Introduction

In the particular exertions of power, the question ought never to be forgotten, What is best? But 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? . . . If any other rule than established practice be followed, factions and dissentions must multiply without end.1

Many find David Hume’s writings on politics agreeable. This book will argue that they are also astonishingly useful. Hume’s political ideas illuminate a host of questions in political theory, political science, and practical politics that would otherwise seem intractable, as well as calling into question some political assumptions that would otherwise seem easy. And if Hume’s ideas are crucial to students of politics, distinctly political forms of analysis are just as crucial to students of Hume. Aspects of Hume’s work that might seem either hard to understand or of questionable modern relevance when treated with the methods of philosophy or history both fall into place and prove their continuing importance when viewed through the lens of political theory.

Political theorists can find in Hume an innovative, unfamiliar way of understanding and addressing political disagreement. It is common to assume that political order rests, or must rest, on a normative consensus, given that our political, social, and economic interests would normally place us at odds. What I shall call Hume’s “liberalism of enlargement” suggests that the opposite is the case. Moral factions divide the members or potential members of polities; political interests, suitably defined and creatively accommodated, unite them. Conventions of authority need not rest on moral agreement. In fact, their great attraction is that they can arise in the absence of such agreement and persist, to the benefit of peace and good government, even as the social and moral foundations of society shift radically. To the extent that Hume can be labeled a “conservative” in matters of constitutional authority (and the label should be disputed even there), this conservatism, if such it be, extends to no other realm of life. In fact, stable constitutional authority not only is proof against social and moral change but can even facilitate change. When social change carries no deadly implications for basic political order, it is harder to
oppose such change by appealing to fears for personal security. Nor does the fact that political order is a very good thing imply for one instant that it is the only good thing. Hume valued England's distinctive mixed government precisely for its ability to unite authority with liberty. His modern admirers need not overstrain his theory in order to make room as well for equality and democracy, as things that not only are consistent with authority but make it more durable. Hume is often compared with Burke, and may in fact have much in common with the Burke who prized liberty and restraints on arbitrary power (whether traditional or revolutionary). But he in fact has fewer affinities with the cartoon Burke (drawn from a few unfortunate passages of his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*), the peddler of an aristocratic constitutionalism founded on chivalry and reverence for political myths, than with a more populist constitutional tradition that enjoys exploding rather than cultivating myths of origin and of ancient virtue, and that judges structures of constitutional authority according to their ability to check unduly powerful social actors and to be challenged in turn by emerging social forces.

Political scientists, whether students of domestic or comparative politics, can find in Hume's work a comprehensive account of political change, both from one regime to another and within regimes that stay formally the same while their effective governmental powers alter drastically. This account is grounded in a familiar set of ideas: what we now call coordination problems and their possible solutions. But it applies in situations in which familiar formal or mathematical treatments of those problems yield answers whose use is limited because those treatments abstract away from features of the real world that are crucially important (sometimes more important than what the models include). Formal models typically assume that the relevant actors are fixed and known; Hume treats situations in which they are uncertain, ever-changing, or the occasion of political controversy. Classic game theory assumes that the actors know how much they stand to gain from each outcome; Hume treats cases in which the gains from huge and durable changes in political structure are potentially vast but massively uncertain, making payoff matrices impossible to draw up.² Formal theory purposely leaves out proper names so that conclusions about human behavior can be stated in scientific or general form; Hume treats the ubiquitous real-world situation in which reaching peaceful and generally acceptable political outcomes requires precisely such proper names or context-specific signals (common traditions, precedents, and tacit agreement on customary solutions). Finally, game theory assumes that the agents' preferences are given and unchanging; Hume treats cases of long-term social change in which the question of how agents will in the future define their purposes and desires is a central object of the game, not external to it. Hume's political science shows that coordination explains even more of politics than first appears. But the kind of coordination theory that does the explaining only works by being open to historical and contextual approaches, not just formal ones. Moreover, the theory only works if it is willing to break down the barrier
between ideas and interests that much contemporary political science—and from the other side, political theory—has made great efforts to erect.

Finally, students of Hume can learn that there are systematic lessons in Hume’s *History of England*, a work that until recently everyone but historians ignored altogether, and that many Hume scholars still prefer to dip into selectively rather than take on as a whole. Coordination theory unlocks the structure and logic of this massive work and brings out its unifying themes: the development of social interests, the role of fundamental or constitutional conventions of authority in accommodating those interests; the way in which individual actions must be understood and evaluated in the context of those conventions; the role of parliaments in correcting (imperfectly and partially) the biases and corruptions of power to which any fundamental convention is subject. The *History* in particular provides substance and depth to treatments of coordination that in Hume’s *Treatise* might seem too spare to satisfy—or too socially complacent, since in the *Treatise* Hume is trying to explain how his own institutions might have arisen, not how they might change.

Hume praised history for keeping us interested but not too interested. Unlike philosophy, whose “general abstract view” leaves us “cold and unmoved,” history engages our passions, makes us care about our political and moral judgments rather than just nodding our assent. Unlike discussions of present politics or society, history remains distant enough (because the events it relates no longer affect us) to allow for cool judgment, relatively free of the partisanship and prejudice that “pervert [our] judgment” (E: SH, 567–8). The good news is that Hume succeeded in practicing what he preached. Hume’s *History* contains a careful logic that belies its reputation for lacking a system: for being colorful, and perhaps important in historiographical context, but of little continuing theoretical value. But it also contains a humanity, dynamism, and engagement with the full variety of human interests that belies Hume’s reputation for detachment. Its subject is life in full—and, above all, politics in full.

