

Opinion, Contagion, and
Enthusiasm in Hume’s
“Historical Essay on
Chivalry and Modern
Honour” and *The History
of England*

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Abstract: Recent research on David Hume has highlighted the significance of opinion in his political philosophy. In *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* and *The History of England*, Hume emphasizes the significance of established customs and opinion as guides for appropriate governance, supported by an underlying claim that enthusiasm cannot subsist for a long time. This study revisits these two views with a focus on Hume’s unfinished manuscript “Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honour” and his descriptions of puritan enthusiasm as contagion and various conspiracies in the *History*. The study demonstrates that Hume fully appreciated three points. First, some extraordinary customs have persisted longer than the dominant interpretation of Hume may suggest. Second, such customs cannot be justified by either their longevity or spontaneity. Third, it is difficult, if not impossible, for those living in extraordinary circumstances to evaluate them appropriately. Examining these three points primarily through the lens of political epistemology, Hume argues that both extraordinary and salutary institutions can arise from the operations and principles of the same human nature and persist for a long time.

Keywords: chivalry, enthusiasm, conspiracy, political epistemology, psychology

INTRODUCTION

Recently, several studies have highlighted the significance of opinion in Hume’s political philosophy (Susato 2015; Stuart-Buttle 2019; Sager 2021). In *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* and *The History of England*, he often repeats the significance of established customs and opinion as guides for appropriate governance. In the essay “Of the First Principles of Government,” Hume claims that “on opinion only that government is founded” (E 32; see also E 512).¹ In another instance, he endorses that “in the general distribution of power among the several members of a constitution, there can seldom be admitted any other question, than *What is established?*” (H 4: 355). Hume’s reasoning is founded on another claim—that enthusiasm cannot subsist for a long time. The essay “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” reveals the seemingly optimistic view that enthusiasm (or religious frenzy) tends to wither over a short period of time. These two perspectives not only support Hume’s image as a conservative but are also premised by another strand of Hume

scholarship that evaluates him as a precursor of coordination theory (Sabl 2012). For example, Schabas and Wennerlind (2020) state that “Hume’s discourse is replete with appeals to ‘the multitude’ that are equivalent to mean-reverting tendencies, as in the case of throwing a weighted die to detect its bias” (p. 71).

This study revisits these two views with a focus on Hume’s unfinished manuscript “Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honour” and his descriptions of puritans’ enthusiasm in *The History of England*. In doing so, it aims to demonstrate that Hume fully appreciated three points. First, some extraordinary customs have continued longer than the dominant interpretation of Hume may suggest. Second, these customs cannot be justified by either their longevity or spontaneity. Third, it is difficult, if not impossible, for those living in extraordinary circumstances to evaluate them appropriately. By examining these three points through the lens of political epistemology, this study argues that, for Hume, both extraordinary and salutary institutions can arise from the operations and principles of the same human nature and persist for a long time. The term “extraordinary” here implies the extent to which the situation was realized because of accidental circumstances, considering the human faculties assumed by Hume.

These considerations lead to a more significant question regarding the compatibility of Hume’s alleged defense of established opinions or institutions with his criticism of other long-established but less meritorious counterparts. This study does not aim to provide an unequivocal answer to this question, as it can be argued that no single answer is applicable here. Although public interest may point to a likely answer, Hume refutes this: “though men be much governed by interest; yet even interest itself, and all human affairs, are entirely governed by *opinion*” (E 51; italics original). This indicates that even if a people living in a particular time judge a certain system to be in the public interest, posterity may differ in opinion because of changes in the conditions that define the very notion of public interest. Antiquity or spontaneity may be another possible answer, but, as shown below, there are many spontaneous institutions and customs that Hume criticizes despite, if not because of, their antiquity. The proper examination of these questions would require a book-length investigation.

Our present aim is to focus on the fact that, despite his seeming optimism in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” Hume is keenly aware of the potential sustainability of customs or a mental state detracted from nature (such as enthusiasm) over a prolonged period. The mere fact of this recognition by Hume can serve to position him as one of the pioneers of political epistemology. Edenberg and Hannon (2021) define this new subject as a field of study that “includes work on propaganda and misinformation, political disagreement, polarization, conspiracy theories, the epistemology of democracy, voter ignorance and irrationality, skepticism wielded for political purposes, and the epistemic virtues (and vices) of citizens, politicians, and political institutions” (p. 1). Some unexplored aspects of Hume’s political philosophy can be best analyzed as a pioneering approach to political epistemology.

This study comprises three sections: the first section presents Hume’s argument on enthusiasm and draws a comparison between enthusiasm and chivalry in terms of each psychological mechanism. The second section explores his description in *The History of England* regarding the psychological state of people in conspiracies, either fictitious or factual, which reveals how Hume’s favored antidote against enthusiasm, such as conversation in ordinary life (e.g., T 1.4.7.9), loses its curative power. The third and final section discusses the difficulty of distinguishing between what Sabl (2008, pp. 44-46) terms “pseudo-conventions” and the more salutary institutions whose sustenance Hume recommends.

