

Introduction

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The objective of this Critical Guide is to provide a series of in-depth studies on the *Essays* of David Hume, as well as an account of the state of scholarship. In Hume's lifetime, the *Essays* acquired considerable *éclat* throughout Europe and North America; they influenced the writings of such diverse figures as James Madison and William Paley, and they have since become a staple of undergraduate and graduate curricula in history, politics, and philosophy. Yet the *Essays* have received comparatively modest attention in the scholarship of Hume's life and thought. The early tradition of Hume's intellectual biography, pioneered by J. Y. T. Greig and Ernest Campbell Mossner, subordinated the *Essays* to Hume's *Treatise* and *Enquiries* as monuments of Hume's contribution to the history of philosophy. This tendency diminished in the 1970s and 1980s, when Duncan Forbes, J. G. A. Pocock and Istvan Hont placed the *Essays* at the heart of their studies of Hume's political thought and political economy.¹ The significance of the *Essays* in James Harris's *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (2015) bears witness to the importance that the work has since acquired in general reconstructions of Hume's intellectual commitments. However, there is no 'critical guide' to Hume's *Essays* in any language, with recent studies having focused more restrictively on Hume's political economy.² This book is intended to address this absence

¹ Duncan Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975); J. G. A. Pocock, 'Hume and the American Revolution: The Dying Thoughts of a North Britain', in J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 125–41; Istvan Hont, *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

² Carl Wennerlind and Margaret Schabas, eds., *David Hume's Political Economy* (New York, 2008); Angela Coventry and Andrew Walls, eds., *David Hume on Morals, Politics, and Society* (New Haven, CT, 2018). Hume's *History of England* has received comparatively greater attention: David Fate Norton and Richard H. Popkin, eds., *David Hume: Philosophical Historian* (Indianapolis, IN, 1965); Nicholas Capaldi and Donald Livingston, eds., *Liberty in Hume's History of England* (Dordrecht, 1990); Mark G. Spencer, ed., *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer* (University Park, PA, 2013).

by providing scholars and students with a wide-ranging and accessible overview of the *Essays*. The recent publication of the Clarendon Edition of Hume's *Essays* (E (C)) is timed propitiously. The extraordinary editorial work of Professor Beauchamp and Professor Box has provided an unparalleled resource for the interpretation of the *Essays*, with a rich apparatus and a granular account of the complex history of the work's publication. This Critical Guide has benefitted enormously from their labours.

Hume wrote in the advertisement to the first two books of *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) that he intended to 'proceed to the examination of morals, politics, and criticism'.³ His ambition was partly fulfilled by the third book of the *Treatise*, 'Of Morals', which he published in the following year.⁴ Yet 'politics' and 'criticism', the latter comprising literature, aesthetics, and taste, were more substantively explored in the *Essays*, which he published in two volumes in 1741 (fifteen essays) and 1742 (twelve essays). In a succession of editions, Hume added new essays, revising the existing essays continuously, and withdrew others entirely. E (C) builds its 'critical text' of the *Essays* on the basis of twenty-two distinctive 'editions', although the term must be used carefully. One such edition was Hume's *Political Discourses* (1752), which introduced a series of new essays to the collection. According to Hume's own testimony in his autobiography, 'My Own Life' (1776), *Political Discourses* was the only publication in his lifetime that was successful on its first printing.⁵ The *Essays* and the *Political Discourses* were published together as part of Hume's four-volume *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, first appearing in 1753 and continuously republished with alterations from the 1750s through to the 1770s. For the 1772 edition of the *Essays*, Hume claimed to have carefully read the proofs five times over.⁶ It is evident that he considered the work as a testament to his ingenuity; the posthumous edition of 1777 was to have included 'My Own Life', intimating the close association he had hoped to establish between the *Essays* and his accomplishments.

The Critical Guide begins by considering the eighteenth-century reception of the *Essays* (Part I), before examining their statements on philosophy and religion (Part II), politics (Part III), and political economy (Part IV). The richness of Hume's varied statements on philosophy, aesthetics,

³ T, I, p. 2.

