RETHINKING UNCERTAINTY:

SPINOZA AND HUME ON SHAPING UNCERTAIN SECULAR FUTURES

Alfonso Ruben Vergaray

Dissertation submitted to the faculty
of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy In

SOCIAL, POLITICAL, ETHICAL AND CULTURAL THOUGHT

Joseph C. Pitt, Chair

Benjamin E. Sax
Gordon Schochet
Patrick S. Roberts
Timothy W. Luke

September 25, 2014
Blacksburg, VA

Keywords: Uncertainty, Spinoza, Hume

Rethinking Uncertainty: Spinoza and Hume on Shaping Uncertain Secular Futures

Alfonso Ruben Vergaray

ABSTRACT

This dissertation extends contemporary views about uncertainty. It does so through a reading of the role of uncertainty in the political thought of two modern philosophers, Baruch Spinoza and David Hume. Despite uncertainty's notable and multi-disciplinary appeal in the academic literature, the frame in which most scholars think about social and political uncertainty is one-sided. On the whole, contemporary scholars consider uncertainty as a problem in need of a remedy. In the social sciences uncertainty is transformed into risk in order to empirically calculate risk probabilities. The hope is that risks (uncertainties) can be controlled, reduced, and in all, mitigated. In this dissertation, I argue for a conceptual rethinking of uncertainty that expands its scope and reach to include a socially and politically beneficent understanding, a constructive form of uncertainty. In particular, I explore the ways social groups experience conditions of uncertainty in different contexts through an examination of what I term future-oriented and epistemic uncertainty in Hume and Spinoza's political thought. Spinoza's arguments for liberal democracy, and Hume's arguments favoring commercial society, are highlighted as instances of constructive uncertainty. The dissertation concludes by applying a general understanding of constructive uncertainty to the ideology of the American Dream in order to illustrate suggestively how a constructive conception of uncertainty might prove useful when critically engaging contemporary matters.

DEDICATION

To My Parents

Pedro Vergaray and Flor Maria Vergaray

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

related and unrelated to this dissertation. Charlie deserves special mention as our friendship extends to my first days as an undergraduate. He has always found time to talk about things personal and political.

One institution outside of Virginia Tech was crucial to the completion of this project. The Frederick Douglass Institute and the History & Political Science Department at California University of Pennsylvania provided me with financial and moral support during the final year of this project. I would especially like to thank Laura, Mel, Harrison, Ayanna, and Dean Yamba for their support and guidance.

I owe my greatest debts to my parents, Pedro and Flor Maria Vergaray. As I began this project, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. The tenderness, care, and patience my father has displayed in these difficult times has been a source of inspiration. More generally, I cannot say enough about the overflowing love my parents have consistently provided. It is thanks to the solid relational foundation they have laid that I am able flourish. My sister Juliana was probably the earliest interlocutor I engaged regarding knowledge and reality. I admire her tenacity in speech and action. I would also like to thank Rabbit, Dark and White Kwai; without them life would be a little less colorful. To my dearest Aom, her loving presence brings sweet coherence to my everyday. Finally, to my child who is due to arrive in late March. I hope you remember that whatever you pursue in life that you pursue it lovingly. *Eros* is the engine of all things high.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

This study reexamines one of the most examined concepts in a broad range of disciplines dealing with social and political things: uncertainty. Uncertainty, as a theoretical point of departure, has captured the imagination of scholars in economics, environmental studies, law, political science, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and statistics.[1] Despite its wide and notable appeal, the frame in which most scholars think about social and political uncertainty is one-sided. On the whole, they consider uncertainty as a problem in need of a remedy. In the social sciences, for example, uncertainty is transformed into risk in order to empirically calculate risk probabilities.[2] The hope is that risks (uncertainties) can be controlled, reduced, and in all, mitigated. In this dissertation, I argue for a conceptual rethinking of uncertainty that expands its scope and reach to include a socially and politically beneficent understanding, a constructive form of uncertainty. As experiences of uncertainty are a ubiquitous feature of human life, social and political thinkers should reflect on uncertainty not only as problem, but also as a potential force for social and political good.

Because inaugurating a conceptual shift in any area of thought is usually a long and arduous process, I attempt to take a small step in that direction through an analysis of constructive uncertainty in the works of two early modern philosophers, Baruch Spinoza and David Hume. As I will show later in this introduction, their thought on uncertainty is an

---

[1] The following is a small sample of the vast literature on uncertainty: Robert M. Arkin, Kathryn C. Oleson, and Patrick J. Carroll, *Handbook of the Uncertain Self* (Florence, KY: Psychology Press, 2013); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (New York, NY: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1992); Michael A. Hogg and Danielle L. Blaylock, eds., *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2012); Barry C. Burden, ed., *Uncertainty in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Claudio Cioffi-Revilla, *Politics and Uncertainty: Theory, Models and Applications* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998); David A. Moss, *When All Else Fails: Government as the Ultimate Risk Manager* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Jens Zinns, ed., *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2008).
[2] For a history of this development, see Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

important part of a broader story of theorizing about uncertainty in modern political philosophy. The purpose of examining uncertainty in the writings of these thinkers is manifold and is stated below in detail. In addition to examining constructive uncertainty in Spinoza and Hume, I conclude by considering how thinking about uncertainty constructively can be applied to contemporary matters by examining the ideology of the American Dream. In that concluding chapter I apply a general understanding of constructive uncertainty to examine the American Dream, and selectively apply the insights gained from the previous analysis on Spinoza and Hume's work on constructive uncertainty. In the end, the conclusion aims to be suggestive, rather than exhaustive in its analysis.

More broadly, I hope to show that constructive forms of uncertainty are implicitly embedded in the social and political landscape. Consequently, one of the overall aims of this project is to make the case that rendering the latent features of constructive uncertainty in the contemporary world manifest is beneficial for those reflecting on social and political matters. In particular, the need for careful historical analysis in addition to theorizing about constructive uncertainty is highlighted when I extend my analysis of the American Dream to post-colonial nation states. While the particular insights reached in the concluding chapter are suggestive, the more general observation regarding the benefits of thinking about the American Dream as a constructive form of uncertainty is demonstrated. Because the bulk of the dissertation focuses on the writings of Spinoza and Hume, let me begin this introduction by explaining why I believe this project warrants that focus.

At the most basic level Spinoza and Hume illustrate what theorizing about uncertainty constructively might look like. Although neither thinker explicitly claims to be engaged in such a project, I will show that a constructive form of uncertainty is nonetheless an implicit and

prominent feature in their social and political thought. Given that I am introducing a new way of thinking about uncertainty, or reviving an old way of thinking about uncertainty that was never recognized as such, the fact that Spinoza and Hume are writing prior to the 19th century is more of a benefit than a burden.[3] For one thing, Spinoza and Hume's account of constructive uncertainty contribute to two main areas of inquiry in contemporary social and political thought: liberal democracy and commercial society. Spinoza is often considered the first modern philosopher to support something like liberal democracy, and Hume is often cited as one of the first proponents of commercial society to embrace avarice and the like.[4] As early modern thinkers they represent, in other words, a watershed moment in thinking about these central ideas. Spinoza and Hume are also at the center of the enlightenment discussions surrounding epistemological questions that are representative of the foundational debates about the nature and scope of epistemological uncertainty in the modern period. To what extent is knowledge certain? Is certain knowledge of the natural world all that can be hoped for, if that, or can metaphysical sources of knowledge provide certainty? While Spinoza and Hume stand side by side in not relying on metaphysical sources of knowledge, they stand on opposite ends on the possibility of attaining certain knowledge.

Spinoza, influenced by the work of Rene Descartes, was a rationalist who held firm to the idea that certain knowledge was possible. Hume, on the other hand, was a skeptic who severely questioned the rational edifice erected by Descartes and Spinoza. Hume's skepticism, in fact, embraces uncertainty in order to move forward with his qualified empiricism. Despite their

---

[3] For a discussion on limitations of using Spinoza and Hume, see the conclusion of this dissertation.
[4] James Wiley, *Theory and Practice in the Philosophy of David Hume* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012**),** 250**.** Hans W. Blom, "The Moral and Political Philosophy of Spinoza," in *The Renaissance and 17th Century Rationalism (Routledge History of Philosophy, Vol. IV)*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), 313.

epistemic differences, both held to the view that an analysis of the way people experience uncertainty is central to thinking about social and political things.

Finally, the theological challenges Spinoza and Hume were embroiled in give their work on uncertainty a special resonance. A move towards the secularization of social and political things, which each thinker argued for in his own way, speaks to the contemporary resurgence of religion as a global force. Scholars of the post-secular would do well to return to Spinoza and Hume's calls for secularization—a call that is tempered by their recognition of religion's staying power.[5] In all, I hope to convince readers that Spinoza and Hume are an important starting point for reflecting on what I am calling constructive uncertainty. As thinkers writing at a critical juncture that helped construct the social and political worlds we inhabit today, they help us reflect on our current condition, by mixing the unfamiliar with the familiar.

While the main of this dissertation is dedicated to the thought of Spinoza and Hume, it does not aim to comprehensively uncover their thinking on uncertainty in social and political things. A whole study can be done on each of these thinkers on that topic alone. Instead, I aim to use their thoughts on constructive uncertainty as a springboard to expand current ways of thinking about uncertainty. In a similar vein, I do not attempt to explicitly draw connections between Spinoza and Hume's thought. For instance, there are a number of scholars who have undertaken to argue for Spinoza's influence on Hume.[6] I do not participate in that scholarly discussion. That said, there are many suggested connections between their thought that can be gleaned from my analysis. In other words, the possibility for further research into the

---

[5] In other words, while both Spinoza and Hume argued for secularization in political and social spaces, neither thinker embraced what has come to be called "the thesis of secularization." See the summary, history, and development of this thesis in David Lyon, "Rethinking Secularization: Retrospect and Prospect," *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 3 (1985): 228–43.
[6] See, for example, W. N. A. Klever, *David Hume (1711-1776): Wetenschappelijke Ethica van Een Overtuigd Spinozist* (Vrijstad, The Netherlands: Klever, 2010).

relationship between Spinoza and Hume is laid forth, without explicitly being drawn out and analyzed.

Although my discussions on Spinoza and Hume's conceptions of constructive uncertainty are not systematic reflections of their thought on the subject of uncertainty in any grand sense, I do offer a careful analysis of their work that in parts yield standalone reflections. For example, Spinoza's normative conception of uncertainty in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, and my reflections on uncertainty in Hume's thinking about commercial society, are two instances that point to sections that are comprehensive when viewed as self-contained efforts to probe the thought of each respective thinker. Given the findings I yield in my analysis of their thought, this dissertation also contributes to the literature on Spinoza and Hume by offering a new way to think about their social and political philosophy.

Let me make one final note on the unbalanced length between my analysis of Hume and Spinoza. Quite simply, the length of each section is determined by the place of uncertainty in the thinking and life of each thinker. Uncertainty was a central and foundational point of reflection for Hume, while it was a focused point of reflection for Spinoza. For Spinoza, thinking about uncertainty was largely limited to the ways the multitude experience epistemic and future-oriented forms of uncertainty.[7] Philosophers, in his conception, recognize the possibilities and limitations of certain knowledge, as well as understand the lack of control they possess over the future. Thus, for Spinoza, uncertainty was primarily a political phenomenon that was both troubling and promising. For Hume, the topic of uncertainty shaped his thinking on virtually all matters throughout his life. *A Treatise of Human Nature* contains Hume's deeply felt attempts to first come to grips with the fundamental uncertainty that results from a reliance on reason alone, "abstruse philosophy" as he calls it. The theme of uncertainty as a problem and promise carry on

---

[7] I define these terms later in the introduction.

5

to Hume's thinking about religion, politics, and commercial society. Lastly, the possibility of others coming to terms with epistemic uncertainty was a shifting target for Hume overtime. That is, his faith in the possibility that other learned individuals would put aside their prejudices to humbly accept the limits of knowledge was tested throughout his life—a point that I highlight in part two of the dissertation. In short, the length of the Hume section is a reflection of the centrality of uncertainty in his life and works.

In what follows of this introduction I will set the foundation for the remainder of this study. In addition to defining constructive uncertainty, I will situate Spinoza and Hume within a broader tradition of thinking about uncertainty in modern political philosophy. I attempt, in other words, to revive what I claim is a dormant tradition of reflecting on uncertainty in modern political philosophy. While there has been plenty of research that tangentially deals with questions of uncertainty in this period, a focus on *uncertainty* has not been recognized as a prominent feature running through key figures in the history of modern political philosophy.[8]

1.1 Uncertainty & Risk

Let me begin with uncertainty. What is uncertainty? In order to answer this question I will reflect on contemporary academic discussions of uncertainty, which have long been tied to the idea of risk. While uncertainty and risk are interrelated, they are not interchangeable. This study limits itself to the concept of uncertainty. Because any understanding of uncertainty in the current context requires a disentangling of its relationship to risk, I will first present the differences and overlapping relationship between these terms, and then lay out how I plan to use uncertainty in this work.

In both historical and theoretical terms, risk is on the whole a derivation of uncertainty. The etymology of risk can be traced backed to 17th century Italian and French usage, *risco* and

---

[8] See for example, Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*, 1st ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

risque.   Both these terms connote an impending or present danger.   Risk notice, at least

etymologically, is inherently negative, it is something to be avoided.   For our purposes, risk

cannot be considered in the abstract, that is, apart from its current use as framework for thinking

about the quantitative analysis of uncertainty.   In that vein, it is noteworthy that starting in the

20th century a seismic shift occurred in the proliferation of the use of risk analysis and risk

management among private and public associations.[9]   It is at that point that the quantitative

analysis of risk, which started taking shape with probability theory in the 17th century, began

gaining a stronghold in political and corporate arenas.[10]   Finding ways to prevent danger, of

course, is not limited to these time periods.   Forms of risk analysis can be traced back to early

Mesopotamia.   It is the quantification of risk that interests us here, however, since it is that form

of analysis that predominates in the theoretical and practical work being done on risk today.

Let us now turn to uncertainty.   The first recorded use of the term "uncertain" appears in

the 14th century, signifying something that is "not determinate" or depending "on chance or

accident."[11]   Again, like risk, a preoccupation with uncertainty can be traced to the very first

recordings of humans capable of conscious reflection on a prospective future.[12]   While the terms

peoples of the past used for uncertainty differed, it can comfortably be conjectured that the idea

of uncertainty has remained a constant theme of interest since time immemorial.[13]   Before

---

[9] Tim Bedford and Roger Cooke, *Probabilistic Risk Analysis: Foundations and Methods*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4-9. Vincent T. Covello and Jeryl Mumpower, "Risk Analysis and Risk Management: An Historical Perspective," *Risk Analysis* 5, no. 2 (1985): 103–20, doi:10.1111/j.1539-6924.1985.tb00159.x.

[10] A. Mazur, "Societal and Scientific Causes of the Historical Development of Risk Assessment," in *Society, Technology, and Risk Assessment*, ed. J. Conrad (Waltham, MA: Academic Press, 1980), 151–57. Stephen J. Kobrin, "Political Risk: A Review and Reconsideration," *Journal of International Business Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979): 67–80.

[11] "un'certain" (adj.). Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "uncertain," accessed September 29, 2014, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/210207?rskey=sGnzp9&result=1.

[12] e.g., "From antiquity to the recent past, those in power have sought to protect their status by providing palliatives for uncertainty and disaster." Teofilo F. Ruiz, *The Terror of History: On the Uncertainties of Life in Western Civilization*, 1st ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 14.

[13] See for example, Esther Eidinow, *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).

getting into a discussion of the theoretical differences between uncertainty and risk, let me give a few preliminary words about how and why I plan to use uncertainty as opposed to risk.

Risk, as suggested above, inherently involves uncertainty. You cannot have risk without uncertainty. In this study, I do not engage with the quantification of risk (uncertainty). Hence the focus is on uncertainty. For one thing, Spinoza and Hume are writing prior to the establishment of risk analysis. Still, it could be pointed out, they are writing at the very beginnings of thinking about theories of probability, which eventually set the groundwork for contemporary risk analysis. While that is true, neither thinker uses anything like the quantification of uncertainty to consider social and political things. Instead, their main concern is with experiences of uncertainty that revolve around epistemic and future-oriented forms of uncertainty. When they discuss constructive forms of uncertainty, moreover, they do not appeal to the quantification of uncertainties as a method to reach their ends. Before explaining how I intend to use uncertainty in this dissertation, let me turn to discuss the evolving and multiple understandings of risk and uncertainty. Undertaking this task will help to clearly differentiate my use of uncertainty from the predominate understandings of uncertainty and risk.

Understanding risk and uncertainty in the abstract apart from its contextual uses presupposes a whole set of understandings that can only be remedied by an examination of the evolution of its use. Therefore, in order to discuss the differences and potential overlaps of the concepts of risk and uncertainty I will present my analysis of these terms through a theoretical narrative of its definitional embodiments as found in the literatures on risk and uncertainty. I begin analyzing this question by examining the popular distinction made by Frank Knight.

A place to begin an analysis of the differences and overlaps of the concepts of risk and uncertainty is with Frank Knight. An American economist, and student of Max Weber,[14] Knight became one of the founders of the Chicago school in economic theory. Perhaps his most noteworthy book, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*, marks a historically important merging of traditional statistical treatment of risk to economic research. His distinction between uncertainty and risk is instructive since it became "a sort of dogma"[15] among certain schools of thought, primarily economic thinkers as well as the work of social theorists and others. It has the added advantage of making a conceptually clear distinction between risk and uncertainty. In the end, the clarity offered by that distinction proved to be a benefit and an obstacle to thinking about risk and uncertainty.

For Knight, uncertainty is a form of indeterminacy that is unpredictable, as opposed to risk, which is predictable and calculable.[16] For example, playing a game of dice is a form of risk. It can be argued with little dispute that knowing the "laws of probability" that govern a game of dice is calculable. However, uncertainty would arise if the number of dice rolled was unknown as well as their inscribed numeric value. The key feature of true uncertainty is that it is incalculable; regardless of how skilled you may be at assessing probability, you are at the mercy of chance. In this abstract manner that is limited to an investigation of dice, Knight's division of risk and uncertainty is rendered relatively unproblematic.

Applying it to complex political, social and economic situations that rarely have objective distributions, however, complicates Knight's neat distinction. Consequently, economists have moved away from Knight's distinction and towards measuring risk by the device of subjective

---

[14] Stephen A. Marglin, *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 126.
[15] Niklas Luhmann, *Risk: A Sociological Theory* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 1.
[16] Frank H. Knight, *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006).

probabilities. Take Akira Takayama's observation when addressing Knight's distinction in her *Analytical Methods in Economics*, she writes, "emphasizing the subjective aspect of probability and employing the axiomatic approach, this distinction seems to have become mostly irrelevant. Here, therefore, we use 'risk' and 'uncertainty' interchangeably."[17] The interchangeable use of risk and uncertainty has become so commonsensical in the minds of some policy makers and academics that they do not refer to Knight's distinction. Bayesians, for instance, do not employ a strict distinction between these terms in their subjective probability frameworks. Along this vein, consider the recent work of the prominent risk scholar Terje Aven, who writes in his 2011 book *Misconceptions of Risk*,

> If we adopt the subjective or Bayesian perspective on probability, Knight's definition of risk becomes empty. There are no objective probabilities. The terminology violates the intuitive interpretation of risk, which is related to situations of uncertainty and lack of predictability. In our view it is tragic that Knight's definition has been given the prominent place in the risk literature that it has. It has caused a lot of confusion, and many still refer to this definition as some sort of established terminology.[18]

As there are no objective probabilities when confronting most risk phenomenon, the distinction between what is calculable (risk) and incalculable (uncertainty) collapses.   The consequence is not that everything becomes incalculable (uncertain), but rather that risk calculations need to take into account subjectivities that can at best yield qualified probabilities. As Aven put it, "Probability is a subjective measure of uncertainty, conditional on the background knowledge."[19] Risk, in this model, always contains the seeds of uncertainty.[20] A broader point for our purposes is to say that the quantification of uncertainties survives a critique of a more dogmatic belief in the predictive power of quantification to help humans control an uncertain future.

---

[17] Akira Takayama, *Analytical Methods in Economics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1993), 258.

[18] Terje Aven, *Misconceptions of Risk* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 75.

[19] Ibid., 148. cf. also Dennis V. Lindley, "The Philosophy of Statistics," *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series D (The Statistician)* 49, no. 3 (2000): 293–337.

[20] In some readings of Knight's work, his model can take this complexity into account. See Aven, *Misconceptions of Risk,* 80.

The faith in the power of quantification, however, is still very much present in certain manifestations of the above position. Take for example a claim by Dennis Lindley, a statistician who writes in his 2006 book *Understanding Uncertainty,*

> The object of this book is to tell you about work that has been done in the twentieth century about uncertainty. We now know that uncertainty has to obey three rules and that, once they are understood, uncertainty can be handled with almost as much confidence as ordinary logic.[21]

Any mishandling of uncertainty, in this account, is due to ignorance or an inability to apply statistical knowledge to an uncertain situation. If only the individual in question knew how to apply the three rules governing uncertainty, Lindley is suggesting, he or she could make better decisions. To be charitable the author does write that it is "almost" the case that uncertainty can be handled with as much confidence as ordinary logic. Still, the book concludes making a similarly bold claim that "the ideas here [in his book] are based entirely on reason. They do not require injection of faith but are the same throughout the world."[22] If Knight's definition of uncertainty is used as the standard, Lindley appears, at least at first glance, to understand all uncertainties as risk. From Knight's perspective, Lindley should have titled his book, *Understanding Risk*. Lindley might object that he takes into account subjective probabilities, which do not fit neatly with Knight's distinction. This brings us back to Aven's observation that once you collapse Knight's distinction between uncertainty and risk; uncertainties, as long as they deal with things of human interest, constitute risk as well. Lindley, in other words, is an example of a quantifier of uncertainty that maintains faithfulness in his methodology despite recognizing its limitations.[23]

---

[21] Dennis V. Lindley, *Understanding Uncertainty*, 11th ed. (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2006), xi.
[22] Ibid., xi.
[23] There are others among the faithful that rely on scientific methodologies to understand human decision-making in conditions of uncertainty. See, for example, Paul W. Glimcher, *Decisions, Uncertainty, and the Brain: The Science of Neuroeconomics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

There is a slightly different position held by those who point to situations where it is becoming harder and harder to make proper estimates. For example, some point to the severe limits in rational calculation when confronting the whimsical nature of financial markets or impending environmental catastrophes.[24] There are some that claim these problems eschew any form of risk analysis since they are so elusive and difficult to pin down through quantitative methodologies.[25] Despite these difficulties policy makers and politicians arrive at ways to handle these situations. The United States Vice President to George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, laid out what has come to be known as "The One Percent Doctrine."[26] The doctrine basically states that if you have a low-probability, but high impact event, you should treat that probability as a near certainty. For instance, if a threat of ISIL acquiring and using a nuclear weapon is 1%, according to proponents of this position, the international community should treat that threat as a near certainty in order to prevent the catastrophic impact of the prospective event.

Whatever is thought of this form of analysis, which is similar to the precautionary principle or an analysis of global catastrophic risk, the point here is that risk analysis, in any traditional sense, disappears in this perspective.[27] All that is left is uncertainty that requires some kind of rational or non-rational analysis that does not rely on the quantitative techniques traditionally used in risk analysis. John Maynard Keynes makes a similar observation when he writes of "uncertain knowledge," which for him includes matters of war or whether stock prices will fall or rise. "About these matters," he writes, "there is no scientific basis on which to form

---

[24] Les Coleman, *The Lunacy of Modern Finance Theory and Regulation*, 1st ed. (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2014),103–113. Douglas A. Kysar, *Regulating from Nowhere: Environmental Law and the Search for Objectivity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

[25] For a recent discussion on probabilistic and non-probabilistic methods of confronting uncertainty, see Terje Aven et al., *Uncertainty in Risk Assessment: The Representation and Treatment of Uncertainties by Probabilistic and Non-Probabilistic Methods* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

[26] Cass R. Sunstein, *Worst-Case Scenarios* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1.

[27] Ibid. and Nick Bostrom and Milan M. Cirkovic, eds., *Global Catastrophic Risks* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008).

any calculable probability whatsoever. We simply do not know!"[28] According to some, in other words, uncertainty trumps quantitative analysis when considering certain phenomenon.

The preceding provided a broad overview of the various ways in which uncertainty and risk are conceptualized when considering the possibilities and limits of quantitative analysis in uncertain situations. The blurring between uncertainty and risk that has occurred overtime has reopened questions that were beginning to bubble in Spinoza and Hume's time regarding the possibility of certain knowledge, and the extent to which probable knowledge could be developed. Yet, it is not those questions that this study focuses on. Nevertheless, as both Spinoza and Hume were preoccupied with the possibilities and limits of certain knowledge, the chapters on their respective thought acknowledges and outlines their positions on certain knowledge. The purpose of reviewing their respective positions is to set up their discussions on political and social uncertainty.[29]

Uncertainty as I use it has less to do with philosophic or social scientific questions about the possibility of obtaining certain or probabilistic knowledge through rational means, and more to do with a state of mind when confronting an uncertain future or uncertainty regarding knowledge claims. Following Spinoza and Hume's analysis of political and social forms of uncertainty, I primarily consider the way individuals *experience* uncertainty, and the consequent effects that follow such experiences. The forms of experiential uncertainty that this study focuses on are what I call *future oriented uncertainty* and *epistemic uncertainty*. Future oriented uncertainty refers to feelings of indeterminacy about the future. Hope and fear about the future,

---

[28] Quoted by Pat O'Malley, *Risk, Uncertainty and Government* (Portland, OR: Cavendish Publishing, 2004). For more on Keynes and uncertainty, see Robert Skidelsky, *Keynes: The Return of the Master* (New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2009), 83. Skidelsky writes, "Uncertainty pervades Keynes's picture of economic life."
[29] For more on philosophical ways of thinking about certainty in the 18th century, including a section on Hume, see Dario Perinetti, "Ways to Certainty," in *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, ed. Aaron Garrett (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), 265–94. For more on Spinoza and these questions, see Eric Schliesser, "Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science: Mathematics, Motion, and Being," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca, 2014, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195335828.013.020.

in particular, are the passions I focus on.[30] Epistemic uncertainty puzzles over the ways individuals and broader social groups deal with uncertainty regarding claims to knowledge. For example, what are the implications when established social beliefs are challenged at their core? In the language used here, what happens when uncertainty about established knowledge claims infiltrate the consciousness of a people? The other side of these questions asks about feelings of dogmatic conviction regarding knowledge claims, and its implications. Without entering into a full discussion here, let me claim preliminarily that excessive feelings of uncertainty or certainty regarding knowledge claims pose social and political problems.

This dissertation's focus on experiences of uncertainty begs many questions. How do society, culture, and language influence experiences of uncertainty? To what extent can experiences of uncertainty be extended beyond individual experiences towards larger groups? For one thing, these questions have already been explored in the academic literature in linguistics, psychology, sociology and cultural studies.[31] The focus on experiences of uncertainty in this study does not aim to discount or challenge contemporary scholarship on those questions. It is difficult, after all, imagining how Spinoza or Hume's positions on psychological or socio-cultural questions would stand up to the scrutiny of those disciplines—their positions are bound to appear antiquated, and lacking in the rigors of contemporary methodologies. Instead of measuring up their positions to contemporary scholarship—an inevitably futile attempt—this

---

[30] Being that I am focusing on Spinoza and Hume, I will use passions and feelings, rather than the emotions. For more on the passions and emotions, see Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1997), and Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[31] In Linguistics, see Karl Halvor Teigen, "The Language of Uncertainty," *Acta Psychologica* 68, no. 1–2 (1988): 27–38, doi:1016/0001-6918(88)90043-1 and Noah D. Goodman and Daniel Lassiter, "Probabilistic Semantics and Pragmatics," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory*, ed. Shalom Lappin and Chris Fox, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2015). In Psychology, Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and Reid Hastie and Robyn M. Dawes, *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World: The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010). In Social and Cultural Approaches, George Cvetkovich and Ragnar E. Lofstedt, *Social Trust and the Management of Risk*, ebook (Florence, KY: Routledge, 2013) and John Tulloch and Deborah Lupton, *Risk and Everyday Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2003) and Scott Lash, "Risk Culture," in *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory*, ed. Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck, and Joost Van Loon, 1st ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2000), 47–62.

study aims to use Spinoza and Hume's work on experiences of uncertainty relating to social and political phenomenon to *point towards* a constructive form of uncertainty. It does not, in other words, aim to offer a thorough analysis of constructive uncertainty. Consequently, the understanding of experiential forms of uncertainty offered here, along with constructive uncertainty, is purposely loose and tentative in order not to disclose alternative understandings that can fit within a general understanding. It is sufficiently robust, however, to uncover and examine constructive forms of uncertainty in the work of Spinoza and Hume, which in turn will be used to *point towards* an alternative way of thinking about uncertainty. It is worth noting here that the overall aim of this study is not to *systematically* offer an alternative approach to contemporary ways of thinking about uncertainty. Instead, this study aims to show the *possibility* of an alternative approach embedded within Spinoza and Hume's political and social thought.

1.2 Constructive Uncertainty

Let us now turn to constructive uncertainty. The first thing to note about my use of "constructive" here is that I am *not* following the usage of constructivism that has various meanings in a slew of academic disciplines and areas.[32] By constructive uncertainty I refer to social phenomenon. That is to say, the term does not apply to individuals in isolation from their sociability. A way to understand what I mean by constructive uncertainty is to consider its opposite, destructive uncertainty. While forms of destructive uncertainty disintegrate the social bonds that hold a group of people together, constructive forms of uncertainty support harmony among the whole, or minimally keep the whole from disintegration. Constructive uncertainty,

---

[32] In science, see, K. D. Knorr-Cetina, "New Developments in Science Studies: The Ethnographic Challenge," *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 8, no. 2 (1983): 153–77; in Political Science, Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Moral Philosophy, Christine M. Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28, no. supplement (2003): 99–122, doi:10.5840/jpr_2003_8, just to name a few.

moreover, is active in its relationship to uncertainty. That is, it does not solely try to temper, eliminate, or mitigate feelings of uncertainty. Rather through the social promotion of certain forms of uncertainty it attempts to achieve social order and/or flourishing.

For example, take Spinoza's claim, which I develop later, that a hope-filled society that is oriented towards secular goods is preferable to a society that makes its primary aim the defense and advancement of metaphysical hopes. Religious hopes, in this context, produce a destructive form of uncertainty that produces religious strife that ultimately spills over onto the social and political arenas creating a situation of perpetual instability. As we will see later, Spinoza position is more complex than simply understanding religious hopes as socially problematic. In fact, he squarely acknowledges that religious hopes can also have salutary social effects.

The point for now, however, is that a constructive form of uncertainty actively promotes and awakens feelings of uncertainty in order to create harmony among a social or political group, or minimally to keep the social and political order from moving towards the direction of disintegration. Spinoza, I will argue, ultimately aimed to achieve both stability and human flourishing through his constructive form of uncertainty. Hobbes' view that the fear of violent death is fundamental to keeping a society from falling apart, on the other hand, would be an example of constructive uncertainty that is only concerned with stability.

Examinations of constructive uncertainty regarding fear's role in promoting social stability have been written without framing them as such. For example, in *Fear of Enemies and Collective Actions*, Ioannis Evrigenis "demonstrates that the fear of external threats is an essential element of the formation and preservation of political groups and that its absence

16

renders political association unsustainable."[33] In the language used here, the fear of an external threat awakens feeling of uncertainty that leads towards an ultimately constructive end.

There is also an extensive literature on the misuse of fear to control and manipulate a populace.[34] It is worth noting here that claiming a form of uncertainty is constructive should not be confused with claiming that it is moral. In its minimal manifestation, constructive refers to the keeping together of social bonds. In other words, the moral standing of the means used to achieve the end of social cohesion is open to question. The fact that the means produce, or intend to produce, social cohesion is not. In this study, we will see that Spinoza and Hume find fear inadequate as a means to support social cohesion overtime, while acknowledging its usefulness in the short term to bring a group of people together. Instead, promoting hope is their focus when considering the benefits of liberal democracy and commercial society. The choice between fear and hope driven societies, as I will show later, is not an either/or choice. It is rather a point of emphasis and priority.

1.3 Uncertainty in Modernity

Before turning to situate my work on social and political uncertainty in Spinoza and Hume within a broader tradition of thinking about uncertainty and politics in modern political philosophy, I will first set up that discussion by examining how a focus on questions of uncertainty are tied to broader material, social and intellectual climates of what today is called the modern period. In hindsight, a number of connections about the modern period can be drawn that help uncover the reasons behind early modern philosophers preoccupation with questions of uncertainty.

---

[33] Ioannis D. Evrigenis, "Frontmatter," in *Fear of Enemies and Collective Action* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
[34] See, for example, Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999).

Before entering that discussion, let me acknowledge that the literature on what constitutes the modern period, or modernity if you prefer, is vast and sprawling, often contentious, with disagreements over fundamental matters.[35] I will stand clear of those debates, as they would take me far from the purpose of this study. Instead, I will borrow well-established and competing opinions about the modern period that I hope allow me to make relatively uncontroversial claims that lay the groundwork for what follows.

The standard story of the origins of modernity focuses on the rise of reason, science, and progress as characteristics that began infiltrating modern consciousness in the late 17th century. These ideas, in turn, are said to signal a move away from the theological ideas that characterized the pre-modern mind. Although various scholars have with due justice complicated that simplistic story, pointing to the ways theological ideas strongly influenced and shaped rationalist movements in the modern period, it nonetheless correctly captures the great uncertainty in the realm of ideas that dominated the modern period.[36] The history of modern philosophy, for instance, begins as a search for certainty. Rene Descartes, considered the father of modern philosophy, began with a radical doubt that could not be alleviated without rationalistic proofs that would establish a foundation that was distinct, clear, and certain. Philosophical debates regarding the status of certain knowledge would preoccupy philosophers that followed. Spinoza, Leibnitz, Hume, Kant, and Rousseau, to name only a few, would in their own ways continue thinking about the status of certain rational knowledge.

---

[35] The following statement from Tierney illustrates this quite well. "Modernity is a slippery concept. David Levine's recent book, At the Dawn of Modernity places the "dawn" around 1000 A.D. Another recent work, Empire, by Hardt and Negri found the beginning of modernity around 1300, rather improbably in the work of Duns Scotus. On the other hand, a recent article in the Journal of Human Evolution explained that modernity really began 70,000 years ago instead of only 40,000 years ago as had been generally supposed." (Brian Tierney, "Author's Rejoinder," *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 3 (2002): 419, doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500034951.)

[36] Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949). Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

It was not only a clash of ideas that prompted reflection on questions of uncertainty. Perhaps more significant in creating conditions of widespread uncertainty were the religious, technological, and military upheavals that shook the early modern period. For example, consider the Hundred Years War, the Great Schism, and the development of black powder.[37] These events made the search for certainty an exercise that extended beyond the elite to include the broader public, who could no longer take one or a few indisputable sources of authority for granted.

The broader public in this narrative were not solely, or primarily, concerned about ascertaining rational forms of knowledge. They were instead embroiled in reconciling their theological beliefs with rising forms of rationalism that seemed to challenge and threaten their convictions. Given that context, philosophers were also caught up in this discussion, sometimes as sincere believers trying to make sense of things, or as non-believers forced to engage with the leading figures of their day. Even before the rise of rationalistic explanations to the question of certainty in the 17th century, "the crisis of certainty and the 'quest' for certitude were dominant themes in the early modern period stretching from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century," as the historian Susan Schreiner demonstrates in *Are you Alone Wise? The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era*.[38] In other words, it is possible to stretch a preoccupation with questions of certainty well before philosophers took hold of the question in the seventeenth century.

Another way to understand why so many were embroiled in these questions, adding to explanations that a rise in philosophical curiosity was due to the various crises of time, is the ontological shift of human's relationship to nature that occurred in the modern period. By

---

[37] Paraphrased from Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*, 15.
[38] Susan E. Schreiner, *The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

ontology here I refer to "a characterization of the fundamental status of all reality, beyond which or behind which there is no further basis or ground.[39] In other words, how humans conceive of themselves in relation to nature and the cosmos, for example, has implications on virtually everything given that that perception becomes the ground from which they interpret reality. Are humans firmly a part of nature and God, subject to laws outside their control? Or are they free individuals that can subdue nature for their ends through knowledge? Louis Dupre confronts these questions in his classic work, *Passage to Modernity*, which traces how the removal, or critical challenges towards the transcendent inaugurated a new way of viewing reality.   As Schreiner writes, explaining Dupre's position, "In the era from 1400-1600, the creation of meaning increasingly fell upon the human mind. The mind had to interpret the cosmos; instead of being an integral part of intelligible cosmos, the person became its sources of meaning."[40] The individual, in others, was left alone, or perhaps more precisely *felt* alone, to decide for him or herself.

Along these lines, consider Charles Taylor's book *Sources of Self*, is a modern history of identity that engages these ontological questions. In the end, Taylor attempts to explicate the origins of a sense of "inwardness, freedom, individuality, and being embedded in nature which are at home in the modern West."[41] Whether following Dupre or Taylor's account of the rise of the modern individual, the point here is that as modernity marched forward, an awareness of individuality and freedom increased that left individuals without transcendent, or indisputable sources of knowledge. In line with that development was the increasing sense that meaning could only be derived from the self. In these conditions feelings of uncertainty and risk

---

[39] Waller R Newell, *Tyranny: A New Interpretation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 20.
[40] Schreiner, *The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era*, 7. See also Louis Dupre, "The New Meaning of Freedom," in *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 120–44.
[41] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), ix.

necessarily increased exponentially. That is, if fate or God-like figures are not ultimately in control of human life, the sense of autonomy, and hence uncertainty, an individual feels necessarily increases. In this condition, it is not only in times of great crises or upheaval that feelings of uncertainty dominate the imagination, but also in everyday decision making, even in times peace and prosperity. It is unsurprising then that the rise of the modern individual corresponds to the rise of risk analysis. The greater individuals feel in control of their lives, the more responsible they feel for planning and preparing for an uncertain future. Hence the rise of life insurance was closely tied to the legitimizing of risk analysis in the broader culture.[42]

1.4 Uncertainty & Modern Political Philosophy

It is in the environment of uncertainty described above that modern political philosophers puzzled over questions of uncertainty, religion, and the state. In the body of dissertation I will present an in depth analysis of constructive uncertainty in Spinoza and Hume. Here I would like to place Hume and Spinoza within a broader tradition of thinking about uncertainty in modern political philosophy. In particular, I will briefly review how uncertainty is central in Machiavelli and Hobbes' political thought. A broader study could include Rousseau, Montesquieu, Nietzsche, Locke, and others. However, that investigation would take us too far afield. Instead I have chosen to focus on Machiavelli and Hobbes as they are both considered founding figures of modern political philosophy.

As achieving a comprehensive investigation into their political thought is beyond the scope of this introduction, I will not attempt to demonstrate a constructive form of uncertainty in their work—that would require another project altogether. Instead, I will take familiar and

---

[42] See Chapter 1 in Viviana A. Rotman Zelizer, "Human Values and the Market: The Case of Life Insurance and Death in Nineteenth-Century America," in *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 19–39. See also Tom Baker and Jonathan Simon, eds., *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

central features of their political thought and show how they relate to questions of uncertainty. As with the question of modernity explored above, there is an enormous literature regarding the political thought of these thinkers as well. I do not intend to engage that literature, but rather I point to relatively uncontroversial features in their thought that correspond with my stated aims.

Let us begin with an examination of Machiavelli's innovative conception of fortune. Machiavelli was a sixteenth century thinker who is considered the first modern political philosopher. It is not a stretch to suggest his ideas on *fortuna* are at the center of that analysis. Acts of *fortuna* are unpredictable, fickle, and thus wholly unreliable. They stand outside the purview of human action, as they thwart human plans without forewarning. *Fortuna,* in other words, is used to describe the uncertainties that make human life dependent on unexpected and external forces.[43]

Fortuna was by and large experienced as the work of providence, or mysterious forces outside human control.[44] In this rendering, humans are subject to external forces they cannot control. The noteworthy part of Machiavelli's usage of the term is his argument that human action, through *virtú*, could manipulate and direct *fortuna* and thereby lead to human progress. The exact extent to which Machiavelli believed human action could manipulate and direct *fortuna* is point of contention among Machiavelli scholars.[45] For our purposes, it is sufficient to say that Machiavelli's ideas on *fortuna* are foundational in modern political philosophy as he unequivocally and forcefully (at least at times) states that human's are not held hostage to an uncertain future, but rather he claims that they can shape the future through precautionary action.

---

[43] The idea of *Fortuna* has a long history that pre-dates Machiavelli. See, for example, Howard Rollin Patch, *The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Philosophy and Literature* (Menasha, WI: The Collegiate Press, George Banta Publishing Company, 1922).

[44] For a history of *Fortuna* prior to Machiavelli see Jerold C. Frakes, *The Fate of Fortune in the Early Middle Ages: The Boethian Tradition* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishing, 1988).

