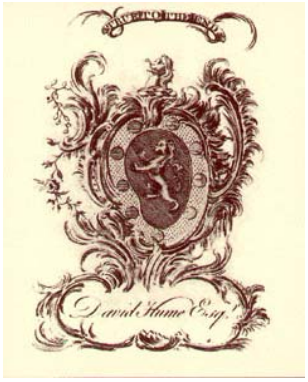

J. J. MacIntosh and H. A. Meynell, eds. ***Faith, Skepticism & Personal Identity: A Festschrift for Terence Penelhum***

Paul Russell

Hume Studies Volume XXI, Number 2 (November, 1995) 351-354.

HUME STUDIES
Volume XXI, Number 2, November 1995, pp. 351–354

J. J. MACINTOSH and H.A. MEYNELL, eds., *Faith, Scepticism & Personal Identity: A Festschrift for Terence Penelhum.* University of Calgary Press, 1994. xviii + 304. $27.95 paper

This substantial collection of essays reflects Terence Penelhum's distinguished contribution to several related fields of philosophy. The essays fall into three sections: "Philosophy of Religion," "Hume Studies" and "Identity and the Self." The contributors include several prominent thinkers in the relevant fields. Those who have contributed to the section on Hume's philosophy are Annette Baier, Alasdair MacIntyre, Antony Flew, and David Fate Norton.

Baier's essay offers an analysis and interpretation of Hume's *Natural History of Religion*—an important but rather neglected work. Baier suggests that NHR is "an attempt to see what happens when we direct upon religion the very forces that it expresses" (62). Hume's "meta-religious meditations," she argues, turn us from questions concerning the causes of the universe, to questions concerning the causes of human beliefs about the (invisible) universe-cause; they express not fear of an "incompletely known super-human power," but rather "fear of the power of religious fears"; and they suggest "hope that our hopes can be redirected to an end to religious intolerance and religious wars" (65 and cp. 74). Her discussion concludes with an especially interesting description of Hume's "meta-piety"—the show of "proper respect for the only partially understood forces that drive people to ordinary piety" (79). Hume expresses due meta-piety by his "serious concerns about the dangerous force of religious conviction as it is normally found" (79). To overcome these dangers we need more than strength of understanding. A "true reflective religious attitude," Baier reads Hume as saying, requires that strength of understanding "will be accompanied by calm passions if the worst evils of religion are to be avoided" (80). Specifically, it demands a "calm hope; calm, informed, but also ignorance-admitting curiosity; and, where necessary, due fear; all taking as their object religion as it has more commonly been found in the world" (81). Penelhum notes that Baier's paper "is full of detailed insights and fills a real gap in the literature" (251). He emphasizes the point, however, that Hume's effort at "religious self-knowledge" does not imply that Hume himself had "the religious motives being scrutinized" (252).

Baier's paper on NHR is evidently sympathetic with the general project in that work. Commentators have not always been so kind. For example, Rev. William Warburton tried to have Hume's work suppressed on the ground that the "design" of this work is "to establish *naturalism*, a species of atheism, instead of religion." (For details, see Mossner, *Life of Hume*, 325–26.) Alasdair

MacIntyre's contribution to this *Festschrift*, while not concerned with NHR, shares Warburton's assessment of the significance of Hume's naturalism for matters of religion. The central thread of MacIntyre's piece is an attack on the philosophy of science which, he claims, lies behind Hume's arguments against (belief in) miracles. Hume's empiricism commits him to the view that we never have adequate reason for *accepting* that a miracle has occurred on the basis of *testimony*. However, MacIntyre points out that Hume also maintains a naturalism that suggests that for every event that occurs there is a natural law (i.e., some relevant regularity) that explains it. If science is founded on naturalism of this kind, then, says MacIntyre, "science leaves no place for the miraculous" (92). The final section of MacIntyre's paper is devoted to sketching an alternative view of philosophy of science that is "able to do justice both to the powers and regularities of the natural order and to the occurrence of miracles" (96–99). In response, Penelhum agrees that Hume is committed to the naturalistic argument and he agrees that this argument should be rejected. However, Penelhum sides with Flew's "more conservative reading" (against MacIntyre) in holding that Hume does not rely on the naturalistic argument in the miracles section of the *Enquiry*.

