

# THE DAVID HUME INSTITUTE



## The Contemporary Relevance of David Hume

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## **FOREWORD**

Although the primary purpose of The David Hume Institute is to promote analysis and debate of current issues of public policy, it has never lost sight of the inspiration provided by its eponym and the achievement of the Scottish Enlightenment. Robert Pringle here provides a forthright discussion of the potential contribution of Hume's thought to determining what Western approaches should be to the great social and economic problems of Eastern Europe and what was the USSR, arguing (with copious quotations from Hume's writings) that the settlement of questions of governance are necessarily prior to issues of economic reform and policy. The Institute is naturally delighted to be able to publish a work extolling the continued relevance of David Hume, although as it has no political affiliations and no collective views on public policy questions, the views and interpretations presented here are those of Mr Pringle alone.

Hector L. MacQueen  
Executive Director.  
May 1992

## INTRODUCTION

Since the overthrow of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the former USSR in 1989-91, there has been a continuing discussion about how the West can assist the countries and territories of the region (it is taken for granted by all concerned that the West should help, if it can, if only to reduce the risk of another hostile power rising from the ashes of the old). The discussion has been about means rather than ends - differences about ends have been brushed under the carpet. It is felt that all market democracies have sufficient in common to obviate the need for debate about the kind of societies that we in the West wish to see established in the region. Also it is felt that there is no time to waste. There is a tendency to assume that we "know" what is needed and that we know what the people of the region want: they want to improve their standard of living, and the precondition for that is far-reaching economic reform. So the emphasis of the western effort is on economic policy advice and financial assistance, coordinated and supervised by the International Monetary Fund, together with humanitarian aid.

The mixture of assistance and advice being offered accords with the experience and inclination of western governments and agencies. Accustomed to dealing with developing countries, the overseas aid ministries and international agencies have much experience in designing economic and financial policies (including notably monetary and exchange rate policies) and in negotiating them with governments of host countries; they also are familiar with techniques for rationing the supply of financial assistance and at the same time creating incentives for host countries to implement the economic reforms through "conditionality", i.e. the policy conditions attached to financial credits. Similarly, independent economists and commentators are accustomed to take part informally in the process of policy formulation through the accompanying debate, which invariably focuses on whether the terms being offered to the client country are too stringent or the financial aid too meagre. This game

has been switched from Brazil and Mexico to Russia and Poland, with the terms of the debate remaining much the same.

But these conventional forms of assistance and conditionality are being subject to increasingly penetrating criticism even when applied to developing countries because the results have so often been disappointing. In the whole of Africa south of the Sahara not a single country has been able to carry through an IMF programme and fulfil agreed targets. In Latin America, it is now 10 years since Mexico precipitated the debt crisis by suspending debt servicing yet much of the region (with the exception of Mexico itself) remains in considerable difficulties, after having endured a decade of low growth.

The main reason why the policies of western agencies have so often failed, and why there is reason to re-examine their applicability to Eastern Europe, is that they do not address the issue of "governance". The governability of a country or territory, its constitutional arrangements, the competence of its administration, the integrity of its judiciary, its capacity to implement any policy or follow any consistent programme - all these are in effect beyond the competence of international official agencies. They are all considered matters for the country to decide, and the only recourse of the agencies is to suspend assistance or postpone offering advice. The reason for this neglect can be traced to the reaction against western imperialism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries - when governance was provided by European powers. This reaction made any such concern appear to be an infringement of sovereignty. Another reason was that the IMF, which in the 1970s became by far the most important international economic agency, was set up to deal with developed countries where a certain level of administrative competence could indeed be assumed (it only switched its main financing effort to the developing countries after the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system and the first oil shock in the early 1970s).

Another, related problem with the traditional forms of western policy advice is that the discussion and negotiation are confined to narrow circles of government ministries and expert commentators

Admittedly, in countries with representative assemblies, the IMF terms are often criticised and subject to debate. But the terms are usually agreed first between governments and international agencies and then presented to the public on a "take it or leave it" basis. This may be acceptable when the issues concern narrow questions of monetary policy and when the basic structures of society are in place. It is much less acceptable when the society is in process of building its basic institutions of property and representative government. Indeed, this "top-down" approach is a contradiction of the basic principles of democratic societies themselves. In short, it is becoming clear that the collapse of communist regimes has taken place at a time when several weaknesses of the western approach to policy advice have also become apparent.<sup>1</sup>

In these circumstances, western governments and agencies are (or should be) embarked on a "transitional" period of learning and experimentation together with their new clients in the new territories. The worst attitude to adopt is one which in effect says: "We know how to generate economic growth - you just have to put these and these reforms into effect". This undue emphasis on means rather than ends leads to a neglect of essential preconditions necessary for a society to survive at all. Official agencies and commentators need to give a higher priority to understanding and nourishing the roots of political stability and competent government in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former USSR, recognising the big differences in historical background, educational attainment and traditions among them. For without a minimum degree of understanding and agreement on the fundamental rules and institutions of the society, financial assistance is likely to make

<sup>1</sup>The need for a re-thinking of traditional programmes is beginning to be recognised by the IMF Mr Camdessus, managing director, has said that the programmes needed "are not like traditional programmes, for which the IMF extends stand-by arrangements... Rather, they could be the crucial first steps in a process of basic transformation that will take many years". See address to Georgetown University School of Foreign Services, April 15,1992.



matters worse. (Already there are signs in Russia of a growing hatred of western agencies and bankers for the arrogance with which they make their policy prescriptions). Nor is it enough just to set up the formal apparatus of "democracy"; there also has to be greater public understanding of the attitudes and customs needed to provide fuel for such institutions to function.

One necessary element in this learning process should be a programme of political and civic education on a very large scale, to provide every adult with the equipment and mental furniture needed to make a success of their new institutions. This paper is a plea for the teachings of David Hume to be accorded a place in that learning process. Hume teaches respect for each country's customs and traditions. He combines this toleration - and a careful analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of government - with a confident belief that liberty is the "perfection" of civil society. His teaching is particularly relevant at a time when western countries and official agencies have come to realise that they cannot overlook or take for granted the issue of "governance". For that is the issue above all others which was Hume's principal interest. He offered the first and arguably still the most penetrating analysis of a society moving from conflict and anarchy to order and freedom and the vital steps to be taken in the transition.

### **Hume's environment**

Hume's work can be seen as an effort to come to grips with what was happening in the economic, social and intellectual life of his time (he lived from 1711 to 1776). Britain was then "in transition"; it had evolved many of the essential features of a market economy; it was enjoying a period of unprecedented political and social stability; the whole country was being integrated in a single market for goods and services knit together by nation-wide financial and commercial flows; Isaac Newton had helped to create a new model of scientific method; and since Hobbes in the previous century many social philosophers had been analysing the foundations of political society. In all these ways, Britain was the first modern country.

