A Symposium: Morality Reconsidered

David Hume and the Origin of Modern Rationalism

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In "How Desperate Should We Be?" Claes Ryn argues that "morality" in modern societies is generally understood to be a form of moral rationalism, a matter of applying preconceived moral principles to particular situations in much the same way one talks of "pure" and "applied" geometry. Ryn finds a number of pernicious consequences to follow from this rationalist model of morals. First, the purity of the principles, untainted by the particularities of tradition, creates a great distance between what the principles demand and what is possible in actual experience. The iridescent beauty and demands of the moral ideal distract the mind from what is before experience.[1] The practical barriers to idealistically demanded change are occluded from perception, and what realistically can and ought to be done is dismissed as insufficient. And "moral indignation is deemed sufficient"[2] to carry the day in disputes over policy.

Further, the destruction wrought by misplaced idealistic change is not acknowledged to be the result of bad policy but is ascribed to insufficient effort or to wicked persons or groups who have derailed it. A special point Ryn wants to make is that, "One of the dangers of moral rationalism and idealism is

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[1] Claes Ryn, "How Desperate Should We Be?" *Humanitas*, Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (2015), 9.

[2] Ibid., 18.

that they set human beings up for desperation. Especially in unanticipated and highly charged situations . . . [they] leave people disoriented."[3] Matters can become so complex, unstable, and tense that they threaten simply to overwhelm the abstract ideal. Ryn concludes: "Because it *disarms, confuses, and discourages* attempts to make the best of real situations, there is even warrant for calling this idealism immoral."[4]

Idealism is an ontological, rather than a moral, disorder.

I agree with the substance of Ryn's criticism of moral rationalism, and wish only to add two amendments which might strengthen the case. First, is "immoral" the best way to describe the "idealism" of moral rationalism? I suggest the pathology is best thought of as an *ontological* disorder rather than a moral one—though, of course, moral disorder follows as a consequence. Second, if the disorder is ontological, then the problem is not the use of "ideals" as such but the ontological disorder itself which need not have an ideal character. Finally, I would like to make these two points by working through David Hume's critique of rationalism both because it is insightful and because it is little known.

Ryn's critique of moral rationalism, as a pathological condition which permeates the modern world, is one of a family of similar critiques worked out by thinkers as different as Edmund Burke, David Hume, Eric Voegelin, Albert Camus, and Michael Oakeshott. But what do I mean in saying the pathology is an *ontological* disorder?

We may begin with an observation by Albert Camus in *The Rebel* where he says "there are crimes of passion" (immoral acts) and "crimes of logic," and that we are living in the era of the "perfect crime." "Our criminals . . . have a perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose—even for transforming murderers into judges."[5] In the ancient world when tyrants dragged conquered people and their possessions through the streets to cheering crowds, the people were proud of their theft, cruelty, and dominion, and knew it to be such. Moral judgment remained unclouded. But in modern times the flags of freedom and human rights fly over lies, cruelty, and murder, which are transmuted by philosophy into truths

[3] Ibid., 26.
[4] Ibid., 22.
[5] Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 23.

and acts of liberation. In this inverted world, moral judgment is disarmed and disoriented. The error is ontological in that the rationalist is not merely doing something morally wrong; he has created in thought, and is acting out, an *inverted world.* Moral thinking is aimed at acts within the world. It is not the kind of thinking capable of inverting the world itself.

Camus wrote in the 1950s and had in mind mainly the tyrannies of communism, but his point applies equally to the "crimes of logic" of liberalism in its left and right forms. By "logic" he, of course, does not mean inductive or deductive logic but what we might call "philosophic logic," an expression suggested by his observation that it is the *philosophic act* itself that generates the world inversion of moral concepts. It is this idea of world inversion built into the very nature of the philosophic act that I want to discuss.

Hume the first systematic critic of modern ideological thinking.

The first philosopher to work out a systematic critique of modern ideologies, of which moral rationalism is one, was David Hume. Like Camus, he traces the origin of this pathology not to a disorder in morals but to one in philosophy. This will seem strange to many because of the long tradition of interpretation which reads Hume as a nihilistic skeptic and as an empiricist. But Hume is neither. Indeed, the purpose of his first and most important work, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* is to lay the foundation for "a compleat [sic] system of the sciences."[6]

Hume is neither nihilist nor empiricist.

Nor is he an empiricist. Hume divided all knowledge into matters of fact and relations of ideas. Kant mistakenly took "relations of ideas" to mean analytic truths or logical tautologies having no empirical content. This would make Hume an empiricist in the mold of John Stuart Mill or A. J. Ayer (Ayer explicitly identified with what he believed to be Hume's view). But empiricism is not Hume's position because he taught that there are necessary truths which have empirical content.[7]

Nor is he a precursor of the Utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill. Moral worth for Hume is embedded in *character*, not the consequences of actions. If we are looking for a latter-day legacy for Hume's thought, it would be the phenomenology of

[6] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 22.

[7] See my discussion of Hume as a precursor of phenomenology in *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 48-59.

Edmund Husserl, who explicitly acknowledged Hume's influence on him.[8] But that is a story for another place.

The very heart of Hume's philosophy—and what was needed to lay the human sciences on a secure foundation—is the distinction he draws between what he calls "true philosophy" and "false philosophy," or what comes to the same thing, a true and a false "rationality." But that poses a question. How can one know that the philosophy through which the "false philosophy" is discovered is not itself an instance of the false form? The distinction can be drawn only by a dialectical mode of inquiry in which philosophical thought discovers a standard independent of itself by reference to which its true and false forms can be distinguished.[9] In short, the science of human nature presupposes a prior act of philosophical self-knowledge whereby the disposition to false philosophy (or what we today call ideology or rationalism) is exposed and purged from the human sciences—and from morals and common life generally.

