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The Social Sciences and the Scottish Enlightenment

Richard Whatmore, in the two previous lectures in this series, has given you some idea of what two figures in the French Enlightenment, Montesquieu and Rousseau, represent when seen within the context of the history of the social sciences; he will be giving further illustrations of this when he deals with Turgot and Condorcet in a future lecture, bringing the subject closer to the social and political event that dominated much social and political analysis at the end of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, namely the French Revolution. In this lecture and the next in the series the scene is shifted to Scotland and to the two main figures in the Scottish Enlightenment, David Hume and Adam Smith, the younger of whom Smith, died in the first year of the French revolution. Their names are more firmly linked with other revolutions: the American revolution which broke out in the year of Hume’s death, where his political essays and ideas proved valuable to the framers of the American constitution, and where Smith’s economic ideas were also influential; the English revolution of 1688, an event that continued to dominate English political thinking; and another historical revolution, more distant in time, but equally significant to them as social and political theorists, namely the transition from feudalism to commercial or civil society. If you know something about Smith’s work, WN, you might think that I should add the Industrial Revolution in Britain to this list. But I shall try to show in my next lecture and a later one on classical political economy, this association is a misleading one, where not downright wrong.

Let me take two of the revolutions mentioned so far. The first is the English revolution of 1688, when England deposed a Stuart monarch for the second time, but this time, instead of undergoing a civil war and attempting to create a Puritan commonwealth or republic, as they did unsuccessfully between 1642 and 1660, they established a peculiar form of mixed government, a limited or parliamentary monarchy -- a system that was widely considered throughout Europe to have endowed Britain with a combination of liberty and stability not to
be found in the absolute monarchies on the Continent, including the richest and most powerful monarchy, that of France. Native English pride in such matters was fortified by the interest shown in its political institutions by such foreigner observers as Montesquieu and Voltaire. This revolution and the peculiarities of the English form of government were of special interest to Hume, partly because he wrote a *History of England* that tried to place English events in a larger European framework, partly because he wrote a number of influential essays on English political institutions and party ideologies. Hume and Smith, speaking as Scottish observers of the English scene -- a scene Scotland had joined with the Act of Union in 1707 -- took a cooler, less congratulatory, and more cosmopolitan view of English history and institutions than many of its patriot supporters. But like everybody else in the eighteenth century, Hume and Smith found it impossible not to remember that English and Scottish history in the previous century had been dominated by civil strife centring on conflict over religion. Remember too, that in Scotland in particular there were still Jacobites, supporters of the Stuart claimants to the throne, and that there was a Jacobite rebellion in 1745, during the lifetime of Hume and Smith. England might seem, therefore, to be the embodiment of political stability under its relatively new constitution, but they had good reason not to feel too complacent about its permanency, its immunity from fundamental conflict over religion and related constitutional matters.

The second of the remaining revolutions that was important to both men was, if anything, more significant because they both devoted considerable attention to it in their writings. It was the silent revolution that had occurred first and most completely in England some two to three hundred years before. It was the revolution that had led to the decline of feudalism and the creation of a centralised form of monarchy as a result of various socio-economic forces connected with the emergence, first in the towns, later in the countryside, of what they called commercial or civil society. Hume provided an analysis of this process in his *History*, and Smith followed his lead, devoting Book III of WN to the way in which it had occurred. Indeed, Smith’s account of this revolution was to be the foundation on which a long series of authors in the nineteenth century, among them Marx and Weber, were to construct their
own account of this process separating the modern world of commerce, later to be called capitalism, from its feudal predecessor. From Marx’s perspective, therefore, Hume and Smith were among those bourgeois pioneers of a form of history that he called materialism, applying the insights provided by economic changes into an understanding of large-scale social and political change. While I think that the proto-Marxian aspects of Scottish thinking can and have been exaggerated in histories of social science, there is no doubt that this was where Marx obtained much of his own inspiration. For Hume and Smith, however, although there was an economic foundation to the process of transition, what they stressed were the legal and political benefits, those that centred on the creation of civil liberty defined as security of property and person under the rule of law. This was the most significant achievement of modern society, and it also explains why justice plays such an important role in their moral and political theorising.

One of the best accounts of the Scottish Enlightenment that has appeared since our reading list was compiled, Christopher Berry’s Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment, gives a balanced account of this feature of Scottish thinking, usually known as a form of ‘conjectural’ or ‘philosophical’ history, organised, in the case of Smith, into four stages, where each can be associated with a particular mode of subsistence: hunter-gatherers at the bottom of the scale, followed by pastoralists, and then, in Europe at least, by the system known as feudalism or settled forms of agrarian life, with commercial society being the latest stage. Such histories of social change over long periods became the hallmark of a number of Scottish thinkers, notably Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Smith’s pupil, John Millar. They provided ways of classifying different types of society and tracing the different forms of law, government, and manners associated with the different stages. Thus Millar employed it in his Origin of the Distinction of Ranks to discuss the phenomenon later known as class, using the role of women in each type of society as a kind of index of other changes in social relations. The other main use to which conjectural history was put was to provide a comparative-historical framework in which historical and anthropological evidence, especially that concerning non-European societies, could be situated and subjected
to closer analysis. Harking back to Montesquieu, an influential figure in Scotland as elsewhere, one can say that it supplied the kind of historical dimension that his classifications and sociological analyses of different forms of government lacked. Montesquieu, of course, employed historical evidence, but he did not possess a strong notion of the dynamics of historical change. Conjectural history organised according to stages was, therefore, a peculiarly Scottish way of meeting what I described in my opening lecture as the challenge of increased knowledge concerning non-European societies. Incidentally, do not take the term ‘conjectural’ too literally: the conjectures involved a theory of development, but they both made efforts to ensure that it conformed with the state of real historical knowledge of their time. It was conjectural in respect of earlier periods, where no written records existed, but where new ethnographic evidence concerning pastoralists and hunter-gatherers could be used to supplement the record.

The use of history, in this conjectural form, however, can only be properly understood as part of the larger impulse outlined in my first lecture, a philosophical impulse that had shifted towards offering naturalistic explanations for social, political, and economic events and institutions. And since this impulse has a philosophical foundation I need to say something about the philosophy of Hume and Smith, beginning this week with Hume, who was undoubtedly the most original of all the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, where originality also entailed considerable controversy. Hume announced his intentions boldly in his first book, the THN, in 1739, giving the work a subtitle that announced its purpose, namely to introduce the experimental method, the method of Newton, into moral subjects. Many eighteenth-century philosophers might have announced such an intention, but there are reasons why Hume’s attempt was more far-reaching, more radical than most of his contemporaries. For Hume, the experimental method was not simply an attempt to apply empirical methods to moral subjects, where this included morals, politics, and economics, but to dispense entirely with religion and the kinds of arguments that linked science with theology. In other words, Hume was a militant secularist, an agnostic if not an atheist (for reasons to be mentioned shortly), and all his writings are a covert or explicit attack
on the byproducts of what he called the ‘religious hypothesis’. Many eighteenth-century philosophers were anti-clerical, attacking through satire the clergy and the doctrines of the Church. Some of these were deists, those who were content to believe that there was sufficient evidence of design in the moral and physical universe to warrant acceptance of the idea of a Designer, but whose religion might not go much further than that to accord significance to the bible or what was known as revealed truth. In Hume’s case, however, he not only applied his empiricism to undermine belief in miracles and other sources of religious faith, but attacked the entire idea that we could infer the existence of God from the existence of order in the universe. In short, he was the complete secularist and humanist, placing man and man’s creations at the centre of the philosophical universe as completely as Copernicus had placed the sun at the centre of the astronomical world. Hume, in fact, did what Darwin was to do over a century later, namely show that one could give an account of the workings of the biological world that showed how design and order could be achieved without a Designer, proving too that no religious or moral conclusions concerning human conduct could be drawn from what occurred in Nature, however well-ordered.

