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# Study and discussion questions on Hume's Essays Moral, Political, and Literary

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**Study and Discussion Questions on**

**David Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary***

(edited by Eugene F. Miller 1987, published by Liberty Fund, Inc.)

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**Questions on Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (selected from Part I)**

**Pages 9-96 (Liberty Fund edition):**

**Part I, XII: "Of Civil Liberty"**

1. Hume admits that Machiavelli "was certainly a great genius." Why then shouldn't we regard the conclusion that Machiavelli drew about politics as true?
2. Under what sorts of government can the arts and sciences flourish, according to Hume?
3. Under what sorts of government can commerce flourish, according to Hume?
4. Under what kind of government is commerce less likely to thrive? Why?
5. What kinds of government seem to have undergone a change for the better in modern times? How so? What secret in politics is known only to the present age?
6. What kind of government seems to have made the greatest advances toward perfection in recent times? How so?
7. Why are monarchical and popular governments becoming more alike?

**Part I, II "Of the Liberty of the Press"**

8. How does liberty of the press affect authority?
9. Is there a necessary connection between forms of government and liberty of the press?
10. Can the press ever exercise too much liberty? If not, then why not? If so, then how should that be remedied?

**Part I, III "That Politics may be reduced to a Science"**

11. Which matter more: forms of government, or the character and conduct of leaders? What did the ancients believe? What is true now? Do circumstances bear on the answer?
12. Do laws exert more power over men, or men over laws? What are the effects of the stronger force on the other?
13. Does politics admit of general truths, maxims, or principles? If yes, then from what are they derivable? If not, then why not?
14. What, according to Hume, should we conclude from the answer to the above (#13)?

15. What is the best way to prevent or remedy bad governance?

**Part I, IV “Of the First Principles of Government”**

16. On what is government founded? How many of these are there? What are they?

**Part I, V “Of the Origin of Government”**

17. Once a man attains power, what kind of conduct does he ordinarily find to be in his interest? What qualities are requisite to attaining and maintaining that power?

18. Why do men continue to obey authority established by other men?

19. What struggle is found within all governments? Can it be resolved?

**Part I, VI “Of the Independency of Parliament”**

20. Why are men partisan?

21. Does Hume agree with Hobbes? Explain.

**Part I, VII “Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic”**

22. What is the answer to the question implied in the title? What is Hume’s view of the tendency of British Government?

**Part I, VIII “Of Parties in General”**

23. What do parties “always infect” in free governments?

24. By what are parties animated? What is the most reasonable source of animation?

25. Which among the sources of animation is new, or modern? Why and how do those sorts of parties become fatal? Is Christianity implicated? In what respects and/or to what extent?

**Part I, IX “Of the Parties of Great Britain”**

26. In what sense are the Court and Country parties “mixed”?

27. What is always fatal to priestly power? Consequently, the established clergy will always be of what party?

28. What are the characteristics and definitions of “Whig” and “Tory”?

### **Part I, X “Of Superstition and Enthusiasm”**

29. What is “superstition” and what is “enthusiasm”?
30. What are their respective political implications and consequences?

### **Part I, XI “Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human Nature”**

31. According to Hume, does the distinction between “good” and “bad” derive from either metaphysical or deductive reason? If so, from which? If not, from what do they derive, or what is their basis?
32. Why do human beings act virtuously?

**Questions on Hume's *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (selected from Part II)**

**Pages 465-529 (Liberty Fund edition):**

**Part II, XII: "Of the Original Contract"**

33. According to Hume, what two principles have always (prior to him) accounted for the existence of government?
34. In what sense may it be said that primitive governments were founded on consent?
35. By what means have almost all modern governments been founded?
36. What is the best and most sacred foundation of government? How often and to what extent has it occurred?
37. What does consent theory assume? Is that ever a sound assumption? Why or why not?
38. What binds us to government?
39. What is an absurd consequence of contract theory?

**Part II, XIII: "Of Passive Obedience"**

40. Which doctrine, passive obedience or resistance, was defended by Tories, and which by Whigs? Does Hume side with either the Tories or the Whigs on this matter? Explain his view and compare it with Locke's.
41. What does a disposition to rebellion amongst a people cause?
42. What peculiarity of the British government makes Hume take the position he does about passive obedience? In other words, according to Hume, should the doctrine of passive obedience prevail under the British system? Why or why not?

**Part II, XIV: "Of the Coalition of Parties"**

43. Are there any political parties that are "dangerous" in a free government, according to Hume? If so, what sort? If not, why not?
44. What is "the only rule of government . . . known and acknowledged among men"? What is the "sole basis" of government?
45. Does the consent of a people, given tacitly over time to a government, confer on them the right to revolution?

46. How does a people's claim to a right to overthrow government affect government? Connect to "Of Passive Obedience," answer to #41 and compare Hume's answers to Locke's answers.

47. What motive for revolution has "the most pernicious consequences"?

### **Part II, XV: "Of the Protestant Succession"**

48. What religion did the Stuart family follow? And what religion, the house of Hanover? Who was at the head of each family in the late seventeenth century?

49. In what manner did James I and James II rule? Why, according to Hume?

50. Who replaced James II? How was that replacement carried out or justified?

51. What were the advantages of that replacement?

52. What were the disadvantages?

53. What happened in Britain after the Protestant succession?

54. What is the main reason the nation opposed the restoration of the leadership of the House of Stuart, according to Hume?

55. Where is Hanover located?

56. If Catholicism were more advantageous to society than Protestantism, then would that be a compelling or sufficient reason to restore the House of Stuart to power, according to Hume?

57. Do the advantages of rule by the House of Stuart far outweigh those of rule by the House of Hanover, or vice versa?

58. What does Hume conclude about the Protestant succession and why?

59. What has been the worst consequence of the dispute over the Protestant succession?

60. Would revolution settle the question once and for all?

61. Is Hume's position on the Protestant succession consistent with the arguments he makes in "Of Passive Obedience"?

## **Part II, XVI: “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”**

62. What kind of government has an “infinite advantage”? Why?
63. Would it be advantageous to know what the most perfect kind of government is? Why or why not? Compare Rousseau.
64. What plans of government are plainly imaginary?
65. How many kinds of representatives does Hume recommend? How many of each kind?
66. What sorts of magistrates does Hume recommend? What are their functions? To whom are they accountable?
67. Of whom is the “council of competitors” made up? What is its function?
68. In the ideal commonwealth, would representatives be paid?
69. Of what must all free governments consist? Why? Compare Rousseau.
70. How should an assembly of 1000 men debate? Why?
71. What arrangements are designed to prevent the senate from abusing its power?
72. What arrangements or provisions are designed to ensure the cooperation of senators, or maintain them as one functioning body?
73. May the 10,000 county representatives resume their power? When or why not?
74. What relation between church and state does Hume recommend?
75. Can a free government do without a militia? Compare Kant.
76. What alterations could perfect the British government’s limited monarchy?
77. What “three great inconveniences” would nonetheless remain?
78. Is it more difficult to form republican government in a small territory or in a large one? Is it more difficult to maintain republican government in a small territory or in a large one? Why, in each case? Compare Federalist #10.
79. According to Hume, will the ideal commonwealth be immortal?