

# SPINOZA AND HUME ON INDIVIDUALS

DOUGLAS DEN UYL

*Bellarmino College*

and

LEE RICE

*Marquette University*

## INTRODUCTION

**A**lthough Hume has had a much wider audience than Spinoza in Anglo-American circles, there are reasons to believe that a comparison between these two great thinkers of the modern era should be instructive. In the first place, we have it on the authority of Wilhelm Dilthey that Hume was carrying on the work begun two generations earlier by Spinoza.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the value of a comparison is suggested by Gilbert Boss's recent and massive two volume study on the work of these two thinkers.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Spinoza may have had some impact on British thought, or at least more affinity to it than may have been initially supposed.<sup>3</sup> These reasons, coupled to the fact that a comparison between any two important thinkers is always instructive, have led us to the conclusion that there is much still to do and gain from a comparison of Hume and Spinoza. For although Boss's work is massive, it is not in English, leaving the English speaking reader with little more than Dilthey's insight to go on. And that insight is sufficiently accurate to justify any further discussion here.

We have chosen to compare Hume and Spinoza on the topic of "individuals." Our main reason for doing so was that it allowed

us to cover a range of topics without stretching our account beyond reasonable limits. Using this topic, we can discuss Hume and Spinoza with respect to the problems of individuation, causality, ethics, and politics. With the possible exception of the second of these topics, the individual factors importantly into the others. Yet our discussion of causality flows out of our discussion of individuation, so that some continuity is maintained throughout the entire discussion to follow. An additional feature of our discussion is that we tend to look at Hume through spinozistic eyes. It might be more prudent, and usual, to keep our biases silent, but it must be admitted up front that part of our purpose is to claim that Spinoza is *worthy* of the comparison to Hume. It is not that we believe that Anglo-American audiences do not respect Spinoza (they do); rather, the relative lack of attention by such audiences puts the burden of proof on Spinoza. On the Continent the matter might be entirely the reverse. What we offer, therefore, is a treatment that gives a bit more emphasis to the Spinozistic solutions to the issues both men had in common. And while such an approach may de-emphasize the many similarities to be found in the thought of these two philosophers, there is the hope that the reader will be inclined to pursue the question further because of the suggestions made here.

### THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUATION

Ever since Hume's discussion of individuation in the sixth section of Part IV of Book I of the *Treatise*, the question of individuation is usually approached in terms of personal identity; but, as Hume and Spinoza both knew, it is both wider in scope and less anthropological in origin than this. From a logical perspective it intersects the general theory of predication, and from a scientific one it underlies the problems of substance and continuity. From both of these perspectives, as well as that of personal identity, the issues remain no less lively today than in Hume's and Spinoza's time. Einstein and quantum theorists spoke of the "disappearance of substance" earlier in our own century, and nominalism today is ably defended by Goodman and an entire school of logicians.

The question of nominalism can best be left in its contemporary setting, for it is one of a great many questions on whose

answer Hume and Spinoza seem to be in perfect agreement. What exists are *individual* objects; universal objects or common properties are no less idle fictions for Spinoza than for Hume. In *E2P40Schol1*, Spinoza reminds us that notions called 'universal' are no more than blurred images in the mind caused by the inability of imagination to keep individual data distinct. The dual division by Hume of perceptions into impressions and ideas, and simple and complex, is equally an insistence that objects and mental states are both *individuals* and *of individuals*. The question of the nature of these individuals remains no less a problem for the one than for the other.

Couching the problem of individuation in terms of personal identity, as Hume does at one point in his own discussion in (*T*, I, IV, 6), seems somewhat perverse, by suggesting that the problem may lie in the nature of "personhood" (about which neither Hume nor Spinoza have much at all to say) rather than in what constitutes the identity of something which happens to be a person.<sup>4,5</sup>

Hume himself has three analogies to offer us in his discussion (see *T*, I, IV, 6, 252-53, 257). The first is that of a "bundle of perceptions"; and, as LeRoy notes,<sup>6</sup> historians intent on emphasizing Hume's atomism have assured a wide audience for it. The second analogy, however, that of the mind as a theatre on whose stage the actors-perceptions play, suggests the sceptical turn which Hume later makes in his Appendix(*T*, 633-36), since the underlying nature of the theatre itself is totally unknown. The third analogy is that of civil society, and in Hume's closing discussion of it, it takes on teleological tones:

A ship, of which a considerable part has been chang'd by frequent reparations, is still consider'd as the same ... The common end, in which the parts conspire, is the same under all their variations, and affords an easy transition of the imagination from one situation to another. (*T*, I, IV, VI, 257)

LeRoy suggests that there are three distinct elements which Hume wishes to incorporate into his account of individuation. The first is that of non-substantiality (an individual is not a self-contained substance in the metaphysical sense), the second that of unknowability (in one sense we cannot know what makes an individual unique), and the third that of agency:

Hume's suggestions are, accordingly, quite precise. The mind is an active spontaneity, but it cannot be considered a single and self-identical agent in the strict sense of these terms. At first sight it may appear as an organism of perceptions really distinct from one another, but bound in an intimate reciprocity of action. In being considered more closely, it emerges as something still more subtle, further yet from our reach.<sup>7</sup>

As Hume himself acknowledges in the general appendix to the *Treatise* (see *T*, 633-36), however, he has no principles by which to base a characterisation of self (or of individuation) upon agency in general; since his concept of agency itself presupposes some notion of individuation. As he puts it in (*T*, 635), "If perceptions are distinct existences, they form a whole only by being connected together. But no connections among distinct existences are ever discoverable by human understanding." The key word here is clearly "discoverable," since connections can always be *produced* or *created* by the understanding. To use an example of Goodmanian origin, the collection of objects consisting of the Eiffel Tower, the present U. S. President, and the square root of two is connected insofar at least as it can be thought of by the understanding as one collection rather than two.

Much has been written about Hume's self-confessed difficulties with individuation and personhood.<sup>8,9,10</sup> From a spinozistic perspective, Hume fares better than some of his contemporary critics would perhaps have it. He has supplied a necessary condition which only fails for sufficiency: while every individual is a collection of parts, not every collection of parts is an individual.

