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The Evolutionary Context of Hume's Political Economy

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Hume reminisced of his *Political Discourses*, published in Edinburgh in 1752, that it was the only one of his works that was met with immediate acclaim. It was republished, along with his earlier *Essays*, a year later, and within a few years circulated widely due to three French translations. By the time Hume died there were over twenty editions, in several different European languages. When François Quesnay, a physician at Versailles renowned for his blood-letting techniques, decided at the ripe age of 67 to turn to a study of the subject, he first read Hume's *Political Discourses*. Hume had carefully positioned his works in a trajectory that could be embraced by the French, paying attention to the ideas of Jean-François Melon, Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, Charles Ferrère Du Tot, and the Gournay circle. Arguably, Hume was the most widely read and influential political economist of the eighteenth century, or at least from 1752 up till circa 1790.

Although Hume had a voracious appetite for factual knowledge—his essays make note of everything but the price of tea in China—there is little evidence to suggest that he took up a systematic reading of political economy until the 1740s. As Ian Simpson Ross has shown, Hume's correspondence from the 1730s while in France shows some attention to population, commerce, and market activities, and he may have read Mandeville or Melon while in Reims, given his access to the library of Noël-Antoine Pluche. This would fit with his broader aim of forging a 'Science of Man' manifest in his *Treatise*, but the specific insights on economic theory and analysis were mostly devised at Ninewells, in the years 1749-51. Certain later correspondence and observations prompted revisions, particularly on the subject of the consumption of luxury goods and the issuance of paper credit. But for the most part, the economic writings by Hume (with the exception of one essay, "Of the Jealousy of Trade" published in 1758), were the product of a brief and concentrated spurt at the very middle of the century.

Adam Smith, of course, is much better known for his contributions to political economy. It would be almost as difficult to measure who is better known in his secondary field, Smith for philosophy or Hume for economics, as it would to arrive at this calculation for their principal field, Smith as a philosopher or Hume as an economist. But given that Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) was slow to gain favour; not until circa 1790 did it achieve wide recognition on the Continent, notwithstanding its physiocratic appeals, it was Hume who dominated the subject for roughly forty years. Hume's economic thought was most ascendant in the 1750s and 60s, when Smith was struggling to complete his magnum opus. It may well be that Smith played Brahms to Hume's Beethoven. The significant gap between the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1750s) and the publication of the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) may have been in part shaped by Smith's sense of awe and subordination toward Hume. Reading just their correspondence in isolation there is a sense in which Smith becomes increasingly guarded about his economic theorizing. This seems perfectly understandable given the reprimands Hume issued to Smith from time to time. In a letter of August 20, 1769, Hume wrote: "I am positive you are in the wrong on many of your speculations, especially where you have the Misfortune to differ from me" (Smith 1987, 155). Hume urged Smith to find a way

for them to meet to discuss the promised book on political economy, but Smith did not cooperate. Letter after letter from Hume gives the impression that Smith was avoiding Hume, wishing, it seems, not to benefit from his proposals. "You say nothing to me of your own work," Hume complained to Smith in 1772 (Smith 1987, 161). Thinking the book was nearly done (and perhaps it was), Hume offered to forgive Smith for avoiding him if he would but move back to Edinburgh and share in his company. Even after he read the WN, Hume had to prevail upon Joseph Black to prompt Smith to reply to his written reactions.

Commentators have long emphasized the dissimilarities between Hume and Smith on economic theory. This is, of course, an overstatement, but not a bad point of departure since it is all the harder to find points of overlap than points of difference. Certainly Hume is hard to pigeonhole; he was neither a mercantilist nor a classical theorist espousing a labour theory of value. He was much more hostile toward physiocracy than was Smith, though both shared an admiration for Turgot who was himself nonsectarian.

