Paul Sagar


Paul Sagar’s *The Opinion of Mankind* is an incredibly ambitious book. It seeks to recover David Hume and Adam Smith as first-rate, yet hitherto underappreciated, political theorists, and thence to change the way in which we think about political theory today. Sagar achieves these two goals, making his book one of the most impressive recent books in political theory.

Political theory, or at least the Western canon of modern political thought, is widely considered to have started with Hobbes, the intellectual founder of the modern state or the modern doctrine of sovereignty. Yet Sagar suggests that Hobbes’s importance notwithstanding, we must consider whether a “privileged emphasis on Hobbes is liable to generate mistaken, partial, and distorted appraisals of both the history of political thought and the forms that political theory may take” (p. 7). In the final analysis, he hopes to show that there are good reasons for political theorists to leave Hobbes behind—and turn to the theories of Hume and Smith instead. Sagar’s main point is that for Hume and Smith there is no clear philosophical notion of sovereignty, but rather an ever-changing notion of opinion. Thus, they were not part of an existing subtradition in the history of political thought, but major innovators in their own right.

Before outlining Sagar’s arguments in detail, it is worth presenting his unique methodological approach. Sagar develops Bernard Williams’s distinction between “the history of philosophy” and “the history of ideas”. By opting for the former, Sagar offers us “philosophy before it is history”. He is interested mainly in philosophies, particularly those of Hume and Smith, while not neglecting their contexts. His aim is to investigate *patterns* of arguments rather than explicit and conscious engagements of one thinker with another, which allows him to talk about thinkers who are, or are not, in agreement with one another in a broader sense. This position also allows him to link the questions of eighteenth-century thinkers with our own questions. This is a crucial aspect of the book and I shall return to it later.

Although the book urges us “to get out from under Hobbes’s shadow”, it acknowledges that “we must first spend a considerable amount of time in the shade” (p. 8). Indeed, Sagar’s first chapter, “Sociability”, begins with a discussion of Hobbes’s “natural unsociability”, which is explained by human pride and the consequent seeking of reputation, that is, glory. In order to establish a large and lasting society in the face of the dangerous interaction between pride
and the drive to self-preservation, Hobbes introduced his fear-based concept of sovereignty. Pride is defined as a breach of the law of nature that dictates us to acknowledge each other as equals (even if we are not). For Sagar, pride stands at the centre of Hobbes’s account: it is a central feature of the human psyche, and it generates the central problem of human (un)sociability, which Hobbes’s entire science of politics is meant to solve. While Anthony Ashley Cooper, third Earl of Shaftesbury, totally rejected Hobbes’s view of human nature, Bernard Mandeville presented a similar view to Hobbes, but believed that pride could be re-directed towards harmless forms of competition and that sociability could be acquired over time. For Hume, unlike Hobbes and Mandeville, the cornerstone of human psychology was not pride but sympathy. Sympathy leads humans to have an ardent desire for society, so seeking recognition may become, however surprisingly, socially conducive. It is this difference between Hobbes’s and Hume’s views of human nature that generated their different if not opposing views of politics. These differences are explored further in subsequent chapters.

In the second chapter, “History and the Family”, Sagar investigates the role of history and the account of the pre-political state from Hobbes to Hume. He argues that Hobbes had a historical explanation for how commonwealths were constructed, namely, his idea of sovereignty by acquisition, a process initiated by historical conquests by powerful families. Hobbes’s idea of sovereignty by institution, on the other hand, is an analytic device aimed at illustrating the mechanism of political authority. However, while Hobbes aspired to establish a science of politics based on demonstration, not on history, his eighteenth-century successors were free to use history to draw their own conclusions. In the end, it was Hume who made the decisive intervention. For him, the state of nature is a pure thought experiment, which means that there is no need to explain how justice was invented in this hypothetical state, but only in actual history, as a convention among early tribes, and so before, not after, government. Interestingly, as a result of Sagar’s original account of Hobbes’s theory of the family and history, Hobbes is distanced from the school of contractualism but becomes an ancestor for the conjectural history of the Scottish Enlightenment.

In the third chapter, “The State without Sovereignty”, Sagar draws out the implications of the previous chapters for Hume’s political theory, which, as the title clarifies, is not a theory of sovereignty. Here Hume’s theory is constructed primarily in opposition to Locke’s theistic political thought and particularly against his idea of tacit consent as the basis of political authority. Hume, Sagar shows, took on the challenge of finding an alternative theory of authority. For him, modern authority is based on a complex psychological process—the work of human imagination, influenced by “general rules”—which transcends