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Hume's Socratism

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Abstract: Hume's famous "Conclusion" to Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature* has been an enduring source of interest and controversy to scholars, with some going so far as to argue that the *Treatise* is inconsistent. Yet in the opening pages of the book Hume makes an odd, rarely noticed allusion to Socrates that helps explain the "Conclusion." This article argues that the "Conclusion" is Hume's version of calling philosophy down from the heavens, establishing it in the cities, and compelling to inquire into morality and human affairs. Recognizing Hume's Socratic allusion focuses our attention on the centrality of moral and political topics to his mature thought and sheds light on the character of his skepticism. Far from being a confession of despair, Hume's skeptical crisis is an argument for a new conception of philosophy that takes self-knowledge as the indispensable condition of philosophizing about anything.

David Hume's skepticism presents an enduring puzzle to his readers. His confrontation with "philosophical melancholy and delirium" at the climax of Book I of the *Treatise of Human Nature* is striking and memorable. Yet at other points in the book, Hume seems optimistic, even boastful, about his new science of human nature. As one scholar writes, "The puzzle of how to understand the skepticism expressed in the concluding section of Book I . . . in relation to the optimistic conduct of the science of man that dominates the rest of the work constitutes perhaps the most fundamental problem in the interpretation of Hume's *Treatise*."[1] Some scholars think that Hume was surprised by his skeptical crisis while composing Book I of the *Treatise*, contrasting Hume's "swagger" in the introduction with the "forlorn skeptical plaint" of the "Conclusion" to Book I.[2] There is, however, evidence that Hume

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[1]Don Garrett, "Hume's Conclusions in 'Conclusion of this Book,'" in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's "Treatise,"* ed. Saul Traiger (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 151. The recent debate between those who characterize Hume as a "skeptical realist" and the more traditional interpretation of him as more straightforwardly skeptical shows that the character of Hume's skepticism is still controversial. See *The New Hume Debate*, ed. Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (London: Routledge, 2000).

[2]Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4–5.

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already anticipates his philosophical drama early in the *Treatise*. In the introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume makes an odd allusion to Socrates. He suggests that he, along with some others, stand in a similar relationship to the founders of modern natural science, notably Bacon, that Socrates did to the founders of ancient natural science, notably Thales.[3] Rarely noted by scholars,[4] the reference to Socrates is both suggestive and opaque. Hume thought it meant something important enough to put into the introduction of his first great work, but he obviously does not imply any agreement with Socratic or Platonic politics, epistemology, or metaphysics. What, we wonder, could Hume have had in mind?

The purpose of this essay is to explore this question in order to shed light on the character of Hume's skepticism. Hume, I suggest, is likely alluding to Cicero's remark that Socrates was "the first philosopher to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her also into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and good and evil."[5] Hume was engaged with Cicero throughout his career, and the remark about Socrates was well known in the eighteenth century. Addison, on whom Hume would model his own career as an essayist, had appropriated Cicero's remark to describe his own project of making philosophy polite: "It was said of *Socrates*, that he brought philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among men; I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at Tea-Tables and Coffee Houses."[6] It would thus be no surprise if well-informed readers of

[3]Parenthetical references in the text marked T are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and include numbers of the book, part, section, and paragraph unless otherwise noted. References marked E are the page numbers of Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985).

[4]Barry Stroud, who does notice it, garbles its meaning by taking Hume to claim that he will be the Newton of the human sciences, applying the methods of modern natural science to human beings (Stroud, *Hume* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978], 5). But Socrates was known for having founded his "science of human nature" in response to the failure of, and in part a critique of, the natural science of his predecessors. Hume is distinguishing himself from the natural scientists, not identifying with them. Readers who notice it and offer insightful remarks about its meaning include John Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason: Recovering the Human Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 33–34, 77 and Donald Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 145–46.

[5]Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J. E. King (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954), 435.

[6]*The Spectator* #10, March 12, 1711, in *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), 44.

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Hume's *Treatise* at the time of its publication in 1739 thought of Cicero's remark in connection with Hume's reference to Socrates.

Is there any parallel in Hume's thought to Cicero's image of Socrates calling philosophy down from the heavens? As several scholars have noted, the last section of Book I of the *Treatise*, entitled "Conclusion of this book" (T 1.4.7), depicts not only his famous skeptical crisis but his turn to a new kind of philosophizing in which moral and political topics play a prominent role (T 1.4.7.12, 14).[7] I argue that Hume's Socratic allusion is an anticipatory reference to his crisis and turn and that reading the "Conclusion" with that allusion in mind focuses our attention on aspects of Hume's thought we might otherwise miss. The Socratic allusion draws our attention to Hume's characterization of his new mode of philosophizing as an investigation of moral and political opinion, animated by a disquieting awareness of the gap between our passionately held moral and political commitments and our ignorance concerning their ultimate principles or foundations (T 1.4.7.12). Recognizing the importance of opinion in Hume's philosophizing after his crisis in turn shows why the main focus of Hume's post-crisis career is political science and history, rather than a "Newtonian" project of applying the methods of natural science to human beings, as is sometimes thought.

This essay makes a unique contribution to the literature by using Hume's Socratic reference as a means of thinking about Hume's skepticism. Unlike many readers who see Hume's main legacy for us as an ancestor and inspiration of positivism, behaviorism, or today's cognitive science, I claim that Hume's "science of human nature" is a political science that attempts to understand moral and political opinion from the inside.[8] While not opposed

[7]Insightful discussions of Hume's turn from a variety of points of view include: Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), esp. ch. 1–2 and *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*; Frederick Whelan, *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 60–67, 304–29; Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*; Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's* Treatise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), ch. 1; and Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis*. Also helpful is Steven Wulf, "The Skeptical Life in Hume's Political Thought," *Polity* 33, no. 1 (2000): 77–99.

[8]The view that Hume was a scientist more than a skeptic whose legacy was carried on by logical positivists and contemporary philosophers of mind has been a common one. See A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1946), 31; Stroud, *Hume*, 3, 5; and Alexander Rosenberg, "Hume and the Philosophy of Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to David Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 65. "Like the empiricists who followed him," Rosenberg writes, "Hume held that the methods of the social sciences must be fundamentally the same as those of natural science" (84). More recently, Rosenberg writes that Hume's key contribution is to help us avoid the mistake of thinking that "there is any more to reality than the laws of nature that science discovers" (Rosenberg, *An Atheist's Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life without Illusions* [New York:

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to using the methods of modern natural science to understand human beings, Hume's own approach is oriented by the need for political prudence and human wisdom rather than the methods of the "hard" sciences. In exploring the meaning of Hume's Socratic allusion, I build on the work of scholars who emphasize the importance of the turn to common life in Hume's thought, especially John Danford, who first discussed the reference to Socrates in print, and Donald Livingston, who first emphasized the importance of common life in Hume and whose writings, to my mind, still provide the standard for work on this topic.[9] Yet my argument differs from these treatments in important ways. Livingston goes too far in seeing common life as Hume understands it as something sacred and in assimilating Hume to the modern conservative tradition exemplified by Burke, Coleridge, and Oakeshott and to various traditions of localist resistance to centralized modern states.[10] Hume, however, does not see common life as something sacred in itself but as an indispensable topic of reflection for a philosopher seeking self-knowledge. Moreover, his politics more closely approximates commercial republicanism or classical liberalism than conservatism in Livingston's sense.[11] As for Danford, while I concur with much of what he says about Hume's politics, I emphasize the importance of radical questioning and *aporia* in Hume's thought more than he does. Hume's intention is not simply to promote moderation, as important as that is. He also makes an argument about why radical questioning is necessary for politics and even attractive for its own sake.

