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HUME ON THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE RISE OF ENGLISH COMMERCIAL SPIRIT

BY
ERIK W. MATSON

This paper interprets the interaction between Protestantism and commercial spirit in David Hume's account of English development, mostly drawing from The History of England. *Hume saw Protestant theology—especially the more enthusiastic strains of English Puritanism—as having fortuitously shifted the landscape of political and economic sensibilities in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by affecting believers' political, social, and economic psychologies. Those shifting psychologies exhibited affinities with concurrent developments, especially the decline of feudalism, the rise of consumerism, and the creation of an independent middle class of merchants. The peculiar synergy between such changes and Protestant theological innovations led to the emergence of England, by the eighteenth century, as a polite and commercial people—a people for whom commerce became, Hume claimed, more honorable than in any other nation. Hume, like Max Weber, saw a distinctive Protestant spirit as having contributed to the modern commercial order.*

> The power of religion in human history has arisen more than anything from its capacity to give identity to its practitioners and to inspire them with behavior which arises out of this perceived identity. In extreme form, this gives rise to the saints and martyrs of all faiths, religious or secular, but it also gives rise to a great deal of quiet heroism, for instance, in jobs, marriage, in child rearing and in the humdrum tasks of daily life, without which a good deal of the economy might well fall apart.
>
> —Kenneth Boulding (1969, p. 10)

> The genius of that religion, which prevailed in Scotland, and which, every day, was secretly gaining ground in England … by nourishing in every individual the highest

Erik W. Matson: Mercatus Center at George Mason University I thank Jordan Ballor, Dan Klein, Paul Oslington, and Aaron Zubbia for their helpful comments and encouragement. I thank three anonymous reviewers for *JHET* for their constructive criticisms and suggestions. Email: ewmatson@gmail.com.

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> raptures and ecstasies of devotion, it consecrated, in a manner, every individual, and in his own eyes, bestowed a character on him, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions could alone confer.
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> —David Hume (1983, vol. 5, p. 260)

I. INTRODUCTION

David Hume praised eighteenth-century Britain for its liberal political institutions, military prowess, and commercial success. Since the Act of Settlement in 1701, he wrote,

> [p]ublic liberty, with internal peace and order, has flourished almost without interruption: Trade and manufactures, and agriculture, have encreased: The arts, and sciences, and philosophy, have been cultivated. Even religious parties have been necessitated to lay aside their mutual rancour. And the glory of the nation has spread itself all over Europe; derived equally from our progress in the arts of peace, and from valour and success in war. So long and so glorious a period no nation almost can boast of: Nor is there another instance in the whole history of mankind, that so many millions of people have, during such a space of time, been held together, in a manner so free, so rational, and so suitable to the dignity of human nature. (*EMPL*, p. 508)[1]

What, on Hume's account, caused Britain's remarkable success?

Throughout his work Hume eschewed monocausal explanations, preferring to reason along the lines of tendencies and qualified generalizations (Matson 2019, pp. 36–40). In his six-volume *History of England* he narrated the emergence of eighteenth-century English liberty and prosperity as a kind of evolutionary process—a prediction-defying process involving interactions between beliefs, behaviors, existing institutions, and innovations (cf. Mokyr 2016, pp. 28–33). English exceptionalism is depicted as the outcome of a set of interacting causes including island geography, war, manners, foreign commerce, and individual personality (of Henry VIII and James II, for example).

The synergy between these causes was by no means preordained. Contrary to some of his Whig contemporaries, Hume ascribed none of England's success to ancient constitutional arrangements or to long-standing physical or cultural endowments. He took certain aspects of eighteenth-century English prosperity and liberty as novel phenomena, partly consequences of the post-1688 constitution (Sagar 2021). Modern English success, for Hume, had roots in earlier institutional developments, including steps towards jural integration in the Middle Ages (Hall 2022), but it was not a forgone outcome. It involved a great deal of luck.

[1] Abbreviations to Hume's works: References to the *Treatise of Human Nature* are to Hume (2007b), abbreviated as "*T*" and followed by book, part, chapter, and paragraph. References to *The History of England* are to Hume (1983), abbreviated as "*H*" and followed by volume and page. References to *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* are to Hume (1994), abbreviated as "*EMPL*" and followed by page. References to the second *Enquiry* or the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* are to Hume (1998a), abbreviated as "*EPM*" and followed by page. References to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* are to Hume (2000), abbreviated as "*EHU*" and followed by page. References to the *Natural History of Religion* are to Hume (2007a), abbreviated as "*NHR*" and followed by page.

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This article treats the interaction between two underappreciated variables in Hume's evolutionary narrative of English success: Protestantism and commercial spirit. Hume, I claim, understood Protestantism generally—and Puritanism[2] in particular—to have unwittingly contributed to the emergence of a distinctive commercial spirit in England that invigorated its industry and contributed to its economic and political development.

This interpretation builds on recent work by Margaret Schabas (2020) and Tamás Demeter (2022) connecting Hume and Max Weber. Schabas (2020) claims that Hume "subscribed to a strong correlation" between the Reformation and "the advent of capitalism." Hume may be viewed, she argues, as a "proto-Weberian" on account of his "pathbreaking sociological study of the world's religions" and the intimate connection of that study with "his broader project to develop the moral sciences, and to join economics with politics, history, and psychology" (p. 193). She draws attention to Hume's awareness of the correlation between Protestantism and certain social ethics, especially conscientiousness and independence, and how those ethics facilitated the development of social networks conducive to widespread, impersonal commercial engagement (pp. 205–206). Hume's analysis on this front, it should be noted, shows awareness of issues drawn out by some contemporary empirical studies on the significance of Protestantism on economic development (Arruñada 2009; Blum and Dudley 2001; Woodberry 2012).

Demeter (2022) perceives a different connection from Schabas's understanding between Hume and Weber. He argues that Hume's social theory, which can be seen in parallel to his treatment of the organic unity of mental faculties, relies on something akin to Weber's concept of "elective affinity" (*Wahlvervandschaft*).[3] Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* described a process of emergent affinities or attractions between certain religious and psychological elements, the compatibility of those elements with specific institutions, and how the interaction of the religious-psychological with the institutional produced a unique social order. Protestant ascetism, according to Weber, put "psychological premiums" on certain social practices that gelled with other aspects of economic life; those psychological premiums breathed life into commercial culture, creating "the 'soul' [that was] needed to unit 'spirit' [i.e., work ethic] with 'form' [i.e., market institutions]" (Weber 2001, pp. 112, 130). Demeter argues that Hume's method resembles Weber's in "outlook and language" but not in "the historical role he ascribed to Protestantism." Hume understood commercial society as emerging out of a particular interplay of social spirit and institutions, in Weberian fashion, but "the elective affinities that Hume reveals are rather different" (Demeter

[2] The meaning of "Puritan" is somewhat ambiguous. Weber uses the word to describe "the ascetically inclined religious movements in Holland and England without distinction of Church organization or dogma, thus including Independents, Congregationalists, Baptists, Mennonites, and Quakers" (Weber 1930, p. 217n). Hume's usage of "Puritan," which I follow here, seems in line with the following working definition by Margo Todd: "'puritans' were a self-conscious community of protestant zealots committed to purging the Church of England from within of its remaining Romish 'superstitions,' ceremonies, vestments and liturgy, and to establishing a biblical discipline on the larger society, primarily through the preached word. They are distinguished … by intensity of evangelical concern" (Todd 1987, p. 14).