To appreciate this aspect of Hume fully one has to consider the interpenetration of science and religion during this pre-Darwinian period -- Hume’s intellectual radicalism. Holding such positions, and taking only minimal precautions to disguise the more shocking aspects of them, meant that Hume could not be appointed as a teacher in a university, as Smith and most other philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment were. Even praising the peaceful nature of Hume’s death in 1776, as Smith did, made Smith himself highly suspect in the eyes of orthodox Christians. No infidel could be allowed to have died in anything but a state of anguish.

In the history of the social sciences there are many examples of those who combined their scientific aims with a personal or philosophical attachment to religion. Smith was thought to be some kind of deist, and Malthus, a figure I shall speak about in a later lecture, was actually a clergyman. Science and religion do not have to be in conflict with one another, though that seemed to be the conclusion that should be drawn from both Hume and Darwin’s work. More
often in the social sciences, however, what one finds is that religion, a set of metaphysical beliefs that has no empirical foundation, has been reinvented by social scientists. This was certainly the case with August Comte’s ‘religion of humanity’ and many would argue that Marxism gave its form of social science religious colouring, lending its historical message a kind of Messianic flavour. In another sense, of course, religious beliefs and practices have become an important field of study for social scientists, especially sociologists and anthropologists. Whatever the personal religious affiliations of the social scientist, religion cannot be ignored in any empirical account of social and political cohesion. Indeed, one of the lessons drawn by social scientists after the French revolution -- when an attempt was made to create a secular form of religion that would replace Catholicism -- was that religious belief was essential to understanding social and political behaviour.

That could also be described as one of Hume’s conclusions. He would not have been a very good historian if he had tried to ignore the religious dimension to English history. Nor would he have been a good political scientist for his own day if he had ignored the role played by what he called ‘superstition’ and ‘enthusiasm’ in provoking and even defining people’s political aims and behaviour. A great deal of the rhetoric of political life was soaked in religious doctrine, where the doctrine of the divine right of kings was only the most obvious example. Being a patriotic Englishman during the eighteenth century and beyond also meant being a Protestant, very much as it does to the Unionist community in Northern Ireland today. Given Hume’s position on religion, however, it will not surprise you to learn that he thought that this kind of mixture of religion with politics was the most divisive and most potentially destructive kind of forces, the enemy of moderation, clear-thinking, and the most dangerous source of political instability. Hence too one of his most sensible or Machiavellian opinions, depending on your point of view, namely that the Anglican system of having an established church, where the clergy were, so to speak, on the payroll of the state, was one way of keeping them in order, preventing them from seeking fame by becoming popular demagogues.

So far, I have not said enough about the core of Hume’s philosophy, the grounds on which he defended his brand of scepticism. This can be found in what can either be described as his
secular empiricism or his anti-rationalism. Hume rejected some forms of extreme scepticism, otherwise known as Pyrrhonism -- those that denied that it was possible to acquire any real knowledge of the external world of objects and persons. To Hume this was like atheism or a destructive kind of relativism. Atheism was simply a mirror version of religious dogmatism: it proclaimed dogmatically that nothing could be known about God, rather than being content with saying that we do not have enough evidence to believe in God. This may seem like an over-subtle distinction in religion, but it certainly is not when we are talking about science defined as I said in my first lecture simply as our capacity to acquire regular, rule-governed forms of knowledge. To Hume, the extreme sceptics refuted themselves every time they undertook the simplest of everyday transactions. Thus even if they pretended to be total sceptics in their studies, believing that nothing could be known about the external world, they disproved themselves when they chose to leave their studies by the door rather than by the window. We could not live our lives without some assumption about regularities in our physical surroundings and social circumstances, some belief that causes were regularly accompanied by effects. Life was not a series of random events, and none of us lived our lives with such a ridiculous preconception.

Nevertheless, Hume’s brand of scepticism which he called ‘mitigated scepticism’ was anti-rationalist in the sense that it denied our capacity to demonstrate rationally, a prioristically, that ‘a’ would always cause ‘b’ under any and all circumstances. Establishing causal connections was simply a matter of observing that ‘a’ seemed to occur in conjunction with ‘b’, and possibly before ‘b’ in time. But this was purely a matter of empirical generalisation, rather than a mathematical or deductive demonstration. In Hume’s language, we could acquire proofs but not demonstrations, where the proofs took the form of observations of ‘constant contingency’ that had so far not been disproved, such as our expectation that the sun will rise tomorrow. The existence of such proofs of regularity ruled out total scepticism and complete relativism as well, though it also meant that someone who had lived his life in a hot climate would have good reason to be sceptical if he was told that in cold climates an elephant could stand on water. Hence Hume’s description of himself as
a mitigated sceptic, which simply meant that one should always proportion belief in causal
gularity to the degree of reliable evidence and act accordingly. In matters of morals and
politics, where the evidence was not as obvious as the daily rising of the sun, this meant
that one should believe and act on probabilistic evidence: the most probable hypothesis,
carrying the most weight by explaining the largest number of observations, if not all of them.
This cautious empiricism also explains something important about the social and political
theorising of Hume and Smith: their unwillingness to engage in predictions of future social
states. There was sufficient evidence to explain many past events and social developments,
even to propound various laws and maxims when faced with present policies and regimes,
but the knowledge we had of human affairs did not license predictions, if only because the
human factor -- the role of sheer folly and stupidity, if you like -- ruled this out.

