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David Hume on custom and habit and living with skepticism

David Hume: sobre la costumbre, el hábito y el vivir siendo un escéptico

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Abstract: This article is an exploration of David Hume's philosophy of custom and habit as a way of living with skepticism. For Hume, man is a habit-forming animal, and all politics and history take place within a history of custom and habit. This is not a bad thing: life without custom and habit would be a nightmare. Hume draws on the «new science» of thinkers such as Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler to foreground the importance of custom and habit. His own contribution is a detailed exploration of philosophical psychology that brings out the role of habits of action such as politeness and manners and habits of thinking such as opinion and reasoning. Finally, life in accordance with customs and habits is not inherently conservative or quietist: there are endogenous and exogenous sources of change and progress in custom and habits.

Keywords: David Hume, custom, habit, skepticism, politics, politeness, opinion, reason.

Some modern people like to think they are not hopelessly caught up in custom, tradition, and the merely habitual. They like to think they are always exploring the new and the different, liberated from the shackles of custom and habit. They like to think they are as rational as possible, living in accordance with reason. And they like to think that politics at its best is about innovation and change. But David Hume recognized that virtually all of history is a history of customs, and almost all of a personality is rooted in habits. In this article, I will demonstrate that according to Hume this need not be a reason for despair: habit and custom are a perfectly adequate way to live.

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There are several reasons for exploring Hume on custom and habit. One is that he provided us with much of the empirical, practical philosophy and mind-set that makes up so much of modernity, so it behooves us to understand the role of custom and habit in it. Another is that Hume described himself as some sort of skeptic, at least concerning some issues, and skeptics have been criticized for offering no way out of dependence on established customs and habits. This, in turn, means a politics of quietism and collaboration with evil, according to the critics. But Hume did not see it that way. So if we understand his way of living with custom and habit we may understand better how skeptics can thrive on living in accordance with custom and habit.¹

The new science of custom and habit

In the Preface to *A Treatise of Human Nature* Hume wrote that he was following in the footsteps of Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler, who had «begun to put the science of man on a new footing».² It will be profitable to look at what they said about custom and habit to see how Hume went beyond them. John Locke did not dedicate systematic philosophical study to custom and habit, but they are important throughout his writings. In the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* he wrote that our ideas come from our «customs and manner of life».³ Unfortunately, they are frequently a bad influence: «Education, Custom, and the constant din of their Party» are the causes of «the greatest, I had almost said, of all the errors in the World» (400-1). Locke observed that «'Tis not easy for the Mind to put off those confused Notions and Prejudices it has imbibed from Custom, Inadvertancy, and common Conversation» (180). Custom is even «a greater power than Nature» (82), stronger than divine and civil law in some respects (357). One of Hume's achievements was to see beyond the negative and bring out the positive in custom and habit.

Joseph Butler turned to the power of custom in defense of religion. In *The Analogy of Religion* he wrote that man is a creature that is capable «of getting a new facility in any kind of Action, and of settled alterations in our temper of character» through the «power of habits».⁴ By «accustoming ourselves to any course of action, we get an aptness to go on, a facility, readiness, and often pleasure, in it», he observed (113). Thus, «moral and religious habits» can improve one's «virtue and piety» (116). A «constant regard to veracity, justice, and charity, may form distinct habits of these particular virtues» (125).⁵

Butler explored the place of habit in philosophical psychology: «apprehension, reason, memory... are greatly improved by exercise» (112). It «may be hard to explain the faculty, by which we are capable of habits... But the thing in general, that our nature is formed to

1 See J. C. Laursen, «Escepticismo y política», *Revista de Estudios Políticos* 144, 2009, 123-142.

2 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Second Edition by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), xvii (hereafter cited with a «T» in the text in parentheses).

3 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 432-3 (hereafter cited in parentheses in the text).

4 Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion in Works* (London, 1828), 110-11 (hereafter cited in parentheses in the text).

5 See the discussion in John P. Wright, «Butler and Hume on habit and moral character» in M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright, eds., *Hume and Hume's Connexions* (State College: Penn State University Press, 1994), 105-118.

yield, in some such manner as this, to use and exercise, is matter of certain experience» (113). Hume's response was to generalize Butler's argument and show that almost all important aspects of life belong in the realm of custom.

