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# Hume's Politics and Four Dimensions of Realism

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Debates between realists and idealists in contemporary political theory have been confused by a tendency to conflate several distinct methodological theses. This article distinguishes between four dimensions of realism and shows how a novel reading of Hume's politics can help us make sense of the importance of these theses and the relationships between them. More specifically, we argue that a theory we call *normative conventionalism* can be distilled from two of Hume's more surprising and controversial essays, "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" and "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science." This theory views norms and institutions as conventional solutions to problems of coordination and conflict that are historically contingent, but also provides us with an approach to gaining leverage on our practices so that we can say something about which norms and institutions are worth emulating.

David Hume's political thought has long puzzled scholars. Hume has been variously characterized as a utilitarian (Hardin 2007), a conservative (Livingston 1984), a contractarian (Gauthier 1979), a realist (Sabl 2012), a (political) skeptic (Merrill 2015), and even as a natural law theorist of sorts (Forbes 1985). This diversity of interpretations is a result of at least three aspects of Hume's work: its remarkable breadth, the apparent tension between the conservative strands of his political thought and the radical nature of his philosophical project, and Hume's relative silence regarding the relationship between the various aspects of his work. Perhaps as important as each of these, however, has been a confusion generated by contemporary political theorists. In particular, the tendency of contemporary theorists to cast methodological disputes in dichotomous terms has often done as much to confuse as to illuminate our understanding of the relationship between various approaches to political theorizing.

We argue that although aspects of Hume's political thought make it fit uneasily into the contemporary categories in which it has been placed, it is coherent both as a stand-alone political theory and as an extension of his broader philosophical project. At the heart of this theory, we argue, is an underappreciated view of the roles that idealization, abstraction, and attention to history play in prescriptive theorizing about politics. Furthermore, it is our contention that understanding the contours of this view can help advance, and perhaps even resolve, several of

the methodological debates that have come to dominate contemporary political theory. In particular, we argue that Hume sheds light on the relationships between four distinct methodological theses, each of which plays an important role in making sense of realism as an approach to political theorizing, but that contemporary political theorists have tended to run together.

Underlying each of the claims above is our novel account of how Hume's wide-ranging work is synthesized in two of his more surprising essays, "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" (1752b) and "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science" (1741c). This account, which we call *normative conventionalism*, paints a picture of politics in which political values and the orders that instantiate them are conventional, but where there is nevertheless room for the idea that we can develop substantive standards for evaluating these conventions and for identifying when alternatives might be preferable. In what follows, we sketch the details of this account and its relevance to contemporary political theory. We begin by surveying a number of methodological debates in contemporary political theory and distinguishing between four theses that help us make sense of these debates. We then offer an account of how Hume fits into these debates. Focusing on the two essays mentioned above, we argue that Hume offers a compelling account of how the four theses we identify relate to one another and why taking a stand on each is necessary. We also argue that reading Hume's essays with these theses in mind allows us to resolve what otherwise appear to be some puzzling aspects of Hume's thought.

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Finally, having done this, we conclude by saying something about Hume's enduring legacy, where he fits in the contemporary methodological landscape, and how the argument presented here helps us make sense of the relationship between various approaches to political theorizing.

### REALISM AND IDEALISM IN POLITICS

It has become common for political theorists to distinguish between two broad approaches to theorizing about politics, realism and idealism. Realism is characterized by an emphasis on the institutions and personalities that characterize the political life of actual societies, as well as by the belief that the normative analysis of social and political institutions can be done without reference to (or at least without being constrained by) concerns about justice or other disputes in moral theory (Galston 2010; Waldron 2013; Williams 2005). Accordingly, realists tend to argue that political theorizing should not concern itself with the features of an ideal political order.

Idealists, on the other hand, cast questions about the nature of idealized political orders as the central concern of political theory. For some idealists, this is because characterizing the ideal political order is taken to be the primary objective of political theory. What most clearly distinguishes idealists from realists, though, is the belief that knowledge of an idealized political order provides helpful—perhaps even necessary—guidance when it comes to assessing actual political societies. For some, this is because such knowledge provides a standard against which injustice in the actual world can be identified (Cohen 2003, 2008; Estlund 2011, 2019). For others, it is because idealized political orders provide a more manageable context within which principles of political morality can be worked out (Rawls 1999; Simmons 2010).<sup>1</sup>

The vast number of figures, events, and states whose stories compose the long arc of history entail that the realist approach to political theorizing is a big tent. Nevertheless, while realists may disagree about which political facts should be taken as fixed or which figures and events should take center stage, there is a sense in which realism represents a unified approach to political theory, insofar as all realists accept that some facts about our history, psychology, and political practices should be taken as given. The same cannot be said for idealism.

Bernard Williams (2005) distinguishes between what he called the “enactment” and the “structural” models of idealism.

1. The distinction between realism and idealism we draw is modeled after the one drawn by Rossi and Sleat (2014); however, we use “idealism” rather than “moralism” for the contrast class with “realism.” We have introduced our own terminology both because “idealism” is more common in the literature, and because “moralism” is a misleading label in at least one important respect.

The enactment model sees political philosophy as a branch of applied moral philosophy. Questions in political philosophy are answered by applying moral principles that are often abstract and general in nature to specific problems in the political domain. For instance, much of the recent literature on the ethics of war and armed conflict has this flavor (e.g., McMahan 2009).<sup>2</sup> The structural model, on the other hand, introduces moralized constraints on the ends that a political order seeks to achieve and the means through which it might seek them, and then constructs an idealized model of the social world shaped by these constraints in order to gain critical leverage on practical political problems. Arguably the dominant form of this brand of idealism is public reason liberalism, which asks how a social order made up of suitably idealized individuals would have to be constructed in order to realize certain ideals of freedom and equality.<sup>3</sup>

Although idealism is not unified in the way that realism is, both brands of idealism identified above are distinguished from realism by the assumption that our theorizing about politics should be constrained by prior normative commitments. In the case of enactment idealists, these commitments are drawn from first order moral theory; in the case of structural idealists, they involve claims about the ends of social and political life and/or the ways in which we can imagine people or the world they inhabit being different (and perhaps better). In contrast, for realists, it is actual political practice and facts about the world in which it takes place that constrain the possibility of political theorizing.<sup>4</sup>

Realists argue that enactment idealists err in not recognizing the uniqueness of the political domain. There are some questions that only arise in the context of politics, and there are certain problems that political institutions have evolved specifically to confront. As a result, it is a mistake to think that abstract moral principles, however well designed, can adequately deal with these problems. On the other hand, structural idealists put the cart before the horse by arguing that politics must rely on moral antecedents, including, in some cases, consensus about what these antecedents are. This is a

2. Notably, however, much of this literature is responding to earlier views that expressed a different view of the relationship between moral and political questions (e.g., Walzer 2015).