So what is philosophy?[10] Philosophy begins in the wisdom of Socrates who said the unexamined life is not worth living. But philosophy is not just any kind of self-examination. In Hume's account, the philosophical act of thought is structured by three principles which I call ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion.

Ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion as three principles of philosophical act, according to Hume.

Ultimacy. Philosophical inquiry is not empirical inquiry. Empirical science seeks merely a conditional understanding of events in space and time testable by sense experience; whereas philosophy seeks an *unconditioned* understanding about what is *ultimately real.* This, Hume says, "is our aim in all our studies and reflections."[11] Mere empirical facts cannot refute a philosophical claim because, being a claim about ultimate reality, it claims authority to define what is to count as empirical facts. The empirical, after all, must first be *real.* And so must the moral.

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[8] Ibid.

[9] I discuss Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), Chapter 2.

[10] For a full discussion of Hume's conception of philosophy, see *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*.

[11] *Treatise*, 266.

Autonomy. Philosophy is and must be radically free inquiry. The philosopher cannot begin his inquiry by assuming the truth of what the poets, priests, or founding fathers have said. That would make philosophy the handmaiden of theology, or of politics, or of some other inherited authority. The philosopher must determine the real with nothing other than his own autonomous reason.

Dominion. Once the philosopher determines the real through his autonomous reason, the philosophic vision has a title to rule society. Hume writes: "Reason first appears in possession of the throne, prescribing laws, and imposing maxims with an absolute sway and authority."[12] Plato's teaching that philosophers should be kings is necessitated by the philosophical act itself.

In Hume's dialectic, the first stage of the philosophical act is to suspend beliefs inherited from the pre-reflectively received order of common life. Indeed, that order, and all within it, is presumed false *as a whole* unless certified by the philosopher's autonomous reason. What Hume discovered is that, if the pre-reflective order is consistently purged from thought, no proposition in philosophy or common life can be established. This reduces the true philosopher to total skepticism and to despair because he was determined to guide thought and life by his own autonomous grasp of the real. Now he has no guide at all. Hume was thought to be a nihilistic skeptic because his readers did not see that this is merely the first stage in a dialectical inquiry.

False philosophers engage in acts of self-deception.

The false philosopher, however, never experiences despair because he does not consistently follow the principles set by the demands of philosophy. At some point he cheats by smuggling in a favorite set of prejudices from his inheritance and participation in common life, while at the same time passing them off as the work of a neutral autonomous reason untainted by the prejudices of common life. The false philosopher is "false" because he is self-deceived about what he is doing.

In the condition of utter despair where *all* argument has been brought to silence, the true philosopher discovers for the first time that he has never ceased to participate in that radiant but mysterious *pre-reflective* order of common life. In despair,

[12] Ibid., 186.

and having no other recourse, he affirms his participation in this order with humility. Whereas before he had presumed the pre-reflective beliefs of common life as a whole to be false unless his autonomous reason showed otherwise, he now presumes they are true unless there is reason to think otherwise. This does not mean he has abandoned critical reason but only that it must be redefined to make it coherent with common life. Henceforth any belief can be criticized if it is incoherent with other beliefs and by standards, rules, and ideals which themselves emerge in the practices of common life.

This yields a reformed conception of rationality and of philosophy which Hume explains as follows: "philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected."[13] This means the autonomy principle which seemed essential to philosophy must be given up. The philosopher must recognize himself not as the spectator of common life with his autonomous reason as a grim measuring rod for examining it, but as a humble, yet critical, *participant* in it.

Philosophers pursue ontological investigations within inherited traditions.

But the principle of ultimacy remains. The philosopher still inquires into the nature of what is ultimately real. However, he does so within the framework of an inherited order of beliefs and practices and with a chastened attitude of humility and even a certain diffidence. And this means the principle of dominion must be abandoned. The philosopher, as a critical participant in common life, has no special title to rule.

Here I must guard against a misunderstanding. "True philosophy" does not mean the philosopher has special access to truths about the world, but that his mode of inquiry is the only way philosophy can coherently gain truth. The distinction between true and false philosophy is like the distinction between valid and invalid arguments. Valid arguments do not give us truths about the world, but given that we have truths, other truths can be deduced from them with certainty. And just as a valid argument can be made up of false statements, so can an engagement in true philosophy. What distinguishes true philosophy from false is that the latter both rejects the prejudices

[13] *David Hume's Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 162.

of common life as a whole *and* presupposes a favored set of them. The true philosopher acknowledges the primordial authority of common life as a whole and against this background criticizes a part.

Another way of looking at this is that Hume's "common life" resembles Husserl's "life world" rather than Thomas Reid's "common sense" philosophy. Reid, like Descartes, sought to discover irrefutable statements about the world. Hume understood that no statement about the world is safe from philosophical world inversions. To say it again, the false philosopher is false because he is *self-deceived*. Truth in philosophy is not about the world but about self-knowledge.

The disposition to false philosophy is part of human nature, and functions in Hume's thought as a kind of original sin whose nature is to "rationally" affirm its own errors. The paradox is that all rational inquiry must begin in philosophy so conceived. No one is a philosopher at all unless he begins with the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion, but no one is a *true* philosopher unless he rigorously follows these principles to the bitter end of total skepticism; and, through the mode of despair, discovers the primordial authority of common life.