⁴ Nicholas Phillipson, *David Hume* (Oxford, 2011), ch. 2; James A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge, 2015), pp. 154–66.

⁵ E (LF), p. xxxvi. ⁶ HL, II, p. 235.

politics, rhetoric, and political economy provoked a varied Anglophone and European reception. In Chapter 1, on Hume's British readers, Mark G. Spencer and Mikko Tolonen provide a synopsis of their wide-ranging investigation into textual reuse – a component of a wider programme of employing tools in digital humanities to study the reception of early modern texts. The frequent incidence of reuses of the *Essays* is more effectually recoverable by this process. Spencer and Tolonen have identified 1,050 cases of text reuse of Hume's essays in the eighteenth century, hundreds of which are 'hitherto unstudied'. These reuses ranged from plagiarism to paraphrase, where Hume's work was 'interpreted, even moulded' by authors to convey 'the gist of Hume's meanings or what they wanted it to be'. The duplicative processes of reuse often obscured Hume's authorship: *The Mitre and Crown* (1750) reprinted selections of 'no fewer than eight of Hume's essays' without attribution, except by reference to *The Craftsman*, where the essays had also appeared without attribution. Yet Hume's reception was not always silent. In primary-source compilations and popular 'readers', he found an extensive audience; these works, such as *The Beauties of English Prose* (1772), arguably 'served to bring Hume's essays, and usually his name, to many more readers than did any edition of his *Essays*'. The reuse of the essays in 'specialised compilations' on trade and commerce had the same dual character, sometimes in the space of one publication: the express attribution of the material to 'the ingenious Mr. Hume' in Malachy Postlethwayt's *The Universal Dictionary of Trade and Commerce* (1757) was coupled with the silent reuse of material elsewhere in the volume. Spencer and Tolonen trace the sentiment of the reception of the *Essays*, chronicling a distinctive shift from negative assessments prior to the 1760s to the laudatory appellations that attended Hume's 'canonization process' in the later eighteenth century.

In Chapter 2, on Hume's German reception, Lina Weber reveals the effects of this canonicity. By the later eighteenth century, pseudo-translations of works attributed to Hume revealed the 'significant reputation' that Hume enjoyed in German lands, 'such that publishers could expect to sell more copies of a travel guide if they presented it as a translation of a work by Hume'. Weber examines the publication history of Hume's *Vermischte Schriften*, a translation of Hume's *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* in four volumes that appeared between 1754 and 1756 in Hamburg and Leipzig. Hume's work was presented as 'markedly different and superior to German political and economic writings'. The reception of the collection was muted. German review journals had praised the English originals and French translations of the

various essays as ‘the most useful and innovative of Hume’s publications’.⁷ In contrast, *Vermischte Schriften* ‘was almost entirely ignored’. Weber observes that this attenuated reception ‘lies in the specifics of cameralism’, whose adherents were warmer proponents of physiocracy. Isaak Iselin read Hume’s *Essays* in the French translation twice in 1755, but had ‘difficulties comprehending them’ and ‘discounted Hume’s view on luxury as overly positive’. In the later eighteenth century, translators ‘tried to integrate Hume’s writings into German reform debates in the aftermath of the French Revolution’. Christian August Fischer’s edition of Hume’s essays, *David Hume’s Geist*, which Fischer conjoined with a biographical sketch, presented Hume’s work as the embodiment of a ‘spirit of peace and moderation, of agreeableness and tolerance’, which could countervail revolutionary fanaticism. In another guise, Garlieb Merkel’s translation of ‘Of the Original Contract’ and Rousseau’s *Du Contrat Social* (1762), published as *Hume’s und Rousseau’s Abhandlungen über den Urvertrag* (1797), utilised Hume in his ‘effort to abolish the institution of serfdom in his native Livonia’.

