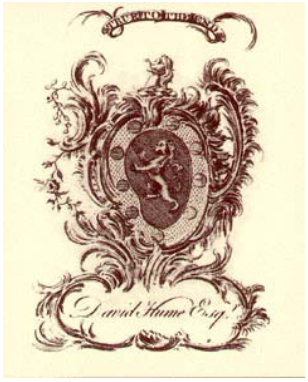

Review of David Pears, *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of his "Treatise"*

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David Pears. ***Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of his "Treatise."*** Oxford: University Press, 1990.[1]

David Hume's appeal that the *Enquiries "may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles"* [2] is once again denied in *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of his "Treatise,"* by David Pears. In his postscript Pears explains his neglect of the *Enquiries*:

> the light that it [*Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*] does throw is softer and more diffuse, whereas the *Treatise* is a young man's book in which the structure of his thought emerges more starkly and with sharper outlines. (p. 199)

While tracking the main themes of his rigorous treatment of Hume, I will show that the gratitude we owe Pears is qualified by some minor difficulties. In at least one case, when dealing with Hume's account of perception, Pears ought to have consulted the softer light of the *Enquiry*.

Pears' account of the first book of the *Treatise* constitutes an attempt to redress the balance upset by past Hume scholarship. He maintains that Hume's theory of mind addresses both of the questions that have served as platforms for opposing interpretations of the *Treatise*. Some commentators have concentrated solely on Hume's theory of idea derivation as it responds to the question, What ideas may we legitimately have? Others have explored Hume's account of the role of ideas in thought as it responds to the question, What may we legitimately believe? When we succumb to the temptation to favour one of these questions, we fail to appreciate the relationship between Hume's account of meaning and his account of truth. The temptations are admittedly powerful. As a psychological version of semantic theory, Hume's account of meaning is strikingly similar to that of the Logical Positivists. But the failure of such interpretations to account for the bulk of Hume's discussion in any but dismissive ways can lead us to consider Hume's notion of idea derivation an "inherited framework on which he constructed his naturalistic system" (Pears, 9).

Pears insists that these two thrusts, meaning and truth, occupy positions of equal importance in Hume's theory. Hume answers both questions, and his answers are related. Neither a sceptical positivist nor an unqualified naturalist, Hume is something in between, a "cautious naturalist" (ibid., viii, 64).

In his first four chapters Pears separates and exposes the two strands of Hume's theory of mind. Along the way he pauses to patch several inadequacies which his treatment reveals. He then applies this two-pronged theory to the three central problems of the *Treatise*: causation, personal identity, and perception.

Hume himself addresses each of these problems without abandoning his deceptively simple theory of idea derivation:

> *all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*[4]

If we substitute 'word' for 'idea' and 'thing' for 'impression', we arrive at a formula very much like Russell's atomism. In a sense, Hume is also an atomist. The simplicity of his 'simple' perceptions is that of phenomenological indivisibility. Yet Hume's concerns are broader than Russell's. For Hume's principle accounts even for the meaningless ideas (images) that occur as mere data. Whatever their status, all ideas are caused by impressions of which they are exact replicas.

Tidy though it may be, this theory can account neither for ideas not derived from impressions nor for the variety of ways in which ideas participate in thought. Pears suggests that Hume need not worry about impressionless ideas if he will both restrict his theory of idea derivation to *meaningful* ideas and allow that meaningless ideas can be derived laterally from other ideas. Pears recognizes that such measures would cost Hume his atomism, while he takes it for granted that Hume's empiricism would be left intact (p. 27). But I suspect that such measures would challenge Hume's empiricism by altering the sort of simplicity exhibited by 'simple' perceptions. If simple ideas can be derived from other ideas, can the parent ideas still be phenomenologically indivisible?

The other problem is more troublesome. Nothing intrinsic to an image tells us whether it is meaningful or meaningless, general or specific, a memory or a fantasy, a belief or a conjecture. Hume's theory of idea derivation accounts only for content, but the differences between the ways in which our thoughts occur are extrinsic to them. They involve the different functions that our ideas perform when we think in the active, directed ways that we do. Hume's theory has no place (no official place anyway) for function. On his account, thinking is assimilable to passive perception.

