

Polite Passionate Persuasion: Hume's Conception of Rhetoric

MARC HANVELT *Carleton University*

David Hume has been cast in many different roles: philosopher, the Great Infidel, historian, *le bon David*, sceptic, man of letters. Consequently, the significance of his work has been understood in many ways. However, to date, Hume's contributions to the study of rhetoric have been seriously overlooked. This omission is somewhat surprising given Hume's central concerns with faction and fanaticism, forces that rely heavily on the power of rhetoric. Hume's concerns with faction and fanaticism led him to explore two related questions. First, what should be done about the fact that most people in the public sphere are, if not deaf to reason, at least easily distracted from it? And second, how should societies counter those who would take advantage of this fact of human nature? In pursuing these two questions, Hume developed a distinction between low and high rhetoric, between the manipulative rhetoric of the fanatics and the factional leaders and a good form of rhetoric that I term accurate, just and polite. This high form of rhetoric combines Hume's philosophy of just reasoning with the rhetorical style of his idealized Demosthenes and eighteenth-century standards of conversational politeness. It is a distinctive conception of rhetoric that revives and modernizes the ancient eloquence that Hume greatly admired. Understanding how Hume's conception of rhetoric is rooted in his philosophical, historical and political writings is important for understanding the full scope of his political philosophy. In addition, further study of his conception of rhetoric could provide a

Acknowledgments: The author would like to thank Simone Chambers and Wade L. Robison for their thoughtful and insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. In addition, he would like to thank the three anonymous *CJPS* reviewers for their valuable critiques and suggestions.

Marc Hanvelt, Department of Political Science, Room B640 Loeb Building, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Drive, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6, marc_hanvelt@carleton.ca

Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique

43:3 (September/septembre 2010) 565–581 doi:10.1017/S0008423910000636

© 2010 Canadian Political Science Association (l'Association canadienne de science politique) and/et la Société québécoise de science politique

valuable avenue of research for contemporary liberal theorists seeking to develop normative models of judgment and deliberation.

While heavily indebted to the Ancients, eighteenth-century writers tended to consider rhetoric in a broader light than had the Greeks and Romans. In addition to presenting rhetoric as a necessary skill for those pursuing careers in law or the pulpit, the vast majority of treatises on rhetoric published in the eighteenth century were also directed at “producing *honnêtes hommes* (“gentlemen”) capable of mixing in polite company and making a good impression in the effort to improve their station in life.” Rhetoric was assimilated to the study of *belles lettres* and the cultivation of aesthetic taste (Conley, 2003: 458). Generally, it was approached as we today approach the study of literature.

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Hume followed Aristotle in conceiving rhetoric in political terms. According to Aristotle, “rhetoric is an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies. Ethical studies may fairly be called political” (Aristotle, 1985: 1356a25–6). This conception of rhetoric clearly resonated with Hume and, though modified according to his own thinking on ethics and reason, is reflected in Hume’s conception of rhetoric in significant ways.

Hume’s interest in rhetoric was spurred by his interest in real moral and political questions. While many commentators have argued that Hume’s “political philosophy follows from and is firmly grounded in his general conception of the mind” (Whelan, 1985: 6), his texts support the opposite interpretation. I concur with Jennifer Herdt who argues that “Hume’s epistemological concerns are not just secondary to practical and moral affairs, ... they are actually driven by his concerns about the threat posed by religious belief and practice to the peace and prosperity of society” (1997: 9). Hume saw his age as a battleground on which the forces of philosophy faced off against the forces of unreflective superstition and enthusiasm (Garrett, 1997: 7).¹ Unphilosophical beliefs were often championed by factions, which Hume saw “as the principal danger” to British society (Pocock, 1985: 136). So, in his own words, Hume spent his life wantonly exposing himself to “the rage of both civil and religious factions” (1987 [1741–42]: xli).

Hume’s defense of the British constitution is central to explaining his concerns with faction and fanaticism. He understood politics as a constant struggle between the principles of liberty and authority. Good politics, according to Hume, requires a balance between the two. Consequently, he thought that the opposition of interests was “the chief support of the BRITISH government” (1987 [1741–42]: 529). However, he was aware that the opposition of interests had often led to the rise of combative sects. Initially, Hume’s primary concern centred on religious factions. However, in the Wilkes and Liberty movement, in particular, the rioting in London toward the end of 1768, “Hume could see, for the first

Abstract. While confronting questions about the negative political effects of faction and fanaticism, David Hume developed a distinction between the manipulative rhetoric of the fanatics and the factional leaders and a good form of rhetoric that I term accurate, just, and polite. This high form of rhetoric combines Hume's philosophy of just reasoning with the rhetorical style of an idealized Demosthenes and eighteenth-century standards of politeness. Understanding Hume's conception of rhetoric is important for understanding the full scope of his political philosophy. In addition, further study of his conception of rhetoric could provide a valuable avenue of research for contemporary liberal theorists seeking to develop normative models of judgment and deliberation.

