

Introduction

In 1741, David Hume published the first volume of *Essays, Moral and Political*. He chose not to include his name on the title page, but the author does not disappear from view. He indicates his nonpartisan stance with an epigraph from Virgil: “Tros Rutulusve *fuat, nullo discrimine habebo*.”¹ He addresses the reader with an advertisement that begins with self-deprecation (he has dropped a more ambitious project partly from laziness), moves through solicitude (he anxiously submits himself to the judgment of the public), and finishes with spirit (he intends to overcome “party-rage” but displease bigots of any stamp). A corrected edition and second volume appeared the following year; Hume tells us near his death in 1776 that these works were “favourably received.”² The third edition (1748) had some subtractions and three notable additions – “Of National Character,” “Of the Original Contract,” and “Of Passive Obedience” – which were also printed together as a separate volume. The author is now in full view: these editions of the *Essays* were the first of Hume’s works with his name printed on the title page. As the *Essays* evolve, Hume demands more of his readers. Gone from the third edition are several essays in a lighter style, and the new *Political Discourses* of 1752 engage difficult questions of political economy, international politics, and foundational political theory. Beginning in 1753, both the *Essays: Moral and Political* and the *Political Discourses* form parts of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, a collection that Hume prepares for numerous new editions,

¹ In Dryden’s translation, “Rutulians, Trojans are the same to me.” More literally: “Be you Trojan or Rutulian, I will make no distinction between you.” The speaker is Jupiter. Joseph Addison uses the same line as an epigraph to the July 25, 1711, edition of the *Spectator* (Addison, 1); the April 24, 1727, number of the *Craftsman* uses it also (D’Anvers, 248). Hume’s advertisement mentions both papers as models. But the Virgil line appears often in early modern writing, perhaps especially among French authors. Pierre Bayle uses it in the preface to *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (8th of the unnumbered pages) and in the *Dictionnaire* in the entry on Friedrich Spanheim (4:249).

² “My Own Life,” in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, xxxiv.

including a posthumous edition of 1777. In the 1758 edition, the former *Essays, Moral and Political* and *Political Discourses* become Parts I and II, respectively, of *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*. Like the inventor of the essay, Michel de Montaigne, Hume revised his essays until the end of his life. Unlike Montaigne, Hume made no attempt to limit his revisions to additions and variations. Montaigne says that he does “not correct [his] first imaginations by [his] second” because he wants to “represent the course of [his] humors,”³ seeking to provide a faithful picture of his undulating self. Hume excises, rearranges, and rewords his previous writing. Yet Hume's corrections are, in their own way, as revealing of his self – a self willing to modify his own statements as he aged and deeply concerned to present the best version of his thoughts to his readers.

0.1 The *Essays* as Philosophy

Hume's relentless concern with improvement shows in the matter of the *Essays* as well as in their composition. For those open to the possibility that philosophical thought can improve life, these *Essays* have some things to say. In June of 1742, Hume wrote to Henry Home that the successful *Essays* “may prove like dung with marl, and bring forward the rest of my Philosophy, which is of a more durable, though of a harder and more stubborn nature” (Letters 1:43). Generations of scholars have, in effect, accepted the simile and ignored the implication that the *Essays* constitute part of Hume's philosophy. Instead of being taken seriously by philosophers, the *Essays* are often contemptuously dismissed or politely ignored.

The practice of ignoring the *Essays* is consonant with the old view, propounded by T. H. Grose, that Hume abandoned philosophy as a young man. The *Enquiries*, Grose asserts, are “for the most part popular reproductions” of material from the *Treatise*, and the *Natural History of Religion* and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* are the only later additions to his philosophical oeuvre.⁴ Grose's view that Hume probably wrote many of the *Essays* before 1739 complicates this assessment. But for the most part, Grose sees the *Essays* as popular works meant to serve Hume's thirst for literary fame.

Grose treats the essays on political topics with some respect – both those published in 1741–2 as part of *Essays, Moral and Political* and those published in 1752 as *Political Discourses*. This elevation of Hume's political essays continues. James A. Harris occupies a careful version of this stance.

³ Montaigne, *Essays*, 574.

⁴ “History of the Editions,” 75.

