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David Hume and the Search for Social Consensus

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ABSTRACT

David Hume's main philosophical works address the question of how to guarantee individual liberty whilst ensuring social cohesion. This question arose through changes occurring in the mid-eighteenth century. One of the most fundamental changes was the appearance of a new commercial ideology that conflicted with traditional ways in which society defined itself and the role of the individual.

Hume was essentially an apologist for this commercial ideology and this thesis examines his attempts to find an answer to the question of social cohesion. Hume's epistemology is examined in the light of this search for social cohesion and this thesis argues that the credibility of Hume's epistemology relies on his aesthetic philosophy. Finally, Hume's writings on aesthetics reveal that he is only able to find a model of social unity at the expense of some individuals' liberty.
DAVID HUME AND THE SEARCH FOR SOCIAL CONSENSUS
David Hume's main philosophical works, as well as his political and social commentaries, show him to be consistently grappling with a central and ineluctable problem. This problem is the balance between individual liberty and social cohesion. The problem might be summarized by a brief question: What model of social unity would guarantee the rights of the individual and the freedom to act on one's passions whilst also ensuring the well-being of society as a whole? This thesis will establish the context which defined the problem of social unity for Hume and will then focus on Hume's attempt to find a solution to the problem.

The emergence of a new and highly controversial commercial ethic or ideology precipitated Hume's investigation into liberty and social cohesion. This ideology was primarily concerned with the actions of the individual within a world defined in terms of commodities. That is to say, a world in which commercial transactions, profit and loss, and the cash nexus became the matrix by which the relationships between individuals, and the relationship between individual and society, were defined. However, this commercial ideology was incompatible with traditional ways in which society defined itself and the role of the individual.

One of the main incompatibilities was that between the new commercial ideology and classical republican theory that
had played an important role in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Broadly speaking, this republican ideology envisioned a society in which individuals curbed their personal desires for the sake of social cohesion. As Thomas Horne suggests, republican ideology appealed to the individual's ability to recognize a public interest and to act upon this interest so as to ensure the proper operation of the "social organism" (Horne X). Horne further points out that whereas republican theory "depended on the willingness [of the individual] to adopt a public stance, commercial activity tended to change legitimate concerns for the self into selfishness, to enlarge private concerns and diminish the awareness of public needs" (Horne X). Classical republicanism was, therefore, fundamentally in conflict with the very premises of the commercial ideology. While Hume is essentially an apologist for the new commercial ideology, he is acutely aware of the problems faced by the conflict between the republican model of society and a new ideology that elevates the passions and desires of the individual over social unity.

Hume's search for a model of social unity is clear in his main philosophical works, the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), and *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751); and in them Hume lays out his epistemological position as well. Although a discussion of epistemology may seem at first far
removed from the subject of liberty and social cohesion, upon further analysis we may see in Hume's epistemology an implicit concern with problems of individuality and universality that paves the way for the discussion of the individual and his relationship to society in An Enquiry Concerning the Principle of Morals.

Hume attempts to find consensus among individuals through an epistemology that is grounded in the senses -- an epistemology that values passion, or the senses, over reason. In Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature, the founding premises of the passional epistemology are found in the distinction between two kinds of perceptions: "impressions" and "ideas." (By "impressions" are meant all the "sensations, passions and emotions" and by "ideas" are meant the fainter images of those sensations and passions we generally truck in while thinking and reasoning [1]). The further observation that all our simple ideas are derived from simple impressions forms one of the critical tenets of Hume's epistemology; the precedence of impressions essentially collapses reason into sensation and leads to an epistemology that is grounded in the body and its sensations.

The appeal to the passions of man rather than to reason enables Hume to find a way of speaking to man's individuality as well as his need for social unity. In grounding his theory of knowledge in the body Hume has chosen the lowest common denominator, for the body is that which is particular to
everyone and yet common to all. And the turn to the body in Hume’s epistemology provides him with a general model in which some common ground could be found between the passions of diverse men. Hume’s passional epistemology, therefore, addresses the main problem faced by the commercial ideology which, as we saw, was to restrain the individual passions, so as to prevent the pursuit of economic gain from wrecking any cohesive structure in which people might operate.