The false philosopher never reaches despair but follows a career of self-deception. It is only through philosophic despair that the primordial hubris of philosophy is extinguished and the true philosopher can emerge to frame a coherent (and humane) notion of philosophy and rationality. Hume describes this dialectical journey of self-discovery by saying there is "a gradation of three opinions that rise above each other according as the persons who form them acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge. These opinions are that of the vulgar [the pre-reflective], that of a false philosophy, and that of the true; where we shall find upon inquiry, that the true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge."[14]

It should be stressed that the reformed conception of rationality which springs from the dialectic of true and false philosophy is the same whether in science or morals. In both it is a matter of "methodizing and correcting" reflections on

[14] *Treatise*, 222-223.

common life. The stock objection to this is that a moral tradition may contain an error for centuries which is regularly confirmed by the practices of a tradition. Followers of Leo Strauss have argued that the only escape from this condition is to affirm abstract universal principles such as natural rights (or as we like to say today, human rights) that transcend all tradition and can be used as measuring rods to judge the practices of common life.

Philosophical and scientific errors are corrected by participants in the tradition, not by those who attempt to stand outside of the tradition.

It is true that a moral tradition may contain an error that lasts for centuries, but so can the scientific tradition. The Ptolemaic theory of the solar system, that the sun moves around the earth, lasted over a thousand years before its error was detected. But the error was exposed and corrected by loyal and skillful participants in that very tradition. There is no shortcut in science around the laborious and uncertain work of critically exploring the incoherencies and potentialities of an inherited scientific tradition.

Nor is there a shortcut in morals. The goal of moral philosophy is to understand what a good human life is and how to live it. Consequently, rational criticism in morals requires a tradition with a shared vision of the human good. Without such a tradition, rationality (Hume's "methodizing and correcting") in morals is impossible and reduces to a power struggle.

Hume argues universal rules and principles must be interpreted with reference to pre-reflective common life.

Modern rationalists are opposed to this Humean vision of tradition as essential to rational inquiry in morals because tradition is *particularistic*, while morality is allegedly universal and because tradition relies on inherited *authority*. Hume did not deny the importance of abstract universal principles, rules, and ideals in the exercise of true rationality, but he observed that they are abstractions from, and must be interpreted in the light of, the pre-reflectively received particularities and authorities of common life; otherwise they are empty and can guide neither thought nor action.

For example, the metric system is an imminently "rational" system of measurement. The whole system can be printed on a page. A meter has a hundred centimeters, and so forth. With it one can measure the length of anything in the universe. But there is essential information typically not included on the page, and that is the *length* of the meter. A meter could be the length of the queen's foot or the length of the king's sword. At

first the standard meter was an iridium bar housed in a particular case in a particular building in Paris. And what made that bar the standard meter was authorization by the French government.

Just as the metric system cannot stand on its own independent of the particularities of length *and* social and political authority, so it is with all other abstract universals and ideals. If there is no agreement on the particular length of the standard meter and no agreement on who has the authority to authorize it, then there will be as many metric systems as the imagination can assign, each having its own favored length.

Natural rights, untethered from traditional contexts, are empty constructs.

And so it is with natural rights. All might agree to the abstract proposition that there is a natural right to life and liberty. But what do these abstract terms mean? The Christian tradition interprets them to mean, for instance, that the unborn child has a right to life which restrains the mother's right to kill it in the womb. But Enlightenment feminists hold that a woman's self-ownership of her body trumps the unborn's right to life.

Conduct here about the morality of abortion is not guided by abstract principles of natural rights but by allegiance to incompatible moral traditions and practices. Nor can the conflict be overcome by appealing to transcendent natural rights because it is just such an appeal that has generated the conflict. It is as if we had two metric systems, each with its own standard meter, but each claiming to be the true metric system. Straussian philosopher Allan Bloom says: "Class, race, religion, national origin or culture all disappear or become dim when bathed in the light of natural rights," which make men "truly brothers."[15] They do not. Although the language is universal, it is also abstract and indeterminate. Consequently, it necessarily divides people into warring camps more than it unifies them.

And the conflicts are made implacable because my opponent is viewed as denying my natural (or human) rights which are thought of as unconditioned absolutes. A Christian who believes in the Trinity and a Muslim who does not also have an ultimate disagreement, but since they do not claim to share

[15] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 27.

the same vision of God, they might agree to disagree and simply tolerate each other. That is more difficult, if not impossible, in a political quarrel over natural rights to which both parties subscribe—for how can I be reconciled to what I honestly believe to be the suppression of my natural rights?

Ethical universality emerges from the practices of moral tradition.

But if we are to reject the abstract universalisms of moral rationalism, whence do the standards, rules, and ideals of moral criticism come? The short answer is from potentialities within the *practices* of a moral tradition. An example might provide clarification. Consider an anthropologist who has lived with a primitive tribe so long that he has learned their language as his second first language. He is able to abstract from the language, its grammar, syntax, semantics, and phonetics. He constructs an alphabet and teaches the natives to read and write their language.

Who has the superior grasp of the language? We might be tempted to say the anthropologist. Has he not given to the natives the enjoyment of a practice, namely reading and writing, of which they were entirely ignorant? Yes, but it was the natives who created the language in the first place, its complex grammar, syntax, semantics, and phonetics. The anthropologist had to submit to the natives as an apprentice does to a master craftsman. Having learned from them how to speak the language *correctly*, he is able to abstract the rules and grammar of the language that make linguistic criticism possible.

But these rules are mere abstractions from what the natives already knew to be correct speech through participation in a concrete tradition of speech. It was not by following the rules that the natives created the language, nor did the anthropologist learn it by following the rules. And so it is with moral rationality. We first learn how to behave correctly through participation in a moral tradition and only later abstract the rules of correct conduct. The discovery of these rules and their logical relations (which might be incoherent or contain glaring gaps) generates a new practice (moral criticism) which is nothing other than what Hume called "methodizing and correcting" the practices of common life.

