

THE VIRTUE OF POLITICAL SKEPTICISM

JAMES T. KING

Northern Illinois University

My thesis in this paper¹ is twofold: first, that Hume advances moderation as the chief political virtue and, second, that he strengthens this view by connecting his account of moderation with his treatment of skepticism. Exploring this twofold thesis will cast light on certain questions that have exercised Hume scholars and will reveal how Hume visualizes the intellectual's relationship to the order of practical politics.

THE VIRTUE OF MODERATION IN HUME'S POLITICAL WRITINGS

That Hume thinks of moderation as an important virtue needs no argument—no other quality of mind is so consistently praised in his works. That he sees it as the chief political virtue is made abundantly clear in the *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*,² and perhaps nowhere quite so forcefully as in those passages which reveal the author's self-understanding. In "Politics as a Science" Hume characterizes himself as a "friend to moderation" and then goes on to describe his role as that of "promoting moderation" (*E*, p. 15). He concludes his important essay, "Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," by remarking, "This may teach us a lesson of moderation in all our political controversies" (*E*, p. 53). The essay, "Of the Protestant Succession," provides Hume an occasion for giving a self-accounting. A penetrating understanding of practical politics,

Reason Papers No. 15 (Summer 1990) 24-46.
Copyright © 1990.

linked with the virtues of balance, impartiality and moderation, are the distinguishing marks of the intellectual and convey, I submit, a portrayal of the qualities the Humean philosopher brings to practical political questions. "It belongs, therefore, to a philosopher alone," he writes, "who is of neither party, to put all the circumstances in the scale, and to assign to each of them its proper poise and influence.... Hesitation, and reserve, and suspense, are, therefore, the only sentiments he brings to this essay or trial" (*E*, p. 507). In short, attention to moderation (and its opposites) is an extremely important element in Hume's political thinking.

At the same time that moderation is a pervasive theme of Hume's, he neither exalts it as a new absolutism nor condemns zeal entirely. Indeed, disconcert for the political order cannot be attributed to Hume; on the contrary, he seemed to believe the intellectual should take a positive interest in the conditions under which political liberty can thrive. Thus in "Politics as a Science" Hume recommends "the utmost Zeal, in every free state, [for] those forms and institutions, by which liberty is secured, the public good consulted, and the avarice or ambition of particular men restrained and punished" (*E*, p. 26).

Despite Hume's eloquent encomium, we may be inclined to think there are certain problems in the notion of political moderation, at least as commonly understood. First, persons who fall into this category are often thought of as being moderate by default, moderate for lack of passion and commitment; the more hot-blooded among us might object to making a virtue of what they think of as inborn pusillanimity. Second, political moderates are sometimes thought of as compromisers long on accommodation and short on principles. This observation becomes a criticism of moderation when it is said, as is customary among philosophers at least, that being a person of moral character is identified with being a person of principle. (Thus Kant, for example, refuses to acknowledge moderation as an important virtue.)³ From such a point of view as this, a politics of principle is incomparably worthier than a politics of moderation; and if moderation has a place in a politics of principle, it will be only insofar as it is required by a principle. Hence moderation appears in the writings of moralists typically as a sleepy minor virtue, if it appears at all.⁴

Further, a specifically Humean notion of political moderation is not without its difficulties. I shall describe two of these. To

begin, it is far from clear that Hume can account for how moderation can be the effective force in the world of modern politics that he wishes it to be. Contemporary affairs were seriously affected, Hume claimed, by what may be termed the politics of principle, which he deemed a source of great upheavals and social ills. Hume cannot settle for praising moderation where he finds it—he must give an explanation of how moderation can counter the politics of principles once the latter has taken root. In setting the politics of moderation over against the politics of principle, he must explain how moderation can be brought about in the area of convictions, beliefs, and even political theory itself. One of the tasks to be undertaken in this paper is to investigate whether Hume has the resources to explain how there can be such a thing as epistemic moderation.

A second difficulty is this. Hume seems far from consistent when he describes the philosopher as disinterested when it comes to matters of political partisanship⁵ but, as we saw above, also zealously interested when it comes to concern over the conditions of political liberty. If this be Hume's view, it seems scarcely coherent, and we are tempted to think that, in the end, he moved away from this praise of moderation and endorsed zeal in pursuit of the values he deems the right ones. Thus another challenge awaiting us is to explore how Hume might consistently maintain that some forms of zeal are not inconsistent with a programmatic moderation in life.

In what follows I shall draw on Hume's far-flung remarks on moderation and show how this quality can be a Humean virtue. I shall reconstruct how the case he makes for political moderation is strongly linked to what most agree is the most basic element of Hume's thinking, namely his skepticism. I shall argue that the distinctive virtue of the skeptic is moderation, and that rather than lacking causal conditions, Hume's accounts of epistemic moderation and of political moderation share the same overall structure. From these materials I shall show how Hume has the resources for a response to the two difficulties just described.

