



MODERATION AND THE  
LIBERAL STATE: DAVID  
HUME'S HISTORY OF  
ENGLAND

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Abstract: Historical examples can often serve as more persuasive evidence, especially to the general public, than the most well-reasoned theory. It is not surprising then that in the later part of his career, David Hume chose this medium to communicate his philosophy. Hume's intentions and the outcomes of writing *The History of England* are well worth revisiting periodically. In this work, Hume cleverly uses political esotericism to push forward his two overarching goals. The primary goal was to disseminate the philosophy that harmony lies near the middle, at least in regard to political authority. This belief does not require all those who are governed and those who govern to be moderate in their views. In fact, on many subjects, Hume did not hold a view anywhere near the center; he merely promoted the notion that society should be governed somewhere near the median. If one wished to push governmental authority in one direction or the other, a society's culture must be pushed in that direction at the same time to avoid the instability that can lead to tyranny. Hume's secondary goal was to push the median view of his society toward one that favored a liberal state, a state that could only be sustainable if Hume's primary goal was achieved.

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In 1752, the year he commenced working on his series *The History of England* (hereafter referred to as his *History*), David Hume was in the later part of his career. He had matured considerably from the 28-year-old who published the work for which he is better known today, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which he famously stated had been rushed to the presses too hastily. Hume's *History*, although not as widely studied today, would end up influencing not just his own culture but American culture as well throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it was to become one of the most widely read texts of English history. As Thomas Jefferson, a strong critic of Hume, wrote, "Our laws, language, religion, politics, & manners are so deeply laid in English foundations, that we shall never cease to consider their history as a part of ours, and to study ours in that as its origin. Everyone knows that judicious matter & charms of stile have rendered Hume's history the Manual of every student" (Jefferson, 1810).

A high-quality history should be written as more than a rote chronicle of significant events and leaders. Beyond simply summarizing the past, a rich historical account can influence society by providing lessons and inspiration on how to create a better future. Hume's *History* went further in this direction than other similar texts from his time. It can be seen as not only a philosophy book that explains human nature through a series of prominent past examples, but also as a political book meant to make us rethink how we view those with opposing political views and to question how government violence should be used against one side or the other.

Many Hume scholars comment critically on Hume's shift in the focus of his writing from his earlier, "more serious" work to his later, more accessible and popular writings which included his *History*. Hume himself was well aware that his love of fame was cause for criticism. When summing up his life in his autobiography, he wrote, "Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments" (Hume, 1985). However, as this paper will argue, chasing celebrity and writing in an approachable manner are not necessarily undignified goals. Rather, a celebrated popular status was a necessary component for Hume to gain enough respect to shift public opinion. Hume saw no value in confusing the average reader with overly complex writing. As M. A. Box points out, "It did not in Hume's view adulterate philosophy to render it approachable to men of *bons sens*; it adulterated philosophy to becloud it with occult qualities and incoherent jargon" (Box, 1952, p.52). For Hume, it was not enough to simply have an interesting and coherent philosophical theory, one had to effectively communicate that theory to the general public.

Hume's later writings were part of a growing movement among philosophers, as Arthur Melzer (2014) states, to write "for the purpose of enlightening and transforming the religious world" (p. 237). In his book, *Philosophy Between the Lines*, Melzer points out that around the

time Hume was active, political esotericism, one of the four types of esotericism he outlines in his book, was starting to gain traction among philosophers. Political esotericism was a project by philosophers aimed at creating a rational society. Melzer formally defines political esotericism as “philosophical dissimulation in the service of a political as distinguished from a philosophical or pedagogical project” (Melzer, 2014, p. 238). The following pages will examine the political esotericism used in Hume’s *History*. By employing esotericism, Hume’s books served the purpose of steering the public away from versions of history that aided extremism and inflamed violent passions by not revealing more than was necessary to make his perspectives clear to the discerning reader.

Hume’s *History* was a document meant to draw in members of all sides and nudge them to accept a center-leaning compromise of the historical narrative, which sometimes required him to write diplomatically in a way that would appeal to all sides. If his readers could learn to make a mental compromise over subjective or uncertain lessons of the past, they may become practiced in doing so and adopt this negotiable approach to their understanding of contemporary political issues as well. I will argue that Hume’s goal was primarily to create a culture which accepted that governmental authority had to set rules around the median opinion, and with this expectation created in a culture, governments would be encouraged to follow a median stance as well. Although it was preferable for government to rule in the center, those with non-central views could be valuable in moving the median opinion along the scale, as long as they did not push an extreme agenda and try to force it on society. In fact, that was Hume’s secondary goal, to push the median belief of culture toward one that favored a liberal state.

Section I explains why Hume set these goals for his political esoteric project and how the two goals were fundamentally linked. Section II will look into why Hume believed a written

history was the best vehicle for this project. Section III will examine specific examples from Hume's *History* and discuss the reactions to the series. Finally, in Section IV I will give my concluding remarks.

### **1. Hume's Goals of a Stable Liberal State**

Moderation, as a political and social aspiration, can be defined in two ways: by holding an opinion that is a compromise between two extremes, or by merely accepting that governance must operate near the middle to dissuade the more violent passions of extremists. For David Hume, a man who understood the importance of balance of power (in spite of his occasional far-off-center views), the second definition of moderation was the better one. In terms of political power, Hume was a believer in meeting halfway to give two arguing sides some of what they want rather than giving a total victory to any one side. When opposing sides walk away from an argument both feeling as though they have been given some degree of political victory, not only will they have had a positive negotiating experience, but when the two sides have to "play again," they will be more likely to temper their high passions and aim for a win-win rather than an absolute victory.