There are two lengthy discussions of individuation to be found in Spinoza. In the first of these, the lemmas, axioms, and demonstrations following *E2P13*, the discussion is related to individuation in physics (better: for physical entities). A detailed discussion of the physical model employed is found in Lee Rice's *Spinoza on Individuation*,<sup>11</sup> and would take us too far afield here. For our purposes, Spinoza's informal discussion in *Ep32* is more useful. Spinoza is here replying to a request from Oldenburg to make clearer his (Spinoza's) distinction between "whole" and "parts," and replies (almost anticipatory of Hume's stylistic approach) with a metaphor. We are asked to conceive a worm ("virus" or "bacterium" would modernize the discussion somewhat) in the bloodstream, endowed with sufficient vision to

distinguish particles or parts within the blood, and sufficient reason (Hume's "understanding") to understand the nature of the interactions which take place among these components. Such a being would inhabit the blood much as we inhabit the earth, and would regard each particle as a whole rather than as a part ("*et unamquamque sanguinis particulam ut totum, non vero ut partem, consideraret*"). Spinoza does NOT say that the worm would be wrong to do so, but only that his (her? its?) notion of an individual would be limited to the causal interactions which it understands, or which it can incorporate into an explanatory model. (These two features of understanding and nomological explanation are not the same, but the differences are of no significance here.)

So *agency* or causal connectedness is the missing link which provides the necessary condition for Hume's characterisation. Spinoza's more technical formulation is found in *E2Def7*: "If several individuals concur in a single action, such that they are simultaneously the cause of one effect, all of them are to that extent one individual" (*unam rem singularem*). One possible objection to this line of definition might be to claim that the notion of "individual thing" is in fact wider in extension than that of causal interaction. Spinoza, however, insists on their co-extensionality: "*Nihil existit ex cujus natura aliquis effectus non sequatur*" (*E1P36*). The unity of an individual is correlated strictly to the unity of available causal chains. One consequence of this is that individuals can be parts of other individuals without themselves ceasing to be individuals. This is the crucial respect in which individuation as both Hume and Spinoza conceive of it differs from the traditional concept of substantiality which both reject as predicable of individuals (no substance can be part of another substance). Spinoza shares this "anti-substantiality" perspective of experience with Hume.<sup>12</sup> Of course, for Spinoza, it is not merely the case than individuals *can be* parts, but rather that every individual is in fact a part of higher-order individuals, with the exception of god or nature itself (see the scholium to lemma 7 of *E2*, following *E2P13*); but that is another story.

None of this is to suggest that Hume could then simply embrace Spinoza's account of agency (or, in Hume's terms, "necessary connection"), thereby solving his (Hume's) avowed problems with identity; for it is just that account which Hume rejects; and thus

concedes that he can go no further, that his own account of (personal) identity is limited by his sceptical analysis of causation. This analysis, as we shall see in the next section, depends intimately upon his understanding of the types or levels of human cognition, another area where there are startling similarities and differences with Spinoza, and the topic to which we now turn.

### AGENCY AND COGNITION

Hume's central discussion of causation is in (*T*, I, II, 73-82), where his claim to found causality upon experience in fact divides into two subclaims. The first relates to our experience of constant conjunctions (spatial contiguity coupled with temporal asymmetry of events which are said to be causally connected). The second relates to the fact that we find ourselves "determined" to pass from one instantial member of a conjunction to the other. As Buchdahl<sup>13</sup> notes, it is unclear whether this feeling of determination is experienced by all, or whether it is instead something whose existence is exhibited only by reflection or by philosophical analysis.

Hume, however, is not trying to justify causal inference, but rather to explain it; which, as he argues, entails that it be traced to its sources in the field of perception (images). He wants to claim that causal *statements* (i.e., claims regarding causal connections among individual events) arise from experience (imagination or sensation), and that causal *laws* are inductive generalizations from these. The problem, as even his most sympathetic commentators note,<sup>14,15,16,17</sup> is once again the provision of necessary conditions in the absence of sufficient ones. Contiguity and regular succession are clearly components of any causal sequence, but just as clearly not of only causal ones. "For there are, first of all, cases where from the occurrence of *A* we may infer the subsequent occurrence of *B*, yet would not speak of *A* as causing *B*. And, secondly, there are cases where from the occurrence of *A* we may infer the simultaneous occurrence of *B*, yet would not speak of *A* as causing *B*."<sup>18</sup>

More seriously yet, the inference from causal laws to statements is at least as common as that of inductive inferences from statements to laws—which suggests that Hume may be reversing the order of explanation. We more commonly appeal to an

individual pair of events as causally related to the extent that we have a cover model or general law from which their connectibility may be inferred, than we do to a causal principle because of its simple conformity with past experience.<sup>19,20</sup> Indeed, Hume concedes as much and contradicts his own explanation of causation in admitting that some causal statements can result from a single conjunctive instance of events (*T*, I, XVI, 173-740); and then goes on to admit that we never meet any series of constant conjunctions which could serve as premises for causal inferences, since they are always encrusted in a variety of causally irrelevant circumstances (*T*, I, XIII, 149). In short, we use the laws to determine conditions of relevance, and thus at least partly as a means of justifying the causal statements, rather than the other way around.

Where, then, do these admissions leave Hume's discussion and putative analysis of causation? As in the discussion of individuation in the preceding section, things are not so bad as they appear when viewed from a perspective which is both spinozistic and sympathetic. First, neither Hume nor Spinoza attempts to "justify" causal inference in general (the scare quotes are there because we are unsure what such a justification could possibly be). They rather accept it as a primitive (see *E1Def3*), and attempt to explain how it functions in a wider explanatory framework. For Spinoza this framework is primarily deductive and necessitarian in structure, for Hume inductive and probabilistic.

Secondly, Hume's implied distinction between causal statements and causal laws is of fundamental importance, just as (for Spinoza) Hume's insistence that experience is a necessary condition for the first (cf. *Ep10*: "*Respondeo, nos nunquam egere experientia, nisi ad illa, quae ex rei definitione non possunt concludi, ut, ex. gr., existentia modorum*") is true. These statements, however, require further conditions than experience; and it is just here that Hume has overlooked (and Spinoza underlined) that it is the laws which justify the causal statements and not the other way around.