However, this passional epistemology may create as many problems as it solves in its attempt to find a model of consensus, for different men’s passions may have no common ground. If so, then the strength of Hume’s epistemology might be its weakness. Hume’s epistemology suggests that the ways in which we make sense of the world evolve independently of each other through our impressions, so the passional epistemology is in danger of totally subjectivising any knowledge thereby ruining any common ground among individuals. Hume’s philosophy is, therefore, in danger of lapsing into solipsism, as he suggests in the conclusion to Book I of the Treatise: "I am first affrighted and confounded with the forlorn solitude, in which I am plac’d in my philosophy" (264). It is this dilemma facing Hume’s epistemology that we will see recurring in Hume’s work as he attempts to find some social consensus and some way to establish a firm basis for social unity.

In his celebrated discussion of causality, Hume addresses exactly this problem of how to find some common
ground among the sensory experiences of individuals. As Hume has subsumed Reason under the senses, it follows that causality must be a fiction of the imagination for it cannot be generated from any impression. The only perceivable impressions that we can observe in the relationship between "cause" and "effect" are contiguity and temporal succession, which alone do not account for any impression of causation. The only way that causal reasoning is possible is through experience, a position leading Hume to conclude that "all our reasonings concerning causes and effects are derived from nothing but custom" (183). So as to guarantee a common ground between the experiences of individuals Hume's argument has to fall back onto custom and precedent and consequently comes to nullify the more individualistic implications of his passional epistemology. The basis for one of the prime guides of human life, i.e. causal reasoning, now operates in terms of what has gone before and therefore denies the individual any part in the reasoning process. From a philosophy which seemingly empowers the individual we have now moved to a position that appeals to custom, and tradition, for its basis. So we can see in Hume's discussion of causality that the passional epistemology has difficulties in finding common ground among the experiences of individuals and has to go outside of the senses to find any consensus. In political terms, Hume's appeal to custom is significant for it seemingly elevates traditional assumptions and institutions over the concerns of
the individual. It therefore cannot guarantee both individual liberty and social cohesion.

The problem of consensus raised by the passional epistemology is also present in Hume's discussion of morality. Morality, says Hume in Book III of the Treatise,

consists not in any matter of fact, which can be discovered by the understanding.... So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it. (469)

Morality, falling within "practical" rather than "speculative" philosophy, is a subject that influences human passions and actions. As reason has "no influence on our passions and actions" then morality can never be derived from Reason, "because Reason alone... can never have any such influence.... The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason" (475). Reason does, however, reappear in Hume's discussion of morality and with its reappearance Hume invokes an interesting analogy with the arts.

In bringing morality into the realm of the senses, Hume has done two things: he has totally subjectivized the operation of morality, for it has now become an individual matter of distinguishing between certain impressions much as in our decisions concerning sound and taste. "Vice and virtue," suggests Hume, "may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind..." (469).
Second, however, morality's basis in sensation has the danger of allowing each individual his own moral code, as we decide which colour, sound, and action pleases us. The way out of this possibly anarchic situation is to appeal to a distinct and universal "moral sense" that attaches either pleasure or pain to the observation of certain human actions: "There is no spectacle so fair and beautiful as a noble and generous action; nor any which gives us more abhorrence than one that is cruel and treacherous" (470). But as we shall see, the appeal to this moral sense is not without its problems as Hume's argument is caught within the problem of how to draw any universal inferences; the "reasons" he gives within his argument are going to rely on his individual impressions. We can see this problem emerging as Hume continues his discussion of morality:

An action, or a sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue. To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind.... The case is the same as in our judgments concerning all kinds of beauty, and tastes.... (470)

In introducing the word "reason" into the above argument establishing the connection between morality and feelings of pleasure and uneasiness, Hume's discussion of morality is in danger of collapsing. With the introduction of Reason, Hume must therefore rely, under the dictates of his own epistemology, upon his own sensations, for in Hume's passional
epistemology, Reason is a slave to sensation. So Hume's argument is in danger of saying nothing as it can only appeal to sensation and sentiment in each stage of its conception, as each assertion comes full circle to rest on the thesis it is attempting to establish.

The problem therefore remains that morality may still be a totally subjective operation even with the posited universal moral sense. For Hume's discussion of morality, as we have just seen, may be particular to himself as his conclusions are drawn from his own feelings. The relation between morality and a universal moral sense can only be established through Hume's observations and these, of course, are founded on his own impressions.