Andrew Sabl's book, *Hume Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England*, details how Hume's *History* can be seen as a series of coordination problems, with violent skirmishes arising over accepted authority. He rightly notes that one of Hume's great innovations in thought is his assertion that "conventions of authority need not rest on moral agreement. In fact, their great attraction is that they can arise in the absence of such agreement and persist, to the benefit of peace and good government" (Sabl, 2013, p. 1). For Hume, the best place for conventions of authority is near the middle of public opinion, where they are most likely to maintain long-term stability. The process of setting government authority near the center requires

nonpartisanship and continual adjustments and refinements of opinions. It requires a tamping down of the natural passions that lead to factionalization and a reducing of the impulse to simplify or distort distinct ideas or groups, whether the ideas or groups are of the past or present.

This process, however, does not require everyone to come to the same or similar conclusions in a society. As Donald T. Siebert points out, Hume held many morally unconventional views in his lifetime. “One thing is clear about Hume the moralist. Although he often supports conventional positions—one should love one’s family and help one’s fellow creatures—he also advocates the heterodox: pride is normally good, adultery is no real vice, suicide is occasionally advisable, religious worship is too frequently an abomination” (Siebert, 1990, p. 180). If a society held a preference for governmental moderation that was grounded in the established system, unconventional thinkers like David Hume or even Jean-Jacques Rousseau could both still live contentedly within it. (Hume’s interaction with Rousseau is an apt example of theory not always matching practice [Hume 2010])<sup>1</sup>. For this type of society to be sustained, the majority of its members would have to favor for a leader what Adam Smith calls a “Man of Public Spirit,” rather than a “Man of System,” even if the “Man of System” favors their preferred system (Smith et al., 1984, pp. 233-234).

In his book, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics*, Duncan Forbes argues Hume wrote his history as a final phase in his plan “to give the established, Hanoverian, regime a proper intellectual foundation” (Forbes, 2010, p.x). In doing so, Hume tried to diminish the power of many partisan myths that encouraged factionalization of political parties. Yet Hume’s work was an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> Hume and Rousseau had initially formed an amicable relationship over scholarship, with Hume even assisting Rousseau in moving to England. However, the friendship eventually soured once Rousseau settled in England, and the two started interacting more consistently.

do much more than legitimize the current regime. In most of his popular work, especially his *History*, Hume tries to train and modify his reader to be open to one's intellectual opponents and to learn from their point of view. He attempts to train the reader to understand that for many issues, politics and history are subjective and worth compromising over. Box notes on some of Hume's writings, Hume "hoped to settle vain disputes by showing them to be undecidable, and thereby to turn man's inquisitiveness into constructive channels" (Box, 1952, 38).

For Hume, his goal of reinforcing a moderate, established government coincided with his desire for greater liberty. There could be no liberal state without an agreement among the populace that government had to be centered near the middle. Although there is some debate around Hume's meaning in using the word "liberty" (Capaldi, 2018), in this paper I assume Hume's idea of a stable liberal state is one with liberty defined as not just the stable rule of law, but a presumption in favor of having one's person, property, and promises due be left alone and undisturbed by the government and other people. Klein and Matson (forthcoming) termed this notion "mere-liberty".

A healthy measure of liberty, in this sense, is much harder to achieve, and it cannot be achieved for long without a moderate government. There must be not only a strong, stable government that is discouraged from encroaching on its peoples' property, but also a strong consensus by the people to obey their government, along with an awareness of when it overreaches. If a culture lacks an appreciation for governmental moderation or if the government stops acting sufficiently moderately, the citizens' sense of duty to obey society's rules will weaken. Rebellious factions may decide to follow only the rules they support, especially if the government is brought too far to the opposing side. A culture built around following the rule of

law but which is unable to coordinate obedience to its laws, likely will deteriorate and bring liberty down with it.

On another level, when factions reach the point where large circles of society do not follow the laws they dislike, the government tends to expand its powers to force obedience. This expansion leads to more violent emotions on both sides, and truth becomes a victim. Leaders tend to gain greater power in highly partisan societies as emotions run high, while citizens put more faith in and give more power to their leaders than their leaders may deserve, believing them to be capable of the extraordinary, and occasionally even the miraculous. Humanizing leaders on both sides can therefore become a tool to encourage moderation in highly partisan societies. Stable, liberal rules of law become less favored as citizens begin to prefer the quick solutions of arbitrary law that can defeat the opposing side.

In such situations, government expansion and encroachment on individual liberty become less troubling than a defeat of the other side, or than stopping the violence that comes from the turmoil of factionalization that begins to build up. In the end, Hume writes, violence often increases the call for tyranny as society hopes to re-establish security. As Hume states in Book VI, after the English Civil Wars when Cromwell took control of the government, “By recent, as well as all ancient example, it was become evident, that illegal violence, with whatever pretences it may be covered, and whatever object it may pursue, must inevitably end at last in the arbitrary and despotic government of a single person” (Hume, 2015, VI, p.54). Turmoil and violence almost never strengthen cultural support for more liberty. Unrestrained strongmen with arbitrary power often are applauded as they encroach on stable rules of law and liberty because they can restrain the violent passions of the masses.



Although Hume called himself a “friend of liberty,” he was well aware that liberty tends to ferment polarization and factions, which, in the long run, can lead to the reduction of liberty. In a letter written in May 1761, he noted, “The spirit of faction, which prevails in this country, and which is a natural attendant on civil liberty, carries everything to extremes on the one side, as well as on the other” (Hume, 2011, p.344). In his essay, “That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science,” Hume states, “Those who either attack or defend a minister in such a government as ours, where the utmost liberty is allowed, always carry matters to an extreme, and exaggerate his merit or demerit with regard to the public. ... When this accusation and panegyric are received by the partizans of each party, no wonder they beget an extraordinary ferment on both sides, and fill the nation with violent animosities” (Hume, 1985, pp. 27-28). In order for liberty to be sustainable and not self-destructive, there had to be a cultural brake on this natural tendency toward polarization. By disseminating philosophy that encouraged the general public towards this type of thinking, one could indirectly encourage liberty and a stable state. Hume saw an impartial history that would encourage moderation as an antidote to political factions. As will be discussed in the next section, there are many reasons why he saw history as a cure to the liberal problem of self-destruction.