**Hume as Political Theorist: Praised on the Shelf**

David Hume was quite possibly the greatest philosopher of his time. In his own lifetime, he was more commonly known as the greatest historian. He had succeeded in becoming England’s Tacitus; he narrated the sweep of events before his own time in ways that simultaneously judged past actions, engaged current readers, and imparted timeless lessons.¹ His first literary successes, and still the source of many non-experts’ knowledge of his work, were his *Essays*, in which he applied to a genre characterized by randomness of voice and subject the rigor of the philosopher, the insight of the social scientist, and the discipline of a literary craftsman who never stopped revising. Very few would deny Hume’s status as a philosopher, as a giant of British and European historiography, and as a transformative figure in English letters.
But very few read Hume seriously as a political theorist. In the United States, his work is rarely even included in the canon. In Commonwealth countries, it generally is included but rarely the occasion of advanced research; it is, implicitly, regarded as worthy but uninspiring.4 There are many understandable reasons for this. First, and most crucially, Hume wrote no single treatise about politics that is easily slotted into a set curriculum (for reasons canvassed later, the third book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, the obvious candidate, will not do).5 Second, Hume is not attached to a useful summary idea, a compelling label for the doctrine or theory that he epitomizes and with which one might reckon: Hume was neither Theorist of the Social Contract, Patron of Absolutism, Ideologist of the State, Genealogist of Morals, Defender of Human Flourishing, nor Prophet of Revolution. The most prevalent labels are probably “skeptic”—long rejected by scholars as completely misleading when applied to Hume’s social and political thought, which is empirical to the core6—or else “conservative,” which is, in contemporary academe, even more fatal.7 These two facts feed on each other. Since there is no work by Hume one should automatically read (or assign), there is no need to develop an opinion regarding his contribution; since he is not thought to have made any particular contribution, we need not worry about neglecting his work. Bertrand Russell’s observation, by now not at all true in philosophy, is still largely true in political theory: “Rousseau was mad but influential, Hume was sane but had no followers.”8

If political theory (which integrates philosophy, history, and political science) has no firm portrait of what Hume’s political writings said and no clear sense of why we need them, its component disciplines are not nearly as helpless—but only add to the theorist’s confusion, as they stress different works and divergent lessons. In Philosophy departments the *Treatise* remains, with few exceptions, the work treated as an authority on Hume’s politics. But the *Treatise* on its own tells a compelling but narrow political story, about how familiar human institutions of property and authority could have arisen in quasi-evolutionary fashion without the need for divine guidance, natural law, or (to some extent) deliberate human agreement or planning.9 This story was in Hume’s time both radical and offensive—to Christians because it did without God, to Whigs because it did without social contracts, to Francis Hutcheson because it did without sentimental rhetoric—but is now routine. And it is a story that reduces society to jurisprudence, the genealogy of general and settled private and public laws—while leaving out *politics*, an account of why people might disagree and fight over such things, and what to do about that. As a result some studies of Hume’s political and social thought portray it as an exercise in the history of jurisprudence.10 But when it comes to jurisprudence, Hume’s importance can only be of historical interest: the view that justice is a matter of social convention is, to put it mildly, no longer unique to Hume.11

In recent years a great many scholars have gone beyond the *Treatise*, rightly treating Hume’s political essays and his *History of England* as contain-
ing his main insights into politics, as opposed to morality or law. But this effort comes up against its own limitations: the work was started by historians of ideas and continues to reflect that frame. Hume is seen as providing an innovative ideological defense of the Establishment of his day in the face of inadequate alternatives. Whether one sees Hume as a “philosophical” or judicious composer of quarrels between Whig and Tory, as a particularly clever contributor to the Court vs. Country debate (where Hume, to a first approximation, supported the Court position of strong national institutions, the Hanoverian settlement, the post-Glorious Revolution system of government, and a politics of interest, against the Country program of a politics based on the “independent” landowner and reliant on civic virtue), or as a brilliant philosopher whose particular political judgments relied fatally on conservative ideological prejudices, the resulting picture—intentionally or not—is the same. It is a picture, strongly based on the famous Allan Ramsay portrait showing Hume as very well dressed, very obese, and smiling, of a philosopher willing to question all principles except the principle that the foundations of his own society, which had done well by him, were not to be disturbed. Contextualists’ attempts to identify Hume’s significance have too often served to teach his irrelevance. If Hume is significant for political history because he put to rest party quarrels now forgotten and cleverly justified institutions long abandoned, and significant for historiography because he exploded the party myths of his day and created a way of looking at English history that we now take for granted, Hume becomes a figure to be respected but forgotten, just as we respect in principle but forget in practice the inventors of vacuum tubes. As a proponent of the latter thesis puts it, Hume was the “author of his own neglect.” Hume’s History is, writes another, a “tract for the times, . . . worthy to be examined briefly in histories of history”—a book useful for educating his contemporaries, not ours.

A third, though smaller, school, has attempted to rehabilitate Hume as a political scientist by stressing his political and economic essays. It treats Hume as one of the founders of pure and applied social science, a harbinger of a practical and progressive approach to policy that rested itself on (what became) social science, rather than expecting political goods to arise out of customary principles, folk wisdom, civic virtue, or religious faith. This view, though more accurate than the view that Hume recognized no standard other than custom and “common life,” likewise bears the danger of making Hume into a mere stepping-stone. If policy analysis, economic history, and empirical political science are what we are looking for, nobody doubts that two and a half centuries of scholarship have produced better social science than what Hume discovered. Again, this account provides reasons to praise Hume, not to read him.

The political theorist vaguely aware of these traditions will take away the impression that Hume’s contribution is dispensable. There is little reason to read a theorist who provided modern foundations for creaky institutions, composed party quarrels that no longer exist, or helped invent social and
policy sciences that have long since passed him by. We may, it seems, safely judge by slight acquaintance and move on. Among political theorists, one can say of Hume what Hume said of Spenser, that he “maintains his place in the shelves among our English classics: But he is seldom seen on the table” (H 4.386).

