external objects is undermined by causal reasoning, as is the validity of sensory experience more generally (see T 1.4.2; Kemp Smith 2005, 124–28). As Hume puts it, "nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu'd existence of matter" (T 1.4.7.4).

Hume seeks to avoid skepticism and to move beyond R1. He searches for a way to responsibly use R2 to increase the bounds of knowledge through philosophy. In his searching, he feels that a just view of reason must lie somewhere between a total rejection of R2 and an unreflective acceptance of R2. The philosopher should neither (1) “assent to every trivial suggestion of the imagination [including the imaginary principles which constitute the basis of R2],” nor should he (2) “reject all the trivial suggestions of the fancy, and adhere to the understanding [i.e., narrowly to R1]” (T 1.4.7.6). But the just balance of these two positions is unclear: how much weight should one give to (1) assent vs. (2) rejection? Are there circumstances in which assent to the suggestions of imagination should bear a higher burden of proof than does rejection? Are there circumstances in which a rejection of such suggestions should bear a higher burden of proof? What criteria does one have for judgment in such circumstances? In a state of turmoil over such considerations, Hume moves towards the climax of the Conclusion, towards the peak of his apparent despair: “The *intense* view of these manifold contradictions [between R2 and R1] and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning” (T 1.4.7.8; italics original). Hume feels he cannot move past the contradictions between R1 and R2 and discover a responsible way forward for his philosophy.

Yet from the peak of despair, Hume suddenly pivots. He finds that *nature* provides a way forward:

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds [of darkness, of anxiety], nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some



avocation, and lively impression of the senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther (T 1.4.7.9).

When Hume leaves the closet of his study, as it were, he finds that his turmoil resolves itself through immersion in the “common affairs of life,” a phrase he uses throughout his work. Immersion in the common affairs of life is central to Hume's reconfiguration of reason, to his move from R1 to R2. As Nicholas Capaldi (1989, 22) has formulated the matter, whereas Hume's modern predecessors, starting with Descartes, treated theoretical questions from an autonomous perspective of an “outside, disengaged, observer” – an “I Think,” perspective, as it were – Hume treats them from an action-oriented, social perspective of “We Do”: “Instead of attempting to scrutinize our thought process in the hope of uncovering principles of rationality which could be applied to directing our action, Hume reversed the procedure. He began with our practice, our action, and sought to extract from it the inherent social norms” (ibid.).

Hume's reference to the common affairs of life, and search for social norms therein, inclines him to take R2 on trust, to presuppose R2 as a valid mode of reasoning. From a common-life perspective, Hume observes the acceptance of R2 as a social norm. Humans unavoidably and naturally incline towards a reliance upon experience and a belief in causation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merrill (2015a, 57) expresses Hume's pivot in this way: “the turning point of [Hume's] philosophical education is facing up to his kinship with ordinary persons and ‘honest gentleman.’ In facing up to the indispensability of opinion, Hume's philosophy must forego the ambition or pretension to be an absolutely self-sufficient thinker. He must learn to accept some things on trust.”

Nonetheless, the process by which he arrives at his inclination towards R2 has rippling effects on his subsequent philosophy. Although Hume in the end embraces R2, the logic of the dual account of reason speaks to both the subjects of his future inquiries and to the overarching spirit or ethos of his philosophy.

### *3.1 Hume's Spiral of Disposition*

After nature provides Hume with a way forward from melancholy and delirium, after he reorients his perspective from “I Think” to “We Do,” as it were, he pauses in the Conclusion to reflect on the development of his philosophy. In T 1.4.7.10, Hume narrates the spiraling development of his outlook by touching on different moments in the evolution of his disposition and attitude. Hume's narration illustrates a dialectic between different moments of disposition and reflection. Hume shows how reflection upon a disposition leads to a disintegration, a tension in his outlook, in the form of some kind of skepticism. He then shows how further reflection moves him towards reintegration, towards resolve and a richer, deeper disposition. This spiraling dynamic is illustrated in **Figure 2**.<sup>6</sup>

Hume begins narrating his spiral of disposition, saying:

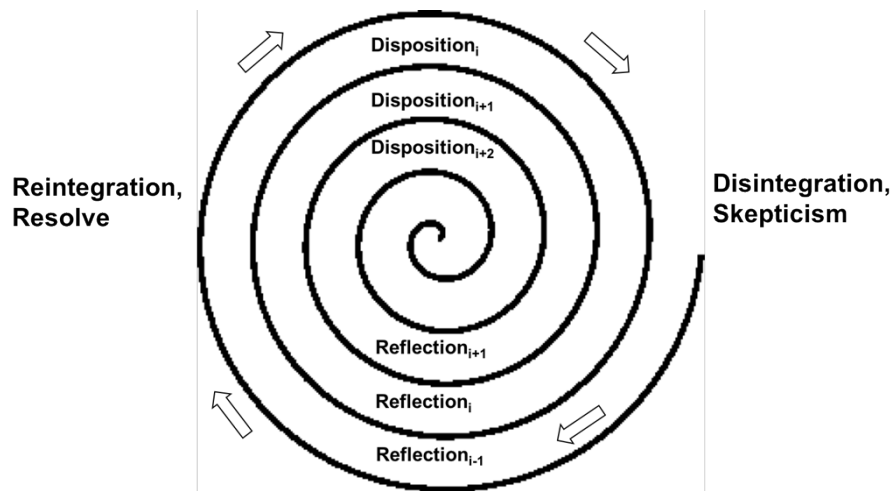
Here then I find myself absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act  
other people in the common affairs of life. But notwithstanding that my natural  
propensity, and the course of my animal spirits and passions reduce me to this indolent  
belief in the general maxims of the world, I still feel such remains of my *former*  
*disposition*, that I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve

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<sup>6</sup> For further elaboration of this sort of spiral dynamic, see Klein (2016)

never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy. For those are my sentiments in that splenetic humour, which governs me at present. I may, nay I must yield to the current of nature, in submitting to my senses and understanding; and in this blind submission I show most perfectly my sceptical disposition and principles. (T 1.4.7.10; italics added)

**Figure 2: Hume's Spiral of Disposition**



Hume's *Disposition<sub>i</sub>* – italicized in the passage above – represents a total, paralyzing skepticism. *Disposition<sub>i</sub>* is reached by reflection on the internal logic of the understanding and the dual account of reason. *Disposition<sub>i</sub>* is challenged by engagement in the common affairs of life. Hume's engagement in common life leads to *Reflection<sub>i</sub>*, a reflection on the natural instability of total skepticism. The dissipation of total skepticism by engagement in common life and

subsequent reflection informs Hume's resolve to press on toward Disposition<sub>i+1</sub>. Hume resolves to get on with life and to presuppose the soundness of R2 in common affairs.

Yet Hume again feels conflict, particularly as pertains to the potentialities of philosophy. Reflection<sub>i+1</sub> leads to skepticism, not of all things as in Disposition<sub>i</sub>, but of the meaningfulness of philosophy within a mode of common-life. Hume arrives at Disposition<sub>i+2</sub>, where he resolves to throw all his books, papers, etc. in the fire and submit to an unreflective instinct to simply follow the ordinary proprieties of common life, thus abandoning his philosophical endeavors. T 1.4.7.10 continues:

But does it follow [i.e. it does follow],<sup>7</sup> that I must strive against the current of nature, which leads me to indolence and pleasure; that I must seclude myself, in some measure, from the commerce and society of men, which is so agreeable; and that I must torture my brain with subtilities and sophistries, at the very time that I cannot satisfy myself concerning the reasonableness of so painful an application, nor have any tolerable prospect of arriving by its means at truth and certainty. (T 1.4.7.10)

Hume is in conflict regarding Disposition<sub>i+2</sub>. He reflects (Reflection<sub>i+2</sub>) on the prospect of life without philosophy. He is skeptical of the idea that philosophy is meaningless and should be totally abandoned; he cannot accept such abandonment. Reflection pushed Hume to another moment of resolve, yet another disposition. He resolves to sometimes seclude himself from

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<sup>7</sup> David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton changed this sentence to end with a “?” in their 2000 edition of the *Treatise*. But almost all previous editions of the *Treatise* (e.g., Hume 1978) end the sentence with a “.” I disagree with the Norton's punctuation change. With a period, the sentence should be read as Hume saying “it does follow,” not “does it follow?”, a reading that better accords with the structure of the entire paragraph.

society to a degree and push forward with his philosophy. Despite the fact that the world is not reasonable from an R1-perspective, there are still things that we *can* better explain, better and worse interpretations to be abductively formulated using R2. He decides to still torture his brain with “subtilties and sophistries,” i.e., subsequent efforts in philosophy.

Under what obligation do I lie of making such an abuse of time? And to what end can it serve either for the service of mankind, or for my own private interest? No: If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable. Where I strive against my inclination, I shall have a good reason for my resistance; and will no more be led a wandering into such dreary solitudes, and rough passages, as I have hitherto met with. (T 1.4.7.10)

The final moment of disposition enumerated in T 1.4.7.10 shows Hume resolving to apply R2 to objects that appear natural and agreeable from his current outlook. Moreover, he even seems to suggest that he will allow himself to inquire into abstruse subject matters *where he has good reason*. He reserves the option, as it were, to apply R2 even to more abstruse matters areas of inquiry where such application overcomes a certain presumption of skepticism of abstruseness, i.e., his “inclination” *against* abstruseness in the passage above. But in such applications, he notes that he will not revisit the “rough passages” that he has “hitherto met with.” In other words, he resolves to pass over the potential melancholy and delirium that potentially stem from abstruse applications of R2 and to cling to the perspective of common life as a sort of grounding. When there is good reason, the presumption not to apply R2 to abstruse and speculative matters might be overcome.

Hume moves on to enumerate things he finds natural and agreeable in his current moment of disposition, the things to which he resolves to apply R2, the things that will, by and large, constitute the subject of his philosophy.

I cannot forbear having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me. I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing upon what principles I proceed. I am concern'd for the condition of the learned world, which lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars. I feel an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind, and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, *I feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and this is the origin of my philosophy (T 1.4.7.12; italics original).

Thus, Hume spirals his way to human things,<sup>8</sup> to thinking about the common affairs of life, by way of epistemological exploration. He appears to intend the *Treatise* as a typical Enlightenment project: he feigns to search for an autonomous metaphysical or epistemological foundation for his “science of man,” a foundation that would be sufficient to “challenge the long tradition of circumspect philosophic writing” and bring philosophy and rational inquiry into the realm of

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Hume’s turn to human things, see Merrill (2015, Chapter 3).

religion, morals, and politics (Danford 1990, 5). But he finds that metaphysics or epistemology cannot hope to provide such foundation. He shows that such intellectual practices are, in fact much less certain than their practitioners pretend. Hume discovers that human beings are actuated in all areas of life – including philosophy! – by fundamentally inexplicable principles in their nature. To fulfill his ambition to develop a science of man then, instead of working to rationalize these principles – which he recognizes will inevitably lead to deep skepticism –, he turns to study such principles by observing the arenas in which they are most directly on display: morals and politics. He overcomes his presumption of skepticism in these areas and determines to “yield to that propensity, which inclines us to be positive and certain in *particular points*, according to the light, in which we survey them in any *particular instant*” (T 1.4.7.15; italics original). His positive reasoning, his application of R2, in these areas eventually yields his innovative moral psychology and theory of the passions, but more importantly, his political theory and political economy.