THE POLITICS OF PRINCIPLE: PROS AND CONS

It cannot be overemphasized that Hume is fundamentally opposed to the politics of principle and thinks of it as a source of

excesses and of great ills in political life. In "Of Parties in General" he distinguishes three sorts of political parties, those "from *interest*, from *principle* and from *affection*" (*E*, p. 60). Parties from affection or attachment to particular persons or families Hume acknowledges as political realities; parties from interest he treats as natural developments of the variety of causes which divide men within the social and political order; both are susceptible of being immoderate but their immoderation does not present any particular theoretical challenge. Turning to "Parties from *principle*, especially abstract speculative principle," Hume writes these "are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable *phenomenon*, that has yet appeared in human affairs." What accounts for Hume's thinking of this form of politics as a bizarre modern development is that he regards abstract speculative principle as being in itself a trifle, a matter of indifference; thus what is wondrous is how the politics of principles can gain such power as to become the source of the most perilous political divisiveness. To illustrate how such principles can generate noxious strife and faction, ruinous wars and divisions, Hume draws an illustration from the influence of religion; but we must remark that in the diachronically structured explanation he gives of this phenomenon the root cause is, rather surprisingly, not religion but philosophy.

Religions, that arise in ages totally ignorant and barbarous, consist mostly of traditional tales and fictions, which may be different in every sect, without being contrary to each other; and even when they are contrary, every one adheres to the tradition of his own sect, without much reasoning or disputation. But as philosophy was widely spread over the world, at the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions; to divide, with some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtilty of argument and science. Hence naturally arose keenness in dispute, when the Christian religion came to be split into new divisions and heresies: And this keenness assisted the priests in their policy, of begetting a mutual hatred and antipathy among their deluded followers. Sects of philosophy, in the ancient world, were more zealous than parties of religion; but in modern times, parties of religion [united with philosophy] are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition. (*E*, p. 62 f.)

Given Hume's view that the introduction of philosophical principle transformed religion into a qualitatively new and socially deleterious phenomenon, it is easy to see that in modernity the coupling of philosophy with politics has generated a hybrid which merits description as "extraordinary and unaccountable." Hume analyzes how this happened and how it can be overcome in what I think is the best of his essays, "Of the Original Contract."

Hume begins the essay by acknowledging political divisions and political parties as entirely normal developments of modern culture. What is distinctive of the modern age, however, is that each party, by drawing on philosophy (the same which above is credited to the tradition deriving from Plato of insistence on principles), annexes to its political program "a speculative system of principles" which it rears up as a fabric so as purportedly "to protect and cover [justify] that scheme of actions, which it pursues" (*E*, p. 465). In Hume's day the chief two systems were of course the theologically inspired Divine Right theory of the Party of the Court and the Lockean contractualist theory of the Party of the People. In each of these cases the basic difference between a politics of interest and a politics of principle seems to be just this, that the latter is based on or mediated by a theory or system—let us call it a *normative political system*—which is thought to provide the party's program with *justification*. When men come to relate to their political program in the manner of something required by principle, there occurs the same sort of shift as that on which Hume had remarked in "Of Parties In General," namely, between ancient non-dogmatic religion and modern philosophically animated religion; with a shift of this sort the adherent of a political program not only comes to believe that he is in the right (as assuredly every political partisan does), but is persuaded his program has a rational foundation or is justified from theoretical principle; when this happens he is obliged to conclude that those who opt for a different course are without justification. Principle thus provides something new for the intellectual who applies himself to politics, namely, the theoretically justified conviction of being in the right. And at the same time it performs an exclusionary function—it deprives the other parties of legitimacy, of the *right to exist*. On Hume's diagnosis the politics of principle is politically disruptive, inherently divisive in the most extreme manner. Clearly, a case can be made for the need

for a form of moderation capable to reining in the politics of principle. The problem is: once unleashed in the world, can it be subdued? What can possibly restrain a theoretical enterprise bent on justifying political principles? What can unthroned normative political theory? (Cf. *T*, p. 186.) We now turn to whether Hume has the resources to explain how moderation is possible in matters of conviction.

It is interesting the form that Hume's first response to the politics of principles takes in "Of the Original Contract." He does not move directly to enjoin the divisive political theories *as theories* and to criticize them for their lack of philosophical grounds, as we might naturally expect of a philosopher hostile to the politics of principle. I venture that Hume realizes that to do this would be to engage in political theory of just the sort he means to challenge and to encourage the continuing cohabitation of philosophy and politics in which the politics of principle is conceived. What he does instead is to deflate the enterprise of theory and to trivialize the parties' systems across the board by saying their differences, extreme though they seem to their adherents, are in reality not at all so significant; scoring a rhetorical *coup de grace*, he says the principles of the most radically opposing theories, are *equally just*. Hume's verdict on normative political systems, set off in a paragraph most of which he italicized, reflects a position which transcends both the order of political interest and the order of political theories which give intellectual articulation to those interests.

I shall venture to affirm, *That both these systems of speculative principles are just; though not in the sense, intended by the parties; And, That both the schemes of practical consequences are prudent; though not in the extremes, to which each party, in opposition to the other, has commonly endeavored to carry them.*
(*E*, p. 466)

To appreciate Hume's strategy, we need to get clear how a theory's *speculative principles* stand "in the sense intended by each party" and then by contrast the sense in which Hume suggests opposing *principles* and *consequences* are equally just or equally prudent. What each party intends is that having a normative political system makes a difference for the political partisan by authorizing his treating his political beliefs as being exclusively and absolutely true. By contrast Hume is not prepared to admit any particular set of political beliefs as true in that sense

or any set of principles as furnishing justification; rival principles are leveled and, so long as they might be reintroduced in a moderated form, are offered as being *equally just*. Stripped of intellectual pretensions (i.e., taken in a sense other than that intended by the parties of principle), normative political systems offer *nothing* of substance not already present in the standard political oratory of the parties.

