

## John Dewey and the ‘sceptical and revolutionary’ Humean tradition

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**Abstract:** John Dewey’s philosophy, as Richard Rorty observed, is historicist to the core. From the 1910s onwards, Dewey emphasised the need for a ‘reconstruction’ in philosophy, which could extract what was most valuable from the Western philosophical tradition and employ it in the attempt to grapple with the most pressing contemporary problems. In his autobiographical reflections, Dewey acknowledged that his early enthusiasm for Hegel’s philosophy had left a ‘permanent deposit in his thinking’, a claim that has recently received considerable scholarly attention. Yet Dewey’s intellectual development is marked by an increasing disenchantment with fundamental aspects of Hegelian philosophy, which he considered to be infected with a ‘reactionary spirit’. In his mature writings, this essay argues, Dewey turned to a pre-Hegelian (and pre-Kantian) philosopher, David Hume, in order to establish the most important philosophical principles that he initially associated with Hegel on non-metaphysical, non-theological foundations. Hume, on Dewey’s reading, was both sceptical and revolutionary; but his call for the transfer of the experimental method to moral subjects had not been heeded. Dewey’s philosophical project both explained why, historically, a ‘reactionary spirit’ had returned to infect post-Humean philosophy, and why the revolution in philosophy for which Hume called was now more urgent than ever.

**Keywords:** Immanuel Kant; G. W. F. Hegel; history of philosophy; experimental method; final causes.

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### INTRODUCTION: THE RECONSTRUCTION OF A HUMEAN TRADITION

In reconstructing the intellectual development of a philosopher, it can be illuminating to mark those points at which they appear to position themselves in a new relation to past philosophers and philosophical traditions. As an example, one might consider Derek Parfit. Parfit’s moral theory, as articulated in *Reasons and Persons* (1984), acknowledged its debt to Henry Sidgwick’s *Outlines of the History of Ethics* (1886) as the best work ever written on that subject, and ‘could hardly have been more anti-Kantian’ (Darwall 2014, p. 80). By *On What Matters* (2011), conversely, Kant is placed alongside Sidgwick as the greatest of western moral theorists, and as an equally important inspiration for, and interlocutor in, Parfit’s enterprise. In such cases, a past philosopher who was once considered irrelevant or even actively hostile to one’s method or central lines of argument is newly-recognised to be an ally—as one who is especial-

ly worth listening to, and engaging with. This essay argues that John Dewey's intellectual development is marked by a similar shift in relation to a predecessor who, he came to think (and argue), offered valuable resources that had remained largely untapped by contemporary philosophers (including his earlier self). If Parfit's lifelong admiration for a nineteenth-century philosopher (Sidgwick) was later accompanied (and qualified) by an esteem for an eighteenth-century predecessor (Kant), so in the case of Dewey an initial (and abiding) attraction to G. W. F. Hegel was later supplemented (and qualified) by an appreciation for David Hume's philosophy. Dewey's claim that his early admiration for Hegel left 'a permanent deposit in his thinking' has recently received considerable scholarly attention (J. M. Dewey 1939, pp. 17-8; Good 2006; Levine 2015). The same cannot be said of his turn to Hume or, indeed, of how Dewey's reappraisal was founded upon a strikingly distinctive interpretation of the nature of Hume's contribution to the western philosophical tradition (for a partial exception, see Welchman 1995).

Recent decades have witnessed a notable resurgence of interest among political theorists in Dewey and American pragmatism (Festenstein 2021). Conversely, the contemporary 'dearth of a Humean strand of political philosophy', it has recently been argued, is as conspicuous as it is 'unfortunate': 'Hume has no school and few disciples' (Coventry and Sagar 2013, p. 588). From the early 1920s, however, Dewey identified a distinctive 'Humean strand' in the history of philosophy, and presented his own philosophical project as reconstructing and developing its still-vital elements. Dewey was unusually alive to what Harold Bloom later christened 'the anxiety of influence' (Bloom 1973). If a philosopher 'ignores traditions, his thoughts become thin and empty'; but 'they are something to be *employed*, not just treated with respect or dressed out in a new vocabulary' (Dewey 1928, p. 132; italics added). This essay asks two questions. First, what did Dewey consider to be so distinctive and valuable about Hume's philosophy? Second, why did he think that it could, appropriately reconstructed, be 'employed' productively to grapple with questions—notably, regarding the prospects for radical democracy in large-scale industrial societies—that had *not* confronted Hume in the eighteenth century? This approach enables us both to affirm the broad claim that Hume's 'attitude' to philosophy bears comparison to 'modern pragmatism or "neo-pragmatism"', and to move beyond it by isolating those aspects of Hume's philosophy that Dewey himself considered to be most amenable to his own method and objectives (Blackburn 2008, p. 8; Engström 1997). Meanwhile, Dewey's questions, as Melvin L. Rogers observes, 'were not merely relevant in the 1920s, but seem equally, if not more, relevant in today's political climate' (Rogers 2016, p. 43). If this is true, then Dewey potentially alerts us to where, and why, aspects of Hume's philosophical project might remain stimulating and vital even today.

