



**Norms for a Reflective Naturalist: A Review of Annette
Baier's *A Progress of Sentiments***

Jane L. McIntyre

Hume Studies Volume XIX, Issue 2 (November, 1993), 317-323.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

Book Reviews

Norms for a Reflective Naturalist: A Review of Annette Baier's *A Progress of Sentiments*

JANE L. McINTYRE

ANNETTE C. BAIER. *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Sentiments*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

A Progress of Sentiments presents Annette C. Baier's reflections on the *Treatise*, and on how to read the *Treatise*. Displaying some of the reflexivity that Baier sees as characteristic of the *Treatise* itself, these two aspects of her work—her interpretation of the main philosophical themes of the *Treatise* and her theory *about* its interpretation—are intimately connected.

Baier's interpretative approach is fairly simple to state, but its employment leads to a work that is complex and subtle. Baier takes the three books of the *Treatise* to comprise a unified work exhibiting a progression of thought. This does not mean merely that the later books build upon the earlier ones, but also that the discussions of the later books shed light upon, and *complete*, the discussions of the earlier books. "One cannot say that epistemology is done, and finished with, within Book One, that passions are reserved for Book Two, and that Book Three is an appendix of interest only to moral philosophers" (vii). Within each book of the *Treatise* as well, later parts and sections reflect back on the earlier. On Baier's view, the *Treatise* cannot be read (*as it often has been*) as a series of discrete essays: every theme, even familiar

topics often dealt with in isolation from the rest of the *Treatise*, such as causal inference and personal identity, must be understood in the context of the account of human nature presented in the completed work. When Baier surveys the *Treatise* from this standpoint, two interrelated themes stand out. First, the whole philosophical enterprise in the *Treatise* is "a search for norms with the sort of grounding a reflective naturalist can accept" (97). As will be discussed below, Baier argues that Hume develops such norms, not merely with respect to moral evaluation but also with respect to the understanding, particularly in our causal reasoning. This is connected to the second of Baier's themes, that Hume aims in the *Treatise* to enlarge our conception of reason, "to make it social and passionate" (278).

Baier's work displays her interpretative approach in every chapter by drawing upon passages from throughout the *Treatise*, weaving connections among them. Her extensive discussion of the passions, for example, is especially valuable precisely because it integrates the relatively unfamiliar themes of Book Two into the *Treatise* as a whole. Underlying issues in Book Two that serve to forge links with Books One and Three are identified:

Reflexivity, indirectness, conflict—these are the opening themes [of Book Two] and they are all themes that are of importance for understanding Hume's version of morality, as well as being themes that are carried over from Book One. (134)

Baier's account of association provides an example of a familiar topic transformed by this interpretative approach. Even readers who are well acquainted with all three books of the *Treatise* will find challenges in Baier's wide-ranging discussion. Not only does Baier bring together the well-known material from Book One with the less recognized but relevant sections from the later books, she also analyzes this material in a highly original way. Baier notes that the *Treatise* deals with three kinds of associations: associations among persons, among passions and among ideas (52). She argues that, far from being Newtonian, social and biological metaphors drawn from personal associations dominate all these accounts, even in Book One. Baier has her own view of what this entails for a Humean account of reason, which is only fully developed in the final chapter of her book, and this will be commented on below.

As described by Baier, the reflective naturalist's search for norms is not an altogether peaceful journey. Each of the individual books of the *Treatise* depicts conflicts: in Book One, deep conflicts within solitary "Cartesian" reason; in Book Two, conflicts between our sympathetic concern for others and the tendency to treat others as a mere backdrop for ourselves; in Book Three, conflicts between the points of view of different persons, as they approve and disapprove of their own characters and the characters of others.

Baier draws rather freely upon a passage from the end of the *Treatise* to develop a Humean account of the norms that enable us to resolve at least some of these conflicts. In the conclusion of Book Three Hume writes "...a mind will never be able to bear its own survey, that has been wanting in its part to mankind and society" (T 620). In this image of the mind "bearing its own survey" Baier sees the kernel of Hume's account of norms throughout the *Treatise*. Each book of the *Treatise* is involved in a search for those mental operations (of the understanding, the passions, or morals) that can "bear their own survey"—that is, mental operations that are revealed as neither unstable nor self-contradictory when they are self-consciously analyzed by the very processes that produced them. Such mental operations are, according to Baier, "successfully reflexive" (97; 99). Our causal reasoning, our due sense of pride, and our moral sentiment all, when understood in a Humean fashion, pass this special test of critical self-examination.

Further, the development of these norms is progressive, "gathering new force as it advances" (T 455; Baier, viii). Hume presents causal explanations, especially in his account of the passions in Book Two of the *Treatise*, that conform to the norms of causal reasoning developed in Book One (82; 93). The causally explained indirect passions of Book Two that have persons as their objects, such as pride, are most stable when reflected and joined by others. The moral approval of character traits, such as due pride, in Book Three, requires a similar, though more abstract, perspective, in which the sentiments of others, communicated by sympathy, play an analogous corrective and stabilizing role (134–5). I believe that Baier sees the moral sentiment, which Hume explicitly says (T 619) wins its own moral endorsement, as the last of a series of such successfully reflexive norms.

