



Hume's Pride or Our Prejudice? A New Take on Hume's Love of Fame

Nathan Porter
University of Utah

Abstract

This paper examines David Hume's desire for fame in his eighteenth-century context. It argues that in his day, a desire for fame was not at all reproachable, because it was to be won by doing something great for the world. In Hume's case, this seems to have been the act of liberating humankind from religious tyranny. The paper further argues that our instinctive distaste for Hume's unabashed longing for fame is likely an unintended byproduct of the democratic societies we inhabit, and suggests that we ought to rethink the idea of fame within our own context.

Introduction

Of all of the thinkers of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, none has been more influential or garnered more infamy than David Hume. Born in Scotland in 1711, he began work on his magnum opus, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, while he was still in his early twenties, publishing it with little initial success in 1739.¹ He tried his hand at essay writing, which proved a more publically fruitful endeavor than his more heavy-handed philosophizing. But the work that was most acclaimed in his day was his six-volume *History of England*, which turned out to be quite a popular success among his contemporaries.

History has its way of turning the tables, however, and today Hume is primarily known for the works in which he presented radically skeptical views about religion, the world, and even rationality itself. Known as an atheist even in his own time, his criticisms of traditional Christianity have had an enduring impact on subsequent philosophy and theology. To take just one example, he mounted an attack on the possibility of knowing whether a miracle ever occurred or could occur, using an argument that has proven quite convincing, even in our own day.² He was skeptical about whether we can really know if there is an external world

1. In his own words, it "fell deadborn from the press" ("My Own Life," xxiv).
2. The argument runs like this: a miracle is an exception to the usual course of nature. But it will *always* be more likely that the usual course of nature will happen than that the exception will occur. For instance, it is always more likely that someone will stay dead rather than come back to life. Thus, the evidence in favor of a miracle will always be much smaller than the evidence against it. For this reason, we should never accept the truth of a miraculous claim. For Hume's own statement of the problem, see his *Enquiries*, 86, and for a critique, see e.g. Craig, "The Problem of Miracles," 9-40.

or other minds, and he seems to have been the first philosopher to recognize the structure of what has come to be known as the problem of induction.³ In the process, he believed he had repudiated the viability of reason itself. If the title of skeptic can be applied to anyone, then, it seems that David Hume was eminently deserving of it.

Hume and his largest philosophical work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, are anomalous on many counts. Both were without precedent in their relentless and thoroughgoing skepticism. It is even now difficult to find anything in the philosophical literature that compares to the ruthlessness with which Hume attempts to dismantle what common sense declares to be true. But Hume is also unique in his quite-obvious but prima facie-unbecoming desire for fame. As will be shown, one of the underlying motivations of his literary and philosophical career was what can only be described as an insatiable craving for literary recognition and popular approval.⁴ As he states quite bluntly in his autobiography, his overriding goal, his “ruling passion,” was “literary fame.”⁵

Various commentators⁶ have remarked that Hume’s desire for fame proved detrimental to the philosophical value of his writings and was rather vain besides. Yet something in the candidness with which he proclaims his desire for distinction makes one question the accuracy of these valuations. If Hume’s desire for fame was really as self-serving as it at first glance appears, why did he make it so obvious? And if this desire truly detracted from the philosophical worth of his work (or if this detraction was at all significant), why have his writings exerted what is widely recognized as an unparalleled shaping influence on modern philosophy?

I argue here that it is mistaken to think that Hume’s desire for fame was unacceptable on either ethical or philosophical grounds. If we read Hume against an eighteenth-century backdrop, it becomes clear that, in his day, fame and a desire for it were usually seen as entirely commendable. The reason for this is that fame was to be won by doing something great and beneficial for the public. Furthermore, Hume can plausibly be read as operating within just such a framework, with his goal being the skeptical undermining of religious authority for the purpose of liberating the public from religious tyranny. Hence, at least in eighteenth-century England, his desire for fame would not necessarily have been