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Though insisting that Hume's work remained philosophical throughout his life, Harris claims that Hume gave up on a specific practical mode of philosophy in favor of philosophy as "a habit of mind, a style of thinking, and of writing, such as could in principle be applied to any subject whatsoever."⁵ Hume allegedly abandoned hope that philosophy can aid the search for individual happiness or improve moral character and turned toward politics. Philosophy could not be "medicine for the mind," but it could be "medicine for the state."⁶

Though I agree that Hume's thought remained philosophical, I do not agree that he abandons the idea that philosophical thinking can promote individual happiness or improve character. In Chapter 7, I examine Hume's use of the term "philosophy" in the *Essays*. But this book as a whole constitutes my main defense of this claim. Each chapter considers a different area of human life: governing, domineering, working, composing, self-loving, loving, and thinking. I discuss what the *Essays* teach about each area, including practical implications that follow from their philosophical thinking. This thinking is not rightly understood as a move from either philosophy to popular dross or from ethics to politics. It can be understood as a move beyond metaphysical speculations. But such a move is the natural sequel to the dismantling of metaphysical speculation in *Treatise I* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*.

I am not claiming that the *Essays* are the outworking of a plan that Hume envisioned prior to or during the composition of the *Treatise*. It is too much to construe them, as John Immerwahr does, as "the end, for which the *Treatise* was the means."⁷ Harris rightly argues that such a construal forestalls understanding Hume as a developing thinker, whose thought and aims evolved throughout his life. It is not true, however, that positing any "fundamental unity and continuity to his thought" has this consequence.⁸ Continuity need not imply stagnation.

The *Essays*' philosophical lessons are rooted in Hume's time but perennially valuable. Although we need a sense of their contexts to understand these works, their relevance transcends their contexts. The *Essays* can still teach us about politics, our tendency to domineer one another, our individual and collective industry, our aesthetic experience, our passions for ourselves and others, and our passion for philosophy itself. But they also

⁵ Hume, 18. ⁶ Harris, "Hume's Four Essays on Happiness," 233.

⁷ "Anatomist and the Painter," 7. For criticism of Immerwahr's position, see Abramson's "Philosophical Anatomy and Painting."

⁸ Harris, Hume, 12.

teach us something about Hume: he did not take his scepticism to imply fatalism about philosophy, about reflective conversation, or about human relations. Like certain forms of religion, some forms of scepticism see all human efforts at progress as in vain. Hume is not that kind of sceptic.

0.2 Reading the *Essays* as a Whole

I must first address an objection that arises from Hume's own words. In the initial advertisement to *Essays, Moral and Political*, he warns that the "READER must not look for any Connexion among these Essays, but must consider each of them as a Work apart."⁹ If it was mistaken to look for connections between the essays in the first volume, is it not a worse mistake to look for lessons across all of the essays? They were published in stages, under various titles. The questions driving Hume in 1741 must have varied greatly from those of the more mature Hume behind the *Political Discourses*.

This concern places certain constraints on this project but does not compromise its fundamental aim. That aim is to uncover important aspects of Hume's thinking that the *Essays* illuminate. For this project, the published texts are the primary resources. In writing them, Hume did not live in what Duncan Forbes calls "a cocoon of his own spinning."¹⁰ We should avoid using one work to interpret another without considering their distance in time or setting. And we must keep in mind the different genres in which Hume wrote. In the advertisement to the *Essays, Moral and Political*, Hume writes that his original aim was to "comprehend the Designs both of the SPECTATORS and CRAFTSMEN."¹¹ Since Montaigne's introduction of the essay, the genre had proved extraordinarily flexible. Hume expands that flexibility. Few of Hume's *Essays* fit Samuel Johnson's definition of "essay" in his 1755 *Dictionary* as a "loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition."¹² It is not even clear that the *Essays* all belong to a single genre. The Lilliputian "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion" bears only a family resemblance to the elephantine "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations."

Yet the *Essays* share a broad common aim. Their form served to promote public benefit by reaching a variety of literate women and men. This

⁹ *Essays, Moral and Political*, 1741, v.

¹⁰ *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, x.

¹¹ M. A. Box notes that this was a paradoxical goal, as the designs of the avowedly neutral *Spectator* and the expressly polemical *Craftsman* were incompatible (*Suasive Art of David Hume*, 122–3).