On Hume's account, man is a habit-forming animal. The «far greatest part of our reasonings, with all our actions and passions, can be deriv'd from nothing but custom and habit», he wrote in the *Treatise* (T118). He reaffirmed the point often, writing of «custom, to which I attribute all belief and reasoning» (T115), that «custom [is] the foundation of all our judgments» (T147), and that «all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom» (T149). In the *Abstract*, written to explain the *Treatise*, he wrote that «'Tis not, therefore, reason, which is the guide of life, but custom» (T652). It is almost impossible to overestimate the role of custom in Hume's philosophy.

Frances Hutcheson was one of Hume's examples of the new science, but rather than following him, Hume endeavored to refute him. Throughout his writings Hutcheson attempted to establish a natural human ethical and aesthetic sense that was prior to habit. Section VII of *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) makes the case against custom and habit: «Custom, Education, and Example are so often alleged ... as the occasion of our relish for beautiful objects, and for our approbation of, or delight in a certain conduct of life in a moral species, that it is necessary... to make it appear that there is a natural power of perception, or sense of beauty in objects, antecedent to all custom, education, or example». ⁶ It is precisely this that Hume reorients: for him, this «natural power», this irreducible natural function, is founded in custom and habit.

As Hume asserts in the *Treatise*, habit «is nothing but one of the principles of nature, and derives all its force from that origin» (T179). People say that animals live by instinct, where we live by reason, but «reason is nothing but a wonderful and unintelligible instinct» (T179), based, as we have seen, on custom and habit. Habits are part of our nature: in judgments concerning cause and effect «our imagination passes... by a natural transition, which precedes reflection, and cannot be prevented by it» (T147). The idea of cause and effect «can never operate upon the mind, but by means of custom, which determines the imagination to make a transition from the idea of one object to that of its usual attendant» (T170).

In the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* Hume repeated the point: custom or habit is a natural instinct, a «principle of human nature», and the «ultimate principle, which we can assign, of all our conclusions about experience». ⁷ We cannot give «the cause of this cause» (E43). «Custom, then, is the great guide of life. It is the principle alone which renders our experience useful» (E44). It is «necessary to the subsistence of our species» (E55).

Ordinary life and politics are dependent on custom. As Hume says in the *Treatise*, custom or repetition creates «a facility in the performance of any action or the conception of any object; and afterwards a tendency or inclination towards it» (T422). It is a motivator: «Nothing causes any sentiment to have a greater influence on us than custom, or turns our

6 Frances Hutcheson, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. R. Downie (London: Dent, 1994), 38.

7 David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. Selby-Bigge, Third Edition, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 47, 108, 43.

imagination more strongly to any object» (T556). A «constant perseverance in any course of life produces a strong inclination and tendency to continue for the future» (T133).

To explain the power of custom and habit in the *Treatise*, Hume even had recourse to psychophysiology. This was the rather speculative theory of «animal spirits» used by some of Hume's predecessors such as Locke and Malebranche to account for the ability of the soul to move the body. Animal spirits are conceived of as something that can run through the various channels in the brain, and habit or repetition makes them more likely to follow certain paths. Belief is «more properly an act of the sensitive than of the cogitative part of our natures», Hume writes (T183). An «imaginary dissection of the brain» gives us a mechanical model of the association of ideas: «the animal spirits run into all contiguous traces, and rouse up the other ideas, that are related to it» (T60). It should be noted that Hume omitted reference to animal spirits in the *Enquiry*, perhaps because he realized that it was wholly speculative, or perhaps because he did not need it in order to describe the effects of custom and habit.

It is remarkable how many Hume scholars underplay the role of custom and habit in his philosophy. In one recent example, Annette Baier recognizes that Hume thinks that magistrates are supposed to enforce «community custom» and that law and politics are about «customary rights and obligations».⁸ She also recognizes that some of Hume's virtues are «habits of action» and some are «habits of reaction» (68). At one point, she reports that «Clearly the customary rules are not being regarded as sacrosanct by Hume» (92) –of course not! But then she seems to think that equity can be isolated from the customary and habitual, asserting that «by nature we have some concern with equity» and that «equity requires periodic checks on traditional rights», as if equity were not also a matter of custom and habit (82). Her innocent example of children «naturally» appealing to equity (58) is belied by lots of empirical evidence. Even a cursory reading of Aristotle would make that problematic: he would insist that there is always a debate over the relevant equality. So Baier is surely right when she says that for Hume it is «almost as if justice is obedience to custom» (98). Yes, it is. But she adds, «while equity is what often demands reform of custom» (98), as if equity were a natural rock on which to stand (cf. 99). But she has no convincing textual evidence that Hume thinks that our ideas about equity are anything more than another set of customs or habits.

