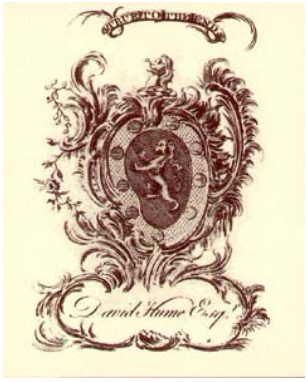

Review of David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician

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David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician. By David Fate Norton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982) Pp. xii, 329. £17.70.

The publication of Norman Kemp Smith's The Philosophy of David Hume in 1941 marked a turning-point in Hume scholarship, and it might even be said that a good part of the Hume literature of the past decades consists of footnotes to Kemp Smith. An obeisance in the direction of his shade has become almost de rigueur.

But what is the substance of the honour in which Kemp Smith is held? Does it entail acceptance of his view that Hutcheson's influence on Hume was decisive? Is his theory regarding the order of composition of the books of the Treatise considered plausible? Can one assent to his opinion that the central utterance of Hume's philosophy is contained in the sentence, "Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions..."?

Or is it not rather that Kemp Smith forced his readers to think anew about Hume's philosophy by showing that it was by no means necessary to accept the traditional view, associated with the names of Reid, Beattie and Green, and still, it seems, complacently regurgitated by most of those who are not Hume scholars, that Hume was merely a destructive force in the history of western philosophy. Kemp Smith, it would appear, is justly revered, but less for the actual contents of his works on Hume than for his challenge to Hume commentators to consider Hume's philosophy as being in its essence a new and constructive synthesis, to which his critical activity was subservient.

Professor D.F. Norton's book attempts to provide a corrective to the interpretations of Kemp

Smith and of Reid *et al*. From the dates of the author's many articles on Hume, several of which are incorporated in the present volume, it seems that the work has been a long time in gestation. The manuscript (or parts of it) was read by several well-known Hume specialists.

As the book's title indicates, Norton maintains that Hume's scepticism is restricted to his theoretical philosophy, and he emphasizes that only in Hume's practical philosophy is sentiment the standard of truth. The expression "common-sense moralist" is based on C.D. Broad's use of such a designation to denote the view that moral approbation or disapprobation arises from the contemplation of actions or characters, which are virtuous or vicious in themselves, whether or not they are perceived. Norton refers to this opinion as "moral realism", harking back to Shaftesbury, who called himself "a realist in morality", and he contrasts this with "moral scepticism", which denies the objectivity of moral distinctions. Lest the terminological purist be offended, Norton notes that there are ample precedents for the applied use of the term "scepticism" in the moral sphere, including that set by Hume himself, when he criticised the theories of Hobbes and Mandeville.

As for scepticism in metaphysics, the author sees little use in a simplistic characterisation of scepticism as such, the mere word "doubt", for example, being uninformative. Norton believes, however, that present-day theorists, taking their cue from Reid and Beattie, tend to see scepticism as a kind of negative dogmatism. He considers Hume's scepticism to be basically a matter of his inability to provide a foundation in reason for "natural beliefs".

According to Norton, Hume's speculative and practical philosophies differ from each other both in

origin and in execution, each being conceived in response to the two crises of the epoch, the moral crisis and the speculative or Pyrrhonian crisis. Only if, says the author, one grasps the important differences between Hume's metaphysical and moral theories, can one do justice to Hume's thought.

Norton aims at interpreting Hume in his historical context, and he prefaces his interpretation of Hume's moral philosophy with chapters on moral scepticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and on Francis Hutcheson's theory of the moral sense.

In the first of these he sets the scene by recalling the collapse of the Scholastic synthesis as a result of the voyages of discovery, the Reformation and the new science. This last had no place for the categories of virtue and vice, and it effectively banished them from the real world, i.e. the world accessible to science and reducible to mere quantity and motion. The initiator of the moral crisis in England was Thomas Hobbes, who, Norton argues, viewed man as essentially selfish and moral distinctions as arbitrary. Of the two principal responses to Hobbes the one, represented here by Cudworth, attempted to treat the propositions of morals as analogous to those of mathematics, while the other, which first achieved prominence through the writings of Shaftesbury, insisted that moral distinctions are objectively real and made known to human beings by means of "affections of the mind". Norton mentions many points of similarity between the doctrines of Shaftesbury and Hume, among them, a protest against one-sided dependence on reason, an emphasis on the importance of observation, a conception of morality as grounded in human nature with its innate moral dispositions and as consisting in harmony between the selfish and the altruistic tendencies, an insistence (derived

