Between Virtue and Knavery: Hume and the Politics of Moderation

Paul Sagar, King's College London

Hume is widely believed to have held that constitutional stability depends entirely on institutional design predicated on the assumption that every person is a knave. His famous statement to this effect has been enormously influential, both historically and among contemporary scholars. Yet Hume did not in fact think that institutional design on the assumption of universal knavery was enough, if seeking to establish long-term constitutional order. This was due to the ongoing threat posed by faction and its capacity to subvert even the best-designed constitutions. The knave maxim was a necessary, yet not sufficient, condition for political stability. To see this, we must locate Hume's knave maxim in the wider context of his critique of parties, and especially his narrative construction in the *History of England*, as well as his exploration of the limits of political science in "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth."

Perhaps the most famous and influential idea in David Hume's political thought is that when it comes to institutional design, we must operate on the assumption that every person is a knave:

> In contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a *knave*, and to have no other end, in all his actions, than private interest. By this interest we must govern him, and, by means of it, make him, notwithstanding his insatiable avarice and ambition, co-operate to public good. Without this, say they, we shall in vain boast of the advantages of any constitution, and shall find, in the end, that we have no security for our liberties or possessions, except the good-will of our rulers; that is, we shall have no security at all. (*Essays* 42)[1]

Although Hume was clear that the assumption of universal knavery—that is, that every individual seeks private good at the expense of others whenever they think they can get away with it—was "false in *fact*," it remained nonetheless "true in *politics*" (*Essays* 42–43). Effective institutional design relied upon neither the civic nor moral virtue of political participants, but the redirection of their ambitions and interests (no matter how vicious or self-serving) into stable and collectively beneficial ends.

Hume's "just *political* maxim, *that every man must be supposed a knave*," has had a long career and justifiably garnered much attention (*Essays* 42). As James Moore demonstrated some time ago, making this move was central to Hume's breaking decisively with the earlier republican, or "civic humanist," tradition that emphasized virtuous participation as essential to the maintenance of a healthy political regime (Moore 1977; also Sabl 2012, 48–49). In turn, and as is well known, Hume's maxim directly influenced the writing of the *Federalist Papers*, particularly via James Madison's insistence that the need for government is the greatest reflection on human nature and hence must be designed so that "ambition . . . be made to counteract ambition" (Madison, Hamilton, and Jay 2003, 252).[2] And Hume's influence has by no means been purely historical. In the study of public policy Julian Le Grand draws directly on Hume's maxim when arguing that the design of welfare institutions must make crucial assumptions about the motivations of the individuals who operate within them (Le Grand 1997, 2003). To rather different effect, Nobel

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Paul Sagar (paul.sagar@kcl.ac.uk) is lecturer in political theory in the Department of Political Economy, King's College London, London, WC2B 4BG.

1. References to Hume's work take the following short titles: *Enquiry* = *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Hume 1998); *Essays* = *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Hume 1985); *History* = *The History of England: From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (Hume 1983); *Treatise* = *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume 2007).

2. For discussions of the Hume-Madison connection, see Adair (1957), Gibson (2005), Manzer (2001), Moore (1977, 833–39), Spencer (2005, chap. 5).

laureate James M. Buchanan, founder of the Public Choice school of economics, drew inspiration from Hume's knave in his project of transplanting assumptions of self-interested behavior from the analysis of markets into that of politics (Buchanan 2000, 9:42, 10:67–68). More recently, in political theory Jeremy Waldron has urged that work take on a more explicitly political hue, expending less effort on analyzing normative values and more on considering the design of good institutions and the structure of desirable legal systems. To this end he makes direct appeal to "the Hume/Madison argument that we can set up institutional structures to produce good results whatever the state of virtue in the polity" (Waldron 2013, 9).

It may come as a surprise, therefore, to learn that Hume did not think it was sufficient simply to design institutions on the assumption that every person is a knave. This was because the knave maxim was only one part of Hume's more fundamental and pressing concerns about the control of faction in politics, and it is only by having these concerns firmly in view that we can properly appreciate his considered position. In order to do this, however, we need to examine in some detail Hume's cumulative reflections on the problem of faction, as located not just in the political essays, but in the monumental *History of England*. In turn we see that while Hume has long been recognized as promoting moderation in the politics of eighteenth-century Britain, the extent to which he wrestled with the difficulties of actually bringing this about remains underappreciated.[3] Furthermore, Hume did not simply diagnose, he also attempted to cure: his writings were live interventions, aiming to bring about the moderation he identified as necessary, part of what Duncan Forbes labeled a philosophical politics of skeptical Whiggism (Forbes 1975; Hanvelt 2012, 26–27). Once we bring Hume's fully considered assessments of faction and moderation into focus, however, we see that his early statement regarding knavishness as a principle of institutional design came to be supplemented by an emphasis on the attitudes possessed by political actors in their dealings with each other and, in turn, their disposition to act in ways that are politically centripetal rather than centrifugal. If these attitudes and dispositions were not appropriately calibrated, institutional design would not be enough to control the potentially devastating effects of faction.

LOCATING THE KNAVE: HUME ON PARTIES

The problem of faction consistently preoccupied Hume (Hanvelt 2012, 14–20). This is evident from his first published collection of essays in 1741, right through to his final political

work, the posthumously published essay "Of the Origin of Government" (1777), which cautioned that all constitutions must balance the demands of both liberty and authority, and that the partisans of each side in the "intestine struggle" respect the claims of the other and ensure that "neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest" (*Essays* 40). The wider political context to Hume's writings was the post-1688 Protestant succession, most especially the ascendency of the Whigs at the expense of the Tories under the Hanoverian kings, and the rise of Walpole as prime minister from 1721 to 1742, and the vociferous opposition he aroused from Lord Bolingbroke for a decade from 1725 (Hicks 2013, 62–64). The more local Scottish context included of course the Act of Union in 1707, which ensured that England's constitutional order became coextensive with that of Scotland, but also the Jacobite rising of 1715, and hence the specter of continued resistance to the Protestant settlement north of the border. As Forbes has shown, while Hume was himself a moderate, or "sceptical," Whig, he worried that the unchecked political preponderance of the Whig partisans would destabilize the mixed constitutional settlement and thus criticized Whig doctrines not because he was a Tory (which he was not), but because of a more fundamental concern about the stability of the British state (Forbes 1975, 136, 202–4, 220–22, 227, 267, 309–10; 1977, 41; Hanvelt 2012, 18–20). Hume early on judged Britain's political arrangements to be precarious, as evidenced by his 1741 essay "Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic," where he predicted either the violent death of the constitution via its revolutionary replacement with a popular government, or else its "easiest death, the true *Euthanasia*" in the form of the direct imposition of absolute monarchy (*Essays* 52–54; Pocock 1985, 125–41; Surato 2015, 182). The 1745 Jacobite rising in Scotland, and the popular disturbances of 1768 brought on by John Wilkes's outspoken opposition to George III in England, served only to deepen Hume's concerns at the instability of the British state, and the possibility that it would prove to be undone by the sort of factional divisions that in the previous century had degenerated all the way into civil war. While Hume's knave maxim is now often read in isolation, to gain a proper appreciation of its place in his political thought we must restore its surrounding intellectual context, which is itself partly a function of the wider political context: Hume's preoccupation with the threat of faction, which he took to be the leading source of internal political disorder and, at its worst extreme, of outright constitutional collapse.[4]

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3. See Chabot (1997), Forbes (1975, 193–223), Hanvelt (2012, chap. 6), Herdt (1997, chap. 5), Livingston (1984, 306–42), Stewart (1992, 224–317).

4. On the importance of context to the precise philosophical character of Hume's political thought, see Dees (1992).

The knave passage appears in the essay "Of the Independency of Parliament," which was part of the first edition of Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political*, published in late 1741. Somewhat perplexingly, Hume claimed in the "Advertisement" to the 1741 edition of *Essays, Moral and Political* that "the Reader must not look for any Connexion among these Essays, but . . . consider each of them as a Work apart" (quoted in Harris 2007, 223). This is odd, however, because it is clear that the essays exhibit a high degree of interconnectedness, and many essays are enhanced by being read in the light of others. One possible explanation here is that after the commercial disappointment of the *Treatise* Hume hoped to achieve greater literary success by positioning himself as a popular essayist, one whose writings could be easily accessed on a case by case basis, without the sort of commitment demanded by the weighty and forbidding tome of philosophy he had previously published. (This in turn might explain why this advice to readers was subsequently dropped from future editions, that is, when Hume was no longer so worried about spooking his readership.) At any rate, Hume unambiguously and directly signaled the connection between the knave and the problem of party when he stated, in the very next paragraph after introducing the knave maxim, that "if . . . separate interest be not checked, and be not directed to the public, we ought to look for nothing but faction, disorder, and tyranny from such a government" (*Essays* 43; Stewart 1992, 238).