The basic issue raised in MacIntyre's paper leads on very nicely to Flew's paper, which is a critique of Hume's views on necessity and freedom. According to Flew, Hume is incapable of understanding the nature of causation because he is committed to a Cartesian ("paralytic's-eye view") of it (109n). Following Locke, Flew maintains that it is through our experience of *agency* that "we acquire, apply, and validate the idea of causation and its component notions of factual necessity and factual impossibility" (109). In this regard, Flew distinguishes between our experience of "movings" and "motions." In the case of "movings" we have experience of being agents faced with "real choices" and "open alternatives." In the case of "motions" we have experience of "confronting factual necessities and impossibilities" (114–15).

Penelhum shares Flew's libertarianism and also rejects Hume's "dogmatic appeals to the causal principle" (265). Moreover, he finds it "remarkable how eager so many theoreticians have been to prove the truth of the nightmare possibility that our conviction of personal powers is illusory" (267). He is, however, less confident than Flew that our general belief "in the reality of personal powers" or "liberty of indifference" serves to establish its truth (266–67).

Finally, David Norton writes on the subject of Hume's scepticism. Norton seeks to defend Hume from two charges. First, Myles Burnyeat has claimed that Hume's criticism of the Pyrrhonists assumes without argument that it is impossible to live without belief. In reply Norton points out that Hume attends "in detail...to the nature of belief and to the manner in which it arises" (137). In this regard, Norton pays particular attention to the contrast between

Descartes and Hume on the subject of belief and the will. Second, Norton also defends Hume's scepticism against Penelhum's criticism (in *God and Skepticism*, 1983) that Hume's scepticism is not "consistently livable" (120–21 and 136–37). According to Norton, Hume recommends *philosophical* (in contrast to *psychological*) doubt (129). His objective, so interpreted, is not an effort to place us in a state of "uncertainty" or to require us to suspend our ordinary beliefs. Rather, Hume's scepticism involves an "intellectual activity or philosophical method" that encourages the reflective thinker to avoid dogmatism and to recognize the limitations of our faculties. In this way, "effective and viable" scepticism does not seek to inhibit (involuntary) belief, but rather to change its *character*—i.e., to "moderate or mitigate" it (130). So the "fundamental aim of Hume's academical scepticism is not disbelief, but mitigated belief" (132). Norton proceeds to describe the benefits of "Humean scepticism" with respect to the regularity of nature, the historicity of miracles, and the existence of God.

Penelhum's reply to Norton is especially interesting. He grants that "this program, whatever is to be said for it or against it, is indeed livable" (269). However, he remains convinced that Hume's basic "recommendation to confine our attentions to science and common life, though certainly one we can follow, is nevertheless arbitrary in a striking way" (269). Penelhum holds that Hume has no *principled* basis for claiming "that philosophical examination of the sphere of our natural beliefs is profitable, whereas the philosophical examination of religious and metaphysical themes is not profitable—indeed, that the volumes containing it should be committed to the flames" (270). Stripped of its rhetoric, Penelhum maintains, Hume's position "amounts to little more than saying that metaphysics and philosophy of religion are too hard, which is hardly an argument"(270). Penelhum concludes this discussion by suggesting that Hume's limitations on theological speculations are more likely connected with his (independently) negative attitude to religion, than they are to "his general recommendations about the value of sceptical attitudes" (270).

All the Hume essays in this collection are illuminating contributions to the interpretation and criticism of Hume's philosophy. Penelhum's replies are characteristically lucid, open-minded and penetrating. These contributions, taken along with the related papers (and replies) in other sections, are a worthy tribute to Penelhum.

Let me close by suggesting that as a philosopher and commentator on Hume, Penelhum follows in a tradition that can be traced back to certain members of the moderate clergy in eighteenth century Britain—individuals such as Butler and Reid. This tradition also includes Hume's "philosophically minded friends in the Moderate clergy"—to whom Penelhum refers in his "Comments and Responses" (254). Suffice it to point out, therefore, that the

tradition and style of criticism of which Penelhum is a distinguished representative, is one that Hume himself held in great esteem.

PAUL RUSSELL
Department of Philosophy
1866 Main Hall E-370
University of British Columbia
Vancouver BC V6T 1Z1 Canada
e-mail: prussell@unixg.ubc.ca