[3] On Weber's concept of elective affinity and its explanatory use in his account of the rise of capitalism, see Kollár (2021); McKinnon (2010). For an attempt to formally model Weber's thesis, see Alaoui and Sandroni (2018).

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2022, p. 14). Demeter emphasizes the synergies in Hume's narrative between republican government, commercial spirit, and the universal passion of avarice (pp. 14–17).

The interpretation of the present article synthesizes aspects of Schabas and Demeter. I agree with Schabas that Hume saw the Reformation as a crucial inflection point in the development of modern commercial society, and that he appreciated Protestantism as contributing to a productive set of social ethics. As he noted in correspondence with his brother during his travels on the European continent with General St. Clair, "the Difference is always sensible betwixt a Protestant & Catholic Country, thro'out all Germany: And perhaps there may be something in this Observation, tho it is not every where sensible" (Hume 2011, p. 125). On the other hand, we must depart from a linear causal account to appreciate Hume's nuanced understanding of the specific contributions of nonconformist English Protestantism to England's commercial and political development. Here it is helpful to employ a lens of elective affinity, along the lines offered by Demeter. Demeter is correct that Hume's general conjectural account of the development of commercial society, as presented in the *Political Discourses*,[4] does not much emphasize the role of Protestantism. But Hume's historical account of English commercial society in *The History of England* does. Hume's narrative depicts nonconformist English Protestantism—especially Puritanism—as operating in conjunction with concurrent developments including the partial curtailing of entails (*H*, 3, p. 77), an increase in luxury consumption, transatlantic trade, and foreign immigration to bring about the contemporary commercialism of his day. English commercialism, for Hume, was an emergent product of a set of attractions between institutions and a certain spirit that owed something to Protestantism. (The specific kind of Protestant spirit Hume saw, discussed below, was different from that perceived by Weber. Weber emphasized frugality and asceticism; Hume foregrounded independence, self-affirmation, and diligence.)

Let me emphasize that I am not claiming here that Protestantism, for Hume, was the chief cause of English commercialization. Hume discussed other historical causes that coincided with and in some cases predated the Reformation: developments in the common law, technological innovations (e.g., printing, agricultural improvements), and transitions from a barter to a monetary system, for example. Neither am I attempting here to provide a comprehensive overview of Hume's account of the development of commercial society. The scope here is narrower. I'm interested in one set of contributory affinities in Hume's account of English development: that between nonconformist Protestant (chiefly Puritan) zeal and the commercial spirit Hume believed necessary for the flourishing of commerce (*EMPL*, p. 93), which he estimated had ascended in England by the end of the seventeenth century (*H*, 5, pp. 58, 132; 6, p. 148; *EMPL*, p. 207).

The historical narrative I reconstruct from Hume to explore these affinities can be summarized as follows: (1) Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English Protestant fanaticism and radicalism set in motion a chain of events contributing to more extensive civil and religious liberties—"the noble principles of liberty took root … under the shelter of

[4] Hume's *Political Discourses* was his most popular collection of essays. It was published originally in 1752, and in its third edition in 1754 it featured the following essays, all of which are reproduced in Hume (1994): "Of Commerce"; "Of Refinement in the Arts" (originally titled "Of Luxury"); "Of Money"; "Of Interest"; "Of the Balance of Trade"; "Of the Balance of Power"; "Of Taxes"; "Of Public Credit"; "Of some Remarkable Customs"; "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations"; "Of the Protestant Succession"; and "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth."

puritanical absurdities" (*H*, 4, p. 368). (2) The effects of fanaticism came in part from its transformative influence on believers' political attitudes. The sovereign came to be viewed not as a divinely appointed ruler but a representative of the citizenry, one tasked only with serving the will of the people to advance "the principles of natural equity" (*H*, 6, p. 83). (3) An underlying theological reason for these transformed attitudes was the Protestant conception of God's immanence, familiarity, and direct accessibility to all through faith. This conception brought forth the conviction that all men are truly equal in the eyes of God irrespective of social station, and that they therefore ought to be accorded certain liberties. (4) These theological notions affected not just political psychology but also attitudes about work, production, and commerce. They enhanced estimations of the properness of "ordinary life" (C. Taylor 1989, p. 211), contributing to a commercial spirit—"the soldier, the merchant, the mechanic … resigned himself to an inward and superior discretion, and was consecrated in a manner, by an immediate intercourse and communication with heaven" (*H*, 5, p. 442). Commercial spirit, like the Puritan demands for political liberty, came to be valorized for a time by a sort of missionary spirit—"enquiries and debates concerning tonnage and poundage [in Parliament] went hand in hand with … theological or metaphysical controversies" (*H*, 5, p. 215). It complemented the rise in luxury consumption, the extension of commerce, and the decline of the country barons. (5) The zeal for political liberty and commercial spirit outlasted seventeenth-century religious fervor and demonstrated staying power into the eighteenth century, shaping England into, in William Blackstone's words, "a polite and commercial people." In part this staying power can be attributed to the path-dependent nature of cultural and moral sensibilities; but more generally these attitudes persisted because of their affinities and suitedness to concurrent institutional developments they helped create—a more liberal, tolerant political and cultural environment oriented to a large extent around the acquisition of wealth.

II. INSTITUTIONS AND IDEAS

Hume presented commercial spirit—the honoring of work, production, commerce, and money-making—as a prerequisite for commercial flourishing. In absolute governments, where social status is determined by one's relative position in the political hierarchy, he believed, commerce would not thrive, "not because it is less *secure* [than in a republic], but because it is less *honourable*" (*EMPL*, p. 93; italics in original). Part of his story of England's success is that commerce had become, by the mid-seventeenth century, "more honourable [there] … than in any other European kingdom" (*H*, 6, p. 148). Attitudes about the properness of commerce fed into a "spirit of the age," which "roused [men] from their lethargy, and put [their minds] into a fermentation," bringing about, by the eighteenth century, an "indissoluble chain" of "*industry*, *knowledge*, and *humanity*" (*EMPL*, p. 271; italics in original).

Hume's invocation of "spirit" in his social explanations might appear odd at first blush, for he is often regarded as a materialist thinker (Buckle 2007) or at least a thinker prioritizing material causes. It does sometimes appear that Hume believed "specific mores … manners, religious practices, [and] intellectual pursuits reflect the economic institutions of a given era" (Schabas and Wennerlind 2020, p. 6; see also discussions in Robertson 2005).

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The reality, however, is more complex. Hume may or may not have been committed to a metaphysical materialism. But regardless, he advanced a notion of social spirit rooted in ideas and opinions. He knew that ideas and opinions are affected by institutions—the form of government (republican, monarchical democratic) contributes to the course of the passions and the contextual determination of specific objects of praise and blame (see *EMPL*, pp. 111–137, 197–215). But he didn't take a reductionistic approach to the ideas–institutions relationship. His is a dialectical, multi-directional account.