Hume's ambivalence toward the nomological and deductive features of causal laws, and their role in interpreting and justifying experience, is nowhere more obvious than in his discussion of gravitation (see *T*, I, V, 62-65), on which his position comes closer to that of Cotes than to Newton,<sup>21</sup> despite his frequent allusions

to the text of the latter. He follows the letter of Newton's account of inertia as well, in wanting to claim that the law of inertia is "derived from phenomena" (*I*, p. 73), without ever asking what possible structure such a derivation could take. If anything, the aristotelian law that a body set in motion tends to come to rest has a firmer basis in ordinary experience and the conjunction of events.<sup>22</sup>

Paradoxically, Hume could have reconciled his own insistence on the logical difference between causal statements and causal laws by taking more seriously his own insistence on the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. He need only have avoided the hopeless claim that this distinction is one of logic (a claim equivalent to the analytic-synthetic distinction in its now-defunct form), in favour of the claim that the distinction is one of functionality. To quote Boss:

To avoid this paradox, the sole means appears to be that of dividing up the tasks, and giving to understanding the task of assuring the basic principles of science, while abandoning to experience the need to discover the particular causal connections.<sup>23</sup>

Boss goes on to argue that Hume's empiricist model of science is most clearly explained in the examples provided by Spinoza: natural history, the interpretation of Scripture, and political science itself.<sup>24</sup> In all of these instances, however, the basic nomologico-deductive principles which are put to work in the inductive task of sorting and generalization are taken from still other sciences which meet the spinozistic notion of *mos geometricus*. In this way Spinoza can, and Hume cannot, account for what both men take to be the two central components of scientific reasoning: deduction and universality on the one hand, and experiential justification (by appeal to probability) on the other.

As in the preceding section, however, it is most important that we not charge Hume with simple oversight. The underlying consistency of Hume's position arises from the fact that his inability to recognize causal connection or causal efficacy as the basis of explanation (rather than its result) is a consequence of his analysis of cognition generally. Note that, in saying this, we are insisting that Hume's purpose is NOT to deprive things of causal efficacy. As he himself says approvingly of Newton:

It was never the meaning of Sir Isaac Newton to rob second causes of all force or energy, though some philosophers have endeavored to establish that theory on his authority. On the contrary, that great philosopher had recourse to an ethereal active fluid to explain his universal attraction, though he was so cautious and modest as to allow that it was a mere hypothesis not to be insisted on without more experiments. (*I*, pp. 84ff, 11)

Hume even concedes a few pages earlier in the *Inquiry* that there is a kind of force which we feel ourselves exert, as in a strong endeavor (see *I*, 78-79ff 7). What Hume is claiming, then, is not that force or causation is absent from things, but rather that we lack an experiential-cognitive basis on which to base just such a concept. And what Spinoza must claim, in order to avoid the very paradox whose existence Hume concedes within his own philosophy, is that such a notion of agency has a cognitive basis.

This claim takes us back to the fundamental point of contention between the two thinkers; but, once again, we shall find interesting and crucial points of agreement as well. The concepts of individuation and of causation depend for their intelligibility upon an underlying claim concerning what we can call (following neither Spinoza nor Hume) *cognitive competence*. A major point to be underlined here is that Spinoza's analysis of mind and of mental events is both empirical and hypothetical. Concerning his explanation of memory, for instance, he remarks:

I do not think that I am far from the truth, since all of the postulates that I have assumed contain scarcely anything inconsistent with experience; and, after demonstrating that the human body exists as we sense it (*E2P13Cor*), we may not doubt experience.

From his, admittedly conditional, analysis of human cognition, Spinoza argues, in a quasi-inductive manner, that human knowledge is of three kinds (see *E2P40Schol2*). The first of these is from individual objects (or symbols) "presented through the senses in a fragmentary and confused manner without any intellectual order," which Spinoza calls "imagination." The second is from common notions and adequate ideas of properties, which is reason (or "knowledge of the second kind"). Spinoza also argues for a third kind of knowledge, intuition, which appears to be an intellectual knowledge of singular things seen in their own natures, and about which there is considerable disagreement among the commentators.<sup>25</sup>

We need only set our sights on the first two kinds of knowledge in any case, for two reasons. First, by Spinoza's admission, the *Ethica* is written at the second level anyway, which is that of scientific demonstration. Secondly, the parallels with Hume's treatment of impressions (Spinoza's ideas of imagination) and ideas (Spinoza's ideas of reason) are what is important for our purposes. Spinoza's confidence in the ability of reason to fashion tools or principles of universal necessity is what clearly separates him from Hume, who sees reason/ideation as little more than a pale theatre reflecting with less vivacity the impressions of sensation (see *T*, I, I, I, 1-7), which themselves contain no basis for the distinction between truth and falsity. As Boss remarks, "The scottish empiricist seems to experience no malaise at the prospect of being carried across the landscape of sensations and images among virtually uncountable indefinite qualia; and, instead of seeking refuge outside of this originating mixture, he traverses these errant terrains and obscure forests in order to trace from them a geographical map."<sup>26</sup>

The central disagreement, however, runs perhaps deeper than this. For it is not so much the *nature* of the geography of the perceptual field (to use a rather attractive phrase of Boss's), but rather of the *epistemic status* of claims about this field. The dichotomy of impressions and ideas, for Hume, with its attendant account of reason as a passive reflection of sensation, constitutes the opening section of the *Treatise* for a very good reason: despite his professed probabilism and empiricism, this dichotomy is an absolute which is not subject to revision. For Spinoza, the account of cognitive geometry comes midway in the *Ethica*, and has no special status, epistemic or otherwise, in the order of explanation.

