CHAPTER SIX

HUME'S PHILOSOPHY OF CUSTOM

Much of Montaigne's work can be taken as an implicit criticism of the doctrines of the scholastic philosophers who preceded him, but he did not confront them overtly and systematically. Thus, perhaps wrongly, he is usually characterized as an essayist and rarely treated as a philosopher. Hume, on the other hand, drew very self-consciously on the philosophers that preceded him. He wrote to Michael Ramsay that to understand "the metaphysical Parts" of his work his friend would have to read Malebranche, Berkeley, Bayle, and Descartes.\(^1\) He saw himself in the tradition of Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler, who had "begun to put the science of man on a new footing".\(^2\) Hume's imbeddedness in the tradition of early modern philosophy allows us to explore the implications for political thought of a far more elaborate and philosophical skeptical apparatus than in Montaigne's case.

The precise meaning of Hume's philosophical endeavors has been subject to at least as many conflicting interpretations as we have seen in the case of the ancient skeptics in chapters two and three, and of Montaigne's politics in chapter five. The interpretation advanced here will draw on a number of them, although it cannot possibly take them all into consideration. The interpretation advanced here is that Hume can most profitably be read as a consistent, thorough-going skeptic who drew heavily on the ancient traditions but also modernized and liberalized them in a number of respects. For the purposes of understanding his politics, his philosophy is best characterized as a philosophy of custom.

In this chapter, some of Hume's uses of the ideas of the metaphysicians are outlined, noting the elements of skepticism and naturalism that he drew from the philosophers mentioned above.

\(^1\) This letter can be found in Popkin, The High Road to Pyrrhonism, p. 291.

Then the role of custom and habit in his epistemology and philosophical psychology is explored, bringing out possible sources in work on the "science of man" to which Hume sought to contribute. Following that, some of the ways in which his work was consistent and inconsistent with varieties of ancient skepticism are explored. Finally, in order to understand Hume's view of how custom functions in politics, attention is drawn to his theory of general rules as a way of controlling our habits and customs. The next chapter explores two vocabularies for the understanding and evaluation of the role of custom in politics that Hume relied on as a way of explaining how we live with skepticism.

1. Hume and the metaphysicians: skepticism and naturalism

Hume used the terms "habit" and "custom" virtually interchangeably, and he used them to fashion a way of living with skepticism, a substitute for occasionalism (the theory that God acts continually in the world) and blind faith, and the basis for a philosophy of man. Descartes, Malebranche, Bayle, and Berkeley had each raised the spectre of skepticism, and each had given his own answer. Hume was not satisfied with any of those answers, but drew on them in developing his own.

Descartes is famous for raising the extreme possibility that God could be deceiving us concerning our reason or senses, a skeptical argument that the ancient skeptics had not considered. As an answer, Descartes started with reason. In the famous formulation, his reason told him that if "I think, therefore I am". But reason did not tell him everything he needed to know: something was needed to assure him that "those ideas which appear to me to proceed from certain objects that are outside me... [are] similar to these objects", and reason could not do it. But nature can: "I am taught this lesson by nature" (160). And nature, Descartes writes, is nothing other "than either God himself or else the order and disposition which God has established in created things" (192). The ultimate answer

3 In his usage, the terms do not carry the contemporary association of "habit" with the individual and "custom" with the social.

4 Descartes, Meditationes de Prima Philosophia (1641), First meditation. Hereinafter cited in parentheses in the text, with the page number in The Philosophical Works, eds. Haldane and Ross, vol. 1.