In the second part of the italicized text, Hume addresses the matter of *practical consequences* to be found in the systems he criticizes. I think we are to understand *consequences* quite literally as logically necessitated implications from a system's principles taken as premises. These are important to those who do normative political theory because the practitioner of the politics of principle takes a system to be perfectly prescriptive in the order of conduct and to provide a justification for a political program in the form of practical consequences from those principles. As explained above, Hume discredits the claims of such theorists to establish principle—the bulk of the essay is attack against the two leading political theories in just this regard. But he here does something else: he denies that, even were any such principles established, there could be any logical nexus from principle to consequences putatively sanctioned by them. Thus his point here is the same as he made in the famous is/ought passage of the *Treatise*: there are not, and cannot be, any practical consequences entailed by speculative principle. And this signifies that theories fail to do the work for which they are raised up, namely, to provide a justification for a scheme of actions. And at the end Hume adds that with the elimination of the conceit of justification (which by its nature is exclusive), parties are deprived of one of the sources of the extremism they display in modern times. We must also note, finally, that Hume does not reject the opposing parties' several schemes of action—these he says are all prudent. But the form in which these programs are acknowledged is their natural or non-extreme presentation, not the shape they take on in normative political theory.⁶

For Hume the operative reality in politics is a genuine and original diversity of interests. We must be careful to note that the target of his criticism is normative political systems and not the politics of interests. Thus if in their everyday discourse ordinary men talk of rights, they do not claim to be naming philosophical

realities but to be advancing a cause or attempting to influence events. Hume attacks the pretensions of writers who would dress up the political rhetoric of rights in the guise of philosophical theory and claim truth or justification over and above the rhetoric of party and practice. Thus Hume turns on its head the standard understanding of the relation of theory and practice. While ordinary discourse is supposed by philosophers to be the application of truths or principles grasped loosely and uncertainly by the vulgar, Hume maintains that political theories never advance beyond political rhetoric and determined for their content by the political programs of the parties they are designed to serve. Moreover, Hume reverses the standard conception of immoderation. Philosophers treat principles as lying beyond the realm of moderation and find the source of immoderation in the vulgar's thoughtless application of them to a practical world. But Hume asserts that the politics of interests is naturally moderated by the give-and-take of political practice, while the politics of principle is, in its hauteur and conceit, natively immoderate.⁷

I stated that Hume's first response to normative political systems is to trivialize them, but he does not stop there. Indeed it could scarcely be that he thought such a response would be effective by itself, for those committed to normative political theory would object in principle to the dismissal of theory as bespeaking the sheerest misology. Thus the essay contains Hume's famous critical attack on the political theories raised by both parties, though Lockean contractarianism occupies most of his attention—perhaps because he thought it the likelier to turn extremist. The purpose of this attack is to loosen the grip exercised on the mind of the intellectual partisan by the theory which his extra-theoretical interests lead him to entertain.

Now to this second response there is an easy objection, namely, that Hume is inconsistent in practice, for to critique theory is (paraphrasing Aristotle) to engage in theory oneself. Thus Hume is accused of just replacing one theory by another and of thinking that the other theory is in fact a justifiable one. This line of objection can also move on to declaring that Hume is in fact no less partisan than the political theorists he derides, since his critical undertaking must itself be animated by some set of partisan interests. Forging a reply to this objection will oblige us to explore Hume's conception of the relation of the

reflective thinker to the world of politics.

I think the beginnings of a reply would emphasize that the dynamics of political moderation do not require opposing one set of interests to another in the exclusionary or absolute sense typical of normative political system—as though in rejecting the Whiggish Locke, for instance, Hume had to be, and show himself to be, a hated Tory. So to construe Hume's critical program is a grave mistake. Rather than overcoming the "systems of speculative principles" by appealing to particular political interests, Hume works from a perspective transcending particular interests and the theories fashioned to support them. His stance is that distinctive of the skeptical thinker. There is no need to read into such skepticism either attachment to a political program or even love of compromise for compromise sake; instead what is required is that we acknowledge the liberating force of the critique of theories and ideas. Critique is destructive of speculative systems indeed, but not of the extra-theoretical interests and political program those systems were created to support. If Humean skepticism returns us to our starting-point in political divisions, it does so with a difference, for we should have learned the lesson that, as opposing political theories cannot make out an exclusive claim to truth, opposing political interests are not entitled to exclusive claim to govern the civil union. The task of refashioning our political thinking in light of this lesson is part of the patrimony Hume has left us.

There is in this a new difficulty, however, for it is problematical how on Hume can deploy "the liberating force of the critique of theories and ideas" against the politics of principles without again admitting a role for philosophical theory of just the sort which spawns the politics of principle. Put otherwise, Hume both gives and takes away when discussing philosophy and its import for political life. He takes away when he says philosophy introduces dogmatism, immoderation in the epistemic order and a most dangerous form of divisiveness into politics; but he gives when he says that it belongs to the philosopher to rise above the fray and discern the elements of merit in the opposing claims of those engaged in politics. The cynic will say that Hume means philosophy is dangerous just when others do it but is salutary when he does it, and this response is not utterly misplaced, for in "Of the Original Contract" Hume not only argued that the Divine Right

theory and the contractualist theory are mistaken but went on in the final pages to present a precis of his own account of the origin of justice, government and political existence. Does this not make Hume a practitioner of philosophical theory just as much as the entire philosophical tradition since Plato, and does not a Humean insistence on "the liberating force of the critique of theories and ideas" place him squarely in the rationalist tradition, *malgre lui*?

