

DAVID HUME AND THE CONSERVATIVE TRADITION

Although the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–76) is viewed by some as a significant figure in the conservative political tradition, many find his credentials problematic. They point to his skepticism, which appears to border on nihilism (J. S. Mill said that “regard for truth formed no part of his character”); or to his supposedly utilitarian theory of morals (Jeremy Bentham credited Hume with the origin of utilitarianism); and A. J. Ayer claimed him as the founder of logical positivism, which held that all metaphysical, religious, and value judgments are cognitively meaningless, expressing merely subjective feelings. These skeptical and positivistic strains, along with his supposed hostility to religion, seem to place Hume outside the conservative tradition. But these are spectacular misconceptions of Hume’s philosophy.¹ When corrected, Hume emerges not only as part of, but as a foundational figure in, the conservative tradition.

Russell Kirk defined the conservative tradition as essentially a critique of ideology in politics, first exemplified in the French Revolution and first exposed and criticized in 1790 by Edmund Burke’s eloquent *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. In Burke’s view (and Kirk’s) a normal or healthy political society reposes in

the enjoyment of inherited traditions and practices. The art of politics is to preserve these general arrangements and, when necessary, to correct them by recourse to principles already intimated in them. An ideological style of politics, however, imagines an *alternative order of politics* known by reason, entirely independent of tradition and expressed in a set of abstract principles. For the ideologue, the task of politics is to instantiate that alternative (and philosophically “correct”) social order.

If we take conservatism to be essentially a critique of ideology, then Hume must be counted as a founding figure in the conservative tradition because he was the first to launch a systematic critique of modern ideologies. The critique is grounded in a distinction Hume makes between “true philosophy” and “false philosophy” that was forged in his first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), and that runs throughout all his writings, including his historical writings. What Hume calls “false philosophy” is what we would describe today as “ideology,” a term unavailable to either Hume or Burke.

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HUME USES “philosophy” and “reason” to mean the same thing; so a critique of philosophy is also a critique of reason. But how can one distinguish between true and corrupt forms of philosophy (or of reason)? Such a critique would itself be another philosophical theory, and how could one know that the critique was not itself of the corrupt sort? This apparent inability of philosophy or reason to throw itself seriously into question led some to think that reason is a self-certifying guide to truth. Descartes, for instance, taught that the cause of error lies in the *will*, not the intellect. Philosophic reason, rightly conducted, is infallible. Hume, however, taught that philosophic reason contains within itself the seeds of its own corruption. How is this possible?²

According to Hume, the philosophical act of thought is structured by three principles: ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion. First, philosophical claims purport to provide an unconditioned understanding of what is thought to be ultimately real. Second, philosophy is autonomous, i.e., self-determining. The philosopher cannot (without ceasing to be a philosopher) defer to the *pre-reflective authority* of custom, tradition, or to the dogmas of priests and poets. Third, philosophical claims about the real, grounded in the philosopher’s autonomous reason, have a title to rule over the domain of the pre-reflective. As Plato said, philosophers should be kings.

What Hume discovered is that these principles of philosophic reason are incompatible with human nature. When cut loose from the authority of the pre-reflective, they are indeterminate and can establish no judgment whatsoever. But philosophers typically do not recognize this; instead, they secretly smuggle in their favorite prejudices from pre-reflective custom and pass them off as universal principles entirely free from the authority

of custom. In doing so they deceive themselves and others. And since the aim of philosophical truth is *self-knowledge*, this form of philosophic reason is *false* in the sense of being self-deceptive.

There is more. The false philosopher not only smuggles in a favorite part of custom in violation of the autonomy principle, but he spiritualizes that part into the whole of experience: “When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favorite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phenomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning.”³ Thales taught that all is really water; Proudhon that “property is theft”; Marx that all history is class struggle; Hobbes that love of others is really self-love. Here the philosophic act is engaged in *world-inversion*, what Hume calls “philosophical chymistry,” i.e., alchemy. Just as the alchemist can transform base metal into gold, and King Midas could transform everything he touched to gold, so Proudhon can transform the inherited order of property into theft, and Marx all of history into class struggle. In so doing the false philosopher is a worker in black magic: “Do you come to a philosopher as to a *cunning man*, to learn something by magic or witchcraft, beyond what can be known by common prudence and discretion?”⁴