Historians have long debated the fundamental causes of the transition. One modern treatment is that by J.H. Plumb:<sup>2</sup>

By 1688 conspiracy and rebellion, treason and plot, were part of the history and experience of at least three generations of Englishmen. Indeed, for centuries the country had scarcely been free from turbulence for more than a decade at a time. How to achieve political stability had haunted men since the death of Cecil...Yet...by the middle of the 1720s the English political system had begun to assume an air not only of stability but of historical inevitability; it had become a child of Time and of Providence, an object of veneration, the Burkeian fantasy, and a halo of glory was forming...

But Hume's primary contribution was not the specific historical explanation that he offered for the change - as told in his *History of England* - but his attempt to draw lessons of permanent value from it. This attempt in his view required not only a full knowledge of the history of England - and in particular the growth of what he called the "liberties of the people" - but also the development of a model embodying the essential principles of the social, political and economic order he observed around him. He wanted to analyse the foundations of the new system in a rational way with a very practical purpose - so as to help people understand them and thus preserve them. He wanted to demonstrate how these social foundations were in turn "naturally" supported by and contributed towards a warm, generous and tolerant view of human nature and behaviour. For Hume the rise of commerce is inextricably bound up with "knowledge, industry and humanity". As one modern commentator has said, these qualities are for Hume "important and

<sup>2</sup>J.H. Plumb, *The Growth of Political Stability in England, 1675-1725*, (Macmillan, 1967) pp 1-2.

universal components of human well-being, not just in eighteenth century England, but simply".<sup>3</sup>

## **BRITAIN'S TRANSITION TO LIBERAL DEMOCRACY**

*Kara temponm felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; & quae sentias, dicere licet*<sup>4</sup>

We should study Hume today above all for what he can teach us about what he called "the system of liberty". We live at a time when people in many countries are trying to establish open and accountable forms of government and market economies, after having lived under various forms of authoritarian rule and arbitrary government. This is obviously the case in Eastern Europe and the 16 new countries that have emerged from the 'disintegration' of the former Soviet Union. But in many developing countries also the process of modernization has eroded the credibility of traditional forms of governance and caused severe instability and civil conflict. This is in many respects a repeat of what happened in England.

The ancient history of England is nothing but a catalogue of reversals: Everything is in fluctuation and movement: One faction is continually undoing what was established by another: And the multiplied oaths, which each party exacted for the

<sup>3</sup>John W. Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, (Yale University Press, 1990) p 135.

<sup>4</sup>"Seldom are men blessed to live at times in which they may think what they like and say what they think". (This is a quotation from Tacitus that Hume appended as an epigraph to the Treatise, though it is not printed in many editions - See Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, p 186).

<sup>5</sup>*History*, Vol II, p 311.

security of present acts, betray a perpetual consciousness of their instability.

But Hume, writing in 1750 and 1760, could look back on more than half a century of peace and rising prosperity. Hume was fascinated by the extraordinary circumstances that had led from anarchy to "the most perfect and most accurate system of liberty" which he saw England as enjoying in his time. He wished to trace how this system had come about, and explain how it could be nourished and what were the chief dangers facing it. He believed passionately in the advantages of a free government and tried to understand how instability and conflict had given way to prosperity - conditions which, even as he wrote, were laying the basis for sustained economic growth, i.e. the industrial revolution. Hume wanted to teach the British to understand their own constitution.<sup>6</sup> He speaks of the years since 1688 when James II was kicked out of England with unwonted lack of reserve:<sup>7</sup>

So long and so glorious a period no nation almost can boast of: Nor is there another instance in the whole history of mankind, that so many millions of people have, during such a space of time, been held together, in a manner so free, so rational, and so suited to the dignity of human nature.

Today, with the exception of Phillipson's excellent commentary, Hume's historical work is comparatively neglected. Yet a reader who comes fresh to these books and essays with contemporary concerns in mind will be richly rewarded. In particular, Hume's cool analysis of the transformation of England from anarchy to order and the rule of law can help to establish priorities for the fledgling democracies of Eastern Europe and the people who would advise and help them. Hume felt that the most important challenge facing him was to understand what had happened and lay bare the basic principles

<sup>6</sup>See Nicholas Phillipson, *Hume*, (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 1989) p 75.

<sup>7</sup> On the Protestant Succession, *Essays*, p 494.

involved. That is why he devoted fifteen years to writing his *History of England*.

What lessons can be drawn from Hume's reflections for us today? The main lesson is the need to go back, as Hume himself did, to first principles - to the basic rules of social and political life. Current recommendations to governments and countries of Eastern Europe, the USSR and developing countries focus on economic reforms and policies but this reflects on an absurd over-valuation of the role that such policies by themselves can play in the process of transition. International agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, as well as the major governments, are exhorting Eastern Europe, as they have exhorted the developing countries for decades, to "reform" economic policies - including, typically, cuts in budget deficits, moves to realistic exchange rates, and relaxation of price controls. Initially, in 1990-91, debate centred largely on economic stabilisation policies. But repeated experience has demonstrated that such policies have little lasting contribution to make in the absence of other preconditions. Indeed, they often do more harm than good by destroying the previous economic and political systems. In the Soviet Union, standards of living have fallen steeply since 'perestroika' destroyed the former command system. It is no accident that many developing countries have suffered a rapid loss of social and political viability, leading often to outbreaks of intense group conflicts, and occasionally even a collapse into ungovernability and civil war, while under the supervision of western agencies. By contrast, countries that have succeeded economically, such as those of East Asia, have placed special value on social harmony, retaining group loyalties and traditional values even during the process of modernization.

For Hume, questions of political constitution - what some now call 'governance' - come before an interest in economics, least of all government policies. True, Hume is remembered as a founding father of economics - notably in establishing the basic insights underlying the quantity theory of money, a theory of taxes and public finance, as well as the adjustment of international payments imbalances. Indeed, these theories provide the rationale for the IMF's policy prescriptions, even today! He clearly analysed the influence of variations in the money supply on economic activity - especially that an increase in the

supply stimulates economic activity in the short run but raises prices in the longer run. He welcomed the expansion of international trade because of its tendency to civilize nations participating in it, break down provincial ignorance and superstition, and advance "polite society". He warned against the temptation to increase taxes excessively, and thought this not only destroys industry but is the main cause of the ruin of free governments. But, essentially, his contributions to economics grew out of, and remained secondary to, his interests in history and the political sciences.

It is ironic that the nature of the IMF advice to Eastern Europe can be traced back to one part of Hume's legacy (i.e. in economic theory) whereas another part of his teaching - much more relevant to the actual problems facing these countries - is largely ignored. What these agencies ignore is Hume's central contribution to clarifying the social, political and moral pre-conditions of functioning markets.