presumably from Bayle) that morality is independent of religion, a conviction that morality is necessary for the maintenance of society, etc. While careful to point out that the influence of the moral-sense theory on Hume should not be overestimated, Norton does accept Kemp Smith's view that the significance of Hutcheson for the development of Hume's philosophy was considerable. He goes on to show that Kemp Smith misinterpreted Hutcheson's moral theory as non-cognitive and subjectivistic, whereas it is in fact "realistic". For Hutcheson the moral sense is a faculty capable of perceiving independently existing objects, viz. virtue and vice. In contrast to Shaftesbury's vague conception of the moral sense the Hutchesonian version is that of a faculty analogous to the external senses, "a determination of our minds to receive amiable or disagreeable ideas of actions when they occur to observation" or the sense by which "we perceive virtue or vice in ourselves or others". Norton emphasizes that there is not the slightest doubt that for Hutcheson the moral qualities are in the object, and when they are apprehended, they cause approbation or disapprobation in the observer. In addition, Hutcheson's theory of the moral sense is underpinned by the notion of a benevolent Providence, which has equipped man with the moral sense and guarantees the veracity of his moral perceptions.

In the third chapter the author sets forth his interpretation of Hume's moral theory, assigning a much greater role to reason in the process of moral deliberation than that allowed it by most commentators. He insists that Hume's polemic against the moral theories of the rationalists must not be taken to entail the opinion that moral evaluations are completely non-rational.

But the central problem for Norton is that of the mode of existence of moral qualities. Does Hume think that they exist in what is observed, or merely in the observer, as some passages seem to indicate? Norton is in no doubt that Hume, like Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, was a "realist in morality", for whom "virtue and vice have objective status". Hume is not an "affective subjectivist in morals". He does not claim that morality is merely sentiment. When the observer feels an action to be vicious, the feeling is in his own mind, but what caused this feeling was something in the mind of the perpetrator of the action. Only when the observer can reason to the existence of enduring vicious propensities in the mind of a particular agent, does he feel moral disapprobation in its full force. A character is felt to be vicious if it is perceived to be selfish and detrimental to the interests of individuals or of society as a whole.

The author terms Hume's ontology of morals "elusive". He quotes the Treatise, "No action can be virtuous, or morally good, unless there be in human nature some motive to produce it, distinct from the sense of its morality" (T 479) and he then asks what it is that transforms natural entities into moral entities. After proposing an answer in terms of "emergenticist" theories he eventually concludes that Hume did not develop the complex ontological terminology which would have enabled him to describe how virtue and vice arise.

The third chapter closes with a consideration of the differences between the moral theories of Hume and Hutcheson. Hume is less optimistic than Hutcheson (or Shaftesbury) regarding the extent of natural benevolence. He is more consistently empirical than Hutcheson, and he does not fall back upon providential

design as a guarantee of the reliability of moral sentiments.

Norton's fourth chapter is entitled "The Providential Naturalism of Turnbull and Kames". The author refers to both men as Hume's "foils", and the point of the chapter is that both writers did in fact extend the method of Hutcheson's moral theory into the speculative field, precisely what Kemp Smith claimed that Hume had done.

The fifth chapter, "Hume's Scepticism Regarding Natural Beliefs", opens with a survey of views concerning Hume's relationship to the Scottish common-sense philosophers. Norton rejects the opinion propounded by Kemp Smith and others that there was no fundamental disagreement between them. Considerable space is devoted to the question of providential design as the guarantee of the reliability of "natural beliefs". The author goes on to show that the role of reason in Hume's theoretical philosophy is other than that assigned to it by Kemp Smith. The theory that Hume entirely subordinates reason to the non-intellectual side of man is pronounced to be untenable. Norton insists that "naturalism" in Kemp Smith's sense is but one aspect of Hume's philosophy, not an attribute of the whole. "Mitigated naturalism" in Hume is merely the counterpart of "mitigated scepticism".