Accordingly, *Essays, Moral and Political* included both "Of Parties in General" and "Of the Parties of Great Britain." The first contained Hume's analysis of the essential structure of parties, dividing them into "personal" versus "real" (the latter further subdivided between "interest," "principle," and "affection"), while warning of the dangers of unchecked faction (*Essays* 56, 59). In "Of the Parties of Great Britain," Hume drew upon his general theory of parties to explain the mid-eighteenth-century division of British politics into Whig and Tory, which had intensified since Robert Walpole's rise to preeminence in 1722, and the return of his outspoken opponent Lord Bolingbroke from political exile.[5] The British constitution, Hume claimed, inevitably produced a split along party lines, which ran simultaneously along axes of both "principle" and "interest." The "genuine offspring" of the British constitution were the "mixed parties" of court and country, although these divisions had been "enflamed into a civil war" and produced the opposition of cavaliers and roundheads, while since the Restoration and the 1688 settlement unhelpful

philosophical principles regarding passive obedience and original contract had muddied the waters, with religious fervor and priestly meddling further intensifying animosity. The "natural" court versus country divide had evolved into the present arraignment of Whigs versus Tories, with that split being marked by the affection of the Tories for the House of Stewart, versus Whig preference for the Protestant succession: "These different views, with regard to the settlement of the crown, were accidental, but natural additions to the principles of the *court* and *country* parties, which are the genuine divisions in the BRITISH government" (*Essays* 65–72).[6]

Although not immediately obvious to the casual reader, Hume's compressed assessment of parties in his first round of political essays both contained, but also drew upon, a complex philosophical account of the nature of parties and the challenges they posed. Joel E. Landis has made this clear via a compelling explication of the foundations of Hume's position, one which is invaluable for appreciating the interdependence between Hume's analysis of faction and his developed view on the need to supplement institutional design with appropriate attitudes and dispositions of moderation.

As Landis shows, Hume viewed parties as both essential to, but also highly dangerous for, the successful functioning of constitutional governments, that is, regime forms in which political disagreement inevitably arose, and had to be managed through public forms of contestation.[7] For Hume, parties appear because of what Landis helpfully terms "motivational myopia . . . our tendency to be motivated by whatever is more affecting to the mind in the moment of action, such that we are more likely to act according to 'very frivolous' near-term interests, thus failing to act toward our 'great and important, but distant interests'" (Landis 2018, 221, quoting *Essays* 37). This "motivational myopia" is the root cause of why humans need to invent "artificial" virtues like justice, promise keeping, property transference by consent, and ultimately allegiance to established political power, as expounded in the *Treatise*. When applied to persons, however, motivational myopia generates partisanship, as the needs and interests of friends and allies often prove more powerful than the claims of more distant or competing groups, let alone humanity as a whole. Yet the problem with parties is

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5. For further historical context of Hume's interventions on party, see Coniff (1978), Harris (2015, 166–74), Hone and Skjönsberg (2018), Skjönsberg (2016).

6. For discussion of Hume's account of religious conflict and the emergence of toleration in the post–Civil War period, see Conti (2015), Herdt (1997, chap. 5), Sabl (2009).

7. In fact, Hume thought faction inevitable under all forms of government, but it posed particular dangers in mixed monarchy constitutions like the British one, and toward which he turned the bulk of his attention: *Essays* 59–60, Harris (2015, 340–41).

that they are always liable to breed self-reinforcing and potentially destructive factionalism.[8]

In part this is because the fundamental human ability to share each other's sentiments, "sympathy" in Hume's technical parlance, while being a crucial component in our capacity for morality, also tends to reinforce partisan divisions: "Popular sedition, party zeal, a devoted obedience to factious leaders; these are some of the most visible, though less laudable effects of this social sympathy in human nature" (*Enquiry* 41; Hanvelt 2012, 24–25). Furthermore, parties operate mechanisms of blame and shame that act upon the psychologies of their members, mechanisms that can come to outweigh judgments of blame and shame emanating from relevant out-groups or wider society. The internal dynamics of blame and shame amid the party in-group can in turn come to fortify its members in a disregard for whatever out-group individuals think of them, while strengthening the in-group belief that it is virtuous to act for the good of the party, even at the expense—or in direct, and even violent, opposition to—the interests of rivals: "When men act in a faction, they are apt, without shame or remorse, to neglect all the ties of honour and morality, in order to serve their party" (*Essays* 33; Herdt 1997, 205–6; Landis 2018, 223–26). Furthermore, the process is mutually reinforcing as opposed factions inflame each other in turn: "the violence of enemies is favourable to ambitious projects, as well as the zeal of partizans," while an "overactive zeal in friends is apt to beget a like spirit in antagonists" (*Essays* 51, 500). Hume thought this was an especially dangerous tendency: in-group factionalism could undermine the artificial virtue of allegiance—and in turn the undergirding belief in a general rule of political obligation to whatever power is presently established—that all stable large-scale societies relied upon in order to avoid collapsing under the weight of internal contestation (Forbes 1975, 109–10, 227; Herdt 1997, 205–6; Landis 2018, 226–28; Stewart 1992, 237–38).[9] Parties were inevitable in a mixed constitution like Britain's, however, where reasonable individuals could disagree in good faith (let alone unreasonable fanatics and the politically ambitious disagreeing in bad faith), such was the difficult nature of adjudicating between the inherently complex and ambiguous political claims involved (*Essays* 28–31, 45–46, 48–51, 55–56, 59, 64–65; Forbes 1975, 184–85; Landis 2018, 224).

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8. Hume does not draw any consistent distinction between "party" and "faction," generally using the terms interchangeably, something I follow him in below. On this, see Spencer (2005, 168–69). A technical distinction between "party"—understood as a means of principled association—and "faction"—destructive associations endangering of political stability—was later drawn by Edmund Burke (Bourke 2015, 197).

9. For detailed accounts of Hume on political obligation, see Sabl (2012, 47–49, 89, 104–5), Sagar (2016).

But parties were nonetheless potentially also lethal to a free constitution because unrestrained factionalism could lead to outright violence between competing sides, as each came to believe that loyalty to their party was a greater virtue than fidelity to the settled constitution. This carried possibly calamitous results, not just for those directly engaged in party contests, but for all who risked being dragged into civil war should unrestrained factionalism run its deadly course.

Although party strife in Britain had by the mid-eighteenth century been brought back under control, Hume was acutely worried that the dominance and increasingly aggressive partisanship of the Whigs under the Georgian kings might precipitate a deterioration of the British party situation (Forbes 1975, 136, 202–4, 220–22, 227, 267, 309–10). Furthermore, while he was also alarmed by the violence of Bolingbroke's Tory response to the Whigs, he simultaneously worried that "under Walpole, crown patronage had endangered the constitution" (Hicks 2013, 64). Ministerial corruption was of particular concern because not only did corruption threaten to entrench faction by deepening clashes of interests, but the accusation of corruption was itself politically incendiary and liable to further increase party animosity. This was a vital surrounding intellectual and practical context of the essay "Of the Independency of Parliament," and hence of Hume's knave maxim. As a result, we can see that on Hume's view knavish behavior—that is, sectional self-seeking, and a willingness to try and cheat the system at the expense of wider society—was likely to be dramatically increased by the presence of parties. Of course, many of those acting in knavish ways may not in fact conceive of themselves as being knaves, instead thinking that they are acting honorably in the cause of their faction. But this was precisely one of the bad effects of party. Hume's dictum that institutions be designed on the principle that every person is a knave was thus deeply entwined with his concerns about the dangers of party, precisely because parties tend to breed knaves.

Yet if we wish to gain a full appreciation of Hume's settled position it is essential not to stop here. On the contrary, if we trace Hume's wider account of the nature of parties, and the particular British experience of their fraught (and sometimes failed) management, we find that he espoused the need for more than institutional design on the principle that every man is a knave. In particular, he stressed the importance of the kinds of attitudes and dispositions that were maintained by political opponents in their dealings with each other.

