

David Hume and the Ideas That Shaped America

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[00:00:00] Tanaya Tauber: Welcome to Live at the National Constitution Center, the podcast sharing live constitutional conversations and debates hosted by the Center in person and online. I'm Tanaya Tauber, the senior director of Count All programs. Called a degenerate son of science by Thomas Jefferson, and a bungling lawyer by James Madison, Scottish philosopher David Hume was cited so often at the constitutional convention that delegates seemed to have committed his essays to memory. In this episode, scholars Angela Coventry, Dennis Rasmussen, and Aaron Alexander Zubia explore Hume's philosophical legacy and its profound impact on shaping America. Jeffrey Rosen, president and CEO of the National Constitution Center moderates. Here's Jeff to get the conversation started.

[00:00:57] Jeffrey Rosen: Hello friends. Welcome to the National Constitution Center and to today's convening of America's Town Hall. I'm Jeffrey Rosen, the president and CEO of this wonderful institution. Before we start, let's inspire ourselves as always, for the light and learning ahead by reciting together at the National Constitution Center's mission statement. Here we go. The National Constitution Center is the only institution in America chartered by Congress to increase awareness and understanding of the US Constitution among the American people on a nonpartisan basis.

[00:01:29] Jeffrey Rosen: We have some great programs coming up in February. This Thursday, February 1st, we're going to Phoenix and to Arizona State University to reconvene the Constitution Drafting Project. Remember that wonderful project convening three teams, libertarian, progressive, and conservative, who agreed on five proposed amendments to the Constitution while we're taking the show on the road and will be in Phoenix on Thursday. On February 15th, we'll celebrate Black History Month with historians, Edda Fields-Black and James Oaks.

[00:01:59] Jeffrey Rosen: And then on President's Day, February 19th, I'm so excited that we're launching my new book, the Pursuit of Happiness, How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America. It'll be live at the NCC. Jeffrey Goldberg from the Atlantic is coming to Philly to, for a conversation about the book. I'm so excited. If you can make it live, come and I'll say hi in person, and if not, please tune in online.

[00:02:23] Jeffrey Rosen: It is now a great honor to introduce the dream team of Hume Scholars, the great David Hume, who had such an influence on the founding is a central character in, in My happiness book, and I'm, can't wait to learn from America's experts on Hume about how, who he was and how he influenced the founding. Angela Coventry is a professor of Philosophy at Portland State University. She's the author of Hume's Theory of

Causation, a Quasi Realist Interpretation. Hume, A Guide for the Perplexed, co-editor of David Hume, Morals, Politics and Society, and The Humean Mind, a co-author of the Historical Dictionary of Hume's Philosophy, and she's published a special edition of Hume's Treatise of Human Nature. Can't wait to learn from her.

[00:03:11] Jeffrey Rosen: Dennis Rasmussen is a professor of political science and the Haggerty Family Fellow at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. He's the author of five magnificent books, including *The Infidel and the Professor*, *David Hume*, *Adam Smith*, and *the Friendship That Shaped Modern Thought*, *Fears of a Setting Sun*, *The Disillusionment of America's Founders*, which I rely on and learn so much from. And most recently, *the Constitution's Penman*, *Gouverneur Morris and the Creation of America's Basic Charter*.

[00:03:44] Jeffrey Rosen: And Aaron Alexander Zubia is Assistant Professor of Humanities at the University of Florida. His work has appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*, *National Review*, *Law and Liberty*, and *Hume Studies*. And his new book is *The Political Thought of David Hume, the Origins of Liberalism and the Modern Political Imagination*. Thank you so much for joining, Angela Coventry, Dennis Rasmussen and Aaron Alexander Zubia. I'll kick us off by saying that, as I mentioned, Hume was a central character for me in the happiness book. I set out to read the books on Thomas Jefferson's reading list that he said were key to understanding the pursuit of happiness. And Hume's essays are on the list along with stoic and enlightenment moral philosophers. And when I read Hume's essays, I was struck that he twice uses the phrase, the pursuit of happiness.

[00:04:38] Jeffrey Rosen: He writes in his essay about the stoics. "It's not true that every man, however, dissolute and negligent precedes unerringly in the pursuit of happiness. Even the most polished citizen is inferior to the man of virtue. And the true philosopher who governs his appetites, subdues his passions and has learned from reason to set a just value on every pursuit and enjoyment." And that phrase by Hume sums up the classical understanding of the pursuit of happiness, not feeling good, but being good, not the pursuit of virtue, not the pursuit of pleasure, but the pursuit of virtue and Hume defines virtue as subduing your passions, governing your appetites, and learning from reason to set a just value on every pursuit and enjoyment. So with that introduction, Dennis Rasmussen, I'll begin by asking you to kick us off to tell us a little more about who Hume was and why he was so influential on the founders.

[00:05:38] Dennis Rasmussen: Thanks, Jeff, and thanks for putting this discussion together. I'm looking forward to it. Hume is widely seen as probably the greatest philosopher to ever write in the English language, or maybe second to Thomas Hobbes, depending on who you ask. He's also, I think it's fair to say among the most loved of philosophers. There's recently a survey of thousands of academic philosophers around the world that found that more identified themselves with Hume than with any other figure in the history of philosophy. That's partly, I think maybe as much due to his personality as, as due to his thought. He seems to have been one of the best natured philosophers who ever lived. During his time, he spent some time in Paris, and he was almost universally known there as the Good David. So he's this rotund, affable guy.