As we saw in his discussion of causality, Hume has to go outside of the senses to find any common ground among individuals. Likewise the discussion of morality in the Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals has to fix some general principles which precede the operation of sentiment:

But in order to pave the way for such a sentiment [moral], and give a proper discernment of its object, it is often necessary, we find, that much reasoning should precede, that nice distinctions be made, just conclusions drawn, distant comparisons formed, complicated relations examined, and general facts fixed and ascertained. (15)

To avoid the subjectivization of morality, Hume appeals to a "proper" sentiment which is established by reasoning. It is essentially this reasoning that becomes the basis for any moral judgment and so morality becomes a process of drawing
careful distinctions, and well-balanced conclusions and examining complicated relations. As with Hume's argument on causality, the appeal to sensation has to be momentarily abandoned so that some common and stable ground can be found by which actions can be judged.

We have already seen how Hume's discussion of morality uses an analogy with the arts to elucidate his argument. Hume continues his discussion of morality quoted above with another example drawn from the arts, which suggests that beauty, like morality, might also have to be properly distinguished before it can be felt:

Some species of beauty, especially the natural kinds, on their first appearance, command our affection and approbation; and where they fail of this effect, it is impossible for any reasoning to redress their influence, or adapt them better to our taste and sentiment. But in many orders of beauty, particularly those of the finer arts, it is requisite to employ much reasoning, in order to feel the proper sentiment; and a false relish may frequently be corrected by argument and reflection. There are just ground to conclude, that moral beauty partakes much of this latter species, and demands the assistance of our intellectual faculties.... (15)

This is primarily an argument about morality but the example Hume draws from the arts is important. As we can see from the quotation above, judgments of beauty are the same as moral judgments in that they operate on the basis of feelings of pleasure and uneasiness. As we distinguish between virtue and vice on the basis of our impressions, so we make aesthetic decisions in exactly the same way. So aesthetics now becomes a matter of feeling pleasure and uneasiness just as in the
case of morality. But as Hume’s moral and aesthetic theories share a common epistemology then we might expect to see them sharing common problems. If his discussion of morals runs the risk of totally subjectivizing morality then his aesthetic theory faces the same problem.

As with the argument on morality, Hume has to avoid the total subjectivization of aesthetics judgments implied by their basis in sensation. As Peter Jones points out, Hume has to constantly avoid the proverb that it is pointless to dispute matters of taste and sentiment, as Jones suggests, "that view ultimately threatens not only his account of moral judgment, but also his central epistemological position" (Jones 107). Hume therefore has to find some way of reconciling matters of taste and sentiment.

As we can see, the comparison Hume draws between morality and aesthetic judgment, rather than elucidating Hume’s discussion of morality, merely replicates the problem of consensus and shifts the argument into the realm of the aesthetic. The problem of finding a possible ground for judgment or agreement between men’s sentiments or tastes finds its fullest exposition in Hume’s aesthetic essay "Of the Standard of Taste." In this essay Hume seeks to find a "Standard of Taste; a rule by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled" and with which to confront the axiom that to "seek the real beauty, or real deformity, is as fruitless an inquiry, as to pretend to ascertain the real
sweet or the real bitter" (229-30). As before, Hume's argument has a central dichotomy: how to steer between the Scylla of authority and the Charybdis of total freedom. A standard of taste must be located within the body but must also avoid an all-inclusive policy on taste which would disrupt any consensus (Shusterman 215). As Hume cannot find an ontological basis for aesthetic value, he attempts to find value through rules founded on the observations of common sentiment. So whilst "beauty is not a quality in things themselves: It exist[ing] merely in the mind which contemplates them," Hume does attempt to find some standard of beauty through observation of what pleases and what does not please (230). As Peter Jones puts it:"it is a matter of fact that certain qualities please qualified observers, and that certain works are valued because they possess those qualities and thereby come to functions as models" (Jones 108). The rules which make up the artifact are not "fixed by reasonings a priori" but through observation; Jones continues, "empirically grounded rules have a scope of sufficient generality to be genuine substitutes for... a priori standards" (Jones 108). These rules are "founded only on experience, and on the observation of the common sentiments of human nature" (232).

Hume sets about the task of finding the standard of taste by outlining how the proper sentiments might be distinguished, so putting him in a position to jettison any judgments of taste which seem unusual. Both the circumstances and the
"serenity" of the observer are necessary for the proper operation of judgment. This enables Hume to suggest that as "particular forms or qualities, from the original structure of the internal fabric are calculated to please, and others to displease; and if they fail of their effect in any particular instance, it is from some apparent defect or imperfection in the organ" (233). Hume follows up with an analogy for this predicament: "A man in a fever would not insist on his palate as able to decide concerning flavours; nor would one affected with jaundice pretend to give verdict with regard to colours" (233). The emphasis is on the good judgment of the observer, the critic, and although aesthetic judgment seems to be on the same basis as that of sight and smell, Hume is never able to tell us what rules he has managed to find through the observation of "common sentiment."