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3. Very briefly, the problem of induction is the apparent circularity that arises when we try to justify the principles on which inductive reasoning is grounded. We can’t justify them by reference to something that is true *necessarily* (i.e., something that could not possibly be false) because an inductive conclusion is always a *contingently* true one (that is, it *could* be false). The sun may have risen every day in the past, but it is nonetheless possible that it could fail to rise tomorrow. But if we try to justify induction by reference to something that is contingently true, then it seems that we will be running in a vicious circle, for things that are only contingently true must be argued for via induction (or so it is alleged). For a fascinating nineteenth-century attempt at a solution, see John Stuart Mill, *A System of Logic*, 157-208.
 4. There are plenty of other factors that make Hume and his work special; for instance, his masterful command of the English language and his artful style is on the whole without much competition from philosophers. C.f. Box, *The Suasive Art of David Hume*, and Morris and Brown, “David Hume”.
 5. “My Own Life,” in Hume, *Essays*, xl.
 6. Such as those mentioned in Millar, “A Treatise vs. an Enquiry,” 1017-8.

seen as reprehensible. I further argue that in our own day, Hume's longing for distinction is far from blameworthy, and the criticisms of the abovementioned commentators are therefore unwarranted.⁷ Lastly, I suggest a tentative diagnosis of the intuitive repugnance to the modern nose of a desire for distinction.

As a methodological preface, I must note that I will be primarily focused on Hume's *Treatise* for two reasons. First, his written corpus is quite large, and so the selection of sources must be somewhat narrowed for a paper of the present size. Second, Hume hoped the *Treatise* would be the work that established him in the public sphere with the fame he sought. It is therefore an obvious target for analyzing the means by which Hume (at least in his early career) believed he would garner public reputation.

I

From the start, Hume's project was centered on shaking off the yoke of authority. It all began with his first published work, *Treatise of Human Nature*. Consider the following passage from his famous 1734 letter to George Cheyne, written at about the time that the *Treatise* was beginning to germinate in his mind:

Upon Examination of these [the "endless Disputations" of philosophers], I found a certain Boldness of Temper, growing in me, which was not enclin'd to submit to any Authority in these Subjects, but led me to seek out some new Medium, by which Truth might be establisht. After much Study, & Reflection on this, at last, when I was about 18 Years of Age, there seem'd to be open'd up to me a new Scene of Thought, which transported me beyond Measure, & made me, with an Ardor natural to young men, throw up every other Pleasure or Business to apply entirely to it.⁸

It was at this time that he began the studies that would lead to the composition of the *Treatise*.⁹ In the same letter, he reveals that two years after his epiphany, he recognized what would become part of the foundation for his *Treatise*—namely, that the only sure foundation on which to build our knowledge is an understanding of human nature.¹⁰ The best way to arrive at this, he thought, was to "throw off all Prejudices either for his own Opinions or for this of others."¹¹

In the 1740 anonymously published abstract of the *Treatise*, he says that

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7. I will not have space to address the question of whether his desire for fame produced philosophical defects in his work. But given the monumental influence he has exerted on subsequent philosophers precisely through these "defective" works, it can hardly be argued that such flaws (if they exist) are enough to justify the pointed criticism Hume's philosophical persona has received on these grounds. And besides this, one could also argue that if fame was to be won by doing something good, then this could easily have motivated Hume to argue well.
 8. David Hume to George Cheyne, 1734, in Greig, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, 13.
 9. Indeed, the project had already been conceived years before during his college studies, if we are to accept his later account in the advertisement to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. See Hume, *Enquiries*, 2.
 10. *Ibid.*, 16. In the introduction to the *Treatise*, he applies this idea to every branch of study from mathematics to religion (Hume, *Treatise*, xiii-xvi), though at the time he wrote the letter, he saw this revamping of knowledge as relevant mainly to "Criticism and Morality" (Hume to Cheyne, 16).
 11. *Ibid.*

the project of revamping the sciences on the basis of a new understanding of human nature will help “shake off the yoke of authority.”¹² In his later autobiographical essay, “My Own Life,” he writes of his composition of the History of England that “I thought that I was the only historian, that had at once neglected present power, interest, and authority, and the cry of popular prejudice.”¹³

Hume was especially concerned with religious authority. In the conclusion to the first book of the *Treatise*, Hume portrays himself as experiencing what Robert Fogelin has called a “skeptical crisis.”¹⁴ After undermining the rationality of our beliefs in everything from cause and effect to personal identity to the existence of the external world, he tops off his skepticism by arguing that we cannot even be sure that we are reasoning correctly about anything. In his conclusion, then, he finds himself in a state of mental anguish, and asks a series of questions designed to bring out the specifically religious implications of his skepticism:

The intense view of these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason has so wrought upon me, and heated my brain, that I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another. Where am I, or what? From what causes do I derive my existence, and to what condition shall I return? Whose favour shall I court, and whose anger must I dread?¹⁵