There is no space here to explore the question of how rational criticism is possible when two traditions with incommensurable visions of the human good confront each other.

Hume's own answer is that rudimentary moral dispositions are the same throughout mankind, though shaped by different factual beliefs, customs, and experiences and by different philosophical and theological views of the nature of ultimate reality. Reason can appeal to these rudimentary moral sentiments, and erroneous views about the facts can be exposed through empirical investigation, but beyond that communication may indeed break down.[16]

That, however, is no reason in itself to doubt the truth of one's own understanding of the human good. If this is still perceived as a problem in need of a solution, it is certain, as we have seen, that it cannot be solved by appealing to the universality of abstract human rights. There is no shortcut to discovering the nature of the physical world, or to discovering the nature of the human good. Both require the laborious and uncertain work of "methodizing and correcting" the inherited practices of the scientific tradition and of one's moral tradition.

It is for this reason that Hume rejected the central modern project of his time, namely working out the rules of the "scientific method" to guide research. Such rules, he says, are easy to formulate but, being abstract, cannot in themselves guide anything. Instead they require "the utmost of human judgment" by skillful and loyal participants in an inherited scientific tradition, solving problems thrown up by that tradition with an imaginative use of the tradition's own critical resources.[17]

The modern search for the correct "scientific method" as a shortcut to scientific progress is parallel to the rationalist's model of applying pre-conceived abstract, universal principles to determine moral conduct, and it is the latter practice which is the object of Ryn's critique. And he is right that it cannot be done without arbitrariness. The reason is that abstract universal principles, without an inherited moral tradition through which to interpret them, are indeterminate. The mind cut loose

[16] Hume discusses the challenge of moral relativism in *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,* op. cit., "Dialogue," 324 343. For an argument that the historicity of moral traditions is not incompatible with absolute truth, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

[17] *Treatise,* 175.

from the pre-reflective order of common life and set afloat on the wide sea of abstraction is free to move in any direction it pleases. So, for example, transcendent natural rights can both protect the life of the unborn child *and* justify killing it. It may legitimate traditional marriage or abolish it as an oppressive institution in favor of same-sex marriage. An official in the People's Republic of China once said that cheap oil is a human right. Most anything that power and lack of shame can assign could be a human right.

Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy exposes not only the vacuity and arbitrariness of applying abstract, universal principles, purged of the particularities of an inherited tradition, but it also exposes the *world inversions* that are internal to the philosophic act. As we have seen, the philosophic act is an effort to grasp the *whole truth* about reality. The first move is to reject the authority of the pre-reflective order of common life as a whole. To avoid the total skepticism to which this leads, the false philosopher (not consciously aware of doing so) smuggles in his favorite prejudices and spiritualizes these into an alternative world, a different *reality*.

Hume on the ontological alchemy of false philosophers.

So Thales, the first philosopher, taught that all is really water. Aristotle argued that all is form and matter. Materialists claimed that reality is a kind of machine ordered by deterministic causation. Berkeley held that to be is to be perceived. The American philosopher W. V. Quine wrote that to be is to be the value of a bound variable. Sartre believed that man is condemned to freedom. Rousseau declared that man is born free but everywhere is in chains. Hume described these transformations of the whole of common life into one of its parts as "philosophical chymstry," by which he meant "alchemy."[18]

The false philosopher does not acknowledge the utter mysteriousness of the pre-reflective order of common life. His speech is not the voice of nature participating in that order but of *hubris*. Hume describes him as a worker in black magic: "Do you come to a philosopher as to a *cunning man*, to learn something by magic or witchcraft, beyond what can be known by common prudence and discretion?"[19]

[18] *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 297

[19] David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1985), 161.

Marx was obsessed with class struggle which he took to be the key to the social world. Current society is to be totally inverted into a classless society. Reforms are out of the question except as they advance *total transformation*. "We are not interested in a change in private property," he said, "but only in its annihilation, not in conciliation of class antagonisms but in the abolition of classes, not in reforms of present society but in the foundation of a new one." This is not idealism but world inversion.[20]

Hume inveighed against moral rationalists (from Epicurus to Hobbes and Locke) who denied the reality of benevolent motives. Through philosophical alchemy, benevolence was transmuted into self-love. Hume called it "the selfish system," and showed how it subverted healthy prejudices of common life. In "Of Moral Prejudices," he charts the unhappy career of an early feminist who wants a child but not a husband. She contracts with a young man to impregnate her and agrees to pay him after the child is born. But she now finds herself in a lawsuit because the young man cannot disentangle his affections for her and the child. Hume describes her as the "philosophical heroine."[21]

Over two centuries later Gloria Steinem would reenact the same alchemy of total transformation, saying that to be interested in "reforms" for women was one thing, to seek the total transformation of society is "feminism." Hume called social critics of this kind "Anti-reformers."[22] True reform is to "methodize and correct" judgments in common life, not to engage in alchemical transformation.

Conservatives also engage in world inversion.

Nor are "conservatives" immune from this pathology. Ronald Reagan, for example, was fond of quoting Tom Paine's saying that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again."[23] We, of course, have no such power, and it is fortunate that no one does. Nor is this a harmless "idealistic" way of speaking. But it has become second nature to a certain kind

[20] Quoted in Eric Voegelin, "The Formation of the Marxian Revolutionary Idea," *The Review of Politics* 12: 301.

[21] *Essays*, 538-544.

[22] Ibid., 538.

[23] Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* in *The Thomas Paine Reader*, ed. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin, 1987), 109.

of American. Driving through New Hampshire to give a talk at Williams College, I was greeted by a young woman on the airways saying "Welcome to New Hampshire Public Radio, coming to you from New England where people get together when they want to change the world."