[45] Erica Benner, *Machiavelli's Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) and the bibliography in Machiavelli, *The Prince*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Russell Price (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

When Machiavelli claims *fortuna* is a woman, for example, he "challenges men in terms of their masculine identity," as Hanna Pitken notes. He in effect says, Pitken continues, "she is there for the taking—if you're man enough."[46] Modern political philosophy begins with the injunction that *fortuna*, or uncertainty, is not an insurmountable foe that places humans at her mercy. In that way his work corresponds with the modern scientific theories of Francis Bacon who famously held that humans could master nature through knowledge of the natural world.

Hobbes was a seventeenth century thinker who with Machiavelli is often considered a founder of modern political philosophy. Hobbes' major contribution to later thinkers was the idea of the state of nature, a pre-political condition of war of all against all. According to Hobbes, what distinguishes humans from other animals is foresight, the human ability to be future-oriented. In particular, Hobbes draws attention to "the fear of violent death" that if properly used can lead to an "immortal peace."[47] It is not only the fear of violent death, however, that is central to Hobbes' thought, but also the concomitant passion of hope that characterizes people within the state of nature and is necessary to move individuals towards the social contract.

For Hobbes, as John Rawls noted in a lecture, there is an "equality of hope in attaining our ends, given the central place in Hobbes's political doctrine of the desire for self-preservation and for the means of a commodious life."[48] That equality of hope creates both the warlike competition in a state of nature and contributes to the move away from that condition when there is the realization—through the fear of violent death—that the state of nature is ultimately hopeless. These dual passions of uncertainty, in other words, are also needed to sustain

[46] Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 293.
[47] For a discussion of Hobbes and the future-oriented nature of his project see, Peter J. Ahrensdorf, "The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy," *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000): 579–93.
[48] John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 49.

conditions of peace and stability in Hobbes' sovereign state. In short, the centerpiece of Hobbes'

political thought engages in a careful analysis of the ways individuals react to uncertainty, while

considering both the negative and positive implications of the uncertain passions.

2. BARUCH SPINOZA

In this chapter, I begin situating Spinoza's thoughts on uncertainty in the context of his early philosophy. In particular, Spinoza's early philosophical labors on the possibilities and limits of certain knowledge laid the foundation for his ideas on the role of uncertainty in political life. I then present Spinoza's normative conception of uncertainty as it is presented in his *Theological Political Treatise* (TTP), which I later breakup into various sections.

Spinoza's thinking on uncertainty is grounded by the intellectual climate of the 17th century, especially through an encounter with modern philosophy's emblematic philosopher, René Descartes. As the first modern philosopher, Descartes inaugurated a search for epistemic certainty that began in radical doubt (uncertainty) of the traditional modes of gaining access to knowledge. In Descartes' framework, a thorough doubting of every conceivable epistemic tool is necessary to establish a solid foundation for certain knowledge. In Spinoza's day, the Cartesian revolution was in full swing, with Spinoza as a key participant in the mechanical philosophy that followed in Descartes' wake.[49]

The intellectual counterpart to Cartesian philosophy was theological in nature.[50] Instead of understanding their position as inextricably opposed to the new philosophy, religious philosophers—as Spinoza called them—aimed to integrate philosophical insights into their theological positions. They aimed, in other words, to bridge matters of faith (metaphysics) with

---

[49] See Eric Schliesser, "Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science: Mathematics, Motion, and Being," in *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, ed. Michael Della Rocca, 2014, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195335828.013.020 for an alternative to this traditional reading of Spinoza.

[50] I do not wish to suggest that the division between Cartesian philosophy and theology is unambiguously clear. Descartes famously grounded his claim to certainty in God. See, for example, Jean-Marie Beyssade, "The Idea of God and the Proofs of His Existence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 174–285.

rational knowledge. More specifically, they used scholasticism as a point of reference when evaluating Descartes' claims.

As we will see later, Spinoza argued that philosophy and theology are intellectually and practically at odds with one another, i.e., the scholastic hope to unite this disparate pair is bound to fail. Intellectually, the otherworldly beliefs of conventional religions cannot be defended by reason that is limited to natural phenomenon. Practically, instead of gaining certain knowledge regarding theological matters, religious positions infused by philosophy resulted in dogmatic sects that posed a "danger to the state."[51] Thus religious philosophers, with their insistence on the rational character of their faith, set the stage for political and social instability, which placed in peril the basic social stability necessary for any meaningful form of human flourishing. Ultimately, Spinoza argues that a secular state, populated with citizens who, on the whole, maintain their gaze on this world, should be the aim of political societies.

In epistemological matters, Spinoza unequivocally sided with philosophy over theology. Perhaps that was one of the reasons Spinoza anonymously published the *Theological-Political Treatise* and reserved his *Ethics* for posthumous publication. His exact reasons for the timing of those publications aside, during his lifetime Spinoza was accused of being a brash atheist who challenged the longstanding authority of the Bible.[52] Despite that criticism, Spinoza was also famously characterized as the "God-intoxicated" philosopher.[53] That label is apt considering the number of times Spinoza refers to God in his works. Spinoza's conception of God, however, had none of the anthropomorphic features that are the mainstay of theistic religious faiths. Instead,

---

[51] Benedictus de Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002), 515.
[52] Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 246.
[53] Novalis coined this term. See Dean Moyar, *The Routledge Companion to Nineteenth Century Philosophy (Routledge Philosophy Companions)*, reprint ed (Florence, KY: Routledge Publishing, 2012).

Spinoza's God is reflected in the natural world and the rational order found therein. Hence, in his pantheistic worldview there are no miracles, no extra-natural phenomenon.

For Spinoza, consequently, an understanding of God requires an understanding of the natural world. Like a theoretical physicist attempting to uncover the universal laws of nature, in the *Ethics* Spinoza aimed to explain and understand the natural laws governing human behavior. These laws were presented in the style of Euclid's geometry, with an axiomatic style that mimicked the precision of mathematical methods. For all Spinoza's differences with Descartes, he continued Descartes' pursuit of knowledge that sought to bring mathematical precision to the human sciences.

Lodewijk Meyer, an early admirer of Spinoza's work, praised Spinoza on just this point in the preface to Spinoza's *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts*. In that preface, Meyer laments that mathematical methods are not applied to areas of study outside mathematics. As a consequence, non-mathematical arguments advanced in matters most pressing to humans are dependent "on likelihood and probability."[54] Thus the mind "finds itself tossed on a stormy sea of opinion, beset on all sides with tempests of dispute, hurled about and carried away on waves of uncertainty, endlessly, with no hope of ever emerging therefrom."[55] The task to seek certain knowledge seemed futile until "the brightest star of our age, Renè Descartes," writes Meyer, provided seekers after certainty with some foundation for their pursuits. Spinoza continued that pursuit.[56]

---

[54] Lodewijk Meyer, "Preface," in *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy with Metaphysical Thoughts* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998), 1.
[55] Ibid, 2.
[56] Ibid.,117.

Spinoza's focus on rationally establishing indubitable arguments is one of the reasons Jonathan Israel and others have hailed him as the crown jewel of the Enlightenment.[57] While it is well established that Spinoza believed that the natural world is governed by natural laws that can be demonstrated with geometric precision, the attainment of that knowledge can only be approximated. Comprehensive knowledge of the workings of nature requires knowledge of the whole, which is only possessed by the whole (God). At best, glimpses of the whole can be gained through a study of the parts. Spinoza understood his work as a contribution towards an understanding of the whole. The seeker after certainty, in other words, must ultimately yield to the uncertainty that remains due to the limited capacities of human cognition. It is noteworthy that Spinoza's recognition of the inevitable uncertainty that remains after rational inquiry did not bring him to despair. To the contrary, Spinoza continued to pursue axiomatic certainties about the natural world until his death. One way to understand Spinoza's unflinching dedication to axiomatic philosophy is to reflect on his claim that human freedom is located in a free mind that seeks knowledge of the natural world.[58]

Despite Spinoza's praise of reason as the means necessary to understand the workings of the natural world and as a necessary tool for human freedom, he does not have the faith other key Enlightenment figures had in the possibility of universal enlightenment. Spinoza's praise of reason, for example, fundamentally differed from Immanuel Kant's claim that universal enlightenment was within the reach of humanity given their ability to reason. For Spinoza, the ability to live a life guided by reason is rare, and an inconsistent feature of even the most gifted

---

[57] For more on Israel's unconventional placement of Spinoza at the center of the Enlightenment, see Przemyslaw Gut, "The Legacy of Spinoza: The Enlightenment According to Jonathan Israel," *Diametros* 40 (2014): 45–72.
[58] See, for example, Michael LeBuffe, *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010).

philosopher. Reason, moreover, is impotent to persuade or guide human action. Hence Spinoza is often considered as embracing the most thorough form of determinism, necessitarianism.

Still, as we will see later, Spinoza did think that political societies could be rationally ordered in such a way that they are advantageous to humans. That rational order, however, is *not* achieved through the people's cultivated use of reason in political and social matters. That is, rational order is not achieved through deliberate and conscious decision-making among citizens that leads them to make choices that are advantageous for the whole. Instead, ordering key social, economic, and political institutions, can direct the people's passions towards a more reasonable social and political life. In the most critical sense, a citizen's life becomes reasonable as he or she begins to act in ways that place social and political peace as a priority. In particular, Spinoza wanted to subordinate the impulse to place theological demands above the secular claim that this-worldly goods need to be protected by the peaceful cohabitation of peoples from various religious and ideological perspectives. For most individuals, Spinoza would argue, the importance of that insight cannot be reached through the workings of reason alone.

The fact that Spinoza did not place hope in the universal enlightenment of humans colored his political thought, and most critically for this project, his thoughts on the role of uncertainty in social and political life. It meant, among other things, that the philosophical search for certainty is not to be expected on a mass scale. Contrary to the calm rational pursuit of knowledge exemplified by philosophers, most people are moved by their passions when confronted with uncertainty regarding knowledge claims or future oriented uncertainties. As the problem of uncertainty is largely handled in non-rational ways, any analysis of social and political phenomenon requires taking into account the ways humans negotiate experiences of uncertainty through their passionate imaginings. Spinoza undertakes that sort of analysis in his

Theological-Political Treatise. The main conclusion Spinoza reaches is that a salutary form of uncertainty is best expressed in a free state. A state that promises the possibility of a better future in this world, to state it differently, is best suited to direct the human passions towards reasonable behavior that is beneficial for all. In what follows I outline Spinoza's normative conception of uncertainty as it is found in the TTP.

2.1 Introduction to Uncertainty in Spinoza's Theological-Political Treatise

The verdict on the role of uncertainty in political life according to contemporary academic and popular discourse is unanimously negative.[59] Uncertainty, in this frame of thinking, leads to indecision, confusion, and instability. The goal then is to reduce uncertainty in order to alleviate its negative effects. The usual means of achieving this end is through a transformation of uncertainty into risk so as to render it subject to empirical analysis.[60] Spinoza had a far more nuanced approach to the problem of uncertainty. He indeed recognized that uncertainty is often at the root of political upheavals. In particular, Spinoza argued that the origin of superstition, in its most politically destabilizing forms, lies in fearful uncertainty about the future. Yet, understanding the intractable influence of uncertainty on human life, he thought it insufficient to focus solely on its reduction. Instead, Spinoza reflected on the salutary possibilities contained within constructive forms of uncertainty.

In what follows I argue that coming to terms with Spinoza's thoughts on uncertainty in the *Theological Political Treatise* (TTP) is fundamental to understanding his normative political

---

[59] Brandon Julio and Youngsuk Yook, "Political Uncertainty and Corporate Investment Cycles," *The Journal of Finance* 1 (2012): 45–83. For work on alleviating the unequal distribution of uncertainties/risks, see Peter Marris, *The Politics of Uncertainty: Attachment in Private and Public Life* (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1996); and Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit, *Disadvantage* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 63-73.
[60] For a broad overview of the move towards treating uncertainty in terms of risk, see Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference*. For an example in political science of treating uncertainty as a negative phenomenon that can be subject to empirical analysis, see Cioffi-Revilla, *Politics and Uncertainty: Theory, Models and Applications*.

project.[61]   The specific focus is on Spinoza's argument for increasing secular forms of uncertainty in order to temper an overextended emphasis on theologically infused forms. Spinoza aims for a form of governance that leads by the salutary passions of secular hopes and devotion, instead of relying primarily on fearful forms of governance.   His promotion of the freedoms accompanying a liberal democracy can therefore be understood as a call for a hope filled politics that facilitates political stability and human flourishing.   Achieving a move towards greater forms of secularity requires, among other things, that the state become the primary site for pious devotion.   More generally, Spinoza suggests that political thinkers need not succumb to negative understandings of uncertainty.   Instead, they can theorize about positive forms by asking the normatively driven question, "what forms of uncertainty *should* be promoted?"   In sum, in addition to providing an unorthodox reading of Spinoza's political thought, the following sections also present a novel way of thinking about the role of uncertainty in political life.

That uncertainty is at the center of Spinoza's political thought is evidenced by his concern with the multitude, whose main characteristic is uncertainty.[62]   The TTP begins with a description of the effects of uncertainty on the multitude in which primacy is given to the future oriented passions of hope and fear.[63]   Uncertainty, in his initial rendering of its effects in the preface to the TTP, inflames the passions, produces superstition, and thereby results in political instability.   Despite the central importance of uncertainty in the TTP, few scholars have directly examined its role on Spinoza's political thought.   Instead, they have limited themselves to examining Spinoza's thoughts on superstition as well as the passions of fear and hope—the two

---

[61] On a few noted occasions, I have modified the translation based on the Latin text provided in Benedictus de Spinoza, *Opera, Vol. III* (Heidelberg, Germany: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1925).

[62] Meyer, "Preface." See also Yirmiyahu Yovel, "Spinoza: The Psychology of the Multitude and the Uses of Language," *Studia Spinozana: An International and Interdisciplinary Series* 1 (1985): 307.

[63] Spinoza's prizing of hope and fear may apply even more broadly to his account of the passions.   "The two passions or emotions that clearly concern Spinoza the most are hope and fear." Steven Nadler, "Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Immortality," in *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy (Mind Association Occasional)*, ed. Tom Sorrell and G. A. J. Rogers (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005), 210.

ideas most closely associated with uncertainty in Spinoza's work.[64] As these scholars have not directly considered the role of uncertainty in Spinoza, his normative thoughts on the role of uncertainty have remained unnoticed. Their work instead focuses on Spinoza's preoccupation with attempting to overcome a politics grounded in superstition and fear.[65] I trace an alternative story that extends Spinoza's thoughts on uncertainty to include a normative role for uncertainty in political life. As political and religious leaders can exploit the multitude's emotional fickleness by heightening their uncertainty about the future—playing on their fear driven anxieties—a political system can likewise be devised that constructively uses uncertainty to promote a more rational and free state. Although Spinoza does not explicitly make the case for a normative politics of uncertainty, I argue that a careful reading of the TTP reveals that a free state necessarily requires a normative conception of uncertainty.

The following argument comprises of two main sections. In the first I begin outlining the centrality of uncertainty in Spinoza's TTP by examining his ideas on the multitude. As the multitude is prey to the worst forms of uncertainty, understanding their place in Spinoza's overall political project is necessary to lay the groundwork for what follows. I then examine Spinoza's presentation of uncertainty in the preface to the TTP. Although uncertainty is there presented as a negative force, I demonstrate how a positive conception of uncertainty is necessary. Then I show how the problem of religion relates to uncertainty in both its positive and negative manifestations. The second section focuses on Spinoza's normative conception of uncertainty contained within his promotion of liberal democracy. The uncertain passion of hope

---

[64] On the role of superstition and fear in Spinoza, Susan James shows subtlety and care in her lecture on the subject. See Susan James, *Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear (Mededelingen Vanwege Het Spinozahuis) 88* (Budel, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Damon, 2006); Nadler, "Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Immortality"; and Gregorio Kaminsky, *Spinoza: La Politica de Las Pasiones* (Barcelona, Spain: Gedisa, 1990), 61-64.
[65] Although Nadler recognizes that for Spinoza fear and hope cannot be eliminated, he nonetheless singularly focuses on Spinoza's attempt to free individuals from a "life enslaved by these [hope and fear] passions" (Nadler, "Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Immortality," 215-216). James presents a more nuanced conception of superstition recognizing its constructive possibilities. Yet, her account falls short of recognizing a normative account of the uncertainty (James, "Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear," 18).

is highlighted for its salutary and restraining characteristics when grounded in a liberal democratic state. Finally, the need for pious devotion towards the state is examined as a precondition for the unleashing of liberal democratic hopes.

2.2 The Multitude

Spinoza's focus on the role of uncertainty for political life is an outgrowth of his conception of the multitude. The idea of the multitude, or the common people, suggests that the many are distinct from the few. For Spinoza, the few are true philosophers, those guided by the dictates of reason. The many would then seem to refer to non-philosophers, those guided by their passions. That binary division of Spinoza's position, however, is misleading.

First, Spinoza does not intend to suggest a dichotomous division between reason (the domain of philosophers) and the passions (the domain of non-philosophers). To the contrary, Spinoza argues for the interdependent nature of reason and the passions. Even in the rare occurrence when an individual is guided by reason, the active passions remain present. The pernicious passive passions, on the other hand, are ubiquitous, as they touch the lives of everyone—philosophers and non-philosophers alike. As the passive passions are pervasive in human life, "absolute command" over them is lacking.[66]

Consequently, at the beginning of his section on the power of the intellect in the *Ethics*, Spinoza claims that, "above all," he is interested in demonstrating reason's "command over the emotions in checking and controlling them."[67] Even at his most optimistic about the power of reason over the passions, in other words, Spinoza makes clear that the influence of the passions cannot be overcome. While philosophers may struggle less with the passions than non-philosophers, they share with the multitude the continual presence of the passions in their lives.

---

[66] Benedictus de Spinoza, "Ethics," in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002), 363.
[67] Discuss passions and emotions.

Add to this the fact that not all philosophers are equally adept at their craft—there are skilled, as there are unskilled, philosophers.[68] The few philosophers who cultivate their ability to lead a life of reason, then, are extraordinarily rare.[69] The overwhelming majority of people are far from the life of reason Spinoza thinks necessary for human freedom in part five of the *Ethics*. Spinoza unequivocally makes this claim in a chapter on the relationship between reason and theology in the TTP. There, he writes, "there are only a few—in proportion to the whole of humanity—who acquire a virtuous disposition under the guidance of reason alone."[70] This Spinozist fact helps make sense of his emphatic claim at the beginning of the TTP that "all men are by nature liable to superstition."[71] Because superstition originates in fearful uncertainty about the future, it can be said that Spinoza argues that virtually all individuals, given the right circumstances, are liable to fall prey to superstition. The problem of superstition, and thereby the problem of the multitude, is a problem all humans face to varying degrees.

The rare excellence possessed by a true philosopher cannot, therefore, be the guiding ideal for a state. Making it such would prove disastrous. Spinoza is clear enough about this in the TTP when he juxtaposes the multitude from the few. He is, however, especially explicit about this position in his later *Political Treatise*. There, Spinoza berates philosophers for showering extravagant praise on the human ability to overcome the passions. "The fact is," he writes, "that they [philosophers] conceive men not as they are, but as they would like them to be…no men are regarded as less fit for governing a state than theoreticians or philosophers."[72] The problem with philosophers governing a state is their tendency to overconfidently trust in the

---

[68] Spinoza mentions "skilled philosophers" (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 471) and also the "common run of philosophers" in "Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts," in *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002), 140.
[69] Spinoza's famous line at the end of *Ethics* comes to mind: "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare" (Spinoza, "Ethics," 382).
[70] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 526.
[71] Ibid., 389.
[72] Benedictus de Spinoza, "Political Treatise," in *Spinoza: Complete Works*, ed. Michael Morgan, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002), 702.

34

power of reason to guide human action. The most effective means of governing is not through reason. The multitude, primarily guided by the passions, is best governed by the passions—albeit by salutary passions. Consequently, Spinoza's primary aim in the TTP is to restrain the most pernicious types of passions in order to better secure a peaceful and stable state.

This is not to suggest that Spinoza's preferred state is irrational and only concerned with political stability. On the contrary, his argument for a liberal democracy in TTP would result in making human behavior more rational and create spaces that are hospitable to ways of life beyond a concern with self-preservation. Spinoza's goal is not simply to restrain the passions. Rather, it is to restrain the passions in such a way that it facilitates human flourishing. Spinoza wants to direct as many people as possible towards a life of virtue.[73] Now that it is established that by the "multitude" Spinoza refers to virtually all humans, who, in turn, require some form of restraint from the passions, we are now prepared to turn to his thoughts on uncertainty, religion, and superstition as he presents them in the preface to the TTP.

2.3 Uncertainty, Religion, and Superstition

The TTP begins with an account of uncertainty, superstition and its attending problems. All humans, as stressed above, are susceptible to superstition. Fear of the unknown, based on the contingency of events, leads humans to use their imaginative faculties to bring coherence to the happenstance nature of life. Fear, originating in uncertainty, in other words, is at the source of superstition. This disposition towards superstition is at the root of conflict, war, and other ills. Spinoza is of course most concerned with theological forms of superstition. In line with this concern, he announces that his work is in part an attempt to reinterpret the Bible. It is an attempt

---

[73] Spinoza, "Ethics," Part IV, Proposition 37, 339. "The good which everyman who pursues virtue aims at for himself he will also desire for the rest of mankind."

to correct the "main false assumptions that prevail regarding religion."[74]   This concern with

religious superstition is a theme that animates the entire TTP.

Still, Spinoza briefly veers away from this concern with religion to give an example of

non-religious forms of superstition.[75] He shows how even an admired leader like Alexander the

Great can fall prey to superstition. Spinoza cites Alexander's employment of seers when

confronted with fear of military defeat at the hand of Darius. Alexander's eventual victory

briefly kept him away from seers and prophets, until he once again found himself in dire

circumstances. The lesson Spinoza puts forward is that as long as fear persists, humans remain

prey to superstition. As humans fall in and out of fear, moreover, it is difficult for them to

adhere to any one source of superstition. Instead, they are swayed this way and that by the

slightest impulse. It is this inconstancy, Spinoza argues, that "has been the cause of many

terrible uprisings and wars."[76] The problem of political instability, then, requires confronting the

human tendency to fall prey to superstitious practices.

How have political leaders dealt with the negative effects of superstition? The most

straightforward solution to this problem is to undercut the uncertainty at the root of the problem.

In order to achieve this end, Spinoza notes, political leaders have co-opted religious beliefs in

order to instill the "deepest reverence" in its followers. This way, political leaders can play on

the fears of their followers while ensuring that they collectively believe in a standardized set of

beliefs. Spinoza uses the example of "the Turks" to illustrate this use of religion in practice. He

writes,

> They hold even discussion of religion to be sinful, and with their mass dogma they gain
> such a thorough hold on the individual's judgment that they leave no room in the mind

---

[74] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 390.
[75] See Susan James, *Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear (Mededelingen Vanwege Het Spinozahuis) 88*, on superstition and the limits of a historical understanding of superstition. Also, Yovel, "Spinoza: The Psychology of the Multitude and the Uses of Language."
[76] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 389.

for the exercise of reason, or even the capacity to doubt. Granted, then, that the supreme mystery of despotism, its prop and stay, is to keep men in a state of deception, and with the specious title of religion to cloak the fear by which they must be held in check.[77]

Spinoza makes clear that ruling through fear and deception can achieve a level of popular control. Ruling through such means is so powerful that subjects are disinclined to even reason or doubt the state sanctioned religion. To the extent that uncertainty may creep into their minds, moreover, they are held in check through fear. While this type of ruling addresses the problem of uncertainty, Spinoza argues that ruling through such means is both impractical, as it does not endure overtime, and stunts human development. Instead, Spinoza puts forward his famous thesis that not only can freedom of judgment be "granted without endangering piety and peace of the commonwealth, but also the peace of the commonwealth and piety depend on this freedom."[78] Rather than attempting to control the minds of a people, freeing their minds achieves the goals of peace and piety with greater effect. In other words, attempting to instill and maintain certainty in the minds of a people proves to be a failing project. This is the first hint in the TTP that the problem of uncertainty is not all encompassing. The suggestion is that uncertainty is only a problem given the type of uncertainty in question.

How can free thought counter the pernicious effects of uncertainty and superstition? Would not freeing thought exasperate the problem? Indeed, it seems that promoting free thought would increase uncertainty, and therefore the very superstition Spinoza is attempting to temper. A state that allows free thought, after all, leads to a multiplicity of ideas that makes any one dominating set of ideas less likely. Understood in this way, Spinoza's free state is subject to the very uncertainty he aims to sidestep in the beginning of the TTP. As I want to demonstrate in

---

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 390.

this section, however, Spinoza responds to this apparent paradox by promoting a salutary conception of uncertainty that tempers the potential dangers accompanying a free state.

Notice, there are two interrelated problems Spinoza is attempting to counter. The first concerns negative forms of uncertainty that produce superstitions. Second, and related to the first, is the problem of excessive certainty. It is excessive certainty regarding superstitious beliefs, after all, that incline religious followers to willingly sacrifice their lives in the name of those beliefs. It is important to remember that uncertainty not only produces an unstable mixture of fear and hope, but it can also result in overconfidence, boastfulness, and arrogance.[79] As illustrated in the above example, when political leaders co-opt religious faith to instill dogmatic obedience, excessive certainty damages a people's intellectual capabilities. The political puzzle Spinoza sets out to resolve can be summarized in the following question, how can a political society leave room in the minds of its people to exercise reason, and sustain a capacity to doubt, without fueling the negative forms of uncertainty that undermine the security of a state?

2.3.1 The Problem of Religion

In itself, religion is not problematic for Spinoza. In fact, Spinoza notes throughout the TTP the many ways in which religion complements political society.[80] Accordingly, Spinoza does not argue for a secular liberal democracy, nor does he present a case for an inevitable process of secularization. In short, the problem of religion cannot be overcome according to Spinoza. In order to understand his preoccupation with religion, it is important to recall that Spinoza was compelled to write the TTP as the politico-religious situation in the Dutch republic was entering a critical juncture. The security Spinoza and his friends enjoyed under the republican party of De Witt began to crumble as theologians attempted (unwittingly or not) to

---

[79] Ibid., 388.
[80] See Chapters 5 and 13.

38

reorder the relationship between politics, philosophy, and theology. As theologians insisted that religion play a greater role in public life, thus placing the freedom to philosophize at risk, Spinoza attempted to push religion back to its proper sphere. Consequently, the TTP is dedicated to articulating religion's proper role in relation to the state and philosophy.

Broadly stated, the proper order Spinoza had in mind turned on the proposition that secular goods, goods of this world, should have primacy over metaphysical doctrines. While it is true that Spinoza argues for a more secular politics, and in that broad sense argues for a kind of secularization, he does not look towards a day when religious impulses are overcome by a wave of increased rationality among the multitude. Likewise, while Spinoza argues for a secular liberal democracy in a limited sense, he integrates religion into the state in ways a strict secularist would deem inappropriate. The larger take away for Spinoza is that when the relationship between religion and the state is poorly ordered, superstition—i.e., negative forms of uncertainty—begins to dominate the public imagination.

As any hope of communicating with the religious authorities in Spinoza's day required meeting them on their own terrain, Spinoza spent a great deal of time engaging in biblical hermeneutics. In particular, Spinoza proposed a controversial reading of the bible that argues it can only properly be understood within a particular historical context. Within that hermeneutical framework, the meaning of the bible is reduced to an accommodation to the political and cultural circumstances of its time.[81] The bible does not reveal universal human principles, as philosophy does, but instead is restricted to a confined sphere in time and place. In line with these observations, Spinoza argues against the scholastic insistence that philosophy and theology unite. Rather than focusing solely on piety and obedience, as Spinoza claims is the proper domain of

---

[81] This is in effect the medieval hermeneutic principle of accommodation, *Scriptura humane loquitur.*

39

theology, theologians also addressed questions of truth and wisdom.[82]   This results in unnecessary conflict among religions concerning the truth and wisdom of their doctrines. Spinoza instead claims that theology and philosophy should remain in separate domains—a practice that can be accomplished without theology or philosophy contradicting each other.[83] Recognizing this separation, any claim to certainty regarding theological truths should be taken as an "idle boast."[84]

Religious and political leaders, however, have self-interested reasons to embrace the conviction that theological certainties are within human reach. The truth claims of religion, after all, can be used to manipulate the multitude. That is one central reason why attempts to tie religious authorities with the state were a prominent feature in Spinoza's time. Although theocratic states can easily degrade into tyranny, Spinoza notes that the combination of civil law and religion is not always disastrous.   In chapter seventeen, Spinoza demonstrates how the Hebrew leaders' tendency towards tyranny was restrained.   Although the Hebrew commonwealth was a theocracy, the Levites, not the Hebrew leaders, had the sole right to interpret the laws.[85]   As the Levites had no share in the "administration of the state or its territory," their entire concern was with properly interpreting scripture.[86]   If the law was entirely in the hands of the Hebrew leaders, on the other hand, they could interpret scripture in such a way to suit their appetites. Although this and other characteristics of the Hebrew commonwealth served to restrain the Hebrew leaders, Spinoza notes at the beginning of chapter eighteen that such a state is no longer possible or advisable to imitate. Spinoza nonetheless continues to draw insight from this period noting that despite the limitations of examining the Hebrew

---

[82] Ibid., 525-526.
[83] Ibid., 526.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 536.
[86] Ibid., 545.

commonwealth for insights in his time, there were many features that are noteworthy, and perhaps even "profitable to imitate."[87] For our purposes, what is especially significant is Spinoza's descriptive analysis of how religion degenerated into "pernicious superstition."[88]

According to Spinoza, feverous disputes regarding religious doctrines arose when the high priests in the second state acquired public authority. The high priests added to their priesthood, in other words, the "right to secular rule."[89] The secular power held by religious authorities resulted in an increase in sectarian divisions among the people, and corrupted religion to the point that it transformed into a dangerous challenge to the state. It is not religion, then, but rather the extension of religious authorities to public rule that resulted in religion being an imminent political problem for Spinoza. In other contexts, as Spinoza notes throughout the TTP, religion was used to support the state. When religious authorities grab hold of political power, however, religion can easily degenerate into "pernicious superstition." Superstitions, remember, originate in, and are sustained by, fear driven uncertainty. Spinoza is therefore arguing that the forms of uncertainty promoted when religious authorities gained secular rule led to the weakening of religion *and* placed the security of the state in peril. I will now turn to examine the problems of having religious authorities dominate the forms of uncertainty people experience, which lays the groundwork to examine Spinoza's argument for a reorientation towards secular forms of uncertainty.

2.3.2 Religion and Uncertainty

Arguably, one of religion's central functions is its ability to alleviate anxiety about life's most harrowing uncertainties. Most prominently, humanities shared fate in imminent death is fertile terrain for metaphysical speculations. As everyone faces and is reminded of their

---

[87] Ibid., 552.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

prospective death throughout their lives, curiosity regarding the mystery of the afterlife is inextricably tied to what it means to be human. Because religion claims to hold comprehensive answers to this greatest of human mysteries, it therefore possesses a power unmatched by merely worldly authorities. Politically, then, it has the power to either support or cripple a state.

In the case of religion supporting political stability, Spinoza has no scruples arguing for religion's many benefits. In chapter fourteen, for example, Spinoza presents his "dogmas of universal faith" that are designed to first and foremost support the state. These dogmas are so broad that both Jews and Christians can embrace the faith. Yet it is not so broad and devoid of religious content familiar to Jews and Christians to constitute a religion based on reason. The peculiar universal faith that Spinoza promotes in chapter fourteen is quite obviously meant for the vulgus.[90] Consequently, it solely focuses on creating just, charitable, and obedient individuals. In part, the list accomplishes this goal by highlighting the power religion possesses in alleviating uncertainty about questions regarding death and justice. Take Spinoza's sixth dogma as an example. He writes:

> All who obey God by following this way of life, and only those, are saved; others, who live at pleasure's behest, are lost. If men did not firmly believe this, there is no reason why they should obey God rather than their desires.[91]

Notice how this universal dogma fits neatly with Spinoza's overall political project of restraining the desires that put political stability at risk. Specifically, belief in this dogma alleviates uncertainty about death in that it presupposes knowledge of an afterlife that can be achieved through obedience. It also implies a cosmic system of justice that ensures that all deeds, whether seen or unseen, are eventually put to judgment by an all-knowing God. On another level, it instills a level of uncertainty regarding the possibility of salvation. The faithful may know quite

---

[90] It is part of a broader tradition of civil religion in western political thought. See Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
[91] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 518.

a bit about the purpose and meaning of death, in other words, but nonetheless remain in the dark about their final judgment. Lacking full knowledge of their place in the afterlife, believers are apt to check their behavior in order to secure salvation. Spinoza's dogmas, in short, temper the politically damaging forms of uncertainty that occurs when beliefs about the meaning and purpose of death are feverishly contested, while sustaining a level of uncertainty that is salutary for the state. In this scenario, religion works in conjunction with the interests of a state.

Religion, however, can also undermine the peace and stability in a state when religious uncertainties are the sole or primary form of uncertainty encountered in people's daily lives. According to Spinoza, this happens when religious authorities obtain a greater hold on the people's imagination in comparison to secular authorities. By "secular authorities" I refer to non-religious authorities that place the peace and stability of the state as a priority. As previously noted, Spinoza, in chapter eighteen of the TTP, uses the example of the Hebrew state to warn against the dangers of having religious authorities grab hold of secular rule. In chapter nineteen Spinoza continues with this theme arguing that the "right over matters of religion" should be "vested entirely in the sovereign."[92] How is a sovereign's right over religious matters different from religious authorities holding secular rule?

The crucial difference is that a sovereign, properly understood, places the interests of the state (i.e., secular interests) before religious interests. In what is perhaps the most startling claim for Spinoza's theologically minded contemporaries, he claims, "There can be no doubt that devotion to one's country is the highest form of devotion that can be shown."[93] Devotion to religion, in other words, is secondary to devotion towards the state. Shirley's translation only partially captures the profundity of Spinoza's claim. Instead of translating pietas as devotion, it

---

[92] Ibid., 557.
[93] Ibid., 560.

is more appropriately translated as "religious devotion" or simply as "piety."[94] Either way,

Spinoza's intent to call for a reordering of religious and secular priorities is clear. Prioritizing

the state, Spinoza continues, is necessary since without it "nothing good can survive."[95] In other

words, because all goods other than the state, including religious goods, are dependent on the

well being of the state, devotion should first be placed in the secular realm known as the state. It

is only through a state, after all, that religion acquires the force of law.

Religion at odds with public authority, on the other hand, is a threat to the peace and

stability of the state. That is why Spinoza can claim that religious leaders challenging the

sovereign's authority on religious matters are "attempting to divide the sovereignty."[96] Hence,

an important means of tempering the potentially damaging effects from religion is by granting

the sovereign control over religious matters. Only in this way can it be insured that the "welfare

of the people" will be upheld as the "highest law, to which all other laws, both human and

divine, must be made to conform."[97] The preoccupation with making the welfare of the people

primary, while taking into account theological ambitions, can today be seen in the widespread

adoption of constitutional theocracies. Most critically, while religious doctrines have a central

role in constitutional theocracies, they are still subordinate to secular authorities and aims.

In sum, the main concern Spinoza expresses is the misplaced devotion his contemporaries

placed on their respective religions. As religion became the primary form of devotion in their

lives, the more fundamental political goods took on a secondary role. As his contemporaries

were far from making devotion to their state primary, Spinoza needed to argue that sovereign

authorities should have control over religious matters. On the other hand, if religions were

---

[94] Ibid.; Spinoza, *Opera, Vol. III.*
[95] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 560.
[96] Ibid., 563.
[97] Ibid., 561.

already liberalized, and thus posed little threat to the state Spinoza may have argued otherwise. Be that as it may, what is abundantly clear is that Spinoza is proposing a social order where secular allegiances take precedence over religious ones. Let us now turn to examine how secular uncertainties distill the politically destabilizing forms of superstitious uncertainties.

2.4 Liberalism, Freedom, and Uncertainty

Spinoza is a forerunner in modern liberal democratic thought. As one of the first philosophers in the modern period to extol the benefits of liberal forms of freedom, Spinoza marks an important moment in the unleashing of the uncertainties that characterize liberal states. For example, rather than the relative social and economic certainties that marked aristocratic societies, liberal societies—at their most abstracted extreme—promise an indeterminate future with no guarantees of social and economic standing. Although the future is not guaranteed, a liberal state gives her citizens hope about their prospective future.

Yet, just as liberalism's embrace of uncertainty marked the beginnings of the modern liberal state, so did a heightening concern with scientific calculation and control. As Pat O'Malley puts it in Risk, *Uncertainty and Government*,

> Liberalism's multifarious institutionalizations of 'individual liberty,' 'freedom of choice', 'freedom of contract', the 'free market' and so on create a much greater affinity with imagining and governing a future that is more open and indeterminate than might be consistent with modernism. In particular, against the modernist desire for control, standardisation and scientific certainty, all forms of liberalism render uncertainty an essential component of good government. Through the nexus with the 'freedom' of rationally calculating subjects pursuing their own interests, uncertainty is at the core of what characterises liberalism."[98]

On the surface, it seems that an emphasis on freedoms understood as individual volition coincides with scientific calculation and control. After all, if humans have the ability to change the future through their volition, it would follow that a responsible society would preoccupy

---

[98] Pat O'Malley, *Risk, Uncertainty and Government* (Portland, OR: Cavendish Publishing, 2004), 29.

itself with rational planning for the future. How these two tendencies exactly wed together is a complicated story that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. For our purposes, it is important to note that even as tools for standardization and control have increased, the celebration of liberal freedoms remains unabated.

Although Spinoza's argument for liberal freedoms holds a central place in the history of liberal political thought, he was a curious champion of liberal freedoms. Spinoza questioned, after all, the very possibility of human freedom as it is understood by run of the mill liberals, such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill. For Spinoza, human volition is nothing more than a fantasy that humans have the peculiar ability—through their conscious awareness of their behavior and possible futures—to recognize. In a memorable section in the *Ethics*, Spinoza illustrates this fantasy when he ascribes consciousness to a falling stone. Due to its consciousness the stone feels itself free. "This, then," Spinoza continues, "is that human freedom which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desires and unaware of the causes by which they are determined."[99] Human's consciousness towards their actions, in other words, makes it easy for them to forget they are subject to the laws of nature, which in turn results in the feeling of free volition.

Despite the enchainment that Spinoza makes human volition out to be in the sections on the passions and human bondage in the *Ethics*, in section five, Spinoza presents his account of human freedom. True human freedom is there characterized as freedom of the mind. It is not a freedom to act, but rather a freedom from the entrapments of the passions. Is Spinoza then concerned with this type of freedom in the TTP?

Yes, in the broadest of ways Spinoza's liberal state points people towards a life of true freedom. However, Spinoza in no way vigorously promotes achieving this end. True freedom,

---

[99] Spinoza, "Ethics," 909.

after all, is the reserve of the few. Attempting to make what is rare, commonplace, is bound to result in more ills than goods. Quite simply, basing a society on the presumed benevolence and virtue of humans is naïve and dangerous. Consequently, Spinoza promotes a conception of freedom that appeals to the intuitive longings of the many. That is, he promotes freedoms that more closely resemble freedom understood as the freedom to act. He argues, in other words, for a political framework that takes into account the false perception of freedom that most individuals operate with, while leaving open the possibility to cultivate the highest form of freedom.

The characteristic that withholds the multitude from a life of true freedom is their enslavement to the passions. These passions, in turn, can create civic havoc if left unchecked. Consequently, Spinoza's political project is designed to liberate the multitude from the most civically disruptive passions. The regime most effective in facilitating that outcome is a democracy. This claim is puzzling considering a democratic regime appears to have the opposite effect Spinoza intends. That is, being the freest of regimes, a democracy conceivably liberates the passions, and thus increases superstition. How can the freest of regimes provide the restraint necessary to govern the multitude? Put differently, how can democracy, which in its promotion of freedom indiscriminately unleashes uncertainties, restrain the uncertain passions that are at the origin of superstition? Answering these questions requires first a deeper examination of the future oriented passions of fear and hope.

As already noted, fear is the origin of superstition. It is the driving force behind superstition that preserves and fosters it. Thus, it is only while fear persists that people fall prey to superstition. Fear then—the elimination or tempering of fear—is central to Spinoza's project. Politically, a primary function of the state is to eliminate the fear that results from a stateless

situation that opens itself to endless violence and disorder, and hence to universal fear.[100]

Political stability is a prerequisite to a normative account of political uncertainty. Fear can

nonetheless also effectively be used as a means of control. At the most basic level, consider the

fear of punishment as a determent for crime. Despite the effectiveness of using fear in certain

circumstances, solely or primarily relying on fear is often counterproductive. In chapter 5,

Spinoza writes, "as long as men act only from fear, they are doing what they are most opposed to

doing."[101] Those guided by fear, in other words, may outwardly obey commands, while

inwardly harboring resentment and fantasies of overtaking the powers they are subject to.