The true philosopher recognizes that philosophical reflection consistently purged of the authority of the pre-reflective leads to total skepticism. In this moment of despair, hubristic reason (structured by the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion) becomes impotent and utterly silent. It is only *then* that the philosopher can recognize, for the first time, the authority of that radiant world of pre-reflective common life in which he has his being and which had always been

a guide prior to the philosophic act. This recognition is gained not by argument (for total skepticism renders all argument silent) but through *despair*. Moved by this recognition, the true philosopher rejects the autonomy principle (which had presumed the domain of the pre-reflective to be false unless shown otherwise), and replaces it with what we might call “the autonomy of custom”: that the pre-reflective is to be presumed true unless shown otherwise. To show otherwise is to criticize a particular belief or practice in the light of standards and ideals already intimated in custom and coherent with the whole. Hume concludes that “true philosophy” is nothing but “reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.”⁷⁵

The principle of dominion is also rejected. Theory based on the autonomy principle loses its title to rule since the philosopher (if he is to inquire at all) now acknowledges the authority of custom as a whole. But the principle of ultimacy remains. Philosophical inquiry is still about what is thought to be ultimate reality, though now purged of the hubris of the autonomy principle.

What the stages of Hume’s dialectic reveal is that no one is a philosopher unless he instantiates the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion; but no one is a *true* philosopher unless he comes to see that those principles are incoherent with human nature. In short, no one can be a true philosopher who has not passed through the fire and despair of false philosophy, an insight achieved only through dialectical reasoning: “In considering this subject we may observe a gradation of three opinions that rise above each other, according as the persons who form them acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge. These opinions are that of the vulgar [the pre-reflective], that of a false philosophy, and that of the true; where we shall

find upon enquiry, that the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge.”⁷⁶ Contrary to Mill and many others, Hume was not a nihilistic skeptic. Total skepticism is only a moment in the dialectic of true and false philosophy and one that necessarily follows from the autonomy of philosophy which denies authority to the pre-reflective. Since true philosophy teaches that custom is presumed true unless shown otherwise, Hume can have no *a priori* objection to religion, even revealed religion, if it can be made coherent with other primordial beliefs in common life. Many forms of revealed religion fail to meet this test, but Hume thought that basic theism (the belief that the universe is the work of a single purposive intelligence) is not only coherent with our deepest natural beliefs but is actually presupposed by them. Because of this, Hume held that no reasonable person could seriously deny the tenets of basic theism, even if he might do so in words. D’Holbach and other atheistic friends in Paris found this amusing, and Hume remarked how they “used to laugh at me for my narrow way of thinking in these particulars.” Sir James McDonald, writing from Paris to a friend in England, could speak of “poor Hume, who on your side of the water was thought to have too little religion, is here thought to have too much.”⁷⁷

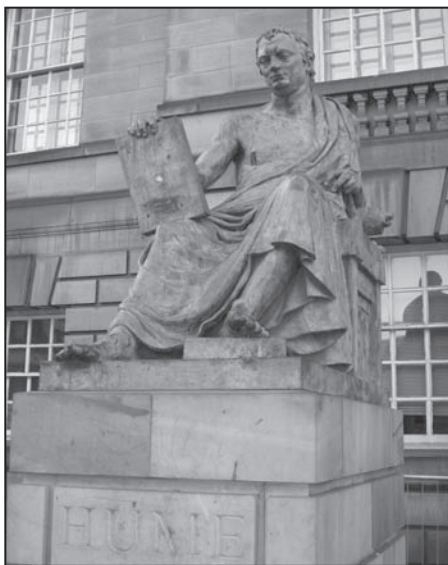
HUME’S CRITIQUE of natural religion is not a rejection of sacred religious tradition as such but of rationalistic theorizing in religion. Speaking through an imaginary Athenian, Hume says: “The religious philosophers, not satisfied with the tradition of your forefathers, and doctrine of your priests (in which I willingly acquiesce), indulge a rash curiosity, in trying how far they can establish religion upon the principles of reason; and they

excite, instead of satisfying, the doubts, which naturally arise from a diligent and scrupulous enquiry.⁷⁸ Hume sought professorships at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh. Had he secured them, he would have had to sign the Westminster Confession of Faith, attend church, and lead students in prayer at Glasgow. He was prepared to carry out these duties. Whatever Hume's personal views might have been, like the ancient philosophers, he was prepared to participate in the sacred rites and teachings of the established religion.⁹