Finally, I add a word about the scope of this essay. I am not concerned here to judge whether Hume understood Socrates correctly, and I avoid importing

Norton, 2011], xiii). Similarly, Russell Hardin argues that Hume's greatness lies in his throughgoing naturalism and refusal to tell us "what our substantive moral views should be" (Hardin, *David Hume: Moral and Political Theorist* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 8).

[9]See Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, and Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* and *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*. Scott Yenor's articles extend Danford's and Livingston's analyses in helpful ways: "Between Rationalism and Postmodernism: Hume's Political Science of 'Our Mixed Kind of Life,'" *Political Research Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2002): 329–50, and "Revealed Religion and the Politics of Humanity in Hume's Philosophy of Common Life," *Polity* 38, no. 3 (2006): 395–415.

[10]Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, chap. 12, and *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, chaps. 12–14. For discussion, see Yenor, "Beyond Rationalism and Postmodernism," 331n7.

[11]For recent readings of Hume as a commercial republican or classical liberal, see Frederick Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli: Political Realism and Liberal Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Neil McArthur, *Hume's Political Theory: Law, Liberty, and the Constitution of Liberty* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); and Andrew Sabl, *Hume's Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the "History of England"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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any account of "Socratism" from the outside. Instead, I aim to allow Hume's "Conclusion," with some help from the *Essays*, to explain what his Socratic allusion meant for him. To this end I first offer a reading of the "Conclusion" and only then explain how the Socratic reference illuminates and is illuminated by Hume's text. As the continuing variety of readings of the "Conclusion" shows, however, Hume's text itself presents a complex and confusing set of statements and implications. The first task of the interpreter, then, is to work through the surface of Hume's text, before speculating on Hume's deeper intentions.

First Impressions

To the casual reader, the "Conclusion" of Book I of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* must appear like the autobiography of a man in the grip of a strange, self-destructive obsession. In the midst of this long, dry treatise, Hume breaks his apparently academic mode to give readers a picture of the disturbing, even destructive effects of an unrestrained endeavor to uncover ultimate or foundational truths about the world. He is, he tells us, moved above all by the desire to know the truth about causes and especially about the cause of causes, the "original and ultimate principle" (T 1.4.7.5). Yet philosophic ambition leads only to despair and to existential crisis. For the enterprise of seeking causes is no merely academic or theoretical affair for Hume. His identity is bound up with the object he seeks, and when the truth about causes proves elusive, it prompts a crisis of doubt and profound disorientation. At first glance, rational inquiry leads only to "philosophical melancholy and despair" (T 1.4.7.9). The ordinary reader can only look on in wonder and puzzlement: what exactly would lead a person into such dire straits? Why is Hume so spectacularly self-destructive?

The problem, Hume suggests, is philosophy itself. In the opening lines of the "Conclusion," Hume presents himself as a sailor. His ambition is comprehensive: he aims to compass the globe (T 1.4.7.1). Yet the sailor's voyage is perilous. Perched on a barren rock, comtemplating putting his "leaky weather-beaten vessel" out to sea, he is overwhelmed by "that boundless ocean, that runs out into immensity." The sublime terror of the sea produces melancholy in his soul; the "desponding reflections" that follow are, he says, the result of the passion of melancholy indulging itself (T 1.4.7.1). The nonmetaphorical version of the sailor's ambition is the philosopher's desire to know the first principles of everything. Hume tells us that he is possessed by a relentless natural desire to uncover genuine necessity. "Nothing is more curiously enquir'd after by the mind of man," he remarks, "than the causes of every phenomenon; nor are we content with knowing the immediate causes, but push on our enquiries, til we arrive at the original and ultimate principle" (T 1.4.7.5). We "wou'd not willingly stop before we are acquainted with that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect." Yet it is

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precisely the philosopher's awareness that neither he nor anyone else knows "the ultimate and operating principle" that presents so much peril. His awareness of his own ignorance alienates him both from ordinary life and from other philosophers. In ordinary life, we human beings sail blithely along, assuming we know what grounds our beliefs, unaware of the abyss that lurks there. Meanwhile, philosophers recognize the question but answer it with projections of their imaginations. Hume compares the philosophers to "those angels, whom scripture represents as covering their eyes with their wings" (T 1.4.7.6). What allows the philosophers to ascend beyond ordinary life, it seems, also blinds them to the truth.

Hume's awareness of his own ignorance first alienates him from his fellows, philosophers and nonphilosophers alike, and then alienates him from himself. He could, he says, try to proceed as most human beings do in everyday life, relying on what he knows to be an illusion. That path, however, presents an obvious difficulty. Is it really possible to will oneself to believe an illusion? And if we do, are we not opening ourselves up to gullibility on the broadest scale? No wonder Hume cannot be truly at home with his fellows. He describes himself as "some strange uncouth monster" unable "to mingle and unite in society" (T 1.4.7.2). But that social alienation is superficial in comparison with what comes next. The psychic disharmony between reason and the belief required for reason to have any purchase in the world starts to unhinge Hume's self-awareness. What if there is no "original and ultimate principle" and causality is only a fiction of the human mind? If that were true, would we not be compelled to reject "all belief and reasoning" and to "look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another" (T 1.4.7.8)? Philosophic reason undermines itself, and the disorientation produced by the immensity of the sea is nothing compared to that produced by our ignorance of first principles. At the turning point of the "Conclusion" Hume gives voice to the anguish produced by radical *aporia*:

> Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favor shall I court, and whose anger must I dread? What beings surround me? and on whom have I any influence, or who have any influence on me? I am confounded with all these questions, and begin to fancy myself in the most deplorable condition imaginable, inviron'd with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv'd of the use of every member and faculty. (T 1.4.7.8)

Hume experiences an abyss and it threatens to undermine his very identity. The thought that the cosmos is no cosmos, that there is no intelligible necessity at the deepest level of things, is profoundly disorienting. Up can no longer be distinguished from down. Such a thought necessarily alienates him from the usual landmarks of everyday life. No wonder he calls his condition "philosophical melancholy and delirium."