## **2. Why History?**

Donald Livingston (1985) argues Hume’s historical work is partially a “fulfillment of a demand imposed by his conception of philosophy” (p. 2). Although the consistency in thought between Hume’s earlier and later work may not be as strong as Livingston proposes, there is a clear thematic trend within Hume’s writings, and his interest in history was likely propelled by his earlier philosophical work. Hume’s desire to write a history can be traced to around 1739, when he published his *Treatise of Human Nature*. The desire continued to be on his mind

throughout the years. In January 1747 he wrote to his brother, “Had I any Fortune, which cou’d give me a Prospect of Leizure & Opportunitys to prosecute my historical Projects, nothing cou’d be more useful to me” (Hume, 2011, p. 23).

In 1752, Hume was finally given the opportunity to focus more directly on his historical series when he was elected librarian to Edinburgh’s Faculty of Advocates. In 1754, he published what is now known as Book V of *The History of England*—the first volume of the series to be written—which opened with the first Stuart King, James I, crowned in 1603. Within a decade, he had published all six volumes of his *History*, which spanned thousands of pages and covered hundreds of years, from the invasion of Julius Caesar to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Why, despite his success in other genres of writing, Hume felt the need to compile a history is a question worth exploring, as he did invest a significant amount of resources into the venture.

One impetus for him was a lack of what he considered impartial English histories of high quality. Historian Rapin de Thoyras, for instance, had once been a favorite of Hume’s for what appeared to be a comparative lack of bias until Hume looked closer at his work and found significant errors of interpretation (Forbes, 2010, pp. 262-263). In one letter, Hume lambasted the ignorance and partiality of all previous historians. He wrote in June 1753, “Rapin, whom I had an esteem for, is totally despicable” (Hume, 2011b, p. 179). In a letter written in January 1753, prior to the publication of his first *History*, Hume wrote, “You know that there is no post of honour in the English Parnassus more vacant than that of History. Style, judgement, impartiality, care—everything is wanting to our historians” (Hume, 2011b, p. 170). Although there were surely many other comparably vacant fields that could have benefited from Hume’s talent, and could potentially have aided him in his push for a liberal state, Hume saw history as uniquely important. This particular deficit bothered him because of the substantial benefits he

believed individuals could gain in learning history and the great danger that could be created in a society when history was written poorly and with bias.

Hume believed an accurate history could play an important role in improving a reader's character and teaching perspective. In 1741, he published an essay titled "Of the Study of History," in which he explains why women particularly, but generally all people, should pursue the study of history, "as it amuses the fancy, as it improves the understanding, and as it strengthens virtue" (Hume, 1985, p. 565). For Hume, a knowledge of one's own country's history, as well as ancient Greek and Roman history, was essential to anyone who craved knowledge and desired to be considered good company and well-esteemed. It is important to note that Hume encouraged focusing study on the history of cultures not too distant to the individual's own. The further removed a history is from one's own culture, the more removed is its usefulness.

Hume did not believe in the uniformity of man, as some scholars like J. B. Black have proposed (1926). Rules and laws that worked in some society in the past would not necessarily work in a different society in the present. Lessons obtained from history cannot be *directly* applicable to any other time or place. As Forbes (2010) points out in a chapter which critiques Black and other scholars' interpretation of Hume, Hume felt "in effect, that pride is pride . . . , but the pride and honour of an Athenian is a different sort of pride and honour to that of a Frenchman who satisfies it in the duel, dueling being unknown in ancient Greece" (p. 108). Nevertheless, this does not mean that history has no value. The passions and conflicts of the governed, passions that Hume sometimes thought needed to be calmed, often echo each other across nations, cultures, and time. History, especially that of a similar culture or period, can help one predict the outcomes of various political circumstances. Thus, cautions and morals that

Hume derives from historical events in his *History*, from England's not too distant past, are likely meant to be applied during his own time. Hume saw that moderation in government could have prevented violence in England's recent past, but this does not mean it would have worked in ruder times. Good rules for governance needed to be customized and gradually adjusted with time. As Hume (2015) states in a footnote in Book III of his *History*, "It must indeed be confessed, that such a state of the country required great discretionary power in the sovereign; nor will the same maxims of government suit such a rude people, that may be proper in a more advanced stage of society" (III, p. 469)

History could illustrate, in a less passionate and urgent manner than contemporary commentary, the instability resulting from factional bias becoming too strong. Hume was able to show in great detail the disconnect between those who believed in a faction's cause and his willingness to see the truth from facts and experience. As John Vladimir Price (1965, p. 6) notes, Hume commonly uses the disparity between the ideal views of a person and reality in his *History* to ironic, and usually condescending, effect, comparing what an actor wants to be true versus what is true. Note Hume's use of the word "chivalry" in Vol. II before telling the story of Edward III's unjust treatment of the town of Calais (p. 237), and again after Henry, duke of Hereford, turns against his criminal associates (p. 313). Another example of Hume's use of irony is the humorous story told in the last paragraph of Hume's treatment of Henry VIII. On the surface it is about banal academic infighting, but it serves as a metaphor for the religious squabbles of the era (Hume, 2015, III, p. 331-2). Hume showed this to be a particular problem historically when some person or group is able to take advantage of those biases through political power. Even though Hume criticizes all questionable historical narratives, the narratives he targets most vehemently are the ones that support certain power structures, be they the Whigs,

the Tories, the rightful power of a king, or the rightful power of Parliament. Hume saw that not all distortions are created equal and not all are an equal threat to the liberal state.