In Chapter 3, Laura Nicolì extends this overview of Hume’s reception to France. Hume’s residence in Paris between 1763 and 1766 was foregrounded by his celebrity status and terminated with the regrettable apogee of his public life, his ‘contestation’ with Rousseau. As Nicolì notes, it is ‘commonly acknowledged that Hume’s intellectual relationship with French thinkers represents something of a paradox’. Although Hume was ‘highly valued, the core of his philosophical thought remained basically uncomprehended in eighteenth-century France’. Moreover, Hume ‘never felt comfortable with the militant ideological afflatus of the *philosophes*’. The Le Blanc, Mauvillon, and Mérian translations were the most prominent of those that appeared in French; others, such as the anonymous *Essais sur le commerce*, published in Amsterdam in 1766 and attributed tentatively to Turgot, diffused Hume’s judgements to a Francophone readership by decoupling the essays on political economy from the remainder of his *Essays*. In addition to published books, the curiosity of French readers was satisfied by ‘translations, summaries, excerpts, and reviews’ that ‘came out in periodicals almost without interruption’. These were not merely derivative of the published volumes. Nicolì conjectures that Nicolas-Claude Thieriot, with the collaboration of Voltaire, provided the first translation of ‘Of National Characters’. The extent of interest commanded

⁷ Günther Gawlick and Lothar Kreimendahl, *Hume in der Deutschen Aufklärung, Umriss einer Rezeptionsgeschichte* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1987), pp. 68–70.

by Hume's writings was reflected by the translation in manuscript, evidently 'for her own amusement', by the young woman of letters Geneviève de Malboissière. France provided a separate venue for the publication of Hume's suppressed essays, 'Of Suicide' and 'Of the Immortality of the Soul', which found their way into print in 1770 through the offices of the Baron d'Holbach and his *coterie*. Nicoli shows that the process of translation was not free of interpolation; the addition of a 'heavy paratext' by Le Blanc typified the tendency of translators 'strategically' to direct their reader 'to a certain interpretation of the work'. In Nicoli's judgement, the *parti pris* conduct of reading and translation reflected a general inclination among Hume's French readers 'to find in Hume's words an exit from despotism and a path towards social happiness'. The chapter is keyed to three online open-access appendices: a chronology of eighteenth-century French translations of Hume's *Essays*; an inventory of publications and review of Hume's *Essays* in eighteenth-century French periodicals; and some other French reuses and responses to Hume's *Essays*.

In Chapter 4, Margaret Watkins returns to the subject of her recent monograph on the *Essays* as 'philosophy'.⁸ Watkins contends that 'the form of the *Essays* implies an ongoing philosophical project with a significant sceptical difference from the systemic form of the *Treatise*'. In the latter, Hume conducts a search for general principles 'within a bounded domain': the human mind. In the *Essays*, Hume broadens his scope to an 'expanded set of questions'. A 'remarkable' difference in form distinguishes the works further. The *Treatise* has a 'unity of shape', which the *Essays* lack, with their frequent recourse to 'dichotomies or more complex divisions'. As Watkins observes, Hume often 'guides his readers through this process multiple times within a single essay. And the available branches at the end may not be at all what they appeared at the beginning'. If the *Treatise* portrays philosophy 'as a project one might complete', the *Essays* 'teach that philosophical thinking is never complete': 'a more profoundly sceptical pedagogy'.

In Chapter 5, this interest in form complements Tim Stuart-Buttle's exploration of Hume's 'essays on happiness', the term coined by John Immerwahr to describe 'The Epicurean', 'The Stoic', 'The Platonist' and 'The Sceptic', the four essays unified by a shared objective 'to explain accurately the sentiments of the ancient sects of philosophy'. As Stuart-Buttle writes, the essays 'disclose the extent of Hume's attentiveness to the relationship between literary form and philosophical content'. To interpret

⁸ Margaret Watkins, *The Philosophical Progress of Hume's Essays* (Cambridge, 2019).