Although these questions might appear to us as harmlessly philosophical queries, they would have been unmistakably religious to the eighteenth-century reader. The questions of from where we come and to where we shall return are criticisms of traditional Christian creation theology,¹⁶ while the questions of whose favor should be sought and whose anger avoided attack a generally Christian and particularly Calvinistic view of the God-human relationship. Think, for instance, of the famous “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” sermon of Jonathan Edwards (who was a contemporary of Hume’s, and an ardent Calvinist). God was the one whose favour was to be sought and whose anger was to be avoided.¹⁷ Hume concludes by saying that, although religious errors are dangerous, those of philosophy are not, and we ought to take up skepticism toward religion wholeheartedly.¹⁸

Hume’s opposition to religious authority appears in many of his other works. In his 1757 *Four Dissertations*, for instance, he writes that “Doubt, uncertainty, and suspense of judgment appear the only result of our most accurate scrutiny concerning [various religious views],” and that once we recognize this,

12. *Treatise*, 644.

13. In David Hume, *Essays*, xxxvii.

14. R.J. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study*, 125-158.

15. *Treatise*, 268-9.

16. The wording of Hume’s question is probably intended to evoke a famous biblical passage: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Genesis 3:19 King James Version, the standard version of Hume’s day).

17. *Treatise*, 268-9.

18. *Ibid*, 270-4.

we ought to “happily make our escape into the calm, though obscure, regions of philosophy.”¹⁹ In one particularly blunt moment, he wrote in 1740 to his friend Henry Home that “the Clergy” are “always Enemies to Innovations in Philosophy.”²⁰ Hume even said on his deathbed (at least according to one witness) that he had not yet completed “the great work” of bringing Scotland out from under “the Christian superstition.”²¹

Religion was certainly a primary target of Hume’s, but he seems to have aimed his sights at philosophical authorities as well. But it seems we can (albeit somewhat imprecisely) lump the latter in with the former, since most of the philosophers of Hume’s day were defenders of Christianity against skeptics.²² Furthermore, much of his philosophical skepticism was aimed at key underpinnings of Christian apologetics. For example, the notion of cause and effect (critiqued in the *Treatise*²³) was seen as central to a teleological argument for God’s existence. In addition, the reliability of eyewitnesses and the possibility of knowing that a miracle occurred (a notion attacked in Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*²⁴) were considered critical for a defense of Jesus’ resurrection. Thus, Beattie spends a sizable part of his *Essay* criticizing Hume’s analysis of cause and effect.²⁵ Campbell’s *Dissertation* took Hume to task in regard to eyewitness testimony and the knowledge of miracles.²⁶ It is therefore clear that, at the time, an attack on philosophical authority was also an attack on religious authority.

From beginning to end, then, Hume was bent on opposing all authority, especially that of religion.²⁷ However, his self-confessed overriding goal, his “ruling

19. 116-7.

20. In Greig, vol. 1, 13.

21. Jones, *Hume’s Sentiments*, 2, quoted in MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 282; c.f. 209-259.

22. Contrary to the usual assumption that the Enlightenment was a revolt against religion and its philosophers were skeptics on the whole, J. M. Suderman has convincingly argued that the Enlightenment was not primarily a war of reason on religion, but an adoption of critical tools. Those who used these tools as a weapon against religion (e.g., Voltaire, Diderot, and Hume himself, who held a high opinion of the French) were anomalies at the time (*Orthodoxy and Enlightenment*, 254-9). Hume’s most prominent opponents were religious philosophers, particularly those of the Aberdeen circle (e.g., George Campbell, *A Dissertation of Miracles*, 1762; Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764; James Beattie’s *Essay Sophistry and Scepticism*, 1770), and many of them were quite popular indeed. Beattie, for instance, received recognition from the king for his *Essay*, along with a generous royal pension (Fieser, *Early Responses to Reid, Oswald, Beattie and Stewart*, x-xi). Some of them – Campbell, for instance (Suderman, 3) – were also very popular preachers. The point is that the prevailing attitude was not one of skepticism, but of critical evaluation and interpretation that was generally in support of religion. Most of the philosophers of Hume’s day, then, would have defended Christianity, and their philosophical work would have supported this project.

23. 74ff.

