

Democratic Interests

Marc Hanvelt
Carleton University

Prepared for delivery at the 2013 Annual Conference of the
Canadian Political Science Association, June 4-6.
University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada

DRAFT: Please do not cite without permission of the author

In his classic article “The Market and the Forum,” Jon Elster distinguishes a mode of politics aimed at “aggregating or filtering preferences” from one “set up with a view to changing them by public debate and confrontation.”¹ This distinction lies at the core of many contemporary debates about the nature of democratic legitimacy and the place of interests in democratic politics. Contemporary theories of public reason and deliberative democracy associate democratic legitimacy primarily with the forum model. Many, either through requirements of rationality or intersubjectivity, seek to eliminate bargaining from public discourse about the public good. These theories posit modes of rational deliberation as normatively superior to bargaining, arguing that they are more conducive to expressing a genuine democratic will and, by extension, far less likely to produce political outcomes that simply reflect and reinforce existing structures of power and domination. The close association that many theorists of deliberative democracy and public reason draw between the pursuit of interests and bargaining leads them to argue that democratic deliberation should be structured so as to purge the pursuit of interests from political discourse.

The work of David Hume calls into question both the desirability as well as the very possibility of expunging interests from political discourse in these ways. Important work has already been published on Hume’s sentiment-based challenge to the rationality that underlies theories of public reason and deliberative democracy.² Far less has been written on the challenges that Hume’s account of political interests poses to these contemporary theories. Hume’s account of judgment commits him to endorse models of political discourse in which persuasion, rather than rational justification, is the central objective. As a consequence, his understanding of constructive or legitimate modes of political discourse necessarily includes space for the pursuit of interests, even in deliberation on matters of political or constitutional essentials. However, this commitment did not blind Hume to the various ways in which the pursuit of interests in politics could impede the achievement of common goods. Hume took a wide view of interests, understanding them to encompass much more than pure economic interests. His analysis concludes that it is not the pursuit of interests *per se* that threatens to reduce political discourse to a mere mechanism for reinforcing existing power structures and exacerbating existing inequalities, but rather a natural human tendency to be more deeply affected by the proximate than by the remote. Hume argued that this tendency, rather than the interested affection itself, could be curtailed by the artificial virtues (justice, allegiance to government, and promise keeping) and that the pursuit of interests could be re-directed by political institutions to facilitate the achievement of common goods.

Hume’s account of British politics illustrates the danger the pursuit of interests can pose to the achievement of common goods, as well as the ways in which political institutions can diminish that danger. It also shows us how different interests, in opposition to one

¹ John Elster, “The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 3-33. 11

² See, for example, Sharon Krause’s *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

another, can serve to buttress the constitution of a state, thereby enabling common goods such as security and prosperity, and, if we extend the analysis further than Hume himself did but in ways entirely consistent with what he did write, reforms to address existing inequalities of power or wealth. In fulfilling the role of primary support to the constitution, interests contribute in significant ways to defining the political terrain of a polity, the contours of which frame political discourse in various ways, and the modification of which can often be a central objective in political discourse. In arguing for the essential place of interests in politics, Hume did not thereby advocate for a reduction of political discourse to simple bargaining. He viewed politics as far more than a mechanism for “aggregating or filtering” private interests. By de-coupling the pursuit of interests from bargaining or, at a minimum, by loosening the connection between the two, Hume offers us important insights into the complexities of political discourse. These insights offer important resources that could enrich contemporary debates in democratic theory about the role of interests in political discourse.

The Contemporary Association of Interests With Bargaining

The deep suspicion of interests that permeates the contemporary democratic literature arises, it would seem, from a supposed close association between interested positions in political discourse and bargaining. John Elster explicitly equates the notion of arguing “that a given solution should be chosen just because it is good for you” with “bargaining” and contrasts it with “arguing,” an activity connected with the giving of reasons that are publicly accessible.³ Though he does concede that “the opposition between general interest and special interests is too simplistic, since the private benefits may causally determine the way in which one conceives of the common good,”⁴ Elster’s normative account of democracy rests heavily on his understanding of the opposition between arguing and bargaining. He writes, “arguments form the core of the political process. If thus defined as public in nature and instrumental in purpose, politics assumes what I believe to be its proper place in society.”⁵

The deep suspicion of bargaining in politics, and the concomitant association of the pursuit of interests with bargaining is also evident in the works of other major theorists of deliberative democracy. Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, for example, write, “the underlying assumption is that we should value reaching conclusions through reason rather than force, and more specifically through moral reasoning rather than through self-interested bargaining.”⁶ This form of moral reasoning is at the core of Gutman and Thompson’s model of deliberative democracy, one that they argue rests on the assertion that “an important part of a political decision’s being right is that it is actually justified to the people who not only are bound by it but are the source of its political authority.”⁷ This

³ Elster, “The Market and the Forum,” 12.

⁴ Elster, “The Market and the Forum,” 18.

⁵ Elster, “The Market and the Forum,” 26.

⁶ Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 80.