the essays, we must accept ‘Hume’s caution to his reader that each essay is an exercise in “personation” or philosophical ventriloquism’. Stuart-Buttle asks why Hume adopts the form of a monologue, in lieu of the more conventional use of dialogue. The answer lies with Hume’s judgement of the dialogic form, as practised by Cicero, in which the interlocutors are guided to truth by the admonition and intercession of the wiser symposiast. Hume had identified the value of employing the ancient sects as analogues to the interlocutors in modern philosophical debate; as Stuart-Buttle notes, ‘modern moral philosophers identified themselves – or, more commonly, their antagonists – with one or other of the ancient sects, by critiquing those sects an author could comment indirectly (but intelligibly) on the errors of their modern disciples’. Yet no one *porte-parole* of the sects speaks for Hume: ‘the Stoic offers criticisms of the Epicurean, the Platonist of the Stoic and Epicurean, and the Sceptic of all three that there is good reason to think Hume shared’. No philosophy ‘displaces the other’. Where the younger Hume had favoured Stoicism as his guide, with ruinous consequences, the Hume of the *Essays* enjoins his readers to ‘sample the works of representatives of *all* the philosophical schools, because doing so will lead to self-knowledge’.

In Chapter 6, the purpose of philosophy recurs as the subject of Timothy Costelloe’s discussion of aesthetics and the arts in the *Essays*. It is in connection with the discussion of ‘the arts’ and its synonyms that Hume contributed to ‘aesthetics’, although he never formulated a ‘systematic presentation of his views’. Costelloe notes that the closest Hume came to this systematic exposition was in the series of essays devoted to ‘pertinent topics’, which Costelloe dubs the ‘aesthetic essays’: ‘Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion’, ‘Of Eloquence’, ‘Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing’, ‘Of Tragedy’, and ‘Of the Standard of Taste’. The essays cannot be interpreted independently of the ‘more general principles that Hume had framed already’, which Costelloe illustrates with case studies of Hume on taste, literary style and artistic representation, tragedy, and the history and political economy of the arts. The application of these general principles is revealed by the parallel between the discovery of the general principles of morals, accessible by analysing ‘that complication of moral qualities’ that constitute ‘PERSONAL MERIT’, as Hume had noted in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), and the discovery of the ‘principles of taste’, which can be ‘ascertained by analysing qualities of objects that constitute *aesthetic* merit, and this is achieved methodologically by cataloguing works that excite “durable admiration”, as Hume would note in ‘Of the Standard of Taste’.

The *Essays* may seem to not have much to say about religion, with ‘Of Superstition and Enthusiasm’ (1741) being the exception. In Chapter 7, however, R. J. W. Mills shows that when the topic of religion arises in the *Essays*, we find Hume outlining the character and dangers of institutional religion on individual happiness and social stability and doing so in an analytical manner characteristic of his wider ‘science of man’. Mills argues that Hume reduced religious belief and priestly power to the level of any other aspect of human life, susceptible of the ‘scientific’ observation that could lead to the identification of general principles. Piecing together Hume’s various discussions of religion in the *Essays*, Mills finds Hume articulating a strong anticlericalism, in which religion is understood to be a natural propensity of human nature, exploited by priesthoods claiming power over others. In Hume’s judgement, this exploitation required the subordination of church to state and our scepticism about clerical power.

In Chapter 8, Danielle Charette observes that Hume’s concern with general principles is reaffirmed in the ostensibly ‘speculative’ ‘Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth’. Charette clarifies that this essay is cogently interpretable as a response not only to Harrington’s *Oceana* (1656) but also to Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), particularly Montesquieu’s criticism of *Oceana* in his chapter ‘On the English Constitution’, which might have ‘prompted Hume to devise his alternative version of Harrington’s commonwealth’. Hume attacked Harrington’s definition of a commonwealth ‘at both its “foundation” (i.e. the Agrarian law) and its “superstructure” (i.e. equal rotation)’. Hume’s intention was to rebuild an *Oceana* according to ‘different principles’. Though he was not inclined to hem this contemplated republic within narrow territorial bounds; we should resist ‘the conventional assumption that Hume wrote “Perfect Commonwealth” with the aim of undermining Montesquieu’s position that republican states must be small’. Moreover, Hume did not conceive of the Perfect Commonwealth as a utopia, a place of non-existence in the ambiguous sense conveyed by the term; the exercise was worth pursuing ‘so that we may be able to bring any real constitution or form of government as near as possible’ to the most perfect model, ‘by such gentle alterations and innovations as may not give too great disturbance to society’.⁹ In this, Hume was obedient to the observable restrictions of political society and the lessons of history. Hume accepted ‘Harrington’s basic thesis that an historical shift in the balance of property had empowered parliament and transformed England into a government of

⁹ *E* (LF), pp. 513–14, *E* (C), p. 363.

laws', but 'he did not conclude that this shift necessitated a return to either the "equal agrarian" or "equal rotation" of offices on which Harrington founded Oceana'. Instead, Hume adapted Harrington's electoral framework to the spirit of commerce and competition that he and Montesquieu associated with modern England.