From a spinozistic perspective one might ask Hume why the theory of perception and cognition should occupy sheltered terrain, separate from and untouched by shifts in perspective and evidence in other areas of our theories. Hume pays little attention to the possibility of alternative hypotheses fitting the same data in his account of causal explanation, and no attention whatever to this question when the data involved are those of the nature and status of cognition. This total lack of attention to the status of cognitive geography is due, Buchdahl argues,<sup>27</sup> to the rigid distinction, itself built into Hume's epistemology, between theoretical and data languages. But that rigid distinction, since it is

the foundation upon which Hume's system is constructed, lies itself foundationless.

We end this section on a paradoxical note. There are numerous and noteworthy agreements between Hume and Spinoza regarding causality and cognition. They differ in the consequences which each wishes to draw from their understanding of the cognitive geography. In this respect, however, Spinoza remains the "pragmatist," Hume the "dogmatist." The nature of cognition, and the question of certainty derivable therefrom, are essentially questions of theory (psychology) for Spinoza, and they cannot be insulated from the scientific and explanatory enterprise. The success of accounts of cognition and of agency depends not upon their roots or foundations, but rather in their ability to interface with a larger matrix of theory and explanation. In this respect Spinoza's account of science is both more optimistic and more humble than Hume's. The justification of principles like those of causation or cognitive certainty lies in the role which they play within larger theoretical constructs, and not in their derivation from principles yet more fundamental.

### MORALITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL

The similarities between Hume and Spinoza are not limited to the areas we have already discussed. If anything, the similarities are perhaps more obvious in moral and political theory. And although it is Hume who is best remembered for making the passions central to morality, it must not be forgotten that Spinoza defined the essence of man to be desire (*E3P9Schol*). Both thinkers understood that action is grounded in desire and that a mere knowledge of the truth (as true) is not alone sufficient to motivate action (*E4P14*). To change an action one must find a way to alter the desire that presently motivates it and replace that desire with another one. Hirschmann credits Spinoza with being the first one to advance and explore this theory,<sup>28</sup> but it is certainly a feature of Hume's moral theorizing as well.

Desire, however, gets transformed by custom into moral sentiment for Hume, whereas for Spinoza if desire is transformed at all,<sup>29</sup> it is towards reason. The impotency of reason in Hume's ethics is to be contrasted with the supreme potency of reason in Spinoza's. Our central question must therefore be concerned with

giving some account of this difference. A complete account of the issue would require us to compare Hume and Spinoza on the nature of reason; but apart from any hints we have given and shall give on what each might say about the nature of reason, such a discussion would take us too far away from ethics to be appropriate here. Fortunately, we can arrive at some conception of the difference between the two thinkers within the purview of ethics itself and with connection to what we have already said above.

We can characterize the difference between Hume and Spinoza in ethics at a general level by noting that Hume is a modern moralist whereas Spinoza is a classical moralist. The difference between the two approaches to ethics revolves around what is considered to be the central problem of ethics. In classical ethics (beginning with Plato) the central question of ethics was "what should one make of one's own life?" Here the focus was upon the perfection of the individual and only secondarily or derivatively upon the individual's relations with others. From Plato's definition of "justice" as having one's soul in proper order, to Aristotle's emphasis upon character development, to medieval Christianity's concern for personal salvation, the first concern of ethics was self-development or self-perfection. It was not that others were of no concern to classical ethics, but rather that appropriate relations with others were a function of the character of one's own "soul" and not the reverse.

In modern ethics, by contrast, the first question of ethics is how one should act towards others. The focus is primarily social with self-perfection or self-development, if it is of concern at all, being given secondary or derivative status. Concepts such as "peace," "harmony," or "cooperation" are given pride of place on this view. Self-perfection, which by the twentieth century simply disappeared as a concern or was discussed in Kantian terms as "duties to self," became thoroughly socialized. We "perfect" ourselves to the extent that we act properly towards others or develop socially conducive attitudes. A pertinent example is Mill's attempt to move from personal happiness to the happiness of society by suggesting that the ethically appropriate attitude is to identify one's own happiness with that of society at large.

The modern conception of ethics owes its origins to Hobbes,<sup>30</sup> but Hume is perhaps one of its finest representatives. We learn from the very first paragraph of Book III of the *Treatise* that our

interest in morality derives from our belief that the peace of society depends upon our moral conclusions. Indeed, the very sentiments which drive the moral enterprise for Hume are "built entirely on public interest and convenience" (*T*, Bk III, Pt. 2, Sec. 5). And elsewhere we are told that approbation about the virtues is a function of their social utility (*T*, III, 3, 6), that justice and promise keeping are artifices in the service of social utility (*T*, III, 2, 8-10, and that the value of the clergy in this life is determined by their contribution to society (see *E*, Pt. 1, Essay 5). Yet it seems to us that there is less need here to show that Hume is a "modern" moralist in the sense we have defined it than that Spinoza is a classical one. For few thinkers have been regarded as more archetypically modern than Spinoza.

The case for saying that Spinoza is a classical moralist is no less obvious than that which places Hume in the modern camp. Spinoza's *Ethica* culminates in a description of what the individual must do to be released from bondage and achieve freedom in Books 4 and 5. This is not social or political freedom, but individual freedom—the sort of freedom that is personal and independent of the condition of one's society. Although freedom is certainly more *difficult* to achieve in some societies than others, the sort of freedom Spinoza speaks of can be attained in tyrannical as well as free social orders. An individual's well-being is not a function of the well-being of his society, nor does Spinoza use social categories in advising the individual on how to escape from bondage. Virtually all of Spinoza's recommendations in the latter part of his *Ethica* are concerned with the "inner" nature of the individual. This is true even when Spinoza speaks of social questions (e.g., *E4P36Schol* and *E4P37*). As a representative example of Spinoza's way of doing ethics, consider the following:

In life, therefore, it is especially useful to perfect, as far as we can, our intellect, or reason. In this one thing consists man's highest happiness, or blessedness.... No life, then is rational without understanding, and things are good only insofar as they aid man to enjoy the life of the Mind, which is defined by understanding. On the other hand, those that prevent man from being able to perfect his reason and enjoy the rational life, those only we say are evil. (*E4App.4-5*; Curley translation)

The self-perfectionist character of the foregoing passage is much closer in tone to what one might find in Aristotle than in Hume.