Before Hume is able to describe the general rules of art, the logic of his argument demands that he establish the proper position of the critic whose sentiments will lead us to the rules governing aesthetic objects. As we have already seen, illness and imperfection in the senses must generate dubious judgments. The qualified observer must also have a "delicacy of imagination," must be practiced in the observation of a particular art, needs to draw comparisons "between the several species and degrees of excellence... must preserve his mind from all prejudice" and, lastly, have a good dose of "strong sense" (234-40). As Richard Shusterman and others have noted,
Hume's argument is circular. The argument, Shusterman points out, "defines good taste and art by appeal to good critics, but the good critics are in turn ultimately defined in terms of (their experience with and reaction to) good art" (Shusterman 214). It is the role of the good critics, those qualified observers, that becomes so important in establishing a standard of taste, and it is a standard ultimately coming to rest on criteria far removed from the scope of the senses.

Hume's line of argument in the essay "Of the Standard of Taste" essentially leads him to displace the whole question of taste onto the quest for the "good critic" who sets its standard. As it turns out the good critic is a rarity indeed, for as Hume suggests, "few are qualified to give judgment on any work of art, or establish their own sentiment as the standard of beauty" (17). After listing various ways in which a critic may go wrong, he continues:

Under some or other of these imperfections, the generality of men labour; and hence a true judge in the finer arts is observed, even during the most polished ages, to be so rare a character: strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty. (241)

But where, asks Hume, are such critics to be found? Hume realises that he has merely displaced the whole argument onto another level. "[T]hese questions," he says, "are embarrassing; and seem to throw us back into the same uncertainty from which, during the course of this Essay, we
have endeavoured to extricate ourselves" (241). The search for a standard of taste has now move to a search for the perfect critic. But by what standard will he be judged? Hume's answer to this is to assert that a "true and decisive standard" exists by which we can judge the critic, one that has real existence and is a "matter of fact" (242). In attempting to avoid an endlessly regressive debate, Hume has to rely on plain assertion to continue his argument:

It is sufficient for our present purpose, if we have proved, that the taste of all individuals is not upon an equal footing, and that some men in general, however difficult to be particularly pitched upon, will be acknowledged by universal sentiment to have a preference above others. (242)

In his assertion, Hume mistakenly locates the superiority of taste held by certain critics as based on a "matter of fact" rather than in the socially determined basis of their "preference above others" (242). This categorial confusion leads Hume out of the scope of the senses altogether.

The physical criteria demanded of the good critic in the analogy between health and sound judgment are stretched to other demands which have nothing to do with the senses. As the good critic must be free of illness and any deviancy in perception, so should he be free of prejudice. "[P]rejudice is destructive of sound judgment" and it is for the critic to rid himself of such influences, so he might appreciate the work of other cultures and ages (240). Hume seems to suggest that if the critic can attain an unbiased and natural perception of the artifact, then it is possible to establish the standard of
taste and to uncover the rules governing the work of art. However, as Shusterman suggests, the innocent, unprejudiced critic is simultaneously one who is educated and socially and culturally conditioned (Shusterman 217). A good critic, for instance, has to be able to compare between degrees of excellence: "A man who has had no opportunity of comparing the different kinds of beauty, is indeed totally unqualified to pronounce an opinion with regard to any object presented to him" (238).

The critic must also be well practiced in the observation of a particular art, so that he will "acquire experience in those objects [artifacts]," and ensure that "his feeling becomes more exact and nice... (237). So while the critic has to free his mind from prejudice, he is also expected to use the criteria of practice, good sense, and comparison to evaluate the artifact. What can these be based on but a culturally conceived notion of taste? As Shusterman points out, "Hume's good critic turns out to be not one without prejudices but simply one with the right prejudices" (Shusterman 217). Hume's standard of taste has certainly found a "rule" by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled, but it is one based on social privilege, rather than being grounded in the observation of the common sentiments of human nature.

The problem of finding some standard of taste, inherited as it was from the discussion of morality, has therefore
failed as Hume is only able to find a model of consensus which has little to do with the senses. And as a social elite now determines matters of taste it must also take the lead in morality. So both moral and aesthetic matters, and perhaps even perception itself, are decided by those "good critics" who can conceal the direction of their own passions under a generally applicable rule.