Instead of being primarily moved by fear, Spinoza suggests that subjects should be

moved by hope. Hope, after all, does not paralyze a subject the way fear does. Hope allows a

subject to feel as if he is acting for his own good and hence from his own volition. This is

significantly different from fearfully acting under the rule of another. The future oriented nature

of hope also pushes individuals beyond their current standing in life towards a prospective

future. Hope, in other words, combats a narrow self-interest, with a future oriented gaze that

takes future goods into account. A healthy society, in his account, would be inclined to consider

the future on an individual and collective level.

Such a strategy is necessary since the multitude, as Spinoza writes when discussing the

necessity of government and coercion, is "carried away by their emotions, which take no account

of the future."[102] In order to prevent the self-indulgent sloth that is a constant temptation given

the ease in which humans are carried away by their emotions, Spinoza deems it necessary to

construct a future oriented social and political order. Given Spinoza's position, he would prefer

a poor society that inclines individuals to take the future into account to a luxurious society that

---

[100] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 560.
[101] Ibid., 438.
[102] Ibid.

has no mechanism moving the gaze of the people forward. Spinoza's position is a reflection of a popular position that stated that luxurious societies had been the downfall of societies in the past.[103] Take, for example, Spinoza's words when discussing a historical episode regarding the Hebrew state, he writes, "Great changes occurred, voluptuousness, luxury and idleness surged up among them, and everything deteriorated."[104] As we will see later with Hume, luxury can be construed as beneficial to a political project that attempts to promote a constructive form of uncertainty. The desire for luxurious goods, Hume argues, creates a future oriented gaze that propels humans to labor for an imaginary future.

For all this talk of the benefits of hope above fear, couldn't one argue that fear and hope are inextricably linked? For the most part, one does not hope without having an attending fear to suppress. If you require hope, it is usually because you fear a negative outcome. Consider the hope that a military battle results in victory. The other side of that hope is fear of defeat. Indeed, for Spinoza hope and fear are interconnected.[105] Nonetheless, they are sufficiently separate in nature that Spinoza gives different accounts of their uses.

More troubling, why would Spinoza, the emblematic rationalist, make such a passion central to his political project? In the *Ethics* Spinoza berates hope, claiming that it "indicate[s] a lack of knowledge and a weakness of mind."[106] Those who endeavor to live by the guidance of reason should therefore be "independent of hope."[107] Yet Spinoza also claims that while hope and fear are not good in themselves, they can serve a useful function in checking excessive

---

[103] Ellen O'Gorman, "No Place Like Rome: Identity and Difference in the Germania of Tacitus," in *Oxford Readings in Tacitus*, ed. Rhiannon Ash (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 112.
[104] Benedictus de Spinoza, *Spinoza: Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 228.
[105] Spinoza, "Ethics," 313. "[T]here is no hope without fear and no fear without hope."
[106] Ibid., 346.
[107] Ibid.

pleasure.[108] It is hope's power in restraining the passions that are the seedbed of superstition that make it central to Spinoza's liberal democratic project. As we will see in the next section the forms of restraint Spinoza advocates, which focuses on the use of hope engendered by a pious devotion to a free state, both decrease negative forms of uncertainty, while facilitating the unleashing of more positive forms. Spinoza attempts, in other words, to decrease fear-driven uncertainties that produce superstitions, with secular forms of hope-filled uncertainties designed to promote a free and rational state.

2.4.1 Restraint

Spinoza first addresses the issues of restraint in chapter five, a chapter that begins discussing ceremonial rites in the Hebrew state. In order to demonstrate how and why these rites have preserved and strengthened the Hebrew state, Spinoza turns from the particulars of "Scriptural authority" to argue "from universally valid principles."[109] In this important section, a precursor to Spinoza's later chapters on politics, Spinoza begins articulating the fundamental need for laws and government. Law would be unnecessary if humans desired only that which is prescribed by reason. As things stand, however, laws are needed to restrain the unseemly side of human nature. As Spinoza puts it, "no society can subsist without government and coercion, and consequently without laws to control and restrain men's lusts and unbridled urges."[110]

What forms of coercion and restraint are most effective in curbing the politically destabilizing passions? Contrary to what a tyrant might believe, repressive forms of government are least effective. As previously noted, while ruling by fear might prove effective in certain conditions, it is bound to fail overtime. A fear driven subject obeys a ruler's commands from fear of punishment, not because he truly desires to obey. Effective rule requires aligning a

---

[108] Ibid.
[109] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 438.
[110] Ibid.

subject's self interest to that of the ruler. Better still is the possibility of democracy, which makes it "so that all are thus required to render obedience to themselves and no one to his equal."[111] In theory at least, and certainly to varying degrees in practice, a democracy dissolves the tension between rulers and ruled. Achieving that optimal situation, however, is not always possible. Consequently, Spinoza also examines rule by one or a few—leaving open prescriptive political suggestions to contextual considerations.

Irrespective of the form of government in power, the more abiding lesson Spinoza imparts to his readers is that governing requires making subjects feel that obedience is in their self-interest. He therefore makes the general claim that in "every state laws should be so devised that men may be influenced not so much by fear as by hope of some good that they urgently desire; for in this way each will be eager to do his duty."[112] Spinoza here again emphasizes an idea he fully develops in the political chapters of the TTP. That is, he argues that the types of uncertainties encountered in a state can and should be ordered in such a manner that its subjects are primarily moved by future oriented hopes. Spinoza illustrates how this works in practice by returning "to the particular case of the commonwealth of the Hebrews."[113]

As the Hebrews were recently freed from the condition of slavery, they were unprepared for self-rule. Hence Moses ascended to power as the sole sovereign. In line with Spinoza's previous insights about effective rule, the system of laws Moses ordained was constructed so that the people would do their "duty willingly rather than through fear." Similarly, state religion was introduced to achieve military success by making solders "do their duty from devotion rather than fear."[114] Spinoza again emphasizes the need to rule in such a way that the people feel it is

---

[111] Ibid., 439.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Notice, the notion that Moses needed to introduce divine religion for the sake of the state is already signaling the priority, Spinoza later argues, the state should have over religion.

51

in their interest to obey sovereign authority. Ruling by fear, notice, is consistently characterized as an ineffective form of ruling.[115] Instead of fear, Spinoza suggests governing a people by the future-oriented passion of hope.

In the case of the Hebrew commonwealth, for instance, Moses promised the people "benefits from God in the future."[116] They were asked, in other words, to sacrifice in the present for future goods. Moses' success in establishing a system of law, for example, was in part due to his "effort to see that the people should do their duty willingly rather than through fear."[117] The necessity of instilling a willful duty to sacrifice in military combat captures the importance of Spinoza's insight.   Asking for military sacrifice based on the fearful prospect of future punishments is comparatively ill suited. Courage cannot be summoned through fear.[118] Self-interested hope that touches on a higher purpose, on the other hand, is more likely to instill obedience that is effective and abiding. The future-oriented nature of ruling put forward by Spinoza in chapter five already suggests a constructive form of uncertainty. The question of restraint, however, remains. How can a hope filled politics restrain the pernicious forms of uncertainty, while unleashing a more salutary form of uncertainty? It is still unclear how hope, a potentially fickle passion, can garner the obedience necessary to achieve political stability and social harmony.

Chapter 16 begins a wholly new section of the TTP. Its purpose is to inquire into the "limits" of freedom of thought in a well-conducted state.[119] While a democratically free state is preferable to other forms of regimes, restraints on freedom are still necessary. For example, later in chapter 20, Spinoza gives a list of seditious political beliefs that infringe on the right of the

---

[115] This characterization of fear continues throughout the TTP. See "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 536-37.
[116] Ibid., 439.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Consider the Athenian Stranger's argument that a constant sense of fear leads to the vice of cowardice in Thomas L. Pangle, *The "Laws" of Plato* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980), 84.
[119] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 526.

sovereign. Included in these is the opinion that "it behooves everyone to live as he pleases."120

Spinoza shows here that he does not embrace a conception of freedom as a type of liberality that

is wholly private and unrestrained. Here, Spinoza's republicanism seems to restrain his

otherwise liberal impulses. Concern with the common good should precede a concern with

living as one likes.[121] Spinoza extends this idea to democracy when he argues that democracy is

fundamentally about containing the emotions within the bounds of reason. This is fundamental

as failing to contain the multitude will lead to democracy's collapse.[122] It is clear then that

Spinoza thinks that like other regimes democracy requires restraint. This position begs an

important question. How does Spinoza reconcile a need for restraint with his concern with

democratic freedom?

Because a democracy's guiding principle is freedom, its form of restraint must

correspond to that principle. In the final chapter of the TTP, Spinoza tells his readers what type

of restraint is not acceptable in a free state. He writes that the "ultimate purpose" of the state is,

> not to exercise dominion nor to restrain men by fear and deprive them of independence,
> but on the contrary to free every man from fear so that he may live in security as far as is
> possible, that is, so that he may best preserve his own natural right to exist and to act,
> without harm to himself and to others.[123]

The operative word here is fear. Fear is an improper means of restraint that is counterproductive

to the security of a state. This is particularly the case when dealing with a free people who are

accustomed to liberty.[124] Restraining citizens through fear is likely to be interpreted by citizens

who have tasted freedom as an enslaving move by the state. The goal is not to deprive citizens

---

[120] Ibid., 568.
[121] Ibid., 530-31, 537-38.
[122] As Spinoza later writes, "as we have shown, it is the fundamental purpose of democracy to avoid the follies of appetite and to keep men within the bounds of reason, as far as possible, so that they may live in peace and harmony. If this basic principle is removed, the whole fabric soon collapses" (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 531).
[123] Ibid., 567.
[124] Ibid., 438.

of independence, but rather to gain their obedience with as little harm as possible to their natural right. Gaining obedience from subjects, however, is not limited to fear.

A government's power over its subjects lies in its ability to garner obedience through any means. "It is not the motive for obedience," Spinoza writes, "but the fact of obedience, that constitutes a subject."[125] There are, in other words, alternative means of obedience that need not rely on fear. It is possible, for example, to obey an authoritarian leader based on admiration for his or her perceived stature as a savior from dire circumstances. In a democracy, on the other hand, obedience is gained through devotion to a free state—a kind of democratic hope. In the following, I examine how a wonder filled admiration of freedom translates into hope, which in turn leads to a devotion to the state.

2.4.2. Devotion to Freedom

Spinoza advocates for a very particular type of freedom in the TTP, the freedom to think and say what you want. Freedom thus understood is second only to philosophic freedom, which is the result of intellectual labors peculiar to the few. Spinoza gives two reasons why the freedom of judgment should be protected. One, this freedom has the potential of facilitating the virtue par excellence, philosophical thought. While restraint is important in all regimes, a democratic regime has the greatest possibility of allowing the use of reason without restraint.[126] It is this freedom, for example, that is of "the first importance in fostering the sciences and the arts."[127] Second, Spinoza argues that because freedom of judgment cannot be suppressed, it should therefore not be denied.[128] That is, it is impractical to attempt to completely suppress the

---

[125] "However, for a proper understanding of the extent of the government's right and power, it should be observed that the government's power is not strictly confined to its power of coercion by fear, but rests on all the possible means by which it can induce men to obey its commands" (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 536).
[126] Spinoza mentions that using reason without restraint is tied with the purpose of the state (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 567).
[127] Ibid., 569.
[128] Ibid., 569, 571.

thoughts of subjects. Not only is it ineffective, but it also fosters bad faith, resulting in people thinking one thing and saying another. Good faith—being of the first importance in a liberal state—is then placed on precarious grounds.[129] This does not mean, however, that Spinoza thinks a sovereign lacks any resource to move the minds of his subjects. To the contrary, sovereigns possess a great deal of power over their subjects.

For instance, near the end of the *TTP* Spinoza notes that "minds are to some degree under the control of the sovereign power."[130] He further claims that there is "no absurdity in conceiving men whose beliefs…and every single emotion is under the sole control of the governing power."[131] He quickly, however, reminds his readers that government can never be so effective in this regard as to do anything it wishes. There can never be a government so repressive that free thought is completely eliminated. How, despite lacking absolute power to command obedience, can a state be formed to achieve stability overtime? It is not, Spinoza writes, his intention to answer this question.[132] Yet, it is that question which would shed light on how a democratic regime would successfully restrain the multitude. Spinoza provides a hint about how to proceed when he claimed that "although it is not by direct command of the sovereign power that these results [the many means of controlling minds] are produced, yet experience abundantly testifies they often proceed from the authoritative nature of his [the sovereign's] power."[133] The authoritative nature of democratic power lies in the hands of the people. How can leaving authority in the hands of the people lead to a rational and stable state?

[129] Ibid., 569.
[130] Ibid., 537.
[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.

55

Democracy, Spinoza claims in chapter sixteen, is the regime most closely aligned "to that freedom which nature grants to every man."[134] That characterization of democracy fits well with his overall purpose in the TTP of discussing the benefits of freedom in a commonwealth.[135] Democracy, in short, is the freest of regimes and therefore the most aligned with Spinoza's project. In order to understand how devotion to freedom is used as form of democratic restraint, it is important to recognize first the difference between two claims Spinoza makes about freedom.

First is his claim that democracy is most closely aligned to natural right, which is to say it is most closely aligned with a type of freedom that knows no bounds. Second, reason is in favor of peace, and freedom of judgment is necessary to achieve peace.[136] In other words, democracy—which facilitates freedom of judgment—is the most rational regime. As Spinoza puts it, in a democracy "all by common resolve live only by the dictates of reason."[137] Does this imply that in a democracy all citizens will be philosophers? Hardly.[138] Following Spinoza's equating a reasoned life with peacefulness, however, the above quote can be altered to read: in a democracy citizens resolve to live together in peace.[139] In this sense it could be stated that democratic citizens resolve to live by the dictates of reason. Still, it appears fundamentally problematic that the sort of freedom closest to natural right (democratic freedom) is the least restrained.

---

[134] Ibid., 531.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid., 529, 580 (Note 33).
[137] Ibid., 559.
[138] "in a democracy (which comes closest to the natural state) all the citizens undertake to *act*, but *not* to reason and to judge, by decisions made in common" (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 571, emphasis mine).
[139] Alternatively, one can highlight Spinoza's emphasis on making decisions in common, and thereby suggest that freedom, within a political society, is realized by membership in a community. In this way, as Steven B. Smith, in *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), notes, Spinoza's ideas on democratic freedom are close to Rousseau's conception of a general will This reading, nonetheless, begs the question of restraint, how is it that the multitude will be sufficiently restrained in order to protect this common life?

As mentioned above, natural right knows no bounds. It makes no difference whether you live a life guided by reason or as a brute guided by appetite—natural right extends to both, and to everything in nature. Accordingly, as nature is amoral, sin does not exist in a natural state.[140] Given democracy's aligning itself most closely to a natural state, how is it also the most rational (peaceful) state?[141]

As noted, democracy is closest to a natural state in so far as it allows for the greatest sphere of liberty. Nonetheless, like all forms of government, its most basic function is to restrain the civically destabilizing passions of the multitude. Democracy is the best regime in this regard because it restrains the multitude as well as creates an environment of freedom that facilitates human flourishing. The dedication to a free state inevitably present in a democracy, I want to argue, is at the core of Spinoza's conception of democratic restraint. The first step to understanding this form of restraint requires taking into account the hopeful form of governance in a free state.

Fear, as we have seen, is an inappropriate means of governing a free people. The alternative to fear is its counterpart, hope. It is a viable alternative because it is an emotion related to fear and thus to superstition—the lifeline of the multitude. Although in the *Ethics* Spinoza considers hope an inadequate idea that a free person would ideally live without, he also recognizes that because "men seldom live according to the dictates of reason" hope can "bring more advantage than harm."[142] In effect, Spinoza attempts to counter one passion, one inadequate idea, with another.[143] Not surprisingly then, in his later *Political Treatise,* Spinoza

---

[140] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002*,* 556.
[141] Ibid., 468-469. Smith (1998, 125) places Spinoza's theory of natural right within the tradition of political philosophy. Unlike his counterparts, Spinoza does not understand natural right as "intrinsically bound up with the virtuous life" (i.e., with a life lead by reason).
[142] Spinoza, "Ethics," 346, 348.
[143] "An emotion, insofar as it is related to the mind, can neither be checked nor destroyed except through the idea of an affection of the body contrary to and stronger than the affection which we are experiencing" (Spinoza, "Ethics," 326).

writes that "a free people is led more by hope than by fear, while a subjugated people is led more by fear than by hope."[144] Democracy being the freest of regimes, then, is led more by hope. How is it led by hope? And how does this appeal to hope restrain the multitude?

Humans are inclined to think that they know what is in their self-interest.[145] Self-assessment of self-interest is a notoriously difficult task. As noted previously, if humans acted under the guidance of reason—making decisions that correctly took their good into account—they would not be in need of governance.[146] Instead, they act based on their whimsical appetites and are guided by superstition. The fact that in a free state most individuals are inclined to believe they know what is best for them places obedience to a sovereign who claims otherwise on unsteady ground. "Men are impatient above all," in Spinoza's words "at being subject to their equals and under their rule."[147] While trying to garner respect for a sovereign is a challenge in all regimes, a democracy is the best regime to overcome this difficulty as it places sovereignty in the hands of the people, i.e., in theory there is no external other that needs to be obeyed. This is true publicly and privately. That is, the people have a say in how they are ruled in both spheres. This, in turn, creates a self-perpetuating hope. This hope is grounded in the possibility of following your natural necessity with little felt external interference. Or put in more explicitly political terms, because through self-government you are not governed by an arbitrary power, the hope that the future can be changed collectively (public) and individually (private) is consistently felt in a way necessarily precluded in other regime types.

---

[144] Spinoza, "Political Treatise," 700.
[145] "Every single man thinks he knows everything, and wants to fashion the world to his liking; he considers things to be fair or unfair, right or wrong, according as he judges them to be to his profit or loss" (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 530, 567).
[146] Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise," 2002, 519.
[147] Ibid., 406. This is why when there is only one ruler, a sovereign must convince the people of his divine status in order to maintain obedience from the people.

Let me further explain. In a democracy the people are sovereign, and thus they are the ones who make the laws, or at minimum feel they could act on that power if they so choose. Nobody, in a democracy, Spinoza says, "transfers his natural right to another so completely that thereafter he is not to be consulted."[148]   Therefore, if a citizen believes he has a "better alternative" to the current law, he can remain hopeful that this might change in the future.[149] Notice how this is different from other regimes that preclude the people from rule. In those regimes, if you disagree with a certain law you can grudgingly go along with the ruling power or you might revolt against the ruling authority.   There is little else you can effectively accomplish considering you hold no political power to do otherwise. Instead of hope, frustration and fear of the unknown have a greater likelihood of being the norm in non-democratic regimes. Feeling helpless with the possibilities present in this world, it is unsurprising that turning to otherworldly sources for hope becomes a viable alternative in non-democratic regimes.

The hope accompanying democratic freedom is not limited to its procedural means of instituting laws, but also extends to its protection of private rights. It is important to note that Spinoza does not speak in terms of private rights or even of the private realm. Nonetheless, he is clear that democracy, being the freest of regimes, should protect diverse ways of life. The system of government that is best, in Spinoza's words, grants men freedom of judgment *and* governs them "in such a way that the different and conflicting views they openly proclaim do not debar them from living together in peace."[150] Legally granting freedom of judgment, then, is not sufficient in the best state. That is, formally allowing freedom of judgment without achieving peace among a diversity of views falls short of the democratic ideal.   Therefore, despite Spinoza's claims that the people must submit their natural right to act as they think fit to a

---

[148] Ibid., 522.
[149] Ibid., 571.
[150] Ibid., 570.

sovereign (whether that sovereign be one, the few, or the many), he is unambiguously clear that it is preferable for a state to be less oppressive, and thus more accommodating to diverse ways of life when governing its subjects.[151] Again, Spinoza thinks a democracy best achieves these goals.[152] Just as having a say in how you are ruled in public life provides citizens hope, having the liberty to lead a particular way of life likewise facilitates hope in everyday life. It mirrors the type of freedom found in a natural state but with the requisite safety needed in order to live in hope rather than fear.

Because freedom is in the constant purview of the people in a democracy, any viable threat to freedom is understood (whether in individual or collective terms) as a threat to the regime that is the protector of that freedom. A democratic peoples' devotion to freedom, in turn, gives them the incentive to use resources to combat those threats. Ultimately, Spinoza wishes to replace devotion to fleeting superstitions with a devotion to freedom. Devotion to freedom runs deeper than devotion to religious superstitions.[153] Reflecting their natural right, a purportedly free life resonates with humans at a visceral level. Nearly everyone can appreciate the benefits of living in a free state. Devotion to freedom, however, is groundless if it is not accompanied by devotion to a state. It is only in a state, after all, that freedom divorced from fear can be protected.

Thus for Spinoza, pious devotion towards the state is a necessary condition to combat religious forms of devotion. Spinoza illustrates the potential power accompanying devotion to a free state at the end of *TTP* when he claims that martyrs for freedom are worth emulating and

---

[151] Ibid. For one thing being overtly oppressive is not practical. "He who seeks to regulate everything by law will aggravate vices rather than correct them" (Spinoza, "Theological-Political Treatise, 2002, 566, 568, 570). Spinoza makes a strong distinction between governing actions as opposed to governing thoughts. It is freedom of thought that he emphasizes.
[152] Ibid., 570-571.
[153] Which is not to suggest that it is necessarily stronger or more useful in all circumstances. It is worth noting that Spinoza may be replacing one form of pernicious superstition for a more salutary type, i.e., the nation state.

revering.[154]   That passionate dedication to a cause is exactly what is needed to move the multitude to protect a free state. This devotion to the state (the protector of freedom), in short, leads citizens to defend their state against threats both internal and external. A threat, in this context, is translated as violations or threats to the freedoms enjoyed in a state. The people, in other words, seek to protect their freedoms. This protection inevitably involves restraining any threat to peace that is a precondition of that freedom, including passionate devotion to religious sects. Fervent religious devotion in this context appears as madness, a threat to the freedom of all. In sum, devotion to a free state naturally translates into passionately devout citizens who are prepared to defend their free state. It is in this way that Spinoza fuses citizens' devotion to freedom with restraint understood as a dedication and devotion to a free state.

2.5 Conclusion

The first sentence of Spinoza's TTP announces the problem of uncertainty. "If men were able to exercise complete control over all their circumstances, or if continuous good fortune were always their lot, they would never be prey to superstition."[155] As human control of the future is limited, and good fortune is not always their lot, the conditions necessary to make humans immune to superstition can never be met. Consequently, the possibility of misfortune invariably accompanying an uncertain future leaves humans prey to superstition formation. In this reading, superstition's main function is to address the problem of uncertainty.

Uncertainty, as pointed out in the introduction, is mostly analyzed as a problem in contemporary academic discourse. In recent work by academic psychologists, superstitions are also treated as the counterpart to the problem of uncertainty. Fancying themselves social scientists, however, psychologists do not use the value-laden term "superstition." Instead, they

---

[154] Ibid., 570.
[155] Ibid., 388.

opt for the more neutral term "anthropomorphism" when discussing the human tendency to seek

order from uncertainty through the workings of the imagination.156 For example, the authors of

"On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism," explain the experiences of

uncertainty behind anthropomorphism as follows:

> From natural phenomena such as the weather and tides, to biological phenomena such as death and reproduction, to social phenomena such as the behavior of human and nonhuman agents, observations of the external world are fraught with uncertainty and ambiguity that must be explained in order to operate effectively in one's environment by children and adults alike.[157]

The experience of uncertainty demands an explanation, without which humans cannot

effectively operate in their environments. The main manner in which humans seek an

understanding of the inexplicable, according to the authors, is by giving human like

characteristics to non-human forces. The appeal of anthropomorphism is straightforward, to

"reduce uncertainty and increase comprehension of events in one's environment."158   For

example, there is ample literature on how the loss of a spouse or loved one is especially likely to

increase the strength of one's religious faith.159 In other words, having one's world thrown into

a whirlwind of uncertainty has the effect of increasing anthropomorphism or superstition

formation.

Spinoza takes these observations about uncertainty and superstition to the political realm.

While the academic psychologists reviewed above examine superstition formation

(anthropomorphism in their terms), and conclude that they serve important individual and social

functions, they do not systematically discriminate between positive and negative forms of

---

[156] Anthropomorphism, of course, is one specific, albeit prominent, form of superstition Spinoza examines.
[157] N. Epley, A. Waytz, and J. T. Cacioppo, "On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism," *Psychological Review* 114, no. 4 (2996): 871.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., 877.

superstition.[160]   Spinoza, writing in the midst of politico-religious conflict, reflected critically on certain superstitions that, while serving some function for individuals and communities, placed the prospect of peaceful coexistence among a plurality of people in jeopardy.   In particular, pockets of religious communities dogmatically placed their beliefs above the good of the state, and thus placed the security of the state in peril. As superstitions cannot be eliminated, Spinoza turned to examine which superstitions served the political function of allowing a plurality of people to live together in peace.

Ultimately, Spinoza argues that devotion to the state needs to take primacy over devotion to religious beliefs. Put differently, religious beliefs must align with the more fundamental needs of the state. In a way, Spinoza trades the dangers of religious superstitions for the dangers of the secular superstitions accompanying fervent devotion to a state. Indeed, the eventual rise of the nation state would prove a mixed blessing, with as much economic prosperity and security as poverty and heedless killing within and among state actors.   I have argued that Spinoza laid out the benefits of devotion to a free state by analyzing how it squarely confronts the intractable problem of uncertainty.   Instead of attempting to eliminate uncertainty (an impossibility), or solely tempering its negative effects, Spinoza argued for a normative conception of uncertainty contained within a liberal state.

In my reading of Spinoza, devotion to a free state translates into devotion to a constructive form of uncertainty. A free state, after all, allows uncertainties (the free pursuit—uncertain attainment—of public and private goods) that are bound within the security of a state. The future-oriented hopes generated in a free state, in turn, make citizens loyal to the state, as it

---

[160] They also take uncertainty as one causal agent among others when considering the human tendency to anthropomorphize. I would argue that the other causal agents they deal with are at bottom related to uncertainty. For example, their observation that loneliness increases anthropomorphizing might be associated with feelings of uncertainty that are experienced in a state of loneliness.

promises them a better future contingent on their individual and collective work. In Spinoza's terms, the freedom in the state viscerally awakens a natural sense of the primordial freedom that is a natural right. Hence it proves a potent antidote to other forms of devotion that tug on the hearts of a free people. That said, it is important to remember that Spinoza did not believe that simply creating a liberal democracy would result in stability and freedom. To the contrary, Spinoza argued that the success of a free state is contingent on the social and cultural history of a people.[161] In all, Spinoza points towards the ways normative forms of uncertainty can support stability within democratic and non-democratic regimes alike.

---

[161] See Chapters 3, 17, and 18 in the *Theological-Political Treatise.*

3. DAVID HUME

David Hume inherited the world Baruch Spinoza navigated: an early modern world, in which faith in reason's power was on the ascent. Unlike Spinoza, who was a rationalist through and through, Hume challenged the facile relationship between reason and the attainment of knowledge propounded by early modern scientists and philosophers. Consequently, his philosophical thought is more explicitly preoccupied with uncertainty. Unlike for Spinoza, for instance, certain knowledge, according to Hume, was not within the reach of even the most careful and gifted philosopher. With his philosophical thinking on matters of uncertainty, Hume set the stage for studies in probability and risk.[162] Spinoza's thought alone, in other words, with its focus on the philosophical attainment of axiomatic truths, does not provide a conceptual bridge to contemporary ways of thinking about uncertainty.

Until recently, the main connection drawn between Hume and Spinoza was their notorious characterization as atheists. In the past two decades or so there has been a flurry of articles and recently one book on the affinities between Spinoza and Hume's philosophy.[163] In this section I suggest that one important way to consider Hume's relationship to Spinoza is his shared preoccupation with uncertainty's role in political life. More specifically, and in line with the aims of this dissertation, I argue that within Hume's work there is a constructive account of

---

[162] See Chapter 2, "The Possibility of Hume: A Brief Genealogy of the Concept of Risk," in Jakob Arnoldi, *Risk*, e-book (New York, NY: Wiley & Sons, 2013).

[163] Klever, *David Hume (1711-1776): Wetenschappelijke Ethica van Een Overtuigd Spinozist*. Annette C. Baier, "David Hume, Spinozist," *Hume Studies* XIX, no. 2 (1993): 237–52, http://www.humesociety.org/hs/issues/v19n2/baier/baier-l.pdf. Willem Lemmens, "The Melancholy of the Philosopher: Hume and Spinoza on Emotions and Wisdom," *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2005): 47–65, http://www.academia.edu/436590/The_Melancholy_of_the_Philosopher._Hume_and_Spinoza_on_Emotions_and_Wisdom. Willem Lemmens, "Philosophy as Medicina Mentis? Hume and Spinoza on Emotions and Wisdom," in *The Concept of Love in 17th and 18th Century Philosophy*, ed. Gabor Boros, Herman De Dijn, and Martin Moor (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2008), 181–204.

political uncertainty. Like Spinoza, Hume also examines the effects of uncertainty on religious philosophers and their followers. Hume adds, however, a preoccupation with the effects of uncertainty on philosophers, as well as an analysis of the political and social implications of the popularization of philosophy.

In order to facilitate the many ways in which one can consider uncertainty in Hume's political and social thought I propose the following divisions:

- Fact based uncertainty

- Perceived uncertainty

- Epistemic uncertainty

- The search for certainty

Fact based uncertainty refers to uncertainties that are the result of some empirical reality. For example, the scarcity of goods makes the equal attainment of those goods uncertain. Also included in this category are characteristics Hume considers to be part of human nature. By human nature Hume refers to a natural impulse that can reliably be expected from most humans most of the time in a wide variety of circumstances. For example, the fact that humans tend to narrowly be concerned with those around them falls into this category. There are exceptions to that rule (i.e., individuals that have broader concerns to the neglect of those who are near), and there are ways to alleviate the effects of the parochial nature of humans. Yet, its intractable presence in human life makes it a Humean fact. *Perceived uncertainty* refers to the experience of uncertainty, whether it is based on facts or not. The fear that one may lose most of his or her external goods despite living in a secure and prosperous society would fall in this category. *Epistemic uncertain*ty deals with uncertainty regarding truth claims, and thus is closely linked to Hume's skepticism.

Finally, *the search for certainty* is the impulse individuals feel to overcome or alleviate the omnipresent uncertainties in human life. This search can be driven by irrational fears or through a sober recognition of life's uncertainties. In either case, humans are moved to search for certainty when confronted with upheavals in life that shake their confidence in their established beliefs, or that bring to consciousness troubling uncertainties never imagined. The search for certainty need not culminate in an embrace of beliefs held with certainty. More often it culminates in feelings of comfort that mute the nagging reality of uncertainty. A religious believer professing a faith, for example, may not claim that he or she has certainty. The search for certainty in the case of faith culminates in the abating of uncertainty to such an extent that it is no longer a problem. As Hume puts it when discussing beliefs, "…the influence of belief is at once to inliven and infix any idea in the imagination, and prevent all kind of hesitation and uncertainty about it."[164] Eventually, Hume will point out, religion became infected by philosophy and began demanding certainty about its beliefs. In that case, a search for certainty does become a search for axiomatic truths.[165]

I want to claim that one way of reading Hume's work is by paying attention to the interplay between a search for certainty (whether originating in fear or the calm passion of wonder) and the inevitable uncertainties that are part of knowledge claims. In this vein, the engine that drives a large portion of Hume's work, I would claim, is his persistent reflections on the way philosophers and the multitude deal with uncertainty.

Before examining Hume's constructive account of uncertainty, I examine how he presents negative forms of uncertainty, framed as problems, in his political, religious, and

---

[164] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume Reprinted from the Original Edition in Three Volumes and Edited, with an Analytical Index*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1896), 453.
[165] See sections 3.3 and 3.4. In some way it might be more accurate to label this process as "a search for comfort" amid uncertainties, which has a search for certainty as a sub-category.

philosophical writings. I first examine uncertainty as it is presented in Hume's account of the origins of political societies in the *Treatise*. That examination shows that Hume began thinking about uncertainty as a political problem as early as the *Treatise*. Then I examine Hume's *Natural History of Religion* in order to highlight the negative effects of uncertainty on the multitude. Next, I examine the deep epistemic uncertainties that Hume encountered in the *Treatise* and its influence on philosophers and political society. In that chapter I show that Hume did not reserve discussing uncertainty as a problem to the multitude, but he also extended that analysis to the activity of speculative philosophers. In particular, I show that overtime Hume came to recognize the pernicious role philosophy played in the religions of his day. In the next chapter I discuss the political consequences that follow from Hume's thinking of uncertainty as a problem. In short, uncertainty about fundamental matters (skepticism) leads Hume to the seemingly paradoxical position of embracing a radical openness to socio-political possibilities and conservatism. In other words, considering Hume's thoughts on uncertainty that were previously reviewed, I hope to present a clearer understanding of his politics. In the final chapter I reconstruct Hume's argument for a commercial society that is based on the channeling of the uncertain passions towards the pursuit of commercial goods.

Before beginning, let me clarify what I consider to be Hume's reconstruction of his politics of uncertainty. Although Hume directly confronted issues of uncertainty in his political and social thought, I am not arguing that Hume was aware of the robust conception of a politics of uncertainty that I patch together from a number of his works. Instead, I take the position that Hume's politics of uncertainty is implicitly examined and developed at various points throughout his works, without the coherent purposefulness that I suggest. Despite the implicit nature of what I attempt to reconstruct, I hope to show that the reconstructed politics of uncertainty in

Hume's work is recognizably Humean. There may be minor interpretative differences with Hume scholars, but in all I aim to reconstruct a model that reveals what is in Hume's texts. Moreover, when I go beyond the text to help in the reconstructive process it remains, I hope, Humean in spirit.

3.1 Uncertainty in Book Three of the *Treatise*

In Book Three of the *Treatise* Hume tells his readers that government is artificial. That is, it is not natural or necessary despite being "very advantageous" and in some "circumstances absolutely necessary."[166] Hume recognized that humans are able to preserve society for sometime without recourse to that human construct known as government. Almost echoing the views of who would later become his close friend in 1766, the Frenchman Jean Jacques Rousseau, Hume describes a pre-political society that is tranquil and far removed from the violent disorder proposed by Hobbes' state of nature. The state of society without government, Hume writes, "is one of the most natural states of men."[167] The most pertinent reason to think of it as such is the fact that human interest is easily met in "the infancy of society." As societies are less complex at the infancy of society, fulfilling human interest in that context is reduced to the maintenance of mere life.

What pushes people away from a pre-political condition--a condition of peace and order-- is an increase in "riches and possessions."[168] Riches make individuals forget their interest in social order, and an excess of possessions makes the pursuit of material goods contested.[169] For Hume this is both a step forward and a step backwards. While the facile peace and order of pre-political societies are lost, the possibility for the advancement of the arts and sciences increases.

---

[166] Ibid., 539.
[167] Ibid., 541.
[168] Ibid., 540.
[169] Ibid.

Unlike Rousseau, Hume's critique of reason did not lead him to praise humans in their pre-political condition. Instead, Hume understood the steady movement towards political and commercial societies as on the whole indicative of progress. Consequently, he describes the first peoples as "uncultivated" and "barbarous."[170] It is only with a movement towards larger and complex societies that human flourishing becomes possible.

The stability and growth of such societies, however, is tenuous if not accompanied by constant vigilance and craftiness. Factual and perceived uncertainties are apt to permeate complex societies that are not well governed. The instability that follows needn't be the case if humans were guided by reason, and thus by their true interests.[171] In that condition humans would recognize that peace is in their self-interest, and thus not attempt to hoard limited resources for themselves and those closest to them. They would instead cooperate in ways that place the common good above their parochial interests. The reasons for placing the common good above our parochial interests, as we will see below, are too weak to persuade the imaginative faculties that lead us to prefer what is near and present.

An inquiry into the origin of government, for Hume, begins with an inquiry concerning *self*-government. That is, examining how individuals are self-governed reveals both the necessity of government and suggests the requirements necessary for its maintenance.

After establishing in the first paragraph that all humans have an interest in upholding social order—and thus have an obligation to observe the rules of justice—Hume proceeds to ask, how can disorder then arise? "What principle there is in human nature so *powerful* as to overcome so strong a passion, or so *violent* as to obscure so clear a knowledge?" His response is that the passions overcome true human interests in favor of narrow self-interest. More

---

[170] Ibid., 486, 541.
[171] Ibid., 534-549.

specifically, Hume notes, it is the fact that "men are mightily govern'd by the imagination."[172]

The imagination obscures what is in our true interests. Self government would not be necessary

if the human propensity to be governed by the imagination were not present. Put differently, the

difficulty of self-government on the scale of the individual, points towards the difficult and

necessity of external restraints in large and complex societies.

It is the parochial nature of humans that makes them forget their true interests in large

societies. Human interest, as manifested in their usual state, prizes what is near and weakly

proceeds outward, in a concentric circle like fashion. "Now it appears, that in the original frame

of our mind, our strongest attention is confin'd to ourselves; our next is extended to our relations

and acquaintance; and 'tis only the weakest which reaches to stranger and indifferent persons."[173]

This is why, for Hume, people prefer trivial advantages that are near, to the maintenance of order

in society that appears remote.[174] One result of this human frailty is the social uncertainty it

produces.

> The consequences of every breach of equity seem to lie very remote, and are not able to
> counterballance any immediate advantage, that may be reap'd from it. They are, however,
> never the less real for being remote; and as all men are, in some degree, subject to the
> same weakness, it necessarily happens, that the violations of equity must become very
> frequent in society, and the commerce of men, by that means, be render'd very dangerous
> and uncertain.[175]

It is the "violations of equity" that follows from our parochial nature, and the social

uncertainty that it leaves in its wake, that is at the foundation of Hume's political theory. As the

inclination towards narrow self-regard is a perennial thorn in the side of humanity, the social

uncertainty it produces requires constant management in order to keep civil disorder in check.

This may be one of the reasons Hume emphasizes the *artificial* nature of government and justice.

---

[172] Ibid., 534.
[173] Ibid., 488.
[174] "[I]f every one had the same affection and tender regard for every one as for himself; justice and injustice would be equally unknown among mankind" (Hume, "A Treatise of Human Nature," 495).
[175] Ibid., 535.

It is almost as if Hume wants to remind his readers that the success of any large complex social order requires purposeful design and management. Mismanaged and poorly designed large societies, on the other hand, have a perpetual propensity towards civil war.

Up to this point the discussion has focused on fact-based uncertainties. As described above, social uncertainty in large complex societies is largely the result of the narrow reach of human affection and concern. From a macro viewpoint, the social uncertainties produced by the human tendency towards narrow self-regard are Humean facts. These facts point towards a negative conception of uncertainty that needs to be managed in order for large societies to endure and prosper overtime. I turn now to examine how Hume initially confronts the problem of uncertainty as it presents itself in Book Three of the *Treatise*.

As negative forms of uncertainty in large societies are due to the parochial nature of humans, Hume addresses that ever-present limitation to public concern. For one thing, it cannot simply be consented away. That is, agreeing to prefer what is remote to what is contiguous is ineffective as it simply ignores the intractable nature of the problem.[176] Hume uses the strongest language to illustrate the extent to which the problem of human narrowness is deeply imbedded. He writes, "Men are not able radically to cure, either in themselves or others, that narrowness of soul, which makes them prefer the present to the remote. They cannot change their natures."[177] Whatever the remedy to this problem, then, it must integrate this general human tendency into its political design.

In the broadest terms, Hume states, "the utmost we can do is to change our circumstances and situation, and render the observation of the laws of justice our nearest interest, and their

---

[176] Ibid., 537.
[177] Ibid.

violation our most remote."[178]   In other words, instead of attempting to cure an incurable narrowness of interest, political thinkers and policy makers should design legal norms in such a way that what initially appears our remotest interests becomes our nearest. Even here, however, there is a discernable problem. Namely, only a few are capable of putting aside narrow interests for the sake of the common good. These few, Hume writes, are those called "civil magistrates, kings and their ministers, our governors and rulers."[179]   Unlike the many who are merely part of the larger political whole, those in political power have an immediate interest in upholding a just society. After all, the position of power that they hold and prize is dependent on the obedience and general order of those they govern. Overtime, with the steady continuation in the "*execution and decision* of justice" by the few, the many "begin to taste at ease the sweets of society and mutual assistance."[180] It is only at that point that the many begin to recognize their interest in upholding a just society.

   The complexities inherent with making the above claims are too obvious to enumerate. Take, for example, the historically well-established fact that the few in power tend to be all too concerned with their own self-interest to be concerned with what anyone might call justice for the society as whole. The difficulties with Hume's position aside, his broader point is that what is in a person's immediate self-interest will take precedence over that which is distant. Given their position of power, the few are inclined to recognize that the dissolution of society would mean their downfall. Hence, in that narrow sense, the few are concerned with justice, which incidentally corresponds to their immediate self-interest. The objection by the many that the few only care about a just society to advance their self-interest, further strengthens Hume's argument

---

[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid., 538. Emphasis is Hume's.

regarding the inherent tensions that result from spatial distances from positions of rule. The differences between the few and the many regarding the meaning and application of a robust conception of justice, in short, are at the root of political uncertainty.