The concluding chapter, "Traditional Scepticisms and Hume's Scepticism", reviews the five kinds of scepticism which were important for Hume, "ethical or moral scepticism, religious scepticism, antecedent or Cartesian scepticism, Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism," and assesses Hume's view of each. His opinion of Pyrrhonism, for example, is held to be distorted, and it is asserted that Academic scepticism is in fact further removed from Hume's own point of view than many utterances in his work would indicate.

It must now be considered whether Norton, in propounding a corrective to the interpretations of Reid and Beattie and Kemp Smith and asserting that Hume's speculative and practical philosophies differed from each other in origin, method and substance, does not himself err on the side of excess. The real challenge to the interpreter of any major philosopher is to discover the unity, the underlying intention, behind the seemingly dissimilar or disparate aspects of his work. Norton, having rejected two opinions that Hume's philosophy is indeed all of a piece, either sceptical or non-rational, does not seem ever to have considered whether there might yet be another possibility of coming to grips with Hume's philosophy as a whole. He merely capitulates before the appearance of heterogeneity and attempts to find a foundation for what he perceives as disunity. This he discovers in the theoretical and moral scepticism allegedly rife in Hume's day. But for want of definition he misjudges the nature and extent of epistemological scepticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and he never grasps the true character and import of Hume's own scepticism.

His survey of moral scepticism and reactions to it in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is interesting as far as it goes, but there are gaps. There is no evidence that Hume was ever disquieted by the selfish theory of Hobbes and Mandeville, but there is every evidence that he went through a moral crisis of his own, which was intimately connected with his attitude to religion and his eventual decision to embark upon the project of the science of human nature. Norton writes that "Hume allied himself with the friends of virtue as early as 1739" (p. 134). Has he never read the letter to Arbuthnot of 1734 or the so-called "Early Memoranda" or Boswell's report of his

words shortly before his death? Does he not realise that Hume knew what he wanted to say in the third book of the Treatise long before 1739?

It is impossible to understand Hume's moral theory without reference to his efforts to sever the connexion between morality and religion, which only a few of his contemporaries questioned. Yet Norton along with countless other commentators seems to think that Hume's writings on religion are not an integral part of his "system", but a mere appendage to the main body of his work, which like, say, the essays on economics, may safely be neglected or dealt with separately.

Nevertheless, Norton's chapter on Hume's moral theory is the most successful in his book, though it would have been better had he been able to gain sight of the basic unity of Hume's thought and to consider how the various parts of his philosophy throw light upon each other. He might then, for example, have realised what lay behind Hume's "elusive" language regarding the ontological status of virtue and vice and thus spared himself much agonising. He quotes most of the relevant texts here without realising their true import. Hume was, in short, trying to define the ontological status of virtue and vice in such a manner as would make them significant to human beings only and not to lower animals or, more importantly, to superior beings. With the rationalist systems of morality and natural religion in mind, Hume reasoned that the reduction of good and evil to relations judged of by reason, whose standard is "eternal and inflexible, even by the will of the Supreme Being" (EPM 294), entailed the direct involvement of the Supreme Being in questions of morality. Sentiment, on the other hand, is merely implanted in human nature, as the Supreme Will has formed it (ibid.) It is necessary for the conduct of life and the survival of society and the

human species, but it is of no signficance outside the human sphere. It is at this point that Hume's letter of March 1740 to Hutcheson, the "is-ought" passage, the essay, "On the Immortality of the Soul", and the conclusion of the Dialogues, to name but the most important texts, all intersect with each other and illuminate this otherwise puzzling aspect of Hume's moral theory. That being said, Norton's view is still upheld: Hume was a realist in morality. But the use to which he put the moral-sense theory was utterly different from that which its original proponents intended.

A related question posed by Norton can also be answered by reference to the religious background. Norton and others look for a greater gap between the natural and the moral, a greater recognition of moral achievement, than Hume allowed for, and they cannot, consequently, make sense of the passage quoted above "No action can be virtuous..." There is a passage in Section XIV of The Natural History of Religion, too long to quote here, which provides the best commentary on this "undoubted maxim". But the key sentence is perhaps the following: "...the whole man, if truly virtuous, is drawn to his duty, without any effort or endeavor". In other words, Hume thought it was actually easy to be good, once the ascetical demands of Christianity (or Stoicism) had been abandoned. And many of his contemporaries, including several who professed and called themselves Christians thought likewise. Archbishop Tillotson, one of whose sermons Hume quoted at the outset of his chapter on miracles, also preached a sermon entitled "The Precepts of Christianity Not Grievous".