COMPARISON BETWEEN ENTHUSIASM AND CHIVALRY

In the essay “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm,” Hume contrasts two psychological phenomena; superstition inclines toward external ceremonies and has an affinity to the religious orders, whereas enthusiasm refers to “the fancy in the invisible regions or world of spirits, where the soul is at liberty to indulge itself in every imagination, which may best suit its present taste and disposition” (E 74). As early as this essay (published in 1741), Hume points out how enthusiasm defangs human reason and morality, which constitutes the basis

of his opposition to it: “When this frenzy once takes place, which is the summit of enthusiasm, every whim-
sy is consecrated: Human reason, and even morality are rejected as fallacious guides” (E 75).

However, the tone of his argument is not cynical, because he believes that such *acqua alta* is unsustainable: “religions, which partake of enthusiasm are, on their first rise, more furious and violent than those which partake of superstition; but in a little time become more gentle and moderate” (E 76; italics original). He repeats the phrase “in a little time” in the same context on the next page: “its fury is like that of thunder and tempest, which exhaust themselves in a little time” (E 77). Together with his relatively positive evaluation of enthusiasm as “a friend to” or a catalyst for liberty (E 78), Hume’s serious concerns about enthusiasm do not come to the fore here, although he continued to investigate its danger in the *History*.

Accordingly, this study focuses on the stamina of enthusiasm. Hume’s depiction of the Civil War in the *History* does not illustrate such short-lived periods of enthusiasm. Rather, he often underlines or even criticizes the long duration and wide influence of “unnatural” mental states or customs. Hume uses Christianity as one example, but the same psychological mechanism may exist in chivalry as well. His view on chivalry can be found in the *History*; however, this study focuses on his unpublished manuscript, “Historical Essay upon Chivalry and Modern Honour,” which comprises only four leaves, written on both sides. Although the final part (or sheet, probably) of this essay is lost, the general line of argument is clear from the surviving parts. This essay has recently been estimated to have been composed in the early 1730s, although Hume scholars have disputed its precise dating.² As the title suggests, this manuscript surveys the collapse of the Roman Empire and the rise of chivalry as an amalgamation of the former culture and that of the Germanic people.

Hume explains the underlying psychological mechanism whereby the Germanic invaders were overwhelmed by the accomplished arts of the conquered Romans. By generalizing this historical process into the operations of human nature, he also illustrates how humans tend to deviate from reason and experience and are easily tempted by wild imagination:

Tis observable of the Human Mind, that when it is smit with any Idea of Merit or Perfection, beyond what its Faculties can attain, & in the pursuit of which, it uses not Reason & Experience for its Guide, it knows no Mean, but as it gives the Rein & even adds the Spur to every florid Conceit or Fancy, runs in a moment quite wide of Nature (HC 3).

Notably, Hume explains the rise of chivalry through the same mental mechanism that he deploys in accounting for enthusiasm, while acknowledging the long-term influence of chivalry upon modern manners. A detailed analysis of Hume’s view of chivalry, therefore, facilitates the reconsideration of his alleged optimism that religious enthusiasm is short-lived.

The quotation HC 3 from the “Historical Essay” sufficiently demonstrates that Hume explains the rise of chivalry through a similar mechanism as that of enthusiasm. Interestingly, Hume compares the state in which chivalry spreads and influences people’s minds to a “fairy-ground,” or “a perfect new World of its own, inhabited by different Beings, & regulated by different Laws, from this of ours” (HC 3). Certainly, Hume admits that people are always drawn back from this new imaginary world into the real one: “but as Nature is apt still on every Occasion to recall it thither it must undermine it by Art, & retiring altogether from the Commerce of Mankind” (HC 3). In the subordinate clause, Hume displays a mitigated skepticism or naturalism, implying the impossibility of maintaining a Pyrrhonian position on a long-term basis. However, he also describes in the main clause how forceful and dominant the power of artifices is. He mentions that “[t]he same thing is observable in Philosophy, which tho [sic] it cannot produce a different World in which we may wander, makes us act in this as if we were different Beings from the Rest of Mankind” (HC 3).

Nevertheless, Hume also indicates the possibility that people would be able to sustain this imaginary world for a long time by adapting their behavioral patterns to its new standards of value. Here, we find the subversion of values—the more we depart from nature, the more it is esteemed.

And in this case of an imagin'd Merit, the farther our Chimera's hurry us from Nature, & the Practice of the World, the better pleas'd we are, as valuing ourselves upon the Singularity of our Notions, & thinking we depart from the rest of mankind only by flying above them (HC 3).

In the *History*, Hume details the process of spreading chivalric manners from a more historical angle. According to him, chivalry was introduced in England around the time of the Norman Conquest and was “cultivated and embellished by the poets and romance writers of the age” (H 1: 486). The chivalric mode attained an extreme during the Crusades: “the most signal and most durable monument of human folly, that has yet appeared in any age or nation” (H 1: 234). Hume condemns the Crusades, but not chivalry in general, as it had both negative and positive effects on modern manners. One of the most important features of chivalry is the combination of the ancient priority of martial valor with the modern value of gallantry:

These ideas of chivalry infected the writings, conversation, and behaviour of men, during some ages; and even after they were, in a great measure, banished by the revival of learning, they left modern *gallantry* and the *point of honour*, which still maintain their influence, and are the genuine offspring of those ancient affectations (H 1: 487; italics original).

