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DAVID HUME'S  
POLITICAL ESSAYS

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# DAVID HUME'S POLITICAL ESSAYS

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### III

## OF THE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF GOVERNMENT

NOTHING APPEARS MORE SURPRISING to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few and the implicit submission with which men resign their own sentiments and passions to those of their rulers. When we inquire by what means this wonder is effected, we shall find that, as force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is, therefore, on opinion only that government is founded, and this maxim extends to the most despotic and most military governments as well as to the most free and most popular. The sultan of Egypt or the emperor of Rome might drive his harmless subjects like brute beasts against their sentiments and inclination. But he must, at least, have led his mamelukes or praetorian bands, like men, by their opinion.

Opinion is of two kinds, to wit, opinion of *interest* and opinion of *right*. By opinion of interest I chiefly understand the sense of general advantage which is reaped from government, together with the persuasion that the particular government which is established is equally advantageous with any other that could easily be settled. When this opinion prevails among the generality of a state or among those who have the force in their hands, it gives great security to any government.

Right is of two kinds: right to *power* and right to *property*. What prevalence opinion of the first kind has over mankind may easily be understood by observing the attachment which all nations have to their ancient government and even to those names which have had the sanction of antiquity. Antiquity always begets the opinion of right; and whatever disadvantageous sentiments we may entertain of mankind, they are always found to

#### IV

### OF THE ORIGIN OF JUSTICE AND PROPERTY<sup>a</sup>

WE NOW PROCEED TO EXAMINE two questions, viz., *concerning the manner in which the rules of justice are established by the artifice of men. . . .*

Of all the animals with which this globe is peopled there is none toward whom nature seems, at first sight, to have exercised more cruelty than toward man, in the numberless wants and necessities with which she has loaded him and in the slender means which she affords to the relieving these necessities. In other creatures these two particulars generally compensate each other. If we consider the lion as a voracious and carnivorous animal, we shall easily discover him to be very necessitous; but if we turn our eye to his make and temper, his agility, his courage, his arms, and his force, we shall find that his advantages hold proportion with his wants. The sheep and ox are deprived of all these advantages, but their appetites are moderate and their food is of easy purchase. In man alone this unnatural conjunction of infirmity and of necessity may be observed in its greatest perfection. Not only the food which is required for his sustenance flies his search and approach, or at least requires his labor to be produced, but he must be possessed of clothes and lodging to defend him against the injuries of the weather; though, to consider him only in himself, he is provided neither with arms nor force nor other natural abilities which are in any degree answerable to so many necessities.

It is by society alone he is able to supply his defects and raise himself up to an equality with his fellow creatures, and even acquire a superiority above them. By society all his infirmities are

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<sup>a</sup> [Treatise of Human Nature, Bk. III, Pt. II, Sec. II.]

human race to subsist, at least in any comfortable or secure state, without the protection of government, this institution must certainly have been intended by that beneficent Being who means the good of all his creatures. And as it has universally, in fact, taken place in all countries and all ages, we may conclude, with still greater certainty, that it was intended by that omniscient Being who can never be deceived by any event or operation. But since he gave rise to it, not by any particular or miraculous interposition, but by his concealed and universal efficacy, a sovereign cannot, properly speaking, be called his vicegerent in any other sense than every power or force, being derived from him, may be said to act by his commission. Whatever actually happens is comprehended in the general plan or intention of Providence; nor has the greatest and most lawful prince any more reason, upon that account, to plead a peculiar sacredness or inviolable authority than an inferior magistrate, or even a usurper, or even a robber and a pirate. The same Divine Superintendent who, for wise purposes, invested a Titus or a Trajan with authority did also, for purposes no doubt equally wise though unknown, bestow power on a Borgia or an Angria. The same causes which gave rise to the sovereign power in every state established likewise every petty jurisdiction in it and every limited authority. A constable, therefore, no less than a king, acts by a divine commission and possesses an indefeasible right.

When we consider how nearly equal all men are in their bodily force, and even in their mental powers and faculties, till cultivated by education, we must necessarily allow that nothing but their own consent could at first associate them together and subject them to any authority. The people, if we trace government to its first origin in the woods and deserts, are the source of all power and jurisdiction, and voluntarily, for the sake of peace and order, abandoned their native liberty and received laws from their equal and companion. The conditions upon which they were willing to submit were either expressed or were so clear and obvious that it might well be esteemed superfluous to express them. If this, then, be meant by the *original contract*, it cannot be denied that all government is, at first, founded on a contract