For the remainder of this lecture I would now like to show how Hume’s scepticism
and anti-rationalism influenced the nature of his substantive contributions to moral and
political theorising, taking two main examples, his theory of justice and the related attack
he launched on the doctrine of the social contract as a theory of political obligation. In other
words, how he set about accounting for the phenomenon of political allegiance, stability,
and breakdown. But first justice, where this relates to what Hume considered the most
fundamental aspect of life in society, the ability to regulate disputes centring on ‘mine’ and
‘thine’. No society could exist without such rules. We can understand this by means of a
comparison with Hobbes's state of nature as one of war of all against all. In Hume's terms,
that is comparable to a shipwreck, in which the only rules are those of individual survival,
where no rules of justice have relevance. At the other end of the spectrum lies a world of
plenty and universal brotherhood: that too is a world in which mine and thine do not need
to be distinguished. I can meet your needs without stinting on my own. But we live most
of our lives in circumstances that are intermediate between these extremes. The goods of
the world do not exist in abundance by comparison with our needs and wants, and we are
selfish animals equipped with limited benevolence towards our fellow creatures. In such
circumstances rules to determine the inevitable conflicts over matters of rightful ownership
are essential: social life is impossible without them. They are in this respect, probably prior to in time, and more important than the precise forms of government under which men have lived. This was to become one of Hume's responses to those who advanced contractarian theories to explain the origin of government: it enabled him to say that men could arrive at peaceful ways of living together before subjecting themselves to the authority of government. Hume, and Smith agreed on this, regarded the establishment of rules or conventions on this matter, rules of commutative justice, as essential to any form of society, regardless of how rich or poor, how much or how little property there was to become the object of disputes. Having said this, there is no doubt that the richer society becomes, the greater the necessity for rules regarding security of property become: hence what I said earlier about the transition from feudalism to commercial society, where feudalism was associated in their minds with disorder.

How societies arrived at such rules or conventions, therefore, was the most important question concerning their origins and survival prospects. Since you have heard a lecture on Rousseau, you will have obtained some idea of how important questions about the origin of society were to social science in the eighteenth century, and Hume and Smith provide a sharp contrast with Rousseau’s manner of theorising, chiefly because they start from a quite different assumption. As Hume said: 'Man is born in a family, is compelled to maintain society from necessity, from natural inclinations, and from habit.' In brief, they assume at the outset that man has always lived in society of some kind; that he could not exist in some imagined state of nature outside society; and that there was no need to have resort to fictions like the social contract to explain why or how he consented to form society and under what conditions he agreed to remain there. These were all rational constructs that had little or no empirical foundation, and they also tended to rely on another dubious hypothesis, namely that since men were at heart unsociable creatures they had to be manipulated into accepting the rules of social existence, where the manipulators could be the rich and powerful, or simply those who were most cunning. Rather than use such rational constructs and conspiracy theories, they preferred to seek explanations in the ordinary everyday transactions of social life, where
instincts and passions common to all men, were the chief motivating factors rather than reason. Hence Hume’s famous aphorism that reason is and always ought to be the slave of the passions, because reason could never motivate an action, merely justify it in retrospect. Hence too his account of justice as an artificial rather than a natural virtue.

You will see a quotation in the handbook, p. 17, number 3, from an essay on the original contract, which gives a highly condensed version of Hume’s position on this. I advise you to read the whole section there before turning to his other work for fuller exposition. On Hume’s account, the natural virtues were those most obviously displayed in our friendships and within our families. They depended on qualities like affection, generosity, humanity, gratitude, liberality, fidelity, and prudence, with each social act being capable of arousing sympathetic pleasure and hence approval in the eyes of spectators. Such transactions were autonomous and self-sufficient; they required no further justification. The motive and the result were transparent. Nor were they capable of being reduced to complicated versions of self-love, as was held by Hobbes. By contrast, an artificial virtue, such as justice and the performance of promises, where Hume treats the repayment of a debt as his textbook example, was not self-sufficient: they required a motive for performance, and each transaction was dependent on the belief that other transactions of a similar kind would conform to the same rules. The mere honesty of the act was not a sufficient motive. Nor is an appeal to self-interest: left to my own devices, I would not repay the loan. Nor are you likely to get much further by saying that it is in the public interest for me to repay my debts. That is too remote, too refined a motive to act on most people when the act conflicts with private interest. We need to find another motive, or if you like, we need to invent another motive: hence its artificiality.

But Hume was anxious to distinguish his idea of artificiality from that advanced by more cynical moralists, such as Bernard de Mandeville, who had argued that all moral codes as well as the rules of justice were an imposition on unsociable man in the interests of making him sociable. They were literally inventions, but by the powerful and cunning in society, or the rich and powerful, who realised that unless they could induce their fellow men to accept ideas of honour, virtue, and justice by working on their pride, life would decline into savagery.
Hume's assumption of natural sociability dispenses with part of Mandeville's argument, but in describing justice as artificial, Hume obviously felt the necessity to disclaim that the rules of justice were arbitrary. For this purpose he has recourse to the idea of convention. A convention differs, however, from a promise. And the homely example he uses to bring this home is as follows: 'Two men who pull the oars of a boat do it by an agreement or convention, though they have never given promises to each other.' We do it because we have learned that it is the only way in which we shall get to where we want to be. Similarly, in the case of justice, we form conventions or tacit agreements based on a sense of common interest to abstain from infringing the property rights of others because we have learned to recognise that this is the only way of preserving the benefits conferred on us by society. In this way we establish a motive that connects private interest with public interest. What one can say, therefore, is that self-interest is converted, through acceptance of the convention, into a remedy for the defects of our selfishness, our avidity, our short-sightedness, which might otherwise lead us to obey only those rules that coincide with our short-term interests.

Hume expressed this by means of a comparison between a wall built up by the natural virtues and a vault constructed on artificial virtues. The wall was composed of individual acts of natural benevolence, where each act simply added to the height or thickness of the wall. The vault, however, though equally composed of individual stones or bricks, could not be built in this fashion. It required something more to hold it in place: a prior acceptance that a vault was needed and that it could only be constructed by following a strict set of rules, even though following the rules did not coincide with our personal interests and inclinations on all occasions. One had to accept justice holistically, making a kind of cost-benefit calculation of gains and losses: 'It is sufficient if the whole plan or scheme be necessary to the support of civil society, and if the balance of good, in the main, do thereby preponderate much above that of evil.' (E,305) Public utility or a sense of what was conducive to the regular continuation of social existence could therefore be the only motive for acting justly. So justice is artificial, but not arbitrary. It becomes “second nature”, another interpretation of artificial.
There are several important consequences of Hume's position. Let me list three of them before dealing with them more fully. First, the rules of justice presume a social learning process, which also means that they have a history. Secondly, the way in which Hume has posed the problem focusses very much on property. Thirdly, it is important to note that he has confined the rules of justice to commutative justice rather than distributive justice.

The rules of justice arise out of ordinary experiments in daily life. It is a learning-by-doing process which has some evolutionary characteristics: we find out what works, and what goes wrong when we disregard the rules we have formulated in the course of our social dealings. Children have to learn to respect the mine and thine of life, and so do families and whole societies. The learning process can also be compared and linked with what Hume has to say about our powers of understanding. In the ordinary course of social life we form conjunctions between acts and events. These become the basis for stable expectations: having worked to our advantage in the past, we expect them to work in the same manner in future. Custom and habit extend experience from case to case, allowing us to form general rules. Reflection on these conjunctions enables us to form general rules, and their inflexibility gives stability, predictability, coherence, confidence, reducing the costs and increasing the benefits of social life, giving us courage to undertake things.

