

“The Great Guide of Life”: Custom and Habit in Hume’s Science of Politics

ANGELA COVENTRY
Portland State University

LANDON ECHEVERIO
Portland State University

Abstract: At the level of the individual, current research suggests that most of our daily actions are done out of habit. At the same time, individuals are part of larger social units, and their behavior gives rise to customs and institutions. Hume recognized the indispensable role of custom and habit in human life in his science of the mind, a science which aims to form the most general principles possible. Custom and habit are singled out by Hume as particularly potent general principles of human nature, describing them as the “great guide of life” and essential to human affairs. The aim of this paper is to explore the role custom and habit play in Hume’s work, especially as it concerns his political philosophy and experimental method, while considering intersections with contemporary discussions in political science.

Keywords: Hume, habit, custom, politics, political science

1. INTRODUCTION

At the level of the individual, current research suggests that most of our daily actions are done out of habit (Martin 2008 and Neal et al. 2006). At the same time, individuals are part of larger social units, and their behavior gives rise to customs and institutions. Hume recognized the indispensable role of custom and habit in human life in his science of the mind. Hume’s science is experimental, drawn from “from careful and exact experiments,” and observational, “the observation of those particular effects, which result from its different circumstances and situations” (T Intro.8).¹ The science of the mind aims to form the most general principles possible, “explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes” (T Intro.8). Custom and habit are singled out by Hume as one of these general principles of human nature, “a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects” (EHU 5.5). He thought of habit and custom as the “great guide of life” and essential to the survival and “regulation of conduct” in the human species (EHU 5.5; 5.21/T 1.3.16.9). The aim of this paper is to explore the role custom and habit play in Hume’s work, especially as it concerns his political philosophy and experimental method, while considering intersections with contemporary discussions in political science.

Our aim is motivated in part by the fact that while Hume is recognized for contributions to political philosophy, such as his account of justice, convention, government and criticisms of social contract theory, he remains somewhat of an outlier with “no school and few disciples” (Coventry and Sager 2013, p. 588). This is perhaps because

a true skeptic, as maintained by McCormick, “cannot adopt what one would normally term a political philosophy of any kind” (2013, p. 96). In place of a totalizing political project, Hume offers an experimental approach to politics. Hume investigates the possibility of a science of politics in the 1741 “That Politics May be Reduced to A Science.” In the essay, he examines whether politics admits of “general truths,” and looks for “principles of this science, which may seem to deserve that character” (EMPL 18). Dahl and Neubauer claim that Hume may be “seen as a practitioner of the scientific approach to politics” (1968, p. 2). As stated by Susato, Hume’s practice of a science of politics must be balanced with “his enduring skepticism” (2015, p. 170). Hume recommends “great caution” when forming “general maxims” in politics, for there will be irregularities (EMPL 366), and emphasizes there are limitations in that “the science of politics affords few rules, which will not admit of some exception, and which may not sometimes be controuled by fortune and accident” (EMPL 477).

We suggest that Hume’s skepticism of totalizing political projects is a net positive. His rejection of what Fosl terms “metaphysical politics,”—entertaining “philosophical posits not grounded in experience or common life” (Fosl 2018, p. 378)—and emphasis on the experimental science of human nature he prefers is shared in spirit by the field of political science. While Hume himself did not distinguish between the enterprise of political science and the more normative or evaluative stances familiar in political philosophy, his insights nevertheless help to diagnose contemporary problems within both domains. We do not intend to litigate what aspects of Hume’s insights belong to either discipline but rather tease out what elements point to Hume seriously considering a science of politics. In the next two sections of the paper, we cover Hume on custom and habit and its relevance to his political thought. The fourth section deals with the scope and limit of the science of politics Hume entertains while the fifth section detects Hume’s presence in some issues of relevance in political science today, with this ‘science’ in mind.

A note about terminology. Hume tends to use custom and habit interchangeably as was common practice in early modern philosophy (Wright 2011, p. 18; Laursen 1992, p. 155). Hume refers to “custom and habit” (T 1.3.5.6; 1.3.10.1; 3.2.2.5) and the “principle of custom or habit” (T 3.2.2.4/EHU 5.5). Hume also uses the term custom in a social or collective sense to do with social regularities while ‘habit or custom’ is reserved usually for the individual psychological and behavioral regularities (Fosl 2013: 147n24 and Garfield 2019: 17). For the purposes of this paper, we will interchange between the terms of custom and habit but in doing so we follow the particular usage of the term by Hume in each context with a comment on the meaning of the term if applicable.

2. HUME ON CUSTOM AND HABIT

Custom and habit is a fundamental principle in Hume’s system of human nature. Hume thought custom or habit was the “ultimate principle, which we can assign, of all our conclusions about experience” (EHU 5.5, 9.5-6). We cannot go any deeper with our explanation of human nature apart from custom and habit or to give “the cause of this cause” (EHU 5.5). Garfield recently put the point this way, Hume’s science treats custom and habit “not as something to explain, but rather as that which explains” (2019, p. 17).