Subscribing exclusively to a distorted, simplistic, and partisan narrative of the past can be dangerous when it leads the subscribers to support dramatic political actions to “restore” something that never existed in the first place, or to destroy something that was never a significant threat. These distortions can create reckless or misguided allegiances to groups or leaders, which can be dangerous in the long run and disrupt the fundamental power of government. Even though a historical text could be used to calm passions, as Hume tried to do, it could also be used to inflame or mislead them.

Hume thought history could shape one’s opinion of government, and that opinion plays a vital role in sustaining that government. In his essay “Of the First Principles of Government,” Hume (1985) writes, “We shall find, that, as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded” (p. 32). Who has a right to rule is a matter of what consensus exists or can be built in public opinion; often that consensus is based on the antiquity or perceived antiquity of a particular claim to rule. Hume (1985) states, “Antiquity always begets the opinion of right” (p. 33). Therefore, a false understanding of history can foster a harmful level of allegiance or animosity to a government’s rule or a political ideal. Hume found that it was common for political groups to write a narrative of history that supported their claim to power. It was also common for some factions of the public to want to believe in these false or exaggerated narratives, presumably when it best fit their agenda.

In one essay, Hume explains how one valuable way to reduce partisan urges was to create a coalition of the political parties to help increase prosperity and encourage proper moderate

opinions (Hume 1985, 494). First, one had to establish that truth and good actors operate on both sides of almost any issue. History could be one tool to help achieve a sense of larger coalition. In the case of historical disputes, Hume (1985) writes that a coalition would also serve in the best interests of a peaceable resolution. “We shall proceed to exercise the same moderation with regard to the historical disputes between the parties, by proving that each of them was justified by plausible topics; that there were on both sides wise men, who meant well to their country; and that the past animosity between the factions had no better foundation than narrow prejudice or interested passion” (p. 494). Further, Hume (1985) writes that a focus on moderation in history could have positive results in unifying present society:

But this is certain, that *the greater moderation we now employ in representing past events; the nearer shall we be to produce a full coalition of the parties*, and an entire acquiescence in our present establishment. Moderation is of advantage to every establishment; Nothing but zeal can overturn a settled power: And an over-active zeal in friends is apt to beget a like spirit in antagonists. The transition from a moderate opposition against an establishment, to an entire acquiescence in it, is easy and insensible (p. 500, emphasis added).

Reading this, it is clear that Hume’s intention in writing his *History* was likely not merely to make it truthful, but to help shape opinion and therefore government, turning it into a sustainable liberal state.

### **3. Hume’s History**

As Forbes (2010) pointed out, it is difficult for anyone to say with complete confidence that he or she has pinpointed Hume’s views on any matter:

Hume is terrible campaign country, rugged, broken, cross-grained, complex, remorseless in its demands. One has to fight every inch of the way, and can never feel really secure. No interpretation ever seems to get going before it is pulled up almost immediately by some difficulty ... that the precision of his language does not match the precision of his thinking is a common complaint, but Hume is

uniquely difficult to interpret because no other thinker probably covers so much ground and says so much with such economy (pp. viii-ix).

This difficulty in understanding Hume's true opinions is surely by Hume's design. His number one goal, as this paper asserts, was not to try to conform society to his beliefs, but to embed a conviction that governmental authority must lie near the middle. To do this, he often spoke out of both sides of his mouth, calling himself "a Whig, but a very skeptical one" yet siding often with the Tories. He wanted to ensure society continued to play the political game of relative success and compromise instead of absolute victory and loss, something that could only occur if people's natural passions for factions were tamped down. As Sabl (2013) notes, the "hallmark of Humean faction" (p. 48), which he tried to persuade against, was zero-sum behavior. Hume's *History* must be seen as a positive-sum proposition, a text that shows the tragedies of missed coordination opportunities; it is a text that was written to be a coordinating document of Hume's political agenda. It was meant to draw both sides into a centered narrative and create a focal perception of the past.

Often beset by criticism from other scholars, Hume had grown adept at responding to critique and defending his work, but his *History* was not written for critics alone. Unlike many previous historical works, Hume deliberately made his *History* as accessible as possible to the general public. His books were able to excite audiences through lively and engaging prose, a quality that had been lacking in many earlier historical writings on England. The elegance of the books was not lost on even his harshest critics of the time. "The capacity of this gentleman, for an orderly, and even elegant narration of facts and events, (if *elegance* were necessary in an historian) and for a pleasing, animated delineation of characters, is freely acknowledged" (dissenting clergyman and historian Roger Flexman cited in Fieser, 2005, p. 2). The approachable quality of his prose was unique, not just as a departure from the typical

contemporary history books of his time, but also because it created an alternative source of history for those whose knowledge in the field was mainly based on unwritten accounts and oral tradition, media typically susceptible to exaggerations. The engaging and accessible nature of Hume's work brought many new readers to the genre who otherwise would have had no interest in reading history, as it previously had required drudging through texts that were long, complex, and dull. As Box notes, this was central to Hume's thinking not just with his historical work, but his philosophical writing too. "Hume might easily have argued instead that for society to spurn philosophy is calamitous. It was more like him, though, to make philosophy more appealing and to entice the reader to 'those noble entertainments' of the life of mind. It was more like an artist thus to wed instructions with entertainment" (Box, 1952, p.52).