This neglect is not only Hume’s loss, but ours. This book aims to clarify Hume, and shine light on his contributions. But it also aims to help us better understand the political world. It is a study not only in what Hume says but in what political theory can do. A form of inquiry that integrates normative and empirical judgments can do full justice to the multiple ends that political actors pursue as well as the institutional solutions for taming clashes among those ends. And just as the limitations of a medium perfect the work of the artist, the need to make sense of the messy material of history renders the claims of philosophy and political analysis alike more acute, more powerful, and above all more cognizant of the ways in which politics is fundamentally about change.

Hume’s Political Theory: Dynamic Coordination

Hume’s great contribution to political thought is an account of dynamic coordination. That Hume was an early and profound student of coordination has in recent years been widely recognized. Hume understood, far ahead of his time, the ways in which the goods of human society stem largely from doing as others do, in certain limited but crucial matters, so that each person’s purposes in all other matters will mutually further others’ purposes instead of crossing them. In some of life and a great deal of politics, the right thing for each person to do is that which he or she has reason to think others will do: speak the same language, meet at the same rendezvous, use the same measurements, accept the same authority for choosing officers and making laws. Hobbes saw this with respect to one limited case (governmental authority) and gave one blunt and largely unworkable solution (unquestioning, universal, and permanent consent to sovereign power). Hume generalized Hobbes’ limited insight to all of political and social life and saw that coordinated action in all these realms—including the power of the most absolute sovereign—rested not on command but on convention.

As said, many have portrayed coordination as Hume’s central contribution. The case has been made in different disciplines by David Lewis (in the terms of philosophy of language), David Gauthier and Annette Baier (moral philosophy), David Miller (normative political theory)—and, most recently and with great force, by Russell Hardin in the name of positive political science.20 All of these writers, however, largely focus on equilibrium cases that are relatively static. They explain how, on Hume’s account, rules in a given sphere may have arisen, and can maintain themselves, merely through the
fact that the people who live under them have a common interest in observing the same rules (with the current rules being a natural, often surprisingly strong, default). Explicit contracts or sovereign command, as many of these authors note, buttress or restate conventions but do not create them. For Hume, in fact, both promises and government authority are the results of convention, not their cause.

Politics and government, however, represent a special case. For one thing, their central concern is not the convention of property, which is supported by the artificial private "virtue" or maxim that Hume calls justice, but authority, whose supporting virtue is called allegiance (or sometimes obedience). And because politics is constituted by authority, disputes over the conventions that govern politics are inherently both ultimate and dynamic. Disagreements over the meaning of other conventions, or over proposals that they be changed or adapted to new circumstances, can often be settled by appeals to authority, which does not establish the lesser conventions but can adjudicate disputes concerning them (most explicitly, concerning property: EPM 3.2.33–4, SBN 196–7). Disputes regarding authority can appeal to no higher judge; they are settled not by "lawyers and philosophers" but by "the swords of the soldiery" (T 3.2.10.15, SBN 562). And this fact renders authority conventions not just crucial but unstable. Those who want reforms in conventions of property, or who want to switch (as Sweden did in 1967) from driving on the left to driving on the right, can accomplish substantial but peaceful change through government (and that alone). Those who want to change the government in fundamental ways must, it seems, wait for the kind of massive imbalances between politics and social or economic forces that will lead a great many people simultaneously to risk toppling an old equilibrium in the expectation of finding a new one.

The big questions of politics are thus fights over dynamic conventions of authority: what Hume called "the confusions incident to all great changes in government" (H 2.338). These are treated in Hume's History and nowhere else in his work. Without denying that the History is a massive work about all topics under the sun, "from the martial to the marital," this book will treat it as if it were a treatise on this one subject: how conventions of political authority arise, change, improve by various measures, and die. Hume's morals and jurisprudence may be all about consensus, about discovering and articulating the foundations for virtues, sentiments, and institutions whose substance may now be taken for granted. Hume's History is all about disagreement, misjudgment, misunderstanding, unnecessary enmities that thwart potential cooperation, and the struggle for power. What most interests Hume in the History are cases in which conventional solutions to coordination games are theoretically possible but not yet present: "[t]he convulsions of a civilized state usually compose the most instructive and most interesting part of its history" (H 2.338; 1.3). Thomas Schelling has said that economics is about equilibria, about what happens "after the dust has settled," and that disequilibrium is interesting only if one "is particularly
interested in how dust settles.” (Jurisprudence, one might add, is much the same way.) But if seeing the world from the perspective of jurisprudence and economics entails focusing on equilibria, seeing the world politically entails seeing it as clouds of dust. Political scientists might prefer things clean but know that something usually stirs them up—partly because the payoffs to stirring them up can be so high. Politics is a story of incessant, usually deliberate, disturbances in common life. And to study politics is to study the disturbances.

Seen this way, the concerns of the philosophers, historians, and political scientists do not disappear but acquire a larger context and greater importance. For instance, in the field of political philosophy (as opposed to political theory), those who focus on that field’s most central, classic question—that of political obligation—often read Hume (in vain) in search of a general theory of when one may rebel against the government. A focus on coordination suggests different questions. In real life, almost nobody deliberately rejects “government” in the name of anarchy. The actual dispute over whether a given government properly exerts authority is not between anarchists and statists but between weak actors seeking shelter under government and warlords who like their chances under personal violence. And civil wars, i.e., disputes over which government properly exerts authority, are not clashes between those who “appeal to heaven” and those who stick by the police, but clashes among armed groups who all acknowledge the desirability of governmental authority but have different ideas about whom they take to be the government, and in virtue of what. Even our most obvious and customary categories of moral philosophy may, on a Humean view, be superstitions. In one sense, the Humean answer to the question of when we may rebel against the government is that the question is badly posed: we are the government. State authority is shorthand for citizens’ propensity to acquiesce in decisions by designated officers. When the citizens lose that propensity, they don’t need to take arms against the government; they have already imagined the government out of existence.