If so much of our make-up is a product of custom and habit, the history of social life and politics is going to be one chapter in a larger history of custom and habit. We shall now turn to that chapter.

The politics of custom and habit (I): politeness and manners

Two of Hume's «new science» authors, Anthony Ashley Cooper, The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, and Bernard Mandeville, provided him with a vocabulary for exploring the political implications of the importance of custom and habit. Each of them developed the French vocabulary of politeness and manners as a way of understanding politics. For them,

8 Annette Baier, *The Cautious Jealous Virtue: Hume on Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 54, 59 [hereafter cited in parentheses in the text]. Elsewhere, Baier remarks that «Hume of all people knows the force of habit in a person's life», but does not really follow up on this observation in *Death and Character: Further Reflections on Hume* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 19.

politics was not to be measured by natural law or legalistic social contracts. Rather, it could be evaluated by its contributions to politeness and manners. Shaftesbury argued for a «free censure of manners» because «refinement in manners, good breeding, and politeness of every kind come only from the trial and experience of what is best».⁹ For Shaftesbury, a fundamental justification of political liberty is its role in such refinement. «All Politeness is owing to Liberty», he wrote (1:64). «We polish one another, and rub off our Corners and rough sides by a sort of amicable Collision. To restrain this, is inevitably to bring a Rust upon mens Understandings. 'Tis a destroying of Civility, Good Breeding, and even Charity itself, under the pretence of maintaining it» (1:64).

Mandeville used the language of manners in defense of commercial society. In his discussion of the «Origin of Politeness», he explained why we have it: «all untaught men will ever be hateful to one another in Conversation».¹⁰ «All the Precepts of good manners throughout the World have the same tendency, and are no more than the various methods of making ourselves acceptable to others» (2:147). In order to get along with one another, we must hide our pride behind the forms of politeness and good manners. It should be clear that politeness and manners are customs and habits. The more we practice them, the more they guide our life.

Hume borrowed from both of these thinkers. He also had personal experience with politeness and manners in France. As he wrote in a letter from that country, politeness consists of «outward Deferences and ceremonies, which Custom has invented, to supply the defect of real Politeness or kindness».¹¹ People «insensibly soften towards each other in the Practice of these ceremonies. The Mind pleases itself by the progress it makes in such trifles, & while it is so supported makes an easy Transition to something more material» (1:21). Politeness and good politics are products of habit.

Politeness and manners gave Hume a standard for comparing republics and monarchies. Many English people condemned France as an absolute monarchy, and criticism of France was an established manner of expressing republican or Country values. But Hume wrote, «I abhor, that low Practice, so prevalent in England, of speaking with Malignity of France» (1:194). In the essay «Of Civil Liberty» of 1741, he wrote that «the most eminent instance of the flourishing of learning in absolute governments is that of France, which scarcely ever enjoyed any established liberty and yet has carried the arts and sciences as near perfection as any other nation».¹² In fact, the arts may flourish better under a civilized monarchy than under a republic: «in a republic, the candidates for office must look downwards to gain the suffrages of the people; in a monarchy they turn their attention upwards» (EM126). The former must make himself useful to the voters, but the latter must «render himself agreeable by his wit, complaisance, or civility»; hence the practitioners of the polite arts will be favored (EM126). Politics and politeness are mutually dependent.

9 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 6th ed. (London: 1737), 1:9-10 [hereafter cited in parentheses in the text].

10 Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, ed. F. B. Kaye (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), 2:138.

11 J. Y. T. Greig, *The Letters of David Hume*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 1:21 (hereafter cited in the text in parentheses).

12 David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E. Miller, Revised Edition (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 90-91 [hereafter cited in the text with the letters EM in parentheses].

