



Anne Jaap Jacobson, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of David Hume*

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Book Reviews

ANNE JAAP JACOBSON, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of David Hume*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000. Pp. xi + 323. ISBN 0-2710-1971-9, cloth, \$55.00. ISBN 0-2170-1972-7, paper, \$19.95.

This collection of thirteen essays and editor's introduction is part of a "Re-reading the Canon" series that includes already published volumes of feminist interpretation of philosophers ranging from Plato and Aristotle to de Beauvoir and Derrida. The essays in this volume on David Hume cover the breadth of his work and aim to engage it with the concerns and challenges characteristic of feminist scholarship. No doubt many of us would welcome an essay collection of uniformly high quality to provide feminist perspectives on Hume and the philosophical questions he addresses; such would be useful, for example, to supplement standard reading in courses on Hume or early modern philosophy. Although I hesitate to recommend the volume as a whole in such a capacity, a number of the essays warrant the attention of scholars and students of Hume's writing.

All but one of the essays in the volume are published here for the first time. The usual constraints preclude discussing each in turn or doing justice to the breadth of offerings. Instead, I briefly discuss here some of the more noteworthy contributions.

Christine Swanton's "Compassion as a Virtue in Hume" aims to defend the status of Humean compassion as a virtue against two Nietzschean doubts. The first stems from Nietzsche's claim that pity involves "infection" with the

pain of another and, so, arouses aversion to its object. Viewed thus, one may doubt that Humean compassion—involving as it does sympathy with another's suffering—is possible, let alone a virtue. Second, because pity involves a comparison of another's plight with our own, Nietzsche suggests it is vulnerable to ignoble motives: perhaps pity allows us to take pleasure in our comparative superiority or prompts us to aid its object only out of cowardice, lest our own vulnerability be revealed.

Swanton draws on Hume's account of "the double sympathy" (*Treatise of Human Nature* II ix) in order to defend him against the first problem. This is no easy task, given Hume's somewhat hydraulic picture of the passions, but Swanton carries it off well. Noting the role of benevolence in Humean pity, Swanton explains how sympathy with another's great pain at the same time arouses a benevolence that involves one empathetically in another's interest in a way that produces not aversion but a concern for the alleviation of their suffering. Thus is pity possible on Hume's picture. The stronger case that pity is a virtue, Swanton argues, must take into account pity's scope and depth. The limited scope of the passion goes some way toward extricating it from Nietzsche's charge that "Pity *increases* the amount of suffering in the world." The limited depth of the passion—it is only faintly felt where the original impression of pain is slight—addresses the worry that pity is destructive of personal projects and values. However, Swanton raises the interesting question of whether the pain that nonetheless accompanies pity or compassion precludes pity from being a virtue, given that Hume says we disapprove of traits of character that are "immediately disagreeable" to their possessor. Here I find Swanton's answer on behalf of Hume—that what is "usual" or "common" in human beings constrains the criteria for virtue—less compelling. The defender of Humean virtue does better, I think, to focus on Hume's elaboration of the point of view from which assessments of traits of character are authoritative in order to examine the sense in which Humean appeals to what is common in human nature function for Hume in a normative, rather than statistical, sense. Swanton does attend to this corrected point of view in defending Hume against the second Nietzschean objection. There she argues that Hume's account of the corrected point of view of sympathy warrants the judgment that compassion undermined by ignoble motives is a vice.

Overall, Swanton provides an insightful discussion of Humean compassion, one likely to prove promising for a feminine ethics of care and, more generally, any ethics that gives a prominent role to compassion and kindred virtues.

Joyce Jenkins and Robert Shaver are more sanguine about Hume's promise for women. In their "'Mr. Hobbes Could Have Said No More,'" the authors

take up a controversy over Hume's account of justice in the second *Enquiry*. In particular, they direct a critical eye at Hume's claim that "although we should be bound by the laws of humanity to give gentle usage to" rational creatures inferior to us in strength of body and mind, we "should not, properly speaking, lie under any restraint of justice with regard to them" (quoted on 137). Against contemporary Hobbesian interpretations of Hume on this score, the authors argue in favor of a broadly utilitarian Hume. They deny that Hume requires mutual advantage as a necessary condition on the introduction of justice and instead read him as requiring the increased total well-being of the concerned parties. In the process of defending this interpretation, the authors advance an original and engaging argument concerning Hume's preference for humanity over justice in the case of such "inferior" creatures. The authors also make good use of evidence from the essays that suggests that Hume regarded women as weaker than men by nature (rather than only by social conditioning) to argue, against scholars such as Annette Baier, that the more promising utilitarian regarding the necessity of justice owed women is not Hume but Mill.