[00:06:21] Dennis Rasmussen: He's fond of food and drink and games. His favorite game was wist he loved good company and he's so kind of open and kindly and cheerful that many

people who were sort of scandalized by his writings were disarmed when they met him in person. So he seems to be a very likable guy. In terms of his, his philosophy or his outlook is very hard to summarize. He wrote so much about so many topics. He is an interesting figure insofar as he is quite highly critical of religion, almost all forms of religion. But he is also quite skeptical about the capacities of human reason. Politically speaking, he certainly welcomes what he sees as the blessings of progress and civilization. He's, I think it's fair to say a liberal in the broadest sense of the term, meaning that he stresses the benefits of limited government and individual liberty, religious toleration, private property, commerce, and the like.

[00:07:11] Dennis Rasmussen: But he's a sort of skeptical liberal. He's a skeptical, not just in his epistemology, but also in his politics, in the sense that he distrusts big sudden innovations in politics. He thinks that given the fallibility of human reason, given the kind of complicated variable nature of the political world, we should be pretty wary of grand schemes for reforming society. So he's skeptical with regard to the introduction of principle and ideology into politics in a way that a lot of his enlightenment colleagues weren't. He was just an enormously important and influential figure. And so it was not surprising that he had a big impact on the founders.

[00:07:51] Dennis Rasmussen: When I was kind of preparing for this discussion, I reread a little bit of Mark Spencer's book. A scholar named Mark Spencer wrote a really exhaustive book called David Hume in 18th Century America. And looking through that again, it's remarkable how widely known how widely read Hume's works were during the founding period, especially his, his, he wrote a six volume Hume wrote a six volume history of England, and his essays, I think were the most read, most cited pieces by people on both sides of the political spectrum for a whole host of reasons. It's not that we had a discussion about Montesquieu, the great French philosopher Montesquieu a few months ago. And there are certain themes like the separation of powers that you can really point to and say everybody's zeroed in on the separation of powers.

[00:08:32] Dennis Rasmussen: Hume's used for a bunch of different reasons by a bunch of different folks. I guess I'll turn it over to maybe Angela and Aaron to talk about what some of those influences are, but that's hopefully a good general sense of Hume, who Hume was.

[00:08:44] Jeffrey Rosen: Superb, such a great introduction to Hume noting his tremendous influence. It's quoted so often during the constitutional convention that people said that his works had been committed to memory. And as you note, among the most cited with Montesquieu Montesquieu is first and Hume is fourth according to one scholar. And you, so well sum up his liberalism and skepticism. Angela, what would you say about why Hume was so influential to the founders?

[00:09:11] Angela Coventry: Well, everything that Dennis said is absolutely true and correct and beautifully put. And definitely you gave out that quote, he was the fourth most cited secular author in early America. So we know that everyone is reading him. But I guess the thing I would like to add to Dennis's story, this is actually part of the reason I like him so much, is that Hume was very controversial during his lifetime. And I do think if you look at his influence on early America, yes, some figures liked him, some didn't like Jefferson. And so that's always kind of an interest to me, like why was Hume so controversial?

[00:09:47] Angela Coventry: Now, obviously when he was writing in Scotland, he was nearly excommunicated for his philosophy. We know that he was denied academic jobs as well because of his philosophy. So we know that he was a very controversial figure. Even though today as Dennis said, like we, he's generally regarded as one of the greatest philosophers to write in English. I mean, there's still plenty of controversy surrounding Hume's works, but I take it that today most of us scholars kind of disagree on what Hume was actually up to. So, and this spans pretty much everything that he wrote.

[00:10:21] Angela Coventry: So this is a huge discussion. But people wonder is he just a destructive skeptic? Or is he really trying to build, a science of the mind that would extend to a science of politics? Does he think there's a self? Is there no self? Is there a self? Is he a causal realist, anti-realist, moral realist? And so all of these kinds of disputes, I think, kind of arise from Hume's philosophy, and he can be appropriated from many, many different angles. And I take it that is one of the attractions of Hume's view, is that it is open to so many interpretations, and we can see it being influential in so many different topics.

[00:11:00] Angela Coventry: So definitely I think we can see that Madison was influenced by Hume. And we can definitely say that Hamilton definitely influenced by Hume, experimental politics and so on. But if you look at someone like Jefferson, he was not a fan of Hume at all and had very harsh things to say also some nice things too. He did say some nice things about Hume style but he also called him some, some, some not nice things. And Adams seemed to agree with him. So basically what I'm trying to say, it should be no surprise that Hume's legacy in thinking about early America is somewhat mixed as well. So to get to a Wig versus Tory dispute, is gonna happen pretty quickly with Jefferson and Adams.

[00:11:41] Jeffrey Rosen: Great. Such a powerful reminder of the fact that despite his wide appeal, some like him and others didn't, and you note that Whig Tory split. And indeed, as you suggest, Jefferson didn't like him 'cause he called him a honeyed Tory, and thought his history of England was pro monarch. And by contrast Hamilton and the Federalists embraced him more as a model because of his strong visions of executive power. We'll dig into those influences in a moment. But before we do Aaron give, give us your overview sense of why and in what ways Hume was so influential on the founding generation.

[00:12:25] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Absolutely. Thanks, Jeff. And it's an honor to be here with Dennis and Angela. Hume born 1711, died 1776 was after Montesquieu death, the leading man of letters in Britain and on the continent. So it's very fitting, Jeff, that you've had two sessions, one on Montesquieu and one on Hume. This one here is very fitting. In connection with your book on happiness Hume was interested in the happiness of mankind. That's what the first reviewer of book three of Hume's Treatise of Human Nature said. So Hume, around the time he is 18, comes up with an idea that takes him 10 years to execute, to write this dense philosophical treatise called the Treatise of Human Nature.

