

## Introduction

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This special issue investigates David Hume's contributions to the studies of political epistemology. As a rising field of research, it facilitates interdisciplinary collaborations in the humanities and social sciences, including philosophy, political theory, sociology, economics and psychology. It has also been producing fruitful findings in political science in response to the challenges to democracy nowadays (Edenberg and Hannon 2021; Hannon and de Ridder 2021). Nevertheless, it is by no means "the rubric of 'democratic theory'"; rather, it has a normative aim to scrutinise "the reliability of our ideas about modern society" (Friedman 2014, p. ix). Its overarching research aim, understood in this way, points to the fact that epistemological issues have become a shared problem for governments around the world. Its causes can be approached from two perspectives: normative political epistemology looks into the relationship between political decision-makers' expertise and their capacity of making reasonable judgement and policies. Empirical political epistemology investigates "the content and sources of real-world political actors' knowledge and interpretations of knowledge" (Ibid., p. i). Overall, both approaches are interested in the process of how the beliefs of political agents (including politicians and ordinary citizens) are translated into their political behaviour. As we shall see in this special issue, the relationship between belief and action is the leitmotiv running through Hume's political theory.

While the discipline and its target are new, Hannon and de Ridder indicate that political epistemology's research questions have old roots dating back to ancient Greece. They take "the fraught relationship between politics and truth" as one of the key questions in a particular tradition of the history of political philosophy that speaks to political epistemology's present concerns (2021, pp. 1–3, 11). Given the historical nature of the research question, it is surprising that intellectual history's contribution to the field has been relatively few. Moreover, although Hume has written extensively about epistemology and politics, his presence in the field remains unexpectedly rare. Studying his works can enhance the historical depth of the field through the historical perspectives on his subject matters and his approach to them. Many of Hume's concerns were prompted by the demagogical politicians and popular movements at the time. The similarity between this context and our world makes his thought more relevant to the interests of political epistemologists.

A comprehensive evaluation of Hume's contribution to the field is beyond the scope of this special issue, but the articles here intend to illuminate two key aspects, namely, public opinion and knowledge production. They are not

only Hume's main interests but also speak to the practical questions that motivate contemporary political epistemologists' research. As Edenberg and Hannon observe, populist rhetoric and disinformation, among all other reasons, have made it "increasingly difficult to discern legitimate sources of evidence"; "disagreement between citizens is not only about moral and political values but also about what information is true and which experts we should trust" (2021, p. 1). This political culture consequently gives rise to a species of scepticism which makes public distrust compromise the efficiency of democratic institutions. In other words, democratic governments now face challenges from both authoritarian regimes abroad and polarised civic societies at home. The more liberal democracies are afflicted by the trust issue, the more fragile public opinion could be when facing the attack of their rivals' political propaganda. Under the circumstances, disagreements among the citizenry would increase ideological polarisation and uncertainties in political decision-making (Peter 2021, p. 68). The uncertainties often hinge on a society's prevailing systems of belief, since undecided opinions on the "decision-relevant normative facts will typically translate to uncertainty about what the right political decision is" (Ibid.). In this scenario, ignorance of political knowledge or justifiable political beliefs would result in more "conflicting judgments about what should be done" (Ibid.). Norms of judgement for the empirical and normative facts in political decision-making are required to curtail their impact.

From Hume's perspective, the public's ignorance and credulity can pose a more profound problem to the legitimacy of the government, considering that its right to rule is established upon the people's belief in its legitimacy and authority. It is on this ground that epistemological issues occupy the centre of our political life, which necessitates a philosophical approach to political studies. The inseparable relation between theory and practice as such also makes Hume recognise that norms of judgement cannot be detached from their societal and historical contexts. Empirical studies of how a society arrives at its present state can make history a useful tool for our judgement. We can find patterns emerging from causal explanations of historical phenomena, which can further generate empirically justified moral and political norms (Bourke and Skinner 2022, p. 3).

