The Concept of System in David Hume’s The History of England

This article employs a method of conceptual analysis set out in Peter de Bolla’s The Architecture of Concepts (Fordham, 2013) to examine David Hume’s possession and use of the concept system in The History of England (1754 - 1761, hereafter the History).\(^1\) After a brief explanation of the structured account of concepts that I will be adapting from de Bolla, I will survey uses of the word ‘system’ throughout the History, assessing these in the context of the flourishing stadial and philosophical histories of the latter eighteenth century. Whilst I begin by close-reading Hume’s uses of this most suggestive term for eighteenth-century historiography, I wish to move beyond hermeneutics to undertake systematic assessment of the conceptual structures implied by the words that Hume uses. I wish ultimately to show how, despite apparent lexical and semantic concurrences, across Hume’s text two discrete ‘system’ concepts are operating: system and system of liberty. I seek to illustrate how the different structuration of these concepts should attenuate our understanding of connections between the concepts liberty and government in Hume’s late thought.

Given the copiousness of the word ‘system’ throughout Hume’s corpus it is not surprising that there is no paucity of commentary on his use of the word. David Pears examines its importance to Hume’s theory of mind in his 1990 monograph Hume’s System. Nicholas Phillipson, both in his 1989 study Hume and his David Hume: Philosopher as Historian, and more recently in a series of international lectures and podcasts, has accounted for the importance of ‘system’ to Hume’s analyses of the anatomies of political parties in his essays of the 1740s. Some have made beginning moves toward discussing the concept as a process of mental representation rather than as a semantic object, such as Donald Livingston, in a chapter entitled ‘Hume’s Historical Conception of Liberty’, and Spencer Wertz in a

\(^1\) Italics will be used to denote where I am referring to a concept rather than a word or proposition.
chapter called ‘The Status of the System’, in his 2000 book *Between Hume’s Philosophy and History*. David Landy has offered an impressive account of Hume’s own theory of the nature of concepts (discussed at some length in part two of this article), arguing for Kant’s partial uptake of this theory, in a 2007 article for the *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*. Each of these studies describe Hume’s own theory of concepts and rightly identify the importance of the word ‘system’ to Hume’s historical thinking. Nonetheless, none of these commentators have described the concept of *system* qua concepts: as an epistemic architecture rather than as semantic or linguistic object.

The present work distinguishes itself from these treatments by charting the conceptual structures that lead to Hume’s understanding. *System* is for Hume not only something that he observes in the painful contractions of nascent English civil society in the *History*: it is a means by which he understands those contractions. This is a crucial distinction: *system* is a concept: a structured way of knowing and understanding, and not merely a lexical object signifying the arrangements of parts within a superordinate assemblage. For this reason, a systematic account of the concept *system*— how it shapes cognition and intellection, its internal structure, and how the concept is suspended in a network of other concepts with and without historiographical currency in the period— might allow beginning moves toward apprehending the ways of knowing that enabled Hume to account for England’s development from feudal to commercial stages as he writes at the turn into the 1760s. While his words represent and indeed offer a crucial means of understanding Hume’s thinking, disaggregating concepts from words, (a difficult but valuable uncoupling), allows us better to describe the ways in which Hume renders historical progress intelligible. This contention is a guiding principle in this work.
I. A structured account of concepts

Peter de Bolla’s *The Architecture of Concepts* is a key contribution to a recent upturn in conceptual study undertaken across disciplines as diverse as philosophy, cognitive science, English literature, computational linguistics and the social and hard sciences. [D]e Bolla’s study explores the formation of the concept of *human rights* in the eighteenth century. It addresses the ontological question of whether concepts are mental representations or abstracta: pragmatic, concretely-felt, subjective ways of thinking, or intangible forms. [D]e Bolla’s response to the question is novel: he posits that, while concepts are unshareable, unique processes of intellection that each thinking subject employs constantly, they are also epistemic structures shared within communities of varying size: culturally and historically defined phenomena whose operation can be charted by examining artefacts and texts from relevant periods and contexts. Coining the term the ‘common unshareable’, de Bolla suggests that while concepts operate internally and subjectively, communication between individuals is only rendered intelligible by concepts held in common. These can be public acts and modes of communication: legal texts, journalism, essay writing, conversations, novels, periodicals and songs (to mention a severely limited set of repositories), across populations. These common, shared conceptualities, along with the processes of intellection possessed by each thinking subject, constitute a concept’s architecture. [D]e Bolla proposes that one can examine the internal structure of concepts, and that this attention can in turn reveal relations between concepts in history. This conceptual turn offer us an alternative to a twenty-first century humanities milieu which operates virtually exclusively at the level of discourse or critique. This current work is distinct from de Bolla’s in that it examines a single thinking
subject’s (Hume’s) possession of a concept. It is not a study of the structuration of the concept system more widely in Hume’s thought. Nor is it a study of how the concept operates in Anglophone culture commonly in Hume’s age. Both projects would require not only more space than is allotted here, but a much wider methodological remit, and I hope to begin this consequent work in a subsequent paper.

In *The Architecture of Concepts* de Bolla uses the following scheme to chart the internal structure of concepts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptual Kind</th>
<th>reificational</th>
<th>ideational</th>
<th>noetic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Function</td>
<td>nominal</td>
<td>containing</td>
<td>load bearing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Structure</td>
<td>rigid</td>
<td>plastic</td>
<td>adaptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Modality</td>
<td>isogetic</td>
<td>schematic</td>
<td>axiomatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Phase</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>dual</td>
<td>continuous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1.*

For reasons of space, I will be using a truncated version of the above scheme, referring primarily to the following:

- ‘containing’ and ‘load-bearing’ conceptual *functions*
- ‘reificational’ and ‘ideational’ conceptual *kinds*
- ‘plastic and ‘adaptive’ conceptual *structure*

All three conceptual *modalities*

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I will move through these preliminary explanations of what these modes of attention mean in some haste, with the hope that the actual applications of these categories of attention in part three of this article will offer a clearer, hands-on demonstration of the efficacy of the scheme.

**Conceptual Function**

*Containing*[^3]

Does the concept function as a repository for other concepts? For example the concept ‘media’ contains related (subordinate or co-dependent) concepts such as *film, television*, *radio* or *tumblr*. The categorisation presses us to ask whether we can say that the concept ‘media’ contains not only the concept of writing (fairly uncontroversial) but also ‘thinking’. If this appears incorrect, might we want to say that the concept of ‘mediation’ contains thinking and not ‘media’? In this case we are beginning to notice something about how changes in architecture set in train different cognitive potentialities (i.e the concept of ‘mediation’ opens up thought in ways that ‘media’ cannot).