This is worth highlighting because it reveals Hume's account of how to deal with the problem of parties to be both more nuanced, and more compelling, than is often recognized. As noted above, Waldron has claimed that "the Hume/Madison argument [is] that we can set up institutional structures

to produce good results whatever the state of virtue in the polity" (Waldron 2013, 9). Yet this risks subtly misconstruing Hume's position on how institutions will be able to fulfill one of their primary tasks in the control of ambitious factions.[10] For although "virtue" would certainly be too strong a term, what Hume nonetheless came to emphasize in his political writings after the early 1740s is that knave-controlling institutions would only succeed if sufficient numbers of political actors exhibited, retained, and cultivated, attitudes and dispositions of moderation toward political opponents, being disposed to act upon these in turn. That is, the institutional structures that Hume prized as the foundations of stable government were not self-sustaining, independent of the beliefs and behaviors of political agents. Although Hume certainly rejected substantive appeals to thick conceptions of civic or moral virtue, it is nonetheless going too far the other way to claim—as Waldron risks implying—that Hume believed institutions could operate merely mechanically, running on good design alone. Instead, Hume occupies a position intermediate between the civic humanist emphasis on what Christopher J. Berry has described as "the link between virtue and the practice of citizenship" requiring "civic equality and a moral disposition to maintain the public good, so that the (male) human personality was only fulfilled in the practice of active virtue in the *res publica*," and the mechanical emphasis on institutional structural design alone that the knave passage taken in isolation appears to advocate (Berry 2018, 327).[11] Instead, Hume's emphasis on the attitudes regulating political engagement puts him closer to something like the position later advocated by Tocqueville, for whom mores were the most crucial aspect of the success of a political community, precisely because the psychological dispositions of agents within a political system were essential in ensuring the successful functioning of even the best institutional structures (Tocqueville 2000, 292–96).

Surprisingly, those more specialist commentators emphasizing Hume's appeal to moderation have not connected this back to his famous knave maxim, despite the fact that if Hume is centrally interested in promoting moderation, he cannot have believed that institutional design alone was enough. Moderation, after all, inheres in agents' attitudes and dispositions, not merely in formal rules.[12] In any case, between knavery and virtue one may take a more intermediate position, focusing on the need for appropriate attitudes and dispositions as well as good institutional structures, a version of which, as the following seeks to show, Hume in fact espoused.

MODERATION AND THE PASSIONS

We begin by turning to Hume's essay "Of the Coalition of Parties," which first appeared in late 1758. The date here is important. Hume had by this point already published, in 1754 and 1757, the two Stuart installments of his (soon to be) six-volume *History of England*. The first of these (later styled vol. 5 after Hume worked his way backward through the rest of English history) dealt with the reigns of James I and Charles I, and caused enormous consternation when it first appeared. Denounced by all sides, it earned for Hume the mistaken label of a "Tory" historian due to his sympathetic treatment of the Royalist cause and of Charles I in particular. Yet, as James Harris has noted, when we keep the above dates in mind it becomes clear that "On the Coalition of Parties" is intended as a précis, advertisement for, and vindication of, the political conclusions that Hume had both drawn from, and advanced in, his detailed history of the Stuart era which when combined with its attack on ancient constitutionalism also offered a preview of the case Hume would mount in subsequent volumes (Harris 2015, 386).[13] As a result, "Of the Coalition of Parties" is instructive as a guide to what Hume thought he had achieved in the first—most politically explosive—installments of the *History*, as well as where he planned to go next. By extension, his wider view on parties and the best

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10. Waldron's use of Hume in this context is part of an attempt to refocus contemporary Anglo-analytic political theory away from an obsession over abstract values and toward the importance of concrete institutions. In this regard, I take it that my reading of Hume in what follows in fact makes Hume even more congenial to Waldron's purposes of developing a sufficiently robust and nuanced, as well as resolutely normative, political theory of institutions. Indeed, Hume can be read as attempting to promote precisely "loyal opposition" as a crucial feature of stable government, something Waldron (2016) has emphasized as being vital to the stability of liberal democratic regimes, and yet which is currently severely underanalyzed in contemporary theory.

11. This remains so even though, on Hume's picture, insofar as moderation is useful and agreeable to self and others it is itself presumably a virtue, although he himself does not make this point explicitly (*Enquiry* 67). That moderation is virtuous is not, however, to endorse a civic-humanist emphasis on self-sacrifice and patriotic service as essential to the health of the res publica.

12. Chabot (1997) briefly acknowledges the knave passage (337) but awkwardly goes on to claim for Hume a view promoting "civic morality," which is too strong a term and less apt than the intermediate position between knavery and virtue, based on attitudes and dispositions, which I put forward here. Forbes (1975) mentions the knave passage only once (227) and does not connect it to the issue of moderation; Harris (2015) likewise mentions the knave only once (173) without further comment regarding moderation; Hanvelt (2012) and Herdt (1997) do not mention it at all; Stewart (1992) discusses the knave in other (especially historical and moral) contexts but does not connect it to the issue of moderation (67, 70, 177–78). Landis (2018) does not mention the knave maxim, despite its connection to party.

13. What would become vols. 3–4, dealing with the Tudors, would appear only later, in 1759. For Hume's attack on ancient constitutionalism, see Forbes (1975, 260–67), Harris (2015, 387–405).

means of managing them can be better ascertained by focusing first on that essay, before turning to the *History* itself.

"Of the Coalition of Parties" emphasized the need for opponents to treat each other not as enemies that need to be destroyed but as adversaries with whom one shared a political habitat on terms of fundamental accommodation, major disagreements notwithstanding: "the only dangerous parties are such as entertain opposite views with regard to the essentials of government, the succession of the crown, or the more considerable privileges belonging to the several members of the constitution; where there is no room for any compromise or accommodation, and where the controversy may appear so momentous as to justify even an opposition by arms to the pretensions of antagonists" (*Essays* 493). This, of course, was precisely the bad situation that had lasted for over a century, "an animosity which broke out sometimes into civil war, which occasioned violent revolutions, and which continually endangered the peace and tranquillity of the nation" (*Essays* 493–94). Yet Hume claimed that there had "appeared of late" a general desire to quell such animosity, a goal which "ought to be carefully cherished and promoted by every lover of his country" (*Essays* 495). Accordingly, Hume claimed that "there is not a more effectual method of promoting so good an end, than to prevent all unreasonable insult and triumph of the one party over the other, to encourage moderate opinions, to find the proper medium in all disputes, to persuade each that its antagonists may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance in the praise and blame, which we bestow on either side" (495). There were three types of "controversy" that needed to be calmed between the contending parties: philosophical, practical, and historical. In turn, Hume now presented his two earlier essays—"Of Passive Obedience" and "Of the Original Contract," originally published in 1748 but in later editions arranged to immediately precede "Of the Coalition of Parties"—as "calculated for this purpose" of quieting the philosophical and practical disputes between Tories and Whigs, aiming "to show that neither side are in these respects so fully supported by reason as they endeavour to flatter themselves."[14] In turn, Hume characterized "Of the Coalition of Parties" as having the same goal of promoting "moderation," but in relation "to the *historical* disputes between the parties, by proving that each of them was justified by plausible topics; that there were on both sides wise men, who meant well to their country; and that the past animosity between the fac-

tions had no better foundation than narrow prejudice or interested passion" (*Essays* 495, emphasis in original).

In the rest of the essay Hume detailed the respective merits of the royalist and parliamentary causes, these of course being the "enflamed" court and country parties, and thus the proper ancestors of the Whigs and Tories. Strikingly, Hume did not shy away from exposing the relative weakness of the parliamentary cause, devoting much more attention to showing the frequently reasonable nature of the royalist stance. Hume concluded by explicitly attempting to temper the triumphalism of the Whigs, stating that "the event, if that can be admitted as a reason, has shown, that the arguments of the popular party were better founded; but perhaps, according to the established maxims of lawyers and politicians, the views of the royalists ought before-hand, to have appeared more solid, more safe, and more legal" (*Essays* 500).