In his essays, Hume did not reveal a preference for France or Britain, but in his letters he lashed out against republican politics in England. Not surprisingly for a man of letters, his standard of judgment was the standing of the life of letters. «Greater Honour is paid to Letters in France than in England», he wrote, repeating the point in many letters (1.415, 1.436, 1.496). London was the home of «factious Barbarians» and «Letters are there held in no honour». ¹³ Paris, on the other hand, was the «Center of Arts, of Politeness... [and] good Company» (1:375). Hume was frankly ready to give up some level of political independence in return for more politeness and more respect for the life of letters. In the *Essays* he wrote that «The republics of Europe are at present noted for their want of politeness» (EM127). The «good manners of a Swiss civilized in Holland» was a French irony (EM127). «The English, in some degree, fall under the same censure», he added, surely in the degree to which they behaved as a republic (EM127).

Politeness was also a standard for evaluating ancient politics. The «scurrility», «vanity», and «common licentiousness» in the writings of the Romans suggests that «the arts of conversation» were not refined (EM127). The custom by which «a Roman always named himself before the person to whom... he spake» (EM130) and the «illbred custom of the master of the family's eating better bread, or drinking better wine at table, than he afforded his guests, is but an indifferent mark of the civility of those ages» (EM132n.). If the political liberty of republics could not provide that civility, Hume was prepared to find it in monarchies. «Civility» and «mutual deference» lead us to «resign our own inclinations to those of our companion, and to curb and conceal that presumption and arrogance, so natural to the human mind» (EM126). If monarchies teach such habits, so much the better for social and political harmony.

In «Of Refinement in the Arts» Hume used the language of politeness to reject the republican critique of luxury and defend commercial society, just as Mandeville had done before him. Luxury is part of a package: «Laws, order, police, discipline; these can never be carried to any degree of perfection before human reason has refined itself by exercise, and by an application to the more vulgar arts, at least, of commerce and manufacture» (EM273). «Thus, industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found... to be peculiar to the more polished, and... more luxurious ages» (EM271). In the long run, this is actually better for political liberty: rich peasants and tradesmen who have acquired property «submit not to slavery» (EM277). The customs and habits of commercial society are actually the foundation of modern liberty.

In the *History of England* Hume explored in detail the role of customs and habits in political life. The rise of absolutism at the time of the Tudors and early Stuarts was the product of a «great revolution in manners». ¹⁴ In the age of Queen Elizabeth, the nobility «still supported, in some degree, the ancient magnificence in their hospitality, and in the numbers of their retainers» (H4:381-4). The political meaning was that each of them maintained (Hume calls it «hospitality») what amounted to a private army, which was a constant threat to the queen. She ordered them to limit the number of their retainers and required them

13 R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner, eds., *New Letters of David Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954) 76, 131. Cf. *Letters* 2:11, 2:134, 2:186.

14 David Hume, *The History of England* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), vol. 5, 80 (hereafter cited in the text with the letter H in parentheses).

to go to great expense in entertaining her. Bit by bit, they transferred their ambitions and resources from their private armies to ostentation: they acquired «a taste for elegant luxury; and many edifices, in particular, were built by them, neat, large, and sumptuous» (H4:383). This meant a «decay of the glorious hospitality of the nation», but it also «promoted arts and industry; while the ancient hospitality was the source of vice, disorder, sedition, and idleness» (H4:383). Commerce and luxury had democratizing effects: they «dissipated the immense fortunes of the ancient barons; and as the new methods of expense gave subsistence to mechanics and merchants, who lived in an independent manner on the fruits of their own industry, a nobleman... retained only that moderate influence which customers have over tradesmen» (H4:384). Changes in politeness and manners meant changes in the distribution of political power.

The revolution in manners that created Elizabeth's and then early Stuart power was followed by another one, the Puritan rejection of luxury, rites, and ceremonies. «From tranquillity, concord, submission, sobriety, [the English] passed, in an instant, to a state of faction, fanaticism, rebellion, and almost phrenzy» (H6:141). And the Puritan set of customs and habits of mind and action were replaced by yet another: the Restoration. «By the example of Charles II, and the cavaliers, licentiousness and debauchery became prevalent in the nation. The pleasures of the table were much pursued. Love was treated more as an appetite, than a passion». Charles's French manners made him a «model of easy and gentleman-like behaviour» who «improved the politeness of the nation» (H6:539-40). These changes in manners created a political atmosphere that accommodated much more personal liberty than the previous Stuart or Commonwealth regimes.

