

ESSAY 2 - FIRST IDEA

'Government is Founded on Opinion Only'

The issue we are concerned about is kinds of government and the role of 'the people' - currently referred to often as 'populism' - in relation to the kind of government a country may have.

We will take our first idea for forming the **Web of Ideas** from David Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment thinker, about the basis of governments.

Prelude

David Hume was born in Edinburgh in 1711.

In a varied life and career, Hume wrote many key works of thought which continue to be influential today. These include the *Essay, On the First Principles of Government*, we are reading as the source of the first idea for our purpose here.ⁱ

Hume died in Edinburgh in 1776. This was the year of the American Revolution which was influenced by Hume's ideas and, indeed, illustrates the point Hume is making in this *Essay*.



David Hume © Mike O'Donnell

As we approach reading Hume's *Essay*, we need to make ourselves aware of *how he is thinking* so that we can best avail of his ideas. This will also help us to become better acquainted with *how we think* about such matters.

Hume's style of thinking was to work with the 'experimental principle', as it was called. This 'experimenting' could not be done in a laboratory as hypotheses about such matters cannot be tested by controlled experimentation. The type of matter of interest to Hume, such as the basis of government required doing what are called 'thought experiments'.

In the emerging thinking style of his time, indeed he was an innovator of this style, Hume reduced a situation to its barest essentials and searched for a 'principle' – a 'driver', as we would say today – to set change in motion.

Although less common to us today, this approach to complex matters has stimulated many developments as we know from exemplars of the style, such as Charles Darwin, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx, as well, as Hume himself. We are indebted to such thinker for the tradition of thought in which we operate today.

Boldness, as well as clarity and incisiveness, is a feature of this style of thinking as we will now see.

Orientation

Hume's orients his thinking with a bold assertion based on his observations of life as he knows it and his understanding of the history of peoples:

" ... all human affairs, are entirely governed by opinion."ⁱⁱ

This is Hume's starting point and, from this base, he advanced the maxim that:

'Government *whatever its type* is founded *only* on opinion'.ⁱⁱⁱ

We will take this idea of Hume as our starting point also but immediately acknowledge that this idea may feel implausible, superficial, and startling for us today - we may have a feeling there must be something more to it, it surely can't be just opinion.

If, perhaps, we have found ourselves having this type of reaction we can observe that such a response can alert us to *how we are thinking* and, thereby, increase our self-awareness.

We may also recognise, and even admit (at least to ourselves) that the challenge to our unconsidered presumptions, which underpinned our reaction, refreshes our thinking. It wakes us up. Most useful to us is that it brings greater awareness of *How We Think* to us.

Increasing awareness of *how we think* is the developmental purpose of these [Exercises for Thinking Experiences](#).

The question of the collapse of democracy, important as it is and meriting attention in itself, is only the material for our exploring *how we think*, a means to know ourselves better.

Therefore, returning to Hume, we can ask: How could Hume come to this view about the basis of government of all types?

Hume, expressing surprise, offered the observation about:

“the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; and the implicit submission, with which [people] resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers”

since force, as he put it, is always on the side of the governed.^{iv}

He added to this observation by noting that, in human affairs, the ‘governors’ have nothing to support them but opinion.^v

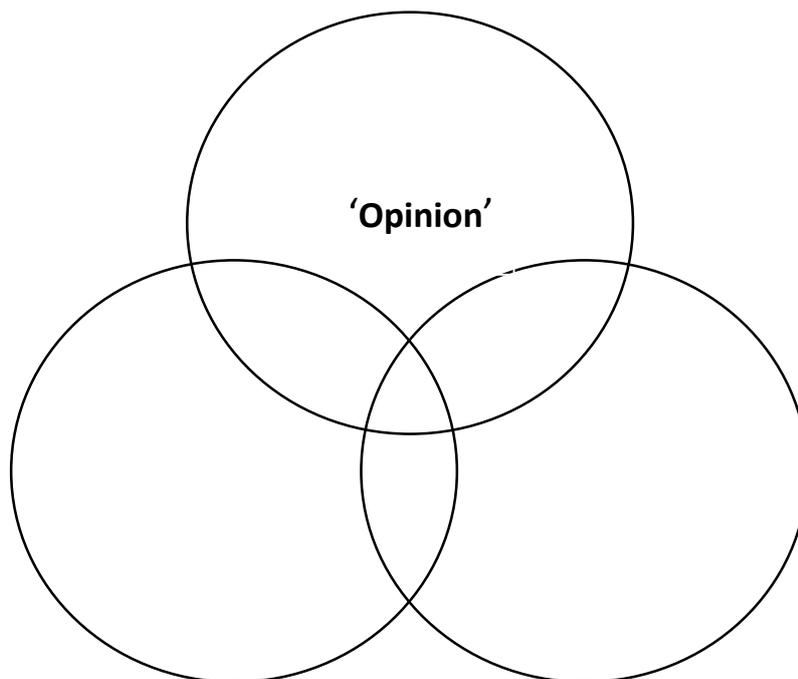
We can see here where Hume’s thinking is coming from. Hume’s grounding for his thinking is in his vigilant observation of the workings of the world around him. He is alert, open and sharp to the facts of his world.