The casual reader will no doubt find Hume's confession of despair rather pathetic and bizarre. Is it not absurd that this highfalutin philosopher talks

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himself into a psychological crisis on the basis of mere doubts? Does it not show even the dullest reader that the search for first causes is folly? Is not everyday common sense better founded that all of this would-be philosophy? In the second half of the "Conclusion" Hume articulates this opinion and makes it his own. He makes it seem as though the message of the "Conclusion" is the folly of philosophy. This seems to deepen the critiques of philosophy known from the ancient world. In Aristophanes's *Clouds* and Plato's *Apology*, philosophy is accused of undermining political society and unleashing mere selfishness. In the "Conclusion," philosophy seems to be the object of a deeper criticism. Hume's theme is not the danger of philosophy to society, but the danger to sanity itself.

The turning point in the "Conclusion" is the discovery of necessity. Not scientifically or theoretically known necessity, but the human experience of necessity, necessity known from the inside, brings Hume's philosopher back down to earth. "Here then I find myself," he says, "absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life" (T 1.4.7.10). This is the moment of the famous backgammon game, of good food and good company. It is also a moment in which Hume's philosopher conveys a frustration with philosophy that his readers may well share. Why should the philosopher, of all people, make himself miserable and be deprived of the pleasures of life? Philosophy, it would seem, needs to be punished, and hedonism goes hand in hand with book burning: "I am ready to throw all my books and papers into the fire, and resolve never more to renounce the pleasures of life for the sake of reasoning and philosophy" (T 1.4.7.10). The search for causes undergoes a righteous comeuppance. The causal reader's intuitions are vindicated. The philosopher, having taken his philosophy to the limit, has been forced to recognize his own folly and to endorse the life of pleasure and the sound wisdom of common sense.

Hume plays this theme to the hilt. In addition to the philosophers and superstitious people (about whom more presently), there are in England, he says, "many honest gentlemen, who being always employ'd in their domestic affairs, or amusing themselves in common recreations, have carry'd their thoughts very little beyond those objects, which are everyday expos'd to their senses" (T 1.4.7.14). A causal reader, perplexed by the extravagant self-destruction of Hume's philosopher, might well recognize an "honest gentleman" as a kindred spirit. Possessed of sober common sense, the "honest gentlemen" lead lives that are much more attractively human than is the ascetic, despairing life of the philosopher. Hume goes out of his way to emphasize this theme, in the process reversing the usual expectation of how enlightenment works. He does not, he says, propose to make philosophers out of the "honest gentlemen": the gentlemen don't need it. It is rather the philosophers who need to sit at the feet of the gentlemen, to study their ways and acquire some of their earthy common sense (T 1.4.7.14).

On a first cut, then, a casual reader could easily come to the following view of Hume's understanding of philosophy. Philosophy is an affliction and a

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calamity that happens to some few, unfortunate human beings. It manifests itself as an obsession with the question about first causes and an insistence on rejecting any knowledge that does not rise to the level of metaphysical truth, even at the price of undermining everything, or almost everything, that makes human life livable. Icarus-like, philosophy ascends toward the sun at the price of self-destruction. No wonder, then, that Hume or his philosopher needs to learn from the "honest gentlemen." The casual reader, instructed by Hume, will sympathize with, without sharing, his plight. He will view philosophers less as threats to social order than as unfortunates evoking a mixture of pity and contempt. In no case will he think of becoming a philosopher, nor will he be attracted to that dangerous and delirious desire for knowledge of the "original and ultimate principle" that drives the unhappy philosopher.

Hume's Enlightenment Project

Although it gives voice to almost everyone's first impressions of the "Conclusion," the Icarus story does not say everything Hume wants to say about philosophy. It does not even explain everything that a casual reader would notice. In the very midst of his remarks that give us the impression that philosophy is a calamity, Hume writes some things that point in the opposite direction. Human beings face, he remarks, a fundamental choice about "our guide." Should religion or human reason be the authority we look up to? Hume makes no bones about his answer. "I make bold," he says, "to recommend philosophy, and shall not scruple to give it the preference to superstition of every kind and denomination" (T 1.4.7.13). Four short paragraphs after giving us to believe that philosophers need to be institutionalized, Hume now tells us that philosophy should be king. How, we wonder, can this possibly be?

The answer to that question lies in the second half of the "Conclusion." While the first half seemed simply personal and autobiographical, the second half offers a project for the reform of European political culture. Hume now speaks with an explicitly practical intention and restates his ambition to found a successful science of human nature (T 1.4.7.13, 14; for his original statement, see T Intro.). There are, he says, three politically relevant human types: the superstitious, philosophers, and "honest gentlemen." England faces a choice between a regime based on religion and one based on unaided human reason, a choice between priests and philosophers (T 1.4.7.13). The crucial political actors are, however, neither the superstitious or the philosophers but the "honest gentlemen." It is the "honest gentlemen" who are the swing voters, the ones who must be persuaded one way or the other. Put differently, any viable politics in Hume's time, and perhaps any time, will be coalition politics: either the "honest gentlemen" will join with the superstitious for what would presumably be a continuation of

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throne-and-altar politics or they will join with the philosophers. Since almost all regimes in Hume's time and earlier were based on some version of the union between politics and religion, Hume in effect proposes an entirely new regime type, one based explicitly on human reason. As befits an attempt to persuade "honest gentlemen," Hume makes his case for the choiceworthiness of philosophy not on the basis of theoretical insight or of goodness for the thinker but on the grounds of practical utility. Superstition arises easily from the "popular opinions of mankind" and often disturbs us "in the conduct of our lives and actions." Philosophy on the other hand, "if just," only presents "mild and moderate sentiments" that do not interrupt the course of our natural propensities." For "generally speaking," he says, "the errors in religion are dangerous," while "those in philosophy" are "only ridiculous" (T 1.4.7.13).

This argument needs some unpacking to be fully intelligible. When Hume says, for example, that superstition disturbs us in our lives and actions, he could rely on his contemporary readers to catch the allusion. No half-awake reader of philosophical and political texts in the eighteenth century needed to be reminded of the awesome wreckage strewn across the European landscape by the early modern wars of religion. The memories of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, of the sack of Magdeburg in the Thirty Years' War, of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, among others, were still within reach in 1739. Only a half century earlier, England itself had replaced a king bent on re-Catholicizing the country. The promise of mildness and moderation, however "ridiculous" philosophy might be in itself, was no milquetoast aspiration in an era still haunted by religious fanaticism and war.