[00:13:07] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Book one is called Of the Understanding, book two, Of the Passions and book three, Of Morals. So that came out in 1740. And the first reviewer said, "This author is interested in the happiness of mankind and wants, he intends to be heard by everybody, and he wants to reach ordinary readers, and he also wants to reform practically all the opinions of mankind," is what this reviewer said. But this reviewer and Hume himself recognized that Hume didn't succeed in doing that when he wrote the Treatise. It was a dense work, a thick work that Hume in his autobiography said, fell dead, born from the press. And

so shortly after the treatise, Hume started translating his own philosophy into shorter pieces and more digestible essays.

[00:13:55] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And so he had two volumes of essays come out in the 1740s on moral, literary and political topics. He had a bestselling collection of essays, the Political Discourses, which came out in 1752. And as Dennis mentioned from 1754 to 1762, his sixth volume history of England was released. So, while Angela mentioned all the controversy about Hume's philosophy and so much contemporary of work on Hume deals with his treatise, at the time in the 18th century, he was known primarily as an essayist and a historian, and he was almost impossible to ignore. Dennis and Angela have mentioned his controversial aspects.

[00:14:34] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And as an example of this Timothy Dwight, who is Jonathan Edwards grandson. He was named president of Yale College in 1795, and one of his first addresses was essentially a plea to save students from falling for Hume's irreligious and libertine views, which testifies to the fact that Hume was being read. He was being read frequently, and it wasn't just in America. There was an Italian priest who noted that even though some of Hume's more controversial works about religion especially, were on the index of forbidden books, yet everybody in Rome seemed to be reading them. He said, it's as if Hume cast a magic spell on his readers. And he managed to be read while his critics and detractors were not read.

[00:15:18] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And so in these essays, Hume is speaking to, writing to polite society. He's also writing to statesmen to teach about cause and effect in political affairs. And two of the statesmen that read Hume and applied, some of those insights, of course, are Hume and Madison. We'll get into that soon, I'm sure.

[00:15:38] Jeffrey Rosen: Superb. He does cast a kind of magic spell as you so well put it 'cause the essays are so clear, and it's so interesting to learn from you that they were intended as popular distillations of the moral philosophy that he set out at greater length in the three volumes of the treatise of human nature. And also so interesting that those three volumes were about the understanding the passions or emotions and morals. Great. Well, let's now dig into his most famous influence on the founders, and that is founders on Madison in Federalist 10. The scholar Douglas Adair famously noted decades ago that Madison's thinking about factions were especially influenced by Hume's essay idea of a perfect commonwealth. Dennis Rasmussen tell us first of all, how Madison defined factions and how his ideas were influenced by Hume.

[00:16:29] Dennis Rasmussen: Sure. We sometimes use the word faction to mean more or less party. Madison defines a faction as a group that is pursuing some, and that is detrimental either to the rights of other citizens or to what he calls the permanent and aggregate interests of the community, meaning the common good. So affection is by definition a negative group for, for Madison. The main burden of Federalist 10 is to show that only a large republic can adequately deal with the problem of majority faction. I think the two main sources for this idea for Madison are David Hume and his best friend, Adam Smith.

[00:17:06] Dennis Rasmussen: So you kindly mentioned the book I wrote on, on Hume and Smith's friendship. They were best friends for their entire adult lives, which is this amazing

thing, right? Hume is again, this great philosopher Smith is maybe the history's most famous theorist of commercial society both kind of pre- both Hume and Smith prefigured Madison's argument in Federalist 10. Smith in the Wealth of Nations makes a similar argument about religious sects. But since this Hume, this, this discussion centers on Hume, let me talk about how Hume prefigures this argument of Madison's.

[00:17:36] Dennis Rasmussen: So Hume makes this argument very briefly. It's in an essay called Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth, which is a sort of curious or unusual essay within Hume's corpus in so far as he is usually quite averse to the idea of striving for perfection in politics. But the key part for our purposes is just really a very short part. The second to last paragraph of the essay is almost a good summary of Madison's argument in Federalist 10. So in this paragraph, Hume argues in favor of the feasibility of a large republic. That is to say, a Republican government that would work in a big country like Britain or France in his time, that had previously been thought to be impossible, right?

[00:18:18] Dennis Rasmussen: Before Hume's essay, people had always assumed that republics are only feasible within small territories, small populations, something on the level of a Swiss Canton or a Greek city state or, or Italian city state. The idea being, well, if the people are gonna govern themselves or even choose their representatives, well then there can't be too many people. They can't be too spread out. If they are, then they won't form a close-knit community. They'll have different interests, different opinions, they'll split into groups, factions tear each other apart. And Hume is maybe the first figure in the whole Western tradition to argue that the contrary is true that republics could work even better on a large scale than they would on a small scale.

[00:19:02] Dennis Rasmussen: Why? He said, well, small republics are susceptible to the kind of changing whims of the people. They're susceptible to what Madison would call the majority faction, where the majority combines to oppress individuals, to oppress minorities. Whereas in a big, diverse republic, representatives can, as he puts it, refine. Madison, would use the same term, refine people's views, and their desires. That is to say correct for people's passions, their, their irrationality and that it's good that it's the, the people are, you know, there are more people, they're more spread out, that makes it harder for them to combine to a, an act of oppressive measures if there's a majority faction in the country.