#### **4. R2 and the Presumption of Liberty**

At the outset of Book III of the *Treatise* – which contains the first expression of Hume’s political theory – Hume recapitulates his conclusion reached by way of his epistemological investigation, i.e., the dual account of reason, in Book I:

What affects us, we conclude can never be chimera; and as our passion is engag’d on the one side or the other, we naturally think that the question lies within human

comprehension; which, in other cases of this nature, we are apt to entertain some doubt of. Without this advantage I never shou'd have ventur'd upon a third volume of such abstruse philosophy, in an age, wherein the greatest part of men seem agreed to convert reading into an amusement, and to reject every thing that requires any considerable degree of attention to be comprehended. (T 3.1.1.1)

Thus, the study of politics – even the abstruse study of politics – falls under the purview Hume's philosophy in that it appears natural and agreeable from the perspective of common life. Hume presupposes the soundness of R2 in the investigation of political matters. He turns his mind to politics.

In the universe of human things, Hume attributes prime importance to politics. In his moral philosophy, Hume sees the virtue of justice – the administration of which politics is explicitly concerned with – as the backbone of society. Without justice and its corresponding institution of property, society falls apart, tending towards “that savage and solitary condition, which is infinitely worse than the worst situation that can possibly be suppos'd in society” (T 3.2.2.22). Hume sees understanding the nature and the administration of justice as of fundamental significance for promoting a peaceable, stable, and free society.

Justice admits of a more regular and universal grammar than does the study of most of the other virtues.<sup>9</sup> The regularity of justice combined with an introspective understanding of human behavior and historical accounts of different sorts of societies allow for the study of

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<sup>9</sup> In EMP, Hume speaks of the difficulty of discerning merit due to the indeterminateness and contextual nature of virtue: “so great is the uncertainty of merit, both from its natural obscurity, and from the self-conceit of each individual” (EMP 3.2.23).



politics and the administration of justice to be all but “reduced to a science” (EMPL, 14).<sup>10</sup> Hume thinks that we can and should speak with some confidence into better or worse politics.

In the remainder of this study, I sketch some central features of Hume’s application of R2 to politics. My purpose is not to give an exhaustive account of Hume’s politics. Rather, given that epistemology leads Hume to study politics as part of the human turn of R2, I comment on the character of his politics and show how his thinking in epistemology about the soundness of R2 returns to speak to the manner of his politics.

In short, Hume’s constructive application of R2 to politics and political economy arrives at a presumption of liberty. The presumption of liberty largely comes from Hume’s view of the usefulness and agreeableness of liberty, the usefulness understood through his theory of property and his conceptual developments in political economy. The presumption of liberty cashes out in terms of debate over concrete issues of policy reform. When choosing between two policy options, Hume’s presumption of liberty inclines him towards the option that least impinges upon individual liberty. But liberty bears exceptions in Hume. Liberty operates within the broader frame of Hume’s establishment political philosophy, a philosophy that recognizes the meaningfulness and focal nature of the status quo. Hume is wary of rationalism in politics – even a rationalism which propounds liberty –, a wariness that is in line with his understanding of the looseness of reason and the difficulty of establishing and legitimizing political authority. Such thinking in Hume arrives at an additional presumption: the presumption of the status quo. The presumption of the status quo recommends prudence in the application of the presumption of

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<sup>10</sup> In saying that politics is a science, Hume is simply articulating that there is a connection between political rules and political outcomes. He is not saying that politics is a science in the sense that physics is a science. Politics is not a contained system of scientific laws, but it does admit of regularities and connections between types of governments, constitutions, and outcomes.

liberty when policy entails departure from current political arrangements. Hume's political outlook unfolds as a balance between the presumption of liberty and the presumption of the status quo.

#### 4.1 *The Usefulness of Liberty: Property*

That Hume values liberty is clear. From the outset of the *Treatise*, Hume speaks to the desirability of liberty: "the improvements in reason and philosophy can only be owing to a land of toleration and of liberty" (T Intro.7). He exalts the importance of "peace and liberty" in his jurisprudence (T 3.2.10.15). In his essay, "Of the Origin of Government," he acknowledges that "liberty is the perfection of civil society" (EMPL, 41). He endorses progress in the arts and sciences in part because such progress appears to be "favourable to liberty," with the "tendency to preserve, if not produce a free government" (EMPL, 277). The theme of liberty and its historical development in England is, moreover, central to his purposes in *The History of England*.

There are different opinions as to what exactly *liberty* signifies in Hume. Many interpreters of Hume have understood liberty to simply mean freedom from *arbitrary* rule within the bounds of positive law. John Vladimir Price (1966, 141) has said that Hume, for the most part, "uses the term 'liberty' to cover individual activities and expressions of ideas that are not inimical to the stability of the government." Duncan Forbes (1975, 153) has equated liberty in Hume with the "security of the individual under the rule of law." Donald Livingston (1998, 184) says that "the primary sense of liberty for Hume is the rule of law: action uncoerced by the arbitrary will of the sovereign power." Andrew Sabl (2012, 2) formulates liberty in terms of "restraints on arbitrary power."