There is however more going on in this essay—and hence in Hume's wider assessment of parties and their dangers—than first meets the eye. We are pointed in its direction by Hume's observation that "the greater moderation we now employ in representing past events; the nearer shall we be to produce a full coalition of the parties, and an entire acquiescence in our present establishment. Moderation is of advantage to every establishment: Nothing but zeal can overturn a settled power" (*Essays* 500). Hume, clearly enough, took it to be a central task for those wishing to control the ravages of faction that they needed to promote moderation while dampening zeal. Although he thought it highly unlikely that a genuine coalition of parties would actually come about, he nonetheless indicated the desirability of reducing the ferocity of opposition. And if we take Hume at his word in "Of the Coalition of Parties," the way to achieve that was simply to present the true facts of philosophy and of history, so as to refute the mistaken views of partisans. This is the reading favored by Landis, who here follows the established scholarship on Hume as a theorist of moderation: "Once it is seen that the parties are the product of the constitution's inherent tension between authority and liberty, then the parties of Court and Country can drop the unnecessary and dangerous dynastic question, and maintain their partisan division without endangering the constitution. Allegiance and partisanship can act in concert" (Landis 2018, 227).[15] Yet we must not simply take Hume at his word here. This is because Hume—of

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14. The same purpose underlay Hume's critique of both Walpole and the hysterical response to him, in the context of those Whigs who indulged in absurd but inconsistent panegyrics to the British constitution: *Essays* 28–31, Forbes (1975, 221, 285), Landis (2018, 227–28).

15. In fairness, Landis earlier notes (224–25) the efforts Hume makes to appeal to the sentiments of his readers in the *History of England* in particular. A similar position is held by Harris (2015, 386–87) and Phillipson (2011, 68–69) as well as the authors cited in n. 2 above. Chabot (1997, 338–39) comes closer to the position I outline here but does not explore it in detail.

all thinkers—was acutely skeptical about the capacity of facts alone to calm party rage. A severe limitation of most of the established scholarship on Hume as a theorist of moderation is that it treats Hume as thinking that he could straightforwardly inculcate attitudes and, in turn, dispositions, of moderation in his audience by writing good philosophy and accurate history, leaving his readers to adapt their sentiments in turn. Yet as Marc Hanvelt has argued, Hume paid sustained attention not just to the logical coherence of specific arguments but also to their rhetorical presentation. This was because Hume recognized that intellectually bad arguments, if presented in sufficiently effective rhetorical style, could overwhelm intellectually better ones—and indeed this was itself a major cause of why faction could be so politically destabilizing, insofar as inflammatory partisan rhetoric solidified in-group factionalism while heightening animosity between contending parties (Hanvelt 2012, chap. 6). Hanvelt focuses specifically on the place of rhetoric in Hume's moral and political thought, but we can extend his insights on this score.

Hume recognized that in practice a strategy of focusing only on good philosophy and accurate history would by itself be highly ineffective. The reasons for this are evident from both Hume's own account of moral psychology and what he says about the peculiar resistance of faction to outside moderating influence. At the most basic level, Hume never fundamentally altered his provocative youthful proclamation in the *Treatise* that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions" (*Treatise* 2.3.3.4, SBN 415). Although the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* took the hard edge off this formulation by emphasizing that reflection could cause us to change our moral outlook by working on the passions in different ways, Hume never altered his view that reason alone is inert, even if it may sometimes help promote the calmer over the more violent of our affective urges (*Enquiry* 83–89). Yet as a result, in matters of political dispute simply presenting the bare facts was likely to prove highly ineffective as a strategy for calming party rage, unless those facts were deployed in such a manner as to work effectively on the passions. However, and as we saw above, a central feature of Hume's analysis of parties is that in-group membership tends to make partisans peculiarly resistant to the blame and shame mechanisms of external moral disapprobation, insulating members of factions from having to consider that they might be wrong, while also inclining them to ignore facts and arguments that upset their established party allegiances, hence feeling no urge to moderate their more antagonistic passions. As he put it in the *History*, "faction is so productive of vices of all kinds: For, besides that it inflames all the passions, it tends much to remove those great restraints, honour and shame; when men find, that no iniquity can lose them the applause of their own party, and no innocence secure them against the calumnies of the opposite" (*History* 6:438; Hanvelt 2012, 127–28).

As Hanvelt's emphasis on the importance of rhetoric in Hume's writings helps us to see, there are therefore two problems to be confronted in this area. On the one hand, that institutional design by itself cannot unilaterally solve the problems posed by party antagonism insofar as moderation in agents' attitudes and dispositions is also required. But on the other, mere attempts at rational persuasion appealing to the ostensive merits of moderation will not do the job either.[16] We must therefore read Hume more subtly than as simply pointing out the facts to a receptive audience of rational and impartial enquirers easily moved by truth. Instead, we must recognize that he consciously entered the political fray himself, aiming to present his case in ways that would exert maximum sentimental leverage on his audience, precisely because it was only by working on individuals' passions that they could be brought to adopt the moderate attitudes and dispositions that kept the threat of faction at bay, and which the knave maxim needed to be supplemented by if party strife was to be effectively contained.

CHARACTER AND SENTIMENT: THE *HISTORY OF ENGLAND*

Hume's efforts to work directly on his audience's passions are evident as early as the 1741 essays. In "Of Parties in General," for example, he forthrightly declared that "as much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honoured and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated; because the influence of faction is directly contrary to that of laws. Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other" (*Essays* 55). Similar flourishes punctuate other essays, most notably Hume's exhortation at the end of "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science" that "I would only persuade men not to contend, as if they were fighting *pro aris & focis*, and change a good constitution into a bad one, by the violence of their factions" (1985, 31). Nonetheless it was the Stuart volumes of the *History*, appearing in 1754 and 1757, that offer some of his most sustained efforts on this score (Spencer 2005, 166–67).

Before turning to see how Hume aimed to influence his audience's passions in the *History*, however, it is worth pausing

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16. Hume thus stands, as Hanvelt further helps us to see (2012, chap. 7), as a forerunner to the more recent contemporary turn to affect and rhetoric in political theory and the history of political thought, for example, Garsten (2006), Kingston and Ferry (2008), Krause (2008), Tarnopolsky (2010).

to consider the nature of that work. In the famous quotation that we began with, Hume talks of "contriving any system of government, and fixing the several checks and controuls of the constitution," which implies (as reinforced by the subsequent Madisonian legacy) an effort at the conscious design of political institutions starting from something like a social tabula rasa, presumably by empowered legislators. But one of the most striking lessons that Hume's *History* expounded was that nobody designed the English constitution (Moore 1977, 825). For while the *History* is undoubtedly about political institutions, institutional design does not play a major role in what Hume has to say. On the contrary, one of the main arguments is that the constitutional order that Hume so highly valued (despite its undoubted need for renewal and reform) emerged largely by accident, as the effect of many unintended consequences. This in turn helped puncture the Whig myth of an ancient constitution that originated in the Saxon woods, migrated to England, survived the Norman conquest, was subverted by the Stuarts, and was finally restored in 1688. Hume debunked this narrative by stressing how England's constitutional order was of far more recent creation, owing its existence to the contingencies of seventeenth-century politics in particular. To be sure, Hume would doubtless have emphasized that any new constitutional innovations aiming to positively improve the historically bequeathed British constitution should respect the knave maxim. But equally, attempts at reform were likely to lead to unanticipated and unintended consequences (as history showed they almost always did), while no designer ever worked ex nihilo, but always with a complex inheritance—meaning that effecting successful reform was usually difficult, and potentially even dangerous. Given this, however, if one was engaged in institutional design—which would in practice typically be a process of reform—one needed to take account of the relevant existing facts, inherited from more or less recent history, that would heavily influence the chances of success. Yet some of the most crucial existing facts related to the attitudes that different agents and actors held both toward each other and toward the constitution as a whole. One thing that Hume himself set out to do in the *History* was to cultivate attitudes of moderation among his readership that would enable them to see that the ferocious partisan divisions inherited from the Stuart convulsions ought properly to be calmed, and in many cases ultimately laid aside. But what this reveals in turn is the extent to which he therefore thought that it was not enough to simply attempt to design or reform historically situated constitutions in terms of their institutional ordering alone. It was also essential to simultaneously cultivate the right kinds of dispositions and attitudes among the individuals who would have to live under and through those same institutions.

This is especially clear if we focus on Hume's account of the Stuart era in volumes 5 and 6 of the *History*. (Jeffrey M. Suderman is certainly right, however, that the medieval volumes, the last to be composed, also offer sustained evidence for Hume's "talent for character analysis by fashioning . . . moral and political assessments of nearly all of England's rulers"; I here focus on the Stuart volumes simply for considerations of space and scope [Suderman 2013, 122].) Time and again, Hume shows the difficulty of making fair and truthful judgments about such a convulsive and contested period. Yet insofar as the spirit of faction relies upon false and simplistic histories that unconditionally laud one's own side while categorically condemn opponents, Hume dampens such tendencies by eschewing simple historical narratives (Hanvelt 2012, 132–41; Herdt 1997, 190). Hence his criticisms of the self-congratulatory false histories put about by the Whig party of his day: not only are these objectionable on straightforwardly intellectual grounds because "destructive to the truth of history," but in painting unflattering partisan pictures of the Tory and Royalist stances these bad histories dangerously enflamed party sentiment, undermining recognition of the fact that a free constitution needs to balance both liberty and authority if it is to survive (*History* 6:533; *Essays* 40–41). In other words, the just-so stories regarding the rise of liberty put about by Whig partisans risked undermining the very conditions of freedom they claimed to be enamored with (Forbes 1975, 267, 309–10; Stewart 1992, 237, 245).