Pears describes Hume's acrobatic attempts to account for these differences within the confines of his theory. Sometimes, for example in the case of the missing shade of blue, Hume shrugs off the fact that our discovery results from active thinking. In other cases, for example

when he explains how an idea can provide a general signification, he covertly appeals to function by depending on a general term annexed to the idea. Pears repeatedly criticizes Hume for thoughtlessly enlisting the guidance of language. Had Hume examined this "guide" more carefully, he would have realized his neglect of the roles of function, choice, intention, and action in our thinking.[5]

These are pedestrian manoeuvres compared to the ways in which Hume attempts to account for memories and beliefs. These kinds of thoughts are "would-be bearers of truth" and as such are "more than meaningful." Whereas we might draw on the resources of linguistic analysis to provide the propositional content and singular references to the world required by such thoughts, Hume had only his theory of idea derivation. Caught between a need to fix the content of such a thought and the need to explain mental phenomena solely via perceptions, Hume is forced to posit a special property of the thought's content. He invokes the "force and vivacity" of the *manner in which we conceive* the content to account for *both* the truth claim *and* the meaning of such thoughts.

If Hume cannot explain the general features of our thought, then we will not expect him to solve complex philosophical problems concerning causation, personal identity, and perception. Surprisingly, Pears takes the scantiness of Hume's theory of mind to be an advantage. What the theory lacks in explanatory power, it gains in freedom and flexibility. In particular, this looseness allows Hume to maintain a strategic stance somewhere between that of the rationalists and that of the naïve empiricists.

According to Pears, Hume is not a sceptic about causation. His theory of meaning has no place for the extra content of causal statements—he has nothing to be a sceptic about. But this does not force Hume to accept that causal statements can be reduced to what is contained in his phenomenological account of them. Hume avoids the conflict by turning away from meaning and toward belief.

For Hume, only causal inferences will take us beyond immediate perception—they are the only kind that produce belief. Our beliefs are shaped by the fact that our minds are attuned to three of the relations that hold among things in the world. Of those relations neither resemblance nor spatio-temporal contiguity can meet the referential and evidential requirements of belief. While Hume's appeal to the association of ideas cannot explain why or how the ideas that result from causal relation achieve the status of beliefs, it leads to a fair *description* of our beliefs. Hume's naturalism is partly theoretical and partly descriptive.

Beliefs are fundamentally audacious, and we form them through habit rather than through demonstrative reasoning or direct

perception. For Hume, there will always be a gap between the evidence and the belief which strives to follow it. Our only evidence for causal inference is constant conjunction, and this convinces us to make audacious inferences from the first to the second member of a constantly conjoined pair of events. That our inferences are audacious only shows that where reason fails us, nature supports us.

Hume has great difficulty accounting for the "impression of necessity" that attends our causal inferences. He calls it an impression because he hopes to explain this essential feature of causal inference from within the confines of his theory of idea derivation. His reluctance to alter his atomism leads him to consider, somewhat in vain, what special intrinsic properties could account for our feeling of being forced along an associational path.

Given that Hume's account of personal identity, like his account of causation, arises from his theory of mind, it is interesting that Hume later offers a recantation of the former but not the latter. But as Pears points out, the bond between identical "selves" is much harder to establish than that which relates cause and effect. When Hume criticizes the pre-theoretical notion of personal identity, he not only applies identity criteria that are too austere even for material objects, but he also refuses to treat "persons" as mind/body couples. The notion of personal identity receives all of the criticism that that of identical material objects evokes but none of the spatial differentiation that material objects enjoy.

For Hume, a person (mind) is nothing but a sequence of related ideas and impressions. The relations between these ever changing impressions and ideas draw the mind along so smoothly that the illusion of identity arises. Pears characterizes Hume's view nicely: "We are like travellers on a road so perfectly constructed that we do not feel that we are moving" (p. 136). Since Hume's perceptions are objects that exist without occupying any location, the only relations that could produce this illusion are resemblance and causation—spatial contiguity is excluded.