Similarly, the reading of Hume as social science-wielding reformer may be limited to the extent that it assumes we can distinguish the “validity of political ideals” from “the wisdom of actually implementing them.” If we take seriously the idea that authority comes from convention, the fact that an attempt at abrupt change would cause “factions and dissentions” is a fundamental and fatal flaw, not an incidental one, since policymaking authority itself presupposes the universal belief that one’s authority will end such dissentions. Saying that a certain policy “would be best” if not for the fact that implementing it would discredit governmental authority and perhaps cause a civil war is like saying that it would be best for me to assert “Marshmallows dance she apodeictic under” if only that were proper English, or that it would be best for the official currency to change every hour if only that wouldn’t cause economic chaos.
What happens when we re-interpret historians’ insight in coordination terms is perhaps the most surprising. Hume’s “coalition of parties” solution to the dispute between Whig and Tory will turn out to be not a special and time-bound case but an example of Hume’s general policy of “enlarging” disputes. Political peace and progress in general require that the actors discover, or be shown, unexpected ways in which partisans can gain more by concurring on institutional solutions to their dispute than by pressing their own side to extremes, and unexpected ways in which such solutions, based on coordination, may be possible when they seem elusive. Though Hume was concerned with the parties of his time, his method of reconciling them has lessons for all times.

Method

Every second spent discussing the methods of political theory is stolen from time that could be spent learning about politics. Fortunately, much of what we can learn from Hume's political theory does not depend on resolving our partisan disagreements on what political theory is or how to study it. If we start with “formal” analysis or seek explanations that appeal to the behavior of instrumentally rational individuals, we will end up with principled reasons for why politics depends on language, history, and tradition. Conversely, studying Hume's concepts and theoretical innovations in their historical context will yield two conclusions that seem to jump outside that framework. First, that Hume's own intention, what he saw himself as doing, was to seek progressive and scientific forms of truth. Second, that he had some hope of finding that kind of truth, because his object of study was not politics' (changing) substantive concerns but the permanent regularities in how political conventions, including language but not limited to that, arise and change.

While it is sometimes thought that coordination problems are best explored through game theory, one could argue—as coordination theory's modern inventor, Thomas Schelling, did argue—that doing so obscures the most fundamental aspect of those problems: names matter. Whether those facing a problem can agree on a solution will depend on what the game is being called, whether relevant solutions have familiar proper names, and so on—all matters inherently obscured by a discussion that posits players named A and B and rows called I and II. But if solving coordination problems requires traditions, symbols, a sense of “naturalness,” visual or rhetorical prominence, or interpersonal intuition, game theory may be a counterproductive way of exploring coordination, not (as often assumed) the best or only way. In the most important real-world case in which more than one coordination solution or “equilibrium” is possible, game theory will lead us to ignore the solutions most likely to coordinate real-world actors, and to focus on the solutions (based on mathematical learning in a sterile laboratory) least
likely to do so. It is rational for instrumental and partial actors who stand to gain from doing as others do to study rhetoric, languages, traditions, laws, local pastimes, and good manners. As noted in the next chapter, the special circumstances of very-long-term constitutional politics render the technical approaches of game theory even less likely to yield useful insights.

Conversely, a “Cambridge school” or contextual approach to Hume that stresses his attempts to shape the political debates of his time oddly yields, in this particular case, much the same lessons as an analytic approach. There are two reasons for this. One involves the substance of Hume's thought; the other, the fact that he thought it. On the first point: the Cambridge school characteristically makes timeless theoretical and methodological claims regarding political language, though its members differ on what political language is and what methods should be used to study it. But while language may on some views (including the Wittgensteinian view that so influenced Quentin Skinner) be a unique realm of human consciousness and one not subject to comparison, another view, familiar since the work of David Lewis, sees it as an instance of a larger category: convention. If that holds, no one who believes there is a proper philosophic or scientific method that enables permanent insights into political language (in the case of science, progressively better insights) can consistently deny that some such philosophic or scientific method might also illuminate other human conventions: promising, property, or authority. But such insights are precisely what Hume aims at: perennial truths about the formal conditions for conventions' arising and changing, though the substantive content of those conventions be indeterminate, a matter of history more than logic. Because of what Hume thought politics was—convention all the way down, a matter of forms endowed with meaning and utility—his particular interpretation of what it means to study politics in an experimental or scientific manner does not contradict the Cambridge school, but merely generalizes it.

An autobiographical accident—but not really an accident, as Hume intended a unique and radical program—points in the same direction. Historians' studies of Hume in context have tended to find that one of his central aims was to dispel partisan and superstitious explanations of human behavior in favor of a viewpoint that stressed individual interest, causal rather than teleological explanations, and the study of institutions that would manage interests toward public ends. The study of formal regularities in human passions and the institutions that might productively channel them would be, Hume himself hoped, sufficiently subject to general rules to be the proper objects of science. Thus, historians of ideas differ with analytic readers of Hume in what they think Hume was against, but largely agree regarding what he was for: the search for, and promulgation of, timeless truths of politics founded on self-interest, sympathy (with its good and bad effects), and institutional design. If we stipulate for argument Skinner's dicta that "no agent can be said to have meant or achieved something which they could never be brought
to accept as a correct description of what they had meant or achieved,” and that no “acceptable account of an agent’s behaviour” (including a political theorist’s behavior when writing) can “survive the demonstration that it was dependent on the use of criteria of description and classification not available to the agent,”35 reading Hume as a political scientist who aims at timeless truths is not untrue to Hume’s own professed, contemporary self-image and intention but precisely true to it. Even those who doubt that timeless truths, even formal ones, can be found in politics should admit that Hume failed to share such doubts. Of course, the historian will differ from the political theorist in the conclusion drawn from this. The former may try to explain what led Hume to get everything wrong—though it is not clear from what timeless perspective it might be called wrong—while the latter can proceed to what he got right.