Note that Hume was well aware that custom and habits could change and often did change, at times quite rapidly. It has often been asserted that living in accordance with customs and habits means quietism and changelessness. But sociologists of custom and habit know better. Edward Shils's *Tradition* contains chapters on both the endogenous and the exogenous factors that lead customs to change.¹⁵ Endogenous factors may be divided into at least two kinds. One is deliberate rationalization and correction of elements of a tradition that do not conform to its professed ideals. Traditions can contain sub-traditions of critical self-correction that are constantly at work. One such was the Puritan rebellion that Hume chronicles, pursuing a time-honored ideal of holiness. Its tradition of rebellion broke out within a larger tradition – but it was still a tradition.

Another sort of change may not be deliberate. Elizabeth surely did not deliberately set out to change the habits of her nobles in exactly the ways that she did. Most likely, she was nervous about rebellion and wanted to keep an eye on them, and found that making state visits helped her to do so.

The rise of Puritan manners, and their replacement by Restoration manners, were probably not predictable. As Shils points out, ideals and values can change, as if by their own internal dynamic. He suggests that much of modern history is about an increase in the value assigned to liberty and wealth and a decrease in the value assigned to conformity and obedience. Some of modern history is about changes in the individual's responsibility for his own well-being, which can be observed in long-term secular trends (219). The changes

15 Edward Shils, *Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

in English customs and habits recorded by Hume surely contributed to these trends, even if no one intended that they do so nor foresaw that they would.

Exogenous sources of change in traditions can include the absorption of foreign traditions, the movement of traditions in either direction between center and periphery, the addition or amalgamation of previously heterogenous traditions. In Shils's exposition, these forces are constantly at work: there is no such thing as a static and settled tradition that never changes. Hume knew that England was constantly absorbing Dutch and French manners, both religious and secular. Some of English history was the product of the contest for superiority of competing exogenous traditions.

Politeness and manners, as habits of behavior, conditioned an important set of political customs and habits for Hume.¹⁶ But so did customs and habits of thought. We shall turn to them now.

The politics of custom and habit (II): opinion

Some idealistic people like to think the best life is one that is wholly guided by reason, rationality, and truth. Hume thought that in fact we base most of our life on opinion, prejudice, belief, judgment, and even taste and sentiment. None of these has the high epistemological status of absolute truth, and all of them are deeply embedded in custom and habit. But this is not a bad thing, for Hume.

For Hume, the history of ordinary life and politics takes place within a larger and constantly fluctuating history of opinion. It can be expressed in the terms of his philosophical psychology. «Opinion or belief is nothing but a strong and lively idea deriv'd from a present impression related to it», he wrote in the *Treatise* (T105). Custom or habit organizes these ideas, and creates beliefs by «invigorating an idea» by repetition (T115). It confers «a facility in the... conception of any object; and afterwards a tendency or inclination towards it» (T422).

Terms such as «judgments», «principles», and «taste» describe sorts of opinion. Judgments are «connected by custom»; judgment «peoples the world, and brings us acquaintance with such existences, as by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of the sense and memory» (T108). High-minded lovers of «principles» will not like Hume's frequent response to them. They are never more than a matter of opinion, and are often nefarious: «Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principles,... are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon, that has yet appeared in human affairs», he wrote in one of his essays (EM60). Judgments of taste, too, are no more than social customs.

In politics, opinion is not a marker of moral truth, as it seems to be for contemporary admirers of public opinion. Rather, for Hume words like «ferment», «clamor», «currents and tides», and «torrents» describe the phenomenon. Opinion is a product of sympathy, which is more a product of mechanical influences from others than of pure reasoning. We learn of another's opinion from «external signs in the countenance and conversation» of another person, which «convey an idea of it». That idea «is presently converted into an impression,

16 For more on Hume's vocabulary of politeness, see J. C. Laursen, «David Hume y el vocabulario político del escepticismo», *Anuario de Filosofía del Derecho* 7, 1990, esp. 414-421.

and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity» as to equal the other person's opinion. «We never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves». This «resemblance must very much contribute to make us enter into the sentiments of others» (T317-18). It is not reason, but a kind of contagion of ideas, that gives us our opinions.

