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Between Rationalism and Postmodernism: Hume’s Political Science of our “Mixed Kind of Life”

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Many recent studies of David Hume emphasize his criticism of Enlightenment rationalism, but these studies risk making Hume into a paleo-conservative advocate of local attachment. This article suggests that Hume’s political science can best be seen as advocating a middle position between Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern relativism in its Rortyan and paleo-conservative manifestations. In his criticism of rationalism, Hume concedes much to postmodern views on foundations, history, and subjectivity. Hume, however, still defends the possibility of philosophic detachment and therefore political science as against postmodern theories. Hume’s criticism of Enlightenment rationalism permit him to affirm important truths about the human condition: that ours is a “mixed kind of life.” Based on this understanding of our mixed condition, Hume argues that the modern world is the home of the virtues most attuned to our complex and mixed nature.

Critics of contemporary liberal theory worry that the abstract language of rights does not do justice to our moral experience (see, e.g., Sandel 1982, 1996; Glendon, 1993; Taylor 1992: 89-90). The problem is traceable to a strain of Enlightenment political science. Enlightenment thinkers reject the teleological approach of ancient political thought and dismiss the guidance of revelation in politics. One particular strain of enlightenment science is modeled on the rational deductive approach of geometry.1 It attempts to order the chaos of political experience by providing simple principles and systems to guide political action. Hobbes announced the beginning

1 While it is tempting and somewhat compelling to see this “rationalism in politics” (Oakeshott 1991: 18-25) as primarily a phenomenon of the modern world, efforts to reconstitute society along the lines of an abstract plan are perhaps coeval with the advent of political thought. See Aristotle’s discussion of Hippodamus of Miletus, The Politics, 1267b22: 69a27 and the “idealism” of Plato’s Republic.

of this new science in De Homine, where he writes that "politics and ethics (that is, the sciences of just and unjust, of equity and inequity) can be demonstrated a priori" (1991: 42. X.5; see also Descartes 1998: 34; and Locke, ECHU 3.11.16 and 2.22.12). Such thinkers hoped that these clear and certain rational principles would introduce a politics of peace, tolerance, and humanity.

A simulacrum of this approach to understanding political life persists in today's political science in rational choice theory and in the tendency of some contemporary theorists to adduce systematic teachings about politics from abstract principles such as the "original position" (Rawls 1971) or "rights as trumps" (Dworkin 1977). This rationalist way of thinking can give rise to dogmatic and dangerous partisanship as some attempt to reshape the political world in light of a speculative system. Such simple systems can do damage to that which is not assimilated to the system, as those who have lived through the twentieth century know.²

Postmodern theorists have exposed what they believe to be a hidden partisanship in Enlightenment rationalism. According to the most prominent American postmodern, Richard Rorty, Enlightenment rationalism is a manifestation of a persistent human "urge to escape the vocabulary and practices of one's own time and find something ahistorical and necessary to cling to." This search for "metaphysical comfort" fails because "our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans [is] our only source for guidance" (Rorty 1982: 165-66). Postmodern theory is the contention that all attempts to apprehend the world or to justify a particular set of political arrangements are fundamentally shaped by historical perspective. Postmodernism rejects the possibility of philosophic detachment or objectivity.³ Liberal postmodernists like Rorty, Sanford Levinson (1988) and others suggest that our commitment to political liberalism be understood as akin to religious faith. Postmodern theory believes the world is occupied by more or less hostile "fighting faiths," and cannot stop itself from collapsing into partisanship.

This postmodern dismissal of reason flows from the rationalist premise of certainty. Postmodernists accept the rationalist account of reason, but they contend that such certainty is unattainable in political reasoning.⁴ Rorty's attempt to

² An early statement of the problems associated with system building can be found in Adam Smith's The Theory of Moral Sentiments (1982: 233-34; VI.i.2.17).

³ Postmodernism refers to post-Enlightenment (almost post-philosophic), anti-foundational, historicist and subjective modes of reasoning. While postmodernism comes in many stripes and hues, this article concentrates on Rorty as the representative of postmodern thought. This article concentrates on attributes that are shared by most postmodern thinkers, even though Rorty may be distinguished by his optimism about the prospects for a healthy anti-foundational liberalism. See Pangle 1992: 53-55, 59, 68 for an account Rorty's place in the postmodern universe.

⁴ Consider Rorty's own account of his hope to use his "budding dialectical talents to demonstrate that the bad guys were bad and the good guys good." These hopes were dashed when he "decided that this project was not going to pan out—that 'demonstration' was just not available in this case" (1990: 637).
escape what he sees as rationalist dogmatism leads him to embrace a different dogmatism; he jettisons reason rather than reassessing it. The persistence of the rationalist and the postmodern—of hopes for certainty and radical doubts about its attainability—suggests that a reassessment of their paradoxically shared understanding of reason may be in order. This article attempts to make the case for such a reassessment based on an investigation of David Hume's political science.

Recent Hume scholarship concentrates on Hume's critique of rationalism (Livingston 1984, 1998; Capaldi 1975, 1989; Danford 1990; Stewart 1992). Hume can plausibly be seen as a precursor to the postmodern critique of the “manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason.” Sounding somewhat like today's postmodern theorists, this awareness prepares Hume to “reject all belief and reasoning” and to “look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (T: 268). His worries about abstract concepts and his critique of our rational faculties lead Hume, again somewhat like postmodernists who emphasize the formative influence of history, to ground political science in what Hume calls “common life” (EHU: 162).