Hume's exposition of his politics of uncertainty in the third book of the *Treatise* is limited, as it solely represents an early exposition of his politics of uncertainty. Hume's advertisement in Book Three informs his readers that the third book of the *Treatise* is in some way independent of the other two. Specifically, it is less abstract in the hope that it may be accessible to "ordinary readers."[181] I want to argue that in section three of the *Treatise* Hume's account of political uncertainty is suggestive of a broader politics of uncertainty. In addition to when Hume explicitly confronts political matters in the final section of the *Treatise*, I also want to demonstrate how his abstruse reasoning into uncertainty in the first two books of the *Treatise* figures into his political thinking.   Ultimately, I will show how Hume's thinking on political uncertainty extends well beyond the *Treatise*. By making that observation, I do not wish to suggest that Hume discards with his earlier thought in his later work. Rather, in his later works Hume adds rich layers to the canvas he stretches in the *Treatise*.

Now that a general sketch of the fact-based uncertainties as it pertains to the origin of government in Book Three of the *Treatise* has been presented, I want to move on to discuss Hume's ideas regarding superstition and uncertainty before returning to the epistemic forms of uncertainty found in the first book of the *Treatise*. Examining Hume's connections between uncertainty, superstition, and religion will provide us with an instance of uncertainty as a problem that focuses on the limits of reason to persuade the many. When I return to Book One

---

[181] David Hume, *David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature, Vol. 1*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Clarendon (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2007), 292.

of the Treatise I will examine the limits of reason to persuade philosophers, which then sets up a discussion of Hume's politics of uncertainty.

3.2 Uncertainty in the *Natural History of Religion*

There is nothing secure in the world; no glory, no prosperity. The Gods toss all life into confusion; mix everything with its reverse; that all of us, from our ignorance and uncertainty, may pay them the more worship and reverence.

~Euripides, quoted in Hume's *Natural History of Religion*[182]

In the NHR uncertainty is presented as a nearly insurmountable problem. It leads humans beyond true religion, and towards civically damaging forms of superstition. To the chagrin of those seeking certain solutions to the problem of uncertainty, Hume does not provide any definitive solutions in the NHR. He instead emphasizes the limits to possible solutions. This is appropriate as uncertainty is an intractable problem that is always present in some form. In this section I want to accomplish two things. First, demonstrate the centrality of uncertainty in Hume's account of the origins of superstition in human nature. Then I want to discuss how Hume's emphasis on the limits of any possible solution to the problem of uncertainty points towards the necessity for a socially constructive conception of uncertainty. I especially highlight Hume's continuous efforts throughout the NHR to draw attention to the severe weakness of reason in face of fear driven uncertainties.

The central aim of the NHR is to examine what causes religion, in all its variety, to appear as it does in everyday life. As one might expect from Hume, the answer does not reside in human's ability to reason. That is, religions in their usual manifestations are not primarily caused through deliberate reasoning about how they should take shape. Instead, the passions arising from uncertainty cause religious superstitions, which in turn make up the content of what

---

[182] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, introduction by John M. Robertson (London, UK: Bradlaugh Bonner, 1889), 13-14.

Hume's contemporaries considered religious. Despite the irrational foundations of religious superstitions, Hume claims there is a sort of linear progression when considering the history of natural religion. Polytheism or idolatry was first present followed by a move towards theism. In this narrative, which Hume qualifies later in the NHR, human society improves in a simple progression from rude beginnings to a state of greater perfection.[183] This progression, however, is in many ways incidental and dependent on the stability provided by good government. It is due, in other words, to a careful form of social and governmental design that attempts to order society in such a way that the darker sides of humanity are restrained. Progress, in Hume's analysis, is emphatically not dependent on the growing rationality of individuals. It is held back by the "generality of mankind" that cannot escape superstitions due to their susceptibility to the passions.[184]

In the following I want to show the interplay Hume presents between uncertainty, superstition, and the "generality of mankind."[185] Understanding the relationship between these categories makes plain Hume's recognition of the stubborn nature of the problem of uncertainty, and thus lays the groundwork for my presentation of Hume's construction conception of uncertainty.

The NHR begins with Hume stating that his work is concerned with religion's "origin in human nature."[186] The question regarding religion's foundation in reason, Hume immediately continues, although the most important, is not examined, since that question "admits of the most obvious, at least the clearest solution."[187] Given Hume's skepticism the obviousness or clarity of the solution of religion's foundation in reason is questionable, as his later *Dialogues Concerning*

---

[183] Ibid., 2.
[184] Ibid., 6.
[185] Ibid. Hume uses various terms to describe the many in the NHR. These include the vulgar, the ignorant multitude, and the generality of mankind. I use these terms interchangeably throughout this section.
[186] Ibid., 1.
[187] Ibid.

Natural Religion demonstrates.[188]   Consequently, even before the NHR's publication, commentators questioned Hume's sincerity regarding his religious beliefs.[189]   Early commentators of the NHR, for example, decried Hume's purported atheism despite his explicit claims to the contrary.

Without entering into the trenches of that debate, it is noteworthy for our purposes that Hume begins the NHR claiming a kind of certainty about "the primary principles of genuine Theism and Religion." As suggested above, Hume's claim to certainty appears dubious. It raises a host of questions regarding Hume's purpose and rhetorical strategy in the NHR. Is Hume really arguing for a theistic religion? If so, his argument is undoubtedly unconventional in character, as it is devoid of the content found in the popular theistic religions of Hume's day. He might, on the other hand, be claiming adherence to some form of theism in order to obtain a fair hearing from his almost exclusively Christian audience. I tend to side with the latter interpretation. Be that as it may, Hume proceeds in the NHR to demonstrate why most individuals and societies fail to arrive at the true principles of theism and religion despite the obviousness of those principles to a "rational enquirer."[190] I will show that for Hume the major reason individuals fail to arrive at those principles is the frailty of human reason that is made even more vulnerable in conditions of uncertainty.

Hume begins his analysis in section one: "That Polytheism was the Primary Religion of Man." Polytheism or idolatry, Hume claims, was the predominate form of religion "about 1,700 years ago."[191] To support the claim that barbarous peoples, such as those at the origins of society, will not arrive at the principles of true religion, i.e., theism, Hume points to the "savage

---

[188] Unless Hume wants to suggest that the clarity in this matter is due to reason's inability to bring any insight into fundamental religious matters.

[189] Paul Russell's *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12-24.

[190] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion* (London, UK: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1957), 1.

[191] Ibid., 2.

tribes of America, Africa, and Asia" of his day.[192] The reason these groups fail to arrive at a higher form of knowledge is two-fold. One, in simple societies, such as those at the origin of society and contemporaneous groups that mimic those characteristics, possess little leisure to contemplate the possible origins and causes of things.

Next, and perhaps more important, was the rather straightforward manner in which "barbarous peoples" experienced life. That is, a barbarous society for Hume necessarily entails a simple society that lacks the great variety and complexity found in societies that have developed the arts and sciences. Hence Hume could write, "the more regular and uniform, that is, the more perfect nature appears, the more is he familarised to it, and the less inclined to scrutinise and examine it."[193] In a condition of relative social certainty, in other words, most individuals have little reason to wonder about origins or the causes of things. When experiences of mysterious and frightful irregularities appear in everyday lives, however, those uncertainties are apt to set a people "a-trembling, and sacrificing, and praying."[194] Because irregularities of that sort that do not predominate in simple societies, their religions remain relatively simple and unreflective, hence the true theistic principles Hume lauds are not approximated.

If they are pushed to reflection, people in simple societies easily satisfy their curiosity instead of probing deeper into the matter at hand. Ask someone in such a condition how an animal came to exist, Hume writes, and "he will tell you, from the copulation of its parents."[195] If you push him further in regards to the existence of their parents, they will answer similarly, from the copulation of their parents.[196] The philosophical curiosity necessary to approximate abstruse insights is not likely to be present or incited in simple societies.

---

[192] Ibid., 3.
[193] Ibid., 5.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid.

In societies in which the arts and sciences flourish, on the other hand, philosophical curiosity is more likely to capture the imagination of individuals. Still, even in those conditions, most individuals will not be inclined to spend their energies on true philosophy. Abstruse arguments, as Hume puts it at the end of section one, "will always be confined to a few persons."[197] As we will see Hume continues to emphasize the power of the passions and the imagination over reason throughout the NHR. The Humean fact that the generality of mankind will not likely engage in abstruse reasoning colors his views about uncertainty's impact on most individuals, and hence on society at large. As Hume observes in the last sentence in section one, reason, when abstruse, "keeps the principles [of theism] entirely from the knowledge of the vulgar, who are alone liable to corrupt any principle or opinion."[198]

After establishing that polytheism was "the primary religion of men," Hume proceeds to describe how polytheism originated in sections two and three.[199] In these sections Hume explains why humans attribute causal agency to invisible powers. Put differently, Hume examines why most humans are not satisfied with naturalistic explanations of events. Setting up an answer to that question, Hume explains that once you accept that invisible powers cause "the various and contrary events of human life," it follows that polytheism arises.[200] The creation and attraction of invisible powers, for Hume, is part of a process that begins with the impact of negative forms of uncertainty on individuals. In other words, a focus on invisible powers is an early, and indeed an enduring, form of dealing with uncertainty.

The process that leads to a belief in invisible powers can be summarized as follows. Experiencing negative forms of uncertainty inflames the passions, which in turn leads

---

[197] Ibid., 6.
[198] Ibid.
[199] Ibid., 7–15.
[200] Ibid., 8.

individuals to entertain ideas regarding invisible powers. Hence, as Hume succinctly puts it later in the NHR, "The primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events."[201]   There are, of course, other passions that may be awakened when confronted by uncertainty—the calm philosophical passion of wonder, for example.   Yet, it is not from contemplation, a motive "too refined," that the first ideas of religion arose, but rather from a "concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears which actuate the human mind."[202]   Notice that as Hume discusses uncertainty, he emphasizes the future oriented nature of the problem that prompts the passions of fear and hope, such as the "dread of future misery [and] the terror of death."[203] Hume is clear that he is "especially" referring to fear in his assessment of uncertainty.[204] It is fear that leads to a "trembling curiosity," which in turn produces the most distorted forms of superstition.[205] Hope, as we have seen with Spinoza, and as we will later see with Hume, is a more flexible passion that has the potential to work as a positive force in human life.

As demonstrated above, the main culprit in the development of superstition is the experience of fear-driven uncertainty. The exact manner in which that relationship works has to do with what Hume calls the *unknown causes* that accompanies experiences of fearful uncertainty. If humans easily knew the true causes of events, there would be no need to resort to imaginings about possible causes. Or, on the other hand, if events always occurred in an orderly and regular manner, humans would feel no need to consider the causes of things. As things stand, however, life admits of little regularity. As Hume puts it in dramatic fashion, "We hang in perpetual suspense between life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want, which are

---

[201] Ibid., 61.
[202] Ibid., 9.
[203] Ibid., 10.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.

distributed amongst the human species by secret and unknown causes, whose operation is oft unexpected, and always unaccountable."[206]

Indeed, nearly everyone encounters moments of suspense about the future when confronted with death, sickness, or dire lack of material necessities. Theories about what causes these events to happen are the stuff of mythology. In fact, any type of disorder that is deemed excessively strange, disordered, or unpredictable is apt to be attributed to "secret causes."[207] Examples of this propensity are not limited to Hume's 18th century. In the 2013 NBA Finals, for example, the Miami Heat's three-point sharp shooter Shane Battier had an unusually poor performance throughout much of the first six games. In game seven, Battier made a postseason, career-high six three pointers—a game in which he contributed to his team's championship victory. In the press conference he attributed his turn around in game seven to the "basketball gods" who owed him "big-time" for his previous performances.[208] The attraction of such an explanation is that it brings order to what appeared disordered and unjust. The more idiosyncratic a situation appears the more tempting it is to resort to secret causes. After all, the strangeness of the event appears to go beyond the usual laws governing nature, such as, in this case, the statistics regarding a player's usual productivity.

Still, understanding secret causes by an appeal to invisible powers is not the only possible explanation of unusual events. Naturalistic causes, while not obvious in the face of an extraordinary event, can still be appealed to for understanding. As Hume puts it,

> Could men anatomise nature, according to the most probable, at least the most intelligible philosophy, they would find that these causes are nothing but the particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of their own bodies and of external objects; and that, by a

---

[206] Ibid.

[207] Hume uses secret and unknown causes synonymously.

[208] Simon Evans, "'Basketball Gods' Shine on Heat's Battier" (Reuter's, June 21, 2013), accessed September 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/21/us-nba-finals-heat-battier-idUSBRE95K07O20130621.

regular and constant machinery, all the events are produced about which they are so much concerned. [209]

In other words, an in-depth and accurate inquiry into purportedly mysterious events yields naturalistic causes when taking the internal workings of humans along with the external workings of natural objects into account. That is not, however, the manner in which most individuals understand unusual events. Hume claims that "philosophy [a philosophy that solely takes naturalistic causes into account] exceeds the comprehension of the ignorant multitude, who can only conceive the *unknown causes* in a general and confused manner."[210] Considering the multitude's inability to comprehend rationally the actual workings of extraordinary events, their passionate imaginings awaken at those moments. The imagination therefore plays a central role in the formation of religions. In particular, Hume highlights, the human tendency to anthropomorphize, which results in the types of gods that abounded in the religions he examined.

Yet, even philosophers, Hume adds, cannot escape from "this natural frailty." They too ascribe inanimate objects, such as matter, with human qualities.[211] In this way, Hume makes clear that the power of imagination to unseat reason is not limited to the multitude. It is then little wonder, Hume continues,

> that mankind, being placed in such an absolute ignorance of causes, and being at the same time so anxious concerning their future fortunes, should immediately acknowledge a dependence on invisible powers possessed of sentiment and intelligence.[212]

Again, it is the future oriented anxieties (fearful uncertainties), coupled with ignorance regarding the actual causes of events, that propel humans to use their imagination to make sense of what appear to be secret causes.

---

[209] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1957, 10–11.
[210] Ibid., 11.
[211] Ibid., 12. "Nay, philosophers cannot entirely exempt themselves from this natural frailty; but have oft ascribed to inanimate matter the horror of a vacuum, sympathies, antipathies, and other affections of human nature."
[212] Ibid.

Consequently, Hume states in formulaic fashion, the greater human life is governed by accident, the more superstitions abound.[213] That formula could be reversed to read, the greater human life is governed by order and regularity, the less likely superstitions will appear. Indeed, Hume adds that a flurry of elaborate and contradictory forms of superstitions is especially likely to exist before "the institution of order and good government."[214] The suggestion here is that with good government and the institution of order individuals will be less prone to indulge in superstitions. In an important sense that is the case. As we will see, however, Hume emphasizes that superstitions do not disappear as society progresses. Rather they change in type and character. While society may become more rational overtime—institutions, for example, may become rationally ordered to benefit stability and growth—human rationality remains severely limited, and thus superstitions continue to play a central, albeit different, role. Likewise, experiences of uncertainty remain in conditions of stability and order, which in turn keep the multitude in the grips of superstitions. Again, the limits of reason are perhaps most pronounced at moments of uncertainty when answers are demanded of the inexplicable.

Hume emphasizes that point at the beginning of his analysis of the origins of theism from polytheism, he insists that the move to theism is not due to the rational decisions of individuals. In a scathing characterization of the multitude, Hume writes,

> whoever thinks that it [the rise of theism] has owed its success to the prevalent force of those invincible reasons, on which it is undoubtedly founded, would show himself little acquainted with the ignorance and stupidity of the people, and their incurable prejudices in favor of their particular superstitions.[215]

To the extent that the vulgar embrace the doctrine of theism, he points out, "they are *never* led

---

[213] Ibid., 12.
[214] Ibid., 13.
[215] Ibid., 27–28.

into that opinion by any process of argument."[216] As if to make it clearer still, he writes, "They [the vulgar] coincide, by chance, with the principles of reason and true philosophy."[217] In other words, to the extent that society as a whole became more rational, that transition did not translate into an enlightened populace. The opinions the majority embrace continues to be clouded by the imagination.

To be certain, the vulgar have a manner of thinking. Their thinking, however, does not plumb into the abstruse depths of true philosophy. Instead, it is a form of thinking that is "suitable to their genius and capacity."[218] It follows the same pattern that Hume earlier described as characteristic of those drawn towards polytheism.[219] Even in theistic nations, Hume reports, events that appear out of the ordinary—such as miracles, prodigies, disorders and so on—result in even deeper religious sentiments.[220] The imagination, in other words, becomes inflamed when confronted with irregularities irrespective of the religious and social context.

Hume continues to describe the manner of thinking characteristic of the vulgar in section eight. This central section of the NHR represents a turning point as it complicates the linear picture of progress from polytheism to theism that Hume presents at the beginning of the NHR. It draws emphasis on the perennial possibility of a return to more primitive forms of religiosity. Hume, in short, makes the progress he neatly laid out at the beginning of the NHR uncertain. As the vulgar are always susceptible to upheavals in life that inflame their imagination in a host of unpredictable and irrational ways, the possibility that they revert to primitive forms of religiosity is always present. The vulgar, Hume clarifies for any of his readers who may have questioned

---

[216] Ibid., 29. Emphasis added.
[217] Ibid., 30.
[218] Ibid., 29.
[219] Ibid., 7–10.
[220] Ibid., 29.

the scope and range of that category, includes "all mankind, a few excepted."[221] As we will see

later, even the few are susceptible to serious corruptions in their thinking. It follows then that

Hume leaves little hope for any project that attempts to overcome the ineptitude in reasoning that

is part and parcel of what it means to be human. It is that ineptitude in reasoning that makes it

difficult for individuals to maintain a belief in rational religious principles. Rather than firmly

progressing to more rational forms of religious beliefs, individuals and social groups in complex

societies fluctuate between primitive and more rational forms of religion.[222]

After Hume establishes that the popular embrace of polytheism and theism is not due to a

natural progression in the reasoning capabilities of individuals, he turns to compare the social

utility of polytheism and theism. By doing so Hume reveals his true religious preferences. That

is, his preference for a particular religion is due to its salutary effects on society. In section

fourteen, "Bad Influence of Popular Religions on Morality," for example, Hume describes the

ways in which popular religions put an unnecessary and burdensome emphasis on rituals and

"absurd opinions" rather than on "virtue and good morals."[223] It is with virtue and morality that

religion should concern itself. The veracity of religious opinions is of little importance in the

context of writing a popular work on the origins of religion since true religious opinions are

always the reserve of the few.

Hume begins exploring the utility of polytheism and theism by comparing their

propensity towards persecution and toleration. The syncretism that generally accompanies

polytheistic religions makes it more tolerant of an array of religious practices and beliefs. Hume

uses various historical examples from the ancient world to illustrate this point. Theism, on the

other hand, being more rational in theory, should "banish everything frivolous, unreasonable, or

---

[221] Ibid., 35.
[222] Ibid.
[223] Ibid., 67.

inhuman from religious worship, and set before men the most illustrious example, as well as the most commanding motives of justice and benevolence."[224] The actual practices of theistic believers, however, demonstrate that the opposite is the case. On the whole, theistic believers narrowly embrace one set of beliefs to the denial and sometimes hatred of those who worship and believe otherwise. The result of such an outlook is a "sacred zeal and rancour, [which is] the most furious and implacable of all human passions."[225] If there are exceptions to that general rule, for example Christian nations that placed tolerance above narrow self-regard, that self-overcoming is due to the civil magistrates that have sidestepped the narrow opinions of religious sects for the sake of the common good. Tolerance, in other words, has been reached in certain cases in spite of the narrow spiritedness of theistic believers.

As to the comparative usefulness of theism and polytheism, Hume states flatly that the corruption of theism when carried to the "utmost height" is far more "pernicious to political society" than the few corruptions accompanying idolatry and polytheism. His prime example is "the Inquisition and persecutions of Rome and Madrid," events that make the human sacrifices of more simple religions seem docile.[226] It nonetheless remains unclear whether Hume prefers the religious practices of polytheistic or theistic believers. Theistic religions, after all, are not always carried to their "utmost height" to disqualify it as Hume's preference. What is clear, however, is that religious forms of madness that disrupt political and social tranquility originate in the space opened up by fear of the unknown.

The desire awakened by experiences of frightful uncertainty is the desire to know. Why do humans die? When will the next calamity strike? Such experiences of fearful uncertainty about the future begin a search for answers. It may more specifically, as we will see in a

---

[224] Ibid., 38.
[225] Ibid., 39.
[226] Ibid., 41.

moment, begin a search for *certainty*. The length and scope of this search varies. It may simply awaken dormant beliefs one had as a child, lead to the creation of new beliefs, start a philosophical journey, or any number of possibilities. In this context, the search for certainty begins with the fear driven anxieties about the future (uncertainty) that are at the root of the most pernicious forms of superstitions. Instead of applying the calm and probing analysis of true philosophy to fearful forms of uncertainties and irregularities in human life (death, calamities, and so forth), or suspending judgment about what appears mysterious and beyond natural causation (miracles), most humans create, embrace, or seek out imaginary doctrines (a longing for knowledge) and rituals (a longing for control) that have the effect of comforting their anxious awareness of an otherwise mysterious and unpredictable world. These doctrines provide a sense of certainty amidst the uncertainties that are an inevitable part of human life.

The feelings of certainty provided by religion, however, are necessarily unsteady. That is, they are not firm and unquestioned like the taken for granted certainties of everyday life. Take for example the fact that most people do not question whether the floor underneath them will collapse. In the case of religion, Hume notes that despite the "dogmatical, imperious style" of most forms of superstitions, the conviction that believers profess is more illusory than real.[227] Unlike the taken for granted certainties of everyday life, belief in religious doctrines need to be reinforced through shared rituals, communion, and so on. Doubt is always lurking in the background.

Religious doubts became an especially pressing issue in what Hume called modern religions. As modern religions tend to be more exclusive and based on the interpretation of sacred texts, they lack the ability of ancient religions to embrace contradiction and a variety of

---

[227] Ibid., 54.

religious opinions.[228] Hence, modern religions insist on possessing *the* religious truth. As these

forms of religion became more intertwined with philosophy, moreover, they demand cognitive

clarity. Previously religious beliefs were primarily experienced as shared practices, not as

abstract truths to be affirmed or denied. Instead of practices, many religions today take the form

of belief systems. Rather than asking what religious community you are a part of, you are more

likely to be asked what you believe. An incessant search for *certainty* begins to overtake the

imagination of religious followers in a way that was not dominant in pre-modern forms of

religions.

Like Spinoza, Hume points towards the scholastic tradition in Christianity as evidence of

the corroding influence of philosophy on theology.[229] Paradoxically, instead of resulting in a

more reasoned form of religion, scholastic religions have "a kind of appetite for absurdity and

contradiction" that nonetheless places demands on their followers to embrace their doctrine as

the truth.[230] As such, those religions maintain a hold on their followers' imaginations that is

immune to true reason. In a memorable passage, Hume dismisses the suggestion that reasoning

with said believers is the best way to awaken them from their superstitious convictions. He

writes:

> To oppose the torrent of scholastic religion by such feeble maxims as these: that "it is
> impossible for the same to be and not to be", that "the whole is greater than a part", that
> "two and three make five", is pretending to stop the ocean with a bull-rush. Will you set
> up profane reason against sacred mystery? No punishment is great enough for your
> impiety. And the same fires which were kindled for heretics will serve also for the
> destruction of philosophers.[231]

In the face of sacred mysteries, reason has little power. Consequently, Hume's project to reform

the most civically damaging forms of religious superstitions does not attempt to eliminate sacred

---

[228] Ibid., 60.
[229] Ibid., 60–61.
[230] Ibid., 45.
[231] Ibid., 46.

mysteries. Instead, Hume attempts to temper and redirect the sacred to this-worldly goods. How Hume proceeds to accomplish that aim is the subject of section 3.6.

With all this in mind, the connection between superstition, uncertainty, and the generality of mankind should now be apparent. I have tried to show that more fundamental than any of the differences Hume presents between polytheism and theism in the NHR are the themes of uncertainty and the limits of reason. While polytheism and theism differ greatly in their practices and utility to society, they both originate and are sustained by uncertainty. The natural history of religion is in the main a history of the ways the generality of mankind responds to uncertainty. In the broadest terms, their response is to go beyond naturalistic explanations in order to make sense of unknown causes. The passions and imagination dominate this process, while reason serves as their slave. Because life will always be filled with uncertainties of various kinds—calamities, looming death, loss of fortune, and so on—the imaginary beliefs that are sparked by uncertainty is an inevitable condition in human life. The degree to which those beliefs are pernicious to society, however, varies greatly due to various conditions. I later hope to show how Hume implicitly argues for a socially constructive conception of uncertainty. That is, he argues that a political society should be ordered in such a way that the types of uncertainties it unleashes produce salutary benefits to society.

It is important to remember that conditions of uncertainty are a reality that does not only preoccupy the multitude. Philosophers are equally caught up in an incessant effort to make sense of what appears nonsensical. Fact based uncertainties, after all, permeate all facets of life in such a way that they cannot escape the notice of any careful observer. As Hume writes in the final paragraph of the NHR,

The whole is a riddle, an enigma, an inexplicable mystery. Doubt, uncertainty, suspense of judgment, appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning this subject.[232]

Like the generality of mankind, philosophers too cannot easily accept this condition. Instead, they attempt to explain the inexplicable through reason. They too are on a search for certainty. Thus, Hume ends the NHR noting the "frailty of human reason" in upholding "deliberate doubt."[233] Considering this frailty, it appears that the role of uncertainty in the mind and imagination of philosophers also needs to be examined. Just as uncertainty shapes the religious imagination, and thus effects society in a host of ways that need to be carefully considered, so too the effects of uncertainty on philosophers are of crucial social and political importance.

3.3 Epistemic Uncertainty in Hume: Philosophy & Politics

If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing certainly are, my follies shall be natural and agreeable.
~Hume, *Treatise*[234]

Contemporary political philosophy is almost exclusively concerned with politics. That is, it tends to consider philosophy solely as a means to think about political things. This usually means focusing on abstract questions of justice, freedom, equality, and so forth. Pre-modern and early modern philosophers, on the other hand, added to these questions a concern with philosophy itself. For example, they might ask the following questions. What should the place of philosophy and the philosopher be in political society? Is the philosopher's way of life inextricably in tension with political life? A preoccupation with these questions extends back to the origins of philosophy. Consider the famous Socratic turn from the pre-Socratic Socrates concerned with naturalistic philosophy, illustrated in Aristophanes' *Clouds,* to the political and

---

[232] Ibid., 75.
[233] Ibid.
[234] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1978), 270.

moral themes that later captured Socrates' imagination in Plato's depiction of Socrates. Hume continues this sort of analysis in the modern period.

In this section, I argue that one of Hume's responses to the epistemic uncertainty that underlay's knowledge claims is an inquiry into the role of philosophy in political life. In tandem with that claim I show that Hume's awareness of the dangers of philosophy grew overtime, as he came to recognize the central role philosophy played in the religious disputes of his day. While in the *Treatise*, Hume expresses a shade of optimism regarding the role his insights might play in the scientific and philosophical community, as the dour reception of that book came to light and his appointment to teach at Edinburgh University was blocked, he strengthened his conviction of the limits of philosophy and the dangers accompanying false philosophy. Since experiences of uncertainty are not limited to philosophers, in the next section I turn to the implications of Hume's investigation regarding philosophical uncertainty for his broader politics. Understanding Hume's politics, however, must begin with an inquiry into epistemic uncertainty. It is only after Hume has plumbed the depths of philosophy in the *Treatise* that he turns to consider possible ways to alleviate the problem of uncertainty in broader sense.

This section engages a wide-variety of Hume's writings almost suggesting they are a unified whole. Of course that is not the case. Each of Hume's works has a particular history, purpose, and audience. In addition, Hume's thinking on many matters altered overtime. Crucially, for this project, Hume's views on the social utility of religion and philosophy evolved overtime. Simply consider the fact that Hume's *Letter from a Gentleman* and the first *Enquiry* were written in direct response to Hume's candidacy at the University of Edinburgh. The significance of understanding the historical context in which Hume's works appeared is explored below. As previously stated, I attempt to piece together what is implicit in Hume's work.

91

Hume never succumbed to despair. Although he writes of the pain and agony that await the true philosopher who takes reason to its limits, he nonetheless finishes writing the *Treatise* in hope. Hume, of course, does not stop there. He continues writing and philosophizing until his death. There is none of the nihilism that some claim is the necessary conclusion of his philosophy. Instead, Hume displayed a magnanimous spiritedness throughout his life.   It is in part this hope that animates Hume's normative conception of uncertainty. Despite Hume's awareness of the uncertainty at the bottom of knowledge claims, in other words, he nonetheless maintains hope. That hope, however, altered overtime as it became less reliant on the listening and understanding ears of his philosophical peers. Hume's eventual recognition of the dangers of false philosophy drove him to focus his energies on addressing a broader audience. Narrowing the scope and reach of philosophy to common life eventually became his main preoccupation in the *Enquiry*—his revamped presentation of the *Treatise*. Before entering into that narrative, let me begin laying out the problem of epistemic uncertainty as Hume presents it in the *Treatise* and elsewhere.

Hume published one of the most enduring books in the history of western philosophy at twenty-eight years of age. While the *Treatise* marked the beginning of his intellectual life, contemporary academic philosophers often treat it in isolation. The suggestion is that following the *Treatise* Hume's work became less philosophical. Hume would vehemently disagree. If anything, he would argue, his works became more aligned with true philosophy. The *Treatise*, particularly Book One, reveals the limits of abstruse philosophizing and thus the need to engage in philosophy with eloquence and a constant eye on the customs and practices of everyday life. Philosophizing apart from the everyday, from an Archimedean point of view, does not yield

knowledge. On the contrary, it reveals perplexing uncertainties. What follows is a general presentation of the move from false to true philosophy. [235]

All philosophers start off in the mode of false philosophy. Philosophy begins questioning the taken for granted, which might include a questioning of the senses, religious beliefs, or more generally the customs of the day. There is a triumphant and almost religious experience that accompanies the first taste of philosophy. The philosopher is awakened from what he or she perceives to have been a dogmatic slumber. The laws she once considered sacred are now considered human creations. All of life is turned upside down through reasoned questioning about the origins, causes, and purpose of things. The new authority that allows the philosopher to stand above his time and place is reason. The philosopher's trust in reason replaces an unreflective acceptance of revelation or simple piety. At first, this new authority appears to be separate from the philosopher—standing outside his purview, waiting to be discovered.

Yet, he quickly discovers that others claiming to use reason disagree with his account of things. Convinced his form of reasoning is correct, he jealously defends his arguments. In other words, the ultimate authority for knowledge becomes self-referential. It is the philosopher who holds the truth. It is *his* use of reason that illuminates an otherwise foggy world. The philosopher thus stands as an autonomous figure holding legitimate access to knowledge and by extension holding authority to rule. Considering this description, it is perhaps not incidental that Plato suggested that philosopher's rule in the *Republic*. [236]

From where does the philosopher derive such confidence in his knowledge? The simple answer is from his conviction that his knowledge is derived from unaided reason. [237] Still, it only

---

[235] I am indebted to David Livingston's presentation of Hume's distinction between true and false philosophy in *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy*, 1st ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
[236] Livingston presents three princples of the false philosopher: ultimacy, autonomy, and dominion (Livingston, 18-19).
[237] "Reason first appears in possession of the throne, prescribing laws, and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 186).

takes little reflection to place almost any claim about knowledge or reality on uncertain grounds. While the false philosopher begins with the philosophic passion par excellence, curiosity, he ends with a kind of certainty about the world. In certain cases, curiosity might be replaced by activism. The activism the philosopher engages in is of an odd sort unknown in pre-philosophic modes of practice or thinking. It attempts to apply abstract principles to a world the philosopher has largely discounted as illusory. That is, the disregard and even distain the philosopher has for the world as it appears to his peers, takes his thinking beyond the everyday to greater and greater abstractions. He then attempts to apply generalized and abstract principles wholesale onto a world from which he is alienated. Hume describes this process as follows:

> There is one mistake, to which they [philosophers] seem liable, almost without exception; they confine too much their principles, and make no account of that vast variety, which nature has so much affected in all her operations. When a philosopher has once laid hold of a favourite principle, which perhaps accounts for many natural effects, he extends the same principle over the whole creation, and reduces to it every phænomenon, though by the most violent and absurd reasoning.[238]

There are, for example, certain schools of thought that begin with the general principle that selfishness or power is omnipresent and proceed to theorize about the social and political things from that premise.[239] For Hume, this form of reasoning does violence to the variety and complexity of life. The false philosopher may proudly believe he has broadened his horizons far beyond his simple fellows, yet, in truth, he ends up displaying a narrowness in understanding resulting from the unbounded use of reason.

As discussed at the end of the previous section on Hume and religion, the fragility of reason does not only apply to the vulgar, but also extends to philosophers who can scarcely

---

[238] David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene Miller, revised (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987), 106.
[239] This tendency can be traced back to the political thought of Kautilya, and later to the thought of Hobbes and Foucault. For a discussion of the relationship among these thinkers see Roger Boesche, *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003).

uphold "deliberate doubt." I conjecture that the reason philosophers have trouble upholding doubt is that they are at the core similar to the vulgar when confronting doubt and uncertainty. They both seek answers to the disorder they perceive based on a felt need to make sense of an otherwise incomprehensible world. The search for certainty, in other words, appears to be an all-inclusive pursuit. The difference is that the vulgar are *solely* driven to search for answers when they are violently distracted from the everyday and reminded of perplexing uncertainties.

Examples might include the death of a loved one or the feelings awakened when a philosophy professor challenges her students to question the reality they perceive. In both cases the individual is shaken from a position of comfort and familiarity to uncharted feelings and perspectives. In addition to these direct and unasked for encounters with uncertainty, a philosopher is primarily driven by curiosity. The pursuit of wisdom, which presupposes a level of ignorance, is what drives the philosophic spirit. The attainment of wisdom would be the self-undoing of the philosopher. In our terms, the philosophic life presupposes recognition of uncertainty accompanied with a desire to make sense of that uncertainty. It then appears that philosophy necessitates a form of skepticism that leaves open the possibility to know. Hume exemplified this philosophic posture. The problem, as he noticed with greater clarity as time went on, is that the philosophers around him claimed to know too much. They seemed to *possess* knowledge. Hume was not simply frustrated by this state of affairs, but also expressed a great deal of sympathy considering he experienced first hand the melancholy accompanying a philosophic search for certainty.

Hume's explicit project at the beginning of the *Treatise* is to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects. In particular, Hume attempts to investigate the workings of human nature. Thus, many scholars on Hume have highlighted his naturalism. The

extent to which Hume's naturalism grounds his overall thinking, as opposed to his skepticism, however, is a point of scholarly dispute.[240] I follow Robert Fogelin in claiming that Hume had a "skeptical crisis" of sorts that lead him to embrace a mitigated skepticism.[241] This mitigated skepticism does not do away with a naturalistic account of things, but rather it embraces a qualified form of naturalism that is informed by skepticism. I will discuss that account later. For now, let us return to the skepticism presented in the *Treatise* and Hume's melancholic recognition of the limits of reason at the end of Book One.

Hume's skepticism is multifaceted and complex. For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Hume's skepticism in Book One involves a questioning of the commonly shared belief that an external world exists independent of individual awareness, followed by a critical investigation into belief formation. Hume finds no argument justifying the belief in an external world, and, concludes, contrary to Cartesian rationalists, that extra-rationalist processes largely determine belief formation. The conclusion of Book One of the *Treatise* expresses Hume's sense of despair following his onslaught on reason.

It is not quite correct, however, to claim that Hume despaired. At the start of the conclusion of book one, Hume writes that the impossibility of correcting the disorder of his faculties reduces him "*almost* to despair."[242] The temporary state of despair Hume found himself in is due to the perplexing uncertainty that results from the unaided use of reason. Now, that condition is justly despairing for the philosopher who places reason as the supreme faculty to understand and guide human life. Instead of reason directing and informing day-to-day human awareness and belief formation, it is rather the foe of philosophy, the imagination, which

---

[240] See the extensive bibliography of the secondary literature on this subject collected in Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*, 398-407.
[241] Robert H Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[242] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 264. Italics are mine.

governs.[243] Critically, the problem of the imagination is not simply the problem of the vulgar. Hume claims that "flights of the imagination" are also the primary reason philosophers have fallen into error.[244] Instead of confronting and accepting the limitations of reason, false philosophers insist on trumpeting the power of that faculty to arrive at *certain* conclusions about the world and thereby attempt to use reason to *directly* guide human affairs. It is the "flights of the imagination" that allows the false philosopher to reach well beyond the experienced world to an abstract netherworld.

The imagination is not simply a problem however. It is the imagination, after all, that allows for sympathy—that much-lauded Humean passion. The ability to place oneself in the position of another requires a great deal of imaginative abilities that even requires the cultivation of the imagination. To be sure, the imagination *is* a danger to philosophical inquiry. It emboldens the philosopher towards metaphysical speculation. Similarly, religious philosophers create rituals, doctrines, and beliefs that could originate only from a frenzied imagination. Despite these problems, and others, accompanying the imagination, it is worth puzzling what life might be like without it. A little reflection reveals that the imagination is in many ways the saving grace of humanity. If humans were to use *only* their rational faculties to perceive and make sense of the world, all they would find is disorder. In Hume's youthful fervor to apply reason indiscriminately to questions regarding human nature that is exactly what he found.

In the course of the *Treatise*, Hume writes, "If we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the senses, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty."[245] Indeed, philosophers fear the dissolution of reason. They fear

---

[243] "The memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 265).
[244] Ibid., 267.
[245] Ibid., 420.

that most of their conclusions are filled, not with the clarity that logicians love, but rather with utter disorder and confusion. Perhaps their fear is more personal. Their real fear lies in the possibility that their way of life will be undone. In this context of fear, the revelation the philosopher experienced about the power of reason turns out to be as much a sham as the conventions and traditions she once ridiculed.[246] Reason, it now appears, stands impotent leaving the philosopher with no ground to stand on.

In the aftermath of Hume's onslaught of unaided reason, he picks up the pieces and develops a more humble role for philosophy. In this new role philosophy is no longer the autonomous onlooker and judge that stands above the customs and beliefs of the vulgar. Hume instead introduces a mitigated or moderate skepticism that responds to the radical skepticism that was the outgrowth of his attempt to apply unaided reason to a science of human nature.[247] Upon reading the *Treatise* a careful reader will notice that a number of Humean positions develop throughout the course of the book that culminates with Hume's mitigated skepticism.[248]

At the beginning of the *Treatise* Hume displays an unmitigated optimism when he proposes to introduce "a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they stand with any security."[249] The second moment is captured at the end of book one, which vividly illustrates Hume's moments of despair following his Pyrrhonian doubts that arise from that very attempt. Then, Hume modestly arrives at a state of resignation regarding reason's limited role. The new role for reason requires belief in the unbelievable. That is, Hume's true philosophy demands a kind of partnership with vulgar opinion.

---

[246] "Were we to trust entirely to their [skeptical arguments] self-destruction, that can never take place, 'till they have first subverted all conviction, and have totally destroy'd human reason" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 187).
[247] As Fogelin calls it (Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study*, 6).
[248] In noting this progression, I am again indebted to Fogelin. I repeat the various steps he lays out, with only slight modifications (Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study*, 7).
[249] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 10.

Philosophy does not end with the acceptance that unaided reason cannot stand on its own ground. Instead, philosophy begins anew side by side with common opinion. As Hume puts it with great clarity in his later *Enquiry*, "philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected."[250] In its new role, philosophy necessarily has to remain focused on common life as it gives up to the pretension of transcending the everyday.   In this new state of philosophical enquiry, philosophers "will never be tempted to go beyond common life, so long as they consider the imperfection of those faculties which they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations."[251] True philosophy, for Hume, in other words, stays within the realm of the vulgar.   Hume points in this direction even before the conclusion of Book One in Section Two, part four, "Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses."

Hume is often unproblematically characterized as an empiricist. Hume's persistent skepticism, however, makes his acceptance of empiricism significantly different from those who possess a firmly grounded conviction that the senses lead to knowledge. Unlike the unshakable confidence a contemporary scientist might place in empirical methodologies, Hume's empiricism rests on his view that he can do no other.

In the concluding portions of his section on skepticism with regard to the senses Hume notes that he began claiming that the conclusion drawn from the whole of his reasoning is that "we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses."[252] Yet, Hume continues, he can "repose no faith at all in my senses."[253] Hume's skepticism, in other words, returns after claiming with some confidence that the senses are our only reliable guide. The truth of the matter for Hume is that relying on the senses as a source of knowledge is fraught with difficulties. A means of

---

[250] David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 208.
[251] Ibid., 209.
[252] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 152.
[253] Ibid.

attending to this problem is by simply submitting to what is given by the senses. The unreflective parts of life (traditions, habits, common opinions, and the like) become a new foundation and point of reflection for the philosopher. The problem and solution of accepting the senses as a source of knowledge is that nature has left us no choice in the matter.[254] That is, nature has made it impossible to wholeheartedly remain a skeptic regarding the accuracy of the senses. There are two ways in which this is the case.

