



Terence Penelhum. *Themes in Hume: The Self; the Will, Religion*

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Book Reviews

TERENCE PENELHUM. *Themes in Hume: The Self, the Will, Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000. Pp. xix + 294. ISBN 0-19-823989-3, cloth, \$55.00.

The thirteen essays (three of which appear in print for the first time) that constitute this volume clearly show that for over four decades Terence Penelhum has been among the most perceptive writers on Hume. Although he carefully spells out the historical context of Hume's discussions in a number of these essays, Penelhum's metier is not identifying antecedents or targets, but instead analyzing with clarity Hume's views and revealing their interconnections and defects. In doing this, Penelhum succeeds not only in drawing out the implications of Hume's philosophy but also in displaying its richness. As its title indicates, the work focuses on three areas in Hume's writings: (1) his discussion of the self and personal identity, (2) his views on moral psychology and freedom of the will, and (3) his treatment of religious belief. Because Penelhum's views on these matters have not been static, one virtue of this collection is that the reader can follow the evolution of his thoughts about Hume. In particular, each of the new essays, "Hume, Identity and Selfhood" (chapter 6), "Hume and the Freedom of the Will" (chapter 8), and "Religion in the *Enquiry* and After" (chapter 11), serves both as a summary of Penelhum's current thinking on the topic and a commentary on his previous work.

Penelhum's general view of Hume is fairly standard if not entirely uncontroversial. He takes Hume to be a systematic philosopher in the Socratic tradition, who seeks self-knowledge through the construction of a science of human nature; in effect he suggests that Hume's primary aim is psychological not philosophical (179). However, he is not doctrinaire about Hume's ultimate philosophical goal in this volume. It is the specific manifestations in, for example, Hume's skepticism, the reversal of the usual philosophical roles of reason and passion, and the denial of a particular sort of self, personal identity and freedom, that interest Penelhum, and on which he has provocative and often compelling things to say.

After an initial chapter that provides a general overview of Hume's philosophy, the first section of the work begins with Penelhum's seminal 1955 article, "Hume on Personal Identity." In this article he argues that Hume's critique of the common person's practice of ascribing identity to changing things, including the mind, is itself mistaken. Penelhum believes that whether or not the identity of something is compatible with change depends on the kind of thing it is, not on the concepts of sameness and identity. He also disagrees with Hume in holding that the common person is aware of change in some instances in which identity is ascribed. In the succeeding four chapters he modifies this position only slightly (113), and proceeds, in chapters 4 and 5, to explore the relation of Hume's account of personal identity to his discussion of the passions in Book II of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and, in chapter 6, to his expressed dissatisfaction in the work's Appendix. He also responds to critics of his interpretation and Hume's account. In the third chapter, "Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited," Penelhum offers arguments against those who think that Hume is not criticizing the common ascription of identity but rather accepting a weaker sort of identity, "imperfect identity," as well as those who think Hume's account presupposes the very unity of mind he is attacking. According to Penelhum the former cannot account for Hume's claim in his discussion of personal identity, as well as in his discussion of the continued and distinct existence of objects, that we confuse identity or sameness with closely resembling objects (48, cf. 109). Interestingly, he also considers the "logical construction" analysis of the concept of a mind anachronistic and non-Humean, since it de-psychologizes Hume's position and fails to capture what he takes to be the common man's view of the mind's identity (54ff. 112ff). Penelhum argues convincingly for the following points: In discussing personal identity Hume is concerned with the unity of the mind not the individuation of minds or persons, the distinction between oneself and others, an issue he never deals with directly (50ff, 121). This distinction is a presupposition not a product of the mechanism by which

the passions are generated for Hume (94–5, 121). Evaluations and moral criticism of the appropriateness of certain emotions, e.g., pride, require the independent establishment of selves' temporal boundaries (78). Although he accepts Donald Ainslie's view that Hume's dissatisfaction in the Appendix concerns the problem of synchronic identity, the alleged unity of mind in apprehending at one time its varied contents, including past perceptions, Penelhum does not think this is actually an insuperable problem for Hume's view (117ff).

Throughout this section of the book there are numerous suggestions of tensions between Hume's view of personal identity and the discussions in Book II of the *Treatise*. One case was noted above, namely, the assumption in Hume's account of the passions that there is a basis for distinguishing oneself from others. But there seems to be a more striking tension for Penelhum, that concerns whether particular emotions can be correctly ascribed given Hume's denial of personal or mental identity (60, 64, 77–8, 85, 123). For instance, to properly or justifiably take pride in certain accomplishments requires that I am the very person who has performed or done them. However, on Penelhum's reading, even if it is intelligible for a perception to reflect on prior perceptions (55–6, 151, 172) and generate a false belief in identity, the perceptions still cannot constitute or be part of the same or identical thing for Hume. I am inclined to think that the supposed tension instead indicates that Hume does accept a weaker sort of identity. I find it hard to read the paragraph in the section on personal identity in which Hume compares the soul to a republic without supposing that this is the sort of identity that is being affirmed. Even conceding Penelhum's point that for Hume the common ascription of identity is muddled does not settle the issue of what sort he, himself, accepts. Consider the analogy with Hume's discussion of causality (cf. 112). That the common and philosophical ascription of the concept of causality is muddled for Hume neither shows that the everyday use of causal language is always (or even generally) inappropriate for him nor that his insights about the confusion do not give rise to his own analysis of the concept.