Although emphasis on Hume's criticisms of Enlightenment rationalism is appropriate, readings that emphasize Hume's opposition to rationalism risk portraying him as an opponent of Enlightenment simply. Such readings concentrate on Hume's perceived embrace of local attachment, inherited culture, custom, and tradition. Hume is seen as a paleo-conservative, endorsing a Burkean brand of creeping historicism (Letwin 1998; Livingston 1984, 1998; Miller 1981). This article attempts to call attention to the resources that fortify Hume against the

5 Rorty compliments Hume for being “the wittest, most flexible, least phallogocentric thinker of the Enlightenment” (1999: 184). See also Williams 1999.
6 Hume's works will be cited as follows: Treatise of Human Nature = T; Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding = EHU; Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals = EPM; and Essays = E.
7 Even among the most penetrating Hume scholars, there is a tendency to consider Hume's political thought as “strongly premodern” in its attachment to provincial, corporate orders, inherited rights, and its opposition to “rootless” consumerism and the idea of modern nation state (Livingston 1998: 368, 351; see also 333 and 342). Livingston in particular attempts to show that Hume criticizes what he calls “Lincoln's organic nationalist founding” and defends secession by local communities from large nation states; Livingston's Hume favors Stephen Douglas over Lincoln. Only such small communities provide the rootedness and connection necessary for human happiness, according to Livingston's Hume. On the face of it, this reading most deal with Hume's decisive criticisms of premodern political arrangements found (among other places) in his essay entitled “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” in which Hume disclaims an admiration for the strictures of ancient policy. More deeply, for all of Livingston's well-founded attempts to show that Hume is opposed to “Enlightenment alchemy” (i.e., Enlightenment efforts to reduce political experience to order through the announcement of simple principles), we must recognize that Rorty too argues against such Enlightenment efforts. In decisive respects, Livingston's paleo-conservative Hume seems as willing to jettison the guidance of theory or reason as Rorty. A corrective of this reading can be found in Hume's defense of the modern practice of commerce, in which the idea of rootedness is not seen as an essential part of human happiness.
postmodern misappropriation. Given the prevalence of the view that Hume denies the capacity of reason to guide political practice, it is important to make this correction explicit by way of developing his defense of philosophic detachment. Hume's criticisms of Enlightenment rationalism make him aware of the postmodern turn toward contingency and historicity, but Hume was equally aware of the deep problems in the postmodern position. Recognition of this impasse led Hume to reassess the nature of reason. This article corrects a prevalent misreading of Hume, while showing that his thought provides a sympathetic corrective to many destructive tendencies in postmodern thought.

Examining the possibility of political science leads Hume to provide an account of reason that is between the rationalism and postmodernism. This middling or in-between understanding of reason orients Hume’s political science and is the basis for his justification for modern commercial republics as most consistent with the “mixed kind of life” (EHU: 9) for which the human race is suited. It accounts for his opposition to both Enlightenment rationalism and postmodern relativism. In Hume’s account of the “mixed kind of life” we find the key to his political thought and to the possibility of reassessing the problem of reason. Hume develops his confrontation with what resembles postmodernism in the context of developing a critique of the rationalist “pursuit of certainty” (Letwin 1998). In following this critique of rationalism, this article passes quickly over some familiar territory in order to concentrate on the ways Hume addresses and responds to the concerns raised by postmodernism. We present Hume’s confrontation with rationalism and postmodernism in three sections, building from the ground up. We begin by describing how Hume’s confrontation with the postmodern abandonment of reason grows out of his critique of previous accounts of how human beings apprehend the world. Second, we discuss how Hume’s defense of our capacity to make reasoned judgments about the world proceeds from his confrontation with a postmodern species of philosophy. Last, we sketch Hume’s defense of modern conditions against the partisanship of Enlightenment rationalism and postmodernism.

**Between Modern Rationalism and Postmodern Irrationalism:**

**Apprehending the World**

According to Hume, modern rationalism is defined by its attempt to give an account of phenomena apart from common opinion. Failure to ground all

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8 A number of recent studies deny that Hume is such a paleo-conservative (Danford 1990; Manzer 1996). They do not examine all the reasons for Hume’s rejection of this position, nor do they develop the deep similarities between Hume’s position and postmodernity.

9 It is noteworthy that no Hume scholar takes bearings from the “mixed kind of life” passage which this article sees as the central concept of Hume’s political science. Some rely on the spirit, if not the
inquiry directly in common life leads modern philosophers into a thicket of problems. Attempts to escape common life with the philosophic imagination are connected to the hope of providing demonstrative knowledge to guide practice. Once these hopes are dashed, as they must be, Hume fears philosophers may be led to doubt the capacity of reason itself. An almost postmodern despair about the capacity of reason derives from the initial formulation about the power of reason to grasp universal truths about the human condition.

Modern accounts of perception are emblematic of a problem in rationalism. The “fundamental principle” of modern natural philosophy, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, is founded on a “scepticism with regard to the senses” (T: 218). Asserting that the deliverances of the senses are merely images or perceptions without any necessary foundation in nature, modern philosophers such as Descartes and Locke invent a hypothesis presuming a “double existence of perceptions and objects; which pleases our reason, in allowing, that our dependent perceptions [or secondary qualities] are interrupted and different; and at the same time is agreeable to the imagination, in attributing a continu’d existence to something else [primary qualities], which we call objects” (T: 215). Whether it is the ancient-scholastic distinction between form and substance or the “fundamental principle” of modern philosophy, Hume criticizes previous philosophy for imposing an artificial, rationalist order on the world. Examining the “fundamental principle” of modern philosophy, for example, exposes lacunae and embarrassing presuppositions in the theory. The hypothesis cannot explain how objects convey perceptions to the human mind (EHU: 152-53), why one perception is necessarily connected to other perceptions (EHU: 74), or how solid matter coheres (T: 232-34). Although these observations are important, what Hume regards as the most decisive argument derives from the observations of Bishop George Berkeley. Our ideas of primary qualities of objects (e.g., extension, solidity) are dependent entirely upon perception, but all things dependent upon perception are presumed by modern philosophers not to exist. If modern inquirers hold that sensible qualities are in the mind and not in the object and that we can know of qualities only through the senses, then “we

letter, of this concept (see, e.g., Norton 1982), but by ignoring the letter, scholars often risk applying Hume’s “middling” standard to too narrow a field of inquiry or, what is worse, do not correctly calibrate Hume’s position on the continuum between rationalism and postmodernism.