3. Quong (2018) provides a nice survey of the various “flavors” of public reason liberalism.

4. This is arguably an oversimplification because many idealists accept that political theorizing is appropriately constrained by some facts about the world and the people in it. Crucially, however, debates among idealists (especially of the structural variety) tend to be framed in terms of how far from the facts on the ground we must abstract in order to get sufficient leverage on our practices. In this vein, some of the most notable idealists, e.g., G. A. Cohen (2003) and David Estlund (2019), have cautioned against endorsing constraints any more restrictive than modal possibility.

mistake because—as realists see things—the lack of a stable consensus about core political questions is one of the conditions that gives rise to the need for politics in the first place (Rossi and Sleat 2014; Williams 2005). Furthermore, realists complain that structural idealists are often conspicuously silent when it comes to explaining how knowledge of an ideal political order is meant to guide our assessment of actual institutions and the problems they face.<sup>5</sup>

One common misconception is that realists are committed to a completely amoral theory of politics. This is to mistake a thesis about the independence of political and moral theory with the more radical thesis that the two fields of inquiry are unrelated. Realists may deny that political principles can (or should) be straightforwardly derived from abstract moral principles, but moral principles may well bear on the problems of politics in important ways. In other words, realists tend to accept the independence of political theory in a way similar to Rawls's (1974) recognition of the independence of moral theory from epistemology, metaphysics, and what we now call metaethics. Rawls did not deny that there might be important connections between moral theory and these other fields. His claim was simply that it is possible and indeed fruitful to do moral theory without relying on foundational claims drawn from these other areas. Realists need not be committed to a claim any more ambitious than this in the political domain: political disputes need not be moral disputes.<sup>6</sup>

#### FOUR METHODOLOGICAL DISTINCTIONS

Having suggested that the realist approach to politics is unified in at least one sense (despite being a big tent) and having distinguished this approach from two distinct brands of idealism, we're now in a position to characterize several methodological dimensions along which approaches to political theorizing might differ. The first dimension concerns the re-

5. Put differently, idealists lack the worked-out theory of the second best that is ultimately needed to make their approach to theorizing about politics fruitful. For more on what theories of the second best teach us about the limits of ideal theory, see Wiens (2016).

6. Note that, Rawls's approach to political theorizing remained idealist even after his turn toward political liberalism. Rawls (1985) acknowledges that problems of political justice cannot be reduced to problems of ethics or morality because of the inescapable fact of reasonable disagreement about what justice is. Nevertheless, his later "political" work (Rawls 1996, 1997, 2001) continues to be concerned primarily with whether it is possible for suitably idealized agents to live together in ways that are consistent with certain ideals of freedom and equality. Moreover, he remains committed to a contentious notion of reasonableness that rests on relatively thick moral premises, as well as to a notion of our "moral powers" that is aspirational and not meant to reflect an empirical account of our moral psychology.

lationship between political theory and other brands of normative theorizing.

**Independence Thesis.** Political theorizing can and should be done free from prior normative constraints (and, in particular, independently from the claims of moral theory).

This thesis has two parts, one descriptive, the other normative. Descriptively, it says that political theory does not require any antecedent moral principles (as in the enactment model), nor does it require various constraints on the ends of politics or the ways in which they might be achieved (as in the structural model). The normative claim, on the other hand, is that political theory *should not* take such moral antecedents as points of departure. These claims are conceptually separable, but tend to be adopted together, and, in light of our previous discussion, it should be clear why both aspects of the thesis tend to be associated with realism broadly construed.

A second way of carving things concerns the way a theorist approaches modeling the features that characterize a political order.

**Correspondence Thesis.** Principles for evaluating political orders tend to become less useful as the theories in which they are embedded become more idealized and abstract.

Understood in this context, we might think of realism as an approach to political theory that prefers to hold most of the features that characterize political actors and institutions fixed, and, when engaged in idealization or abstraction, is hesitant to depart too much from the ways in which actual political actors behave or the ways in which actual institutions operate.

Third, the methodological terrain can be carved up in terms of how aspirational a theory purport to be.

**Practicality Thesis.** The primary aim of political theory is to identify an achievable standard for how social and political institutions should be organized or assessed given realistic expectations about how political actors are likely to behave.

Realists tend to embrace this thesis, in contrast to idealists, who tend to be more aspirational. Put roughly, idealists tend to be concerned with what is possible for human beings living together in political communities, whereas realists are more concerned with what is probable.

Finally, we can distinguish between evaluatively monist and pluralist theories of politics.

**Plurality Thesis.** Political orders can be meaningfully evaluated by myriad; often overlapping; and, in many cases, conflicting normative principles.

Compared to the other three theses, this thesis may appear to do a poor job of distinguishing realist approaches from the various brands of idealism. However, there are reasons why a realist might be relatively more inclined to embrace such a thesis than an idealist. In particular, realists often conceive of politics as agonistic, or, at least, as characterized by a degree of diversity and disagreement that makes the search for a single set of evaluative standards misguided.

### THE METHODOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

With four methodological distinctions on the table, we are now in a position to provide a rough sketch of the landscape they carve up. The first thing to note is that each of the theses invites a categorical reading. One can either accept the thesis in question, or not. In practice, however, the theses admit of degrees and can each be endorsed in stronger and weaker forms, and, as we will see, this is especially true of the correspondence and practicality theses. Furthermore, although the theses are related in numerous ways, and there are reasons why each tends to be associated with realism, the theses are independent. Embracing one need not commit one to embracing the others, and, in fact, few theorists accept or reject all of them (especially in their strongest forms).

One practical advantage of endorsing the independence thesis—especially in pluralistic, open, and contestatory political systems—is that it allows each party to a political dispute to see the other side as morally legitimate. As Bernard Williams (2005, 13) describes it, in this view, a “political decision . . . does not in itself announce that the other party was morally wrong or, indeed, wrong at all. What it immediately announces is that *they have lost*.” Members of losing coalitions can thus remain steadfast in their opposition to winners, confident that they will not necessarily be seen as moral monsters or enemies of truth and justice.<sup>7</sup>

From the perspective of the political theorist, however, the more significant implication of adopting the independence thesis may be that it allows one to analyze political actors, norms, and institutions without having to assess their behavior in terms of some underlying set of moral commitments. Given that there is substantial disagreement about moral principles, this has the advantage of insulating political theory from those

disputes (at least initially). Of course, to ultimately gain leverage over a political order, a theory eventually has to reckon with the moral beliefs operative in it. By maintaining the independence of political theory from moral theory, though, realists treat moral theories as among the variables that might characterize a society and that might, as a result, contribute to distinctively political desiderata like the robustness of a set of institutions or values.