Freedom from arbitrary rule and the enforcement of the rule of law are important facets of liberty. Hume is concerned with protection from arbitrary rule throughout his writing, particularly as it pertains to religious persecution and violence (see Boyd 2004, Chapter 3). But strictly formulating Hume's conception of liberty in terms of restraints on arbitrariness is insufficient. Liberty in Hume is better understood in something of a natural law sense, following the tradition of Hugo Grotius, as the freedom to do as one pleases with one's own, insofar as one's activities do not impinge upon anyone else's own.<sup>11</sup> Such a conception of liberty is formulated by Hume's contemporary, Adam Smith, as the flipside of property and the rules of what Smith calls commutative justice.<sup>12</sup> On Smith's account, the duties of commutative justice are abstaining from the possessions of others and honoring contracts; these duties can *almost* be fulfilled by sitting at home and doing nothing; that which does not violate the life, person, or property of others does not violate commutative justice (TMS II.ii.1.9). Liberty is the freedom to do that which the rules of commutative justice do not prohibit.<sup>13</sup> Hume formulates something like the Smithian conception of liberty – which he refers to as “this noble principle” – in an important passage in *The History of England*:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hume cites Grotius and says that own theory of property is the same as Grotius' in EPM App. 3.8. On locating Hume's thinking on property in the natural law tradition, see Buckle (1991)

<sup>12</sup> In speaking to the rules of commutative justice, Smith says: “The most sacred laws of justice, therefore, those whose violation seems to call loudest for vengeance and punishment, are the laws which guard the life and person of our neighbor; the next are those which guard his property and possessions; and last of all come those which guard what are called his personal rights, or what is due to him from the promises of others” (TMS II.ii.2.2).

<sup>13</sup> Smith all but explicitly formulates liberty as the natural implication of commutative justice in several places in his work. In one signal passage in *The Wealth of Nations*, he says: “To remove a man who has committed no misdemeanour from the parish where he chuses to reside is an evident violation of natural liberty and justice” (WN, 157).

<sup>14</sup> Sabl (2009, n 14) suggests we read Hume in this passage as endorsing a “proto-Millian” concept of liberty.

Advantage was also taken of the present good agreement between the king and parliament [James I in 1624], in order to pass the bill against monopolies, which had formerly been encouraged by the king, but which had failed by the rupture between him and the last house of commons. This bill was conceived in such terms as to render it merely declaratory; and all monopolies were condemned, as contrary to law and to the known *liberties* of the people. *It was there supposed, that every subject of England had entire power to dispose of his own actions, provided he did no injury to any of his fellow-subjects; and that no prerogative of the king, no power of any magistrate, nothing but the authority alone of laws, could restrain that unlimited freedom.* The full prosecution of this noble principle into all its natural consequences, has at last, through many contests, produced that singular and happy government, which we enjoy at present. (H 5.114; italics added)

Although this passage is one of the few instances in Hume where liberty is *explicitly* formulated in a Smithian sense, I contend that liberty throughout Hume prefigures such a formulation in that it takes shape as the flipside of property and contract.

Hume first develops his thinking on property in Book III of the *Treatise*. Central to Hume's thinking on property is the idea of convention. Conventions for Hume are explicitly not articulated promises or organized social decisions – “convention is not the nature of promise” (T 3.2.2.10) –, nor are they even necessarily conscious. Humean conventions, I think, can be understood in David Lewis' (e.g., 1969, 42) later use of the word to describe solutions to coordination games. Such conventions can be decentral, emerging as mutual understandings that evolve and are socially and contextually understood (like language). Or they might be centrally

planned, like when a government determines a countries convention for daylight savings (see Klein 2012, 69). Hume tends to emphasize decentralized, emergent conventions, although the more central sort are not absent from his thinking, particularly on matters of political authority (see Sabl 2012, Chapter 1).

Hume tells a conjectural story of the emergence of the convention of property. Through observation and experience within the family, people become “sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society” (ibid.). Families group together into larger social groups. Social groups sense the advantages of possession and extend personal ownership sensibilities developed in the family to external objects. Such sensibilities eventually trickle up into a “convention enter’d into by all the members of society to bestow stability on the possession of those external goods, and leave every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry” (T 3.2.2.9). The convention of property is a necessary condition for any society; societies that develop and fail to establish conventions of possession quickly fade and are replaced by those that do (e.g., EPM 3.1.21). The convention of property helps people to curb their present expressions of the passion of self-interest.

Implicit in the convention of property are a set of general rules that speak to what can be owned and what constitutes violating someone else’s own. Hume speaks of four principles that contribute to the general rules of property: occupation, prescription, accession, and succession. The rules of property can conceivably change over time and are be subject to reinterpretation as new difficulties arise. Yet once the rules are determined, they apply inflexibly: “the convention concerning the stability of possession is enter’d into, in order to cut off all occasions of discord and contention; and this end wou’d never be attain’d, were we allowed to appy this rule differently in every particular case, according to every particular utility, which might be

discover'd in such application" (T 3.2.3.2). The convention of property entails "insensible gradations" in its origin, yet "admits not of degrees" in its in-the-moment application (T 3.2.6.8). In the moment, within a particular historical context, "a man's property is suppos'd to be fenc'd against every mortal, in every possible case" (T 3.2.1.16).