My aim is to propose that there was much more common ground, and that it derives from an evolutionary framework. And since I will only have time to explore this theme with respect to Hume, let me here just submit at the outset that in Smith the case is far easier to make. We know that Smith had cultivated an interest in natural history in the 1750s if not earlier. He was instrumental in promoting the ideas of René-Antoine Réaumur and the Comte de Buffon, noting in his 1756 *Letter to the Edinburgh Review*, that "none of the sciences indeed seem to be cultivated in France with more eagerness than natural history" (Smith 1980, 248-9).[5] This and what we know about the contents of Smith's library point to a keen and sustained interest in the subject. He much admired Linnaeus and had read the *Systema Natura*, for he makes use of it in his essay "Of the External Senses" (most likely written before 1752).[6] He also had in his library Benjamin Stillingfleet's 1759 translation of Linnaeus's *Oeconomy of Nature*, and may well have read the original 1749 Latin version. Smith also notes the adaptiveness of species, and makes an oblique reference to classification by genera and species in his essay on the history of astronomy. This supports the view that he had perused this tract in his formative years (Smith 1980, 38). I will not explore here the many apects by which his political economy was shaped by natural historical modes of thinking, but suffice it to say that he positioned wealth as part of the more extensive oeconomy of nature.

My proposition here, that natural historical and evolutionary modes of thinking shaped Hume's political economy, is bolstered by attending to the chronology of his *oeuvre*. There is firm evidence that he wrote his "Natural History of Religion" in 1751, although it was not published until1757, as one of the *Four Dissertations*. Here he analyses religion as a trait that is shared by all members of the species homo sapiens. The title is not in the least a misnomer. More significantly, we have good evidence to suppose that Hume drafted most of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* [published posthumously in 1779] in the same few years, 1749 to 1752, that he composed his *Political Discourses*. In short, his most concentrated efforts on the two subjects of natural history (for the *Dialogues*, I would argue, is essentially a critique of natural theology looking to the adaptation of species) and political economy were in the same three year span. He also repackaged his *Treatise* into the two *Enquiries* over this same quiet retreat at Ninewells. As M. A. Stewart has observed, this period brought to a close Hume's philosophical career (with the exception of a few essays written later on;

Impressions of Hume, 2005, p. 47). Hume only revisited his work on natural theology and political economy in brief concentrated spurts that never again matched the original period of composition of 1749-52.

As Paul Wood has observed, thanks to Gladys Bryson "it has now become something of a truism that Scottish savants like [Adam] Ferguson were natural historians of human societies" (Wood 1989, 90). Insofar as the Hume (and Smith) subscribed to the four-stages theory, it is readily easy to cast them into this mould. Eugene Rotwein (1954) and Andrew Skinner (1967), likewise, emphasized the strong historical predilections of Hume's economics. Rotwein, for example, suggested that the many threads of Hume's analysis congeal as a kind of "natural history" (p. lxviii), but as with Skinner and Wood, there are no substantive details. Stefano Fiori is one of the first to explore the links between Smith and Buffon, specifically Buffon's idea of the *moule intérieure* or internal formal cause that guies the individual development of specific organisms (Fiori 2001) but apart from Rotwein's conjectures, little to nothing has been said about Hume.

This is partly, I believe, because for much of the twentieth century it was the received view that Hume was more or less impervious to the developments of natural science of his day, and that his expressed objective to cultivate an experimental method in the study of human nature was mostly superficial rhetoric. Smith, by contrast, had long been acknowledged for his excellent essay on the History of Astronomy, and known too for his close ties with William Cullen, Joseph Black and James Hutton (the first was his personal physician, and the latter two his literary executors after Hume, his closest friend, passed away). But thanks to the efforts of Michael Barfoot (1990) and Eugene Sapadin (1997), among others, we have acquired a different picture of Hume. The evidence is now quite substantial to the effect that Hume had a solid grounding in natural science as a student at Edinburgh, that he most likely received further training from the Jesuit natural philosophers such as Pluche during his two-year sojourn in France (1735-7), and that he sustained an interest in science throughout his later years. There are two mathematical papers that are allegedly by Hume, and also, as Marina Frasca-Spada has argued, considerable scientific depth to Hume's analysis of space and time (and the vacuum) in his *Treatise*.

Hume and Alexander Monro (2nd), following the directions of the recently deceased Colin Maclaurin (1746), served as joint secretaries for the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh from 1751-63. This meant that Hume oversaw the publication of a number of scientific papers, and cultivated friendships with a significant number of naturalists and physicians both in Edinburgh and through correspondence. And again, his appointment came a year before he issued his essays on political economy, suggesting all the more that there was a close link. Alas, there is only one extant letter during the critical three-year period that gives even a hint of this, to William Cullen in 1752, but then a fair amount of Hume's correspondence is lost (we have but 3 volumes).