10 Locke’s understanding of identity (T: 254), liberty (EHU: 93-94), causation (T: 161-62), and social contract theory are examples of how modern rationalism invents principles where no principles can be discovered in nature. These concepts are, in the words of Livingston, forms of “false philosophy” (see 1984: 20-25, 182-86).

11 Locke, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 2.8.15.

12 While it is dangerous simply to impute the position of the essay “The Sceptic” to Hume, the complaint about “the decisions of philosophers upon all subjects” in the essay mirrors the formulation we often see in Hume (E: 159).
utterly annihilate all these objects, and reduce ourselves to the most extravagant scepticism" (T: 228).

The fact that so many important questions about the senses cannot be answered by reason may cause one to lament "the wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties." When reason "acts alone," Hume continues, it "entirely subverts itself, and leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition." Hume faces the postmodern temptation to abandon reason entirely: he appears to have "no choice left but betwixt false reason and none at all" (T: 267-68). Can this maze be escaped?

Hume responds on a number of levels. The "postmodern" abandonment of reason is a dogmatic, albeit negative, assertion of certainty. Denying the capacity of reason to make objective judgments is every bit as "metaphysical" as asserting such a capacity for reason. The postmodern denial of objectivity is the mirror image of dogmatic scholasticism and Enlightenment rationalism in this respect.13 "To throw up all pretensions" of discovering general principles of human nature, Hume writes, "may justly be deemed more rash, precipitate, and dogmatical, than even the boldest and most affirmative philosophy, that has ever attempted to impose its crude dictates and principles on mankind" (EHU: 15). Instead of being "foundationalist" like Locke and other moderns or "anti-foundationalist" like postmoderns, Hume practices, in Griswold's formulation, a non-foundational science (1999: 165).

Nature frees human beings from the melancholy and delirium of philosophic doubt (T: 264, 269). Despite the impression conveyed in the immediate context, what Hume means by nature is not a distracting game of backgammon or a conversation with a friend. These casual observations bespeak a serious philosophic position. The skepticism inherent in the modern account of perception is mitigated by an understanding of the limits of human understanding and by awareness that certain attributes of human nature (i.e., natural belief, custom, trust in our senses) exist to remedy the situation. A correct understanding of our nature fosters a reasonable, relaxed submission to the mixed character of human reason. Hume recommends a prudent suspension of judgment about issues beyond human ken.14 A "true sceptic" will be diffident of philosophical doubts and convictions (T: 273). By understanding the vices to which human understanding is naturally prone (i.e., dogmatism, prejudice, distinguishing the natural or necessary from the accidental or contingent), Hume's science offers itself as a self-consciously precocious, non-dogmatic, potentially fruitful enterprise.

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13 Even though Rorty tries to keep up nondogmatic appearances, he asserts that "there is no central faculty; no central self, called 'reason'" and he denies the possibility of detached scientific neutrality (cf. 1989, 8 with 33 and 48-51).

Hume's political science opposes both Enlightenment rationalism and the postmodern abandonment of reason. Against what he sees as the hubris of Lockean rationalism, Hume's conclusion is unmistakable: Philosphic accounts of human perception must accept certain elements of common sense without explanation and maybe even without the hope of providing adequate explanations. An element of what postmoderns call "contingency" is unavoidable in our perception of the world. Hume would also not demur from Rorty's belief that modern rationalism wrongly sees itself an example of "presuppositionless critical reflection" (1989: 54). Against postmodernism, however, Hume argues that human beings can ascend from reflections grounded in common life or "contingencies." In Rorty's account, Hume sides with "metaphysicians" like Plato and Kant in seeing language or common life as "a tip-off to the way the world is," rather than "just the characteristic mark of the discourse of people inhabiting a certain chunk of space-time" (1989: 76). For Hume, "philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected" (EHU: 162). How can common language serve as a window to reality or nature?

**Between Certainty and Relativism: The Possibility of Political Science**

Though Hume distinguishes ancient philosophy and scholasticism from modern philosophy (cf. T: 219-25 and 225-31), these modes of thought share an important attribute. Anticipating Nietzsche and Rorty, Hume argues that all kinds of rationalism impose an artificial order on an inexplicable world; Hume agrees with the postmoderns who see Enlightenment rationalism as a kind of poetry that distorts the phenomena under consideration. Unlike the later thinkers, however, Hume does not embrace an ethic of self-overcoming or self-creation. Hume peers into the postmodern abyss without jumping because, unlike Rorty, Hume thinks that human beings can affirm something important about the human condition. A defense of science frees Hume from the postmodern maze. Inquirers must be reconciled to approach "such subjects as are best adapted to the narrow capacity of human understanding" (EHU: 162). Political science is one of the subjects suited to our imperfect faculties (EHU: 165). Unlike contemporary political scientists, Hume does not insist on quantitative or hypothetical objectification as a means of achieving scientific objectivity. He recommends an "intercourse of sentiments" which takes place in the study of history and "in society and conversation" and allows us to form some "general and

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13 On the theme of poeticizing the world, cf. Hume's discussion of the philosophic tendency to interpret the world in light of a "favourite principle" (E: 159) and his treatment of the imagination in escaping the proper confines of common life and "correct Judgement" (EHU: 162) with Rorty's repeated claims that all descriptions of the world are fundamentally poetic (1989: 30, 40, 61, passim).
unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners” (EPM: 229; see also E: 566-68). Exchanging views and increasing materials for correct judgment do not guarantee the cultivation of a standard, but Hume holds out hope that a general standard can be approximated.