In the *Treatise* Hume wrote, "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous," but he added that this difference was a contingent one.¹⁰ He observed that philosophers in the ancient world (each implacably insisting on his own world-inverting system) were more fanatical than the devotees of pagan religion. So why has modern religion been the scene of fanaticism, persecution, and war? Hume's answer is unexpected and quite different from that offered by his Enlightenment colleagues. When Christianity first appeared it was not a theory rooted in the thinker's autonomy; it was instead a story grounded in a sacred tradition. But it soon incorporated Greek philosophy and began to justify itself philosophically in the form of theology, and this would eventually turn Christendom into an unstable compound of sacred *tradition* and philosophic *autonomy*. What made Christianity a scene of war and persecution was not its sacred tradition, but rather the transformation of that tradition by false philosophy into sects of implacable world-inversions.

It was false philosophy among the ancients that had made philosophy more fanatical than pagan religion. Philosophy, however, posed no threat to ancient society because it was practiced by only a few—its doctrines were not attractive

to the vulgar—and because it was tightly controlled by the pagan political authorities, as Socrates and Aristotle discovered. But in Christendom all Christians were theologians, and as such, practiced sublimated forms of the philosophic act. Just as ancient philosophers were constrained by the pagan magistrate, so sacred Christian tradition kept the philosophic act on a short leash: philosophy was the hand-



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maiden of sacred tradition. But philosophy would become impatient with this role, and by the seventeenth century would break free from its control by sacred tradition in an act that would come to be known as the Enlightenment. The Catholic philosopher Descartes would revive the radical autonomy of pagan philosophy in terms even stronger than the pagans had conceived it, by laying down as a principle of *reason* that the whole domain of custom should be presumed false unless shown otherwise.

Since all Christians possessed a sublimated philosophical consciousness, many

greeted emancipated philosophy as something with which they had been, in some way, long familiar. For the first time in history, a mass consciousness informed by the philosophic act would appear on the scene—despite Descartes' insistence that his rationalist method applied only to mathematics, physics, and metaphysics, and should not be applied to morals and politics. Henceforth, partisan political disputes would not be negotiable conflicts over practical interests, but non-negotiable conflicts between the seamless world-inversions of the philosophic act: "Parties from *principle*, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable *phenomenon* that has appeared in human affairs."¹¹

Enlightenment philosophers welcomed the liberation of philosophical autonomy and sought to make it popular. Not having passed through the fires of Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy, they did not realize that the philosophic act might contain a source of corruption internal to itself. Hume taught that the tendency of philosophy is to its corrupt forms and that true philosophy is rare. The philosophic act in politics would inevitably display itself in corrupt forms. No political party "in the present age," he said, "can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles annexed to its political or practical one." But the people are "commonly very rude builders, especially in this speculative way, and more especially when actuated by party-zeal," so it is natural that "their workmanship must be a little unshapely, and discover evident marks of that violence and hurry, in which it was raised."¹² Hume was a critic of the errors of religion, but he did not think matters would be improved should mass *secular philosophical movements* replace religion as the dominant form of culture.

Hume presents us with the paradoxical teaching that what made Christendom the scene of "religious" wars was not conflict over sacred stories but the spiritualization of them into corrupt forms of the philosophic act. By the seventeenth century the more radical Protestant sects were virtually indistinguishable from instantiations of philosophic autonomy. Self-certifying Protestant "enthusiasm" is isomorphic with self-certifying philosophical autonomy. Consequently, Hume held that Puritanism, "being chiefly spiritual, resembles more a system of metaphysics" than a religion. And he compares it unfavorably with "the Catholic religion" which, adapting itself to the senses and enjoining observances which enter into the "common train of life," is not as inclined to total alienation from the pre-reflective order and is, consequently, more reasonable.¹³ Hume thought that religion in his own time had become "nothing but a species of philosophy."¹⁴