¹² *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), s.v. "essay." This is the only noun definition of "essay" that refers specifically to written compositions.

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practical aim does not vitiate their philosophical significance. They repay and contribute to philosophical reflection on numerous issues. I do not claim that these issues are unifying themes of the *Essays*. The *Essays* are not unified.¹³ But they can be read as parts of a complex conversation between numerous parties, including their readers. The living Hume can no longer be part of that conversation. But we can interpret his published words charitably.

Because the conversation I have in mind is broadly philosophical, this conversation can include works of Hume that are familiar to contemporary philosophers. I do not shy away from drawing on the *Treatise* and *Enquiries*. Hume continued to publish the *Enquiries* as part of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* throughout his life and did not reject the positions that he argued for in them. His views develop between the *Treatise* and *Enquiries*, and I endeavor to acknowledge or explain these developments when it is germane to do so. Nonetheless, some of the discussions in the *Treatise* provide details of Hume's views that are nowhere else to be found but we have no reason to believe that he rejected, especially with respect to his views on the passions. Hume's own views, as presented in other works, are part of the context of the *Essays*' composition.

But does Hume's presentation of those works itself vitiate any attempt to read the *Essays* philosophically? For the last edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, he prepared a new advertisement, which concludes with the request "that the following Pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles" (EHU Advertisement). He asked his publisher, William Strahan, to place this statement at the beginning of the second volume of the *Essays and Treatises*; "the following Pieces" would therefore include *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, *A Dissertation on the Passions*, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, and *The Natural History of Religion*.¹⁴ Since the *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary* constituted the first volume, one might infer that Hume excludes these essays from his philosophy proper.

Such an inference, however, would be premature. Hume repeatedly refers in his letters to his "philosophical pieces," seeming to mean all of the *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. (The nonphilosophical writing

¹³ But for an interesting attempt to read the first volume of the *Essays* as a whole, which takes seriously the essay genre, see Scott Black, "Thinking in Time in Hume's *Essays*."

¹⁴ See Hume's letters to Strahan on October 26 and November 13, 1775 (Letters 2:299–302 and 304–5). Hume's claim in the advertisement that "most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in" the *Treatise* may suggest that he does not mean to refer to the *Natural History* here.

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would be the *History*.) But this debate cannot be settled by accumulating citations to Hume's labels for his own work. Whether or not the *Essays* are philosophical depends on whether or not they contain philosophical ideas and arguments. It is the work of the following chapters to show that they do.

The degree to which one finds all of this convincing depends in part on one's conception of what philosophy is. Among the reasons that philosophers must listen to historians, literary theorists, political theorists, and economists is that these scholars make it more difficult for us to read Hume as easily translatable into the idiom of contemporary philosophy. Happily, this interdisciplinary dialogue has become more common in recent years. I will not attempt to define "philosophy" here, but the conception of philosophy that emerges in Chapter 7's exploration of Hume's own use of "philosophy" and its cognates is a broad one. I take this breadth to be a virtue.

0.3 Progress, Social, and Individual

Progress is a recurring theme in this book, as it is in many of Hume's *Essays*. I have said that Hume is not the kind of sceptic who believes all efforts toward progress to be vain and that the *Essays* share a practical purpose of benefiting the public. The two claims go together: in composing the *Essays*, Hume strove to bring about progress. That is, he wanted his efforts to benefit the public. (Here I am using "progress" in the contemporary sense; as Roger Emerson notes, for eighteenth-century Scots, "progress did not usually imply a necessarily better state but only a change.")¹⁵ In this respect, Hume is a quintessential Enlightenment thinker. Does he therefore reject "the ancients" in favor of "the moderns"? Some recent commentators have emphasized Hume's repudiation of elements of Shaftesbury's thought in favor of ideas that share more with Hobbes and Mandeville.¹⁶ Because of Shaftesbury's affinity with certain ancient ideas, this emphasis can suggest that Hume is wholly on the side of his fellow moderns. But his continuing hope that philosophy can effect personal and individual progress shares something important with ancient thinkers.

Throughout the *Essays*, Hume compares modern cultures with their predecessors. These predecessors are often ancient, but the relevant questions transcend specific quarrels between specific time periods. One such

¹⁵ "Conjectural History and the Scottish Philosophers," 65n.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Tolonen, *Mandeville and Hume*; and Harris, *Hume*, especially 52–62 and 194–5.

