**Pluralism, Politeness, and the Public Sphere:
Hume on the Liberty of the Press**

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David Hume's essay "Of the Liberty of the Press" has tended to garner more attention for what Hume removed from it than for what he left in. Political events in England during the 1760s and 1770s, and in particular the Wilkes and Liberty affair that produced rioting in London towards the end of 1768, led to Hume's famous decision to cleave off the original conclusion of his essay which had been very favourable to liberty of the press, and to replace it with the terse statement that unbounded liberty of the press is one of the "evils" attending mixed forms of government.[1] Most discussions of this essay have focused on determining whether Hume's decision to edit the conclusion confirms him as a conservative establishment thinker or not and on what the edit tells us about Hume's account of liberty and its relationship to authority. These discussions are certainly important for developing an understanding of Hume's political thought. However, the significance of Hume's essay, and of his decision to edit it as he did, extends beyond a strict concern with freedom of the press, or for that matter, a concern with the relationship between liberty and authority or a support for the establishment. Hume's essay "Of the Liberty of the Press" opens an important window into his thoughts on the public sphere and, in particular, on the importance and nature of political discourse. The essay points us toward Hume's account of a pluralist public sphere, a realm in which a range of different interests are opposed to one another. For Hume, the opposition of interests is Janus-faced. On the one hand, he believed that it was the key support of the British constitution and of the constitution of his ideal republican commonwealth. On the other hand, the opposition of interests can lead to factionalism and fanaticism, forces that threaten the foundations of those very constitutions. Hume's concern with balancing these dangers against the necessity of having an open public sphere in which interests can be opposed is a defining element of his political thought. His thoughts on the conditions requisite for establishing and maintaining this balance inform his discussions of constitutional design as well as the ideas that can be gleaned from his writings on the promise of a more polite public discourse. In addition, reading "Of the Liberty of the Press" in light of Hume's greater concerns with public discourse raises some very important questions about the relationship between the written and the spoken word, questions that we can only begin to answer.

There seems to be a wide consensus in the academic literature that, as tempting as it might be to attribute Hume's decision to edit the conclusion of his essay "to the crustiness of an elderly man," it would be inaccurate to do so.[2] However, the real significance of Hume's edit is contested. David Miller argues that that it provides a clear instance of Hume coming down "unhesitatingly and passionately in favour of the political establishment."[3] Donald Forbes characterizes the incident as "perhaps the most striking example of a retreat in the later Hume from a liberal to a less liberal position."[4] But, Forbes goes on to note that Hume's revision of his essay was not symptomatic of a

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[1] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," p.13. [References to the *Essays* take the form *Essays* followed by the essay title and page reference in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987).]
[2] David Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p.182.
[3] *Ibid*, p.182.
[4] Donald Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.184.

"reactionary conservatism."[5] In editing the essay, Hume did not entirely abandon his earlier defense of liberty of the press. Rather, he brought the essay into line with his philosophically-grounded objection to "unbounded liberty."[6] John B. Stewart argues that Hume's decision to edit the essay had less to do with support for the establishment or with defending a particular conception of liberty than it did with a change in his assessment of the dangers posed by a "bigoted, racist, and chauvinist press." According to Stewart, as far back as 1741, when Hume first published his essay, he viewed journalists "as mercenary and irresponsible."[7] But, Stewart writes, "Hume was convinced that freedom of the press, though certain to be abused, posed no great danger to the public mind."[8] This assessment of the dangers posed by freedom of the press changed in the aftermath of the Wilkes affair.

Stewart's claim is straightforward and convincing. Hume re-wrote the conclusion of his essay in order to correct what, in the aftermath of the Wilkes affair, he came to perceive as an error in the earlier versions. The Wilkes affair demonstrated to Hume that, contrary to what he had originally written, popular tumult was actually one of the dangers attending the liberty of the press. Hume originally wrote "Of the Liberty of the Press" to ask why it was the Great Britain was alone amongst European countries in allowing such extensive freedom of the press. In the earlier versions of the essay, he also addressed the question of "whether the unlimited exercise of this liberty" was "advantageous or prejudicial to the public."[9] Hume's answer to the first question is that, under a mixed constitution such as that of Great Britain, liberty of the press is an important check on the power of the monarchy. He writes that

> arbitrary power would steal in upon us, were we not careful to prevent its progress, and were there not an easy method of conveying the alarm from one end of the kingdom to the other. The spirit of the people must frequently be rouzed, in order to curb the ambition of the court; and the dread of rouzing this spirit must be employed to prevent that ambition. Nothing so effectual to this purpose as the liberty of the press, by which all the learning, wit, and genius of the nation may be employed on the side of freedom.[10]

What is important to note in this passage is that Hume's argument in favour of liberty of the press is almost entirely unrelated to his discussion of political discourse. Hume defends the press as an alarm system. The message carried by the press is relatively unimportant, so long as it serves to rouse the population against the crown's attempts at encroaching on parliamentary power.