First, engaging in everyday life demands an implicit faith in the senses. Without that faith life would be unlivable in any recognizably human way. Only those in the midst of a severe psychosis have experienced a life consistently lived with doubts regarding the senses.[255] Nature, for the most part, as Hume suggests in the *Enquiry*, "severely punish[es]" abstruse thought by the "pensive melancholy" and "endless uncertainty" which it introduces.[256] In other words, nature is designed to incline humans towards the sensual world and away from the abstruse speculations of philosophers. The second, and interrelated way, in which nature obstructs skepticism regarding the senses is the pleasure she's assigned to sensual activities. What drives Hume out of the melancholy and near despair that resulted from his skepticism is not reason, but the "lively impression" of his senses that are part and parcel of the everyday pleasures of life.[257] A deep and focused skepticism, in short, is no match for the sensual powers that accompany nature.

While the power of the senses to distract humans from the limitations of the sensual faculties is a satisfying solution to an otherwise miserable existence for humanity, for the philosopher this remedy to the problem of skepticism proves to be a vice. It is a vice as it creates

---

[254] Ibid., 136.
[255] Ibid.,132-33.
[256] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 89.
[257] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 184. See also Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 206.

a kind of barrier to the truth of skepticism. Still, this vice allows the true philosopher to recognize that she must accept the authority of the senses despite its' tenuous standing when confronted with reason. As a result Hume can note that "the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason."[258] After subordinating philosophy to the senses, Hume can later claim that "true philosophy approaches nearer to the sentiments of the vulgar, than to those of a mistaken knowledge."[259] The vulgar, after all, are sentimentally nearer to the common practices and habits that philosophers *should* be considering.

Now, the exact contents, meanings, and possible applications that result from Hume's true philosophy are contested and beyond the scope of this paper. The broader point for our purposes is to recognize that although Hume does not succumb to a nihilistic form of skepticism, but instead embraces a form of empiricism that is an outgrowth of his mitigated skepticism and naturalism, uncertainty about fundamental matters remains. The empirical "solution" to the problem of skepticism, then, must take uncertainty about fundamental matters into account. One way to proceed is to rely on probability rather than striving after certain knowledge. Indeed, Hume has a good deal to say about probability in the *Treatise*.[260] Putting the limitations to that approach aside, the solution it propounds is only partial at best. It addresses epistemic uncertainties, but it fails to shed light on the perceived and fact-based uncertainties that will continue to plague humans regardless of advances in probability theory. As we saw in the section on Hume and religion, perceived uncertainties (whether fact-based or not) can produce civically dangerous imaginaries that place basic security in peril. In short, the search for

---

[258] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1978., 187.
[259] Ibid., 222-233.
[260] See also Hélène Landemore, *Hume : Probabilité et Choix Raisonnable* (Paris, France: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).

certainty will continue irrespective of advances in theories that take epistemic uncertainty into account.

The specific civic problem with perceived uncertainties, as we saw in the last section, are the fearful and anxious forms of uncertainty that dominate the imagination. Those negative forms of uncertainty lead to a distorted search for certainty that in turn results in imaginaries that place political and social tranquility on the balance. Tempering those forms of uncertainty is part and parcel to any comprehensive response. The question is how to temper negative forms of uncertainty?

It should be clear that any solution cannot include the indoctrination of certainties. While beliefs embraced with certainty provide a kind of relief from the anguish accompanying perceived uncertainties, they are civically dangerous if not tempered by a kind of skepticism. Moreover, they do not allow for the liberty of the mind necessary to produce advancements in the arts and sciences. All in all, I want to argue, Hume proposes that salutary forms of uncertainty should be combined with shared beliefs (ideas embraced with near certainty) derived from the customs of a particular people. Before entering into that discussion I need to present an overview of Hume's growing dissatisfaction with philosophy's role as an unrestrained tool for bringing about public change. Put slightly differently, overtime, Hume become increasingly aware of the potentially dangerous role *false* philosophy could play in public life.

Hume was cautiously hopeful that his *Treatise* might lead to the advancement of knowledge in the realm of philosophy.[261] Given the content and form of the *Treatise*—especially Book One—it is little surprise that philosophers and potential philosophers are the primary audience Hume hoped to incite. Incite an audience the *Treatise* did! The audience incited, and

---

[261] "For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of *philosophers*, and pointing out to *them* more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction" [emphasis mine] (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 186).

the precise reception that followed the anonymous publication of the *Treatise*, however, was not exactly what Hume had in mind. As he famously put it his autobiographical work *My Own Life*, "Never literary Attempt was more unfortunate than my Treatise of Human Nature…It feel dead-born from the Press; without reaching such distinction as even to excite a Murmur among the Zealots."[262] Of course, Hume's *Treatise* did not fall dead-born from the press in the sense that it yielded no readers. There was plenty of interest and controversy that followed its publication. From Hume's point of view the early reviewers of the *Treatise*—those he hoped as competent interlocutors—failed to understand its' central tenets. After the publication of the *Treatise* Hume would anonymously publish an abstract in the hopes of clarifying its central ideas.[263] That effort, however, was to no avail. The caricature of Hume as an unorthodox and immoral thinker was beginning to take place.[264]

It appears that Hume's great disappointment regarding the reception of the *Treatise* did not lay in the fact that his book was not popular, but rather it lay in the fact that the philosophical community failed to engage his ideas with the due seriousness and thoughtfulness it deserved. I agree with his biographer Ernest Mossner that it was the "learned world['s]…failure to understand his philosophical effort that altered the course of his career."[265] His longing to be part of a philosophical community, however, would soon return and once again be shattered when an opportunity to become chair of Ethics and Pneumatical Philosophy at Edinburgh University opened up in the summer of 1744.[266]

---

[262] Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, 17.
[263] Hume, *David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature, Vol. 1*, 403-418. Writing an abstract to "puff up" one's work was a common practice in Hume's time.
[264] Russell (*The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*, 12-23) provides a thorough review of the early reception to Hume's Treatise and the accusations of 'immorality' that followed—most notably in the anonymous work *A Specimen of the Principles Concerning Religion and Morality*, thought by many to be the work of the Reverend William Wishart.
[265] Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1970), 126.
[266] Ibid., 153.

Hume's friend, the Lord Provost, John Coutts, informed Hume about the position. It was most likely this connection and the prospect of having an opportunity to concentrate on philosophical questions among interested and competent peers that led Hume to naively believe that the process towards becoming a publically legitimized philosopher was imminent. That scenario, however, never came to fruition. Instead, Hume's name once again was smeared. The culprits this time were members of the highest institution of learning, which included, to boot, the sanction of academic philosophers. Even Hume's friend, the moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson, turned his back on Hume's candidacy. In the midst of the decision making process Hume would write to his friend Matthew Sharpe of Hoddam,

> such a popular Clamour has been rais'd against me in Edinburgh, on account of Scepticism, Heterodoxy & other hard Names, which confound the ignorant, that my Friends find some Difficulty, in working out the Point of my Professorship, which once appear'd so easy.[267]

Now that that process was complicated, Hume was writing Sharpe to ask that he carefully use his influence to attempt to change the tide of malice against his candidacy.[268] In other words, despite all the criticism leveled against him, Hume maintained hope that the calm workings of reason might prevail among these learned men. Nothing, of course, was further from the truth. Hume's candidacy was eventually denied.

This double blow[269] to Hume's hope for acceptance into a philosophical community that would engage his ideas with even-mindedness and rigor, I claim, is central to understand Hume's increasing disillusion with the explicit role philosophy should play in public life. A hasty critic might reply that Hume's disillusion with the power of reason is already firmly present in the

---

[267] J. Y. T. Greig, ed., *The Letters of David Hume, Volume 1* (New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1983), 59.
[268] Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 156.
[269] Although in 1751 Hume failed in another attempt to secure an academic position—this time as chair of logic at Glasgow University—he did not expend the energy or express the high hopes he originally had with the Edinburgh position. The fact that he nonetheless went along with the process of obtaining an appointment suggests that he did maintain a glimmer of hope even after the Edinburgh episode.

Treatise!   Indeed, it is.   My claim is that based on his disappointing experiences with philosophers and potential philosophers of his day, Hume's position regarding *the public role* of philosophy was reformed.

First, it was reformed in the broad sense that Hume's original hope that he could inform and participate in the central philosophical debates of his day became increasingly weakened. Hume certainly had interlocutors with whom he shared his ideas.   However, his initial hopes of influencing a larger philosophical audience met the barriers already reviewed.   It is this weakening that may have led Hume to write in his essay "The Sceptic," "The empire of philosophy extends over a few; and with regard to these too, her authority is very weak and limited."[270] As much as Hume writes of the limits of philosophy in the *Treatise*, I do not think he ever unequivocally expresses the extent to which the authority of philosophy is weak even among philosophers.

The second, and more critical, way it was reformed is Hume's growing recognition of the publically dangerous role that philosophy can support when it indulges in metaphysical speculations.   In the *Treatise* Hume limits his characterization of false philosophy to misguided and speculative opinions.[271]   False philosophy, while false, in this account, does not transform into dangerous forms of superstition.   Thus, he makes a sharp distinction between superstition and philosophy.   This allowed Hume to make the following observation in the *Treatise*, "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous."[272]   At its worst, philosophy becomes misguided and stuck in abstruse speculations— hardly a dangerous practice. The qualifier, "generally speaking," however, allows for exceptions

---

[270] It should be noted that this was published before the Edinburgh incident. One can only imagine how much stronger Hume embraced that claim afterwards!

[271] "Philosophy on the contrary [contrary to superstition], if just, can present us only with mild and moderate sentiments; and if false and extravaagant, its opinions are merely the objects of a cold and general speculation, and seldom go so far as to interrupt the course of our natural propensities" (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 272).

[272] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 272.

to that general rule. Despite that mild recognition of the possible dangers accompanying erroneous philosophy, Hume did not yet appreciate the extent to which the errors in philosophy can produce pernicious public effects. That recognition comes only later, following the reception of the *Treatise* and his failed attempt to secure an academic position at Edinburgh.

The claim that Hume's awareness of the dangers of philosophy followed the aforementioned events may appear strange in the sense that the main culprit to Hume's disappointment appears to be religion's grip on the public's thinking, not philosophy or philosophers. If anything Hume's recognition of the damaging effects of religion appear to have grown overtime. This view supports the popular characterization of Hume as a dogmatic atheist who had *only* scorn for religion and its effects. While Hume certainly did express scorn for religion and its effect in many of his writings until the end of his life,[273] overtime he came to accept religion's staying power. Another way of stating it is to claim that Hume would not subscribe to what later came to be called the secularization thesis, which states that overtime society's values and institutions will become more an more secular, leaving behind religious ways of thinking about the world.[274] As in so many things, Hume was sober when considering the possibility of a future devoid of religion. The recent resurgence of religion would come as no surprise to Hume.[275] Hume's sober acceptance of the enduring and intractable significance of religion, I intend to show, is connected to his growing recognition of the potential dangers of false philosophy.

---

[273] See Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 236.

[274] See the summary, history, and development of this thesis in Lyon, "Rethinking Secularization," 228–43.

[275] See Martin Riesebrodt, "Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion," *Numen* 47, no. 3 (2000): 266–87. Such a resurgence is also chronicled by Lyon, "Rethinking Secularization," 233-40. Even those who have more recently attempted to critique this observation have had to acknowledge that, if not increasing, traditional religious beliefs and practice are at least remaining stable. See Mark Chaves, *American Religion: Contemporary Trends* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

Religion is not *the* civic problem for Hume. It is simply one manifestation of the broader problem of superstition. The imagination, driven by the passions, in other words, runs amok and produces civically dangerous beliefs, irrespective of whether the content of those beliefs are religious in any conventional understanding of the word. For example, Hume later recognized that dangerous beliefs could also manifest themselves as ideological creations of the imagination. Examples of these ideological imaginaries include fascist, liberal, or communist ideologies. Secular superstitions, in other words, can be just as problematic as sacred beliefs. Most critically for Hume, both religious and secular superstitions attempt to transcend common life towards murky metaphysical terrains that are guided by speculative imaginaries. There may be important differences of course, but at their core they share similar origins as well as the possibility of seriously destabilizing civic tranquility.

The dominant form of Christianity in Hume's day, according to Hume, was a peculiar hybrid of these two forms of superstition. That is, Hume considered the dominant denominations in his day as versions of scholastic Christianity that held revelation *and* reason as epistemologically interrelated sources of knowledge. In that theological model through reason humans can apprehend God's design and to a certain extent even the mind of God. It is that kind of religious model that Hume described as intolerant, inflexible, and civically dangerous in his later *Natural History of Religion*.[276] Religion, in other words, that relies on philosophy as a guide poses a special challenge to civic stability. I would contend that it was *primarily* a scholastic form of Christianity that Hume had in mind when he spewed most of his rhetorical venom against religion. This view will be supported as I examine Hume's changing views of philosophy's public role as they are found in the *Enquiry*.

---

[276] See Section IX in Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1957.

3.4 Uncertainty in the *Enquiry*: Philosophy & Politics cont.

In the *Enquiry* Hume inaugurates his philosophy to the public. That is, unlike the anonymously published *Treatise*, Hume openly acknowledges the *Enquiry* as a work containing "his philosophical sentiments and principles."[277] Related to that acknowledgment, Hume explicitly distances himself from the *Treatise,* calling it "a juvenile work."[278] The juvenile status of the *Treatise*, as we will see below, is largely due to its lack of prudence when discussing philosophical matters. It is important to also remember that Hume's *Enquiry* was written in the shadow of his rejection from Edinburgh University. In an attempt to clarify that the skepticism of the *Treatise* is not fatally in conflict with the religious views held by the authorities at Edinburgh, Hume wrote *Letter from a Gentleman*. Then, after his rejection from that academic post, Hume continued writing the *Enquiry*, which is in part an extended response to his critics.[279] The failed attempt to gain a post at Edinburgh served as a stark lesson for Hume that even the few culturally legitimized philosophers of his day were in the grips of popular superstition. Given that context I want to argue that Hume addresses the potential dangers of philosophy to the public in a way hitherto not expressed in his earlier works. The potential of philosophical doctrines to turn into pernicious superstitions is presented in parallel to religious superstitions. False philosophy, in this expanded reading, can either transform into standalone superstitions or further deform religious superstitions. Ultimately, I want to argue, Hume attempts to reform philosophy's public perception in order to make a space for philosophy to be useful in public life.

---

[277] Hume, "Advertisement," *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.
[278] Ibid.
[279] M. A. Stewart, "Two Species of Philosophy: The Historical Significance of the First Enquiry," in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First Enquiry*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83.

As things stood in his time, philosophy was used to support religious superstitions, instead of properly praised for its "spirit of accuracy" that might further various arts in common life.[280] Put differently, philosophy, for Hume, to the extent that the public uses it, should be used for secular purposes that secure political and social stability. Theologians and metaphysicians should cease using philosophy as a defense for otherworldly beliefs. While philosophy proper—abstruse philosophizing into metaphysical matters—may always be the reserve of the few—Hume recognized that philosophy's popularity in the public imagination needed to be reoriented so that it no longer posed a danger to peace and stability. Accomplishing that end required tempering religious philosophers' overly ambitions metaphysical aims.

The style and form of the *Enquiry* moves away from the abstruse presentation of the *Treatise* to the literary style in the *Essays* that brought Hume popular success. This is not to suggest that there is a clear break from abstruse to literary. After all, a good portion of the *Enquiry* discusses questions that belong to abstruse philosophy. In addition, Hume signals to readers when he is headed into abstruse territory.[281] Overall, however, the literary quality of the *Enquiry* is distinctly noticeably. Hume announces this shift in the advertisement of the book where he writes that the major change from the *Treatise* is "more in the expression" than in correcting the "negligences" in his reasoning.[282] The juvenile status that Hume placed on the *Treatise* is not primarily then due to its failings in reasoning. Rather, the manner in which Hume expressed himself in the *Treatise* is signaled out as problematic.

---

[280] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 90.
[281] Ibid., 124. "As to readers of a different taste; the remaining part of this section is not calculated for them, and the following enquires may well be understood, though it be neglected."
[282] Ibid., 83.

Most critically, Hume's manner of writing in the *Treatise* led to the gross misperception that his philosophical principles led to Pyrrhonian skepticism.[283] In addition to simply being an inaccurate reading of the *Treatise,* attributing a radical skepticism to Hume also played an important role in his eventual rejection from Edinburgh. After all, a radical skeptic could hardly be expected to subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith, as was required by faculty at Edinburgh. Add to this the fact that "the Chair of Moral Philosophy at a Scottish university was unprecedented in its influence on general culture."[284] It is something of a puzzle why Hume thought he could obtain the Edinburgh position knowing the general perception of the *Treatise* as well as his need to subscribe to Christian beliefs he clearly did not hold. Hume's exact position on this matter aside, his openness to embrace, in some fashion, the Westminster Confession of Faith is affirmed by his willingness to take on the positions at Edinburgh and later at Glasgow University. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that Hume had advocates for both these positions who judged he was up for the task.[285] Hume, in other words, was aware that his public persona did not need to reflect his private philosophical positions. In this he imitated Cicero who, as Hume wrote in his later work *Natural History of Religion,* avoided "skeptical liberties" "in the common conduct of life," while maintaining those liberties "in his writings and philosophical conversation."[286]

Hume's change in literary posture then is a broader reflection of his attempt to clarify his views on skepticism. Part and parcel of this goal is Hume's position that philosophical inquiries should be confined to common life. Hence Hume's mitigated skepticism as presented in the *Enquiry* takes its critical aim at a certain species of metaphysical speculations, but leaves

---

[283] Hume responding to Reid and James Beattie in John P. Wright, "The Treatise: Composition, Reception, and Response," in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), .20-21.
[284] James Baillie, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Hume on Morality* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), 4.
[285] As Livingston observes (Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy*, 158).
[286] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1957, 44.

everyday experiences and events largely unscathed.   The difficulty, as Hume understood it, is that humans have a propensity to go beyond the everyday.   Given that propensity Hume takes great care in his decision to present or remain silent about his philosophical principles in the *Enquiry*.   Take for example Hume's silence regarding the doubts he raised in the *Treatise* about our beliefs in external objects and a continuous sense of self.   Hume primarily focuses on the question of causation in the *Enquiry*, but remains silent about other matters presented in the *Treatise* that might easily suggest a radical skepticism that Hume clearly wants to avoid.   The message Hume wants to convey in the *Enquiry* is that the reach and power of reason is and should be limited to common life.   That message is particularly pertinent to the religionists of Hume's day who used philosophy to defend their metaphysical views that they claimed were supported by reason.   As we will see, Hume's critique of the limits of reason in religious matters extends to his broader warnings regarding the limits of philosophy's role in public life.   A mitigated form of skepticism, Hume ultimately wants to argue, is best suited to temper the pernicious public effects of religion *and* false philosophy.

The final sentence in Section One of the *Enquiry* highlights Hume's overall aim to "undermine the foundations of an abstruse philosophy, which seems to have hitherto served only as a shelter to superstition."[287]   It is important to notice in this quote that Hume is taking aim at a particular type of abstruse philosophy, which has been used to legitimize popular superstitions. Hume, after all, unproblematically engages in abstruse philosophy in the *Treatise,* and does so with care in the *Enquiry*.   While the intended audience of abstruse philosophy is the "learned and the wise," Hume writes at the start of section one of the *Enquiry*, its speculations appear "abstract, and even unintelligible to common readers."[288]   By the time Hume writes the *Enquiry*

---

[287] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 95.
[288] Ibid., 88.

he recognized that simply writing to the "learned and the wise" can easily turn into an act of imprudence.[289]   The imprudence in a philosophical work that is largely abstruse, as Hume learned following the reception of the *Treatise*, lies in the fact that it can easily be maligned.

The lack of philosophical charity shown towards Hume's *Treatise* following its publication can be dismissed as a curiosity of its time. The benefit of hindsight allows us to recognize that despite its rocky beginnings the *Treatise* became one of the most enduring works in the history of western philosophy. On the other hand, his then wildly popular *The History of England* is today largely forgotten as a relic of the past. Hume, of course, could not know how posterity would greet his works. Those facts aside, *his* experience taught him that the style of the *Treatise* was a youthful mistake. It failed in its aims to lay a foundation for the sciences through an examination of human nature[290] and resulted in a widespread misreading of his main tenets. Hume's attempt to correct this mistake did not include abandoning abstruse philosophy, but rather Hume alters his form of writing to accommodate a wider audience. The success of Hume's *Essays* surely served as confirmation that a literary form was key to gaining an attentive audience that he could potentially influence.

Given this context, the *Enquiry* is Hume's attempt to carefully and selectively engage in abstruse philosophy, while keeping in mind that a literary form is central to conveying his substantive aim of undermining the misuse of abstruse philosophy, especially in popular religion. Hume signals that intention in Section One, which is aptly titled "Of the Different Species of Philosophy." In this section Hume juxtaposes abstruse philosophy with an "easy philosophy" that is literary in style and more palatable to the general public.[291]   As noted above, Hume does

---

[289] This observation takes on special resonance in Hume's day when philosophical works enjoyed a level of public interest virtually absent today.

[290] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, xvii-xviii, an ambition he completely drops in the *Enquiry*.

[291] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 88. This approach is in contrast to the Treatise where Hume enters directly into a discussion of his philosophy.

not intend to undermine all forms of abstruse philosophy. In fact, in order to correct the misuse

of abstruse philosophy Hume needs to engage in abstruse philosophy. As Hume writes,

> The only method of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions, is to enquire
> seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its
> powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects.
> We must submit to this fatigue, in order to live at ease ever after: And must cultivate true
> metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate.[292]

A true philosophy that examines the limits and possibilities of reason, in other words, can

free us from the shackles of a false philosophy that easily goes beyond the bounds of common

life. Put differently, in order to arrive at a mitigated skepticism, one must entertain principles of

skepticism regarding human understanding. Even in this "exact analysis" of the power and

capacity of human understanding, Hume does not lose sight of the importance of using "care and

art" to temper the necessarily abstract nature of that endeavor.[293]

It is noteworthy that in the first section of the *Enquiry* Hume's focus is unequivocally on

philosophy. To the extent that he confronts religion it is in relation to religion's adoption of

metaphysical speculations that are distortions of true philosophy. Hume's focus on philosophy is

important for two reasons. One, it gives some specificity to a popular notion that after Hume's

rejection from the University of Edinburgh he "became less defensive regarding his views on

religion and went on the attack."[294] Indeed, Hume did openly and forcefully attack religion in a

way he previously only hinted at. The point I have tried to stress is that the religion Hume aimed

his vehemence towards was a religion that borrows from false philosophy. It is not religion

simply, but rather a philosophically infused religion on which Hume focused his attacks. The

second reason it is important to note the focus on philosophy in the first section of the *Enquiry* is

that it helps illuminate Hume's intentions in subsequent sections. That is, after reading Section

---

[292] Ibid., 92.
[293] Ibid., 94.
[294] Wright, "The Treatise: Composition, Reception, and Response," 14.

One of the *Enquiry* a reader can deliberately proceed with the rest of the book knowing that he or she is not simply going to confront Hume's abstruse teachings. Instead, Hume will at times use a form of artistry designed to direct his readers in certain directions, even while discussing abstruse philosophical questions.

In particular, Hume hints at the edifying potentiality of philosophy, an observation he returns to in the penultimate section of the *Enquiry*. Philosophy that borrows from poetry and eloquence, Hume announces in the first paragraph of Section One, allures "us into the paths of virtue…by the soundest precepts and most illustrious examples."[295] The principles of abstruse philosophy, on the other hand, cannot "easily retain any influence over our conduct and behaviour."[296] Hume, in short, is keenly aware of the futile aftereffects that follow a presentation of abstruse philosophy that is not accompanied by a careful literary style. While a certain kind of philosophical presentation can have the effect of leading "us into the paths of virtue," it follows that other types of philosophical presentations may lead us into the paths of vice. I do not wish to suggest that philosophy is for Hume merely an edifying or noxious activity. Hume is also concerned with expressing his true philosophical positions. What drives that pursuit by the time of the *Enquiry*, however, is Hume's awareness that the majority of his audience will not understand and/or find abstruse philosophy palatable.

The edifying potential of philosophy is most clearly seen in Section One when Hume celebrates philosophy's promise to improve society. The politician, the lawyer, and the general can all benefit from what Hume calls a "spirit of accuracy."[297] While Hume can celebrate that aspect of philosophy, his concern with philosophy's dangers is directed at another species of philosophy, namely metaphysics. The benefit that a philosophically informed "spirit of

---

[295] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 87.
[296] Ibid., 88.
[297] Ibid., 90-91.

114

accuracy" brings to arts or professions that "concern life or action" is an altogether different matter.[298] As popular philosophy is grounded in common life, in other words, it provides great benefits to society at large. The function and role of popular philosophy, however, should not be confused with the work of philosophers. As Hume makes clear a philosopher tends to live "remote from business."[299] As the philosopher proper puzzles over fundamental questions that require abstruse reasoning that borders on the metaphysical, there is little to make him or her directly concerned with common life. Philosophers primarily live a life of the mind.[300]

In light of these views, one can say that by the time of the *Enquiry* Hume had three broad aims when considering philosophy's future. First, and most importantly, Hume attempts to ground philosophy from the metaphysical heights that were popular in his time. In particular, the tendency of religionists to use metaphysical speculations to justify and defend their positions was Hume's main target. Using philosophy to defend religion on rational grounds led to unnecessary divisions among religions, intolerance, and civil strife. Secondly, Hume attempts to popularize "a spirit of accuracy" that will help perfect arts and professions that are concerned with common life. Using reason with a spirit of accuracy allows practical professions, such as law and economics, to become "more subservient to the interests of society."[301] In this way, the public will come to appreciate the practical benefits accompanying philosophical reasoning. Finally, Hume aims to carve out a space for philosophers to continue their activities without fear of public condemnation.

---

[298] Ibid., 90.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Whether a philosopher *should* primarily live a life of the mind is a different matter. By the time of the *Enquiry* Hume obviously was of the opinion that philosophers should ground their activity in common practices (89-90). Nonetheless, Hume seemed to be aware that philosophy moves her most devout followers away from common life. At best, tempering that natural inclination is the most that can be hoped for.
[301] Ibid.

In order to achieve these aims philosophy must be publically perceived as an effective tool with a limited reach. If too much emphasis is placed on philosophy as an *a priori* branch of knowledge that allows thinkers to enter metaphysical terrain, you risk inciting ideological fervor in religious or secular forms. If reason's impotence is emphasized, on the other hand, you lay the groundwork for unbounded superstitions and hostility towards philosophy and philosophers to flourish. The right amount and type of philosophy must be promoted. Using Humean terms, a mitigated skepticism with a respect for custom and habits should be cultivated. In terms that align with this dissertation, one could claim that while acceptance of radical uncertainty should be avoided, a moderate form of uncertainty should be a mainstay of the sciences and the general consciousness of the public, all the while paying homage to the near certainties that are part and parcel of a given tradition and outlook.

A radical uncertainty in this context can refer to a *complete* suspension of any reliance on reason to understand the world in favor of revelation, mysticism, or hedonism due to the groundlessness of understanding that results when reasoning is stretched to its boundaries. A moderate form of uncertainty is aware of the limits of reason, and thus of fundamental uncertainties that plague any claims to absolute certainty.   Nonetheless, recognition of uncertainty that is not radical, which is the same as Hume's mitigated skepticism, salvages the usefulness of reason without succumbing to the sense of resignation to reason that accompanies a radical uncertainty/skepticism.   Put differently, a moderate recognition of uncertainty allows reason's capacity to improve society to be recognized without being beholden to quests for certainty or metaphysical longings.   The benefits of having a rationally ordered political and legal system, for example, outweigh the drawbacks of not having certainty about whether these systems are "true" or the best in any certain sense.

In line with these aims, Hume's central preoccupation in the *Enquiry* is to present a mitigated form of skepticism that is sensitive to the dangers and potentialities of philosophy. In what follows I attempt to defend that claim by examining the last three sections of the *Enquiry*. At first glance this attempt may appear strange considering that sections ten and eleven of the *Enquiry* are Hume's most provocative sections on religious matters. Section Ten 'Of Miracles,' for instance, has long represented Hume's coming out in the open to express his true views on religion. That reading is supported by Hume's reluctance to include a discussion of miracles in his *Treatise*.[302] It would seem then that the sections on religion in the *Enquiry* reflect Hume's new founded willingness to express his true views against revealed religion. While that reading is partially true, I plan to demonstrate an alternative reading that moves the emphasis to Hume's overall aim of promoting a mitigated skepticism as well as highlighting the dangers and potentialities of philosophy. Before doing so, I will briefly set up this section by suggesting how Immanuel Kant's claim that Hume is "perhaps the most ingenious of all skeptics," in his *Critique of Pure Reason,* can serve as a starting point to help us understand the place of skepticism in the *Enquiry*.[303]

As background it is important to note that Kant's ideas on Hume's philosophy were almost singlehandedly informed through his encounter with the *Enquiry*. While Kant owned a copy of the *Enquiry*, which was translated into German in 1755, Hume's *Treatise* was not translated into German until after the publications of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and

---

[302] See his letter to Henry Home (1932, letter 6) in Greig, *The Letters of David Hume, Volume 1.*, 23-25. Scholars arguing for such an interpretation include: Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 113; Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 11; and Roger Woolhouse, *The Empiricists (OPUS: History of Western Philosophy)* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988), 158. Cf. Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*, 132, for an alternative interpretation.

[303] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Jim Manis, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, Electronic Classics Series (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2010-2013), 430.

Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics.[304] This fact is crucial when considering that Kant

critiqued Hume for not extending his doubts about the existence of an *a priori* concept and

principle of causation to "all the central concepts of metaphysics."[305] Hume did not realize, Kant

was suggesting, that his insights led to a deeper skepticism than his claimed "mitigated

skepticism." Given this reading of Hume's work, Kant could characterize Hume as "the most

ingenious of all skeptics."[306]

For our purposes, it is important to recall that in the *Treatise* Hume does provide the

extended criticism Kant argued should follow from his thoughts on causation. There, Hume

raises doubts not only about causation, but also about beliefs in external objects and an enduring

self. What made Hume only focus on the question of causation in the *Enquiry*? While we

cannot be certain, I want to suggest that Hume's growing preoccupation to be perceived as a

defender of a mitigated skepticism is one of the reasons that led him to exclude elements of his

philosophy that might incline readers to conclude that he embraced a radical form of skepticism.

One of the undoubted purposes of the *Enquiry*, after all, was to reshape the popular views of

Hume's philosophy that followed the publication of the *Treatise*. I will now turn to the final

sections of the *Enquiry* to show how Hume—that "most ingenious of skeptics"—attempted to

promote a moderate view of skepticism and philosophy.

Section Ten, 'Of Miracles' and Section Eleven, 'Of a Particular Providence and Future

State,' of the *Enquiry* are often characterized as sections on Hume's philosophy of religion.

More specifically, these sections are primarily conceptualized as critiques of the foundations of

revealed and natural religion.[307] I would like to suggest that another way of reading these

---

[304] See footnote 2 in Paul Guyer, *Knowledge, Reason, and Taste: Kant's Response to Hume* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 75-76, for a more detailed analysis.
[305] Ibid., 3. The general observations and ideas about Kant and his relationship to Hume are taken from Guyer.
[306] Kant recognized that Hume's views on causation did not amount to a negation of using causal explanations in common life.
[307] For example, see the Editor's introduction to Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 44.

sections is to emphasize Hume's broader aim in the *Enquiry* of promoting a mitigated skepticism and rethinking the role of philosophy in public life.

Hume's section 'Of Miracles' covers a lot of terrain that is beyond the scope of this present study. For our purposes, it will suffice to puzzle over Hume's summary of his argument at the end of this section. At the conclusion of Section Ten, Hume tells his readers that he is "better pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered," compared to that of Lord Bacon who "seems to have embraced the same principles of reasoning."[308] What makes Hume pleased with his method of reasoning? Is it the accuracy or style of his reasoning? Hume states that the pleasing nature of his method of reasoning lies in the effect it may have on "those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the CHRISTIAN faith, who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason."[309] Notice, Hume does not hope that his method of reasoning will help undermine all forms of Christianity, much less religion in general. Instead, his narrow aim is on those "pretended CHRISTIANS" who insist on using reason to defend their faith. Hume even goes so far to affirmatively state, "Our holy religion is founded on *Faith*, not on reason."[310] Here, Hume not only affirms that Christianity is a holy religion, but most critically for our analysis, he also stresses that the only legitimate form of Christianity is founded on faith.

A reader might dismiss Hume's conclusion in section ten as nothing more than an insincere nod in the direction of the established authorities after his otherwise devastating critique of revealed religion. Even so, why would Hume bother to claim that *reason* is damaging to Christianity? Wouldn't the promotion of reason in the realm of Christianity help illuminate its absurdities? Why does reason in the realm of Christianity generate "dangerous friends" and

---

[308] Ibid.,185.
[309] Ibid.,185-86. Hume's aim is narrow, compared to Bacon who in the quote Hume cites takes aim at "every thing new, rare, and extraordinary in nature."
[310] Ibid.,186. The emphasis is Hume's.

119

"disguised enemies" of the faith? Wouldn't it instead be the case that a religion founded on faith, which ignores reason as a guiding principle, has the greatest chance of producing believers who are dangerous enemies of that religion? Moreover, doesn't Hume, by demonstrating the limits of reason and emphasizing faith as the bedrock of faith, show how reason can help bring to light a true Christian faith? These puzzling questions can only be answered by attending to Hume's next section.

Section Eleven, 'Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State,' is Hume's most explicitly literary section that consists of a dialogue between Hume and "a friend who loves skeptical paradoxes."[311] Given the radically different form that Hume employs in this section, it behooves readers to remain alert to Hume's less than obvious intentions. Consider, for example, the title of this section—originally 'Of the Practical Consequences of Natural Religion'—that does not reflect the actual content of Hume's discussion. As commentators have pointed out about the title, "providence is barely referred to, and the afterlife is touched on only by implication."[312] The traditional and obvious reading of this section is that it is devoted to Hume discrediting the argument from design. Although Hume is certainly concerned with that aim, I want to suggest that he also comments on the broader theme in the *Enquiry* of situating philosophy's place in public life by highlighting the limits and possibilities of reason.

As mentioned before, Hume begins this section recounting a private conversation with a friend who appears his equal in philosophical acumen. Hume opens the conversation admiring and praising philosophy's origin in Greco-Roman antiquity. He especially focuses on the liberties afforded to philosophy at that time that included a harmonious relationship with

---

[311] Ibid.,187.

[312] Quoted in Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*, 144. See also Stewart, "Two Species of Philosophy: The Historical Significance of the First Enquiry," 80-81. "[B]oth titles are a smokescreen, along with the pretence of a dialogue, deflecting attention from the primary content."

established religions. The ill treatment Protagoras and Socrates received, Hume writes, are exceptions to the general rule of the peace and tranquility philosophers enjoyed in ancient history. In contrast, the case for philosophers "at present," Hume continues, is one of persecution and calumny.[313] What accounts for this disparity in the public's conception of philosophy and thereby their treatment of philosophers in ancient and modern times?

Hume's friend claims that the "pertinacious bigotry" philosophy endured in his time is a result of its allying with superstition. More specifically, the ill standing of philosophy is due to "speculative dogmas of religion" that bring together philosophy (reason) and religion (faith). Such religions were not possible in the "early ages of the world" due to the general ignorance of the mass of people, which in turn allowed ancient religions to harmoniously align with philosophy. The suggestion is that as mass ignorance dissipated, overtime, a taste for argument and disputation infected religions, which led to the dogmatically rigid religions of Hume's day.

Hume's response to these claims is to point out that his friend has left "politics entirely out of the question."[314] Another way of framing Hume's response is to say that his friend has not taken into account the reasonable and just interest public authorities have in philosophy's affect on the general population. Specifically, Hume states that denying "a divine existence, and consequently a providence and a future state," loosens the ties of morality and hence is "pernicious to the peace of civil society."[315] To this his friend acknowledges that persecutions against philosophy never proceeded from the calm workings of reason, rather philosophy suffered due to the passion and prejudice of her enemies. Yet, he quickly changes his tone by suggesting that had Epicurus been accused before the people that he could "easily have defended his cause, and proved his principles of philosophy to be as salutary as those of his

---

[313] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 187.
[314] Ibid., 188.
[315] Ibid.

adversaries."[316]   Hume replies that he wishes that he would try his "eloquence upon so extraordinary a topic."[317]   Hume places the qualification that his friend's speech must be addressed not to the Athenian mob, but rather to the "more philosophical part of his [Epicurus'] audience."[318]   As we will see, included in this largely imagined audience are religious philosophers, much like the "pretended Christians" at the end of Section Ten who attempted to found their faith on reason. The central point is that the audience should be sufficiently educated to comprehend the argument.

Given the divergent opinions among these friends regarding the public's justified interest in philosophy's effects on the people at large, I would like to suggest that Hume's friend represents an earlier incarnation of Hume—perhaps the Hume of the *Treatise*. While the Hume of the *Enquiry* is sensitive to the real and present possibility that philosophy can have pernicious public effects and is also sensitive to the limited capacity of reason to persuade, his friend is convinced of the unequivocally salutary benefits of philosophy and believes in the power of reason to persuade a philosophical audience. As we will see, while these friends agree about fundamental philosophical principles, their critical point of disagreement highlights Hume's shift from the *Treatise* to the *Enquiry*. That is, overtime Hume became increasingly disillusioned with the ability of reason to persuade a supposedly philosophical audience and eventually he arrived at a fuller recognition of the potentially damaging affects philosophy could have on the public. Let us return to Hume's dialogue.

After Hume finishes inserting his one qualification that the audience his friend addresses should be able to comprehend his argument, his friend replies that "upon such conditions" the matter would not be difficult.   The earlier Hume would reply similarly due to his belief that

---

[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid.
[318] Ibid.

philosophical discourse among philosophical peers has a good chance of being understood, and occasionally may even have the power to persuade. "After all," the earlier Hume might think, "I have the reasons and they have the capability to follow those reasons." Hume's friend frames his imagined speech by telling his audience that he will examine to what extent speculative questions in philosophy have a bearing on public concerns. He openly states, moreover, that he will attempt to persuade them that enquires into speculative philosophy are "entirely indifferent to the peace of society and security of government."[319] Curiously, his friend—squarely reflecting the Hume of the *Enquiry*—then mentions how "the religious philosophers" have attempted to establish their religion with reason, which instead of leading to clarity has only led to greater doubts. His defense of speculative philosophy, in other words, is dedicated to refuting religious philosophers that take reason to unwarranted heights of speculation.

It is at this point that the argument about design is taken on. After these final touches that frame what is to come, the majority of the dialogue is an attempt to discount that argument. The justification for focusing on the argument from design is that by proving that that question is "entirely speculative," Hume's friend hopes to demonstrate how his philosophical musings do not cause civic havoc. In particular, he ends stating that "when, in my philosophical disquisitions, I deny a providence and a future state, I undermine not the foundations of society, but advance principles, which they themselves, upon their own topics, if they argue consistently, must allow to be solid and satisfactory."[320] In other words, Hume's friend seems to squarely and unequivocally appeal to his audience's ability to reason, and perhaps equally important, he appears convinced that openly denying "a providence and a future state" will not taint philosophy's image in the eyes of the people. It is these crucial positions that Hume later

---

[319] Ibid., 189.
[320] Ibid.

contests. The bulk of the dialogue then moves on to examine the argument from design. The points of agreement among the friends surrounding this matter are so stark that many commentators conflate the opinions of Hume's friend with Hume's views. By and large that is the case. To highlight their critical point of disagreement I will now move on to the conclusion of the dialogue. While there is much of interest in the body of the dialogue, for our purposes examining the concluding sections suffices.

Hume interjects into his friend's speech once before giving his final comments on his speech at the end of Section Eleven. The first break in the discussion occurs with Hume observing that his friend is unabashedly appealing to Hume's sensibilities by presenting an argument that his friend knows he largely agrees with. Then, Hume presents a series of questions that challenge him to push his argument further. In Hume-like fashion, his friend concludes the final portion of his speech claiming that all philosophy and religion cannot "carry us beyond the usual course of experience," but are rather limited to "reflections on common life."[321] It is hard to see at this point how Hume might disagree with his friend.