24. Section X.

25. See R.J. Robinson’s introduction to the *Essay*, vii-viii.

26. Suderman, *Orthodoxy and Enlightenment*, 29.

27. This might seem an obvious conclusion, especially given Hume’s contemporary reputation as a religious skeptic. But my suggestion is not merely that Hume opposed religion. My claim is the stronger proposal that one of the overarching motivations of Hume’s entire philosophical and literary career was the skeptical undermining of religious authority.

passion,” was literary fame, as he states unequivocally in his autobiography.²⁸ He expressed the same sentiment in multiple letters.²⁹ He also seems to have done nearly all in his power to secure this fame; for instance, he surreptitiously prevented William Strahan, his publisher, from contracting his opponents, such as Adam Ferguson³⁰ and James Beattie.³¹ His desire for the *Treatise* to make him famous was so strong that he had a mental crisis when he was about twenty-three years old, the cause of which he described as follows:

Here lay my greatest Calamity. I had no Hopes of delivering my Opinions with such Elegance & Neatness, as to draw to me that Attention of the World, & I wou'd rather live & dye in Obscurity than produce them maim'd and imperfect.³²

Closely related to Hume's desire for fame was his longing for the public's praise of the *Treatise*: “the approbation of the public I consider as the greatest reward of my labours.”³³ He regretted that he could not “make an appeal to the people, who in all matters of common reason and eloquence are found so infallible a tribunal.”³⁴ He wanted the people to be able to understand his work³⁵ (though he recognized early on that they probably wouldn't).³⁶ This can presumably be traced back to Hume's desire for praise, since, as will be argued below, he believed that the content of the *Treatise*, if understood and absorbed, would provide a great and laudable service to the public. In turn, Hume's desire for praise can probably be linked to his desire for distinction, bolstering the case that he was driven by his love of fame.

II

In order to understand Hume's goals properly, we need to read them against an eighteenth-century backdrop. At the time, literary fame and the

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28. “Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, notwithstanding my frequent disappointments” (“My Own Life,” in Hume, *Essays*, xl).
29. Hume to the Abbé Le Blanc, 1754, in Greig, v. 1, 197; Hume to William Strahan, 1755, in *ibid*, 222; Hume to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, 1758, in *ibid*, 278.
30. Millar, “A Treatise vs. an Enquiry: Omissions and Distortions by the New Humeans,” 1021.
31. Strahan wrote to Hume that he had never published any of his opponents, “in particular Dr. Beattie's book” (in Greig, *The Letters of David Hume*, vol. 2, 360), the author of which was regarded by Hume as a “bigoted, silly fellow” (Hume to Strahan, 1775, in Greig, vol. 2, 301). His low opinion of Beattie may be due to the harsh tone in which Beattie wrote his *Essay* (noted by R.J. Johnson in his introduction to the 1996 edition, vi), but it was probably also, and perhaps even more, due to the immense fame garnered by Beattie for the work (see n. 18 above). He also, in my opinion, was by far Hume's stylistic superior, something Hume would not have been much pleased with (see Hume to William Mure of Caldwell, 1744, in Greig, v. 1, 24; Hume to Pierre Desmaizeaux, 1739, in *ibid*, 29). In short, the Hume-Beattie controversy further reveals the depth of Hume's desire for fame. Ironically, Beattie is almost entirely unknown today, while Hume still receives serious attention from philosophers.
32. Hume to Cheyne, 17.
33. *Treatise*, xii, c.f. 643.
34. *Ibid*, 644.
35. *Ibid*, 454.
36. Hume to Henry Home, in Greig, vol. 1, 27; Hume to Henry Home, 1739, in *ibid*, 30; Hume to Francis Hutcheson, 1739, in *ibid*, 34; Hume to Francis Hutcheson, 1740, in *ibid*, 39.

desire for it were generally seen as commendable.³⁷ This makes sense, because authors were often associated with doing something great for humanity, such as memorializing heroes of the past,³⁸ being a “benefactor for mankind,”³⁹ bringing great pleasure to readers,⁴⁰ producing works that benefit the whole nation,⁴¹ and producing quality literature on the level of the common people.⁴² Literary fame could also be spoken of as incompatible with sophistically earning money at the expense of the people,⁴³ reinforcing the general principle that such fame must be achieved by benefiting the public.

Literary fame was often seen in close connection with “public approbation,”⁴⁴ earned by accomplishing something significant for society. For example, the phrase was used to applaud the delegates of the Continental Congress in 1776.⁴⁵ As Hume himself put it, “The characters which engage our approbation are chiefly such as contribute to the peace and security of human society.”⁴⁶ This implies that the instinctive association between approbation and fame was correct.