Where does our thinking come from?

We have posed ourselves a problem for these [Exercises for Thinking Experiences](#), namely about the collapse of democracy as we are witnessing it today.

We wish to take forward Hume’s idea about government being founded on opinion for our first idea in a **Web of Ideas** for our tool for thinking about the problem.

Web of Ideas (1)



The purpose of our essay is to bring Hume's idea to attention and it is by way of introduction and exhortation to reading Hume's Essay On the First Principles of Government and thinking *with* him.

Consequently, our essay is just a short account of Hume's thinking in his Essay. Hume's Essay has so much more to it that it is to be read 'slowly' to get all it can give us for thinking.

In reading and re-reading Hume, we can think *with* Hume and by that means we can also *re-reflect* on our own thinking, we can observe *How We Think*.

Working with ideas is not just about reading about them and leaving them on a page. We have to *work with* them. We have to use them as our own tool of thought for some time even if, later on, we move on from them.

Only by spending time with Hume can we bring the 'rhythm of his idea' into our mind.

In this way we make the idea part of the 'apparatus of our mind' - a tool for thinking *with*, to help us make our own judgments and reach our own conclusions about this complex matter - rather than just something we 'look at' and leave there with no benefit for *how we think*.

Concepts for Thinking With

We can deepen our feeling of this idea of government being founded on 'opinion' by exploring dimensions of 'opinion' using the two sets of distinctions made by Hume to develop his idea of opinion as the foundation for government.

Making these distinctions is, in effect, Hume's response in anticipation of the reaction we might have that 'opinion' sounds to be both too fickle and changeable and, therefore, unstable, to be the foundation for types of government. They also counter a sense we might have of his idea being unreliable and inadequate as an explanation and a way of thinking about the basis of government.

Thus, Hume went into some depth about 'opinion' to show that 'opinion' is a more complicated matter than we might casually presume, especially in our times of the ubiquitous and erratic 'opinion polls' about politicians and political parties, and also that the concept has explanatory power.

We can only give a flavour of this thinking in our essay here and the reader of Hume's Essay will soon appreciate the subtlety, nuance, and depth of Hume's thinking despite its brevity. It has, as they say, much food for thought for thinking about our thinking – exactly what we want for our purposes in these [Exercises for Thinking Experiences](#).

Hume, to deepen the conception of 'opinion' as an idea for working with, first classified the 'founding opinions' into two types: '*Opinions of Interest*' and '*Opinions of Right*'.

He then added a further distinction under the second of these initial heads of arrangement, 'Opinions of Right', to give a framework with three opinions on which he says all governments and the authority of the few over the many are founded.

While Hume also recognises other principles, such as self-interest, fear and affection, which may add force to these three opinions and determine or limit their operation, he holds these to be secondary as they can have no influence alone without the three original principles of government.^{vi}

On '**Opinion of Interest**' Hume refers to the view that there is general advantage which is reaped from government as such and combined with the persuasion that a particular government is equally advantageous as any other that could easily be settled.^{vii}

Particular governments are selected by the votes of the electorate, which is how 'the many' exercise their opinion, in democratic states with general elections. The form of government is settled over time through that sequence of particular governments holding power on the basis of 'mandates' claimed on foot of winning the popular vote in some way.^{viii}

This may prompt us, for example, to consider what interests are met by electing 'strongmen governments'?