Spinoza is, however, modern (and thus closer to Hume) in the sense that he does not make the mistake of antiquity in believing that, because the well-being of an individual is not necessarily a function of the society he is in, therefore the well being of society can result only if that society is populated with, or at least led by, individuals who have achieved the sort of perfection he recommends. Spinoza fully expects that society will be led by and populated by those who have not achieved self-perfection (*TP*, 1, 5-6). But that fact does not change the claim that ethics for Spinoza is still essentially about individual self-perfection.<sup>31</sup>

To evaluate which approach to ethics is "better" would be a monumental and perhaps fruitless task. Our point here is not to argue for the superiority of one approach over the other, but instead to argue that (1) Spinoza *can* be a classical ethicist precisely because he has the theory of individual agency which Hume lacks, and (2) that because Spinoza has that theory of individual agency he can carry ethics to an additional level, while still agreeing with much of what Hume says about the foundations of morality and politics. Given what we have already said, the first of these points is largely logical in nature. One cannot have a self-perfectionist ethics if there is no self to perfect. As we have seen, Hume's problems with personal identity and individual agency would necessarily make it difficult to get a self-perfectionist ethics going. Spinoza, in contrast, makes constant reference to a person's nature when discussing freedom or perfection. When speaking of virtue, for example, we are told that "insofar as it is related to man, [it] is the very essence, or nature of man, insofar as he has the power of bringing about certain things, which can be understood through the laws of his nature alone" (*E4Def7*). And what is good for us is also defined in terms of the things conformity to our nature (*E4P31&Cor*). Obviously to speak of something conforming to one's nature requires a reasonably well articulated conception of individual agency.

In describing Spinoza as a classical moralist, one should in no way draw the inference that the theoretical underpinnings of that morality are conceived in classical terms. Classical morality is essentially teleological, whereas Spinoza's ethics is not, although this still continues to be a source of some controversy in Spinoza scholarship.<sup>32</sup> As Spinoza puts it, "by end for the sake of which we do something, I understand appetite" (*E4Def7*). The antecedent

conditions of an action (i.e., appetite) are what matter for Spinoza, not final causes. And "perfection" too is not understood in terms of final causality, for by "perfection" Spinoza means nothing more than "reality" (*E4Pref*). The ability of a thing to act in accordance with the laws of its own nature, as opposed to things outside of itself, are what determine the degree of perfection or reality of the thing. In the human case, this means acting according to reason rather than passive affection, and activity (as opposed to passivity) is defined in terms of the adequacy of our ideas (*E3Def1-3*). There is nothing teleological in this, for perfection as activity amounts to an increase in power—that is, in efficacious action—and not in the realization of some end. So while Spinoza can be clearly defined as a classical moralist because his ethics is self-perfectionistic, his conception of self-perfection is neither the same, nor similarly grounded, as the teleological ethics of antiquity.

Nevertheless, the foregoing qualifications do not affect the claim that the formal properties and intent of Spinoza's ethics are classical, even if some substantial features of it are not. But to say all this would be to merely point to the fact that our two thinkers are different. What is interesting about Spinoza is that he *adds* the self-perfectionist dimension onto a foundation which is substantially similar to Hume's ethics. As we have said, the lack of skepticism on Spinoza's part with respect to agency and causation allows for the element of self-perfectionism in his ethics. What we need to do now is locate the place for the "humean" elements in that ethics.

In a manner quite analogous to the three levels of knowledge already mentioned, Spinoza has three levels of the good. At the first level, what is good or bad is decided by what is pleasurable or painful (e.g., *E3P39Schol*). Here the individual is being considered essentially in isolation, and when the other levels of the good are added, this first level does not disappear but is more commonly characterized by what we might call "motivation." This, of course, is akin to what Hume does in the first section of Book III of the *Treatise* when he argues against reason being the ground of morality and favors passion. Morality proper, however, is reserved for that sentiment which, as the result of the artifice of custom, law, politics and culture, looks to the utility of society. And it is here that we also find Spinoza's second level of the good. Here the good is the "social good" which Spinoza understands as

the socially useful (*utile*) (*TTP*, XX). This level is, in fact, the normative standard used in the political writings (see *TTP*, XVI, XX; *TP*, II, 19; *TP*, V, 1). It is nevertheless found in Spinoza's ethics as well (see *E4P34-35*, especially *E4P35Cor2*), although with an eye to the third level. The first two levels are meant by both Hume and Spinoza to work in tandem as we can illustrate by comparing the following two passages:

Such a principle is a proof that promises have no natural obligation, and are mere artificial contrivances for the convenience and advantage of society. If we consider aright of the matter, force is not essentially different from any other motive of hope or fear, which may induce us to engage our word, and lay ourselves under any obligation. A man, dangerously wounded, who promises a competent sum to a surgeon to cure him, would certainly be bound to performance; though the case be not so much different from that of one who promises a sum to a robber, as to produce so great a difference in our sentiments of morality, if these sentiments were not built entirely on public interest and convenience. (*T*, III, 2, 5)

And for Spinoza:

...no one at all will keep promises save from fear of a greater evil or hope of a greater good. To understand this better, suppose a robber forces me to promise that I will give him my goods whenever he wishes . . . if I *can* get out of the robber's clutches by making a counterfeit promise to do anything he wishes, I have a natural right to do this, . . . From this I conclude that a contract can have no binding force but utility; when that disappears it at once becomes null and void . . . Hence even although men give sure signs of honest intentions in promising and contracting to keep faith, no one can be certain of the good faith of another unless his promise is guaranteed by something else. (*TTP*, XVI)<sup>33,34</sup>

For both Hume and Spinoza, promises carry with them no natural obligation beyond what is to be found at the first level of the good. The moral obligation promises carry with them is purely an artifice of civil society. As Spinoza says a few pages after the passage just cited, "for wrong-doing can only be conceived in a political order" (see also *TP*, II, 19). Consequently, the private utility of the first level becomes public utility at the second. The latter in turn defines the standards of moral conduct for human beings. Such standards are utilitarian in result (but not in origin), and apply to all (and only)<sup>35</sup> humans.