Résumé. En réfléchissant aux effets négatifs du factionnalisme et du fanatisme, David Hume a établi une distinction entre la rhétorique manipulatrice des leaders factionnaires et fanatiques, et une rhétorique que je qualifie ici de correcte, juste et polie. Cette dernière s'inspire de la philosophie du juste raisonnement de Hume, mais aussi d'un style de rhétorique associé à Demosthenes, érigé ici en idéal, ainsi que des standards de politesse du dix-huitième siècle. Cette conception de la rhétorique joue un rôle important dans la philosophie politique de Hume et pourrait constituer une avenue de recherche intéressante pour les penseurs libéraux contemporains qui cherchent à développer des modèles normatifs de jugement et de délibération.

time, mass passions informed, not by religious enthusiasm, but by philosophical enthusiasm" (Livingston, 1995: 161). So, as Stephen Miller writes, "in the last decade of his life, [Hume] was less concerned about the immoderate religious factions than about immoderate patriots" (2001: 71).

In book 1 of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume develops the philosophy of mind that is a central component of his challenge to the unphilosophical beliefs that underlie faction and fanaticism. It is here also that his interest in rhetoric first becomes apparent. Hume's treatment of belief, as a feeling of the mind, establishes an intimate connection between belief and rhetoric. In his system, a belief is "a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression" (1978 [1739–40]: 96). An idea is a copy of a sense impression. A belief connects that idea to a different impression. Hume was primarily concerned with causal beliefs which, he believed, arise simply from the mind's tendency to associate ideas. As we experience a cause and its effect together more and more often, their relation begins to feel *right* in our mind. The two ideas come to feel as though they belong together. Hume calls this feeling "a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*" (1978 [1739–40]: 629). It is this feeling that leads us to infer the existence of the cause or the effect from the presence of the other. This process is, for Hume, judgment or reasoning.

For the most part, Hume believed that the feeling of the mind that he called belief would arise from the experience of habit and custom. But he acknowledged that eloquence also has the capacity to infuse ideas with the liveliness and vivaciousness that is belief. Hume argues that only eloquence and education can take the place of experience in this regard. Eloquence, however, can exceed the influence of experience (1978 [1739–40]: 123). Hume claims that "nothing is more capable of infusing any

passion into the mind, than eloquence, by which objects are represented in their strongest and most lively colours. We might of ourselves acknowledge, that such an object is valuable and such another odious; but till an orator excites the imagination, and gives force to these ideas, they may have but a feeble influence either on the will or the affections” (1978 [1739–40]: 426–7). The power of eloquence helps to explain why people are so often either deaf to reason or easily distracted from it. Therefore, the significance of Hume’s famous assertion that “reason is and ought only to be slave to the passions” is not limited to his challenge to the power of demonstrative reason (1978 [1739–40]: 415). This assertion inverts the classical hierarchy that placed reason and philosophy above the passions and rhetoric, and opens the door for the “noble art” of rhetoric, as Hume terms it, to assume a privileged place alongside his philosophy (1987 [1741–42]:103).

Of course, not all orators practice a “noble art.” For the most part, Hume thought the politicians of his day to be poor orators and “altogether incapable of politeness in any form” (Pocock, 1985: 131–32). This was particularly disturbing because it showed they had failed to learn from British history about the dangers of fanatical or low rhetoric. Hume writes that, in the lead-up to the Civil War, “the altercation of discourse, the controversies of the pen, but, above all, the declamations of the pulpit, indisposed the minds of men towards each other, and propagated the blind rage of party” (1983 [1778], 5: 401). Those declamations from the pulpit were reinforced by speeches in parliament that were designed to excite the ardour of the people (1983 [1778], 5: 438). Hume writes that “as the controversies on every subject grew daily warmer, men united themselves more intimately with their friends, and separated themselves wider from their antagonists; and the distinction gradually became quite uniform and regular” (1983 [1778], 6: 212). That distinction produced a gulf so wide between the different parties that their capacity to sympathize with one another, and thus their capacity for moral judgment, became sufficiently impeded to allow for the country to be plunged into a civil war. And the British nations, Hume writes, spent the better part of four years “shedding their own blood, and laying waste their native country” (1983 [1778], 6: 487).

There is an alternative view of the public sphere that lies behind Hume’s discussions of faction and fanaticism. Hume argues that there is an imperative to “maintain, with the utmost ZEAL, in every free state, those forms and institutions, by which liberty is secured, the public good consulted, and the avarice or ambition of particular men restrained and punished” (1987 [1741–42]: 26). In “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” Hume outlines an institutional structure that divides and disperses political power so as to mitigate against the development of factions and the consolidation of power by any one group (1987 [1741–42]: 516–17). The

stability of the commonwealth depends in no small measure upon a balance created by the opposition of interests. However, because no particular interest can consolidate power, the institutional structure of Hume's perfect commonwealth ensures that the opposition of interests "does all the good without any of the harm. The *competitors* have no power of controlling the senate: They only have the power of accusing, and appealing to the people" (1987 [1741–42]: 525). Here is the essential connection between Hume's republican ideal and his conception of high rhetoric. In Hume's perfect commonwealth, political rhetoric is the key means through which interests are opposed to one another and the balance upon which the commonwealth depends is maintained.