But spelling out the complexity of England's recent history, simply by itself, could not move men to moderate their passions if (for example) they found such complexity merely tedious, easy to discount in favor of established prejudices, or otherwise straightforward to ignore. Hence Hume did not just state the facts, but presented them in a way intended to generate meaningful affective responses. As Jennifer Herdt puts it, "Hume does not hesitate in the *History* to employ the rhetorical tools of sentimentality. He does so specifically in order to dislodge readers from their party prejudices and encourage them to enter sympathetically into foreign points of view" (Herdt 2013, 48).[17] In particular, Hume's big set pieces—for example, the trials and executions of the Earl of Strafford, of Archbishop Laud, of Charles I, and of Viscount Stafford—are constructed to exert maximum emotional leverage on the reader, while simultaneously preserving Hume's distance as an impartial historian (Herdt 1997, 206; 2013, 47–48; Phillipson 2011, 88–90; Salber Phillips 2000, 37). In this regard, Hanvelt has drawn particular attention to Hume's own

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17. On this, see also Chabot (1997, 337–39), Herdt (1997, 188–97), Hilson (1978), O'Brien (1997, 60–67), Salber Phillips (2000, 60–61, 65–71), Siebert (1990, chap. 1).

use of rhetorical style and, in particular, his presentation of the rhetoric of key historical personae in the *History* (most notably Strafford), as part of Hume's efforts to dampen faction and fanaticism by constructing a "high" rhetoric that he employed in order to combat the "low" style wielded by the proponents of dangerous party division (Hanvelt 2012, chap. 6). But Hume was also at pains to offer his audience opportunities to distance themselves—politically and morally—from the conduct of their forebears. Hence, he pointedly describes the violence and factional mayhem that punctuated the Stuart era as deviations from a more fundamentally moderate and peaceful English character, one which although taken up with "hypocrisy" during this period was "naturally candid and sincere" and whose relative restraint when it came to bloodshed (especially compared to historical precedents) reflected "great praise on the national character" (*History* 5:401, 6:142). In other words, the English may in their recent history have fallen into the morass of factional conflict, one that was furthermore enflamed by "theological poison" in the seventeenth century, but this was not an intrinsic part of the national character and thus did not have to be repeated. The emotional appeal to the patriotic pride of Hume's readers is clear, even if the extent to which he really believed in any such underlying national characteristics is less so.

Even more important—despite so far attracting relatively little attention in the existing literature—are Hume's extended treatments of the individual characters of key players in his historical narrative.[18] Given the importance that Hume's wider political theory placed on the role of psychologically based authority in generating the "opinion" upon which all government is founded, and the fact that his moral philosophy emphasized the importance of sentimental sympathizing with other agents as the psychological basis of all our ethical engagements, it should not be surprising that he sought to temper and shape his reader's attitudes toward central historical figures who had been crucial in either rallying or alienating different factions (*Essays* 32–35).[19] By offering nuanced, but also affectively engaging, assessments of central historical personae, Hume further sought to dampen the polarizing simplicities of party division. These passages are crucial because they show how Hume sought to promote moderation in his audience: not by simply recounting the facts of English history, but by encouraging direct sentimental identification with central actors as a way of dampening factional division.

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18. For different examples put to different purposes, see Sabl (2002), Salber Phillips (2000, 65–71).

19. For detailed analysis of Hume's political theory of opinion, see Sagar (2016, 2018). On the relevance of opinion to Hume's historiographical approach, see Salber Phillips (2000, 49–52).

Take Hume's differing treatments of Charles I and Oliver Cromwell. Hume's sympathetic assessment of Charles I is striking in its attempt to paint him as an essentially good man, who while often making poor choices and showing an unfortunate intransigence and lack of good judgment at key moments, did so in extremely difficult circumstances under grotesque pressure from enemies who frequently behaved in far worse ways than he did. Charles's "virtues predominated over his vices, or, more properly speaking, his imperfections: For scarce any of his faults rose to that pitch as to merit the appellation of vices" (*History* 5:542). Charles was primarily an unlucky king, undone by the terrible situation he found himself in: "He deserves the epithet of a good, rather than of a great man; and was more fitted to rule in a regular established government, than either to give way to the encroachments of a popular assembly, or finally to subdue their pretensions. . . . Had he been born an absolute prince, his humanity and good sense had rendered his reign happy and his memory precious" (*History* 5:542; Forbes 1975, 290; Sabl 2012, 175–76). By contrast, Charles I's opponents were often "furious, implacable, and bigoted factions." Furthermore, and alongside these political assessments, Hume was keen to also emphasize the fundamentally decent nature of Charles's character as an individual, that is, as a man his readers might relate to on a basic human level. Hence "probity and honour ought justly to be numbered among his most shining qualities," while the man himself was "of a sweet, but melancholy aspect" (*History* 5:543). In short, Hume sought to make clear that whatever his limitations, Charles I was no tyrant and was not legitimately overthrown in an act of principled resistance. No honest assessment of his reign, or the causes of the Civil War, could maintain otherwise.

Hume likewise gave a strikingly balanced assessment of Cromwell, who had ended the chaos of the Civil War by imposing military dictatorship (*History* 6:54, 65, 110; Baier 2008, chap. 4). Although unambiguous that Cromwell was a master politico who frequently misled, deceived, and manipulated others so as to bend them to his ambition, it is also clear on Hume's telling that such skills were necessary during the period in which Cromwell restored order. Having said that, Cromwell's abilities were not guided by any deeper principle of settling the constitution in favor of either "liberty or arbitrary power" and were confined to ending the crisis and maintaining his own position of dominance, while his foreign policy was positively "pernicious to the national interest" (*History* 6:109; Phillipson 2011, 90–91). An uneven political character, "the abilities, which in him were most admirable, and which contributed to his marvellous success, were the magnanimous resolution of his enterprizes, and his peculiar dexterity in discovering the characters, and practising

on the weaknesses of mankind" (*History* 6:109). But as with his assessment of Charles I, Hume was keen to bring the human qualities of Cromwell into view. While Hume certainly did not approve of Cromwell's puritanism, when it came to his "moral character" he explicitly resisted falling into "the blindness and infirmities of the human species" which incline us "to load his memories with such violent reproaches as those which his enemies usually throw upon it" (*History* 6:109). In particular, Hume was prepared to grant that even "the murder of the king, the most atrocious of all his actions," was "to him covered under a mighty cloud of republican and fanatical illusions." What Cromwell did was certainly wrong, but Hume allows for the genuine possibility that Cromwell at least believed it to be "the most meritorious action, that he could perform." Similarly, the "usurpation" of the rule of England "was the effect of necessity, as well as of ambition; nor is it easy to see how the various factions could at that time have been restrained, without a mixture of military and arbitrary authority." Ultimately, Cromwell's character "upon the whole . . . does not appear more extraordinary and unusual by the mixture of so much absurdity [i.e., his religious puritanism] with so much penetration, than by tempering such violent ambition and such enraged fanaticisism with so much regard to justice and humanity" (*History* 6:110).

Regarding two of the most polarizing figures of the Civil War period Hume paints evocative and yet also moderating pictures, not just of their political successes and failures, but of their characters as individuals. Charles I was no more a Nero than a Marcus Aurelius, and Cromwell's political skills made him the man the country needed to end its torments, subsequent hysterics regarding his moral character notwithstanding. As Suderman notes, "The truly reprehensible English kings are nearly as rare in Hume's *History* as the worthy rulers," while "the unworthy and even the disastrous kings . . . were not all bad men by Hume's moral reckoning. Most were the unfortunate victims of the cruelty of their times" (Suderman 2013, 124, 126). Hume wanted his audience to take such points on board not just as truthful assessments of the historical facts, but as renderings of real human beings whom his audience could relate to and moderate their sentiments toward, aiming to temper contemporary factional divisions that still harked back to the Stuart convulsions.

