

Liberty, Prudence, and the Pragmatic Liberalism of David Hume

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Introduction

This presentation is about David Hume's pragmatic liberalism and his attitude in political economy.

It emphasizes connections between philosophy and economics and their significance.

Upshot: Hume's philosophy leads him to study political economy and speaks to the balance between liberty and prudence in policy deliberations.

Why should we care?

(1) Hume's connected thinking on knowledge and political economy recommends a spirit of prudence, humility to those of all ideological inclinations.

(2) Hume shows how to move forward in matters of politics in a world of uncertainty.

The Background: *A Treatise of Human Nature*

A typical understanding of Hume

Hume wrote about epistemology and social studies.

Hume₁ = philosopher

Hume₂ = social theorist

Hume₁ ≠ Hume₂

More extreme: Hume₁ ∪ Hume₂

Why this story?

- (1) Hume's *Treatise* fell "*dead-born from the press.*"
- (2) His subsequent works were (more) in social studies.
- (3) He was best known as an historian.
- (4) Commentators: T.H. Grose, Bertrand Russell, etc.

My basic argument

(1) Hume₁ → Hume₂

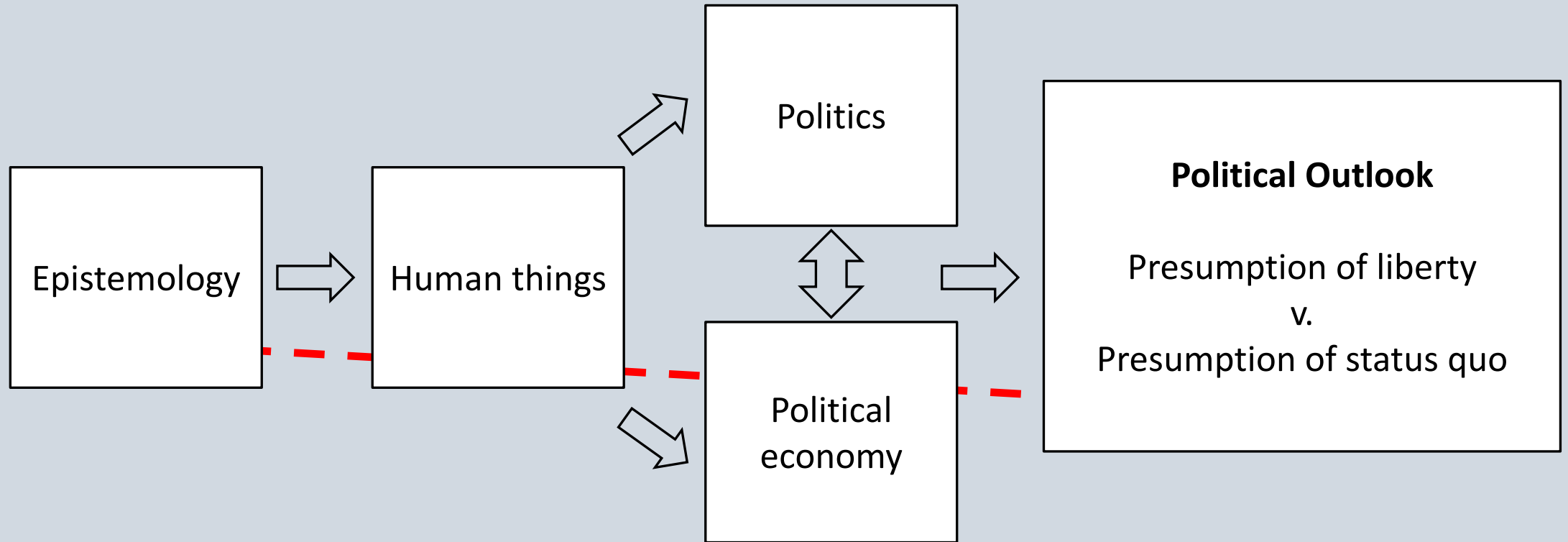
(2) The *Treatise* illustrates the Hume₁ → Hume₂ narrative.