The question we are here encountering bears on the character of Hume's philosophical career, and specifically on whether his skepticism represents a revolutionary break with the philosophical tradition since Plato. We have arrived at the recognition that Hume's views on political moderation require exploration of probably the most basic theme in his writings, his skepticism.

DOXASTIC MODERATION

The traditional model whereby philosophers account for "the liberating force of the critique of theories and ideas" attributes a moderating role to reason itself which, precisely because of this force, is construed as having a governing or ruling function (a model that may deservedly be termed Platonic). Here moderation is achieved from reason but not of reason. As is well known, Hume denies this model and in fact inverts it, asserting that reason is subordinate to the passions. Now the problem is that it appears the only way a consistent Hume can say that moderation is possible is by tracing it to a passion (in parallel manner as the rationalists trace it to reason). But for several reasons philosophers are inclined to think Hume cannot do this. First, if the only resources available to explain how moderation comes about are reason and passion, having rejected reason, Hume can only count on passion; but on the terms of his moral psychology, it does not seem possible that passion can determine or influence reason. Second, if it were possible, it would be most objectionable that matters of truth were deemed to be determined by the passions. Philosophers' *principle of epistemological autonomy* requires the order of truth be insulated from that of value. If Hume did allow the passions to determine truth (which is one possible reading of his famous—or infamous—dictum that reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions), then Hume would be in violation of the principle of epistemological autonomy. And third, Hume

himself often presents political moderation as a matter of detachment and disinterest, that is, the exact opposite of a passion. But if Hume will not allow that moderation be produced by reason in a ruling role and if moderation cannot be produced by a passion, it is not clear that on his terms there can be such a thing as epistemic moderation—moderation, that is, in the order of beliefs and convictions.

I defend the view that Hume has within his distinctive adaptation of the skepticism of Sextus Empiricus the resources for an account of liberating moderation internal to the life of the mind and radically different from the Platonic model. To see how this works, let us briefly examine first Sextus' skepticism and then Hume's revision of it.

Sextus makes out the case for skepticism in the proper manner. He does not attempt to prove by reason that we should abandon reason. Rather, he describes a life embodying rational inquiry as an all-absorbing ideal, and asks from the broadest perspective whether it is worth living. His answer is that such a life does not attain its *telos* but instead annuls itself in its pursuit of rationally grounded knowledge achieved by inquiry. That it does so is something learned through repeated test and experiment: in terms of results reason's historical record, revealed in the history of philosophical speculation, is regrettably quite negative according to Sextus. But reason's failure is disclosed in the present as well, for by providing strict proofs of contradictory theses regarding any interesting claim (and this not just occasionally but systematically), reason cancels itself. The skeptics, aware of this, must withdraw from the business of reason and suspend judgment. The self-annulment of reason is limited, however, in that while the skeptic abandons the life devoted to rational inquiry, he is not impelled to deny the formal canons of logic; it is just that in the course of his life logic will play no important role. The newfound skeptic, one who had professed that the life of rationality represents the summum bonum and the highest form of selfhood, thus comes to see that form of selfhood as a vacuous ideal. Of the progression from the philosophical to the skeptical life Sextus writes as follows.

His initial purpose in philosophizing was to pronounce judgments on appearances. He wished to find out which are true and which false, so as to attain mental tranquility. In doing so, he

met with contradicting alternatives of equal force. Since he could not decide between them, he withheld judgment. Upon his suspension of judgment there followed, by chance, mental tranquility in matters of opinion.⁸

The term *mental tranquility* appears twice in this passage. That which the seeker after knowledge originally pursued would be the attainment of the intellectual telos; the mental tranquility he actually achieves, without seeking it, is not the satisfaction of that same connotation but rather *self-satisfaction in abandoning it*. What is of maximum interest is that Sextus describes the resulting condition as one of moderation; I propose to call this "mental tranquility in matters of opinion" a form of *doxastic moderation*.

In Book I of the *Treatise* (and in the Appendix) Hume, although not an academic skeptic, plays out a 'natural history of philosophic reason' quite similar to Sextus' account of the self-cancellation of the quest for rational knowledge.⁹ He follows the ancient skeptics in holding that the reflective thinker, upon examining the contradictions of philosophical and common reason, will discover both that the form of selfhood determined by the quest for rational certainty is to be abandoned but at the same time that reason as *organon* is scarcely to be dismissed. Thus something like a Humean form of doxastic moderation emerges consisting in abstinence from the business of speculative reason and a refashioning of one's life as one in which confidence in theoretical enterprise plays no important part. What is most significant about this re-ordering of the self is that it occurs *precisely in the epistemic order*, and thus the effect of Humean doxastic moderation is a deflation of the enterprise of theory-construction accomplished otherwise than on the basis of a theory constructed by the skeptic. Its causal conditions, moreover, depend on no particular passion, but represent an illustration of self-correction of the reflective mind by the reflective mind. Finally, since this re-ordering is a liberation and since it is something approvable on reflection, *doxastic moderation* appears to be a virtue, though an epistemic one. Here we have a *virtue from conviction* in the epistemic order which is specific to the skeptic. I think we are entitled to conclude that for Hume there is a form of moderation from conviction, namely the epistemic virtue of *doxastic moderation*, and that this achievement is the skeptic's virtue *par excellence*.¹⁰