It is only in the passage that Hume edited from the conclusion of his essay that he touches directly on the relationship between freedom of the press and public discourse. It has been found, he writes that, "as the experience of mankind increases, that the *people* are no such dangerous monster as they have been represented, and that it is in every respect better to guide them, like rational creatures, than to lead or drive them, like brute beasts."[11] Through the guarantee of liberty of the press, Hume argues, "it is to be hoped, that men, being every day more accustomed to the free discussion of public affairs, will

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[5] *Ibid*, p.191.
[6] *Ibid*, p.184.
[7] John B. Stewart, *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.307.
[8] *Ibid*, p.306.
[9] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRa, p.604.
[10] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," p.12.
[11] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.604-5.

improve in the judgment of them, and be with greater difficulty seduced by every idle rumour and popular clamour."[12] However, Hume is very clear in his opinion that the contribution to public discourse is only a collateral benefit of freedom of the press. His argument for the benefits that accrue from this freedom is dependent upon his assessment that, "however abused," the liberty of the press "can scarce excite popular tumults or rebellions."[13] The impact of the articles published in the *North Briton* in fomenting the "Wilkes and Liberty" riots of 1768 put the lie to this claim. And, realising his error, Hume edited the conclusion of his essay.

Reading the edited conclusion of Hume's essay as simply the correction of a perceived error does not, however, diminish the significance of the edit or of the essay. Looking back on the entire saga of the conclusion to his essay, Hume might have thought that its real significance was to demonstrate the danger of not knowing your history. In discussing the pamphleteers and the press at the time of the Civil War in the *History of England* that he published years after the first edition of "Of the liberty of the Press" first appeared in print, Hume writes that, "the press, freed from all fear or reserve, swarmed with productions, dangerous by their seditious zeal and calumny, more than by any art or eloquence of composition. Noise and fury, cant and hypocrisy, formed the sole rhetoric, which, during this tumult of various prejudices and passions, could be heard or attended to."[14] Presumably, if Hume had written his *History* prior to writing his essay on the liberty of the press, he would never have written the original conclusion of the essay. Or at a very minimum, the conclusion would have been markedly different.

The fact remains, however, that Hume did write the original conclusion to the essay. And that conclusion, along with the changes that Hume made to it, is significant because it gives us a window into his account of the public sphere. Hume was a pluralist in that he acknowledged that a plurality of interests would compete for space and influence in the public sphere. One of his primary political interests was to address the problems that arise from the Janus-faced character of that competition of interests. On the one hand, Hume saw it as "the chief support of the BRITISH government."[15] On the other hand, he was aware that the opposition of interests had often led to the rise of combative sects that had threatened the delicate balance upon which the constitution rested.

"Factions," Hume writes "subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other."[16] As J.G.A. Pocock argues, Hume's writings reflect his concern that "the undisciplined sociability of mankind led to the rise of combative sects, in taste and philosophy ("Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature") as well as in religion and politics ("Of Parties in General") that pitted one irrationally retained habit of mind against another."[17] Hume writes that "we know not to what length enthusiasm, or other extraordinary movements of the human mind, may

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[12] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.605.

[13] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.604.

[14] *History of England*, Vol.5, p.295. [References to the *History of England* list the volume and page number in *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688.* Forward by William B. Todd, 6 vols. 1778 Edition; rpt. (Indianapolis: Liberty, 1983).]

[15] *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," p.529.

[16] *Essays*, "Of Parties in General," p.55.

[17] J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p.136.

transport men, to the neglect of all order and public good."[18] When people begin to neglect the public good, Hume writes, "whimsical and unaccountable factions often arise."[19]

In his essay "Of the Independency of Parliament," Hume writes that

> men are generally more honest in their private than in their public capacity, and will go greater lengths to serve a party, than when their own private interest is alone concerned. Honour is a great check upon mankind: But where a considerable body of men act together, this check is, in a great measure, removed; since a man is sure to be approved of by his own party, for what promotes the common interest; and he soon learns to despise the clamours of adversaries.[20]

Factions remove the check that honour had previously placed on the actions of individuals and thereby free those individuals from the constraints of laws and morality to act solely according to their perception of their factional interests. Initially, Hume's primary concerns were religious factions. However, in the Wilkes affair, "Hume could see, for the first time, mass passions informed, not by religious enthusiasm, but by philosophical enthusiasm."[21] 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."[22]

Hume believed that there was an innate human tendency toward fanaticism. In his essay "Of Parties in General," he writes that:

> Two men travelling on the highway, the one east, the other west, can easily pass each other, if the way be broad enough: But two men, reasoning upon opposite principles of religion, cannot so easily pass, without shocking; though one should think, that the way were also, in that case, sufficiently broad, and that each might proceed, without interruption, in his own course. But such is the nature of the human mind, that it always lays hold on every mind that approaches it; and as it is wonderfully fortified by an unanimity of sentiment, so is it shocked and disturbed by any contrariety. Hence the eagerness, which most people discover in a dispute; and hence their impatience of opposition, even in the most speculative and indifferent opinions. This principle, however frivolous it may appear, seems to have been the origin of all religious wars and divisions.[23]

Hume's concern with the Wilkes affair was precisely that it was based on such speculative principles. In fact, he writes, the affair was "based on nothing."[24] Therefore, Hume's reaction to the Wilkes affair can be explained by the parallels that he saw between it and manifestations of religious enthusiasm. Not only did Wilkes' supporters threaten the balance upon which the constitution rested, but they did so in the name of a frivolous understanding of liberty.

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[18] *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," p.529.

[19] *Ibid*.

[20] *Essays*, "Of the Independency of Parliament," p.43.

[21] Donald W. Livingston, "On Hume's Conservatism," *Hume Studies* XXI:2, (November 1995), pp.151-164, p.161.

[22] Stephen Miller, *Three Deaths and Enlightenment Thought* (London: Associated University Presses, 2001), p.71.

[23] *Essays*, "Of Parties in General," p.60.

[24] *Letters*, II, p.178 [References to *Letters* take the form *Letters* followed by the volume and page number in *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 Vols., J.Y.T. Greig (ed.), (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932).]

This was not the first instance of such a threat to the constitutional balance. Hume thought that British history was rife with cases of factional conflict that aimed at just such an unbalancing of the constitution. Hume viewed the Puritan factions as extreme or religious Whigs who promoted an excess of liberty that could ultimately unbalance the constitution. Conversely, he argued that the Jacobites were an extreme faction of the Tories whose support for monarchy and whose partisanship of the House of Stuart risked tipping the balance towards an excess of authority. Hume referred to Jacobitism as "the most terrible *ism* of them all."[25] And yet, he also wrote that "the religious *Whigs* are a very different Set of Mortals, and in my Opinion, are much worse than the religious *Tories*."[26] In practice, Hume thought that the balance between liberty and authority had best been achieved under Britain's mixed constitution. But the balance was delicate and required protection.

Whatever its inconveniences, Hume saw the liberty of the press as essential to ward of threats to the balance of Britain's mixed constitution. However, under the constitution of Hume's ideal republican commonwealth, the liberty of the press would not be required to perform the same function. Hume broke with earlier republicans such as Rousseau and Montesquieu in arguing that a republic "might be *more* stable and durable in a large state than in a small, because the large state would have a plurality of interests that might balance each other."[27] Hume outlines such a republic in his essay "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." The ideal that he defines therein is one to which, he claims, he "cannot, in theory, discover any considerable objection."[28]

Hume's ideal republic is characterised by a wide dispersion of power and extensive checks against its consolidation. The commonwealth is divided into one hundred counties, each of which is in turn divided into one hundred parishes. Once a year, those eligible to vote gather in their parish to elect one representative.[29] The one hundred representatives in each county then gather to elect one senator and ten magistrates from amongst their ranks. The executive power is granted to the senate, which is made up of one hundred senators. The legislative power is granted to the county representatives and can be wielded either by the eleven hundred magistrates (all senators are also magistrates) or by the full ten thousand county representatives divided into their one hundred councils of representatives. [30]

The stability of the commonwealth depends in no small measure upon a balance created by the opposition of interests. In Hume's ideal commonwealth, the institutional structures ensure that the opposition of interests does "all the good without any of the harm."[31] A healthy opposition of interests militates against the development of factions

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[25] *Letters*, I, p.264.

[26] *A True Account of the Behaviour and Conduct of Archibald Stewart, Esq; Late Lord Provost of Edinburgh*, (reprinted in John Valdimir Price. *The Ironic Hume*. Austin: Texas University Press, 1965), pp.171-2.

[27] Jacob T. Levy. "Beyond Publius: Montesquieu, Liberal Republicanism, and the Small-Republic Thesis," *History of Political Thought*, vol.27, no.1 (Spring 2006), pp.50-90, p.11.

[28] *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," p.516.

[29] In Hume's ideal commonwealth, the right to vote is limited to freeholders of twenty pounds per year in the country and householders worth five hundred pounds in the town parishes (*Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," p.516).

[30] *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," pp.516-7.

[31] *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," p.525.

and the consolidation of power by any one group. Hume argues that in his ideal commonwealth, the politicians "have no power of controlling the senate: They only have the power of accusing, and appealing to the people."[32]

According to Hume, therefore, the liberty of the press is not required for maintaining the opposition of interests in his ideal republican commonwealth in the same way that it is required under Britain's mixed constitution because the institutional structure of Hume's republic goes further towards preventing usurpations of power than does Britain's constitution. Therefore, the alarm role that Hume ascribes to freedom of the press is not as necessary in his ideal republic as it is under Britain's constitution. But this is not to say that the liberty of the press could not play a productive, albeit different, role in maintaining the opposition of interests in Hume's republic. Hume argues that freedom of the press could contribute positively to two facets of public discourse. And, as the original conclusion of his essay on the liberty of the press shows, he believed that a free press could possibly bring these same benefits to the British public, but only if it did not simultaneously increase the risk of popular tumult.