Hume tried to encourage the belief in his reader's mind that safety and calm often lies in the middle. Undoubtedly, he did not expect to convert his reader into a man of moderation but by describing the stability that lies in the middle, he could nudge his reader into having a positive opinion of the government ruling there. Toward the end of History Book VI, Hume (2015) states, "Extremes of all kinds are to be avoided; and though no one will ever please either faction by moderate opinions, it is there we are most likely to meet with truth and certainty" (VI, pp. 533-534).

In his work, in line with other "philosophical historians," Hume uses several tools to encourage his readers to be impartial and open to a more moderate view in their interpretation of the past. First, Hume shows how both sides create heroes and villains out of political leaders to fit the narrative they are promoting. As Hume was attempting to write a history that readers of any persuasion would read, he had to strike a balance that would allow all sides to develop skepticism in how they portrayed their own leaders and opponents. He did this by showing the



truth to be less clear-cut than the binary hero/villain dynamic allowed, illustrating that leaders were far less capable of predicting grand or devastating effects than those with partisan convictions would give them credit for. Hume veered away from categorizing any figure as “good” or “bad.” Even in cases when Hume considered a particular figure to have had a primarily positive or negative impact on society, he endeavored to point out a few traits, obscure though they may have been, that would balance that leader’s reputation. Generally, most figures in his writing come across as neither overwhelmingly praiseworthy nor fully reproachable.

One example of Hume’s attempt at balance can be seen in his summation of King James II. Although Hume voiced his approval of Parliament’s action to give away James II’s throne to a worthier candidate, viewing James as a leader out of sync with the median view of the public in his time, he did not follow the trend of other writers who claimed James II was a completely flawed and irredeemable figure:

Thus ended the reign of a prince, whom, if we consider his personal character rather than his public conduct, we may safely pronounce more unfortunate than criminal. He had many of those qualities, which form a good citizen: Even some of those, which, had they not been swallowed up in bigotry and arbitrary principles, serve to compose a good sovereign. *In domestic life, his conduct was irreproachable, and is intitled to our approbation. Severe, but open in his enmities, steady in his counsels, diligent in his schemes, brave in his enterprizes, faithful, sincere, and honourable in his dealings with all men: Such was the character with which the duke of York mounted the throne of England. In that high station, his frugality of public money was remarkable, his industry exemplary, his application to naval affairs successful, his encouragement of trade judicious, his jealousy of national honour laudable:* What then was wanting to make him an excellent sovereign? A due regard and affection to the religion and constitution of his country. Had he been possessed of this essential quality, even his middling talents, aided by so many virtues, would have rendered his reign honourable and happy. When it was wanting, every excellency, which he possessed, became dangerous and pernicious to his kingdoms. (Hume, 2015, VI, p. 179, emphasis added).

Hume not only trained his readers to appreciate the moderate view regarding leaders but to appreciate moderate arguments made in regards to government authority as well. When writing on a hotly debated historical subject, Hume would often give significant space to the strong and weak arguments on both sides. He usually weighed in at the end with a compromise, or at least with an acknowledgment of the strong points of the side he did not agree with. In fact, Hume gave praise and blame to such an extent in his *History* that he comments in a letter of June 1753 that he was worried his balancing would be misinterpreted. “The truth is, there is so much reason to blame and praise alternately King and Parliament, that I am afraid the mixture of both in my composition, being so equal, may pass sometimes for an affectation, and not the result of judgement and evidence” (Hume, 2011b, p.179). John Immerwahr (1989, p. 309), focusing on a few of Hume’s essays, notes Hume’s fondness for Cicero’s rhetorical dialogue. This type of dialogue occurs in Hume’s writing when multiple actors give long uninterrupted arguments making their best case for a cause. Clear examples can be seen throughout Hume’s *History* (Hume, 2015, II, pp.436-438; III, pp. 145-146, 231-232 431-434; V, pp. 93-96, 192-196, 354-356; VI, pp. 171-172, 454-456, 524-525). Immerwahr (1989) argues that Hume uses this type of writing to “enhance the spirit of moderation and calmness in his reader.” Hume hoped to move his reader from “dogmatism and its attendant violent passions to a more skeptical view, with its attendant calm passion” (p. 320).

In addition to constructing balanced character assessments and arguments, Hume was very careful to remove the marvelous and unrealistic attribution which he saw particularly in religious, political, and historical works, which he believed drove people to more extreme positions. A prime example of this is Hume’s characterization of Oliver Cromwell, a figure often either beloved or despised by writers. Hume’s overall view of Cromwell is certainly critical, yet

he is careful to give credit where it is due and remove credit where it is not, undoing a fault he finds in writers on both sides concerning Cromwell's history:

The writers, attached to the memory of this wonderful person, make his character, with regard to abilities, bear the air of the most extravagant panegyric: His enemies form such a representation of his moral qualities as resembles the most virulent invective. . . . My intention is not to disfigure this picture, drawn by so masterly a hand: *I shall only endeavour to remove from it somewhat of the marvellous; a circumstance which, on all occasions, gives much ground for doubt and suspicion* (Hume 2015, VI, pp. 107-108, emphasis added).

Hume continues, explaining that although Cromwell's success did require some talent, it was not a talent unique to him. Much of Cromwell's success, whether interpreted as good or bad, can be attributed to his being in the right place at the right time.

Hume was even more critical when acts of genius by historical subjects were escalated into miraculous feats that could be explained only by divine intervention. Readers who believed in miraculous events were a clear threat to Hume's goal of a moderate government, as this view tended to discourage compromise. In an earlier essay, "On Miracles," Hume outlines why miraculous events were improbable and it was unreasonable to believe in them, "as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined" (Hume et al., 1975, p. 114). Hume brought this skepticism on miracles to his *History* as well. As discussed previously, the further removed from reality a well-believed tale was, the more unreasonably its believers would behave and the more susceptible they were to being controlled by any authority endorsing that tale.