Hume relied on custom and habit to explain a variety of topics. For Hume, the “greatest part of our reasonings with all our actions and passions” depend on “custom and habit” (T 1.3.10.1). Custom and habit explains how general or abstract ideas are formed, the belief that the future will be like the past, the nature of belief, the necessary connection between cause and effect, the external world, the self, justice and government. Moral judgments, the development of our character, aesthetics, history and economics are shaped by custom and habit. Custom and education are cited as the main reasons for differences amongst societies, across “ages and countries” (EHU 8.11). Custom even aids in the achievement of human happiness (EMPL 269).

Custom and habit is triggered by repetition in thought and action. Hume calls “every thing CUSTOM, which proceeds from a past repetition” and that operates immediately in the mind “without any new reasoning or conclusion” (T 1.3.8.10-13). This repetition brings about what Hume calls “facility”: an ease that

makes certain associations between thoughts and actions easier to produce, and this provides an automatic impetus towards those same thoughts and actions in the future (T 2.3.5.1; 2.3.4.1). The force of custom may be so strong that it may influence the mind even when the circumstances are not exactly similar (T 1.3.13.8). He also thinks that custom and habit may lead us to hold false beliefs (T 1.3.5.6) or tempt us to a “false comparison of ideas” (T 1.3.9.17-18). Hume allowed education to be founded on custom but noted that “its maxims are frequently contrary to reason, and even to themselves in different times and places” (T 1.3.9.19). Hume also distinguished four kinds of irrational probability judgements that are based on custom and habit (T 1.3.13). Hume thought we could apply rules of reasoning to correct these erroneous judgements (T 1.3.15) and these rules are based on the principle of custom and habit itself (T 1.3.13.8). The mechanism of custom and habit is responsible for the formation of beliefs, including the mistaken ones, and it is a mechanism capable of self-correction—custom and habit allows us to revise our beliefs (T 1.3.13.8-12). In morals, Hume allowed that we can acquire new habits. A person learns virtues by putting them into practice (T 3.2.1.8). Habit he says is a “powerful means of reforming the mind, and implanting in it good dispositions and inclinations” (EPML 170-1). Put simply, bad habits can be replaced with better, more effective ones. The influence of custom and habit on our moral sentiments may be reflective and progressive just like causal reasoning (Fosl 2013, p. 143).

Hume emphasized that custom influences the strengths and weaknesses of our feelings. He thought that “custom and repetition” may convert pleasure into pain and pain into pleasure (T 2.3.5.1). Some actions or thoughts produce, as they become customary, stronger passions and as other actions or thoughts turn customary they may produce weaker passions. This means that custom may diminish the force of those feelings, beliefs and practices to which we might have little commitment to but may also strongly reinforce new feelings, beliefs and practices (Fosl 2013, p. 138). In this context Hume mentioned Butler’s distinction between active and passive habits. Butler distinguished passive habits that lose force after repetition and active habits that gain strength by repetition, both of mind and body (1736, p. 138ff). Butler thought that through the power of active habit we can find new ways to act and undergo alterations in our temperament or character (Ibid.). He highlighted the positive influence of moral and religious habits, forces that could generate “a new facility in any kind of Action, and of settled alterations in our temper of character” (Ibid.). Butler believed that habit even provides the possibility of a total character transformation (1736, p. 141).

This distinction between active and passive habits is now often referred to as the “double law of habit.” Following Butler, Hume noted that custom “increases all *active* habits and diminishes *passive*” (T 2.3.5.5). What happens in the mind is that the “facility takes off from the force of the passive habits” whereas the active habits give “the tendency of the mind a new force, and bends them more strongly in action (T 2.3.5.5). This distinction between active and passive habits indicates that habit is not simply the result of repeating the same thought or actions but that habit is a powerful source of new thoughts and actions. Custom and habit may lead us to error but may also serve as a constructive force in the effort to improve such things as our reasoning and character on Hume’s account. Habit’s dual influence then can be seen as a positive blessing (“habit, blessed habit” in the words of Latour 2013, p. 265) that “can turn into a curse” (Bennett 2015, p. 3) or a curse that can be turned into a blessing. James described our lives as nothing “but a mass of habits,—practical, emotional, and intellectual,—systematically organized for our weal or woe” (1900, Ch. VIII). de Biran remarked on the ambivalent nature of habit, that habit can serve as the “general cause of our progress on the one hand, of our blindness on the other” (1929, p. 49).

Laursen suggests that Hume’s distinctive contribution was to take Butler’s view on habit further (2011, p. 89). Recognizing the central role of custom and habit in daily life, Hume’s innovation was to extend the influence of custom and habit to all affairs, including the social and political sphere. In fact, the dual nature of custom and habit as both a forceful and reflective influence on the minds of humans forms a necessary part to explain how life and progress in society is possible.

