



Steven Shapin. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England*

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STEVEN SHAPIN. *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth Century England*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994. xxxi + 483. \$29.95/£23.95 cloth.

When sketching out a genealogy of the "will to truth" in his "Discourse on Language," Michel Foucault pointed to the rise of the new science in seventeenth century England as marking one of the crucial moments in the history of Western disciplines of knowledge. Foucault's remarks (and approach) served as the starting point for one of the most influential recent works on the genesis of the experimental philosophy, *Leviathan and the Air Pump* (1985), in which Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer used the debates over the meaning of Robert Boyle's experiments with the air pump to illustrate the nexus of knowledge and power in Restoration England. In this exemplary new book, Shapin returns to Boyle in order to investigate further the social relations embedded in the form of natural philosophy promoted by the Royal Society of London in its formative years.

Put simply, Shapin's theoretical argument (which serves as the backbone for this study) runs as follows. Historically, empiricists have valorized personal experience as the foundation of human knowledge. Yet their rhetoric obscures the fact that much of what we count as knowledge about people and things comes to us secondhand, through the reports, testimonies, and writings of others. The central question is thus posed: how do we assess what others tell us? His answer is that ultimately we regulate our beliefs on the basis of our moral estimate of those upon whom we depend for our information. For Shapin, knowledge rests on trust, and hence is inseparable from social relations.

When applied to the context of seventeenth century England, Shapin's thesis proves highly illuminating, for he shows how gentlemen were typically seen as trustworthy sources for the truth about humankind and the natural order, and how closely assessments of credibility were calibrated to the perceived social rank of the informant. Transposed to the sub-culture of the experimental philosophy, these features of the English form of life had important consequences. According to Shapin, Boyle was able to mobilize his status as a gentleman in order to secure his place as a faithful interpreter of nature and, echoing other scholars, he suggests that the early Royal Society was likewise able to trade on the privileged social standing of many of its Fellows in order to establish its credibility. Secondly, he draws on little-examined sources to reveal how reports, experiences, and observations were routinely evaluated by the experimentalists with reference to the social position of the individuals involved. Thirdly, Shapin indicates that Boyle's reservations regarding the use of mathematics were bound up with his

decidedly non-Galilean view of the *Book of Nature* and his sense that the “conversation” between experimentalists would be disrupted by the importation of standards and expectations appropriate to the transactions of mathematicians. Finally, in an especially stimulating chapter he explores how the subordinate status of the technicians employed by Boyle and others to carry out scientific work meant that they were not usually regarded as genuine members of the experimental community and were thus “invisible” (women were likewise excluded, although Shapin has less to say about this).

Readers of *Hume Studies* will find much to ponder in this impressive book. For those of a primarily philosophical bent, Shapin’s sociological approach to epistemological questions may well raise some hackles, but true Humeans who recognize the role of custom and convention in the production of knowledge will be receptive to his message and will welcome his invocation of Hume in the text. For those mainly interested in historical matters, Shapin’s analysis raises a number of questions.

Thanks to the work of Michael Barfoot, we know that Hume was exposed to Boyle’s presentation of the experimental philosophy at a formative stage in his career, yet the full details of the connection between Boyle and Hume remain unclear. At the very least, Shapin’s discussion of Boyle should help us to decode the meaning(s) of Hume’s appeal to the practice of experimental philosophers in the *Treatise* (and elsewhere). Unfortunately, Hume scholars have been slow to pick up on the relevance of Shapin’s earlier treatment of Boyle’s formulation of the experimental ethos for our understanding of Hume’s science of the mind, and one hopes that what he has to say in the present book about such issues does not meet with a similar fate. Moreover, Shapin’s handling of the social dimensions of Locke’s reflections on probability and testimony in the *Essay* invites extension to Hume’s writings, while his reconstruction of the codes of gentlemanly culture has considerable bearing on how we should view Hume’s social milieu and the ideal of politeness he espoused.

Given the differences between Restoration England and the Scottish Enlightenment, Shapin’s insights into Boyle will have to be used with care when applied to the study of Hume, but, such concerns notwithstanding, there is little doubt that *A Social History of Truth* offers a fresh and potentially rewarding perspective on a variety of Humean themes. In the spirit of Boyle and his fellow experimentalists, Shapin offers us the opportunity of entering into a scholarly conversation—we would do well to accept his invitation.

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