In Chapter 9, Max Skjönsberg illuminates another significant aspect of Hume's political thought: party. As Skjönsberg notes, 'Whig-Tory as well as Court-Country alignments' were 'integral' to British politics as Hume conceived of it, 'with the former dividing the political nation along religious and at least to an extent dynastic lines, and the latter reflecting parliamentary conflict and the workings of the mixed and balanced constitution'. Hume's historical inclinations are again present in 'Of Parties in General', with its recitation of the incidence of party in present and past polities. Party revealed the operation of a general tendency in human nature 'to dispute and seek to convert others'. 'Of the Parties of Great Britain' expressed a similar tendency to generalizable propositions about the conduct of politics; in Hume's judgement, 'party division was inevitable in mixed governments such as the British, delicately balanced between its monarchical and republican elements'. Hume returned to the contents of this essay in the ensuing years, revising it more than any other, as he sought to keep pace with the permutations of the political landscape, particularly in the form of Jacobitism in relation to the rising of 'Forty-five'. 'Of the Original Contract', 'Of Passive Obedience', and 'Of the Protestant Succession' each embodied Hume's critical engagement with the shibboleths of party in mid eighteenth-century England and Scotland. Each exemplified Hume's intention to 'sound a note of moderation amid division and pacify party animosity by revealing the strengths and weaknesses of the Tories' and Whigs' ideologies alike'.

As Ross Carroll observes in Chapter 10, this preparedness to contemplate the merits of legislation extended to Hume's discussion of political rhetoric. 'Of Eloquence' has confounded scholars on account of Hume's overt praise for 'ancient examples of political practice, particularly given his sensitivity to the historical gulf separating ancient and modern societies, and his unease with the demagoguery he considered characteristic of ancient polities'; the essay 'risks incoherence because Hume seems to backtrack in the essay's final paragraphs on his initial recommendation that English orators emulate the ancients'. In Carroll's judgement, the essay 'does possess an underlying coherence and offers a compelling account of both why English oratory had lagged behind that of other nations such as France and how it could yet be reformed'. Remedying this

deficiency demanded the recognition that its cause was owed ‘less to the unsuitability of pathetic speech to a modern commercial society, than to the peculiar place of Parliament in Britain’s mixed constitutional order’. This conceit was criticised by Hugh Blair, who believed Hume ‘had possibly overstated the similarity between the popular assemblies of Athens or Rome and the eighteenth-century House of Commons’. Moreover, it required a defence of a Parliament in its present form, where the crown could dispose of offices of state – the mark of corruption, according to Country sentiment. The reform of rhetoric envisioned by Hume necessitated his readers’ concession that ‘deliberative oratory had always to compete for the attention of listeners with the distant directives and inducements of the Court’. But to reform the latter – to the detriment of the crown’s influence – would jeopardise ‘England’s peculiar constitutional order’.

This concern about the threats posed to political society in England suffuses several essays, but it acquires unusual prominence in Hume’s treatment of political economy. The essays on political economy were not uniformly alarmist enjoinders to reform, although Hume’s warning over the threat posed by public debt is perhaps his best known pronouncement in the work *en bloc*. Sylvana Tomaselli, in Chapter 11, locates Hume in the eighteenth-century debate on population. His essay ‘Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations’ engaged with Montesquieu’s account of the same subject. Montesquieu’s ‘interest in the causal relations between mores, social practices and political institutions’ necessitated Hume’s occupation of the same ground, ensuring that the essay would contain ‘several of Hume’s interesting views on history, human nature, and politics’. Hume believed that the debate ‘mattered’ since it was ‘indicative of peoples’ “whole police, their manners, and the constitution of their government”.¹⁰ Tomaselli observes that Hume’s concerns related to an epistemic restriction on discovering the present population of Europe. The matter ‘seemed so uncertain to him that, in the absence of secure data, he would “intermingle the enquiry concerning *causes* with that concerning *facts*; which ought never to be admitted, where the facts can be ascertained with any tolerable assurance”.¹¹ Yet Hume’s concerns were not confined only to the determination of causes, since he believed that his inquiry could form the basis of a political remedy: ‘Hume implicitly positioned himself as having a rather grander aim in endeavouring to identify the constraints on demographic growth and, presumably,