3. CUSTOM AND HABIT IN HUME'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Hume sees politics, a science that treats humans as “united in society, and dependent on each other,” as grounded in the science of mind (T Intro.5). On the Humean view humans are naturally social animals that are “compelled to maintain society from necessity, from natural inclination, and from habit” (EMPL 37). As society advances, the mechanisms of government evolve to enforce justice. Hume thinks that the justice as well as the origin, authority of and beliefs about government are cemented by custom and habit. When it comes to justice, Hume says that “custom and habit” operates early “on the tender minds of the children” and “makes them sensible of the advantages, which they may reap from society” and this increases esteem for justice (T 3.2.2.4; 3.2.2.26). The rules of justice originate as a set of conventions aimed at settling conflicts about property ownership in society. Hume thought it was difficult to keep people “faithfully and unerringly, in the paths of justice,” due to the self-interested nature of human beings and their tendency to prefer what is present and near to what is distant and remote (T 3.2.7.1-2/EMPL 38). Given the limits of human nature, we form government with magistrates that have the power to enforce the rules of justice (T 3.2.7.8). Over time, Hume says that “habit soon consolidates what other principles of human nature had imperfectly founded; and men, once accustomed to obedience, never think of departing from that path” (EMPL 39).

Custom explains our submission to the authority of government. Hume observed that custom or “*long possession*” gives “authority to almost all the establish’d governments of the world” (T 3.2.10.4). This takes place over a long period of time, but custom when “operating gradually on the minds of men” eventually “reconciles them to any authority, and makes it seem just and reasonable” (T 3.2.10.4). Human society gradually becomes stable as each generation inherits the institutions and customs already established by previous generations. After noting the strong influence of custom on our passions and imagination, Hume writes that “we have been long accusom’d to obey any set of men, that general instinct or tendency, which we have to suppose a moral obligation attending loyalty, takes easily this direction” (T 3.2.10.4). In the essay ‘Of the Original Contract’ Hume argued against social contract theorists, starting that no contract can be binding without an uncoded pattern of habits that undergird it. “No compact or agreement,” is expressed formally without first being “called forth by the present exigencies” (EMPL 468-9). Such exigencies make government’s “interposition. . . become daily more frequent; and their frequency gradually produced a habitual and, if you please to call it so, a voluntary and therefore precarious acquiescence in the people” (EMPL 469). Hume commented that a king who might initially be a usurper to the throne may “settle his family on the throne,” and that family may gain legitimacy in the eyes of the public due to the influence of time and custom (T 3.2.10.19).

Hume thought that while time and custom give authority to government now, the mind also traces “back upon its footsteps, transfers to their predecessors and ancestors that right” and makes comparative evaluative judgements about the effectiveness of leadership, for example, “the present king of *France* makes *Hugh Capet* a more lawful prince than *Cromwell*” (T 3.2.10.19). Hume noted that there is much debate over who has the right to rule, that “the accession of the *Prince of Orange* to the throne might at first give occasion to many disputes, and his title be contested” (T 3.2.10.19). In “That Politics May be Reduced to A Science,” Hume discusses good and bad kinds of government with the aim of forming good principles of government. These sorts of discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of rulers and governments may lead us to review our current opinions, form new beliefs or habits by the use of comparison with other leaders or forms of government throughout history and think of ways to do things better in the future. In the “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” Hume’s investigation into the “most perfect” form of government is deemed useful because it is the best way to improve existing governmental systems and constitutions without giving “too great disturbance to society” (EMPL 513-4). It allows us, he says, to consider how to make “some improvements for the public good” without dismantling the entire foundations of the current constitution or government (EMPL 512-3). As Hankins and Thrasher write, Hume was not averse to political reform in principle, but simply aware that “reforms often fail to live up to the aspirations of their architects” (2022, p. 1013). Hume thinks that reformers like Cromwell “must be careful not to displace the tacit knowl-

edge embedded in the practices and customs that support, define, and push back against long-standing institutions.” (Hankins and Thrasher 2022, p. 1013). On the skeptical side, Hume thinks the most perfect government still has weaknesses (EMPL 528-9).

Our beliefs or opinions about government also depend on custom and habit. Hume defines “opinion or belief as “an act of the mind arising from custom” (T 1.3.9.13). Hume claims that the foundation of government is not consent or force but opinion. In the essay, “Of the First Principles of Government,” Hume wonders how government, that has only opinion at the foundation, has the power to make “men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers” (EMPL 32). There are two kinds of political opinions: opinion of interest, and opinion of right. Opinion of interest is “the sense of general advantage which is reaped from government,” that goes together with the belief that the existing government is the most advantageous that could easily be established (EMPL 33). Opinion of right divides into two kinds, concerning power and property. On opinion of right to power, Hume means the opinion, to which custom gives rise, that certain persons or institutions possess the right to rule and that all members of society are under an obligation to obey them. The opinion of right to property is “in all matters of government” (EMPL 33). Hume recognized that right to power and right to property may counteract each other. Nonetheless, he explained how a “Government may endure for ages, though the balance of power, and the balance of property do not coincide” (EMPL 35).