Baier's most detailed discussion of the development of successfully reflexive norms occurs in the context of her comprehensive and, in many respects quite original, treatment of Hume's account of causal inference, in chapters Three and Four. Though they are unlike most of the rest of her book in paralleling the order of Hume's text rather closely, these chapters illustrate very clearly Baier's general strategy of interpreting the parts of the *Treatise* in the context of the argument of the whole work and, in particular, of using the later books to illuminate Book One. Baier argues:

The *Treatise*, from start to finish, traces what appear to be causal dependencies. Hume began with the dependency of our ideas on our impressions, and he ends Book Three with worries about the effects of his own "abstruse" moral philosophy on his readers' conception of morality. This last turn of thought is a typically Humean one—he turns his moral reflections on themselves. This is the very essence of "reflection," to turn a mental operation back onto itself and its source, and I shall argue that Hume does this with causal inference in

Book I, Part iii. He had relied on causal inference before that point in the *Treatise*; he relies on it during it; and he will rely on it after it. (55)

The *Treatise* cannot be coherently interpreted as distrustful of causal inference because “unless some [causal inferences] are well grounded, most of the claims of the *Treatise* itself will be groundless” (56). Further, Hume’s discussion of causal inference culminates in the distillation of rules (that is, norms) “by which to judge of causes and effects,” which tell us something about the account that has preceded them. The context of the discussion of causal inference both within Book One, Part iii and within the *Treatise* as a whole, Baier argues, does not support a sceptical interpretation of Hume’s view.

The initial stages of Baier’s account of how causal inference becomes normative are familiar. Human minds are sensitive to constant conjunctions in nature. When we experience them, the ideas of the constantly conjoined events become associated. This gives rise to a tendency to draw inferences from the believed occurrence of one of the pair to the other, accompanied by a feeling of determination in the mind. This is the impression that is the source of our idea of necessity, which we have a tendency to project back onto nature. At this point, Baier introduces another feature of human nature as it is described by Hume: human beings are reflective and curious. When we reflect on this idea of necessity, we can formulate *and confirm* causal hypotheses about the origin of this idea. This prompts continued attention to the constant conjunctions that affect us, and our habitual responses to them. We form new hypotheses concerning them, which can also be confirmed or corrected. As we become increasingly self-conscious of the causal conditions of the causal inferences we make, we can, with increased self-confidence, endorse *as rules* the experience-based, self-correcting habits we have become aware of.

It has already been made clear that Baier’s interpretation of Hume is not sceptical. However, her emphasis on the conversion of habits into normative rules also sets her interpretation apart from most other philosophers who view Hume as a naturalist. Although I find this aspect of her interpretation appealing, I was puzzled by Baier’s relative inattention to those habits of mind that are not successfully reflexive. If all of our habits turned out to be successfully reflexive, they would have little claim to normative endorsement—they would be merely our habits, like the habits of non-reflective beings. Baier does briefly address the question of whether advocates of the “monkish virtues” would take them to be successfully reflexive, and argues that they could not do so (215–16). She suggests, without much argument, that non-causal reason is shown to fail the test of successful reflexivity in I iv 1 (96). In other places, however, she sees norms of causal reasoning as operative in the critique of non-causal reasoning (10–12). Viewed this way, the

rationalists' employment of reason does not self-destruct—rather it joins in an alliance which ultimately proves subversive. Perhaps on this topic Baier needs to “collect all the different parts of this reasoning” to provide a more detailed account of groundless beliefs as the products of insufficiently grounded norms.

In summarizing Baier's account of the development of successfully reflexive norms for causal reasoning it is difficult to avoid giving the impression that the being reflecting on its habits is an isolated, if not Cartesian, intellect. While there is no explicit reliance on others in Baier's account of the reflection that leads us to endorse our habits of causal reasoning, Baier does not take Hume's overall perspective in Book One to be individualistic or solipsistic (32), although she thinks that Hume reverts to something *like* this position in Part iv of Book One (120). In fact, the conflicts she sees within Book One are only overcome ultimately by dropping reason's solitary stance (123). The habits that Hume endorses are, after all, shared habits (18). One of the ways in which the *Treatise* presents a progression of thought, according to Baier, is in the turn from the narrow conception of reason as the activity of solitary intellects to the broader vision of reason as a virtuous trait of passionate and social beings.