*Load-bearing*

Does the concept function in a load bearing capacity? This is to ask, is the possession or use of one concept a necessary precondition for the possession and use of another? For example, *Distance* is unintelligible without the prior concept of *space*. Therefore the concept of ‘space’

[^3]: Note that ‘containing’ as described here and in de Bolla’s structured account departs from ‘containment’ and ‘inference’ functions of concepts as described by Margolis et al in *Concepts: Core Readings* ed. by Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence (Massachussets: MIT Press, 1999). Crucially, Margolis et al describe containment in terms of necessity: concept X is a structured complex of specific other concepts which must, if concept X is to be possessed / operated, be present. [D]e Bolla’s account stresses the *structural characteristic* of containment, not the necessary presence of certain concepts. Margolis and Laurence’s description of the ‘containment’ and ‘inference’ functions are (albeit nuanced) extensions of the classical theory of concepts, from which de Bolla notably departs.
is load bearing with respect to the concept ‘distance’. The purpose here is not to identify the intelligibility of the word ‘distance’ even if this analysis does imply that indeed we would not know what distance means if we had no notion of space. The intelligibility I wish to examine is the operation of the concept – that is how it provides a map or set of moves in a process of cognition. The claim is, then, that the concept of ‘distance’ sits on the platform of another concept – here ‘space’ – and it is this platform that provides the structure for thinking with the concept of ‘distance’. Another example: is grammar load-bearing for language?

**Conceptual Kind**

*Reificational / Ideational*

How is the concept door different in kind to the concept size? ‘[I]deational’ concepts allow one to think the quality of something- to grasp an abstraction. For example, size is not a thing in the world in the way that door is. Nevertheless, although one cannot point to size in the way that one can point to a door, it is relatively simple to point to an object and make an intelligible statement about its size, using the concept size. Ideational concepts often move between different domains without much friction, allowing us to make sense of such propositions as ‘modernity is a big idea’ and ‘the boat is large’. Reificational concepts bring phenomena to mind: to some extent embody that which is being tokened in the mind, temporarily at least.

Reificational concepts operate in a single phase of cognition. On encountering a creature that flies, has two wings, feathers and a beak, the concept bird operates by assigning a mental token to the creature: a reifying mental representation which should correctly correspond to the creature in the world. Once in possession of this single (perhaps very
simple or rudimentary) building block of cognition, the thinking subject is able to render
certain things intelligible, such as differences between birds and bats, characteristic features
of birds and how this one example coincides / differs from these. This process is quite
different to that put in motion by an ideational concept, which would not be used to make
sense of something tangible, and which would undertake two phases of cognition (e.g first
identifying whether size is appropriate and then modifying cognition to assess what modality
of size is suitable for the experience).

**Conceptual Structure**

*Plastic*

Can the concept by operated in more than one domain? For example, the concept *pattern*
renders a wide range of phenomena intelligible: ‘The patterns of imagery in *The Waste Land*’,
‘This fabric has a fine pattern’, ‘these patterns of human behaviour are encouraging’ and ‘his
argument follows a familiar pattern.’ In other words, the same concept can be operated in a
number of seemingly disparate domains without the loss of its architecture. Appreciation of
conceptual plasticity might allow us to observe some sense or reason in ostensible
disparateness.

*Adaptive*

This structural category introduces the element of time. Does concept X adapt over time?
The distinction between a *plastic* structure and an *adaptive* one is that a concept that is plastic
is so from its first instantiation. A concept whose structure is adaptive might be both plastic
and adaptive, the adaptive tag is intended to mark where a concept’s structure changes over
time. Here we are looking once again at a conceptual architecture and not a meaning, although as per above since words and concepts are ineradicably linked an adaptation in a conceptual architecture will necessarily result in an adaptation of the meaning of the word.

I wish to conclude this section with reference to passages from de Bolla’s Architecture of Concepts which I hope will begin to demonstrate the kinds of claims that might be made with the above scheme. In Architecture [D]e Bolla’s argument is that two conceptual structures are operating under the lexical sign ‘rights’:

‘right(s)’ and ‘rights of man’

There is, argues de Bolla, a conceptual bifurcation that has been obscured by the similarity of the language in the two cases. The former concept, argues de Bolla, is extensive with classical ‘natural law’ traditions. It functions with both a containing and load-bearing conceptual architecture. Of this concept [D]e Bolla writes: “rights’ is conceived in terms of a jumble of specifiable items’.

When for example it was claimed that natural law upheld the distinct rights of property and personal safety, the concept “rights” functioned as a container for the many distinctive rights that could be claimed’.

[D]e Bolla elaborates:

the functionality of the concept “right(s)” is twofold. On the one hand the concept functions as load-bearing, allowing one to understand how innate, perfect rights (to

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5 Ibid, p.64.
life or liberty) are fundamental and effectively fixed in number even if a set of subsidiary rights may be built upon them. On the other hand, it functions as containing, allowing one to understand how imperfect acquired rights have the capacity to increase their number.

Thus, ‘rights’ is a concept that acts as a repository for other concepts such as onus and proprietorship. Crucially, what is important in this case is not what is contained, but the fact that concept functions as a container. But in this thesis rights is not only a repository for other concepts: it names a set of inflections and limitations of power in the real world: it both enumerates and reifies the actual. ‘To say “I declare my rights” is conceptually incoherent if the primary architectural element of the concept of right was not what I call the deposit [that is, containing]… persons may have close attachments, even express those attachments as rights claims, rights that one claims as one’s own, one’s own to declare.’ PAGE 98.

This containing architecture is fundamentally different to what de Bolla calls the emergent, ‘ideational’ latter-eighteenth-century concept rights of man, by which conceptuality which he writes that the eighteenth-century thinker ‘understood rights as indivisible and uncountable.’ Using computation to search through the journals of the First Continental Congress that met between September 5 to October 26, 1774 at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, de Bolla demonstrates how “rights of man” is ‘operating an axiomatic modality…. [rights of man] were now now universal.’ While one might find the phrase ‘rights of man’ enunciable, this is by no means equivalent to a conceptual enumeration of other concepts relating to lived, actual, concrete relations, objects or structures in the world. Despite its plural form '[R]ights of man’ is a non-enumerative, single ideational concept, impossible to actualise in inflections of power and concrete relations in the manner
of rights. This is to say that while one might assert the ‘rights of man’, this by no means guarantees that the concept’s architecture functions as a container, or as a platform upon which other concepts can be articulated, or that the concept implied by the phrase names anything in the world. It is precisely this realisation that adds force to de Bolla’s ‘different concepts’ thesis, and which strenuously emphasises the opaque relationship between conceptuality and linguistic expression.

Finally, it is important to note that [D]e Bolla reaches all of these conclusions using an earlier version of the computational search methods I describe and use in section three.

II. ‘System’, ‘System of government’ and ‘System of liberty’

Hume's uses of the word 'system' in the History can be divided into three broad categories according to uses of the single word and its most common collocations: ‘system’, ‘system of government’ and ‘system of liberty’. 'System' appears four times in Volume 1, ‘system of government’ once and ‘system of liberty’ not at all. In volume two 'system’ appears five times, 'system of government' once and 'system of liberty' twice. Across the first two volumes (written and published last, in 1761, as the History was published in reverse chronological order) the single word ‘system’ is most often employed in what may appear to be a surprising domain: most often describing the ‘superstition’, ‘idolatry’ and ritualistic ‘tradition’ of early Romano-British communities as the activities of various disparate pre-Christian groups and
sects underwent a series of regularising interventions, by various parties, between 55 BC and
the Christianising challenges to paganism between the fifth and eighth century AD.6 Thus, as
Hume charts the fashioning and refashioning of the demographic, monarchic and inchoate
political landscapes of the sub-Roman British Isles in Volumes 1 and 2, 'system' is most often
employed in descriptions of the nullification or amelioration of non-Christian deistic
practices. The use of the word in describing the regularisation of pagan extravagance in pre-
literary communities by superordinate powers continues through Hume’s accounts of Viking
raids and the Norman conquests. In these passages, Hume anticipates a trend in post-
Enlightenment Scottish historiography in which superstition, vagueness and inconcision are
depicted as follies from which the precise historical thinking of the later eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries is allowing us to awake.7 I am thinking here of the early nineteenth-
century Benthamites, and in particular James Mill, who in his History of British India
vituperates against inconcise and vague writing in jurisprudence, religious, scientific and
lexicographical texts, as an indicator of cultural and intellectual regression. Whereas
contemporaries of Hume such as Adam Ferguson and William Robertson looked to early
communities for an unpolished vigour that might ameliorate the deleterious, stifling effects of
the ‘commercial stage’ of the eighteenth century, the utilitarian historians railed against the
valorisation of primitive past expression.8