At the heart of Hume's political proposal is his analysis of the roots of superstition. "Honest gentlemen" are content to busy themselves with "their domestic affairs" (T 1.4.7.14). Nonetheless, there is something in the human spirit, some source of dissatisfaction with the merely opined or believed, that compels (at least some) human beings to go beyond the visible phenomena to speculate about first causes, ultimate necessities, and the like. As we have seen, Hume's autobiography has already provided some evidence of that. Superstition represents that same dissatisfaction or restlessness in the human mind that philosophy does, albeit in a politically much more dangerous form. But where philosophy discovers its ignorance and makes itself ridiculous, superstition or religion claims to discover the truth about the "original and ultimate principle" and stakes a claim to rule human beings on the basis of that truth (T 1.4.7.13). Yet as the story Hume has just told about his own search for the "original and ultimate principle" seems to show, the truth about the first things is essentially unsettled, and so the political ambition of superstition necessarily leads to claim and counterclaim that cannot be rationally adjudicated on the level of our knowledge of first causes. Insofar as it claims to rule politically, superstition necessarily leads to religious war.

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The "honest gentlemen" represent the aspiration for peace and toleration, the hope for a politics not dominated by fanatical battles over first principles. The "Conclusion" appeals to all those repulsed by the devastation left by the wars of religion. Hume addresses "honest gentlemen" not only because those are, in the England of 1739, his most likely readers, but also because they embody the spirit of the new regime Hume wishes to bring into existence. That spirit is a sober self-concern, untroubled by the dangerous or delirious desire for insight into ultimate principles. While not simply or extravagantly selfish, the "honest gentlemen" nonetheless put the comfortable settlement of their private affairs above politics. They are grounded in the unpretentious realities of domestic life and the prudent pursuit of self-interest.

To understand Hume's political-cultural strategy here fully, it helps to turn to the *Essays*. The "great defect of the last age," that is, the medieval and early Renaissance periods, Hume remarks in his essay on essay writing, was "the separation of the learned and conversible worlds" (E 534). Philosophy and ordinary life were isolated from each other, to their mutual loss. Following Addison,[12] Hume presents essay writing as a means of overcoming this division by making philosophy polite and enlightening ordinary persons. He aims to encourage "a league betwixt the learned and conversible worlds," to which end he can think of "nothing more advantageous than such Essays as these." Hume offers to serve as "a kind of resident or ambassador from the dominions of learning to those of conversation." The recommendation Hume makes in the *Treatise* of a coalition between philosophers and "honest gentlemen" is clearly a version of the strategy sketched in "Of Essay Writing" and pursued in the *Essays* as a whole. That strategy is a project of Enlightenment.

The *Essays* also explain more concretely just who the "honest gentlemen" are. In some sense the "honest gentlemen" are Hume's main interlocutors throughout the *Essays*, insofar as he both starts from their point of view and aims to educate and enlighten them. But it is not until "Of Refinement in the Arts" that Hume describes his audience to itself. In premodern societies, he says, society tends to divide into two classes, the masters or owners of land and their vassals or dependents, reflecting the lamentable human tendency to sort themselves into masters and slaves. It is only in times of commerce, fueled by luxury, that these social divisions begin to break down. By a "proper cultivation of the land," the peasants "become rich and independent," while the "tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property" (E 277). It was the revolution in commerce in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that drew "authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who

[12]On Hume's indebtedness to Addison and the project of politeness, see Nicholas Phillipson, "Propriety, Property, and Prudence: David Hume and the Defense of the Revolution," in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Nicholas Phillipson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 302–20.

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are the best and firmest basis of public liberty" (E 277). Hume speaks to and for a middle-class audience created by commerce and defined by its unwillingness to be either a master or a slave. "These submit not to slavery," Hume says, "like the peasants, from poverty and meanness of spirit; and having no hopes of tyrannizing over others, like the barons, they are not tempted, for the sake of that gratification, to submit to the tyranny of their sovereign" (E 277–78). While material plenty is a necessary condition of their existence, the "middling rank of men" is defined above all by a psychic disposition: "They covet equal laws, which may secure their property, and preserve them from monarchical, as well as aristocratical tyranny" (E 278). Only the rule of law allows most human beings to escape the dreary psychic alternation between tyranny and slavery. It was, moreover, the "middling rank of men," the beneficiaries and agents of commerce, who bolstered the Commons and made the several English revolutions of the seventeenth century possible.

What we today would call Hume's commercial republicanism is thus already anticipated, albeit in compressed form, in the "Conclusion."[13] Hume's new regime builds on the desires of ordinary persons, present to some extent in all times and places, to lead their lives as they see fit, without interference by priest or prince. They know government is necessary to protect property, but they do not wish government to meddle in their private affairs or the private affairs of their fellows. These are private citizens who recognize that a measure of public-spiritedness is necessary, but for the sake of the private life, not for glory or recognition. They more closely resemble the modern bourgeoisie than Aristotle's *kalos k'agathos*.

Yet commerce and the "middling rank of men" are manifestly not enough for a stable regime. Hume thinks it essential that they reject a politics based on superstition, which means they must accept a politics explicitly based on human reason. Otherwise they are vulnerable to the temptations of superstition. Hence the necessity of the educative project of the *Essays*. The "Conclusion" makes the same point from a slightly different angle. The "honest gentlemen" must recognize and endorse the authority of human reason or philosophy. The reason is that their earthy preoccupations leave them unprepared to defend themselves against "speculations without the sphere of common life" (T 1.4.7.13). Although they are able to recognize the practical disasters resulting from the rule of superstition, the "honest gentlemen" need assistance in rebutting the theoretical claims of superstition.

Enter the philosophy that Hume says should be "our guide." Hume makes his case for philosophy on the basis of the impossibility of eliminating the

[13]On the background and general outlook of commercial republicanism, see Ralph Lerner, *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), and Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern,* vol. 2*: New Modes and Orders in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). For a helpful recent discussion of commerce in Hume, see McArthur, *Hume's Political Theory*, chap. 1.

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natural restlessness of the human mind at work in both superstition and philosophy. For human nature is not exhausted by the concern with one's private affairs, the desire for comfort, and the like. Human nature also shows itself in dissatisfaction with all that is merely believed, a dissatisfaction that leads some to reject all concern with comforting certitudes. Hume aims to teach his audience that, while they may not understand it, the restlessness of the mind is a fact about human beings that must be taken into consideration for the sake of their own self-interest. Even if "this curiosity and ambition" did not impel him to investigate matters outside "the sphere of common life" (although he clearly thinks that it does), Hume says, he would be compelled to make "such enquiries" simply as a matter of enlightened self-interest. Fire must be fought with fire: speculative philosophy is required to fend off speculative superstition. There is then a permanent need for philosophy, if only as an instrument by which human politics can assert itself against divine politics. This need is rooted in the permanent fact of the natural restlessness of the human mind: "Since therefore tis almost impossible for the mind of man to rest, like those of beasts, in the narrow circle of objects, which are the subject of daily conversation and action, we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable" (T 1.4.7.13). And this is Hume's reasoning for his "bold" recommendation that philosophy be "our guide."