Hume believed he was witnessing something entirely new in the history of mankind - the emergence of a spontaneous social order by which "millions of people" came to be "held together" (see above quotation, page 7) by gentle social bonds, despite their innate "self-love" and "selfishness" which cannot help but be directly destructive of society - and all this without detailed supervision by an overlord, or the State. How had this come about? How were the various activities and purposes of people co-ordinated without any strong central government? The following passage, written in or about 1752, conveys his awe and surprise:<sup>8</sup>

During these last sixty years, whatever factors may have prevailed, either among the people or in public authorities, the whole form of our constitution has always fallen to one side, and an uninterrupted harmony has been preserved between our princes and our parliament. Public liberty, with internal peace

<sup>8</sup>Of the Protestant Succession, *Essays*, p 493

and order, has flourished almost without interruption, trade and manufacturers, and agriculture, have increased; the arts, and sciences, and philosophy, have been cultivated.

It was a kind of miracle. Hume certainly realized, before Adam Smith, that this new social order was possible only because it had found a way of bending selfishness to social purposes - which meant that in this new "system", people's actions must often have quite different results from those they intend. In the previous century (the seventeenth), people's selfishness and intolerance had led in England to civil war, the execution of one monarch and the deposition of another, and (in Continental Europe) continual religious wars that had left 30 million people dead. In his century (the eighteenth) similarly 'selfish' people operating in a different political environment had produced peace, stability and accelerating prosperity. How could this be explained? Could it endure? What were its philosophical, moral and social presuppositions?

Despite Hume's pervasive scepticism, and his insistence on the narrow limits of reason, he felt it was desperately important not only to explain in some historical sense what was happening but also to analyze its foundations in a rational way. Only in doing so could the fundamental lessons be drawn from experience. Did he succeed? After two centuries of relative neglect, some leading modern social scientists believe that he did succeed. The analytical understanding of the conditions required for a free society reached by Hume, Smith and the other leading figures of the Scottish Enlightenment is now regarded as a decisive breakthrough - one that proved for all time how human beings can live together in a voluntary association by accepting certain rules of conduct and upholding the "constitution of liberty", to use Hayek's term. These scholars, such as James Buchanan, no longer see Hume and Smith just as figures in the history of economics or philosophy but rather as path-breaking philosophers before whom all was darkness and confusion and after whom there is really no more progress to be made, in any fundamental sense.

Their works therefore are to be studied again and again, like Holy Writ.<sup>9</sup>

### **Lessons for Eastern Europe?**

Of particular relevance to Eastern Europe is the priority Hume's teaching gives to the following (spelt out in great detail later in this paper):

First, the creation of a system nourishing and protecting public liberties, which by implication should have priority over policies for economic growth i.e. the priority of 'governance' over economics;

Second, the need to understand the principal elements or strands in the system of liberty and how they are held together, including the central role carried by motives of long-term self-interest;

Third, the need for a social consensus on principles of justice, of which the most important is the individual's right to peaceful enjoyment of property;

Fourth, the need for a clear and unambiguous assignment of property rights to specific individuals;

<sup>9</sup>Buchanan has frequently acknowledged his debt to Hume, see, e.g. *The Limits of Liberty*: "Hume's whole discussion concerning the origins of property rights and the advantages of such rights for social stability is similar in many respects to that which is developed in this book" (p 182). For his part, Hayek says that Hume "gives us probably the only comprehensive statement of the legal and political philosophy which later became known as liberalism". See F A Hayek 'The Legal and Political Philosophy of David Hume', in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1967) p 109.



Fifth, the need to recognize that property rights and the rules governing them are deliberate, artificial human contrivances, and that there is no "naturally" just distribution of property;

Sixth, the need for conceiving the authority of government as deriving from a constitutional agreement which sets strict limits on the powers of the government of the day - and therefore also on the hopes placed on it;

Seventh, the need to encourage a free press and public opinion.

The first question is: what did Hume mean by the "system of liberty", which he saw to be so new in Britain?

### **The system of liberty**

This is the first question for various reasons. Liberty is the concept that is so often Hume's own starting point. It brings in the importance of social conditioning, which he saw as steering if not determining human action. It is also the inspiration for his 8-volume history of England, and many of his essays.

For Hume the concept of liberty embraced all the virtues that he saw as subsisting in a free government and nation - security, protection from exploitation, peaceable enjoyment of personal property, freedom from arbitrary power, and freedom of expression, characteristics that were seen as closely linked to moderation and toleration - in which the Dutch people had, he said, shown the way forward. But the evolution of freedom is a mysterious process. Liberty and freedom arise in the spirit of a people and are then embodied in its constitutional arrangements. They are public virtues; a nation is either free or it is not. They are compatible both with a monarchy and a republic; what matters more is that the citizens are subject to general rules governing behaviour - rules of prudent conduct - rather than the whim of the government. Law is seen as the slow and gradual product of liberty rather than the other way around.

Far from a legalistic, defensive, view of liberty, Hume like Shakespeare sees it as a precious fruit of the human imagination. In

The *Treatise*, he views liberty as closely bound up with the performance of promises, which is one of the "laws" on which "the peace and security of human society entirely depends". Yet the giving of promises is one of the most "mysterious and incomprehensible" operations that can possibly be imagined, and may even be compared to transubstantiation, or holy orders.<sup>10</sup> How can a mere form of words change entirely the nature of an object? This capacity to give promises has to do with the human ability to foresee reciprocal action and imagine oneself in another person's place. In the course of one's education, he explains,<sup>11</sup>

I learn to do a service to another, without bearing him any real kindness, because I foresee that he will return my service in expectation of another of the same kind, and in order to maintain the same correspondence of good offices with me or with others. So after I have delivered on my promise, he is induced to fulfil his promises, because he can foresee the consequences of refusing to do so.

It is only by our capacity to imagine how others might behave if we treat them in a certain way, to sympathize with and to trust others that society and the moral conventions on which it depends become possible. When Miranda in *The Tempest* exclaims "Oh Brave New World, that hath Such People in it!" on seeing for the first time people other than her father - she is making the imaginative leap of a savage into society, i.e. the willingness to recognize other people as human, to imagine reciprocal action and then to act on the pure trust that one's actions will be reciprocated. That is also why Hume takes care to prove that all the moral virtues - benevolence, love, wit, humanity, industry, honesty, patience, humility, temperance - are useful to society. They are all necessary to buttress "my" confidence that "you" will fulfil your promise.

<sup>10</sup>*Treatise*, p 576.

<sup>11</sup>*Treatise*, p573.