Hume's philosophy *leads* him to study politics and political economy.

My basic argument

Hume's epistemological developments in the Treatise, through his reconceptualization of the faculty of reason, drives him to study politics and political economy and continue to speak to the prudential manner in which he applies his reconceptualized reason in these areas.

The structure of the narrative in Hume's *Treatise*

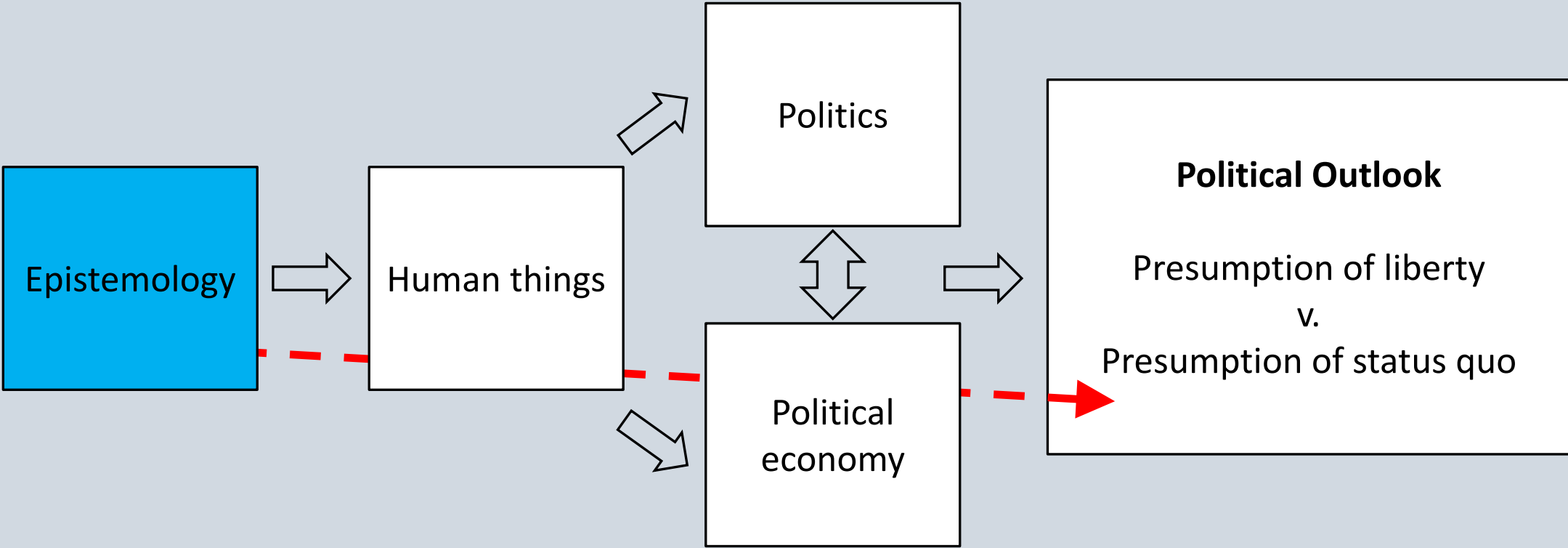


The structure of the narrative

- (1) Hume has a dual account of reason
- (2) The dual account of reason leads to skepticism
- (3) Skepticism is overcome by social engagement
- (4) Reason is applied to human things
- (5) Politics is a paramount human thing
- (6) Reason in politics arrives at a presumption of liberty
- (7) The frailties of reason speak to a presumption of status quo

Epistemology: The Dual Account of Reason

The structure of the narrative in Hume's *Treatise*



Three *reasons*

Hume uses the word *reason* in three ways.

(1) R1 = narrow/traditional concept of reason

(2) R2 = R1 + a mode of probable reasoning

(3) Reason *qua* argument/warrant/deliberation

The R1 account

Hume uses *reason* to mean R1 through T 1.3.11.1.

R1: Faculty of intuition/demonstration from Locke.

Begins from intuitive perception of idea.

Intuitively perceiving connections between ideas.

Demonstration: chain of intuitively-connected intuitive ideas.