The “Standard of Taste” is the topic of two essays in Hume’s collection: the first essay of Book I (“Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion”) and the last essay of Book I (“Of the Standard of Taste”). The topic of securing a standard literally frames the first book of the Essays. The difficulty of finding a standard is particularly acute when we survey history and see the amazing diversity of taste about the good or the beautiful. The “most careless enquirer” can notice this diversity. The variety of taste is upon inspection “still greater in reality than in appearance.” All countries use the language of virtue and recommend certain actions or styles, but when “critics come to particulars, this seeming unanimity vanishes.” Everyone blames coldness and affectation in writing (to use Hume’s example), but there is greater disagreement among critics in deciding whether a particular piece is cold or affected (E: 229).

Hume’s reaction to this diversity distinguishes him from postmoderns. Rorty finds evidence for relativism in this diversity because he concludes that there “is no way to rise above the language, culture, and practices one has adopted” (1989: 50). Hume, in contrast, suggests that in this confusion “it is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste; a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled; at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another” (E: 229). The diversity of opinion on matters of taste is an impetus to search for a standard.

Seeking a standard of taste does not guarantee that a standard can be found or that it will yield certain knowledge. There is a “species of philosophy, which cuts off all hopes of success in such an attempt, and represents the impossibility of ever attaining any standard of taste” (E: 229). This “species of philosophy” divorces judgment from sentiment and holds that sentiment is always correct. Sentiment “has a reference to nothing beyond itself, and is always right, wherever a man is conscious of it.” On this account, the “determinations of the understanding . . . are not right; because they have a reference to something beyond themselves, to wit, real matter of fact” (E, 230). This is an ethic of

16 Danford’s (1990) discussion of the standard of taste parallels many of the considerations here. I place Hume’s argument in the context of postmodern theory and to point out the similarities between Hume and the postmodern view.

17 What Hume conceives of as sentiment runs parallel to Rorty’s understanding of vocabulary. Recognizing the need to “de-divinize the world” and to “face up to the contingency of language” means that the “world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, that we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called ‘fact’” (1989: 21, 9, 20).
subjectivity. We will call this species of philosophy “postmodern,” even though postmodern theorists radicalize it by denying that “determinations of the understanding” refer to any “real matter of fact.” All judgments for Rorty are derived from what Hume calls sentiment (Rorty 1989: 3-22). The separation of sentiment from judgment and the preference for pure sentiment in matters of taste “seems to have attained the sanction of common sense” (E: 230)—we say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. A philosopher of common life cannot discount this common opinion. Hume’s teaching of moral sentiments further suggests that there is at least a similarity between this postmodern “species of philosophy” and Hume’s own view: neither thinks reason provides a basis for making moral distinctions.

At the same time, recall that “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (EHU: 162). Correcting common opinion is accomplished by drawing on resources within common life. Hume counters the common sense view that distinctions are in the eye of the beholder with more common sense, the distinction between tutored and untutored sentiment or between good and bad judgment. There is a “species of common sense” which opposes or “at least serves to modify and restrain” the position of subjectivity implicit in the “species of philosophy.” Referring to literary taste, Hume compares critics who cannot see the difference “between OGILBY and MILTON, or BUNYAN and ADDISON” to those who think “a pond as extensive as the ocean.” Such critics are absurd and justly ignored. The “species of philosophy” endorses a “natural equality of taste” (E: 230-31), but human beings distinguish between good and bad judgment in common life. Because it emphasizes the equality of tastes, this postmodern species of philosophy demands democratic political and social arrangements, the “priority of democracy to philosophy” in Rorty’s (1988) formulation. Ranked order can be justified with reference to a

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18 Hume characteristically does not provide any examples of those who entertain this “species of philosophy.” Perhaps Hume’s reticence is due to his judgment that this species of philosophy is a permanent philosophic temptation that should not be associated with any one thinker. Danford finds this “an extraordinarily prescient account of the sort of relativism which dominates contemporary social science of the positivist variety.” The prescience consists in the fact that “Hume anticipates exactly the formulations of Ayer or Stevenson, which place moral judgments in the realm of personal preference (affective judgments) and divide them sharply from factual statements, which are verifiable by reference to the empirical world” (1990: 94). See also Salkiever 1980.

19 Consider Rorty’s “ideal” society: “This would be a culture in which neither the priests nor the physicists nor the poets nor the Party were thought of as more ‘rational,’ or more ‘scientific’ or ‘deeper’ than one another. No particular portion of culture would be singled out as exemplifying (or signally failing to exemplify) the condition to which the rest aspired. There would be no sense that, beyond the current intra-disciplinary criteria, which, for example, good priests or good physicists obeyed, there were other, transdisciplinary, transcultural, ahistorical criteria, which they also obeyed” (1982: xxxviii).
kind of superiority seen by creditable judges. The perspective Hume outlines implies refinement or ranking, and therefore is more cautious about democracy. If we accept reservations about a democracy of tastes (and everyone does in common life), we must face the question of what constitutes good judgment.

Hume's equation of good judgment with a "delicacy of taste" calls to mind an earlier essay, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion." A delicacy of taste, he writes, "enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of mankind" (E: 5). The cultivation of a delicacy of taste "enables us to judge the characters of men, of compositions of genius, and of the productions of the nobler arts" (E: 6). While "Of the Standard of Taste" is concerned most directly with questions of literary beauty, the earlier essay makes clear that a delicate taste is necessary to judge moral sentiments as well. Few experiences promote a delicate taste more than an education in liberal arts (ibid.). Essential to the cultivation of a delicate taste is "practice in a particular art," which involves repeated "comparisons between the several species and degrees of excellence"(E: 237-38). Frequent observations will train the eye to see all that is relevant to a particular performance, character, or object (E: 241). It goes without saying that a critic will have a "mind free from all prejudice" (E: 239). Intellectual liberty would then be essential to develop good taste.20 Lastly, a delicate taste requires what Hume calls "good sense" to check the influence of prejudice and to ascertain the design of the object under consideration (E: 240). The "chief use" of delicate taste is "to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature" through an investigation of history (EHU: 83).