Whatever the outcome of Hume's search for a standard by which individuals' passions and tastes can be compared, it is significant that this problem finds its fullest explication in the realm of the aesthetic. And the centrality of the aesthetic to Hume's philosophy is indicative of the importance mid-eighteenth century society accorded to matters concerning culture, taste, and the fine arts. The importance of the aesthetic was that it, unlike traditional appeals to moral universalism, provided support for the nascent and problematic commercial ideology. It is this aesthetic support for commerce we can see unfolding in Hume's political and aesthetic essays.

Hume sees an intrinsic link between commerce and the arts for they both come into existence at the same time; only when society progresses from the first "savage state," in which all have to fend for themselves, to a state where production exceeds consumption can society spare the people to develop the arts. In this way "the finer arts, which are commonly denominated the arts of luxury" arise (Of Commerce 256). The arts, in both the essays "Of Refinement in the Arts" and "Of
Commerce," seem to become synonymous with luxury. And in establishing a link between the arts and luxury Hume is implicitly registering the influence of classical republican theory. One of the central tenets of this theory was the perceived incompatibility between virtue and luxury. Within republican theory, luxury essentially meant the ability to produce more than a society could consume and so enabled labour to be redistributed. Society could then afford to employ people within industries or activities that were not essential to society's immediate needs. Classical republican theory saw this redistribution of labour as a profound threat to the state for one of the possible avenues of diversification might be the creation of a standing army. And standing armies, for Machiavelli and every republican, were an anathema to the well-being of the state for they pose the permanent threat of a military coup.

However, Hume seeks to undo this link between luxury and social disintegration. As he writes in the essay "Of Refinement in the Arts", "industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain" (271). As the specialization of labour produces "skillful weavers, and ship-carpenters," so we will also find great poets and philosophers. For Hume, these developments must also make man more sociable, so we see "an increase in humanity, from the very habit of conversing together, and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment" (271). Rather than the
destruction of liberty arising through the growth of commerce and the consonant rise of culture and the fine arts, Hume is suggesting, in direct contrast to republican theory, that liberty and communitarian values actually prosper under a modestly luxurious commerce.

We can, therefore, see how culture and the arts are aligned with pro-commercial thought in opposition to classical republicanism, for the arts are capable of civilizing man and ensuring the continuation of society. Hume explicitly refutes the republican teleologies which saw social disaster as the inevitable consequence of wealth and luxury. For instance, classical republicanism constructed a history of ancient Rome which blamed the fall of the republic on the growth of luxury. Hume describes it thus:

What has chiefly induced severe moralists to declaim against refinements in arts, is the example of ancient ROME, which joining to its poverty and rusticity virtue and public spirit, rose to such a surprising height of grandeur and liberty; but, having learned from its conquered provinces the ASiATIC luxury, fell into every kind of corruption; whence arose sedition and civil wars, attended at last by a total loss of liberty. (275)

Hume, however, denies that luxury can be blamed for the fall of ancient Rome, and suggests that those who construct such a history have mistakenly blamed the disorders on luxury, rather than on its "ill-modelled government, and the unlimited extent of conquests" (276). Refinement on the conveniences of life do not lead to corruption. In fact, states Hume, "the liberties of England, so far from decaying since the improvements in the
arts, have never flourished so much as during that period" (276-77).

Hume makes the more startling claim that liberty in fact rests with the creation of the merchant classes, the owners of mobile property, i.e., broadly speaking, the middle classes:

In rude unpolished nations, where the arts are neglected, all labour is bestowed on the cultivation of the ground; and the whole society is divided into two classes, proprietors of land, and their vassals or tenants. The latter are necessarily dependent, and fitted for slavery and subjection; especially where they possess not riches.... (277)

This balance cannot maintain a stable society, for the landowners become petty tyrants or attempt to assert their independence and so fall into feuds and contests. But it is luxury that promotes industry and commerce, and so peasants are able to become independent, and the tradesman and merchants resulting from the establishment of commerce "acquire a share of the property" (277). It is this middle class who, in direct opposition to republican theory, provide the firmest basis of public liberty, for they will not submit to slavery, as will the peasants, and equally will not tyrannize over others.