6 I have chosen to use the Liberty Fund edition of the History because it is most amenable to the processes of
computation that are crucial to this research, especially in section three. This is to say that this work would have
been drastically slowed had I been relying on text-grab technology to upload other editions of the History’s six
volumes. While I acknowledge that Hume’s first edition of the Stuart Volume (1754) was substantially revised
before the 1778 edition from which the Liberty Fund edition is composed, My enquiries into uses of ‘system’,
‘system of’, ‘system of liberty’ in the earlier editions do not yield results sufficiently different to warrant the
alteration of my thesis. Furthermore, the Liberty Fund edition is an invaluable resource in that it has proved
easily formatted and ‘cleaned up’ for methods of computational analysis. See also footnote 19.

7 These passages anticipate Hume’s exhortations toward ‘accuracy’ in theories of mind, art and

Even as Hume describes the diffuse tenets of the pagan Saxons; ‘idolaters’ whose ‘inchantments’, polytheism and sun-and-moon worship mean that their obsolescence appears inevitable, the extremities of early ‘savage’ or ‘barbaric’ worship do not disbar the arrangement of those extremities within a ‘system’. The Saxons operate ‘[...] a system of doctrines, which they held as sacred, but which like all other superstitions, must bear the air of the wildest extravagance, if propounded to those who are not familiarized to it from their earliest infancy.’\(^9\) Crucially, for Hume, the word ‘system’ is ethically neutral. That which has, through time, passed into an ordered assemblage of beliefs, actions and rituals (irrespective of their perceived lack of validity or substance), is made systematic purely through repetition and habituation. They are the parts of a system by virtue of their having become posterior and patterned. While ‘system’ often appears to carry with it the weight of a methodological certainty or an appurtenant clarifying modernity, Hume understands these values as having been ascribed to system only by lived experience and habitual use. In this respect the word is extensive with Hume’s wider emphases on the importance of habituation and custom in his theories of mind and epistemology in \textit{A Treatise of Human Nature} (1739).\(^10\) Following a Ciceronian conceptual tradition, Hume’s ‘first principle’ of human perception states that experiences that are signified or understood using cognitive objects, such as concepts, are not constituted by those objects. Despite being the means by which one meaningfully can know anything about experiences, concepts are not a necessary precondition or constituent of experience. Phenomena, sense perceptions and impressions of phenomena, must have occurred prior to concept formation. The intelligibility of experiences by the possession of

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concepts occurs by virtue of perceptive events being anterior, and in this schema the human agent conceptualises after experience. One’s experience of the colour green, for example, must have happened—must be past—before one can possess the concept green. Thus posterity, repeated experience and convention are the necessary platforms for A Humean account of conceptualisation.

In the *Treatise of Human Nature* we can feel the importance of chronology or sequence to his theory of mind, ideas, impressions and concepts. Of what Hume calls the singular mental entities (ideas and impressions), ideas operate by forming exact copies (to use Hume’s word) of impressions. Ideas come into being by resembling impressions identically. Once formed, ideas are one’s only means of understanding concepts, which are patterns or networks of other singular mental entities. Whilst ideas are singular entities, they allow us to access non-singular, abstract concepts when one comes into contact with a word or experience which has, through convention and habituation, accrued a wealth of associations to other singular mental entities. In other words, the individual building blocks of cognition are systematised. Hume posits conceptualisation as a rudimentary form of systematic post-hoc rationalisation. In this regard, the process has something fundamental, macrocosmic, in common with historical understanding and expression. Of course, there is a clear difference in terms of agency: the conceptual is not formed consciously; the historical is most often formed by conscious acts of interpretation and linguistic expression. Despite this, in both, one’s experience or knowledge of phenomena in time and space is fashioned and refashioned in mediatory processes. Knowledge accretes in both cases by virtue of a posterior account of phenomena.

11 Clearly this is a different observation to that of Hume’s concept system. But, as I wish to discuss later, there are numerous suggestive concurrences between Hume’s theory of mind and his operation of the concept system.
From volume three onward, and in the majority of the *History's* 90 uses of the word ‘system’, the semantic field that yokes ‘system’ and ‘superstition’ (and related words and near synonyms) declines, and there is a bifurcation between two superordinate collocations in the remainder of the *History*: ‘system of government’ and ‘system of liberty’. Despite often occurring in close proximity on the page, and despite the fact that Hume clearly sees one as occurring as a consequence to the other, the two phrases are clearly doing two different types of work in the *History*. In the *History’s* earliest stages the word ‘system’ most commonly appears in a proximity of five words to ‘superstition’ and ‘extravagance’, and by volume 3 ‘system’ often collocates with the language of attack and fortification: ‘defence against’, ‘invasion’, ‘subdued’, ‘secure’, ‘inroads’, ‘ravish’, ‘revolt’, ‘conquests’ and ‘establish’. This vocabulary characterises Hume’s accounts of how the northern European ‘nations’ (the anachronism is Hume’s) hold out the Roman Empire, and of Henry II’s response to the agitations of the barons and vassals of Europe in 1154: ‘the turbulent spirit and independent situation of the barons or great vassals in each state gave so much occupation to the sovereign, that he was obliged to confine his attention chiefly to his own system of government, and was more indifferent about what passed among his neighbours.’

The phrase ‘system of government’ appears in its early instantiation to represent a non-interventionist, insular organisational principle: ‘After the northern nations subdued the provinces of the Roman empire, they were obliged to establish a system of government, which might secure their conquests, as well against the revolt of their numerous subjects, who remained in the provinces, as from the inroads of other tribes […]’

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the historical agent’s purview and political power more widely are all within the semantic
field of the word ‘system’ in mid-to-late eighteenth-century historiography.