Consider, likewise, Hume's contrasting treatments of two individuals who at different times, and to very different ends, were embroiled in deeply partisan affairs. On the one hand, Hume had nothing but praise for General Monk, who played a pivotal role in the Restoration by keeping his cards close to his chest when maneuvering his allies and enemies, thereby helping to ensure that the restoration of Charles II was a peaceful affair. Hume emphasizes that Monk was "remark-

able for his moderation in party; and while all around him were inflamed into party rage against the opposite faction, he fell under suspicion from the candour and tranquillity of his behaviour" (*History* 6:123; Harris 2015, 164–67; Spencer 2005, 169). Here was an example of how to ride the turbulent waves of faction so as to promote the good of the nation. By contrast, Anthony Ashley Cooper, First Earl of Shaftesbury, is repeatedly criticized for exhibiting the opposite characteristics. A man of boundless ambition, Shaftesbury's willingness to form factions and cabals "surmounted all sense of shame," while his endless scheming, despite his "eminent abilities," was "equally dangerous to himself, to the prince, and to the people" (*History* 6:240). Shaftesbury was a paradox: he never betrayed his former friends on the frequent occasions he switched sides, being simultaneously "a man of such restless temper, such subtle wit, and such abandoned principles" (*History* 6:358). Yet his scheming and its effects were certainly to be condemned, for he promoted the "factions, into which the nation had been divided, and the many sudden revolutions, to which the public had been exposed, had tended much to debauch the minds of men, and to destroy the sense of honour and decorum in their public conduct" (*History* 6:276).[20]

Hume's nuanced treatment of key historical figures is, to be sure, partly born of a basic commitment to writing truthful history from a perspective of impartiality (Herdt 1997, 206; Phillipson 2011, 88–90; Salber Phillips 2000, 60). But for Hume, truthful history also had an instrumental benefit, insofar as he believed that it could promote political moderation—so long as it was presented in a way geared to act upon his readers' sentiments. Hume's treatment of Shaftesbury again illustrates this: despite Hume's evident disdain for the earl's insurrectionism and endless capacity for skulduggery, he nonetheless credits Shaftesbury for being (somewhat surprisingly) an "excellent chancellor" later in life, one of "justness and integrity," illustrating the truth that "so difficult is it to find in history a character either wholly bad or perfectly good; though the prejudices of party make writers run easily into the extremes both of panegyric and of satire!" (*History* 6:427). Hume's point cuts two ways: party prejudice makes for bad history, but good history can help ameliorate party prejudice so long as it is presented in the right ways, in particular by acknowledging that important and polarizing historical

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20. I have drawn on examples from only the final two volumes of the *History*, but many more exist in the other installments: consider, for example, Hume's treatment of Mary Queen of Scots and the factional intrigues surrounding her execution at the hands of Elizabeth I, as related in 4:250–52 (and on which see Salber Phillips 2000, 67–71). See also his withering—but ultimately moderating—assessment of Charles II (*History* 6:446–47; see also 5:330, 384).

actors were complex individuals about whom nuanced, and thus moderating, judgments must usually be passed.

Hume was acutely aware that prevailing political attitudes about how one may treat opponents were crucial to restraining the evils of faction. This explains why Hume devoted so much energy to cultivating attitudes and dispositions of moderation in the narrative construction of the *History*, through rhetorical invitations to emotionally identify with key historical actors, itself unsurprising given the centrality of sympathy in Hume's own moral philosophy. This is particularly well illustrated toward the close of volume 6, where Hume assessed the "barbarous delusion" of the Popish Plot, which ultimately led to the judicial murder of Stafford in 1680 (*History* 6:395). By this point the English had largely recovered their mixed constitution, possessed a working balance between Crown and Parliament, and the rival parties of court and country no longer took up arms against each other directly. This was no trivial matter. As Hume had argued in the essay "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," such a science revealed it to be a "universal axiom . . . *That an hereditary prince, a nobility without vassals, and a people voting by their representatives, form the best* MONARCHY, ARISTOCRACY, *and* DEMOCRACY" (*Essays* 18). The British, in other words, had a good claim to having stumbled into the best sort of mixed constitution it was possible to have, with a mixed constitution itself being the best form of government so far discovered. Certainly, the liberty afforded by the British constitution was liable to breed faction: as we saw above, this was an inherent problem to such a mixed arrangement, that is, one that enabled a balance between both liberty and authority. (Alternative arrangements that clamped down on faction by excessively subordinating liberty to authority would throw the baby out with the bathwater and, hence, overall rated as inferior forms of constitution on Hume's view.) Yet insofar as the threat of faction was an inevitable drawback of Britain's mixed constitution, its institutional structures, even if functioning well, would therefore be insufficient to fully contain its potential evils. This was precisely illustrated by the judicial murder of Stafford: "the two parties, actuated by mutual rage, but cooped up within the narrow limits of the law, levelled with poisoned daggers the most deadly blows against each other's breast, and buried in their factious divisions all regard to truth, honour, and humanity" (*History* 6:407). Hume's point again cut two ways. It was certainly good that the parties were "cooped up within the narrow limits of the law"—if they had gone outside of the law, a return to outright civil war would have threatened. But the laws themselves were not enough to prevent gross injustices being committed against innocent men who happened to fall on the wrong side of factional divides. Not just Stafford—judicially murdered by the par-

liamentarians—but "one College, a London joiner" who was tried for treason by a royalist kangaroo court in retaliation for Stafford's execution. When such party rage ruled men's hearts, "little justice could be expected' (*History* 6:406–7). In other words, institutional design is certainly essential on Hume's view, but if men continued to be actuated by party hatred and refused to act toward each other with appropriate moderation, institutional structures alone—even in a broadly well-balanced mixed constitution like that of Britain—would not be enough to guarantee protection of the innocent. More generally, and as Hume's wider history of the Stuart period sought to demonstrate, if enough people came to see their opponents not as adversaries to be confronted within the "coop" of the law, but as enemies to be destroyed outside of it, then existing institutional structures would often be insufficient to restrain them. Political actors also needed the right kinds of attitudes toward their opponents, and to be disposed to act toward them appropriately in turn. Recognizing this, Hume himself attempted to help fashion the very moderation that was required by offering a narrative construction of English history geared to work on the sentiments, and not just the intellectual faculties, of his audience.[21]

MODERATION AND THE PERFECT COMMONWEALTH

I have argued that the existing literature on Hume as a theorist of moderation has failed to properly connect this aspect of his thought to his more famous writings regarding institutional design and that, furthermore, the ways in which Hume sought to promote moderation have not yet been fully appreciated. Nonetheless, I have endorsed the overall picture of Hume as a theorist of moderation in politics. Yet this may itself be less straightforward than it is usually taken to be.

If Hume's guiding aim is to promote moderation, and if (as I have argued above) he is skeptical about the capacity of mere facts and arguments to do the work required, why does he often present his narrative in apparently provocative and controversial ways? For example, while Hume puts forward an argument that is overall supportive of the Church of England, he does so on skeptical grounds, insulting the Puritans as poisonous fanatics but at the same time claiming that they (unintentionally) kindled the spirit of liberty and that Britain owes its mixed constitution and its practices of religious toleration to the unintended consequence of their machinations (Conti 2015). This was a narrative more likely to irritate all parties simultaneously than one obviously designed to promote moderation (even if these are not, necessarily, mutually exclusive). Similarly, as his death drew

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21. For discussion of Hume's literary strategies, see Box (1990), Price (1965).

near, Hume noted the provocations his *History* had caused, writing in "My Own Life" that "miserable was my disappointment" to be assailed by all sides, "united in their rage against the man, who had presumed to shed a generous tear for the fate of Charles I." What is to be made of this? Perhaps the end of life reflection that all sides objected to Hume's account, despite his being "the only historian, that had at once neglected the present power, interest, and authority, and the cry of popular prejudices" (*Essays* xxxvii), was intended to reinforce the fundamental point that getting the facts right was by itself not enough to change people's partisan allegiances? But there is certainly an irony (one Hume was well aware of) that despite his promotion of moderation in politics, it was he—the one that conspicuously tried to rise above partisan divisions—who ended up being denounced by all sides, not least because he was quite happy to provoke his audience when he saw fit.

It is perhaps inevitable that in a work of the scope and ambition of the *History of England* such tensions emerge (Hicks 2013; Suderman 2013, 122–23). Similarly, Hume's own at times intellectually mischievous personality may help explain why his presentation and rhetoric are not always uniformly marshalled in the service of moderation. Nonetheless, and these admitted complications notwithstanding, on the evidence of the materials considered so far it seems that despite it being widely believed that when it comes to politics Hume thought we need worry only about institutional design, he in fact placed crucial importance on the attitudes that must underpin institutional structures.