⁷ Gutman and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* 45.

justification requires that political actors adopt and defend genuinely moral positions, ones that “presuppose a disinterested perspective that could be adopted by any member of a society, whatever his or her particular circumstances.”⁸ The emphasis on rationality in political discourse flows from Gutman and Thompson’s account of a disinterested perspective. They argue, “the power of reason is less directly tied to the existing distribution of power, and therefore has the potential to challenge it.”⁹ For Gutman and Thompson, the mode of reason appropriate to political discourse is reciprocal. It appears as citizens offering “reasons that other similarly motivated citizens can accept even though they recognize that they share only some of one another’s values.”¹⁰ Or, in stronger terms, this mode of reason manifests as appeals “to principles that individuals who are trying to find fair terms of cooperation cannot reasonably reject.”¹¹

Jürgen Habermas displaces interests from political deliberation by locating popular sovereignty in democratic procedures as opposed to democratic citizens. Habermas writes,

sovereignty is found in those subjectless forms of communication that regulate the flow of discursive opinion- and will-formation in such a way that their fallible outcomes have the presumption of practical reason on their side. Subjectless and anonymous, an intersubjectively dissolved popular sovereignty withdraws into democratic procedures and the demanding communicative presuppositions of their implementation.¹²

According to Habermas’ procedural account, intersubjectively-generated disinterested expressions of popular sovereignty will produce “rational outcomes insofar as opinion-formation inside parliamentary bodies remains sensitive to the results of a surrounding informal opinion-formation in autonomous public spheres.”¹³

Perhaps the most explicit attempt to displace interests from the public realm as part of a project of banishing bargaining from democratic deliberation appears in John Rawls’s account of public reason. Rawls’s account of the veil of ignorance and his construction of the original position are explicitly designed to eliminate an individual’s consideration of their own interests from their reasoning about fundamental principles of justice.¹⁴ These two devices also shape Rawls’s account of public reason which, he argues is public in three ways: “as the reason of the citizens as such, it is the reason of the public; its subject

⁸ Gutman and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* 72.

⁹ Gutman and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* 43.

¹⁰ Gutman and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*. 14.

¹¹ Gutman and Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* 3.

¹² Jürgen Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure” in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 35-65, 59.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, “Popular Sovereignty as Procedure,” 60

¹⁴ See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), chapter 3.

is the good of the public and matters of fundamental justice; and its nature and content is public being given by the ideals and principles expressed by society's conception of political justice, and conducted open to view on that basis."¹⁵ Because his account of public reason is constructed so carefully as to leave no space for the expression of interests, it grounds Rawls's account of the principle of legitimacy, defined as a willingness "to live politically with others in light of reasons all might reasonably be expected to endorse."¹⁶

A similar account of the importance of eschewing interested bargaining in favour of disinterested rational deliberation appears as central in the work of Joshua Cohen. Cohen writes,

the notion of deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceed through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens. Citizens in such an order share a commitment to the resolution of problems of collective choice through public reasoning, and regard their basic institutions as legitimate insofar as they establish the framework for free public deliberation.¹⁷

Central to this model is Cohen's principle of deliberative inclusion: "The deliberative conception requires more than that the interests of others be given equal consideration; it demands too, that we find politically acceptable reasons – reasons that are acceptable to others, given a background of differences and conscientious conviction."¹⁸ Once again, interests are cast as impediments to democratic outcomes. Cohen writes, "it may be possible to use the associative strategy to advance the principles of participation and the common good without thereby encouraging particularistic group identities that turn politics from deliberation to bargaining."¹⁹

Justification vs. Persuasion

Theorists of deliberative democracy and public reason openly acknowledge their commitment to deliberation in place of bargaining. Less explicit is their corollary commitment to modes of political deliberation centered on justification rather than persuasion. In *Saving Persuasion*, Bryan Garsten argues that theories of deliberative democracy and public reason are notable for the centrality they assign to justification – an

¹⁵ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 213.

¹⁶ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 243.

¹⁷ Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 67-91, 72.

¹⁸ Joshua Cohen, "Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy." in *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, eds. James Bohman and William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 407-37, 417.

¹⁹ Joshua Cohen, "Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy," 431.

activity that involves treating individuals as generic rational beings and offering reasons that ought to be rationally compelling to any other rational being – and for their aversion to persuasion.²⁰ In contrast to discourses of justification, persuasion involves speaking to individuals as we find them – historically-situated, partial to their own interests and to those of their friends and families, prejudiced in some respects, emotionally-engaged, etc... – and seeking to persuade them as individuals, rather than as autonomous and generic rational beings.

Garsten argues that, if our objective is political deliberation that yields good political outcomes, we would be well served by engaging the judgment of individuals. A politics of persuasion offers two central advantages over discourses of justification in this respect. Garsten identifies these advantages, which he draws from Aristotle, as deliberative partiality and situated judgment.²¹ The former suggests that individuals' judgments will be better when their passions are suitably engaged, the latter that individuals will be better able to filter extraneous information and identify the most essential aspects of any question when they themselves are directly affected and their own interests are at stake. Garsten argues that a deliberator will exercise better judgment when considering matters that affect his or her own interests because those interests act as “an anchor” that keeps his or her attention focused on the matter at hand, as a standard against which he or she can “easily measure the worth of various arguments and feelings, and as a motivation to pay attention.”²²