He wonders at the strange combination of “the most effeminate superstition” with “the most heroic courage, and with the fiercest barbarity” by exclaiming, “So inconsistent is human nature with itself!” (H 1: 250. Cf. H 2: 532, H 3: 318; Hanley 2007). Tracing its history, Hume investigates the continuous influence of chivalry on the fashion of dueling (H 5: 133; Cf. H 5: 238n) and the sexual licentiousness of gallantry in the Stuart dynasty (H 6: 539). Hume's discussions on chivalry both in the “Historical Essay” and the *History* evince that it spread widely and endured over a prolonged period, despite the odd amalgamation of ideas.

Two points should be heeded on the relationship between Hume's views of chivalry and enthusiasm. First, Hume's utilization of the same psychological explanation for the rise and spread of both chivalry and enthusiasm is exemplified by his use of the expression “infected” in the above quotation (H 1: 487) to explain the spread of chivalry. A similar phrase, “social contagion,” is used in describing enthusiasm in the *History* (and the process of spreading habits and customs peculiar to each nation is also called “contagion” in the essay “Of National Characters”(E 202)). Second, for Hume, both enthusiasm and chivalry are examples of unintended consequences—the rise of enthusiasm served to establish liberty in England, whereas chivalric codes formed the basis of politeness in the modern world. Certainly, there are remarkable contrasts between chivalry and enthusiasm: the first had more affinity with monarchy and the court culture (such as dueling and gallantry), whereas religious enthusiasm in its puritanical form was more averse to monarchy. Nevertheless, in both cases, extraordinary manners and ways of thinking were widely accepted and the deviation from common life was accelerated (Susato 2015, p. 129, n20).

Therefore, Hume's views of chivalry and enthusiasm evince very “Humean” characteristics. This is demonstrated in his repetition and development of the same mechanism not only in the essay on enthusiasm and the *History*, but also in the *First* and *Second Enquiries*. In the *First Enquiry*, he criticizes the theory of occasionalism by claiming that “it has carried us quite beyond the reach of our faculties, when it leads to conclusions so extraordinary, and so remote from common life and experience. We are got into fairy land” (EHU 7.24). However, this could be a mere storm in a teacup. He maintains, “Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous” (T 1.4.7.13). Therefore, the more serious consequences would be anticipated from the unnatural and extravagant cultures and customs sustained over longer periods. This situation is mentioned in Hume's argument on “Artificial Lives” in “A Dialogue” of the *Second Enquiry*, as detailed subsequently.

CONSPIRACIES IN HUME'S *HISTORY*

Bearing the relationship between Hume's views of chivalry and enthusiasm in mind, this section explores his descriptions of various conspiracies at a time when religious enthusiasm heavily affected people's mentality. Hume's exposition of conspiracies clarifies the processes of people's deviation from common life through enthusiasm. At the beginning of Chapter 45, Hume describes the religious meetings called "prophesy" among the puritans as follows:

where alternately, as moved by the spirit, they displayed their zeal in prayers and exhortations, and raised their own enthusiasm, as well as that of their audience, to the highest pitch, from that social contagion, which has so mighty an influence on holy fervours, and from the mutual emulation, which arose in those trials of religious eloquence (H 5: 12-13).

The use of not only "social contagion" but also "the mutual emulation" is noteworthy. This identifies the mechanism through which religious enthusiasm accelerates people's deviation from the normal state. In Chapter 57, through the character description of the Independents, he delineates that, once enthusiasm was widely accepted, it became "the immediate means of distinction and preferment." "Every man, as prompted by the warmth of his temper, excited by emulation, or supported by his habits of hypocrisy, endeavored to *distinguish himself beyond his fellows, and to arrive at a higher pitch of saintship and perfection*" (H 5: 441; italics added). This is a repetition of Hume's description of the psychological mechanism on the rise of chivalry in the "Historical Essay." Once existing values were overturned, people began to reinforce it through mutual competition.

Such a cascading effect, as it were, appears more prominently in conspiracies, which Hume mentions in the Stuart volumes of the *History*. Although the word "conspiracy" frequently appears in the previous volumes, the conspiracies dealt with in the Stuart volumes are those which involved wide sections of society, not only the elite. The most conspicuous example is the Popish Plot, although it belongs to a later period than the other conspiracies:

The terror of each man became the source of terror to another. And an [sic] universal panic being diffused, reason and argument and common sense and common humanity lost all influence over them. From this disposition of men's minds, we are to account for the progress of the Popish Plot, and the credit given to it; an event, which would otherwise appear prodigious and altogether inexplicable (H 6: 333).

Hume clearly maintains that the Popish Plot cannot be understood without presupposing a certain "disposition of men's minds." It is also noteworthy that once people fall into such a state, it negates the powers of human reason, common sense, and humanity ("humanism" in our parlance) that tend to keep them grounded. He repeatedly makes the same observation throughout his narrative of the Popish Plot (H 6: 341; see also H 6: 347).

Hume admits that there were certainly some who did not lose their senses even in this situation. However, they pretended to follow others because they had neither courage nor interest to resist popular opinion. Even worse, these pretenders behaved as others' oppressors in the vanguard:

We may even conclude from such impatience of contradiction, that the prosecutors themselves retained a secret suspicion, that the general belief was but ill-grounded. The politicians among them were afraid to let in light, lest it might put an end to so useful a delusion: The weaker and less dishonest party took care, by turning their eyes aside, not to see a truth, so opposite to those furious

passions, by which they were actuated, and in which they were determined obstinately to persevere (H 6: 361-362).