[00:19:43] Dennis Rasmussen: So this is, again, Madison's argument in Federalist 10 in a nutshell. Madison spells out things at much greater length than Hume does. Again, it's just this one paragraph of this one essay. But in terms of purely practical impact, that might be the single most influential paragraph Hume never wrote to just the way it influenced Madison, and thus the whole American experiment.

[00:20:05] Jeffrey Rosen: Beautifully distilled for just the reasons you say. In Hume's view quoting from the essay that you cited the idea of a perfect Commonwealth. Republics in large territories are more difficult to form, and once established, they're less susceptible to tumult and faction. The various parts of the large republic are so distant and remote that it would be very difficult for factions to use intrigue, prejudice, or passion to hurry the representatives into any measures against the public interest. And that's the sentence that Madison, as you say, distilled into his famous sentence about how in an extended republic, it's less likely that the majority will invade minority rights or to actually coordinate action if they discover their

strength. Angela, more of course about what Madison took from Hume. And then maybe introduce differences between Madison's notion of faction and Hume's.

[00:20:58] Angela Coventry: It's kind of actually, and it was great to hear Dennis's summary of Madison on factions. And I think one of the things that I would add to that is that both Hume and Madison seem to think that factions are inevitable and they're gonna happen. And this is probably just due to human nature but I think also if you've got people that have different interests and different passions, different levels of wealth as well different amounts of property what you're gonna find is people are gonna group together between those who are most similar to them. And I think Hume thought that that could be a threat, like it could lead to the dismantling of the government it could lead to violence.

[00:21:47] Angela Coventry: These are things that Hume definitely thought that the government should be able to control. And that seems to be when Madison starts, he says a well-functioning government should be able to stop the violence of factions. So very kind of clear cut, I think similarity in that this is something that is inevitable in society. And so that means if we're gonna talk about how we ought to be governed, then we have to talk about, well, how we actually gonna deal with something like factions.

[00:22:16] Angela Coventry: Now, as you said, Madison thought that we could manage it by getting bigger, and he seems to have gotten that from Hume. So the more diverse groups we have, the more people's interests are out there, it's gonna be the case that no one group can dominate the other. I take it that for both of them, faction is absolutely central for any kind of well governed union. But it's something that has to be taken seriously because it's just gonna be something that happens when you have groups of people together.

[00:22:47] Angela Coventry: Because we're together in a society, Hume says, we're dependent upon each other. So we have to learn how best to live with each other. So making sure that no one group can threaten the rights or the wellbeing of the community is of absolute importance. That's what I love about Madison's number 10 is that he starts right there. If we're gonna be world governed, we have to start with this. So I think he was also worried about religious factions as well as political ones, but Madison is focused on political ones.

[00:23:17] Angela Coventry: But notice that they both think that factions in moderation are okay, and it's okay to have moderate party affiliation. That's not a detriment at all. In fact, I think Hume says at one point, part of the English constitution, the upshot of that is that you're gonna have moderate factions that will come out of it, but the question arises, well, what do we do to curb that, the extreme factions? 'Cause Hume definitely wasn't a fan of extreme factions because violence threatened disruption to society. I think as Hume says, once we kind of like society, we want it to continue.

[00:23:56] Angela Coventry: So we wanna make sure if we're gonna be governed well, that we have the right kind of measures in place to make sure that factions can't infringe on others, and also threaten the wellbeing of society. Now differences well, I guess Madison really what he does is gives it like a beautiful solution based on him looking at the current state of American politics. Obviously Hume didn't have that.

[00:24:23] Angela Coventry: So, but Madison is kind of like, he's taking what Hume's doing an idea of a perfect commonwealth, and he is applying it, but it's not like he takes the utopia from him, obviously. I think, as Dennis mentioned, there's no utopia, there's no perfect government that's a fiction. Even the best government is going to have weaknesses. Just like any system of justice, there's gonna be injustice. What I like about Madison is that he thinks we can actually build the stability...

[00:24:58] Jeffrey Rosen: I may have lost you, and I'm going to check.

[00:25:01] Tanaya Tauber: Dennis or Aaron, do you want to pick up where Angela left off while we wait for her and Jeff to return?

[00:25:06] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Madison opens Federalist 10 writing that a well constructed union will be able to break, or at least if not cure at least mitigate the main mischiefs of the faction. And right there with this phrase, well, constructed union. We see that Madison is employing this new science of politics that Hume developed, which is focused on institutions more than the character of the people leading, more than the character of the governors, right? What kind of institutions can we create to ensure safety and promote public happiness? Madison, I think, is building on what Hume wrote, and that politics may be reduced to a science where he is concerned with taking human beings not as we wish them to be but taking them as they are.

[00:26:01] Aaron Alexander Zubia: For Hume, in an essay called of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature he emphasizes both the highs and the lows of human nature. So if you look at the human person and, and compare the human person to other animals, we come out looking quite good. Quite noble. There's perhaps a divine part of us, the rational part that is capable of categorizing, of foreseeing things, planning executing those plans. But if you look at the angelic realm and compare the human person, person to angelic beings, well, we look quite depraved. And Hume had a Calvinist upbringing, so he knew a good bit about human depravity.

[00:26:41] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And similarly with Madison. I mean, he says in Federalist 63, that reason truth and justice should be the authorities of our public deliberation. But that's not always going to be the case. Sometimes partial interests will arise. Sometimes partial loves will predominate, and that's when faction occurs. So for Hume, faction is not necessarily a bad thing. There are certain bad kinds of faction. Hume thinks that the modern world is unique, and that there are factions based on speculative first principles.

