

MIKKO TOLONEN

(University of Helsinki and St. Andrews)

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Monarchy and commerce in Hume's History of England

Monday 7 May 2012: 5pm, Beves Room, King's College

The author

Mikko Tolonen is a postdoctoral researcher studying eighteenth-century moral and political thought. He is currently a Leverhulme Visiting Fellow at the University of St Andrews. He is part of the Academy of Finland's Centre of Excellence in Research, *Philosophical Psychology, Morality and Politics*, and was recently appointed as Junior Fellow at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies.

Tolonen defended his doctoral dissertation, 'Self-love and self-liking in the moral and political philosophy of Bernard Mandeville and David Hume', at the University of Helsinki in 2010. The thesis was supervised by Markku Peltonen and John Robertson acted as the external examiner. While preparing his dissertation Tolonen spent a year in Cambridge, advised by Richard Serjeantson.

Tolonen's thesis examined Hume's conception of the conjectural development of civil society and artificial moral institutions. In order to understand it, Tolonen argued, we need to appreciate the intellectual development of Bernard Mandeville. In his later works, Mandeville acknowledged the possibility of natural virtues in contrast to his earlier thesis. The new account was also based on distinguishing between the two passions of 'self-love' and 'self-liking'. Using this distinction, Mandeville explained how it was that justice and politeness emerged as the artifices that hold civil society together. It was this account of social development that crucially shaped Hume's moral and political thinking in his *Treatise*.

Tolonen is currently in the process of finishing a book based on his dissertation, having already published on its themes in *Hume Studies*. He also has an interest in book history, on which he has published with Noel Malcolm (on Hobbes's correspondence) in the *Historical Journal*. Tolonen also has a biographical ambition regarding Bernard Mandeville.

The paper presented to the seminar is part of Tolonen's new project: 'Writing the History of Civil Society in the Scottish Enlightenment'. The project studies how political thought became firmly grounded on the historical understanding of the development of civil society. This particular paper concentrates on Duncan Forbes's reading of Hume.

The paper

This paper argues that there are two main lines of political argument in Hume's *History of England*. The first is a familiar purpose to show that liberty has modern roots. The second is a more complicated argument concerning the historical relationship between monarchy and commerce from the Tudor times onwards. The relevance of this change in *History of England* has not been appreciated in previous scholarship mainly because of Duncan Forbes's influential interest in the Stuart volumes and his decision to leave economics to experts. Hume's aim changes when he turns backwards in time instead of bringing the argument about English/British liberty to its natural conclusion in the Hanoverian Succession in 1714. Hume turns to show that history reveals that a narrow conception of justice and liberty of his *Treatise of human nature* are sufficient to secure rule of law in Britain. Historically this is founded on the extensive role of Henry VII, who through change of manners and luxury initiates the commercial development in England. Hume's point is that the interest of the monarch and common people are historically united in commerce, even when one consequence of economic development is to limit monarch's prerogative.

At the same time, Hume turns to critique the idea that England (or Britain) constitutes a special case in the European context because of public liberty that his Stuart volumes at least partly endorsed. For Hume the historical analysis of monarchy and commerce forms a dual argument emphasising that there is no path to polite society without prosperity in both of them. This is a derivative of Hume's understanding of human nature and the need for monarchy, sovereignty and external restrictions upon men formulated for the first time in the *Treatise of human nature*. Justice and government depend on the real power of the monarch. Without it, civil society cannot cope, as Hume points out already in his essay 'Whether the British government inclines more to absolute monarchy, or to a republic'.

When we read the *History of England* with these two main lines of political argument in mind, we find a consistency in Hume's political thought. This needs to be understood in the context of Bernard Mandeville's natural law thinking and different Court Whig arguments of the 1730s. The arc of Hume's political thought thus extends from the *Treatise of human nature* to the *History of England*, despite Forbes's claims that it does not.