Hume's thoughts about aesthetic judgment receive attention from essays by Jacqueline Taylor and by Christopher Williams, though with different aims and varied results. In "Hume and the Reality of Value," Taylor enlists Hume's character of the true aesthetic judge to support a reading of Hume as a realist of sorts about moral value (127–8). Taylor eloquently invokes the insight that Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay imparts to Lily Briscoe—in Taylor's view, the insight that it is our sociality, the interdependence of our thoughts and sentiments with those of others, that lends meaningful shape to a life—as a literary analogue to a thought whose philosophical expression she finds in Hume. Taylor argues that the insight in Hume gives rise to an understanding of the differing importance of different objects of evaluation, an understanding that contributes to authoritative standards of evaluation, such as those for the moral evaluation of character traits. In taking as her primary focus for the emergence of authoritative standards of evaluation Hume's true judge, Taylor invites some interesting reflection on the relationship between Hume's thoughts on moral and aesthetic evaluation. However, Taylor's focus on pressing the analogy prevents her from considering the ways in which it may break down. At the least, the fact that Hume himself stops short of using the device of a true judge in the moral realm warrants further comment.

Whereas Taylor's essay on moral evaluation relies on a perhaps too strong analogy with Hume's true aesthetic judge, Williams's essay on aesthetic evaluation ("False Delicacy") errs in failing to discuss the true aesthetic judge in

any detail at all. Williams takes up what is in Hume's essay a thorny problem concerning the proper evaluation of works of art that some may regard as morally offensive. In Williams's view, Hume's own solution to the problem turns on whether a difference between ourselves and a character represented in a work is one some of us can imaginatively traverse (244). If so, then a person unable to relate to the work reveals a fault in himself: false delicacy. If the work remains alien to all of us, however, we can stand firm in our conviction that the fault is in the work. Williams rightly notes four problems with this supposed solution (see 245–50). Nowhere, however, does Williams attend to the question of how Hume's own appeal to the true judge—a character Hume spends a good portion of the essay discussing—might enable him to avoid these problems. Were he to do so, I suggest, Williams would find that Hume himself has responses to at least two of the four (those Williams refers to under the headings of “too much jealousy” and a “narrow conception of morality”). Hume may have a more difficult time escaping the remaining problems Williams raises for him. Unfortunately, however, Williams's reading disadvantages Hume from the start.

I also recommend to the reader the contributions by Kathryn Temple (“‘Manly Composition’: Hume and the History of England”) and Jennifer Herdt (“Superstition and the Timid Sex”).

Although one might find points of disagreement with the arguments of these essays, they raise some interesting points of debate. It is less clear how to assess philosophical essays, such as Jacobson's “Reconceptualizing Reasoning and Writing the Philosophical Canon: The Case of David Hume,” that view with skepticism the fact that “logical argumentation is very widely considered to be essential to philosophical methodology, and consistency a sine qua non of the acceptable work” (61). Perhaps charity dictates excusing as rhetorical flourish some claims, such as Annette Baier's in the volume's one previously published essay (“Hume: The Reflective Woman's Epistemologist?”): “To dismiss as hopelessly contaminated all the recorded thoughts of all the dead white males, to commit their works to the flames, could be a self-defeating move” (20). (*Could?*) However, examples such as these are likely to serve little purpose other than providing fodder to feminism's foes. This presses the question—a question I expect other readers of the volume will put to themselves—of what is feminist about these “feminist interpretations” of Hume? At their best, the essays exhibit a clear critical sense guided by concerns arising from attention to questions of gender, power, and their interconnections. At their worst, posturing takes precedence over good thinking.

Finally, the collection also includes essays by (in order of appearance) Genevieve Lloyd on Hume on the love of truth, Aaron A. Smuts on Hume's use of gendered metaphors in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*, Nancy J. Hirschmann on the conservatism of Hume's political philosophy, Susan A. Martinelli-Fernandez on the feminist potential of a Humean theory of moral education, and Sheridan Hough on the potential of Humean empiricism versus Nietzschean anti-essentialism with regard to the improvement of women's condition.

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