There remains the question of whether the current work intends to interpret Hume’s thought or to reconstruct it. The answer is some of both. Hume’s observations on dynamic coordination, I submit, add up to a coherent theory and quite a profound one. But Hume did not draft them as a coherent theory. They must be assembled into such from a larger narrative that Hume arranged chronologically, not systematically. Except where explicitly noted, I will not intentionally add anything to what Hume said, but making sense of this piece of Hume’s work requires radical disregard for the order in which he said it. One may ask why, if Hume had a systematic account of dynamic coordination in him, he did not present it explicitly. One answer, a bit blunt but not therefore wrong, is that no thinker lives long enough to write every possible book that he or she might have written. Another, more satisfying but not necessarily more true, is that Hume was unable to put forth a systematic solution to coordination problems because the problem itself was only properly formulated two centuries after his death.36 One could go further and say that the posing of the question required an intellectual atmosphere that Hume helped create. In order to ask the question how individuals coordinate on authority, one had to stop believing what most people in Hume’s time very strongly believed: that political institutions resulted from some combination of a divinely ordained system of rank and order, a Providential history that looked toward the good of all human beings, and perfect ancient plans of liberty that corrupt contemporaries are in danger of losing through lack of virtue.

Here the fact that Hume wrote his History in reverse order, drafting the chronologically latest volumes first, may explain why some of the material most useful for reconstructing his theory of dynamic coordination comes from Hume’s account of ancient and medieval England rather than the much more famous Stuart volumes.37 Hume suggests that his own rejection of the ancient constitution hypothesis was gradual: each successive revision of his work expressed it more confidently.38 Perhaps as Hume gained assurance that the prevalent myths of his own time were false, he also became ever more curious to provide an account of authority and its limits that might be true.
Hume's Two Sciences

Of the two possibilities just mentioned, Hume's political science is clearly most useful to those who take up the second: who actually believe in political science, in our ability to make generalizations about political actions and institutions that are supported by evidence and that become over time ever more helpful in providing explanations, predictions, or (in practical mode) evaluations or suggestions. Here we must distinguish between two different kinds of social or political science that Hume practiced and had a key role in founding. Hume made a much more permanent contribution to one than to the other.

The first kind of social science, which we may call science (1), became the causal social science we are accustomed to: large-scale, large-N, hostile to proper names, data-driven, progressive. Hume numbers politics, along with physics and chemistry, among the “sciences” that “treat of general facts . . . where the qualities, causes and effects of a whole species of objects are enquired into.” On occasion he refers to historical events as “collections of experiments” that establish scientific principles, just as naturalists and chemists derive principles from experiments on plants and minerals. In Hume's time a proto-social-scientific approach to history was called philosophical history. Whatever the rest of the History may have been doing, Hume's famous Appendices (and similar passages in the text, self-consciously labeled digressions), in which he abandons the chronological narrative and discourses on the state of economics, public administration, trade, arts, and manners, are often regarded as exemplifying this kind of history, a “macronarrative” of “systemic change.” How far we should regard this part of Hume's program as scientific in the modern sense is controversial. In any case, we know what this kind of science came to look like, and it is clear that its further progress rendered Hume obsolete. In matters of constitutional design, economics, and the other social sciences, Hume laid the groundwork for those who would gather much more data than he had available and would take their ambitions for making law-like generalizations much further.

There is, however, another kind of social science that studies the choices of individuals, regarding larger social forces as the setting rather than the plot. Sociologists speak of structures that condition agency; political scientists, of institutions that determine actors' most rational strategy; economists, of constraints under which the agent exercises choice. The study of agency, strategy, or choice might be called science (2): a microscience of explaining—or, in normative or "strategic" mode, evaluating or recommending—human actions in a context when others are also free to act but all actors face certain limits. No reader of Hume's Treatise can doubt that it was largely if not exclusively about this kind of science. It aimed to study human nature through isolating the various causes of “men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures,” very much on the level of microbehavior rather than macro-narratives (T Intro.10, SBN xix). (As Hume writes explicitly in an early essay,
a nation is nothing but a collection of individuals . . . , " and "the character of a nation" is shorthand for that of its individuals [E: NC, 198].) And certainly no reader of Hume's History—except one who reads the Appendices and skips the text, as used to be distressingly common—can doubt that Hume's latest works had this much in common with his earliest. The narrative, very far from being impersonal, uses every reconstructed "situation" or "circumstance" to praise, blame, excuse, understand, evaluate, or in the most general sense account for the actions of individuals.43

This is the kind of social science—or whatever one chooses to call it—noted by many of Hume's interpreters under different names. Some call Humean explanations "moral causal" (giving the "reasons an agent had for acting") rather than "covering-law" (Donald Livingston); others speak of Hume as providing "narrative-historical" explanations that portray us as "conscious beings with purposes . . ." (Nicholas Capaldi); still others see Hume as a historian in the traditions of Butterfield and Collingwood, who uses the formal uniformity of human motives not to derive quasi-Newtonian laws but to render apparently inexplicable actions intelligible and to articulate the dynamic circumstances within which they might make sense (S. K. Wertz).44 On this view generalizations about large-scale causes, however valuable, cannot capture the logic of every circumstance. As Hume puts it, "What is most probable in human affairs is not always true; and a very minute circumstance, overlooked in our speculations, serves often to explain events, which may seem the most surprising and unaccountable" (H 6.287).45