The "system of liberty" has several distinct, interwoven strands. First, it requires a system of justice, by which property rights and their transfer by consent are secured (of which more later). Second, it signifies absence of oppression, requiring constitutional limits on law-making bodies as well as on the executive, and a reliance on general (non-discriminatory) laws. Thirdly, it draws sustenance from and in turn fosters a particular set of attitudes and mores in the nation - what Hume called "the spirit of liberty" - a spirit that he recognized to be a delicate plant but, once rooted, very hard for a dictator to extirpate. He recognized this spirit at work in particular periods of English history, and in his own day, among the American colonies. The system of liberty goes along with freedom of the press, toleration, economic progress and better standards of politeness and manners. (Applied to the present, which developing country or East European country satisfies any of these conditions?)

### **Interpreting the motive of self-interest**

Far from a narrow insistence on self-interest as the dominant motive, Hume repeatedly condemns such a view of human motivation and, on the contrary, insists on a view that does justice to "the dignity of human nature".<sup>12</sup>

A man who loves only himself, without regard to friendship or desert, merits the severest blame and a man, who, is only susceptible of friendship, without public spirit, or a regard to the community, is deficient in the most material part of virtue.

Admittedly, people are often "seduced" from their real, more important, but distant interests by the allurements of present temptations. But this is a fault, not something to be proud about: "This great weakness is incurable in human nature". "When a man denies the sincerity of all public spirit or affection to a country and community, I am at a loss what to think of him", he remarks, asking "Could there be anybody who never feels such affection?" Normally,

<sup>12</sup>That Politics May be Reduced to a Science, *Essays*, p 23.

Hume says, such a man is merely abusing the language - if, for example, he claims to reject all private friendship without self-interest. Philosophers who insist so much on the selfishness of man have been "led astray".<sup>13</sup>

Cold, self-interested behaviour is synonymous with avarice, which Hume condemns as "monstrously absurd". And he makes plain that the term is not confined just to a greed for money; a cold and calculating temperament - homo economicus? - is equally despicable.<sup>14</sup>

When the temper is warm and full of vigour, it naturally shoots out in more ways than one, and produces inferior passions to counterbalance, in some degree, its predominant inclination. It is impossible for a person of that temper, however bent on any pursuit, to be deprived of all sense of shame, or all regard to sentiments of mankind. His friends must have some influence over him... But it is no wonder that the avaricious man, being, from the coldness of his temper, without regard to reputation, to friendship, or to pleasure, should be carried so far by his prevailing inclination, and should display his passion in such surprising instances.

He insisted that philosophers had unduly emphasised the quality of selfishness in human nature:<sup>15</sup>

So far from thinking, that men have no affection for any thing beyond themselves, I am of the opinion, that tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself, yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not overbalance all the selfish.

<sup>13</sup>Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature, *Essays*, pp 85-6.

<sup>14</sup>Of Avarice, *Essays*, p 565.

<sup>15</sup>*Treatise*, p 538.

Nevertheless, a broad concept of self-interest, tempered by sympathy and other human virtues, is the glue that holds together a free society.

### **The rules of justice**

The emergence of a social order (i.e. a free society in place of a command economy) requires the observance of three "laws of nature": first of all, assignment of rights to property - what is mine and what is yours; secondly, rules whereby the rights can be transferred; and thirdly, a willingness to fulfil promises.<sup>16</sup>

Tis on the strict observance of those three laws, that the peace and security of human society entirely depend; nor is there any possibility of establishing a good correspondence among men where these are neglected.

The establishment and protection of property rights are the foundations of Hume's concept of civil society; and the assured right to peaceable enjoyment of one's property is the most important component of liberty. The social convention establishing rules of justice has no other aim than the creation of property rights. There are no such things as right and property independent of justice or antecedent to it. The "vulgar" conception of justice as "a constant and perpetual will of giving everyone his due" is a "fallacy". Yet these rules so essential to society are entirely artificial, and not in themselves natural.

Hume is plainly excited and disturbed by the conclusions to which his own reasoning inexorably led him, for in the *Treatise* he repeatedly comes back to the relationship between "justice" and "nature". Hume based his new theories of perception, causation and moral behaviour on how men actually behave, and their natural feelings of approval and disapproval. So it was alarming to be forced to the conclusion that the rules of justice "are artificially invented for a certain purpose and

<sup>16</sup>*Treatise*, p 578.

contrary to the common principles of human nature...".

Hume considers various ways in which justice could be derived directly from moral principles. First is the question of the just distribution of property. If justice is to be a natural virtue, apart from notions of right and obligation, then a certain distribution of wealth (as Hume calls it, "certain external relations of objects") must have "naturally a moral beauty or deformity" and cause "an original pleasure or uneasiness". Similarly, nature must have given us the sentiment that it is virtuous to restore a man's goods to him - i.e. that there is such a thing as property. But, Hume argues, nature has given us no such sentiment. The just distribution of property is not self-evident; "there are contained in the subject some obscurities and difficulties, which we are not able to surmount" by direct appeal to moral feelings or intuition, and which we can only evade by artificial means. Furthermore, laws governing property rights and obligations which actually exist in societies are obviously contrived - they "have no marks of a natural origin". Indeed, if men had had a natural regard for the public good, they would not have needed to restrain themselves by these rules of justice, so that "the laws of justice arise from natural principles in a manner still more oblique and artificial". Hume traces their principles from men's long-term self-interest:<sup>17</sup>

Tis self-love which is their real origin; and as the self-love of one person is naturally contrary to that of another, these several interested passions are obliged to adjust themselves after such a manner as to concur in some system of conduct and behaviour.

Again, note the word "system". Hume stops short of asserting that whatever distribution of property results from voluntary transfers of original claims is itself *ipso facto* just. The moral virtue is attached to fixed rules of justice; feelings of approval for justice, he claimed, arise naturally after the original establishment of the rules, because they clearly promote the public good - as it is impossible to live in

<sup>17</sup>*Treatise*, p581.

society without such rules. But there is nothing naturally good or bad about any particular distribution of wealth. Nor is it clear that an element of redistribution is necessarily excluded from the rules of justice themselves. The emphasis is placed firmly on the need to agree on fixed and general rules, and to apply them rigidly, while leaving open the substantive content of the rules themselves, apart from a general presumption that they will be designed to leave each in peaceable enjoyment of his possessions.