The R1 account

R1 conclusions (demonstrations) are certain in that they only depend on the ideas that make them up.

Example from Locke: a triangle

R1 conclusion: a triangle has 180 degrees.

This conclusion is certain.

Demonstrations aren't subject to counter arguments.

Hume says:

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 the capacity equal to such subjects. (T 1.2.2.6; italics added)

R1 and the problem of induction

Hume discovers a problem: R1 can't work on experience and can't endorse probable reasoning.

Probable/experiential reasoning relies on the assumption that experience proceeds uniformly, which can't be demonstrated.

You can't perceive the contrary of a just demonstration. Since we *can* perceive, e.g., the sun not rising tomorrow, the proceeding of experience is non-demonstrable.

Another way to think of it: what *reason* do we have to rely on experience?

Hume says:

Our foregoing method of reasoning will easily convince us, that there can be no *demonstrative* arguments to prove, *that those instances, of which we have had no experience, resemble those, of which we have had experience...* To form a clear idea of anything is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it. (T 1.3.6.5)

Probable reasoning is not R1-reasonable!

R1 and the problem of induction

Why do we think that the future will resemble the past?

We don't *know* that it will, in an R1 sense.

We believe that it will. Such belief is a matter of custom and imagination, of "habits of association."

Hume: "Thus all probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation." (T 1.3.8.12)

Shifting to R2

Hume doesn't want to subvert probable reasoning.

Elsewhere in his writing, he clearly attributes 'probable reasoning' to the faculty of reason.

He moves to reconceptualize reason such that reason = R1+probable reasoning = **R2**

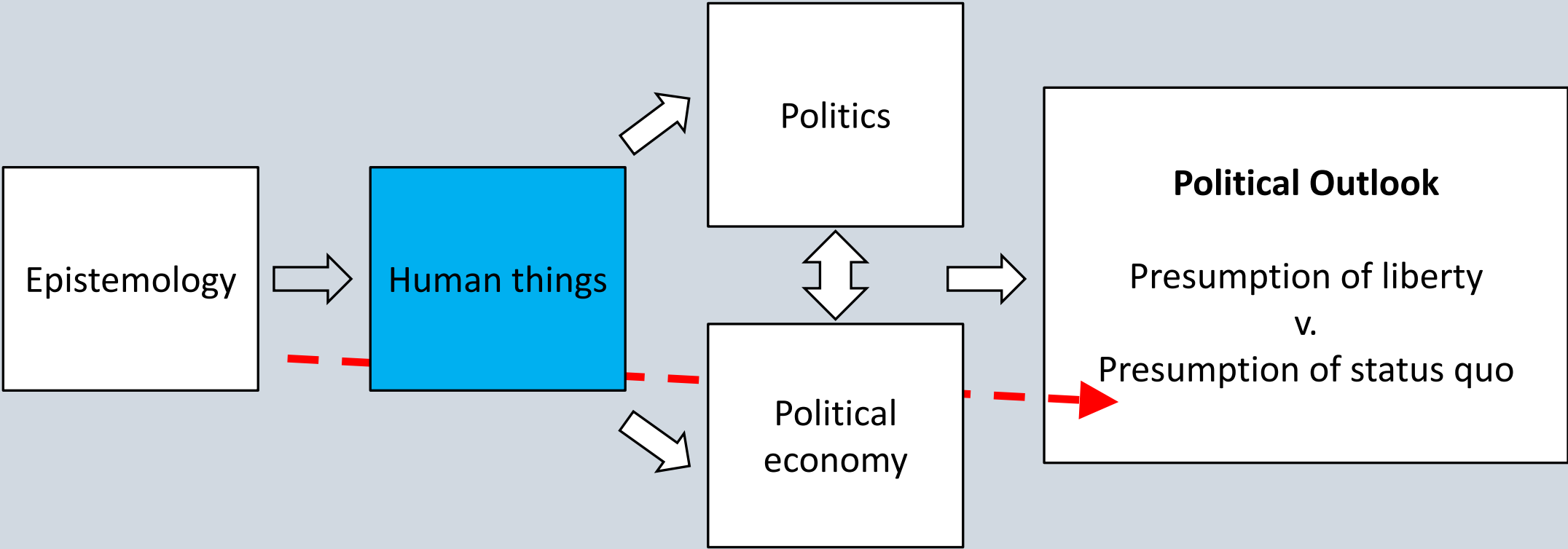
This entails a semantic shift.