Capaldi, Peter Jones, and others have noted the similarities between Hume's method of understanding motives and correcting our over-hasty judgments of others' actions and the German interpretive or Verstehen school of history.46 Indeed, the links between rational choice explanations in economics or political science and that kind of history are very strong. Weber of course linked the two explicitly. Instrumental rationality was to be posited in the "ideal type" not because agents always act rationally but because pursuing the hypothesis that they do act rationally forces us to distinguish cases in which they really do act irrationally—which will then drive the study of why they do so—from those in which actors merely seem irrational to us because we have failed to research their situation.47

Contemporary political scientists treat this nexus between interpretive history and rational choice theory more rarely, largely because methodologies in a specialized age serve not just intellectual but factional purposes.48 Iain Hampsher-Monk and Andrew Hindmoor's recent article is an exception, and raises the interesting question of whether there is anything that rational choice techniques can do that excellent interpretive evidence cannot do. They note that if the point is to reconstruct the reasons for which agents did things, attributing preferences and strategies to them would seem less efficient and less credible than simply asking them what they were aiming at, or examining evidence (e.g., memoirs) regarding that. But they do cite three instances
in which rational choice explanations will improve on *Verstehen*-type history: when there is reason to think that actors are either unaware of their motives or prone to lie about them; when results turn on unintended consequences of individual behavior; or when interpretive evidence is equivocal. (One might add Carl Friedrich’s law of anticipated reaction, which does not require game theory but does call interpretive methods into question: people often do not articulate why they refrain from certain actions because they take for granted the fact that doing so would involve huge costs or sanctions.)49 All three of these conditions obtain in Hume’s *History*—and, to be frank, in the large-scale history of high politics generally. In the affairs of great powers, politicians lie, and lie more the more is at stake; historical irony and unintended consequences are arguably the great themes of Hume’s *History* and his social theory generally; and in matters of history, interviews are of course impossible and reliable memoirs often unavailable—missing altogether for the ancient and medieval periods that make up a third of Hume’s *History* and arguably the most instructive third.50 Deception and self-deception, unintended consequences, and insufficient sources of reliable information as to motives are arguably the conditions of political life generally. But they certainly are the conditions of Hume’s *History*, and explain why the most conscientious historian can benefit from theories of coordination and convention in the cases he treats.

If interpretive and rational choice approaches sometimes dovetail in practice, they would seem to diverge sharply in principle—but least so, I would argue, during circumstances of dynamic coordination. Social scientists generally think that agents’ typical motives and the choices that flow from them, in particular their response to economic and social incentives, are predictable enough to yield, over time and given large numbers, general social laws. The interpretive historian, anthropologist, or literary critic denies this. The only time Hume takes up something like this question, he endorses the first view. Given that each decision we take in a complex society requires the action of others for its success, anyone aiming at (or interpreting) intentional action must assume that others’ actions will be both explicable (science [2]) and prone to follow the same patterns as they did in the past (science [1]). The most fervent believers in free will and human spontaneity, Hume claims, de facto endorse “necessity” in this sense (EHU 8.1.17, SBN 89).

But when conventions are contested, in flux, or lacking altogether, the assumption that others’ behavior is rational does not entail that the result will be predictable. Everyone, while trying to do the conventional thing, that is, what others do and expect one another to do, will be unsure of what that thing will be—precisely the conditions of a coordination game. In such circumstances, the scientific attempt to explain regularities collapses into the sociological or historical attempt to explain the origin of social norms, since a whole host of different outcomes are equally rational.52 Even charisma fits perfectly into a rational choice explanation in these circumstances (and no others). The charismatic leader is followed as a source of safety, identity, or
ritual behaviors when and only when conventions of law, national manners, and religion have broken down. Charisma is so powerful precisely because life without conventions is so unpleasant; when we do not know what others around us will do, we can accomplish almost none of what we want.

In general, conventions represent a bridge between science (2) and science (1), between the kind of social explanation that explains “situations” and choices within them and the kind that tracks “trends.” If one seeks microfoundations, one can explain large-scale social forces in terms of them. It is in everyone’s interest to observe a pattern of behavior that then becomes the context for others’ decisions. In that sense, the pattern, especially a durable, constitutional pattern of laws recognized as authoritative, becomes a “cause” of later decisions (in the sense of a factor that determines the feasible set, though not the specific choice taken from it): “Effects will always correspond to causes; and wise regulations in any commonwealth are the most valuable legacy that can be left to future ages” (E: PRS, 24). If one wants to stress the primacy of social causes, one can emphasize that such causes determine the constraints that make most actions impossible and often inconceivable. “New situations produced new laws and institutions: and the great alterations in the finances and military power of the crown, as well as in private property, were the source of equal innovations in every part of the legislature or civil government” (H 2.101). A causal science explains why the circumstances of political choices change. A science of rational choice, and/or the interpretive understanding of such choices, makes sense of what people do in the context of change—and makes sense of it in a way that collapses “rational” and “cultural” explanations into one another. For it will be in the interest of agents to observe cultural conventions where they exist and to manipulate or change them when they don’t.

In different languages, many scholars have considered the interaction between individuals and conventions to be the central story of Hume’s History. They are right. J.G.A. Pocock may put it best, portraying Hume as updating the ancient Thucydidean or Tacitean practice of drawing from narrative history lessons of political strategy:

[H]e is able to show the speech, thought and actions of his characters as performed under certain historical conditions, as produced by those conditions, and as failing to keep pace with change in those conditions; with the result that the arcana imperii, which explain or at least dramatise how it is that human actions produce undesired results, cease to be only the arcana of state, of fortune, of the passions of the heart, and become the arcana of historical change or continuity.

