

OF PARTIES IN GENERAL

David Hume

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OF all men, that distinguish themselves by memorable achievements, the first place of honour seems due to LEGISLATORS and founders of states, who transmit a system of laws and institutions to secure the peace, happiness, and liberty of future generations. The influence of useful inventions in the arts and sciences may, perhaps, extend farther than that of wise laws, whose effects are limited both in time and place; but the benefit arising from the former, is not so sensible as that which results from the latter. Speculative sciences do, indeed, improve the mind; but this advantage reaches only to a few persons, who have leisure to apply themselves to them. And as to practical arts, which increase the commodities and enjoyments of life, it is well known, that men's happiness consists not so much in an abundance of these, as in the peace and security with which they possess them; and those blessings can only be derived from good government. Not to mention, that general virtue and good morals in a state, which are so requisite to happiness, can never arise from the most refined precepts of philosophy, or even the severest injunctions of religion; but must proceed entirely from the virtuous education of youth, the effect of wise laws and institutions. I must, therefore, presume to differ from Lord BACON in this particular, and must regard antiquity as somewhat unjust in its distribution of honours, when it made gods of all the inventors of useful arts, such as CERES, BACCHUS, ÆSCULAPIUS; and dignify legislators, such as ROMULUS and THESEUS, only with the appellation of demigods and heroes.[1]

As much as legislators and founders of states ought to be honoured and respected among men, as much ought the founders of sects and factions to be detested and hated; because the influence of faction is directly contrary to that of laws. Factions subvert government, render laws impotent, and beget the fiercest animosities among men of the same nation, who ought to give mutual assistance and protection to each other. And what should render the founders of parties more odious is, the difficulty of extirpating these weeds, when once they have taken root in any state. They naturally propagate themselves for many centuries, and seldom end but by the total dissolution of that government, in which they are sown. They are, besides, plants which grow most plentifully in the richest soil; and though absolute governments be not wholly free from them, it must be confessed, that they rise more easily, and propagate themselves faster in free governments, where they always infect the legislature itself, which alone could be able, by the steady application of rewards and punishments, to eradicate them.

Factions may be divided into PERSONAL and REAL; that is, into factions, founded on personal friendship or animosity among such as compose the contending parties, and into those founded on some real difference of sentiment or interest. The reason of this distinction is obvious; though I must acknowledge, that parties are seldom found pure and unmixed, either of the one kind or the other. It is not often seen, that a government divides into factions, where there is no difference in the views of the constituent members, either real or apparent, trivial or material: And in those factions, which are founded on the most real and most material difference, there is always observed a great deal of personal animosity or affection. But notwithstanding this mixture, a party may be denominated either personal or real, according to that principle which is predominant, and is found to have the greatest influence.

Personal factions arise most easily in small republics. Every domestic quarrel, there, becomes an affair of state. Love, vanity, emulation, any passion, as well as ambition and resentment, begets public division. The NERI and BIANCHI of FLORENCE, the FREGOSI and ADORNI of GENOA, the COLONESI and ORSINI of modern ROME, were parties of this kind.[2]

Men have such a propensity to divide into personal factions, that the smallest appearance of real difference will produce them. What can be imagined more trivial than the difference between one colour of livery and another in horse races? Yet this difference begat two most inveterate factions in the GREEK empire, the PRASINI and VENETI, who never suspended their animosities, till they ruined that unhappy government.[3]

We find in the ROMAN history a remarkable dissension between two tribes, the POLLIA and PAPIRIA,

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which continued for the space of near three hundred years, and discovered itself in their suffrages at every election of magistrates.[4]

This faction was the more remarkable, as it could continue for so long a tract of time; even though it did not spread itself, nor draw any of the other tribes into a share of the quarrel. If mankind had not a strong propensity to such divisions, the indifference of the rest of the community must have suppressed this foolish animosity, that had not any aliment of new benefits and injuries, of general sympathy and antipathy, which never fail to take place, when the whole state is rent into two equal factions.