Where the independence thesis concerns the relationship between morality and politics, the other three theses concern ways of approaching political theorizing. For instance, by maintaining that evaluative principles become less useful as they become more abstract or idealized, the correspondence thesis encapsulates a view about how to model political actors and the world they inhabit. While the practicality thesis concerns the aims of that theorizing, the plurality thesis concerns the degree of unity we should expect or strive for in our normative assessments of politics.<sup>8</sup>

Although the theses are distinct, one way of thinking about both the correspondence and practicality theses is in terms of James Madison's claim in *Federalist* 51 that if “men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Understood in this light, the practicality thesis maintains that the point of theorizing about politics is to understand how to build and maintain governance institutions for people as they are, rather than as they might be, while the correspondence thesis maintains that political theorists should be cautious not to abstract away from features of the world that make social and political institutions necessary or that determine how they are likely to operate. Realists tend to embrace each of these principles and, understood in this way, realism can be characterized as an approach to politics that (1) takes the problems of existent (or historical) political orders as its primary point of departure and (2) analyzes these problems through the lens of the people, places, and events implicated in them. Contemporary empirical approaches to political science typically have this flavor, as does plenty of work in the history of political thought. As an approach to normative political theory, though, this Madisonian brand of realism is perhaps better understood as a commitment to the principle that we lose critical leverage on the problems of practical politics as we distance ourselves from the (often messy) facts on the ground.<sup>9</sup>

7. This, of course, is no guarantee. Members of opposing political coalitions may well view one another as evil or wrongheaded, but by making room for the possibility that politics is distinct from morality, we arguably expand the possibilities for stable compromise (Vallier 2019; Wendt 2016).

8. It's worth noting that the correspondence, practicality, and plurality theses each have analogs in the moral domain. Since our concern here is with methodology in political theorizing, we set aside the question of what implications these theses have for normative theorizing more broadly.

9. One reason for offering this second formulation of the Madisonian brand of realism is that when we place too much emphasis on the role that attention to history plays in cashing out the respective methodological theses, we risk conflating realism with historicism. In this context, historicism is the



Several things are worth noting about the Madisonian brand of realism. First, as we previously suggested, the correspondence and practicality theses each admit of degrees. A political theory can be more or less aspirational, and in aspiring to something, it can be more or less tied to the facts on the ground. Second, although they are distinct, the practicality and correspondence theses are nevertheless closely related, insofar as a theorist's model of how political actors can be expected to behave is (partly) constitutive of the extent to which the model abstracts or idealizes away from the facts on the ground. Third, the role of the theorist, in this view, is to choose which facts should be abstracted from and which should be taken as fixed points. Fourth, insofar as realists are engaged in the normative project of gaining critical leverage on the problems that confront political actors and institutions, they must engage in some degree of abstraction. At the least, the realist must assume that political actors are capable of acting or choosing other than they did, or, alternatively, that institutions could be designed differently. In embracing the Madisonian approach, then, realists need not (and indeed should not) reject the utility of idealization altogether. After all, in *The Federalist Papers*, Madison and his collaborators were making a case for a revolutionary political order.<sup>10</sup>

Note that the Madisonian brand of realism does not provide the only way of thinking about the relationship between the correspondence and practicality theses. While a theorist who is concerned with how political actors are likely to behave may be hesitant to depart too far from the facts on the ground, embracing the practicality thesis need not commit a theorist to embracing the correspondence thesis, or vice versa. Indeed, there is a prominent approach to political theorizing often associated with realism that is clearly motivated by something

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thesis that normative theories of politics must be read in light of the historical context in which they were written and that we risk abusing historical texts when we read contemporary debates or understandings of politics into them. While it's true that historicism has long been associated with realism, this is largely a matter of historical accident reflecting the fact that many prominent realists (e.g., Bernard Williams, James Tully, Raymond Guess) were also closely associated with the Cambridge school of intellectual history. As we see things, the methodological theses the Cambridge school raises about intellectual history are quite distinct from the methodological issues at stake in the various debates between idealists and realists that concern the ways in which we can gain normative leverage on problems of politics. That said, we're open to the idea that our analysis could be extended to include the historicism thesis as a fifth dimension along which we might distinguish approaches to political theorizing.

10. *The Federalist Papers* were revolutionary in two senses. On one hand, they provided a defense of the recently formed state that had emerged as a result of a war for independence from England and that aspired to a form of government that was not found in any other part of the world at that time. On the other hand, the essays were advocating the movement to replace the previously adopted Articles of Confederation with an altogether new Constitution.

resembling the practicality thesis, but that is characterized by a highly idealized model of who the relevant political actors are and how they can be expected to behave. In particular, the realist school of thought in international relations is typically characterized by its commitment to the view that states are the primary actors in the international arena and by the assumptions that states are unitary, self-interested actors that are primarily concerned with their own security and acquiring or maintaining power (Korab-Karpowicz 2017). Accordingly, some international relations (IR) realists, especially those associated with the "neorealist" school, have viewed international politics as an arena that can be usefully modeled with game theoretic tools that are abstract and highly idealized. Of course, there are those who argue that the assumptions built into these models are a reasonable representation the facts on the ground and so not that idealized. That said, even if we accept that the idealized models of nation states embraced by IR realists abstract quite a way from the facts on the ground, it's worth noting that their approach shares the aims of the Madisonian brand of realism, insofar as it is aimed at identifying a floor on what can be minimally expected of political actors given relatively pessimistic assumptions about the behavior of states.<sup>11</sup>

Having spent some time on the relationship between the correspondence and practicality theses, it is important to say something about how those theses relate to the independence and plurality theses. The first thing to note is that the former are related to the latter, insofar as one may be inclined to endorse one or both of the independence and plurality theses as a result of a prior commitment to the correspondence or practicality theses. For instance, one view is that the practical aims of politics raise normative concerns that are distinctively political. Alternatively, politics may be seen as too varied across time and space to make the search for a single set of normative criteria for evaluating social orders a fruitful one. Indeed, even if doing so were possible, many pluralists reject the idea that identifying a single such standard would be beneficial (Gaus 2016; Sen 2006; Wiens 2012).

One can be a pluralist without thereby embracing the independence thesis, though. For instance, one might accept that political orders can be meaningfully evaluated by myriad, often overlapping, normative principles, but deny that there is anything unique about the political domain that gives us reason to differentiate moral from political principles (e.g., Cohen

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11. Something similar is true of certain versions of the contractarian approach to political philosophy (D'Agostino, Gaus, and Thrasher 2019; Moehler 2018). Here the contrast with Rawls's "realistic utopianism" is instructive. Although Rawls embraces aspects of the contractarian project, he also adopts the assumptions that societies are closed and that there is perfect compliance with the law explicitly to avoid some of the more vexing problems of practical politics (see, e.g., Rawls 1999, 7).