According to Pears, Hume fails to notice that no theory of identity can be settled without an understanding of differentiation. In addition to offering a concept of person that is impoverished by being left body-less, Hume fails to realize that minds cannot be differentiated without some reference to the world. His oversight prevents him not only from having a compelling account of personal identity, but also from having a coherent account of what qualifies as a mind. Although Hume later realizes that there is a problem, he shows no awareness that he needs to do more than find a stronger relation to replace the excluded spatial contiguity.

I can now return to my opening remarks where I suggested that Pears ought to have consulted the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. For I believe that he fails to account for some important features of Hume's account of perception and the external world.

I agree with Pears that Hume construes the non-philosophical attitude toward the world as "uncategorized," "pre-theoretical," and even "pre-reflective." But I do not believe that this view could be, or is meant by Hume to be, characterized as "ontologically neutral" (Pears, 152-53). Pears seems to insist that Hume portrays the non-philosophical belief in body as one which takes no stance on the distinction between mental occurrences and physical objects. The view of "the vulgar" may well be unquestioned, but it is an unquestioned faith in the existence of physical objects. There is some ambiguity in the way Hume talks about the "vulgar" view in the *Treatise*. The extent of the ambiguity is surely exaggerated by Pears who, beginning by being astonished that Hume could offer this view, spends several pages explaining why Hume only *seems* to be attributing quite different views to the non-philosophers, and several more pages pointing out that Hume fails to preserve "neutrality" (p. 63). He later suggests that Hume's attribution of this belief constitutes an error which damages his account of perception (p. 163). I take it that Hume would endorse his clarifications in the first *Enquiry*:

> This very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist, independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. Our presence bestows not being on it: our absence does not annihilate it. (E 151-52)

Later Pears construes Hume's rejection of the senses and of reason as possible causes of our belief in body as a strategic elimination of the naïve empiricist and rationalist points of view. This construal fits into the pattern of Hume's strategic approach which Pears has emphasized in his discussion of each of the main problems of the *Treatise*. But Hume's arguments against the senses and reason overflow strategic elimination. There are, in fact, three arguments that Hume considers when he talks about perception. The third argument I refer to can be found in "Of the modern philosophy"—two sections away from the arguments Pears discusses (T 225). Here again, a consultation with the first *Enquiry* would have helped. For in the latter, the three arguments are collected into one place, and their conclusions are listed together (E 155).

Unhappily, Pears' account does not seem to leave room for Hume's own revision of his work. If Hume took the non-philosophical view of

the world to involve a commitment to existing physical objects, then Pears' careful trailmarkings indicate not Hume's lapses, but rather his real opinion. Pears' scenario, wherein Hume slips between neutrality and physicalism at crucial points, might have to change with consideration of the discussion in the *Enquiry*. Similarly, if Hume argues against *three* possible accounts of the external world, then we must at least question whether Hume was as interested as Pears suggests in strategically protecting his "sophisticated empiricism." At the most, we must question whether or not Pears is leaving out an important part of Hume's treatment of the problem.

On the whole, *Hume's System* is a thorough and carefully argued encounter with Hume's *Treatise*. The prospect of balance in interpretation is appealing. Pears' project would be even more appealing if he had balanced his account of Hume's early writing with insights drawn from Hume's own revision of that work. It would also have been more appealing if Pears had not had to "balance" Hume's ideas so often by fitting them to a systematic structure they to some degree resist.

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1. Ideas developed in this review arose during a Hume seminar conducted by John Bricke at the University of Kansas, 1991.
2. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1986), 2 (hereafter cited as "E").
3. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1989), 4 (hereafter cited as "T").
4. While I agree that Hume might have attended more to the language he imported into his account (for example, general terms), I think Pears goes too far when he suggests that Hume's introspection should have taken the form of an investigation into language. See Pears, 74.

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