Certainly, Garsten acknowledges the potential dangers attending a politics of persuasion. He writes that the practice of persuasion can be easily corrupted and that “in trying to persuade, democratic politicians may end up manipulating their audiences, or they may end up pandering to them.”²³ Consequently, the theorist advocating a central role for rhetoric and persuasion in democratic politics must tread a fine line. Garsten writes that, “if we want to avoid alienating our judgment to a sovereign ruler or reasoner, if we want to find a way to bring the insights of citizens' practical judgment to bear on political decisions... we must show, contra Hobbes, that political rhetoric can be turned into something other than a tool for manipulation and demagoguery.”²⁴

A discourse of justification might seem to offer safer ground and better assurance that political discourse will not degenerate into either impassioned demagoguery or a masquerade that disguises or worse, legitimizes, the reinforcement and reproduction of existing hierarchies of power. But, on Garsten's account, that apparently safer mode of political discourse comes at a serious cost: the alienation of individual judgment. In his book, he tells “an intellectual top-down story, in which the notion of public reason is invented by political philosophers seeking to quell religious and political controversy by

²⁰ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 189.

²¹ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 119.

²² Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 126.

²³ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 2.

²⁴ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 116-17.

subjecting debate to an authoritative standard.”²⁵ Garsten describes the development of public reason as “a well-thought-out early modern program of political thought, a program that explicitly aimed to quell controversy by having us alienate our capacity for private judgment.”²⁶ He argues that we see this trend in Hobbes’ treatment of the sovereign, in Rousseau’s conception of the General Will, in Kant’s conception of public reason, and in contemporary theories of deliberative democracy. Garsten writes,

to adopt a Habermasian criterion of deliberativeness and reasonability is to adopt another version of the deep suspicion of individual’s ordinary private judgments and opinions that we have noticed in Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant. Discourse theory follows these theorists in asking citizens to substitute for private judgments ones that emerge from one authoritative public point of view – a sovereign set of procedures. Theorists of deliberative democracy who follow Habermas on this point thus remain within the grip of the campaign against controversy and the art of controversy. In spite of their interest in disagreement, they often find themselves opposing rhetorical deliberation and the politics of persuasion.²⁷

Garsten’s call for a politics of persuasion is a call for, what he argues is, a better form of political deliberation: one that could achieve many of the objectives of inclusiveness and respect that are central to contemporary theories of deliberative democracy and public reason, while yielding better political outcomes. Where the contemporary theories of deliberative democracy and public reason seek the alienation of individual judgment, Garsten argues that we achieve better political outcomes when we engage our own judgment as well as that of our fellow citizens.

As I have argued elsewhere, Hume’s work stands clearly in opposition to the tradition, described by Garsten, that has sought to insulate politics from dogmatism and impassioned demagoguery (most notably in relation to religious controversy) through the alienation of individual judgment. In *The Politics of Eloquence*, I argue that Hume’s philosophy of the mind committed him to assigning an important place to rhetoric, and therefore persuasion, in political discourse. Hume developed an account of political rhetoric as part of his larger political project aimed at combating the forces of faction and fanaticism.²⁸ He was concerned that factionalism would threaten the stability of the British constitution, impede meaningful public discourse, and even jeopardize the capacity of individuals to make good moral and political judgments by dividing groups so completely that they would lose the sense of their resemblance to one another that is

²⁵ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 177.

²⁶ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 179.

²⁷ Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 191.

²⁸ Marc Hanvelt, *The Politics of Eloquence: David Hume’s Polite Rhetoric* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

essential for the proper functioning of sympathy and, by extension, moral judgment.²⁹ Hume's accounts of judgment and reasoning show us why reasoned arguments will usually fail to persuade individuals whose passions are inflamed by faction and fanaticism.³⁰ His conception of rhetoric also provides an account of why this fact should

²⁹ In the *Treatise*, Hume famously makes sympathy the basis for his model of moral judgment. He argues that the "propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments" is the most remarkable quality of human nature (T 2.1.11.1). Through sympathy, Hume argues, we actually come to experience the passion that another experiences. He writes, "when any affection is infus'd by sympathy, it is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. The idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection" (T 2.1.11.3). The transition from idea to impression is achieved through the relations of contiguity and resemblance, or causation. Our proximity to the person experiencing the passion in question combines with the resemblance we share as fellow human beings to "convey the impression or consciousness of our own person to the idea of the sentiments or passions" of that person (T 2.1.11.6).

In Hume's account of moral judgment, the indirect passions of pride, humility, love and hatred arise through sympathy and, what Hume terms, the double relation of impressions and ideas. In Hume's words, the double relation of impressions and ideas is explained as follows: "When an idea produces an impression, related to an impression, which is connected with an idea, related to the first idea, these two impressions must be in a manner inseparable, nor will the one in any case be unattended with the other. 'Tis after this manner, that the particular causes of pride and humility are determin'd. The quality, which operates on the passion, produces separately an impression resembling it; the subject, to which the quality adheres, is related to self, the object of the passion" (T 2.1.5.10). In simpler language, Hume is arguing that an indirect passion such as pride can only arise when two relations exist: the first is between a quality of the subject – for example the generosity of a character – and either pain or pleasure; the second is between the subject and either myself or another. In the case of my generous character, the generosity is associated with pleasure. The generous character is associated with me. Through this double relation, I feel pride in my generous character. Were the generous character someone else's, the association of generosity and pleasure would combine with the association between the generous character and that person, to produce in me a love for that person on account of their generous character. Pride and love are associated with pleasure. Humility and hatred are associated with pain. Pride and humility are associated with oneself. Love and hatred are associated with another. From the initial two relations – that between the quality of the subject and either pain or pleasure, and between the subject and either myself or another – one of the four indirect passions arises naturally in my mind through its association of impressions and ideas.