In the eye of the person who has these traits "is the true standard of taste and beauty" (E: 241). We must notice perhaps the deepest point of agreement between Hume and the postmodern "species of philosophy." Both argue that our notions of beauty and morality arise from within the spectator or judge; nothing is beautiful or moral in itself. Hume would agree with the "species of philosophy," which holds that "beauty is no quality in things themselves" (E: 230).21 The

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20 Even though Hume may have reservations about democracy, he does emphasize the importance of liberty. In contrast, Rorty embraces democracy, but denies the importance or existence of human liberty. Consider the following: "There is no such thing as inner freedom... There is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity, to use as a moral reference point. There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them" (1989: 177).

21 Thomas Reid notices this parallel. Moral judgment, for Hume, Reid writes, "has no other foundation but an arbitrary structure and fabric in the constitution of the human mind: so that, by a change in our structure, what is immoral might become moral, virtue might be turned into vice, and vice into virtue. And beings of a different structure, according to the variety of their feelings, may have different, nay opposite measures of moral good and evil" (1970: 480; Essays VII). This, of course, is the postmodern view, as repeated by Rorty, and Rorty applies this to the notion of truth (1989: 5, 21).
standard of taste is made by human beings; judgments are produced by the creative action of the human imagination, which Hume calls "the ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy" (T: 225). It is with reference to the extraordinary importance of the imagination in "mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing" our ideas that Hume raises the question of how we can establish "the difference between . . . fiction and belief" (EHU: 47). Hume answers that human beings distinguish truth from falsehood with reference to "more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object" within the spectator (EHU: 49). Hume and postmoderns agree that human beings are touchstones for interpretations of the world. Hume marks a step in the direction of postmodernity. He makes the study of nature problematic, in that he obscures the difference between discovering and making. In agreement with postmoderns, Hume does not conceive of nature as something "out there" (Rorty 1989: 5) independent of human beings. How is this "subjective" starting point consistent with philosophic detachment?

Nature is made by human beings, but it is not made arbitrarily. Hume's working hypothesis is that nature can be impartially made by human imagination, judgment, and feeling out of the materials of common life. The building is done with natural equipment, which becomes finer the more it is used. Detached observation can methodize and correct our view of common life with the aid of this equipment. More specifically, a person of delicate taste is engaged in moral life through sentiments, but is able to achieve some critical distance from moral life through the exercise of judgment. The mind assembles perceptions from and makes judgments about common life and these ideas prove to be more or less reliable guides for acting in the world. Human beings accept some guides as more reliable than others because experience reveals some people have delicate taste. Hume proceeds non-dogmatically on the assumption that the "appearances of objects to our senses" (T:638) have some relation to the world. This assumption is no worse than the alternative given the inscrutability of nature; science would be impossible without this assumption. This assumption recommends itself above the alternative because language reliably guides action. Hume's

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22 Livingston characterizes Hume's political philosophy as "poetic" as well (1998: 348 and 366) or productively shaping and creating the intellectual world that we inhabit.

23 Consider Rorty's boast that "the truth [is] made rather than found" (1989: 3) or that the ideal community "is to be reached, if at all, by acts of making rather than of finding—by poetic rather than philosophic achievement" (1982: xxx).

24 Consider, for instance, Hume's discussion of the rules of justice, which are "artificial," but are "not arbitrary" (T: 484).

25 Hume's detached delicate taste resembles Smith's impartial spectator, in that it abstracts to some extent from the view of the moral actor with a kind of detached sympathy or disinterested engagement. Sentiments are key to good judgment. Consider Smith's formulation "the sentiments of the cool and impartial spectator" (1982: 38, Theory I.i.3.8) and Griswold's discussion of Smith's blurring of the lines between feeling and reflection, perception and evaluation (1999: 135-46).
non-foundational approach counsels against the radical, dogmatic postmodern conclusion: Our inability to know how our observations correspond to the world is another reason to be modest.

After responding to “a bad critic” (E: 241), Hume makes another concession to postmodernity. “Notwithstanding all our endeavours to fix a standard of taste,” Hume writes, “there still remain two sources of variation, which are not sufficient indeed to confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity, but will often serve to produce a difference in the degrees of our approbation” (E: 243). The “different humours of particular men” and “the particular manners and opinions of our age and country” (ibid.) shape even the most delicate taste to an extent. These variations suggest that a “certain degree of diversity in judgment is unavoidable,” and that “we seek in vain for a standard, by which we can reconcile the contrary sentiments” (E: 244). Young people prefer different authors than old people; some prefer comedy, others tragedy, yet others satire. “Such preferences are innocent and unavoidable, and can never reasonably be the object of dispute, because there is no standard, by which they can be decided” (ibid.). This would seem to suggest that we can judge which is the best comedy and which is the best tragedy, but that choosing between genres is a matter of taste divorced from judgment. Does this not imply that our capacity for moral evaluation is historically-conditioned? Does Hume rehabilitate the postmodern subjectivity he sought to “restrain and modify”?