Opinions, for Hume, effect—and to a real extent can be said to constitute—institutions. Rules of property, contract, and political authority are based upon conventions, which are not a matter of literal agreement but emergent opinion and shared interpretation (Matson and Klein 2022; Sabl 2012). Conventions establish patterns of normalcy in human action. These patterns, when they are sufficiently appreciated and expected, become "institutionalized" and often moralized (cf. Sugden 2005, p. 160). Changes in the patterns change expectations and derived moral sensibilities over time—thus institutions effect ideas. But institutional patterns can change for a variety of reasons, including shifting opinions for reason of, say, theological or philosophical innovations. One might argue that ideational innovations have material efficient causes, and of course they sometimes do, but Hume appreciated that investigations of deeper causes will frequently unearth still earlier changes in ideas, opinions, and sentiments.[5]

To take a quick example, during the reign of Charles I, Hume discussed how "men payed no regard to [customary crown] prerogative" (*H*, 6, p. 148). English sensibilities and opinions about political authority shifted, leading to a *de facto* change in English politics. The disregard for prerogative came about partly because Englishmen were aware of profit opportunities that could be captured by ignoring executive economic regulations and bypassing government-granted monopolies. They were also aware that the Crown at the time lacked sufficient administrative and financial power to enforce the regulations. But these incentives were preceded or at least accompanied by an independent ideational shift amongst a critical mass of members of the commons: a conviction of the proper role of the executive rooted as much in theological as economic reflections—a conviction advanced by English dissenters, especially the Puritans, who helped usher in a "zealous spirit of the age" (*H*, 4, p. 33) during which "religion … [was] the great spring of men's actions and determinations" (*H*, 6, p. 144).

III. SPIRIT

With those preliminaries, we now can turn to consider the logic of Hume's notion of "spirit." In the most general terms the concept, for Hume, again, simply indicates the drift of popular opinion and its discernable effects on patterns of action. To understand the causal significance of spirit, however, we must consider its connection with interest or the desire for gain.

Hume's emphasis on the universal motivational strength of interest and the desire for gain is well known, especially as it figures prominently in his account in Book III of his

[5] For general methodological reflections on these themes, see Nozick (1977); Hodgson (2007); Matson (2023c).

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Treatise on the origins of property and civil society (Hirschman [1977] 2013, pp. 24–25). What is much less appreciated is the breadth and plasticity of his sense of interest. We are universally motivated by certain kinds of interests, but the specific content of those interests varies widely in time and place. As Demeter usefully puts this point, "what is gain … depends on what an individual perceives as his interest, and that perception depends on his opinion, which is a consequence of 'moral causes' such as manners, institutions, and the spirit of the age" (Demeter 2022, p. 15).

Manners, institutions, and spirit affect individuals' perceptions of interest by influencing their ideas of what their fellows approve or disapprove of. A universal part of human interest is the desire to be praised and avoid blame—Hume maintained a roundly social conception of human nature (*T*, 2, 2, 5, para. 15). Individuals act in pursuit of gain, but part of that pursuit involves conforming to beliefs about the expectations of others to avoid external shaming from the community or internal feelings of guilt.

A key point for Hume is the idea that individuals' beliefs of the types of actions that will elicit praise and blame (and therefore the estimated desirability of types of actions) vary with social context. The content of desire arises from "good consider'd simply" (*T*, 2, 3, 9, para. 7); but each person's sense of "good" itself is to some extent a complex product of experience and enculturation (cf. McIntyre 2000; Matson 2021, pp. 853–856). For this reason, Hume described the causes of the passions of pride and humility—passions experienced as we do or do not act in line with our beliefs of what will elicit praise—as "natural … but not original" (*T*, 2, 1, 3, para. 5). It is natural and inevitable that all communities develop social norms of praise and blame; but the social norms developed will vary some according to differences in "art … industry … caprice … [and] fortune" (*T*, 2, 1, 3, para. 5). There are some aspects of some virtues, like justice, that are "obvious and absolutely necessary" and "inseparable from the species" (*T*, 3, 2, 1, para. 19). But inside of those elements that are "absolutely necessary," Hume's theory can accommodate a very wide degree of historical variation (Forbes 1975, pp. 102–121; J. A. Taylor 2015, pp. 35–38).

Spirit thus exerts causal influence on individuals' actions by influencing the efficient causes of individuals' passions of pride and humility or, in more general terms, informing the social aspect of each individual's desire for gain. But how are an individual's passions connected with that of her community? How does she consider the "spirit of the age" when charting her own course of action? The answer is through the faculty of sympathy and the formation of general rules.

Sympathy, for Hume, is the connective tissue between an individual's passional life and her community; it is "the epistemic framework within which [Hume] constructs a notion of social 'relations' that is essential for understanding the sociology of human nature" (Finlay 2007, p. 105). Through sympathy we re-create what we understand to be the emotional experience of another. We learn what kinds of actions and virtues our community finds desirable and instinctively form standards that color the content of what we perceive as our own interests. In brief, the sympathetic process, for Hume, works like this: we observe someone in a situation, form an idea of the passion we believe he or she feels, and then come to feel some modified version of that passion itself (*T*, 2, 1, 1, para. 1). This process has a contagious or mimetic aspect, especially at first when we are children (*EMPL*, p. 202; see also Hardin 2007, p. 41). But over time we don't just reproduce others' passions; our sympathy comes to involve reflections on "custom-based general rules" (J. A. Taylor 2015, p. 37; see *T*, 2, 1, 6, para. 9).

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General rules play a significant role in Hume's cognitive psychology, epistemology (Owen 1999, p. 222; Lyons 2001; Matson 2017, pp. 50–54), and aesthetics (Costelloe 2019). They are also significant in his social psychology. In Book I of the *Treatise* Hume identified the remarkable coordination of various mental faculties (e.g., memory, reason, imagination) to make sense of experience (see Demeter 2022, pp. 5–11). The mind instinctively practices experiential reasoning, which is essentially a complex of general rules derived (subconsciously and instinctively) from observed resemblances, conjunctions, and associations between ideas. Experiential reasoning itself generates further general rules and heuristics to navigate the complexities of reality. Some of these rules can be quite bad, leading to prejudice or inappropriate pre-judgment; e.g., "An *Irishman* cannot have wit, and a *Frenchman* cannot have solidity" (*T*, 1, 3, 13, para. 7). These rules can be corrected, in a manner, by better, more "philosophical" considerations of extensiveness and constancy—i.e., by searching about for observations that would falsify generated rules. But considerations of extensiveness and constancy are, in Hume's view, still general rules—they are just better ones (Lyons 2001, p. 259).

Hume's ideas about general rules carry over into his theory of the passions and social psychology. We can see the significance even from his example of misguided general rules and stereotypes from Book I of the *Treatise* quoted in the last paragraph. Single experiences are readily transferred into general rules about certain characters. The same can be said for sympathetic experiences. After several pleasant or unpleasant emotional experiences, we form rules for ourselves about the kinds of behaviors and virtues that will elicit praise or blame, that will cause us to experience pride or humility. With these rules in mind, we experience passions in situations and in connections with our sense of their customary occurrence. We feel humility, for example, not simply when we do something that elicits negative feedback from a physically present onlooker but when we do something that we believe (or remember) customarily elicits negative feedback from others in like situations according to our past experience. Thus "custom and practice … [settle] the just value of every thing; this must certainly contribute to the easy production of the passions, and guide us, by means of general establish'd maxims, in the proportions we ought to observe in preferring one object to another" (*T*, 2, 1, 6, para. 9).

To summarize the forgoing: (1) "Spirit" describes a general set of shared opinion in a community. (2) Each individual develops an instinctive awareness of the spirit of his age through sympathetic experience and the iterative formation of general rules. (3) Each individual has an interest in conforming to that spirit, to some extent, to procure the praise or love of others and avoid the blame or hatred, since human nature is social. (4) Since the objects and characteristics that are deemed proper or loveable are to some extent historically contingent, different places and ages will have different spirits, and these can account for at least some of observed differences in social affairs.