For Dewey, no less than for Coventry and Sagar (2013), Hume was a powerful ally in the attempt to critique the hegemonic position of Kantian idealism in moral and political theory. On Dewey's reconstruction, Hume proposed an alternative and methodologically superior Copernican revolution in moral philosophy to Kant's, and one which promised to provide infinitely greater benefits to human life (Section I). It is, I suggest, significant that Dewey came to Hume—as, perhaps, only a few philosophers either before or since have done—via Hegel (Section II). On Dewey's interpretation, Hume was better understood as a predecessor of Hegel rather than as the successor of Locke, Berkeley, and the British empiricists. Yet Hume's development of insights more commonly associated with the great German philosopher—historicism, and a commitment to the unification of all branches of thought—was already 'emancipated' from certain 'inherited elements' that, in the judgment of the mature Dewey, blighted Hegel's philosophy (RP, p. 184).<sup>1</sup> Whereas other philosophers who have approached Hume via Hegel have presented Hume's philosophy as (extremely) politically conservative, Dewey's Hume is far more amenable to appropriation and development by those on the left of the political spectrum (Section III).

## HUME, KANT, AND THE SCIENCE OF MAN

In a new foreword to the 1930 Modern Library edition of *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology*, originally published in 1922, Dewey declared that: 'Were it not for one consideration, the volume might be said to be an essay in continuing the tradition of David Hume'. That 'one consideration' was that, 'in the usual interpretation of Hume, he is treated simply as a writer who carried philosophical scepticism to its limit' (HNC, p. 228). Influential in this interpretation of Hume were 'Kant and his successors, among whom should be mentioned in England, Thomas Hill Green' (Dewey 1926a, p. 16). Green and his fellow British idealist, T. H. Grose, had made almost all of Hume's works available to a modern audience (Hume 1874-5); but their commentaries emphasised that the key to Hume's philosophy (and its historical significance) was to be found in Book I of the *Treatise*. By 1930, as Dewey's remarks suggest, this had become the 'usual interpretation' of Hume, and it remained so when Basil Willey summarised its claims in 1964. 'Using the methods of Locke and Berkeley', Willey declared, Hume 'showed that, if rigorously enough applied, they led nowhere'. The *Treatise* could be 'regarded as a turning-point in the history of thought' because, after Hume, 'philosophy had to be rebuilt on new foundations'. Yet Hume 'did not himself *make* the new start, nor point very explicitly in the new direction'. If there were certain constructive 'principles [...] implicit' in Hume's work, it was Kant's achievement to tease them out and build upon them, in such a way as to overcome the challenge of Hume's insistently corrosive scepticism (Willey 1964, pp. 248-52).

Whilst Dewey conceded that there is 'sufficient ground in Hume for this way of looking at his work', it was nonetheless 'one-sided'. As the 'introductory remarks with which he prefaced' the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) indicated, Hume's project was animated by 'a constructive aim'. Indeed, Dewey declared in the (unfinished) history of philosophy upon which he was working in his final years that, in those 'introductory remarks', Hume 'sets forth an aim as ambitiously comprehensive as is expressed in the systems of Bacon or Descartes, and this in spite of Hume's well-deserved standing as the leading skeptic of modern philosophy' (UPMP, p. 70). Yet Hume confronted the problem faced by all true revolutionaries in philosophy: he had 'to oppose certain views current and influential in his own day', and this meant that 'his original positive aim got obscured and overlaid as he proceeded' (HNC, p. 228; cp. UPMP, pp. 70, 113). As Hume observed, because his proposed 'complete system of the sciences' was built upon 'a foundation almost entirely new', so he needed to level the ground before he could build (Hume 1739-40, 'Introduction', p. 4). The excessive preoccupation with the preliminary part of Hume's exercise had, however, precluded philosophers from grasping, and building upon, the 'inexpugnable element of truth' that could be found in his constructive 'teachings' (HNC, p. 229; cp. UPMP, pp. 194-5).

Implicit in Dewey's critique of the 'usual interpretation of Hume' was the suggestion that 'Kant and his successors' had taken a wrong turn. Hume *had* provided a 'positive' contribution to philosophy, one that was very different in character to—and had subsequently been 'obscured and overlaid' by—Kant's, which Dewey dismissed as 'an incoherent scheme' that had regrettably 'remained for a century and more at the very focus of philosophical discussion' (UPMP, pp. 178-9). Hume's 'constructive idea' is that 'knowledge of human nature provides a map or chart of all humane and social subjects, and that with this chart in our possession we can find our way intelligently about through all the complexities of the phenomena of economics, politics, religious beliefs, etc.' Hume's vision of 'morals', like many 'eighteenth-century' (*sc.* pre-Kantian) philosophers', was similarly capacious: 'It included all the subjects of distinctively humane import, all of the social disciplines as far as they are intimately connected with the life of man and as they bear upon the interests of humanity' (HNC, p. 228).

Conversely, Dewey held Kant principally responsible for the 'separation' which has 'become current in modern thought' of 'the cognitive or intellectual from the active', of the ideal from the empirical, of values from facts. Kant 'was not satisfied until he had separated, if he possibly could, everything that belonged together'—including morality and politics (Dewey 1935, p. 74). Implausible and unjust though it now appears, Dewey considered 'Kant and his successors' partly culpable for Germany's descent into militaristic nationalism in the early decades of the twentieth century, on account of their categorical separation between

morality and ‘the phenomena of economics, politics, religious beliefs, etc.’ (Dewey 1915). The ‘tradition of David Hume’ which Dewey, in 1930, presented his own work as continuing represented a determined (pre-Kantian) effort pre-emptively to dissolve such artificial divisions in human thought.

Dewey’s earlier *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) already indicates a close engagement with what he later identified as the constructive aspects of Hume’s philosophy. Morals, Dewey there declares,

is the most humane of all subjects. It is that which is closest to human nature; it is ineradicably empirical, not theological nor metaphysical nor mathematical. Since it directly concerns human nature, everything that can be known of the human mind and body in physiology, medicine, anthropology, and psychology is pertinent to moral inquiry. [...] Moral science is not something with a separate province. It is physical, biological and historic knowledge placed in a human context where it will illuminate and guide the activities of men (RP, pp. 204-5).