This speech of total transformation is the error of King Midas: everything he touched was transmuted into gold. Having repressed his participation in the pre-reflective order of common life, he failed to realize how much of that order was essential to his being: a splendid dinner, an embrace from his daughter, etc. These he could no longer enjoy because they had been turned to gold.

Hume would further strengthen Ryn's critique of idealism and moral rationalism.

Ryn traces the source of what is pernicious in moral rationalism to its use of idealistic critiques. The account would have been more comprehensive had he drawn Hume's distinction between ideals generated by true philosophy as opposed to the false. Ideals are valid if they are stylizations of potentialities embedded in the practices of common life. Hume wrote a seminal essay, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," arguing against the traditional view that republics had to be small. He agreed that the small republic "is the happiest government in the world within itself," but it can be overrun by a large monarchy. He suggested that, if done properly, a large state federated into small republics would be the best form of government, embodying the virtues of large monarchies with the advantages of a human scale possible only in small republics. And he even suggested a few reforms in the British constitution that would nudge Britain in the direction of the ideal.[24]

The source of Hume's ideal, however, did not come from an inverted world generated by the thinker's own autonomous reason but was already intimated in the political practices of his day. Hume saw that "republican" dispositions and talk of "liberty" were stirring throughout Europe and that Switzerland and the Netherlands were already successful federations of very small republics. A large federative republic of the size of Britain or France was potentiality already discernible in the political practice of his day. So strong were republican potentialities in Britain that Hume could publish an essay in the 1740s titled "Whether the British Government inclines more to Abso-

[24] *Essays*, 525.

lute Monarchy, or to a Republic."[25]

The "ideal" in false philosophy is not a stylization from inherited practice but an ideal generated by a *world inversion*. When Proudhon says that "property is theft," he is logically saying that the *whole order* of property relations in common life is illegitimate. True property relations are determined by the false philosopher's autonomous reason and constitute an inverted world. Such critiques seem profound, and instill in the reader not ordinary resentment, which happens when someone steals your automobile, but *philosophical* resentment. That is, a resentment that supervenes upon contemplating the relation between my place in common life and in Proudhon's inverted world which is taken to be the real world. The resentment is that my own, and that of others, has been taken away by the *entire system* of property relations in common life.

And it would be a mistake to describe Proudhon's philosophically certified world as an "ideal" to which existing property relations should *approximate*. That would mean there is some degree of goodness in the current order of property relations and that reforms are needed to make those relations better. But in Proudhon's statement that "property is theft" there is no goodness at all in the established order of property. It is theft all the way down. The relation between Proudhon's inverted world of true property relations and the illegitimate order of property in common life is not that of ideal to approximation, but of the *real* to the unreal. It is an ontological distinction, not one of *degrees* of a quality. The only way to truth is to destroy the current system and replace it with an entirely different one.

Even in Plato the particular *participates* in the reality of the ideal; so that all particular things have a degree of goodness. That is not the case for modern rationalism, which is why Hume describes the false philosopher not as one proposing radical reforms (a Humean true philosopher may propose radical reforms as a gardener might recommend radical pruning) but as an "Anti-reformer."[26]

Hume compares critiques generated by the inverted worlds of false philosophy to an experiment performed in a "vacuum"

[25] See *Essays*, 47.

[26] Ibid., 538.

as opposed to one in the open air. In the vacuum of false philosophy, generated by "philosophical enthusiasm," no one can know what will please or displease the thinker or how to apply the principles of his inverted world. By contrast, ideals generated by true philosophy can be tested because they spring from, and are applied in, the open air of common life.[27]

When Ryn says that a disorder in circumstances can overwhelm the ideal so that the thinker is led to desperation, we must ask whether he has in mind a Humean ideal springing from true philosophy or an ideal springing from the inverted world of false philosophy. If the former, a disorder in circumstances will not overwhelm the true philosopher because he is a connoisseur of the practices of common life in their particularity. Whatever ideal he employs is intimated in those practices and testable by them. If the practices are thrown into disorder, he will not insist on imposing the ideal nor will he despair that it is no longer applicable and plunge into desperate conduct. He will behave in the manner of Aristotle's man of practical wisdom, landing on his feet and trying to do what is right in the circumstances.

Hume might lead Ryn to refine and deepen an important part of his argument.

And it might be that nothing can be done. If so, he will abandon the engagement for something entirely different. Viewed this way, a disorder in circumstances will not overwhelm the ideal because the true philosopher will have withdrawn the ideal before that happens. A person who is obsessed with the ideal has supplanted the real with an inverted world.

If the ideal springs from the inverted world of false philosophy, it is not clear how the ideal can be overwhelmed by a disorder in circumstances. Recall that the false philosopher views the *whole* of common life as disorder in relation to his inverted world. Nor can we speak of circumstances getting so out of hand that they no longer approximate to the ideal because, as we have seen, the relationship between the inverted world as an ideal and the world of common life is that of reality and unreality, not degrees of a quality in approximation to the highest degree of that quality.

As Hume points out, the false philosopher's mind operates

[27] *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, 343.

in a vacuum and there is no way to know what he will do at *any moment* and not merely in times of stress. In common life, a mob on a mindless rampage might be viewed as disorder. But to the false philosopher it might be viewed as a beautiful instrument with which to destroy society and make possible the emergence of the philosopher's inverted world.

Descartes warned that the rationalist model should be applied only to mathematics, physics, and metaphysics. He excluded it from religion, morals, and politics. But that was not to be. Its greatest and most pernicious influence would be in morals and politics. Hume observed that "no party, in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one."[28] These metaphysical parties inevitably distort and corrupt the practical engagements of politics. One of these theories was the "contract theory" of the origin of government, put forth by Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau (and countless liberal philosophers since, e.g., John Rawls and Robert Nozick).