IV. COMMERCIAL SPIRIT

Understanding the capaciousness of Hume's concepts of interest and gain, along with the mechanisms of his notion of spirit, helps us appreciate his political economy as, at least in part, "a system of manners" (Sakamoto 2003). Commerce will not flourish where it is not honored (*EMPL*, p. 93), not because individuals cease to pursue gain but because

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their ideas of gain privilege non-pecuniary positional goods. Extensive economic development and advancement, Hume believed, requires commercial spirit—a locus of positive opinions about production, voluntary exchange, and refinement in consumption that will spark a community, by virtue of each individual's estimation of what will bring him honor, to industry, innovation, and mutually beneficial acts of emulation (*H,* 3, p. 76; *EMPL*, pp. 263–264, 268–280).[6]

Hume depicted commercial spirit or the "spirit of the [commercial] age" (*EMPL*, p. 271) as a complex product that emerged from transformed sensibilities about both the achievements that bring honor and the kinds of activities that are honorable. His narrative of the transition out of feudalism, which Adam Smith later borrowed in Book III of *The Wealth of Nations* (Brewer 1998), emphasized how the English barons became honest gentlemen by substituting luxury consumption for the maintenance of large retinues of dependents, and how they did so out of a concern for appearance and social status. This transformed the ends viewed as socially honorable in English society; wealth and luxury became preferred to domination (Sabl 2012, pp. 65–89). Accompanying this transformed view of honorable achievements were enhanced views of the properness of wealth-creating activities themselves—cultivation of the mechanical arts, industriousness, and trade. Hume attempted to contribute to the positive views of these activities in his own day, especially through his eulogizing of merchants (*EMPL*, p. 300; see also Schabas 2014). He clearly understood, however, such attitudes to have come forth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in part owing to the developments in Protestantism.

The account of the transition away from feudalism in the *History of England* is a familiar one. Following an increase in money and improvements in agricultural technology, the ancient barons found that

> the produce of [their large estates] could be much more conveniently disposed of by the peasants themselves, who raised it, than by the landlord or his bailiff … a commutation was therefore made of rents for services, and of money-rents for those in kind; and as men, in a subsequent age, discovered, that farms were better cultivated where the farmer enjoyed a security in his possession, the practice of granting leases to the peasants began to prevail, which entirely broke the bonds of servitude, already much relaxed from the former practices. (*H*, 2, pp. 523–524)

In later stages of feudalism, the barons exerted authority not, as before, through land tenure arrangements but by retaining knights, squires, and clerks for service (cf. Cam 1940, pp. 225–227). Hume described this practice as "rustic hospitality." The Tudors, especially Henry VII, attempted to curtail rustic hospitality to shore up Crown power by passing statutes "against engaging retainers, and giving them badges of liveries" (*H*, 3, p. 75). The more effective palliative to the clout of the barons, however, was the introduction of luxury goods and the extension of commerce. Printing and new styles of clothing apparel appeared on the scene, especially during the reign of Elizabeth, giving

[6] It is worth noting that Hume's analysis here dovetails to some extent with recent work by Deirdre McCloskey (2011). In general, however, Hume's historical analysis appears to have more in common with the evolutionary explanations offered by, for example, Joel Mokyr (2016) and Joseph Henrich (2020) than with McCloskey. Hume emphasized the gradual coevolution of ideas and institutions more than McCloskey does. But like McCloskey, he understood that an extensive commerce requires a certain rhetoric and a widespread belief that commercial enterprise will be esteemed.

rise to "a new turn of expence" (*H*, 4, p. 383). The barons directed surplus revenues to purchase new luxury goods, not just to support idle dependents. This contributed, unwittingly, to the decline of their political influence. It paved the way towards a new social equilibrium: "The nobility, instead of vying with each other, in the number and boldness of their retainers, acquired by degrees a more civilized species of emulation, and endeavoured to excel in the splendour and elegance of their equipage, houses, and tables" (*H*, 3, p. 76). Interestingly, part of the demand for luxury goods seems, according to Hume, to have been due to Elizabeth's own habits of dress and presentation, which may have contributed to the ascendant spirit of fashion (*H*, 4, p. 383). But whatever the cause, habits of luxury consumption gradually changed manners and the kinds of achievements viewed as honorable.

The main shift in manners emphasized in treatments of Hume's account is the change in preferences, amongst the barons, from political domination to luxury consumption. An important but less obvious shift concerns the activity of the lower classes, many of whom would, by the eighteenth century, join the swelling English middle class or "middle station" (*EMPL,* pp. 45–51; Langford 1989, pp. 59–121).

Individuals are prone to emulate those they view as successful, for each desires pleasure and recognition for himself. When successful individuals are characterized by their wealth and consumption habits, rather than bloodlines and land, a range of wealth-procuring activities are pursued, normalized, and legitimated. Something along these lines happened, according to Hume, in England. By the eighteenth century, Hume wrote, "great riches, acquired by commerce … [confounded] all ranks of men, and [rendered] money the chief foundation of distinction" (*H*, 5, p. 132; cf. Langford 1989, p. 5). The people in authority were "composed of gentry and merchants" (*EMPL*, p. 207). Observing the changing criteria of authority and importance inspired widespread industriousness, "[rousing] men from their indolence … [and raising] in them a desire of a more splendid way of life than that which their ancestors had enjoyed." A "few merchants," through foreign commerce, "became rivals in wealth to the ancient nobility" and tempted "other adventurers to become their rivals in commerce" (*EMPL*, p. 264). Widespread adoption of luxury consumption habits and emulation of the commercial adventuring of the merchants supported a new class, "who lived in an independant manner on the fruits of their own industry" (*H*, 4, p. 384).

These developments altered the spirit of the age—the prevailing set of norms and opinions amongst the body of English society. The ascendant commercial spirit, on Hume's account, can be said to have entailed the honoring or dignifying of: refinement in consumption (i.e., "luxury"); independence—living by the fruits of one's own industry, or the working of one's own land; diligent profit-seeking and innovation—exploiting the "secrets of … importation and exportation," "work[ing] up every home commodity to the utmost perfection" (*EMPL*, p. 264); and general arbitrage (*EMPL*, p. 300). This kind of spirit seems in part responsible for turning England, in the eighteenth century, as Paul Langford has described it, into "a plutocracy if it was anything, and even as a plutocracy one in which power was widely diffused, constantly contested, and ever adjusting to new incursions of wealth, even modest wealth" (Langford 1989, p. 5).

Aspects of the commercial spirit just described resonate with Protestant teachings stretching back to the sixteenth century, both on the Continent and in Britain (Ballor and van der Kooi 2019). In the seventeenth century, the Englishman Richard Baxter famously wrote in 1664 that to turn down a profit opportunity was to disobey God's

calling for one's life: "If God show you a way in which you may lawfully get more than in another way, (without wrong to your soul, or any other) if you refuse this … you cross one end of your calling, and you refuse to be God's steward" (Baxter [1664] 1838, 1, p. 377). Similar themes came forth in other Puritan writers, including Richard Steele, in his *The Tradesman's Calling* (see discussion in Hart 1995; Valeri 2010; Matson 2023b, pp. 89–91). Weber of course treated these matters in his thesis on the Protestant ethic (Weber 1930). He saw developments in Puritan theology complementing the institutional and material developments in England. So did Hume, although in a slightly different manner. Weber's Protestant ethic emphasized the valorizing of savings, investment, and accumulation. These elements figured into the commercial ethics and growth theory of Adam Smith, but they are much less prominent in Hume (see discussions in Davis 2003; Brewer 1998). Hume saw Protestant and Puritan zeal instead as bolstering individuals' sense of independence, habits of diligence, and their demands for political liberty. But despite their differences, Hume, like Weber, understood largely independent theological developments as having contributed to the rise of English commercial spirit.