Whereas we tend to see secular ideologies such as Marxism, liberalism, and nationalism as forms of *religion*, Hume viewed modern religious fanaticisms as disordered forms of *philosophy*. Religion and philosophy spring from different dispositions: religion, from fear of unknown causes and humility; philosophy, from curiosity, pride, and love of dominion. The former issues in a *tradition* to guide society; the latter in a *theory* (entirely emancipated from tradition) to guide society. Their union (and tension) in Christendom created a dynamic civilization.¹⁵

THE FIRST instance of modern ideology in politics was the Puritan Revolution. Puritanism was false philosophy in a religious idiom. By the end of the seventeenth century rationalist secular ideologies would emerge. By 1771 Hume thought the religious idiom had been driven from

the political scene: "Factious [political] prejudices are more prevalent in England than religious ones," he wrote.¹⁶ In 1843 Marx could observe to Arnold Ruge that "philosophy has become secularized, and the striking proof thereof is that the philosophical consciousness itself has been pulled into the torment of struggle. . . . What we must accomplish is the ruthless criticism of all that exists."¹⁷

Of the philosophic superstitions that were replacing religious ones, Hume singled out three for criticism: the contract theory of government, moral rationalism, and ethical egoism. In "Of the Original Contract," Hume argues that the origin of government cannot be explained by a contract because contracts presuppose the existence of government to enforce them. Furthermore, if "consent" is taken in its ordinary sense, hardly any government has been based on consent. If, on the other hand, we stretch "consent" to include "tacit consent," then any regime that is obeyed is based on consent. The contract theory is a philosophic superstition that occludes political reality and distorts true prudential judgments about it.

Another philosophical superstition is moral egoism. Here, self-interest is spiritualized by "philosophical chymistry" into the whole of moral experience. That human beings are motivated by love of others is held to be an illusion. These philosophers "unmask" everything that has "hitherto appear'd sacred and venerable in the Eyes of Mankind. Reason, Sobriety, Honour, Friendship, Marriage are the perpetual subjects of their insipid Railery: And even public Spirit, and a regard to our Country, are treated as chimerical and romantic." Hume calls these new vulgar philosophers "Anti-reformers" because they are interested not in a genuine understanding of experience but in the world-inversions of false philosophy.¹⁸

Finally there is moral rationalism, which was to have a long and influential history, especially in the form Kant gave to it. In this view, morality has nothing to do with prudential judgments about the formation of virtuous character but only with conduct that satisfies universal and necessary relations between abstract propositions. Hume laid bare the fatal flaw in moral rationalism: either the abstract rules are truly emancipated from the whole of custom, in which case they are indeterminate and incapable of guiding any conduct, or, if content is illegitimately smuggled in from a favorite part of custom, they are arbitrary because not critically examined in light of the whole of custom: "[M]orality consists in the relation of actions to the rule of right. . . . What then is this rule of right? . . . How is it determined? By reason, you say, which examines the moral relations of actions. So that moral relations are determined by the comparison of action to a rule. And that rule is determined by considering the moral relations of objects. Is not this fine reasoning?"¹⁹

Nor is Hume a utilitarian in ethics, as Bentham and many others have maintained. Utilitarianism locates moral worth in the *consequences* of an action. Hume teaches that moral worth is in the *motive* of the act, which in turn springs from character. Morality for Hume, as for Aristotle and Cicero, is a matter of character formation, and the task of true philosophy is to provide a rational (as opposed to a rationalistic) ideal of human excellence. Hume's ideal combines the Christian virtue of extensive benevolence (humanity) with the pagan virtue of greatness of mind (honor), and is exemplified in an imaginary character called "Cleanthes," who is "a man of honour and humanity," a "character" that "a philosopher might select . . . as a model of perfect virtue."²⁰

Hume was at odds with the Whig establishment of his time, which subscribed to the contract theory of government (a form of false philosophy) and “ancient constitutionalism” (a false history). The latter taught that liberty is a unique possession of the English national character due to an unchanged constitution stretching back to the Saxon forests. Hume thought this history nourished a chauvinistic and aggressive English nationalism that threatened liberty, and he wrote *The History of England* largely to refute it. He showed that there had been at least four distinct constitutions in English history and that each was more the result of unintended consequences and contingencies than of efforts to defend any pre-existing, “ancient” constitution.