We must not rush to extremes. The objects of our evaluation are particular and particulars must be judged by a suitable standard. Arriving at a standard of taste in any particular genre requires a person to study, compare, and practice within a genre. “There is no standard, by which [disputes across genres] can be decided” only when we “feel a predilection for that which suits our particular turn and disposition” (E: 244). The delicate taste is to some extent culture bound, a delicate taste takes its bearings from the conventions and norms of a given culture and may never completely escape them. These sources of variation do not “confound all the boundaries of beauty and deformity.” Further expansion of one’s horizons beyond delicate taste in one field and elimination of predilections for particular objects or characters moves one toward a philosophic perspective. Delicate taste is a step toward philosophy; it is not philosophy itself. Hume’s account of the delicate taste points beyond itself to a philosophic engagement across different horizons. Hume is mute about this philosophic perspective, but this perspective is presupposed in his account of standard of taste. Hume shows great respect for what we might see as the self-sufficiency of particular genres or of common life because he worries that philosophy can impose a false order on common life as it tries to “methodize and correct” common life; he is keenly aware of the perils of rationalism. Those with a taste for philosophy must preserve appearances, while at the same time seeking to evaluate and transcend them.
This difficulty of perspective illustrates an important tension in Hume’s philosophy of common life. Seeking a standard by which to judge tastes requires that one take the correct perspective in relation to the particular thing under examination. Evaluation of the particular requires that we have some recourse to a general rule or, at least, to a general storehouse of thoughtful observation. An excessive postmodern “particularity” precludes the critical distance necessary for evaluation; Hume’s defense of a standard of taste combats the contention that critical distance is impossible. Against Enlightenment rationalism, Hume worries that an excessive “generality” or abstraction fails to do justice to the phenomena. Delicate taste requires a horizon or historical context in order to point beyond an immediate horizon or historical context; there are successive layers of context that can be ascended by those with a taste for philosophy. Science accommodates itself to the in-between character of our faculties. In this understanding of the “foundations” of science Hume finds insights into the human condition.

**Between Partisanship: Hume’s Non-Foundational Account of Modernity**

Hume’s account of human understanding has implications for the relationship between theory and practice. It offers an account of the status of theory in an effort to tell how far theory can guide practice. It also tells how different theoretical accounts may endanger practice. Inflated and overly pessimistic accounts of human capacities foster a dogmatic partisan politics. Locke’s approach to understanding political life explains political life in light of simple principles such as “social contract,” “tolerance,” and “rights.” Political parties rallying around “abstract speculative principle,” Hume writes, are “known only in modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon, that has yet appeared in human affairs” (E: 60). Hume worries that such parties will give rise to a furious partisanship as reformers attempt to remake the world in the image of abstract systems. Such reforms tend to undermine the virtues of humanity and tolerance to which they aspire.26 Implicit in this modern approach is an assertion of human sovereignty over the political world and man’s nature. Rorty, on the other hand, contends that these principles of liberalism are founded on a false view of human nature. “There is nothing,” Rorty writes, “beneath’ socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human” (1989: xiii; also 35, 59-60, 189-90). Rorty’s “position is not incompatible with urging that we try to extend our sense of ‘we’ to people whom we have

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previously thought of as 'they' or with recommending an ethic of humanity. This preferred understanding of "moral progress" rests on "nothing deeper than . . . historical contingencies" for Rorty (1989: 192). Humanity is not a virtue; it is our virtue. Rejecting the idea of human nature, Rorty provides a justification for partisanship by new strong poets, even if he is opposed to revolutionary public efforts. Rorty's postmodernity forecloses the possibility of making an argument for the modern practice of humanity.

Neither defense of humanity suffices as an antidote to partisanship or as a description of politics. Locke's rationalism tends to undermine the humane virtues by flattering human hopes of sovereignty and orthodoxy. The postmodern "defense" of humanity argues that no social arrangement or human virtue can be defended by reason, and therefore cannot avoid slipping into partisanship. The debate among the liberal Enlightenment, liberal postmodernism, and Hume persists with a general agreement on the virtues of modern arrangements. It centers on how to understand modernity.

Against postmodernity, Hume acknowledges priority of nature to history, but, against Lockean rationalism, Hume is much less willing to define nature abstracted from particular circumstances. Politics can be studied as a science only because there is a constant and universal human nature, and Hume insists that historical variations are manifestations of a common human nature (EHU: 83-84). Hume's understanding of human nature emerges from his analysis of the tensions that exist among human faculties and in political life. Scientific activity is a window to the human condition. Our condition is characterized by irresolvable tensions between reason and ignorance, judgment about common life and imagination, universals and particulars, and our natural equipment and our critical faculties. Our ability to know the world is shaped by a skepticism that is mitigated by natural beliefs and by natural beliefs that are discovered, corrected, and mitigated by critical reason. Our capacity for science must be grounded in common life, and try to ascend from common life without distorting common life. Instead of resolving these tensions, philosophers must reconcile themselves to our mixed condition. Hume's remarks on the human condition are worth quoting at length.

Man is a reasonable being; and as such, receives from science his proper food and nourishment: But so narrow are the bounds of human understanding, that little satisfaction can be hoped for in this particular, either from the extent or security of his acquisitions. Man is a sociable, no less than a reasonable being: But neither can he always enjoy company agreeable and amusing, or preserve the proper relish for them. Man is also an active being; and from that disposition, as well as from the various necessities of human life, must submit to business and occupation: But the mind requires some relaxation, and cannot always support its bent to care and industry. It seems, then, that nature has pointed out a mixed kind of life as most suitable to human race, and secretly admonished them to allow none of these biases to draw too much. (EHU: 8-9)
The proper reaction to our mixed condition is modesty. Modesty recognizes our susceptibility to prejudice and error, and reflects an appreciation for the transience of earthly affairs. Claims about the world should be tentative; “little satisfaction” can be hoped for from science with regard to the “extent or security” of its acquisitions. Speculation is best done in an “easy manner” (EHU: 16) or a “careless manner” (T: 273).

The great modern virtue of humanity or benevolence appears to be philosophic modesty applied to social life. Gentle mores reflect the proper social reaction to our “mixed kind of life,” in that they are self-effacing, corrosive of excessive pride, reasonable, productive of action, and friendly (EPM: 263-65). Just like scientific modesty, humane virtue is easy (E: 271). Humane virtues provide a context for deciding conflict by civilized debate, instead of calls to arms and for peaceful assertions of personal ambition (i.e., commerce), instead of violence and fraud. On the other hand, humanity or benevolence must be distinguished from compassion, in that humanity participates in reason and therefore can make important distinctions about the propriety of easy manners. Because they reflect an account of the human condition and an argument about our proper reaction to it, humane virtues provide a foundation for affirming agreeableness and opposing excessive pride and a too indiscriminate sense of compassion.