Sabl points out that Hume’s political theory allowed that custom may negatively constrain the institutional practices of society (2012, pp. 243-4). One example occurs in chapter thirty of the third volume of the *History of England* regarding the dissolution of Henry VIII’s marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Hume maintained that the “principles of sound philosophy” prove beyond doubt that the laws and conventions against incest should not have been applied in such a case. However, Hume noted that “Henry had custom and precedent on his side, the principle by which men are almost wholly governed in their actions and opinions” (Sabl 2012, pp. 243-4). On the more positive side, Hume allows that societal customs may change (EMPL 294). Laursen emphasizes that Hume allowed that political habits and beliefs are changeable and assumes that they can be corrected (2019, p. 243). Garfield also underscores that for Hume customs may evolve and change over time and this allows for “a kind of progressiveness as law and morality develop in society” (2019, p. 44). Hume allows for the “great” influence of “laws, and of particular forms of government” on people (EMPL 16), and that government may also guide people to adopt new beliefs, practices and customs (T 3.2.7.8).

4. HUME’S ‘SCIENCE’ OF POLITICS

As we have seen, Hume held that custom and habit play an essential role in operations of the mind. The role of custom and habit influences a great many things that concern a given polity, such as the formation of political opinions, the emergence and justification for political norms, and even the possibility of political change. Hume’s emphasis on habit and custom also helps to elucidate an interplay between our psychological and social lives. For Hume, any study of politics should be undertaken with due attention given to the influence of habit and custom in our political lives. In fact, a reduction of politics to something properly regarded as a science is a purely theoretical and experimental enterprise for Hume. He rejects a metaphysical politics that would place political understanding outside the operations of the mind. According to Forbes, Hume instead wanted to bring the experimental method “to bear on English politics” (1975, p. 136). As Fosl writes, “philosophical posits not grounded in experience or common life that would pretend to legitimate authority and obligation in an *a priori* and summarily universal way,” are rejected by Hume (2018, p. 376). Just as Hume is skeptical of any totalizing political project, he is skeptical of political proclamations based in “free-floating philosophical reason,” as Fosl describes (2018, p. 377). As Whelan notes, for Hume, the “[a]dvocacy of certain social arrangements and approval of certain courses of conduct rest in part on empirical assessments” (2018, p. 291).

What emerges is an image of Hume as an early practitioner of a scientific approach to politics. Dahl and Neubauer note that his method “places him among the political analysts who have tried to systematize the study of political behavior, institutions, and systems” (1968, p. 2). In the essay “That Politics may be Reduced to a Science” Hume provides a rough sketch of principles of good governance and “tries to show that from a perusal of different systems, both current and in history, one can draw reliable, general conclusions about what contributes to political health” (McCormick 2013, p. 84). In another essay, “The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” Hume debates the merits of different forms of government with the aim of, according to McCormick, coming to “a better understanding of the kinds of principles we ought to employ in trying to, for example, balance liberty and authority” (2013, p. 86).

However, others maintain Hume’s expressed scientific approach to political analysis is concretely historical. Conniff argues that Hume’s real aim in “That Politics may be Reduced to a Science” is not in fact a reduction of politics to a science but rather to rebut those (such as Harrington) who claimed to have built a politics upon science (1976, p. 98). Moreover, Conniff states that the essay is a plea for moderation in politics animated by Hume’s thoroughgoing skepticism. “Since so little can be known for certain,” Conniff writes, Hume advises that “a sensible man will be careful and tentative in his judgments and recognize his own fallibility.” (Ibid.).

While it is true that Hume does not give a robust breakdown of what may be termed a scientific methodology in “That Politics may be Reduced to a Science,” and that his distinct brand of skepticism permeates his work, he does plainly state the animating stance. Because the force of particular types of governments and laws depend so little on the “humours and tempers” of any one individual, “consequences almost as general and certain may sometimes be deduced from them, as any which the mathematical sciences afford us” (EMPL 16). In his essay “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” Hume emphasizes this point more generally, writing that “[w]hat depends upon a few persons is, in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes: What arises from a great number, may often be accounted for by determinate and known causes” (EMPL 112). As George H. Sabine describes it, causal explanations for the phenomena that interest us are, for Hume, confined to “movements which involve a large number of persons” (1906, p. 21).

This considered, the scope of what may be termed a Humean science of politics are those political phenomena which involve a requisite number of persons or cases, are open to empirical study, and avoid metaphysical posits that stand outside of everyday experience and common life.² The challenge for Hume, and the political scientist more generally becomes, as Moore describes, rescuing “generalizations from a world characterized by contingency and radical change” (1977, p. 812). Moreover, generalizations that can be rescued should be understood with a certain skeptical caution, as Hume’s empirical method made “even the most durable political maxims” vulnerable to exceptions (Wulf 2000, p. 87).