2008). Nor does a commitment to the correspondence and practicality theses commit one to the independence thesis. This is perhaps best exemplified by the effective altruism movement. Peter Singer (2009, 2015) and William MacAskill (2015), for instance, each advocate reforming practices that contribute to problems of pressing moral and political concern. Each clearly embraces the correspondence thesis, insofar as their view entails that we should do whatever is most likely to be effective. Neither, however, distinguishes between problems of morality and politics.

That said, those who embrace the plurality thesis are perhaps less likely than those who do not to maintain that principles for evaluating political orders need not reflect any deeper moral commitments. Whether one accepts the independence thesis or not, to the extent that one is willing to entertain a variety of normative standards, it seems fair to say that she is less likely to see the attraction of theorizing about an abstract order that idealizes away from the facts on the ground. Whether one view deserves the “realist” label more than another, though, is not our primary concern. Since none of the relationships between the theses we have identified are necessary, it’s perhaps unsurprising that the realist label has been applied to so many different views, especially since none of these theses by themselves maps neatly onto the term.

Our conjecture, which we will defend in what remains of the article, is that making sense of realism as an approach to political theorizing requires taking a stand on each of the theses identified here. We do not mean this conjecture to be controversial. However, to the extent that theorists have engaged in methodological debates about the theses identified here, they’ve tended to focus on one (or at most two) of the theses and have done so in a way that has obscured the other theses. Our goal is to use Hume’s political thought to shed light on the importance of each of these theses and, in doing so, to clarify Hume’s thought and its place in the canon. Before turning our attention to Hume, though, it will be useful to paint a picture of how a number of important political theorists and schools of thought differ vis-à-vis the theses we have identified (see table 1).

Table 1 is obviously incomplete. Some important theorists—notably Bernard Williams, whose efforts to define realism we drew on earlier—have been left out.<sup>12</sup> And some might dispute our classification of certain theorists.<sup>13</sup> Our aim is not to

12. We’ve refrained from classifying Williams because, while his analysis of the independence thesis is incisive, it’s less clear where he stands with respect to the other theses.

13. As we previously noted, even after his turn toward political liberalism, Rawls does not endorse the independence thesis as we’ve characterized it. However, some might question our claim that he does not endorse the plurality thesis either. Our judgment here is based on the fact that though Rawls’s later project is concerned with developing a theory of justice for citizens who dis-

provide a definitive categorization of various views, though. Rather, our hope is to provide a rough sense of the methodological terrain so that we might see how Hume fits into it.<sup>14</sup>

### HUME’S CONVENTIONALISM AND ITS RELATION TO REALISM

It’s easy to see why Hume is often taken to be a realist. In “Of the Original Contract,” Hume (1752a) criticizes the social contract theories of the Whigs, which were both idealist and monistic insofar as they proposed single idealized standards by which to evaluate the political and constitutional orders of the time. Hume argues, however, that these theories are premised on historical fables that are as fallacious as they are misleading (1752a, 469–71). Hume’s chief complaint was that the contract theorists were attempting to justify certain political arrangements by looking to an imaginary past instead of focusing on the actual past (Phillipson 2011, 62–64). In doing so, such theories were not just misleading, but politically harmful.<sup>15</sup>

Nor are Hume’s criticisms restricted to the focus on an imaginary past. In the essays “Of the First Principles of Government” (1741b) and “Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic” (1741d), Hume takes aim at one of the more prominent idealist strands of contract theories (related to independence), arguing that contract theorists are misguided in seeking to base political authority on rational consent. As Hume argues (1741c, 51), it is opinion, not rational consent, that provides the glue that holds our actual social institutions together, and by focusing on consent, contract theorists encourage us to endorse institutions that, in practice, tend toward tyranny and instability. Contract theories thus tend to be both moralistic and impractical.

Andrew Sabl (2012) has argued that *The History of England* can be profitably read as an extended meditation on the conventional basis of political institutions. At the heart of this reading is the idea that political institutions are rarely a perfect reflection of carefully crafted principles of design meant to instantiate specific ideals. Instead, politics is an arena within which myriad conventions emerge and evolve over time in order to confront the various conflicts and challenges that characterize social and political life. Viewed this way, we need to know quite a bit about history to know which of the many possible conventions are well suited to a given society at a particular time. Accordingly, in Hume’s view, no idealist theory

agree about the right and the good, and though he entertains the idea that there are multiple reasonable conceptions of justice, he remains committed to identifying the most reasonable such theory.

14. We’ve included Hobbes and Walzer here because comparisons with them will be illustrative in some of the discussion that follows.

15. Andrew Sabl (2011, 173) makes a similar criticism of Rawlsian contract theory.



Table 1. Dimensions of Realism

	John Rawls	G. A. Cohen	Effective Altruist	Hobbes	International Relations Realists	Contemporary Just War Theorist	Michael Walzer
Independence	X	X	X	X	✓	X	✓
Correspondence	X	X	✓	X	X	X	✓
Practicality	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Plurality	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓

of politics—Whig or otherwise—is likely to capture the strange contingencies of actual political life. And, for similar reasons, when we look back over the course of history, we see that political actors like Henry VIII or Cromwell who attempted to reform England’s institutions in order to make society better fit their ideals often—and unsurprisingly—failed.

On a conventionalist theory of politics of the sort Sabl attributes to Hume, the moral norms of a society may influence what conventions take root and how they change over time. However, in such cases, politics is only contingently constrained by morality because it is only the moral (and other) beliefs actually held by political actors that can shape the way political institutions evolve. Note, then, that there is a natural connection between conventionalist theories of politics and each of the methodological theses we’ve identified. In order to better characterize Hume’s view, though, it’s worth distinguishing between two types of conventionalism.

The *strong* conventionalist argues that whatever normative force a set of norms or institutions has *can only be explained by existent conventions*. In other words, the norms and institutions that characterize a political order can only be justified by reference to the actual behavior and consent (or at least compliance) of the political actors who inhabit the order in question. One reason for this is that the strong conventionalist tends to accept the most extreme versions of our four theses. Strong conventionalism is not a popular position among theorists, because it makes the theorist’s task primarily descriptive. Nevertheless, its possibility in logical space is analytically useful, and as a characterization of the views of actual political actors, the view is arguably well represented among a certain brand of conservatives.