Evolving out of these contexts of martial depredation and fortification is the
meaning of ‘system of government’ that is most characteristic of uses throughout the *History.*
Describing William the Conqueror’s defence of England against invading forces, he begins to
define the phrase: ‘The better to unite the parts of the government, and to bind them into one
system, which might serve both for defence against foreigners, and for the support of
domestic tranquility, William reduced the ecclesiastical revenues under the same feudal law,
and tho’ he had courted the church on his first invasion and accession, he now subjected it to
services, which the clergy regarded as a grievous slavery, and as totally unbefitting their
profession.’ Hume understands the king’s disenfranchisement of the church by fiscal
adjustment in terms of a network of competing claims on authority. It clearly means for
Hume a single assemblage whose somatic efficacy is defined by the disposition of its discrete
parts. Most often in the *History* ‘system of government’ explains or describes how a King
negotiates relations between gentry or aristocracy, the military or military groups,
ecclesiastical influence, jurisprudential wrangles and, very often some way after all of the
above, the mood across the general populace of the country. These are the ‘parts’ that
constitute the ‘system of government’, and whether absolute or constitutional monarchy,
protectorate or nascent civil state, the effective contrivance of ‘system of government’
amounts, in Hume’s account, to the realisation, apportionment or privation of political
influence, finance or a mixture of these. Describing a desperate Charles II’s suing to the
French king to ascertain whether the French ‘system of government’ (to which Charles felt
particularly amenable) could be imposed in England, it becomes apparent that the numerous

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tangible parts of the assemblage can undermine, block or make untenable a less concrete idea of ‘liberty’:

…there could be no security for civil liberty: [...] in France every circumstance had long been adjusted to that system of government, and tended to establishment and support: That the commonality, being poor and dispirited, were of no account; the nobility, engaged by the prospect or possession of numerous offices, civil and military, were entirely attached to the court: the ecclesiastics, retained by like motives, added the sanction of religion to the principles of civil policy: that in England a great part of the landed property belonged to the yeomanry or middling gentry; the King had few offices to bestow, and could not himself even subsist, much less maintain an army, except by the voluntary supplies of his parliament.¹⁵

The grammar of the passage enacts the disposition of the many within the whole: its subordination of clauses makes legible the diffuseness being brought under the purview of a French polity. The ecclesiastics and nobility, engaged alike in proprietorial relationship to ‘numerous offices, civil and military’ work in concert to buttress the martial with the sacred; civil and church consubstantial parts of a system which contains and unites property, moral ballast and civic responsibility. By contrast the English equivalent is a dysfunctional system of government, with its lands already apportioned thus unavailable for purchase or offer by the king. Furthermore, that king’s influence over the army is undermined by his penurious relationship to the executive. Overlaying these disunited constituencies is the unlikelihood of

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the army doing Charles’s bidding given how little appetite there is for Catholicism in England (an antipathy judged by Hume to be more pronounced in Scotland).

In the French case the tangible enables the intangible; in the English, such a dynamic is, at this stage of history, impossible: ‘civil liberty’ comes into being only after the correct disposition of parts in the French system, and fails to materialise in the case of England. All through the History ‘system of government’ carries this enumerative imperative. Volume five, written a considerable time before volumes one and two, offers another example. Hume describes the failure of James I’s understanding of how to implement his ‘system of government’. Alighting on the crucial moment of the 1604 crisis, Hume identifies the King’s essential misapprehension: James fails to grasp that ‘system of government’ is precisely that which lies outwith the abstract: it is a countable series of inflections of actual, lived, pragmatic power, not an ill-defined (or indeed undefinable) series of assumptions about divine right, as Hume understands the King’s thinking. Hume takes the example of James’s botched militarism as symptomatic of a reign which is marred by a confusion between the implementable and the intangible. ‘Liberty’ evanesces in this confusion: the fulcrum of any political agent’s effectiveness is their purchase on a specific type of pragmatism.

‘System of government’ in Hume’s History both reflects and subverts the cultural logic of ‘system’ thinking in Anglophone historiography of the mid-to-late eighteenth century. Roger Acherley’s The Britannic Constitution, originally published in 1727 and then republished in 1759, is typical of the age in eschewing the ethically neutral definition of ‘system’ common in the History’s earlier volumes. For Acherley, discussing Agricola, a ‘system of government’ works ‘either for protecting the Virtuous and Peacable or Restraining
the Vicious and Disorderly, Parts of the people’. Acherley’s use of the word has a characteristic melding of the pragmatic and the ethical. And across the 93 uses of the word ‘system’ in Adam Smith’s *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, the definition of the word is putatively the same. However, Smith places particular emphasis on transfer between these constituent parts: a kind of transactional kinesis between parts that is absent from Hume’s system. Smith wishes to describe how ‘parts’ move and interact with one another, ethically mindful of correct delimitation. Smith’s vision of political economy is explained largely with reference to two ‘system’ collocations: ‘system of commerce’ and ‘system of agriculture’. Within these superordinate collocations Smith observes moving, transactional systems of administration and taxation (excise duties being transacted by virtue of the ‘administrative system’), and also the ‘mercantile system’ that allows Smith to chart the flow of capital across national boundaries. Smith and Hume describe systems against a backdrop of a Scottish Enlightenment historical writing which repeatedly delivers ambivalent reports of human progress, reports that are in stark contrast to narratives of human perfectibility being composed across the English channel by Condorcet and Turgot. And yet Hume subverts this common ambivalence in ways that only become fully apparent when we direct our attention away from semantic and towards structured accounts of concepts.

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16 Roger Acherley, *The Britannic Constitution: or, the Fundamental Form of Government in Britain* (London, 1759), 94.

III. *System*: toward the architecture of a concept

Having briefly surveyed uses of the word ‘system’ and its collocates in the *History*, I wish now to proceed to my principal undertaking in this paper: offering a structured account of the concept *system* based on de Bolla’s scheme, enabled by bespoke co-occurrence data searches that I have carried out on the text. I am aided in doing so by some preliminary questions that have occurred through the attention to the text that I have so far undertaken. These are: given that I have identified three categories of use of the word ‘system’, will systematic analysis of concepts reveal these to be three separate concepts? Do *system*, *system of government* and *system of liberty* have such different conceptual structures that it makes no sense to assume that they enable similar or identical ways of thinking for Hume? If the internal architecture of one of the three is revealed to be substantially different to that of the other two, can we chart a moment in Hume’s thinking when related concepts have disaggregated? Alternatively, if the three concepts are revealed to be structured in substantially similar ways, are two of them only instantiations of what might be called a parent or dominant concept? In answering these questions I will proceed by discussing *system* and *system of government* together, before turning my attention to *system of liberty*.18

Given that it is a guiding objective of this article to focus on conceptual structure rather than semantics, I have, in conjunction with Dr. Gabriel Recchia (my colleague at the Centre for Digital Knowledge, University of Cambridge), written bespoke co-occurrence search code that is designed to identify that which lies outside linguistic and semantic structuration. Usually, when one wishes to run word co-occurrence searches through a

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18 I am italicising all ‘system’ phrases here until I have satisfactorily disarticulated these as concepts.
corpus, one searches for words that appear within some fixed proximity of a search term—often between 1-5 words. We have designed search tools that allow us to run word co-occurrence searches through corpora at arbitrary proximities. In other words, where a regular search tool for a text corpus might allow one to find out what nouns, verbs etc occur at a distance of 5 words or less from another word, say for example 'system', our new tools allow us to run searches at a distance of 5 words, 50 words, 100 words, or whatever distance is desired. This enables us to look at how co-occurrence frequencies change at different proximities, diminishing the importance of grammar and syntax with respect to collocation in order to highlight non semantic relations between words and thus discover the conceptual networks within which individual concepts are suspended. My analysis here on in will correspond to the chart shown in section one and reproduced below:

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<td>rigid</td>
<td>plastic</td>
<td>adaptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Modality</td>
<td>isogetic</td>
<td>schematic</td>
<td>axiomatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Phase</td>
<td>single</td>
<td>dual</td>
<td>continuous</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2.*

To interrogate whether *system of government* is a concept distinct from *system* I began by ascertaining whether ‘system’ and ‘government’ do indeed exert a conspicuous pull on one another, and whether such a pull indicated conceptual discreteness. This involved running a search through the text for all words which occur within a range of 50 to the left of every use