Hume saw two important facets of public discourse. The first is, what I will call, the messy side of discourse in which interests are openly opposed to one another. This is the side of public discourse that Hume thought a foreigner would be surprised to see facilitated by Britain's liberty of the press. Britain, he writes, is notable for the "extreme liberty, which we enjoy in this country, of communicating whatever we please to the public, and of openly censuring every measure, entered into by the king or his ministers."[33] While this facet of public discourse is messy, Hume, we must remember, considered it necessary for maintaining the constitutional balance.

The question that arises, however, is how, precisely, this form of discourse is any different from the factional discourse that Hume took to be so dangerous. It is difficult to pin Hume down on the precise differences that distinguish the legitimate opposition of interests from factional discourse. However, he is clear on the nature of factional discourse. Hume was most concerned with, what he termed, factions from principle. Specifically, he was concerned with parties based upon "abstract speculative" principles.[34] Hume argues that a conflict of abstract speculative principles – such as would be at stake in a difference of opinion over religious principles or over an abstract conception of liberty – does not actually require people to change their way of life. People should easily be able to co-exist while holding differences of opinion over such principles. However, Hume argues, human nature is such that people are shocked by opinions that differ from theirs and feel a need to challenge those opinions and to defend their own. They, therefore, "form a system of speculative opinions; to divide, with some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtility of argument and science."[35] Factions develop around these different principles and the members of the various factions immediately come into conflict with one another. These disputes, Hume argues, quickly become heated because the members of the various factions come to see their own interests as being bound up with those of their particular faction and lose sight of the common good. Because the differences of opinion at the root

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[32] *Essays*, "Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth," p.525.
[33] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," p.9.
[34] *Essays*, "Of Parties in General," p.60.
[35] *Essays*, "Of Parties in General," p.62.

of these conflicts revolve around abstract speculative principles that are not rationally defensible, there is no possibility that these disputes will lead to any productive discourse. Rather, Hume believed, they beget "a mutual hatred and antipathy" among the "deluded followers" of the various factions and can even lead to violent confrontations.[36]

Hume's account of a legitimate opposition of interests is less clear. But it is undoubtedly tied up with the second facet of public discourse, namely its capacity to improve the judgments of the citizenry on matters of politics and morals. In the conclusion that he edited from the essay, Hume defends the importance of the free press, arguing that it is important that grievances "should get vent in words" because mankind "have always a greater propension to believe what is said to the disadvantage of their governors," and that a whisper will be more pernicious than a pamphlet "where men are not accustomed to think freely, or distinguish between truth and falsehood."[37] In this passage, Hume seems to connect the two facets of public discourse. On the one hand, a free press will publish all manner of grievances, perceived or real, against the king and his ministers. But, on the other hand, it also has the potential to contribute positively to the education of the populace and so render the citizenry less likely to be "seduced by every idle rumour and popular clamour."[38]

It would be a mistake to believe that Hume thought public discourse should be free of zeal. He actually 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."[39] Hume was not opposed to political deliberation or debate. His notion that the opposition of interests was a primary support of the British constitution entailed full recognition of the fact that people will disagree, sometimes very profoundly, on political and moral questions. The danger of faction and fanaticism is not, therefore, that they produce heated moral and political debates. On the contrary, one of their principal dangers is that they make meaningful discourse impossible. Understanding how and why they do so better positions us to understand how a free press could contribute positively to public discourse.

Factions directly impede meaningful discourse in two ways. In the first place, they often dissuade their members from engaging in open discourse by casting opposing positions as fundamentally dangerous to their own. However, some debates do not involve meaningful or significant disagreements. So, in the second place, factions impede meaningful discourse by magnifying insignificant differences and thus fomenting discord where none exited before. Hume argues that factional leaders, particularly priests, often intentionally exacerbate the divisions between parties to further their own interests.

> At the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions; to divide with some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtility of argument and science. Hence naturally arose keenness in dispute, when the Christian religion came to be split into new divisions and heresies: And this keenness assisted the priests

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[36] *Essays*, "Of Parties in General," p.63.
[37] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.604.
[38] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.605.
[39] *Essays*, "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science," p.26.

in their policy, of begetting a mutual hatred and antipathy among their deluded followers.[40]

Hume believed that the ideas and opinions that divided factions such as Christian sects were insignificant and purely speculative. As we have seen, he also believed that the notion of liberty trumpeted by Wilkes' supporters was equally speculative and he faulted the press for exploiting their arguments in print.