Hume's recommendation compels us to revise our original impression of Hume's treatment of philosophy in the "Conclusion" as a kind of Icarus story. Whether or not philosophy is the self-destructive affliction it seems at first, it is also a political necessity. For "honest gentlemen" instructed by Hume's argument would come to see that they need Hume's philosopher around. If Hume did not exist, they would have to invent him, simply in order to secure the conditions of their own lives. In this light, Hume's expressions of radical *aporia* about the "original and ultimate principle" appear in a different light. "Philosophical melancholy and delirium" is not an existential howl but Hume exhibiting his job qualifications.[14] His seriously intended message to the "honest gentlemen," then, is not the Icarus story but something like this: "However strange and pathetic you may find the philosopher, you should recognize that you need him. He does something for you that you cannot do for yourself. Think of him as you would a garbageman. You may not want to be a garbageman yourself and you may not understand a person who seeks that occupation out. But you should recognize that it is good for you and for society that someone does."

[14]Andrew Sabl's remark nicely captures this moment of Hume's argument: Hume "did look into the abyss; it looked back. One of them blinked and it wasn't Hume" (Sabl, *Hume's Politics*, 247).

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Philosophy Reevaluated

This analysis of Hume's political project in the "Conclusion" suggests that Hume's rhetoric has layers and that the most obvious layer does not convey all that Hume wants to say on a given topic. Like any able advocate, Hume knows that he cannot start with the truths he wishes to convey to his audience. He must gain their trust by starting where they start; he must mirror their initial opinions back to them, even if he wishes to replace them eventually with something better. For example, the view that speculative inquiry into first principles inevitably leads to "melancholy and delirium" tracks quite closely with the opinion that the "honest gentlemen" have of philosophy prior to opening Hume's book. Similarly, Hume's odd suggestion that philosophers need to learn from the "honest gentlemen," but not the other way around, so obviously in tension with philosophy being our guide, doubtless restates what Hume's audience already thinks and is quite flattering to them to boot. In these ways Hume reflects the usual views of the "honest gentlemen" back to them in order to gain their trust and ultimately with a view to persuading them of a claim quite foreign to their native opinions. Hume initially appears as supplicant, exaggerating the self-destructiveness of philosophy, but only so that he may ultimately make the case that philosophy should be our guide. With his rhetoric, Hume stoops to conquer.[15]

These observations, however, lead us into a deeper set of puzzles. Hume makes "philosophy" the key to his political project. The whole point is to persuade ordinary persons to reject the rule of priests and to accept the authority of Enlightenment and philosophy in political-cultural matters. Yet Hume's rhetoric—which alternately deprecates and elevates philosophy—makes it hard to make out exactly how he thinks philosophy can fulfill the role he sketches for it in the new regime. The status of philosophy is thus both absolutely crucial for his project and quite enigmatic. A reader who is attracted to Hume's political project and skeptical about sales pitches will thus want to ask: if philosophy is not the rather pathetic thing it initially seems to be in the "Conclusion," what is it? What must it be if Hume's project is to work?

Hume points to the limits of the "philosophy as affliction" view in the aftermath of "philosophical melancholy and delirium." After his recuperative turn to backgammon and the pleasures of society, the philosophical itch returns. There is no better evidence that Hume thinks of philosophy as a recurring, naturally rooted desire than the fact that his natural inclination to

[15]Livingston underestimates these political-rhetorical dimensions of Hume's text and so overlooks the irony in Hume's praise of the "honest gentlemen" or the "vulgar." See, e.g., *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, 22. This is not to deny that Hume makes a serious point about the character of philosophy in suggesting that philosophers learn from common life, only that Hume ever fully identifies with common life.

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inquire comes back after "melancholy and delirium." At the time when he has grown tired with "amusement and company," Hume remarks, "I feel my mind all collected within itself, and am naturally *inclin'd* to carry my view into all those subjects, about which I have met so many disputes in the course of my reading and conversation" (T 1.4.7.12). Hume reopens all the questions that had so recently seemed to threaten his sanity, but now without a glimmer of angst. The power of radical questioning to threaten sanity was, it seems, greatly overstated.

Still, there is an important shift in Hume's conception of philosophy in the aftermath of his philosophical crisis. Metaphysics and theology, the most obvious topics of Hume's interest before the crisis, are now explicitly replaced by moral and political topics. "I cannot forbear," he says, "having a curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me" (T 1.4.7.12). Yet Hume does not pursue those topics as merely academic topics or intellectual puzzles not affecting his vital interests. He is already in the middle of these questions, entangled with moral and political opinions: "I am uneasy to think I approve of one object, and disapprove of another; call one thing beautiful, and another deform'd; decide concerning truth and falsehood, reason and folly, without knowing on what principles I proceed" (T 1.4.7.12). Like the rest of us, Hume's philosopher is already animated by praise and blame, moral approbation and disapprobation. Unlike the rest of us, he is also aware that he does not know what the principles or foundations of his moral-political opinions are. Morality above all needs justification, a justification our moral opinions do not automatically possess. Alongside the animating presence of praise and blame, then, there is an uneasiness lurking in the philosopher's self-awareness. That uneasiness is born of a consciousness of the gap between claim and justification, between aspiration and reality. Hume raises the question of the ground of morality; he does not promise that the foundations we aim to discover will be the ones we expect, or even that the sought-after foundations exist at all, since not even those whom one would expect to have some insight into these questions actually possess the answers. The "learned world," he remarks, "lies under such a deplorable ignorance in all these particulars" (T 1.4.7.12).

It is this conception of philosophy as oriented by moral-political questions, not the earlier image of philosophy as dejected and despairing in the face of our ignorance of first principles, that Hume recommends as our guide. To be a guide in Hume's sense is, it seems, to educate human beings about the truths of morality, politics, and the passions. This is the positive guidance Hume's philosopher offers the world, alongside the negative teaching mentioned earlier. For concrete examples of what Hume has in mind, one need look no further than the moral, political, and historical inquiries he pursues in the rest of his corpus. In Book III of the *Treatise*, for example, he starts from the everyday experience of the moral sense, then shows that, once thought

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through, that moral sense requires us to search for its principles or foundations (T 3.1.2.1, 6). In the course of Book III, that search leads Hume to uncover the truth about the natural human condition, which he claims is characterized by a fundamental disproportion between human desire and the means of satisfying that desire. Because that disproportion is ameliorated but never erased by means of convention and artifice, knowledge of human nature and the human situation provides an enduring ground for moral-political judgment (T 3.2.2.2; 3.2.8.5; 3.2.9.4; 3.2.10.16).

