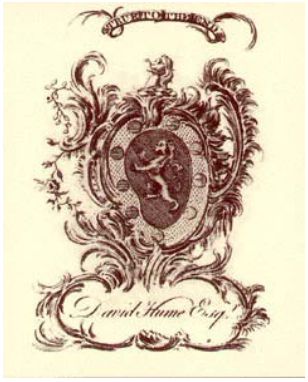

Review of *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher* by Nicolas Capaldi and *Hume* by Terence Penelhum

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INTERPRETING HUME

Nicholas Capaldi: David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher, Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1975.

Terence Penelhum: Hume, 'Philosophers in Perspective' series, The Macmillan Press, London, 1975.

These two books are comparable in several respects. Both are general studies which cover the full range of philosophical topics treated by Hume. Both begin with a biographical essay and a summary account of Hume's position and aims. Following Hume's own order, both move from epistemology, introduced by a chapter on causation, through the psychology of the emotions to ethics, arriving at a discussion of Hume's philosophy of religion. Both are written by scholars who are well versed in Hume's texts and consider them important for contemporary philosophy. Both authors attribute certain current misrepresentations of Hume's teaching to such contemporary preconceptions about the nature of philosophy as its radical difference from all empirical disciplines. Since both of them oppose standard interpretations at many points with thoughtful alternatives, their books will interest mature students as well as help beginners to appreciate the main exegetical and critical issues currently debated by Hume's commentators.

There is a difference between these two books as striking as their similarities. Professor Capaldi's interpretation is developed under the control of a master hypothesis, and Professor Penelhum's is not. Capaldi considers Newton to have been the decisive influence on Hume's formation, and he interprets Humean philosophy as a response to Newtonian science. Starting with a clear and definite conception of Hume's strategy, he reconstructs the blueprint from which Hume worked when putting his

philosophical system together. Penelhum sets to work without any master plan except the quite general one of elucidating Hume's doctrines in the light of the intellectual concerns of his age and the diverse philosophical influences that worked upon him. He brings current distinctions and conceptions to bear upon the assessment of Hume's theories while avoiding such anachronistic criticism as has produced the common complaint about Hume's psychologism. Capaldi brings the system into focus from a consistent perspective, affording his readers a clear view of the whole and fresh insight into its principles of organization. Penelhum's critical analyses provide readers with a basis in argument for judging the contemporary relevance and strength of Hume's central doctrines.

That Hume aspired to be 'the Newton of the moral sciences' is a familiar fact of eighteenth century intellectual history. Various aspects of this important fact have been considered by previous commentators, but none of them have explored its ramifications throughout Hume's system with the thoroughness displayed by Capaldi. A conveniently brief statement of his thesis is made at the beginning of Chapter 3, where he says:

> It is generally accepted that Hume's philosophical program was greatly influenced by Newton...Nevertheless, what has never been made clear is the exact manner in which that influence is translated into Hume's specific philosophical statements. An understanding of the exact nature of Newton's influence on Hume can serve as the key to understanding Hume's philosophy as a whole, and it can explain why Hume structures the Treatise as he does. Finally, it can serve as the basis for correcting a number of misconceptions about Hume's philosophy. (49)

The Newtonian influence, Capaldi argues, can be appreciated only when viewed against the backdrop of the Aristotelian tradition, which the mechanistic world view replaced during the scientific revolution. Fundamental to

this great shift in man's conception of his world, himself, and of the conditions of knowledge was the revision of the medieval theory of causation, which had its source in Aristotle's doctrine of the Four Causes. On that older view, prediction and explanation required insight into the essence or form of the object of investigation. What happened in the world happened necessarily by virtue of a formal cause operating efficiently to produce the effect determined as natural by the final cause governing the process. Given sufficient analysis of the nature of a thing, its cause and effect could be deduced. On the view of causation implicit in Newtonian physics, whatever happens to things in the world happens because of forces impressed upon them, not by virtue of their essential natures. Prediction and explanation, consequently, require such knowledge of the dynamic relations in which physical objects are involved as can only be acquired by experimenting and observing. Hume was the first philosopher to fully understand the empiricist implications of Newtonian physics. "Historically the importance of Hume's analysis is that he carefully articulates what happens when we substitute Newtonian physics for Aristotelian physics" (50).