[00:27:13] Aaron Alexander Zubia: So the Wigs of his day based their partisan proposals based on the theory of the original contract. Whereas Tory's developed their proposals in line with the theory of the divine right of kings. And Hume thinks it's a bad idea to debate these moral first principles in public life. But for Hume economic interests are most excusable 'cause these are, as Madison would say, sewn into the nature of man. And so these are the things that we need to deal with. Either you're going to extinguish liberty, but that's not desirable. So the next best thing is to check the mischiefs of faction. And that's by limiting power where it needs to be limited and balancing various interests so that no single one predominates.

[00:27:59] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Madison says, there are various faculties, various opinions are gonna form various levels of property will be attained. There'll be mercantile interests. There will be landed interests, moneyed interests. What we need to do is recognizing the depravity of the human person, recognizing, as Madison said, that enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm. How are we going to limit these factions, which are so pernicious and how are we going to limit them and prevent them from taking us away from deliberation over about the general good?

[00:28:35] Jeffrey Rosen: Superb, I'm back. Forgive me for having dropped off 'cause of a wifi issue, but no need for me in this great conversation, which is moderating itself. And you so well introduced the connection between Hume's pessimistic view of human nature and his solutions to the problem of faction, which Madison channeled, as you said, both first representation and second of the separation of powers are Madison's humane solutions to the problem of faction.

[00:29:02] Jeffrey Rosen: Let's now put Hamilton on the table. And since you introduced his idea of human nature, focus on this famous phrase of Hume's. "Every man is supposed to be a nave," which Hamilton embraced in 1775. In an early stage in his political career, he wrote an essay called The Continentals which set forth the relevance of Hume for the revolution. And broadly, Hamilton embraced Hume's idea that we're motivated by private interests, not public interest. And the goal of the government is not to eliminate self-interest, but to harness it, to make it cooperate in the public good, notwithstanding his insatiable avarice and ambition.

[00:29:48] Jeffrey Rosen: This introduces the central question of Hume's notion of virtue. And while classical philosophers said, you could only have a republic when virtuous citizen used their powers of reason, Hume disagrees and says, reason is and ought to be the slave of passions and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them. And Hume argues that self-interest can actually serve the public good and profit maximizing commerce can increase the prosperity of all. Alright, Dennis, how did I do with that? That's just a stab at the summary of the connection between Hume's views on human nature and his in, and his views of commerce. And tell us more about that and how they influenced Hamilton.

[00:30:27] Dennis Rasmussen: Yeah, no, that was an excellent introduction. I do think that's one of the biggest things that put Hume on the side of say Hamilton and against the side of Jefferson, is his extraordinarily welcoming attitude toward commerce and commercial society, even much more so than Adam Smith, who's much more famous as a proponent of commerce and commercial society.

[00:30:49] Dennis Rasmussen: So let me maybe just back up and, and talk about Hume's attitude toward commerce and, and maybe even the situation in which he made this or gave his arguments. Because two of the most venerable traditions of Western thought up to that time, namely civic republicanism and Christianity, tended to regard commerce and wealth and luxury, all the things that went with commerce is inherently corrupting that they, they saw commerce as a threat to public order, to political liberty, to virtue to salvation. Hume comes in and says, "Commerce is good. There's nothing particularly noble or redeeming about poverty. There's nothing intrinsically objectionable about luxury."

[00:31:30] Dennis Rasmussen: For me, the key essay in this regard is an essay was first titled of Luxury and Later Retitled of Refinement of the Arts. I read this as one of the most forceful and comprehensive, yet succinct defenses of the whole modern liberal commercial order that's ever been written. It's only maybe 12 pages long. It's amazing how much ground he covers in this essay. Hume argues that progress in the arts and sciences and commerce and the like, lead to what he calls an indissoluble chain of industry knowledge and humanity as well as liberty, he adds later in the essay. And so here he's very much on the opposite side of someone like his contemporary Jean Jacques Rousseau Hume had a very famous personal quarrel with Rousseau. Rousseau thought commerce and civilization. The whole complex of things that went by the name of progress at the time made people vicious and miserable. Hume thought they did the opposite.

[00:32:24] Dennis Rasmussen: Hume thought that commerce, the whole process of civilization makes us happier, makes us more virtuous. They make society not just richer, but freer, more stable, more orderly, more moderate, more humane. He wrote quite a bit on what was then called political economy. He takes a very cosmopolitan view insofar as you know, most of the economic tracks of the day are set, setting out to say, how might we advance Britain's tradings interests? Or what came to be seen as basically the what amounted to the same thing in most eyes is how can we harm France's trading interests? Hume looks at this with a much broader view that I have a philosopher or a historian, let's rise above petty national prejudices and animosities. How can commerce, can free trade, he thought can promote the interests of all?

[00:33:15] Dennis Rasmussen: So here, he's writing before Smith's wealth of nations, and he is anticipating a lot of Smith's arguments about what's the true source of a nation's wealth? It's not gold or silver or a positive balance of trade as those known as the mercantilist advocated, rather it's a productive citizenry. He argued that most attempts by politicians to guide or control people's economic choices are at best, futile, at worst, positively counterproductive. That free trades benefits everyone, city, country, rich, poor, government, populace, everybody benefits. So he's anticipating a lot of Smith's arguments in the wealth of nation.

[00:33:53] Dennis Rasmussen: I think that's a big part of why someone like Hamilton or Hamilton's good friend, Gouverneur Morris, what they found so attractive in Hume is he has such an overwhelmingly positive view of commerce and its social and political effects.