Hume's commentary to his friend's speech occupies the rest of dialogue. His reply consists of three parts that are separated in three paragraphs. The final two parts consist of an attempt to lay a different set of principles "in favour of liberty" and to expose a "difficulty" in his friend's discussion of causation. In other words, the two final parts are in direct response to his friend's discussion. The first part, however, differs in that it presents a point that his friend has "overlooked."[322] What is overlooked has nothing to do with the design of his argument, but rather with his lack of prudence. Hume says it best,

> Though I should allow your premises, I must deny your conclusion. You conclude, that religious doctrines and reasonings can have no influence on life, because they ought to

---

[321] Ibid., 197.
[322] Ibid., 74.

have no influence; never considering, that men reason not in the same manner you do, but draw many consequences from the belief of a divine Existence, and suppose that the Deity will inflict punishments on vice, and bestow rewards on virtue, beyond what appear in the ordinary course of nature. Whether this reasoning of theirs be just or not, is no matter. Its influence on their life and conduct must still be the same. And those, who attempt to disabuse them of such prejudices, may, for aught I know, be good reasoners, but I cannot allow them to be good citizens and politicians; since they free men from one restraint upon their passions, and make the infringement of the laws of society, in one respect, more easy and secure.[323]

Hume's friend, while a savvy reasoner, lacks an awareness of the influence of reason and religious doctrines on most people. He naively believes that others who are open to philosophy will reason in the same manner. Like the Hume of the *Treatise*, Hume's friend is confident that those open to philosophy can be persuaded, or at minimum understand his arguments. In fact, as Hume would later learn when applying for the position at Edinburgh University, even the philosophically inclined of his day had distorted modes of reasoning due in large measure to their religious prejudices. Reasoning with them had little effect on their final judgments. Hume goes a step further and suggests that a philosopher should remain silent about a people's distorted reasoning *if* that reasoning leads to salutary beliefs. Why disabuse people of their prejudices, he asks, if those very prejudices place a restraint on the people who might otherwise be prone to civic discord?

Since the *Treatise* and the series of events leading up to the *Enquiry,* Hume became, I have tried to show here, a "good citizen" in addition to being a "good reasoner." He became the mature Hume of the dialogue in Section Eleven who realized that philosophers must be cautious when communicating their message to any audience, even a philosophical audience. Reasoning, as in the case of the religious philosophers that Hume largely dealt with, can easily turn into rationalizations when used to defend extraordinary beliefs that leave the realm of common life.

---

[323] Ibid., 197.

Therefore, the philosopher must promote reason's inability to transcend everyday life, which includes critiquing religions that attempt to use reason to support the foundations of their beliefs. What is also learned in Section Eleven is that philosophers should respect the parts of religious or superstitious dogmas that uphold salutary restraints on the people's passions. In other words, philosophers should support beliefs that promote civic concord, irrespective of the rational standing of those beliefs.

Hume shows convincingly, contrary to his friend's claim, that the political interests of a society *are,* and *should* be, concerned with "the philosophical disputes concerning metaphysics and religion."[324] This is not, of course, because philosophers, or even their doctrines, are in themselves dangerous. As Hume makes clear at the end of Section Eleven, philosophers are not prone to enthusiasm and their doctrines are not alluring to the people.[325] Thus, the state should tolerate "every principle of philosophy," as philosophy poses no imminent or necessary threat to political interests. A political problem arises when philosophers imprudently deny, or are perceived to deny, religious beliefs that are otherwise politically and socially beneficent. Considering that possibility, philosophers should remain vigilant about how their work and public proclamations regarding *speculative* philosophy are perceived.

The danger of speculative philosophy when in the wrong hands is that it is prone to run amok and create endless disputes over dogmatically embraced doctrines that are purely fanciful yet claim to be founded on reason. Ultimately, it is in philosophy's and the public's interest that speculative forms of philosophy, religious or otherwise, be tempered in favor of this-worldly activities and inquiries in order to safeguard a peaceful and free society, which are the

---

[324] Ibid.
[325] Ibid., 198.

preconditions for philosophy and a flourishing state. In the next and final section of the *Enquiry* we will see that Hume.

The final section of the *Enquiry* is dedicated to providing a justificatory rational and definition for a mitigated form of skepticism. Hume concludes his defense of philosophy in the *Enquiry* by explaining the beneficent features of a skepticism that is rightly understood. Philosophy, after all, is a species of skepticism. It naturally engages in doubt, and thus dwells in uncertainties more than in certainties. Examining how far one can push those uncertainties is part of Hume's stated intention in this section.[326] As with the previous section, Hume addresses philosophy in relation to religion and the opinions of religious philosophers.

In particular, Hume aims to show whether skepticism is necessarily the "enemy of religion."[327] An excessive skepticism, which claims uncertainty in all things, would be the enemy of religion, as it would be the enemy of science and of everything in-between. Hume's mitigated skepticism, on the other hand, is not so certainly the enemy of religion. I will return to the puzzling relationship between Hume's skepticism and religion when we examine the conclusion of Section Twelve. For now, I would like to reorient our focus on Hume's attempt to bring those interested in philosophy—notice this includes especially religious philosophers— down from the heights of speculative philosophy in order to temper the dogmatic certainties that result from an unjustified use of reason. Hume demonstrates that a mitigated skepticism both halts the pretentions of an untamed speculative philosophy and is additionally beneficent to society. It ridicules the most extravagant and groundless forms of belief, while maintaining a space for rational enquiry regarding things of this world. In order to bring out these strands of

---

[326] See his discussion of 'excessive skepticism' in par. 23 of this section (XII).
[327] Ibid., 199.

Hume's thought, I will review a hand fold of arguments in this section in order to highlight the aforementioned ideas.

Hume first examines Cartesian doubt as a form of skepticism that is "*antecedent* to all study and philosophy."[328]   In other words, this method requires that one doubt everything, including our sensory and intellectual capacities, before attempting to move on to scientific inquiries. Hume quickly dismisses this form of skepticism due to its inability to begin such an inquiry without relying on the very faculties it claims to reject. Despite this rejection, Hume concedes that a moderate form of this skepticism can be understood in a "reasonable sense," as it encourages a disposition of impartiality and care in reasoning that are prerequisites for any system that hopes to "reach truth, and attain a proper stability and certainty in our determinations."[329]

Hume next turns to a form of skepticism that is "*consequent* to science and enquiry."[330] Unlike the Cartesian model that relies on an *a priori* basis for knowledge, this form of skepticism gains traction through an investigation of the world that is grounded in empirical research. The potential of this form of skepticism is to place in doubt both "the maxims of common life" *and* "the most profound conclusions of metaphysics and theology."[331] Considering the experimental mode of analysis that has resonance with Hume's approach, he dedicates more time to this approach's arguments against the senses. Then, in part two, Hume turns to the skeptic's arguments against reason. He divides their objections in two parts, "abstract reasonings, and to those which regard matter of fact and existence."[332] Abstract reasoning refers to demonstrative forms of reasoning that hold *a priori* status, such as mathematics. Matters of fact and existence,

---

[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid., 200.
[330] Ibid.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid., 204.

128

on the other hand, fall to pretty much all other forms of knowledge claims that cannot be demonstrated through reason alone. Hume's first mention of excessive skepticism or Phyrrhonism in this section occurs in his discussion of the skeptic's objections regarding matter of fact and existence.

The popular skeptical objection to "reasonings concerning matter of fact" is derived from the "natural weakness of human understanding" that is plagued by contradictory opinions that follow from the multiplicity of circumstances that determine opinions—such as age, wealth, location, health, and so on.[333] Despite this objection, Hume continues, in common life "we reason every moment concerning fact and existence." It is impossible to do otherwise. Thus, Hume states, "the great subverter of PYRRHOMISM or excessive principles of skepticism, is action, and employment, and the occupations of common life."[334] While the principles of excessive skepticism may flourish in the private halls of philosophical schools, they collapse when "they leave the shade" into the world of everyday practices and concerns, the passions and sentiments put those skeptical doubts to rest.

As a result, Hume continues, the skeptic should keep "within his proper sphere," and display the philosophical objections that "arise from more profound researches."[335] Unlike in the previous mode of analysis, the skeptic has "ample matter of triumph" when she considers the philosophical objections to the reasonings concerning matter of fact. It is at this point where Hume explicitly shifts his analysis to focus on the beneficent features of his mitigated skepticism. To that end, in this context, Hume needs to show that excessive skepticism, as powerful an argument as it may pose, is ultimately not beneficent to society if not tempered by common life.

---

[333] Ibid., 206.
[334] Ibid.
[335] Ibid.

After briefly reviewing the skeptic's philosophical objections to reasonings concerning matter of fact, which Hume concedes are strong, he writes, "These arguments might be displayed at greater length, if any durable good or benefit to society could ever be expected to result from them."[336] Hume chooses *not* to display those arguments at greater length, but instead, in the next sentence of the next paragraph, he writes of "the chief and most confounding objection to *excessive* scepticism."[337] Are Hume's objections based on arguments that demonstrate the incoherence of excessive skepticism? No, the most confounding objection against excessive skepticism, Hume states, is that "no durable good can ever result from it; while it remains in full force and vigor."[338] Hume expands on this idea by stating that "a PHRRHONIAN cannot expect, that his philosophy will have any constant influence on the mind; Or if it had, that its influence would be beneficial to society."[339] As Hume will show in a moment, pushing the principles of excessive skepticism to their limit has no influence on the mind considering it would ultimately place all of human life on precarious grounds.

At this point, Hume returns to his reply to the popular objections in order to elaborate on his "chief and most confounding objection" to excessive skepticism. In particular, Hume claims that the excessive skeptic's "profound reasonings" lacks force in the face of nature. That is, when the skeptic returns to the everyday practices of life, he cannot help but to act, reason, and believe in the very things he confidently doubted. Hume then ends this part of section twelve describing a skeptic awakening from "his dream," only to realize "the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations."[340] In short, Hume

---

[336] Ibid.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Ibid.
[339] Ibid., 207.
[340] Ibid.

is suggesting that irrespective of the lack of foundations accompanying a reliance on rational enquiry, the force of nature, which shakes away any such doubts, should move us away from an excessive skepticism that *alone* serves no use, and may even prove unbeneficial to society if not halted from its excesses through common life.

Hume begins Part Three introducing his mitigated skepticism that he claims is "durable and useful." Mitigated skepticism is *in part* the result of "*excessive* skepticism," Hume writes, "when its undistinguished doubts are, in some measure, corrected by common sense and reflection."[341] It is important to highlight that Hume's mitigated skepticism results from two forces. First, it requires abstruse reasoning into matters of fact, which results in an excessive skepticism that demonstrates the limits of reasoning. Then, a reflection on "common life" is required to temper the excesses of the first step, which in turn, results in Hume's mitigated skepticism. After Hume's brief explanatory introduction of mitigated skepticism he presents the human inclination that his skepticism is aimed to correct. Namely, a mitigated skepticism corrects the propensity that drives humans to affirm dogmatically their opinions and remain oblivious to counterarguments. In other words, to use a phrase from this work, "the search for certainty" that humans are naturally predisposed towards blinds them to alternatives and makes them unwilling to consider counterarguments. A mitigated skepticism tempers that inclination by reminding the dogmatic reasoner how little he or she really knows. As Hume puts it, "a small tincture of PYRRHONISM might abate their pride."[342] From the point of view of a skeptic, it is in large part pride, which in the case of religious philosophers comes from an unwarranted confidence in reason, that leads a dogmatist to unwaveringly hold on to his or her beliefs. The

---

[341] Ibid.
[342] Ibid.,208.

ability of skepticism to moderate otherwise unwavering beliefs is the first advantage of a mitigated skepticism that Hume presents.

The final advantage of a mitigated skepticism is related to the previous as it continues to addresses the dogmatic believers that Hume's skepticism is designed to temper. As should be clear at this point, Hume's main audience are religious philosophers who have carried their rational speculations beyond common life. It is then no surprise that Hume's final words in the *Enquiry* are dedicated to showing how skepticism—read philosophy—can limit the pretentious speculations of religious philosophers that cause more havoc than civic good.

It is noteworthy that Hume does not attempt to eliminate inquiries that go beyond the everyday. That would be impossible, as it would require an overcoming of "the imagination of man."[343] As the imagination, for Hume, is "naturally sublime," political speeches, mythic stories, and religion will perpetually reproduce themselves satisfying the imagination's desire for something beyond the everyday.[344] Hume juxtaposes the imagination with "correct *Judgment*," which unlike its contrary remains steadfastly focused on common life, and hence does not extend its inquiries beyond this world.[345] In this context, Hume discusses the two "proper subjects of science and enquiry," abstract reasoning, which he limits to "quantity and number" and experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence.[346]

The science that yields demonstrative knowledge, for Hume, is limited to mathematics, and to those studies akin to mathematics. Attempts to extend that type of knowledge beyond its self-enclosed bounds results in "sophistry and illusion."[347] In this way Hume squarely distinguishes himself from Spinoza who attempts to accomplish just that in his *Ethics*. All other

---

[343] Ibid.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid.
[346] Ibid., 209.
[347] Ibid.

inquiries, Hume continues, fall into the category of "fact and existence," which are based on arguments founded entirely on experience.[348] Attempting to apply *a priori* knowledge in moral reasoning, by contrast, is bound to produce virtually any position if not circumscribed by experience.[349] While not demonstrative, knowledge gained from experimental reasoning about experience through the lens of experience allows for the best sort of knowledge that can be hoped for in the arenas of fact and existence.

There is a rupture in Hume's discussion of "fact and existence" when Hume discusses theology. Hume writes:

> Divinity or Theology, as it proves the existence of a Diety, and the immortality of souls, is composed partly of reasoning concerning particular, partly concerning general facts. It has a foundation in reason, so far as it is supported by experience. But its best and most solid foundation is faith and divine revelation.[350]

A simple explanation, or dismissal, of Hume's purported affinity with religious beliefs in this quote is to say that Hume is expressing a form of fideism. That is, a radical form of skepticism might align itself with fideism, in that fideism demands an emphasis on faith, rather than reason, when it comes to religious belief. Reason is weak, and therefore not a proper tool to discern religious beliefs, both fideists and radical skeptics agree with that claim. That reading, as plausible in a general sense as it may be, ignores Hume's unequivocal claim that divinity or theology "proves the existence of a Deity, and the immortality of souls."[351]

Might Hume have in mind that the proof provided for the existence of a deity comes from arguments that are founded entirely in experience? Does the same argument apply for proving the immortality of souls? The answer would at best have to concede that Hume partly had that in mind. One must add to this recognition Hume's concluding claim, "the best and most solid

---

[348] Ibid., 209-10.
[349] Ibid., 210.
[350] Ibid. Emphasis Hume's.
[351] Ibid.

foundation [for the claims of divinity or theology] is *faith* and divine revelation."[352] At the end, in other words, it is faith that provides the proof for the existence of a deity and the immortality of souls. For obvious reasons, knowledge claims based primarily on faith are rather silly for Hume. Why then might have Hume conceded any ground to what seems groundless for him? Without taking a strong position, it seems that Hume is in some way conceding ground to a position that might be a palatable and salutary alternative to one of his main audiences in the *Enquiry*, religious philosophers—who rely on reason to defend their beliefs. Considering the hostility and blatant intolerance towards non-believers in Hume's day, moreover, it is plausible that Hume wanted to come across as not wholly hostile to religion. We will return to an examination of Hume's views of religion in the *Enquiry* at the end of this section.

Whatever Hume's exact reasons for addressing religious beliefs in the matter he does above, Hume ends the *Enquiry* in striking fashion committing to the flames any book "of divinity or school metaphysics" that does not contain demonstrative forms of reasoning or any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence. He leaves no room for an account of religion whose "best and most solid foundation is *faith* and divine revelation." In other words, Hume negates what he previously affirmed. The religious philosophers reading the last words of the *Enquiry* might nonetheless think, "Fine, my books of theology *do* contain experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence, which through the ladder of reason lead to my beliefs in a deity and so on." If that religious philosopher read the whole of the *Enquiry* with any care he or she would recognize that Hume does not think such a methodology carries much weight. Perhaps their sole conclusion might be that Hume misunderstands or misrepresents their position. Be that as it may, Hume's overall hostility toward religion has an undoubted presence and force in the *Enquiry*.

---

[352] Ibid.

With all this in mind, we are prepared to ask whether a mitigated skeptic is an "enemy of religion." As we have seen, the relationship between skepticism and religion holds a central place in Hume's final two sections, the last of which notes that while "The *Sceptic* is another enemy of religion," no one has actually "met with such an absurd creature."[353] Part of Hume's point is to suggest that a mitigated skepticism is a position that one can hold without falling into absurdity *and* it avoids being an enemy of religion in the way an unqualified skepticism cannot.

Part of what makes Hume's mitigated skepticism moderate, in comparison to its Pyrrhonian counterpart, is its recognition that the deep and unwavering uncertainty that is at the bottom of an unrestrained skepticism leads not only to absurdity, but also to a kind of social and political imprudence. Part of its imprudence, in the context of Hume's time, is exemplified by Hume's skeptical friend in Section Eleven who fails to understand that denying a divine existence and providence is socially and politically pernicious. Moreover, his skeptical friend places too much trust in reason's ability to persuade an audience that claims to be open to philosophical persuasion. The reception to the *Treatise,* which berated Hume for his treatment of religion, and his subsequent rejection from the position at Edinburgh University, shaped Hume's prudential stance towards religious matters. More generally, it shaped Hume's views about the relationship between philosophy, philosophers, and the political and social world.

Hume's critique of miracles, for example, demonstrates the great care Hume took when expressing his opinions in the *Enquiry*, as it took up a popular cause against Catholics that allowed his views to be palatable to a largely protestant audience. While it is true that Hume does take shots at Shaftesbury and Christian Stoics themes (aimed perhaps specifically at Hutcheson), the overall tone of the *Enquiry* is one that can be characterized as "an anti-Catholic

---

[353] Ibid., 199.

tract."[354] As such, the blatant Catholic attacks are a smokescreen that allowed Hume to express

"his own personal grievance with the Christian Stoics in a larger and widely popular cause."[355]

It is important, however, not to get lost in these details and lose sight of Hume's larger aim in the

Enquiry, which attempts to temper the corrupting use of philosophy by religion.

Returning to Section Twelve, Hume applies the lessons he claims his friend overlooked

regarding public prudence and the power of reason to persuade. One of the central functions that

Hume claims his mitigated skepticism possesses is its ability to temper dogmatic beliefs.[356]

Notice, Hume does not claim that educating the people to better understand rational arguments is

the way to proceed. Instead, he claims, "the greater part of mankind are naturally apt to be

affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions."[357] Mitigated skepticism can serve as a corrective

to those opinions, reminding dogmatic believers of the uncertainties accompanying human

understanding more broadly, and thus humbling their unjustified trust in their dogmatic

beliefs.[358] The imagination, in addition, is presented as the other side of correct judgment. While

Hume believes that correct *judgment* is the most accurate methodology to employ when studying

human affairs, he also acknowledges that the *imagination* naturally strives for sublime topics that

reach beyond the everyday. As there is no eliminating of the imagination, the priest, the poet,

and the orator will continue to use their imaginative faculties to communicate their lofty aims

and visions. The goal for Hume, as I have been trying to argue, is not to eliminate dogmatic

opinions that are driven by the imagination. Rather, Hume argues that philosophers should join

hands with the politically and socially prudent to temper and redirect dogmatic beliefs to this-

worldly goods.

---

[354] Stephen Buckle, "Introduction," in *Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: And Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xviii.
[355] Ibid., xx.
[356] Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 208.
[357] Ibid., 207.
[358] Ibid., 208.

While it is true that Hume does make arguments for the moderation of dogmatic religious beliefs in the *Enquiry*, overall, it could be argued, that that position is overshadowed by Hume's devastating arguments against religious beliefs that ultimately promote a thoroughly secular future. After all, this counterargument would continue, overtime Hume became more vocal about his opposition to religion. Prudence was shown in the *Treatise* where Hume excluded a critique of miracles, not in the *Enquiry* where Hume levels direct blows against religious dogmas![359] By the time of the *Enquiry* Hume unleashed his fury against religion that continued in a *Natural History of Religion* and in the *Dialogues*. Prudence, in effect, was sidetracked by Hume's liberated posture that followed his rejection from the Edinburgh position.

In a broad sense, I agree that examining the *Enquiry* alone is insufficient to establish that Hume takes a moderate position in-between a radical desire for a secular future driven by a philosophy grounded in this-worldly inquiries with a more conservative posture that attempts to prudentially cultivate the traditions and habits that ground a community or nation. In contrast to that position, the *Enquiry* tilts towards a scathing critique of religion, with a defense of philosophy rightly understood. As I have tried to show, Hume's critique of religion in the *Enquiry* is more to the point a critique of the misuse of philosophy. To the extent that Hume critiques Christian doctrine, it is to say that philosophy has been ineffectively and inappropriately used to defend miracles and the argument from design. Read in this light, the central take away of the *Enquiry* is to promote a proper use of philosophy that is firmly grounded in this-worldly inquiries. The *Enquiry* is not, in other words, a repudiation of Christianity or religion. After all, an unrestrained assault on what was the reigning worldview in Hume's time, namely a religious worldview, would amount to an imprudent attack on common life in the service of abstract, philosophical, ends.

---

[359] 1737 letter to Henry Home (Greig, *The Letters of David Hume, Volume 1*, note 145).

Contrary to attacking established practices, including religion, in common life, Hume, as we will see fully in the next section, expresses what some might consider an extreme prudence when considerations are made about uprooting long established traditions and practices. The claim that Hume shows prudence, or a conservative posture in social and political things is well established in the literature. I will try to add to that literature by showing how Hume's work on the limits of philosophy directly influenced his conservatism. Put differently, I will show how uncertainty about knowledge claims (skepticism) influences Hume's revitalized reverence for common life first worked out in the *Treatise*. Hume, I will show, is first and foremost a political radical, and only contingently a conservative or liberal. Uncertainty about fundamental matters, in other words, led Hume to embrace the seemingly paradoxical position of a radical openness that depending on context manifested itself in a politics that leaned towards conservatism, liberalism, or a mixture of both.

3.5 Hume: The Radical Liberal Conservative

Hume attracts strange political bedfellows. In one rendering he appears to be a staunch conservative, a defender of the status quo. In another presentation Hume is a run-of-the-mill liberal, a defender of private property, free trade, individualism, and representative government. Still again, Hume has been presented as a radical thinker that opens up a space "towards something like a post-structuralist practice."[360] Hume's writings prompt a kind of cognitive dissonance in writers who often ignore one aspect of his thought in favor of another. While Hume is a critic of the Enlightenment, for example, he is also fully embroiled in many of its politically liberal projects. Yet, his promotion of liberalism isn't fully enmeshed in the ideologically laden liberalism that emphasizes abstract theories over practice. As a consequence

---

[360] John Glassford, *Disrupting Philosophical Boundaries: Gilles Deleuze on David Hume*, unpublished manuscript.

of Hume's elusive political views, there has been a slew of scholarly work dedicated to disentangling those views in hopes of presenting a coherent Humean politics.

The much-cited example of confusion over Hume's politics is Jefferson's ban of Hume's *History of England* from the University of Virginia. Jefferson's reading of Hume's *History* led him to conclude, as he put it to Johns Adams, "This single book has done more to sap the free principles of the English Constitution than the largest standing army."[361] Little was Jefferson aware that Hume in fact supported the independence of the American colonies as early as 1768.[362] Like so many, Jefferson was blinded by a part of Hume's work that sacrificed a view of Hume's broader political sensibilities. In this section I want to suggest that *one* way of reconciling Hume's multiplicity of political views is to situate his conservatism as a response to the limits of philosophy—speculative or false philosophy, to be more precise. Considering Hume's conservatism in this way sheds light on another aspect of Hume's thinking about uncertainty, which I briefly outline in what follows and summarize at the conclusion of this section.

In this context, the limits of philosophy refer to the corrupting and circumscribed influence philosophy has on the general public, which in turn suggests philosophy's impotence to rule publicly. This is especially the case with the many who are more often hurt rather than helped by speculative philosophy. Outside of any concern with the many, however, philosophy lacks the power to rule even among philosophers. As we have seen, for Hume, philosophy is bound to the context of common life. Thus, the *a priori* ambitions of philosophy are necessarily cut short. If philosophy is to play any role in public life, it must be sensitive to those contextual

---

[361] Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail & John Adams* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 498.

[362] David Wootton, "David Hume, 'The Historian,'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 447–79.

considerations. The destiny of philosophy, of course, is not solely in the hands of philosophers. Hume witnessed firsthand the ways speculative philosophy could be misused to legitimize and defend theological and political principles. It is that misuse that informed Hume's conservatism. Before turning to Hume's conservatism, I frame that discussion by laying out how Hume's thinking on uncertainty fits into his political conservatism.

There are two traditional ways to think about *how* Hume attempts to achieve his political ends. These can be called Hume's normative political practices. The first is to align Hume with broader trends in modern political philosophy that attempt to redirect human self-interest towards the public good. At least since Machiavelli there was a move shamelessly to ground politics around self-interest, rather than through virtue or other "higher aims."[363] In particular, Hume has been described as a follower of the Hobbesian-Mandevillan "selfish system" of politics. This evident part of Hume's *political* thought requires a confrontation with his critique of the selfish system in *morals*.[364] That complexity aside, a prominent example of this strategy in Hume is his argument for institutional arrangements that channel the selfish passions towards the public good. As we will see in the next section, Hume's thinking on economics aligns with the aim of channeling self-interest towards a greater good.

The second way Hume attempts to achieve his political ends is through a cultivation of the natural virtues, such as benevolence and compassion. Through a kind of moral and aesthetic education, Hume attempts to expand the limited and narrow moral sense of individuals. If uncultivated, moral sense is prone to ignore broader social and political concerns in light of its stubborn focus on concerns that are near and present. An example of using Hume's ideas on the

---

[363] Although Jane Mansbridge primarily traces the origin of the self-interest interpretation of politics to Hobbes in her article "Self-Interest in Political Life," *Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (1990): 132–53, her argument could easily be extended to Machiavelli, who had a direct influence on most of the later political theorists who adopted this self-interest framework.
[364] See Jeffrey Church, "Selfish and Moral Politics: David Hume on Stability and Cohesion in the Modern State," *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 169–81.

passions for political purposes is found in Sharon Krause's *Civil Passions*, where she argues that impartial conceptions of justice can be bolstered by the cultivation of the passions. Krause uses Hume's views on the cultivation of the passions as the groundwork to her broader argument. Foundational to Hume's two ways of thinking about normative political practices, I would add, is his thinking on the role of uncertainty in political and social life.

Specifically, Hume recognized that the melancholy that resulted from his inquiries into abstruse philosophy—into areas of thought that led him to entertain ideas of the ubiquitous uncertainties confronting human life and knowledge—requires a suspended state of judgment that is not tolerated by many. Humans by nature, Aristotle aptly notes in the first line of his *Metaphysics*, all desire to know.[365] The idea that knowing is ultimately inaccessible to humans runs against a fundamental human desire. Instead of accepting uncertainty, even philosophers, Hume showed, are apt to deal with uncertainty by building philosophical systems out of thin air. How much more vulnerable are the many un-philosophically inclined when confronting uncertainty!

In section 3.2, for example, we saw that intractable religious superstitions are born in moments of fear-driven uncertainties. In other words, dogmatic certainties often originate at times of deeply *felt* uncertainty, in times of great adversity, for example. Needless to say Hume is wary of both uncertainty in its negative manifestations and dogmatic certainties. It would be incorrect, however, to conclude that Hume opts for some sort of middle ground between these extremes. While that is the case in a broad sense, it would be more precise to say that Hume attempts to promote positive forms of uncertainty as well as support established certainties. It is the latter part of this duality that I am concerned with here. The reasons for Hume supporting established certainties is to facilitate political and social stability and, more fundamentally, to

---

[365] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, ed. John H. McMahon (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2008), 1.

protect this world (the customs and traditions that make a world in the human imagination) from the onslaught caused by the popularization of false philosophy. Before elaborating on these claims, I will continue to discuss the reasons Hume argues established opinions are important to protect.

Hume's peculiar brand of conservatism suggests that as some horizon of opinions will always dominate the imagination of a people, attempting to undermine or alter their traditions and habits should be done with great prudence. Attempting to uproot traditions wholesale, after all, is likely to encourage the very uncertainties that are the bedrock of dogmatic superstitions. This is not to say that criticisms of established traditions are anathema in Hume's thought. Consider the obvious fact that Hume was quite critical of the popular Christianity of his day, which he consequently attempted to reform. The key word here is reform. Hume did *not* attempt to completely usurp the Christian faith, nor did he attempt to replace it with a foreign and unknown tradition. Instead, Hume tried to reform established traditions by using resources from within that tradition. For example, as we saw in the last section, Hume argued for a form of Christianity that primarily relied on faith, rather than reason. Hume seems to be suggesting that traditions and habits should only, or primarily, be criticized when the peace and security of a state is in jeopardy. Otherwise, great care should be taken to support established opinions, habits, and traditions.

Whatever Hume's exact opinion about the above, the reasons for his protective stance towards established traditions are practical and secular. Hume recognizes that most people require a stable mental horizon of opinions, beliefs, and habits to flourish properly. Destabilizing those mental horizons in the name of speculative theories results in dangerous and unnecessary social and political upheavals. The challenge for Hume, then, was to emphasize the

importance of accepting the current norms and practices of a society, while allowing space for alterations and reforms towards a better future. Ultimately, these concerns are wholly this worldly for Hume. There is no mysticism, or otherwise metaphysical longings in Hume's aims. There is, however, a factual recognition that humans long for otherworldly coherence and order that supports political and social life.

In effect, these views informed Hume's attempt to balance the requirements of political life, with the freedom of the mind required for political and social life to flourish. The requirements of political life refer to the traditions and shared narratives that bring coherence to an otherwise fragmented political community. The freedom of the mind, in turn, is required in order to have innovations and/or advancements in the sciences, technology, and arts. That freedom, however, requires a respect for what is given. Respect, in this context, demands recognition of the functional and foundational role current traditions and shared narratives play in the lives of people. More importantly, and in relation to that aim, respect demands that one recognize that the bounds of human reflection are contained within the everyday. It is in this context that Hume would claim that the greatest threat to established opinions and ways of life, as I will attempt to demonstrate below, is philosophy.

As stated previously, Hume's conservatism is a puzzle. The first difficulty in deciphering the nature of Hume's conservatism is the fact that that term was out of reach in Hume's time. The term conservatism, after all, has a history. It was largely a response to the French Revolution and is by and large an outgrowth of the early nineteenth century. Hume, then, could not have self-identified as a conservative. Nonetheless, it is possible to look back at Hume's work and tease out the conservative strands in his thought. The problem with such an approach is that it requires an understanding of what it means to be conservative. In order to bring out the

central tenet of Hume's conservatism, I will first show how a popular caricature of conservatism fails to align with Hume's works.

A misleading—because simpleminded and one-dimensional—hint to the meaning of conservatism is found in the name. The name suggests that a conservative is preoccupied with conserving. Conserving what? The answer often given is the status quo. The conservative fears change. Or slightly more positively, she is preoccupied with stability and social cohesion, and thus understands radical change as a threat to social order. The conservative, in this understanding, sacrifices progress for social stability. It is within this general understanding of conservatism that Hume is often lumped.

Hume's radical skepticism is signaled as a central cause of his conservatism. Eschewing any form of idealism, and thus utopianism, Hume is left with what is given. Hume's call to reduce reason's role to common life, leaves little else for a political thinker to reflect on. Hume, in a way, is forced to be a conservative given his skepticism. That position is a broader reflection of Hume's relationship to the enlightenment. His attack on reason paved the way for conservatives of the eighteenth-century to argue for the authority of feeling and sentiment, given his powerful philosophical arguments against the "extended orgy of rationalism" that was sweeping the continent.[366]

Thinking of Hume's conservatism in the above terms is complicated by the fact that Hume does not do away with reason or progress in the ways a simpleminded understanding of conservatism would suggest. Hume's critique of the enlightenment, for example, was not wholesale. Hume's science of politics is in important ways in line with enlightenment principles and the coming of empirical political science. Consider that Humean rationalism is characterized by a "quest for objective analysis, its distrust of obscurantism, its faith in empirical data, its

---

[366] Sheldon S. Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism," *The American Political Science Review* 48, no. 4 (1954): 999–1000.

disdain for the *a priori*, and its strong emphasis on the criterion of utility."[367] Thus, Hume would firmly separate himself from any suggestion that reason has no place in social and political life. Hume does not try to do away with the influence and utility of reason in social and political life as much as he attempts to promote a proper use of reason that focuses on this world. Hume also makes a point to critique strongly the metaphysical and systematic ambitions of an *a priori* use of reason that disdains common life in favor of abstract principles.

In addition to Hume's maintaining a central place for reason in social and political life, Hume is also progressive in a way that rubs against a form of conservatism that understands a conservative as fearful of change, and thus as an unambiguous champion of old and established norms. As rightly argued in John Stewart's *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy,* Hume was a liberal reformer in a multitude of ways. Hume, in other words, had a particularly liberal and reformist vision for the future that looked in important ways different from the past and present. In what way, if any, is Hume then a conservative?

To answer this question I will follow the general tenor of Donald Livingston's observation that what needs to be conserved for Hume is the world, which is in perpetual threat by philosophy.[368] Philosophy, here, is not synonymous with reason, or to approaches that rely on reason. As we have seen, Hume advocates for a particular type of reason that is grounded in this world. Instead, "philosophy" refers to philosophy as it appears prior to a turn to common life— false philosophy in Hume's lexicon.   That is, it refers to philosophy at its most potent, when it claims autonomy from other sources of knowledge (custom, revelation, history etc.). The ability to transcend all particulars through the use of reason becomes a perpetual danger to the world when philosophy became popularized.

---

[367] Ibid., 1001.
[368] As will become evident, I do not follow Livington's complete analysis of Hume's politics.

For example, Hume pointed to political parties based on principles as a particularly modern phenomenon. Parties from principle in modern times rely on abstract speculative principles as a guide and motivating force. Hume juxtaposes parties from principles with parties from affection and from interest, the latter of which he considers "the most reasonable, and the most excusable."[369] Unlike parties from interest, parties from principle unite around abstract concepts (such as who has the right to govern) that sap dialogue from among those with different viewpoints. As Hume nicely puts it,

> where the difference of principle is attended with no contrariety of action, but every one may follow his own way, without interference with his neighbour, as happens in all religious controversies; what madness, what fury can beget such unhappy and such fatal divisions?[370]

Instead of fostering discussion among a plurality of viewpoints, parties of principles encourage sects that are insular in way that ultimately creates an apolitical faction that understands politics as a zero sum game. Their embraced principles become an immutable law that is non-negotiable. Consequently, those adhering to such principles are not open to debate—neither reason nor a change in context will sway them from the abstract principles they know are correct. Hume explicitly links philosophy to parties from principle when he discusses the simultaneous rise of Christian sects (factions of principle) with the spread of philosophy "over the world."[371] Notice, philosophy proper, which requires a level of skepticism, is not present. Whether infused with a healthy dose of skepticism or not, philosophers proper, reasoning on their own about speculative principles, cause no harm. A problem arises when philosophy is popularized. When the *hoi polloi* feel a need to rationally defend their views in an ultimate way. Hume knew first hand

---

[369] Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, 53.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Ibid., 54.

with his constant interactions with the Christians of his day how intractable speculative beliefs become once ingrained.

Another way to understand how philosophy becomes a threat to the world is to consider the sense in which Hume is a liberal. Examining Hume as a liberal also highlights the advantages of a Humean liberalism. As previously stated, Hume advocated various recognizably liberal practices, for example, the protection of private property, free trade, and representative government under the rule of law. He did not, however, embrace the speculative foundations of liberalism, represented by Hobbes and Locke. That is, Hume was a critic of the social contract theory, its attending focus on juridical norms, and its insistence that the individual was the primary and only sight of analysis. For Hume, a form of liberalism that grounds itself in abstract speculative principles encounters two major problems that subvert the world.

First, the single-minded focus on individuals as *the* essential point of reference in political and social life blinds liberals of principle from the obvious ways in which humans unite in groups. A liberal from principle sees only individuals competing with each other in their theories about human behavior, and consequently design laws and policies that correspond to that idea. This blinding focus results in liberals of principle ignoring the way humans come together in groups. Consider, for example, the way major liberal political philosophers of the 20th century fail to address party politics.[372] Hume, on the other hand, could argue for an ethic of individualism, while remaining attuned to the reality of party politics. Caught up in abstract speculative arguments, liberal political philosophers are blinded to what is right in front of them. With Hume's analysis of parties, on the other hand, he represented a move from liberalism that

---

[372] See the Introduction to Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010) for a discussion about the general neglect of party politics among political theorists.

147

explained liberal ideas on the basis of juridical grounds, to one that analyzed the psychological basis for liberalism.[373]

The second way in which a liberalism of principle subverts the world is by demanding that its speculative principles be applied in all contexts. As speculative reasoning makes abstract systems appear immune to contingency, it reduces complex problems to simpleminded solutions. Consider, for example, a champion of liberal democracy who believes that all people, everywhere, in any context, would turn to a liberal democratic system if given the opportunity. In hindsight, many look back at the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan as examples of a major failure to turn countries that are clearly unfit for liberal democracy into freedom loving people. Instead of understanding liberalism as the outgrowth of various practices embedded in a particular region, time, and culture, liberals of principle "provide foundationalist arguments to show that the liberal way of life is the only way of life for human beings and that the liberal state is the only legitimate state."[374] For Hume, an insistence that liberalism represents some kind of unequivocal end when reflecting on social and political arrangements, results from the tendency in liberals of principles to skirt the messiness of this world in favor of speculative theories. What is worse, the foundationalist theorists convince the people of the veracity of their theory, which in turn creates dogmatic followers of principle immune to counter-arguments.

The Humean alternative to this position is to embrace liberalism as a contingent good that is the outgrowth of customs, traditions, and habits. The primary advantage of this position is the flexibility to new contexts that it allows. While the liberal of principle attempts to make the world fit into his theory, the Humean liberal is constantly paying attention to human practices—both past and present—in order to make sense of the best ways to move forward. The Humean

---

[373] "Hume saw clearly, as the later philosophic radicals did not, that the arena of practical politics was not peopled by individuals pursuing their own aims in the splendid isolation of self-interest" (Wolin, "Hume and Conservatism,"1014).
[374] Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy*, 156.

liberal, in other words, entertains abstractions only *after* he or she has paid careful attention to past and present human practices. Liberalism, in this understanding, is not the only legitimate state and space for humans to live in the best way possible. Rather a Humean liberal takes the more humble position that a particular form of liberalism is most likely the best given a particular context that may very well change in the future.

In short, a Humean liberal's posture allows for flexibility when new contexts arise that do not fit within a liberal framework. New policy challenges, for example, should not automatically and necessarily become subsumed under liberal practices. Consider the increasing legal and policy challenges brought on by the perpetually evolving relationship between cyber technologies and humans. For instance, it could be argued that the question of privacy as liberals have traditionally conceptualized it should change due to the ubiquitous lack of privacy that has accompanied the Internet. Likewise, the question of property, or ownership, has altered due to the widespread file sharing of music and movies, to name only two prominent examples. More generally, consider what some have called the posthuman.[375] As humans and technology merge, traditional notions of what it means to be human have significantly shifted. The possibility of populating outer space, for instance, is no longer a distant fantasy. Thinking about political and social arrangements in these new contexts requires thinking beyond liberalism, whether of the foundationalist or Humean sort. That conclusion is a plausibly Humean one given his instance that politics cannot, and should not, be bound by abstract theories derived from speculative reason.

As we can now appreciate Hume's conservatism is not a prosaic doctrine that amounts to fighting against progress in favor of the status quo. Instead, Hume's nuanced conservatism—

---

[375] N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, Kindle (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

counterintuitive to popular conceptions of the term—provides a space for progress in new contexts. There is no mistaking, however, that Hume is interested in conserving certain prejudices and inherited customs. His interest in preserving is not due to the veracity of what is being conserved, nor is Hume solely concerned with defending customs and prejudices in order to maintain peace and stability. As previously stated, Hume's conservatism is at bottom concerned with preserving this world. The world is in constant threat by the popularization of speculative philosophy. Parties of principle, for Hume, were a consequence of false philosophy gaining a stronghold on popular consciousness.

Let me take the above observations and frame them in terms of uncertainty. The popularization of philosophy, with its speculative and world inverting modes of reasoning, threatens an established order of things that bring coherence to an uncertain world. It is important to note that *questioning* traditions and habits is not in and of itself a problematic feature of philosophy for Hume. The problem with speculative philosophy (i.e., false philosophy) is that it attempts to replace opinions about things with indisputable and metaphysical truths about things. It attempts to replace contingently held beliefs (near certainties) with absolute and metaphysical certainties. In other words, the popularization of speculative philosophy has the effect of suffocating the uncertainty necessary for social and political freedom as well as a more useful form of philosophy to flourish.

In many societies not saturated or deeply influenced by philosophy, having unreflective opinions about the meaning, purpose, and function of things is sufficient to satisfy the human desire to know. Consider the religious syncretism that was the mainstay of social experience prior to philosophical religions (monotheistic religions). In that context, opinions about the afterlife and demands from the gods were held without an insistence on the absolute veracity of

150

any particular belief system. In that context, a believer can *know* something about the afterlife without being wedded to the ultimate truth of that insight. The demand to know things as they ultimately are, with the use of autonomous reason, on the other hand, is an imperative of speculative philosophy. Hume wants to temper speculative philosophy, without eliminating philosophical curiosity. Philosophical curiosity, for Hume, should be used to search for probable and useful knowledge about secular goods. The otherworldly pursuits exemplified by the theologians in Hume's day, on the other hand, should be left to the faithful who rely on the poetic writings of divine revelation.