Yet there remain important further factors to consider, pertaining to the question of whether for Hume there was a significant difference between what history showed had empirically needed to be the case thus far versus what a proper political science might show to at least be possible, even if practice had not yet caught up with this (though one day, perhaps, it might). For the above analysis has shown only that on Hume's analysis the real existing British constitution needed supplementing with moderation, and not just good design, in order to control faction. But might it not be the case that some superior form of constitution could be designed (or indeed, the real-existing British one reformed) such that only the knave maxim need to be relied upon? Indeed, is this not precisely the suggestion put forward by Hume himself in the essay "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth"?

First published in 1752 as the final contribution in the *Political Discourses*, this essay was retained in all subsequent editions of Hume's collected essays and always as the closing set piece. It was thus the final impression he wished to leave with his readership—and, on the surface at least, it appears a direct challenge to my insistence that Hume urged the need for more than just institutional design when it comes to the securing of a politics free from the destructive effects of faction. After all, the argument of 'The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth' is a systematic explication of how to arrange the constitution of a state, and Hume's emphasis there is firmly on institutional design, not on the attitudes of citizens (Stewart 1992, 290). Indeed, he even claims that whereas "the chief support of the British government is the opposition of interests; but that though in the main serviceable, breeds endless factions," by contrast his own plan "does all the good without any of the harm" by appropriately ordering competing interests and thus checking the emergence of destructive party opposition (*Essays* 525). Yet I suggest that "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" supports my reading of Hume, at least when taken in the round. To appreciate this, however, we must first be clear about the nature of the essay.

Given its apparent flirtation with utopian thinking—something usually presumed antithetical to Hume's skeptical and realist bent—"The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" has sometimes been a source of perplexity among commentators, some going so far as to suggest that the essay is satire, or irony (Coniff 1976; Letwin 1998, 89; Whelan 1985, 342). By contrast, I agree with Ryu Surato that it is actually a clear and consistent continuation of Hume's thinking on the nature and uses of a science of politics, coupled with his increasing worries about the problems of faction, something heightened after the '45 Jacobite rising, and a growing interest in systems of representation throughout the 1740s (Surato 2015, chap. 6). Specifically, the essay is an attempt by Hume to apply the "general truths" he took a proper science of politics as capable of revealing to the question specifically of institutional design, while (as demanded by that same science of politics) holding constant general features of political reality that the science was itself supposed to account for and work with, in particular what Hume took to be immutable basic facts of human nature and the fundamental rules necessary to all actually exiting societies regarding the governing of property relations (*Treatise* 3.2.2–4, SBN 484–516; 3.2.6, SBN 526–34; *Essays* 16–18; Moore 1977, 839; Surato 2015, 197). Accordingly, Hume dismissed the utopian schemes of Plato and Thomas More for their unrealistic (and hence, unscientific) suppositions about human motivations and capacities, as well as their communistic suggestions about how systems of property might be organized. Harrington's *Oceana* did better, but nonetheless fell down on the question of scientifically well-supported institutional design—something Hume believed he could improve on. "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" was thus a specific application of Hume's insistence that politics was sufficiently regular to "admit of general truths" to one precise area—constitutional design of

the British state (or "any territory of equal extent" [*Essays* 516])—and an enquiry into what this particular exercise might reveal from an appropriately scientific perspective (*Essays* 16; Stewart 1992, 290).[22]

We need not concern ourselves here with the details of Hume's plan of dividing the state into 100 counties further subdivided into 100 parishes, with 100 representatives in each county selecting one senator and 10 magistrates from among their ranks, with executive power vested in the senate, legislative power held by the magistrates, plus the further creation of various councils and courts for the administering of affairs of state in a system of mutual checks and balances.[23] What matters for present purposes is that Hume's ideally designed constitution had, continuous with his wider thought in this area, a direct and sustained focus on the control of faction. Specifically, the system of multilayered and mutually checking institutions of election and representation that Hume suggested was designed to deal with those party disputes arising from "real" (as opposed to "personal") divisions, and specifically those born of "interest" (*Essays* 56; Moore 1977, 836–38). Hume here clearly employs the knave maxim, combining this with a focus on faction in an attempt to suggest a theoretically optimal solution to the latter problem. Insofar as parties from interest were a common and extensive form of faction in politics, and a universal threat to all forms of constitution, it is unsurprising that Hume's suppositions about what the most effective means of checking faction might look like focuses primarily on this. However, even in the context of attempting to construct a theoretical ideal based on scientific principles corresponding to observable general truths of politics, what is finally striking about "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" is that even in the most maximally ideal scenario Hume was prepared to countenance he ultimately intimates that institutional design will not be enough to entirely control the problem of faction. The limits of the knave maxim thus apply not just to the real existing British constitution but also to the theoretically ideal one.

We see this by noting that after laying out the constitutional structure of the ideally designed commonwealth, Hume turned to address specifically the problem of faction that was liable to beset any political association, and hence which his own theory needed to be alert to. The measures he proposed certainly involved heavy emphasis on appropriately designed institutions. Yet it is striking that in the closing paragraph of the essay, after Hume had laid down a raft of extensive institutional remedies to the problem of faction explicitly presented

as an improvement on the actually existing British constitution, as well as suggesting specific reforms that might bring the real-world British constitution closer to the "perfect" commonwealth he has just described, Hume goes on to consider what the long-term prospects of even this ideally designed constitution might be. What he says is revealing.

Although the constitutional apparatus depicted in "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" is geared toward control of faction based on opposed interests, nonetheless faction will remain a threat to the longevity of such a constitution, precisely because "we know not to what length enthusiasm, or other extraordinary movements of the human mind, may transport men, to the neglect of all order and public good. Where difference of interest is removed, whimsical and unaccountable factions often arise, from personal favour or enmity" (*Essays* 529; Hanvelt 2012, 143). In other words, precisely because Hume refused to imagine significant changes to baseline human nature when hypothesizing what the best institutional structure might deliver, even the best-designed institutions could not entirely eliminate the problem of faction. Beyond those based in "interest," "real" parties based on "principle" and "affection" still threatened to emerge, as did those from "personal" sources.[24] Yet given that on Hume's own account parties from interest are "the most reasonable, and the most excusable," but parties from principle and personal affection are "the most extraordinary and unaccountable" and "often very violent," this must be a serious cause for concern (*Essays* 59, 60, 63; cf. Hanvelt 2012, 17; Surato 2015, 187). Furthermore, in drawing back from the ideal, Hume likewise acknowledged that even if the British constitution were reformed in line with the model he proposed, such a "plan of limited monarchy . . . removes not entirely, though it may soften, the parties of *court* and *country*" (*Essays* 527). In other words, despite his best efforts to use a science of politics to establish the theoretically most effective way to control the problem of faction through institutional design, both in the purely ideal case (the system proposed in the essay) and in the best imaginable real-world scenario (a Britain reformed in line with those theoretical proposals), faction could not be entirely eliminated.

Hume, of course, was however under no illusions that the real world of politics would ever be reformed in line with

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22. For discussion of Hume's conception of a science of politics, see Coniff (1976), Forbes (1977), Moore (1977, 810–13), Surato (2015, 181–84).

23. For detailed discussion, see Stewart (1992, 284–90).

24. Stewart (1992, 287) claims that "one of the foremost advantages of this plan is that it will not produce parties of principle." This is true, to the extent that Hume's plan hoped to prevent parties emerging as regards the principle of what sort of constitution ought to obtain, one of the leading causes of disagreement in his own time. However, this is only one source of principled disagreement; agreement on the constitution alone could not prevent disagreement about other principles emerging—as Hume candidly admits, in the above quoted passage.

the purely theoretical speculations of "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." The suppositions he put forward there were justified as being simply "the most worthy curiosity of any the wit of man can possibly devise," due to the inherent interest of imagining what the best-designed constitution might look like under appropriate (i.e., properly political-scientific) constraints (*Essays* 513). And while Hume left open the possibility that in "some future age, an opportunity might be afforded of reducing the theory to practice," his point was not that some empowered legislator might directly apply the plan of his essay, but rather that being aware of the general truths both revealed and utilized by a science of politics was the best way to proceed, and in turn gave one the best chance of establishing or reforming "any real constitution or form of government as near it [perfection] as possible" (*Essays* 513–14).[25] Yet we must in turn interrogate more carefully the connection between Hume's idea of a science of politics and what he thought that science could deliver in terms of addressing real world political problems. After all, "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" is a purposefully and very specifically focused essay, one which seeks to explore how much might, at least in theory, be achieved by good institutional design. Yet as Hume was well aware, practice did not—and never would—conform to speculative theory alone.