Importantly for Hume’s experimental method, and subsequently our application of custom and habit to contemporary political science, is the principle of uniformity. As Hume expresses perhaps clearest in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, “. . . all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities” (EHU 4.21). The inferences we make about human behavior also assume a uniformity. Hume states that there is “great uniformity among the actions of men, . . . The same motives always produce the same actions” (E 8.7). Hume finds that “the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature” (EHU 8.16). In applying this principle to human nature, the implication is “if human nature remains the same at all times and in all places,” as Moore writes, “then differences in human conduct must be explained in terms of those circumstances in which men differ; and those circumstances were nothing but the artificial or conventional arrangements of social and political life” (1977, p. 813).

The picture that emerges might at first blush appear to sell the central focus of this paper short. That is, in adopting Hume’s approach and noticing that custom and habit is a feature of cognition that all humans uniformly share, won’t explanations of political phenomena have to be found elsewhere? Simply put,

no, though the question highlights the importance of Hume's use of custom and habit. Recall that Hume's use of custom connotes both a psychological and social dimension. The artificial and conventional arrangements Moore describes exist in the social dimension to be sure, but they are supported by our habits. As Garfield points out, "custom comprises not only social convention, but also biologically determined or otherwise fundamentally cognitive patterns of thought or behavior, as well as acquired habits, including the habits and practices of reinforcing our customs" (2019, p. 33). Of further note is that Hume sets limits on generalizations about human behavior just as there are limits to general principles in politics. Hume warns that we should not get carried away and "expect, that this uniformity of human actions should be carried to such a length, as that all men, in the same circumstances, will always act precisely in the same manner" (EHU 8.10). He reminds us "to allow for the diversity of characters, prejudices, and opinions" (EHU 8.10). In fact, for Hume the greater variety of human action means that we can "form a greater variety of maxims, which still suppose a degree of uniformity and regularity" (EHU 8.10).

5. CONTEMPORARY DIRECTIONS

In the spirit of the preceding section, we suggest that Hume's emphasis on custom and habit factors into many contemporary issues and approaches in political science, as they indicate how differences in the patterns of habituation effect political behavior and institutions and vice versa. As a robust and thorough accounting of the whole academic terrain is beyond the scope of this paper, we will first offer a brief overview of some aspects of the landscape where Hume's influence is detected before probing the topics of civic participation and social change and political legitimacy in some detail.

In seeing the character of institutions as emerging from the normativity expressed in local traditions, beliefs, and behaviors, Hume's characterization of custom has much in common with analyses of *political culture*, an explanatory variable that has generated a great deal of theoretical and empirical interest (Conway 1989, p. 5). Political scientist Daniel Elazar, whose work follows American political culture, argues that the varied values, perspectives, and beliefs traceable to the migration patterns of the early American settlers worked as an aggregate force, expressing itself in the behavior of the polity and subsequently becoming embedded in the original state constitutions (Elazar 1972, pp. 93-98). Employment of Elazar's tripartite topology of American political culture has had much empirical purchase, inspiring hundreds of studies that generally confirm Elazar's typology (Gray, Hanson and Kousser 2017, p. 19; Formisano 2001, p. 398).

Other theorists interested in political culture expand the target of inquiry. Political Scientists Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba widen "the political culture approach into a global framework for the comparative analysis of political change and regime legitimacy" (Dalton and Welzel 2014, p. 2). Verba suggests that a collection of attitudes support a democratic polity: allegiance to the political system and pride and participation in the political process (Ibid.). This *allegiant model* connects quite strikingly with the opinions Hume believed legitimate government.

Though approaches to political culture are varied, they share a general theme in that they emphasize a given polity's differing attitudes to political objects. Recalling that Hume thinks political opinions arise from custom and habit, where political habits differ, opinions differ, and thus customary regularities vary. Moreover, customary regularities are likely to influence what habits form. Though the link between individual psychology and their social dimensions is a tangled web we are unprepared to tackle here, we suggest that the empirical efficacy political culture has enjoyed is likely undergirded by Humean insights concerning the effects custom and habit have on distinct polities. As political cultures become increasingly pronounced, as Fisher (2016) has argued is true of America, Hume's emphasis on custom and habit might help sharpen theory crafting for those interested in getting clearer on the contours of political culture.

Such work may also help shed light on the interplay between habit and political belief, an area Hume was quite sensitive to. A person's set of political beliefs constitute the political belief system from which they navigate and orient themselves in the political sphere. For the political scientist, making sense of belief sys-

tems is crucial in elucidating to what degree an informed citizenry can be said to exist, a research question which has important implications for the health of the polity (Hochschild 2010).

While distinct threads in the literature converge with Hume's more optimistic view that political beliefs are amenable to update, the literature also suggests that political attitudes are resistant to new information, much more in line with them being habitual and self-reinforcing. In reviewing the state of the art of belief systems and political decision making among citizens, Kuklinski and Peyton note a downbeat turn, evidence suggesting that the politically knowledgeable class doubles down on political beliefs despite countervailing evidence. Put cleanly, those who are politically knowledgeable "devote most of their mental energies to maintaining their attitudes, often unreasonably" (2007, pp. 6-7). However, the authors also detect an upbeat strain, noting that "people appear to update their factual beliefs consistently with changed conditions" (2007, p. 10).