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19 The Liberty Fund edition is an invaluable resource in that it is easily formatted and ‘cleaned up’ for these methods of computational analysis. I am aware of groundbreaking work being done to ensure that John Locke’s corpus is being formatted for computational enquiry, and I am personally solicitous about building on the salutary work that Intelex have done in making Hume and so much more available in this form.
of the word ‘government’ in the History. Clearly, this sort of search will throw up a great deal of lexical material, some of which might not tell us a great deal about the concept government. But the key difference allowed by this search is that it allows us to compare words that occur generally within the ambit of the search term with those that collocate conspicuously closely with it. For example, throughout Hume’s text, the word ‘system’ appears 24 times within a proximity of 50 words to the left of (ante) ‘government’. Numerous terms also occur within a proximity of 50 (left or right) to government, but the important distinction in this case is that all of the 24 collocations of ‘system’ and ‘government’ also occur within a proximity of ten words, and 14 of those occur within an ante-proximity of 5 words. ‘[G]overnment’ clearly exerts a strong gravitational pull on this word. In other words, when ‘government’ occurs it drags ‘system’ with it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>At proximity of 50 to ‘government’</th>
<th>At proximity of 10 to ‘government’</th>
<th>At proximity of 5 to ‘government’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parliament</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Species</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 3.*

Furthermore, this drag is unusual among the words which collocate with ‘government’ within a proximity of 50— for example ‘authority’, which co-occurs 164 times with ‘government’ at a range of 50 and then only 37 times at a range of 10 words. Or ‘parliament’, which collocates from 119 at a range of 50 to 10 uses in the 10 proximity. Therefore, although
‘government’ collocates strongly with numerous other words, its proportional pull on ‘system’ is considerably greater. From Figure 3, then, it appears that the locution ‘system of government’ is a special case. But despite the strong drag that these two words exert on one another, and despite the fact that (as illustrated in part two) ‘system of government’ is Hume’s chosen umbrella term for the ‘parts’ of nascent civil society, I am still not satisfied that ‘system of government’ is a discrete concept. We must remain agnostic about whether it is doing a special type of conceptual work for Hume in the History, distinct from how system operates in isolation.

The next key question in this case is whether system’s conceptual architecture is sufficiently different to what at this stage is tentatively posited to be a separate concept, system of government. It is axiomatic in the current work that linguistic and conceptual structures are not equivalent even if our only way into a realisation of a potential conceptual difference is by exploring whether ‘system of government’ and ‘system’ occur in close orbital proximity, and more widely occur in lexical environments which tell us something about a decisive difference in conceptual structuration.20 The seemingly innocuous function word ‘of’ provides a first clue. Across the 90 occurrences of the word ‘system’ in the text, the word ‘of’ co-occurs 64 times immediately to the left- far outnumbering any other colligation. ‘[G]overnment’ is the most common noun to appear after ‘system of’ (14 times), then ‘Europe’ (7 times), then ‘liberty’ (6 times), ‘civil’ and ‘jurisprudence’. A search through all nouns occurring within a proximity of 100 right and left of all instances of ‘system’ and ‘system of government’ reveals a substantial overlap:

20 This is to say, that despite the fact that linguistic and conceptual structures are not equivalent, language offers us a crucial, if not currently the only, way into a delineation of an historical conceptuality. Language is one means by which conceptual architecture can be recovered for interrogation, and yet this is not a linguistic study.
**System**: king, government, people, authority, England, religion, liberty, law, state, nation, public, parliament

**System of government**: religion, king, authority, parliament, constitution, liberty, law, France, England, nation, situation, barons, vassals

That so many nouns occur in both cases, that the adjectival language itself evokes other concepts, and the overwhelming occurrence of the word ‘of’ right of ‘system’, are strong clues that *system* is operating as a repository for other concepts. Results for ‘system’ and ‘system of government’ attest to this same enumerative moment of intellection: a containing way of rendering intelligible the operation of a state. It is important to remember that the present work is not interested in semantics. What is important in terms of conceptual structure is not what the phrases ‘system’ or ‘system of government’ mean: not what is brought up when Hume uses these phrases, be that ‘parts’ above, or other popular results *military, populace, constituency* or *public mood*, but to move beyond an observation of meanings in order to uncover that the concept of *system* operates as a container for other concepts. What I wish to emphasise is pointedly not what is carried in the semantic field of the phrases ‘system’ or ‘system of government’ but that an item of Hume’s cognition functions as a container.
Such an observation—that ‘system’ is a containing concept—may seem uncontroversial if not banal. Nevertheless it is a first crucial clue to the special way in which Hume renders historical change intelligible. Where de Bolla’s consideration of a concept’s containment function urges our attention specifically away from types of concepts being contained toward the fact of containment, one must focus on just that detail in order to assess the plasticity of a concept. As explained in Part 1, concepts can be described as having a plastic structure if they can be operated in a wide range of domains—unrelated, possibly disparate—without loss of their essential structure (remember the example of pattern). Lexical heterogeneity indicates that an array of phenomena are rendered intelligible with this conceptual architecture, as we can see in Figure 4:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>One word left of ‘system’</th>
<th>One word right of ‘system of’:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>feudal 9</td>
<td>government 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>general 7</td>
<td>europe 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>regular 6</td>
<td>liberty 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>establish 4</td>
<td>civil 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political 3</td>
<td>jurisprudence 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>state 2</td>
<td>policy 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>part 2</td>
<td>politics 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perfect 2</td>
<td>religion 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>who 2</td>
<td>english 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>best 2</td>
<td>doctrines 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>state 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Figure 4.](image)

---

21 I wish to interrogate this sense of naturalness. Imagine, for example, that Hume had not used the word ‘system’ to explain so many ‘parts’ of government, and had collocated the word in the overwhelming majority of cases with (for example) the adjective ‘natural’, and to the right of ‘system of’, ‘nature’. It is entirely likely that such locutions might not involve the enumeration of parts at all. In this scenario, Hume would be using the concept as a single, non-containing entity, without apprehending the many within the whole. The other major ‘system’ collocation in the History, ‘system of Europe’ offers an example of this kind of use. Unlike in the search results for ‘system’ and ‘system of government’, there is a remarkable dearth of nouns occurring within a window of ten words left and right of every instance of ‘system of Europe’. Of the top 35 words co-occurring within a window of 100 to the right and left of each use of ‘system of Europe’, only three nouns occur: ‘princes’, ‘England’, ‘himself’. The overwhelming co-occurrent language is determining, prepositional and verbally auxiliary.
The adjectival language immediately to the left of ‘system’ is of a kind that evokes parts and institutions as strongly as it suggests the qualities of the referent: ‘[F]eudal’, ‘political’, ‘state’, theological’. These descriptors instantiate a wide variety of social and political structures. Of course the word drags with it qualitative descriptors ‘general’, ‘best’ etc, but it is a defining characteristic of the word ‘system’ that it is suspended in a linguistic environment naming parts or institutions. Because the *History* is in large part an audit, a kind of registering and gathering up of constituent elements, most uses of *system* see Hume schematising the parts enumerated in *Figure 4*. There is a wide variety of close-proximity co-occurrent terms (mostly adjectives to the left, mostly nouns to the right), from ‘liberty’ to ‘policy’, from ‘government’ to ‘Europe’, ‘feudal’ to ‘civil’ and ‘religion’ to ‘state’. The range and variety of close proximal terms provides evidence for a range of discursive environments in which Hume uses the phrase ‘system of’, showing a wide as opposed to a narrow lexical set which, in turn, indicate conceptual plasticity. Hume renders fiscal, martial and regal assemblages intelligible using the concept: Hume speaks with equal facility of ‘feudal system’, ‘system of Europe’, ‘system of doctrines’ and ‘system of religion’. This word-use indicates a range of conceptual uses which, crucially in terms of plasticity, toggle easily between lived, actualised structures of heredity and national power-relations, and more abstract relations between the state and the individual, policies in documents and jurisprudential arrangements.