[00:34:07] Jeffrey Rosen: Superb. Such a great introduction of the centrality of commerce. And why, as you said, that welcoming view would naturally make him a favorite of Hamilton and not of Jefferson, who of course, suspects Hamilton's urban preference for financiers and exalts agrarian virtue. Angela, tell us more about that dichotomy you flagged about the fact that Hamilton mistrusted Hume and Hamilton liked him and what it affected their views of English history.

[00:34:41] Jeffrey Rosen: Hume wrote a history of England that Jefferson considered such a locus of honey Tory-ism, that he would insist on burglarized or edited versions before they were safe to be read by law students 'cause it was so Tory like. And what was it that made Hume a favorite of conservatives beyond his embrace of commerce and made Jefferson so, mistrust him? She may have had the same wifi issues I did. So if I may, Aaron, might I ask you to take that one up?

[00:35:14] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Absolutely. You mentioned this quote you know, treating everyone as if he were a nay. And thinking just a little bit more about faction I mean, Hume was a moral sentimentalist. So we have feelings of praise and blame. And one thing about faction is that it disrupts the operation of the sentiments so that we judge what is good and bad based on partial interest rather than the public interest. So Hume did think that there was a redeeming quality to economic self-interest is that you display industry and frugality and discipline and create products that other people want, you're going to contribute to the increasing prosperity of your community.

[00:36:05] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And Dennis mentioned of refinement in the arts that great Hume essay that really is, as Dennis said a distillation of the modern commercial spirit. That's what Hamilton cites in Federalist 85 when he describes Hume as a solid and ingenious writer. Hamilton is the only one who refers to the United States as a commercial nation. He does that in Federalist six. This too is evidence of his reliance on Hume's theory of advancement. Advancement in the mechanical arts leads to advancement in the liberal arts. Material welfare, increasing material welfare leads to the improvement of morals. So Hume is a key theorist there. Hamilton was definitely attentive to Hume's theory there.

[00:36:55] Aaron Alexander Zubia: One thing, I mean, adding to this conflict between Hamilton and Jefferson Hume was a defender of authority to a certain degree. In one essay, he says that in every government, there's a perpetual conflict between liberty and authority. He says, although civil liberty is the perfection of government authority is necessary to its existence. So in his history of England, as you mentioned Hume refers to the modern period beginning with the tutors is when really useful history begins, and we can start learning from how the centralization of the state reduced the power of the barons and reduced competing jurisdictions between the church and the barons and the prince.

[00:37:41] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And so you have a centralized monarchy that eventually gets limited. But that monarchy also with Henry VIII subordinates the church to its power. Then not so much with Henry VII and Henry VIII, but after them, Elizabeth and onward you find the promotion of commerce. So Hume sees the role for an energetic government, which is precisely what the Federalist Party wanted during the time of ratification. So you could see how Jefferson, who's a decentralist would be somewhat wary of Hume's writing, especially when as Hume's said, when he was amending the history of England, he made almost every change away from the Wig side and toward the Tory side.

[00:38:24] Aaron Alexander Zubia: So especially as Hume got older, he was more skeptical of cries for liberty, and he defended the need for a strong authority in order to promote civilization and peace in society.

[00:38:39] Jeffrey Rosen: Great. That so well explains why he would appeal to Hamilton and not Jefferson. Jefferson sees an alterable tension between liberty and power. Hamilton believes that power can reinforce liberty and by increasing commerce and the wellbeing for all, and Hume would be a natural touchstone for Hamilton. I know we've lost Angela and she's still trying to get back with wifi. And as we're waiting, let's turn to Federalist 85 Hamilton's discussion of executive power. He explicitly cites Hume, Dennis he cites your favorite piece, the Rise of Arts and Sciences, and talks about the need for an energetic executive.

[00:39:25] Jeffrey Rosen: Describe Hume's influence on Hamilton in this Federalist piece. Broadly why it was that Hamilton thought that Hume's defense of a strong monarch who was able to bring the House of Lords rather than the House of Commons over to his side by giving them offices and emoluments. Hamilton thought, you can call this corruption, but it's a good way of the executive defending its own interest against the incursions of Parliament. Jefferson took that out of context and said Hamilton was defending corruption. So give us a sense of all how that influenced Hamilton's Humean conception of executive power.

[00:40:01] Dennis Rasmussen: Sure. Well, so first just a minor correction. So Hume wrote two essays, one called the Rise in Progress in the Arts and Sciences, one called the Refinement in the Arts. So I've been referring to the latter.

[00:40:13] Aaron Alexander Zubia: I was mistaken there.

[00:40:15] Dennis Rasmussen: But yeah, so in this 85th and final paper of The Federalist is the only paper in the Federalist that Hamilton or Madison or Jay, for that matter, Publius actually cites Hume. There's the clear allusion to Hume, I think in Federalist 10. But he actually cites Hume in, in Federalist 85. He calls Hume a writer equally solid and ingenious. So again, showing the sort of differences between Hamilton and Jefferson on their attitudes toward Hume. Although I guess I should say, I don't think it's been said. I think the younger Jefferson, in fact, admired Hume more than the later Jefferson did. It was really only later in his career that Jefferson came to see him as a Tory who ought to be avoided or shielded from young students.