Hume also observes the difficulty inherent in religious people being conscious of their own hypocrisy: “The religious hypocrisy, it may be remarked, is of a peculiar nature; and being generally unknown to the person himself, though more dangerous, it implies less falsehood than any other species of insincerity” (H 6: 142). In this sense, the word “hypocrisy” has a more complex implication for Hume than we tend to imagine—hypocrites could be blind to their own hypocrisy. Pretending oppressors who would have been conscious of their own hypocrisy may have gradually become impervious to it. Elsewhere, Hume casts doubts on some Parliamentary leaders’ awareness of their pretentious enthusiasm (H 5: 527). Nevertheless, he keenly acknowledges the difficulty in maintaining the naïve dichotomy between hypocrisy and honesty or the conscious and unconscious under such circumstances.

In the *History*, Hume examines the “Gunpowder Plot” in Chapter 46 and the “Conspiracy in Ireland” in Chapter 55 of Volume 5. He depicts the first as “one of the most memorable, that history has conveyed to posterity, and containing at once a singular proof both of the strength and weakness of the human mind; *its widest departure from morals*, and most steady attachment to religious prejudices” (H 5: 25; italics added). In the chapter following the Gunpowder Plot (Chapter 47), Hume reiterates the psychological mechanism of “a gloomy and sullen disposition established itself among the people” as expounded in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm”:

The mind, straining for these extraordinary raptures, reaching them by short glances, sinking again under its own weakness, rejecting all exterior aid of pomp and ceremony, was so occupied in this inward life, that it fled *from every intercourse of society, and from every chearful [sic] amusement, which could soften or humanize the character* (H 5: 67; italics added).

Such circumstances were not limited among the puritans in England. In Chapter 55, Hume depicts the Irish Catholics who rose in revolt against the English settlers: “Amidst all these enormities, the sacred name of Religion resounded on every side; not to stop the hands of these murderers, but to enforce their blows, and to steel their hearts *against every movement of human or social sympathy*” (H 5: 343; italics added). Here, Hume depicts the atrocities of the Irish against the English planters who surrendered without further resistance. Although Hume ascribes such inhumanity partially to the national character of the Irish, he also claims that this was triggered and reinforced by the accelerated deviation from normality.

Although these conspiracies and the subsequent revolts were transient in themselves, Hume’s narratives of these religious events evince the temperament of the time, which enabled people to behave as such. For example, at the beginning of Chapter 59, in the section describing how the new model army was confronted by the royal army, Hume depicts how “shame, obligation and the feeling of honor,” which would have had significant authority in a normal situation, lost their power:

Among the generality of men, educated in regular, civilized societies, the sentiments of shame, duty, honour, have considerable authority, and serve to counterbalance and direct the motives, derived from private advantage: But, by the predominancy of enthusiasm among the parliamentary forces, these salutary principles lost their credit, and were regarded as mere human inventions, yea moral institutions, fitter for heathens than for christians [sic]. ... And, besides the strange corruptions engendered by this spirit, it eluded and loosened all the ties of morality, and gave entire scope, and even sanction, to the selfishness and ambition, which naturally adhere to the human mind (H 5: 493).

It was not only these sound principles that lost their power. In addition, Hume warns, “Learning itself, which tends so much to enlarge the mind, and humanize the temper, rather served on this occasion to ex-

alt that epidemical frenzy which prevailed” (H 5: 348-349). Similar remarks by Hume can be found in the *History* (H 5: 131) and his other works.

Hume’s primary concern, the spread of enthusiasm, cannot be ascribed to its rampancy. Once the society is infected by enthusiasm, sympathy, humanity, or learning sometimes serve to normalize the abnormal circumstance, rather than restore normalcy. Hume details the subjugation of the ordinarily deterrent forces such as conversation, sympathy, and learning by the acceleration of mutual emulation to deviate from banality in the same way that he explains the rise and spread of chivalry. He certainly depicts the consequential if not intended effect of enthusiasm in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” in a more positive light. However, when reading Hume’s narrative of the inhumanity and the nonchalant attitude toward it during the Civil War, it is dubious if he justifies these sacrifices in consequentialist terms.

Another significant point is that the times of religious fervor continued for more than half a century, even if the period is limited from the beginning of the seventeenth century up to the Restoration in 1660 (the Popish Plot allegations, however, arose in 1678, after the Restoration). Although the panic triggered by these conspiracies did not persist, “the gloomy enthusiasm” continued much longer than is suggested in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm.”

These occurrences imply that Hume’s claims regarding the relatively rapid dissipation of enthusiasm in “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” should not be deemed as determinate. At least, Hume may be of the opinion that such an exceptional situation could exert a more continuous long-term influence, as in the case of chivalry.