Dewey again gestured towards the constructive rather than sceptical aspect of Hume’s philosophy in an essay of 1935. There, he offered criticisms of the British empiricist tradition that were regularly rehearsed by other pragmatist philosophers, such as William James (Roth 1993; for Dewey’s interpretation of the origins of American pragmatism, see Dewey 1926a). The ‘important thing’ in the ‘empirical movement’ of the early modern period ‘was its critical, negative side’, as in Locke’s hands its ‘power as a dissolvent of tradition and doctrine was much greater than any impetus it could give to construction’. Yet Dewey expressly ‘pass[ed] over’ the aspect of Hume’s contribution to this tradition that ‘is emphasized in all histories’: his ‘dialectical development of Locke’s simple ideas’, resulting in ‘complete scepticism as to the existence of an external world and a self’. ‘The *truly* empirical contribution of Hume’, Dewey instead declared, ‘lay in his revival of habit and of custom and their importance’. This was the ‘positive, constructive’ aspect of Hume’s project to which Dewey had drawn attention five years earlier (Dewey 1935, p. 81; italics added).

In *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), Dewey distinguished between legitimate and unphilosophical forms of scepticism—a distinction borrowed from James (Dewey 1920b, p. 220)—in ways that bear once more upon his interpretation of Hume:

A disciplined mind takes delight in the problematic, and cherishes it until a way out is found that approves itself upon examination. The questionable becomes an active questioning, a search; desire for the emotion of certitude gives place to quest for the objects by which the obscure and unsettled may be developed into the stable and clear. The scientific attitude may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful; scientific method is, in one aspect, a technique for making a productive use of doubt by converting it into operations of definite inquiry. [...] Scepticism that is *not* such a search is as much a personal emotional indulgence as is dogmatism.

‘Doubt and scepticism attach’, in short, ‘only to the adequacy of the operations’—that is, the ‘method’—used in attempting to ‘transform a problematic situation into a settled or resolved one. Instead of being impotent and paralyzing, they are opportunities for bettering concrete methods of inquiry’ (QC, p. 182). Dewey’s decidedly sceptical evaluation of the Western philosophical tradition—from ancient Greece, via Kant, and into the present day—yielded a ‘revolutionary’ conclusion, which he advanced in practically all his writings from the later 1910s onwards. The experimental method, applied so fruitfully in natural science since the seventeenth century, had to be introduced (shamefully belatedly) into moral subjects. ‘It is’, Dewey conceded, ‘a hypothesis rather than a settled fact that [the] extension and transfer of [the] experimental method is generally possible. But like other hypotheses it is to be tried in action, and the future history of mankind is at stake in the trial’ (QC, p. 155).

Already in 1920, Dewey could scarcely conceal his frustration that this transfer of the experimental method had yet to occur: ‘we are only pleading for the adoption in moral reflection of the logic that has proved to make for security, stringency and fertility in passing judgments upon physical phenomena’ (RP,

p. 174). Nearly three decades later, in a new introduction to the 1946 edition of *The Public and its Problems* (1927), Dewey suggested that recent events confirmed his long-held conviction that this *intellectual* revolution was the only means of arresting the seemingly interminable *political* crises and revolutions that characterised the modern age:

We have also held that a considerable part of the remediable evils of present life are due to the state of imbalance of scientific method with respect to its application to physical factors on the one side and to specifically human facts on the other side; and that the most direct and effective way out of these evils is steady and systematic effort to develop that effective intelligence named scientific method in the case of human transactions (PP, pp. 380-81).

Hitherto, such intelligence had been woefully lacking. This explained why it had taken periodic, uncontrolled and irrational eruptions of violence to jolt prevailing social customs and political institutions into alignment with underlying shifts in values and interests that they were otherwise incapable of accommodating or representing:

We realize how little the progress of man has been the product of intelligent guidance, how largely it has been a by-product of accidental upheavals, even though by an apologetic interest in behalf of some privileged institution we later transmute chance into providence. We have depended upon the clash of war, the stress of revolution, the emergence of heroic individuals, the impact of migrations generated by war and famine, the incoming of barbarians, to change established institutions. Instead of constantly utilizing unused impulse to effect continuous reconstruction, we have waited till an accumulation of stresses suddenly breaks through the dikes of custom (HNC, p. 73).

That ‘human aims’, as Dewey observed, ‘have so far been affected in an accidental rather than an intelligently directed way’ revealed that philosophy had failed in its task, because the ‘change’ it had enabled ‘has been technical rather than human and moral, it has been economic rather than adequately social’ (RP, p. 103).

Dewey thought that Kant’s moral theory had played no small part in humankind’s failure to exercise purposive and intelligent agency within the constraints of history, due to the unresolved tension between the *a priori* and the empirical it had bequeathed to modern thought. In a similar vein, Marx’s upended Hegelianism proposed to change the world without first bothering to interpret it properly. On Dewey’s interpretation, conversely, the ‘tradition of David Hume’ began with the ‘is’—our received traditions of philosophy, our inherited political and social institutions, and our moral practices—as the necessary precondition for exercising judgment and foresight as to how they might intelligently be adapted so as to enable us to live together better in the future.