Notice too, that although Hume had objected to the idea of these rules being imposed arbitrarily, from above, or behind our backs by the wise or cunning, he was prepared to acknowledge that once the rules existed, it was possible for politicians to assist nature, to lend artificial reinforcement to them. But he still denied the Mandevillian position: 'The utmost politicians can perform, is, to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds; but still nature must furnish the materials, and give us some notion of moral distinctions'. (T, 500)

Secondly, there is the emphasis on protection of property that some have said gives Hume's position an economic bias. By emphasising the problem of scarcity of resources in relation to wants, this is certainly the case. Hume's way of thinking is capable of being extended to cover personal rights as well as property rights, but the property bias does
illustrate the importance Hume attaches to economic life, to material prosperity as the key to what he describes as civilisation, another learning process which I will deal with tomorrow.

Finally, there is the restriction to commutative justice -- a confirmation of what I have just said about the economic bias of Hume's thinking. But it is worth considering why Hume rejects the idea that we can formulate rules concerning the distribution of property and incomes. This would entail general acceptance of some scale of relative merit, wisdom, or virtue that can be applied to individuals -- one that could be used to determine who should get more, who less. Hume could hardly deny that ideas on this matter had been given currency, though, typically, he treats the ideas of levellers as those of political fanatics, where the fanaticism has to be attributed to religion. He acknowledged that there was something agreeable about a communistic ideal in a world of plenty; and in the idea of redistributing goods from the very rich to the very poor. Nevertheless, he did not think our ideas on merit were sufficiently stable to establish the degree of consensus needed to form enforceable rules on the subject, rules capable of dealing with the mass of cases between the extremes. Schemes for equalising property, such as the ancient agrarian law, had either failed, or had not prevented inequalities reestablishing themselves: 'Render possessions ever so equal, men's different degrees of art, care, and industry will immediately break that equality. Or if you check these virtues, you reduce society to the most extreme indigence; and instead of preventing want and beggary in a few, render it unavoidable to the whole community.' But his most important criticism was that a commitment to equality would entail a 'rigorous inquisition', and increase in the powers of government over individual lives that could not fail to become tyrannical.

These are, or were to become, the standard arguments on the subject of attempts to establish equality of outcome, which are quite different, of course, from arguments about equality before the law, political equality, and equality of opportunity. There is an economic dimension here, once more, but you also have to remember that private property was also thought of as a counterbalancing factor when dealing with the powers of monarchs.
As I anticipated, there is not sufficient time to deal with Hume’s devastating attack on all forms of contract thinking when dealing with the question of political obedience. But it links with what I have said so far on two levels. First, historically, one of his reasons for attacking the idea was that the idea of contract had become the ‘fashionable’ theory adopted by many Whigs during the eighteenth century; it was used to proclaim the superiority of English arrangements by suggesting that only the English had had the wisdom to come to a formal contractual arrangement with their monarch. It was also capable of being used as the basis for an argument as to why, having given their consent in this manner, it was possible for the people to withdraw that consent in order to vest power elsewhere. On the second level, Hume’s arguments against contractual explanations is linked closely with what I have said about his theory of justice, which means that if you have grasped the logic of this you should be able to see how the same reasoning is applied to undermine the rationalist bias of the contract. We give allegiance to forms of government for reasons based on what might be termed Hume’s ‘sociology of convention’. We do so either because we believe that the system has acquired legitimacy by persisting successfully over long periods of time (an argument that has a ‘Tory’ flavour), or because we perceive the public utility of sustaining regular government (a Whiggish argument) when compared with the alternatives. In neither case do we give our formal consent, and in neither case does it require us to believe that the origins of governments were legitimate when first established, or that governments have to be perfect before we accept them. These were not the kinds of arguments likely to commend themselves to those who stressed the ‘rights of resistance’ that accompanied some forms of the contractual argument, and Hume’s purpose was to discomfort such advocates, encouraging moderation in political debate. Thus Hume can be treated as a ‘conservative’ political theorist, though I think it more accurate in the context of the history of the social sciences to say that his scepticism and anti-rationalism engendered a form of sociological realism.

Hume and Smith are undoubtedly the most original figures in the Scottish Enlightenment; they were also close friends and shared many basic philosophical positions on the foundations
of knowledge, on how moral questions should be tackled naturalistically, and on political and economic subjects. I want to begin this lecture by mentioning some of these points which they held in common before moving on to consider some characteristic contributions of Hume to the sciences of morals and politics as those sciences were understood throughout Europe in the eighteenth century. In particular, I shall concentrate on Hume’s theory of justice treated as an artificial virtue and his criticisms of contractual ideas on government.

Hume stood apart from Scottish and many English philosophers and moralists by virtue of his decidedly unorthodox position on religion: he was a skeptic, a secularist, and unbeliever, and therefore an infidel. Smith was more cautious on such matters, as can be judged from the simple fact that whereas he was appointed to a Chair of Moral Philosophy in Glasgow, Hume was considered far too unsound on religious matters to be appointed to any university post. Smith's policy of keeping his cards closer to his chest on these matters has allowed many to believe that he was at best, or at worst, depending on your point of view, a theist or deist. My own opinion is that it went a bit further than that, as became clear when he wrote his brief encomium on the life and death of Hume. By praising the Stoic calmness and good humour with which Hume approached death, Smith earned the enmity of all those who claimed that unrepentant infidels were not entitled to die in anything but torment. At a time when all questions of truth in matters of natural and moral philosophy were intimately bound up with Christian theology, this antagonism or luke-warmness towards organised religion and theology is more than a simple matter of personal preference; and I shall indicate ways in which it impinged on the philosophical and political opinions of Hume and Smith later.

In broad terms, Hume and Smith were both social Newtonians. Hence Hume's declaration in the subtitle of the THN that it was 'an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects'. Slightly less obviously, the same aim is proclaimed in the self-conscious title of Smith's first book: a theory of moral sentiments, an attempt to provide an explanatory overview of how moral sentiments worked to produce the kinds of moral codes that could be observed in modern societies. The full title of his more famous work, An
Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations makes its naturalistic intentions plain. As does his espousal in that work of something he called 'a system of natural liberty'.

Hume and Smith, then, were both committed to the construction of systems of morals and politics that would meet the test of observation and experiment, where this could be based on everyday observation of social institutions and practices, comparative and historical evidence of life in other societies at other times, and by an appeal to the kind of knowledge we all have as intelligent social actors, capable of reflecting on our own motives as well as those of others.