We have, however, told only part of the story. Hume is, of course, a *moderate* skeptic. Where he differs from Sextus and the ancient skeptics is in whether total suspense of judgment is possible. Admitting that what is beyond reach is the certain and justified knowledge philosophers seek, he contends that we nevertheless have implanted in us by Nature an instinct-like determination to form beliefs. Avowing that no form of selfhood which denies our belief-forming nature is liveable, he breaks with Sextus by recognizing that skepticism involves a more complex problematic and by attributing to doxastic moderation a more significant role than it has on Sextus' misguided view that it lies within our power to abstain not only from the business of philosophy but from having beliefs about ourselves and the world about us. For Sextus suspense of judgment is an all-or-nothing affair and skepticism therefore a simpler matter; for Hume, since we cannot cease to be belief-formers, skepticism informs how we are to conduct ourselves as belief-formers when we have arrived at the conviction that in this connection reason alone provides no reliable influence. As is well known, Hume proposes a moderate ethics of belief: he suggests we form our beliefs within the natural order in a measured and moderate manner—measured by what is necessary for life and moderated by the hard won lesson the self-cancellation of the quest for metaphysical knowledge. And of course admitting measured and moderated beliefs does not expose us afresh to the foibles of speculation and theory-construction because the Humean skeptic, having gone through the discipline of the first Book of the *Treatise*, is now cured of excessive attachment to the business of reason.

I find it extremely interesting to note that Hume's account of the self-cancellation of the philosophical life reveals the same structure as does his account of the overcoming of the politics of principle: in each case the abandonment of a vacuous and delusive enterprise leaves intact something which, taken by itself, is entirely to be acknowledged—in the first case, the natural belief-forming self and in the second, the ordinary politics of interest. Of course the basic liberation is that which the skeptic achieves over the self who would make the world over according to the philosophers' norms. Having achieved this, the skeptic can turn to politics and upon detecting there the work of theoretical reason in constructing speculative systems can move to their overcoming

by deploying criticism ordered by reason as *organon* (logic) against reason in its system-building and world-remaking role (metaphysics). In deploying criticism, however, the skeptic is not slipping back into the theory-constructing enterprise; he works not as promoter of any particular beliefs but as protector of the order of natural (pretheoretical) beliefs as such.

The challenge we have been examining in this section is to explain how Hume can account for "the liberating force of the critique of theories and ideas" without reintroducing philosophical theories of the sort he judges *manques*. The answer is plain in Hume's adaptation of classical skepticism. Skepticism is a liberating force which operates by critique of theories and ideas, but it does so differently than does the form critique which operates from within a particular theory; the latter is engagement in fashioning theory with different objectives, the former is the relinquishment of the enterprise of constructing theory as such. Since for Hume skepticism cannot annul the belief-forming propensity of the mind, doxastic moderation requires that ordinary beliefs be measured as part of the natural order and that the tendencies to turn such beliefs into more than what they are be checked by a hard won skeptical bent of mind (such tendencies being, of course, the spurs to construction of theories). Thus moderation is possible without appeal to the Platonic model and without making the epistemic order subject to any particular passion or passions. Hume is entitled to hold that, as a virtue from conviction, Humean doxastic moderation regarding political convictions bespeaks the detachment and disinterest characteristic of the skeptical thinker.

While this response shows how Humean skepticism, or more specifically, Humean doxastic moderation, *requires political moderation as an epistemic virtue*, it gives the impression that Hume's treatment of moderation in the political order is seriously incomplete. This is because the import of doxastic moderation is against theories, but not against ordinary beliefs. Though to cancel the politically exacerbating influence of normative systems is significant, Humean skepticism seems to leave intact the disagreements and natural party divisions typical of the politics of interest. Since these are also inimical to the social union in their immoderate form, the question arises, is it true that Hume's perspective on politics also leaves ordinary political

disagreements and divisions intact? Certainly many of Hume's references to the importance of political moderation bear on ordinary politics. What needs further elaboration is how, once the problem of overcoming the politics of principle has been addressed, moderation is to be accounted for in the politics of interests; and whether Hume believes there is a specific contribution the skeptical intellectual can make in effectuating practical political moderation.

ZEAL FOR INSTITUTIONAL GUARANTEES: AN INCONSISTENCY?

The disinterestedness which characterizes the skeptic does not extend of course to every matter of practice: Hume would no more turn this quality into an absolute than any of the other absolutes he criticizes. Respects in which Hume holds the philosopher admits interests are chiefly two, each determined by nature, though in very different ways. First, the existence of the passions and of the original instincts of the mind is to be traced to nature (in much the same manner as is the existence of the mind's propensity to form beliefs). Second, and more to the point, Hume admits such interests as are required to check and correct our natural passions, that is interests won in experience, such as we can recognize in the rules of justice and other areas where our practices are governed by general rules. The former make for men's social co-existence; the latter furnish conditions that make for social co-existence being informed by practices of a sort that men can approve of. The former are furnished by nature; the latter emerge in history and must be cultivated. Their cultivation is something to which the Humean intellectual can and should contribute.

That natural interests are fully compatible with skepticism and doxastic moderation helps explain how, without falling into inconsistency, Hume can praise political moderation and also recommend "utmost zeal" for the "forms and institutions, by which liberty is secured." To appreciate Hume's view that there is an internal connection between political moderation and the institutional securing of liberty we must explore Hume's account of how liberty came to be secured in the one context where in his day it flourished. This takes us into Hume's analysis of British history.