V. PROTESTANT ENTHUSIASM IN THE WEB OF HUME'S CAUSES

Hume's social scientific method considers peculiar interactions between webs of causes in context, the effects of those interactions on individual passions, and, by extension, reasons for actions (cf. Skinner 2009, p. 411; Capaldi 1978). That method is on display in one of his synopses of the early, peaceful part of the reign of Charles I in Volume 6 of his *History.* He elaborated myriad contributors to the expansion of English commerce. Featured in his description are both material and ideational causes: expanded international trade, "democratical" principles, and perceptions of Crown prerogative. Towards the center of the web appears commercial spirit—the ascendant belief that commercial activity was a path towards honor:

> The commerce and industry of England encreased extremely during the peaceable period of Charles's reign: The trade to the East-Indies and to Guinea became considerable. The English possessed almost the sole trade with Spain. Twenty thousand cloths were annually sent to Turky.… The prevalence of democratical principles engaged the country gentlemen to bind their sons apprentices to merchants; *and commerce has ever since been more honourable in England than in any other European kingdom.* The exclusive companies, which formerly confined trade, were never expressly abolished by any ordinance of parliament during the commonwealth; but as men payed no regard to the prerogative, whence the charters of these companies were derived, the monopoly was gradually invaded, and commerce encreased by the encrease of liberty. (*H,* 6, p. 148; italics added)

Both "democratical" sensibilities and the growing habit in the seventeenth century of ignoring of Crown prerogative relate directly, in Hume's narrative, to Protestant enthusiasm. Insofar as a rising commercial spirit sits towards the center of the causal web here described, then so too does Protestantism. To put the point briefly, Hume saw "democractical principles" as, in part, a social and political manifestation in England of a

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distinctly Protestant theology; this theology corresponded to a particular set of social and work ethics (discussed in the next section), which exhibited an affinity with commercial stirrings of the time, shoring up the emergent commercial spirit of the age.[7]

Hume didn't often use the words "democracy" and "democratical." He discussed democracy as a political regime in various places in passing, but he was more interested in the institutional differences between monarchies and republics (e.g., *EMPL*, pp. 124–128). When he used "democratical" as an adjective, however, he did so not strictly to describe a specific political regime but also to indicate a certain spirit—a leveling spirit predicated upon beliefs about the theological, moral, or political equality of certain individuals. Democratical spirit correlates with a demand for democratic politics, of course; but it can exist in various ways within different kinds of political regimes. Hume, in fact, described a certain democratic spirit in republics (although he didn't use the term "democratic"): "the candidates for office [in a republic] must look downwards, to gain the suffrages of the people.… To be successful [in a republic] it is necessary for a man to make himself useful, by his industry, capacity, or knowledge" (*EMPL*, p. 126). In the *History* he occasionally described a zeal for republicanism and for civil liberty; that zeal seems democratic in spirit—it exhibits a demand for political representation and progress towards self-government (see *H*, 5, p. 11).

Hume associated democratic spirit with Protestantism, especially with Puritan enthusiasm: "So violent was the democratical, enthusiastic spirit diffused throughout the nation, that a total confusion of all rank and order was justly to be apprehended" (*H*, 5, p. 361). Later he wrote of London adopting democratic principles "with zeal" (*H,* 5, p. 387). This association of democratic spirit and Protestantism was not unique to Hume. One of the earliest English uses of "democratic" catalogued by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for instance, is from John Ley's 1641 *A Discourse Concerning Puritans*, in which he wrote of "fiery spirited Ministers" fancying themselves "a democratick forme of policy."[8] But Hume placed special emphasis on the association as causal, and he argued it can be understood by examining the shifting grounds of ideas about political authority following the Reformation.

Prior to the Reformation, claims to sovereignty by the English monarchs were affirmed by the Catholic Church. Papal recognition served as one of several focal points around which the citizenry could coordinate their opinions of legitimate rulership.[9] This focal point disappeared gradually in the wake of the Reformation on the European continent, and then rapidly with the English Reformation under Henry VIII.

An immediate consequence of the English Reformation was the unification of civil and religious authority. The Tudors claimed sovereignty from a supposed divine right to rule, and they simultaneously established themselves as head of the Church of England. Hume believed the unification of civil and religious authority to have been beneficial on account of its prevention of tangled disputes between Rome and London. But the unification, howsoever beneficial on the front of jural integration, had

[7] For a contemporary empirical study connecting democracy and Protestantism, see Woodberry (2012).

[8] Quote from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, full entry on "democractic, adj. and n.", 1a. Accessed online, July 5, 2023.

[9] For useful discussions on Hume on the sources of political authority in theory and practice, see discussions in Sabl (2012). See also Matson and Klein (2022, pp. 17–19).

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unforeseen consequences. These consequences would begin to play out during the reign of Elizabeth, and then especially in the seventeenth century under the Stuarts (*H*, 3, p. 207).

The throes of the Reformation helped clarify the conceptual connection in the minds of the English between political legitimacy and theological doctrine.[10] The Reformation, in other words, brought closer together practical politics and political theology. This connection had long been implicit in Christendom. But Henry VIII inadvertently made the matter more explicit. He "render[ed] asunder those bands, by which the ancient superstition had fastened itself on the kingdom [England]" (*H,* 3, p. 256); but stabilizing his rule and legitimizing this break with Rome called for theological justification, at least in the minds of a religious citizenry. This in turn called for open theological disputation, which Henry, the erstwhile "Defender of the Faith," entered with zeal.

In openly entering into "scholastic disputes," Hume wrote, Henry VIII "encouraged the people, by his example, to apply *themselves* to the study of theology" (*H*, 3, p. 290; italics added). In bringing theological disputes into the center of his court, Henry inadvertently provided tinder for the spiritual and cultural sparks of revolution. This had major political and cultural ramifications. Says Hume: Henry's "encouraging [of] speculation and dispute, was ill fitted to promote that peaceable submission of opinion, which he recommended" (*H*, 3, p. 311). The now articulate knowledge that political legitimacy entails a theological element, combined with the open practice of rational theological inquiry, gradually subverted the divine-right monarchy that Henry wished to establish for himself and his heirs:

> But in proportion as the practice of submitting religion to private judgment was acceptable to the people, it appeared, in some respects, dangerous to the rights of sovereigns, and seemed to destroy that implicit obedience, on which the authority of the civil magistrate is chiefly founded. The very precedent, of shaking so ancient and deep founded an establishment as that of the Romish hierarchy, might, it was apprehended, prepare the way for other innovations. (*H*, 3, p. 212)

The subversive consequences came forth initially under Elizabeth. At the turn of the seventeenth century under the rule of Elizabeth, Hume describes the English spirit as largely "subdued" and "inclined to admire those acts of violence and tyranny, which were exercised over themselves, and at their own expense" (*H,* 3, p. 323). But an unlikely vanguard, animated by the spirit of the Reformation, looked to stall the advance of royal power and keep alive the practice of liberty. That vanguard was the Puritans:

> The precious spark of liberty had been kindled, and was preserved, by the puritans alone; and it was to this sect, whose principles appear so frivolous and habit so ridiculous, that the English owe the whole freedom of their constitution. Actuated by that zeal which belongs to innovators, and by the courage which enthusiasm inspires, they hazarded the utmost indignation of their sovereign. (*H,* 4, p. 146)

The Puritan indignation flowed in part from a demand for religious toleration from the Church of England. The indignation also flowed from theological conviction. A good

[10] I owe parts of the discussion of Hume on divine-right monarchy here to ideas from an unpublished manuscript by Thomas Merrill (Merrill 2018).