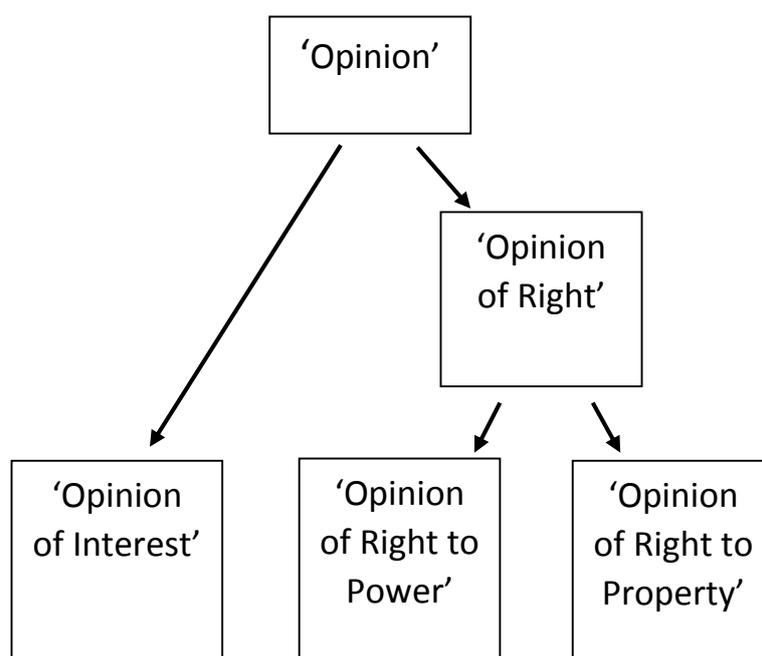
On '**Opinion of Right**', Hume forms two sub-categories - '*Opinion of Right to Power*' and '*Opinion of Right to Property*':

'Opinion of Right to Power', refers to the "attachment all nations have to their ancient government, and even to those names which have the sanction of antiquity".^{ix} Tradition and custom - 'antiquity' as Hume terms it - are inherent in the opinion of right to power and are prevalent in societies;

'Opinion of Right to Property', refers to the demand for security in property, and is of importance to all matters of government and opinion in this regard has a great influence on governments.^x

This is the basic framework of the idea that government rests on opinion of the people which we will use as the initial idea for constructing a **Web of Ideas**.

Hume's Framework of 'Opinion' for Thinking about Types of Government



At this point, we may be prompted to consider whether, in using this idea to think with, we are placing responsibility for the 'crisis of democracy' on all people, rather than on those in government, or whether responsibility lies with both and how it does.

When working with the ideas of a thinker such as Hume, a person thinking in a different time or place than our own, we must allow for changes which may require amending the terms of the ideas as originally used.

Thus, for example, when we are thinking with the *concept of 'property'* which may have had a particular, clear and literal meaning for Hume and for his use in his time, we have to consider how to adjust or expand the

scope of the concept so as to give a useful tool for thinking with in our circumstances.

We must ask: How the 'opinion to right of property' would be manifested today?

We can, to continue with this example, extend the concept of 'property' to encompass the development both of democratic franchises and what would be considered as 'property' for the enfranchised voters of today. Accordingly, we might amend the concept to cover more than physical properties, such as land as it would have been in Hume's time.

We could, for example, include pension funds which would be a significant 'property' holding for many voters today. More generally, we might consider expanding the concept of 'property' to include 'economic security' of people. This is what land meant for some people and was the basis of their enfranchisement in Hume's time.

Economic security is a matter of direct and significant to many people and plays a role, under various guises, and opinion in this regard, as Hume might have put it if he were writing today, has a great influence on governments.

In similar vein, we can ask: how do we see the manifestation of 'opinion of interest' and 'opinion of right to power' (the attachment to past governments, tradition and antiquity) today and expand these concepts for our thinking?

We must also make a different type of allowance when working with the ideas of thinkers from an earlier era. This need is illustrated by the example of changes since the era when Hume was writing – England of the Eighteenth Century – which requires us to consider whether the basis that people easily 'resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers' still holds.

We may rush to dismiss this observation as not 'applying today'. This, therefore, brings us to another opportunity to observe *how we think* - the issue of what we believe we know, but in fact do not, and on further reflection become aware that we were presuming.^{xi}

These changes alert us to a key aspect of how to work with ideas of thinkers like Hume, if we are to use them properly and effectively to help our own thinking. This is the distinction we need to make between a *concept*, which

may need amendment for different times and places, and an *historical observation*, which may no longer be apt for a different time and place.