Thomas Jefferson possessed many attributes of Humean “true philosophy,” but he was also inclined to philosophic rationalism and to “ancient constitutionalism.” Consequently, he saw Hume’s *History of England* (which was critical of Puritan republicanism) as a threat to the American republic. “This book,” he said, “has undermined free principles of the English government . . . and has spread universal toryism over the land.”²¹ He accordingly banned Hume’s *History* from the University of Virginia.

Yet Jefferson did not understand just what a republican Hume was. Hume taught that *civilization* began, and had to begin, in small, barbarous republics. He thought monarchies could be superior to republics, but only because they had learned the rule of law from republics. Further, he found intimated in modern European civilization the model of an ideal republic which he formulated in the 1752 essay “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth.” There, Hume rejected the long tradition that republics had to be small and was the first to work out a constitu-

tion for a large-scale republic: something Americans would be the first to try putting into practice.²²

Hume supported independence for the colonies as early as 1768, even before Jefferson had come to that view. He was the only major British thinker to support American secession from the British empire. True, there were “friends of America,” who urged “concessions” to the colonies—Edmund Burke, William Pitt, Isaac Barre, John Wilkes, Adam Smith—but ultimately, all of them wanted to maintain the empire. Hume’s friends were shocked when he refused to write a letter to the King asking for strong measures against the Americans. He replied: “Besides, I am an American in my Principles and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper.”²³

It is noteworthy that Jefferson and Hume agreed on the evils of public credit. Mortgaging future revenues enabled the state to finance wars and patronage projects without having to levy taxes for them. This led to a transfer of wealth from regional and local authorities to holders of paper who would have no interest in the nation and “who can enjoy their revenue in any part of the globe in which they chuse to reside, who will naturally bury themselves in the capital or in great cities, and who will sink into the lethargy of a stupid and pampered luxury, without spirit, ambition, or enjoyment. Adieu to all ideas of nobility, gentry, and family.”²⁴

Hume—like Jefferson, Tocqueville, Calhoun, and Acton—did not think of liberty as merely a matter of individual rights. He also recognized the right of *independent social authorities*. These constituted for Hume “a kind of independent magistracy in a state, instituted by the hand of nature.” He defined a *free state* as one composed of a number of independent social authorities recognized to have

constitutional status, such as the Lords, Commons, Church, and Crown in England or the states in the American federation. Since encroachments were inevitable, Hume, like Jefferson, taught a doctrine of frequent resistance: "In such mix'd governments, the cases, wherein resistance is lawful, must occur much oftener, and greater indulgence be given to the subjects to defend themselves by force of arms, than in arbitrary governments."²⁵

The resistance described here is not Hobbesian or Lockean revolution but *lawful* constitutional resistance. Hume puts it this way: "As matter wou'd have been created in vain, were it depriv'd of a power of resistance, without which no part of it cou'd preserve a distinct existence, and the whole might be crowded up into a single point: So 'tis a gross absurdity to suppose, in any government, a right without a remedy, or allow, that the supreme power is shar'd with the people, without allowing, that 'tis lawful for them to defend their share against every invader."²⁶

This is of a piece with Jefferson's natural law doctrine of frequent resistance, and his view expressed in the 1799 Kentucky Resolutions that an American state can lawfully "nullify" unconstitutional acts of the central government and if necessary lawfully secede from the Union.²⁷ Likewise, Hume saw secession of the colonies as a *natural evolution* of American society. How so? The English colonies planted under James I, he said, were "established on the noblest footing that has been known in any age or nation." By this he meant that the Crown *left them alone* to govern themselves. Over thirty years before the Declaration of Independence, Hume wrote, "the Charter Governments in America are almost entirely independent of England."²⁸ So it is not surprising that by 1768 he could welcome American independence. In so doing, he

did not need to invoke what he would surely have considered the philosophic superstition of abstract inalienable rights that Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence.