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part of the Puritan coalition "rigidly defended the speculative system of the first reformers" (*H,* 5, p. 212), which maintained that humans can commune directly with God, without mediating institutions. The mediating institutions and practices the Puritans emphasized, namely the sacraments of baptism and communion, were taught to be integral to the life of the believer; they were not, however, taught as necessary to interaction with the divine.

Such theological perspectives, Hume maintained, encouraged a transformed view of human authority generally, including political authority. In Scotland after the union of the crowns, James I experienced this first-hand:

> [He] had remarked in their Scottish brethren a violent turn towards republicanism, and a zealous attachment to civil liberty; principles nearly allied to that religious enthusiasm, with which they were actuated. He had found, that being mostly persons of low birth and mean education, the same lofty pretensions, which attended them in their familiar addresses to their Maker, of whom they believed themselves the peculiar favourites, induced them to use the utmost freedoms with their earthly sovereign. (*H*, 5, p. 11)

Scottish Presbyterianism and English Puritanism flowed largely from similar Calvinistic theology. In de-emphasizing mediation and affirming man's ability to approach God Himself directly, through faith in the work of Christ, such theology couldn't, according to Hume, help but affect a believer's social and political psychology. If the throne of God Himself might be approached with confidence, why should one feel trepidation approaching the throne of an earthly king? Why should one feel trepidation in the face of any earthly judgment? These sentiments fed into the emerging notion among the English Puritans and their allies that political authority derives legitimacy from consent of the governed, a notion canonized later in the seventeenth century by John Locke—the son of a Puritan. Due to a confluence of "fanatical" and "republican" spirit, the belief ascended that "individuals … could invest [the lawgiver] with no authority of commanding what is contrary to the decrees of heaven" and with nothing "contrary to the principles of natural equity" (*H*, 6, p. 83).

And here we come full circle to Hume's comment quoted above about "democratical principles" and the spirited ignoring of Crown prerogative (*H*, 6, p. 148). "Democratical principles" in context of *H*, 6, p. 148 describe an ascending set of convictions derived in part from a sense of the theological, moral, and jural equality of persons. Such convictions underpinned a "bold and daring spirit" (*H,* 4, p. 124), increasing the disregard and outright disobedience of Crown prerogatives perceived to be inconsistent with civil and religious liberty. This spiritedness complemented another democratic sort of development: country gentlemen alienating their estates and releasing their retainers, as discussed above, which provided larger opportunity sets for the lower ranks and put in motion greater social dynamism. As the property of the commons increased in England, previously idle individuals began "to learn some industry or calling and [became] useful both to themselves and others" (*H,* 3, pp. 76–77). The industriousness sanctioned by the shifts out of feudalism complemented the enthusiastic, democratic spirit ascending in politics, in part because both moralized independence and innovativeness but also because the religious-democratic spirit contributed to further shifts in social and work ethics.

VI. THE PROTESTANT ETHIC

Hume indicated an awareness of distinctive Protestant social and work ethics flowing from the same theological convictions that gave rise to "democractical principles" and attitudes in politics just treated. The proposition that one could commune with God directly, and could be justified in His eyes by grace through faith in Christ, produced a psychological inwardness in believers. The inwardness produced a sense of moral and political equality, and hence demands for civil and religious liberty. It also affected other ethical sensibilities by: dignifying of ordinary, active life—manufacturing, trade, husbandry, and so on (cf. C. Taylor 1989, p. 211); privatizing moral judgment, thus generating a spirit of independence; and emphasizing the avoidance of inward sentiments of guilt, rather than simply outer shame. These are not presented systematically by Hume in one place, but they emerge as we take a synoptic view of his writings.

Printing facilitated "mighty innovations … in religion, such as not only affected those states as embraced them, but even those that adhered to the ancient faith and worship" (*H*, 3, p. 81). Those innovations constituted the Reformation. Hume presented the Reformation as "the triumph of a new culture and system of ideas in the midst of a tense ideological struggle" (Wei 2017, p. 61). He repeatedly emphasized two of its connected effects: the precedent it set for the questioning of authority (*H*, 3, p. 139), and its emphasis on active, ordinary life.

A classic Protestant trope against Catholicism, going back to Martin Luther, was the accusation that it promoted idleness and indolent contemplation. Hume's contemporary Francis Hutcheson implicitly described Catholicism as having presented "worldly business" as "inconsistent with the heights of piety." But piety, Hutcheson argued, "is never more sincere and lively than when it engages men in all social and kind offices to others, out of a sense of duty to God" (Hutcheson 1755, 2, p. 182).[11] In his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* Hume communicated these sensibilities as part of his own ethical theory. He derided the "train of monkish virtues"—including celibacy, fasting, humility, self-denial, and humility—as unproductive, being neither useful nor agreeable (*EPM,* p. 73). A primary standard of virtue in Hume's own intellectual account was service to others, like many other British moralists of his century (Ahnert 2014, pp. 37–44). This standard fed into his personal estimation of the virtues of commerce and explains his warm admiration for merchants (*EMPL*, p. 300; Schabas 2014): "Can anything stronger be said in praise of a profession, such as merchandize or manufacture, than to observe the advantages which it procures to society; and is not a monk and inquisitor enraged when we treat his order as useless or pernicious to mankind? … In general, what praise is implied in the simple epithet *useful*! What reproach in the contrary!" (*EMP*, p. 10).

In both the *History* and his *Natural History of Religion,* Hume advanced the idleness trope against Catholics more explicitly and at greater length than in the *Enquiry* (see Schabas 2020, pp. 206–207; cf. Santori 2022). Part of the idleness and social stagnation he associated with Catholicism was due, he claimed, to its constant subverting of the rules of justice. Arts and sciences will never develop in despotic governments (*EMPL*, p. 118). Catholicism tended towards despotism and irregular execution of law, thus

[11] For further discussion of Hutcheson on these points, see Matson (2023a).

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limiting commercial opportunities and failing to rouse men from indolence (cf. *EMPL*, p. 264). This tendency was due to its requiring a "unity of faith"; the efforts to preserve that led to "violent persecution [of dissenters]" (*H*, 3, p. 136). Roman Catholicism is presented by Hume as less tolerant and amenable to pluralism than Protestantism: "it is essential to the Roman catholic religion to inspire a violent hatred of every other worship, and to represent all pagans, mahometans, and heretics as the objects of divine wrath and vengeance" (*EMPL*, p. 247). In England, he argued, the "abolition of the ancient religion [Catholicism] much contributed to the regular administration of justice" by allowing for the punishment of clergy in secular courts and by gradually elevating the Crown to par with the mitre (*H*, 3, p. 324).