The *moderate* conventionalist, on the other hand, agrees that any explanation of the normative force of the norms and institutions that characterize (or would characterize) a political order must refer to existing conventions. But she denies that the normative force of norms and institutions can only be explained by the fact that they are conventions. Because they affirm the relevance of existing conventions to the normative analysis of politics, moderate conventionalists are committed to accepting the correspondence thesis in some form. They

also tend to accept the plurality and independence theses. Since they deny that normativity is entirely conventional, however, they are likely to adopt weaker versions of all three of these theses than the strong conventionalist. Indeed, one can be a moderate conventionalist without accepting the independence thesis at all. For instance, one can deny the uniqueness of the political domain—while being a conventionalist about politics—because one is also a conventionalist about morality. For example, one reading of Hobbes maintains that morality and politics are not independent because they amount to the same thing, and, in this view, the question of who should rule has conventional elements even if Hobbes is not a thoroughgoing conventionalist in other respects.

Hume is clearly a conventionalist, but there are reasons to doubt that he is a conventionalist in the strong sense. Although Hume criticizes reformers like Cromwell in several places, his point isn’t that institutions can’t (or shouldn’t) be changed.<sup>16</sup> We see this, for instance, in “The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” where Hume praises some of the features of Cromwell’s reformed parliament. Rather than objecting to reform on principle, Hume’s point is that reforms often fail to live up to the aspirations of their architects. Reformers, like Cromwell, who propose change must be careful not to displace the tacit knowledge embedded in the practices and customs that support, define, and push back against long-standing institutions. In effect, Hume is defending what we’ve characterized as a Madisonian brand of realism that is committed to the practicality and correspondence theses as constraints on any proposed reform. This is perhaps never clearer than in the opening paragraph of “The Idea of the Perfect Commonwealth,” where he writes:

An established government has an infinite advantage, by that very circumstance of its being established; the bulk of mankind being governed by authority, not reason,

16. Arguably, Donald Livingston’s (1984) depiction of Hume as a conservative provides an interpretation of Hume as a strong conventionalist. In Livingston’s reading, though, the appeal of existing conventions is based on skepticism, rather than a presumption of normative authority.

and never attributing authority to any thing that has not the recommendation of antiquity. To tamper, therefore, in this affair, or try experiments merely upon the credit of supposed argument and philosophy, can never be the part of a wise magistrate, who will bear a reverence to what carries the marks of age; and though he may attempt some improvements for the public good, yet will he adjust his innovations, as much as possible, to the ancient fabric, and preserve entirely the chief pillars and supports of the constitution. (1752b, 512–13).

Hume warns against political experimentation premised on philosophical argument alone, but he allows that a wise magistrate might sometimes seek to reform a society's institutions or practices in order to promote the public good. His argument, in other words, is that the good reformer must pay attention to features of the past and present that tend to promote stability and order.<sup>17</sup>

Even if it is clear that Hume is a conventionalist of a moderate sort, and even if it is clear that this has implications for his stance vis-à-vis the methodological theses we've identified, the degree to which he endorses the correspondence, plurality, independence, and practicality theses remain open questions. Answering these questions isn't easy. Doing so requires us to reconcile Hume's skepticism about the utility of prescriptive theorizing with his willingness to engage in that sort of work in both *The History of England* and political essays. More important, it requires us to make sense of Hume's willingness to embrace two methodological devices that he otherwise seems skeptical of. The first is the portrait of an idealized regime that we find in "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth." The second is an approach to his subject matter that makes room for a priori judgments, which we find in "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," although each of these devices is found in other places as well. As we alluded to at the outset of this essay, the key to doing this lies in our reading of these essays and, in particular, in our account of the place they occupy in his work.

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17. We're not alone in drawing this connection between Hume and what we've called the Madisonian brand of realism. Notably, Frederick Whelan (2004, especially chap. 6) argues that a liberal brand of realism that is perhaps best articulated in *The Federalist Papers* can be traced to Hume and Machiavelli. While we're sympathetic to much of what Whelan says about the through lines in the political thought of Hume and Madison, his emphasis differs from ours in two respects. First, he emphasizes a contrast between realism and what he refers to as "utopian" or "ideal" theorizing that we think is painted with too broad a brush. Second, where our main concern is with Hume's relevance to a number of methodological debates, Whelan is at least as concerned with what implications Hume's methodological commitments have for his first-order political views.

## THE SCIENCE OF A PERFECT COMMONWEALTH

It is somewhat surprising that Hume, known for his conventionalism, would even entertain the idea that a perfect commonwealth could exist. More surprising still is that Hume, the skeptic, would suggest that we can know what such a commonwealth would look like. Perhaps most surprising of all is that Hume, the thoroughgoing empiricist, would suggest that reflection, rather than observation, is sometimes enough to identify the key features of such a commonwealth. Indeed, Russell Hardin found this mixture so jarring that he declared that "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" was "probably the grossest violation of [Hume's] well-argued views in all of his works" (2007, 170n29). James Conniff (1976, 101) goes further, arguing that Hume's essay should be read as a "disingenuous" satire of Harrington's *Oceana*.

We agree that some of the claims in "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" are hard to parse, at least at first glance. Nevertheless, it's a mistake to dismiss the essay too quickly. For one thing, even if the essay was meant as satire—which we think is unlikely—it was influential. As Ryu Susato (2016, 595) has argued, Hume's essay provided reformers in America, Britain, and France "with an important intellectual resource and a source of authority in the turbulent decades towards the end of the eighteenth century." We don't have any reason to think that Hume would have been surprised by this reception. Indeed, as Margaret Watkins (2019, 27) argues, the essay invites itself to be read as a blueprint for productive reform. Nor, as Susato (2015b) argues, is the idealized portrait Hume paints necessarily inconsistent with the skepticism that characterizes much of his work. At the very least, as Eric Schliesser (2018) argues, the similarity between the model commonwealth of Hume's essay and the features he associates with good government in both *The History of England* and *Political Discourses* gives us good reason to take the essay seriously. As we'll argue below, though, there's actually a more full-throated defense of this essay to be made. In particular, when the essay is read alongside Hume's earlier essay "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science," it paints a nuanced, but cohesive, picture of how to theorize about politics. Furthermore, this picture is consistent with what Hume has to say about science and epistemology and, in particular, the science of man.

As we pointed to in the passage quoted at the end of the previous section, Hume begins "The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth" by reminding us that governments are not like other "artificial contrivances" that may be safely cast aside when philosophical argument suggests that an alternative might prove better. However, Hume then proposes that just as we may ask which sort of ship is most commodious for sailing, so too may we ask which form of government is "the most perfect of all." And he appeals to a surprisingly familiar argument to motivate

the importance of this sort of question. Knowledge of the perfect commonwealth, he suggests, can help us to identify, and perhaps adopt, better institutions. Or, as he puts it, “in all cases, it must be advantageous to know what is most perfect in kind, that we may be able to bring any real constitution or form of government as near it as possible” (Hume 1752b, 513).