In sum, the dogmatic certainties engendered by speculative philosophy pose just as much a threat as negative manifestations of uncertainty. In this section we have seen how Hume's conservatism is an outgrowth of his concern with the dogmatic certainties that accompanied the rise and popular embrace of speculative philosophy.   It is the world of habits, traditions and customs, in other words, that requires conserving from the threat posed by the usurpers of speculative philosophy. Hume did not, as we have seen, attempt to eliminate philosophy. Rather Hume sought to reform philosophy's scope of interest to secular goods. In this reading of Hume's politics, the conservative and liberal strands in his thought are historical curiosities. That is, Hume becomes a liberal or conservative when the time is ripe for that sort of political position.[376] As future possibilities always remain open, Hume's political radicalism, on the other hand, remains a permanent, albeit not an always prominent, feature of his politics.

3.6 Hume & the Uncertain Commercial Passions

In the preceding sections I examined Hume's various modes of thinking about uncertainty as a point of departure to reflect on social and political phenomenon. In sections 3.2

---

[376] Hume's conservatism, for example, is a direct result of philosophy's inherent challenge to the prereflective order of things, which in turn poses a threat to common life when speculative philosophy becomes popularized.

and 3.3 we saw uncertainty presented as an intractable human problem infecting the judgment of both the multitude and the few. While all humans are susceptible to the negative effects of uncertainty at times of great adversity, adding the philosophical quest for certainty into the mix (i.e., speculative philosophy), results in a lethal combination that leads to the inverting of common life in favor of abstract principles. In Hume's day, religious philosophers seeking to justify rationally their beliefs exemplified that tendency. Instead of discovering transcendental truths about the mysteries of faith—god's existence, the afterlife, and the like—religious philosophers developed dogmatic rationalizations to their beliefs. Religious followers, in turn, adopted a dogmatic stance, which led to feuding with other religious sects that also claimed a rational basis for the veracity of their beliefs. Instead of reason being used to improve worldly goods and ways of life—the only legitimate role for reason, according to Hume—reason was used to justify otherworldly beliefs.

As we saw in section 3.4 Hume addresses the question of reason's role in metaphysical matters squarely in the *Enquiry*. In short, Hume concludes that reason should have no role in metaphysical matters, considering metaphysical questions are beyond the reach of demonstrative reason and are unable to stand the scrutiny of empirical methodologies. Hume's conservatism, it was then shown, is a critique of ideologically laden political and religious positions that obscure common life in favor of principled conviction. As the popularization of speculative philosophy has the tendency to turn religious and political beliefs into hardened ideologies, a conservative posture that is open to change is necessary to conserve the world from the distorting influences of ideologically driven believers. Affirming and promulgating dogmatic certainties, supposedly arrived at through the use of speculative philosophy, in other words, fails to address adequately the problem of uncertainty.

In this section I turn to an example of Hume's attempt to order social forms of uncertainty for salutary ends. Like Spinoza, Hume attempts to channel the uncertain passions to secular goods that keep the gaze of the people firmly in this world. The response to negative forms of uncertainty for Hume is not the promulgation of dogmatic certainties. Instead, Hume advocates constructive forms of uncertainty that should thoughtfully be integrated into social and political domains of life. In what follows I reconstruct Hume's argument for a commercial society that is based on the channeling of the uncertain passions towards the pursuit of commercial goods, which in turn produces socially beneficent ends.

As mentioned in section 3.2, Hume traces the origin of superstitions to the uncertain passions. At times of economic and political insecurity, humans are thrown between hope and fear about their uncertain future. The most prominent passion at these times is fear. Superstition, consequently, originates from fearful uncertainty about the future. Commentators have devoted much attention to the connection between these emotions[377] and Hume's account of superstition and religion. Yet the importance of the uncertain emotions extends to non-religious areas of life. Uncertainty about the future, after all, characterizes human life beyond moments of dire scarcity that produce the most vulgar superstitions. Think of a football fanatic anticipating inclement weather that could postpone an upcoming match. Or consider a student awaiting word from an academic search committee about her admission or rejection to a graduate program. And then there is the most obvious uncertainty confronting religious and nonreligious individuals in conditions of scarcity and plenty, imminent death. In view of the ubiquitous nature of uncertainty in human life, it is only natural to contemplate the broader role of the uncertain passions in human life. This section extends Hume's analysis of the uncertain passions his analysis of commercial society. In line with this aim, it also provides a broader framework to

---

[377] Henceforth I use passions and emotions interchangeably.

153

understand the role of the uncertain passions in Hume's social and political thought, adding to his science of politics.

My reading of Hume's account of uncertainty and commerce is as follows. Presuming an ordered and stable political order, the commercial passion of avarice should be embraced. Among other reasons, channeling the commercial passions towards material luxuries provides an opportunity to temper toxic religious passions. In particular, commercial passions are directed towards hopes that are comparably harmless. Reorienting the uncertain passion to this-worldly *attainable* pursuits, for example, has the effect of lessening fanatical passions based on *unattainable* otherworldly pursuits. Hume's intent is not to replace religious faith—something he thinks impossible—but rather to diffuse the worst forms of religious superstition by focusing the uncertain passions on commercial pursuits. A focus on these pursuits has the added effect of facilitating a hope-centered society. This is opposed to a fear centered society that is the incubator of religious fanaticism. In short, Hume attempts to moderate civil discord through the commercial passions.

This section is divided in three sections. Because Hume does not explicitly make a connection between the uncertain passions and commerce, it is particularly important to set the groundwork for that discussion. Therefore, the first part of this section defines Hume's understanding of the uncertain passions and establishes its importance in Hume's work. In addition to the account of hope and fear in the *Treatise*, this requires an examination of one of Hume's most neglected philosophical works, "Dissertation on the Passions." The second section examines Hume's application of the uncertain passions to religion. The focus of this section is *The Natural History of Religion,* with occasional reference to other sources. I then turn to "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," an essay that approximates an explicit treatment of the uncertain

passions in political life. The final section synthesizes what came before to demonstrate how Hume's articulation of the commercial passions produces artificial hopes.

At times of uncertainty humans often turn to beliefs to assuage their worries. Death can be tolerated with a belief in an afterlife, a risky investment appears less risky when someone places his faith in a risk management professional, luck rituals are created to prevent negative outcomes, and so on. In all these cases, according to Hume, rational assessment about the optimal means to deal with uncertainty is not undertaken. Instead humans are guided by their passions towards a system of belief to confront an uncertain situation. For instance, sympathetic recognition of a socially shared, and thus legitimated, means of dealing with uncertainty is used. An investor, then, is guided towards a Lehman Brothers financial advisor as a result of their reputation. This is not because she studied whether Standard & Poor's high rating of Lehman Brothers is worth the paper it is written on. More fundamental then the actual choices individuals eventually make, however, are the passions underlying those choices. These are the passions of hope and fear.

The passions of hope and fear are explicitly treated in the *Treatise* and in a section of Hume's last philosophical work published in his lifetime, *Four Dissertations*. When discussing Hume on hope, certain scholars have ignored this later work.[378] This oversight is understandable given that Hume's *A Dissertation on the Passions* "probably qualifies as Hume's most neglected philosophical work."[379] In addition, it could be added that the *Dissertation* adds little to Hume's conception of hope and fear in the *Treatise*. Although this latter claim is true in a broad sense, I will nonetheless argue that Hume's *Dissertation* gives the uncertain passions an importance not found elsewhere.

---

[378] J. P. Day, "Hope," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1969): 89–102.
[379] John Immerwahr, "Hume's Dissertation on the Passions," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (1994): 225.

The neglect of the *Dissertation* probably began with L.A. Selby-Bigge's decision in the 1890s to omit it from Hume's edition of the *Enquires*.[380] He found it wanting both in terms of style and content. Since then, the most noteworthy criticism leveled against the *Dissertation* is that it omits the most interesting parts of the *Treatise* (in particular, Hume's account of sympathy), and "adds nothing new and original."[381] Nevertheless, as John Immerwahr has demonstrated, reading the *Dissertation* in "light of its original companions, the *Natural History* and 'Of Tragedy,'" grants one a better understanding about the changes Hume intended to highlight in the *Dissertation*.[382] To summarize this position, in the *Dissertation* Hume chooses to begin and focus on the direct passions as they intersect and supplement his earlier treatment on the origins of religion in the *Natural History*.

Understood in these terms, the *Dissertation* is not meant to override the *Enquires* or the *Treatise*. Rather it serves a very particular purpose. The importance of this purpose should not be underestimated. By turning his attention to religion, Hume was in effect confronting *the* problem standing in the way of political progress, religious faction. Thus, his focus on the direct passions in the *Dissertation* is a return to the fundamental human passions that animate religious faction. This explains his claim in the beginning of the *Dissertation* that, "None of these passions seem to contain any thing curious or remarkable, expect *Hope* and *Fear*."[383] While Hume acknowledges that hope and fear "merit our particular attention" in the *Treatise*, he does not claim it is "remarkable."[384] The remarkable status granted to hope and fear is only given late in Hume's philosophical development.

---

[380] Ibid., 226.
[381] Ibid., 228.
[382] Ibid.
[383] David Hume, Thomas Hill Green, and Thomas Hodge Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1* (London, UK: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1875), 139.
[384] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1888), 439.

Considering the *Dissertation* is one of Hume's final works, perhaps Hume would have continued working through the role and political implications of the uncertain passions had he arrived at this insight earlier. Hume does, of course, focus on the importance of hope and fear to religious superstitions. This focus on religious superstitions amounts to a focus on the political dangers of religious faction to a stable political order. He did not, however, extend this analysis to a broader consideration of how the uncertain passions both positively and negatively affect political life outside a religious context. This omission is odd considering uncertainty is present in many non-religious realms of life. Perhaps Hume thought extending his analysis of the uncertain passions to commercial society would prove too controversial—for reasons that will later become apparent in this essay. Be that as it may, with the distinctiveness of hope and fear now established, we can turn to Hume's understanding of these passions.

Hope and fear are "derived from the probability of any good or evil."[385] That is, these mixed passions are sustained by a feeling of uncertainty about the probable good or evil of a future event. Hume gives the example of a parent who hears from a stranger of her child's death. She is not certain of the stranger's credibility, and thus does not immediately fall into grief. Instead, she fluctuates between fears and hopes about her child's fate. When she later confirms her child's death, hope and fear dissipate and are replaced by grief. A feeling of certainty about the condition of her child, in other words, overtakes the uncertain passions that were previously activated. Hope and fear, then, can be characterized as passions of uncertainty.

More precisely, uncertainty about a probable good or evil incites the passions of grief and joy, depending on the perceived probability on each side. Because these passions are not firmly fixed on an object, they do not produce either grief or joy, at least not unequivocally. Instead, being intermingled with each other, the imagination fluctuates between these opposite views, and

---

[385] Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 140.

thus produces the passions of hope and fear. As these passions are based on uncertainty, they are consequently at their height "when the chances [of the fearful or hopeful outcome] are equal on both sides."[386] This uncertainty, moreover, can be purely imaginary. If an object is in fact certain, but uncertain to human judgment, Hume claims, that is sufficient to awaken feelings of hope and fear. With this background in mind, let us turn to Hume's account of the origin of religions. It is there where Hume explicitly applies his theory of the uncertain passions.

The Natural History of Religion contains Hume's most comprehensive treatment on the origins of religion. One could as easily say that it is an account of the origins of superstition. For Hume, religious superstition begins with polytheism. As was the case with seventeenth and eighteenth century theologians and philosophers, Hume used "superstition" as a referent to religious practices and beliefs he rejected.[387] To call a religion superstitious, in other words, is to claim it a "false religion." Hume differed from the bulk of these critics, however, as he did not firmly subscribe to any one religious tradition in his day. Instead he took the bold step of referring to all popular religions as superstitious, thus calling into questions the possibility of a "true religion." If popular religions are false, and false religions are superstitious, from whence do superstitions originate?

Hume's short answer to this question is the passions. Superstitions, not being based on religion, are instead based on a groundless foundation conjured up by the imagination. In particular, according to Hume, "the primary religion of mankind arises chiefly from an anxious fear of future events."[388] Being in a condition of want and scarcity, humans do not know the causes of their condition, and thus fear the continuation or worsening of their misfortune.

---

[386] Ibid.
[387] Martin Bell, "Hume on Superstition," in *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 153.
[388] David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, ed. A. Wayne Colver (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976), 48.

Amidst this fear there is also hope for a better future. As a result of this continuous uncertainty, humans turn to *understand* these unknown and secret causes that have them hanging "in perpetual suspense betwixt life and death, health and sickness, plenty and want."[389] This turn to understand causal relationships is not animated by a philosophical love of truth. Instead, Hume writes, these unknown causes "become the constant object of our hope and fear; and while the passions are kept in perpetual alarm by an anxious expectation of the events, the imagination is equally employed in forming ideas of those powers on which we have so entire a dependence."[390] The passions of hope and fear, then, activate the imagination to create an idea about these invisible powers that appear to determine both fortune and misfortune. That these imaginings produce anthropomorphized religious beliefs should come as no surprise. "There is an universal tendency amongst mankind," Hume writes, "to conceive all beings like themselves."[391] It is therefore not long "before we ascribe to them [unknown causes] thought, and reason, and passion, and sometimes even the limbs and figures of men, in order to bring them nearer to a resemblance with ourselves."[392] This, in short, is how Hume characterizes polytheistic religions at the beginning of *Natural History*.

Hume later extends this analysis to include theistic religions. At first glance, this appears in conflict with his claim that theism, being "so comfortable to sound reason," finds a natural ally in philosophy. This alliance, however, is at best superficial. Rather than temper the superstitious inclinations of popular religions, philosophy "is at every turn perverted to serve the purposes of superstition."[393] As we saw in the last section, the uncertain passions distort religious doctrine when a religion's tenets are closely aligned to philosophy. Given the persistent force of

---

[389] Ibid., 10.
[390] Ibid., 20.
[391] Ibid., 33.
[392] Ibid., 34.
[393] Ibid., 65.

superstition in molding and directing religious dogma, Hume investigates its problematic influence on government and society in his essay, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm."

Hume begins this essay alerting his readers that superstition and enthusiasm are both corruptions of "true religion." As it turns out, both these moods animate the religions of Hume's day. Superstition, on the one hand, refers to Catholicism, and enthusiasm to various forms of Protestantism. Concerned with political practice, Hume aimed not to dismantle these false religions, but rather to better understand the advantages and dangers of their respective religious practices. Hume ultimately sides with religions of enthusiasm. The distinction between religions based on enthusiasm and superstition, however, is not unequivocal. Superstition, remember, connotes a false religion. As we will see, religions of enthusiasm also contain elements that Hume considers superstitious. This distinction, then, appears to be a heuristic means of emphasizing the extent to which Catholicism relies on the most primitive sort of superstition, thereby highlighting Hume's preference for Protestantism.

As the most primitive of the two, the source of superstition is weakness, fear, and melancholy. Of these sources, fear stands as the remarkable passion. Consequently, Hume's account of superstitious religions in the *Essays* is similar to his account of the origins of religion in the *Natural History*. Much in line with what Hume wrote in the *Natural History*, Hume writes that in a superstitious state of mind, "infinite unknown evils are dreaded from unknown agent," which leads the imagination to create unverifiable causes.[394]

Religions of enthusiasm share important features with religions of superstition. As false religions, they are born of ignorance. This ignorance, moreover, has roots in the passions that color the imagination, and thus the belief systems of each religion. The central difference is the uncertain passions that animate each type of belief. While fear dominates religions of

---

[394] Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 60.

160

superstition, hope is the guiding passion of enthusiasm. I would like to highlight the implications accompanying the dominant passions of uncertainty in these two types of religious faith.

Religions of superstition, based on fear, are more dependent on hierarchy, and hence on the priesthood. Accordingly, it "renders men tame and abject, and fits them for slavery."[395] The hopeful disposition afforded by enthusiasm, on the other hand, is a friend of civil liberty as it is "destructive of all ecclesiastical power."[396] Its accompanying "spirit of liberty," which has "contempt of forms, ceremonies, and traditions," results in a more individualistic conception of religion.[397] Therefore, according to Hume, it is less prone to civic upheaval. Religions based on enthusiasm, however, are not unequivocally unproblematic. In fact, they can be "more furious and violent" than those based on superstition. The saving grace of enthusiasm is that over time it becomes "more gentle and moderate." On the whole, therefore, Hume prefers religions of enthusiasm.

How is it that hope predominates in religions of enthusiasm? Put differently, what is it that suppresses, hides, or eliminates fear when a spirit of enthusiasm is present? Let us being with Hume's claim that a mind subject to "an unaccountable elevation and presumption" arises from "prosperous success, from luxuriant health, from strong spirits, or from a bold and confident disposition."[398] In other words, the stability following continuous health and worldly success leads to a kind of confidence that results in a hopeful outlook. This state of mind notice is far from the origin of religions, which arise in moments of dire scarcity and need. At these

---

[395] Ibid., 62.
[396] Ibid.
[397] Ibid., 61.
[398] Ibid., 60.

161

times, fear, remember, is the dominant of the two uncertain passions. As Hume writes in the

Natural History,

> Any of the human affections may lead us into the notion of invisible, intelligent power; hope as well as fear, gratitude as well as affliction: But if we examine our own hearts, or observe what passes around us, we shall find, that men are much oftener thrown on their knees by the melancholy than by the agreeable passions.[399]

This is understandable considering in moments of need and affliction, a despairing type of uncertainty leads to an urgent desire to understand the unknown causes. Feeling helpless, it also is accompanied by a desire to be led. Hence Catholicism—and its propensity towards hierarchy, ceremonies, and forms—reflects this primitive sort of superstition for Hume. In moments of prosperity, on the other hand, confidence resulting from health and success governs the outlook of a person overtaken by enthusiasm. This confidence, notice, does not arise from philosophical reflection that results in a kind of certainty or a sober acceptance of uncertainty. This confidence, so important to hope when in the grip of enthusiasm, is founded on good fortune and the passions it produces. As Hume puts it,

> Prosperity is easily received as our due, and few questions are asked concerning its cause or author. It engenders cheerfulness and activity and alacrity and a lively enjoyment of every social and sensual pleasure: And during this state of mind, men have little leisure or inclination to think of the unknown, invisible regions.[400]

Prosperity, then, is necessary to achieve a confident spirit. Notice, hope nonetheless prevails at these moments. Uncertainty about the future, after all, remains present in these conditions. The difference is how uncertainty is experienced. When hopeful, an individual does not *feel* uncertainty as she does in moments of fear. Her confidence masks any direct confrontation with uncertainty. Instead she looks to the future with joy (when feeling certain) and hope (when feeling uncertain) that it will continue in its success filled trajectory.

---

[399] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1976, 36.
[400] Ibid.

162

Despite the advantages of hope filled religions, Hume suggests, the foundation they are built on is insufficient. Without advancing socially beneficent forms of secular uncertainties, a loss of fortune can quickly revert to an embrace of more primitive types of religions. As Hume says through his character Philo in the *Dialogues*, "fits of excessive, enthusiastic joy, by exhausting the spirits, always prepare the way for equal fits of superstitious terror and dejection."[401] This suitably applies to Hume's discussion of both religions of enthusiasm and superstition, as the "true sources" of both are ignorance and the passions.

Lacking a solid foundation for either type of religion, why does Hume not discount both? That is, why isn't Hume more radical about calling for the eradication of these religions? One response is that doing so is simply imprudent. Therefore, Hume characteristically acts with moderation when confronting the religious sects of his day. After all, explicitly denouncing religion would make Hume an unequivocal enemy of the multitude, thereby eliminating the readership Hume was clearly after. By itself, this reply is inadequate. There is another, more practical, reason Hume does not call for the eradication of religion, Hume does not think it is possible. Unlike some of his contemporaries, such as John Addison and Samuel Clarke, Hume did not argue that superstition could be corrected by reason.[402] Even his friend, Adam Smith, believed that over time education could play a significant role in terminating civil strife originating from religious fervor. In the latter part of book V of the *Wealth of Nations,* Smith proposes remedies for religions that incite civil strife. The first of these is the "study of science and philosophy." "Science," Smith writes, "is the great antidote to the poison of enthusiasm and superstition."[403] Hume never approximates making such a claim. His insistence that the

---

[401] Ibid., 259.
[402] Jane McIntyre, "Passion and Artifice in Hume's Account of Superstition," in *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, ed. D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), 180.
[403] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1999), 909.

passions, and not reason, produce actions explains this absence. Instead, Hume makes the following claim in his short essay "Of Miracles," "As long as the world endures" will "the accounts of miracles and prodigies be found in all history, sacred and profane."[404] There is, in other words, no hope in eliminating belief in the miraculous. Elsewhere he makes a similar, but broader claim, "All mankind have a strong propensity to religion at certain times and in certain dispositions."[405] Hume, in short, accepts religion as an inevitable feature of human life. The question for Hume then is how to temper the dangerous religious passions while not relying on reason?

This brings us back to Hume's preference for religions based on enthusiasm. It brings us back to hope and the problem of uncertainty. Certainty, notice, is not a goal for Hume. Uncertainty will always be present in human life. The kind of uncertainty humans confront makes the difference. The type of uncertainty produced by fear, for example, is not a viable option. Living in unreliable social and economic conditions incites fear that leads to the most vulgar and dangerous sorts of superstitions. A philosopher's manner of confronting uncertainty is also not an option. In the face of uncertainty a philosopher is moved to reason about said uncertainty, which is to say she is not overtaken by her emotions. Philosophy, moreover, seldom—if ever—results in certain knowledge. As Hume put it, "Reason is so uncertain a guide that it will always be exposed to doubt and controversy."[406] Consequently, in the hands of the vulgar (the many), philosophy is just as likely to lead to fear.[407] The problem with both these approaches is the persistent uncertainty present in each. Hope, recall, is also a type of uncertainty. It is, however, of a very different sort. As Hume explains,

---

404 Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 169.
405 Ibid., 246.
406 Ibid., 269.
407 In the *Natural History,* Hume writes, "The vulgar, that is, indeed, all mankind, a few excepted" (Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1976, 57).

Uncertainty is, indeed, in one respect as near ally'd to hope as to fear, since it makes an essential part in the composition of the former passion; but the reason, why it inclines not to that side, is, that uncertainty alone is uneasy, and has a relation of impressions to the uneasy passions.[408]

If a conscious and explicit uncertainty predominates, in other words, fear is close at hand. The uncertainty accompanying hope, by contrast, is never alone. Hope, always attached to a positive predisposition, transforms how uncertainty is experienced. In short, hope masks uncertainty. The confident posture a hopeful person possesses transforms an uncertain circumstance into felt certainty, or at least nearly felt certainty.

Two things can be summed up in this section. First, Hume prefers religions that are hopeful. This preference is due to the greater moderation present in these types of religions. Second, Hume implicitly suggests that a society driven by hope is preferable to one driven by fear. Because prosperity supports hope, moreover, the importance of commerce is implied. We are now prepared to turn to a reconstruction of the role of the uncertain passions in a commercial society.

Hopes change over time. In conditions of scarcity, an individual's hope is minimal. Her hopes are limited to basic needs, such as food and security. Once these needs are met, however, humans shift their hopes to non-necessities. Aristotle succinctly captures this reality within a political context. "It [the polis] comes to be for the sake of living," Aristotle writes in the *Politics*, "but it remains in existence for the sake of living well."[409] The teleology of the polis by necessity moves beyond mere life. Humans have insatiable desires that are not satisfied once their basic needs are met. What then is their hope? They might hope for wisdom, which is to say for philosophy. Yet, the many do not pursue philosophy. What then constitutes this move away from mere life for most people? As will be seen, for Hume, an indulgence in sensual

---

[408] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1888, 305.
[409] Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998), 3.

pleasures and luxuries should replace the hope for basic needs. For example, clothing, once simply used for practical purposes, becomes transformed to fashion. Food, once scarce and rationed, transforms into a cuisine. These examples alert us to the fact that providing for the basic needs of people is politically insufficient. Any successful political society must find a means to address human's never-ending desires. Hume understood the role of commerce as essential for this purpose.

Although Hume advocated commerce, he does not always announce its virtues in his political writings. In fact, it is many times absent. Its absence is a reflection of Hume's recognition that securing mere life is both fundamental and in itself an extraordinarily achievement. As Hume writes in the "Origin of Government,"

> All men are sensible of the necessity of justice to maintain peace and order; and all men are sensible of the necessity of peace and order for the maintenance of society. Yet, notwithstanding this strong and obvious necessity, such is the frailty or perverseness of our nature! it is impossible to keep men, faithfully and unerringly, in the paths of justice.[410]

Consequent to the recognition of the problem of securing basic justice, Hume spent the bulk of his political writings addressing the best means of establishing a secure and stable political order. This is the first step towards a hopeful politics. By securing justice, a state reduces uncertainty, and thus the fear that leads to the most vulgar types of superstition. Hume expresses this position in the *Natural History*, "All human life, especially before the institution of order and good government, being subject to fortuitous accidents; it is natural, that superstition should prevail."[411] Having reduced uncertainty in public life, a political society is then able to create an environment of hope that extends beyond hopes for basic goods. The means by which Hume intends on achieving the basic justice required to reach this end is beyond

---

[410] Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 114.
[411] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1976, 21.

the scope of this paper. It suffices to say Hume argues for a form of republicanism that successfully controls factions through its institutional ordering.[412]

Although a secure and ordered government is a great achievement, it does not satisfy the insatiable desires of individuals. True political stability, in other words, requires more than an ordered and secure government. Justice is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for a successful politics. In order to achieve political stability over time, commerce is required to sustain and grow a nation's economy. Commercial growth, and the busy activity accompanying that growth, is necessary to satisfy the needs that go beyond mere life. Despite this seemingly obvious role of commerce, political thinkers have not always argued in these terms. Thus, Hume puzzles that "There is not a word of trade in all Machiavel, which is strange, considering that Florence rose only by trade."[413] Consequently, for Hume, any account of politics that does not take commerce into account is incomplete. These accounts of politics are incomplete for two reasons. The most obvious reason is the material benefits that accompany commercial societies. The passions spurred by commerce are another, albeit nonmaterial reason, Hume argues for a commercial society. It is these passions that are central to creating a hopeful regime.

Among the passions Hume promotes is avarice. Related to this passion is his defense of luxury. It is worth considering why Hume chose to defend what was condemned by many of his contemporaries. Hume could have simply defended the material benefits of commerce and left it at that. Instead he decided to enter into a swath of opposition. This includes the widely held opinion that the fall of Rome was in large part due to its indulgence in luxury, which supposedly led to its corruption and eventual downfall.

---

[412] Knud Haakonssen, "The Structure of Hume's Political Theory," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 201-9.
[413] John Hill Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume, Vol. 1* (Edinburgh, Scotland: William Tait, 1846), 129.

First, Hume disagreed with this reading of Rome's downfall. He attributed Rome's downfall to its form of government. Second, Hume understood an appeal to avarice as the best, and most practical, means of harnessing support for the common good. If we could produce a selfless passion for the common good, Hume writes in "Of Commerce," that would prove sufficient to motivate industry and serve as a support for the common good. This, however, ignores the way humans usually are. Attempting to rely on altruistic human motivations towards the common good is a naïve setup for failure. In Hume's words, "But as these principles are too disinterested and too difficult to support, it is requisite to govern men by other passions, and animate them with a spirit of avarice and industry, art and luxury."[414]

Notice, governing people by this "spirit" presupposes they are not living on the brink of life and death, and hence presupposes they are not susceptible to the worst kinds of fears that accompany that condition. In conditions of extreme fear, after all, human hopes are reduced either to securing mere life or securing the benefits of an afterlife. Longing for art and luxury are not even within the range of possible hopes. This supports the previous claim that a hopeful society requires the establishment of basic justice. While the establishment of basic justice can be accomplished in a number of different regime types, a commercial society works best in a free government. That is to say, in order for a commercial society to flourish, it requires the belief that you are part of a form of government that provides the requisite freedoms to pursue economic and social advancement.

The opportunity for luxury creates hopes for the particular pleasures accompanying a luxurious way of life. Without these opportunities commercial hope cannot flourish. Consequently, commerce is "apt to decay in absolute governments."[415] Because these

---

[414] Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 160.
[415] Ibid., 69.

governments are hierarchical and stifle social mobility, it prevents those stuck in lower class positions from hoping for a better future. Hence, commerce "can never flourish but in a free government."[416] The opportunity for luxury in a commercial society awakens the imagination and directs it towards sensual "goods." Hopes directed towards luxurious and sensuous goods, in turn, are preferable to religious hopes as they are not as dangerous.

Religious hopes are often matters of life and death. In the *Dialogues* Philo argues that while a "calm and equable" state of mind is preferable, this is "impossible to support, where a man thinks that he lies in such profound darkness and uncertainty, between an eternity of happiness and an eternity of misery."[417] Uncertainty about the afterlife is less likely to have a dominant presence in a well-ordered government. One role of commerce is to redirect the uncertain passions away from otherworldly goods and punishments and towards the relatively harmless passions of this world.

Hume explains how a commercial society might begin this process. The first step is the recognition that spurring industry requires an appeal to the passions. As Hume writes, "Our passions are the only causes of labour."[418] Imagine a farmer who has a surplus of crops. Not living in a commercial society that cultivates the "mechanic arts,"

> They have no temptation, therefore, to encrease their skill and industry; *since* they cannot exchange that superfluity for any commodities, which may serve either to their pleasure or vanity. A habit of indolence naturally prevails. The greater part of the land lies uncultivated.[419] (emphasis mine)

The pleasure and vanity attached to commodities is what spurs industry. Notice, it is not the *attainment* of these objects that accomplishes the desired effect, rather it is the *opportunity* and imagined status of obtaining said objects that suffices. Thus Hume writes that the "the arts

---

[416] Ibid.
[417] David Hume, *David Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 100.
[418] Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 159.
[419] Ibid., 293.

of luxury" adds to the "happiness of the state; since they afford to many the opportunity of receiving enjoyments, with which they would otherwise have been unacquainted."[420] In other words, it is the uncertain possibility of obtaining luxurious goods that is needed. Hume illustrates this point when discussing the possibility of obtaining foreign commodities. He writes,

> It rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury, which they never before dreamed of, raises in them a desire of a more splendid way of life than what their ancestors enjoyed.[421]

As individuals become acquainted with the pleasures of foreign luxuries, newly awakened passions lead them to dream about a previously unimagined way of life. This desire for an uncertain future of luxury is made possible by profits that are achieved through labor. Commerce, then, creates a kind of artificial uncertainty.

Hume's hope is that these artificial hopes, made possible through a commercial society, will assuage religiously dangerous hopes and fears. This is accomplished by reducing the time spent considering ultimate questions about life and death. Instead of placing hope in the afterlife, human hopes should remain focused on this world. After all, it is in times of prosperity, according to Hume, that "confidence and sensuality" make humans "forgetful of a divine providence."[422] By tantalizing the senses, in other words, dreams about potential luxuries narrowly focus human attention on the attainment of material goods. These pursuits may be vulgar, as Hume acknowledges, but their advantage is the moderate civil society it helps creates. Over time, for example, individuals become so habituated to desiring things, that their reactions to poverty are severely altered. In a fervently commercial society it is not odd, for instance, to encounter a poor individual who instead of focusing on his or her basic needs, or on

---

[420] Ibid., 156.
[421] Ibid., 296.
[422] Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, 1976, 21-22.

revolutionary dreams for a better a future, hopes for the luxuries he or she lacks. This may be unfortunate on many levels. Yet it is preferable, according to Hume, to solely relying on religious hopes that can quickly mutate into dangerous flights of the imagination.

To be clear, Hume's aim is not to eliminate religion. That aim presupposes mass enlightenment, a possibility Hume does not entertain. Rather Hume's aim is to create other passions of uncertainty that rival the more dangerous religious passions. As long as death, civil war, and natural disasters, are the constant lot of humankind, religion will have a secure presence in human life. This presence is also secured by the fact that individuals experience uncertainty differently. That is, irrespective of material and social conditions, certain individuals will experience fear driven uncertainty. This, in turn, predisposes them to religious faith even while living within a commercial society. And finally, commerce itself is subject to uncertainties that undermine the hopes it produces. In one of his last essays, "Of the Jealousy of Trade," Hume recognizes that "every particular branch of commerce will always be exposed" to "revolutions and uncertainties."[423] This was recently illustrated in a Financial Times opinion piece titled, "Fear Undermines America's Recovery." According to Alan Greenspan, as Americans lost hope in what they perceived to be a grim and uncertain financial market, they were gripped by fears that consequently paralyzed the economic recovery.

This section sought to explain Hume's application of the uncertain passions to his social and political thought. In particular, it extended his analysis of the uncertain passions to the commercial passions. Once a secure and stable government is established, Hume argues, it becomes possible to govern humans through the use of avarice. Compared to the hopes and fears that accompany a preoccupation with eternal damnation or salvation, the pursuit of luxuries creates relatively harmless secular hopes. This, in turn, supports a hope driven society that

---

[423] Hume, Green, and Grose, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*, 195.

tempers the toxic religious passions arising from fearful uncertainty. More specifically, indulging in the sensual this-worldly pursuits of commercial luxuries distracts the mind from the grim uncertainties present in a fear-driven society. Instead of confronting uncertainty, a hopeful society masks uncertainty through distractions pursuant with commercial society.

The key to this analysis is the relationship between uncertainty and humans. To what extent can humans live with uncertainty? Hume is not optimistic on this point. In fact, he is so pessimistic about the dangers accompanying a direct encounter with uncertainty that he does not offer confronting it as a possible solution. That confrontation is the very problem! Humans desire certainty, or at least a feeling of knowledge that is not plagued by doubt. As Aristotle claims in the first line of his *Metaphysics*, "All men by nature desire to know." This desire to know should not be confused with a desire to philosophize. Philosophy rarely produces certainty, and therefore requires the ability to squarely confront uncertainty. Consequently, Hume does not promote philosophy, or even education, as a solution to the problem of uncertainty. As most individuals cannot deal with a direct confrontation with uncertainty, the most effective means of dealing with uncertainty is through an appeal to the passions. Hence, Hume argues that the sensual pleasures accompanying avarice should be used to temper any dangerous passions that may otherwise arise. This may suggest that a direct confrontation with uncertainty should solely be reserved for the few. Hume's appeal to the commercial passions, in this reading, is a salutary injunction to tame the passions of the many.

Philosophers, however, are not immune from the distorting effects of the passions. "Nothing," Hume writes, "is more dangerous to reason than the flights of the imagination, and nothing has been the occasion of more mistakes among philosophers."[424] Philosophers, in other words, are also susceptible to the "flights of imagination" caused by the passions. They too get

---

[424] Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 1888, 183.

bogged down when confronted with persistent uncertainty. In the *Treatise*, Hume acknowledges that philosophizing led him to a kind of "philosophical melancholy and delirium." Instead of continuing to philosophize, and inadvertently making causal connections where none exist, Hume turned to worldly distractions, "I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends." The distractions available in commercial societies are not only for the benefit of the many, but extend to philosophers who also confront the distorting effects of persistent uncertainty.

4. CONCLUSION

Uncertainty about knowledge claims and possible futures is *always* present. Yet, it is primarily at moments of fearful uncertainty when people predominantly turn to consider explicitly the effects and nature of uncertainty. In the midst of an impending storm, or on hearing of a scientific breakthrough that challenges conventional beliefs, the problem of uncertainty strikes at the emotive lives of those affected. It is at peaceful moments—on a sunny day, or when conventional beliefs go unchallenged—that uncertainty is a distant thought overwhelmed by positive and calm feelings. A consequence of this predisposition is that academic research on uncertainty has more often than not solely considered uncertainty as a problem. In this dissertation, I tried to show that uncertainty could also be considered in constructive ways that represent a social and political promise. I contend, moreover, that future-oriented forms of uncertainty should explicitly be theorized in order to examine implicit visions of constructive uncertainty as well as possibly to design new forms of constructive uncertainty that are socially and politically beneficial.

In order to illustrate what theorizing about constructive forms of uncertainty might look like, I examined the concept of uncertainty in the political and philosophical work of Baruch Spinoza and David Hume. As both these thinkers wrote at a time prior to the rise of risk analysis—which is to say, prior to the attempt to make uncertainty calculable and subject to the powers of scientific analysis—their thought was untouched by the dominance of risk analysis that colors theorizing about uncertainty today.

It is this fact that makes Spinoza and Hume's thinking on uncertainty refreshing for students of risk and uncertainty studies. While the approach taken by researchers within this

broad area of inquiry is diverse in terms of disciplines and methodologies, Spinoza and Hume provide a nuanced way of thinking about uncertainty that can inform their inquiries into philosophical and political forms of uncertainty. In addition to contributing to risk and uncertainty studies, this dissertation also attempted to resurrect a dormant tradition of thinking about uncertainty within the work of major thinkers in the history of modern political philosophy in the west. In the introduction I presented a brief sketch of this dormant tradition that began with Machiavelli and Hobbes, while in the body of the dissertation I engaged in an in-depth analysis of Spinoza and Hume.

Ultimately, I hope to have provided guide posts that help expand current ways of thinking about uncertainty, especially by highlighting uncertainty understood as a constructive force for social and political life. I do not claim to have systematically developed a conception of constructive uncertainty. Instead, I tried to show that thinking about uncertainty constructively was embedded in the political thought of Spinoza and Hume, in order point towards alternative ways of thinking about uncertainty. In what follows, I discuss the limitations of looking back to the work of Spinoza and Hume. I also present one example of an implicit form of constructive uncertainty by briefly examining the idea of the American Dream.

While Spinoza and Hume's work on constructive uses of uncertainty is illuminating for those studying uncertainty today, their insight into political and social things is limited by the historical horizons of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Consider, for example, that they wrote prior to a world dominated by nation states, modern liberal democracy, advanced capitalism, and globalization. These are only a few examples of how the world today is conspicuously different from the one Spinoza and Hume inhabited, or even from any world they may have envisioned. Spinoza's liberal democracy is not the liberal democracy of today. Nor is

Hume's vision of commercial society equivalent to the characteristics of advanced capitalism in the twenty-first century. One could, of course, claim that certain aspects of liberal democracy and advanced capitalism fall in line with Spinoza and Hume's visions. The praise of freedom as something that is nearly sacred in certain liberal democracies today, for instance, might well reflect Spinoza's suggestion that devotion to freedom should be a priority in a liberal democracy. Or, consider the unproblematic acceptance of luxurious living and avarice that characterizes the expansion of a capitalist ideology, which is certainly an aspect of advanced capitalism that aligns with Hume's praise of commercial society.

These parallels, however, are only parts of a much larger and complex whole. The general agreements that Spinoza and Hume may have with contemporary forms of political and social phenomenon, in other words, should not lead us to conclude that they would agree with commercial society and liberal democracy as they currently appear in all their complexity. The creativity and growth that result from the advance of capitalism, for example, need to be considered alongside the destruction left in its wake. Considered in this light, it is unclear whether the benefits of commercial society as they currently stand would be sufficient to render Hume a supporter of the status quo. The hope each thinker had for liberal democracies and commercial societies to orient us hopefully towards the future, moreover, is challenged by the pervasive fears that underlie modern societies.[425] In short, Spinoza and Hume's presentation of constructive forms of uncertainty need to be thought anew for today's world, rather than simply used as "evidence" to support or denounce the current order of things.

---

[425] While this would not be surprising for either thinker, the pervasiveness of fear in contemporary societies would give them pause. See, for example, Daniel Gardner, *The Science of Fear: Why We Fear the Things We Shouldn't--and Put Ourselves in Greater Danger*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Dutton, 2008) and Uli Linke and Danielle Taana Smith, eds., *Cultures of Fear: A Critical Reader* (New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2009).

The more pressing limitations when considering Spinoza and Hume's work on social and political uncertainty are the multiple ways in which the world today would be unrecognizable to thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Today's new challenges and possibilities are due largely to the expansion and growth of science and technology that affect virtually all areas of life. An obvious example is the ubiquitous and rapid growth of cyber technologies that act as co-extensions of everyday life. In such a world, what does it mean it be human? The coming moment of the singularity, or what has also been called post-humanism, generates fears as well as hopes about a cyborg-like future.[426] There is little guidance that Spinoza and Hume can directly provide regarding this new condition that has major implications for social and political life. Given all these limitations, why look back to Spinoza and Hume at all?

First, Spinoza and Hume provide us with a better understanding of the current triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism. Specifically, an understanding of Spinoza and Hume's thinking on constructive forms of uncertainty is foundational to reconsider critically the reasons why certain early modern thinkers supported liberal democracy and commercial society. There was a push by certain early modern thinkers, I contend, to make humans future-oriented through economic and political means. In a broad sense, I think Spinoza and Hume's project was successful. Liberal democracies, when they function well enough, keep discontented citizens hopeful that the next election might bring about a better future. Liberal democracies also tend to encourage placing the prospective good of freedom to pursue one's ends as a value above all other goods, including religious imperatives.