Similarly, in the *Essays*, Hume guides his readers by offering an education in political science, a political science that, Hume admits, owes much to Machiavelli (E 21–25).[16] This is Hume, the constitutionalist political scientist who aims to secure individual liberty under law through the prudent design of institutions and who influenced the American founders. Moreover, Hume clearly considers his political science to be an education in what it means to have a philosophic stance toward politics. As he indicates in the essay "Of the Protestant Succession," moderation, the great theme of the *Essays*, ultimately requires a disposition to weigh the pros and cons of any given phenomenon, to put all the circumstances in the scale, and to recognize that no choices are simply good or simply bad (E 506–7).[17] Hume calls that disposition the "temper" of a philosopher; encouraging that spirit in his readers is, he implies, the primary task of the genre of essays as he practices it.[18] Finally, Hume's greatest effort at educating or guiding is his masterwork, the *History of England*. The task of the historian, he says, is to show the truth about human beings in all its sometimes squalid reality without corrupting our moral sentiments (E 567–68). The genre of history accomplishes that delicate goal better than either poetry or pure philosophy; Hume suggests that his model in this respect is the Machiavelli of the *Florentine Histories* rather than that of the *Prince*. The moral philosophy of the *Treatise*, the political science of the *Essays*, and the history of the *History of England* each present Hume's knowledge of human beings in a slightly different light. But at bottom each is an expression of Hume's attempt to use philosophy or enlightenment to guide human affairs.

Even with the breadth and depth of Hume's moral-political inquiries in view, however, we may still wonder about the properly philosophical dimensions of Hume's project. How exactly, we may ask, do Hume's moral-political inquiries respond to the crisis of "melancholy and delirium"? Could not a

[16]See Whelan, *Hume and Machiavelli*.

[17]Whelan gives a nice description of the skeptical, moderate spirit Hume aims to encourage and exemplify in *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy*, chap. 5. See also Wulf, "The Skeptical Life in Hume's Political Thought," and Yenor, "Between Rationalism and Postmodernism."

[18]Hume uses the term "essaying" to describe the philosopher's activity of weighing all the circumstances (E 507). Perhaps then we should see the *Essays* as a whole as an extended exercise in training for philosophy.

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skeptic look at these discussions and judge them to be more dignified (and perhaps more useful) than the backgammon game, but in the end no less of an attempt to sweep the truly disquieting questions under the rug? Is Hume's political philosophy anything more than another attempt to change the subject?

To answer this question, it helps to pay attention to a thread of Hume's discussion that we have hitherto neglected. When he describes his new, postcrisis mode of philosophizing, Hume lists three topics of inquiry: the "principles of moral good and evil"; the "nature and foundation of government"; and the "causes of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me" (T 1.4.7.12). In the inquiries of the *Treatise*, the *Essays*, and elsewhere, the first two topics turn out to be almost inextricably intertwined. But there is good reason to think that the most important item in Hume's list of topics is the third. An effort to know the "passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern me" is, of course, an effort to acquire self-knowledge. The necessity and difficulty of knowing oneself is also the underlying theme of his description of the uneasiness motivating his inquiries: I am uneasy to think, he says, that I praise and blame, approve and condemn, without knowing on what principles I proceed (T 1.4.7.12). Hume implies that whenever we make normative claims—which he thinks we do all the time—we tacitly assume the existence of some principle or foundation underlying and justifying those claims.[19] To have a right to those claims, we would need to know, and not just assume, what those foundations are. Without that, without knowledge of the truth of those things we love and that in some sense form our identity, we are necessarily sailing in darkness with no clue of where we are going or who we really are. Whatever may be the truth about the "original and ultimate principle," this is a question that cannot be evaded by anyone who takes himself seriously.

It is a striking fact that Hume presents his turn to moral and political investigations before he presents the potential utility for human life resulting from those investigations (compare T 1.4.7.12 and 13). If we pay attention only to Hume's political proposal, we would likely say that Hume justifies philosophy

[19]Annette Baier suggests that one of the discoveries Hume makes in his philosophical crisis is that human beings are unavoidably normative: "any mode of life, whether or not philosophical or intellectual, commits us to turning some habits into normative rules. Once we are fully self-conscious, any attempt to be free of all norms will reveal our possibly once hidden commitment to some norms or other" (Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, 17; cf. 99–100). Baier's remark is correct insofar as Hume's postcrisis philosophy begins by recognizing the primacy of moral and political opinion. But Hume treats that primacy as a problem requiring investigation, not an answer, and there is no guarantee that what we find will confirm the character or existence of the morality we think we are looking for. When Hume finally states what he thinks the virtues are after his long analysis of the moral sense in Book III, they turn out to be natural abilities and not something we can be held responsible for in the traditional sense (T 3.3.4).

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by showing that it is useful, even indispensable, for politics because it undermines superstition. That is true, but not the whole truth. By showing himself turning to moral and political philosophy prior to the strictly political argument, Hume indicates that he has an interest in moral and political topics independent of political utility. The philosopher, it seems, cannot avoid his need for self-knowledge, in addition to his obvious interest in protection from persecution and religious war. Self-knowledge cannot, however, be acquired by a simple act of introspection. One needs all the help one can get; in particular, one needs to know something about other human beings and human nature generally. Human nature shows itself by what it does. In particular, it expresses itself above all in the moral and political claims it makes in the world. Hume makes morality and politics his primary themes because morality and politics are the stages on which human nature plays out its characteristic dramas and enacts its fate.

The philosopher's need for self-knowledge should lead us to reconsider Hume's strange suggestion that philosophers need to learn from the "honest gentlemen" and not the other way around. As we have noted, that suggestion is obviously ironical and intended to flatter Hume's audience. Yet there is no reason to think that what Hume intended to convey with that remark is exhausted by the political necessity of persuasion. He may well have intended to say something serious about philosophy and the human condition in addition to and by means of his political proposal. If it is true that self-knowledge is the primary desideratum of the philosopher, Hume's remark begins to make some sense. The "honest gentlemen" are the representatives of pretheoretical opinion. They are characterized by their trust that the world is intelligible. Yet Hume's philosopher discovers that he cannot live and prosper, much less engage in philosophical inquiry, without taking something for granted. Every human endeavor, every philosophical inquiry, starts from some opinion about the world that in the nature of things cannot be proved in advance. To attempt to do so without those orienting opinions would be to condemn ourselves to "philosophical melancholy and delirium." The alternatives of throwing all of our opinions out, on the one hand, and blindly following those opinions, on the other, are not, however, exhaustive. One could recognize, Hume suggests, the unavoidability of opinion and proceed to take it seriously, even while investigating it and treating it as a question.