Hume doesn’t flesh out this argument any further. He doesn’t, for instance, tell us how such knowledge is useful. Nor is it clear whether he means to be staking out the position, now widely regarded to be mistaken, that the best feasible state of affairs will closely approximate the best possible state of affairs. What he clearly is doing, however, is defending the thesis that knowledge of the best form of government is both possible and useful, and, having done so, Hume then embarks on the task of describing what such a commonwealth would look like. Here Hume takes Harrington’s *Oceana* as his model. After documenting some of the inconvenient, impracticable, and undesirable features of Harrington’s commonwealth (1752b, 515–16), Hume goes on to describe the features of a limited monarchy that he takes to be ideal in virtue of its ability to avoid or overcome these (and other) objections (1752b, 515–26). For our purposes, the particular features of Hume’s perfect commonwealth are not terribly important. What are important are the remarks he makes regarding the desiderata for such a commonwealth. These allow us to see how Hume can get normative leverage out of a project that is largely descriptive, and this alone would warrant attention. But if Hume’s approach is attractive, it also shows that a conventionalist brand of realism is compatible with some elements of idealism, and specifically with a rejection of the strongest version of the correspondence thesis

The first desideratum of a perfect commonwealth that Hume identifies is that it should be realistic, even if not immediately realizable. We see this when, in the course of praising Harrington’s model, he rejects More’s *Utopia* and Plato’s *Republic* as “plainly imaginary” (1752b, 514). Although we’ve already seen that Hume rejects a strong version of the correspondence thesis, in rejecting the ideals of More and Plato, Hume clearly embraces some version of the thesis. We see this in his complaint that More’s and Plato’s ideals each require “great reformation in the manners of mankind” (1752b, 514) and later in the attention he devotes to how a senate can resist the forces that encourage exploitation of the public by the politically powerful, on one hand, and the problems of factionalism, on the other (1752b, 524–25). It’s perhaps clearest, though, in “That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science,” where Hume argues that “a constitution is only so far good, as it provides a remedy against mal-administration” (1741c, 29).

Arguably, each of the claims described above also evince a commitment to the practicality thesis and so provide further

support for our earlier contention that Hume’s conventionalism is a Madisonian brand of realism. Further support for this can also be found in his desire to illustrate the resemblance between the ideal commonwealth he sketches and the one that governed the United Provinces (1752b, 526) and in his desire to show how the British government could be altered so as to more closely approximate that ideal. In other words, in Hume’s view, while there is room for abstracting away from the facts on the ground in order to get normative leverage on our practices, we can only abstract away from so many facts before we begin to lose this leverage.

The second hallmark of Hume’s political theorizing also reflects the idea that a perfect commonwealth should be realistic. Here, however, this desideratum consists not in a positive property, but rather in a property that the perfect commonwealth need not possess—namely the capability of sustaining itself forever. Hume’s precise concern is nuanced. As we pointed out above, he clearly values the ability of good government to sustain itself in the face of vicious leaders. What Hume recognizes, though, is that the desire for a commonwealth to last forever is unrealistic. “The world itself probably is not immortal,” he tells us, and so why should the ideal commonwealth be (1752b, 528)? Nor is this the only desideratum that a perfect commonwealth need not possess. As Hume cautiously reminds us, the plan of limited monarchy he sketches, though immune “in theory” to “any considerable objection” (1752b, 516), is “still liable to three great inconveniences” (1752b, 527).<sup>18</sup>

If the “The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth” is where Hume most clearly defends the value of normative political theorizing, it’s in “That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science” (Hume 1741b) where he most clearly tells us how to go about making such prescriptions (i.e., where he develops his distinctive methodology). Here, Hume carefully catalogs the features that distinguish good from bad government. Two things are distinctive about this essay. First, Hume suggests that at least some of these features can be discerned a priori (1741b, 17). Although it should be noted that Hume’s use of the term does not map onto how it is typically used today, which is more reflective of Kant’s usage. Instead, Hume uses the term a priori to refer to our ability to discern truths on the basis of reflection without direct reference to experience. Specifically, Hume embraces the idea that we can form judgments about prospective phenomena (or historical phenomena

18. The inconveniences are that (1) limited monarchy does not entirely remove the parties of court and country, (2) the monarch’s character retains a significant influence on government, and (3) the monarch has insufficient incentive to maintain a well-run militia, as opposed to a standing army.

we haven't observed) on the basis of our general familiarity with human affairs paired with the ability to identify relevant similarities in circumstances and events. We see this, for instance, in Hume's account of the advantages and disadvantages of various forms of aristocracy (1741b, 16–17). Hume distinguishes between two aristocratic models in which the legislative power of the state is held by the nobility: one in which every nobleman shares power as part of a whole legislative body and another in which the legislative body is composed of parts that each have their own distinct power and authority rooted in vassals. As Hume notes, the Venetian aristocracy is emblematic of the first, and is preferable for this reason to the Polish aristocracy, which is emblematic of the second. In particular, because Venetian nobles possess their authority in common, Hume suggests that they have greater incentives to preserve peace and order, and individual factions will seldom have the power needed to placate the nobles likely to be disadvantaged. Hume also draws similar conclusions with respect to the superiority of democratic governments with representative bodies to those without (1741b, 15–16) and the superiority of hereditary over elective monarchies (1741b, 18). What is important for our purposes, though, is that, while he is using historical examples, the conclusions he draws are made on the basis of the structural features of the governments in question, not their track records of success.

Second, in addition to endorsing (at least in some contexts) the value of reasoning about politics without direct reference to experience, Hume also suggests that such analysis can deliver “universal axioms” and “general” or “eternal” truths (1741b, 18, 21). Of course, if such analysis is able to deliver truths, it's unsurprising that these truths would be general. But, in Hume's view, the utility of this analysis isn't limited to making comparative judgments about similar forms of government. Pointing to a monarch's relative independence from the opinion of the people, Hume argues that monarchies tend to be less exploitative of the provinces they conquer than democratic states (1741b, 18). In other words, Hume distinguishes his approach from a more cautious brand of theorizing that insists that conclusions about how a particular policy or set of institutions would work in a given set of circumstances can only be reached on the basis of observing the policy or institutions in the requisite circumstances.

Moreover, this (perhaps initially surprising) aspect of Hume's political methodology is even clearer if we look at the first *Enquiry*. In the chapter on liberty and necessity, Hume argues that “Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of *nothing* new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by shewing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us

with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behavior” (emphasis added; 1748, E 8.7, SBN 83-4). He then goes on to argue that the moral philosopher or political theorist uses history to establish “the principles of his science” in exactly the same way that the natural philosopher uses observation of the natural world. In Hume's view, then, embracing the practicality thesis is consistent with (and perhaps even requires) looking for universal principles that will be generally applicable to the problems of practical politics. Note, however, that doing so entails rejecting the strongest formulation of the correspondence thesis, insofar as too strong a commitment to that thesis would make history seem like a series of contingent miracles, rather than the complex result of local causal regularities.<sup>19</sup> But once again, there is a limit to how far away from our present circumstances we can abstract if we want to get leverage on our practices.