Hume's theories of causality and induction are philosophical formulations of the epistemological principles presupposed by Newtonian method. His scepticism of rationalist metaphysics as yet unemancipated from Aristotelianism is a consequence of accepting the limitations upon human knowledge implicit in Newton's theory and practice of science. Even the very structure of his Treatise is accountable only in terms of his great project of adapting the Newtonian experimental method to 'moral subjects'.

Since I am unsure of all that might be meant by calling an interpretative hypothesis applied to a complex

philosophical work 'true', I shall manage with less august words and say that I found Capaldi's formula for reading A Treatise of Human Nature useful, illuminating, and stimulating. It is useful because it puts the formerly vague and general claim for Newton's influence to a long overdue test by attempting to render the details of Hume's system as integral parts of a philosophical programme inspired by Newtonian science. It is illuminating about Hume's scepticism because it fits his critique of rationalist metaphysics into the historical movement from the Aristotelian to the Newtonian world view. It is stimulating in that it provides an alternative to the usual notion that Hume's analyses of causality and induction are the results of a psychological investigation of the mind at work upon the materials of everyday experience. On the Capaldi hypothesis, Hume's theories amount to the articulation of the concepts of causality and induction implicit in Newtonian physics. They are, thus, distinctly philosophical, the psychological investigation of the common sense grounds of scientific thinking being subsidiary and derivative.

Penelhum takes precisely the opposite view. Hume's "main enterprise", he declares, "is primarily, and unconfusedly psychological" (18). What Hume got from Newtonian science, or from Hutcheson's adaptation of it, was not ontology with implications for epistemology, but the method which produced his Science of Human Nature. Within this psychological science, which proceeds "from a cautious observation of human life" (Treatise, xxiii), the conditions and limits of factual knowledge and moral judgement are fixed. When the facts of mental and social life have been reduced to principle, the "general philosophical vision" (7) which emerges is at once sceptical and naturalistic.

Hume's scepticism starts from his discovery that

certain irresistible and indispensable beliefs have no basis in reason. His naturalism consists in tracing these same beliefs to their sources in imagination, feeling, and instinct. The scepticism is levelled at metaphysicians who supply spurious and needless arguments to vindicate common sense and scientific beliefs and at theologians whose speculations are an affront to common sense and science alike. The force of the naturalism, which is an antidote to scepticism as natural inclinations are to paralyzing doubts, is to reconcile men to their limited capabilities and to direct their thinking toward topics upon which it can be profitably employed.

The 'general philosophical vision' is impressive. It terminates the rationalists' quest for certainty by showing it to be unattainable outside of pure mathematics and formal logic. It shows how to distinguish between sense and nonsense and between the questions that should be taken up and those that should be laid aside. It relieves metaphysical anxiety by showing man his rightful place in nature, where adaptation to an ultimately incomprehensible world is secured by sub-rational, biological forces. Have we any reason to suppose that the truth of things shows up in this vision? Not really, according to Penelhum. "A philosopher", he says, "should be judged by his doctrines and his arguments" (15), and most of Hume's he finds defective.

Hume's fundamental distinction between impressions and ideas collapses at inconvenient moments. His theory of association, unlike the theory of attraction with which he deludedly compared it, is not a universal principle at all. His application of it requires "a sumptuous proliferation of amplifications and subsidiary hypotheses" (34). Of Hume's theory of belief he says, "It is hard to imagine a more ingenious, or a more unsatisfactory, solution to a self-made theoretical predicament" (35). The distinction between Relations of Ideas and

Matters of Fact "is fundamental, and wholly dogmatic" (39). Hume's inductive scepticism (also called "wholly dogmatic" (53)) has been undermined, allegedly, by D. C. Stove. Hume's mistaken view that numerical identity entails invariance "has disastrous consequences" (70; cf. 80) for his theories of perception and personal identity. The famous dictum that reason is the slave of the passions is "Hume's most shocking dogma" (110). With so little sound doctrine and cogent argument to sustain it, the general philosophical vision tends to melt away.