### **Need for clear-cut rights and strict enforcement**

But once agreement has been reached by members of society, the rules must be clear-cut. This again shows their artificial nature. In moral discussion, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine what is "good" or "bad" - "vice and virtue run insensibly into each other" - they are matters of degree where there is often no determinate outcome. By contrast, property rights are not susceptible of such gradation: "a man either has a full and perfect property or none at all". "An object must either be in the possession of one person or another". An action must either be performed or not. Hume illustrates this by comparing decisions arrived at through arbitration with those reached by judicial process. In arbitration, where, by the consent of both parties, the referees are left free to decide the issue, they commonly discover so much equity and justice on both sides, that they are induced to strike a medium, and divide the difference between the parties. Judges, however, are obliged to give a decisive sentence on one side, and are often at a loss how to decide. But decide they must. Not only must the rules be unambiguous, in the sense that they require either/or decisions about property rights, even where morally there seems to be right on both sides, but they must also be rigorously enforced, even where they result in decisions that are neither in the private interest of the parties concerned nor in the public interest.

Again, Hume treads fearlessly down this apparent cul-de-sac. He provides an example to clarify the point:<sup>18</sup>

Here are two persons, who dispute for an estate, of whom one is rich, a fool and a batchelor; the other poor, a man of sense and has a numerous family. The first is my enemy, the second my friend. Whether I be actuated in this affair by a view to public or private interest, by friendship or enmity, I must be induced to do my utmost to procure the estate to the latter. Nor would any consideration of the right and property of persons be able to restrain me, were I actuated only by natural motives, without any combination or convention with others.

If men were to treat the laws of society as they do other social affairs, they would naturally take into consideration such factors as the characters and circumstances of the persons involved, as well as the general nature of the issue to be resolved. Yet it is easy to observe, says Hume, that this "would produce an infinite confusion in human society".<sup>19</sup> Men's unavoidable partiality in matters that closely concerned themselves would quickly "bring disorder into the world, if not restrained by some general and inflexible principles". This is what makes the rules of justice rigid and inflexible, and this can be based only on social agreement. Elsewhere, he states that the distribution of justice, in turn, is "ultimately" the only object or purpose of political society and the whole apparatus of government.<sup>20</sup>

### **Need for unanimity**

Indeed, a feature of the convention establishing rules of justice is that it is conceived as having the *unanimous* support of all members of society. This follows from the nature of the laws required to remedy

<sup>18</sup>*Treatise*, pp 583-4.

<sup>19</sup>*Treatise*, p 584.

<sup>20</sup>Of the Origins of Government, *Essays*, p 35.



our greed and avarice, so disruptive of society. These are derived from "artifice"; or more properly speaking, "nature provides a remedy in the judgment and understanding for what is irregular and incommensurable in the affections". This "judgment and understanding", allied to experience, leads men to conventions, into which all members of society enter, "to bestow stability on the possessions of those external goods, and leave everyone in the peaceable enjoyment of what he may acquire by his fortune and industry".

Justice establishes itself by a kind of convention or agreement; that is, by a sense of interest, supposed to be common to all, and where every single act is performed in expectation that others are to perform the like.<sup>21</sup>

This is surely very similar to saying that society can be supposed to be *founded on agreement*.

Why should all individuals agree on such rules? Hume explains that while single acts of justice may be contrary to public and to private interest, it is certain that the whole system is absolutely necessary both to the support of society and to the well-being of every individual. It is impossible to separate the good from the ill:<sup>22</sup>

Property must be stable, and must be fixed by general rules. Tho' in one instance the public be a sufferer, this momentary ill is amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which it establishes in society.

Hume insists that every individual must gain from this since, without justice, "society must immediately dissolve and everyone must fall into that savage and solitary condition, which is infinitely worse than the worst situation that can possibly be supposed in society."

<sup>21</sup>*Treatise*, p549.

<sup>22</sup>*Treatise*, p 549.

## **The establishment of government - the constitutional stage**

Once society has been created by agreement on property rights and rules governing them - including rules on the transfer of rights by consent - it is time to consider the establishment of governmental authority. Although he poked fun at the notion of an "original contract" as the source of political allegiance he fully endorsed the principle which such theories were intended to establish: that the person (or persons) who are granted political authority must undertake to make the citizens benefit from that authority, and that "an egregious tyranny in the rulers is sufficient to free the subjects from all ties of allegiance". True, Hume is unable to accept that political obligation is based on a promise on the part of the subjects to obey the sovereign, since a promise itself is merely a "convention". So Hume bases the establishment of government squarely on citizens' "real and permanent" interest in the security and protection they can enjoy only in a society. Men owe obedience "merely on account of the public interest".

The public interest requires some citizens to be placed in positions of authority. However, as those placed in authority do not change their characters, but merely their situations, when they acquire positions of power, they will often be tempted to abuse their power or exceed the limits entrusted to them. That is why an intermediate stage is needed in any large or complex society - i.e. the constitutional stage at which men agree on the rules which will circumscribe the actions of the legislature and government in the future. Direct 'election' may be suitable for small groups at an early stage of social evolution, but eventually a more systematic basis for political authority is needed.

Despite Hume's rejection of Locke's Social Contract, he re-introduced many of the features of contractarian approach through the back door - i.e. using other language to achieve much the same objectives.

The basic objective was to found political authority on voluntary agreement. The avoidance of a contractarian language is explicable in terms of the circumstances of his time, as the Social Contract idea was part of the "Whig" ideology deployed for party political purposes - and how Hume despised party politics! He feared that the cries of

"Liberty" from the Whigs could cause as much damage as the absurd claims of a divine "Right of Kings" from the Tories; so he always underlined the virtues of a mixed form of government. But in his philosophical work, rather than essays written for popular consumption, his logic led him inexorably to a quasi-contractarian position.

At least in some of his writings, this made Hume put Authority before Liberty. Hume placed a very special value on Liberty, and called it the "perfection of civil society", but it was ultimately secondary to the need for Authority, without which civil society could not exist at all. Observing the very wide variety of constitutions and forms of government established in the world, he judged them essentially by their social results rather than by the degree of liberty they permitted. Indeed, the preservation of "public liberty" was often secured only by a strong authority. He does not condemn all non-liberal forms of government, but insists only that liberty is the "perfection" of civil society.

Hume's constitutional position is brought out in his repeated insistence on government as an artificial contrivance - like property rights:<sup>23</sup>

As government is a mere human invention for mutual advantage and security, it no longer imposes any obligation, either natural or moral, when once it ceases to have that tendency.

But neither Liberty nor Authority can be secured in the absence of a constitution of governance. The importance he attached to the role of the constitution is illustrated in his Essay, *That Politics may be reduced to a Science*:<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup>*Treatise*, p 615.

<sup>24</sup>*That Politics May be Reduced to a Science*, *Essays*, p 13.

Were it once admitted that all governments are alike, and that the only difference consists in the character and conduct of the governors, most political disputes would be at an end, and all Zeal for one constitution above another must be esteemed mere bigotry and folly. But, though a friend to moderation, I cannot forbear condemning this sentiment, and should be sorry to think, that human affairs admit of no greater stability, than what they receive from the casual humours and characters of particular men.