Perhaps the most important clue to our realisation of this conceptual plasticity is the fact that, when Hume uses the concept *system*, it appears to operate in a process that is something like typology. Extending my initial observation about containment, it is conspicuous that *system* contains other systems, in much the same way as ‘English
government’ is a mixed assemblage of other ‘species’ of government. From the hierarchical system of various militaries, to the variegated parts of aristocracy and general populace, the feudal and then civil political systems and the nascent credit systems of the commercial stage, a ‘system of government’ is something constituted by other systems. Certainly the marshalling of the military and feudal relations bear the hallmarks of a plastic concept of system. We can feel the plasticity of system in various different domains perhaps most sharply in volume two, in Hume’s description of Henry V’s management of the military as the ‘most essential circumstance’ of the ‘feudal system’. Later, in volume 7, dealing with the political tumult around the year 1649, the renegotiation of what system includes involves a profound consideration of the ‘system of jurisprudence’. I wish to claim that System performs a containing function in Hume’s intellection, but that its peculiar potency comes by virtue of its admission of system concepts represented by countable nouns such as ‘doctrines’ (volume 2), ‘the plainest dictates of morality [...] erect a regular system of casuistry’ (volume 5), ‘every circumstance’ and ‘political sentiments’ (both contained within system, both from volume 6). Hume uses the concept to systematise— to make sense of— a wide variety of systematic ‘parts’. The plastic structure of system allows Hume to think about state politics in holistic abstraction as whilst also intellectually inhabiting the ‘parts’ of actual administration. While system is a containing moment of mentation, its plasticity sees Hume intellectually inhabit those ‘parts’ that are contained. Clifford Siskin invokes a kind of reversible thinking in the century up to Hume’s moment:

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22 ‘system of doctrines’ Vol. 1, 27 and Vol. 5, 442. ‘System of casuistry’, Vol. 4, 188. ‘Every circumstance’ and ‘political sentiments’ both from Vol. 6, 22.
I compare the logic of the calculus—of using parts to approximate wholes—to the scalability of system... This interaction, I argue, was the engine of Newtonian Enlightenment: the calculus divided wholes into an infinite number of parts and system connected parts into wholes.\textsuperscript{23}

This ‘system’, with its reversible scalability as Siskin understands it, allows Hume to describe the transfiguring grit, the hard-lived and hard-won efficacy of ‘system of government’ in the face of the mass proliferation of printed media and the volatile fashioning and refashioning of political entities in the age. [\textit{System of government}] provides the structured conceptual environment that leads to Hume’s understanding of civil society as emergent, mixed among the vicissitudes of these early capitalist phenomena, concrete and abstract parts which must be rendered intelligible in relation to one another as a single object. The Scottish historiographical tradition, particularly attuned to the deleterious and atomising effects of modernity, needs a way of thinking that can encompass proliferation of individual objects in its formation of a unifying theory of the British state. Siskin understands this as having been enabled for Hume by a sense of holism, with a reciprocity between parts and superordinate assemblages, that is the hallmark of calculus. The concept places simultaneous pressure on the particular and the more coherently somatic, and this is Hume’s key heuristic for understanding how inchoateness might coalesce into something patterned and controlled as ‘nation’ over a span of ten centuries. As Siskin comments, \textit{system} ‘became a thing in the world \textit{and} a way of constituting that world as a thing.’ (original emphasis)\textsuperscript{24} This

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Clifford Siskin, \textit{The Project of Enlightenment: Master Systems} (forthcoming), quotation from chapter three.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Clifford Siskin, \textit{The Project of Enlightenment: Master Systems} (forthcoming), quotation from chapter three.
\end{itemize}
‘constituting’ is conceptual, a means by which to intellectually organise not only abstracta but also things in the world. While I want to resist connecting the structuration of Hume’s system too explicitly to what were perceived to be the historical, cultural and constitutional imperatives of his century, clearly, Hume is solicitous that a cogent narrative can be written about the recent history of the region. It is a disinterested intellectual contour that offers the thinker a way of knowing the crusades as the low ebb of western civilisation, the Pandects of Justinian and the rise of political economy. This is because of the plasticity I have outlined: because systems are phenomena in the world, and a means by which to understand phenomena.

In volume five, Hume writes that:

The three species of government, monarchical, aristocratical, and democratical, are there plainly distinguished, and the English government is expressly said to be none of them pure, but all of them mixed and tempered together. […]²⁵

Perhaps the English is the first mixed government, where the authority of every part has been very accurately defined […] The king’s power is, indeed, more exactly limited; but this period, of which we now treat, is the time at which that accuracy commenced.²⁶

²⁵ Hume, History Vol. 5, 751.

²⁶ Ibid., Vol. 5, 93.
This moment is rare in the *History* because the ‘parts’ of government remain un-enumerated: the usually-explicit relation of *system* to a named concatenation of pieces of the body politic is left implicit. Nonetheless this is a lexical omission worthy of attention. Hume is using the concept *system* to render intelligible the effective disposition of governmental ‘parts’, ‘in spite of the fact that he does not use the word ‘system’. Hume operates the concept ‘system’ with a load bearing function in the background of his explanation of government. As we have seen from the account of word-drag in section 1 ‘government’ attains coherence conceptually by operating on the platform of the concept ‘system’: a structural relationship that is anything but simple common sense. For example, it is entirely feasible that *government* might have collocated proportionately more strongly with *parliament* or *king* than *system*. But *system* it is, and because one of *system*’s functionalities is containing we can infer that the network of concepts within which *government* is suspended includes a strong containment function. In other words, Hume’s way of knowing *government* in this period of his thinking, relies heavily on operating *system* in its containing functionality. Had *parliament* or *king* functioned as the load-bearing platform which enabled Hume to operate the concept *government*, this would have meant that concepts with other architectures, possibly containing, possibly not, would have been a crucial *government* rather than the containing *system*. By such contingencies are subjective, ‘unshareable’ conceptualities shaped.27

While it may appear to us uncontentious that such adjectival and post-occurring nouns should appear so near to ‘system’, I wish to interrogate this sense of naturalness. Imagine, for example, that Hume had not used the word ‘system’ to explain so many ‘parts’ of

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27 See footnote 3.
government, and had collocated the word in the overwhelming majority of cases with (for example) the adjective ‘natural’, and to the right of ‘system of’, ‘nature’. It is entirely likely that such locutions might not involve the enumeration of parts at all. In this imagined scenario, Hume would be using the concept as a single, non-containing entity, without apprehending the many within the whole. The other major ‘system’ collocation in the History, ‘system of Europe’ offers an example of this kind of use. Unlike in the search results for ‘system’ and ‘system of government’, there is a remarkable dearth of nouns occurring within a window of ten words left and right of every instance of ‘system of Europe’. Of the top 35 words co-occurring within a window of 100 to the right and left of each use of ‘system of Europe’, only three nouns occur: ‘princes’, ‘England’, ‘himself’. The overwhelming co-occurent language is determining, prepositional and verbally auxiliary. Because the History is in large part an audit, a kind of registering and gathering up of constituent elements, most uses of system are quite different to ‘system of Europe’, and see Hume schematising ‘parts’ as shown in Figure 4. Hume’s system concept is working in the large majority of cases with a containing function, even if the culture at large need not have.