The story essentially ends here for Hume. What is left to be

done is to show how public utility transfigures the sentiments to where they become moral sentiments. Clearly Hume (and later Adam Smith) have carried this project much further than Spinoza did; but there is nothing in the nature of it that is substantially different from the foundations laid by Spinoza in his second level of the good. Unlike Hume, however, Spinoza does not rest the moral enterprise here. For however well one manifests the sorts of actions and attitudes conducive to public utility and demanded by the standards of that utility, one is still some distance away from moral perfection—what Spinoza in Book V of his *Ethica* calls “blessedness.” Just as we saw earlier with respect to agency and causation when Hume (from a spinozistic perspective) had correctly identified the necessary but not the sufficient conditions in those matters, so too do we find here that public utility is but a necessary, and not a sufficient, condition of ethics for Spinoza. Without the third level of the good, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish ethics from law and politics.<sup>36</sup> And neither law, culture, politics, nor custom are sufficient to guarantee to anyone the condition of blessedness or moral perfection demanded by ethics for Spinoza. The good, in other words, is not fundamentally social, but personal:

Spinozism, however, will not allow itself to be further reduced to a classical utilitarian morality. Dogmatic utilitarianism claims to limit us within a theoretical and abstract egoism. Spinoza is content to state, without normative hindsight, that utility is in fact the underlying principle of our actions. He makes no pronouncement on its content. The pleasure principle is in fact a natural attitude which precedes each personal deliberation and involves a multiplicity of aspects—to such a degree that it sometimes may take aberrant forms. Each person is only able to seek that which is agreeable to her/him.<sup>37</sup> (see also *Ep19*)

To rest at the second level is to settle for passivity in Spinoza’s sense of the term, because accommodation, rather than self-directedness, is the hallmark of a social ethics. Spinoza’s third level, then, points to a different conception of politics than does Hume’s. To that problem we now briefly turn.

### INDIVIDUAL AND LIBERTY

The classical orientation of Spinoza and the modern orientation of Hume in ethics have certain spill-over effects in their

respective political theories. Yet it is important to note at the outset that Spinoza and Hume are more similar in political theory than they are in ethics. In the first place, both thinkers place a great deal of emphasis upon actual practice, in opposition to abstract theory. For Hume this means that he paid a great deal of attention to history and experience (e.g., his *History of England*). Spinoza likewise draws lessons from history (*TTP*, XVIII), as well as from "practical" thinkers such as Machiavelli (*TP*, V, p. 7). By the same token, this reverence for experience leads both thinkers to reject the idealism and moralism of philosophers and theologians (see *T*, Bk. 2, 2, 10; *DNR*, Pt. 12; *TP*, I, 1). Promises, for example, have no binding force but the utility or sentiment they carry with them, and in the absence of coercion they cease to be binding if that utility or sentiment are absent (see *T*, Bk. 3, 2, 5 and *TTP*, XVI). In addition, both Hume and Spinoza reject social contract theory and adopt a more evolutionary approach to government and social institutions (see *T*, Bk. 3, 2, 8, 10).<sup>38</sup> They both regard the right of property to be established by the state (see *T*, Bk. 3, 2, 2; *TP*, II, 23; and VII, 25). And finally, both men are rather conservative when it comes to challenges to the fundamental character of one's political order (see *T*, Bk. 3, 2, 10; *TTP*, XVIII; *TP*, VI).

It might further be argued that the "ends" of the state or political order are the same in Hume and Spinoza. Hume, for example says that "liberty is the perfection of civil society" (*E*, Pt. 1, Essay 5). Spinoza too says that "the purpose of the state is really freedom (*libertas*)" (*TTP*, XX). Although such statements suggest a common framework, they actually mask the division between these two thinkers. Hume's politics is essentially conservative, whereas Spinoza's is essentially liberal. Since we attached the term "conservative" to both thinkers above, a word of explanation is in order. A conservative outlook on politics is one which requires political questions to be evaluated in light of standards used or implied by the traditions and institutions of one's own society. There is no vantage point "outside" one's society from which to evaluate it. All moral, political, and social principles of analysis are given by the social/political order itself. It is one thing, therefore, to suggest that both Hume and Spinoza are conservative when it comes to revolution. It is quite another to claim that both have a conservative framework of analysis. Spinoza's politics

is not conservative in the sense just described, and the main reason for this is that Spinoza, unlike Hume, does not take the normative standards inherent in any social/political order to be sufficient for the evaluation of that order. And Spinoza does not take those standards to be sufficient, because his self-perfectionist moral theory implies a standard of analysis that is independent of the communitarian framework Hume must use. That Spinoza's perspective is also liberal is not a necessary consequence of not being a conservative, but it does become an issue when the relation between state and individual is discussed.<sup>39</sup>

Hume's political theory is perhaps best summed up by Shirley Letwin:

For Hume's politics follows no logical scheme and offers no formulas. Although it is consistent in itself and of a piece with the rest of his thought, its pattern lives only in particular judgments. One can discover it in the way one comes to know a man's character, by seeing him in many different moods and circumstances.<sup>40</sup>

Letwin's point seems confirmed by other Hume scholars as well. Miller writes, for example, that "Hume believed that those things which liberals characteristically value are indeed valuable, *provided* that those things which conservatives characteristically value can be securely enjoyed at the same time."<sup>41</sup> This suggests that Hume's politics is decided in terms of balancing competing claims on a case by case basis with an underlying conservative temperament. The conservative temperament of Hume's politics is brought out in some detail by Livingston.<sup>42</sup> Here the "common life" of a society cannot be superseded by philosophical abstraction or exogenous standards of analysis. So called "liberal values" must be understood in context and not as a program for reform. This leads Hume to be skeptical of any universalistic platforms of reform, because such reforms are usually imposed upon an existing order rather than derived from it. Consequently, Hume's conservatism stems in large part from his skepticism, but as Whelan notes, that skepticism requires that Hume's conservatism "be distinguished from a partisan position: the term conservatism, referring to a programmatic political doctrine or ideology, is anachronistic when applied to Hume."<sup>43</sup> Skepticism of *any* programmatic endeavor in politics means that the only acceptable

role for the political philosopher is that of an impartial arbitrator among claims made by those who *are* attached to various programmatic reforms. Partisans confuse partial truth with the whole truth; the political philosopher recognizes the truth that is missing from each partisan position. But since the arbitrator has no standards to call upon other than those given by society itself, he judges the defects of one partisan position in light of valid claims made by others.