In addition to its direct effects on discourse, faction poses an indirect threat by diminishing the very capacity of individuals to make moral judgments. Faction steels the heart of individuals against the social sympathy that makes moral evaluation possible. As Jennifer Herdt argues, "factional zeal, and the passive, contagious sympathy by which it spreads, are directly opposed to the sympathetic understanding needed to appreciate different points of view" and make good moral judgments.[41] An essential aspect of Hume's account of moral evaluation is "that it be shared and articulated."[42] As Annette Baier describes Hume's account of moral judgment,

> the test for virtue, for what makes a quality an approved quality, is "tendency to the good of mankind" (T.578), recognized by impartial sympathy with all of those affected by the presence of that quality of mind. Vices are anything that renders "any intercourse with the person dangerous or disagreeable" (ibid). Human happiness is the touchstone, and Hume takes it to be obvious that happiness requires fellowship, commerce, intercourse.[43]

Factions, none more so than factions of enthusiasts, block this moral intercourse.[44] The fanatic, Hume writes, "consecrates himself, and bestows on his own person a sacred character, much superior to what forms and ceremonious institutions can confer on any other."[45] The sacred view that they hold of themselves divides enthusiasts, in their own minds, from others by a gulf so wide as to completely impede the sympathy that Hume took to be the basis of moral judgment. He argues that the fanatic's sense of his own superiority "naturally begets the most extreme resolutions; especially after it rises to that height as to inspire the deluded fanatic with the opinion of divine illuminations, and with a contempt for the common rules of reason, morality, and prudence."[46]

In order for a free press to contribute positively to the development of knowledge and judgment amongst the citizenry, it would have to engage in a different style of public discourse, one that did not shut off debate or impede moral sympathy. Hume believed that the promise of such a style of discourse could be found in politeness, a virtue that he felt need not be confined to the private salons, but could be exercised in the wider public sphere as well. Hume's account of politeness gives us some important indications as to how he thought a free press could improve the quality of public discourse.

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[40] *Essays*, "Of Parties in General," p.62.

[41] Jennifer A. Herdt. *Religion and Faction in Hume's Moral Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.206.

[42] Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p.191.

[43] Baier, *Progress of Sentiments*, p.219.

[44] Hume viewed the Protestant sects, such as the evangelical Scottish Presbyterians, the various Puritan sects, the Anabaptists, the Antinomians, the Fifth Monarchy Men, and the Independents as enthusiasts.

[45] *Essays*, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," p. 76.

[46] *Essays*, "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," p. 77.

The two major influences on Hume's understanding of politeness were Joseph Addison and Anthony Ashley Cooper, the third earl of Shaftesbury. In his famous mission statement, Joseph Addison wrote in the *Spectator* that while "it was said of *Socrates*, that he brought Philosophy down from Heaven, to inhabit among Men," Addison hoped that it would be said of him that he had "brought Philosophy out of the Closets and Libraries, Schools and Colleges, to dwell in Clubs and Assemblies, at Tea-tables, and Coffee-Houses."[47] This sentiment is echoed in Hume's portrayal of himself as "a Kind of Resident or Ambassador from the Dominions of Learning to those of Conversation."[48] Hume's objective was actually the opposite of Addison's in that he sought to introduce the groundedness of the world of conversation into the realm of philosophy. Nevertheless, Addison's conception of polite discourse certainly had a great impact on Hume who tried to emulate Addison's polite writing style in his own essays.

However, the philosophy of politeness really originated in the work of Shaftesbury. According to Lawrence Klein, Shaftesbury's vision of politeness was 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."[49] Politeness, for Shaftesbury, was centered in discursivity,[50] by which he meant the dynamic of conversation in which ideas are openly exchanged and debated between and amongst equals. Klein writes that "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.'"[51] Following Shaftesbury, Hume defined politeness as "the arts of conversation."[52]

The notions of politeness suggests a type of elitism. However, Hume's treatment of this concept is much more complex than one might expect. Adam Potkay argues that "politeness is an eighteenth-century ideology in formation, intended to consolidate the members of the gentry and professional orders and to differentiate this group from a 'vulgar' class of labourers, servants, and 'cits.'"[53] However, while Hume does use the term politeness to differentiate the social classes that Potkay describes, he is most interested in using it to make distinctions *within* the elite. His famous allusion to "the many honest gentlemen" in the *Treatise* contrasts them not to members of any lower social classes but to the philosophers Hume calls "our founders of systems."[54] Hume did not, therefore, consider politeness to be inherent to all members of the gentry and the

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[47] Joseph Addison, *Spectator*. No.10 (March 12, 1711), Bond, I, 44.

[48] *Essays*, "Of Essay Writing," p.535.

[49] Lawrence, E. Klein. *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.210.

[50] *Ibid*, p.119.

[51] *Ibid*, p.3-4.