Paul Wood has provided considerable historical evidence to the pervasive reach of natural history among the Scottish enlightenment philosophers. As he observed, "the moralizing of the Scots ultimately rested on the natural history of the human species, which they modelled on the practices of the natural historians of the vegetable and animal kingdoms, and pieced together from a variety of sources including personal observations, travel reports and, most importantly, works by Buffon, Linnaeus, and other naturalists"

(Wood, 2003). This is exemplified in John Gregory's *A Comparative View of the State and Faculty of Man with those of the Animal World* (1765), a book that Aaron Garrett observes has "surface similarities with Hume" (Garrett 2003, 84). It is also evident in the four stages approach to history that was fostered by a number of Scottish thinker, Adam Ferguson, John Millar, etc.

Hume, however, was more inclined to emphasis cyclic processes in his account of the ebb and flow of wealth, and there is certainly a sense of eternalism, that there is no terminal point. It would be easy to ascribe these to Hellenistic sources rather than the more immediate French proto-evolutionary thinkers. But it would also be possible to accept both sources as influential, and recognize a possible indebtedness of the natural historians to Epicurean eternalism as well. Attention to cycles was rife in early modern natural history, whether of organisms, populations, or the meteorological and geological frames in which life forms were positioned. In many respects, it was the point of departure for any attempt to form systems or reach more general levels of abstraction. Reproduction is also a kind of cycling, or circulation, and the fact that it served as the lynchpin for the Linnaean taxonomic system was not accidental. Quite the contrary, it was well entrenched in early modern discourse on natural history, whether in the work of Rudolph Jacob Camerarius or John Ray.

For Hume, all creatures, animal and vegetable, partake in the process of "corruption or dissolution, from one state or order to another" (Hume 1985, 377). Moreover, "the life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster" (Hume 1985, 583). This sense of detachment is present throughout much of Hume's writings, especially ones that bear on difficult religious issues. All creatures, man, animal and vegetable, partake in these cycles of advancement and decline.

These appeals to growth and decay are also true in the moral realm. Wealth, the arts and the sciences, flourish in one place, then decline, only to flourish elsewhere (Hume 1985, 378; Skinner 1993a, 244). Moreover, the cycles reinforce one another. Hume claims that one does not encounter flourishing arts and sciences where there is not also flourishing commerce. And commerce only comes if the various activities--agriculture, manufacturing, and trade--coincide in one region. Furthermore, each region's apotheosis is short-lived: "*when the arts and sciences come to perfection in any state, from that moment they naturally, or rather necessarily decline, and seldom or never revive in that nation, where they formerly flourished*" (Hume 1985, 135). The justification of this claim is based on an analogy to plants: "the arts and sciences, like some plants, require a fresh soil; and however rich the land may be, and however you may recruit it by art or care, it will never, when once exhausted, produce any thing that is perfect or finished in the kind" (Hume 1985, 137).

Hume also argues that one cannot encourage flourishing arts and sciences without flourishing commerce and a liberal government, and that they all move in tandem. Hume's political economy is evolutionary through and through. As Andrew Skinner observed, Hume's eye is continuously on the "interplay between economic growth and liberty." Commerce also fosters greater learning, polite conversation, civility among strangers, and peace among nations. The lower orders are less rude and barbarous, disciplined by regular labor and a desire for material well-being, and the aristocrats are less prone to their passions and more subject to the disciplined frugality of the merchants who for Hume were the heroes of the modern age. Refinement and emulation also factor

into this dynamic of global economic development. As nations look to each other for novel fashions in consumption and new methods of production, merchants cultivate networks of commerce and trade that enable a more rapid flow of wealth from one region to another. This expansion of trade brings people of different nationalities, religions, and political persuasions together, thus fostering greater mutual respect.