I HAVE argued, following Russell Kirk, that conservatism is a critique of ideology in politics, or what Oakeshott called "rationalism in politics," and that Hume was the first to offer a systematic philosophical critique of ideology. He was also the first to explore its dynamic in an historical event. In *The History of England*, he treats the Puritan Revolution as a violent intrusion of false philosophy into politics, albeit one cast in a religious idiom: "The gloomy enthusiasm, which prevailed among the parliamentary party, is surely the most curious spectacle presented by any history, and the most instructive, as well as entertaining, to a philosophical mind."²⁹

Instead of questions of prudence, debates in Parliament were spiritualized by false philosophy into implacable metaphysical oppositions. A "popular assembly, enflamed with faction and enthusiasm," pretended to discuss "questions, to which the greatest philosophers, in the tranquillity of retreat, had never hitherto been able to find any satisfactory solution."³⁰ Speculative theological and philosophical controversies soon spread throughout the nation by means of the pulpit, and "every man began to indulge himself in political reasonings and inquiries." London became a "furious vortex" of speculative "opinions and principles, which had transported the capital."³¹ Even learning and virtue were transmuted "into the most virulent poison."

Instead of reforms, demands were made for a total transformation of the world. The Crown could do nothing to placate "the endless demands of certain insatiable and turbulent spirits, whom nothing less

will content than a total subversion of the ancient constitution.”³² Accordingly, “the bands of society were everywhere loosened, and the irregular passions of men were encouraged by speculative principles, still more unsocial and irregular.”³³ Speculative opinions informed “all business” and “every discourse or conversation.”³⁴ “Every man had framed the model of a republic; and however new it was, or fantastical, he was eager in recommending it to his fellow citizens, or even imposing it by force upon them.”³⁵ The Puritans fractured into more radical sects: the Independents, the Quakers, Millenarians, Fifth Monarchists, and so forth. These thought themselves “dispensed from all the ordinary rules of morality, by which inferior mortals must allow themselves to be governed.”³⁶

As false philosophy became a habit, “nothing remained to confine the wild projects of zeal and ambition. And every successive revolution became a precedent for that which followed it.”³⁷ Simple pleasures were transmuted into crimes. Ministers, magistrates, and the Bible itself were no longer needed by those into whose hearts Christ had descended. Christians no longer had to pay rent to their equals. A Quaker woman walked into Cromwell’s presence naked because clothes are no longer needed for the saints.³⁸

The Puritan Revolution cast a grim shadow over monarchical and ecclesiastical Europe for over a century. Hume’s was the most popular account, especially in France, where more editions of the *History* were published than in England. By 1789 the French had been reading Hume for some thirty years. Hume’s account of the Puritan Revolution was used as a template to understand the French Revolution as it unfolded. Endless parallels were drawn between the two revolutions in speeches given in the National Assembly, in pamphlets, and in sermons.³⁹ The

Catholic Right celebrated Hume’s defense of tradition and reform and noticed the generous remarks made in the *History* about Catholic and Anglican respect for tradition as opposed to the abstract philosophy of Puritanism. The latter leads to melancholy self-absorption and hubris, whereas a liturgical religion allows the mind to “relax itself in the contemplation of pictures, postures, vestments, buildings, and all the fine arts, which minister to religion.”⁴⁰ Puritan ideologues were identified with the Jacobins; Charles I with Louis XVI; Cromwell with Robespierre and/or Napoleon. And since Hume was known to be a skeptic from a Protestant background, his judgments were all the more valuable because they could not be dismissed as Catholic. Some even called him “the Scottish Bossuet.”⁴¹

Catherine Macaulay’s whiggish *History of England* (1763–82) was written to subvert Hume’s “anti-republican” account of the Puritan Revolution. Hume wrote a letter to Macaulay trying to explain the difference between reform and the world-inverting act of false philosophy—and how dangerous the latter could be if it informed political life. His letter apparently made no impression, for Macaulay later wrote a pamphlet attacking Burke’s *Reflections* and praising the French Revolution.⁴² Madame Roland, who had the ambition of becoming the Catherine Macaulay of France, helped promote a French translation of her *History* that she hoped would counter Hume’s influence in France. But Madame Roland was killed by the Revolution she did so much to support and is famous for lamenting, as she faced the guillotine, “O Liberty, what crimes are committed in thy name.”⁴³ Neither she nor Macaulay understood how the world-inversions of false philosophy can transmute liberty into tyranny and tyranny into liberty.