³⁰ Hume argues that the passions are necessarily implicated in practical judgment. He writes, "assistance is mutual betwixt the judgment and fancy, as well as betwixt the judgment and passion" (T 1.3.10.8). He also writes that reason is "utterly impotent" in

not lead us to despair of individual judgment. Hume shows us how, through passionate appeals, we might harness the power of rhetoric and turn it towards the positive goals of persuading individuals, through the exercise of their own personal judgment, to pursue common goods and, where necessary, to change their minds on significant moral and political questions.

Hume's commitment to a politics of persuasion, instead of a politics of rational justification, is not merely normative. It is also practical. His account of the necessary interplay between reason and the passions in practical judgment, as well as his central insight into the power of rhetoric – that both its capacity to manipulate and its positive potential lies in its special ability to produce lively ideas that mimic the empirical evidence of sense impressions – committed him to acknowledging that political discourse would necessarily entail persuasion through appeals to the particular passions and interests of particular individuals.

But, though he considered interests to be inescapable elements of political discourse, Hume did not, as the contemporary theories of deliberative democracy and public reason that I discussed earlier would seem to suggest that he should have, reduce political discourse to mere bargaining. Hume was very conscious of the dangers that interests could pose to constructive political discourse. As Sharon Krause writes in *Civil Passions*, a Humean-inspired critique of deliberative democracy and public reason, we must be on guard against the possibility that “our decision making will be hostage to prejudice and the vagaries of power, with the result that those who have less (less status, less power, fewer resources) will get less (less freedom, less equality).”³¹ Hume openly acknowledged that greed is perpetual, universal, and destructive of society.³² He writes, the “chief impediment to problem of society is avidity and selfishness,”³³ and asserts, “self-love is the source of all injustice.”³⁴ To illustrate the point, Hume writes, “when a man of business enters into life and action, he is more apt to consider the characters of men, as they have relation to his interest, than as they stand in themselves; and has his judgment warped on every occasion by the violence of his passion.”³⁵

regard to motivating action (T 3.1.1.6), and that any attempt to oppose a powerful appeal to the passions with calm cool reason “is pretending to stop the ocean with a bulrush” (*Natural History of Religion*, 54).

[References to the *Treatise* take the form of T followed by the book, part, section, and paragraph from which the passage is taken from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

References to the *Natural History of Religion* give a page reference in *The Natural History of Religion*, H.E. Root (ed.), (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957).]

³¹ Sharon Krause, *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 25.

³² T 3.2.2.12

³³ T 3.2.3.3

³⁴ T 3.2.1.10

³⁵ *Essays*, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” 567.

Though he recognized the pursuit of interests in politics as a possibly serious impediment to the achievement of common goods, however, Hume also saw that pursuit as playing an undeniably positive role as well. He writes, “the chief support of the BRITISH government is the opposition of interests.”³⁶ How is this possible? How is it possible that the pursuit of interests could be both the chief support of the government and, at the same time, the source of all injustice and destructive of society? In order to answer this question, we need to look more closely at Hume’s understanding of the interested affection as a motive to action, as well as at his understanding of how interests function in establishing the political terrain of a given polity.

The Interested Affection as Motive to Action

As Albert O. Hirschman has famously argued, in the eighteenth-century, interests came to be seen as occupying a special place in relation to the two traditional categories of human motivation: reason and the passions. Hirschman writes, “interest was seen to partake in the better nature of each [reason and passion], as the passion of self-love upgraded and contained by reason, and as reason given direction and force by that passion.”³⁷ Hume’s account of interests fits within Hirschman’s to a great extent. As is indicated by Hirschman, Hume does often define interests in evidently material terms. He writes of the “avidity... of acquiring goods and possessions for ourselves and our nearest friends,”³⁸ and describes the interested affection as the “love of gain.”³⁹ However, as Andrew Sabl argues, “Hume had a wider view than the passions-interests thesis usually suggests.”⁴⁰ For example, Hume’s account of the advantages of society shows that his understanding of interests extended well beyond the material or financial. Hume writes, society provides a remedy for “*three* inconveniences. By the conjunction of forces, our power is augmented: By the partition of employments, our ability increases: And by mutual succour we are less expos’d to fortune and accidents. ‘Tis by this additional *force, ability, and security*, that society becomes advantageous.”⁴¹

Hume argued that the “sense of interest maintains permanent influence and authority.”⁴² However, he was adamant that human behaviour could not be explained solely according to interested motivations. He writes,

³⁶ *Essays*, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” 525.

³⁷ Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism Before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 43.

³⁸ T 3.2.2.12

³⁹ T 3.2.2.13

⁴⁰ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics: Coordination and Crisis in the History of England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 87.

⁴¹ T 3.2.2.3

⁴² *History of England*, II: 411. [References to the *History of England* list the volume and page number in *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 1778 Edition, Reprint, 6 vols, forward by William B. Todd, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983).]