Still fascinating today is the question of how the liberties of

Englishmen were established in the midst of the upheavals of the seventeenth century. Hume of course discredits the suggestion that the events of that time were brought about in some way thanks to the theories of the philosophers. But he goes so far as to argue that the establishment of liberty came about *without its having been foreseen or intended* by the actors in the historical scene. As proof he need but note that neither the followers of Cromwell nor the advocates of the Crown aimed to establish the political liberty which ensued historically from the conclusion of the turmoil which their differences had produced. Liberty came about, however, precisely through the interplay of those opposing forces, in that, extremities of opposition having cancelled themselves out, men of moderation could effectuate a balanced resolution of conflict. In this process what secured the civil union was of course not simply oppositional interplay, for this can be destructive as well as beneficial, but precisely the effective influence of moderation—a lesson which eloquently reinforces the importance of this political virtue.

For Hume liberty was secured when it was given institutional guarantees through the establishment of the modern British Constitution. The Constitution assured liberty (that is, effectively forestalled tyranny) by effectively *obviating a monopoly of power* by the interests represented in either the party of the Court or the party of the Country; and this of course is just moderation institutionalized. It is not hard to see that the virtue of the Constitution consists precisely in its consolidating and systematizing the moderation reflected in its origin. Thus the process of achieving balance between competing political interests was permanently incorporated as the leading feature of the mixed constitutional form of government in Britain. In Hume's view moderation and constitutionalism converge in value. The internal connection between moderation and the securing of liberty which we are seeking is now evident. At the same time we must bear in mind that the modern British constitution is an artifice and a fragile one at that, something the maintenance of which calls for vigilance on the part of those sensitive to the conditions whence it sprang, men, that is, of moderation.

What results is an historically conditioned conception of common interest or public good, a good which in explaining in the *Treatise* the origin of justice Hume implies must be originally of

an order different from personal or private interest, though through civilizing influence can become for the public man a matter of his personal interest. The public interest presupposes the achievement of moderation, adjustment, correction, and thus it secures the pursuit of personal interests. Of course the public good does not oblige men to abandon, neglect or fail to take their particular interests seriously; what it does is place the opposition of interests within a dynamic setting, the leading feature of which is that the political contest has conventional rules and civilized men play by these rules because doing so is essential to the preservation of the processes whereby political life can be sustained. What conditions it doubles as condition of men's civil liberty.

Perhaps it is not surprising that thinkers who do standard normative theory should construe moderation as being nothing but an abstract principle in need of the standardly conceived *philosophical* justification. But from the first introduction of this good (implicit even in the famous oarsmen example in Part II of Book III of the *Treatise*) Hume has construed it not as an abstract ideal or object of theory, but an actuality attained in the mutual give-and-take of social co-existence. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to ask what the *philosophical* principle or *philosophical* standard of moderation is, as if we were undertaking a Platonic inquiry, or how Humean moderation is rationally justified, as if Humean skepticism had not shown that the old way of thinking about the human world had not been overcome. Moderation is to be understood naturalistically and as part of the historical order; we gain access to it not by theoretical reason but by imaginatively re-enacting, understanding and appreciating the past; moderation is disclosed in the civilized give-and-take of social co-existence.

We are now in a position to address the question before us. The text from "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science" which occasions the objection now being discussed encourages, on its face, not moderation but utmost zeal; on closer examination we find that Hume's concern is directed precisely to the conditions whereby the civil union is shaped and influenced by the processes making for progress, enlightenment, and social liberties. "Here, then, is a sufficient inducement to maintain, with the utmost ZEAL, in every free state, those forms and institutions, by which liberty is secured, the public good consulted, and the avarice of

ambition of particular men restrained and punished" (*E*, p. 26). A little later he says that "perhaps the surest way of producing moderation in every party is to increase our zeal for the public" (*E*, p. 27). What needs clarification here is just what exactly is the object of the zeal Hume recommends and how it differs from the forms of political zealotry, including that characteristic of the politics of principle, which Hume abhors.

The difference, I submit, is that between concern for what makes the social union possible and particular concerns which take the existence of the social union for granted. This distinction somewhat parallels that between the public interest and particular interests the pursuit of which is secured by the institutions which articulate the public interest. Or this distinction parallels that between what is basic to the artifice by which justice is originated and therewith civilized society constituted and the partial interests which are protected by the rules of justice. That in civilized society particular interests are moderated, that is, some of their exercises are curtailed by rules and laws, is inherent in its very constitution, and the continued existence of this sort of society requires that actions which threaten the social union be quashed—or as Hume puts it, "the avarice of particular men restrained and punished." A political writer's saying that it is imperative that violations of justice are to be punished is certainly nothing out of the ordinary. The *zeal* Hume commends to the public man in this regard is likewise unexceptional, for such is *required* by the public interest and by the standards of probity. And of course utmost zeal can be recommended only to those actuated by the public interest over against the interests of political factions, for to urge on the political parties utmost zeal in the pursuit of their political interests would of course invite discord and weaken society, if not assure its destruction. When properly conditioned, this zeal, moreover, functions as a moderating force, and in this regard is sharply distinguished from the zeal associated with the politics of principle.

Against this it might be objected that Hume draws a false contrast between a zeal for the public good and a zeal for party, since what the parties embody is just distinct *conceptions of the public good*. But this objection fails, and for two reasons. First, even if a party has and works from a conception of the public good, this is a function of the interests which animate the party—inter-

ests which do not exhaust the legitimate pursuits of men within political society. (We should bear in mind it is not extra-theoretical interests Hume condemns, but extremism in their pursuit.) Second, it is in fact not necessary, in order for men to be actuated by a *concern* for the public good, that they have a *conception* of the public good, whether this conception be partisan or not. (In the famous oarsmen simile in the *Treatise*, for example, it is not the case that the participants need share a *conception* of what is involved in what they are doing.) What is necessary, on Hume's view, is to be involved in advancing one's political interests collaboratively with others, or at least without violating the processes that make for the maintenance or even the flourishing of social co-existence.