Because of the different approaches made upon Hume's philosophy by Capaldi and Penelhum, historical and analytical respectively, their commentaries leave the reader with diverse estimates of its worth. It is not unusual for a scholar preoccupied with explaining the meanings of doctrines in terms of historical determinants to suspend the question of their truth. More than once Capaldi remarks that he is not concerned with whether what Hume says is true or false, but with what he means by saying it, and with accounting for his saying it. With Penelhum, elucidating Hume's meaning is preliminary to deciding whether what Hume says is right or wrong. His expositions are clear, orderly, concise, and accurate. His presentations of Hume's several treatments of various topics, especially those in the Treatise, Book I, the Abstract, and the first Enquiry are so well coordinated that one becomes clearer than ever before about what Hume added, removed, and altered and about the philosophical significance of these changes. Penelhum is a tough-minded, relentless critic, equipped with impressive analytical skills, but very literal minded also, and, unlike Capaldi, disinclined ever to re-cast an argument in order to show its author in the most favourable light. "But it is only just", he says sternly at the close of his chapter on 'The Self',"to convict a philosopher of confusions he actually commits" (88). One must concede

the point, but is tempted to add that after justice has been served a place remains for critical reconstruction that makes the best use of the materials and the ground plan that the philosopher has supplied.

Each of these commentaries invites a more thorough discussion of a number of themes than the pages allotted to me here can accommodate. Since it is indicated that the general comparative and evaluative comments made above be illustrated with reference to at least one topic, a choice must be made. Hume's philosophy of religion is initially attractive, for all the main currents of his thought converge there. However, Capaldi's chapter on this subject is not fairly representative of his book, consisting as it does of a slightly edited version of his widely read paper, "Hume's Philosophy of Religion: God without Ethics" (International Journal for Philosophy of Religion, Winter 1970). Hume's theory of personal identity, which epitomizes his metaphysical principles and problems, would have been suitable had not both authors outdated their interpretations given in these books by subsequent work. (See Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited", Dialogue, September, 1975; and Nicholas Capaldi, "Self and Substance in Hume's Ontology", presented at Edinburgh Hume Conference, August, 1976.) Hume's theory of perception or, as it is sometimes called by the title of H. H. Price's book, Hume's Theory of the External World, suits our purpose in that it typifies Hume's empiricist handling of metaphysical problems and Capaldi's and Penelhum's disagreement about how that should be interpreted.

Penelhum's criticism of the theory is set out in his third chapter, but the tenor of it is anticipated in his first, where he says, "If we are able to reflect only upon our perceptions then the belief in an independent material world has to be read as a belief in the independent existence of our perceptions: a belief whose

irrationality needs little additional emphasis" (30; his italics). The peculiarity of Hume's formulation of Everyman's belief in the independent existence of the external world is dictated by "the Lockean ideal framework" (ibid.) within which Hume chose to work. And the choice accorded with his intention of showing the impotence of human reason to defend this fundamental natural belief against scepticism. Prior to any philosophical reformulation, this natural belief is found to involve incompatible presuppositions. Everyman, before turning to science or philosophy, takes it for granted that through his power of sight and sense of touch he makes direct acquaintance with physical objects. He draws no distinction between perceptions in his mind and things in the world; they pass with him as identical. But he also believes that most of what he sees continues to exist when he is no longer perceiving it and must, therefore, exist independently of his perceptions. The implication of this second belief is that objects and perceptions are distinct and different, which, conflicting with his presumption of their identity, renders his position incoherent.

The obvious philosophical move to resolve the dilemma is to correct the first belief by distinguishing between perceptions and objects, which is what Locke did. Since Everyman has not yet made this move, the question arises of what presuppositional belief he must hold in order to sustain his belief that most of what he sees continues to exist when he is no longer seeing it. The only answer that avoids the self-refuting implication of the percept/object distinction is the one given by Hume, viz., that his percepts continue their existence independently of himself when he is unaware of them. Penelhum objects that since nobody believes any such thing, Hume's 'tortuous' explanation of how Everyman came to believe it is wasted argument (64, 66, 67). The objection entails denying that Everyman fails to

distinguish between his perceptions and objects so long as he remains in a state of metaphysical innocence. The following plausible (but unsatisfactory) argument I offer in support of this verdict.

Suppose that one dark night you should ask Everyman this question: "Do you believe that the portrait which you now raptly contemplate will continue in existence after the light is switched off?" He would, if sincere in his answer, reply "Yes". If you should then ask him, "Do you believe that when the light is switched off the visual impressions which you are now enjoying will continue to exist?", he would say, if equally sincere, "No". Thus Everyman does not believe what Hume said that he did. Having wrongly supposed "that to believe we perceive distinct and continuing objects is to believe the proposition that our perceptions have distinct and continuing existence" (64), Hume's causal explanation of our natural perceptual beliefs is beside any point worth making.