I am sensible, that, generally speaking, the representations of this quality have been carry'd much too far; and that the descriptions, which certain philosophers delight so much to form of mankind in this particular, are as wide of nature as any accounts of monsters, which we meet with in fables and romances. So far from thinking, that men have no affection for any thing beyond themselves, I am of opinion, that tho' it be rare to meet with one, who loves any single person better than himself; yet 'tis as rare to meet with one, in whom all the kind affections, taken together, do not over-ballance all the selfish.⁴³

So, far from accounting for all human motivation, Hume argues that, in fact, “men often act knowingly against their interest: For which reason the view of the greatest possible good does not always influence them.”⁴⁴

This claim is startling. It would be one thing to claim that people often fail to understand or appreciate their own best interest and, consequently, often act against it. But Hume very explicitly claims that people often *knowingly* act against their own interest. In making and defending this claim, Hume reveals an element of human psychology that is essential for making sense of the place of interests in politics: the greatest dangers to political society arise not, on Hume's account, from individuals acting on self-interested motives, but rather from the natural human tendency to prefer the immediate to the remote, an affliction that Hume deems “incurable.”⁴⁵

Our inability to entirely overcome this tendency is explained by Hume's account of belief. In his system, all perceptions of the mind are either impressions or ideas. The former include all sensations, passions and emotions. The latter are “faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.”⁴⁶ Because they are more immediate, impressions usually have a livelier effect upon the mind than do ideas. But belief will “raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow upon it a like influence upon the passions.”⁴⁷ Hume defines a belief as “a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression.”⁴⁸ Beliefs consist “not in the nature and order of our ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind... which distinguishes the ideas of judgment from the fictions of the imagination.”⁴⁹ Hume calls this feeling “a superior *force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness.*”⁵⁰

⁴³ T 3.2.2.5

⁴⁴ T 2.3.4.10

⁴⁵ *Essays*, “Of the Origin of Government,” 38.

⁴⁶ T 1.1.1.1

⁴⁷ T 1.3.10.3

⁴⁸ T 1.3.7.5

⁴⁹ T 1.3.7.7

⁵⁰ T 1.3.7.7

A defining element of Hume’s account of belief is his claim that the very same principles of association that determine people to make philosophical judgments can also lead them into error. According to Hume, unsound judgments result from the fact that “when set into any train of thinking,” the imagination “is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse.”⁵¹ Any factor that diminishes the lively feeling in the mind that connects a given set of ideas is naturally diminishing the force of our conviction for the simple reason that our conviction, or belief, consists in that feeling of the mind. Because the proximate affects us more strongly than the remote, our immediate interests naturally exert a stronger pull on us, even when we recognize that our remote or distant interests might be of greater significance. Hume writes, “tho’ we may be fully convinc’d that the latter object excels the former, we are not able to regulate our actions by this judgment; but yield to the solicitations of our passions, which always plead in favour of whatever is near and contiguous.”⁵² The political significance of interests, in the sense of how they shape our political choices and actions, rests less, therefore, on our interests understood objectively than it does on the force with which they affect our judgment. Hume acknowledges that “men be much governed by interest;” However, he adds that, “even interest itself, and all human affairs, are entirely governed by *opinion*.”⁵³ If we are to live and prosper as members of a political society, therefore, we must find a way to temper the negative effects of our natural tendency to prefer the proximate to the remote. Herein lies the origin of, what Hume terms, the artificial virtues.

Redirecting rather than Combatting The Interested Affection

In describing the origins of government, Hume famously writes, “nothing appears more surprizing to those, who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few... as FORCE is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded.”⁵⁴ According to Hume, this opinion is of two types: “opinion of INTEREST, and opinion of RIGHT.”⁵⁵ Interest, therefore is foundational to the establishment of government. And, as we have seen, Hume is here invoking a broad meaning of the term *interest*. He writes, “by opinion of interest, I chiefly understand the sense of general advantage which is reaped from government; together with the persuasion, that the particular government, which is established, is equally advantageous with any other that could easily be settled.”⁵⁶ As Sabl argues, “people will enable the goods of political conventions if they see the benefits in terms of what they most value – which may not be money.”⁵⁷

⁵¹ T 1.4.2.22

⁵² T 3.2.7.2

⁵³ *Essays*, “Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic,” 51.

⁵⁴ *Essays*, “Of the First Principles of Government,” 33.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, 87.

According to Hume, like allegiance to government, principles of justice are also political conventions, initially founded on the basis of self-interest.

‘Tis self-love which is their real origin; and as the self-love of one person is naturally contrary to that of another, these several interested passions are oblig’d to adjust themselves after such a manner as to concur in some system of conduct and behaviour. This system, therefore, comprehending the interest of each individual, is of course advantageous to the public; tho’ it be not intended for that purpose by the inventors.⁵⁸

There is nothing naturally moral about principles of justice (understood in the very limited Humean sense of abstaining from the property of others),⁵⁹ or allegiance to government. Hume writes, “if men were supply’d with every thing in the same abundance, or if *every one* had the same affection and tender regard for *every one* as for himself; justice and injustice wou’d be equally unknown among mankind.”⁶⁰ However, “tho’ the rules of justice be *artificial*, they are not *arbitrary*.”⁶¹ Experience of the salutary effects of a system of justice, along with “public praise and blame” and “private education and instruction,”⁶² eventually attaches a moral character to the adherence to that system. Therefore, Hume argues, “*self-interest* is the original motive to the *establishment* of justice: But a *sympathy* with *public* interest is the source of the *moral* approbation, which attends that virtue.”⁶³