While the general sensibility of Hume's political theory would not be denied by Spinoza, that theory, like Hume's ethics, seems unable to attach any particular significance to the liberty of the individual. This is to be expected, since the categories of evaluation do not address themselves to individuals but to society at large. And the value of liberty is itself instrumental to the well-being of society. Hume sees politics in general as a kind of contest between liberty and authority (*E*, Pt. 1, Essay 5), and if a preference for liberty is shown it is because its presence is more difficult to establish and delicate to maintain. As Hume says:

The government, which in common appellation, receives the appellation of free, is that which admits of a partition of power among several members, whose united authority is no less, or is commonly greater than that of any monarch; but who, in the usual course of administration, must act by general and equal laws, that are previously known to all the members and to all their subjects. In this sense, it must be owned, that liberty is the perfection of civil society; but still authority must be acknowledged essential to its very existence; and in those contests, which so often take place between the one and the other, the latter may, on that account challenge the preference. Unless perhaps one may say (and it may be said with some reason) that a circumstance, which is essential to the existence of civil society, must always support itself, and needs be guarded with less jealousy, than one that contributes only to its perfection, which the indolence of man is so apt to neglect, or their ignorance to overlook. (*E*, Pt. 1, Essay 5)

The humane political philosopher is, of course, neither indolent nor ignorant. He therefore seeks to keep the contest between liberty and authority alive and in balance. If he tilts toward liberty it is because of its fragile character; but if the two were of equal strength and resilience, a preference could not be shown.

In sum, the foregoing is the best Hume can do for individual liberty, because he has no normative standards beyond the community itself by which he could give a decisive weighting to individual liberty against authority. And this in turn stems from the fact that Hume must rest contented at what we called Spinoza's second level of the good in the last section. For when normative principles are exclusively social in nature and society itself is but a confluence of evolutionary forces tending as much away from liberty as towards it, there is little else to appeal to but balance and the moderation of partisan causes. The only other way to give liberty additional weight would be to claim that the progress of society is inherently tilted towards increased liberty. This may have been the position taken by Adam Smith.<sup>44</sup>

Now it should not be inferred from this that Spinoza is in substantial disagreement with the passage we have just cited from Hume's *Essays*. Spinoza too speaks of the foundational importance of authority or power and even advocates a state that is absolutely powerful. But when Spinoza is correctly interpreted, his absolutely powerful state looks very much like Hume's civil society perfected by liberty.<sup>45</sup> As Hume himself points out in the passage being referred to, free orders are often more powerful than those more commonly associated with the idea of "absolute" rule. So when Spinoza advocates an absolute state he should not be understood as an advocate of tyrannical rule. The disagreement between Hume and Spinoza is not, therefore, one that occurs within the same level of analysis, but rather one that exists because Spinoza has *another* level of consideration that he can bring to bear upon politics.

When considering Spinoza's political theory it is important to realize that the state (*civitas*) may open the way to moral development, but is not the vehicle through which such development is realized or ultimately understood. This interpretation was first given by H. F. Hallet.<sup>46</sup> The point is that the problem of moral development or self-perfection is in no way secured or even defined in terms of the categories or processes appropriate to political life or theory. Just as sacred rites in religion contribute nothing to a person's blessedness (see *TTP*, V and *TP*, III, p. 10), so too does conduct in conformity to the conventions, rules, and norms of civil society contribute little to self-perfection. As Spinoza puts it,

Actions whose only claim to goodness is the fact that they are prescribed by convention, or that they symbolize some good, can do nothing to perfect our understanding, but are simply empty forms, and no part of conduct which is the product or fruit of understanding and sound sense. (*TTP*, IV)

It does not, of course, follow from this that one is free to ignore the rules and conventions of one's civil society, but it does follow that the "good" secured by such behavior is some distance from the highest good or self-perfection. And while conventional standards cannot be used to judge the nature or degree of self-perfection, the door has now been opened for the standards of self-perfection to be used to judge conventional norms.

As Hallet correctly understood,<sup>47</sup> the individual does not exist for the state, but rather the reverse is more nearly the case. But unlike Locke who limits the ends of the state for the sake of the individual by means of the social contract, Spinoza's point is that *whatever* the ends of the state may be, they do not bear upon the question of self-perfection, except with respect to providing the platform from which the pursuit of self-perfection can be launched. It would be a mistake, therefore, to see the good of the individual in terms of the good of the state (or social life) or the good of the state in terms of the good of the individual or even to suggest (à la Mandeville) that the vices of the individual can be good for the state, or that what is good for the state can be a vice for the individual. From a spinozistic perspective, making such claims either misunderstands the meaning of self-perfection or inappropriately mixes different levels of the good.

Now the problem for the spinozist is that since self-perfection is significantly separated from politics and seems to be achievable under almost any political order, how can we say that this third level of the good can have any political importance at all? This problem is only accentuated when one realizes that Spinoza, like Hume, does not really take the question of the legitimacy of a civil order seriously, because its actual presence is sufficient to answer the question of why it is justified. Thus an abstract and programmatic politics of reform seems as foreign to Spinoza as it does to Hume. In an important sense all this is true—Spinoza is like Hume when it comes to practical politics. The role of the partisan is no more appropriate to the spinozist political philosopher than it is to the humean political philosopher. So to see the difference

between these two thinkers we must return to the role of the political philosopher in each of their theories.