While the connection between political rhetoric and Hume's perfect commonwealth is clear, however, Hume's account of rhetoric is more difficult to decipher. His most developed argument on rhetoric appears in "Of Eloquence," a short essay in which he appears to express very inconsistent views. Hume laments the decline of ancient eloquence but then seems to argue both that his contemporaries ought *and* ought not to attempt to rekindle it. In trying to make sense of the essay, Adam Potkay argues that Hume's ideas are conflicted because, in eighteenth-century Britain, "politically, eloquence aligned with virtue, but philosophically it derived from error; and socially, it was beyond the pale." Undoubtedly, Potkay is correct in his portrayal of the conflicting conceptions of rhetoric that defined the eighteenth-century British outlook. However, I disagree that "Of Eloquence" is an "acutely perplexed" work (1994: 73, n.16). Instead, we should read this essay as highlighting an important complexity in Hume's conception of rhetoric, namely, his distinction between high and low rhetoric. This distinction allows us to see that Hume advocated the resuscitation of only a particular form of ancient eloquence, one that he associated with virtue. However, he also understood that the modern political context differed markedly from the ancient. In order to appeal to an eighteenth-century British audience, the ancient eloquence that Hume admired would have to be modernized. This modernized form of ancient rhetoric—Hume's high rhetoric—is made up of three components: accurate reasoning, a rhetorical style that appeals to the human compulsion to make judgments and eighteenth-century standards of politeness.

The first component of Hume's high rhetoric is accurate reasoning. Reason and truth are opposed to passion and rhetoric in the Platonic hierarchy. Hume rejected this hierarchy, rejecting the coherence of the notion of a battle between the passions and reason (1978 [1739–40]: 122). Nevertheless, he did concede that lively ideas can "confound" our judgment. In fact, he argues that credulity is one of the most universal and conspicuous features of human nature (1978 [1739–1740]: 112). Hume would, therefore, have considered an orator to be employing low rhetoric who

took advantage of this weakness in order to deliberately lead an audience into error. By treating the types of rhetoric that derive from error separately from the rhetoric that aligns with virtue, Hume makes space within his conception of rhetoric for sound reasoning. In fact, sound reasoning is an integral part of his conception of high rhetoric. Ultimately, it is because he rejects the Platonic hierarchy of reason and the passions that Hume is able to reconcile rhetoric and reason.

Central to Hume's conception of rhetoric are his understandings that reason alone is rarely very persuasive and that rhetoric can enliven sound as well as unsound ideas. Were reasonable ideas necessarily livelier than unreasonable ideas, fanatics and zealots would pose no danger at all. It is precisely because people are generally deaf to reason that accurate reasoning can be only one part of Hume's conception of high rhetoric. Despite its apparent impotence, however, accurate reasoning is still essential to Hume's conception of high rhetoric. Sound ideas, for him, are those grounded in his empiricism and proceeding from the experimental method that he employs in the *Treatise*. The groundedness of Hume's accurate reasoning is an essential anchor that weighs against the flights of fancy that characterize enthusiastic and superstitious beliefs.

The unsound ideas, or flights of fancy, about which Hume was most concerned were inaccurate perceptions of interest that could lead people to act immorally or against the good of their society. By defining actions in defense of their particular party as selfless and principled, factional orators license their audience "to do greater harm with a clear conscience" (Herdt, 1997: 205, n. 5). These orators take advantage of two features of human nature in particular that lead people to develop inaccurate perceptions of their interests. The first is the quality that "leads us to prefer whatever is present to the distant and remote, and makes us desire objects more according to their situation than their intrinsic value" (1978 [1739–40]: 538). No other quality, Hume writes, causes more fatal errors in our conduct. Hume recounts many such errors in his *History of England*. He writes that "among the generality of men, educated in regular, civilized societies the sentiments of shame, duty, honour, have considerable authority, and serve to counterbalance and direct the motives, derived from private advantage." However, through the contagious dissemination of enthusiasm throughout England in the seventeenth century, "these salutary principles lost their credit, and were regarded as mere human inventions, yea moral institutions, fitter for heathens than for christians" (1983 [1778], 5: 493). In the speeches that Hume uses to illustrate the zealous rhetoric of the age, morality is subjugated to private interests. Hume describes the "enthusiastic genius of young Vane" (Sir Henry Vane the Younger) as "extravagant in the ends which he pursued, sagacious and profound in the means which he employed; incited by the appearances of religion, negligent of the duties of morality" (1983 [1778],

5: 294). Indeed, throughout the seventeenth century, faction and fanaticism often predominated in parliamentary debates. Of these debates, Hume writes that “the commons shewed a greater spirit of independence than any true judgment of national interest” (1983 [1778], 5: 21).

The second feature of human nature that enthusiasts prey upon is the “usual propensity of mankind towards the marvelous.” Hume writes that “though this inclination may at intervals receive a check from sense and learning, it can never be thoroughly extirpated from human nature” (1975 [1748]: 119). This feature of human nature is a significant contributor to the credulity that Hume thought to define much of the general population. It is also the basis for peoples’ readiness to believe in miracles, and therefore, essential to the appeal of many religious doctrines.