The question is how we come to recognize or define that public interest. Hume’s critique of contract theory is well-known. He argues, “were all men possessed of so perfect an understanding, as always to know their own interests, no form of government had ever been submitted to, but what was established on consent, and was fully canvassed by every member of the society: But this state of perfection is likewise much superior to human nature.”⁶⁴ Hume goes further than to make the simple empirical observation that the original contract “has very seldom had place in any degree, and never almost in its full extent. And that therefore some other foundation of government must also be admitted.”⁶⁵ As Sabl writes, “Hume decouples social order from normative consensus.”⁶⁶ His “liberalism need not be conscious. It does not matter whether we affirm it as long as we live by the conventions it describes.”⁶⁷ And Hume is very clear in arguing that such conventions need not be based in explicit promises or contracts. He writes, “two men,

⁵⁸ T 3.2.6.6

⁵⁹ T 3.2.2.10

⁶⁰ T 3.2.2.17

⁶¹ T 3.2.1.19

⁶² T 3.2.2.26

⁶³ T.3.2.2.24

⁶⁴ *Essays*, “Of the Original Contract,” 474

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, 52.

⁶⁷ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, 89.

who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other."⁶⁸

Such conventions are, for Hume, based in interest. He writes,

I observe, that it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, *provided* he will act in the same manner with regard to me. He is sensible of a like interest in the regulation of his conduct. When this common sense of interest is mutually express'd, and is known to both, it produces a suitable resolution and behaviour. And this may properly enough be call'd a convention or agreement betwixt us, tho' without the interposition of a promise.⁶⁹

As Sabl argues, "Hume came to believe that potentially antisocial passions (love of gain, factional loyalty, love of power, love of status and social distinction, desire for glory in battle, even – more equivocally – religious enthusiasm) should be addressed by redirecting the ends they pursue rather than moralizing against them or seeking to bend them toward forms of altruism."⁷⁰ Hume argues that the only way to control the interested affection is by altering its direction.⁷¹ So, for example, "the same self-love, therefore, which renders men so incommodious to each other, taking a new and more convenient direction, produces the rules of justice, and is the *first* motive of their observance."⁷²

The interested affection can never be entirely curtailed. Therefore, Hume argues, the most that politicians can hope to do is to extend the natural sentiments beyond their original bounds.⁷³ After all, it is not the interested affection alone that poses the most significant threat to the public realm, but rather, our natural infirmity of preferring the close to the remote.⁷⁴ Hume's preferred remedy for religious enthusiasm is the establishment of a national church,⁷⁵ combined with a policy of bribing the priests into indolence "by assigning stated salaries to their profession, and rendering it superfluous for them to be farther active, than merely to prevent their flock from straying in quest of new pastures."⁷⁶ This proposal illustrates a particular example of how the infirmity of preferring our proximate interests to those that are more remote can be employed to prevent the harms it usually causes. Extending the lesson more broadly, Hume argues that

⁶⁸ T 3.2.2.10

⁶⁹ T 3.2.2.10

⁷⁰ Andrew Sabl, *Hume's Politics*, 53-4.

⁷¹ T 3.2.2.13

⁷² T 3.2.8.5

⁷³ T 3.2.2.25

⁷⁴ T 3.2.7.2

⁷⁵ *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," 525.

⁷⁶ *History of England*, III: 136.

we ought to assess different governments by evaluating how effectively the division of powers redirects competing interests to facilitate the pursuit of public goods.⁷⁷

Opposition of Interests as the Chief Support of the Constitution

Practically speaking, Hume thought Britain's mixed constitution to be one of history's greatest political achievements. His account of the opposition of interests in British politics illustrates both the danger that it will impede the pursuit of common goods, and how it can buttress the constitution so as to enable that pursuit. On Hume's account, conflict is a central feature of politics. He writes, "in all governments, there is a perpetual intestine struggle, open or secret, between AUTHORITY and LIBERTY; and neither of them can ever absolutely prevail in the contest."⁷⁸ Under the British constitution, this contest took the form of a struggle between parliament and the crown, or between the republican and monarchical elements of the constitution. Different Britons arrived at different conclusions regarding the best distribution of power between these two elements of the constitution: some favoured a stronger crown while others argued for a stronger parliament. This division gave rise to two distinct parties: Court and Country. And, though they might initially have appeared as simply parties of principle, Hume argued that they were also "fomented by a difference of INTEREST" because an individual's principles in this regard would almost assuredly influence their chances of receiving benefits in the form of trust or power. Therefore, Hume writes, "*Court and Country*, which are the genuine offspring of the BRITISH government, are a kind of mixed parties, and are influenced both by principle and by interest."⁷⁹

At the root of Hume's analysis of the rise of these two parties lie his conclusions about the limitations of demonstrative reasoning – detailed primarily in Book 1 of the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* – applied to the question of constitutional design. Hume writes,

The just balance between the republican and monarchical part of our constitution is really, in itself, so extremely delicate and uncertain, that, when joined to men's passions and prejudices, it is impossible but different opinions must arise concerning it, even among persons of the best understanding. Those of mild tempers, who love peace and order, and detest sedition and civil wars, will always entertain more favourable sentiments of monarchy, than men of bold and generous spirits, who are passionate lovers of liberty, and think no evil comparable to subjection and slavery. And although all reasonable men agree in general to preserve our mixed government; yet, when they come to particulars, some will incline to trust greater powers to the crown, to bestow on it more influence, and to guard against its encroachments with less caution,

⁷⁷ *Essays*, "Of the Independency of Parliament," 42.