Hume’s call for an intellectual revolution had not been heeded. Dewey made precisely the same call as Hume, but with an even greater sense of urgency. All Dewey’s hopes for the future revolved around the single hope that the times were, at long last, propitious for such a revolution:

Intellectual prophecy is dangerous; but if I read the cultural signs of the times aright, the next synthetic movement in philosophy will emerge when the significance of the social sciences and arts has become an object of reflective attention in the same way that mathematical and physical sciences have been made the objects of thought in the past, and when their full import is grasped. If I read these signs wrongly, nevertheless the statement may stand as a token of a factor significant in my own intellectual development (Dewey 1930, p. 160).

It is to Dewey’s intellectual development that we turn next. If, initially, Dewey was convinced that the Hegelian tradition offered the best vehicle for this ‘new synthetic movement in philosophy’, his mature



writings indicate a decisive shift. It was the ‘tradition of David Hume’ that allowed for the most important and valuable principles Dewey had first discerned in Hegel to be reconstructed on an ‘empirical, not theological nor metaphysical nor mathematical’ philosophical foundation (RP, pp. 204-5).

## HUME, AFTER KANT AND HEGEL

For Dewey’s ‘revolution’ in philosophy, Hume proposed a ‘total alteration’; and for both, this involves (as the subtitle to the *Treatise* declares) *An Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. This ‘method’ had, both agree, been pioneered in natural science in the seventeenth century by Francis Bacon, with transformative technological and economic consequences that Dewey’s generation, unlike Bacon’s or Hume’s, was now in a position to appreciate and evaluate. For Hume as for Dewey, even as the success of this ‘attempt’ cannot be gainsaid—for the simple reason that it has barely ever *been* attempted—there are good reasons to ‘hope’ for success. For both, it promises to deliver unprecedented benefits for human life: ‘we may *hope* to establish [...] a science, which will not be inferior in certainty, *and will be much superior in utility* to any other of human comprehension’ (Hume 1739-40, ‘Introduction’; italics added).

I say ‘barely’ attempted because Dewey remarked in 1920 that, in the eighteenth century, a few philosophers—‘those who were avowedly sceptical *and* revolutionary’—were able to ‘grasp the full import of the new science’ for ‘moral and political matters’. There is every reason to think that Dewey has Hume in mind here: Hume was ‘revolutionary’ precisely *because* he was ‘sceptical’. His ‘doubts’ led him critically to evaluate the philosophical tradition he inherited, and to show why, and where, it had gone astray and needed to be reconstructed afresh. In 1920, Dewey proposes, as had Hume nearly two centuries earlier, fully to develop the insights of a ‘science of man’ by extending the experimental method to moral subjects. It is, Dewey declares, ‘the intellectual task of the twentieth century to take this last step’, and thereby to effect a Humean revolution that Kant had smothered in its cradle (RP, p. 123).

One aspect of Hume’s philosophy, in particular, is pushed to the fore if we approach it via Dewey. This is Hume’s deep, and abiding, interest in the history of philosophy. Whereas Dewey offered to reconstruct the Western philosophical tradition in two works of the 1920s—*Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *The Quest for Certainty*—and, still more comprehensively, in the study on which he was working in his final years (*Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*), Hume’s interpretation of that tradition and its development is diffused throughout his writings. We may nonetheless fairly say of Hume what Rorty says of Dewey: his philosophy is ‘historicist to the core’. When the striking continuities between Hume’s interpretation of that history and its significance and Dewey’s later account are taken into consideration, however, there is reason to qualify Rorty’s judgment that Dewey’s philosophy is ‘unique, unclassifiable, [and] original’ for its attempt ‘to encapsulate the whole sequence’ of the history of philosophy, ‘set it aside, and offer something new—or at least a hope of something new’ in its place (Rorty 1982, p. 46). Dewey, at any rate, considered Hume’s philosophy to be ‘sceptical and revolutionary’ in precisely this respect.

In identifying Hume’s historicism as an essential aspect of his philosophical project, it matters very much that Dewey, unlike William James, came to Hume via Hegel rather than the tradition of British empiricism. ‘We must not forget here’, Dewey cautioned, ‘that James was an empiricist before he was a pragmatist, and repeatedly stated that pragmatism is merely empiricism pushed to its legitimate conclusions’ (Dewey 1926a, p. 12). Dewey, in contrast, was a Hegelian before he was a pragmatist; and pragmatism was, for him, better understood as Hegelianism pushed to its legitimate conclusions, and emancipated from its ‘inherited elements’ (RP, p. 184; Randall Jr. 1953, p. 9). As the predecessor to Hegel rather than the continuator of the British empiricist tradition, Dewey presented Hume as a valuable ally in his attempt to do so.

In an autobiographical essay of 1930, Dewey recalled that his encounter with Hegel when a graduate student at Johns Hopkins had ‘supplied a demand for unification that was doubtless an intense emotional craving’. Hegel effected a dissolution of the boundaries between disciplines that Kant drew so firmly, and which the institutionalisation of philosophy in the academy tends to perpetuate. ‘Hegel’s treatment’, Dewey continued, ‘of human culture, of institutions and the arts, involved the [...] dissolution of hard-and-fast di-