Hume did not deny that these tales were effective in motivating masses, but he saw that in the long run, miraculous tales often netted negative effects. As Sabl notes, "Since leadership

and discipline, like politics, depend on opinion, the opinion of divine favor may work just as well as the real thing (especially since in Hume's view there is no real thing)... Joan rallied the French because she was chosen by God, and only as long as they believed that; she was a strong focal point but an unstable one" (Sabl, 2013, p. 64). In his History, one can see Hume's skepticism of the miraculous in his depiction of the story of Joan of Arc, where he casts strong doubt on her connection to God. "Her unexperienced mind, working day and night on this favourite object, mistook the impulses of passion for heavenly inspirations; and she fancied, that she saw visions, and heard voices, exhorting her to re-establish the throne of France, and to expel the foreign invaders" (Hume, 2015, II, pp. 397-398). Hume continues to describe Joan of Arc's rise to power, while cautioning historians about reproducing such tales without criticism. "It is the business of history to distinguish between the miraculous and the marvellous; to reject the first in all narrations merely profane and human; to doubt the second; and when obliged by unquestionable testimony, as in the present case, to admit of something extraordinary, to receive as little of it as is consistent with the known facts and circumstances" (Hume, 2015, II, p. 398).

Hume goes on to outline the ways in which Joan of Arc's story was embellished and made more miraculous in order to galvanize troops. He sought to highlight the danger of a tale not grounded in truth, as it can always be expanded and embellished. Though the feats of Joan of Arc appeared miraculous for a girl with no military background, Hume notes that this too could have been an embellishment. In truth, Joan of Arc could have achieved her success by simply heeding the military generals around her rather than listening to the voice of God. Sabl argues that Hume's writings on Joan of Arc are meant to encourage his reader to follow military leaders with "well-earned reputations," yet this may only be partially true (Sabl, 2013, p. 65). Leaders who held more skill were certainly praised more in Hume's writings than leaders who relied on

myths, yet throughout Hume's *History* he seems to be encouraging a caution towards unquestioning loyalty to even the more capable of leaders.

Hume was often very careful not to conflate positive outcomes with any "genius" in one's character or negative outcomes with a deficit, realizing the truth was often more complicated, and large macroscopic events usually resulted from numerous less visible factors. As Frederick G. Whelan notes, "Hume evaluates the characters of his protagonists not in terms of fixed, ideal principles, or from the general point of view of an ideal observer, but from the contextual perspective of the complex historical situations in which they lived and in which their actions were performed, as best as this can be reconstructed" (Whelan, 2004, p. 250). A notable example is Henry VIII. In Hume's estimation, Henry was "sincere, open, gallant, liberal, and capable at least of a temporary friendship and attachment," but was unfortunate in "that the incidents of his reign served to display his faults in their full light" (Hume, 2015, III, p. 322).

Significant moments, as Hume renders them, are often catalyzed not just from actions but also from opposing reactions, both of which can be praised or criticized. Convincing his readers of this fact could perhaps spread skepticism over axiomatic thinking and beliefs in cure-all solutions, which leave little room for compromise. For example, Hume is careful not to place the blame for the English civil wars of the 1640s solely on King Charles I or Parliament. Hume expresses more sympathy for Charles I, who in the end was removed from his throne and executed, than many historians of his time, but he does not allow him to be a complete victim of his circumstances. Hume goes into detail on the many missteps Charles I made, and although Hume felt that Parliament overreacted to some of Charles I's actions, it was still within Charles I's control to avoid his fate. "From the mixed character, indeed, of Charles, arose in part the misfortunes, in which England was at this time involved. His political error, or rather

weaknesses, had raised him inveterate enemies: His eminent moral virtues had procured him zealous partizans: And between the hatred of the one, and the affections of the other, was the nation agitated with the most violent convulsions” (Hume, 2015, V, p. 384).

Even though the main intention of Hume’s *History* was to persuade public opinion of the importance of a moderate government, he also gave warning to political leaders who did not yield in some manner to the center opinion. Hume argues that many of the Stuarts’ political troubles were not the result of a change in their administration’s policies from the previous successful reigns, but from a *lack* of change. A leader has to evolve with his or her people. Many historians in Hume’s time argued that the Stuarts’ reign failed because they tried to restrain liberty but in his *History*, Hume made it clear that Elizabeth, though much beloved, also imposed restraints on liberty. In many instances, for example, he criticized her allowance of monopolies, which he claims she supported more than her predecessors, restricting the liberty for free trade for many:

She granted her servants and courtiers patents for monopolies; and these patents they sold to others, who were thereby enabled to raise commodities to what price they pleased, and who *put invincible restraints upon all commerce, industry, and emulation in the arts*. It is astonishing to consider the number and importance of those commodities, which were thus assigned over to patentees. Currants, salt, iron, powder, cards, calf-skins, fells, pouldavies, ox-shin-bones, train oil, lists of cloth, pot-ashes, anniseeds, vinegar, sea-coals, steel, aquavitae, brushes, pots, bottles, saltpetre, lead, accidences, oil, calamine stone, oil of blubber, glasses, paper, starch, tin, sulphur, new drapery, dried pilchards, transportation of Iron ordnance, of beer, of horn, of leather, importation of Spanish wool, of Irish yarn: These are but a part of the commodities, which had been appropriated to monopolists (Hume, 2015, IV, p. 344).

As Klein and Matson (forthcoming) note, the word “restraints” (p. 29) refers to violations of mere-liberty. Had the culture in England not changed with the next ruler’s reign, or had the Stuarts evolved with the culture, they might never have lost power (Hume, 2015, V, p. 19).