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question asks for an assessment of present states of affairs relative to past ones: have human lives improved in significant ways, in comparison with lives in previous ages? We can call this the “assessment” question. Another asks what our political approach to progress should be: should we conserve the goods of the past by modest and restrained policies, or should we attempt to encourage progress through governmental intervention? I call this the “political intervention” question. Finally, we can ask whether and how we ought to hope for future progress. Let us call this the “predictive” question.

Hume gives complex answers to all three questions. He usually argues that our lives have improved, but not always. He has little hope that political intervention will further progress, but does not share the elevating admiration of the past characteristic of others who resist political innovation. Finally, his scepticism precludes predictions of inevitable decline or improvement.

In addressing these questions, Hume seeks to benefit the public in two ways. First, he tries to allay irrational attitudes that produce imprudent personal and political behavior. Second, he censures a form of factionalism that can exacerbate these ill effects. Nostalgia about the past is often ill-informed, and it allows the dead to bury the living, as Nietzsche says.¹⁷ The shadow of an alleged Golden Age smothers attempts at something new. Politically, rhetoric about lost greatness has served the aim of many a tyrant. Yet we are, Hume notes, prone to such nostalgia. At the end of “Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations,” he writes that the “humour of blaming the present, and admiring the past, is strongly rooted in human nature, and has an influence even on persons endued with the profoundest judgment and most extensive learning” (2.11.464).

Likewise, faith in progress brings its own set of dangers. Progressivism can lead to contempt for the past – a failure to appreciate the resources handed down from past human experience. (Hume’s composition of the *History* demonstrates how much he values that experience.) A complacently positive answer to the predictive question trusts the Hegelian principle of inevitable progress without attending to the crucible of human suffering that Hegel sees as the precondition for such progress. The consequences again include imprudent personal and political choices. In the *Essays*, Hume often defends modern progress against those with “the humour

¹⁷ “Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” 72.

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of blaming the present,” but he also reminds modern readers of how precarious that progress is and ways in which they have failed to overcome ancient problems, or even to live up to ancient examples.

These two tendencies – irrational reverence for the past or unreflective progressivism – can breed factions. Our answers to questions about progress affect our understanding of our potential, individually and as a species. But they also shape our identities. Narratives of progress and decline become bound up with our sense of ourselves, so that challenges to them can seem to be personal attacks. Feeling attacked in this way can lead people to band together in factions, more concerned with the good of like-minded fellows than with that of society as a whole.

Hume laments the “spirit of faction” that he claims “is a natural attendant on civil liberty” and strives to rise above it, representing what is most compelling in both sides to any dispute. Factions are inevitable and can promote civic debate, but they can also promote irrationality and engender violence. In the *Essays*' initial advertisement, he writes, “Public Spirit, methinks, shou'd engage us to love the Public, and to bear an equal Affection to all our Country-Men; not to hate one Half of them, under Pretext of loving the Whole. This Party-Rage I have endeavour'd to repress, as far as possible.” Hume works against factionalism with both his tone and his approach to controversial topics, whether they are general questions about progress and decline or specific disputes between Whigs and Tories.

Hume's *Essays* are not, however, solely concerned with progress on the social or political level. They offer rich and relatively neglected resources for thinking about personal or individual progress. These resources come into focus in Chapters 4–7, and they show why it is a mistake to see Hume as having abandoned this aspect of the ancient ideal of philosophy. In calling this an ancient ideal, I mean neither that the ancients were uniquely committed to it nor that Hume's version of it is identical to that of “the ancients.” (Of course, there is no single ancient version of such an ideal.) I mean that it is a perennial ideal, which has survived despite numerous attempts to make philosophy purely at the service of utilitarian ends, scientific aims, or political agendas. Hume's version is modest: philosophy comes with no guarantee of eudaimonia and can only improve those with certain temperaments. Such a philosophy does not found movements that seek to improve or appeal to the bulk of humankind. Yet it is of crucial importance for the well-being of unusual people, as well as humankind in general, that we not dismiss or neglect any practice that fails to market itself to a general audience.