Hume's political thought includes remedies for the contagion of opinion. In one of his essays, he proposed the dispersion of people into small groups for the purposes of political decision-making because then they «are more susceptible both of reason and of order», and «the force of popular currents and tides is, in a great measure, broken» (EM36). Counter-customs may help: «it is to be hoped, that men, being every day more accustomed to the free discussion of public affairs, will improve in the judgment of them» (EM605). Customs can be self-correcting.

Again in the *History* Hume used his theory of custom and habit and the contagion of opinion for explanatory effect. A «torrent of general inclination and opinion ran so strongly against the court» in 1640 that the king could not resist (H5:284). The «spirit of mutiny and disaffection» was «communicated from breast to breast» (H5:294). So «strong was the current for popular government in all the three kingdoms, that the most established maxims of policy were every where abandoned» (H5:336-7). Hume's metaphors are constant reminders of non-rational the behavior of public opinion: London was a «furious vortex of new principles and opinions» when the smaller towns were still peaceful (H5:378). The «force of popular currents over those more numerous associations of mankind... gave, there, authority to the new principles» (H5:387). «Elections for the Restoration Parliament became «one of those popular torrents, where the most indifferent, or even the most averse, are transported with the general passion, and zealously adopt the sentiments of the community, to which they belong» (H6:135). Such vocabulary provides Hume with his explanations for a great deal of political behavior.

In his «Of the First Principles of Government», Hume wrote that politically significant opinion can be distinguished into «two kinds, to wit, opinion of interest, and opinion of right» (EM33). Opinion of interest is «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» (EM33). Opinion of right further divides into two kinds, concerning power and property. «Upon these three opinions, therefore, of public interest, of right to power, and of right to property, are all governments founded» (EM34).

Opinion of interest is not the same as self-interest in the narrower sense, or «the expectation of particular rewards» (EM34). No government can pay off everyone individually. Those who are not rewarded must believe that the government provides «general protection» and «general advantage» (EM33-4). In the *Treatise*, Hume explained that this general advantage is that government protects property and maintains «order and concord» (T544-6).

Authority is founded in opinion of right to power. In the *Treatise*, Hume observed that custom or «long possession» gives «authority to almost all the establish'd governments of the world» (T556). Like any other custom, it is the product of repetition, «operating gradually on the minds of men» (T556). «Time alone» reconciles them to «any authority» (T556). Accordingly, Hume's advice to the «wise magistrate» is to «bear a reverence to what carries

the marks of age» and «adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entire the pillars and supports of the constitution» (EM512-3). Sovereigns «must take mankind as they find them, and cannot pretend to introduce any violent change in their principles and ways of thinking» (EM260).

It should be clear that opinion of right to power does not exclude change. It can even retroactively justify changes and new governments. When some time and custom give authority to a present government, the mind does not «rest there; but returning back upon its footsteps, transfers to their predecessors and ancestors that right... The present king of France makes Hugh Capet a more lawful prince than Cromwell» (566-7). The endogenous and exogenous factors discussed by Shils can shift opinion of right from one person or dynasty to another, especially over time.

The influence of opinion of right to power is an important explanatory factor in Hume's *History*. Queen Elizabeth was «the most popular sovereign that ever swayed the scepter» because «the maxims of her reign were conformable to the principles of the times, and to the opinion generally entertained with regard to the constitution» (H4:145). Later, the Stuart family relied wholly upon opinion. Its «authority was founded merely on the opinion of the people, influenced by ancient precedent and example. It was not supported, either by money or by force of arms», unlike what the realists would expect (H5:128). When opinion deserted the second of them, he lost his head; when it supported the third, he regained the throne, and the last of the line, Queen Anne, came in on nothing but opinion (H5:128).

«It must be owned,» Hume wrote, «that the opinion of right to property has a great influence» on the «foundation of all government» (EM33-4). Unlike his predecessor, James Harrington, Hume stressed that property was mostly a matter of rights and opinion, and that right to power and right to property could counteract each other. This explained Harrington's failure to predict the Restoration. A «government may endure for ages, though the balance of power, and the balance of property do not coincide. This chiefly happens, where any rank or order of the state has acquired a large share in the property; but from the original constitution of the government, has no share in the power» (EM35). There was no support in public opinion for changing the form of government to better reflect the ownership of property.