Apart from what we have already said above about the role of the political philosopher in Hume's thought, we can follow Livingston's thesis that the philosopher's mission is to purge society of "false philosophy."<sup>48</sup> False philosophy is that philosophy which tries to emancipate itself from common life. In practice such philosophy subverts the order and traditions of society and lends itself to partisan conflict. Spinoza, in contrast, while recognizing the value of common life to the peace and stability of a social order, need not and does not rest contented with common life as the final arbiter in political questions. The principles which characterize the essence of common life—obedience, order, tradition, authority, custom—are passive in nature (in Spinoza's technical sense of "passive" in *E3Def2*) and not the sort of principles that are exhibited by the "active" life of the free individual. Yet while the self-perfected or free individual for Spinoza is indeed emancipated from common life, he is no purveyor of "false philosophy." Indeed, such is precisely the political problem for Spinoza. On the one hand, it makes no sense to threaten the peace and stability of society with the sort of abstract and detached moralizing that Hume rightly rejects as "false philosophy." On the other hand, there is the higher order of the good that must be made compatible with, if not safeguarded against, the conservatism of common life. This is Spinoza's political problem. Because Spinoza must in some sense reconcile the ordinary with the extraordinary, he does not have the luxury of settling for either the conservatism or skepticism so characteristic of Hume.

Spinoza's answer to this problem seems to us the only plausible one—evaluate civil societies in light of their prospects for individual liberty. Liberty is not only a value to be found in the fabric of common life, but is also productive of other values to be found there, e.g., peace, order, security, and willing obedience to established authority. The reverse implication, however, does not necessarily hold; that is, one can have peace, order, and security (with some ambiguity about willing obedience) without liberty (*TP*, VI, 4). By the same token, liberty is the optimal environment for the pursuit of self-perfection, not only because it allows the individual the freedom to engage in that pursuit, but also because self-perfection is itself a personalized form of liberty. For as we

have already mentioned, the self-perfected individual is one whose actions flow from his own nature, and the liberal commonwealth treats people as if they were self-directed in this sense.

This is not to say that liberal politics is a logical implication of Spinoza's metaphysics or ethics; it is not.<sup>49</sup> In Spinoza's philosophy, liberalism as a logical implication would mean that there could be nothing but liberal regimes. Instead, the bias towards individual liberty found in Spinoza's political thought represents his insight that this is the most efficient and direct means for making what we have called the second and third levels of the good compatible in a social context. And because of this, liberty (or what Spinoza often calls "democracy" when speaking of political forms and institutions) comes to function as an evaluative norm of political orders—a point one can verify by simply looking at how he modifies monarchy and aristocracy in the later chapters of the *Tractatus Politicus* or by examining his defense of free speech in chapter XX of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. True, one can attain self-perfection under almost any political order; but it is only in liberal orders that such self-perfection is made consistent with, as opposed to in conflict with or alienated from, the civil society in which one finds oneself. And in saying this one is not committed to a reformist program that ignores context. All that really follows is that one now has a standard of evaluation that is not limited to a particular context. So in the end we can say with Spinoza that,

It is not, I say, the purpose of the state to change men from rational beings into brutes or puppets; but rather to enable them to exercise their mental and physical powers in safety and use their reason freely, and to prevent them from fighting and quarrelling through hatred, anger, bad faith, and mutual malice. Thus the purpose of the state is really freedom. (*TTP*, XX)

### CONCLUDING NOTES

The question of what it means to be an individual, the application of this concept in both epistemology and ethics, and the consequent role of the notion in political theory, are not only intimately connected in the thought of Spinoza and of Hume, but also form a focal matrix from within which their mutual agreements and disagreements may be better seen and critically assessed. We have suggested that, contrary to the time-honored (or

perhaps "tattered") dichotomy between "rationalists" and "empiricists," the interplay between these two thinkers is both subtle and piecemeal. The dichotomy in fact emphasizes too strongly, and oversimplifies as well, their differences, and fails to see the often startling similarities and convergences between them.

The issues and questions which we have underlined are major points of contemporary philosophical development as well, in both social theory and epistemology (to mention only two areas). To insist, as we do, upon a close and critical assessment of both thinkers on these issues is to place them both into the contemporary dialogue. Given the originality of their thought, and the place of importance which philosophical dialogue occupied in their development, we owe such a rereading and juxtaposition of their arguments not only in justice to them, but to ourselves as a means of further developing the important issues which they raise.

### WORKS OF SPINOZA

We use the standard spinozistic abbreviations:

*E* — *Ethica*

*TTP* — *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*

*TP* — *Tractatus Politicus*

*EP* — *Epistola*

So *E32P16Cor2* is the second corollary to Proposition 16 of Book 2 of the *Ethica*.

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3. See D. Den Uyl, "Passion, State and Progress: Spinoza and Mandeville on the Nature of Human Association," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25 (1987).
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5. Boss, *La différence des philosophes: Hume et Spinoza*, pp. 27-28.
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  12. See Gilbert Boss, *La différence des philosophes: Hume et Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 24-25.
  13. Gerd Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969), p. 380.
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  16. John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, pp. 30-35.
  17. André-Louis LeRoy, *David Hume*, pp. 133-40.
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  21. Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science*, p. 387.
  22. Buchdahl, *Metaphysics and the Philosophy of Science*, p. 328.
  23. The translation is mine; Boss, *La différence des philosophes: Hume et Spinoza*, vol. I, pp. 316.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 322.
  25. For a summary of this literature, see, Jonathan Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1984), pp. 364-69.
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33. For a discussion of Spinoza's theory of natural right, see, Douglas Den Uyl, *Power, State, and Freedom* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1983).
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36. Douglas Den Uyl, *Power, State, and Freedom*, pp. 276-77.
37. Jean Préposiet, *Spinoza et la liberté des hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 97.
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43. Frederick G. Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) p. 325.
44. See Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, vol. 2, chap. 3, p. 31.
45. Den Uyl, *Power, State, and Freedom*, ch. 5.
46. H. F. Hallet, *Creation, Emanation and Salvation* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1962), p. 197.
47. Den Uyl, *Power, State, and Freedom*, ch. 5.
48. H. F. Hallet, *Creation, Emanation and Salvation*, esp. ch. 10.
49. Douglas Den Uyl and Stuart Warner, "Liberalism and Hobbes and Spinoza," pp. 306-08.

**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.

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