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We cannot capture the complexity of the mature Hume's thought by calling it philosophy, politics, or history, any more than we can by labeling it progressive or conservative. When we try to stuff Hume into a taxonomy, he refuses to fit. At this point, Hume might joke about his corpulence, as he does in a letter to David Mallet in 1762. He resolves "to resist, as a Temptation of the Devil, any Impulse towards writing": "I am really so much ashamed of myself when I see my Bulk on a Shelf, as well as when I see it in a Glass, that I would fain prevent my growing more corpulent either way. To keep my Mind at rest & my Body in motion seems to be the best Recipe for both Maladies" (Letters 1:369). But for a philosopher, keeping the mind at rest is no small achievement. The easier options – diversion, ignorance, lack of curiosity – never satisfy such a character for long. To this list we can add the handing over of one's thinking to a political party or philosophical system. Instead, Hume chose to remain a philosopher – one whose acts of public spirit included writing the *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. To call this an act of public spirit is not to confuse it with a sacrificial offering. We know that he enjoyed the rewards of money and pride.¹⁸ But it is to suggest that the *Essays* still have the potential to benefit the philosophically minded reading public, as I believe they do.

0.4 Summary of Chapters

The following chapters address the *Essays*' treatment of seven different aspects of human life: governing, domineering, working, composing, self-loving, loving, and thinking. In Chapter 1, I consider Hume's judgments about methods of governing. Although Hume recognizes the wisdom of appealing to ancient political precedent, he undermines justifications for doing so that appeal to reverence for the past. And he qualifies his assessment of modern political progress by noting local errors in modern government and an overconfidence that threatens progress itself. Turning then to the political intervention question, I argue that Hume believes that government has a limited role to play in improving human well-being, consisting mainly in restraint rather than intervention.

Chapter 2, "Domineering," considers ways in which humans exercise power over one another as individual members of society or when civil authorities fail to preserve peace. "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," plays a vital role here. I argue that the logic of this essay relies

¹⁸ See "My Own Life," especially xxxviii–xl.

on a conception of human nature that includes both universal, static principles and significant malleability in response to circumstance. I then apply this analysis to Hume's comparisons of war and slavery in the ancient and modern worlds. Last, I discuss Hume's view of the priesthood.¹⁹ Here, Hume does not think moderns have made progress. He argues that the priestly office encourages the growth of domineering tendencies.

Chapter 3, "Working," discusses Hume's commitment to the value of work and industry. Hume not only links progress in industry with political freedom, virtue, and happiness; he believes industry to be a valuable end in itself. An analysis of the four "essays on happiness" shows that valuing industry is among those traits that he considers constants of human nature. His view is radical in its thorough rejection of the claim that celebration of work leads to neglecting humane pursuits in favor of utilitarian ends.

Chapter 4, "Composing," turns to aesthetics, addressing the *Essays'* treatment of how humans produce, experience, and study beautiful things. Here, in some respects, Hume finds the ancients superior to the moderns. But art can serve different needs at different moments in human development. I consider his claim that modern eloquence is "much inferior" to that of the ancients. I then argue that the *Essays* provide resources for the idea that aesthetic pursuits can prove therapeutic for various emotional disorders.

Chapter 5, "Self-Loving," distinguishes between benign and malignant forms of the "selfish system of morals." The rhetorical force of writers like La Rochefoucauld and Mandeville generates the power of the malignant forms. A close reading of "Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature" enables further understanding of the threat, through distinguishing between the related concepts of self-love, pride, and vanity. Self-directed passions, on Hume's view, actually support our ability to help and love others.

I move to a discussion of love of others in Chapter 6, beginning by comparing Hume's views on possible conflicts between friendship and the state with those of Aristotle and Cicero. Because Hume portrays such conflicts as arising from natural principles of humanity, and because of the difficulty of combining public spirit with private virtue, his views imply that such conflicts will be perennial. I then turn to questions about

¹⁹ I offer no chapter solely dedicated to Hume's treatment of religion, because he generally treats religious practice as reducible to one of the other practices studied here (such as politics, domineering, or thinking) or as a kind of emotional disorder. It is telling, I think, that the natural one-word gerund to title such a chapter is "worshipping." Yet worship is something about which Hume has little to say, except, again, as it might be understood as serving some other need.