Both authors, then, were also keen to create naturalistic systems of moral philosophy based on 'immediate sense and feeling' and on the assumption that human sociability was a natural state of affairs rather than something imposed from above, or arrived at artificially by a ruse on the part of the cunning and powerful, or by means of some treaty between creatures possessing rational foresight. As Hume said: 'Man is born in a family, is compelled to maintain society from necessity, from natural inclinations, and from habit.' Sociability was what ultimately distinguished man from the animal kingdom. This had an important consequence for political theory. For if man's instinct for society was an entirely natural one, if man had never actually been observed outside some primitive form of society, albeit one that might not be more than an extended family or tribe, it was not necessary to resort to speculations about pre-social man in a state of nature, and how this state came to be relinquished, whether by historical accident, rational calculation, or conspiracy on the part of the few or the many. What David Hume has to say in opposition to contractual modes of dealing with the origins and legitimacy of society or government, goes for Smith, his closest friend and intellectual ally, as well. They rejected all known version of the idea: the Hobbesian version based on fear; the Lockean version based on a utilitarian perception of mutual self-interest; and the Mandeville-Rousseau idea of a corrupt social compact imposed by the rich and cunning on the poor and unknowing. All such devices were at best unnecessary intellectual fictions, at worst a hindrance to proper understanding, and hence to stability in 'free governments' that were dependent on opinion based on understanding.
Hume and Smith can also be described as anti-rationalists: appeals to reason, God-given or not, were simply teleological short-cuts, no substitute for the business of understanding based on natural instincts or passions that were common to all men in some degree or mixture.

But there were regularities of social existence that justified the pursuit of science: in Hume's case, these derived from the effect of custom, usually as embodied in certain institutions, to create stable expectations. Human behaviour possessed regularity because it consisted in following rules, consciously. In other words, he was not treating man as some kind of machine.

In his first work Hume had attempted to show that there were inherent limitations in our capacity to understand the world. The limitations centre on his famous demonstration of our inability through reason alone to penetrate beyond our immediate sensations to create determinate models of the world; that the causal connections we posited could never be necessary connections, susceptible to demonstration, but would have to remain constant conjunctions. We have no other resource than to believe that what had been observed to be conjoined in the past would also hold for the future. We might be able to marshall evidence in favour of our beliefs, but it was always going to fail the test of demonstrability. Although Hume had clearly stared into the abyss of total scepticism, he had retreated, and urged others to retreat into what he called practical or mitigated scepticism. It was right to reject the claims of ethical rationalists to the effect that God had endowed us with the rational capacity to intuit right and wrong; but Hume also wished to repudiate the conclusions of a more full-blooded scepticism that concluded that all moral judgements were arbitrary; that anything goes. Mitigated scepticism entailed proportioning belief to evidence rather than denying that any evidence can be adequate for belief. We should be content with proofs rather than demonstrations.

But the point I wish to stress when mentioning Hume's scepticism on epistemological issues is that it lends some truth to the verdict that Hume wished to place man at the centre of a universe from which he had been displaced by Copernicus. Moreover, in rejecting the idea of God as the author of the universe, as the ultimate designer, in the manner of Newton,
this was a far more radical form of humanism, comparable to Darwin's later demonstration that the biological world may have some of the characteristics of a design without a designer, but lacks any discernible moral purpose that could be corroborated, apart from the ones with which we choose to endow it. Although it is possible to exaggerate the Darwinian parallels, they do help to suggest why Hume was regarded as such a subversive figure for many of his contemporaries.

Smith may not appear to go as far as Hume in such matters. In TMS, though not WN, you will find plenty of references to Providence, the Great Geometer or watch-maker and so on as the explanation for what was known as 'final causes'. He makes extensive use of teleological or functionalist arguments suggesting that the world is a complex piece of machinery in which all the parts are neatly adjusted to the ends they were designed to serve. Nevertheless, what Smith is also saying is that questions that require such answers are beyond our comprehension: hence our resort to hypotheses of an all-wise and beneficent deity. This has the further implication that we were better advised to stick with what was entirely within our powers, namely an understanding of 'efficient' causes of this-worldly events, the subject to which he devotes most of his attention.

There are more detailed points of similarity and difference between Hume and Smith on other matters: on the role of sympathy in moral judgements, on the origins and nature of the rules of justice, on the psychological foundations of authority, whether seen as allegiance to government or as deference within a society composed of ranks, as well as on the more mundane issues of everyday political and economic life. I will deal with some of these in the course of these lectures, but I wanted to begin with some fundamental points they held in common.

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Politics, defined in its original or Aristotelean sense as dealing with 'men united in society and dependent on one another', was to be one of the sciences that Hume believed could be reformulated along new lines by his discoveries in the science of human nature, his epistemological writings on the limits of human reason in achieving understanding. The most
essential element in Hume's science of politics can be found in THN, and later in the Enquiries concerning the principles of morals: and it centres on what he has to say about justice as an artificial virtue. Anyone who grasps Hume's meaning and purpose on this subject, or so it seems to me, has mastered much of what is distinctive about Hume's philosophical and political vision and the links between them. I shall spend the rest of this opening lecture on the subject. But first let me give some general reasons why the subject of justice was so important to Hume. Hume believed that the evolution of rules of justice to deal with the meum and tuum of social life was the most important feature of the formal social bond as well as being one of man's most important historical achievements. No society could exist without such rules. We can understand this by means of a comparison with Hobbes's state of nature as one of war of all against all. In Hume's terms, that is comparable to a shipwreck, in which the only rules are those of individual survival, where no rules of justice have relevance. At the other end of the spectrum lies a world of plenty and universal brotherhood: that too is a world in which mine and thine do not need to be distinguished. I can meet your needs without stinting on my own. But we live most of our lives in circumstances that are intermediate between these extremes. The goods of the world do not exist in abundance by comparison with our needs and wants, and we are selfish animals equipped with limited benevolence. In such circumstances rules to determine the inevitable conflicts over matters of rightful ownership are essential: social life is impossible without them. They are in this respect, probably prior to in time, and more important than the precise forms of government under which men have lived. This was to become one of Hume's responses to those who advanced contractarian theories to explain the origin of government: it enabled him to say that men could arrive at peaceful ways of living together before subjecting themselves to the authority of government.

Furthermore, when making comparative-historical assessments of different forms of government, Hume made their capacity to administer the rules of justice with a tolerable degree of impartiality the main criterion. This was to give rise to another divergence from received wisdom when he refused to condemn France, an absolute monarchy, as living under a system of slavery, as lacking liberty. Hume's position was that modern liberty should be
defined in terms of security under the rule of law, and by this criterion, civilised absolute monarchies were perfectly capable of passing the test. The final reason for beginning any study of Hume with what he has to say about justice considered as an artificial virtue is that it helps to understand what he has to say about allegiance and theories of obligation. It is therefore important to his rejection of contractarian modes of justifying obedience to government with all of their unacceptable consequences.

Why then was it so important for Hume to treat justice as an artificial virtue?