The goodness of a government does not depend just on the quality of the administration. This may be true to a large extent in "absolute" monarchies - and is one of the "great inconveniences" of that form of government - but a "free" government has to rely mainly on its constitution for its stability:<sup>25</sup>

A republican and free government would be an obvious absurdity if the particular checks and controls provided by the constitution had really no influence, and made it not the interest, even of bad men, to act for the public good.

A constitution was the only way for a "free government" to secure confidence in future stability, on which peace and present prosperity depended.<sup>26</sup>

Legislators...ought not to trust the future government of a state entirely to chance, but ought to provide a system of laws to regulate the administration of public affairs to the latest posterity. Effects will always correspond to causes; and wise regulators, in any commonwealth, are the most valuable legacy that can be left to future ages.

<sup>25</sup>op cit, p 14.

<sup>26</sup>op cit, p 22.

Pointing to the faults in the constitutions of Greece and Rome which ended in their ruin, he concluded:<sup>27</sup>

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 or ambition of particular men restrained and punished.

### **Limited government**

The next question is: given the need for a constitution, how could it effectively constrain the actions of parliaments? Further, what was to stop future generations from overturning it? Popular respect for the law - a government of laws rather than men - was already in Hume's day the conventional answer to the first question. What Hume regarded as a "new invention" was the idea of a balance of power.<sup>28</sup>

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 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.

Hume drew a clear distinction between the pre-constitutional and post-constitutional stages in the development of political authority (and the duty of obedience by subjects), which is the essence of modern contractarian theories. The constitution was especially necessary in a free government to provide stability, to provide a "court of appeal" to which people could resort if the government of the day abused its powers. This constitution should contain rules on

<sup>27</sup>op cit, p 23.

<sup>28</sup>Of the Origin of Government, *Essays*, p 39.

the kind of laws that could be passed by the legislature and on the division of power between executive, legislative and judiciary.

These rules and controls are designed to "lead even bad men to act for the public good." When it came to constitution building, political writers had already established the maxim, Hume said, that "every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest". Hume accepted this maxim, while puzzling about why "a maxim should be true in politics which is false in fact". His answer, following Machiavelli was that men behave differently in a political context than in private life, where they are restrained by sentiments of honour.

### **The role of public opinion**

The next question is: by what force is the constitution held in place and respected after its initial establishment? The only answer, according to Hume, was public opinion, which was another of the phenomena which, as he noticed, was growing rapidly during his lifetime, nourished by the liberty of the press. Opinion had always been of some importance - even the sultan of Egypt or the emperor of Rome must have relied on it to persuade his "marmelukes or praetorian bands" to obey him - but it had grown rapidly in importance during the early eighteenth century. Together with the doctrine that men are absolved from their duty to obey governments that exceed constitutional bounds, public opinion - and writers like Hume who influenced it - served as a substitute for the original contractual basis of the constitution itself - a pre-constitutional element in the post-constitutional settlement. Governments had to be continually reminded that their authority derived from the consent of the people.

Thus, while property rights were the "first origin and foundation" of civil society, Hume was far from regarding property as the sole foundation of all government. The consent of the governed, and the constant support of opinion, were the main sources of legitimacy for free governments. Absolute governments had other sources of legitimacy - though all government is ultimately "founded on" opinion. Hume explicitly stated that writers like Harrington accorded

far too large a role for property ownership in determining political power. Opinion was more important:<sup>29</sup>

There has been a sudden and sensible change in the opinions of men within these last fifty years, by the progress of learning and of liberty.

For confirmation Hume pointed out that superstitious reverence had largely disappeared, the clergy had lost credit and the mere name "King" commanded little respect. But then Hume would turn around and tease his intellectual friends by declaring his preference for Monarchy over a Republican government - "in this island". For consider, what kind of a republic would be likely? Do not imagine it would be the ideal republic of your dreams, where all is rational. Anybody strong enough to overthrow the monarchy in England would be already a dictator. And the only body strong enough to overthrow the monarchy would be the House of Commons. What a disaster that would be! With all power concentrated in the House of Commons, "we shall suffer all the tyranny of a faction divided into more factions".

Despite his general preference for "free" governments, in Hume's analysis the relative advantages of absolute governments versus democratic governments could not be decided in the abstract, but only by reference to their results. The broad 'utilitarian' criteria for measuring success used by Hume included economic growth ('the progress of the arts and sciences'), where he thought that free countries were better suited to initiate development and inventions, while monarchies and more disciplined states were probably more able to maintain development in the long run. But economic growth was only one measure of progress. More important was the achievement of greater "politeness" (though not over-refinement and "foppishness", which he deplored). Even liberty itself was in some ways more secure in an absolute government like France than in a

<sup>29</sup>Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic, *Essays*, p 48.

democracy - the French King, being, as Hume assumed, totally secure, "grants subjects great liberties of speech and action". (Ironically, the story goes that Louis XVI, on learning during the French Revolution that the Convention had ordered him to be executed, asked his valet to get the volume of Hume's history dealing with the execution of Charles I).

Indeed, Hume believed that in recent years monarchy had made greater progress than republicanism as a form of government. Because monarchs were trained to take a long-term view, and regarded their countries as in some senses their property, they were freer from the great evil that doomed all democracies to eventual bankruptcy - borrowing to finance budget deficits.<sup>30</sup>

The source of degeneracy which may be remarked in a free government consists in the practice of contracting debt.

Hume taught his readers that the actual system they lived with - a mixed form of government - was as good a system as could be expected. He feared the ambitions of Reason - ideal plans for a more rational world. The liberty of the press in England was due to its mixed form of government, whereas extremes of government, "liberty and slavery", commonly "approach nearest to each other".

But even the liberty of the press, so important for the formation of informed public opinion, was a fragile achievement:<sup>31</sup>

The liberty of the press did not commence with the revolution [of 1688]. It was not till 1694, that the restraints were taken off, to the great displeasure of the king and his ministers who, seeing nowhere, in any government, during present or past ages, any example of such unlimited freedom, doubted much of its salutary effects and probably thought that no books or writings would ever so much improve the general understanding of men

<sup>30</sup>Civil Liberty, *Essays*, pp 96-97.

<sup>31</sup>*History*, Vol VI, p 540.



and to render it safe to entrust them with an indulgence so easily abused.

Summarising rather crudely, Hume's system of liberty stands on three main pillars - justice, constitutionalism, and public opinion. It is only the force of public opinion that can restrain a government, even in a constitutional state, from overstepping its powers.