A century-and-a-half later, after an ocean of blood had been spilled in ideological wars and totalitarian revolutions, others would reach insights similar to Hume's. Writing at the height of the Cold War, Albert Camus could say: "There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic." We are "living in the era of the perfect crime," and our criminals have "a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges. . . . On the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself."⁴⁴ Camus' "curious transposition" is just what Hume, two centuries earlier, called "philosophical chymistry."

Hume was introduced to the future Louis XVI at court when Louis was a boy, and recalled that the young prince praised his *History*. As the Revolution advanced, Louis became obsessed with the parallels between the two revolutions. Upon receiving the death penalty, the King's secretary recorded that he asked for Hume's account of Charles' trial and execution to be read in the days he had left. And there is reason to think that he patterned his conduct at the trial and at the guillotine on the noble bearing of Charles I as drawn by the masterful pencil of Hume.⁴⁵

IF CONSERVATISM is a critique of ideology in politics, then it can be said that Hume, not Burke, was the first conservative because he was the first to work out a systematic philosophic critique of ideology. When Burke looked at what was happening in France in 1789, he saw the *beginning* of a whole drama that Hume's history of the Puritan Revolution had prepared him to see.

Burke's *Reflections* tried to convince the whiggish English that the French Revolution was not a reform movement but a

spiritual pathology. But Hume's *History* had been doing the same thing in France *before* the publication of Burke's book. It seemed to some in France as if Hume had already written the history of what they were living through. Thus, one of the founders of French conservatism, Joseph de Maistre, titled the last chapter of his famous *Considerations sur la France* (1796), "Fragments of a history of the French Revolution by David Hume." Hume's *History* also influenced another founder of French conservatism, Louis de Bonald.⁴⁶

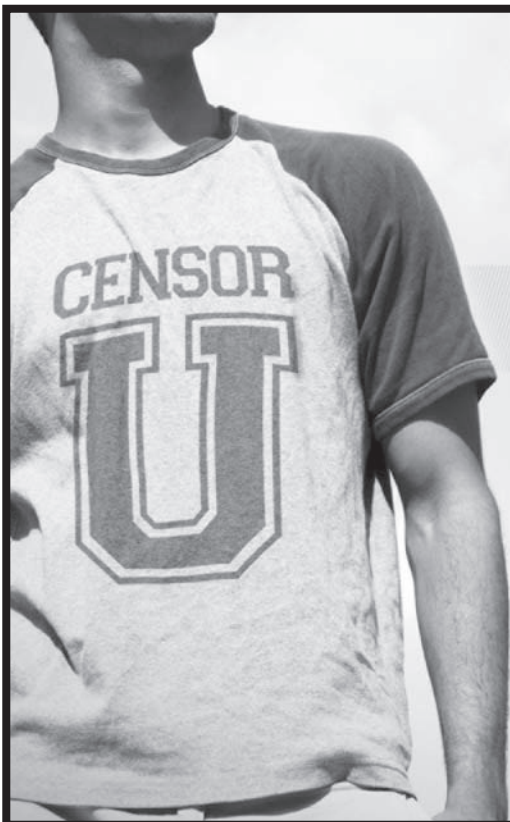
Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy also traveled well in Germany. It awakened Kant, as he said, "from his dogmatic slumbers" (though only partially, because Kant never could emancipate himself from moral rationalism). Hume also had a considerable influence on the rise of a German conservatism springing from the thought of Johann Hamann and Friedrich Jacobi. The history of Hume's influence on Continental conservatism has yet to be written.