viding walls’, and offered ‘an immense release, a liberation’ (Dewey 1930, p. 154). Dewey similarly declared that the ‘discovery of history’ was the nineteenth century’s ‘great intellectual contribution’, and he absorbed and made his own Hegel’s insight that philosophy is ‘its own time apprehended in thoughts’ (Dewey 1935, p. 132; Hegel 1820, p. 11; Rorty 1982, p. xl). Yet Dewey’s gradual disillusionment with Hegelian philosophy reflected a repudiation of its form, its metaphysical underpinnings and—crucially—its political implications. Dewey declared that ‘the form, the schematism, of his system now seems to be artificial to the last degree’ (Dewey 1930, p. 154). Meanwhile one could not hold onto the metaphysics without committing oneself to the ‘inert conservatism’ in social and political matters which they were intended, by Hegel, to support. Hegel’s historicism combined the ‘discovery of history’ with ‘elements drawn from the classic religious and philosophical tradition of Europe so as to effect an intellectual rehabilitation of the latter’. Hegel had not emancipated modern philosophy from its pre-modern baggage, or political practice from the dead weight of inherited custom and tradition. He had instead exalted ‘the existing state of institutions as a manifestation of some inner absolute Idea or Spirit engaged in the slow process of evolutionary expression’. Hegelianism was, like the Western philosophical tradition more broadly, ‘infected with a reactionary spirit’ and ‘essentially apologetic’. The German idealists ‘contributed their support to acquiescence and impotence rather than to direction and re-creation, because they gave an inherent ideal value to what exists’ (Dewey 1928, p. 132).

Further reflecting on his intellectual development in 1939, Dewey described how, having initially (and mistakenly) attempted to adapt Hegel’s system and terminology to new uses, he ‘came to realize that what [Hegel’s] principles actually stood for could be better understood and stated when completely emancipated from the Hegelian garb’ (J. M. Dewey 1939, pp. 17-18). The textual evidence has already been adduced for the contention that Dewey considered the most important of those ‘principles’—historicism, and the emphasis on the unification of all branches of human thought—to be endorsed, on an empirical and non-metaphysical basis, by Hume. Dewey drew attention to Hume’s emphasis on custom and habit. This allowed for an understanding of the importance of ‘the structure and operations of our common nature in shaping social life’, which Hume had explored in depth; it also indicated ‘the reflex influence of the latter upon the shape which a plastic human nature takes because of its social environment’, which Hume had failed fully to grasp (HNC, p. 229). The inference Dewey drew was that, by ‘continuing the tradition of David Hume’ and without Hegelian metaphysical presuppositions, one could dissolve the false dichotomy beloved of modern philosophers since the eighteenth century: between the individual (whether the ‘highly particularized creature of sense’ of the sensationalist empiricists, or the same such creature infused with ‘universal reason’ of Kantian lore) and society (which humankind created, but which was a necessary precondition of *their* re-creation as *moral* individuals) (Dewey 1908, p. 44). If, as James A. Harris avers, Hume’s ‘conception of human nature’ and morality was ‘intensely, even claustrophobically social’, then this was one source of its great appeal to Dewey (Harris 2015, p. 115).

Hume’s philosophy, on Dewey’s reconstruction, allowed for the meaning of conscience to be returned to its etymological roots, as ‘together-knowing’. When it comes to learning to form judgments about the propriety of actions—our own, and others’—from our earliest infancy the individual’s thoughts ‘are saturated with the ideas that others entertain about them, ideas which have been expressed not only in explicit instruction but still more effectively in reaction to our acts’. Through ‘visit[ing] us ‘with approval’, or ‘bestow[ing] frowns and rebuke’ upon us—sanctions of praise and blame the importance of which Hume emphasised in both the *Treatise* and the second *Enquiry*—the members of our community hold us ‘accountable’ for what we ‘*have* done’, so as to make us more ‘responsive’ in what we are ‘*going* to do’. ‘Gradually persons learn by dramatic imitation to hold themselves accountable, and liability becomes a voluntary deliberate acknowledgement that deeds are our own, that their consequences come from us’. ‘An assembly’—here Dewey channels Adam Smith, as well as Hume—‘is formed within our breast which discusses and appraises proposed and performed acts. The community without becomes a forum and tribunal within, a judgment-seat of changes, assessments and exculpations’ (HNC, pp. 216-7).

So understood, any clear-cut distinction—still less, opposition—between the individual and the society of which she is a member becomes invidious, without any need to follow Hegel (as had Dewey in 1888) in describing society as a natural organism manifesting the gradual (but reassuring) progress of ‘Idea or Spirit’. Moral judgment was predicated upon our capacity for sympathy (in the Humean sense), which is a product of the human imagination and enables us to learn through ‘*dramatic*’ imitation, and by seeing ourselves through others’ eyes. Dewey concluded *Human Nature and Conduct* by declaring that:

These two facts, that moral judgment and moral responsibility are the work wrought in us by the social environment, signify that all morality is social; not because we *ought* to take into account the effect of our acts upon the welfare of others, but because of facts. Others *do* take account of what we do, and they respond accordingly to our acts. Their responses actually *do* affect the meaning of what we do. [...] Our conduct *is* socially conditioned, whether we perceive the fact or not (HNC, pp. 216-17).

In Dewey’s subsequent reflections on his intellectual development, Hume’s presence is, to borrow a phrase from Dewey, ‘secreted in the interstices’ of the written text (PP, p. 336). ‘The metaphysical idea that an absolute mind is manifested in social institutions dropped out’ of his philosophy; but ‘the idea, *upon an empirical basis*, of the power exercised by [the] cultural environment in shaping the ideas, beliefs, and intellectual attitudes of individuals remained’. This fostered ‘my belief that the only possible psychology, as distinct from a biological account of behaviour, is a *social psychology*’, just as the only possible conception of morality is a social morality (J. Dewey 1939, pp. 17-18: italics added). These fundamental ‘principles’, which had initially attracted Dewey to Hegel, now drew him to Hume. In moral subjects Hume offered—as had Bacon in natural philosophy—a method by means of which to *discover* the good not through an appeal to *a priori* reasoning (or, still less, to the Judaeo-Christian scriptures), but rather through the careful observation and manipulation of relations between observable phenomena, with the ultimately practical purpose of contributing to the betterment of humankind.