“ARTIFICIAL LIVES” AND “WHAT IS ESTABLISHED”

The aforementioned discussions imply that extraordinary psychological states can occur spontaneously and persist for a long time; therefore, these are not justifiable on account of their spontaneity or antiquity. In addition, once such a psychological state is widely accepted, Hume claims, neither common life nor conversation (nor learning) can restore the normal state. This is attributable to Hume’s assumption that people with such mental states do not evaluate the situation’s legitimacy or merits appropriately. This challenges the common interpretation that Hume confides in “what is established” rather than “what is best” (H 4: 355; E 513-514). Certainly, Hume presents a similar view as a descriptive statement occasionally (e.g., in the essays “Of Parties in General” or “Of the First Principles of Government”), in which he remarks upon people’s behavior as an observable fact. However, he also expresses the same opinion as a normative statement; for example, “there can seldom be admitted any other question, than *What is established?*” (H 4: 355). This is despite the focus of some scholars, such as Hardin (2007) and Sabl (2012), on Hume’s descriptive analyses, while dismissing his normative statements as peripheral.

This section compares these unnatural but persistent customs and institutions and those that Hume endorsed normatively. In doing so, this study first distinguishes between those that Hume clearly terms “conventions” in Book 3 of *A Treatise* and those deemed salutary in his later works. This distinction is occasionally blurred among the Hume scholars, who tend to consider these two as continuous and seamless.³ However, according to Hume’s own terminology, “conventions” such as justice and language are defined as follows: “an invention is obvious and absolutely necessary, it may as properly be said to be natural as any thing that proceeds immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflection” (T 3.2.1.19). Following Hume’s definition, conventions must satisfy both conditions. Thus, no extensive society could exist and sustain itself without any rules of justice or language. This study distinguishes these *proper* and *fundamental* conventions, in the strict sense of the terms, from two other conventions. The first are the variants of these proper conventions, and the second are those that Hume deems to not have proceeded “immediately from original principles,” irrespective of their establishment as institutions.

In the first case, Hume himself does not clearly distinguish between proper conventions and their variants in his arguments. While detailing the rules of private property in Book 3 of *A Treatise*, he admits that

the male line of succession is a variant or a particular rule of the more fundamental convention of private property (T 3.2.3.11). Another example that he discusses is the institution of marriage. In the essay “Of Polygamy and Divorce,” he maintains that although the established system of marriage is indispensable for the maintenance of human society, the choice between monogamy or polygamy is a matter of variation. In fact, while mentioning the demerits of marriage, Hume states that “it is mere superstition to imagine that marriage can be entirely uniform and will admit only of one mode or form” (E 181–182).

In the second case, the institutions that Hume considers to not have proceeded “immediately from original principles” are the government and religion. He frankly admits that “it is not necessary in all circumstances, nor is it impossible for men to preserve society for some time, without having recourse to such an invention” (T 3.2.8.1). Hume clearly defines religion in the *Natural History of Religion* as follows: “The belief of invisible, intelligent power... has neither perhaps been so universal as to admit of no exception, nor has it been, in any degree, uniform in the ideas, which it has suggested” (NHR 0.1).

Hume considers enthusiasm as a special psychological state of religion, that is, the second case. The same applies for chivalry, which neither affects or pertains to property rules nor alters marital relations directly. Both cases, however, affect language or (especially in the case of enthusiasm) governmental administration. Therefore, it cannot be denied that both partake, though partially, in the first case. This would suffice for the present purpose if it can be confirmed that Hume would consider both enthusiasm and chivalry to be different from conventions such as justice and language and in the same category as other (less fundamental) institutions.

This classification can be clarified by its comparison with that of Andrew Sabl (2012), who provides a threefold classification of Hume’s concepts of conventions: ordinary, fundamental, and pseudo-conventions. Ordinary conventions are those that Hume treats in Book 3 of *A Treatise*: “property, promising, justice, allegiance to government, chastity (not virginity but approved sexual behavior), and good manners” (Sabl 2012, p. 42). In addition, he includes money and toleration. Fundamental conventions, according to Sabl, “consist of those ways of living together that provide such basic political and social bonds that any challenge to them is likely to be both fruitless and immoral.” Sabl (2012) therefore considers that “the most important kind of fundamental convention is *constitutional*” (p. 44). Finally, Sabl terms religion and political faction as “pseudo-conventions” (on the detailed analysis of factions in Hume’s politics, see Herdt 1997; 2013). Sabl (2012) argues that “Hume calls such conventions ‘local and temporary’ or simply ‘prevailing’. [Hume] applies these labels to variants of religious or theological belief in general, and Christianity in particular” (p. 45).

The findings of this study contradict Sabl’s (2012) batched categorization of ordinary conventions. The justification of this study is based on the fact that, according to the degree of social scale, Hume distinguishes between the necessity of private property and of government (hence, the allegiance to the government). Although the government is categorized as one of the institutions that do not proceed “immediately from original principles, without the intervention of thought or reflection” (T 3.2.1.19), it cannot be considered a “pseudo-convention” like religion. Although Sabl’s (2012) conception of “pseudo-conventions” are useful for focusing on enthusiasm and chivalry, a question arises as to who is entitled to judge “pseudo-conventions” as such and when. As Sabl remarks, “The hallmark of pseudo-conventions is that they serve no real purpose, hence the name.” However, it cannot be asserted that Christianity has served “no real purpose,” because Hume acknowledges that the Catholics’ “pomp and splendour of worship ... contributed, in some respect, to the encouragement of the fine arts, and began to diffuse a general elegance of taste, by uniting it with religion” (H 3: 137). Puritanical enthusiasm clearly, though unintentionally, contributed to bring about political liberty in England. As the title of the “Historical Essay” suggests, Hume clearly recognizes the contribution of chivalry in the development of modern honor.

