

Book Review

Aaron Alexander Zubia: *The Political Thought of David Hume: The Origins of Liberalism and the Modern Political Imagination*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2024. Pp. xv, 366.)

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Scholars of David Hume’s political thought and its relation to present-day political theory are divided into two main camps: those who view him as a conservative, and those who view him as a liberal. (There is also a recent trend that situates Hume as the origin of game theory and coordination theory, which are more analytical branches of political theory.) This dichotomy arises from the fact that Hume’s texts contain views that support each of these positions. In *The Political Thought of David Hume*, Zubia identifies contractual and skeptical Epicureanism as the core of Hume’s thought (parts 1 and 2) and construes his political thought as an origin of liberalism (part 3), ultimately drawing from modern Epicureanism and the social contract tradition.

The book is structured as follows. Part 1, “Despiritualizing the World,” begins with Hume’s critique of religion and situates it within the tradition of ancient Epicureanism. (Paul Russell’s *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism, and Irreligion* [Oxford University Press, 2008] is pioneering in this regard.) The author surveys the assessments of Hume as an Epicurean by his contemporaries. In part 2, “Liberalism’s Founding Myth,” the contractarian tradition found in Epicureanism, in contrast to Stoicism, is explored. According to Zubia, Hume, despite his criticism of the contract theory, adopted a naturalized version of it. The interpretation of Hume as a proponent of contract theory, previously seen in the works of David Gauthier (“David Hume, Contractarian,” *Philosophical Review* 88, no. 1 [1979]: 3–38) and others, ultimately serves the author’s aim, in part 3, of connecting Hume’s political thought with Rawls’s theory of justice and liberalism—this, despite the fact that Rawls himself placed Hume in the utilitarian tradition. Part 3, “The Modern Political Imagination,” critically examines the conservative and liberal interpretations in Hume scholarship to date, considering his key works that serve as their basis in a balanced manner.

The author’s main points, highlighted in chapter 5, “Conservating Liberalism,” are summarized in the following statement: “What Hume conservatized, then, was a liberal vision of society that privileged the Epicurean ... vantage point. This same privileging of the Epicurean vision—of the *utile* and the *dulce* over the *honestum*—is a standard component of the foundationalist liberalism not only of Benthamite utilitarianism, but also of Rawlsian political

liberalism" (228). Accordingly, the author fulfills the promise of the book's subtitle. In essence, Hume's skeptical Epicureanism rejects the language of *honestum*, the ultimate moral value, as the basis of political liberalism, much as does Rawls.

The author's identification of Hume's political philosophy as "skeptical Epicureanism," however, does not sufficiently clarify whether this philosophy leaned more toward skepticism or Epicureanism. Zubia appears to emphasize the latter. He maintains that "for Kant, as for Hobbes, and other thinkers in the contractarian-conventionalist tradition," "the world is despiritualized" (243). This proves that Hume, like Kant and Hobbes, contributed to the liberal tradition by rejecting the language of *honestum*. More attention could have been given to Hume's positive or unique contributions. This ties back to the question of the status of skepticism in Hume's political philosophy and the extent to which Hume's skepticism permeates his politics and history.

Two points are left largely unaddressed in the book. First, Hume's stance on public debt. Despite the author's detailed examination of Hume's vehement criticism of the Wilkes affair after the 1760s, the book does not focus on his growing pessimism toward increasing public debt in his later years. (The issue of public debt in Hume's work is given crucial attention in the opening chapter of Richard Whatmore's *The End of Enlightenment: Empire, Commerce, Crisis* [Allen Lane, 2023], published around the same time as Zubia's book.) Second, the author disregards an important essay by Hume, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." While he appropriately relies on Laurence Bongie's classic study to evince the reception of Hume's *History of England* by French traditionalists, he overlooks that this enigmatic essay was favorably received among British radicals. These two aspects of Hume's political thought—marked by seemingly extreme pessimism and utopianism—are often overlooked or disregarded, even by Hume scholars, as they are difficult to reconcile with the overall picture of his philosophy. These aspects appear to lie beyond the scope of the author's analysis, as Zubia primarily focuses on how Hume inherited the contractarian tradition of Epicureanism. But the question remains: How can Hume's skeptical Epicureanism engage with these two aspects, which are also integral to his vision of political society, within the broadly defined intellectual tradition of liberalism outlined by the author?

In the book's conclusion, the author maintains that "public political deliberation on the political liberalism model is already faith-based"—"a faith in the broader Epicurean world picture" (266–67). In the preceding passage of this conclusion, the author made a rather sudden claim that Hume's philosophy "requires faith ... in the intelligibility of nature. And this belief in the intelligibility of nature is consistent with belief in the existence of a transcendent source of order and regularity" (266). While there is a scholarly interpretation that takes Hume's occasional claim for "true religion" seriously, the author offers little explanation of how this aligns with his own repeated emphasis on Hume's rejection of *honestum*. Furthermore, no indication is given about how it can be said that this approach "is consistent with the classical Christian tradition" but

“would be no more faith-based than the [Rawlsian] ‘public reason’ approach of political liberalism” (266). The author’s argument in this part of the book is somewhat lacking in explanation, and rather than summarizing the meticulous discussions in the previous chapters, it appears to contradict them.

Overall, the book skillfully integrates Hume’s major works along with intriguing assessments and criticisms from Hume’s contemporaries, while also being attentive to the secondary literature. It strives to evaluate impartially the validity of both conservative and liberal interpretations, in a manner that is akin to Hume’s own approach to writing English history. The endeavor to frame Hume’s political thought as skeptical Epicureanism contributes significantly to the recent trend in modern intellectual history known as the ancient “turn.” This trend offers insight into how modern political thinkers used “proxy terms” representing ancient philosophical schools to shape their discussions and analyses.

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