In applying this method to moral subjects, Dewey argued that the crucial, truly ‘revolutionary’ step was to banish final causes altogether. There is no *one* good, one *finis ultimus* or *summum bonum*, according to which the legitimacy of the moral, social and political beliefs, practices and institutions of any given society are to be judged. These, including inherited philosophical traditions, are to be evaluated according to their appropriateness and utility: that is, whether they enable the ‘problematic situation’ which generates unease and hence stimulates the quest for knowledge to be identified accurately and ‘transform[ed] into a settled or resolved one’ (QC, p. 182). Just as every ‘problematic situation’ is never entirely like any that had previously been experienced, so too the ‘good’ that the successful application of critical intelligence secures (i.e. the resolution of the problem in view) will be to some extent *sui generis*. On Dewey’s reductive and polemical, but unfailingly invigorating interpretation, the Western philosophical tradition was characterised above all by a ‘quest for certainty’ that resulted in the claim that there were ‘fixed ends’ for humanity. The invocation of an unchanging and eternal realm of moral values provided a refuge from the contingency and flux of human life to those who were perturbed by uncertainty. For most philosophers, scepticism had been ‘a personal emotional indulgence’; for it to be a genuinely ‘productive use of doubt’, the philosopher had to be open to the uncertainties and possibilities of a future that remained forever unknown.

This desire for certainty where it could not be had was accompanied by an impulse to justify a society’s present (and/or past) ways of organising its collective life over alternative possibilities: that is, by the ‘reactionary spirit’ and ‘apologetic interest’ that Dewey discovered in German idealism no less than in ancient Greek philosophy. This, Dewey maintained, explained why progress in philosophy was so hard to divine: a total ‘revolution’ was required if philosophy were to develop a method with sufficient flexibility to accommodate, and to respond to, the new problems with which every age and society is periodically confronted. ‘The theory of fixed ends’, Dewey remarked, ‘inevitably leads thought into the bog of disputes that cannot be settled. If there is one *summum bonum*, one supreme end, what is it?’ (RP, p. 174). Philosophers through-



out history had wasted their time and ingenuity in joining this insoluble ‘dispute’, rather than turning their attention to the urgent practical problems that confronted their societies, which *were* capable of some kind of resolution. ‘Philosophy recovers itself’, Dewey pithily remarked, ‘when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men’ (Dewey 1917, p. 230).

Rorty observed that Dewey ‘attempted to tell a great sweeping story about philosophy from Plato to himself’, characterised by ‘name-dropping’ and a ‘rapid shifting of context’ which later philosophers in a more ‘professionalizing period distrusted [...] as “unscientific” and “unscholarly”’. This explains why subsequent scholars of Dewey have tended to overlook ‘the depth and extent’ of his ‘commentary on the details of the tradition’ (Rorty 1982, pp. 65, 41). Much the same might be said of Hume, whose sweeping dismissal of all moral philosophy after Socrates (who had appreciated the importance of the experimental method, as developed by Thales in natural philosophy, for the moral sciences) appeared absolute (Hume 1739-40, ‘Introduction’). It is clear that *Dewey* grasped the importance of Hume’s interpretation of the history of Western philosophy for Hume’s own, ‘constructive’ enterprise, which bespoke a determination to banish final causes from moral philosophy. The ‘germ’ that gave rise to Hume’s science of man was a result of his realisation that:

the moral Philosophy transmitted to us by Antiquity, labor’d under the same Inconvenience that has been found in their natural Philosophy, of being entirely Hypothetical, & depending more upon Invention than Experience. Every one consulted his Fancy in erecting Schemes of Virtue & of Happiness, without regarding human Nature, upon which every moral Conclusion must depend. This therefore [Hume continues] I resolved to make my principal Study, & the Source from which I wou’d derive every Truth in Criticism as well as Morality (Hume 1734, p. 16).

This was why, in the *Treatise*, Hume felt emboldened to declare that ‘moral philosophy is in the same condition as natural, with regard to astronomy before the time of *Copernicus*’ (Hume 1739-40, p. 185).

Hume’s Copernican revolution was, from Dewey’s perspective, vastly superior to Kant’s, and its ‘reconstruction’ provided a springboard from which to launch the most searching criticism of neo-Kantianism. Hume recognised that the transfer of the experimental method into moral subjects implied the unequivocal rejection of final causes.

In almost identical terms to those employed by Dewey nearly two centuries later, Hume savaged any moral theory that was ‘founded on final Causes’, asking rhetorically: ‘For pray, what is the End of Man?’ (Hume 1739). This question had preoccupied the ancient philosophers; and, thanks not least to the unholy alliance forged between Greek philosophy and Christianity, it had continued to do so in the modern age. (Dewey’s withering contempt for ‘religious emotions’ and institutions as ‘not creative but conservative’, attached to ‘the current view of the world’ which they ‘consecrate’, is as unimpeachably Humean as it is questionable (Dewey 1909, p. 5).) The dispute over man’s true end and greatest good was, Hume declared, merely verbal—an ‘endless’, irresolvable problem conjured into existence by philosophers, taken up by theologians, and of no meaningful consequence for human life and happiness—and he dismissed it, as would Dewey, as ‘quite wide of my Purpose’ (Hume 1739).