Hume’s discussions of misrepresented interests suggest a major distinction between his conceptions of high and low rhetoric. Hume argues that eloquence should rightfully be directed toward the public good, in large part because of the close relationship that exists between the common good and the general point of view that is essential to his theory of moral judgment. Hume suggests that it is only when individuals come to believe misrepresentations of their own interests, often on account of fanatical rhetoric promoting such misrepresentations, that they become inclined to act in ways that are clearly contrary to the liberty, happiness and honour of their country. Low rhetoric is, therefore, manipulative because it leads people to act immorally and against their true best interests. The zealots have cant and thunder on their side. But their reasonings are either suspect or, in the case of their outright lies, utterly absent. In fact, Hume suggests that hypocrisy is a defining feature of low rhetoric. The groundedness that accurate reasoning contributes to accurate, just and polite rhetoric is, therefore, essential to the overall persuasiveness of this high form of rhetoric. However, of at least equal importance is the style and manner in which accurate reasoning is communicated.

Hume draws much of his theory of rhetorical style from Cicero, to whom his intellectual debts are well known.² Hume famously wrote to Francis Hutcheson, “upon the whole, I desire to take my Catalogue of Virtues from *Cicero’s Offices*, not from the *Whole Duty of Man*. I had, indeed, the former Book in my Eye in all my Reasonings” (1932, 1: 34). Of primary relevance to this discussion is Hume’s interest in Cicero’s project of reconciling philosophy with rhetoric. Cicero argues that “the followers of Socrates dissociated the pleaders of cases from themselves and from the shared title of philosophy, though the ancients had intended there to be an amazing sort of communion between speaking and understanding” (2001: 3.73). It is this “communion” that Cicero seeks to re-establish.³ As Crassus advises in *De oratore*, “we must not only forge and sharpen our tongues, but we must load our minds to the brim with the attractive richness and variety of the most important matters in the

greatest possible number” (Cicero, 2001: 3.121–22). Crassus here merely concurs with Cicero’s view, expressed in the prologue in his own voice, that “it will be impossible for anyone to be an orator endowed with all praiseworthy qualities, unless he has gained a knowledge of all the important subjects and arts” (2001: 1.20).

Cicero’s communion of speaking and understanding is echoed in Hume’s discussions of the painter and the anatomist. Hume argues that these two characters represent two species of philosophy. The former extols virtue, “borrowing all helps from poetry and eloquence, and treating their subject in an easy and obvious manner, and such as is best fitted to please the imagination, and engage the affections” (1975 [1777]: 5). The latter endeavours to “understand” people rather than to cultivate their manners (1975 [1777]: 6). Hume argues for a union of the two species of philosophy that would unite “profound inquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty.” This union, he suggests could “undermine the foundations of an abstruse philosophy which seems to have hitherto served only as a shelter to superstition and a cover to absurdity and error” (1975 [1777]: 16).

Hume and Cicero share a common understanding of the power inherent in oratory that is grounded in philosophy. And they share a common prescription for ensuring that that power is put to good uses. In *De oratore*, Crassus argues that the unity of philosophy and rhetoric holds the power to unfold “the thoughts and counsels of the mind in words, in such a way that it can drive the audience in whatever direction it has applied its weight” (Cicero, 2001: 3.55). This passage is echoed in Hume’s argument that it is “difficult for us to withhold our assent from what is painted out to us in all the colours of eloquence” (1978 [1739–40]: 123). As a consequence of the mind’s susceptibility to rhetorical argument, Crassus argues that it is absolutely necessary that the power of eloquence be joined “to integrity and the highest measure of good sense. For if we put the full resources of speech at the disposition of those who lack these virtues, we will certainly not make orators of them, but will put weapons into the hands of madmen” (Cicero, 2001: 3.55). Hume too was keenly aware of the possibility that his discussions of the power of rhetoric could empower the zealots whose influence he sought to counter. And similar to Crassus’ call for rhetoric to be joined to integrity and good sense, Hume’s conception of accurate, just and polite rhetoric joins sound reasoning and the virtue of politeness to powerful oratory.

Given Hume’s intellectual debts to Cicero, and given Cicero’s status in the rhetorical canon, one might be surprised to find that Hume does not consider him as his model orator.⁴ Instead, he chose an idealized vision of Demosthenes. That Demosthenes was the greatest of the Greek orators was a view widely held in the eighteenth century. This common view was likely heavily influenced by his portrayal in Plutarch’s *Lives*. Hume’s description of Demosthenes very closely echoes that of Plu-

tarch, suggesting that Hume simply accepted much of what he read in *Lives*.⁵ Demosthenes should not, therefore, be understood as a true model of Hume's ideal orator. Rather, it is this fantasy of Demosthenes whose speeches Hume deems the human productions that "approach the nearest to perfection" (1987 [1741–42]: 105–06).