More significantly, Hume seems to lack a *single* clear-cut criterion to distinguish between those worth protecting and otherwise. Evidently, his criterion is not *solely* spontaneity, antiquity, or public interest (Rasmussen 2024, pp. 37–44). This is because there are various examples to indicate that Hume does not defend, but rather criticizes the institutions that occurred spontaneously and survived for a long time

(Whelan 2015, pp. 84-147). Although Hume's statements on occasion indicate that the benefits of institutions can be evaluated objectively, he is cautious enough to claim the following: "What may be true, while [man] adheres to one way of thinking, will be found false, when he has embraced an opposite set of manners and opinions" (E 256).

Such an example arises in "A Dialogue," which consists of a conversation between "Palamedes" and the narrator "I." Palamedes narrates his experiences in an unknown country, Fourli, whose people have completely different customs and manners from his own. The narrator gradually notices that ancient Greek manners are symbolized as those of the people of Fourli, which Palamedes admits. Thereafter, Palamedes underlines that the difference in manners is considerable enough that the ancient ones are presented as fairy tales. In conclusion, to the narrator's claims of the universality of human nature, Palamedes replies:

What you insist on ... may have some foundation, when you adhere to the maxims of common life and ordinary conduct. ...But what say you to *artificial* lives and manners? How do you reconcile the maxims, on which, in different ages and nations, these are founded? (EPM, D. 52; italics original).

The narrator counters:

When men depart from the maxims of common reason, and affect these *artificial* lives, as you call them, no one can answer to what will please or displease them. They are in a different element from the rest of mankind; and the natural principles of their mind play not with the same regularity, as if left to themselves, free from the illusions of religious superstition or philosophical enthusiasm (EPM, D. 57; italics original).

A similar example is found in the essay "Of Commerce" of the *Political Discourses*. Reiterating the ancient Greek and Roman manners that prioritized public interest over private interest, Hume represents them as contrary to "the general course of things, though they may fail in particular cases" (E 259). Here Hume depicted these ancient manners as not natural, no matter how long they lasted. He means the "general course of things" (E 254) as an empirical fact; people almost always pursue their private interest over public interest. Nevertheless, even as he criticizes them for their unnaturalness, Hume admits that these lifestyles can persist.

In addition to ancient manners, there is another example that Hume discusses critically, while allowing for its inveterateness—Christianity. For Hume, religion is an institution that does not immediately proceed from original principles. In "A Dialogue," Palamedes, in mentioning "artificial lives," explains that some ancient philosophers, such as Diogenes, conducted a peculiar life. However, Palamedes continues, after their philosophy lost its influence, "Its place is now supplied by the modern religion, which inspects our whole conduct, and prescribes an [sic] universal rule to our actions, to our words, to our very thoughts and inclinations" (EPM, D. 53). What Palamedes terms "modern religion" is Christianity, that which Hume elsewhere terms "sick men's dream" (NHR 15.6). Hume admits that Christianity, partially associated with chivalry and more fundamentally with puritan enthusiasm, has exerted a longer and wider influence over modern Europe and its mentality and behaviors; he even anticipates its persistence.⁴

The concept of "artificial lives" has attracted Hume scholars' interest because it presents fundamental questions on the standard of judgment in terms of his moral and political theories. It also pertains to Hume's criticism of "monkish virtues" (Lottenbach 1996; Davie 1999). Rasmussen astutely clarifies Hume's seemingly ambiguous and relativistic statements in "A Dialogue." He wrote, "ultimately [Hume] appears to be a moral pluralist without being a complete moral or cultural relativist" (2014, p. 40; see also pp. 30-45 for further discussions). Therefore, Hume's moral and political pluralism undermines his sporadic appeals to antiquity, interest, or spontaneity to judge some institutions positively. His examples refute such a naïve and unique justification.

As Hume repeatedly states, common life and conversation, which he elsewhere deems an antidote to delirium, not only tend to lose their curative power but also have the potential to exacerbate enthusiasm when society is affected by an abnormal psychological state. In this regard, conversation differs from reason and humanity, which might simply be paralyzed in such situations. He reasons that practices wielding widespread influence over time may have already entered people's daily lives and conversations. Moreover, these practices may increasingly accelerate "mutual competition." This strategy does not consolidate but instead moves away from "nature" and the usual sense of duty and moral rules. The former, socially stabilizing effect of sympathy through conversation is captured by Hume's phrase that "the minds of men are mirrors to one another" (T 2.2.5.21; Rasmussen 2014, pp. 236-242), but this intersubjectivity can be an Achilles heel. In the *First Enquiry*, Hume cites the example of "the poorest artificer, who labours alone," imagining that this artificer "expects, that, when he carries his goods to market, and offers them at a reasonable price, he shall find purchasers; and shall be able, by the money he acquires, to engage others to supply him with those commodities, which are requisite for his subsistence" (EHU 8:17). If this artificer lived in a society in which chivalry or enthusiasm were prevalent, people would have corresponding expectations (even if this artificer worked "alone," they would have opportunities to talk with people in market). It is sufficiently possible to assume so from Hume's discussions on social sympathy and contagion.