While both strains lend some support to Hume's work, they do so in different ways. That people aim to square their political belief systems with reality showcases the influence of custom in one of its most basic forms, our natural tendency to infer effects from causes. That is, if a person updates or takes on a new political belief to better mirror reality, they do so because their understanding of certain causal relations between political objects has changed. "If the economy worsens," to borrow an example from Kuklinski and Peyton, "people say the economy is weakening" (2007, p. 9). The upbeat turn in the study of political belief systems portrays a citizenry "who ground their beliefs and attitudes in reality, implying that people hold true beliefs and attitudes" (Ibid.). Impressively, political choices are congruent with one's set of beliefs or ideological commitments; "citizens use their core values and political ideologies to derive 'the right' policy preferences and choose 'the right' candidates" (2007, p. 10). On the other hand, the downbeat strain showcases how habits can sharply limit the production of potential political beliefs, as habit shapes what we devote our attention to. "People's attention to politics determines whether they receive information," the authors write, "and their ideological predispositions and, more generally, core values shape whether they accept it" (Kuklinski and Peyton 2007, p. 7).

Of course, an important distinction should be made between belief and action. Just as beliefs about the value relevance of political objects will vary among citizens, the same is true of beliefs about the value relevance of potential political action taken with respect to these objects (Dawson 1979, p. 116). Just as habit shapes the attentional landscape with respect to political information and belief formation, it too shapes the likelihood of political action.

Civic Participation and Social Change

In current discussion of habit across disciplines it is generally assumed that habit is repetition that gives rise to associations between thoughts and actions. In more contemporary terms we might say that habitual activity follows from the same repeated behavioral and neurological patterns. There is research suggesting civic participation is one such self-reinforcing act. When people abstain from voting, the likelihood they will engage next time declines (Gerber, Green, and Sachar 2003, p. 540). Conversely, voting in one election increases the likelihood that people will turn out at the next one (Ibid.). Importantly for those turning out for the first time, previous habits fostered outside of the political sphere will push them one way or the other. Condon and Holleque note that "when individuals have little experience in a domain of activity (such as politics), they rely on general psychological attitudes and personality traits developed outside of that domain to determine behavioral choices, in particular on general self-efficacy. . ." (2013, p. 168).

Green and Sachar suggest that the self-reinforcement of political action may transmute into comfort with the political process, engagement thus becoming easier and more enjoyable (2000, p. 571). Relatedly, such engagement can alter the way voters conceive of themselves within the broader polity, internalizing civic participation as the type of thing one ought to do (Ibid.). This suggestion may be underwritten by research on countries in which voting is compulsory. While conventional wisdom suggests compulsory voting is effective to the degree that penalties for abstention are enforceable, data suggests that even in

countries where compulsory voting laws are not enforced turnout is still six percent higher than countries with voluntary systems, suggesting voters turn out for reasons other than avoiding fines. As Engelen writes, “compulsory voting helps solidify some kind of *habit* or *social norm* that erodes only gradually in time” (2007, p. 42, emphasis added).

Of course, civic participation is hardly limited to formal activities like voting but extend to the informal processes that also facilitate political change. Many scholars have paid close attention to the customs and habits that govern human life to understand how genuine social change takes place. Hume on custom and habit may be seen as a precursor to current pragmatic theories of social change in particular. Pedwell (2016) explores the double law of habit to approach the complexities of social change and politics. Pedwell suggests that social change looks at the habits of practice that sustain existing institutions and looks to reform these practices by using habit to open up more practices and possibilities. According to Pedwell, “it is through the creation of habits, not their cessation, that more progressive and enduring forms of social transformation might be achieved” (2017, p. 6).

Pedwell ties her research program to Dewey’s pragmatic political philosophy and public policy. Dewey understands the social psychology of the human being as a configuration of habits as detailed in his 1922 book *Human Nature and Social Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*. According to Kaufman-Osborn, on Dewey’s perspective “real social change” will not come about by a “revolutionary upheaval that destroys existing institutions but leaves untouched the habits of practice which sustain them” (1985, p. 835). Instead, social change will come about with “pragmatic public policy, backed by the power of the state,” and this approach “must reconstruct the web of interconnection that constitutes the current social environment” (Ibid.). Of note is that Dees understands Hume’s overall political theory as “a kind of pragmatism” (2008, p. 404).

Pedwell contrasts this pragmatist project with contemporary ‘nudge’ theory, advocated by Thaler and Sunstein. Nudge theory explores how policy-makers and corporate leaders, ‘choice architects’ in their terminology, can intervene in the choice architectures of the marketplace to alter people’s behavior, bypassing problematic tendencies (2017, p. 60). Pedwell argues that if new forms of habituation are to be robust and enduring, due appreciation should be given to the necessary role the collective will play in their development (2017, pp. 65-66). Where nudge theory emphasizes harnessing expert psychological and economic knowledge to nudge individuals toward better patterns of behavior, thereby addressing a host of complex social problems, Pedwell notes that “pragmatists highlight the difficulties and pitfalls of assuming that we can know in advance the nature of progressive social or ethical conduct” (2017, p. 66).