In this crucial sense, even the most self-aware of us have a definite kinship with the "honest gentlemen." Hume's philosopher is distinguished from the gentlemen on the one side and the other philosophers on the other by his awareness of that kinship. He recognizes the necessity of starting from opinion.[20] Rather than simply relying on it, however, he makes it a question and is alive to its problematic status as opinion. Hume seems to think that

[20]See Livingston's remark: "unlike Descartes Hume does not, methodologically, view the customs and prejudices of common life as barriers to understanding.

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this is not just a fact about our moral-political opinions but describes the human condition more broadly. As in morality and politics, where we always start with opinions about things without full clarity on the principles or foundations of those opinions, so too when we deal with nature and the cosmos, we bring to it opinions about what nature really is, opinions that enable us to get started in life and inquiry without being fully grounded or proved. Self-knowledge, it seems, is the sine qua non of our knowing, not just moral-political matters, but anything at all. There is "no question of importance," including "mathematics, natural philosophy, and natural theology," he claims, "whose decision is not compriz'd in the science of man" (T Intro. 6). The lesson Hume learns from the "honest gentlemen"—one of which the gentlemen themselves are not entirely aware—shows us why. What Hume learns is both the unavoidability of opinion and its character. We human beings cannot do without opinion. It serves as the enabling ground of all our engagement with the world. Yet while opinion makes our openness to the world possible, it also stands as a barrier between us and whatever is out there. We are somehow dimly aware that opinion is not the thing it claims to be. While opinion is our only access to the world, we also somehow stand outside of it, are able to reflect on its limitations. To be human, then, is to stand both inside opinion and outside opinion at the same time.[21] And this is perhaps the deepest message conveyed by Hume's story about philosophers and honest gentlemen.

Hume's Socratism

In the light of Hume's turn to moral-political topics in the "Conclusion" to Book I of the *Treatise*, the allusion to Socrates in the introduction begins to make sense. If the core of Hume's thought was the recognition that the investigation of morality and politics is indispensable for a self-aware philosopher, then we can understand why he might have alluded to Socrates bringing philosophy down from heavens and establishing it in the cities, in Cicero's famous formulation, in order to anticipate the central thoughts of Hume's own book. He evidently relied on his readers to catch the allusion, which they could have known from reading Cicero directly, or from Addison's appropriation of the remark in the *Spectator*, or from some other source. To think that that Hume used the Socratic allusion in this way, we need not think that he had any elaborate interpretation of Socrates in mind. He may well have had nothing more than Cicero's remark in view

Rather he views them as the only instruments through which we can understand the real, however darkly and obscurely" (*Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, 31).

[21] As Livingston points out: "Philosophical reflection . . . must work, paradoxically, both within and without the world of common life" (*Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, 31).

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when he wrote it. Moreover, it is entirely possible that he had arrived at the central teachings of the *Treatise* independently and only later realized that Cicero's remark would provide an apt image for his own argument, one that at least some of his readers would recognize as such. But whether Hume understood Socrates deeply or not, this essay has argued that the image draws our attention to aspects of Hume's own argument that are undeniably there and quite crucial for understanding Hume's intentions. Hume does think that, once philosophers come to recognize the aporetic quality of their metaphysical or theological inquiries into the "original and ultimate principle" of things, they come to see that they cannot avoid thinking through and investigating everyday opinion, especially everyday moral and political opinion. Whatever may be the truth about genuine necessity, no philosophy that ignores opinion as it presents itself in everyday life can be adequate. And this discovery, portrayed so memorably in the "Conclusion," is the core of what may be called Hume's Socratism.

As we have seen, calling philosophy down from the heavens and compelling it to investigate life and morality and human affairs is exactly what Hume does in the "Conclusion." He starts by presenting himself as a theoretical philosopher, concerned only with the truth about causality and the character of the "original and ultimate principle." But in the course of the "Conclusion" he is compelled to come back down to earth, to recognize his kinship with the "gross earthy mixture" of the "honest gentlemen," and to face up to his need for common sense as a philosophical starting point. In the "Conclusion" Hume enacts for us the discovery that even the most theoretical philosopher needs to start from common sense, from the ordinary experience of everyday life. I conclude that Hume's reference to Socrates in the introduction is meant to be an adumbration of just this dimension of the drama of the *Treatise*.

If correct, these observations have important implications for how we read the rest of the *Treatise*. In particular, they suggest that the book has a dramatic structure with Hume's turn from metaphysics and epistemology to morality and politics as its pivotal moment. They lead us to expect that Book I reveals something about the roots and motivations of the turn depicted in the "Conclusion," and that Books II and III show us its results and consequences. More precisely, we would expect that Book I gives us Hume's analysis and critique of the natural science of his early modern predecessors, and that Books II and III show us Hume's quasi-Socratic treatment of morality, politics, and the passions in action. The Socratic allusion thus provides a hypothesis about the structure and argument of the *Treatise* as a whole.

To judge this hypothesis adequately, we would need an interpretation of the *Treatise* as a whole, a task beyond the scope of this essay.[22] Nonetheless,

[22]I offer the beginning of such an interpretation in *Hume and the Politics of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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a few observations may make it more plausible. In the "Conclusion," Hume refers directly back to his chapter "Of the Modern Philosophy" and uses the same formulation of the problem of causality in both places (cf. T 1.4.7.4 n. with 1.4.4.15). While he does not name any names in that chapter, he means by the "modern philosophy" something very close to Cartesian mathematical physics. According to the "modern philosophy," he says, the "generation, increase, decay and corruption of animals and vegetables, are nothing but changes of figure and motion; as also the operations of all bodies on each other; of fire, of light, water, air, earth, and of all the elements and powers of nature" (T 1.4.4.5). "Of the Modern Philosophy" leads up to a skeptical crisis, the very same crisis in fact that animates Hume's autobiographical crisis at the end of Book I. It thus looks as though Hume's turn in the "Conclusion" is directly related to the crisis that Hume found in the Baconian-Cartesian science of nature.[23] As for Hume's inquiries after his quasi-Socratic turn, the focus on the passions, morality and politics in Books II and III is obvious enough, but the self-reflective character of Hume's inquiries there is not always sufficiently noted. Hume indicates this dimension of his inquiries most clearly in the epigraph to Book III, which restates his original articulation of his moral-political inquiries quite precisely. "O lover of hardy virtue," the epigraph runs, "ask what virtue is and demand an example of an honest man" (T 3 epigraph).[24] Hume does not address a Cartesian mind, disinterestedly contemplating human beings from some "view from nowhere," but someone already moved by the beauty of virtue, perhaps because only someone already in love with virtue has a sufficient incentive to wrestle with it and think it through to the bottom. Yet loving virtue does not mean that we know what virtue is, what its foundations are, or even if it has any foundations. By using this epigraph, Hume thus indicates that the animating source of his moral-political inquiries is an awareness of our ignorance of the grounds for the beliefs we hold most dearly, echoing his description of his new project in the "Conclusion." In a longer reading of Book III, we would see that Part 1 of that book works out both parts of this approach to moral and political matters. Hume first articulates our everyday admiration for virtue and detestation of vice (T 3.1.2.1), and then shows that those moral sentiments are not self-explanatory or self-justifying. We must seek their foundations or principles (T 3.1.2.6, 11).