The status of this public liberty becomes clear in the essay entitled "Of Commerce." As we have already seen, the arts emerge when agriculture can produce a surplus of what it needs for those who work on the land. As Hume puts it: "time and experience improve so much these arts [agriculture], that the land may easily maintain a much greater number of men,
than those who are immediately employed in its culture..." (256). Those superfluous hands can then apply themselves to the arts of luxury. Within Hume’s economic theory everybody gains from the production of superfluities as every individual becomes his own middleman or merchant and exchanges his labour for the objects of passions; "Every thing in the world is purchased by labour... the superfluity, which arises from their [farmers’] labour, is not lost; but is exchanged with manufacturers for those commodities, which men’s luxury now makes them covet" (261).

As Jerome Christensen has noted, the commercial structure envisaged by Hume promises gain for all in managing to avoid assigning loss to anyone (Christensen 19). Hume’s economic theory, as Christensen goes on to point out, places most importance on the role of the merchant middleman, for it is the merchant’s role as the mediator between economic parties that oils the wheels of commerce. The privilege accorded to the merchant is meant to rebound on Hume’s own activity as an essayist or man of letters for the essayist is also a mediator in the intellectual transitions he makes between parties and ideas. But as Christensen perceptively remarks, this equation between merchant and essayist occludes "the crucial difference that capital (as opposed to mere intelligence or mere technical facility) makes in raising one economic agent to superiority over another" (Christensen 19). If we reinsert a notion of capital into Hume’s economic formulations then we
might emerge with a system that has to assign loss somewhere along the line.

Despite Hume’s vision of a perfectly oiled economy - one that ensures the continuous circulation of energy without loss - Hume seems to concede that there might be some losers. For instance, in Hume’s discussion of the role of the labourer, he establishes labour as a commodity which can be exchanged with other commodities. However, as Hume’s following discussion admits, the fact that labour can be exchanged means that it is also possible to exploit:

It is a violent method, and in most cases impracticable, to oblige the labourer to toil, in order to raise from the land more than what subsists himself and his family. Furnish him with manufactures and commodities, and he will do it of himself. Afterwards you will find it easy to seize some part of his superfluous labour, and employ it in the public service, without giving him his wonted return. (Of Commerce 262)

Exactly what this "public service" entails is unclear but it is likely that it involves the maintenance of an army which, no doubt, is involved in protecting the nation’s markets - foreign trade being high on Hume’s list of priorities. Indeed the equation between the wealth of a kingdom, its power and the happiness of the public seems remarkably circular, for as a country participates in foreign commerce so it builds up the "stock of labour" which can be "stored up against any public exigency" (261). Hume does not state what this "public exigency" might be but it would surely entail any threat to national boundaries and the nation’s mercantile activities.
The people who seem to lose within Hume's economic visions are those who are producing the surplus which can support the standing army.

In Hume's discussion of the response to a national emergency, we can clearly see that his economic formulations are going to have to assign loss somewhere along the line. When a sovereign raises an army, and levies a tax, society has to retrench, and, for Hume, those who labour in the commodities "must either enlist in the troops, or turn themselves to agriculture..." (261). Labourers might, in cases of national emergency, have to enlist in the army and it is here that loss might become most visible. As the only commodity which the labourer has is his own body, or labour, so he has to enter into the marketplace and with it all the vicissitudes of supply and demand. In the case of war this might culminate in the labourer forever being parted from his only capital as he is killed fighting for his country.

Hume's appeal to the aesthetic and to the growth of the "polite arts" as a guarantee of liberty would seem to have failed. For the aesthetic indeed may a measure of society's commercial progress, but it is progress gained at the expense of the liberty of others. So Hume's search for consensus, for a standard of taste, and his consonant turn to the aesthetic as the proof of liberty, has ended up elevating the passions of some members of society over others.

With such possibilities in mind we can see how far we
have travelled from the basic principles of Hume's philosophy. Hume was attempting to find some balance between individuals' passions and the social cohesion that would provide an arena for their operation. Hume, as we have seen, never managed to find either a moral standard or a standard of taste, or any other means by which consensus could be found among the individual impressions of diverse men. Thus, Hume consistently had to go outside of the body for any way towards finding such a standard. And as we have seen, it was the "good critics" who set the standard of taste and justified their own passions and desires under a general and universally applicable rule -- a rule established through the critics' social and economic position. So, Hume, perhaps despite himself, ends up condoning the passionally motivated actions of some individuals while finding social unity only at the expense of the liberty of others. And it is ironic that given Hume's passional epistemology the people who are constrained within this vision of society are those whose only capital is the body itself.
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