Our question then is whether or how Hume expects a more objective evaluation of the merits or advantages of a specific institution after a certain period—"in a little time," in his own words. Although history has a didactic utility, as Hume reiterates (H 4: 44; H 6: 142; Sabl 2002), this only implies that posterity can make relatively neutral judgments in the presence of more material to evaluate the past. Hume's consistent interest in enthusiasm and chivalry, and his political epistemology of the same, illustrate the difficulty of objectively understanding the general trends of thought prevailing *within* each period (Herdt 2013, pp. 36-39). He also warns that posterity is unlikely to have any privileges as better judges only because they live in later times. In narrating the Popish Plot, Hume adds that this historical event "is necessary to perpetuate, as well to maintain the truth of history, as to warn, if possible, their posterity and all mankind never again to fall into so shameful, so barbarous a delusion" (H 6: 395). If there were no apprehensions of falling into the same delusion, his caveat would have no meaning.

These considerations also suggest that posterity must have a proper attitude to evaluate the past times. In the "Appendix to the Reign of James I," Hume evaluates James I not as a monarch but as a writer:

That James was but a middling writer may be allowed: That he was a contemptible one can by no means be admitted. ...If he wrote concerning witches and apparitions; who, in that age, did not admit the reality of these fictitious beings? ...From the grossness of its superstitions, we may infer the ignorance of an age; but never should pronounce concerning the folly of an individual, from his admitting popular errors, consecrated by the appearance of religion (H 5: 154-155).⁵

If this caveat can be applied in evaluating Hume himself, his historical limits can be expressed in various ways. For example, from a contemporary perspective, it could be claimed that "Hume thus provides... an unsatisfactory underpinning for an attempt to claim universal rational authority for what is in fact the local morality of parts of eighteenth-century Northern Europe" (MacIntyre 1981, pp. 231-232). Hume often presupposes the normality of some institutions and customs by simply using the adjective "natural," such as in the case of primogeniture. It is likely that questioning this does not lie within the scope of his work. From a postmodern perspective, Hume's praise for monogamy and his critical comments on polygamy may be representative of modern Eurocentrism.

A contemporary example is his seemingly stubborn attitude toward the Wilkes and Liberty affair (a riot triggered by the arrest of John Wilkes, a radical journalist and MP, due to his seditious libel in 1763) and its subsequent radical movement in England, which can be found between the late 1760s and the beginning of 1770s in his correspondence. Hume remarks, "I wish that my Indignation at the present Madness, encourag'd by Lyes, Calumnies, Imposture, and every infamous Art usual among popular Leaders, may not

throw me into the opposite Extreme” (L 2: 216; To Gilbert Elliot of Minto; February 21, 1770; see also NL 189; [To Gilbert Elliot of Minto]; February 9, 1770). However, he frankly reveals:

This Madness about Wilkes excited first Indignation, then Apprehension; but has gone to such a Height, that all other Sentiments with me are bury'd in Ridicule. This exceeds the Absurdity of Titus Oates and the popish Plot; and is so much more disgraceful to the Nation, as the former Folly, being derivd [sic] from Religion, flow'd from a Source, which has, from uniform Prescription, acquired a Right to impose Nonsense on all Nations & all Ages: But the present Extravagance is peculiar to Ourselves, and quite risible (L 2: 196; To Hugh Blair; March 28, 1769).

Notably, Hume uses the example of the Popish Plot, criticizing its atrocity and inhumanity while showing some understanding of its historical context of religious enthusiasm. In contrast, Hume finds no such religious background for the Wilkes and Liberty affair, ascribing it to “Licentiousness, or rather the frenzy of liberty” (L 2: 191; To the Comtesse de Boufflers; December 23, 1768), which he considers to be the national character of the English. As some thinkers are more sympathetic to Wilkes and Liberty or even deem it as an expression of universal human liberty, Hume’s view of its parochiality may have been evaluated as obsolete even in his own times (the same can be said about his notorious comments on a particular race in a footnote of the essay “Of National Characters”). However, this study confirms that a “de-centrality” permeates Hume’s thinking and warns against focusing on a specific time and region. It is partially revealed in his cyclical view of civilization. More clearly, in the essay “Of Civil Liberty,” he remarks, “I am apt, however, to entertain a suspicion, that the world is still too young to fix many general truths in politics, which will remain true to the latest posterity” (E 87).

CONCLUSIONS

The aforementioned considerations highlight the need to revisit the common interpretations of Hume. F. A. Hayek traces the intellectual origin of the theory of spontaneous order to Hume, Smith, and other Scottish Enlightenment thinkers.⁶ However, various examples of what Whelan terms “the spontaneous disorders” exist in their writings (Whelan 2015, pp. 84-147). These are not easily explained by the Hayekian dichotomy between *taxis* (a made order, constructed on concrete arrangement and design) and *cosmos* (a spontaneous, unconsciously formed, order) (Hayek 1973). This is especially true for chivalry and puritanical enthusiasm (see Whelan 2015, pp. 99-100; he mentions the religious persecution caused by enthusiasm). Hume details the process of how people become estranged from their common life in the “Historical Essay” and other writings and states that imagination unregulated by reason causes this deviation from nature. However, the same imagination plays a major role in determining the detailed rules of private property in Book 3 of *A Treatise*. Therefore, it is difficult to draw a clear line between chivalry, enthusiasm, and Christianity, and other institutions that Hume recommends be upheld.