Hume describes Demosthenes' rhetoric as "rapid harmony, exactly adjusted to the sense: It is vehement reasoning, without any appearance of art: It is disdain, anger, boldness, freedom, involved in a continued stream of argument" (1987 [1741–42]: 105–06). This oratorical style appeals to the human compulsion to make judgments. Hume argues that "nature, by an absolute and uncontrollable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel" (1978 [1739–40]: 183). If rhetoric is to take the place of experience in the formation of beliefs, it has to appeal to the imagination as a primary sense impression. The greater the audience members' awareness of the artifice in an orator's rhetoric, the less natural will be the persuasive force of the orator and, therefore, the less powerful will be the effect of words on the passions.

Although it takes the place of experience, rhetoric is unlike experience in that it is always a matter of conscious presentation. We might experience any number of events without anyone intentionally willing that we do so. However, an orator always intends for the audience to experience the oration. If rhetoric is too artificial, in other words, if the language is too flowery and the orator's devices for eliciting particular passions from the audience too obvious, the rhetoric will never take the place of experience in the process of belief formation. It can only do so if ideas are presented to the audience's imagination in such a way that the orator minimizes the differences between these ideas and those that are copies of the impressions of experience. Otherwise, the audience members' awareness of the artificiality of the rhetoric will hinder the sympathy through which the orator's passions are conveyed to them. In many ways, Hume's mention of concealing the artifice by which rhetoric stimulates a passion in the members of the audience echoes Joseph Addison's definition of fine writing that Hume so much admired—it "consists of sentiments, which are natural, without being obvious" (Hume, 1987 [1741–42]: 191).

According to Hume, an orator seeking to convey sentiments that are natural without being obvious must avoid excessive ornamentation. He writes that "uncommon expressions, strong flashes of wit, pointed similes, and epigrammatic turns, especially when they recur too frequently, are a disfigurement, rather than any embellishment of discourse" (1987 [1741–42]: 192). Secondly, he argues that orators should ensure that their speeches are easily pronounced and presented because words or sentences that are difficult to pronounce "affect the mind with a painful sentiment, and render the style harsh and disagreeable" (1978 [1739–40]:

586). Finally, he warns against the delivery of orations that lack unity or simplicity. In Hume's system, common judgments and opinions are characterized by a natural conception of ideas that the imagination does not feel from piecing together a confused and circuitous argument (1978 [1739–40]: 185). Hume argues that “the more single and united it is to the eye,” the less effort any argument will require of the imagination to “collect all its parts, and run from them to the correlative idea, which forms the conclusion.” When the mind is required to labour excessively in order to run through the course of an argument, rhetoric fails to take the place of experience in the formation of beliefs. The regular progress of the sentiments is disturbed and the “idea strikes not on us with such vivacity” as is required to significantly influence the passions and imagination (1978 [1739–40]: 153).

Though ease of conception is central to his theory of rhetorical reception, Hume, nevertheless, proposes a significant limitation to its utility. One of the central features of his conception of rhetoric is his argument that overly facilitating the mind's progress through an argument—in other words, facilitating it to the point where the audience's judgment is no longer engaged by the orator's speech—can actually hinder the effectiveness of rhetoric. Effective rhetoric requires that the orator engage the imagination of the audience members by raising questions, not simply supplying answers. “Obscurity,” Hume writes, is indeed “painful to the mind as well as to the eye; but to bring light from obscurity, by whatever labour, must needs be delightful and rejoicing” (1975 [1777]: 11). Effective rhetoricians must not attempt to overpower our natural determination to make judgments. They must play to it. In other words, the most effective rhetoric does not simply supply all of the answers required for the audience members to adopt the speaker's views. On the contrary, it allows enough space for the audience members to make judgments of their own.

Hume described the ancient eloquence that he so admired as the “noble art and sublime talents” that are “requisite to arrive, by just degrees, at a sentiment so bold and excessive” (1987 [1741–42]: 101). Bold and excessive sentiments were not, however, commonly considered compatible with the eighteenth-century British model of a gentleman. Therefore, in order to resuscitate the ancient eloquence that he so admired, Hume had to modernize it by imbuing it with eighteenth-century standards of conversational politeness.

The polite character of the orator is the third component of Hume's conception of high rhetoric, after accurate reasoning and the rhetorical style of Hume's idealized Demosthenes. Hume understood the relationship between politeness and rhetoric differently from many of his contemporaries. Most understood the polite virtues of simplicity and moderation in a way that was antithetical to the flair and passion of rhetorical figures.

Hume, as we will see, did not. In the eighteenth century, politeness belonged to the realm of conversation. Hume suggested ways in which this feature of the egalitarian world of conversation could be exported to the stratified realm of rhetoric.

Hume's conception of politeness was informed by the work of Anthony Ashley Cooper (the third earl of Shaftesbury). According to Lawrence Klein, Shaftesbury viewed politeness as "refinement that had submitted to the disciplines of sociability: the combination of self-confidence and unpretentiousness, the naturalness and ease, the honesty and elegance, of the fully autonomous being" (1994: 210). Politeness, for Shaftesbury, was centred in discursivity (1994: 119, n. 58). As Klein writes, "the kernel of 'politeness' could be conveyed in the simple expression, 'the art of pleasing in company,' or, in a contemporary definition, 'a dextrous management of our Words and Actions, whereby we make other People have better Opinions of us and themselves'" (1994: 3–4, n. 58). Following Shaftesbury, Hume defines politeness as consisting in "the arts of conversation" (1987 [1741–42]: 127).

Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* model his notion of politeness quite effectively. As opposed to the zealous wrangling and bigoted tirades that dominated the factionalized style of religious discourse against which Hume was writing, the characters in the *Dialogues* engage in a civilized and, more or less, polite conversation to explore the merits of their respective positions. Towards the end of Dialogue X, Philo, the sceptic, seems to have fully refuted Cleanthes' defense of the infinite power, wisdom and goodness of God. But rather than push his advantage and end the conversation, Philo backs off and cedes the floor to Cleanthes. "It is your turn now," he says, "to tug the laboring oar, and to support your philosophical subtleties against the dictates of plain reason and experience" (1970 [1779], 92). Cleanthes, the defender of the argument from design for the existence of God, is described as having an "accurate philosophical turn" (1970 [1779], 5). As a polite individual, he is able to continue the conversation with Philo.

The first to leave the conversation is Demea. At the end of Dialogue XI, Pamphilus observes that "Demea did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse; and he took occasion soon after, on some pretence or other, to leave the company" (1970 [1779], 106). Demea, as the defender of the a priori argument for the existence of God, is the least polite of the characters in the dialogues because of his "rigid and inflexible orthodoxy" (1970 [1779], 5). Demea's impoliteness ultimately impedes his ability to converse with Philo and Cleanthes so he simply slinks off. Pamphilus does not recount the end of the conversation between Cleanthes and Philo. Rather, he breaks away from it and simply states that the two "pursued not this conversation much further" (1970 [1779], 123). What is significant, however, is that they did continue it. Demea leaves

the conversation before it ends because he is impolite. Cleanthes and Philo continue the conversation past the end of the *Dialogues*, demonstrating that they are polite, and thus are capable of civilly debating these sorts of contentious questions.

Polite rhetoric is defined by three key characteristics that are absent from low rhetoric. First are the manners and decorum of politeness. These ensure that orations are respectful rather than bullying. In the world of conversation, this decorum manifests itself in the conversants' willingness to cede the floor to one another. However, it would be a mistake to interpret this "mutual deference" as acquiescence. Hume defines it as "civility" (1987 [1741–42]: 126). Another word would be respect. Politeness requires that conversants respect one another, that they not treat their conversation as a blood sport. There should be no objective of winning in conversation. Rather, conversants should seek an open exchange of ideas.

The decorum of politeness translates into the realm of rhetoric as a respect for the individual reason and judgment of the audience members. In Hume's conception of rhetoric, the orator appeals to these faculties in the audience rather than seeking to overpower them. A rhetorical setting does not allow for the reciprocity of a conversational setting. However, the orator can still respect the audience members. The polite orator is not a lecturer. Through rhetoric, the orator engages with the audience members.

This engagement is closely related to the second contribution that politeness makes to Hume's conception of high rhetoric, namely sociability. In the realm of conversation, sociability is the capacity to sustain conversation with one's interlocutors. In the realm of rhetoric, it translates as the capacity to stimulate and to contribute to larger societal conversations. While the orator may not be engaged in a reciprocal conversation with the audience members, the orator's speeches become the subject matter for their conversations, both with each other and with others. The virtue of simplicity increases the quotability of the orations, thus facilitating their dissemination throughout society.

The capacity to sustain conversation is closely related to Hume's experimental method. It belies the certainty of dogmatism and, instead, promotes the type of self-conscious uncertainty that is central to Hume's epistemology. Hume argues that we can never have certainty in our knowledge of the causal relations that determine our world, but only greater and greater degrees of certainty following from repeated experiments. Similarly, the capacity to sustain conversation allows for the development of a justifiably greater and greater trust in the merits of our political judgments.

Lastly, politeness, along with its rejection of pedantry and specialized learning, contributes to the groundedness and connection with every day life that are fundamental to Hume's empiricism. As, M.A. Box writes,

“the empiricist stress on experience as against ratiocination was appealingly analogous to the gentlemanly stress on worldly experience as against book-learning. Both were seen as means of keeping one’s feet firmly on the ground” (1990: 13–14). As Annette Baier writes, Hume believed that “it is philosophy which must become worldly, not the world which must become philosophical” (1991: 24). Rather than convert the “many honest gentlemen” into philosophers, Hume wished instead to “communicate to our founders of systems, a share of [the honest gentlemen’s] gross earthy mixture, as an ingredient, which they commonly stand much in need of, and which would serve to temper those fiery particles, of which they are composed” (1978 [1739–40]: 272). Hume’s conception of rhetoric is directed precisely at tempering the “fiery particles” of the zealots’ rhetoric.