⁷⁸ *Essays*, "Of the Origin of Government," 40.

⁷⁹ *Essays*, "Of the Parties of Great Britain," 65.

than others who are terrified at the most distant approaches of tyranny and despotic power.⁸⁰

According to Hume, neither the monarchist nor the parliamentary position was demonstratively correct. And yet, somehow, over time, these two interested parties, through their opposition to one another, had enabled the development of, what Hume terms, “the most perfect and most accurate system of liberty that was ever found compatible with government.”⁸¹ Much of the vitriolic party politics of his day, Hume thought, originated, at least to a significant extent, in competing party stories about how this system had come into being. In his *History of England*, Hume attempts to dispel notions of any original contract or ancient constitution, and instead, recounts a story of “the great mixture of accident, which commonly concurs with a small ingredient of wisdom and foresight, in erecting the complicated fabric of the most perfect government.”⁸²

The history of the British constitution that Hume recounts is a story of different interests competing with one another and coalescing around certain political conventions, rarely out of altruistic motivations. It is a story of how “political interests, suitably defined and creatively accommodated, unite” people,⁸³ and how “counter-intuitive social institutions were able to arise for the first time, and may continue to arise in the future, in spite of their contributions to mutual advantage initially not being clear.”⁸⁴ Hume’s constitutional story challenges the pretensions of rationalist theories of politics. It suggests that the best political answers can emerge through competitive interest politics, rather than through any foundational moral consensus, hypothetical or real.

Hume’s account of British politics suggests that interests will play an inescapable role in shaping the political terrain of a polity because different societal groups, what he terms “different orders of men,” will have real and permanent differences of interest.⁸⁵ One of his central political claims is that different constitutions will produce particular sets of permanent interests and that these competing sets of interests will give rise to particular parties. In this sense, Hume’s analysis of constitutions and interests is heavily informed by his view that politics admit of certain regularities.⁸⁶ Of course, this is not to say that

⁸⁰ *Essays*, “Of the Parties of Great Britain,” 64-5.

⁸¹ *History of England* II: 525.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, 1.

⁸⁴ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, 53.

⁸⁵ *Essays*, “Of Parties in General,” 59.

⁸⁶ “Were it once admitted, that all governments are alike, and that the only difference consists in the character and conduct of the governors, most political disputes would be at an end, and all the *Zeal* for one constitution above another, must be esteemed mere bigotry and folly. But, though a friend to moderation, I cannot forbear condemning this sentiment, and should be very sorry to think, that human affairs admit of no greater stability, than what they receive from the casual humours and characters of particular men.” (*Essays*, “That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,” 15).

the characters of particular politicians will have no effect on the party politics of their country. Hume argues, “the strength and violence” of factions “will much depend upon the particular administration.”⁸⁷ And, he writes that particular political leaders – the example Hume offers is Brutus – can, by example, induce their people to look beyond private interest to the public good.⁸⁸ However, a particular constitution will, with regularity, produce particular factions. Of Britain, Hume writes, “however the nation may fluctuate between them, the parties themselves will always subsist, so long as we are governed by a limited monarchy.”⁸⁹

Of course, Hume recognized the possibility that Britain would not persist as a limited monarchy. In fact, his chief concern with the British parties was precisely that they would acquire sufficient power to “change a good constitution into a bad one, by the violence of their factions.”⁹⁰ He writes, “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.”⁹¹ The British constitution established a set of conventions and institutions, what Hume terms “forms and institutions,” that secured “the liberty of the people” and provided means through which “the public good [could be] consulted, and the avarice and ambition of particular men restrained and punished.”⁹² The most fundamental amongst these institutions were Magna Charta and hereditary monarchy.⁹³ The forms and institutions of the British polity were of vital significance because, as Hume writes, “general virtue and good morals in a state, which are so requisite to happiness, can never arise from the most refined precepts of philosophy, or even the severest injunctions of religion; but must proceed entirely from the virtuous education of youth, the effect of wise laws and institutions.”⁹⁴

In his analysis of the causes of the civil war, Hume writes, “the pretensions of parliament, if yielded to, broke the balance of the constitution, by rendering the government almost entirely republican. If not yielded to, the nation was, perhaps, still in danger of absolute power, from the settled principles and inveterate habits of the king.”⁹⁵ Even though, Hume argues, the natural instincts of human beings “lead us, either to indulge ourselves in unlimited freedom, or to seek dominion over others,”⁹⁶ he believed it was in the interest of all Britons, regardless of party, to see that neither of these impulses ever won

⁸⁷ *Essays*, “Of the Parties of Great Britain,” 65.

⁸⁸ *Essays*, “Of National Characters,” 203.

⁸⁹ *Essays*, “Of the Parties of Great Britain,” 65.

⁹⁰ *Essays*, “That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,” 31.

⁹¹ *Essays*, “Of the Coalition of Parties,” p.493.

⁹² *Essays*, “That Politics May be Reduced to a Science,” p.26.

⁹³ See Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, especially ch.4.