In addition to giving a lesson to rulers, Hume's view helped coordinate multiple sides' views by including elements from both the Tory and Whig versions of British history. In his essay "The Parties of Great Britain," Hume defines a post-1689 Tory as "a lover of monarchy, though without abandoning liberty; and a partisan of the family of STUART." He defines a Whig as "a lover of liberty though without renouncing monarchy; and a friend to the settlement in the Protestant line" (Hume, 1985, p. 71). By arguing that the Stuarts were more or less following their predecessors and were not simply tyrants who wanted to expand royal prerogative beyond previous limits, one can be a little more sympathetic to their reigns. On another level, by repainting the Stuart kings as ordinary, relatable people and not villains, as the Whigs made them seem, readers are able to identify more with the monarchy, an institution Hume largely supported, and therefore have more faith that it will act in the people's best interests. If history were full of examples of villainous kings and queens, no citizen would ever feel any duty or inclination to obey them and instead would want stronger opposition leaders to challenge them.

A frequent refrain in Hume's *History* is a caution against radical change, as Hume considered society's stability fragile and difficult to regain once lost. Hume claims the relative stability of eighteenth-century England arose from a complex series of actions and reactions, and not from a driving force like God, a constitution, or a heroic actor. Given this complexity, any substantial reform puts its society at risk of spiraling into tyranny, especially if the reform is unpopular to a large group. Once violent passions in a society are inflamed, they are hard to suppress. In one of his essays, Hume strongly warns against revolting against the government, even when the government is far from ideal, as risk is usually involved.

Here I must confess, that I shall always incline to their side, who draw the bond of allegiance very close, and consider an infringement of it, as the last refuge in desperate cases, where the public is in the highest danger from violence and tyranny. For besides

the mischiefs of a civil war, which commonly attends insurrection; it is certain, that, where a disposition to rebellion appears among any people, it is one chief cause of tyranny in the rulers, and forces them into many violent measures which they would have never embraced, had everyone been inclined to submission and obedience. (Hume 1985, p. 490).

Although Hume approved of liberal policies put forward by the government, he did not support a dramatic change of any state, even to the most ideal liberal form. Hume preferred reform to be gradual and steady, allowing culture to have time to adjust to it. For Hume, many people are habit-driven, and any change in circumstance will yield some level of unpredictability.

Although there is room for debate concerning Hume's support of Parliament in the events leading up to the civil war of the 1640s, his support of the revolution of 1688 is clear. Nevertheless, his reasons for this support are still debated. Hume's stance, Forbes (2010) suggests, may have been an uncomfortable one. "The plain fact seems to be that although Hume can defend, quite unambiguously and consistently with his general principles, the present establishment, he cannot unambiguously and consistently defend those who brought it about" (p. 100). The question of why Hume does not condemn the revolution despite its being, as Forbes asserts, against his general principles is one with no definite answer. It is possible that Hume does this to help diminish the passions of his fellow citizens, rather than truly believing that dethroning James II was a rightful parliamentary act. As previously noted, Hume would on occasion sacrifice a completely honest account with one that would assist in moderating the public's general outlook. The change in the line of succession due to the revolution continued to spark occasional rebellions. The Jacobite rebellions, occurring sporadically from 1688 to 1746, were uprisings with the aim of restoring James II's descendants to the throne. Hume himself was very cautious to avoid being thought of as a Jacobite sympathizer and would likely have used



prudence in writing anything that would fuel the flames of this rebellion and upset the current government (Hume, 2011b, pp. 263-264). Even if Hume did believe the revolution was unjust, writing this opinion could have come at a high cost to himself and his nation—a cost Hume was unlikely to find worthwhile. As Forbes (2010) notes, “Hume wanted to avoid giving unnecessary offence to either party: and to raise the question of the rights and wrongs of 1688 was only to unnecessarily exacerbate the animosities which he wanted to allay” (p. 97).

An alternative explanation for Hume’s support of the revolution is that he was not as conservative as scholars often attribute him to be. As Merrill (2005) notes, Hume is contradictory and possibly esoteric in his writings on rebellions, stating in his *History* that one could argue that the right of rebellion should be hidden from the public. However, then Hume proceeds to talk at length about the right to rebel. Merrill notes that Hume acknowledges in one passage of his *History* that there are multiple degrees of resistance to government, each with varying levels of acceptability, depending on the level of tyranny of the government. Although Hume strongly condemns regicide, he admits that it is acceptable in a few select cases; dethroning a king is somewhat more tolerable, and resisting a king is more acceptable still (Hume, 2015, V, pp. 544-546). Merrill (2005) makes the distinction that contrary to what other scholars have claimed, Hume is not creating limits on rebellions, but rather thresholds for the acceptability of rebellions.

Even if Hume was not as supportive of rebellions as Merrill hints he may be, it is unlikely that Hume was as conservative as he sometimes purported himself to be. The most likely excuse for Hume’s support of the 1688 Revolution was that it had great support among the populace and was therefore a less risky venture. Had King James II maintained his throne, he would not have ruled it near the median. Hume goes to lengths to show this successful revolution was an exception, not the rule.

It happens unluckily for those, who maintain an original contract between the magistrate and people, that great revolutions of government, and new settlements of civil constitutions, are commonly conducted with such violence, tumult, and disorder, that the public voice can scarcely ever be heard; and the opinions of the citizens are at that time less attended to than even in the common course of administration. The present transactions in England, it must be confessed, are a *singular exception* to this observation (Hume, 2015, VI, p. 528, emphasis added).

It is rare for the public to be so unified against the king as they were in 1688, and thus Hume likely thought it would not have been a risk to support it.