Yesterday I laid considerable stress on Hume's view of justice as based on convention. I also said that it provided the key to another of Hume's distinctive positions -- those expressed in his rejection of all ideas based on the social contract. I want to begin with Hume's views on this subject today, before moving on to consider some of his other ideas on the benefits derived from modern commercial forms of society, and his views on the workings of the British eighteenth-century constitution. But first a brief word about the works with which I shall be dealing.

Following the failure of THN to evoke much of a response, Hume turned to the essays, and later to history as a way of cultivating his science of politics. This was a change of style but not of aim. It conforms with another aim, namely Hume's belief that philosophy should be brought out of the scholarly closet and into society. It should, as he said, be made 'conversible', which does not mean that it should be less serious, merely a polite form of entertainment with some uplifting qualities. Hume mixed serious essays on political and economic subjects with others of a more ephemeral nature, but this should not detract from the original aim. Some of the essays -- on first principles of government, on the original contract, and passive obedience -- are the kinds of things that might have appeared in treatises on government. Indeed, they are often popular versions of what Hume had written in THN and Enquiries. I commend to you the three or four paragraphs in the essay on the original contract which summarize what he has to say on justice as an artificial virtue. Others -- such as the nature of parties under the British system of government, on the independence of parliament from the executive -- are more by way of serious inquiry into the sociology of British political institutions, always
with an historical and comparative dimension added. They are political science in a narrower sense, where it should be borne in mind that Hume was interpreting an unwritten constitution that was still in process of development, and where interpretations of what was essential to its working, what was detrimental, were either a byproduct of party divisions, or had yet to become part of contemporary understanding. The same goes for the group of economic essays on commerce, money, interest, public credit, taxes, and foreign trade. In this case, however, Hume was entering territory that had less of a history of learned cultivation by philosophers and natural lawyers; and while the essays are often penetrating, they could not match what Adam Smith was to do in WN, namely provide a complete philosophical system to explain the causes of the growth of opulence in commercial societies.

There is a commonplace observation that runs to the effect that profound political theorising is always the result of living through major political disruptions of one kind or another. To those who believe such things, the eighteenth century, is often thought to be a somnolent period in English political history, and hence in political analysis. It was poised between a period in which the English had the peculiar distinction of having decapitated one monarch and forced another into exile, becoming a godly commonwealth or republic in between, on the one side, and the upheaval of the French revolution at the end of the century on the other. Wars, another source of social and political upheaval in our century, were a permanent feature of eighteenth-century life, but they were all fought in Europe or more far-flung places like India and North America. Hume did not live to see the outcome of the American revolution, but he clearly expected it and was not altogether dismayed by the prospect of Britain losing its western empire.

But apart from the doubtfulness of the original hypothesis, one has to bear in mind the continuing reverberations of late 17th century events on English political dispositions and arguments. It was these atavistic or backward-looking elements that Hume sought to counter, partly through his rewriting of the history of England, and partly through his essays attacking the hang-overs from the English revolution. There was also, it has to be said, especially for a Scotsman who regarded himself as a North Briton, and therefore a supporter of the union of
England and Scotland in 1707, the constant reminder that the Hanoverian settlement was still subject to contest, notably from the supporters of the Stuart claims to the throne -- claims that were backed by military successes before Culloden finally put paid to them in 1745. These fundamental issues of allegiance to the old or the new royal families were also kept alive by the party divisions between Whigs and Tories, where many of the latter were non-jurors, those who refused or avoided taking an oath of allegiance where possible.

Hume was hostile to the way in which party divisions were expressed in terms of speculative principles on the nature of government, with the upholders of the divine right of kings commanding passive obedience of their subjects on one side, and those who maintained that the English had reenacted a form of original contract in 1688, voluntarily or consensually entrusting powers of government to the new royal line, while retaining certain rights to resist or withdraw support under certain, not very easily specifiable circumstances. It was hardly likely that someone with Hume's religious beliefs would give much credence to divine right theories; they could hardly meet the kinds of empirical criteria which he had set himself. How could we know if it was true that God had meant rulers to exercise divine powers? Hume mainly contented himself with the mischievous observation that if rulers were placed over us by a beneficent deity, why had God conferred this right on some pretty awful ones, such as the Borgias, as well as some good ones?

The doctrine of original contract seemed to have a bit more going for it. For example, it contained the idea of consent, of voluntary submission to a government that could guarantee peace and stability. What Hume rejected here, as he had rejected it earlier when dealing with justice as an artificial virtue, was the further idea that the contract involved a promise, albeit a conditional one that allowed the promisor to withdraw his allegiance if he was disappointed with the results. This abstract idea was not supported by history or by the everyday practices and beliefs of rulers and ruled. At best it was an unnecessary fiction, at worst a dangerously destabilising doctrine. Most established forms of government had originated in violence, conquest, or usurpation. When writing his history of England, Hume stressed how small the oligarchy of active politicians who engineered revolution was. Nevertheless, obedience to
government, whatever their origins, was a natural response that did not require any further reinforcement. In fact, Hume regarded the voluntary consent idea as one that undermined rather than reinforced the natural deference we are always inclined to give to established authority. It was, potentially at least, a seditious doctrine. Governments cannot turn on shifting interpretations of whether private interests are best served by continuing obedience. That would be like abandoning the convention that underlies the rules of justice in property matters whenever one's private interest was harmed. You bought governments holus-bolus, not on those occasions on which it suited you to do so. As in the case of property, present possession must carry a good deal of weight; and long possession comes in as reinforcement: we do as a matter of plain observation accept what exists and has long existed. Time and custom must be allowed their full weight; they overcome memories of the irregularities, the violence and injustice that attended the first formation.

Hume also ridiculed the weaker notion of our giving tacit consent to be ruled by virtue of remaining a subject or citizen: 'We may as well assert that a man, by remaining in a vessel, freely consents to the dominion of the master; though he was carried on board while asleep, and must leap into the ocean, and perish, the moment he leaves her.' Another version of the same idea in more serious guise can be found in Hume's argument that since society is not a static entity, but rather is composed of new generations joining, and old ones leaving, this 'perpetual flux' meant that the newcomers were not free to exercise choice. It is, if you like, Hume's version of an idea that was later to be expressed by Burke as a contract that bound past, present, and future, rather than a contract between those who happened to exist at any given moment of time.

As in the case of justice, promises to obey are not based on contracts, promises are the result of conventions, artifices, or inventions, which means that obligation must have a solid basis in human nature since we form the convention or make the invention. What then are our motives for doing so? We give our allegiance for two main reasons: because we have learned to appreciate the advantages of regular government, to appreciate the public benefits it confers, and we have therefore acquired an opinion in its favour based on interest.
Alternatively, we have a natural deference towards long-established regimes, we have formed an opinion of who has the right to rule which underlies our obedience. You can call these two forms of allegiance, active and passive psychological principles, and you can also say that Whigs have more of the former, while Tories have more of the latter. If that had remained the basis of party divisions, they would be matters of emphasis only; there would be more room for mutual accommodation and for keeping all disagreements within existing constitutional boundaries. Hume's chief criticism of the 'fashionable system' based on the contract was that it created a form of ideological politics that magnified the differences and brought the very idea of government into question.