If, as Dewey maintained, ‘intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume’, then Hume’s ‘revolution’ was one of the few, truly progressive moments in the history of moral philosophy (Dewey 1909, p. 15). Hume’s call for the abandonment of *the* question that had most centrally preoccupied, and continued to preoccupy, Western philosophers had, however, not been heeded. In his voluminous writings, which roamed freely across conventional disciplinary divisions, Dewey endeavoured to make it unignorable.

## HUME: 'TRUE CONSERVATISM' AND 'PRACTICAL IDEALISM'

Dewey's emphasis on the 'constructive' contribution of Hume's philosophy undercut another element of the 'usual interpretation' established by Green and Grose: that Hume's shift, in the post-*Treatise* years, to focus on the practical problems of his own day in his writings on politics, economics, religion and history represented an abandonment of philosophy. On this interpretation, Hume had shown that the philosophical problems that had animated Western philosophy could not adequately be addressed using the methods it had developed for this purpose. Unfortunately, he offered no means to address them any more adequately, as his self-contradictory comments on personal identity were paradigmatically taken to illustrate. It was simply assumed that Hume *wanted* to address these (timeless) philosophical questions, but was prevented from doing so by a form of scepticism that dissolved everything it touched.

Dewey invited a different judgment. Hume's philosophy was 'revolutionary' because it did away with these supposedly eternal philosophical questions altogether. Books II–III of the *Treatise*, and all of Hume's subsequent writings, represented the consummation, not the abandonment, of his new conception of philosophy, the purpose of which is to address the problems of men, not those of philosophers (Dewey 1917, p. 230).

Dewey's account of justice and the state in *The Public and its Problems* is resoundingly Humean in precisely this respect. Dewey's criticism of social contract theory as founded on the absurd 'idea that men are mere individuals, without any social relations *until* they form a contract' was longstanding, and again initially indebted to Hegel (Dewey 1888, p. 232). In 1927, however, Dewey's emphasis on the 'necessary and persistent modes of association' that lay beneath those 'voluntarily undertaken' was articulated in a Humean, rather than a Hegelian manner (PP, p. 298). Dewey followed Hume in arguing that our natural benevolence, and our sympathetic reaction to others' unnecessary suffering, is sufficient in small-scale communities to enable relatively durable forms of cooperation and harmony. But law, and a mechanism (the state) to enforce it, was required in larger-scale societies; and justice builds upon, and further extends beyond their previous limit, our moral sentiments, so as to encompass even those whom we have never met, and whose sufferings we do not witness first-hand.

Dewey cited Hume explicitly in support, as a philosopher who grasped (unlike social contract theorists) that justice was eminently 'reasonable', but that this was because of the 'function' it served rather than due to its 'causal origin'. Law is necessary to anticipate and prioritise 'remote and long-run consequences' that naturally 'shortsighted' men invariably tend to ignore (PP, p. 271). As for what the state is legitimately authorised to *do*—where the boundary is to be drawn between the public and the private, the state and the individual—this simply cannot be determined *a priori*. It is subject to continual negotiation, and will (and must) depend on the local context. 'There is no antecedent universal proposition which can be laid down because of which the functions of a state should be limited or should be expanded. Their scope is something to be critically and experimentally determined'. Insofar as a state enables 'the transformations of group and personal action' by relieving both 'from the waste of negative struggle and needless conflict', then 'there is no call to be niggardly in acknowledging' such a state to be 'good'. When, conversely, the state actively fomented struggle and conflict—by privileging the interests of the few, rather than providing all individuals and groups with 'positive assurance and reinforcement' and creating 'respect for others and for one's self'—then it is '*not* good' (PP, p. 281). In determining political legitimacy, the invocation of inviolable natural rights was, as Hume implied, a hindrance rather than a help.

How successfully the state performed its role at any given time, and how it might perform it better, could be determined only 'experimentally'. As Hume had emphasised, various forms of government had developed historically within particular societies as they attempted (often by flailing about) to find a means by which the (fluctuating) interests of all members might better be represented and secured. The modern representative republic—'political democracy'—had 'emerged as a kind of net consequence of a vast multitude of responsive adjustments to a vast number of situations', as 'an effort to remedy evils experienced in consequence of prior political institutions' (RP, pp. 122–23). Like justice, democracy as a form of government is

reasonable because of the function it serves, rather than on account of its causal origins—an interpretation of the gradual development of political institutions that, as Dewey evidently grasped, was very close to the one advanced in Hume’s political and historical writings. As a form of government, in Western societies representative democracy has, from the nineteenth century, been found preferable to the alternatives not primarily on theoretical grounds, but rather because it has proved more successful at rendering ‘the desirable associations’ amongst citizens ‘solider and more coherent’. In its modern form, democracy has thus made possible ‘a life of free and enriching communion’ that must ever remain a shared human ideal rather than a concrete human achievement (PP, pp. 281, 351).

If Dewey’s ‘ideal’ of democracy as an ‘ethical conception’ and a ‘form of moral and spiritual association’ undoubtedly owed more to Hegel, on Dewey’s account Hume’s importance lay in his development of a ‘method’ that enabled critical intelligence to be applied to present problems to generate future improvements. Just as Hume’s philosophy was more radical than Hegel’s in the degree of its emancipation from ‘the classic religious and philosophical tradition of Europe’, so too was it freer from the charge of ‘reactionary spirit’ and ‘apologetic interest’ that Dewey levelled at that tradition (including German idealism), the tendency of which, he repeated, has always been to give ‘an inherent ideal value to what exists’ (Dewey 1928, p. 132).