Importantly for either project concerns what changes are being proposed. Recalling that for Hume any political artifice must assist nature, policy recommendations must be implemented “by such gentle alterations and innovations as may not give too great disturbance to society” (EMPL 514). Trying out “experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument” is to neglect the natural sentiments of humans, and while Hume is sympathetic to his own conception of utopia, he at the same time warns against those who take the notion too seriously (EMPL 512). “[I]n order to establish laws for the regulation of property,” to take one example, “we must be acquainted with the *nature and situation of man*.” (EPM 3.2.6, emphasis added). In this sense, social reform is successful to the extent it furnishes a political community with (or builds upon previous instantiations of) the types of habits and customs that further our natural sentiments. While both nudge theory and Pedwell’s pragmatism could potentially fit a Humean construal of government serving as a guide for the adoption of new beliefs, practices and customs, nudge theory is decidedly more paternalistic and individualistic. Here, expert knowledge is exploited to guide individuals into ‘better’ habits. The upshot to Pedwell’s project, insofar as it is analyzed through a Humean lens, is its skepticism toward the normative inducements of experts, what Pedwell describes as “a top-down technology of behaviour modification” versus an “embodied process emerging from the ground up.” (2017, p. 84). Contemplating Hume’s own pragmatism, Dees notes that while governments are powerful tools, “the people have the right to insure that the tool remains only in the hands of those that will use it well” (Dees 2008, p. 404). This is especially true if the most powerful institutions seek to modify the polity’s behavior.

Of course, even if one favors the ground up approach, difficulties arise in assessing how individuals conceive of and relate to political objects such that there would be agreement as to what habits or customs will be successful in furthering our natural sentiments. This is a central difficulty for politics and likely why Hume's intentions "as a moral and political writer were practical as well as philosophical and scientific," in that he hoped his arguments would, as Whelan writes, "promote such values as social utility, political moderation, legal and constitutional government, free trade and industry, and the civility and refinement of modern society." (2018, p. 291) Of course the promotion of these values seems all but impossible in a political era increasingly marked by distrust of political competitors.

Political Legitimacy and Legitimatory Mechanisms

Hume's second kind of opinion on who has the right to power and who are we obligated to obey connects to debates today about political legitimacy, defined as the "right to rule, where this is understood as correlated with an obligation to obey on the part of those subject to the authority" (Raz 1985, p. 3). Recall that Hume rejected the social contract account of legitimacy on grounds that habit and custom provide a more compelling account of consent. He notes that all the governments of his day were founded on "either on usurpation or conquest or both, without any presence of a fair consent or voluntary subjection of the people" (EMPL 471). His insistence on grounding a study of politics in common life and in separating the study of politics from that of morals (escaping an "ethics-first" approach) suggests Hume may be best placed in the realist tradition with regards to legitimacy.³ In the *Treatise*, Hume seemingly rejects understanding legitimacy by dint of normative import, noting that an inability to square the allegiance to a given ruler in a way that satisfies any "received system of ethics" does not entail we are exempt from the duty of allegiance (T 3.2.10.7).

This approach tracks with Sleat's realist attempt to legitimate political order from "justificatory resources that are internal to politics," escaping import of "normative values that are external to the political sphere and are taken to have antecedent authority over it." As Sleat suggests, for the realist "[p]olitics has an identity distinct from morality; hence moral, values, considerations and principles are part of politics but they are not constitutive of it," a distinction Hume also explicitly drew. The key take-away is that a construal of political legitimacy that is built on ideal and/or rational normative conditions resists empirical investigation in ways Hume would have found unacceptable. Instead, Hume offers a positive account of legitimacy secured by the opinions that arise from habit and custom. Berry points out that in Hume's politics, "habit and customary ways of behaving not only stabilize but also constrain by circumscribing the range of effective or discernible options" and this applies to individuals as well as institutions (2019, p. 321). Berry supports this with the *History of England* where Hume noted that the "wise magistrate" will be aware that "habits more than reason" are "in everything...the governing principle of mankind" (Ibid.). Since government relies on opinion, and because it serves to "restrain the fury and injustice of the people", it is "dangerous to weaken ...the reverence which the multitude owe to authority" (Berry 2019, p. 322).