[00:40:58] Dennis Rasmussen: Can I add one more thing that we've been talking about Hume's impact on the founders. Hume also himself talked about the march toward American independence. I don't want to finish this discussion without at least touching on that. Hume dies in the autumn of 1776. So it's of course very early on in the movement toward independence. I think word of the Declaration of Independence didn't reach Scotland until just days before Hume's death. Hume never published anything on the topic, but he did write quite a bit in his correspondence about American Affairs, and I think it's very interesting. He was among the earliest and most consistent advocates of American independence in all of Britain.

[00:41:38] Dennis Rasmussen: Almost everybody besides Hume, and again, his good friend Adam Smith advocated forceful measures to keep the colonies within the British fold and saw the Americans as behaving really really terribly. Hume and again, Smith are basically the lone dissenters on the score. They both denounced the war, they denounced the policies, what they saw as the mercantilist policies that provoked it. Hume in his correspondence as early as 1771, so this is way before almost any American had seriously contemplating severing ties with Britain, says basically, "The union with America can't last. There's just, in the nature of things, there's no way this can last."

[00:42:16] Dennis Rasmussen: When war breaks out in 1775, he immediately says, "We should lay aside all anger, shake hands, and part friends." Basically just let, let America go. In fact, at one point he went so far as to declare I'm an American in my principles and wish we would let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper. Now, I think that's maybe a bit misleading for Hume to say he's an American in his principles. I've

already tried to suggest he really distrust the, in invocation of abstract principles in political life of the kind that the American revolutionaries love to appeal to, right? The self-evident truths and inalienable rights of the declaration, independence and the like.

[00:42:54] Dennis Rasmussen: Really, his advocacy of American independence rested on pragmatic considerations. And then what he thought would be best for Britain. He thought most British people were sure that the colonies were an important source of national wealth and power and the like. He thought they were a burden, an economic, political, military burden that basically both sides would benefit if they just end the colonial relationship, set up a system of free trade and just part ways. So he's not quite an American in his principles, I'm trying to suggest, but he was, interestingly, one of the first and boldest advocates of American independence in all of Britain.

Powerful statement about, I'm an American in my principles, but more complicated for just the reasons that you say. I should note that Angela's campus has lost internet. She's trying to get back, but we haven't gotten her back yet. There are lots of great questions that have come through, and I just a few that I'll flag in connection with happiness. Charlie Kraner asks, "Is it true that the pursuit of happiness was changed from the original, the pursuit of property? How did that work?"

[00:44:03] Jeffrey Rosen: Property is an alienable natural right. You can surrender it to government during the transition to the state of nature. Happiness, by contrast is unalienable 'cause you can't surrender your powers of reason, and you can't allow anyone else to tell you or anyone else what to think. So that's why Jefferson gets the pursuit of happiness, not from John Locke's second treatise, but from Locke's essay concerning human understanding. And the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers think of happiness as unalienable rather than alienable.

[00:44:34] Jeffrey Rosen: And we also have a great question about, is there a source from Hume's writing appropriate and accessible for middle schoolers approaching the Constitution? What would it be? Linda, great question. Dennis and Aaron have recommended Hume essays, and I think I'll ask you, Aaron, is there a particular essay that you would start with for the middle school students? And then as we begin to tie this together, give us a sense of Hume's influence on Hamilton's view of Executive Power in Federalist 85.

[00:45:06] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Those are great questions there. As far as Hume's essays and teaching middle schoolers, I really like Hume's that Politics May be Reduced to a Science. You get there, Alexander Pope said that government is best, which is best administered. And you have Hume rebutting that and saying that the constitutional machinery is more important. And he has a great set of essays on happiness, four essays on happiness that I would recommend. And we've been talking about happiness a little bit here. And Dennis started by saying that Hume was this cheery guy. People like to have dinner parties with him, to have conversations with him.

[00:45:42] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And in these four essays, Hume speaks about the ancient moralists. And he says, there are some sentiments that seem to arise naturally in human affairs. And he ties the platonists with contemplation and the stoics with action, and the epicurean with pleasure. And then he writes an essay called The Skeptic which is a response to these and argues as, as Hume will argue in a later essay, that happiness consists in

a balance of all these things, right? A little bit of contemplation, a little bit of action, a little bit of pleasure. And I mean, I think that says a lot about who Hume is his perspective on happiness.

[00:46:18] Aaron Alexander Zubia: And you have this idea that there are various perspectives on happiness and the pursuit of them re- requires, you know, in Hume's mind, and also, I mean, you can see this in the Federalist papers. You can see this in later interpreters of the American political order. Right. There's a plurality of visions of happiness, and there's a freedom there to pur- pursue that. We'll all be happier if we allow each other to pursue these various life plans. But Hume said, he repeated in his works the aim of this moral inquiry is to promote to, to help delineate and promote our duties. So I think that's what I mean, the idea of happiness and, and virtue are, are closely tied together.

[00:47:00] Jeffrey Rosen: Beautiful. And Linda says, "Middle schoolers love happiness," And don't, don't we all? And what a great place to begin learning about happiness from, from Hume. They're so accessible, which is why it's such a great introduction for learners of all ages. Dennis, as we begin to bring this great discussion home, why was it that Hamilton was so attracted to Hume's notion of a strong monarch defending himself against legislative encroachments by handing out offices. And Jefferson called that a kind of corruption, but it was central to Hume's vision. And how well has it endured in the American context?

[00:47:46] Dennis Rasmussen: Right. A number of British thinkers at this time worried about the, the system that the king used to essentially grease the wheels of politics to use money as leverage within parliament. This is seen as corruption. The Wigs wanted to get rid of this. People like Jefferson saw this as an enormous black mark on the British constitution. People like Hume and Hamilton thought, you know, sometimes the wheels need to be greased, right? That politics, you can't stand too much on principle, that sometimes you need to bow to pragmatic considerations.