Hume indicates a semantic shift:

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 followed **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; bold added)

Human Things: The Turn of R2

The structure of the narrative



Moving forward with R2

Hume has difficulty accepting his R1-not-reasonable R2.

The difficulty is famously expressed in the Conclusion to Bk.1

Hume is anxious in that he can't explain R2.

R2 proceeds on unverifiable principles.

Hume expresses anxiety on this head:

Metinks 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)

Hume finds himself at an impasse:

“We have, therefore, no choice left but betwixt a false reason [R2] and none at all. For my part, I know not what ought to be done in the present case” (T 1.4.7.7).

R2 is “false reason” because it is not R1-reasonable.

R1 is “no reason” because it cannot work on matters of experience and is limited analytic statements.

Hume feels he should follow a path of moderation:

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., strictly to R1]” (T 1.4.7.6).

But *how much* weight should one give to (1) assent vs. (2) rejection?

Hume's peak of 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)

Nature's cure:

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).

Out of seclusion, into the world

Hume leaves his closet of study, as it were.

His anxiety dissipates through immersion in common affairs.

Hume flips traditional perspective in philosophy, begins with a “We do” perspective instead of an “I think” (cf. Capaldi 1989)

Reference to common life and search for norms therein leads him to presuppose soundness of R2.

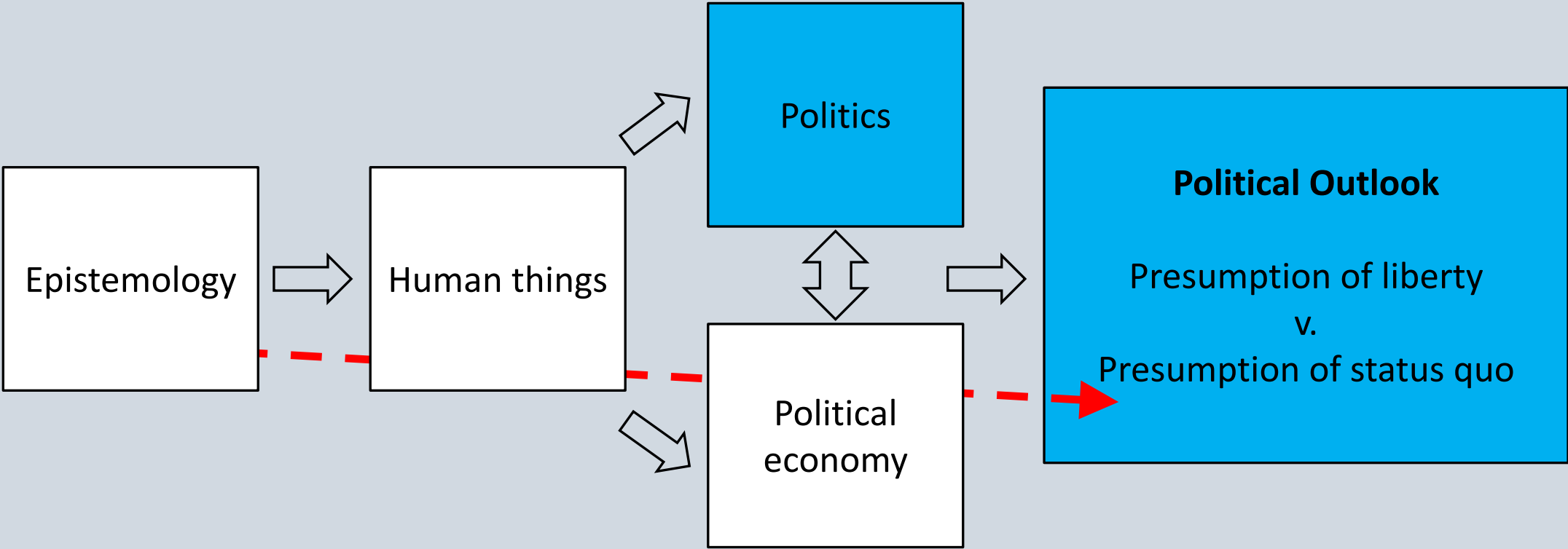
Hume's move to human things

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; italics original)

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 *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, bold added).