It might have been thought that Hume’s desire for distinction was a desire for skeptical infamy. But the above analysis of the eighteenth-century British view of fame renders such an idea entirely implausible. One had to do something good and commendable to earn such fame. Hence, a desire for infamy is a highly unlikely interpretation of Hume’s yearning for literary distinction.

From all of this, it follows that if Hume desired literary fame, and if fame involved doing something great for the public, then it seems that Hume ought to have had some such deed in mind. This is where his project of undermining authority comes in. He believed that challenging authority, especially by introducing new ideas, was necessary for a peaceful society, because it prevents

37. See, e.g., James Boswell, *An Account of Corsica*, xi; Hill, *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, vol. 1, 14; *The Monthly Review* 56 (1777), 206ff.; “Article IX,” *The Gentleman’s and London Magazine* 63 (1788): 287; Edward Gibbon, *Autobiography*, 76, 111, 140; “Essay on Literary Fame,” *Edinburgh Magazine* (1797): 83-7; “The Observer: No. III,” *The Scots Magazine and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany*, 72 (1810): 272-5; “Biographical Sketches,” *The Weaver’s Magazine* 11, no. 12 (1819): 241-272. Especially relevant to the present subject is an article published *The Critical Review* on Hume’s “My Own Life.” The author considers Hume’s desire for “honest fame, and an unblemished reputation” to be laudable (43 (1777): 222-227, quoted in Fieser, *Early Responses to Hume’s Life And Reputation*, 266). A few exceptions are Richardson, “On Literary Fame and Literary Pursuits,” in *Literary Leaves*, 1-16, and “Foreign Literature in Italy,” *The Monthly Review* 75 (1786): 376. But these seem unrepresentative of the usual perspective.

38. “The Observer: No. III,” 273; “Essay on Literary Fame,” 83, 87.

39. “The Observer: No. III,” 273, 275.

40. Boswell, *An Account of Corsica*, xi; c.f. Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary*, 284.

41. “Biographical Sketches,” 241-272.

42. “The Observer: No. III,” 273. C.f. Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary*, 282-5.

43. “Article IX,” 287.

44. Spence, *Crito*, 286; Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 1, 408; Richardson, “On Literary Fame and Literary Pursuits,” 2, 6-7.

45. “. . . this public approbation of our conduct” is “the greatest reward a subject can receive, or a people bestow.” *The Remembrancer*, 350.

46. *Enquiries*, 102.

the violence that can result when one view becomes established as the view. In the *History of England*, Hume writes:

As healthful bodies are ruined by too nice a regimen, and are thereby rendered incapable of bearing the unavoidable incidents of human life; a people, who never were allowed to imagine, that their principles could be contested, fly out into the most outrageous violence, when any event... produces a faction among their clergy, and gives rise to any difference in tenet or opinion.⁴⁷

Why should such violence ensue from a belief being contradicted? According to Hume, orthodox opinions (in the sense of officially enforced orthodoxy) are never entirely believed by those who hold them.⁴⁸ When their adherents “are shaken in their imagined faith, by the opposite persuasion, or even doubts of other men,” they:

easily embrace any pretence for representing opponents as impious and profane; and if they can also find a colour for connecting this violence with the interests of civil government, they can no longer be restrained from giving uncontrolled scope to vengeance and resentment.⁴⁹

Hume thought that such beliefs are held universally, because they are never contradicted, and because no one even thinks to do so:

The universal and uncontradicted prevalence of one opinion in religious subjects, can be owing at first to the stupid ignorance alone and barbarism of the people, who never indulge themselves in any speculation or enquiry; and there is no expedient for maintaining that uniformity, so fondly sought after, but by banishing for ever all curiosity and all improvement in science and cultivation.⁵⁰

We can see clearly, then, that Hume believed that exciting people’s curiosity by presenting new views is necessary for a non-tyrannical and peaceful society.⁵¹ Thus, it is probably safe to say that the means by which he believed he would achieve something great for the public (thus earning himself literary fame) was by fighting against the religious establishment of his day.

III

Given all of this, there seems to be little reason to condemn Hume’s passion for renown. It seems intuitively true that a desire for praise and reputation as a result of doing something beneficial and commendable is not blameworthy. Even if one would not want to go so far as to commend it, it seems ethically groundless—at least in many or most cases—to denigrate it. For when Hume is

47. *The History of England*, vol. 3, 432; c.f. 433. Here, Hume is describing the arguments of one political party in contrast with another, less forgiving one. However he seems to agree with the arguments, because he paints them in the best possible light, while doing the reverse for the opposing party.