[52] *Essays*, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," p.127

[53] Adam Potkay. *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.86.

[54] T 1.4.7.14; SBN 272. [References to the *Treatise* take the form of T followed by the book, part, section, and paragraph from which the passage is taken from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), followed by a page reference in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).]

professional classes. Rather, as Klein points out, "'politeness' was a criterion of *proper* behaviour."[55]

When Hume wrote of gentlemen and of polite discourse, he was referring primarily to those in, what he called, the middle station of life. He argues that

> these form the most numerous Rank of Men, that can be suppos'd
> susceptible of Philosophy; and therefore, all Discourses of Morality
> ought principally to be address'd to them. The Great are too immers'd
> in Pleasure; and the Poor too much occupy'd in providing for the
> Necessities of Life, to hearken to the calm Voice of Reason. The
> Middle Station, as it is most happy in many Respects, so particularly in
> this, that a Man, plac'd in it, can, with the greatest Leisure, consider his
> own Happiness, and reap a new Enjoyment, from comparing his
> Situation with that of Persons above or below him.[56]

Hume argues that the middle station of life both safeguards virtue and provides the most opportunities for its exercise because those in this station of life can exert their patience, resignation, industry, and integrity towards their "superiors," and their generosity, humanity, affability, and charity towards their "inferiors."[57] In addition to virtue, Hume argues that the middle station of life is also more conducive than the upper station to wisdom and ability. He writes that "a Man so situate has a better Chance of attaining a Knowledge both of Men and Things, than those of a more elevated Station."[58]

Hume's understanding of politeness as related to the middle station of life was very much in keeping with the trend noted by M.A. Box whereby, "from the Restoration age through the eighteenth century… the identity of the 'gentlemen' came to exchange somewhat its aristocratic for a bourgeois character."[59] In this sense also, Hume's conception of politeness was more Addisonian than it was Shaftesburian. As Klein remarks, there are some notable differences between Addison's and Shaftesbury's conceptions of politeness: "Addison's tone was matter-of-fact while Shaftesbury's was rarefied; Addison's clientele was a wide segment of the upper and middling population while Shaftesbury's was more restrictively gentlemanly; Addison's project was more harnessed to the sites of ordinary life while Shaftesbury's, again, was more exclusive."[60]

What Hume retained from Shaftesbury's model of politeness was the equality and the reciprocity that are at its heart. As Klein writes, "polite conversation assumed the equality of participants and insisted on a reciprocity in which participants were sometimes talkers and sometimes listeners."[61] Within the category of polite gentlemen, all are equal. Hume writes of the virtue of friendship "that seems principally to ly among *Equals*, and is, for that Reason, chiefly calculated for the middle Station of Life."[62]

What, then, are the characteristics of a polite gentleman? In his brief autobiography, Hume describes himself in unequivocally gentlemanly terms. "I was," he writes, "a man of mild dispositions, of command of temper, of an open, social, and cheerful humour, capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great

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[55] Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p.3.
[56] *Essays*, "Of the Middle Station of Life," p.546.
[57] *Ibid*.
[58] *Essays*, "Of the Middle Station of Life," p.547.
[59] M.A. Box. *The Suasive Art of David Hume* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p.10.
[60] Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness*, p.37.
[61] *Ibid*, p.4.
[62] *Essays*, "Of the Middle Station of Life," p.547.

moderation in all my passions."[63] Each of these qualities is polite because each facilitates conversation. As Klein writes,

> conversants were warned against taciturny, stiffness, self-effacement,
> and withdrawal, which starved conversation. They were also warned
> against excesses of assertiveness and sociability, which killed
> conversation more efficiently. It was wrong to dominate discussion or
> push one's opinions too relentlessly. Self-righteousness, self-solemnity,
> and gravity were odious. To terminate a conversation with dispatch,
> one needed only be pedantic or magisterial! Finally, affection, the
> striving for effect, was noxious to conversation.[64]

Politeness "presupposed an intersubjective domain in which the cultivation and exchange of opinions and feelings were involved."[65]

For Hume, moral judgment relies on one's capacity to sympathise with the feelings of others. Everyone has the capacity for moral judgment. However, that capacity does admit of improvement. Politeness is intimately tied to the refinement of moral judgment because it facilitates social interaction that is free from the factionalism that coloured so many other aspects of eighteenth-century British life. As Hume writes of one who exhibits a delicacy of taste, "a polite and judicious conversation affords him the highest entertainment; rudeness or impertinence is as great a punishment to him. In short, delicacy of taste has the same effect as delicacy of passion: It enlarges the sphere both of our happiness and misery, and makes us sensible to pains as well as pleasures, which escape the rest of mankind."[66] Factional discourse has the opposite effect. Hume understood it to foment animosities and divide individuals, thus blocking their sensitivities to the pains and pleasures of others.