Hume argues social contract thinking is a representative example of world-inverting false philosophy.

In "Of the Original Contract" (1748), Hume refuted contract theory by presenting it as a world-inverting species of false philosophy. He quoted Locke as saying that, because French absolute monarchy is not based on consent of the governed, it "can be no form of civil government at all."[29] Hume observed that, although the public rhetoric of the French monarchy was absolutist, the *practices* were not. Liberty and property, he thought, were about as well protected in France as in Britain. But even if France was not the best regime, it was certainly a legitimate one. To deny this, and to take the denial seriously, is to demand a *total transformation* and the totalitarian power that comes with it, the very thing that led to the French Revolution and the reign of Terror.[30]

As with all false philosophy, the original contract theory is either empty and guides nothing or is arbitrary. In the first place, it is a conceptual absurdity. The very concept of a contract is something to be enforced by government; consequently, it cannot be used to explain the origin of government. As a

[28] *Essays*, 465.

[29] John Locke, *Of Civil Government*, in *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Stilwell, KS: Digireads, 2005), 98.

[30] *Essays*, 486-487.

"philosophical enthusiasm" ripped out of its context in common life, no one can know how to apply it. If by consent we mean *explicit* consent, then hardly any government has been established by consent. If we mean *implicit* consent (living in the country, using its roads, etc.), then even manifest tyrannies are legitimate if people remain in them. Hume did not deny that consent of the governed is a noble practice where possible, but only that it cannot explain the origin of government.

In the second place, the theory fails to explain political *authority.* It attempts to do so by dissolving authority into consent, another case of "philosophical alchemy." But whatever the origin of authority might be, it is something we are *obliged* to acknowledge whether we consent to it or not. Acknowledging authority is not the same as consenting to it. What is the nature of that peculiar obligation? The original contract theory and, indeed, the liberal tradition generally, shies away from this question because of its King Midas-like obsession with consent.

Hume on the dangers of "spiritualized" politics in modern world.

Hume thought Britain was being torn apart by political quarrels which were poisoned and made implacable, because shaped by false philosophy. Instead of factions fighting over practical conflicts of policy in a shared political tradition, policy disputes were spiritualized by philosophical alchemy into the symbols of inverted worlds. This, he thought, was something unprecedented and peculiar to modern times. Societies had been torn apart in the name of religion, but the world had never before seen mass *secular philosophical* movements such as the original contract theory tearing society apart in the name of philosophical reason. In "Of Parties in General," he wrote: "Parties from *principle*, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable *phenomenon*, that has yet appeared in human affairs."[31]

Hume tried to cure his countrymen of this pathology by pointing out that liberty is not a set of abstract universal principles but a set of *practices* with a history. This is worlds apart from John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, in the next century, which claims to have discovered a "simple" theoretical principle, i.e.,

[31] Ibid., 60.

the "harm principle," which can resolve conflicts between the liberty of the individual and the liberty of the state. For Hume there is no such principle. He wrote the six-volume *History of England* to help Britons understand the origin and nature of the *practice* of liberty, which had made them the envy of Europe but which, Hume thought, was being destroyed by "philosophical enthusiasms."

He showed that the British constitution was not a single thing, going back to the Saxon forests where the contract was originally formed. Instead, the history of England reveals four distinct constitutions each with a different notion of liberty. Nor did the changes occur through rational criticism as required by Locke's contract theory. The changes were often the unintended consequences of blind armies clashing at night. Nevertheless, from these struggles new practices of liberty emerged which Britons rightly cherish despite these unflattering origins.

Hume hoped that an historical understanding of the practice of liberty—and above all its fragile character—would serve the cause of moderation and help preserve the practice. When the American colonies began resisting efforts at tighter centralization from the British Crown, Hume viewed the quarrel through the lens of true philosophy, not through the world-inverting lens of false philosophy. He looked at historical practice to see what reforms were needed and practicable. He had written in his Memoranda somewhere between 1729 and 1740 that "The Charter governments in America are almost entirely independent of England."[32] By the time of the Stamp Act, Hume concluded that the colonies had developed to the point where they would naturally want to govern themselves. He argued that repealing the Stamp Act would not be enough, and he recommended independence for the colonies as early as 1768 before most Americans had thought of it.[33]

There were "friends of America," such as Edmund Burke, William Pitt, John Wilkes, Isaac Barré, and others who favored conciliation, but Hume was the only major thinker in Britain to recommend complete independence. The colonists and the

[32] Ernest C. Mossner, "Hume's Early Memoranda, 1729-1740: The Complete Text," *Journal of the History of Ideas* (October, 1984), 504.

[33] *Letters*, vol. 2, 184, 304.

British government structured ideological positions based on the contract theory of government. The administration used the theory to insist that the central government has plenary power over individuals in its territory and that, consequently, colonial resistance is anarchy and a threat to government as such. The colonists using the same theory appealed to the consent of the governed. Being a species of false philosophy, the original contract theory could support contrary positions and it could inflame passions, but it could not rationally resolve the dispute.

Hume concluded that a negotiated division was the best solution for both sides, and urged: "Let us, therefore, lay aside all Anger; shake hands, and part Friends." He would later shock his friends who were nearly all pro-government by declaring: "Besides, I am an American in my Principles, and wish we woud [sic] let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper."[34]

Jefferson an example of a false philosopher during the American Framing.