Landis (2018) brings Hume's work to bear on current debates about the nature of political legitimacy, analyzing Hume's writings to show that the "psychological experience of party informs the opinions by which governments can be considered legitimate" (2018, p. 219). Hume invites us, Landis argues, to reconsider the essential role that parties might play in "securing legitimacy as that ideal is practiced or understood by citizens" (Ibid.). Crucially, this understanding is "independent of the ideal understandings of legitimacy currently being articulated by theorists," highlighting Hume's insistence that it is insufficient to evaluate legitimacy from a justificatory perspective external to politics as practiced in common life (Ibid.). From this perspective, parties are viewed as foundationally valuable because of their ability to shape opinion through habit and custom, especially the opinions concerning the type of allegiance that gets legitimate government off the ground. As Landis writes "parties can either act as a support, or pose a fatal threat to the entire project of society" (2018, p. 220).

Relatedly, the legitimatory mechanisms available for different societies are constantly changing, contingent on the political affordances of specific periods (Sleat 2014, p. 325). Such affordances include not only

what political beliefs are indeed held by the polity but the mechanisms available for generating new beliefs, such as newspapers or universities (Ibid.). Parties and factions can take advantage of these mechanisms to generate and secure new beliefs and habits, ones that attach “our desire for social esteem to whatever narrow sentiments advance the party line” (Landis 2018, p. 228).

One such mechanism is of great interest to contemporary work concerning the legitimacy: social media. Contemporary research suggests that the more social media companies can create and secure daily-use habits, the more financially successful they are (Anderson and Wood 2020, p. 2). In work exploring Facebook’s “ideal user,” Docherty suggests that users are “technologically ‘nudged,’” a method discussed previously, “along pathways of active behavior,” securing use-habits (Ibid.). Social media also serves as a vehicle to “connect, communicate, mobilize, fundraise, and affect the news agenda” (Kalsnes 2016, p. 1). This is especially true given that the large datasets generated by social media companies allow political actors to target individuals more precisely by analyzing “correlations between their political choices and other attributes” (Tufekci 2014). A study of political sectarianism in *Science* found that social media plays an “influential role in political discourse, intensifying political sectarianism” (Finkel et al. 2020).

Hume noted that such strong disagreement will often fall under “the pretence of public good” (EMPL 27)—the type of “competition among groups in the marketplace of ideas” that is the “hallmark of a healthy democracy” (Finkel et al. 2020). However, if partial interest is engendered solely by enraged passions, parties may be blinded to their interest in “equitable behavior,” thus threatening legitimate government (T 3.2.7.7). It has been noted that this type of political polarization is of a strikingly different character, “one focusing less on triumphs of ideas than on dominating the abhorrent supporters of the opposing party,” and that social media habits have exacerbated it (Finkel et al. 2020). This polarization has already transmuted into active challenges to the legitimacy of democratic institutions and elections, such as in the U.S. capital riot of 2020. In autocratic regimes, social media has increasingly been coopted and used “as a tool of regime stability” by means of enabling “non-democratic incumbents to safely gather previously hidden or falsified information about public grievances, to increase the transparency of the performance of local officials, to bolster regime legitimacy by shaping public discourse, and to enhance the mobilization of their support base” (Gunitsky 2015).

Getting a better understating of how social media habits are played upon by politicians and parties to influence political behavior, especially in efforts to undermine the political legitimacy of opponents, seems of critical contemporary import. While Hume’s emphasis on custom and habit may not provide a straightforward solution, it certainly helps diagnose the problem.

6. CONCLUSION

Custom and habit pervades society, directing interrelations between humans and shaping our broader communities and institutions. Hume recognized the profound impact custom and habit has on political life, a sphere that (along with logic, morals, and criticism) comprised “almost everything of importance in the study of human affairs” (Moore 1977, p. 810). Rejecting a metaphysical politics, Hume sought to ground an understanding of political behavior and institutions in “experience or common life” (Fosl 2018, p. 376). By emphasizing similarities natural and fixed, Hume hoped to lay the groundwork for an empirical investigation into our relationship to politics, especially our differences. We hope to have shown that Hume’s thought on the entrenching yet dynamic natural principle of custom and habit as applied to political society may be of relevance to some of the contemporary currents of theorizing about issues in our socio-political climate.⁴

NOTES

- 1 The following abbreviations are used for Hume: ‘T’ for *A Treatise of Human Nature*; ‘EHU’ for *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ‘EPM’ for *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and ‘EMPL’ for *Essays Moral, Political, Literary*. References cite the book, chapter, section, and paragraph for the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries* and a page number is provided for the *Essays*.
- 2 Here “empirical study” stands for Hume’s expressed experimental method in the Introduction to *A Treatise of Human Nature*.
- 3 The “ethics-first” terminology is found in Raymond Guess’s work. See *Philosophy of Real Politics* (2008). For a detailed and compelling account exploring the similarities in realist thought and Hume on political legitimacy, see Östbring (2011).
- 4 Versions of this paper were presented at the Oxford Hume Forum, March 16th 2022 and the University of Venice meeting of the *International Society for Intellectual History: Histories of Knowledge: Political, Historical and Cultural Epistemologies in Intellectual History*, September 15th 2022. We thank the audience there for discussion. We thank as well Elena Yi-Jia Zeng for her editorial guidance and an anonymous referee for helpful comments.

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