In Hume, as Pocock sees him, a “history of social and cultural change,” accomplished through “generalisations” and the formulation of rules (with due exceptions), takes place alongside a “narrative of actions . . . written with the aid of the maxims of reason of state, designed to explain the anomalies of human behaviour rather than subject them to covering laws and predictions.”
Hume’s history is written in a “double key”—a key that blends two kinds of social science, whether one calls them that or not.

This book will focus overwhelmingly on the micro level of choice and situation, not the macro level of social, economic, and political causes, because only on the micro level does Hume still have much to teach us. When it comes to large-scale social science or social and economic history, Hume could not possibly be of more use than his successors. Quite aside from methodological innovations and new archival research, history itself allows for a range of data (what Hume called “experience”) regarding society, economics, and politics unimaginably superior to what Hume could draw on. Later accounts necessarily improved on Hume’s. Even when they confirmed Hume’s speculations, they had much better grounds for believing in them than Hume did.

But Hume’s account of micromotives, their contexts, and their collective (often unintended) effects was neither taken up nor developed. Though his account of large-scale social causes is stale, this is fresh. Hume’s account of convention and coordination anticipated theories only articulated two hundred years later and not yet fully worked out: in Hardin’s words, Hume’s “strategic categories of moral and political problems are still advanced beyond almost anything else in moral and political theory.” In our age, the kind of history of ideas that explains political theory writings in terms of the writers’ political intentions and the intellectual situations they faced was developed as an antidote to “perennial questions” approaches to political theory. But ironically, the kind of history that explains political decisions with reference to agents’ intentions and the political situations they face is more likely than other kinds to yield permanent insights into recurrent predicaments—though perhaps not the insights that the student of political theory “in context” is used to. Though the substantive questions of politics change greatly over time, the formal study of how actors move from one equilibrium to another, or how they make other decisions while this is happening, never goes out of style, and we may make steady progress in our understanding of these processes. These are the “general truths . . . invariable by the humour or education either of subject or sovereign,” that can be distilled (or as Hume says “reduced”) from our study of politics (E: PRS, 18).

In turn, if the “perennial questions” kind of political theory is to be anything other than bad empirical history or political science (asserting questions to be perennial without any evidence that they are so), it may have to redefine those questions in formal terms. “Authority” will become a question of coordinating on ways of designating political officials and lawmaker authorities. “Liberty” will be restated in terms of strategies and institutions for limiting the power that accrues to those who hold power under conventions of authority. The ethics of revolution will become a matter of the advantages and hazards of shifting from one convention to another. The content of the conventions of authority, strategies of liberty, and maxims of revolution will then be largely empirical matters. They will be subject to change (possibly
improvement) through reflection on experience rather than deduction from first principles. This work can partly be seen as a call for such transformation.

Only two things need be added. First, conventions are not separate things from actions and intentions; rather, they are a verbal shorthand for regularities in action caused by common interests. If enough people decide that a certain pattern of ownership counts as property, it at some point becomes property and those who try to challenge the pattern become thieves. If enough people decide to recognize a given form of government, it becomes “the government” and those who hold positions under it will be able to get people to do things without threatening physical harm each time. The interaction between agents and conventions is an interaction between individual actions and the past and present collective results of those actions—not between individual actions and something else. Second, Hume’s History frustrates attempts to explain its methodology because it focuses on very odd historical moments in which conventions are not predictable, in which property, authority, and even religion face large, unstable changes. In these situations everyone would love to respond rationally (and boringly) to incentives—so as to live and prosper, rather than starving or going to prison—but is uncertain how to do that. The question of whether Hume considers human motives unique and “personal” or, on the contrary, caused and predictable has frustrated readers of the History for generations and will continue to frustrate them because the question is badly posed. In the cases of dynamic coordination that the History covers—and in no others—it is essentially impossible to tell the difference between observing a convention and flouting it.

Audience and Style

This book is not intended only for Hume specialists. It is a book about political order and its discontents, about political change and its risks. It claims that Hume’s insights into these matters are superior to our own in crucial respects. In fact, it assumes that neither Hume’s political theory nor anyone else’s is worth reading except to the extent this is true. The questions raised here are both positive and normative—or better, normative in the sense of that word that straddles empirical and moral claims by recommending as good unexpected ways in which a multiplicity of agents can achieve their interests.46 A work that is directed at such an audience and treats a book that few have read—or, alternatively, asks those who have read it to read it very differently—must be as accessible as possible and must make the fewest possible assumptions about what readers know or take for granted. For that reason, this work will inflict on both Hume experts and connoisseurs of coordination problems quick, introductory discussions of matters they already know well. With apologies, I can only advise that those who do not need these explanations skip them.
Beyond this, the goal of teasing out a coherent political theory story from a 1.3 million-word book of (mostly narrative) history requires quick treatments of matters that deserve long ones. I will skimp on long and repeated textual citations (or place them in notes); focus more on Hume's own views than on their importance as contributions to philosophical, political, or historical debates in his time or ours; assume in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary that Hume's views in one work provide clues to what he means in another; and focus on those parts of Hume's story that can be translated into more general and timeless claims about politics to the exclusion of those that cannot. The result will look analytic—though non-technical—rather than humanistic. The choice is driven by the project, not by general conviction. When it comes to other work on Hume, a more humanistic approach may be much more appropriate; I salute those who have used it, and I have used it myself.

Outline of the Book

Using dynamic coordination as a key to Hume's *History* allows one to unify many of the *History*'s disparate concerns in a remarkably coherent and logical story. Conversely, taking the *History* as a key canonical work about dynamic coordination allows one to address questions regarding coordination that are often treated in an ad hoc fashion across many different authors or even different literatures.