It is ironic that Jefferson, who at times lapsed into moral and political rationalism (though not as often as some think), had banned Hume's *History of England* from the University of Virginia because of its unrepublican character. Jefferson did not understand that, although Hume had some good things to say about how liberty was practiced under monarchy, he was a lifelong republican. Blinded by false philosophy, Jefferson could see only an attack on republican "principles." But Hume supported independence from Britain eight years *before* Jefferson penned the Declaration of Independence. This famous document, because of the rationalist style of its second sentence ("all men are created equal"), has done its part—mainly through Lincoln's appropriation of it—in making a corrupting and mendacious ideological style of politics a part of American character.

The English Civil War sent shock waves throughout Europe lasting into the eighteenth century because Charles I had been tried and executed in the name of the original contract. Would any monarchy now be safe? In the *History of England*, Hume offered a unique interpretation of the English Civil War. He did not view it primarily through moral categories, nor as

[34] *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), vol. 2, 303.

a war of religion, but in ontological terms; it was a violent intrusion of false philosophy's world inversions into politics.

It is easy to miss this because we tend to think of the English Civil War as a war fueled by religious factions. But Hume thought modern religion had become philosophic. Modern religion, he said, had become "a species of philosophy," and this, Hume thought, was not a good thing.[35] He observed that philosophic sects in the ancient world were more fanatical than religious ones. The reason is that pagan religion worked hand in hand with the inherited traditions of society whereas Greek philosophy was governed by the world inversions of false philosophy, prompting Cicero's comment that there is nothing so absurd that some philosopher has not taught it, and St. Paul's advice to Timothy to avoid "vain philosophy." But philosophic world inversions were not a threat to ancient society because they were confined to the philosopher's study or to small private sects under the watchful eye of the pagan civil magistrate. When philosophers like Socrates got out of hand, they were put in their place.

Hume on the source of division and conflict generated by Christianity.

All of this changed with the emergence of Christianity which was a universalist theistic religion that eagerly sought and appropriated philosophic support. The result was that the sacred *story* of a tradition was transformed by philosophy into a new experience called *theology.* As long as Christianity was the story of the incarnation of God in Christ and the sacrificial salvation of man, it posed no threat to society. But once it was fused with philosophy, it took on all the implacable features of false philosophy: ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion. It is this *philosophical* element in Christianity, Hume thinks, not its character as sacred story, that made Christianity the scene of faction and hatred in medieval and modern Europe.

The union of sacred tradition and philosophy in the form of theology meant that all Europeans would have at least a rudimentary grasp of the philosophical act because in Christendom theological thinking was widespread. In this union, philosophy was the junior partner, "the handmaiden of theology" as the medievals said. But by the seventeenth century, the philosophical element was becoming restless and eventually

[35] See discussion of philosophy and religion in my *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, especially 115-118 and 225-236.

broke free from theology and reappeared as the philosophic act in its pure form. Because philosophy was logically built into the experience of theology, Europeans eagerly embraced the pure philosophic act as something with which they had, in some way, always been familiar.

What we call the "Enlightenment" is simply the emancipation of the handmaiden from theology. Thomas Paine would become famous peddling Hobbesianism and Lockeanism for the people. Marx made the matter plain: "philosophy has become secularized, and the striking proof thereof is that the philosophical consciousness itself has been pulled into the torment of struggle . . . . What we must accomplish is the ruthless criticism of all that exists."[36] So for the first time in history a mass philosophical consciousness had emerged in society. Hume observed that, since "the people" were "commonly very rude builders, especially in this speculative way, . . . their workmanship must be a little unshapely, and discover evident marks of that violence and hurry, in which it was raised."[37] And since the disposition of philosophy is always to its false forms, a new form of fanaticism emerged rooted in nothing other than the philosophical act's disposition to ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion, undisciplined by Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy.

Hume and Voegelin differ on character of Puritanism.

Consequently, when Hume looked at the Puritans, he saw not religious fanaticism but *philosophical fanaticism* in a religious idiom. Puritanism, he said, "being chiefly spiritual resembles more a system of metaphysics."[38] And "the gloomy enthusiasm, which prevailed among the parliamentary party, is surely the most curious spectacle presented by any history; and the most instructive, as well as entertaining to a philosophical mind."[39] Eric Voegelin also presented a picture of the Puritans as an instance of modern ideology in *The New Science of Politics.* However, Voegelin views Puritanism, and all modern ideologies, as a species of religious Gnosticism; whereas

[36] Karl Marx, *Karl Marx on Revolution*, ed. and trans. Saul K. Padover (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 516.

[37] *Essays*, 466.

[38] David Hume, *The History of England, From the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688*, with the author's last corrections and improvements, in 6 vols. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1983), vol. 4, 14.

[39] Ibid., vol. 6, 142.

Hume views them as springing from the philosophical act itself in its pure form, an act which is independent of religion.[40]

Hume's *History* became the standard work on the English Civil War in France, where more copies were sold than in England. France and Scotland had centuries-old ties. Hume was loved in France, spent more time there than in England, and often thought of retiring there. When the French Revolution broke out, comparisons were made immediately in France between the English Civil War and the events that were unfolding. Hume's *History* quickly became the standard, chosen by both left and right to explain their position philosophically. Louis XVI was Charles I. Robespierre and Marat were compared with Cromwell, Hampden, and Pym. French republicanism was a reenactment of English republicanism, and so on.[41]

Just as Jefferson had banned Hume's *History of England* from the University of Virginia in favor of a "republicanized" version of Hume's text, so Catharine Maccaulay wrote a "republican" history of England to counter Hume's *History*. Madame De Roland was instrumental in publishing Maccaulay's *History of England* in France to counter Hume's influence. Both works battled each other, as Frenchmen sought to understand their revolution as a kind of reenactment of the English Civil War. The Catholic right praised Hume's natural-law understanding of society and liberty, and even called him "the Scottish Bossuet."[42] Being a philosopher with no Christian ax to grind, his testimony was all the more persuasive.