It follows that Hume had no time for the related topic, namely rights of resistance. The dissolution of government was the worst of all eventualities, and discussion of the circumstances in which established governments could be overthrown encouraged a dangerously voluntaristic and valetudinarian attitude in such matters. As Hume said, placing emphasis on rights of resistance was like making a theory of divorce the foundation for understanding the institution of marriage, its rights, duties, and obligations.

Another major divisive force was factionalism, particularly when the faction was united around a speculative opinion, one that could not be readily settled by any known empirical methods. The worst form of these, in Hume's opinion, was the faction derived from religious enthusiasm. To a man of Hume's temperament and experience, such factions involved a species of irrationalism. Political differences based on an apparent or actual clash of economic interests could be dangerous, but interests were capable of being assessed empirically and, where necessary, used against one another in a mutually checking fashion -- this was one of the parts of Hume's teaching that was to be important to James Madison when taking part in American constitutional debates in the 1780s.

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Some of Hume's political essays, as I mentioned earlier, take a different form. They are attempts to diagnose how the English system of government actually works, as compared with how some of its partisans suggested that it ought to be working. The best example of
this kind of analysis can be found in Hume's discussion of the problem that most exercised party politics during and after Walpole's long period of office, namely what was known as the 'influence' of the Crown, as exercised through its capacity to gain support for the executive in parliament by means of bribes and jobbery. The Country party opponents of Walpole's methods regarded this form of corruption as one designed to undermine the independence of parliament. And since the constitution could be described as requiring a balance between the elements that composed its mixture of Crown, Lords, and Commons, anything that disturbed this balance, by increasing the discretionary powers of the crown, could seem to pose a fundamental threat to the constitution.

Hume's response to this kind of party rhetoric was to show that the combined wealth of those represented in parliament had grown to the point where it could challenge the monarchy through its power over the purse. It could in theory even create a republic. Why does it not do so? Because the crown has many offices at its disposal which enable it to buy support for the executive. Looked at from a Court party perspective, the capacity of parliament, if unmanaged by Walpolean methods, to disrupt the executive, prevent it from acting, could lead to deadlock of the kind that one still sees in the American constitution, and where 'log-rolling' remains a method of management. Under these circumstances, 'influence' or corruption, call it what you will, was, in Hume's opinion, essential to the running of the system. Instead of railing against corruption, the Country party should think about how balance should be maintained, rather than use a heightened rhetoric that saw every bit of jobbery as undermining the constitution itself. Once more, Hume appears in the guise of a moderate, standing above party, and reminding those who are the chief players to keep their eye on what matters most, the continuity and stability of government.

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I would now like to turn to the group of essays that Hume wrote on economic subjects, where these too have an important dimension that is both historical and political. The economic essays, as Duncan Forbes noted, display Hume in his least sceptical guise. He gives an account of the benefits of commerce and the spread of luxury that is almost entirely
positive, while at the same time keeping at arm's length from Mandeville's scandalously cynical defence of luxury. Hume does this by acknowledging that the moral distinctions between 'innocent' and 'blameable' forms of luxury are genuine, whereas Mandeville's paradoxes derived much of their force by refusing to make any such distinction. Unlike Smith and other Scottish writers on the same theme, however, Hume does not draw attention to any of its possible social and political drawbacks. There is nothing in Hume, for example, to match what Smith and Ferguson have to say about the mental mutilation associated with the narrowing effects on the mass of society of partaking in the division of labour.

In his essay on commerce Hume proclaims that there can be no conflict between the private material interests and happiness of subjects and the greatness of a state. Private and public interest are united. He qualifies this a little later, but there can be no doubt that what he was doing was challenging an entire republican tradition that warned against the dangers to res publica posed by luxury and inequality. Virtue and public spirit could only suffer when unlimited scope was given to the private pursuit of wealth and luxury. Men became effeminate, societies enfeebled, unable to defend themselves, incapable and unwilling to undertake the supreme patriotic task of fighting for, and, if necessary, dying for one's country. Such republican ideas remained alive and well among Hume's Scottish contemporaries, and there was of course a large body of ancient literature on the subject, much of it centring on the fall of Rome. Characteristically, therefore, Hume denies that the fall of Rome was due to such factors: it was more the result of basic defects in its system of governance due to the expansion of empire.

The optimistic sequence begins as soon as agriculture becomes sufficiently improved to furnish a surplus beyond the subsistence needs of those who work in agriculture. This enables a society to support an urban sector devoted to the production of luxuries. In ancient republics, the labour of slaves served public purposes by enabling citizen armies to be maintained. But the ancient policy of suppressing the desire for the kinds of goods that could be acquired through manufacture and commerce meant that there were no incentives to improve agriculture, no spur to emulate the finer products that could be imported, to improve
on the mechanical arts. There was also no storehouse of labour that could, in time of war, be withdrawn from luxury production into defence of the realm. It is a stagnant form of society that survives only by acting contrary to the ‘common bent of mankind’ to seek novelty, activity, and refinement. It begets indolence at the expense of what Hume describes as the 'quick march of the spirits'. The search for refinement in commercial societies, however, animates all aspects of society: 'We cannot reasonably expect that a piece of woolen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation which is ignorant of astronomy, or where ethics are neglected.' Industry, knowledge, sociability, and humanity are linked by an 'indissoluble chain'. These yield public benefits too: the love of liberty grows, governments improve, factions become less inveterate. Liberty benefits most from the growth of the middling ranks, thereby filling the gap between lords and peasants: such people 'covet equal laws' and are watchful of encroachments of monarchical and aristocratic power. In short, commerce begets 'free governments', just as, in return, commerce is more likely to thrive under free governments. Republics seek to control trade, and absolute monarchies create a climate in which commerce carries an element of social stigma.

All this can be read as a celebration of the superiority of modern over ancient societies; and it is again part of Hume's campaign against atavism, the tendency among some of contemporary political moralists to indulge in nostalgia for ancient simplicity and virtue. As when he was criticising the tendency to look backwards for evidence of legitimacy when dealing with the grounds of political allegiance, Hume was counselling a policy of counting blessings, of building on the achievements of the recent past rather than regretting a glory that was long past and whose credentials often did not bear close scrutiny. As historian of England, Hume reinforced this campaign...

In other economic essays, those on money, the rate of interest, the balance of trade, and jealousy of trade, Hume is beginning the process of questioning another popular body of maxims, those associated with what Smith was to call the mercantile system: the confusion of specie and monetary indicators with the real sources of wealth that lie in labour and technology; the anxieties over a favourable balance of trade that had led to a confusion of
trade with power. Whereas power was a zero-sum game in which the weakening of your opponent added to your strength, trade was a positive sum game in which since both parties could gain, you should pray for the prosperity of your neighbours. It becomes a case for freedom of trade by virtue of its destruction of a number of popular objections and fears.