R2 and the presumption of liberty

The structure of the narrative



For Hume, politics looms large among the human things

Why?

In morals, Hume finds that justice is special. Admits of more regularity than other virtues (and is more important).

The study of politics is study of administration of justice.

English historical context.

Overview of Hume's political outlook

Hume's application of R2 to politics arrives at presumption of liberty.

Liberty is useful and agreeable, usefulness understood by way of theory of property and concepts in political economy.

Dual account of reason arrives at additional presumption: presumption of status quo.

Emphasis on prudence in application of R2 in politics.

Two presumptions

(1) The presumption of liberty: given two reform options (one of which might be the status quo), the option that further departs from liberty bears the burden of proof.

(2) The presumption of the status quo: the option that further deviates from the status quo bears the burden of proof.

Hume on liberty

Hume embraces presumption of liberty because he sees liberty as useful and agreeable.

But it isn't always clear what Hume means by liberty.

Many Hume scholars emphasize that liberty means the rule of law, i.e., freedom from arbitrary coercion etc.

Rule of law is an important facet of liberty in Hume.

But rule of law underdetermines Hume's conception of liberty.

Hume on liberty

Liberty in Hume is better understood in line with the natural law tradition (i.e. Grotius, Pufendorf, Locke, Hutcheson)

Liberty is: freedom to do with one's own insofar as one's activities do not impinge on another's own.

Liberty in Hume can be understood in such a way in that the convention of property and the rules of justice are its backbone.

Property

Hume develops his theory of property in Bk. III of *Treatise*.

Central to property is the idea of convention.

Humean conventions are solutions to coordination games that are (1) evolved through man's interaction in society or (2) centrally directed. [Property is a convention in the first sense]

Example: language, property, money.

Property

Conventions of ownership evolve as people cooperate to overcome scarcity.

Property entails “insensible gradations” over time but “admits not of degrees” in its in-the-moment application

Justice is the virtue of abstaining from other’s property.

There is no virtue of justice in Hume without property.

The rules of justice

Justice is a virtue in Hume because it is useful.

The rules of justice provide a stable framework for social cooperation.

We might not like individual enforcements of the rules of justice.
(e.g., punishing a good-natured thief)

But the strict adherence to justice compensates everyone on the whole.

Hume says:

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)