In his analysis of money and prices, Hume outlines a mechanism that allows a more rapid flow of wealth from one region to another. When domestic labour becomes too costly, manufacturers move on mass like a flock of birds, almost "flying" to other countries where wages are lower, till they "are again banished by the same causes" (Hume 1985, 283-4). Money readily adjusts in order to restore domestic prices to their "natural level." It is again only over larger chunks of time--centuries given his analysis on population growth--that wealth really intensifies or diminishes in a given region. There are, in short, built-in checks to the tendency for wages and prices to rise, just as urban centres tend to reach a saturation point (which Hume, incidentally, suggests is already the case for London; Hume 1985, 448).

There is also a natural progression by which the flourishing of one region is followed by that of another. In a well-known letter to Lord Kames of 1758, he wrote:

> It was never surely the intention of Providence, that any one nation should be a monopolizer of wealth: and the growth of all bodies, artificial as well as natural, is stopped by internal causes, derived from their enormous size and greatness. Great empires, great cities, great commerce, all of them receive a check, not from accidental events, but necessary principles (Rotwein, 201).

It is hard to know where this idea came from, one named appropriately by Rotwein as the migration of economic opportunity. Certainly it calls for justification, one which Hume does not fully provide. Possibly it owes most to Hume's interest in the decline of Rome and Greece, but insofar as he also looks well into the future, there is a sense that the locus of wealth will continue to drift around the globe.

Note, too, that Hume readily equates the natural and the artificial, implicitly comparing animals and nations. [1] Hume maintains that "the universe, like an animal body, had a natural progress from infancy to old age" but since it is uncertain whether we have reached middle age as yet, "we cannot thence presuppose any decay in human nature" (Hume 1985, 378). He also argues at length that population now exceeds that of ancient times, and that this is correlated with happier and more virtuous conditions (Hume 1985, 382). And he puts much faith in the growth of trade and commerce, despite the paucity of records to that effect. Our ignorance, Hume conjectures, favours optimism: "it is not fully known, what degree of refinement, either in virtue or vice, human nature is susceptible of; nor what may be expected of mankind from any great revolution in their education, customs, or principles" (Hume 1985, 87-8). Mankind, he retorts, may not yet be at the midpoint of its history.

Hume held a similar view on natural evolution, that the "order of nature" was "still unfinished" (Enquiry, Sect. XI). Or to put it rhetorically, "why may you not infer a more finished scheme or plan [for nature], which will receive its completion in some distant point of space or time?" (Ibid). Insofar as he also insists that humans are governed by laws of nature (a point that hardly needed emphasis in his age), it follows that our evolution is intertwined with that of nature. Notwithstanding Hume's famous appeal to understand the actions and motives of Britons by the study of Roman history,

Hume is much more inclined to emphasize the evolution of human nature. The shifts Hume focuses upon take place over long stretches of time, over centuries and are thus, he submits, imperceptible to any contemporary analysis (Hume 1985, 378). Three thousand years of written records are all too brief "to fix many general truths in politics" (Hume 1985, 87), and given the advent of modern commerce but a century or two ago, Hume conjectures that we can only begin to assimilate its significance and full implications. Certainly human nature, while stable and robust in certain respects, undergoes an evolution over time. Certain traits, such as politeness or scientific curiosity, are induced by favourable material circumstances. Trust among strangers is more deeply entrenched in the modern era, as is evident in the increase in the number of cartels and use of fiduciary money (Hume 1985, 406). He also sees this in the increase of gallantry, in the decline of political rivalry and vicious slaughter, and in the diminution of slavery and petty tyranny (see Schabas 1994, 128-32). Genuine friendship, however, may be diminishing with the rise of a mercantile culture.

Hume also downplayed the role of reason in his depiction of economic activity. Our actions always stem from a sentiment or passion, and while accompanied by reasons, the latter can never be the sole source of the agency. Most of our actions are in fact pre-rational or non-deliberative. Economic phenomena, money, the interest rate, commerce and trade, proceed from traits that function at the level of groups or types of individuals (Schabas, 2007). Hume seeks (and finds) laws in the moral realm, but they pertain to social institutions rather than individual rational choice. This fits well with his famous account on the reason of animals (Treatise 1.3.16). Our method of induction is one we share with other animals and in that sense, we act more by instinct than by reason pure and simple.