Justice is the virtue that corresponds to the act of respecting the property of others. Property proceed justice. Without the convention of property, Hume thinks that justice has no meaning: "after this convention, concerning abstinence from the possessions of others, is enter'd into, and every one has acquir'd a stability in his possessions, there immediately arise the ideas of justice and injustice; as also those of *property*, *right*, and *obligation*. The latter [i.e., right and obligation] are altogether unintelligible without the former" (T 3.2.2.11; italics original). The enforcement of justice, or the rules of justice, is the enforcement of the rules of property. The rules of justice and the rules of property are synonymous and are used interchangeably in Hume.

Justice is a virtue because of its usefulness. A virtue is considered useful in Hume if it conduces to agreeable things (e.g., T 2.3.10.5; T 3.3.1.30). The virtue of justice is useful because it provides a framework for social cooperation which enables people to overcome the scarcity they face in isolation. It enables them to freely pursue their own interests within so long as they do not violate the property of others. The virtue of justice, which corresponds to the institution of property, demarcates Hume's conception of liberty.

Hume articulates that the rules of justice are useful, and hence virtuous, because of their certainty. In a community of equals, i.e., a community without an established government, single acts that violate the rules of justice – and appear to benefit some parties by such violations – are subversive to the stability of property and the social cooperation and freedom enabled by that stability:

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. 'Tis impossible to separate the good from the ill. Property must be stable, and must be fix'd by general rules. Tho' in one instance the public be a sufferer, this momentary ill is amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which it establishes in society. (T 3.2.2.22)

Once political authority enters the scene, matters change. Hume does not hold that the government ought never to violate rules of justice. Indeed, the very existence of the government is a violation of the rules of justice.<sup>15</sup> Political authority, though it violates a strict adherence to the rules justice, is useful and a precondition for liberty. But the usefulness, the paramount importance, of strictly adhering to the rules of justice in pre-political society informs Hume's maxims in politics. It provides the core of his presumption of liberty and informs his thinking on spontaneous order within a framework of rules certainty.

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<sup>14</sup> Hume is aware that government is not founded on any kind of social contract, but rather, more often than not, has its root in conflicts of possession between different social groups: "And so far am I from thinking with some philosophers, that men are utterly incapable of society without government, that I assert the first rudiments of government to arise from quarrels, not among men of the same society, but among those of different societies" (T 3.2.8.1). Yet once a government is in place, it takes hold of the imagination on account of some focal principles of association – e.g., hereditary succession, past or present possession of authority (see T 3.2.10) – and comes to be recognized as legitimate. Government is recognized as useful in that it helps people constrain their self-love and "violent propensity to prefer [the] contiguous to [the] remote" (T 3.2.7.6). Government increases the cost of breaking the rules of justice and solidifies the convention of property.

#### 4.2 *The Usefulness of Liberty: Political Economy*

Hume's political economy is of paramount importance to his political theory and to his thinking on the usefulness of liberty. Understanding the polemical and controversial nature of Hume's political economy undercuts the credibility of claiming Hume as simply a political "conservative," a thinker with general complacency towards the status quo (cf. Livingston 1984, Chapter 12). Hume's political economy illustrates his forward-looking presumption of liberty and his confidence in the usefulness of liberty over interventionist alternatives in economic policy in actual policy discussions. His political economy shows his willingness to use R2 against status quo political opinions and formulations, to innovate and to reform. Indeed, as Roger L. Emerson (2008, 26) has put it, in his writings on economics, Hume aims to refute specific economic "shibboleths" of his time with the goal of informing policy decisions and encouraging liberal political reform. Eugene Rotwein (2009, liv) nicely underscores the polemical nature of Hume's economics, pointing out that "there is relatively little in his political economy that is not discussed within a controversial frame of reference, so that almost every essay reads as a kind of debate in which Hume pointedly seeks to expose and rectify what he regards as the main economic errors of his day."

Hume's political economy illustrates the usefulness of liberty and underscores his presumption of liberty in politics in at least three ways: (1) Hume illustrates the unintentional coordination and harmony resulting from individual pursuits of private interest (i.e., a proto-invisible hand vision). (2) Hume illustrates the mutual benefits of peaceable exchange. (3) Hume illustrates the connectedness between liberty, industry, knowledge, and humanity.

Hume's view of the unintentional coordination of private action is largely influenced by Bernard Mandeville, whom Hume mentions by name in the introduction to the *Treatise* (T



Intro.8). Mandeville (1988, 1:37) famously proposed that private vices can translate to public benefit: “So Vice is beneficial found, When it’s by Justice lopt and bound.” Hume’s first expression of this kind of thinking occurs in the context of his thinking on justice in the *Treatise*. Like Mandeville, Hume admits that self-interest is a strong motivating action in human conduct.<sup>16</sup> It is, again, man’s self-interest, man’s “violent propension to prefer [the] contiguous to [the] remote,” that makes peaceable social organization problematic in the first place (T 3.2.7.6). Over time, first through the convention of property and later reinforced through the institution of political authority, self-interest becomes sufficiently constrained and channeled within the rules of justice. But such constraint would never arise unless it enabled people to better achieve their private purposes. Hume concludes that it must be self-interest that undergirds the rules of justice. Only the passion of self-interest is sufficient to restrain the more immediate and violent expressions of self-interest. The self-interested constraint of self-interest leads to unintended public benefit. Hume explicitly makes this point in a key passage, a passage that prefigures Smith’s invisible hand:

Those rules, by which property, right, and obligation are determin’d, have in them no marks of a natural origin, but many of artifice and contrivance...’Tis self love which is their real origin; and as the self-love of one person is naturally contrary to that of another,

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<sup>16</sup> Importantly, self-interest is not necessarily vicious in Hume as it is in Mandeville. In EMP, where Hume schematically develops his moral philosophy, he denominates a whole category of virtues which are approved of on the grounds that they are useful for the person who possesses them – i.e., they align with the self-interest of their possessor. Such virtues include: “*discretion, caution, enterprize, industry, assiduity, frugality, oeconomy, good sense, prudence, discernment...address, presence of mind, quickness of conception, facility of expression*; these, and a thousand more of the same kind, no man will ever deny to be excellencies and perfections” (EPM 6.1.21; italics original).

these several interested passions are obliged to adjust themselves after such a manner as to concur in some system of conduct and behaviour. *This system, therefore, comprehending the interest of each individual, is of course advantageous to the public; tho' it be not intended for that purpose by the inventors.* (T 3.2.6.6; italics added)

Hume further shows sensibility to the coordinating tendency of human behavior *within* the established frame of the rules of justice: “after the agreement for fixing and observing of this rule [the distinction of property] there remains little or nothing to be done towards settling a perfect harmony and concord” (T 3.2.2.12). The arc of Hume’s thinking in political economy, which presupposes a stable polity, might be said to emphasize spontaneous order in human interaction and, moreover, a general harmony between private and public interest (i.e., the interest of the whole of society, not government *per se*). He understands that simple adherence to the rules of justice are often sufficient to leave “every one in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry” (T 3.2.2.9). His understanding of the harmony of private and public interest informs the by-and-large case he makes against policies that violate liberty.

In the first of his writings on economics – the essay “Of Commerce” – Hume puts forth the thesis that the wealth of private individuals leads to the wealth of the state. He argues that private industry promotes national opulence: “Now, according to the most natural course of things, industry and arts and trade encrease the power of the sovereign as well as the happiness of the subjects; and that policy is violent, which aggrandizes the public by the poverty of individuals” (EMPL, 260). He sees that what is in the interest of individuals, within the rules of

justice, is closely linked to the interest of the public. Throughout *The History of England*, Hume makes a similar point. In one notable instance, he says:

Most of the arts and professions in a state are of such a nature, that, while they promote the interests of the society, they are also useful or agreeable to some individuals; and, in that case, the constant rule of the magistrate, except, perhaps in the first introduction of any art, is to leave the profession to itself, and trust its encouragement to those who reap the benefits of it. The artisans, finding their profits to rise by the favour of their customers, increase as much as possible their skill and industry; and as matters are not disturbed by any injudicious tampering the commodity is always sure to be at all times nearly proportioned to the demand. (H 3.135)

Hume's thinking on the harmony of private and public interest, and the unintended coordination brought about by private actors is reinforced by his developments in price theory. He shows recognition of the coordinating power of the price mechanism. On his deathbed, writing in a letter to Smith, Hume briefly indicates a proto supply-and-demand understanding of price determination: "If you [Smith] were here at my Fireside, I should dispute some of your principles [in *The Wealth of Nations*]. I cannot think, that the Rent of Farms makes any part of the Price of the Produce, but that the Price is determined altogether by the *Quantity and the Demand*" (Hume 2009, 217; italics added). His conception of the price-specie flow mechanism shows an understanding of the connection between money, the price level, and relative demand for imports and exports (see, e.g., EMPL, 286). His understanding of the price mechanism leads him to attack practices such as the "chartering of royal monopolies, wage and interest regulation

as well as general price control, restrictions regarding apprenticeship and control of the movement of labour” throughout his political economy (Rotwein 2009, lxxix n2). He clearly articulates his presumption of liberty in this vein:

In order to promote archery, no bows were to be sold at a higher price than six shillings and fourpence... The only effect of this regulation must be, either that the people would be supplied with bad bows, or none at all. Prices were also affixed to wollen cloth, to caps and hats: and the wages of labourers were regulated by law. *It is evident, that these matters ought always to be left free, and be entrusted to the common course of business and commerce.* (H 3.78; italics added).

Hume’s understanding of the usefulness of liberty is illustrated by his thinking on the mutual benefits of exchange. Against some of his mercantilist-tending predecessors and contemporaries, Hume understands trade to be generally welfare-enhancing, not zero-sum. Hume’s analysis of the welfare-enhancing character of trade stays largely at an international level – the relevant level for policy discussion during his day – and is built upon a view of the character of wealth and the division of labor. In terms of the character of wealth, Hume understands that it is consumable goods and services that make a nation wealthy, not stocks of bullion. He sees that free trade flows expand the division of labor, increasing productivity and enhancing opulence. Protectionism, on Hume’s account, reduces wealth and is a blameworthy policy outlook. He succinctly expresses such an understanding in the closing passage of his essay “Of the Jealousy of Trade”:

Were our narrow and malignant politics [of trade restriction] to meet with success, we should reduce all our neighbouring nations to the same state of sloth and ignorance that prevails in MOROCCO and the coast of BARBARY. But what would be the consequence? They would send us no commodities: They could take none from us: Our domestic commerce itself would languish from want of emulation, example, and instruction: And we ourselves should soon fall into the same abject condition, to which we had reduced them. I shall therefore venture to acknowledge, that, not only as a man, but as a BRITISH subject, I pray for the flourishing commerce of GERMANY, SPAIN, ITALY, and even FRANCE itself. (EMPL, 331)