It is also clear that Hume accepts the independence thesis. As we suggested earlier, we see this in his argument that politics is founded on opinion and not agreement, but we also see it in “Of Parties in General,” where he argues that politics shapes moral education more than ethics shapes politics (Hume 1741a).<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Hume's resignation to the fact that even the perfect commonwealth he describes is subject to some inconveniences, combined with the fact that political institutions are founded on opinion and not agreement, suggests that he embraces a version of the plurality thesis. For Hume, different institutions will be better at confronting different problems. Ultimately, the regime type that would be best in any given time and place will depend on the particular challenges that characterize those circumstances and how the political actors in those circumstances prioritize the challenges they face.

Summing up the argument to this point, we have suggested that Hume's politics should be understood as a version of conventionalist realism that leaves space for principles of politics that are general, if not necessarily universal. As we see things, two aspects of our reading are especially noteworthy. First, the political principles Hume posits are best characterized as normative standards of comparative institutional analysis, not first-order normative principles.<sup>21</sup> Second, in our view, a distinguishing characteristic of Hume's methodology is his clear rejection

19. Our analysis here mirrors McCormick (2013), although she is more skeptical than we are of how consistently Hume is applying his methodology in “The Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth.”

20. On the importance of opinion in politics, see Paul Sagar (2018).

21. In addition to distinguishing our reading of Hume from Whelan's (as we discussed in n. 17), our commitment to this claim also distinguishes our view from Neil McArthur (2007), who argues that Hume makes a case for several first-order normative political principles.



of the strongest versions of the correspondence thesis. A commitment to a strong version of that thesis is a hallmark of much conventionalist and realist thought. Hume rejects such a commitment, though, because of a more thoroughgoing dedication to the practicality thesis. In Hume's view, politics is fundamentally practical, but to understand the path toward practical success in politics, a science of politics must endeavor to identify what general principles there are.

In what remains of the article, we look at some of the distinctive features of the brand of realism we attribute to Hume. We then conclude by saying something about how Hume's approach relates to other prominent views, and about how the argument we've advanced helps paint a more cohesive view of Hume's political and philosophical work.

### THE REALIST NATURE OF HUME'S NORMATIVE CONVENTIONALISM

Although Hume's rejection of the strongest forms of the correspondence thesis may be surprising, his work reveals two reasons why someone committed to conventionalism and realism need not reject an appeal to general normative principles. The first has to do with how universal principles lay the foundations for good social science. The second concerns the role it plays in providing normative leverage on our political practices through comparative institutional analysis.

Hume begins *A Treatise of Human Nature* by declaring his intention to develop a science of man (of which the study of politics is a part) on the foundation of experience and observation. Here Hume is explicitly contrasting his approach with that of Hobbes and others whom he took to be attempting to found moral and political philosophy on the basis of a more thoroughgoing brand of a priori reasoning. As he also recognized, though, in comparison to the natural sciences, the study of man has the disadvantage of having to rely completely on the "cautious observation of human life" as opposed to having the benefit of testing theories through the use of controlled experiments (Hume 1739, 6). Even if we could conduct such experiments, Hume suggests that we cannot form confident conclusions on the basis of them because we cannot trust that the behavior observed in them is unaffected by the conditions in which the experiment takes place. This is important because, while Hume is generally skeptical of a priori reasoning, he recognized that in parsing the historical record, events don't speak for themselves, nor can the testimony of political actors or those who write histories ever be wholly trusted. Accordingly, the first step in establishing a science of politics is to develop a theory of the subject matter. It's not inconsistent with Hume's empiricism to maintain that, at least initially, some aspects of this theory might be posited on the basis of speculative reflection. Indeed, as Susato (2015a, 11–21) argues,

when it comes to his politics, Hume's skepticism manifests itself as a constraint on extending general principles too far, not as a rejection of those tools as such.

Embracing this line of thought, we think there are three lessons that Hume can teach us about developing a science of politics. First, even the most thoroughgoing empiricist must begin their investigation of the social world with a working theory of the relevant features of the world (or at least of how to identify these features). In Hume's case this means an account of the aspects of the political world that are relevant to compiling a history that is informative. Among other things, Hume does this through his adoption of an account of the various types of government and the features that allow us to distinguish between different versions of them. While this account is not itself the subject of his essays, the distinctions Hume draws are deployed consistently in both his essays and the more cohesive *The History of England*.

Second, one must then begin to draw generalizations on the basis of the available data. Sometimes these generalizations will feed back into one's working theory, allowing it to be enriched or updated as one goes. In Hume's case, we see this in his shifting focus over the course of *The History of England's* six volumes. It is instructive that he started with the volume on the Stuarts, an example that was both useful to his purposes and that still had political implications in his own time.<sup>22</sup> Here what really matters, however, is that the generalizations one draws lend themselves to being tested against the data. So, for instance, Hume notices that elective monarchies are vulnerable to the formation of factions that sow the seeds of civil war—a fact that he takes to be well supported by the historical record. So far, this fits well enough with the orthodox picture of Hume the empiricist. What, however, are we to make of Hume's suggestion that it's not just frameworks for approaching data about the world that may be posited without direct reference to experience, but rather that certain "general truths" about politics can be discerned in this way? Here the answer is that political theory provides us with the resources for making predictions about politics without reference to the historical record. By analyzing the structural features of various regime types, we can make predictions about how they will behave in various contexts. However, it is only when these hypotheses are shown to be born out in the historical record that these "general truths" can be truly known.<sup>23</sup>

22. Andrew Sabl's (2012) work on the relationship between politics and *The History of England* is second to none in terms of scope and depth, so we direct readers to that work for more examples.