The latter is to be discarded while the former is to be retained – the former is what we want as a tool for thinking with. We need, in other words, to avoid the temptation, danger, and error of discarding what we need from a thinker like Hume of throwing out, as we say, the ‘baby’ with the ‘bath water’.

Finally, we can see here the place of ‘general ideas’, in the role of ‘general opinions’ relating to the question of the *need for government* to provide for certain goods like economic security and the public good, and ‘particular ideas’, in the role of ‘particular opinions’ relating to the question of the *best type of government* to meet these demands of people.

The distinction between ‘general ideas’, such as government as such, and ‘particular ideas’, such as type of government, is a useful distinction for thinking about complex questions, such as the ‘collapse of democracy’.

Ignoring the distinction between the ‘general’ and the ‘particular’ brings a lack of clarity. The result is that, in practice, many of us will have a complicated but confused bundle of thoughts about – ‘answers’ to – these questions. These thoughts, confused as they may be, govern our behaviour.

From this confusion come assertions such as ‘all government is incompetent or bad’, ‘there is no such thing as good government’, and ‘what we need is a benign dictatorship’ which when challenged for explanation generally disintegrate.^{xii}

Thinking *with* Hume will not only exercise our thinking but also grow How We Think. As we were thinking with Hume, working with his ideas, have the opportunity to observe *how we think* and what we may want to hold on to or let go about *how we think*.

Hence, the concept of ‘opinion’ and the idea that government rests on opinion is what we take from Hume as our first idea for constructing a **Web of Ideas** for thinking about the issue at hand.

Developmental Questions for Conversation and Reflection

1. Do I read with goodwill towards the author?
2. Do I think with the author to enlarge how I think?

3. Do I observe myself jumping to 'conclusions' and opinions?
4. Do I hold my opinions tentatively or dogmatically?
5. Do I dismiss ideas or concepts because they do not resonate immediately with me?
6. Do I make the effort to dig deeper into the layers of an idea to enlarge my categories of thought?
7. Will I observe myself in coming days to see what ideas and concepts I dismiss without consideration?
8. Has my behaviour shaped by my opinions contributed somehow to the 'crisis of democracy'?

ⁱ David Hume, *Of the First Principles of Government*, in *Selected Essays*: 24-28, edited by Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993. This essay can be accessed in the Online Library of Liberty here: https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/hume-essays-moral-political-literary-lf-ed?q=oN+government#Hume_0059_192 and at the Constitution Society here: <https://www.constitution.org/dh/pringovt.htm>

ⁱⁱ In: *Whether the British Government Inclines More to Absolute Monarchy or to a Republic*. Essay VII in *The Philosophical Works of David Hume* (1826), available online.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hume, 1993:24. There are three basic forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. These are the known types of government for over 2,500 thousand years since the Greeks with Plato and Aristotle. Each kind has a corresponding perversion: tyranny, oligarchy, and ochlocracy (mob rule). Each of these structures also has its own 'principle' to set it in motion, as discovered by Montesquieu: honour in a monarchy, fear in a tyranny, virtue in a republic. Hannah Arendt, *The Great Tradition*, in Hannah Arendt, *Thinking Without a Banister - Essays in Understanding 1953 -1975*: 43 – 68, Edited by Jerome Kohn, Schocken Books, New York, 2018.

^{iv} David Hume, 1993: 24

^v This idea would seem to have resonance with Gopnik view of the normal course of the history of government. We should take note however of an implicit assumption which is most relevant in our times, that is the military forces of a country are neutral and do not intervene in unfolding events in the political realm. This, as has been repeatedly demonstrate across the world, is not the case although even the military in forming governments are not immune to Hume's point. Dictators, no matter how brutal, can only dictate because they have many supporters and helpers, as was demonstrated by Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR. Arnold Brecht, *Political Theory: The Foundations of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*: 441, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., (1959) 1967.

^{vi} David Hume, 1993: 25-26.

^{vii} Hume, 1993:25.

^{viii} The United States of America selects the President on a vote of an 'Electoral College' appointed by various state-level mechanisms rather than on the basis of the popular vote.

(Hence Presidents George W. Bush and Donald Trump were 'elected' President although they failed to win the majority of the popular vote.)

^{ix} Hume, 1993:25.

^x Hume, 1993:25.

^{xi} This is known as the 'illusion of explanatory depth' - the illusion that understand something complicated but find when an explanation is required that in fact our understanding is not what we believed it to be – outlined [here](#).

^{xii} See footnote xi.

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