*

As we can see with reference to Figure 1, ‘containing’, ‘plastic’ and ‘load-bearing’ are only three of several designations that can be allotted to system: specific turns in a set of directions that this concept makes in Hume’s thinking. I now wish to illustrate where another concept represented by a similar lexis directs Hume’s intellection in markedly different ways. Hume uses the concept to describe the improbable emergence of what he considers ‘the most perfect and most accurate’ English civil society. He describes how species of government exist the world over, but how the English ‘system of government’ has a unique precipitate:

Above all, a civilised nation, like the English, who have happily established the most perfect and most accurate system of liberty, that was ever found compatible with government, ought to be cautious of appealing to the practice of their ancestors, or regarding the maxims of uncultivated ages as certain rules for present conduct. An
acquaintance with the history of the antient periods of their government is chiefly useful by instructing them to cherish their present constitution from a comparison or contrast with the conditions of those distant times.28

This ambivalence regarding the corrective potential of ancient practices is entirely in keeping with the aforementioned philosophical histories of Hume’s age and milieu. Hume defrays any unequivocal valorisation of the uncultivated past as a model for redeeming his own commercial stage. Instead, its power must be chiefly didactic and ‘useful’. Where Hume uses the phrase ‘system of liberty’, it drags with it the language of intangibility: a stark offsetting of the usual language pragmatism that characterises uses of ‘system’ in the text. Notice the absolutist pre-modifying adjectival language- ‘perfect and most accurate’- flanking ‘system of liberty’ and also how improbable it appears in Hume’s thinking that such a rare phenomenon should be found ‘compatible’ with the reificational, containing system. System is embodied in practices: it is actualised in an aforementioned series of administrative, legal, martial and fiscal acts and institutions. This language of actualisation is, as we can see above, still present in the ‘system of liberty’ case, but it now co-exists with the language of absolutes and intangibles. We see this in the adjectival, and determiner language which occurs within a window of five words to the left and right of every time the term occurs in the History: ‘most’, ‘perfect’, ‘least’, ‘accurate’, ‘perfect’, ‘entire’, ‘ever’, ‘unequal’. These search results concur with those for ‘system of liberty’ across a sample corpus from the whole of Eighteenth-Century Collections Online. Every one of these listed terms occurs at high proximity to ‘system of liberty’ in the ECCO sample, and the other co-occurrent terms turned

up in the ECCO searches (‘always’, ‘fantastical’, ‘none’) support the position that system of liberty is represented by the language of the improbable.

If we compare this with the adjectival language that occurs at the same proximity to ‘liberty’ in the ECCO corpus, the ‘perfect’ improbability of Hume’s system of liberty comes into stark relief. The incidence of the aforementioned words in the ten-word window (5 left and five right) of the 14841 instances of the word ‘liberty’ in ECCO is remarkably low. Genitive pronouns appear proportionately very frequently at high proximity to the word ‘liberty’ in Hume and in ECCO. In both, liberty is something which belongs, to the individual as well as the polis, it is ‘your’, ‘their’, ‘our’, ‘his’ and ‘her’ liberty. Hume’s uses add ‘national’, ‘public’, ‘personal’, ‘own’, ‘have’, ‘gave’ and ‘give’ to the proprietorial sense. And yet in ECCO and the History, ‘system of liberty’ is conspicuously unlikely to occur near such genitive or proprietorial language. No genitive pronouns occur at all within the ten-word window of the phrase in the ECCO sample. As for Hume, there is a solitary use of the word ‘his’ in this proximity window. This lexical terrain stresses even more emphatically the distinction between liberty and system of liberty. Further work clearly needs to be done to corroborate this, but there is strong evidence that we should attenuate any assumption that liberty is idealised very commonly in Anglophone culture in the age. One locution is suspended in the vocabulary of purchase and tactility, the other appears markedly to repel this. The concept system, in conjunction with liberty, creates something distinctive: a new way of knowing that, while relatively rare, is a break with how Hume understands history using the concept liberty.

Where system reifies for the thinker a countable series of concepts relating to inflections of actual, lived, pragmatic power, system of liberty does not contain, and nor does it name things in the world. This is reflected in the co-occurrence searches: ‘great’ the most
common co-occurring adjective in the case of ‘system’, and ‘established’ the most common non-auxiliary verb. In the case of ‘system of liberty’, ‘great’ is also a high-ranking adjective but it is scarcely more common than ‘whole’ and ‘perfect’, both of which are non-existent in the ‘system’ search results. The most common noun terms from the ‘system’ results: ‘authority’, ‘religion’, ‘people’, ‘law’, ‘state’, ‘barons’, ‘vassals’, ‘France’ and ‘public’ never occur within 100 words to the left or right of ‘system of liberty’. ‘Constitution’ occurs five times at the higher proximity window of 100 and then only once within 50 words, and ‘government’ drags considerably stronger with the phrase ‘system of liberty’ than any other co-occurrence phrase from the ‘system’ searches, for reasons that I wish to attend to later in this part of the article. It is increasingly apparent that linguistic similarity between the phrases ‘system’ and ‘system of liberty’ is concealing radical conceptual differences. *System* acts as a repository for other concepts, is load-bearing for at least one other concept (government) and can be operated in a wide range of domains. *System of liberty* is an ideational way of knowing which does not contain other concepts or seek to render phenomena in the world intelligible. Nor is it plastic. It is an ideational concept, as it allows Hume to apprehend an abstraction. It does not load-bear for another concept: it is an outlier.

An analogous comparison might clarify the distinction further. The two concepts *system* and *system of liberty* are as different as the concept *vehicle* is from the concept *style*. *Style* is not a thing in the world in the way that *vehicle* is. Nevertheless, although one cannot point to style in the way that one can point to a vehicle, it is relatively simple to point to an object and make an intelligible statement about its style, using the concept *style*. Therefore an ‘[I]deational’ concept such as *style* allows one to think the quality of something- to grasp an abstraction. This is exactly the kind of work that *system of liberty* does for Hume: he can speak intelligibly about the late history of England using this concept not in spite of but
because of the fact that it has no concrete instantiation. It is a quality, albeit seemingly evanescent, that can only coalesce in the context to which Hume refers. Usually, ideational concepts often move between different domains without much friction, allowing us to make sense of such propositions as ‘This style of design’ and ‘Tennyson’s late style’. But system of liberty does not work in this way. It is undeniably ideational, but its application is rare.