Burke's conservatism is rooted in eloquence. He inveighed against "metaphysical scribblers" and celebrated "wisdom without reflection," but he did not explain how "wisdom without reflection" can generate rational criticism. A conservatism of the heart, though not to be despised, leads to a romantic, nostalgic view of tradition as a refuge from philosophical reflection. De Maistre left France for Russia hoping, as he said, "to find a country not scribbled on by philosophy." What he found instead was an intelligentsia thoroughly taken with the French Enlightenment. Hume described his own age sarcastically as "this philosophic age." There had never been an age in which the philosophic act, unrestrained by religious tradition, was the dominant form of culture. But, as Hume was one of the first to see, we live in such an age. Henceforth, there can be

no country not “scribbled on by philosophy.” In such a world, conservatism, if it is to have substantial meaning, must be a critical philosophical engagement, and for this project, Hume has more to teach us than Burke.

- 1 See John Stuart Mill, review of Brodie’s *History of the British Empire* in *The Westminster Review* 2 (1824), 14. For Hume as founder of positivism see A. J. Ayer, *Logical Positivism* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1959), 4. For an alternative view of Hume and a systematic interpretation of his conception of philosophy and his critique of ideology, see Donald W. Livingston, *Hume’s Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). The latter work thoroughly discusses Hume’s distinction between true and false philosophy and the place of philosophic reason in culture. Both works argue that the standard view of Hume as an “empiricist” is understandable but mistaken.
- 2 I explore Hume’s distinction between true and false philosophy in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*. See especially chapters 2 and 12.
- 3 David Hume, *Essays Moral, Literary, and Political*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 159.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 161.
- 5 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 162.
- 6 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 222–23.
- 7 Quoted in E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 483–86.
- 8 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 135.
- 9 Roger Emerson, “The ‘affair’ at Edinburgh and the ‘project’ at Glasgow: The politics of Hume’s attempt to become a professor,” in *Hume and Hume’s Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John Wright (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 16. That Hume’s philosophical reflections on religion are complicated is discussed in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, chapters 3 and 5.
- 10 *Treatise*, 272.
- 11 *Essays*, 60. Hume’s italics.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 465–66.
- 13 David Hume, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), 4:14.
- 14 *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 146.
- 15 See *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, chapters 3, 5, and 9.
- 16 *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 2: 223.
- 17 Karl Marx, *Karl Marx on Revolution*, ed. & trans. Saul K. Padover (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), 516. For a discussion of Hume’s critique of ideology see *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, chapters 9 and 10. For his break with Rousseau, 244–55.
- 18 *Essays*, 538; for Hume’s critique of “the selfish system,” see Appendix II, “Of Self-Love,” in *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.
- 19 *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 289.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 269–70.
- 21 Quoted in Craig Walton, “Hume and Jefferson on History,” in *Hume: A Re-Evaluation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), 393.
- 22 On republicanism and civilization see in Hume’s *Essays*, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” and “Of Civil Liberty.” See also “True Philosophy and Civilization” and “False Philosophy and Barbarism” in my *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*; also in this work, see “Hume and America” for a study of Hume’s republicanism and the American regime.
- 23 *Letters*, 2:184, 210, 303. See also “English Barbarism: Wilkes and Liberty!” “English Barbarism: The Poor Infatuated Americans,” and “Hume and America” in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*.
- 24 *Essays*, 357–58.
- 25 *Treatise*, 564.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Thomas Jefferson, letter to W. Crawford, 20 June 1816 in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Albert Bergh (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association of

- the United States, 1905) 15:27.
- 28 “Hume’s Early Memoranda 1729–1740: The Complete Text,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9 (1948), 504.
- 29 *History*, 6:142.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 5:211–12.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 5:378, 380.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 5:321.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 6:4.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 5:348.
- 35 *Ibid.*, 5:3.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 5:514.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 5:492.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 6:4, 145, 288, 546, 547.
- 39 For a fascinating examination of Hume’s influence in the French Revolution on the Right and Left, see Lawrence Bongie, *David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965).
- 40 *History*, 5:459–60.
- 41 Bongie, 30.
- 42 Catherine Macaulay, *Reflections of the Right Hon. Edmund Burke, on the Revolution in France, in a Letter to the Right Hon. Earl of Stanhope* (1790).
- 43 Bongie, 119.
- 44 Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 23.
- 45 Bongie, 120–26.
- 46 *Ibid.* For Hume’s influence on French counter-revolutionary thought, see Bongie, especially 158–72.




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