Penelhum is most critical of Hume in chapters 7 and 8, "Hume's Moral Psychology," and "Hume and the Freedom of the Will," which compose the second section of the book. He believes that Hume has failed to distinguish adequately talents and virtues (148ff, 174ff), is mistaken in contending that only judgments or beliefs can properly be deemed unreasonable (150), and argues against libertarianism by somewhat dogmatically holding that every event has a cause (165ff). Most importantly, he thinks that the Humean concept of freedom, which in Penelhum's view allows for "unexploited opportunities" but not unexercised powers, is inadequate for moral evaluation

and appraisal or for Hume's concept of virtue (155, 176). Penelhum's discussion of Hume's explanation and/or justification of the principle "same cause-same effect" and how it differs from the principle of universal causality is one of the most interesting parts of chapter 8. Whether or not Hume clearly distinguishes these principles, Penelhum quite correctly sees that the two are logically distinct.

In the third section of the work, which includes three essays on Hume's view of religious belief, as well as essays on Hume and Butler and Hume and Pascal, Penelhum has intriguing things to say on many topics: the nature and practical efficacy of Hume's skepticism; the affinity between Hume and fideists; the aims and arguments of sections 10 and 11 of the first *Enquiry*. Yet if one concern can be said to be central for Penelhum in trying to fathom Hume's view of religious belief, it must be the significance of Philo's "confession" in part 12 of the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. It is fair to say that the debate about Hume's view of religious belief would be much less lively today if this part had been excluded from the work. Perhaps it is not surprising that in his discussion of it Penelhum's views change rather noticeably over time. In the first essay, "Hume's Scepticism and the Dialogues" (chapter 9), he holds that (a) Philo represents Hume (194), (b) Hume is holding a limited deism (197), (c) religious belief of a certain sort is a "natural" belief for Hume (199), and (d) Hume's position at the end of the *Dialogues* is closer to the skepticism espoused in the *Treatise* than to the "mitigated skepticism" of the first *Enquiry* (200). By the appearance of the second essay, "Natural Belief and Religious Belief in Hume's Philosophy" (chapter 10), four years later, Penelhum has surrendered or at least modified his belief in (c) (207ff.) and questioned whether (a) and (b) are correct (220ff.). Finally, in the new essay, "Religion in the *Enquiry* and After," in addition to a more emphatic rejection of (a) and (b) (241ff.), Penelhum claims that Hume's view concerning religious belief in the *Dialogues* is not different from that in the first *Enquiry* (243). Insofar as the sort of skepticism endorsed in section 12 of the latter fairly describes the positions taken in sections 10 and 11, one could say that Penelhum has renounced (d) as well.

Penelhum's current view of the final part of the *Dialogues* is substantially more plausible than his earlier reading in chapter 9 of this volume. As Penelhum himself notes (209), it is difficult to accept or take literally some of Philo's earlier statements in part 12, for example, those in paragraph 8, which seem to turn his previously stated position on the problem of evil on its head. Hume's irony is not confined to part 12 of the *Dialogues* but also occurs in the concluding statements of his discussions of religious topics in the first *Enquiry*. One thinks of what Flew calls his "smirking genuflection of piety" in

discussing the reconciliation of God's ultimate causality and the presence of sin at the end of section 8, and his remark at the end of section 10 that faith in Christianity is a "continued miracle."

Although I do not disagree with Penelhum's general observation that the *Dialogues* "does not incorporate any real change from the positions of the *Enquiry*" (243), I have some doubts about his reading of Hume's concluding remarks in section 11 of the *Enquiry*. Penelhum thinks that Hume is "bringing out his most destructive weapon" and showing that "natural religion has no theoretical basis" (234) in claiming that natural religion relies on an illicit use of causal reasoning due to the singularity or uniqueness of the supposed cause and effect. Whereas Hume's "friend" is arguing that there are limits on what the proponent of natural religion can legitimately infer about the cause of the universe, Penelhum takes Hume to be claiming that the proponent cannot make any legitimate inference about it whatsoever. But this is not exactly what Hume says in the concluding paragraph. He says that causal inference is illicit where the supposed cause and effect are "so singular . . . as to have *no* parallel and *no* similarity with any other cause or object, that has ever fallen under our observation" (my italics). It is not the singularity or even uniqueness per se that makes them unfit objects for causal inferences but their lack of any similarity with all other known things. As Penelhum notes, the same point resurfaces in part 2 of the *Dialogues* (where the objects are supposed to be "without parallel or specific resemblance"). Yet in the later work, the presentation of this argument results in Cleanthes's claiming that there is an evident similarity and introducing the case of the articulate voice in the clouds. This suggests that Hume may not have thought his point to be decisive against natural religion, even if in the *Enquiry* the particular position under attack by Hume's friend is also vulnerable to Hume's parting shot.

It should be apparent from the preceding comments that *Themes in Hume* contains a wealth of ideas that will intrigue and benefit Hume scholars, especially those with a special interest in any of the three areas to which the work is devoted. Yet because of Penelhum's lucidity this is a valuable work for anyone interested in Hume, and I certainly would not hesitate to recommend it even to those who are barely acquainted with his philosophy.

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