In only one instance -- though it is a significant one -- does Hume fail to take the sanguine position on the prospects opened up by commerce as the foundation for national prosperity: the case of public credit, an institution that had been brought to a fine art in Britain and had allowed her to prosecute war against France so successfully. It was the foundation of what economic historians now refer to as the 'fiscal-military' state. Although Hume did not endorse all the fears expressed by spokesmen for the landed interest when faced with the growth of a monied interest, he took a dim view of the tax burden associated with rising public debt, and allowed himself to become alarmist about the growing influence of the debt-holders on government. The alarm can be judged by the fact that he counselled a policy of voluntary bankruptcy, of repudiation of all public debt, before it undermined the constitution and ruined the nation. The main source of Hume's worries, so far as Britain was concerned, was that this policy was more likely to be adopted by absolute monarchies like France. Free governments were more likely to delay until it was too late, meaning that forced bankruptcy would occur, possibly during a war. Hume's alarmism on this has provided some of the evidence needed to convict, or praise, him for having Tory sympathies. While that judgment is almost certainly wrong, it shows that the Court-Country spectrum during the eighteenth century was a genuine spectrum, allowing movement along its length. On this subject, Hume entertained the Country diagnosis and fears, whereas on influence, corruption, and the need for 'management' he took a Court position. It may be significant, however, that when Hume speculated as to whether the English form of government was likely to move in the direction of a republic or become an absolute form of monarchy, he made it clear that he would favour the latter route.

The entire line of speculation, of course, suggests a much older approach, one that sees all forms of government as suffering from characteristic forms of decay. If not conflict, there
is room for a gap to have appeared between Hume's optimistic account of the connections between commerce and free governments, and his fears about the political stability of such types of government. The English now enjoyed the most complete realisation of a free government, with liberty as its main achievement. It enjoyed liberty of the press, religious toleration, a degree of political participation, and safeguards against arbitrary taxation. Hume refused to tell the story of English constitutional developments as an heroic struggle: neither the monarchs nor the puritan parliamentarians were fit subjects for such treatment. Instead of a landscape of heroes and villains, it was populated by people acting out the roles assigned to them by circumstances, sometimes doing better, sometimes worse. Even the best of men, acting in those circumstances, could not do better than they did. It was this coolness that made Hume's history seem anti-Whig and hence Tory. He was depriving Whigs and other politicians of one of their main resources in defining themselves and arguing their corner: historical precedent.

As Duncan Forbes has stressed, another unusual feature of Hume's history was its cosmopolitanism. The parochial events of 1688 were placed within a European-wide context in which the breakdown of feudalism was the revolution that was most important to modern governments. A similar cosmopolitanism describes Hume's position within a Scottish context. As in the case of Smith, though one can find evidence of an awareness of Scotland's relative backwardness -- as well as, in Smith's case, a certain pride in Scottish educational institutions -- the audience to which they were appealing was a cosmopolitan one. Both had strong French contacts, and one could even describe Hume's cosmopolitanism as Francophilia matched by an element of Anglophobia.

What worried Hume, particularly as he grew older, was the possibility that liberty in England had gained too much at the expense of authority, thereby threatening both liberty and authority. Forms of government were not immortal.

Hume's views on public credit point up an intriguing feature of his political outlook. On the one hand, he urges wholehearted acceptance of the modern world of commerce and material opulence, not necessarily because he places high value on private enjoyments, but
because it creates the kind of society and polity that he favours. On the other hand, Hume is a nervous optimist, someone who is aware of the fragility of modern achievements and civilisation: the benefits are hard won, worth celebrating, but also vulnerable to destructive forces. On this perhaps some clarification can be gained from returning to what Hume has to say about the importance of opinion and belief systems. Zealots and enthusiasts, those who formed factions based on abstract principle, can never be entirely defeated. It is a constant battle which may be lost. But if conventions are strengthened through a learning process, why are those that have a long tradition behind them fragile? This question is not easy to answer, but consideration of it may help to explain Hume's emphasis on opinion as the medium that supports or subverts free governments; and his preference in matters of politics for machinery rather than men. Only by subjecting political behaviour to institutional constraints could such behaviour be controlled and stabilised. Hume's constitutionalism flows from the jurisprudential foundations of his political thinking.

Though impartiality and moderation were his main lessons as a political writer, Hume remained rather nervous about the fragility of our beliefs and hence arrangements. Attempting to be calm, dispassionate, and impartial was the best service a philosopher could perform in a heated and excitable world. Far better than the technocrat offering devices, another Enlightenment model, best illustrated perhaps by someone like Condorcet, and more actively by Sieyes. There is only one apparent exception to this in Hume's work, his essay on the idea of perfect commonwealth, and it is worth noting that it begins with a typical Humean warning: 'To tamper...or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate, who will bear a reverence to what carries the marks of age.' He also says that all utopian speculations based on 'great reformation in the manners of mankind are plainly imaginary'. He carries out his own imaginary exercise simply because there might be a 'future age' in which, through the dissolution of government an opportunity of translating theory into practice might exist. Oddly enough, the opportunity arose not long after Hume's death when the new American republic attempted to use materials from the eighteenth-century science of politics, as developed by Montesquieu and Hume,
to build a federal republic containing all the checks and balances of a piece of clockwork. Madison's reading of Hume's essays was to prove very helpful in these circumstances. He certainly made good use of the following advice in the perfect commonwealth essay when writing Federalist Paper 10 on the need to curb factions or use them to counterbalance one another: 'Though it is more difficult to form a republican government in an extensive country than in a city; there is more facility, when once it is formed, of preserving it steady and uniform, without tumult and faction.'

There is no clear agreement on how to label Hume's politics. Just as he has had to be rescued from some contemporary judgements, such as the Tory label, so he needs to be protected from some modern attempts at recruitment. Thus attempts to see him as yet another possessive individualist on the basis of his stress on the economic basis of modern civilisation, as another figure in a bourgeois tradition stretching from Locke to Mill, are not, in my opinion, very insightful, and fairly easily countered. If the anachronistic labels are to be employed, one can say that Hume's jurisprudence conforms with some versions of negative liberalism as we have later defined them. He is also a utilitarian, but not of the Benthamite kind. Conservatism is another anachronistic label, usually reserved for those, like Burke, who lived long enough to react against the French revolution. French events made it plain that there was an ancien regime to be defended, and that despite good intentions -- Burke would not even have conceded that to the leaders of the revolution -- nothing permanent can be built on bloodstained foundations. We can only speculate what Hume's position might have been. The emergence of a conservative position in British politics, largely based on Burke, allows us to see Hume in that light, though one major element is missing in Hume: religion and Burke's idea that church and state are part of an indissolvable union. Hume's conservatism lacks piety, an element of the sacred, and hence mystery. Those who can only live on the oxygen of 'first principle' of legitimacy, obligation, allegiance etc will find Hume sceptical on all such matters.