Nevertheless, there are important differences. In his essay "Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature," Hume proposed that we come to understand our own human nature by comparison to other animals. He came to the conclusion that "Man falls much more short of perfect wisdom, and even of his own ideas of perfect wisdom, than animals do of man; yet the latter difference is so considerable, that nothing but a comparison with the former can make it appear of little moment" (83). We are more like apes than angels.

In sum, Hume is thinking both inter-specifically and intra-specifically. There is some evidence that Hume was already well disposed to the nascent evolutionary schemes that emerged in his day. In the library attached to Steuart's course at the University of Edinburgh are nine books on the theory of the earth's creation, as well as a much larger collection on natural history. Whether Hume read some or all of them is still open to question, but certainly by the 1740s he had reflected on such questions when drafting his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.[2] Roy Porter has argued that theories of the origins of the earth gained in popularity in the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries because of their secularizing and even political implications. Moreover, earth histories were formulated partly to motivate prelapsarian accounts and thus lend credibility to appeals to the state of nature (see Porter 1979). Although Hume eschews that analytic device categorically, his Dialogues easily fits into the broader schema adduced by Porter. Certainly, given Hume's keenness to expose the fallacy of the argument from design, it would be a natural step to want to know more about natural history and geological accounts of the earth's origin. Aaron Garrett has argued that "for

Hume animals functioned not as a mark of the richness of providence and our pre-existent teleological duties but rather as a sceptical razor" (Garrett 2003, 85). Insofar as Hume emphasized our animal sensibility, the imperfection of nature's order, and the sheer insignificance of our existence, it is but a short step to accept that the broader context was one of natural history.

The 1740s and 50s marked a watershed in the development of theories of generation and natural history more generally. Charles Bonnet's work on aphids (1740) and Abraham Tremblay's study of hydra (1744), by lending evidence to spontaneous generation, had intensified debates on the origin and nature of life. Both Julien La Mettrie and Dénis Diderot embraced Tremblay's mechanistic theories which in turn inspired Pierre de Maupertuis and the Comte de Buffon, by the late 1740s, to broach evolutionary hypotheses. These ideas circulated widely with the publication of the first two volumes of Buffon's Histoire Naturelle (1749).[3]

It is hard to believe that Hume, who had such a strong affinity with the secular French philosophers and who was at the centre of Enlightenment debates, did not hear about these ideas at least in their simpler versions.[4] Adam Smith, in a lengthy letter to the Edinburgh Review (1756), explicitly addressed the importance of Buffon's work on generation, and conveys the impression that it was already well known and controversial for its materialist and atheistic implications (see Wood 1989, 99-100). Alas, there is no concrete evidence that Hume had read Buffon until a decade later, when they met in Parisian salons during the 1760s. But Buffon's gift to Hume of a personal copy of some volumes of his Histoire Naturelle suggests that they conversed on scientific issues (see Mossner 1980, 480). Hume also expressed a strong liking for the French naturalist, and sounds distinctly Buffonian in the passage that opens his lengthy essay on population:

> The continual and rapid motion of matter, the violent revolutions with which every part is agitated, the changes remarked in the heavens, the plain traces as well as tradition of an universal deluge, or general convulsion of the elements; all these prove strongly the mortality of this fabric of the world (Hume 1985, 377).

James Hutton, arguably more than any other Enlightenment figure, stretched our estimate of geological history (see Laudan 1987). In defiance of the biblical account, Hutton proposed that the earth's geology displayed "no vestige of a beginning,-no prospect of an end" (Hutton 1788, 304). Hutton was a deist, and this might well have been partly why he and Hume formed a bond starting in the late 1740s. It is difficult to know if Hutton held these views at that point in time, since his geological findings came later, in the 1760s. Moreover, his views were not widespread until he published the Theory of the Earth in 1795, two years before he passed away. He had studied medicine at Leiden, where the Boerhaavian school was still in ascendance, and then befriended Black, Hume and Smith. A direct influence is thus difficult to establish, although Hume's appeals to eternal cycles is resonant with Hutton's geology. Hutton aside, if Hume was aware of new currents in French biology this would suffice to account for his emphasis on economic evolution, and the relatively unprecedented temporal element in his essays.