[00:48:22] Dennis Rasmussen: This sounds strange to the modern ear that we tend to think of principles as almost automatically good things, right? To call a person principle that maybe even especially a politician principled is high praises, right? You have strong beliefs, you have the courage of your convictions. You're not just motivated by kind of pragmatic political considerations.

[00:48:44] Dennis Rasmussen: Hume thought that too much emphasis on principle was in fact a great danger, a source of great ills in politics. Well, why would that be? Well, Hume worries that when people think that their views, their beliefs, their desires are justified by a principle, then they start to regard those who disagree with them as not just political opponents or as rivals, people who have different interests, but rather as somebody who's wrong, maybe even evil or impious, right? And so this is why Hume thinks that a politics of principle is apt to be a politics of fanaticism and zeal and ruinous conflict. There can be moderation, there can be compromise when it's just a matter of conflicting interests. But it's a lot harder to do that when it's a matter of principle.

[00:49:35] Dennis Rasmussen: This sounds very odd for a philosopher to condemn the intrusion of, of speculation of, of principle into politics. Philosophers from Plato to the present have said, how can we use philosophy to guide politics? But this, in some ways, ties

together a lot of what we've been saying as befits a skeptic like Hume. He thinks it's wrongheaded, it's dangerous to, to appeal to some transcendent principle beyond the political world and expect that it's somehow going to solve all of our problems. So the alleged corruption of the Parliament is sometimes a necessary matter of what has to go on in politics.

[00:50:12] Jeffrey Rosen: Indeed a great distillation of Hume's skeptical vision. Aaron there's a big topic and little time to address it, but in your closing thoughts, you talk about Hume's religious skepticism, the fact that he was attacked as a atheist, although you say he's better understood as an agnostic, and at the end of his career, he described himself as an epicurean, as surprisingly did Jefferson. What can you say to help our listeners understand Hume's spiritual views and their relationship to his politics?

[00:50:47] Aaron Alexander Zubia: Absolutely great question. Hume wasn't alive at the time of the English civil wars, but the wars of religion. He read the works of Bernard Mandeville and Pierre Bale, he read Hobbes. And so he knew of the violence, the extraordinary violence that occurred in these wars of religion. And liberal political thought is in many ways derived from this attempt to lower the temperature of political discourse to not allow an enthusiastic religious views to intrude upon public political discourse.

[00:51:27] Aaron Alexander Zubia: At this time, in response to the religious wars, there was a kind of skepticism and an epicureanism that arose. Epicureanism was known in the ancient world for separating politics, morals, and politics from the providential order. It was more empirical in its approach. So Hume is someone who says in the treatise that experience is the only authority on which we can allot and on which we can rely. Madison in Federalist twenties calls experience the, experience the oracle of truth. There's this turn to make politics, I don't wanna say less principled, but I mean less philosophical or certainly less ideological.

[00:52:11] Aaron Alexander Zubia: One thing I argue in my book is that this attempt to make politics less philosophical required a lot of philosophical maneuvering. That's one thing I think I contribute with this book is showing that, Hume, for someone who wanted to be more practical perhaps in politics, I mean, he wrote a massive tome as you've mentioned Jeff, on the understanding and the passions and morals. I think in modern political thought, I mean, sometimes, in modern life, we take for granted some of these big philosophical moves that were taken during the Enlightenment.

[00:52:50] Aaron Alexander Zubia: I mean, that's one of the reasons Hume remains this central figure. He was ambitious. He wanted to be heard, and he was heard. I do think that this skeptical epicureanism that arose in the early modern and enlightenment periods was present in Hume. But that's precisely like folks like Madison, they didn't accept that moral and those moral and religious views. So they looked at Hume's political views and his thoughts on public opinion and reliance on experience and observation producing constitutional machinery; these are the things that they really took on board.

[00:53:31] Jeffrey Rosen: Absolutely fascinating. So important to distinguish between the epistemology and the, and the politics. But to note that the framers took some of Hume and not all of it. Thank you so much. First of all, Angela Coventry, who wasn't able to get back, but contributed so much to our discussion, as well as Dennis Rasmussen and Aaron Alexander Zubia. And to you dear NCC friends, it's just so exciting to see your phenomenal

questions and the fact that you're taking an hour out in the middle of your evening to learn about this important topic of Hume and the founders. And of course, the way to keep the conversation going is to keep reading and to read the Hume essays, starting with the essays on happiness and to continue with more primary sources. And then the great books of our scholars today Dennis Rasmussen and Aaron Alexander Zubia and Angela Coventry. Thank you panelists. Thank you friends, and look forward to seeing everyone again soon. Have a good night.

[00:54:37] Tanaya Tauber: This program was streamed live on January 29th, 2024. This episode was produced by Lana Ulrich, Bill, and me, Tanaya Tauber. It was engineered by Dave Stotz and Bill Pollock. Research was provided by Yara Daraiseh, Cooper Smith, Samson Mostashari, and Lana Ulrich. Check out our full lineup of exciting programs and register to join us virtually at constitutioncenter.org. As always, we'll publish those programs on the podcast, so stay tuned here as well, or watch the videos. They're available in our media library at constitutioncenter.org/medialibrary. Please rate, review, and subscribe to live at the National Constitution Center on Apple Podcasts, or follow us on Spotify. On behalf of the National Constitution Center, I'm Tanaya Tauber.