The discussion of politeness gives some indications as to how a free press could contribute positively to public discourse. Obviously, the dynamics of conversation cannot be exactly replicated in public discourse. Hume was certainly under no illusions that, in the real world, public discourse could be rendered entirely polite or that the public sphere could be entirely transformed into a realm of refined sociability. However, the press could certainly adopt a polite tone in its writings and, as Hume writes, the liberty of the press could be used to employ "all the learning, wit, and genius of the nation... on the side of freedom."[67] Any evolution that the press could effect toward a more polite public discourse would hold the promise "that men, being every day more accustomed to the free discussion of public affairs, will improve in the judgment of them, and be with greater difficulty seduced by every idle rumour and popular clamour."[68] In other words, not only would a more polite public discourse lead to an improvement in the judgment of the citizens, but it would also serve as a further antidote to the forces of faction.

The potential that Hume saw in a politer public discourse should not be underestimated. He believed that it might even have prevented the English Civil War. As Miller argues, Hume thought that "the dispute between king and parliament could have been resolved had it been conducted in purely secular terms; but once religious

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[63] *Essays*, "My Own Life," p.XL.
[64] Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness,* p.4-5.
[65] *Ibid*, p.4.
[66] *Essays*, "Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion," pp.4-5.
[67] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," p.12.
[68] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.605.

enthusiasm was yoked to the cause of political liberty, civil war became unavoidable."[69] The virtue of politeness holds the potential to unite the two facets of public discourse towards the same end. In a polite public discourse, the messy facet, in which interests are openly opposed to one another in the public sphere, still provides the primary support for the constitutional balance. In addition, the educative facet of public discourse contributes to the refinement of judgment in the citizenry, and thereby further supports that balance by deflating the factional bigotry that threatens it.

"Of the Liberty of the Press" still leaves us with a puzzle. We have yet to explain why Hume initially claimed that, "however abused," the liberty of the press "can scarce excite popular tumults or rebellions."[70] What makes this assertion all the more intriguing is that Hume makes his claim by contrasting articles in the press with political rhetoric. Writing of liberty of the press, Hume argues that "we need not dread from this liberty any such ill consequences as followed from the harangues of the popular demagogues of ATHENS and tribunes of ROME."[71] Why did Hume think that the written word did not carry the same dangers as the spoken word?

As I have argued elsewhere, Hume's perspective on rhetoric was very different from that of many of his contemporaries.[72] Though he thought the politicians of his day to be poor orators and "altogether incapable of politeness in any form,"[73] Hume argued that eighteenth century politicians ought not to give up on their attempts at matching the skills of the ancient orators. On the contrary, Hume writes, the good sense and manners of the modern orators "should make them redouble their art, not abandon it entirely."[74] Hume saw a possibility for the development of a polite form of political rhetoric through which interests could be opposed in ways that maintained rather than threatened the British constitutional balance.

Rhetoric and politeness were commonly seen as antithetical to one another in the eighteenth century. The figures, tropes, and flair of oratorical stylings seemed to clash with the polite virtues of simplicity and clarity. Yet, classicism was also alive and well in eighteenth century Britain. Adam Potkay argues that the "tension between a nostalgia for ancient eloquence and an emerging ideology of polite style defines both the literary and political discourses of mid-eighteenth-century Britain."[75] Hume certainly did struggle with this tension. However, he did not understand politeness and rhetoric to be completely incompatible. Though ancient rhetoric was not always polite, Hume, unlike most of his contemporaries, recognised that politeness had many important affinities with classical rhetoric. As Klein writes,

> like classical rhetoric, modern politeness aimed at persuasion through
> the skillful use of formal means. Also like rhetoric, politeness assumed
> that all knowledge, insight, and expression arose in specific social and
> discursive situations. Thus, the fully realized polite gentleman
> combined learning and other virtues with the ability to deploy them
> skillfully as occasion demanded. More important, politeness could

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[69] Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology*, p.170.
[70] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.604.
[71] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRd, p.604.
[72] See Marc Hanvelt, "Polite, Passionate Persuasion: Hume's Conception of Rhetoric," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* (forthcoming).
[73] Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and History*, pp.131-2.
[74] *Essays*, "Of Eloquence," p.104.
[75] Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence*, p.1.

> inspire an account of human life in which ethical and political possibilities were grounded in a recognition of their linguistic, historical, and cultural character.[76]

Politeness arose from the realm of conversation. However, "the arts of conversation"[77] could be transposed to the rhetorical realm. Hume writes in his essay "Of Eloquence," "perhaps it may be acknowledged, that our modern customs, or our superior good sense, if you will, should make our orators more cautious and reserved than the ancient, in attempting to inflame the passions, or elevate the imagination of their audience: But, I see no reason, why it should make them despair absolutely of succeeding in that attempt."[78] Hume was certainly aware of the many cases in which fanatics and zealots had used rhetoric to whip their followers into a frenzy. But he did not see these cases as reason to condemn rhetoric all together. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hume never considered rhetoric to be necessarily impolite. He simply condemned the use of impolite rhetoric.