Hume's economics also treats property as a matter of opinion. Different forms of government distribute honors in different ways, in order to maintain their control. «Birth, titles, and place, must be honoured above industry and riches» in monarchies, he explains, because «subordination of ranks is absolutely necessary» in them (EM93). In republics men work for ever greater wealth and power, but in monarchies they work in order to buy titles and retire. Different opinions of the value of property determine different behaviors. Hume himself, it might be argued, reacted so negatively to the growing public debt because he could not fully understand, or at least not reconcile himself to, the logic of opinion about property in modern commercial society.¹⁷

There is one other issue that it will surprise no one to hear that Hume thought was largely a product of opinion, and that is religion. In his analysis, it was largely pathological. Superstition and enthusiasm were the two «corruptions of true religion» that constituted the

17 See J. C. Laursen and G. Coolidge, «David Hume and the Public Debt: Crying Wolf?», *Hume Studies* 20, 1994, 143-149.

vast majority of all actual religion (EM73).¹⁸ Superstition consists of «unaccountable terrors» which are placated by «ceremonies, observances, mortifications, sacrifices, presents’, and more. Enthusiasm is an «unaccountable elevation and presumption, arising from prosperous success, from luxuriant health, and from strong spirits», such that «the inspired person comes to regard himself as a distinguished favourite of the Divinity» (EM73-4). «We know not to what length enthusiasm, or other extraordinary movements of the human mind, may transport men, to the neglect of all order and public good» (EM528-9).

Superstition gives power to the priests and fears civil liberty: it is a synonym for Catholicism. Enthusiasm rejects priestcraft and ceremonies, and encourages liberty. He does not like it, but Hume had to admit that the English owed their liberty to the fanatic enthusiasts of the Civil War. The «precious spark of liberty had been kindled, and was preserved, by the puritans alone; and it was to this sect, whose principles appear so frivolous and habits so ridiculous, that the English owe the whole freedom of their constitution» (H4:145-6). Hume often described the power of religious opinion as «supernatural and unaccountable» (e.g. H5:67), but he also expended considerable effort on understanding it and tracing its influence in politics.

Hume is sometimes called a «conservative», which of course is a much-contested term. But many of Hume’s writings are efforts to change people’s opinions about religion. He knew it would not be easy because of the accumulated weight of religious custom in both practice and opinion. But if he had succeeded –and maybe he did in the long run, in self-described more enlightened circles in modern times– it would have been a revolution in opinion, not at all a matter of conservatism.

All of the above should make it clear that for Hume, no one in politics is making judgments on the basis of truth and knowledge, and thus no one can be sure that they hold the higher epistemological ground from which to judge others. Hume’s critique of religious and political opinion, part of his philosophy of custom and habit, can be read as a contribution to the critique of moralism in politics, which has been the subject of recent work.¹⁹

Living with skepticism

Up to this point, we have reviewed Hume’s analysis of human action and belief in terms of custom and habit, broken down into vocabularies of politeness, manners, and opinion. It is time to explain that all of this fits well within the tradition of skepticism as examples of how to live in the absence of truth and knowledge.

Almost every scholar believes that Hume is some sort of skeptic, so it will not be necessary to prove that here. There has been some debate about whether he is best understood as a Pyrrhonian or an Academic skeptic, or an early modern skeptic different from the ancient traditions. It is probably true that all early modern philosophers were different in some ways

18 See J. C. Laursen, «Bayle, Hume y Kant. Sobre la superstición y el fanatismo en política» in G. López Sastre, ed., *David Hume. Nuevas perspectivas sobre su obra* (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2005), 65-85.

19 See, e.g., C. A. J. Coady, ed., *What’s Wrong with Moralism?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006) [originally a special issue of the *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 22, no. 2, 2006]; Jane Bennett and Michael Shapiro, eds., *The Politics of Moralizing* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

from their ancient predecessors, just by virtue of the changes in way of living and in the overall framing of philosophical, religious, political, and scientific issues. I do not mean to intervene here in debates over precisely what sort of skeptic Hume was, but only to draw attention to the way Hume's philosophy of custom and habit can be seen as an answer to the eternal question of the anti-skeptic: «how are you going to live if you cannot live by truth and knowledge?». The answer, of course, is to live by custom and habit.