It is useful here to look to Aristotle for a comparison that helps to illuminate Hume’s conception of rhetoric. A persuasive orator, according to Aristotle, is characterized by credibility, which, for Aristotle, rests on “good sense, excellence, and goodwill” (1985: 1378a9). However, there is a fundamental difference separating Aristotle’s and Hume’s respective conceptions of character. For Hume, the character of the orator is determined by the manner in which he speaks to the audience. Aristotle’s conception of character is reliant upon past performance. Ultimately, the credibility of an orator is determined by the results of the actions he either endorses or opposes. An orator whose predictions and arguments are born out will develop a reputation for credibility. Thus, the credible orator is one who develops a reputation for having a grasp of truth and reason.

Hume would certainly agree that an orator’s past performances affect perceptions of his credibility. He notes that there is a natural tendency in human nature to regard the judgment of another “as a kind of argument for what they affirm” (1978 [1739–40]: 320–21). Correspondingly, Hume argues that our suspicions are raised by any matter of fact presented by a speaker of “a doubtful character” (1975 [1777]: 112). However, reputation based upon past performances does not fully account for character in Hume’s conception of rhetoric. Hume’s treatment of politeness, the arts of conversation, suggests that the character of an orator is determined, at least in significant part, by the audience members’ perception of how he speaks to them. An orator who harangues his audience would not be considered polite by the members of that audience, even if the orator had a previous reputation for politeness, because politeness is a criterion of proper behaviour.

Aristotle’s advice to the orator is, ultimately, grounded in his faith in the persuasiveness of truth and reason. He writes that the argument is the “substance of rhetorical persuasion” (1985: 1354a15). For Aristotle, therefore, the orator’s demonstrated connection with truth and his under-

standing of the rationality of emotions only further augment the persuasiveness of his oration. From a Humean perspective, the Aristotelian theory of persuasion ultimately fails because it is so heavily grounded in Aristotle's faith in truth. For Hume, it is the combined effect of accurate reasoning, rhetorical style, and the orator's good character that accounts for the persuasiveness of high rhetoric.

Hume could find very few examples of orators who had successfully modernized the ancient eloquence that he so admired. But, given his understanding of belief and judgment, he thought it was possible and indeed necessary, that orators do so. Accurate reasoning would counter the hypocrisy of the zealots. Powerful figurative language would imbue this reasoning with the liveliness and vivacity required for an audience to believe it. And the politeness of the orator would ensure that the audience's judgment was respected and that the orator's ideas were presented in a way that would facilitate and encourage the types of societal conversations that would challenge and could ultimately undermine the forces of fanaticism.

Hume's discussion in the *History of England* of the Earl of Strafford's speech at his impeachment trial provides one of the clearest examples of an orator succeeding in resuscitating and modernizing the ancient eloquence that Hume admired. Ironically, the account of Strafford's speech that most confirms it as an example of accurate, just, and polite rhetoric comes from Bulstrode Whitlocke, the chairman of the committee that conducted Strafford's impeachment:

Certainly, says Whitlocke with his usual candor, *never any man acted such a part, on such a theatre, with more wisdom, constancy, and eloquence, with greater reason, judgment, and temper, and with a better grace in all his words and actions, than did this great and excellent person; and he moved the hearts of all his auditors, some few excepted, to remorse and pity.* (1983 [1778], 5: 317)

Hume quotes at length from the conclusion of the speech that Strafford made in his own defense. This passage contains far and away the lengthiest quotation to be found anywhere in volumes 5 and 6 of the *History*. Hume presents Strafford as a man standing alone against a parliament inflamed with fanaticism and bent upon his destruction. Strafford, Hume writes, "without assistance, mixing modesty and humility with firmness and vigour, made such a defense that the commons saw it impossible, by a legal prosecution, ever to obtain a sentence against him." In Hume's words, Strafford's rhetoric won out over "the managers [who] divided the several articles among them, and attacked the prisoner with all the weight of authority, with all the vehemence of rhetoric, with all the accuracy of long preparation" (1983 [1778], 5: 318).⁶

Hume's conception of rhetoric is an important feature of his political philosophy that deserves greater study. It connects his discussions of persuasion, reason and politeness to his concerns with the real political and moral effects of faction and fanaticism. In addition, it offers insights into the conception of opposing interests that Hume understood to be the foundation of the British constitution and of his ideal republican commonwealth. Political theorists will gain a richer appreciation of Hume's political philosophy as well as a more nuanced understanding of the inter-relationships between his political, philosophical and historical works by engaging more closely with his conception of rhetoric.

Hume offers hope that a high form of political oratory might effectively counter those who would employ the power of rhetoric to misrepresent people's interests and to persuade them to reject law and morality as guides to action. He shows us that political and religious extremism are dangers of fanaticism, not rhetoric, and that rhetoric has a very constructive and important role to play in political discourse. Certainly these lessons are as relevant for contemporary liberal democracies as they were in Hume's time.