To be sure, Dewey offered no indication that Hume’s treatment of the political and economic issues of his own day was particularly radical. He noted, however, that Hume and his contemporaries could afford to place a qualified faith in the logic of market forces under a regime of secure property ownership, having not lived to witness the slums, poverty and widespread misery that attended economic and technological ‘progress’ from the nineteenth century onwards. Much the same point was made by Raymond Williams, another figure on the left of the political spectrum who questioned the over-easy assumption that Hume’s scepticism necessarily issued in what Dewey termed an ‘inert’ form of political ‘conservatism’ (Williams 1964; RP, p. 98; cf. Jay 2005, p. 200).

These conclusions differ markedly from those of two other commentators who have approached Hume’s philosophy via Hegel and idealist philosophy: Dewey’s younger contemporary Michael Oakeshott (1956) and Donald Livingston (1998). For the latter two, a Humean political philosophy will accept the revision—the less, the better—of existing institutions and laws only when the necessity of doing so has become unignorable. For Dewey, conversely, Hume’s ‘method’—his most vital contribution to modern philosophy—privileges foresight as well as judgment. This allows for political theory to be empirically grounded but nonetheless an imaginative, perhaps even a prophetic exercise of the human intelligence.

## CONCLUSION: HUME AND IMAGINATION IN POLITICS

In the *Treatise*, Hume developed ‘a method of moral and political diagnosis and prognosis’—the experimental method—which he was then able to apply to the pressing political, economic and social questions of his day (Dewey 1909, p. 14). It was, Dewey maintained, a (common) error to assume that Hume’s empirical approach was incapable of yielding normative insights—that to focus on the ‘is’ was to banish the ‘ought’. The experimental approach was *both* ‘in the interests of the only true conservatism—that which will conserve and not waste the values wrought out by humanity’, *and* in the service of ‘a practical idealism’, characterised by ‘a lively and easily moved faith in possibilities as yet unrealized, in willingness to make sacrifice for their realization’ (RP, pp. 89-90; Dewey 1917, p. 232). As Dewey observed:

It is the first business of mind to be “realistic”, to see things “as they are”. [...] But knowledge of facts does not entail conformity and acquiescence. The contrary is the case. Perceptions of things as they are is but a stage in the process of making them different. They have already begun to be different in being known, for by that fact they enter into a different context, a context of foresight and judgment of better or worse (HNC, p. 206).

On Dewey's reconstruction, the 'tradition of David Hume' allows for the intelligent adaptation of our environment when customary ways of doing and thinking no longer conduce to the realisation of our ends. These ends are, given human nature, both material *and* moral. In Hume's day, it was clear that the improvement of 'the mechanical arts' and the 'industry' they had encouraged in all ranks had been accompanied by 'some refinement in the liberal' arts which were no longer sustained (as in the ancient world) by domestic slavery (Hume 1752). Hume considered recent technological advances and the rapid economic growth to which they gave rise to conduce for the most part to 'progress in sociability, humanity, knowledge, and honour' (Watkins 2019, p. 90), by fostering an environment that shaped an inherently plastic human nature to these ends.

Dewey similarly emphasised the 'influence' of the surrounding 'social environment' on 'the shape which a plastic human nature takes', an insight he explicitly identified with Hume's philosophy. On Dewey's reconstruction, Hume's confidence, however legitimate in his own day, that technological advances, economic growth and the inviolability of private property will tend to facilitate ever-enriching forms of human association had been exposed for what it was: a hypothesis, even a prophecy, to be tested rather than a doctrine to be tenaciously defended in the teeth of evidence to the contrary. Such cautionary evidence, Dewey declared in the 1920s, was now overwhelming. One hundred years later, we can surely find fewer reasons still to dissent from this judgment.

Dewey's 'tradition of David Hume' dissolves the artificial distinctions beloved of philosophers including, one might argue, Oakeshott's distinction between the 'politics of faith' and the 'politics of scepticism' (Oakeshott 1996, pp. 73-80: where Hume is placed firmly in the latter camp). Hume's most valuable bequest to contemporary philosophers, on this account, lies in the (empirical, experimental) 'method' to which he was led by his scepticism; but this nonetheless provides ample grounds for 'faith'—not in a deliverer, whether divine or mortal, but rather 'in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentalities of its realization' (Dewey 1917, p. 232). To confront the challenges we face, philosophy stands in need of 'recovery'; and Dewey acknowledges Hume as offering powerful assistance in this endeavour, even as he neither confronted nor anticipated the most pressing problems with which we are now required to grapple.

Dewey explicitly extracted from Hume's philosophy—and from the western philosophical tradition more broadly—what *he* held to be most valuable. It is perfectly legitimate to argue that Livingston's or Oakeshott's conservatism—or, indeed, Rorty's neo-pragmatism, which emancipates the Deweyan tradition from 'inherited' metaphysical commitments that Rorty considers to mar its founder's work—is more consistent with fundamental aspects of Hume's vision. All acts of interpretation are partial, and Dewey never pretended otherwise: we bring our own ethical values and political presuppositions to bear on the philosophical traditions that we choose to privilege (or to critique). At the very least, however, Dewey's reconstruction of 'the tradition of David Hume' reminds us that 'any philosophical view is a tool which can be used by many hands', on the 'left' no less than on 'the political right' (Rorty 1999, p. 23; cp. Miller 2014). Dewey furnishes us with good reasons to reflect afresh on the ways in which Hume's philosophy might offer us a 'tool' which, hitherto underemployed, remains of vital service today.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTES

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