### **The elusive concept of liberty**

Yet the concept of liberty and freedom as used by Hume remains elusive. He prefers the adjective "free" to the noun "freedom", and couples it often with another adjective as if they are synonymous - as in "a free and republican government", or the "progress of learning and liberty"; "English liberties" is another favoured usage. Modestly, Hume suggests he is daunted by the difficulties of the subject, and (while paying tribute to the genius of Machiavelli) saw himself as a pioneer opening up unknown scientific territory. No man was "sufficiently qualified" to make a full comparison of civil liberty and absolute government, he said, in his essay on Civil Liberty. The science of politics is "too young" - why, "we have not as yet had experience of 3,000 years"<sup>32</sup> (detecting Hume's use of irony is an amusing aspect of reading his works). It seems that Hume wanted above all to avoid the trap into which Machiavelli had fallen -making a lot of clever remarks and being damned as a cynic or worse by the history books.

### **Is liberty possible?**

The high value Hume placed on liberty is clear. Liberty is the "perfection" of civil society and represents first of all absence of oppression - freedom from persecution, from the Stazis and Securitate and all the horrors that have been visited on humans as a direct result of the lack of constitutional restraints on governments and their henchmen. Liberty depends also on decent government on a day-to-

<sup>32</sup>Of Civil Liberty, *Essays*, pp 89-90.

day basis - as J.S. Mill remarked, for the classical liberals, liberty is very close to good government.

But Hume's "liberties" were very different from Mill's more self-centred concept with its focus on the goal of individual happiness, and equally far from later visions of "positive freedom" linked to the realization of human capabilities or "flourishing", or the maximization of actual or potential choices for the lone individual. Hume would not, I believe, have felt at home with those later writers from Left or Right of the political spectrum who start from the individual and his desires and preferences. Even those contemporary social philosophers who see themselves as following in the same tradition as Hume, notably F.A. Hayek and James Buchanan, have different concepts of liberty. For both of them (though widely differing in many respects) the purpose of constitutional arrangements is to provide the individual with a protected domain. For Hume, the purpose is to benefit society. Indeed, philosophically Hume denied the possibility of liberty for the individual - human behaviour is governed by "necessity":<sup>33</sup>

We may imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves; but a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition. Now this is the very essence of necessity.

Hume was a pioneer of the modern "sociological" view of man as a creature of social conditioning. Indeed, he wished (among other things) to be the Newton of social science, and he regarded society as governed by laws similar to laws of nature:<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup>*Treatise*, p 456.

<sup>34</sup>*Treatise*, p 449.

Whether we consider mankind according to the difference of sexes, ages, governments, conditions, or methods of education, the same uniformity and regular operation of natural principles are discernible. Like causes still produce like effects, in the same manner as in the mutual action of the elements and powers of nature.

"We must certainly allow", states Hume, warming to his theme, that atoms hold together physically from natural and necessary principles. If that is so, we must also agree that human society is founded "on like principles...".<sup>35</sup>

Our reason in the latter case, is better than even that in the former; because we not only observe, that men always seek society, but can also explain the principles on which this universal propensity is founded.

Hume relies heavily on the capacity of law and custom to condition human behaviour and to make it predictable. Political or public liberties required it; for constitutional government and the achievement of political stability would not endure without such conditioning. Public opinion, which is necessary to uphold any given constitution, needs a natural human tendency to accept known and established rules, as well as respect for precedents and authority, although this should not degenerate into a romanticization of tradition or an uncritical acceptance of existing authority.

### **Out of anarchy**

What else is there in Hume's vision of a liberal society? Is it enough to have property rights, a good constitution, educated public opinion, a free press and a spirit of liberty? No; conditions change and new threats emerge. The problem is: when should innovations be made in an existing system facing new conditions? And if the old system breaks down totally in anarchy, how can a new system be established?

<sup>35</sup>op cit, p 449.

For one who insisted so much on the role of custom in legitimizing power, these are particularly difficult questions (as they are for Hayek). But Hume's solution is far less traditionalist than Hayek's. Sometimes you have to start from scratch - and Hume did not hesitate to sketch out in his *Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth*. Though he prefaced this "Utopia" with a caution against tampering with existing constitutions and against trying "experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy", the subject appears to him to be a valid one. More than that, it is "the most worthy of curiosity of any the wit of man can devise!"

Hume also allowed for the possibility of putting theory into practice "by the dissolution of the old form of government". Hume would not have advised Poland in 1990 or Russia in 1992 to use custom as its guide. He would have started with justice - who owns what.

In particular, assignment of property to particular people is the first priority after the establishment of political society from an original state of anarchy:<sup>36</sup>

Tis evident, then, that their first difficulty, in this situation, after the general convention for the establishment of society, and for the constancy of possession is, how to separate their possessions, and assign to each his particular portion, which he must for the future inalterably enjoy.

His recommendation, therefore, is what we would call immediate privatisation. But on what basis are property rights assigned?<sup>37</sup>

It must immediately occur to them, as the most natural expedient, that everyone continue to enjoy what he is at present master of, and that property or constant possession be conjoined to immediate possession.

<sup>36</sup>*Treatise*, p 554.

<sup>37</sup>*Treatise*, p 554.

After the transition to a rule of law, men have de jure property rights to what they have already for a long time actually possessed, because custom and habit make us prefer what we have long enjoyed to other objects, which may be more valuable, but are "less known to us".

### **Innovation and tradition**

Despite his insistence on the narrow limits of reason - much trumpeted by those who claim Hume for the Tories, including Thomas Jefferson who had his books banned from the University of Virginia for spreading "universal toryism" - he often delighted in debunking traditions he did not agree with, especially if they had anything to do with the clergy. (Was it his early sojourn in France that impressed him with the need for any man of letters to have an anti-clerical image?). Reason and toleration were to be employed in devising innovations.<sup>38</sup>

Some innovations must necessarily have place in every human institution; and it is happy where the enlightened genius of the age give these a direction to the side of reason, liberty, and justice: but violent innovations no individual is entitled to make: they are even dangerous to be attempted by the legislature...

Mere appeal to tradition is not a justification for resisting change.<sup>39</sup>

Above all, a civilised nation, like the English, who have happily established the most perfect and most accurate system of liberty that was ever found compatible with government, ought to be cautious in appealing to the practice of their ancestors, or regarding the maxims of uncultivated ages as certain rules for present conduct.

<sup>38</sup>Of the Original Contract, *Essays*, p 463

<sup>39</sup>*History*, Vol II, p 525.

Changes were subject to two key tests: appeal at the court of public opinion and the right of people to reject rulers who abused the powers entrusted to them. Mere survival was necessary but not a sufficient test. Thus Hume's concept of liberty is rooted in the particular histories of particular countries:<sup>40</sup>

For my part, I esteem liberty so invaluable a blessing in society, that whatever favours its progress and security, can scarce be too fondly cherished by every one who is a lover of human kind.