The fact that Hume could distinguish between impolite and polite rhetoric, between the rhetoric of the factional leaders that had been employed towards violent ends and a higher form of rhetoric that could inspire people to virtue and improve the quality of public discourse, leaves us wondering why he did not, at least at the time of the initial publication of "Of the Liberty of the Press," make the same distinction with regard to the written word. Surely, a portion of the answer lies in Hume's account of sympathy. Hume writes of the orator's ability to "inflame the audience, so as to make them accompany the speaker in such violent passions, and such elevated conceptions: And to conceal, under a torrent of eloquence, the artifice, by which all this is effectuated."[79] By contrast, he writes in the original conclusion to "Of the Liberty of the Press," that

> A man reads a book or pamphlet alone and coolly. There is none present from whom he can catch the passion by contagion. He is not hurried away by the force and energy of action. And should he be wrought up to so seditious a humour, there is no violent resolution presented to him, by which he can immediately vent his passion.[80]

Perhaps that is the full answer to the question. Perhaps, Hume simply believed that a few moments of cool solitary reflection would dissuade any individual from being carried away by even the most seditious or inflammatory book or pamphlet. Hume really does not give us enough information to answer the question. And the abrupt paragraph that he substituted for the original conclusion to his essay tells us nothing more than that he had changed his assessment of the dangers attending a free press. We are left to infer that, in the aftermath of the Wilkes affair, Hume now conceded that the written word, just like political oratory, could produce popular tumult.

I believe that this answer is too simple and that it is only partially correct. None of Hume's other writings necessitate that we treat the contributions to the public discourse of the written word and the spoken word in the same manner. Though he was likely wrong in his initial assessment of the dangers posed by a free press, Hume's initial impulse to treat the two forms of communication separately was probably correct. And doing so would certainly be in keeping with his other writings. Hume's philosophy of

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[76] Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness,* p.46.

[77] *Essays*, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences," p.127

[78] *Essays,* "Of Eloquence," p.104

[79] *Essays,* "Of Eloquence," p.101.

[80] *Essays*, "Of the Liberty of the Press," VRa, p.604.

mind is based on the notion that the feeling of the mind that he called belief would usually arise from experience. But eloquence, he argues, also has the capacity to produce lively ideas. Hume writes that only eloquence and education can take the place of experience in this regard. The influence of eloquence can, however, exceed that of experience.[81] 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."[82]

This account of the power of eloquence would seem to confirm Hume's initial suspicion that the written word should be treated differently from the spoken word. The question of how to understand these two forms of communication, and in particular, how to understand the differences between them, is thus of great significance for developing our understanding of Hume's conception of public discourse and its role in the public sphere. Sound reasoning could certainly be conveyed through the written word as well as through oratory. Hume's own philosophy was communicated through writing. The notion of politeness also has as much significance for the written word as it does for rhetoric. In fact, Hume drew much of his conception of politeness from the prose style of writers such as Addison. However, the "disdain, anger, boldness, freedom, involved in a continued stream of argument,"[83] that Hume attributed to great orators such as Demosthenes belongs solely to the realm of the spoken word. On Hume's own account, the written word simply cannot take the place of a sense experience in the way that oratory can.

Reading the different versions of Hume's essay "Of the Liberty of the Press" in the context of the political developments of the 1760s and 1770s, and of the Wilkes affair in particular, opens an important window into Hume's conceptions of the public sphere and public discourse. The essay helps to demonstrate the centrality to Hume's political thought of his concerns with the opposition of interests as a primary pillar upon which the constitutions of Britain and of his ideal commonwealth rely for support. It also provides an avenue for connecting Hume's discussions of politeness with his thoughts on public discourse. Though a fully polite public discourse might be an unachievable ideal, Hume believed that a politer press – at least, one politer than the *North Briton* – could improve the quality of public discourse such that its educative facet and, what I have called, its messy facet, could be united towards maintaining the constitutional balance, the latter by providing a forum for the opposition of interests and the former by deflating factional bigotry.

Developing a fuller account of Hume's conception of public discourse will, however, require that we properly distinguish the written from the spoken word. We must develop a better and more nuanced account of Hume's thoughts on the potential, both negative and positive, inherent to each. Hume's decision to edit "Of the Liberty of the Press" as he did begs the question of how he distinguished the two forms of political communication. The answer, however, cannot be found in the essay. At the end of the

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[81] T 1.3.10.8; SBN 123.
[82] T 2.3.6.7; SBN 426-7.
[83] *Essays,* "Of Eloquence," pp.105-6.

day, therefore, we might determine that Hume's essay "Of the Liberty of the Press" is most significant for the question that it forces us to confront, but leaves unanswered.

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