48. *Ibid*, 431-2; c.f. Hume, *Four Dissertations*, 83.

49. *The History of England*, vol. 3, 431-2.

50. *Ibid*.

51. For a similar view, see Mill, *On Liberty*, 31-98.

read in his proper context, it is not at all obvious that his desire for fame is the vain and self-serving thing that it initially seems. If it is a good thing to be free of tyranny, religious or otherwise, then it would seem that a goal of liberating people from tyranny is probably a good one. And it seems that in both our day and to an extent in Hume's, freedom from tyranny and domination is and was generally considered a good thing. And to desire to earn a good reputation by way of bringing about such a good state of affairs seems at least morally permissible and plausibly commendable. Hence, to desire to earn a good reputation by way of bringing people out from the bondage of oppressive authority (i.e., for Hume to want what he wanted) is morally permissible and plausibly commendable.

Even if we cannot adopt Hume's view of fame wholesale, I believe that it should at the very least provide us with an impetus to rethink how we view and pursue fame. I want to suggest that our difficulty praising a passion for fame is, perhaps, an unintended effect of modern democracy's suppression of the desire for distinction. In the largely undemocratic societies of the past, great achievement often resulted in an increase of rank, which then entailed an increase in power. In the ancient world, we can recall the biblical stories of Saul and David, each of whom (according to the biblical narratives) was granted the throne of Israel by means of great military victories that rescued their nation. Josephus, a Jewish soldier during the revolt against Rome in the 60s C.E., gained favor with, and access to, the Roman royal family by successfully predicting Vespasian's ascent to imperial power in Rome. In the Middle Ages, the distinction of knighthood was often awarded for acts of valor.

History is replete with such cases. The main point is that, in the past, power was given to those who achieved great things, and it was almost felt to be their "right" to attain it, given what they had accomplished. To put it another way, fame was believed necessarily to entail an increase in power. Furthermore, those who were already in power—kings, councils, faculties, and so on—usually bestowed this increase. But as a whole, this conflicts deeply with Enlightenment democratic ideals. Distinction, according to standard democratic theory, does not give you an automatic claim to power, and any power that is granted is bestowed by the people, not usually by those who are already "in power." So, given that fame has historically been associated with and followed by something that is in serious tension with some of the most basic elements of our political and social worldview, it is perhaps understandable that we find it difficult to praise a desire for fame.

I might also add that the "all men are created equal" ideal seems to have the propensity to make distinction undesirable. As Nietzsche argued extensively,⁵² the belief that everyone is equal has the psychological, though perhaps not the logical, consequence of suppressing those who wish to do more, to be more, to achieve more than others, resulting in "the degeneration and diminution of man into the perfect herd animal."⁵³ Certainly it can be argued that there is no logical

52. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, among other places.

53. *Beyond Good and Evil*, 253.

tension between seeing everyone as “created equal”—if you take this phrase in a certain sense—and striving for greatness. But I suggest that in practice, this is precisely the feeling that takes hold of those who are gripped with a simplistic understanding of democratic ideas—as most people are. The majority of people, it could easily be argued, do not have a very deep understanding of democratic theory, and it would be quite easy to infer from many democratic catch phrases (such as the already-mentioned “all men are created equal”) consequences that are not at all part of the intended ideological package. So, I think it is not at all unreasonable to suppose that a lack of enthusiasm for fame is the result of popular misunderstandings of basic democratic ideals.

Consequently, I suggest, we need to reimagine fame and distinction within the context of human equality. Or perhaps we need to rethink human equality itself, accounting more seriously and more explicitly for the goodness of fame and distinction. This is obviously an extremely complicated issue, especially when we consider that opportunity for achievement is often limited by the belief—conscious or otherwise—that certain persons are, in Orwell’s words, “less equal” than others.⁵⁴ But it seems to me that this is a conversation that ought to be had. I am in agreement with Nietzsche that democracy, as it stands today, is in tension with the possibility of human greatness. But unlike Nietzsche, and in accordance with Hume, I do not believe that it is necessarily so. If we are to maintain democracy without sacrificing the possibility of greatness for the individual, then we must begin to explore ways of reconciling them, and my hope is that this paper can provide historical stimulation for doing so.

54. George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 192.

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