Nothing is more usual than to see parties, which have begun upon a real difference, continue even after that difference is lost. When men are once enlisted on opposite sides, they contract an affection to the persons with whom they are united, and an animosity against their antagonists: And these passions they often transmit to their posterity. The real difference between GUELF and GHIBBELLINE was long lost in ITALY, before these factions were extinguished. The GUELFs adhered to the pope, the GHIBBELLINES to the emperor; yet the family of SFORZA, who were in alliance with the emperor, though they were GUELFs, being expelled MILAN by the king[5] of FRANCE, assisted by JACOMO TRIVULZIO and the GHIBBELLINES, the pope concurred with the latter, and they formed leagues with the pope against the emperor.[6]

The civil wars which arose some few years ago in MOROCCO, between the blacks and whites, merely on account of their complexion, are founded on a pleasant difference.[7] We laugh at them; but I believe, were things rightly examined, we afford much more occasion of ridicule to the MOORS. For, what are all the wars of religion, which have prevailed in this polite and knowing part of the world? They are certainly more absurd than the MOORISH civil wars. The difference of complexion is a sensible and a real difference: But the controversy about an article of faith, which is utterly absurd and unintelligible, is not a difference in sentiment, but in a few phrases and expressions, which one party accepts of, without understanding them; and the other refuses in the same manner.

Real factions may be divided into those from interest, from principle, and from affection. Of all factions, the first are the most reasonable, and the most excusable. Where two orders of men, such as the nobles and people, have a distinct authority in a government, not very accurately balanced and modelled, they naturally follow a distinct interest; nor can we reasonably expect a different conduct, considering that degree of selfishness implanted in human nature. It requires great skill in a legislator to prevent such parties; and many philosophers are of opinion, that this secret, like the grand elixir, or perpetual motion, may amuse men in theory, but can never possibly be reduced to practice.[8] In despotic governments, indeed, factions often do not appear; but they are not the less real; or rather, they are more real and more pernicious, upon that very account. The distinct orders of men, nobles and people, soldiers and merchants, have all a distinct interest; but the more powerful oppresses the weaker with impunity, and without resistance; which begets a seeming tranquillity in such governments.

There has been an attempt in ENGLAND to divide the landed and trading part of the nation; but without success. The interests of these two bodies are not really distinct, and never will be so, till our public debts increase to such a degree, as to become altogether oppressive and intolerable.

Parties from principle, especially abstract speculative principle, are known only to modern times, and are, perhaps, the most extraordinary and unaccountable phenomenon, that has yet appeared in human affairs. Where different principles beget a contrariety of conduct, which is the case with all different political principles, the matter may be more easily explained. A man, who esteems the true right of government to lie in one man, or one family, cannot easily agree with his fellow-citizen, who thinks that another man or family is possessed of this right. Each naturally wishes that right may take place, according to his own notions of it. But where the difference of principle is attended with no contrariety of action, but every one may follow his own way, without interfering with his neighbour, as happens in all religious controversies; what madness, what fury can beget such unhappy and such fatal divisions?

Two men travelling on the highway, the one east, the other west, can easily pass each other, if the way be broad enough: But two men, reasoning upon opposite principles of religion, cannot so easily pass, without shocking; though one should think, that the way were also, in that case, sufficiently broad, and that each might proceed, without interruption, in his own course. But such is the nature of the human mind, that it always lays hold on every mind that approaches it; and as it is wonderfully fortified by an unanimity of sentiments, so is it shocked and disturbed by any contrariety. Hence the eagerness, which most people discover in a dispute; and

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hence their impatience of opposition, even in the most speculative and indifferent opinions.

This principle, however frivolous it may appear, seems to have been the origin of all religious wars and divisions. But as this principle is universal in human nature, its effects would not have been confined to one age, and to one sect of religion, did it not there concur with other more accidental causes, which raise it to such a height, as to produce the greatest misery and devastation. Most religions of the ancient world arose in the unknown ages of government, when men were as yet barbarous and uninstructed, and the prince, as well as peasant, was disposed to receive, with implicit faith, every pious tale or fiction, which was offered him. The magistrate embraced the religion of the people, and entering cordially into the care of sacred matters, naturally acquired an authority in them, and united the ecclesiastical with the civil power. But the Christian religion arising, while principles directly opposite to it were firmly established in the polite part of the world, who despised the nation that first broached this novelty; no wonder, that, in such circumstances, it was but little countenanced by the civil magistrate, and that the priesthood was allowed to engross all the authority in the new sect. So bad a use did they make of this power, even in those early times, that the primitive persecutions may, perhaps, in part,[9] be ascribed to the violence instilled by them into their followers. And the same principles of priestly government continuing, after Christianity became the established religion, they have engendered a spirit of persecution, which has ever since been the poison of human society, and the source of the most inveterate factions in every government. Such divisions, therefore, on the part >

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factions of principle; but, on the part of the priests, who are the prime movers, they are really factions of interest.