Indeed, Ryu Susato, Angela Coventry and Landon Echeverio elucidate this subject in their articles for this special issue by surveying the role of custom and habit in Hume's philosophy. According to their observations, the normativity of custom is reflected in historically justified opinions, which yields general principles' enduring influence on morals and politics in a society. Competing ideas and human passions, however, can destabilise those opinions. Susato argues that such changes do not necessarily lead to negative consequences by juxtaposing Hume's accounts of the rise of modern chivalry and the causes of enthusiasm. Both cases show that irrationally-motivated beliefs can be contagious. Longevity and spontaneity thus cannot justify some extraordinary customs and it is difficult to assess their justifiability impartially. Coventry and Echeverio indicate that while Hume accepts epistemically-stable custom and habit as a useful guide to common life experience and philosophising, he also warns of their potential errors in probability judgements. That said, Hume remains optimistic that custom and habit are capable of correcting themselves alongside the progress of opinion, which makes them more reliable than the metaphysical politics detached from the operation of human nature. The three authors thus agree that Hume acknowledges the need for diversity of opinions, which can lead to moral pluralism when norms are distilled from such a wide range of data.

Hume's explanation of the ways human passions affect belief formation and knowledge production without doubt sheds light on a note-worthy aspect in the studies of political epistemology. That is to say, if we are to understand the effectiveness of political beliefs and knowledge, we need to measure it from how they are perceived and to what extent their supposedly rational effects are compromised by passion-driven irrationality. The irrational effects can reflect on, for instance, voters' psychology or collective behaviour. As Susato points out, passion-driven irrationality caused a serious problem of enthusiasm in Hume's time. The public zeal, if translated into the challenge faced by liberal democracy nowadays, would resonate with the rise of populism. Populist politicians can succeed in gaining public support and fuel factional strife by mobilising seditious rhetoric, making unjustifiable ideologies override the secure norms of judgement. Elizabeth Radcliffe's article discusses Hume's account of the power of rhetoric, which explains the dire con-

sequences of abusing eloquence. As she observes, Hume nevertheless—and perhaps paradoxically—regards eloquence as a political virtue despite its potential to mislead and manipulate the public. Radcliffe addresses the problem through investigating the epistemological and psychological foundations of Hume’s conception of effective oratory.

The function of custom and habit, the interaction between belief and action, and the psychology of public persuasion all demonstrate how Hume situated epistemological questions at the heart of his political enquiries. The very fact that he takes opinion as the ground of government manifests the potentiality of political epistemology. It is not merely a study of political agents’ beliefs and knowledge. Instead, it shows how a particular mode of knowledge production or belief formation can shape the making of a philosophical tradition or school. In the final two articles in this special issue, this is reflected in the ways twentieth-century thinkers construed and utilised Hume’s approach to philosophy and politics. In other words, Hume’s theory of belief and science of politics *per se* have hermeneutic merits for contemporary commentators to envisage the disciplines of political philosophy and theory.

Eric Schliesser and Tim Stuart-Buttle present the cases of Hume being mobilised in two opposite—if not entirely rivalry—philosophical traditions. According to the former, Foucault’s reading of Hume demonstrates his intellectual progress from the 1960s to the 1970s. Schliesser argues that the implication of Foucault’s idiosyncratic reading of Hume in *The Order of Things* (1966) is twofold: Foucault was reacting to Husserlian phenomenology where Hume triggered the debates over transcendental subjectivity; Hume meanwhile was utilized to serve Foucault’s preliminary project for *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). Later in the *Birth of Biopolitics* (1979), Hume plays a foundational role in Foucault’s conceptualisation of Benthamite radicalism and *homo economicus*. Foucault deliberately interpreted Hume in an anachronistic manner, which made him a forerunner of modern liberalism. However, Stuart-Buttle indicates that Anglophone intellectuals who approached Hume via Hegel and German idealism, such as Michael Oakshott, tended to situate him in the conservative tradition. This raises the interpretive question of whether Hume can really be affiliated with any schools of thought. Stuart-Buttle’s article shows John Dewey’s reconstruction of a “Humean tradition” is not simply a question of where Hume stands on the political spectrum. Rather, it has more to do with how political philosophy as a discipline is envisaged by its students and practitioners. Hume’s scepticism, in this scenario, makes him both a producer of knowledge and an examiner of knowledge production. For Dewey, Hume’s method is sceptical yet revolutionary precisely because it can be a useful tool to challenge the contemporary imagination about the disciplinary, philosophical and ideological boundaries artificially drawn by their commentators. Moreover, Humean philosophy, in this regard, proffers robust support for us to recover from the intellectual revolution that banishes counterproductive modes of enquiry.

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