Complementing the irregular administration of justice under Catholicism, for Hume, was the drag of monastic life. The narrative he tells of the rise and fall of the monasteries has notable parallels with that of the feudal barons. Before the English Reformation the monasteries absorbed and diverted capital, placing "fetters on liberty and industry" (*H*, 3, p. 227). During the reign of Henry VIII, monasteries and church lands were confiscated and redistributed by the Crown. The effects were beneficial, as capital was productively reallocated. The monasteries also no longer could afford their practice of extensive hospitality, a practice adopted to "dissipate revenues, and support [their] popularity" (*H*, 3, p. 256). As with the barons and their practice of keeping retainers, the extensive hospitality of the monasteries made them "nurseries of idleness" (*H*, 3, p. 256).

The association between Catholicism and idleness provides a kind of negative evidence that Hume appreciated a distinctive Protestant ethic—or it at least indicates that he understood Protestantism as facilitating developments that led to changes in ethics. More substantive evidence for his appreciation can be gleaned by considering Hume's reflections on the inwardness and individualism of Protestant psychology.

Tipping his hat to Machiavelli in his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume described Catholicism as subduing "the spirit of mankind" and rendering people fit for "slavery and subjection" (*NHR*, pp. 63–64). He connected this subduing in the *History* to the practice of auricular confession, which he described as "one of the most powerful engines that ever was contrived for degrading the laity, and giving their spiritual guides an entire ascendant over them," especially combined as it was with the sacrament of penance (*H*, 3, p. 355). In keeping individuals in suspense about their salvation, and in exercising authority over conscience through the sacraments of confession and penance, the Catholic Church sapped individual vitality and perpetuated "agonies of superstitious terror" (*H,* 3, p. 355). The Protestant churches dispensed with confession and penance, and to varying degrees they outsourced moral accountability to individuals' own consciences (*H*, 5, pp. 214, 442). This outsourcing, supported theologically by the placing of the conscience in direct relation to the divine, is depicted as producing confidence and self-assurance in the believer. As he wrote in his *Essays*, Protestant psychology "arises from a presumptuous pride and confidence, it thinks itself sufficiently qualified to *approach* the Divinity, without any human mediator … [It] even imagines itself *actually* to *approach* him by way of contemplation and inward converse. … The fanatic consecrates himself" (*EMPL*, p. 76).

The Protestant individual relative to his Catholic counterpart is presented by Hume as zealous and ready for action—ready to engage with and transform the world. Luther's followers "adopted an enthusiastic strain of devotion, which admitted of no observances, rites, or ceremonies, but placed all merit in a mysterious species of faith, in inward

vision, rapture, and ecstasy" (*H*, 3, p. 141). These characteristics are especially pronounced amongst the Puritans and Presbyterians: "By nourishing in every individual, the highest raptures and ecstasies of devotion, [the genius of religion] consecrated, in a manner, every individual, and in his own eyes, bestowed a character on him, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions could alone confer" (*H*, 5, p. 260). Hume described these effects further by recounting an analogy from a man called Rouse:

> 'If a man meet a dog alone,' said he [Rouse], 'the dog is fearful, though ever so fierce by nature: But, if the dog have his master with him, he will set upon that man, from whom he fled before. This shows, that lower natures, being backed by higher, encrease in courage and strength, and certainly man, being backed with Omnipotency, is a kind of omnipotent creature. All things are possible to him that believes.' (*H*, 5, p. 214)

The effects on economic psychology can be seen, at least implicitly, in Hume's remarks on the Puritan demands for more extensive economic freedom. Under Elizabeth, the Puritan-dominated commons introduced a bill to eliminate monopolies granted by prerogative as an assertion of rights (*H*, 4, p. 344). Under Charles I, "enquiries and debates concerning tonnage and poundage went hand in hand with … theological or metaphysical controversies," and "the merchants who should voluntarily pay these duties, were denominated betrayers of English liberty, and public enemies" (*H*, 5, p. 215). Economic freedom came to the fore of Puritan parliamentary demands. Underneath these demands sat the changed conceptions of political legitimacy discussed in the previous section; but we can also detect the role of inward vision and self-affirmation here as well—convictions of the dignity of one's belief and wheel of activities, independent of statutory law and cultural expectations. Hume seemed, too, to have perceived the connection. He described, later in Volume 5 of the *History*, the sweeping psychological and moral effects of the Protestant enthusiasm in this way:

> The fanaticism of the independents, exalted to a higher pitch, abolished ecclesiastical government, disdained creeds and systems, neglected every ceremony, and confounded all ranks and orders. The soldier, *the merchant*, the *mechanic,* indulging the fervors of zeal, and guided by the illapses of the spirit, resigned himself to an inward and superior direction, and was consecrated in a manner, by an immediate intercourse and communication with heaven. (*H,* 5, p. 442; italics added)

Hume clearly picked up here, albeit in his own polemical way, the idea that, in the seventeenth century, ordinary activities of all sorts, including work and trade, became valorized as "most 'spiritual'" (Hart 1995, p. 196). The theologian Benjamin B. Warfield (1913) captures the spirit that we can fairly read into Hume's remarks: "Talk of the divine right of kings! Here is the divine right of every workman, no one of whom needs to be ashamed, if only he is an honest and good workman" (p. 211).

It is worth noting here a curious asymmetry between Hume and Max Weber. Hume claimed that the uncertainty about one's salvation under Catholicism promoted indolence, fear, idleness, and slavish devotion to ritual (*H,* 3, pp. 227, 355; *NHR*, pp. 63–64). He maintained that Puritanism (like Protestantism generally) overcame uncertainty by the turn towards inwardness—the emphasis on individual consecration by virtue of direct communion with God (*H*, 5, pp. 214, 442). That confidence, for Hume, shifted ethical sensibilities. It yielded zealous confidence and industriousness as a consequence of "hope, pride, presumption, [and] a warm imagination" inspired by theological priors

(*EMPL*, p. 74). For Weber, on the other hand, similar commercial ethical sensibilities came forth not because of resolved uncertainty (as in Hume's case) but as an attempt *to* resolve it. Weber interpreted Reformed dogmatics as underproviding individuals with assurance of their salvation. God alone elects individuals for salvation; they have no say in the matter. Having no means of ascertaining whether he is part of God's elect, then, the believer falls back on diligent work as a way towards material success, which he hopes will signal his salvation and his favored divine status, to himself and others. It is the demand for the assurance of salvation that leads, in Weber's account, to commercial spirit—which is Hume's account backwards. Thus, both Hume and Weber understood Puritan theologies as producing a commercial ethic in consequence of attempts to alleviate eternal uncertainty. But Hume saw the ethic flowing from the solution of salvation through faith alone, whereas Weber saw the ethic as the solution itself.