The context refers to a gradual reduction in the prerogatives of the sovereign and increase in the "privileges of the people" in England. Hume contrasted this somewhat idyllic picture with continental countries, where public liberty had been on the decline.

To recapitulate: we have reviewed some of the important components of liberty and why they contribute to its prominent position in Hume's work; it should be clear that an interest in liberty links his entire oeuvre, moral, philosophical, historical and political. It is the great unifying theme. But what lies at the centre?

### **Why freedom is necessary**

At the centre of Hume's justification of liberalism is the process that Hume thought he was engaged in - the pursuit of truth. Though he cultivated his image as a well-known sceptic, Hume saw himself as a scientist engaged like Newton in the pursuit of truth and he demanded the right to follow his passion and his reason wherever they might lead him. His concept of liberty was not a demand for "personal" freedom to pursue his preferences and whims, whether in politics or in matters of personal morality; but rather, he demanded what he called "public liberty", i.e. the freedom to publish, proclaim, and pursue the truth. Only individuals could uncover the truth -whatever bits and pieces of truth could be wrested from nature - and that is why they needed to be free. But the benefits flowed out into society, just as

<sup>40</sup>On the Protestant Succession, *Essays*, p 497.

society had nourished the individual and given him friends and family. The individual is seen as embedded in society:<sup>41</sup>

Although the exercise of genius be the principal source of that satisfaction we receive from the sciences, yet I doubt if it be alone sufficient to give us any considerable enjoyment. The truth we discover must also be of some importance.

The 'love of truth' was the 'first source' of all his enquiries.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever his ultimate beliefs - and he took care to conceal them - Hume demanded for himself and therefore for everybody else the public freedoms to pursue the truth.<sup>43</sup> But these freedoms only derive significance because there is a truth or truths to discover - the freedoms would otherwise be meaningless, the merest absurdity and self-indulgence.

### **The Friends and Enemies of Liberty**

Liberty is seen as surrounded by many enemies, and as needing "friends" (as Danford says, philosophy becomes *political* if it wishes to preserve an environment where it can be carried on). Its enemies include "superstition", the clergy, political parties, government debts, "popular opinion" (as distinct from an informed public opinion) and all large nations, like China. Its friends include "enthusiasm", creative scepticism, international trade, religious toleration and small states such as Holland (Hume actually refers to China and Holland by name, showing how little has changed in 200 years).

<sup>41</sup>*Treatise*, p496.

<sup>42</sup>*Treatise*, p 495.

<sup>43</sup>As a recent commentator notes with reference to the Dialogue on Natural Religion, "Some of the finest interpreters of Hume have attempted to unravel the teaching of the Dialogues, yet there is little consensus" (Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, p 168).

Hume hated religious intolerance and suffered from it. Bishop Warburton held him up to ridicule: "He is an atheistical Jacobite, a monster as rare with us as a hippogriff."<sup>44</sup> Through religious intolerance, Hume lost his chance to get chairs at Edinburgh and Glasgow (though perhaps it was remarkable that "the great infidel" should even have been considered for appointment as a professor), and had to "castrate" his *Essay on Miracles* and suppress publication of several other essays. Yet he was able to maintain close friendships with moderate clergy, and conducted a famous correspondence with Dr Wallace. In this they were self-consciously creating a new art -the art of polite discussion among people holding radically different beliefs and opinions. Hume sadly asked: "Why cannot all the world entertain different opinions about any subject as amicably as we do?"<sup>45</sup> Montesquieu congratulated them on this achievement, and both were aware how unusual it was.

Hume would have been saddened by the modern uncertainty about the justification for liberty. Like today's inhabitants of former communist countries, most people in his day could recall times when they had been forbidden to say the truth, and when people who had opinions at variance with the official doctrine were spied on and abused - even for making what to them was the most obviously true statement.

In his time, religion was of course the most sensitive subject (as sensitive as, say, racial issues today). In the *Natural History of Religion*, Hume accepts the argument from Design for the existence of God, but he analyses religion thenceforth as a natural product of the mind. Yet, as he often proclaims, he is not such a sceptic as many supposed and he concludes the work on a note of what he calls "deliberate doubt":<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Quoted in Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, p 309.

<sup>45</sup>Quoted in Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, p 265.

<sup>46</sup>*Natural History*, p 95.



The whole is a riddle, an aenigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspence of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning this subject.

Although sociology, politics and economics could, he hoped, (eventually in another 3,000 years?) be reduced to sciences admitting of general laws of a Newtonian type, nature and the Supreme Being would, he believed, always retain their secret mysteries. Each person had to have the right to be free to discover the truth about them - and that was the real justification for liberty. The value of liberty reflects the belief that it is a necessary condition for the discovery and dissemination of truths. Economic prosperity is essentially a by-product of conditions established for and justified by other reasons.

Underlying all the constituent parts of his system of liberty is the observation captured in the quotation from Tacitus: in general people appreciate being free to think what they like and say what they think. But it is rare for them to be free in these ways. What Hume teaches is that, in order to maintain these freedoms, people need to share an understanding of how *public liberties* can be protected and why they should be. Without this understanding, the zeal for the *public interest*, few will have the spirit to resist the enemies of liberty and truth.

### **Postscript: from 1750 to 1992**

All this is a far cry from the current debate in the West about how to help Russia and other countries seen as struggling to move to democratic systems of government. To read the newspapers in 1992, you would think that the only important issues were whether the G7 group of individual countries would help stabilise the rouble, or whether \$20 billion in aid would be "enough" to "save the reforming government", or whether the "price liberalisation" could be expected to have a "supply side response".

Hume teaches instead that a successful 'transition' (to use the 1990s jargon) to a market economy requires a widespread public understanding of a different range of issues. (First of all, it is doubtful

whether Hume would have classified Russia, say, as a society at all, rather than as a mere agglomeration of people in a state of nature). These include, as first principles, rules of justice establishing property rights, assignment of these rights to individual people, a constitution supported by public opinion, government by consent, strict limits to the powers of the government of the day, a respect for (but not an uncritical worship of) each country's own traditions, a spirit of liberty, and "enthusiasm" (a willingness to embrace unpopular causes and to stand up and be counted in their defence).

But perhaps the greatest contribution Hume's teaching can offer is his view of the ultimate justification of a liberal society - for this is where the West is currently most weak and uncertain. There is little confidence in the traditional justifications of freedom - other than the argument that it seems to produce the goods. Even if we like it for ourselves, we are no longer confident we are entitled to recommend it to others (after all, they may be quite happy and "flourishing" under their own quite different systems of government): we are not quite sure what it is *for*.<sup>47</sup> This is not a problem for Hume.

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<sup>47</sup>See John Gray, *Liberalisms: Essays in Political Philosophy*, (Routledge, London, 1989).

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