However, more significantly, Hume admits that various institutions and customs can deviate from the universality of human nature and remain apart for a long time. From the perspective of political epistemology that focuses on the process of how people recognize (or fail to recognize) political legitimacy, Hume’s analyses on the abnormal psychological condition of chivalry and enthusiasm reveal his recognition of the following two points. First, these unusual mental states can persist for prolonged periods, contrary to the impression conveyed by the essay “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm.” Second, as both anomalous and normal states arise from the same principles of human nature, social sympathy and conversation lose their power as antidotes to social anomaly and might even exacerbate the situation through mutual emulation. In addition, Hume warns posterity, who have seemingly surmounted such an anomalous condition, against falling into the same rut. In conclusion, I quote a passage from “A Dialogue” of the *Second Enquiry*:

There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but may be rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard, unknown to the persons; especially, if you employ a little art or eloquence, in aggravating some circumstances, and extenuating others, as best suits the purpose of your discourse (EPM, D. 19).

NOTES

- 1 See the list of abbreviations the end of this article.
- 2 Stewart (2009) conjectures the year 1731 as the essay's most likely composition date while providing ranges between 1731–34 (pp. 270–276), and Wright (2012) estimates 1732 or 1733, considering the possibility that Mandeville's *Enquiry into the Origin of Modern Honour*, published in 1732, inspired Hume's interest in the topic of chivalry (pp. 187–189). Mossner (1947) proposed 1725–26 (pp. 54–56). For discussion, see also Sakamoto (2020) pp. 116–117, n23. Scholars have discussed over Hume's shift in evaluation of chivalry in both works (see Siebert 1997; Susato 2007; Hanley 2007; Wright 2012), but this is neither separable from the issue over the exact dating of the "Historical Essay," and nor is the subject of my present paper.
- 3 For example, Wennerlind (2008) takes "property, market, and money" as "the primary conventions of a modern commercial society" (p. 106), whereas Caffentzis (2008) explains that "paper money is not based on collective "natural" conventions (like language) but is an artificial product of the promises of specific institutions: private banks, companies, and governments (p. 165). Sabl (2009) also interprets the religious tolerance that Hume depicted in the *History of England* as the last convention (see also Whelan 2015, pp. 89–90).
- 4 Adam Smith recorded Hume's jocular remarks on his deathbed: "But I might still urge, 'Have a little patience, good Charon, I have been endeavouring to open the eyes of the Public. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall [sic] of some of the prevailing systems of superstition'. But Charon would then lose all temper and decency. 'You loitering rogue, that will not happen these many hundred years. Do you fancy I will grant you a lease for so long a term? Get into the boat this instant, you lazy loitering rogue.'" (Smith, *A Letter to William Strahan*, in E xlvi).
- 5 A similar remark can be found in Hume's mention of Archbishop William Laud. Laud, who attempted to re-introduce "a few primitive institutions" such as "pictures, postures, vestments, buildings; and all the fine arts, which minister to religion" met with fierce opposition from the reformers and was executed. "But this blemish is more to be regarded as a general imputation the whole age, than any particular failing of Laud's; and it is sufficient for his vindication to observe, that his errors were the most excusable of all those, which prevailed during that zealous period" (H 5: 460).
- 6 Some have criticized Hayek for his ascription of the spontaneous order theory to the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. Petsoulas (2001), for example, points out that the eighteenth-century Scottish authors, such as Hume, Smith, and Ferguson, underlined the significance of reflection in evaluating the advantages of institutions. However, the following is what Hayek (1973) himself admitted, and therefore, Petsoulas's criticism seems to miss the point: "Although undoubtedly an order originally formed itself spontaneously because the individuals followed rules which had not been deliberately made but had arisen spontaneously, people gradually learned to improve those rules: and it is at least conceivable that the formation of a spontaneous order relies entirely on rules that were deliberately made. The Spontaneous character of the resulting order must therefore be distinguished from the spontaneous origin of the rules on which it rests, and it is possible that an order which would still have to be described as spontaneous rest on rules which are entirely the result of deliberate design" (pp. 45–46).

ABBREVIATIONS

- E: *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*. Ed. E. F. Miller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985.
- EHU: *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. T. L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000 (Chapter and paragraph numbers are provided).
- EPM: *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Ed. T. L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998 (“D” denotes “A Dialogue,” and the following number means the paragraph number).
- H: *History of England: from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to The Revolution in 1688*. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983.
- HC: An Historical Essay on Chivalry and Modern Honour. Transcribed by E. C. Mossner, *Modern Philology* 45: 54-60; transcribed by J. P. Wright, Appendix: Transcription of Hume’s ‘Essay on Chivalry’, to his article, Hume on the Origin of ‘Modern Honour’: A Study in Hume’s Philosophical Development. In: *Philosophy & Religion in Enlightenment*, pp. 204-9. Ed. Ruth Savage. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. (The paragraph number of Wright’s transcription is provided).
- L: *The Letters of David Hume*. Ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.
- NHR: Natural History of Religion In: *A Dissertation on the Passions; The Natural History of Religion*. Ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008. (The section and paragraph number is provided).
- NL: *The New Letters of David Hume*. Eds. R. Klibansky and E. C. Mossner. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954.
- T: *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. D. F. and M. Norton. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. (Book, Part, section, and paragraph number is provided).

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