Humane virtues are characteristic of “ages of refinement,” which Hume considers the “happiest and most virtuous” (E: 269). Modern society is home to humane virtues. Even as modern people would be astonished at the “grandeur and force of sentiment” among ancient heroes, ancient thinkers would have “equal reason to consider as romantic and incredible, the degree of humanity, clemency, order, tranquility, and other social virtues, to which, in the administration of government, we have attained in modern times” (EPM: 256-57; also E: 94 and 274). Hume’s defense of refined modern conditions is founded on an appeal to the nature of human happiness. Human happiness “seems to consist in three ingredients; action, pleasure, and indolence” (E: 269). Happiness is experienced when human beings properly mix activity and indolence or leisure. A happy life exists somewhere in the middle of a continuum between the extremes of activity and leisure. Most men find happiness by finding pleasure in action. A life of pure action would be self-defeating, however. “That quick march of the spirit, which takes men from himself, and chiefly gives satisfaction, does in the end exhaust the mind, and requires some intervals of repose.” Rest and repose are “agreeable for a moment,” but “if prolonged, beget a langour and lethargy; that destroys all enjoyment.” Activity centered on the arts and industry appears most crucial to invigorating the human spirit. “Banish those arts from society, you deprive men both of action and of pleasure; and leaving nothing but indolence in their place, you even destroy the relish of indolence, which is never agreeable, but when it succeeds to labour, and recruits the spirits, exhausted by too much application and fatigue” (E: 270). When the division of labor advances and where
opportunities for economic advancement abound, men are spurred to action. A life involved with arts and industry fosters happiness and self-satisfaction by encouraging individuals to improve themselves. “The spirit of the age affects all the arts; and the minds of men, being once roused from their lethargy, and put into a fermentation, turn themselves on all sides, and carry improvements into every art and science. . . . Men enjoy the privilege of rational creatures, to think as well as to eat, to cultivate the pleasures of the mind as well as those of the body” (E: 271). Refinement in the arts therefore promotes happiness by promoting industry and activity.27

Modern conditions are likely to promote conduct and sensibilities consistent with our mixed condition as well. As industry and refinement advance, men become more sociable, humane, knowledgeable, and moderate. In “ignorant and barbarous nations” people are content “to remain in solitude, or live with their fellow citizens in that distant manner.” Modern conditions of equality and opportunity for advancement encourage men to live together in cities, to work together, and to converse and organize with one another in “an easy and sociable manner.” Aside from “the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts,” writes Hume, “it is impossible but they must feel an encrease of humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other’s pleasures and entertainment.” Since the sentiment of humanity is the foundation for moral distinctions, the way that modern conditions increase feelings of humanity refines moral sensibilities too. Hume concludes that “industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to . . . what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages” (E: 271). Against the paleo-conservative reading’s emphasis on rootedness and local attachment, it seems that Hume embraces the modern world because it breaks down many of the barriers to commerce and leads to a greater awareness of humanity. The middling way of life consists in a gradual expanding (and diluting) of attachments in the name of resolving the problems of partisanship.

The encouragement of industry discourages practices of immoderation. Industry satisfies the natural appetites for gain and for the satisfaction of pleasure and prevents the “growth of unnatural ones, which commonly spring up, when nourished by ease and idleness” (E: 270). Moderation is important in social relations and politics, where the wealthy of the modern world are more free, easy and respecting than the despots of the ancient world and Orient.

The great political achievement of the modern world—the institution of laws of liberty—is also best seen as an expression of moderation.

27 I do not follow Livingston’s reading, which sees Hume’s economics as a pre-industrial rejection of global industrial society (Livingston 1999).
Where luxury nourishes commerce and industry, the peasants, by a proper cultivation of the land, become rich and independent; while the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty. These submit not to slavery, like the peasants, from poverty and meanness of spirit; and having no hopes of tyrannizing over others, like the barons, they are not tempted, for the sake of that gratification, to submit to the tyranny of their sovereign. They covet equal laws, which may secure their property, and preserve them from monarchical, as well as aristocratical tyranny (E: 277-78, emphasis supplied).

Hume welcomes the tendency of modern arrangements to produce a large “middling rank of men.” Hume’s middling rank resembles the middling element from Aristotle’s most possible good regime (see 1095b5: 10, 35). The middling rank does more than promote political stability. Avoiding the pretentious aristocratic imagination without lapsing into the slavish self-concern of the poor and steering a course between aristocratic slothfulness and the servile drudgery of the poor, the middling rank accepts the “mixed kind of life” that defines our condition. Conforming to our mixed condition leads to moderation and humanity, not partisanship (E: 273-74).

Hume discusses the virtues of the middling rank in the essay “Of the Middle Station of Life.” Hume begins by repeating that the middle class is devoid of the vices of the great and the poor. Hume adds that this lack of vice leads to virtues. “The Middle Station, as it is most happy in many respects, so particularly in this, that a Man, plac’d in it, can, with the greatest Leisure, consider his own Happiness, and reap a new Enjoyment, from comparing his Situation with that of Persons above or below him” (E: 546). The middle station is best for the exercise and enjoyment of every excellent human quality.

Those, who are plac’d among the lower Rank of Men, have little Opportunity of exerting any other Virtue, besides those of Patience, Resignation, Industry and Integrity. Those, who are advance’d into higher Stations, have full Employment for their Generosity, Humanity, Affability and Charity. When a Man lyes betwixt these two Extremes, he can exert the former Virtues towards his Superiors, and the latter toward his Inferiors. Every moral Quality, which the human Soul is susceptible of, may have its Turn, and be called up to Action. (E: 546-47)

The peaceful reflection on one’s good character presupposes the good character of the “Middle Station” and “the greater Leisure” to “consider [one’s] own happiness.” Middling men are uniquely capable of “repose amidst active lives. Their easy sociability disposes them to enjoy the company of their fellows even as they live lives of action. Beyond the moral virtues exhibited by the middling rank, it is peculiarly situated to conduct scientific or philosophic investigation on Hume’s model. Those above the middle station are likely to be drawn to fits of fancy and subsequent
flights of melancholy when grand hopes are not fulfilled, while those below probably lack the leisure necessary to learn altogether (E: 547). A middling man has "the Motive of Ambition to push him on in his Attainments; being certain, that he can never rise to any Distinction or Eminence in the World, without his own Industry" (E: 548). Hume surpasses Aristotle in praising the middling rank.