Among the ancients, Sextus Empiricus had given an account of the life of the skeptic that observed that in the absence of truth and while suspending judgment, the skeptics live «a life conformable to the custom of our country and its laws and institutions».²⁰ This was explicated by four «rules for life», which a skeptic could follow, not dogmatically and as a truth, but as a practice. They were: 1. follow the guidance of nature, 2. live subject to the «constraint of the passions», 3. and in accordance with «the tradition of laws and customs», and 4. learn an art (PH I 23). Much of what Hume wrote about custom and habit can count as an explication of what it means to live by the general statement quoted above, and by rule number 3. His philosophy is a specification of the details of living with habit and custom in the absence of knowledge.

Ever since Sextus Empiricus, critics have charged the skeptics with philosophical inconsistency or contradiction, and with moral turpitude.²¹ And yet imagine what it would be like if we had to make rational philosophical decisions concerning every aspect of life. Tie our shoes today or not? Eat today or not? Have we gone over the reasons pro and con? It would be a nightmare if we had to improvise new ways of living and make conscious decisions at all times. All of what we have reviewed in Hume above helps us avoid this nightmare. Rather, life in accord with customs and habits saves us a lot of time and effort, but does not pin us down to a single behavior at any one time. For Hume as for the ancient skeptics, the rule which suggests that we live much of our life in accordance with custom and habit is as good a guide to life as we will ever have.

Yet another approach to evaluating the political implications of Hume's philosophy of custom and habit is to compare it to later philosophers of custom and habit, such as the American philosopher John Dewey. The first of three Parts of his book, *Human Nature and Conduct* is on «The Place of Habit in Conduct».²² «All virtues and vices are habits», he observes (16). They are our identity: «we are the habit» (24). We are not slaves to our habits: there is such a thing as «intelligently controlled habit» (28). But intelligence and ideas do not stand on their own: «an idea gets shape and consistency only when it has a habit back of it» (30), and «reason pure of all influence from prior habit is a fiction» (31). There is no moral standard outside of custom: «for practical purposes morals means custom, folkways,

20 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (vol. 1 of 4 volumes under the title *Sextus Empiricus*) ed. R. G. Bury (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), cited by standard book and paragraph number: PH I 17 [hereafter cited in parentheses in the text].

21 See J. C. Laursen, «Yes, Skeptics Can Live Their Skepticism and Cope with Tyranny as Well as Anyone» in J. Maia Neto and R. Popkin, eds., *Skepticism in Renaissance and Post-Renaissance Thought* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2004), 201-223 and J. C. Laursen, «Skepticism, Unconvincing Anti-Skepticism, and Politics» in M. Bernier and S. Charles, eds., *Scepticisme et modernité* (Saint-Étienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 2005), 167-188..

22 John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Holt, 1922), 14-88 [hereafter cited in parentheses in the text].

established collective habits» (75). But habits should not be understood as essentially conservative: there are just as many progressive habits (66). In addition to ordinary habits, there are habits of change (69). The «real opposition», Dewey writes, «is not between reason and habit but between routine, unintelligent habit, and intelligent habit or art» (77). It is safe to say that Hume knew all of this, and expressed it in his own words.

In the remainder of his book, Dewey goes on to explore the interaction of custom with two other factors: impulse and intelligence. The first of these, impulse, would seem to correspond very well with the ancient skeptical rules of living in accord with nature and subject to the constraint of the passions. Dewey had more confidence in the second of these factors, intelligence, than the ancient skeptics. It is arguable that Hume did, too. His skepticism did not require the eschewal of all intellectual effort: in fact, of course, his life was dedicated to it. But he played this game within constraints. For one, he recognized that «reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions» (T415). For another, he wrote that he deliberately tried to «compose my temper» in order to obtain an «easy disposition» and study «philosophy in this careless manner», all ways of saying that we should not take our philosophy too seriously (T273). We have a kind of Zen philosophy here: the best philosophy does not take itself too seriously.

In the many texts we have reviewed, it is apparent that Hume was very aware of the importance of custom and habit in human life. In his account, it is not a sad thing or bad thing that we live largely by habit. And in fact it is a way of living with a deep skepticism about knowledge. No, we may not often know what is really and positively true. But it turns out that it is not necessary to know much in order to live. Rather, most of life will inevitably be a matter of living with custom and habit, and such a life is not by any means the worst life.