23. Hume clearly suggests something like this in the extended note to sec. 5, pt. 1 of the first *Enquiry*. There he acknowledges that we can draw inferences about the influence of constitutions on civil governments on

This then brings us to the third and most important aspect of Hume's science of politics: the connection of principled theory with conventional history. History and theory together allow us to make claims about the tendencies of various forms of government. Moreover, some of these claims will be normative, insofar as they let us say that some forms of government are better than others given our needs and circumstances. In every case, though, both our normative *and* our descriptive claims must be held at arm's length because they are always subject to disconfirmation.<sup>24</sup>

Taking each of the claims sketched above together leaves us with a coherent view of politics we call "normative conventionalism." This view is realist, insofar as it is committed to the uniqueness of the political domain entailed by the independence thesis. It also accepts versions of the plurality and practicality thesis while rejecting a strong version of the correspondence thesis. Indeed, Hume shows us why a commitment to the practicality thesis might entail a commitment to a fairly strong version of the independence thesis, but a relatively constrained version of the correspondence thesis. According to this view, it is acceptable—indeed important—to engage in a certain degree of general—and to some extent idealized—theorizing in order to gain leverage on our actual practices for the purpose of comparative institutional analysis. Having a conception of a perfect commonwealth, in other words, allows us to look at our current or past practices and say something meaningful about the ways in which they could be better. Furthermore, there is room for abstract theorizing about how or institutions with certain features would work. But the extent to which we can fruitfully engage this sort of theorizing is always and everywhere constrained by the fact that we don't (and can't) know very much about worlds different from our own (or at least those that we have observed at some point in the past). In other words, the conventions of history constrain and inform normative theorizing.

Note that if we interpret Hume as a normative conventionalist along the lines we have suggested here, the puzzling conjunction of the idealism we find in *Essays* and the conventionalism we find in *The History of England* makes more sense. If we're right, the political essays need not be cast aside, as Hardin is wont to do. But unlike Sabl and Phillipson, we think the key to understanding Hume's politics does not lie in beginning with *The History of England* and proceeding from

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the basis of reason, but he argues that these inferences are ultimately (if not directly) founded on experience (1748, E 5.n8.1, SBN 43-4).

24. Eric Schliesser (2017) attributes a view very much like this to Hume's friend and intellectual sparring partner, Adam Smith. As Schliesser notes (2017, 310–13), this marks an important and underappreciated point of similarity between the two that also serves to differentiate them from some of their fellow British empiricists.

there. Instead, *The History of England* should be read in dialogue with the essays, for doing so allows us to see how Hume's political thought coheres with his overall philosophical method. And, perhaps more important, doing so allows us to approach *The History of England* with a better sense of *why* it is important and *what* Hume wants us to glean from it.

In particular, for a realist of Hume's stripe, the role of political theory is to make a case for how the institutions that govern our social and political lives might be shaped as they evolve. While we agree with Sabl's (2012) modesty about how much the conventionalist can claim to know, there's certainly ample room for thinking about how institutions might be guided or nudged to evolve in better or worse directions. Indeed, if institutions are best thought of as conventional solutions to coordination problems, this suggests that there will often be multiple conventions that could play this role.<sup>25</sup> And, while there is some reason to privilege existing institutions, there is also room for thinking about which solutions would be better or worse, and here, ideals of a certain sort play a role.<sup>26</sup> The question that theorists and reformers alike face, however, is not only whether reform is possible, but, if so, why the existent suboptimal convention is operative instead. If our reading of Hume is right, though, even when these questions can be answered, the task of the theorist is not complete, for the final lesson to be drawn from Hume's science of politics is that the perfect commonwealth is not one thing that we can come to know, but rather something that evolves as we (and the facts on the ground) do.

## HUME'S PLACE IN THE METHODOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

With a relatively complete portrait of Hume's political thought now in place, it's worth locating Hume in the picture of the methodological landscape that we drew earlier (see table 2). Several things are worth noting here. First is the diversity of views represented. The methodological space carved out by the

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25. Here we agree with Susato (2015b, 83–84), who argues that Sabl's distinction between the theory of spontaneous order and coordination theory is too stark and that the economic and political realms are not as distinct as Sabl sometimes suggests. While we think that the distinction Sabl draws among ordinary, fundamental, and pseudoconventions is analytically useful, we share Susato's suspicion that in practice it's often hard to distinguish between these (2015b, 84–85). That said, our reading of Hume is considerably closer to Sabl and Whelan than to someone like John Stewart (1992), who rejects the conservative reading of Hume in favor of one on which he's considerably more open to entertaining radical political reform.

26. Although we do not necessarily endorse all of her conclusions, for a reading of Hume's politics and its relevance to debates over international law that is broadly consistent with the approach we've outlined here, see Pavel 2020.



Table 2. Revised Picture of the Methodological Landscape

	John Rawls	Jerry Gaus	G. A. Cohen	Effective Altruist	Hobbes	International Relations Realists	Contemporary Just War Theorist	Michael Walzer	Hume
Independence	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	X	✓	✓
Correspondence	X	✓	X	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓
Practicality	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Plurality	X	✓	✓	X	X	X	✓	✓	✓

four theses we identified is large, but many of the possibilities are well represented. Second is the fact that even this way of presenting things obscures many important differences. For instance, in this view, Hume is superficially indistinguishable from Walzer. But while both may embrace each of the four theses we've identified, they endorse different versions of the theses and for different reasons.<sup>27</sup> A more accurate picture of things would thus reflect the fact that the theses we've identified actually characterize continuous dimensions along which approaches to political theorizing might vary. Even if the picture is less than perfect, though, it illuminates meaningful relationships. Note, for instance, that this picture helps us identify the joint commitment to the practicality and independence theses as the characteristic that arguably does the best job of setting apart realist approaches to politics from more idealist views. Most important, though, we think this picture helps us to see the importance of distinguishing between the various theses. As we noted earlier, it is Hume's commitment to the practicality thesis that helps us make sense of his willingness to endorse only a limited version of the correspondence thesis (and something similar was true of the IR realists albeit for different reasons).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, this last fact also helps explain why debates over realism have been so confusing. As we noted of Bernard Williams earlier, many of the most prominent realists have not always expressed clear commitments along the methodological lines we've identified, and this, we think, is why it

27. For example, while Hume's commitment to each thesis is relatively clear, Walzer 1983 is arguably driven first and foremost by his commitment to the plurality thesis, whereas Walzer 2015 is driven more by a concern for the independence and practicality theses; the relationship between these two aspects of Walzer's work is not entirely clear.

28. We've included Jerry Gaus in the revised picture portrayed in table 2 to further clarify this point. Although Rawls doesn't endorse any of the theses we've identified, Gaus (2011, 2016) arguably develops a version of the Rawlsian project that is committed to both the independence and plurality theses, as well as a weak version of the correspondence thesis. The theses we've identified help clarify how Gaus's project differs from Rawls's. Furthermore, the fact that Gaus doesn't endorse the practicality thesis and doesn't embrace the realist label (despite being a vocal critic of ideal theorizing) lends further support to our conjecture that the practicality thesis plays an important role in characterizing the realist approach.

has proven hard to say what realism amounts to. Ultimately, then, whether the account of Hume's politics that we've sketched here is the right way to read Hume or not, we think that this interpretation is important because it helps us to see why it's a mistake to cast methodological disputes in the dichotomous terms characteristic of so many contemporary debates. If nothing else, this would be a fitting tribute to Hume, who was at once a conservative and a radical.

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