In what other ways does system of liberty direct Hume’s processes of intellection? If we refer to ‘Conceptual modality’ in Figure 1, it is apparent that the concept does not have an isogetic modality. That is, Hume does not move through a series of negations of unsuitable concepts in order to arrive at the one that renders the late historical development of England intelligible. If we take a concept such as ‘poem’ and focus on its isogetic modality we can see how it leads us to understand a number of candidates for inclusion in the category ‘poem’ by operating the necessary conditions that gatekeep the concept. We might, for example, notice stress, ‘poetic’ or prosodic lexis and rhetoric, lineation and so on. But in the case to hand, ‘system of liberty’, the superlative pre-modifying language–least, most, perfect, entire, suggests the incomparability of what is being described. These things are not similar or isomorphic. There is no list of closely structured concepts from which ‘system of liberty’ might be discriminated. Nor does the concept seem to operate with a schematic modality: nowhere in the History does Hume use this concept to apprehend the arrangement, organisation or hierarchising of parts. As may be apparent, system operates in precisely this modality: not only containing other concepts, but arranging them in accordance with a scheme or hierarchy. Again, I wish to stress that what is crucial is not what is schematised, but the fact of schematisation, and system of liberty pointedly, conspicuously does not schematise. [D]e Bolla’s third modality designation—the axiomatic—captures something
meaningful about the way in which Hume understands English historical progress through this concept. Axiomatic concepts are those which carry with them the solidity of self-evidence. They are something like mini-theories that moves a thinker’s cognition from point X to point Y without this series of moves appearing undue or counterintuitive. They have an inconspicuous logic, and it is here that one recognises this as the key modality for this concept. In explicating this I would like to conclude the current work.

In my research into Hume’s use of these concepts, I have frequently returned to the question of whether the real difference in Hume’s historical conceptuality is not actually between system and system of liberty but in fact between system and merely liberty. Certainly, the copiousness of ‘liberty’ (used 78 times in the text to ‘system of liberty’’s 5) appears to bespeak the relative centrality of the concept liberty when compared to the phrase containing the word. Thus, one must ask whether Hume’s use of the phrase ‘system of liberty’ then amounts to an act of mere adornment: clothing liberty in a fashionable, if conceptually vacant ‘system’ locution. I wish to claim that, despite the fact that ‘system of liberty’ does not occur very often in the History, and virtually never in culture more widely, it is indeed a discrete, and crucial concept for Hume, marking as it does his apprehension of a type of concept that has a curious cultural and intellectual potency: that which strafes the ideational and the reificational / nominal conceptual kinds and functions.

[S]ystem of liberty’s occurrence in a lexical terrain of intangibility suggests an unusual ideational structuration. Just as system, in Hume’s usage strongly reificational and containing, cannot entirely vacate what appears to be a counterintuitive ideational sense, system of liberty retains something, albeit vestigial, of system’s enumerative, containing imperative. To go further- it is precisely because of the ambiguity of system of liberty, impossibly absolutist and ideational on the one hand, nonetheless retaining the enumerative and nominal on the other-
that Hume rarely feels wholly emboldened to operate the concept in the text. It is precisely
the ‘perfect’ and ‘entire’ ideation of the concept that largely prohibits Hume from registering
in prose the concrete systematicity that is its provenance. Nonetheless the fact that in Hume’s
conceptuality one concept can only operate on the platform of another indicates a kind of
conceptual genealogy that we feel underpinning the language of the *History*. While the
numerous concepts contained within *system* at the moment of its operation pertain to the
pragmatic activities of states and monarchies, it is a distinguishing characteristic of *system*
that it holds nominal and ideational conceptual kinds in tensile relationship. Simultaneously,
the pragmatism of *system* is for Hume worthless without an idea of the disposition of
attentions, money, martial force etc. The concept names something in the world, that is, the
tangible business of government: actual negotiation and decision making regarding different
claims on the prevailing power base in the body politic. It calls to Hume’s mind arrangements
which have palpable reality, whether these are the deployment of militias, the apportionment
of tax receipts, courting favour or engendering ire among other heads of states or leaders of
gentry. Herein lies the axiomatic utility of this concept: despite the fact that the institutions
apprehended by *system* may (and indeed must) alter vastly at different stages in the narrative
that Hume is composing, the concept’s duality of palpability and abstraction means that it
allows Hume to make sense not only of a plenty, but a plurality. An idea of political
equilibrium guides Hume’s apprehension of the materiality of governance- fiscal policy or
the scaling up or down of aristocratic powers, say. It is this tension between the tangible and
the intangible which makes *system* such a useful tool for understanding various stages in the
development from feudalism to commercialism: quantities of ‘parts’ and their respective
qualities equally apprehended by *system*.
System of liberty operates in an axiomatic modality not because it is somehow self-evident that ‘liberty’ is a goal whose desirability has been agreed by common consent. It is because one of the History’s central contentions that the nebulous, system of liberty cannot coalesce without the prior intellectual directions brought about by system. The above quotation from Hume’s History starts with the statement that ‘there could be no security for civil liberty’. Just as system and government exert a conspicuous pull on one another, ‘system’ is again proportionately far more likely to be used within a high proximity of ‘system of liberty’ in the History. Hume cannot possess system of liberty’s ideational epistemic architecture without possessing and using system’s series of (firstly disaggregated, then systematised) nominal, reificational concepts, uploaded as I have said in relation to the axiomatic modality without the thinking subject becoming aware of the series of cognitive moves being undertaken. Before Hume can render English history intelligible in an ideational type of concept that manifests in a lexical field of intangibility and absolutism, a series of containing, nominal and reificational modes of cognition must be in operation. Hume’s absolutist pre-modifying language emphasises the improbability of system of liberty being possessed, but the clue to its lived actuality is precisely in its unusual locution. System of liberty is ‘perfect’ for Hume not because its being brought into existence is a reality never to be actualised but the exact opposite: it operates on the actualisable ‘system’ platform. Recall how Hume’s own language feels oddly at variance with itself: ‘established the most perfect and most accurate system of liberty, that was ever found compatible with government [...]’. The impossible perfection is nonetheless ‘compatible with government’ and can therefore be ‘established’.

I have charted these structural relationships because I want to posit that these load-bearing relationships are present in Hume’s concept system of liberty. I have already
suggested that concepts are akin to a map, a series of directions made in one’s intellection. I have also claimed that system of liberty retains something of the functionality of system. Extending the metaphor, these concepts are districts in system of liberty’s ideational topography. It is entirely uncontentious that system of liberty operates on the platform of system in the History. For this reason it has system in its cognitive precincts, and the latter concept’s ideationality never entirely prohibits access to these when system of liberty is operating in Hume’s thought.

Conclusion

This study is necessarily limited in its scope, and it will be apparent that at various stages I have strained toward a study of the common life of these concepts: how they are structured by the many and not the single thinking subject. But this work has always been considered a beginning move. From this point, enabled by bespoke computation, we may undertake hundreds of these comparative searches both within Hume’s text, the Hume corpus as a whole, and then outward, ever outward to the wealth of searchable text that one can access across the 18th century. This way, we can note the oddities in what language collocates with ‘system’ in Hume as opposed to the wider corpus of the mid-to-late 18th C (as far as this has been scanned / time stamped / uploaded into searchable domains). This gives a sense of what is conventional, distinctive or downright unusual about Hume’s conceptuality. It allows one to zoom out from one thinking subject’s possession of the concept to how it obtains in wider culture. This facilitates comparison of ‘unshareable’ and ‘common’ conceptualities. In what was does Hume’s process of intellection differ from that obtaining across many, many texts?