Hume's defense of rhetoric puts into question stark dichotomies between the rational persuasion of deliberation and the irrational manipulations of rhetoric and speaks to important political and moral questions about the nature of judgment and the communication of interests that are central to contemporary liberal theory. Consequently, liberal theorists—particularly those engaged in the development of normative models of judgment and deliberation—would benefit from an engagement with Hume's discussions of rhetoric. Hume's influence on the development of contemporary liberal theories of judgment and deliberation has been negligible, especially when compared with the influence of Kant. Following Kant, contemporary liberals have tended to draw a clear distinction between reason and the passions and to define no legitimate role for the latter in moral and political deliberation.⁷ In large part, this can be accounted for by the overwhelming, and very laudable, concern among contemporary liberals with ensuring impartiality in moral and political matters. However, though the motive behind it may be laudable, the effect of this bifurcation has been the development of normative models of judgment and deliberation that do not accord very well with the empirical realities of judgment. As Sharon Krause argues,

no sentiment-free form of practical judgment is available to us. In this sense, there is no real choice to be made between the sentiment-based model and the rationalist one because we cannot deliberate about practical ends without affect. So to argue for a sentiment-based model of judgment and deliberation is not to recommend bringing more passions into politics, or to encourage people to be more emotional and less reflective in their judgments. It is rather to defend

a clearer understanding of what is already happening (and what cannot help but happen) when we deliberate about what we ought to do. (2008: 140–41)

Hume's conception of rhetoric has much to offer contemporary efforts at redefining the relationship between reason and the passions in the liberal tradition. His account of judgment in which reason and the passions mutually assist one another challenges conceptions of judgment that rely on the possibility of cleanly distinguishing reasoned from passionate appeals.

What is more, Hume's conception of rhetoric offers an important basis from which to incorporate a positive role for orators into contemporary theories of deliberation. Most such theories do not take sufficient account of the role that political oratory plays in the judgments arrived at by citizens of contemporary liberal democracies. An engagement with Hume's conception of rhetoric would surely help to broaden the scope of contemporary theories of deliberation by providing important tools for understanding and evaluating political oratory.

Notes

- 1 Hume sometimes uses the terms *superstition* and *superstitious beliefs* to refer generally to unphilosophical beliefs. At other times, he uses *superstition* to refer to the teachings of the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, in particular beliefs surrounding their ceremonies and other "superstitious" acts. For the purposes of this paper, I will use the terms *superstition* and *superstitious beliefs* to denote unphilosophical beliefs in general. As I am concerned with Hume's treatment of both religious and political factions and zealots, I will not here enter into a discussion of the differences between his general and specific usages of the terms.
- 2 In particular, see Peter Jones (1982).
- 3 Peter Jones points to other passages in which Cicero argues for a unification of rhetoric and philosophy (1982: 33, n.29).
- 4 Hume critiques Cicero's rhetoric in his correspondence with Henry Home (1954: 7–9).
- 5 We know that Hume read Plutarch from a March 1734 letter that he wrote to Dr. George Cheyne (1932, 1: 14). Plutarch's description of Demosthenes can be found at: John Dryden's translation (1982: 459).
- 6 Ultimately, the Commons did manage to execute Strafford after passing a Bill of Attainder against him, so his victory was fleeting. Strafford is important to Hume's discussions of rhetoric for the particular speech that he gave at his trial. Hume goes to great lengths to ensure that his readers know that, on the occasion of this particular speech, Strafford's rhetoric proved persuasive despite the odds that were stacked against him.
- 7 The most notable and influential examples of this trend can be found in John Rawls's conception of public reason and in Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action.

References

- Aristotle. 1985. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes. 2 vols. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press

- Baier, Annette C. 1991. *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*. Cambridge MA.: Harvard University Press.
- Box, M.A. 1990. *The Suasive Art of David Hume*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cicero, Marcus Tullius. 2001. *Cicero: On the Ideal Orator*, trans. James M. May and Jakob Wisse. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Conley, Thomas M. 2003. "Rhetoric." In *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan Kors. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garrett, Don. 1997. *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1999. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. trans. William Rehg. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Herd, Jennifer A. 1997. *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, David. 1978 [1739–1740]. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch. Clarendon Press.
- Hume, David. 1987 [1741–1742]. *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
- Hume, David. 1975 [1748]. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P.H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hume, David. 1957 [1757]. *Natural History of Religion*, ed. H.E. Root. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Hume, David. 1983 [1778]. *The History of England, from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*. 6 vols. Indianapolis: Liberty Classics.
- Hume, David. 1970 [1779]. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Hume, David. 1932. *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hume, David. 1954. *New Letters of David Hume*, ed. Raymond Klibansky and Ernest C. Mossner. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jones, Peter. 1982. *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
- Klein, Lawrence E. 1994. *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Krause, Sharon. 2008. *Civil Passions: Moral Sentiment and Democratic Deliberation*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Livingston, Donald W. 1995. "On Hume's Conservatism." *Hume Studies* XXI (2): 151–64.
- Miller, Stephen. 2001. *Three Deaths and Enlightenment Thought*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Plutarch. 1982 [1683]. *Plutarch's Lives Translated from the Greek by Several Hands*, trans. John Dryden. Franklin Center PA: The Franklin Library.
- Pocock, J.G.A. 1985. *Virtue Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Potkay, Adam. 1994. *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press.
- Rawls, John. 2005. *Political Liberalism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Whelan, Frederick G. 1985. *Order and Artifice in Hume's Political Philosophy*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.