⁹⁴ *Essays*, “Of Parties in General,” 55.

⁹⁵ *Essays*, “Of the Parties of Great Britain,” 68.

⁹⁶ *Essays*, “Of the Original Contract,” 480.

out completely and thereby permanently upset the delicate balance of the British constitution. Preserving Britain's laws and institutions was, Hume thought, in the interest of all Britons as it was precisely the balance of liberty and authority that enabled them to pursue their own individual interests in relative peace and freedom. A central lesson to be drawn from British political history, he believed, was that both those who associated their interests with the power of the crown and those who thought they would be best served by a powerful parliament were wrong to carry their positions to the extreme. Both were best served by the mixed constitution: the accidental outcome of their lengthy struggle with one another.

But how to induce members of competing interest groups to temper their party enthusiasm and preserve Britain's mixed constitution? Once again, rather than seek to counter the interested affection at the root of that enthusiasm, Hume seeks to re-direct it. He acknowledges a paradox in the very essence of factionalism: "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; and yet, when a faction is formed upon a point of right or principle, there is no occasion, where men discover a greater obstinacy, and a more determined sense of justice and equity. The same social disposition of mankind is the cause of these contradictory appearances."⁹⁷ Hume argues that a determined sense of justice and equity are essential elements of public spiritedness. His account of the history of Britain and his critique of contract theory aim to persuade his compatriots that their own interests are better served by cultivating a moderate form of politics and refraining from seeking to eliminate competing interests from the political landscape. Hume seeks to redirect party enthusiasm by urging his compatriots to cultivate a "zeal for the public" and to increase "the industry and passion, with which every individual is bound to pursue the good of his country."⁹⁸

Experience, Hume argues, must be consulted during debates over political principles. His challenge to the British parties is that, were they to "look abroad into the world, they would meet with nothing that, in the least, corresponds to their ideas, or can warrant so refined and philosophical a system."⁹⁹ Philosophical precepts of this sort must be submitted to the wisdom of common experience. Hume writes, "in all questions with regard to morals, as well as criticism, there is really no other standard, by which any controversy can ever be decided. And nothing is clearer proof, that a theory of this kind is erroneous, than to find, that it leads to paradoxes, repugnant to the common sentiments of mankind, and to the practice and opinion of all nations and all ages."¹⁰⁰

"As no party, in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one;" Hume writes, "we accordingly find, that each of the factions, into which this nation is divided, has reared up a fabric of the former kind, in order to protect and cover the scheme of actions,

⁹⁷ *Essays*, "Of the First Principles of Government," 33.

⁹⁸ *Essays*, "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science," 27.

⁹⁹ *Essays*, "Of the Original Contract," 469-70.

¹⁰⁰ *Essays*, "Of the Original Contract," 486.

which it pursues.”¹⁰¹ However, Hume suggests, once party zeal had been redirected to become a zeal for the public, party members would see that the best course to pursue their own interests lay in moderating their positions so as to leave space, even if just in a small way, for competing interests on the political playing field. He writes, “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 antagonist may possibly be sometimes in the right, and to keep a balance in the praise and blame, which we bestow on either side.”¹⁰² Hume illustrates this approach in his challenge to the Whig doctrine of original contract: “My intention here is not to exclude the consent of the people from being one just foundation of government where it has place. It is surely the best and most sacred of any. I only pretend, that it has very seldom had place in any degree, and never almost in its full extent. And that therefore some other foundation of government must also be admitted.”¹⁰³

Conclusion

Hume’s account of interests in politics does not offer any certain respite to assuage the fears of those who worry that the pursuit of interests in democratic politics will simply reinforce and reproduce existing hierarchies of power. However, neither does it stand necessarily as a roadblock to reform. “If a regime is an arrangement for the common advantage,” writes Andrew Sabl, then “new discoveries in the political realm imply an ethical requirement to consider new conventions – and new possibilities for dynamic transition from one to another.”¹⁰⁴ Though I have focused here on Hume’s account of how the opposition of interests between those who favoured a more powerful parliament and those who would have vested more power in the crown produced public goods for partisans of both sides, his writings point to other important oppositions of interest in which the same dynamic could reproduce itself. Notably, Hume explicitly acknowledges the permanent differences of interest that exist between “the distinct orders of men, nobles and people, soldiers and merchants.”¹⁰⁵ His account of how particular constitutions will produce permanent constellations of different interests clearly suggests that this list is not exhaustive.

By itself, Hume’s account of political interests does not offer a complete alternative model of political deliberation. However, it does indicate an important set of parameters that can aid in keeping the development of such normative models compatible with politics in the real world. It also demonstrates that making space for the pursuit of interests in democratic discourse need not result in political activity being reduced to mere bargaining. Hume’s account of how interests shape the political playing field of a polity and how they can be re-directed by political conventions and institutions to

¹⁰¹ *Essays*, “Of the Original Contract,” 465.

¹⁰² *Essays*, “Of the Coalition of Parties,” 494.

¹⁰³ *Essays*, “Of the Original Contract,” 474.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Sabl, *Hume’s Politics*, 239.

¹⁰⁵ *Essays*, “Of Parties in General,” p.60.

facilitate the achievement of public goods offers a set of insights that should be included more fully in contemporary debates about both the objectives and the nature of democratic deliberation.