¹⁰ *E* (LF), pp. 378–79, *E* (C), p. 281.

¹¹ *E* (LF), pp. 377–78, *E* (C), pp. 279–80.

encouraging their removal'. As Hume noted, 'it seems natural to expect, that, wherever there are more happiness and virtue, and the wisest institution, there will also be most people'.¹²

In Chapter 12 by Margaret Schabas, we find Hume engaged with the problem of economic inequality. On this subject, Hume was averse to egalitarianism: '[t]here will always be rich and poor, he believed, and property rights should trump compassion for the less well-off'. As Schabas writes, property and rank were, in Hume's judgement, 'by-products of our deeply-rooted passions for pride and envy, and essential for sustaining the upward trajectory of commercial prosperity and political stability that Hume celebrated in his own kingdom'. A 'perfect equality of possessions', Hume observed in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, would 'soon degenerate into tyranny'.¹³ This belief informed Hume's vision of preferable economic policy. Hume 'firmly believed that greater equality of *income* tends to increase aggregate happiness for the nation as a whole, and he broached various policies for taxes and trade to achieve these ends'. He wished to see 'ordinary labourers enjoy higher wages and lift themselves out of poverty through the acquisition of skills', while enlarging the membership of the 'middle station', increasing 'the number of tradesmen, merchants, and manufacturers'. In contrast with the received view, which holds that Adam Smith 'was the first major economist to acknowledge the plight of the lower orders', it is evident that Hume was 'of a similar mind'.

In Chapter 13 by Tom Hopkins, Hume turns to the compatibility of commercial change with the recalcitrant but remediable inclinations of human nature. According to Hume, 'the industry of individuals could be turned to the service of the public; the cultivation of reason would serve in the perfection of the laws and of the arts of government; and the diffusion of humane maxims of conduct and habits of civility would moderate the rigour of the magistrates and the zeal of partisans alike'. This implicated the history of commerce and the arts in the 'natural history of justice and property' that Hume had adumbrated in the *Treatise*, and it served as 'the basis for an extended critique of Locke's account of the origin of political society in contract'. This critique extended to Locke's monetary theory, which Hume's elaboration of the price-specie flow mechanism criticised to destructive effect. Yet the thrust of Hume's critique stemmed from a completely disparate vision of the relationship between the state and the economy. For Locke, the 'instability of money as a standard of value

¹² *E* (LF), p. 382, *E* (C), pp. 281–82. ¹³ *EPM*, p. 21.

provoked an anxious search for means by which it could be confined to its proper function of giving circulation to wealth without subverting the established property order and with it, civil society'. In Hume's eyes, there 'was no need to entrust the fortunes of commercial society to regulative principles that were both artificial and arbitrary', as Locke had suggested; 'what was required for nations to flourish was the patient application of an ever-more refined prudential judgement on the part of statesmen'.

As these summaries testify, Hume's *Essays* alighted on an extraordinary array of topics. Yet these topics were not co-extensive with the boundaries of Hume's interests. Understanding the *Essays* is not a surrogate for understanding Hume's thought *simpliciter*, but the *Essays* are now indispensable to the exercise. We do not pretend that these chapters offer an exhaustive summary of the *Essays*. However, we hope that the Guide will shed light on many of the *Essays*' more important features, while also prompting fresh research into their composition, their arguments, and their reception. Hume's renown and notoriety were secured principally by his work as a historian and philosopher, but it is as an essayist – as an 'Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation'¹⁴ – where he is at his most engaging.

¹⁴ *E* (LF), p. 535, *E* (C), p. 4.