Justice and the presumption of liberty

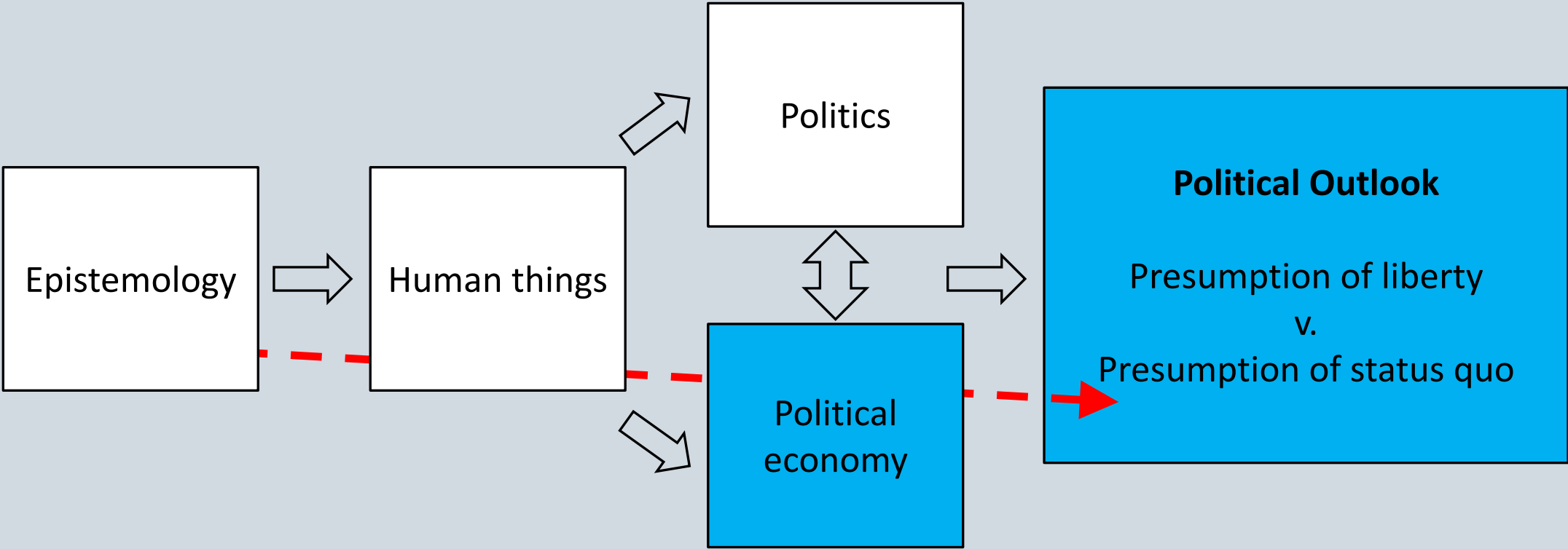
The rules of justice and conventions of property precede government.

The existence of government is a violation of justice (though a beneficial one, at times).

When talking about government affairs, strict adherence to the rules of justice becomes a policy maxim for Hume.

The usefulness of justice as framework for social affairs impels positive law that violates justice (and hence liberty) to bear a burden of proof in Hume.

The structure of the narrative



Liberty and political economy

Hume's estimation of the usefulness of liberty is enhanced by developments in political economy.

He sees spontaneous order in the undirected actions of private individuals.

He sees the mutual benefits of voluntary exchange.

He sees a chain of connection between liberty, industry, knowledge, and virtue.

Spontaneous order

“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).

Hume’s sensibilities are reinforced by his price theory.

Hume prefigures Adam Smith’s invisible hand: This system [of justice], 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)

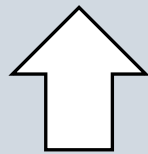
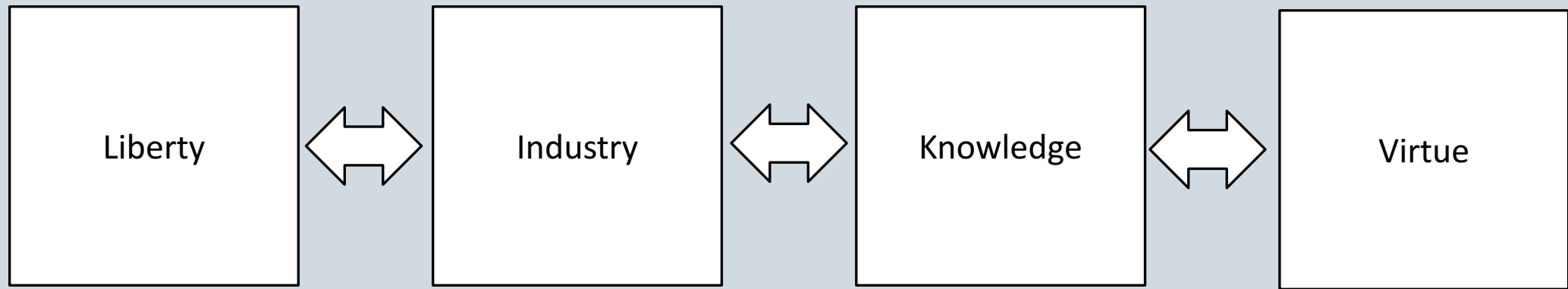
Dovetailing of private and public interest

Hume's essay, "Of Commerce."

Hume's thinking on trade.