[23]Danford provides helpful discussion of Hume's relation to his early modern predecessors along these lines in *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, ch. 2–4. See also Yenor's discussion of Descartes and Locke in "Beyond Rationalism and Postmodernism," 333.

[24]The source of the epigraph is Lucan, *Pharsalia* 9. 544. Paul Russell provides the full text of the speech from which the epigraph is taken and argues persuasively that in Hume's milieu the quotation carries connotations of freethinking and opposition to tyranny. See Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's* Treatise: *Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ch. 7 and appendix.

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The moral-political inquiries of Book III are thus Socratic in this sense: by taking our moral sentiments seriously, Hume forces us to see that we too must seek for their grounds, whatever those grounds might be.

In lieu of the more detailed interpretation of the *Treatise* that would be required to substantiate these suggestions, I conclude with two general remarks, one about the meaning of Hume's science of human nature, the other about the relationship of philosophy to politics. The usual reading of Hume's reference to his science of human nature is that he is proposing to apply the methods of modern Baconian-Cartesian science to human beings. This interpretation is often supplemented by the view, mentioned above, that the "Conclusion" signifies the disappointment of Hume's hopes for that science. But if Hume's comparison of himself to Socrates means anything, it should mean that his science of human nature refers, not to some investigation of human beings on the model of mathematical physics, but to his investigation of moral and political opinions as they present themselves in everyday life. And this, of course, is exactly what Hume proposes in the "Conclusion." The introduction, it seems, only gives us a preliminary image of Hume's science of human nature, the main theme of the entire book. We readers come to see fully what Hume has in mind with his science of human nature at the end of Book I, after his turn to morality and politics. Perhaps we readers need to work through the stages of how Hume came to his science of human nature before we can fully understand that science as he intends it. Far from being a confession of disappointment and despair, the "Conclusion" is Hume's fullest statement of what his science of human nature is. It is thus no surprise that Hume reasserts both his claim that the science of human nature is the master science and his ambitions to produce a superior such science at the end of Book I (T 1.4.7.14).[25]

I do not mean to suggest that Hume has abandoned his ambitions for a truly empirical study of human beings. But empirical or "experimental" (Hume's word) does not necessarily entail the whole apparatus of what we have come to call the hard sciences—controlled experiments designed to uncover predictive, mathematical laws of motion. It can mean something closer to the hardheaded study of human life on its own terms, the kind of study realistic historians and political scientists have engaged in for a long time.[26] To speak anachronistically, Hume is closer to Machiavelli and

[25]Hume also reasserts his claim about the fundamental character of his "science of human nature," first made in the introduction, in T 1.4.7: "Human nature is the only science of man" (emphasis added; T 1.4.7.14; cf. T Intro. 6, 4). Compare Leo Strauss's remark about Socrates: "we have learned from Socrates that the political things, or the human things, are the key to the understanding of all things" (Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958], 19).

[26]Baier makes a similar observation: "Hume was initiating not the science (in our sense) of psychology, either introspective or experimental, but a broader discipline of reflection on human nature, in which Charles Darwin and Michel Foucault, as

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Thucydides than he is to B. F. Skinner or the cognitive science of our own time. Hume's science of human nature, as it comes to light at the end of Book I, starts from our pretheoretical moral and political attachments and strives to understand them on their own terms. As we have seen, it is motivated by the disquieting awareness of the gap between our moral beliefs and our knowledge of their foundations or principles.[27] Hume in fact touches on the difference between the human sciences and the "hard" sciences in the introduction to the *Treatise* itself. "Moral philosophy," he says, has "this peculiar disadvantage, which is not found in the natural," in that it cannot make its experiments "purposely, with premeditation, and after such a manner as to satisfy itself concerning every particular difficulty which may arise" (T Intro. 10). Moral philosophy must thus proceed, not by double-blind experimental studies, but through the commonsense investigation of human beings in ordinary life. "We must therefore," he remarks, "glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behavior in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" (T Intro. 10). As would become clear in a longer study of Hume's corpus, his science of human nature more closely resembles political prudence or rationalism than it does any hard science.[28] And it is for this conception of the science of human nature that Hume reserves his highest praise: "Where experiments of this kind are judiciously collected and compar'd, we may hope to establish on them a science, which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension" (T Intro. 10).

Finally, scholars often emphasize moderation as the defining virtue of Hume's practical philosophy.[29] This is certainly accurate: Hume does really think that the human proclivity for radical questioning about first causes and the like is dangerous for political life. But our reading of the "Conclusion" shows that it is not the whole story. Hume also thinks that

much as William James and Sigmund Freud, can be seen to belong" (*A Progress of Sentiments*, 25). See also Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, 192–93.

[27]Hardin is thus correct to emphasize Hume's empiricism and naturalism, but he misses Hume's claim that he is already entangled in moral opinions and therefore must seek their foundations. For Hume, but not for Hardin, we cannot avoid the question of "what our substantive moral views should be." See *David Hume: Moral and Political Theorist*, 8, together with T 1.4.7.12.

[28]The example Hume chooses to illustrate the "love of truth," the passion, he says, motivating the whole *Treatise*, is a man standing outside of a city contemplating it (T 2.3.10). And when he discusses the "anatomist of human nature" in the last paragraph of the book, he is referring to his own investigation of morality and politics in Book III (T 3.3.6.6).

[29]See, for example, Danford, *David Hume and the Problem of Reason*, 85; and Yenor, "Between Rationalism and Postmodernism," 347–49.

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sound political life, especially the liberal-democratic regime he encourages, needs skeptical philosophers to beat back superstition. Since Hume's philosophers are defined by having gone through "philosophical melancholy and delirium," that means that sound political life needs people within it who have some relationship with the enduring question of the "original and ultimate principle" and all that it entails. Rather than being simply a plea for moderation, the "Conclusion" is in fact an argument to preserve an awareness of the *aporias* associated with radical questioning. To be sure, Hume does not recommend that everyone in the society concern themselves with those questions. It is easy enough to see how a direct confrontation with radical questioning can produce fear and anxiety, and how fear and anxiety can sway human beings to superstition and eventually to fanaticism and religious war. We are far better off making the center of our regime political prudence and enlightened self-interest then religious or theological belief. Nonetheless, the political society Hume recommends cannot lose touch with radical questioning altogether. In the course of making his case for moderate politics, Hume has simultaneously made the case for the necessity and goodness of something immoderate, philosophy itself.

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