Louis XVI had been introduced to Hume in Court as a boy. As the Revolution developed, he studied Hume's *History* and was obsessed with avoiding the fate of Charles I. Some have argued that he failed to take strong measures at first because he did not want to appear a brutal monarch deserving execution by his people. This weakness gave the revolution a momentum that could not be reversed. Be that as it may, his secretary records that, upon receiving the death sentence, he asked for

[40] I discuss Hume's distinction between religion and philosophy in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium*, chapters 3 and 9.

[41] For a study of how Hume's *History* became the standard of left and right in explaining the Revolution in France while it was happening, see Lawrence Bongie, *David Hume, Prophet of the* Counter *Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1965, 1989).

[42] Ibid., 35.

Hume's history of Charles I to read in the days that remained. And some think "Le Stuart Francais" modeled his conduct at the execution platform on Hume's account of Charles's behavior at his execution.[43]

Hume's possible influence on Edmund Burke and the latter's interpretation of the nature of the French Revolution.

Burke is often thought of as the father of conservatism. He saw the French Revolution not as a response to manifest and implacable injustice, but as a world-inverting act. But this is exactly how Hume interpreted the English Civil War, namely as false philosophy in a religious idiom. Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) seems prophetic because he outlined the course of the Revolution as it was just beginning. It is arguable, however, that Burke read the revolution through the lens of Hume's account of the English Civil War just as many in France were doing at the time Burke was writing. If so, Burke saw what Hume had prepared for him to see.

Nor is this far fetched. The great French conservative Joseph de Maistre wrote an essay titled "History of the French Revolution by David Hume." Hume died in 1776, but for de Maistre, Hume's *philosophical* account of the English Civil War reveals to us the essential ontological pathology of the French Revolution. De Maistre fled to Holy Mother Russia hoping to find a country "not scribbled on by philosophy." What he found was a Russian intelligentsia busy studying the French *philosophes*, writings that would inflame the natural disposition of philosophy to its false forms and yield the bitter fruit of the Communist Revolution.

What is interesting about Hume's critique of moral rationalism is that he locates its source not in religion (many treat ideologies such as communism as theologies) nor in a moral disorder, but in the philosophical act itself. Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy shows how the disorder springs naturally from the philosophic act itself and that only by a rigorous engagement with that act can the philosopher gain a true understanding of his place in the world and how to think rationally about it.

Hume's critique of philosophy is different from those postmoderns who speak of the "end of philosophy," and think they can abandon it. To abandon philosophy is to abandon

[43] Ibid., 141-148.

rational inquiry and truth. To say it again: In Hume's account, the natural disposition of philosophy is to its false forms, and no one is a philosopher unless he has tasted the temptations of false philosophy. But no one is a true philosopher unless he has pressed on to acknowledge, existentially, the primordial authority of pre-reflective common life and to reform accordingly his understanding of rational inquiry.

Though the philosophical act is intrinsically disorienting, it does not become a problem for society until the modern era when it becomes a mass phenomenon–when "Everyman" can try his hand at working the principles of ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion. Hume observed that moral rationalism was a new thing, and he traced its roots to Father Malebranche, who "as far as I can learn, was the first that started this abstract theory of morals," which, since it "pretends to found everything on reason, it has not wanted followers in this philosophic age."[44] We live in the first "philosophic age," in which the logic of world inversions is confused with rational inquiry and is to be found everywhere.

In the first "philosophic age," something like Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy should be a requirement of education. It was not until Aristotle that the distinction between valid and invalid inference was codified and became essential to all education. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the distinction between scientific and unscientific thinking was clarified and, through education, has filtered down to the public which generally thinks in, at least, a rudimentary scientific manner. In the first philosophic age, students should be required to reenact for themselves Hume's dialectic of true and false philosophy (or a more up to date version of it) as an essential part of humanistic education.

But that is not the case. And there is an uphill task in establishing any such education, because education today is largely introduction into an ideology. Hubris and desire for dominion are internal to the philosophic act which strengthens those dispositions in the demagogue and his subjects, since they falsely imagine themselves acting in the name of reason and not their own arbitrary will to power. In this age when world inversions are part of common speech, no normative term is in-

[44] *Enquiries*, 197n.

nocent. 'Justice,' 'mercy,' 'human rights,' 'rule of law,' 'liberty,' 'democracy'—each can be inverted by philosophical alchemy into its opposite. As Camus said: "On the day when crime dons the apparel of innocence—through a curious transposition peculiar to our times—it is innocence that is called upon to justify itself."[45]

In the "Wilkes and Liberty" riots of the late 1760s, Hume perceived an instance of how an innocent term such as 'liberty' can be transmuted into crime while at the same time wearing the mask of its traditional and favorable connotations. He hoped that "People do not take a Disgust at Liberty; a word, that has been so much profaned by these polluted Mouths, that men of Sense are sick at the very mention of it. I hope a new term will be invented to express so valuable and good a thing."[46] In what Hume called the first "philosophic age," no moral term can be taken as innocent. Each may be transmuted into a mask for crime.

But it works the other way also. What is innocent can be transmuted into crime. Marriage, the oldest institution of human history, is a bond between a man and a woman to bring into being and educate the next generation. Today the institution is viewed by federal courts as unconstitutional (and so is criminal) in so far as it excludes homosexual couples from the legal and moral privileges of "marriage." We are so far gone in Camus's "crimes of logic" and Hume's philosophical alchemy that we need a new word for 'marriage' to express so good and valuable a thing.

[45] Camus, 23.

[46] *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 196.