A prominent conflict in Part iv of Book One, one which leads to some of the most despairing passages in the conclusion of that book, is the apparent inconsistency between our causal reasoning and our belief in the continued existence of physical objects. In the masterful and insightful analysis of the conclusion of Book One which opens *A Progress of Sentiments*, Baier argues that the sceptical crises of Book One, Part iv, are overcome by the return of the thinker to society. This is not merely a diversion from insoluble problems, but a way of resolving them. For, the apparent sceptical conclusions of Part iv are dependent on the assumption of the reasoner's isolation from other reasoners. The analyses and arguments of Books Two and Three of the *Treatise* clearly reject the near-solipsism of Part iv of Book One, providing the resources to solve that book's problems (141–2). “We need each other's help in judging the fidelity or “truth” of representations, and we have that help” (47).

Baier's interpretation of Hume draws on the social dimensions of his account of human nature to dispel the despair brought on by the examination of sceptical systems of philosophy. We are curious, and seek the truth; we are also concerned with our reputations, including our reputations for good judgment (280). We need, and create artifices to extend, trust. We are, at least to some extent, sociable truth seekers, able to enter into mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements. We can therefore overcome the limitations of the solitary investigation into truth. “We trust the ‘testimony’ of our senses, more or less as we do the testimony of our fellows. We learn from experience, and from reflection on that experience, that most testifiers can, in some conditions and on some matters, speak falsely, and maybe that some few rarely speak

truly" (119). Like determining the trustworthiness of testimony, determining the trustworthiness of the senses is a social task. "We reflect together on what points of view we should take as standard, as ones from which we correct what appears from other points of view" (119). Appealing back to her discussion of association, Baier writes, "If my claims about Hume's use, in his epistemology, of metaphors taken from the social and the personal realm are correct, then it should come as no surprise that true reason and true beliefs are abstract variants of true friends" (287). It is our passionate and social nature that capacitates us for the cooperative approach to epistemology which Baier sees as implicit in the *Treatise*.

Baier admits that Hume does not actually say what she does about the nature of this rehabilitated reason. Even those who have argued that the role of reason has been given insufficient emphasis in interpretations of the *Treatise* do not go as far as Baier does in attempting to outline a new Humean epistemology. If Baier does not convince everyone of the correctness of her view, the comprehensiveness of her interpretation, and the seriousness of the attempt to make sense of the three books of the *Treatise* as a whole, will set a very high standard for her critics. For, they must either argue persuasively against her theory of interpretation, or draw as fully as Baier does on the whole of the *Treatise* to argue for a different position. It will, I am sure, take the resources of many other Hume scholars to evaluate the success or failure of this aspect of Baier's work in detail, but that in itself reflects the spirit of her work.

The strengths of Baier's interpretative approach are illustrated most clearly in her account of the self that is striving for reflexive self-understanding and self-approval throughout the *Treatise*. Hume's discussions of personal identity in Part iv of Book One and in the Appendix to the *Treatise* have, of course, been the focus of much scholarly attention and debate. Only recently, however, have they been placed in the context of the *Treatise* as a whole. Annette Baier's earlier work certainly encouraged this salutary trend.

"Of personal identity," according to Baier, describes the self as it can be known through the understanding alone. The view arrived at from this limited perspective is of the self as a complex causal system of perceptions, with "not very definite boundaries" (127). So described, the self has little relation to the persons of Book Three whose characters and character traits are the subject of moral approval and disapproval. Book Two supplements and completes the account of Book One, most notably, as Baier sees it, by dropping the constraints of Book One that make the self appear a "phenomenal wraith," instead treating persons as ordinary individuals of flesh and blood. Such persons, concerned with themselves and with others, with all the variety, contrariety, and sympathetic communication of their passions, form the rich (though often ignored) subject matter of Book Two, transforming the complex

minds of Book One into the recognizable persons of Book Three. Baier maintains (correctly, in my view) that Hume does not retract the denial in Book One of a simple self. The persons who are the objects of the indirect passions in Book Two are, as physical and passionate beings, still to be understood as complex and changing (130). Baier carries her account of persons and their passions forward with a very thorough and detailed treatment of Hume's moral theory as an account of the morality of character.

The comprehensive scope that is definitive of Baier's approach to the *Treatise* is also reflected in her thorough documentation of the views of other scholars, both those she agrees with and those with whom she takes issue. Although the narrative of her text is only infrequently broken by the discussion of other philosophers' interpretations or arguments, her endnotes are meticulous in the placement of her work in the context of Hume scholarship. These notes, the useful brief chronology of Hume's life, the engravings of Hume at different stages of life, and the beautiful color reproduction of the portrait of Hume owned by Ian Ross all reflect the care that has gone into the production of this book.

A Progress of Sentiments is a richly rewarding exploration of the complex unity of the *Treatise*, and a review can hardly do justice to the breadth of Annette Baier's interpretation or her mastery of the details of Hume's text. Many philosophers will be challenged by *A Progress of Sentiments* to re-think how they read the *Treatise*. Though some may disagree with Baier on "particular points" and a few may judge the more speculative parts of her interpretation to be the result of a "warm imagination," no one will be "a loser in point of pleasure."