The first three chapters of the book will introduce the question of coordination, while treating its preconditions and implications in more depth than more formal approaches to the question tend to allow. Chapter 1 will provide a basic introduction to coordination questions for non-specialists, as well as exploring some implications of the coordination framework that even specialists may find of interest. Chapter 2 will take up a neglected precondition for coordination problems’ existing in the first place: the actors involved must share a common interest in coordinating their actions that outweighs whatever interest they have (e.g., in the personal power they might have under anarchy) in not coordinating them. This condition is often taken for granted but is in the real world not trivial. The chapter will explore how Hume's approach to coordination avowedly requires seeking out innovative sources of common interest that might not at first appear. Chapter 3 will treat some neglected implications of viewing political power in terms of coordination. In particular, it will stress how essential (though difficult) it is, on a coordination view, to regard governmental authority and citizen allegiance not as two different things but as two different ways of viewing the same thing.

The next two chapters will discuss what one might call the main theme of Hume's *History*: fundamental or constitutive conventions, the broad norms of constitutional government that make lesser conventions possible. If a specifically political reading of Hume involves treating conventions of authority as in
some sense prior to those of justice, a dynamic and historical reading of Hume’s politics requires treating conventions of authority as something achieved rather than given, and taking seriously Hume’s conviction that time is the crucial variable in establishing them. Chapter 4 will explore what I take to be the most crucial conventions in England as Hume portrays them: hereditary monarchy (with clear and unquestioned rules of succession) on the one hand, and Magna Carta on the other. Chapter 5 will take up questions of political change—or viewed in normative language, political ethics—from the perspective of such conventions. The prospects for achieving such change peacefully and, loosely speaking, consensually will track the statesman’s ability to manage or manipulate fundamental conventions when there is more than one competing view of what they rightly entail.

The last two substantive chapters will address the problem that real-world coordination problems are typically “impure” or “biased,” such that any possible solution will benefit all participants to some degree but some much more than others. One can speak of two kinds of bias or inequality: vertical, in which those who hold positions of authority in some scheme can use their authority to reward their particular associates and dominate others, and horizontal, in which particular coordination solutions systematically advantage some social groups over others (either from the outset or else over time as society changes and governing conventions do not). Hume’s political theory contains an explicit solution to vertical inequality and an inchoate but suggestive solution to the horizontal kind. Vertical inequality can be addressed by institutionalizing a challenge to the exercise of governing authority that does not question the necessary existence of that authority. Readers of Hume will recognize this as the question of authority and liberty, or prerogative and privilege. For Hume, the source of executive authority in England has been a hereditary monarch commanding the army, and the site of salutary challenges to that authority has been an ever-more confident parliament wielding the power of supply. Hume’s story of how England’s parliament over time came to wield the supply power in opposition to tyranny, and in support of liberty, is explored in chapter 6. That chapter will claim that Hume’s theory contains a justification for a neglected constitutional tradition that seeks to both strengthen government power so that it can enforce justice against vested interests, and check that power to prevent tyranny and self-dealing.

As for horizontal inequality, Hume said less about it (and, it must be admitted, cared less). That said, there is again a parliamentary story to be drawn from his slight suggestions: an ever-more inclusive system of representation provides an institutionalized mechanism for challenging and renegotiating the inequalities inherent in any scheme of authority. How in the famous phrase, “what touches all” might come to be decided by all, and how this might allay some of our concerns about coordination, is the subject of chapter 7. While acknowledging that Hume himself was no great egalitarian, that chapter will argue that Hume’s scheme, which posits political representation rather than
ideal deliberation as the mechanism by which new social claims can be accommodated, contains a potentially robust check on the tendency of authority structures to reproduce existing inequalities. The chapter will also break new ground, as far as I know, by conceptualizing the separation of powers as an attempt to achieve both the benefits of uncontested authority and a standing capability to mount popular challenges to the distributions of power that uncontested authority would otherwise have free reign to impose. Both the sixth and the seventh chapters, by stressing paths to liberty and equality that make no use of the neo-Kantian categories of autonomy, mutual justification, and practical reason, will also suggest how a Humean form of liberalism is both possible and arguably superior to the Kantian version that prevails among political theorists.

The conclusion will explore the larger implications of the Humean account of politics generally and authority in particular, and will explore the consequences for political theory of a set of Humean theses that cross the boundary between political theory and political science. First, it will continue the suggestion that Humean liberalism may be superior to the Kantian kind (as well as to less liberal alternatives, whether communitarian or multicultural). It is empirically superior as describing how human beings actually act, but also morally superior in attempting to further all human endeavors and projects, as opposed to arbitrarily elevating one—the desire for dignity or recognition—above all others. Second, Hume’s conventional approach to virtue and authority has the crucial advantage of letting political theory and ethics change as political possibilities change. Increasing knowledge of politics should make us wiser in our political judgments. On the other hand, huge empirical variation in the circumstances political actors face will mean that no canned or a priori “ethics” that makes no reference to the strategic situation will be appropriate in all cases. Finally, what might be called Hume’s ethics of charm—showing people what political institutions can do for their interests, rather than preaching that they should not expect political institutions to further their interests at all—can be seen as a way of engaging common energies so as to overwhelm concerns about foundations.

This work aspires to build bridges. It aims to engage deeply with history, doing due justice to the strangeness of the past, without abandoning the old-fashioned aim of drawing political lessons. It hopes not only to speak both to political theorists and to empirical political scientists, but to address both simultaneously. Above all, it adopts the practical perspective that used to be the common property of students of politics: it not only describes the things that Humean political theory shows to be possible but unabashedly welcomes the fact that they are possible. At its root, dynamic coordination is the science of making everyone’s projects further, as much as possible, everyone else’s—and of continuing to pull this off as those projects change. It can safely be neglected by those who do not care whether human beings become more likely over time to get more of what they most value out of life. Hume’s History is for everyone else.