There is another cause (beside the authority of the priests, and the separation of the ecclesiastical and civil powers) which has contributed to render CHRISTENDOM the scene of religious wars and divisions. Religions, that arise in ages totally ignorant and barbarous, consist mostly of traditional tales and fictions, which may be different in every sect, without being contrary to each other; and even when they are contrary, every one adheres to the tradition of his own sect, without much reasoning or disputation. But as philosophy was widely spread over the world, at the time when Christianity arose, the teachers of the new sect were obliged to form a system of speculative opinions; to divide, with some accuracy, their articles of faith; and to explain, comment, confute, and defend with all the subtilty of argument and science. Hence naturally arose keenness in dispute, when the Christian religion came to be split into new divisions and heresies: And this keenness assisted the priests in their policy, of begetting a mutual hatred and antipathy among their deluded followers. Sects of philosophy, in the ancient world, were more zealous than parties of religion; but in modern times, parties of religion are more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition.

I have mentioned parties from affection as a kind of real parties, beside those from interest and principle. By parties from affection, I understand those which are founded on the different attachments of men towards particular families and persons, whom they desire to rule over them. These factions are often very violent; though, I must own, it may seem unaccountable, that men should attach themselves so strongly to persons, with whom they are no wise acquainted, whom perhaps they never saw, and from whom they never received, nor can ever hope for any favour. Yet this we often find to be the case, and even with men, who, on other occasions, discover no great generosity of spirit, nor are found to be easily transported by friendship beyond their own interest. We are apt to think the relation between us and our sovereign very close and intimate. The splendour of majesty and power bestows an importance on the fortunes even of a single person. And when a man's good-nature does not give him this imaginary interest, his ill-nature will, from spite and opposition to persons whose sentiments are different from his own.

1. [See Francis Bacon (1561–1626), *Advancement of Learning*, bk. 1. This work was published in 1605. Ceres, Bacchus, and Aesculapius were, respectively, Roman deities of crops, of wine, and of healing. Romulus, the legendary co-founder of Rome, and Theseus, legendary hero and king of Athens, were supposedly offsprings of gods.]

2. [The Neri ("Blacks") and Bianchi ("Whites") were opposing factions within the Guelf party of Florence, centering around the families of the Donati and the Cerchi. These names came into use in 1301, when the Cerchi intervened on behalf of the "Whites" in the town of Pistoia and the Donati came to the aid of the Pistoiese

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"Blacks." The Fregosi and Adorni were among the families who contended for the office of Doge in the republic of Genoa, beginning around 1370. In the modern Roman republic, beginning in the early thirteenth century, the nobility split into a Guelf party, headed by the Orsini, and a Ghibelline party, under the Colonna.]

3. [In the circus at Rome and the hippodrome at Constantinople, the professional charioteers (*factio*) were distinguished by colors, with green (*prasini*) and blue (*veneti*) being the most important. These contests were followed with special fervor in Constantinople and other cities in the Byzantine (or Greek) Empire, where the populace came to be divided into two factions, the "Blues" and the "Greens," which frequently engaged in bloody and destructive conflicts. These factional disputes are described by Hume's contemporary, Montesquieu, in *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* (1734), chap. 20, and by Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), chap. 40.]