Commercial society, on the other hand, fuels the imagination of large swaths of people to desire mundane material goods, which, in turn, keeps their passions within narrow boundaries

---

[426] Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis* (London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2013) and Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2005).

that maintains their gaze on a possible future of luxury. These outgrowths of liberal democracy and commercial society, I have argued, are not unintended consequences that were unreflectively overlooked prior to their manifestation in the world. On the contrary, arguments were made that those consequences (future-oriented uncertainties) would on the whole be advantageous. In order to understand those arguments better, one needs to return to the first presentations of those positions—one needs to return to Spinoza and Hume. While the work of Spinoza and Hume cannot have a final say in these matters, they are a necessary starting point.

Spinoza and Hume's work on constructive uncertainty is also worthwhile today given its engagement with perennial human problems. The claim that perennial human problems exist is tenuous given human's increasing ability to alter their environments and self-experiences through bio-technological and virtual means. Yet, I contend, there are a few underlying experiences that remain constant, even if the manifestations of those experiences vary based on context. For all the talk of trans-humanism, post-humanism, and the singularity, for example, humans continue to have hopes and fears about the future. Part of what it means to be human in a wide array of contexts, in other words, is to passionately experience an uncertain future. And it is exactly to the problems and possibilities of experiential responses to an uncertain future that Spinoza and Hume's work on constructive forms of uncertainty addresses.

Perhaps the most informative part of Spinoza and Hume's analyses on human responses to uncertainty is their work on the interconnections between uncertainty, superstition, religion, and the secular. The thesis of secularization—the once firmly held conviction of intellectuals that forms of the secular would over time replace religious beliefs—is falling out of vogue, as the fact of religion's staying power has produced a new literature on the post-secular.[427] In light of

---

[427] In Philosophy, Jolyon Agar, *Post-Secularism, Realism and Utopia: Transcendence and Immancence from Hegel to Bloch* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); in Sociology, Gregor McLennen, "Towards Postsecular Sociology?" *Sociology* 41, no. 5

the resurgence of religion, Spinoza and Hume's detailed discussions on the relationship between experiences of uncertainty and religion are as relevant as ever. Because both advocate the turning of the religious gaze towards the secular, moreover, they speak directly to the challenges of balancing the relationship between the secular and the religious.[428] As I have tried to show, neither Spinoza nor Hume was a proponent of the thesis of secularization. They both understood that religions, or religion-like beliefs, are an inextricable part of what it means to be human. Their goal, consequently, was not to eliminate religion, but rather to temper its civically damaging characteristics.

Lastly, Spinoza and Hume's work on uncertainty and superstition can also contribute to discussions on the origins and workings of superstitious forms peculiar to the twenty-first century. For example, as the divide between machines and humans further blurs, the manifestations of conventional religions will alter as new forms of superstitions arise due to human's interaction with a digital, virtual, and machine-saturated worlds.[429] Consider that robots can now take care of the elderly, basic conversations are conducted with mobile devices, and machines can drive cars, make autonomous military decisions, and soon diagnose health problems.[430] How are humans going to make sense of these changes? Will they trust machines to take over so many aspects of their lives? Whatever the response to these questions, it can be assured that many will hope, fear, or fluctuate between those emotions, whether immersed in those new technologies or when considering the prospective future that awaits them. They will, in other words, struggle with the emotions of uncertainty that produce superstition. Hence,

---

(2007): 857–70, doi:10.1177/0038038507080441; in Literature, William Franke, "Beyond the Limits of Reason Alone: A Critical Approach to the Religious Inspiration of Literature," *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 2 (2009): 69–78; and in International Relations, Luca Mavelli and Fabio Petito, "The Postsecular in International Relations: An Overview," *Review of International Studies* 38 (2012): 931–42.

[428] Ran Hirschl, *Constitutional Theocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[429] Heidi A. Campbell, ed., *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).

[430] George A. Bekey et al., *Robotics: State of the Art and Future Challenges* (London, UK: Imperial College Press, 2008).

Spinoza and Hume provide an illuminating starting point to think about the fundamental human experience of uncertainty.

4.1 The American Dream as a Constructive form of Uncertainty

I would now like to briefly consider an implicit form of constructive uncertainty by examining the idea of the American Dream. While there is a wide range of scholarship on the American Dream, its effects on human's experiences of uncertainty have not been explicitly explored. I want to claim that thinking about the American Dream in terms of uncertainty opens up new and promising ways to theorize about this ideological phenomenon.

The ideology of the American Dream fits neatly as a constructive form of uncertainty as it is a future-oriented promise. In its most common understanding, the American Dream promises, "that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it—material or otherwise— through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfillment through success."[431] Despite this generally held understanding, the meaning of the American Dream has varied, at times drastically, throughout American history. It is difficult, in other words, to speak of any one American Dream.[432] Still, speaking of the American Dream as a persistent theme in American history is possible, as the historian Jim Cullen has shown in his book *The American Dream*. In the 1830's, for example, Alexis de Tocqueville—that perspective observer of all things American—called it "the charm of anticipated success."[433] It can be said with some confidence then that despite its varied manifestations across time, there is an American ideology that perpetuates dreamers of a prospective future that is brimming with possibilities and rewards.

---

[431] Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), xi.

[432] Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[433] As quoted in Cullen, *The American Dream*, 5.

The hope for a better future captured by the American Dream serves many social and political functions or dysfunctions, depending on whom you ask. The wholehearted intention of the Dream to promote some good, however, can be acknowledged by all parties. After all, supporters of the Dream might ask, what is wrong with instilling citizens with a prospective hope for a better future? It is difficult to understate the significance of that hope to the American psyche. It is even enshrined as a right—the right to pursue happiness—in one of her founding documents.[434] At its most potent the American Dream promises citizens that no matter their social class, race, or material condition, they can nonetheless rise above their circumstances through hard work and determination. While there are plenty of anecdotal examples of that occurring—the rags-to-riches stories Americans love—the facts do not support the promise.[435] Nonetheless, perhaps there are benefits to this future-oriented gaze. In what follows I will present two arguments that broadly support and oppose the American Dream (both arguments are caricatures of complex positions that cannot be entered into here), and then turn away from the American Dream to understand it better.

Before considering the benefits to the American Dream, I will present an argument a detractor of the American Dream might pose. Instead of providing a legitimate hope, the anti-Dreamer could argue, the American Dream provides false hope. That is, it blinds people to the reality that their chances of succeeding are extraordinarily slim. The false hope garnered by a belief in the American Dream runs parallel to another deeply held American conviction in a meritocratic system. Like the American Dream, belief in a meritocracy presupposes that social mobility is sufficiently fluid to accurately reflect winners and losers. Hence those who succeed

---

[434] While the American Dream is often interpreted as the right to pursue private happiness, Hannah Arendt points towards the public nature of the pursuit of happiness in Jefferson. See Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999), 295.
[435] Timothy Bates, *Race, Self-Employment, and Upward Mobility: An Illusive American Dream* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

socially and economically deserve their position in society, while those who fail equally merit their plight. According to this position, if there are a disproportionate number of failures based on race or ethnicity—say reflected in the low graduation rate of black and Hispanic males[436] or the demographic makeup of the incarcerated[437]—it may reflect some inherent deficiency.

Consider, for instance, the dissertation findings that Jason Richwine reached in "IQ and Immigration Policy," successfully defended at Harvard University in 2009. As Richwine states in his abstract, "The average IQ of immigrants in the United States is substantially lower than that of the white native population, and the difference is likely to persist over generations."[438] Hispanics, in particular, are the unfortunates in his story.[439] That is, their persistently low IQ scores are something that should trouble policymakers. Richwine is quick to point out that while the precise causes of their low IQ are complex and inconclusive, the fact that they fail to catch up with the white native population over time, unlike past European immigrant groups, should be a red flag to those designing immigration policy.[440]

This type of story, explaining the failings of a particular group, anti-Dreamers might argue, is facilitated by the ideology of the American Dream. Persistent failure—according to any ideology that claims that irrespective of circumstances hard work results in success—must result from some causal factor inherent in an individual or group. In short, the ideology of the American Dream gives credence to a pernicious and untrue idea, according to anti-Dreamers.

An example of this position can be found in Mike Davis' *Prisoners of the American Dream; Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class*. The book puzzles over a

---

[436] Gary Orfield et al., *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004), 2.
[437] Amanda Bailey and Joseph Michael Hayes, *Who's in Prison?: The Changing Demographics of Incarceration* (San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2006). Also, James J. Heckman and Paul A. LaFontaine discuss both minority graduation rates and the demographics of incarcerated individuals in their article, "The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 92 (2010): 244–62.
[438] Jason Richwine, "IQ and Immigration Policy" (Ph.D. dissertation , Harvard University, 2009), iii.
[439] Ibid., 60-66.
[440] Ibid., 76-77.

question asked by many leftists in US history: why has the left never taken hold in any substantive way in the United States? The book's answers to that question are not explicitly connected with the American Dream. In fact, outside the title, the phrase the "American Dream" only appears cryptically as the last two words in the book. Nonetheless, an understanding of the author's intention can be gleaned from the context of the final sentence as well as the overall aims of the work. Given that context, I would argue, Davis suggests that the American Dream imprisons the working class by making them believe that their misfortunes are their fault[441]. It also inflames their imagination with false hopes about a future that is most likely out of reach given the structural inequities that hinder the working class from advancing socially and economically. Consequently, an important reason the left has never taken hold in the United States is that the ideology of the American Dream has kept people hopeful even amid dire circumstances. In other words, revolutionary action can never take hold in a people whose perpetual dreams of a better future are caught up *within the current order of things*. The American Dream, in this extended understanding, includes a belief in the exceptional nature of the United States Constitution and the general institutional form of governance. Hence, the hope of dreamers cannot radically supersede the current governing structures. Even in times of economic downturn, dreamers maintain their hope that America will rebound and that their opportunities for success will be restored. The dream, in this understanding, becomes an intergenerational nightmare for the poor and oppressed.

Pro-dreamers concede to the mythic status of the American Dream, while highlighting that its benefits outweigh its burdens. In particular, the fact that the American Dream keeps revolutionary fervor at bay is understood as a central benefit. Political stability over time, a pro-

---

[441] Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (New York, NY: Verso, 1999).

dreamer might argue, is no small feat. One only needs to look at the political instability that plagues nations, both past and present. The fact that the American Dream has contributed to preventing radical political revolutions at challenging economic times—the Great Depression, for example—is testament to its usefulness. While injustices may be perpetuated in the short- or mid-term, a pro-dreamer might argue, the political stability the American Dream lays the necessary groundwork for making strides towards a more just and equitable society over time.

Jagdish Bhagwati supports some variation of that position in his 2009 World Affairs journal article titled, "Feeble Critiques: Capitalism's Petty Detractors." As the title and the year of the article suggests, Bhagwati takes aim at the various critiques of capitalism that followed the financial crisis of 2007. After responding to those critiques, he concludes by suggesting how Americans can strengthen capitalism. The main thrust of his argument is that capitalism works best "when those who do not succeed…still believe in success—believe that those who do succeed put their wealth to good use."[442] Notice, there are two beliefs the unsuccessful must internalize in order to support capitalism. Bhagwati's concern with these beliefs makes him put aside his usual concern with empirical facts. Not empirical facts, but beliefs are paramount to persuade the unsuccessful into sustaining a capitalist system. Let us turn to examine those two beliefs.

A consequence of supporting the belief that the successful put their wealth to good use is that it should coolly be accepted that certain individuals make a disproportionate amount of money—"American society, after all tolerates extreme inequality in pay."[443] Instead of attempting to close the "extreme" income gap, we should encourage philanthropy and "corporate

---

[442] Jagdish Bhagwati, "Feeble Critiques: Capitalism's Petty Detractors," *World Affairs* 172, no. 2 (2009), 44.
[443] Ibid., 45.

social responsibility" among wealthy individuals and corporations.[444] The hope is that the good-will shown by the wealthy few will support the *belief* that high earners are not solely self-interested, that they in fact care about the common good. That belief, however, is not sufficient. The unsuccessful must also believe that they too can one day succeed. As Bhagwati puts it, "Capitalism works well when those who lose feel that one day they might also win. This is the great American dream: even when mobility has been less real than imagined, the belief matters."[445] Without a belief in upward mobility, capitalism might suffer from revolutionary moments of reflection that attempt to usurp capitalism's stronghold on the public's imagination. Hence, Bhagwati claims that we "need to respond to the steady erosion of the American myth of mobility."[446] That myth has been in "disastrous decline" due to wage stagnation, lack of educational access for the poor, and lack of health care for those most in need. The goal then is to appear to address these problems, or to address these problems just enough to keep the myth of mobility alive. Any systematic solution to these "problems" is not an option considering such an all-encompassing project would destroy the significant economic inequalities that are part and parcel of a capitalist system.

The broader point here is that pro-dreamers of a certain stripe argue that the American Dream is an overall good given its ability to sustain hope in the underclass. The Dream keeps those struggling economically from rebelling against an inherently unequal economic and political system that pro-dreamers argue is on the whole beneficial. It is worth noting that there are other reasons to be a pro-dreamer, quite separate from the reasons offered above. The point here was to give two examples of how scholars have reflected on the ideology of the American Dream. I will now turn to discuss how framing the American Dream as a constructive form of

---

[444] Ibid.
[445] Ibid., 44.
[446] Ibid., 45.

uncertainty helps us think about the dream in a new way. In the end, we will see that the analysis of the dream points us beyond the United States and towards careful historical analysis of constructive forms of uncertainty.

The ideology of the American Dream attempts to instill citizens with a future-oriented promise. As the goods it promises are uncertain, it awakens citizens' emotions of uncertainty—excitement, hope, and fear. As illustrated with the examples above, scholars have attempted to analyze the benefits and burdens of the American Dream while accepting, or attempting to uncover, its mythic status. Talk of the decline of the American Dream should give us pause to reconsider the function of the dream.[447,448,449] I want to suggest that thinking about the dream as a constructive form of uncertainty—confronting that fact explicitly—allows us to reframe the discussion as it currently stands. The reframing itself will not produce easy answers for critics or defenders of the American Dream. Instead it will allow those thinking about the American Dream to evaluate the dream through another lens.

For one thing, it allows us to understand the functional nature of the American Dream in a different way. The American Dream's function is not simply to support an economic or political system, or to restrain an unruly underclass, but it also provides a coherent way for a group of people (a nation in this case) to conceptualize an uncertain future. In the end, detractors and supporters of the American Dream can concede that the dream promotes, or aims to promote, social order—i.e., a constructive form of uncertainty. Whether the order gained from the dream is an overall just, equal, or beneficent ideology is the real point of contention.

---

[447] William A. Galston, "A Decade of Decline in the American Dream," *The Wall Street Journal*, accessed September 30, 2014, http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304858104579264271656203200.
[448] "A Superpower in Decline: Is the American Dream Over?," *Spiegel Online International*, accessed September 30, 2014, http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-superpower-in-decline-is-the-american-dream-over-a-726447.html.
[449] Chris Good, "American Dream in Decline?," *Atlantic Monthly*, 2010.

The broader point gained from thinking about the dream as a constructive form of uncertainty is the recognition that as long as the future is experienced as uncertain, ways of thinking collectively about an uncertain future will always be present. In other words, the decline of the dream cannot signal a future without a collective way of thinking about an uncertain future. If the dream were to disappear, something would take its place. I do not mean to suggest that a collective way of thinking about the future is ever perfectly shared among a mass of people. Depending on any number of contextual considerations—including times of crisis, socio economic standing, and communal affiliations—the way a person sees the future might stand at odds from a collective vision. Fragmented visions of the future, in other words, are the rule rather than the exception.

Still, the power of collective visions of the future cannot be underestimated. Fragmented and collective visions of the future, after all, are not mutually exclusive. They are mutually supportive. A central function of constructive uncertainties (collective visions of the future) is to unite the fragmented pieces of a collectivity, if only imperfectly. Constructive uncertainties bring a common narrative to divergent ways of thinking about the future. In the case of the American Dream you have an example of a constructive form of uncertainty that fits nicely with the abstract aims of liberal democracy and commercial society. Perhaps more importantly, those abstract aims fit neatly with American history and culture. The future-oriented uncertainties unleashed by a liberal democracy and commercial society, in other words, have a special resonance in the United States.

4.2 Beyond the American Dream and Towards the Post-Colonial

The American Dream is a convenient example to illustrate a constructive form of uncertainty in the shadow of my previous analysis of Hume and Spinoza. It is the United States,

after all, that has a peculiar history that allows its many different citizens to unite around abstractions, such as freedom, equality, and opportunity. The ability of the United States to achieve such a peculiar form of national unity lays in large part with the fact that American citizens do not have to deal with the post- and neocolonial realities that a vast swath of other nations confront. Outside of Native Americans, African Americans, and conscientious immigrants from post-colonial nations, other American citizens can experience the future as open, and the past as a mere prelude to a possibly bright future.

Those touched by colonialism, on the other hand, are haunted by a lost and forgotten past, and simultaneously and hesitantly with a desire to move forward. Forward, notice, means succumbing to the colonizers' ideas about what is forward, what is modern, what is right, and what is desirable. The narrative told about what it means to be American allows for a sort of magic to happen. It allows outsiders and insiders the opportunity to start anew, irrespective of their background. Even the Native American, for example, can be charmed by that magic, which makes him or her feel an equal with other citizens in regards to an open-ended future of possibilities. That magic, however, can be broken with an awakening to a forgotten past. The Native American teenager that first confronts the history of the destruction of his peoples and their traditions at the founding of the United States can no longer think about the future in the untainted way he once did.

The specter of colonialism, in other words, changes the way certain individuals experience the future. The hope-filled uncertainty promised by liberal democracies and its accompanying insistence that commercial society equals freedom can at best be uncomfortably accepted by those aware of the colonial gaze that overlooks those projects. The American

188

Dream, in this light, is a magical dream that immunizes her citizens from confronting a dark past and/or present in order to look forward with focus and hope towards a better future.

If an American citizen is dissatisfied with her national politics, for example, she can hope that the next presidential election will usher in change. Focusing on the political history of the United States, moreover, is not an obstacle, as it appears unproblematic given that the general narratives told about American political history are usually stories of triumph and progress away from injustice. Likewise, commercial society promises a future of luxury or at minimum one that fulfills your needs and wants. The destructive nature of capitalism, on the other hand, is largely hidden from view. It is something Americans see on the news, such as when the factory in Dhaka collapsed leaving thousands of garment workers dead.[450] In other words, to the extent that the destructive nature of capitalism is unmasked, it is too emotively distant to have a visceral impact.

When forced to confront those realities, moreover, those in "developed" nations can appeal to a historicist narrative that tells those in "less civilized" conditions to wait for the benefits of modernization. As the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it in *Provincializing Europe,* "historicist consciousness was: a recommendation to the colonized to wait."[451] That "stagist [or developmental] theory of history" relegates certain peoples to the "waiting room of history."[452] It is easy for an economist or politician, in their condition of relative political and economic stability, in other words, to look at the poverty of distant others and tell them to "wait their turn," to "be patient," and to remind them that "development takes time." Those who have witnessed generations of their friends and family under the foot of distant and impersonal

---

[450] Julfikar Ali Manik and Jim Yardley, "Building Collapse in Bangladesh Kills Scores of Garmet Workers," *New York Times,* April 25, 2013.
[451] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.
[452] Ibid.

corporations and governments have little time and patience for *their* promises of a brighter future. The "not yet" pronounced by a stagist theory of history, Chakrabarty further observes, stands in contrast to the "global insistence of the 'now' that marks all popular movements toward democracy."[453]

Again, looking towards the future for those in post-colonial situations is not easily accomplished in a linear hope-filled manner. The pain of the past and present are too real and causally interwoven to be swept away with ease by visions of future possibilities. Nonetheless, as we see with the example from above, even those suffering from distant corporate and governmental agents join popular movements toward democracy. That is, they struggle and hope for a form of self-government that in the end may have strong resemblances to liberal democratic regimes. That way of looking forward, the analysis of Spinoza here would have us observe, is preferable to metaphysical longings that inflexibly place demands on the present, as a result of dogmatic truths passed down from the past, which can point human desires towards an intolerant future of religious supremacy.

Still, it is important to recognize that those that feel the gaze of the colonial overlord looking over their shoulder cannot help but remember that the construction towards liberal democracy and commercial society in *their* society was founded on barbarity. It is insufficient to appeal to abstractions—such as freedom, hope, and democracy—when a lived past brings to mind the lovers of liberal democracy and commercial society who destroyed more than they built. Again, a desire for democracy or self-governance is there, but it is of an ambivalent sort. An unqualified looking forward is out of reach. Consequently, champions of liberal democracy

---

[453] Ibid.

190

and commercial society from within post-colonial nations challenge the claim that democracy and commercial societies are uniquely western.[454]

4.3 Concluding Remarks

The above analysis of the American Dream has taken us beyond the borders of the United States to consider complex visions of the future within the consciousness of those in post-colonial nation states. The American Dream is perhaps an emblematic case that resembles—if only superficially and broadly—the types of constructive uncertainties Spinoza and Hume championed. As we saw above, peoples marked by post-colonialism present challenges to the future-oriented gaze found in places like the United States. Given that most nations in the world have been touched by colonialism—not to mention the continual reach of neo-colonialism—it behooves those thinking about constructive uncertainty to consider complex cases that do not fit as neatly as the relatively unencumbered future-oriented aims of liberal democracy and commercial society in the United States.

It turns out that when considering the American Dream, in light of this study's reflections on constructive uncertainty in Spinoza and Hume, we are moved towards broader questions about the relationship between modern political philosophy and colonialism. As modern political philosophy cannot be separated from what is more broadly known as modernity, we are also directed to reflect on the relationship between modernity and colonialism. In this context, we can consider Arturo Escobar's claim that "There is no modernity without coloniality, because coloniality is constitutive of modernity."[455] In a same vein we can reflect on what Walter Mignolo has called the "darker side of western modernity."[456] This study both points to these

---

[454] Amartya Kumar Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value," *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 3–17.

[455] Arturo Escobar, "World and Knowledges Otherwise: The Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 31–67.

[456] Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Future, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). See also Alexander. Jeffrey C., *The Dark Side of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

questions and offers new starting points to consider the relationship between modernity and coloniality.

This conclusion is at best a suggestive attempt to apply a broad and loose conception of constructive uncertainty. As I stated in the introduction, Spinoza and Hume's work on constructive uncertainty only tangentially figures into this concluding analysis. That said, I hope that the more general claim that a constructive form of uncertainty is vital when engaging contemporary matters is demonstrated. The particular insights highlighted in this conclusion, however, are only demonstrated suggestively, which leaves a space open for future research into a perplexing subject that requires a more robust conception of constructive uncertainty.

Ultimately, this study sets the stage for a longer and more disciplined performance. In order to do justice to the questions explored in this conclusion, for example, we must follow Hume's insistence that philosophy take into account common life. That is, after applying a broad understanding of constructive uncertainty, along with the central insights garnered from the analysis of Spinoza and Hume's constructive conceptions of uncertainty to contemporary matters, we encountered the complexities of the particular. Thinking abstractly about forms of constructive uncertainty, in other words, is ineffective and insufficient when making judgments about the American Dream or any type of future-oriented ideology. In the end, we must follow Hume when thinking about constructive uncertainty; we must join in his insistence that philosophy unite with history.[457]

---

[457] For a collection of essays examining Hume's attempt to unite philosophy and history, see Mark G. Spencer, *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvannia State University Press, 2013). It is worth noting that Hume's unification of philosophy and history radically differs from Schelling and Hegel's attempt to do the same.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"A Superpower in Decline: Is the American Dream Over?" *Spiegel Online International*. Accessed September 30, 2014. http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-superpower-in-decline-is-the-american-dream-over-a-726447.html.

Agar, Jolyon. *Post-Secularism, Realism and Utopia: Transcendence and Immancence from Hegel to Bloch*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

Ahrensdorf, Peter J. "The Fear of Death and the Longing for Immortality: Hobbes and Thucydides on Human Nature and the Problem of Anarchy." *The American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000): 579–93.

Aristotle. *Politics*. Edited by C. D. C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998.

———. *The Metaphysics*. Edited by John H. McMahon. New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2008.

Arkin, Robert M., Kathryn C. Oleson, and Patrick J. Carroll. *Handbook of the Uncertain Self*. Florence, KY: Psychology Press, 2013.

Arnoldi, Jakob. *Risk*. E-book. New York, NY: Wiley & Sons, 2013.

Aven, Terje. *Misconceptions of Risk*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

Aven, Terje, Enrico Zio, Piero Baraldi, and Roger Flage. *Uncertainty in Risk Assessment: The Representation and Treatment of Uncertainties by Probabilistic and Non-Probabilistic Methods*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

Baier, Annette C. "David Hume, Spinozist." *Hume Studies* XIX, no. 2 (1993): 237–52. http://www.humesociety.org/hs/issues/v19n2/baier/baier-l.pdf.

Bailey, Amanda, and Joseph Michael Hayes. *Who's in Prison?: The Changing Demographics of Incarceration*. San Francisco, CA: Public Policy Institute of California, 2006.

Baillie, James. *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Hume on Morality*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2000.

Baker, Tom, and Jonathan Simon, eds. *Embracing Risk: The Changing Culture of Insurance and Responsibility*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Bates, Timothy. *Race, Self-Employment, and Upward Mobility: An Illusive American Dream*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. New York, NY: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1992.

Bedford, Tim, and Roger Cooke. *Probabilistic Risk Analysis: Foundations and Methods*. 1st ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Beiner, Ronald. *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Bekey, George A., Robert Ambrose, Vijay Kumar, David Lavery, Arthur Sanderson, Brian Wilcox, Junku Yuh, and Yuan Zheng. *Robotics: State of the Art and Future Challenges*. London, UK: Imperial College Press, 2008.

Bell, Martin. "Hume on Superstition." In *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin, 153–70. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

Benner, Erica. *Machiavelli's Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Beyssade, Jean-Marie. "The Idea of God and the Proofs of His Existence." In *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, 174–285. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Bhagwati, Jagdish. "Feeble Critiques: Capitalism's Petty Detractors." *World Affairs* 172, no. 2 (2009).

Blom, Hans W. "The Moral and Political Philosophy of Spinoza." In *The Renaissance and 17th Century Rationalism (Routledge History of Philosophy, Vol. IV)*, edited by G. H. R. Parkinson, 288–319. New York, NY: Routledge, 1993.

Boesche, Roger. *The First Great Political Realist: Kautilya and His Arthashastra*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003.

Bostrom, Nick, and Milan M. Cirkovic, eds. *Global Catastrophic Risks*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Buckle, Stephen. "Introduction." In *Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: And Other Writings*, edited by Stephen Buckle, ix–xxxi. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Burden, Barry C., ed. *Uncertainty in American Politics*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Burton, John Hill. *Life and Correspondence of David Hume, Vol. 1*. Edinburgh, Scotland: William Tait, 1846.

C., Alexander. Jeffrey. *The Dark Side of Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2013.

Campbell, Heidi A., ed. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.

Cappon, Lester J., ed. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson & Abigail & John Adams*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chaves, Mark. *American Religion: Contemporary Trends*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Church, Jeffrey. "Selfish and Moral Politics: David Hume on Stability and Cohesion in the Modern State." *The Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 169–81.

Cioffi-Revilla, Claudio. *Politics and Uncertainty: Theory, Models and Applications*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Coleman, Les. *The Lunacy of Modern Finance Theory and Regulation*. 1st ed. Florence, KY: Routledge, 2014.

Covello, Vincent T., and Jeryl Mumpower. "Risk Analysis and Risk Management: An Historical Perspective." *Risk Analysis* 5, no. 2 (1985): 103–20. doi:10.1111/j.1539-6924.1985.tb00159.x.

Cullen, Jim. *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Cvetkovich, George, and Ragnar E. Lofstedt. *Social Trust and the Management of Risk*. Ebook. Florence, KY: Routledge, 2013.

Davis, Mike. *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class*. New York, NY: Verso, 1999.

Day, J. P. "Hope." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (1969): 89–102.

Dixon, Thomas. *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Dupre, Louis. "The New Meaning of Freedom." In *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture*, 120–44. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993.

Eidinow, Esther. *Oracles, Curses, and Risk Among the Ancient Greeks*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Epley, N., A. Waytz, and J. T. Cacioppo. "On Seeing Human: A Three-Factor Theory of Anthropomorphism." *Psychological Review* 114, no. 4 (2996): 864–86.

Escobar, Arturo. "World and Knowledges Otherwise: The Latin American Modernity/Coloniality Research Program." *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 31–67.

Evans, Simon. "'Basketball Gods' Shine on Heat's Battier." Reuter's, n.d. http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/21/us-nba-finals-heat-battier-idUSBRE95K07O20130621.

Evrigenis, Ioannis D. "Frontmatter." In *Fear of Enemies and Collective Action*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Flew, Antony. *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.

Fogelin, Robert H. *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Frakes, Jerold C. *The Fate of Fortune in the Early Middle Ages: The Boethian Tradition*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Academic Publishing, 1988.

Franke, William. "Beyond the Limits of Reason Alone: A Critical Approach to the Religious Inspiration of Literature." *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 2 (2009): 69–78.

Galston, William A. "A Decade of Decline in the American Dream." *The Wall Street Journal*. Accessed September 30, 2014. http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304858104579264271656203200.

Gardner, Daniel. *The Science of Fear: Why We Fear the Things We Shouldn't--and Put Ourselves in Greater Danger*. 1st ed. New York, NY: Dutton, 2008.

Gillespie, Michael Allen. *The Theological Origins of Modernity*. 1st ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Glassford, John. *Disrupting Philosophical Boundaries: Gilles Deleuze on David Hume*, n.d.

Glassner, Barry. *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1999.

Glimcher, Paul W. *Decisions, Uncertainty, and the Brain: The Science of Neuroeconomics*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.

Good, Chris. "American Dream in Decline?" *Atlantic Monthly*, 2010.

Goodman, Noah D., and Daniel Lassiter. "Probabilistic Semantics and Pragmatics." In *The Handbook of Contemporary Semantic Theory*, edited by Shalom Lappin and Chris Fox, 2nd ed. Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Greig, J. Y. T., ed. *The Letters of David Hume, Volume 1*. New York, NY: Garland Publishing, 1983.

Gut, Przemyslaw. "The Legacy of Spinoza: The Enlightenment According to Jonathan Israel." *Diametros* 40 (2014): 45–72.

Guyer, Paul. *Knowledge, Reason, and Taste: Kant's Response to Hume*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Haakonssen, Knud. "The Structure of Hume's Political Theory." In *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor, 182–221. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Hacking, Ian. *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Hastie, Reid, and Robyn M. Dawes. *Rational Choice in an Uncertain World: The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 2010.

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Kindle. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Heckman, James J., and Paul A. LaFontaine. "The American High School Graduation Rate: Trends and Levels." *Review of Economics and Statistics* 92 (2010): 244–62.

Herbrechter, Stefan. *Posthumanism: A Critical Analysis*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2013.

Hirschl, Ran. *Constitutional Theocracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.

Hochschild, Jennifer L. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995.

Hogg, Michael A., and Danielle L. Blaylock, eds. *Extremism and the Psychology of Uncertainty*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2012.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1888.

———. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1978.

———. *A Treatise of Human Nature by David Hume Reprinted from the Original Edition in Three Volumes and Edited, with an Analytical Index*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1896.

———. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999.

———. *David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature, Vol. 1*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Clarendon . Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2007.

———. *David Hume: Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*. Edited by Dorothy Coleman. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

———. *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*. Edited by Eugene Miller. Revised. Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987.

———. *The Natural History of Religion*. London, UK: Bradlaugh Bonner, 1889.

———. *The Natural History of Religion*. London, UK: A. and H. Bradlaugh Bonner, 1957.

———. *The Natural History of Religion*. Edited by A. Wayne Colver. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1976.

Hume, David, Thomas Hill Green, and Thomas Hodge Grose. *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary, Vol. 1*. London, UK: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1875.

Immerwahr, John. "Hume's Dissertation on the Passions." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (1994): 225–40.

James, Susan. *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, 1997.

———. *Spinoza on Superstition: Coming to Terms with Fear (Mededelingen Vanwege Het Spinozahuis) 88*. Budel, The Netherlands: Uitgeverij Damon, 2006.

Julio, Brandon, and Youngsuk Yook. "Political Uncertainty and Corporate Investment Cycles." *The Journal of Finance* 1 (2012): 45–83.

Kahneman, Daniel, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky. *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Kaminsky, Gregorio. *Spinoza: La Politica de Las Pasiones*. Barcelona, Spain: Gedisa, 1990.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited by Jim Manis. Electronic. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, n.d.

Klever, W. N. A. *David Hume (1711-1776): Wetenschappelijke Ethica van Een Overtuigd Spinozist*. Vrijstad, The Netherlands: Klever, 2010.

Knight, Frank H. *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2006.

Knorr-Cetina, K. D. "New Developments in Science Studies: The Ethnographic Challenge." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 8, no. 2 (1983): 153–77.

Kobrin, Stephen J. "Political Risk: A Review and Reconsideration." *Journal of International Business Studies* 10, no. 1 (1979): 67–80.

Korsgaard, Christine M. "Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 28, no. supplement (2003): 99–122. doi:10.5840/jpr_2003_8.

Kurzweil, Ray. *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology*. London, UK: Penguin Books, 2005.

Kysar, Douglas A. *Regulating from Nowhere: Environmental Law and the Search for Objectivity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

Landemore, Hélène. *Hume : Probabilité et Choix Raisonnable*. Paris, France: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.

Lash, Scott. "Risk Culture." In *The Risk Society and Beyond: Critical Issues for Social Theory*, edited by Barbara Adam, Ulrich Beck, and Joost Van Loon, 1st ed., 47–62. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2000.

LeBuffe, Michael. *From Bondage to Freedom: Spinoza on Human Excellence*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Lemmens, Willem. "Philosophy as Medicina Mentis? Hume and Spinoza on Emotions and Wisdom." In *The Concept of Love in 17th and 18th Century Philosophy*, edited by Gabor Boros, Herman De Dijn, and Martin Moor, 181–204. Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2008.

———. "The Melancholy of the Philosopher: Hume and Spinoza on Emotions and Wisdom." *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2005): 47–65.

Lindley, Dennis V. "The Philosophy of Statistics." *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series D (The Statistician)* 49, no. 3 (2000): 293–337.

———. *Understanding Uncertainty*. 11th ed. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2006.

Linke, Uli, and Danielle Taana Smith, eds. *Cultures of Fear: A Critical Reader*. New York, NY: Pluto Press, 2009.

Livingston, Donald W. *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy*. 1st ed. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Löwith, Karl. *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1949.

Luhmann, Niklas. *Risk: A Sociological Theory*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008.

Lyon, David. "Rethinking Secularization: Retrospect and Prospect." *Review of Religious Research* 26, no. 3 (1985): 228–43.

Machiavelli. *The Prince*. Edited by Quentin Skinner and Russell Price. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Manik, Julfikar Ali, and Jim Yardley. "Building Collapse in Bangladesh Kills Scores of Garmet Workers." *New York Times*, April 25, 2013.

Mansbridge, Jane. "Self-Interest in Political Life." *Political Theory* 18, no. 1 (1990): 132–53.

Marglin, Stephen A. *The Dismal Science: How Thinking Like an Economist Undermines Community*. 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Marris, Peter. *The Politics of Uncertainty: Attachment in Private and Public Life*. Florence, KY: Routledge, 1996.

Mavelli, Luca, and Fabio Petito. "The Postsecular in International Relations: An Overview." *Review of International Studies* 38 (2012): 931–42.

Mazur, A. "Societal and Scientific Causes of the Historical Development of Risk Assessment." In *Society, Technology, and Risk Assessment*, edited by J. Conrad, 151–57. Waltham, MA: Academic Press, 1980.

McIntyre, Jane. "Passion and Artifice in Hume's Account of Superstition." In *Religion and Hume's Legacy*, edited by D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin, 171–84. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.

McLennen, Gregor. "Towards Postsecular Sociology?" *Sociology* 41, no. 5 (2007): 857–70. doi:10.1177/0038038507080441.

Meyer, Lodewijk. "Preface." In *Principles of Cartesian Philosophy with Metaphysical Thoughts*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998.

Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Future, Decolonial Options*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

Moss, David A. *When All Else Fails: Government as the Ultimate Risk Manager*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Mossner, Ernest Campbell. *The Life of David Hume*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1970.

Moyar, Dean. *The Routledge Companion to Nineteenth Century Philosophy (Routledge Philosophy Companions)*. Reprint ed. Florence, KY: Routledge Publishing, 2012.

Nadler, Steven. "Hope, Fear, and the Politics of Immortality." In *Analytic Philosophy and History of Philosophy (Mind Association Occasional)*, edited by Tom Sorrell and G. A. J. Rogers. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2005.

———. *Spinoza: A Life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Newell, Waller R. *Tyranny: A New Interpretation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

O'Gorman, Ellen. "No Place Like Rome: Identity and Difference in the Germania of Tacitus." In *Oxford Readings in Tacitus*, edited by Rhiannon Ash, 95–118. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012.

O'Malley, Pat. *Risk, Uncertainty and Government*. Portland, OR: Cavendish Publishing, 2004.

Orfield, Gary, Daniel Losen, Johanna Wald, and Christopher B. Swanson. *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004.

Pangle, Thomas L. *The "Laws" of Plato*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980.

Patch, Howard Rollin. *The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Philosophy and Literature*. Menasha, WI: The Collegiate Press, George Banta Publishing Company, 1922.

Perinetti, Dario. "Ways to Certainty." In *The Routledge Companion to Eighteenth Century Philosophy*, edited by Aaron Garrett, 265–94. New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. *Fortune Is a Woman: Gender and Politics in the Thought of Niccolo Machiavelli*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Rawls, John. *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

Richwine, Jason. "IQ and Immigration Policy." Ph.D. dissertation , Harvard University, 2009.

Riesebrodt, Martin. "Fundamentalism and the Resurgence of Religion." *Numen* 47, no. 3 (2000): 266–87.

Robin, Corey. *Fear: The History of a Political Idea*. 1st ed. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Rosenblum, Nancy L. *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

Ruiz, Teofilo F. *The Terror of History: On the Uncertainties of Life in Western Civilization*. 1st ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Russell, Paul. *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Schliesser, Eric. "Spinoza and the Philosophy of Science: Mathematics, Motion, and Being." In *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, edited by Michael Della Rocca, 2014. doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195335828.013.020.

Schreiner, Susan E. *The Search for Certainty in the Early Modern Era*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Sen, Amartya Kumar. "Democracy as a Universal Value." *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 3–17.

Skidelsky, Robert. *Keynes: The Return of the Master*. New York, NY: Perseus Books Group, 2009.

Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1999.

Smith, Steven B. *Spinoza, Liberalism, and the Question of Jewish Identity*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

Spencer, Mark G. *David Hume: Historical Thinker, Historical Writer*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvannia State University Press, 2013.

Spinoza, Benedictus de. "Ethics." In *Spinoza: Complete Works*, edited by Michael Morgan, 213–382. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002.

———. *Opera, Vol. III*. Heidelberg, Germany: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1925.

———. "Political Treatise." In *Spinoza: Complete Works*, edited by Michael Morgan, 676–754. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002.

———. "Principles of Cartesian Philosophy and Metaphysical Thoughts." In *Spinoza: Complete Works*, 108–212. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002.

———. *Spinoza: Theological-Political Treatise*. Edited by Jonathan Israel. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

———. "Theological-Political Treatise." In *Spinoza: Complete Works*, edited by Michael Morgan, 383–583. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002.

Stewart, M. A. "Two Species of Philosophy: The Historical Significance of the First Enquiry." In *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First Enquiry*, edited by Peter Millican. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Sunstein, Cass R. *Worst-Case Scenarios*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Takayama, Akira. *Analytical Methods in Economics*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1993.

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Teigen, Karl Halvor. "The Language of Uncertainty." *Acta Psychologica* 68, no. 1–2 (1988): 27–38. doi:1016/0001-6918(88)90043-1.

Tierney, Brian. "Author's Rejoinder." *The Review of Politics* 64, no. 3 (2002): 416–20. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0034670500034951.

Tulloch, John, and Deborah Lupton. *Risk and Everyday Life*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2003.

Wendt, Alexander. *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Wiley, James. *Theory and Practice in the Philosophy of David Hume*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Wolff, Jonathan, and Avner De-Shalit. *Disadvantage*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Wolin, Sheldon S. "Hume and Conservatism." *The American Political Science Review* 48, no. 4 (1954): 999–1016.

Woolhouse, Roger. *The Empiricists (OPUS: History of Western Philosophy)*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Wootton, David. "David Hume, 'The Historian.'" In *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor, 447–79. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Wright, John P. "The Treatise: Composition, Reception, and Response." In *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise*, 5–25. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.

Yovel, Yirmiyahu. "Spinoza: The Psychology of the Multitude and the Uses of Language." *Studia Spinozana: An International and Interdisciplinary Series* 1 (1985): 305–33.

Zelizer, Viviana A. Rotman. "Human Values and the Market: The Case of Life Insurance and Death in Nineteenth-Century America." In *Economic Lives: How Culture Shapes the Economy*, 19–39. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Zinns, Jens, ed. *Social Theories of Risk and Uncertainty: An Introduction*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 2008.