While Hume was confident that a science of politics was possible precisely because "politics admit of general truths, which are invariable by the humour or education either of subject or sovereign" (*Essays* 18), we must not erroneously read into his thought a mechanistic view of the possibility of successfully implementing the findings of any such science, or the assumption that the merely general truths that a science of politics could reveal would, by themselves, be enough to bring about adequate practical solutions to specific political problems embedded in complex historically inflected contexts (Dees 1992). As he explicitly warned, to "try experiments merely on the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate" (*Essays* 512). Regarding the threat posed by faction, Hume took a nuanced stance. Good institutional design founded on the knave maxim was certainly necessary to combat this evil and was itself revealed as a baseline scientific principle due to the wider truth that "so great is the force of laws, and of particular forms of government, and so little dependence have they on the humours and tempers of men, that consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced

from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford" (*Essays* 16). Institutions that did not respect the knave maxim would be breeding grounds for faction, and thus disorder and potential collapse, a truth that deserved the status of a scientific claim such was its generality. By the same logic, if applying the principles of a good science of politics to the question of controlling faction specifically in relation to ideal theoretical constitutional design, "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" indicated how things should look.

Yet in the case of faction, the "general truth" of the need for good institutional design did not by itself settle the issue. Indeed, as "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" revealed, even in an ideal constitution space would open up for factional conflict based on conflicting principles that had become endemic to the modern world, as well as the personal enmities, rivalries, and antagonisms that human nature inevitably gave rise to. Given the decidedly less than perfect conditions of all real-world politics, the need for moderation became only more pressing the further away one moved from the ideal. In turn, therefore, the need for moderation in the attitudes and dispositions of political actors emerges as itself one of the general truths of politics that can be deduced from a study of the underlying constants given by the "force of laws," and the relatively uniform character of human nature, given the fact that human beings necessarily find themselves living in more or less severely imperfect commonwealths. While moderation might be only a minimal supplement used to combat non-interest-based factionalism in the speculative ideal commonwealth, the further we find ourselves from such a scenario—as we always more or less do—the greater will be the need for moderation.

Beyond this, however, Hume also recognized the inherent limits of the findings of any science of politics more generally. For it was folly to hope that the general truths revealed by a science of politics could be straightforwardly translated into direct reforms that solved pressing political problems through the intentional direction of an empowered magistrate. This was for two reasons, one general, and one specific to the case of dealing with faction.

The first, general, point relates to the limits of theoretically directed reform. In a passage that was retained in "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" after 1770, even when Hume removed from all subsequent editions the vociferous attack on the dangerous activities of political "projectors" with which he had opened earlier versions of the essay, he nonetheless wrote:

> An established government has an infinite advantage, by that very circumstance of its being established; the bulk of mankind being governed by authority, not

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25. As Surato (2015, 180) has noted, while "Hume is deeply sceptical about the implementation of radical reforms, this attitude need not be seen as incompatible with his intellectual quest for the best possible system of government."

reason, and never attributing authority to any thing that has not the recommendation of antiquity. To tamper, therefore, in this affair, 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; and though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric and preserve entire the chief pillars and supports of the constitution. (*Essays* 512–13; see also Stewart 1992, 211–13, 251, 281–82; Surato 2015, 194–200)

Even the most well-meaning of reformers was likely to do more harm than good if imposing top-down changes based on purely theoretical ideas. A good reformer worked with the fabric of the existing constitution, which was necessarily imperfect, and hence that would mean continuing to recognize the need for moderation in conditions of less than ideal constitutional design. Hume not only knew full well that the perfect commonwealth was not coming any time soon but urged his readers to understand that it never would be, given the dangers and difficulties of effecting complex political reform in the real world. As he put it in volume 4 of the *History*, "In the particular exertions of power, the question ought never to be forgotten, *What is best*? But in the general distribution of power among the several members of a constitution, there can seldom be admitted any other question, than *What is established*?" (*History* 4:184). If one was serious about the control of faction it was no good thinking only about ideal scenarios (where the threat of faction would anyway ultimately remain to some extent), one also had to consider the challenges of introducing effective reform in practice, not least because bad reforms could make the problem of faction worse, not better: "If any other rule than established practice be followed, factions and dissensions must multiply without end: And though many constitutions, and none more than the British, have been improved even by violent innovations, the praise, bestowed on those patriots, to whom the nation has been indebted for its privileges, ought to be given with some reserve, and surely without the least rancour against those who adhered to the ancient constitution" (*History* 4:184–85; Dees 1992, 240–41). Moderation would always be essential, insofar as the humans were always condemned to conduct their politics in less-than-ideal settings.

The second reason, specific to the attempt to control faction through the cultivation of moderation in particular, is that due to the fact that moderation inheres in individuals' attitudes and dispositions, it is not something that can be reordered or controlled at the whim of legislators, no matter how attentive they may be to a science of politics, but instead requires experience, repeat cultivation, and a suitably hospitable environment in which to flourish. A science of politics focused purely on ideal institutional design might not—as with "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth"—need to emphasize the need for moderation. But for Hume the science of politics went beyond thinking only about good institutional design in ideal scenarios and included what was needed when institutions were less than ideal, as they always would be (Dees 1992, 221–24). While an appropriately broad science of politics could reveal the need for moderation if attempting to control faction, it could not by itself create that moderation. Hence, again, why Hume was alert to the need to use other means to try and help bring it about, as evinced in his effort to work on the affective sentiments of his audience, as he did most extensively in the *History of England*. Political science could point out the path of moderation, but actually walking it required more than simply knowing that the path was there.

CONCLUSION

Despite being perhaps the most famous of all Hume's political ideas, his refrain about supposing that all men are knaves when it comes to institutional design is only one part of his view, and if taken alone does not adequately capture his full position. In the first place, the knave maxim pertained specifically to the control of faction but was far from the only thing that Hume had to say on that matter. Properly understanding the knave maxim, as I have tried to show above, can only be done by placing it in the light of Hume's wider thought on party. If we restore that wider thought, however, we find that Hume did not think that the knave maxim alone was enough. On the one hand, the real historical experience of Britain's mixed constitution in particular—imperfectly realized, but still the best species of constitution yet devised—showed that institutions alone were not sufficient to control the ravages of faction and needed to be supplemented with attitudes and dispositions of moderation. On the other hand, even in ideal theoretical scenarios the knave maxim would not be enough: as "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" showed, even in the best-designed constitution faction would still threaten to emerge. Yet the further away one moves from an ideal constitution, the more the knave maxim will need to be supplemented with appropriate attitudes and dispositions—and given that human beings always find themselves living under more or less severely nonideal constitutions, to that extent they will always be more or less reliant not just on institutional design, but moderation, to control the ravages of faction. This was itself a truth revealed by political science, but one that required more than just political science to

adequately act upon—hence Hume's use of rhetoric and history to both bring the point home while also trying to put it into practice.

From Hume's perspective, if one happened to be in the process of designing or reforming political institutions, it would certainly be foolish not to make central the assumption that all men are knaves. However, more than just this assumption (and its successful implementation) would be required if the threat posed by faction was to be contained. Hume's famous knave maxim was offered as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of eliminating faction, the inevitable outgrowth of a mixed constitution in which liberty is balanced with authority, that is, the best sort of constitution, and which the British one of Hume's day, however imperfect, was still in his view the best exemplar of. Thus while James Moore was certainly right, over 40 years ago, to identify Hume as breaking with an earlier republican tradition centered on the importance of civic virtue, and subsequent scholarship has likewise been largely correct to follow his lead in this regard, Moore nonetheless overstated the case when he wrote that "Hume did not depend on moderate or philosophical temperaments in politics, any more than he thought it possible to depend on natural or moral sentiments in the administration of justice. He believed rather that good government could be achieved quite irrespective of the moral qualities and characters of the politicians who conduct the government" (Moore 1977, 821). "Quite irrespective" is putting it too strongly. Between knavery and virtue there is a middle course, one that focuses on the need to cultivate attitudes and dispositions of moderation alongside well-designed institutions. This is what Hume urged was required if the terrible dangers of faction were to be contained.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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