4. As this fact has not been much observed by antiquaries or politicians, I shall deliver it in the words of the ROMAN historian. *Populus TUSCULANUS cum conjugibus ac liberis ROMAM venit: Ea multitudo, veste mutata, & specie reorum tribus circuit, genibus se omnium advolvens. Plus itaque misericordia ad poenæ veniam impetrandam, quam causa ad crimen purgandum valuit. Tribus omnes præter POLLIAM, antiquarunt legem. POLLIÆ sententia fuit, puberes verberatos necari, liberos conjugesque sub corona lege belli venire: Memoriamque ejus iræ TUSCULANIS in poenæ tam atrocis auctores mansisse ad patris ætatem constat; nec quemquam fere ex POLLIA tribu candidatum PAPIRAM ferre solitam, T. LIVII, lib. 8.* [Livy, *History of Rome* 8.37: "The citizens of Tusculum, with their wives and children, came to Rome; and the great throng, putting on the sordid raiment of defendants, went about amongst the tribes and clasped the knees of the citizens in supplication. And it so happened that pity was more effective in gaining them remission of their punishment than were their arguments in clearing away the charges. All the tribes rejected the proposal, save only the Pollian, which voted that the grown men should be scourged and put to death, and their wives and children sold at auction under the laws of war. It seems that the resentment engendered in the Tusculans by so cruel a proposal lasted down to our fathers' time, and that a candidate of the Pollian tribe almost never got the vote of the Papirian."]

(Loeb translation by B. O. Foster). The Tusculans, upon gaining Roman citizenship, were enrolled in the Papirian tribe, whose vote they were able to control.] The CASTELANI and NICOLLOTI are two mobbish factions in VENICE, who frequently box together, and then lay aside their quarrels presently.

5. LEWIS XII. [Louis, who reigned from 1498 to 1515, invaded Italy in 1499 to assert his claim to the duchy of Milan.]

6. [Italian cities during the Renaissance were divided between parties aligned with the Holy Roman Emperor (the Ghibellines) and parties loyal to the Pope (the Guelfs). Hume refers here to events of 1499–1500. Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan, had formed an alliance with Emperor Maximilian I to stop the French invasion. The French forces were led by Gian Giacomo Trivulzio, who had once been Ludovico's own commander. Ludovico lost the city, retook it, and finally lost it again. He was taken as a prisoner to France, where he died in 1508. Pope Alexander VI, who had been an ally of the House of Sforza, formed an alliance with Louis XII in 1498.]

7. [This reference is probably to the civil war in Morocco that followed the death of Mulay Isma'il in 1727. Hume may have read John Braithwaite's eyewitness account of this conflict and its racial aspects in *The History of the Revolutions in the Empire of Morocco upon the Death of the Late Emperor Muley Ishmael* (1729).]

8. [The grand elixir is a universal medicine that supposedly can cure all disease. Theories of perpetual motion envision a machine that, being once set in motion, will go on forever.]

9. I say, in part; For it is a vulgar error to imagine, that the ancients were as great friends to toleration as the ENGLISH or DUTCH are at present. The laws against external superstition, amongst the ROMANS, were as ancient as the time of the twelve tables [The Twelve Tables (451–450 B.C.) codified Roman law]; and the JEWS as well as CHRISTIANS were sometimes punished by them; though, in general, these laws were not rigorously executed. Immediately after the conquest of GAUL, they forbid all but the natives to be initiated into the religion of the DRUIDS; and this was a kind of persecution. In about a century after this conquest, the emperor, CLAUDIUS [ruled A.D. 41–54], quite abolished that superstition by penal laws; which would have been a very grievous persecution, if the imitation of the ROMAN manners had not, before-hand, weaned the GAULS from their ancient prejudices. SÜETONIUS in vita CLAUDII. PLINY ascribes the abolition of the Druidical superstitions to TIBERIUS, probably because that emperor had taken some steps towards restraining them (lib. xxx. cap. i.) [Pliny, the Elder (A.D. 23–79), *Natural History*, 30.4 in the Loeb edition. The emperor Tiberius ruled

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A.D. 14–37. The religious practices of the Druids included human sacrifice]. This is an instance of the usual caution and moderation of the ROMANS in such cases; and very different from their violent and sanguinary method of treating the Christians. Hence we may entertain a suspicion, that those furious persecutions of Christianity were in some measure owing to the imprudent zeal and bigotry of the first propagators of that sect; and Ecclesiastical history affords us many reasons to confirm this suspicion.