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Hume and the Politics of Enlightenment

“Methinks I am like a man, who having narrowly escap’d shipwreck,” David Hume writes in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, “has yet the temerity to put out to sea in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel, and even carries his ambition so far as to think of compassing the globe.” With these words, Hume begins a memorable depiction of the crisis of philosophy and his turn to moral and political philosophy as the path forward. In this groundbreaking work, Thomas W. Merrill shows how Hume’s turn is the core of his thought, linking Hume’s metaphysical and philosophical crisis to the moral-political inquiries of his mature thought. Merrill shows how Hume’s comparison of himself to Socrates in the introduction to the *Treatise* illuminates the dramatic structure and argument of the book as a whole, and he traces Hume’s under-appreciated argument about the political role of philosophy in the *Essays*.

Thomas W. Merrill is a political theorist in the School of Public Affairs at American University in Washington, D.C. He was a senior research analyst at the President’s Council on Bioethics and is the co-editor of *Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Honoring the Work of Leon R. Kass* and *Human Dignity and Bioethics*. He has held fellowships from Princeton University, Harvard University, and the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

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**Winner of the Delba Winthrop Prize for Best Recent Work
in Political Philosophy**

“In this provocative and persuasive study, Tom Merrill treats the career and the thinking of David Hume as no one has before, drawing out in full the implications of a remark, made in the *Treatise of Human Nature*, in which the Scot compares his project as a philosopher with that of Socrates as represented by Cicero in the *Tusculan Disputations*; and showing in fine detail that what appears to be a passing remark is, in fact, the key to Hume’s entire enterprise. To be more precise, he demonstrates that Hume’s turn from metaphysical materialism to a treatment of the science of human nature as first philosophy recapitulates Socrates’ rejection of the approach of Anaxagoras and his ‘second sailing’ as described in the *Phaedo*.”

– Paul Rabe, *Hillsdale College*

“This book portrays a Hume of precipices and paradoxes: a fearless skeptic devoted to the theory and practice of political moderation and the broker of an innovative, unlikely alliance between modern philosophers and a prudent middle class, in support of commerce and the rule of law. While it will not convince everyone and will start a debate rather than ending it, this highly original, forcefully written, ingenious, and insightful book ranks immediately among the indispensable works on Hume’s political thought. It establishes Merrill not only as one of the brightest Hume scholars of his generation but as a striking new voice in political theory.”

– Andrew Sabl, *Yale University*

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For Jacquie

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Socrates was the first philosopher to call philosophy down from the heavens and set her in the cities of men and bring her into their homes and compel her to ask questions about life and morality and good and evil.

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations**

* See note 4 in Chapter 1 for the relevant citation.

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Arthur S. Westneat, Jr., and Marion Merrill. Let this book stand, however inadequate, as a token of what I learned from them.

I would also like to recognize two debts more closely associated with the book. Bill McClay helped me to think about the mechanics of narrative and had an indefatigable enthusiasm for the project that never failed to cheer me up. Robby George supported this project when it needed it by giving me a fellowship in the James Madison Program at Princeton University. It also must be said that Robby, no Humean he, sets an example of intellectual courage and a cheerful willingness to fight for what he believes in that is instructive, even (or especially) for Humeans. I am grateful to him, and to the whole community of the Madison Program, for giving my project a place to flourish.

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Abbreviations

References throughout this study marked with a T are to Book, Part, Section, and Paragraph, and references marked with an E are to page numbers, in accord with the following works:

- E: David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. by Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987).
- T: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).