A final point we can make about Hume's awareness of a distinct Protestant social ethic concerns the issue of trust. Strands of contemporary literature emphasize that the economic benefits of Protestantism came not from changes in work ethic but from increasing trust. Benito Arruñada (2009) contends that Protestantism historically impacted not work ethics but social ethics: Protestant teachings lead to "more active mutual self-control" and "greater concern for social interactions, at least in terms of social control, rule of law, and homogeneity of values" (p. 894). These outcomes result, he argues, from differences in the psychological cost of promise-breaking among Protestants and Catholics. Unlike Catholics, most Protestants do not observe the sacrament of penance, meaning there is no third-human-party absolving of sin. Sin must be dealt with, in the first instance, in the believer's breast in communion with God. There is no outsourcing of the weight of guilt to the priest and no list of good tasks that will balance the scales—there is only faith in the sacrifice of the Christ. Arruñada argues from this observation that members of Protestant communities might be marginally more likely to cleave to internal moral standards (including the keeping of contracts): wrongdoing will be more painful for the Protestant since it can be dealt with only internally. Common knowledge of such internal mechanisms of self-control has network effects, facilitating trust and lowering transaction costs, which in turn stimulate economic activity. Similar lines of argument occur in Ulrich Blum and Leonard Dudley (2001), who argue that small changes in perceived cost of cooperation can have widespread impact within trading networks, and that Protestantism lowered "subjective cost[s] of cooperating with strangers," thus affecting economic growth.

Hume made related observations (Schabas 2020, pp. 205–207). He elaborated conscience and belief homogeneity as facilitating trust and cooperation. Sensible knaves know that violating customs of property can yield pecuniary returns. But in his contemporary Protestant society, Hume observed that "the antipathy to treachery and roguery is too strong to be counterbalanced by any views of profit or pecuniary advantage. Inward peace of mind, consciousness of integrity, and a satisfactory review of our conduct; these are circumstances, very requisite to happiness" (*EPM*, p. 82). In overcoming the "sensible knave" problem, this kind of inward moral conscientiousness facilitates a more extensive commerce.[12] Schabas says that in his emphasis on a clear

[12] Hargreaves Heap (2021) makes Hume the standard bearer for what he calls the "prudential" approach to economics—an approach emphasizing each individual's pursuit of his or her interest, and the potentially disjointed nature of those interests. When we consider the plasticity of Hume's sense of interest, and the

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conscience as a precondition for "greatness of mind" and virtue, Hume "embraced the Protestant ethic that puts the burden in oneself rather than the actions of the priest" (Schabas 2020, p. 206). He evidently saw certain Protestant sects as maintaining this ethic. For example, the Quaker, he wrote, "never asked more for his wares than the precise sum, which he was determined to accept. This last maxim is laudable, and continues still to be religiously observed by that sect" (*H,* 6, p. 144).

VII. AFTER THE TEMPEST

For Hume, Protestant enthusiasm inadvertently led towards an extension of English civil and religious liberty. It did so due to its effects on political psychology, its encouraging of democratic spirit. That spirit contributed to a rise in independence and individuality, which complemented the stirring of English commerce during the decline of feudalism. The same dogmas that shifted Protestant political psychology, which emphasized inwardness and man's direct relation to God, shifted work and social ethics by consecrating each individual in his or her ordinary activities, and also by facilitating habits of trust. Moral judgment was gradually outsourced to each individual's conscience. This is the narrative I've attempted to reconstruct out of Hume. But what happened next?

Weber famously described capitalism as taking on a tragic energy of its own after the decline of the religious spirit that was its spark:

> To-day the spirit of religious asceticism … has escaped from the cage. But victorious capitalism, since it rests on mechanical foundations, needs its support no longer. The rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.… In the field of [capitalism's] highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport. (Weber 2009, p. 96)

Hume perhaps had a broader understanding of the sources of the spirit of commercial society than Weber had of capitalism. But like Weber, Hume, too, understood commercial society to take on an energy of its own after the relative decline of enthusiasm—albeit a beneficial energy, not a tragic one.

In his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm" Hume described what can be called the natural history of false religions. One of his observations is that "religions, which partake of enthusiasm are, on their first rise, more furious and violent … but in a little time become more gentle and moderate" (*EMPL*, p. 76). He gave as an example the Levellers in England and the Covenanters in Scotland. Into the eighteenth century, religious enthusiasm associated with these movements cooled in Britain, giving rise to moderations and latitude. The fury of enthusiasm "is like that of thunder and tempest, which exhaust themselves in a little time, and leave the air more calm and serene than before"

extent to which abiding by our conscience becomes part of our "interest," Hume is a much better candidate for Hargreaves Heap's second approach to political economy, of which he makes Tocqueville the exemplar.

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(*EMPL*, p. 77). The reason for the short lifespan of enthusiastic religion is that it lacks sufficient continuity, symbolism, and ritual. Protestantism sets a precedent for the fragmentation of authority (denominational splits), which fosters continuous short-run innovation but lacks the moral ecology to sustain belief and zeal within any given sect over the long term.

But the political spirit and the social and work ethics to which Protestant enthusiasm contributed had not declined by Hume's day—to the contrary, they had increased. One reason for this might simply be the inertia and path-dependence of custom. A related point is that church teaching, which of course remained a key arbiter of culture in the eighteenth century, continued in its positive moral evaluation of wealth creation and industry, in keeping with church practice from the outset of the Reformation (Ballor and van der Kooi 2019). A third reason, one that finds support in Hume's views, might be that the ethics that came forth in the seventeenth century with the rise of commerce and Protestant zeal have a deep resonance with certain passions of human nature themselves.

In his *Dialogues* Hume, through the voice of Philo, claimed that "industry is a power, and the most valuable of any." If everyone were industrious, society should "at once … fully reach that state of society, which is so imperfectly attained by the best regulated government" (Hume 1998b, p. 72; cf. Santori 2022). Elsewhere he pointed to our inherently active nature. The human person is "an active being; and from that disposition, as well as from the various necessities of human life, must submit to business and occupation" (*EHU,* p. 7). The desire for "exercise and employment" is the most "constant and insatiable" desire in the human frame (*EMPL*, p. 300). What we want is not the satisfaction of static desires but to have and pursue new desires (Rotwein 2009, p. xlvii; Matson 2021). Hume judged the commercial society of his day to provide an outlet for our passions for employment, our demand for activity, and also our desire to be seen by others. For this reason, he deemed commercial society "the happiest and most virtuous" type of society in history (*EMPL*, p. 269).

The outlet provided to the passions by commercial society gives it self-reinforcing tendencies. Hume presented, in his essay "Of Refinement in the Arts," a chain reaction between industry, development in the arts and sciences, refinement of the law, and socialization. This reaction is depicted as taking on an energy of its own:

> The spirit of the age affects all the arts; and the minds of men, being once roused from their lethargy, and put into a fermentation, turn themselves on all sides, and carry improvements into every art and science. Profound ignorance is totally banished, and men enjoy the privilege of rational creatures, to think as well as to act, to cultivate the pleasures of mind as well as those of the body. (*EMPL*, p. 271)

On Hume's point of view, perhaps, what initially causes commerce to become seen as honorable is in some sense not relevant.[13] Protestant enthusiasm played a role in his understanding of the historical origins of British commercial spirit, just as it clearly played a role in his narrative of the development of English liberty. But once established, that spirit tends to itself, at least for a time. Although perhaps not mechanical, in the sense in which Weber described nineteenth-century capitalism as "mechanical" (Weber 2009, p. 96), the spirit of commercial society possesses a self-preserving and perhaps even self-augmenting dynamic. Hume, however, presented the dynamic not as an iron

[13] For similar interpretations, but of Weber, see Berger (2010); Hansen (1963).

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cage—an acquisitive form of human behavior without the motivating religious spirit—but as an "indissoluble chain" of "industry, knowledge, and humanity" (*EMPL*, p. 271). And perhaps therein lies their deepest difference.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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