Norton's failure to look to the unifying elements of Hume's philosophical activity in its entirety makes his discussion of Hume as a "sceptical

metaphysician" unsatisfactory in its conception and its outcome. What was the point of the experimental method, as Hume redefined it in the first book of the Treatise, other than to direct the observation of human behaviour, so that the observer could draw conclusions regarding the general rules of truly moral, i.e. truly human, conduct? What men actually do and can do, not the ideals they subscribe to, was to be taken as the norm. Does not the introduction to the Treatise promise progress in the field of natural religion? Is this unrelated to what Hume actually accomplishes in the Treatise?

Here again, Norton's chapter is adequate as far as it goes, but it is much too narrow in scope, focussing more on the by-products of Hume's studies in scepticism than on the main thrust of the sceptical arguments and paradoxes, which are directed against the rationalist systems of morality and natural religion. There is a lot more here than the mere resolution of the tension between the assumptions and expectations of ordinary life and the doubts about them which the slightest reflexion can call forth.

Norton's initial failure to delimit Hume's scepticism proves to be a mistake. He could easily have used the words of Shaftesbury quoted on p. 243, adding to them a word or two of Hume's on knowledge (certainty) and probability.

While the author's emphasis on the role of reason in Hume's theoretical philosophy is important and useful, he does not drive home the point that the deliberation required before the involuntary attitude of "belief" is reached in causal reasonings is analogous to that necessary before the equally involuntary sentiment of approbation or disapprobation that is felt in moral evaluations.

The final chapter is of little use. The reader, having forced his way through the potted histories of Pyrrhonism and Academic scepticism, is rewarded only with the insight that 'there is yet more to be learned about his (Hume's) scepticism, for some aspects of it are not to be found in the earlier sceptics." (p. 279) Peirce, Moore and Wittgenstein are then consulted, but not because of anything they said about Hume.

Norton wishes to enlarge the historical context within which Hume's philosophy should be considered. Unfortunately, his coverage is not as extensive as it should be, and he does not attempt to explain why Hume was susceptible to various "influences". Furthermore, he does not give due weight to the figures he selects. In underestimating the importance of Shaftesbury he is not alone, but it is known that Hume bought (and presumably read) the Characteristicks in 1726, before Hutcheson's Inquiry appeared. There is no doubt that Hume was influenced by Hutcheson, but never to the extent which Kemp Smith and Norton assume. Butler's influence, never fully appreciated by the commentators, is apparent in Hume's views on probability, sympathy, the normal man ("the bulk of mankind") as embodying moral norms, etc., and it is Butler's opinions on liberty and necessity, personal identity and eternal rewards and punishments, which are under attack in Treatise I.IV.VI. and II.III.I. and elsewhere. Hume did read Cudworth, but it was Clarke's rationalism which he most thoroughly rejected, even though it was much more fashionable and influential in Hume's formative years than any version of the moral-sense theory. Why did Norton, having neglected all this, waste his readers' time with 22 pages on Turnbull, who was of no importance whatever for Hume? Neither he nor Kames could justifiably be called Hume's "foils".

Finally, Norton might at least have mentioned in the course of the 17 pages devoted to Kames that Hume wrote to Kames approvingly of his view of personal identity. (Letter of 24 July 1746)

As for questions of presentation, there are a number of flaws throughout the book, a lack of caution or qualification, for example, when Hume's views on the category of substance are mentioned, a curious definition of scepticism at the outset, a confusion (common to many authors) of "belief" in the context of causality and "natural belief". Berkeley's dictum is rendered "esse est percipere". The style is, in general, boring and repetitive. A more judicious use of the India rubber, especially in the final chapter, would have shortened the book by a third. The material in the chapter on Turnbull and Kames should surely have been saved for an article or two.

Nevertheless, this reviewer is willing to forgive much in an author who has taken such great pains to show that Hume was a realist in morality. It is to be hoped that this chapter will move those who talk so glibly of Hume's "emotivism" or "subjectivism" to look again at all the texts. It remains an achievement for Norton to have arrived at this unfashionable but true account of Hume's view of moral distinctions. More's the pity that Professor Norton could not see that there is yet more to Hume's philosophy that has hitherto met the eye.

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