With the advent of modern commercial arrangements and the practice of modern science in the conquest of nature, Hume promises a convergence of happiness, virtue, and public liberty. With the ascension of modern arrangements, the class best reflecting our "mixed kind of life" comes to the fore. The moderate middling rank avoids the extremes of haughtiness and servility, and more fundamentally embodies the virtues of our divided nature. Their happiness consists in the mixture of industry and relaxation, motion and rest, self-concern and sociability, reflection and action at the heart of our "mixed kind of life." Of more importance for Hume given his concerns about the problems of rationalism, the intellectual ambitions of the middling rank properly mix critical reason with an appreciation for our natural equipment. Ambitious to attain knowledge of men and things, the middling rank grounds science directly in common life, directly in men and things. At the same time, ambition is not satisfied with mere popular prejudice and seeks to correct the reflections of common life. An engagement with the world keeps the "middling rank" from falling into the postmodern maze. The middling rank will be confident and modest in its capacities, so that it is likely to avoid the partisanship of rationalism and postmodernism.

PHILOSOPHIC AND POLITICAL MODERATION

Except when Enlightenment philosophy seeks to overcome the mixed character of human life, "our modern education and customs instill more humanity and moderation than the ancient" because the modern condition best reflects the "mixed kind of life" suitable for human beings (E: 94). The influence of modern rationalism in the form of Whig political theory, however, would be difficult to counteract. By appealing to our naturally sublime imagination, abstract speculative principles or ideals appeal to a permanent feature of human nature. The proud temptation to apply these principles to politics is an indication that human beings are the builders of the "Tower of Babel" (Oakeshott 1991: 465-87). All the more distressing given that the imagination is a most sublime human trait is the fact that it is the source of a most dangerous factionalism; the imagination, like almost all things, is a "mixed" blessing (NHR:74). An imagination striving for perfection may be suitable for individuals as individuals, but when it comes to direct social and political changes little but disruption is apt to follow. The disruption of a healthy common life initiated by the imaginative utopianism can be debilitating.

The politics of the imagination is founded on a fundamental misconception of the human condition. Hume's skepticism manifests itself above all in the now fashionable debunking of Enlightenment rationalism. Skepticism clarifies our
condition by deflating the pretentious imagination. Hume's awareness of the
limits of reason does not send him careening to the opposite extreme of rela-
tivism or historicism, however. The skeptic's skepticism is in the service of affirm-
ing that ours is a "mixed kind of life." Hume's understanding of the mixed con-
dition provides grounds for steering public life between undesirable extremes.
Against the servility encouraged by arbitrary rule and priestly power and against
aristocratic and rationalist pride, Hume's teaching argues for a middle course
suitable to our condition. Hume argues against political utopianism, religious
enthusiasm and superstition, and postmodern skepticism on his own grounds.
This middling standard orients political science to introduce improvements con-
sistent with our mixed condition. Hume is far from dogmatic or disinterested in
his orientation of openness. This tension between reforming and conserving,
utopianism and skepticism, and the general and particular appears to be charac-
teristic of the human condition.

The apparent persistence of permanent human questions about the existence
of a standard of taste, the character of the best community, the way in
which our language reflects the world around us and so on is suggestive evidence
for Hume that human nature remains the same over time. Rorty "is urging that
we do our best to stop having such intuitions" and "develop a new intellectual tradi-
tion" (1982: xxx); he does so in part because he believes that questions are put
there by the socialization process, not because they are simply permanent ques-
tions human beings raise. To put this more bluntly, Rorty recommends that we
relinquish our humanity and settle for being "clever animals" (1999: 174). For
Rorty the purpose of philosophy is to transform the world. Hume's rebuttable
assumption that the persistence of permanent questions suggests that under-
standing the world should be the goal of philosophy. Understanding the charac-
ter of fundamental questions does not guarantee that the questions will be
resolved, and their resolution need not produce knowledge along the model of
geometry. The rationalist temptation to claim perfect knowledge often produces
what Hume calls "crude dictates" dangerous for politics. As unsatisfying as this
may be, perhaps tensions must remain as tensions.

It is in his counsel to live with the tensions of human life that we find the
deepest reason for Hume's philosophic and political moderation. Hume is as lib-
eral in his tone as he is in his politics, but Hume tries to show that his liberal pol-
itics proceeds directly from his liberal tone. This liberal, moderate tone is one of
Hume's great contributions to enlightenment. He turns enlightenment away from
being primarily concerned with changing the world through the announcement
of liberal principles and directs it toward understanding the world with moder-
ate expectations for understanding. Hume's political science of our mixed con-
dition is evidence that the Enlightenment is a complex, contentious family.

Hume takes the inability to answer certain metaphysical questions to be a
counsel for moderation, not a license for liberal partisanship or for dedication to
a utopian politics. In his opposition to the attempts of modern rationalists to give an account of our experience without a proper grounding in common life lies his critique of rationalism. Hume has thought the implications of our ignorance all the way through. At its most fundamental level, our “mixed kind of life” lies between the poles of nature and reason. “Be a philosopher,” nature enjoins the philosopher, “but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man” (EHU: 9). Quite unlike his modern predecessors, Hume makes the dangers of reason a central theme of his thought. And quite unlike his postmodern successors, Hume reasons for a moderate endorsement of modern political communities in the opposition between reason and nature.

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