Finally, Hume sees an “indissoluble chain” between industry, knowledge, and humanity (EMPL, 271). Given that Hume sees liberty as favorable to industry – in terms of free trade, unregulated price system, relatively hands-off monetary policy, etc. – it is perhaps not a stretch to add liberty to this indissoluble chain. Liberty enables people to discover new uses of their own and encourages industry and exertion. Freedom to industry, on Hume’s account, helps people satisfy their desires for action, pleasure, and indolence, the three looming psychological principles in Hume’s economic psychology: “In times when industry and the arts flourish, men are kept in perpetual occupation, and enjoy, as their reward, the occupation itself, as well as those pleasures which are the fruits of their labor” (EMPL, 270). Industry begets discovery and new knowledge in other areas – “we cannot reasonably expect, that a piece of woollen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation, which is ignorant of astronomy, or where ethics are neglected” – leading to an increase in knowledge, virtue, and humanity. Such discovery redounds back to industry and has, to use the language of economics, numerous positive externalities on

both private and public life: “industry, 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.” (EMPL, 272; italics original).

## 5. The Presumption of the Status Quo

There is an important element to Hume’s political outlook that illustrates the lasting impact of the dual account of reason on his thinking: the element of the presumption of the status quo. When choosing between two policy options, the presumption of the status quo inclines one towards the option that least deviates from the status quo. The presumption of the status quo would require deviations from the status quo to bear the burden of proof.

The presumption of the status quo interacts with the presumption of liberty. The presumption of liberty speaks both to reforms that would reduce liberty and to policies that would augment liberty (e.g., trade liberalization). In the first case, the presumption of liberty and the presumption of the status quo are mutually reinforcing; in the second, they are opposed. As Daniel Klein (2012, 255) has expressed the relationship between the two presumptions in instances of reform: “when the reforms would repeal, abolish, or liberalize existing contraventions, the status-quo presumption obstructs and moderates the liberty presumption.” New contraventions to liberty need bear a high burden of proof in that they run against both the presumption of liberty and the presumption of the status quo. Proposed reforms that would

augment liberty bear some burden of proof in that they run against the presumption of the status quo.

The presumption of the status quo looms large in Hume in light of his thinking on the looseness of R2 and in his recognition of the meaningful nature of current political arrangements and conventions. He is averse to policy reforms that might be inimical to the core of political authority. Again, he sees some measure of political authority as precondition for liberty. Moreover, he thinks that efforts to improve the constitution of the polity often go awry even when they sound good on paper (see EMPL, 37-41).

Hume's dual account of reason implies that R2 proceeds on the basis of custom and a natural belief in the uniform procedure of experience, a belief that cannot be independently verified. Such an understanding of R2 leads Hume to emphasize the importance of the intellectual virtue of prudence. Hume makes prudence a necessary condition for the just application of R2.

In the *Treatise*, Hume's conceptual emphasis on the importance of prudence is implicitly informed by the dual account of reason in Book I. The nature of the emphasis can be seen by briefly examining the culmination of the drama in the *Treatise*, or as Annette Baier (1991) puts it, the culmination of Hume's "progress of sentiments." After moving through the dual account of reason in Book I and spilling out into more directly human investigation in Books II and III, Hume returns to comment on the appropriate manner of reasoning. His comments come in the wake of his dissolution of the distinction between the capacity for virtue and the expression of virtue (see T 3.3.4).

Hume's move is to make prudence an internal and focal part of reason, more specifically, of R2, the broad concept of reason that works on matters of experience. To successfully use R2,

one must recognize its inexplicable constitution and proceed with due moderation and self-awareness. Prudence is important in view of the non-foundational character of R2 and the experiential construction of our thinking. Indeed, Hume prefigures necessity of prudence in reasoning in Book I, Part 4 of the *Treatise*: “We must, therefore, in every reasoning form a new judgment, as a check or controul on our first judgement or belief; and must enlarge our view to comprehend a kind of history of all the instances, wherein our understanding has deceiv’d us, compar’d with those, wherein its testimony was just and true” (T 1.4.1.1).

Hume’s emphasis on the importance of prudence in the application of reason motivates his presumption of the status quo. We must tread with some caution when deviating from existing traditions and political conventions in that the overall effects of a given policy or reform on the social order are difficult to ascertain and, moreover, that our mean of ascertaining such effects (R2) is highly imperfect. As Hume puts it in his *Essays*:

It affords a violent prejudice against almost every science, that no prudent man, however sure of his principles, dares prophesy concerning any event, or foretel the remote consequence of things. A physician will not venture to pronounce concerning the condition of his patient a fortnight or month after: And still less dares a politician foretel the situation of public affairs a few months hence. (EMPL,47)

Whether the presumption of liberty or the presumption of the status quo gets more weight in a discourse situation is a matter of context. Hume seems to put more weight on the presumption of liberty in matters of political economy and more weight on the presumption of the status quo in matters of constitutional reform. Hume clearly recommends humility and



prudence in constitutional matters. Hume says that “to balance a large state or society, whether monarchical or republican, on general laws, is a work of so great difficult that no human genius, however comprehensive, is able, by the mere dint of reason and reflection, to effect it” (EMPL, 124). There is perhaps a stronger presumption of the status quo in reforms that would affect constitutional arrangements in that the scope and trajectory of constitutional reforms are, perhaps, more difficult to ascertain than other reforms. Constitutional reforms are, moreover, higher risk in terms of their overall effect on political stability in that a constitution forms important pillars of political authority and stability. Hume intimates the importance of the presumption of the status quo in constitutional matters in his essay, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”:

An established government has an infinite advantage, by that very circumstance of its being established; the bulk of mankind being governed by authority, not reason, and never attributing authority to any thing that has not the recommendation of antiquity. To tamper, therefore, in this affair, or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate, who will bear a reverence to what carries the marks of age; and though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, *yet he will adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution.* (EMPL 512-513; italics added)

The strength of Hume’s presumption of the status quo in constitutional reforms has led Duncan Forbes to attribute him with an “establishment political philosophy.” As Forbes (1975,

91) explains the phrase, Hume's "establishment political philosophy," sought "to give the established regime, the Revolution Settlement, the Hanoverian succession, the respectable intellectual foundation which, in the 'fashionable system', it had not got." This establishment, status-quo bent of Hume's political outlook comes from his recognition of the usefulness of political authority. Hume understands political authority as useful and as a necessary condition for liberal society. As he puts it in his essay, "Of the Origin of Government:

In all governments, there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; and neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest...it must be owned, that liberty is the perfection of civil society; but still authority must be acknowledged essential to its very existence: and in those contests, which so often take place between the one and the other, the latter [authority] may, on that account, challenge the preference [liberty]. (EMPL, 41)

Hume sees the contest for political authority as a kind of coordination game (see Sabl 2012). As such, it matters most that everyone agrees on *a* political authority – much like it matters most that everyone agrees to drive on either one side of the road or the other. This is not to say that the character of political authority is meaningless, of course, but simply that having most any sort of established political authority is, to Hume's mind, better than having none at all (EMPL, 512). Andrew Sabl (2012) illustrates how Hume's *History of England* tells the story of the development of political authority in England as series of coordination games, the resolutions of which Hume generally seems to embrace – at least inasmuch as they enabled the establishment of the stable English polity of Hume's day.

Hume's view of political authority and its importance for liberty makes him averse to policies that would lead to political revolution and upheaval. That which is inimical to stable, generally liberal, political authority is inimical to liberty in the general course of things. Much like the rules of justice, where we see the usefulness of the whole scheme despite single acts of enforcement that might offend our moral sentiments, we might tolerate established practices that impinge upon liberty in that they are somehow integral to the established political order, which is good for liberty on the whole.

Although the presumption of liberty seems to carry significant weight in political economy, Hume is clear that presumption of status quo and its accompanying attitude of prudence is important in economic reforms. Hume argues in his economic essay "Of Commerce," that people have difficulty regarding the "general course of things" and tend towards short run considerations or "particular deliberations" (EMPL, 255). In "Of the Protestant Succession," he points out that people have the tendency to focus on that which is seen, or immediately obvious in policy, not on the "many consequences, unforeseen, [which] do always, in fact, result" (EMPL, 507). Even philosophers (or economists) are subject to intellectual lock-in and dogmatism, and to extend their models, their "favourite principles...over the whole of creation, and reduces it to every phaenomenon, though by the the most violent and absurd reasoning" (EMPL, 159).

Hume most elegantly expresses his prudential political attitude, in light of the problems of reason, in his essay "Of the Protestant Succession":

It belongs, therefore, to the 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.

Such a one will readily, at first, acknowledge that all political questions are infinitely complicated, and that there scarcely occurs, in any deliberation, a choice, which is either purely good, or purely ill. Consequences, mixed and varied, may be foreseen to flow from every measure: And many consequences, unforeseen, do always, in fact, result from every one. Hesitation, and reserve, and suspense, are, therefore, the only sentiments he brings to this essay or trial. Or if he indulges any passion, it is that of derision against the ignorant multitude, who are always clamorous and dogmatical, even in the nicest questions, of which, from want of temper, perhaps still more than of understanding, they are altogether unfit judges. (EMPL, 507)

## 6. Conclusion

As Livingston (1984, 36) points out, philosophical insight in Hume's *Treatise* "is gained by working through the contrarities of thought which structure a drama of inquiry." There are many "contrarities" in the *Treatise*, tensions which not only lead the reader to better understand Hume's thinking, but to inquire and innovate on their own. A looming question that the reader is left with after reading Book I of the *Treatise* is: what should philosophy look like in a world where reason contradicts itself and proceeds on the basis of custom? Put differently, what should a non-foundational epistemology imply about our vision for philosophy? Hume provides a possible answer: philosophy in such a world should entail a diffident acceptance of reason and a prudent inquiry into things that are distinctly human and of inevitable interest from the vantage point of common life. Hume's thinking after Book I of the *Treatise*, generally speaking,

illustrates such philosophy by way of example. His philosophy emphasizes prudent inquiry into morals and politics. In politics, especially when we turn to Hume's *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, Hume shows himself to be a classical liberal, arriving at a presumption of liberty in his thinking on public policy (particularly economic policy). Yet his liberalism is of a pragmatic bent, recognizing the importance of status-quo social and political arrangements and humbly acknowledging the limits of reason. His epistemology moves him to politics but returns to speak to his manner of applying political principles.

Understanding the connectedness between epistemology, politics, and political economy in Hume's thinking, particularly in the *Treatise*, makes the case for reading him as a unified thinker. His writing and thinking is, indeed, all of a piece. Such an understanding should heighten our estimation of him as a philosopher and, moreover, should inform our own attitudes, dispositions, and conversations in philosophy, whether epistemological, political, or economic.

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