Most scholars know of Smith's effort to establish a monetary measuring rod based on bushels of corn from century to century, but few know that this was preceded by Hume, who may have been the first in that discourse to adopt century-by-century comparisons. In Hume's essay "Of Money," the most prevalent temporal interval is three centuries (Hume 1985, 281, 289, 292, 294). He draws comparisons not only between the

English and German economies, but between the European and the Chinese and refers back to ancient Rome in three passages (282, 285, 294). Thus, when he points to the "happy concurrence of causes in human affairs, which checks the growth of trade and riches" and prevent any one country from prolonged dominance, he could only have several centuries in mind, if not the thousand-plus years that separated the fall of Rome and the now comparable state of wealth in Western Europe, circa 1700 (see Hume 1985, 283). Elsewhere, he compares the British level of industry from the present to a state two centuries ago (Hume 1985, 328). No mercantilist or physiocratic writer has the same temporal sweep. I would submit that Enlightenment naturalists such as Linnaeus and Buffon served to awaken Hume's mind to this mode of thinking.

Human action takes centre stage for Hume, but the backdrop throughout is that of a natural and orderly world, one that is configured so as to foster human prosperity. On reading Hume's many essays, say "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," or "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," one is struck by his immense sweep over global history. Hume unfolds a tale of passions and human frailty based on a vast temporal and geographical scale, drawing numerous lessons from the rise and fall of the empires of Greece, Rome and Spain among others. Wealth and virtue wax and wane in accordance with a complicated morality tale. Hume even peers well into the future, conjecturing in his essay "Of Public Credit" that in five hundred years, servants and masters will have changed stations (Hume 1985, 357).

Hume's general approach to human activity, economic and otherwise, was consistently made with an eye to the physical context by which the world was put together. There are a sufficient number of metaphysical and epistemological points of similarity to suggest that Hume did not take economic processes to be cordoned off from the physical world. His conjecture that there exists "a kind of pre-established harmony" (Hume 2000, 44) between our minds and nature offers the single bedrock from which all knowledge, including knowledge of economic phenomena, emanates. If both are in a state of flux, of evolution, then it seems all the more important to treat economic features of our world, the interest rate, the money stock, the level of trade and commerce, with natural historical modes of thought.

To conclude, there is a strong predilection in Hume to view economic phenomena developmentally, and to think in large chunks of time. Such an approach was relatively novel in the history of economic thought--not the reference to historical events per se, but the effort to think of the flow of wealth from nation to nation at the rate of a few if not several centuries. More importantly, Hume's account is epigenetic and not just one of augmentation(preformation). The various mechanisms that enable commerce and trade to flourish bootstrap one upon the other, passions, virtues, instincts, institutions. They are woven into a complex account that suggests a mind deeply steeped in the proto-evolutionary accounts of his contemporary natural historians.

Endnotes

5. Stefano Fiori links Smith to Maupertuis and Buffon for their respective appeals to invisible orders, notably Buffon's *moule intérieure* (internal formal cause) which guides the individual development of organisms. This would prove to be an additional source for Smith's distinctions between nominal and natural price and, as I have argued, his grander scheme of moral deception (see Fiori 2001, esp. 442; Schabas 2005).

6.. Wightman (1980, 15, 133-34) makes this argument, based on the presence of Berkeley's and the absence of Hume's ideas in the essay.

1. Recent assessments of Hume's endorsement of economic growth in recent European times can be found in Brewer 1995 and Berdell 1996. Berdell also points to Hume's appreciation for what we would now label technological innovation. Indeed, Franklin's lightning rod was one of the first cases of a scientific theory inspiring a practical device with clear economic benefits.

2. Paul Wood 1989 has made the same observation regarding Hume's writings on religion, and also suggested that in Hume's Enquiry (1748) there is evidence of "natural historical methods of description and classification in the science of the mind" (p. 99).

3. For a good overview of Enlightenment natural history, see Hankins 1985, Ch. 5.

4. Paul Wood (1989), drawing on the work of Gladys Bryson and Andrew Skinner, has suggested that interest in natural history, Buffon most notably, rivalled interest in Newtonian physics among the intellectual elite of the Scottish Enlightenment. Simon Schaffer (1997) has explored the infusion of agrarian culture and natural history into Scottish moral philosophy.