What is unsatisfactory about this argument is that our make-believe questionnaire, like so many real ones, does not establish the desired conclusion because the questions have prejudiced the answers. The questions put to Everyman were philosophical, incorporating an ontological distinction of which he had been hitherto unaware, but to which he was alerted by them. His answers were philosophical monosyllables, not common sense ones, expressive of the metaphysical dualism into which he is drawn as soon as the incoherence of his naively realistic position is revealed to him. As reflection on our own hopes, desires, fears, and strategies often reveals, presuppositional beliefs which are inconsistent with our conscious convictions are not uncommon. The presuppositional belief uncovered by Hume's analysis of Everyman's attitude toward his sense experiences operated below the propositional level now occupied by the philosophical

conviction he acquires when the irrationality of his naive realism is exposed. So far, then, it has not been proven that Hume has incorrectly analysed primitive natural beliefs about the external world, if these are taken to include presuppositional ones.

After his conversion to dualism, Everyman is beset with new metaphysical perplexity. He is never directly acquainted with the relatively permanent material objects which he now believes to be the causes of his fleeting impressions. He cannot even imagine these objects as entities of a sort quite different from his perceptions. If it were a proof of the reality of the external world, or a rational justification of his natural belief in its independent existence, that he sought, he would be in no better a position to find it than formerly. But if he is a Newtonian philosopher intent upon introducing the experimental method into the study of perception, he has moved in the right direction. For now he thinks within a conceptual framework which accommodates causal explanations of perceptual events. His philosophical hypothesis "of the double existence of perceptions and objects" (Treatise, 215), for which neither logical reasons nor direct empirical evidence can be adduced, serves him as well for science as his untenable belief in unperceived perceptions formerly did for everyday life.

If Hume is not explicit about the pragmatic value of the percept/object distinction in his discussion "Of scepticism with regard to the Senses", that is because he is concerned in that section of the Treatise (I, iv, ii) with showing that scepticism about perception cannot be silenced by metaphysical reasoning. But his ulterior motive for so arguing is not to support a 'deflationary account of human nature and human knowledge' (30) that allows his "sceptical conclusions to be foisted on his readers" (ibid.). Rather it is, as he says in his Conclusion to Book I of the Treatise, to give 'a different

turn to the speculations of philosophers' (Treatise,273). And the 'turn', if Capaldi's interpretation is along the right lines, is from rational metaphysics in the Aristotelian tradition to positive Newtonian science.

The chief advantage of Capaldi's broad historical view over Penelhum's close critical analysis is that it construes particular arguments in the light of Hume's long range objectives. The more narrowly one attends to Hume's discussion of "Scepticism with regard to the senses" and two other sections (Treatise I, ii, vi and I, iv, iv) directly related to his attempt to show scepticism irrefutable on purely rational grounds, the more likely one is to lose sight of Hume's own commitment to percept/object dualism. He may call it "the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other" (Treatise, 215), and charge that it is "loaded with...absurdity" (218), but it is nonetheless the 'philosophical system' which he advocated because, as Capaldi shows, he realized that it was indispensable for causally explaining perceptual phenomena. "After all," Capaldi asks, "where would the Newtonian program be without an external world?" (206).

The divergent implications of Newtonianism for rational metaphysics and for empirical science account both for Hume's scepticism and his positivism. Demonstrations of matters of fact and existence, including the existence of the external world, are precluded by Hume's theory of propositions. A common sense belief in independently existing physical objects, which neither needs nor admits of rational justification, arises from natural causes in the course of ordinary sense experience. A related belief that these same objects cause our perceptions is a presupposition of the scientific investigation of sense experience which admits of no other justification than a pragmatic one.

It is Capaldi, not Penelhum, who shows in historical perspective the purpose and importance of Hume's

arguments and theories for his vast project of "a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new" (Treatise, xx). In fairness one must add that it is Penelhum, not Capaldi, who shows from a contemporary point of view the failings in Hume's arguments, if they are supposed to lead to true conclusions about the nature of things.

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