Further, if we turn from reflecting on the conditions for the existence of society to considering the conditions of its flourishing in liberty, again Hume directs us to think in terms of institutions. On his analysis a society becomes free as it achieves institutions which are made to function on the basis of law, and the fashioning and the administration of law is made independent of the whim of those in political power, and between the chief competing political factions in society there is in place a *system for moderating extremism* and inducing action on behalf of the public interest, despite disagreements in political outlooks. But the institutions to which men's liberty is tied are fragile artifices subject to subversion and manipulation. To protect them is to protect the highest political good. It is most particularly toward this end that Hume recommends the utmost zeal, but he recommends this zeal not to all, but to men of moderation, that is, those who can rise above particular interests—as does the skeptical philosopher—for only such as these understand how political life is to be conducted conformably to the requirements of liberty.

Better to appreciate Hume's response to the above question and to the others we have discussed, it is helpful to bear in mind what role he thinks the enlightened intellectual plays relative to the order of practical politics of which he is a part. The careful thinker will not refuse political involvement but neither will he involve himself as does a partisan. He will refrain from indulging in the rhetoric of rights or the rhetoric of established order because he will maintain a detached stance and will focus instead on a *tertium quid*, the interplay of social forces that animates

political life. And if intervene he must, it will be by reinforcing the quality of moderation, which may oblige him, if one or the other of the political factions of the day has given in to excess, to seek in a statesmanlike manner to restore balance by advancing the reasonable case for the other side. (That in Hume's England the popular party had become extremist accounts for his intervening by advancing the cause of stability and order.)

We may wish to pause to ask what entitles the Humean intellectual to intervene in the political order if he is not doing so in the manner of the politics of interest. Involvement is all well and good, we might say, but what permits Hume to think the intellectual's intervention stems from anything but *particular interest* rather than *zeal* for liberty and public interest? After all, in being a skeptic, the intellectual works without the benefit (if such it be) of a normative political theory and the convictions men take such a theory to sanction. What then guides the skeptic, if not his private and partial interests?

I can only surmise what Hume might say in response to this question. The Humean intellectual is guided indeed not by abstract theory but by an understanding of the conditions of liberty derived from the study of history. We have already seen the outline of such an understanding in the summary earlier given of Hume's explanation of the securing of liberty through the establishment of the British constitution. Probing somewhat deeper shows what it is that guides the Humean intellectual's interventions into politics.

In arriving at this explanation and at any number of others in his philosophical and popular writings Hume deploys the same methodologically pluralist approach he used as early as the *Treatise*: he sets a problem up as a clash between two opposite principles or forces. His treatment of the political order follows the same pattern, and in this regard it is noteworthy that Hume thinks the existence of political factions not a regrettable breach of the social union but the very source and guarantee of civil liberties. This pluralism explains why zeal for liberty does not translate into partisanship in the party which claims the cause of liberty or rights as its own. The study of history indicated to Hume that the effectiveness of the advocacy of liberty in actually bringing liberty about is limited inasmuch as it necessarily meets the *counterforce* of the opposing faction, the party of established order and authority. Thus, when effective, the advocacy of liberty is in reality *only*

a partial cause alongside the advocacy of order, since one faction functions to limit or moderate the other. Were this not so, the advocacy of liberty would be perverted into an absolutism and therein spawn tyranny, as it did at the hands of Cromwell, when the tempering influence contributed by the oppositional interests was effectively removed. By contrast, when opposing parties represent their particular interests moderately, each functions as a partial cause of the resulting political action. Under such circumstances as these, the advocacy of popular rights would meet the tempering counterforce of the advocacy of order, and the stage would be set for the statesmanship of moderate men toward a suitable resolution. Here we find renewed evidence that for Hume moderation is the foremost virtue of civil life and we discern the deep reason for his rejection of normative political theories. By affirming a single standard and judging what does not conform to this standard as valueless, these theories tend inherently toward a single-minded extremism denying the viability of the opposition and thus violating the dualism which for Hume accounts for the liberties Englishmen actually enjoy. And, as we have seen, only a moderation strongly connected to skepticism, itself reinforced by an understanding of how civil liberty has actually come to be established—connected, that is, with the distinctive convictions of the skeptic—can prevail against the influence of normative political theory.

I submit that what for Hume guides the skeptic's political interventions is an understanding of political life informed by the Hume's method of explaining social phenomena as the result of the interplay of opposing partial causes which Hume so frequently deploys in his writings. This leads him to be neither fashioner of normative theory nor practitioner of practical politics, but an unimpassioned observer (contrast Nietzsche) who rising above faction comprehends the conditions under which it can contribute to the public interest and perhaps even the cause of liberty. What shapes his political vision is study of the historical processes whereby the political order unfolds, rather than an extra-theoretical attachment to one or the other of the motivating causes operative in that unfolding. Thus Hume's occasional comments on politics reflect not partisan preference, as his liberal critics claim, but the moderating force of political skepticism; it is because he appreciates the bipolar structure of political dynamics

that he resists extremism of whatever stripe. To think that Hume is inconsistent in counseling the zealous safeguarding of the processes wherein political oppositions are moderated while he praises political moderation is to overlook the difference between thinking in terms of social systemic interests and thinking in terms of party interests. We find, consequently, that Hume's outlook on politics was, first, not ideologically inspired, second, strictly required by the findings of his analysis of political history, and third, entirely within the spirit of his skepticism. Thus I find Hume is not inconsistent in praising both zeal regarding the conditions of liberty and moderation regarding the pursuit of limited interests.