In general, Hume supported proportional public responses to poor leadership. However, he was aware that this type of response did not always occur once the public was aroused. Dylan Dellisanti (2018) points out in his research on innovation in the works of Adam Smith (who was a good friend of Hume's) that Smith was very cautious of being supportive of innovation in public policy as it could lead to great violence. Hume shared this caution. Many times when Hume mentions "innovation" in regard to public policy, it accompanies references to turmoil and violence. Although this is not proof that he opposed rebellions, it does show that he likely wanted rebelling factions to weigh the potential costs of their actions and consider moderating them proportionally. Rebellion should be seen as a risk, and for Hume, should only be considered if a super-majority approve.

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The initial reception to Hume's *History* was tepid to say the least. Prior to its publication, Hume predicted some animosity toward the work. In a letter written in October 1753, Hume (2011b) acknowledges Book V would find less favor with the Whigs, while Book VI would disappoint the Tories more. "I am sensible, that the History of [the] two first Stuarts will be most agreeable to the Tories: That of the two last, to the Whigs. But we must endeavor to be above any Regard either to Whigs or Tories" (p. 180). In many letters written after the publication of

Book V, Hume laments not releasing the first two volumes of his *History* at the same time, to balance each other out, or not starting his series with Book III, on the reign of Henry VII. If he had started with that volume, he could have introduced one core yet contentious thesis of the later books—that the Stuarts were not much different from the previous rulers (Hume, 2011b, pp. 263-264).

Once Book VI was published in 1756, however, criticism of his work started to recede and the popularity of the first two volumes together increased. As Hume (2011b, p. 5) admits in his autobiography, Book VI “helped buoy up its unfortunate Brother.” The effects of the popularity of his works were manifold. First, Hume’s *History* inspired a trend of not only increased consumption of historical books, but increased production. One bookkeeper noted at the time, “Formerly we had few histories of England. Before the publication of Mr. Hume’s first volume, in 1755, we could seldom find above half a score in folio, and two or three of smaller size in the shop of our eminent booksellers; but since that time they have multiplied upon us in great abundance” (Fieser, 2005, p. XIV). One could argue that the increase in both supply and demand of history books was important in order to foster more public discourse over history, which in turn could have helped reduce extreme views.

For Hume, the conversation about history seemed never to be over. Hume not only advised others on what he believed to be the proper way to write history but he was also willing to take advice and was unafraid to revise his own work. As James A. Harris (2016) writes in his biography of Hume, “Correction was as important a part of Hume’s literary life as composition was. No book was ever finished. It was always in the process of being improved” (p. 23). Hume frequently wrote to those with strong historical knowledge asking them to advise him on any errors. Using feedback and new information, Hume made numerous revisions to his works

throughout his lifetime. “There is no End of correcting,” he wrote in March 1763 to one historian, after noting a number of corrections he had made to Book V and VI for a new edition and asking for advice on more (Hume, 2011b, p. 379).

Notably, his revisions were not just over factual errors. He revised also to be more inclusive of both sides’ opinions, to give his *History* the broadest appeal possible. As he wrote in one letter in March 1763, “I have corrected several Mistakes and Oversights, which had chiefly proceeded from the plaguy Prejudices of Whiggism, with which I was too much infected when I began this work. ... As I began the History with these two Reigns [King James I and Charles I], I now find that they above all the rest, have been corrupted with Whig Rancour” (Hume, 2011b, p. 379). This claim, which he also makes in his autobiography, is worth questioning, and as Harris (2016) notes, it is likely overplayed. “It is not true that every alteration made was to the Tory side. Hume’s toning down of his treatment of Protestant enthusiasm could be seen as a partial mitigation of his support for the Stuarts, or at least a mitigation of his hostility to their opponents. In ‘My Own Life’, and in his letters, Hume had a tendency to exaggerate his independence from the party that was, as he put it in ‘My Own Life,’ ‘in possession of bestowing all places, both in the state and in the literature’” (p. 370)

Although Hume’s impartiality was sometimes in question, it is clearly a virtue he continually strived for and tried to promote among his readers. In many instances in his correspondence, he can be found relishing in the fact that his loyalties are hard to determine. As he wrote in October 1754, “Whether am I Whig or Tory? Protestant or Papist? Scotch or English? I hope you do not all agree on this head & that there [are] disputes among you about my principles” (Hume, 2011b, p. 196).

#### 4. Conclusion

Hume intended his *History* to encourage political moderation within the English government and to pave the way for a sustainable liberal state. The impulse to romanticize, simplify, and be partisan is an impulse that continually needs to be suppressed in any free society. Hume saw his *History* as one way to do that. In fact, according to Thomas Jefferson (2018), he was hugely successful in this venture. “The distinctions of whig & tory will disappear like chaff on a troubled ocean. Indeed, they have been disappearing from the day Hume first began to publish his history.” In spite of some factual inaccuracies that have been discovered since its publication, Hume’s series still contains many philosophical truths and still can be seen as a powerful political text.

The rules of civility and conduct have progressed quite a bit since the era of Hume. A person today is less prone to invoke violence over partisanship and factionalization issues and is less susceptible to believing in the miraculous. But human nature can only resist so much of its natural inclinations. The dangerous tendency to hold unreasonable amounts of faith or scorn toward leaders, the folly of believing leaders capable beyond their capacity, or the taking of simplistic narratives or ideologies too seriously are still with us and still drive us to extremes. History is still weaponized in politics. It is still common and effective for politicians, in trying to sway a crowd, to claim the past was either magnificent or horrible and that it must be restored or resisted. The drive to push government completely toward one’s own preferred “system” still manifests itself. Hume’s *History* illustrates the dangers in straying too far from truth, moderation, and complexity.

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