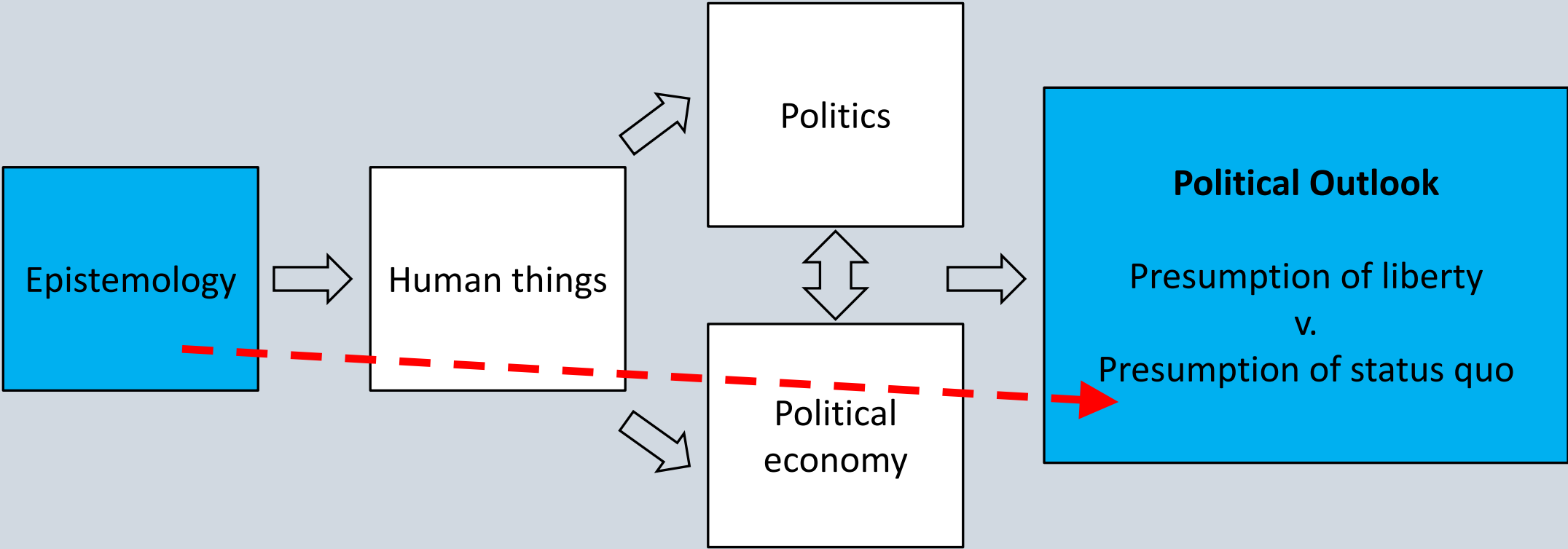
On trade, Hume says:

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)



Economics psychology: desire for (1) action, (2) pleasure, (3) indolence

The structure of the narrative



Liberty and reason

Liberty in Hume is a maxim, not an axiom.

Hume's dual account of reason reenters the scene, emphasizing prudence in political deliberation. (R2 is frail)

Hume's view of the importance and fragility of political authority contributes.

Hume's thinking thus arrives at a presumption of the status quo.

The path to prudence

Hume merges intellectual virtue with capacity.

Given the frailties of R2, a successful application of R2 is a prudent one. (R2 is sentimental and experientially bound)

The virtue of prudence becomes internal to a correct application of R2.

Prudence is doubly important in politics: overall effects are difficult to ascertain, difficult to regard 'general course of things,' etc.

Hume says:

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 suspence, 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)

Constitutional matters vs political economy

Presumption of the status quo carries more weight in Hume as pertains to constitutional reforms.

Why? Hume sees the importance of political authority. Is leery of reforms that would sap the strength and sense of legitimacy of the nation state.

Authority as a precondition for liberty.

Presumption of liberty looms larger than presumption of status quo in political economy. But prudence and existing social arrangements are still important.

The Path of Hume's Pragmatic Liberalism