1. This paper is a development of a paper presented at the Central Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association in the Spring, 1989. I am grateful to the persons present at that session for their comments.

2. Citations of Hume's works will be given parenthetically in the text, after the symbols *T* and *E* for the *Treatise* and *Essays*, respectively. I have used the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) and the Miller edition of *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985).

3. There is not a single reference to moderation in the extensive index of the Ellington edition of Kant's *Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964), pp. 167 ff. Kant's attack on a somewhat related topic, the Aristotelian doctrine that virtue lies in a mean, may be found at pp. 63 f. and 94 f. of that work.

4. To the objection that a person mild by natural endowment should not be counted as virtuous there are two lines of response Hume might pursue. First, aretaic ethics does not prize struggle and effort as such, and admits no reason why, if someone's being politically moderate is of positive value, we should discount that person's coming by this quality in so felicitous a manner as natural endowment. Second, Hume adopts a generous attitude toward virtues from endowment generally. The scope of morality is broader for him than it is for us; his catalog of the virtues includes qualities such as cheerfulness, industriousness, wit and good memory, even if these be natural in a person and not the object of deliberate striving. He concedes that "the approbation, which attends natural abilities, may be somewhat different to the feeling from that, which arises from other virtues," but quite expressly denies that this renders "them entirely of a different species." (*T*, p. 608)

5. In "Of the Coalition of Parties" Hume writes, "There is not a more effectual method of promoting so good an end, than to prevent all unreasonable insult and triumph of the one party over the other, to encourage moderate opinions, to find the proper medium in all disputes, to persuade each that its antagonist may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance in

the praise and blame, which we bestow on either side." (*E*, p. 494)

6. And if there be anything of theoretical merit in a normative political theory, it will be fragmentary—as is the interest which inspires it. Obviously to compose these fragments into a suitable picture of political life requires the ability to rise above faction and to appreciate how the civil union is sustained despite the factions into which society is divided.

7. For Hume politics of interests is practiced in a civil world and exposed to the virtues of the common life; its practitioners are as oarsmen in the same craft. Theory is spun in a largely private world apart from civility and common life. It is distinctive of the justification which theorists seek that it transcends mere civility and lies outside common life, though it pretends to ordain and regulate life. I believe the thinking underlying Hume's critique of the politics of principle is much the same as we find rehearsed in the Conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*.

8. *Skepticism, God and Man*, P. Hallie, ed. (Middleton, Mass.: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), p. 41.

9. It is of course impossible in a paraphrase to convey the impact that working one's way with Hume through a series of philosophical quandaries has on the reader of the *Treatise*, especially because the force of the case Hume makes for skepticism is not a matter of argument but of trial.

10. In this connection a remarkable parallel is to be noted between the moderating self-correction of the reflective mind and the moderating self-correction of the acquisitive passions—between what I term *doxastic moderation* and *dikastic moderation*, that is, the process by which, as Hume explains in Part II of Book III, the order of justice, which is foundational for morality, comes about. An interesting question is how, if at all, these two forms of moderation are interrelated. Let it here suffice to say that Hume's treatment of the origin of justice is consistent with his skepticism in that it is a *doxastically minimalist* account.

Note: While editing this issue of *Reason Papers* Stuart Warner had occasion to remark to me that in aiming to correct misconceptions about the character of Hume's political thought I may have given the impression that Hume embraced a fully non-normative approach to morality and politics. Such was not my intention, however, and is not in fact a correct statement of Hume's position (who, after all, emphasizes *rules* for the correction of the judgment in matters either causal or moral) nor is it a plausible position in itself. I would defend the interpretation that there is room for normative considerations in Hume's thought but that these are only minimally or weakly normative, in that they are entirely *derivative* from practices in which educated persons find themselves engaged. Properly to spell out such an interpretation would require a separate study, and one of not inconsiderable length. I am grateful to Professor Warner for providing me the opportunity to add this clarifying note.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reason Papers

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Normative Studies

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

Edited by Stuart D. Warner

Articles

- Hume on the Origin and Evolution of Religious
and Philosophical Consciousness Donald W. Livingston 3
- The Virtue of Political Skepticism James T. King 24
- Hume's Account of Property Nicholas Capaldi 47
- David Hume on the Public Interest Stuart D. Warner 74
- Spinoza and Hume on Individuals Douglas Den Uyl and Lee Rice 91
- Natural Rights, Philosophical Realism, and Hume's
Theory of Common Life Douglas B. Rasmussen 118

Discussion Notes

- In Defense of Moore's "Proof of an External World" John O. Nelson 137
- Race Isn't Merit Eugene Sapadin 141

Book Reviews

- William G. Scott and David K. Hart's *Organizational
Values in America* David L. Norton 149
- Hans-Hermann Hoppe's *A Theory of Socialism
and Capitalism* Daniel Shapiro 154

REASON PAPERS is published at the Department of Philosophy, Auburn University, AL 36849. Send orders (\$7.00 per copy in US and Canada, \$8.00 elsewhere; make checks payable to Reason Papers) to Professor Tibor R. Machan, *Reason Papers*, Department of Philosophy, Auburn University, AL 36849. Manuscripts should be accompanied with return postage and envelope. Copyright©1990 by the Department of Philosophy, Auburn University. All rights reserved.
