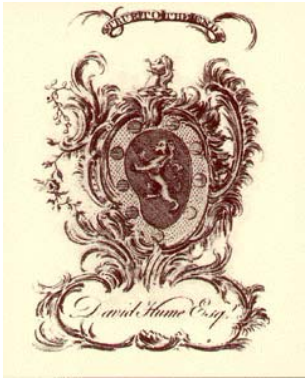

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Book Reviews

STEPHEN BUCKLE. *Hume's Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of* An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2001. Pp. xiv + 351. ISBN 0-19-825088-6, cloth, £40.00, $55.00.

An excellent companion to Hume's first *Enquiry*, Stephen Buckle's study offers a systematic overview of Hume's philosophy from the standpoint of his later period. Buckle hopes to instill new interest in the importance of Hume's *Enquiry*, against the tide of what he sees as excessive enthusiasm for Hume's early philosophy, represented by *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Buckle laments the trend, especially in undergraduate philosophy courses, of selectively anthologizing bits and pieces of the *Enquiry*, while preferring the *Treatise* as the more definitive, or at least the more interesting or teachable, of Hume's writings. Buckle wants not only to take the *Enquiry* out of the shadow of the *Treatise* into its own light, but to go further in restoring balance to their distorted relation, making a case for the greater relative importance of the *Enquiry* over and above the *Treatise*.

Buckle's argument is developed on several fronts. He addresses some of the misinterpretations that have surrounded Hume's own statements of attitude toward the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. He characterizes Hume's project in his early and later works, comparing the two books with respect to their overall designs and the maturing of Hume's position and philosophical and literary acumen in the intervening years. Finally, and most crucially, Buckle

establishes the value of the *Enquiry* by contrast with that of the *Treatise*, and, contrary to the opinion of legions of commentators, offers a coherent unified interpretation of the *Enquiry*, in which the novelty and significance of the later writing emerges clearly. If we are to see the *Enquiry* in its true nature as a distinctively Enlightenment tract, Buckle recognizes that the book must be understood to stand on its own terms, as an original work whose special message should be grasped as something more than a restatement of Hume's *Treatise* conclusions. The *Enquiry*, if Buckle is right, is not merely a reformulation intended to procure for Hume, as he states in an unfortunate expression that Buckle is at pains to set right in its historical context, "a certain literary fame."

The *Enquiry* has many points of affinity with the *Treatise*. It is, for all that, a different project of the later Hume, reflecting an evolved set of preoccupations, especially involving his ambivalent fideism or atheism in the philosophy of religion, and his disavowal of the Enlightenment's favored argument from design for the existence of God. Rather than extract from Hume's first *Enquiry* passages and whole chapters isolated from the argument structure to which they belong, Buckle demands to understand the book as a whole, and to interpret its connecting themes that other less patient or penetrating and attentive commentators have overlooked. What has been especially lacking in more standard treatments of Hume's first *Enquiry*, Buckle maintains, is a good understanding of Hume's later skepticism, and how it fits exactly into his theory of perception and knowledge within the application of the experimental method in philosophy, progressing from epistemology to philosophical anti-theology, with chapters pursuing a consecutive series of topics from the origin and association of ideas to skepticism, probability, necessary causal connection, necessity and liberty, the reasoning abilities of animals, miracles, and the concept of a particular providence and possibility of an afterlife.

Buckle's book is divided into three parts, "Approaching the Text," "The Argument," and "Conclusion." The "Conclusion," however, is barely five pages long, and as such hardly deserves to rank as a distinct part. Knowing that the work grew out of Buckle's lectures on Hume's *Enquiry* at the University of Sydney, Australia, in 1993–98, it is tempting to imagine the second main part of the book as a revision of Buckle's seminar commentary on Hume's original text, and the first part providing context for the commentary in the form of Buckle's reflections on the significance of Hume's later thought in its relation to the *Treatise*. The first part on "Approaching the Text," in my estimation, is the most interesting, original, and valuable part of Buckle's discussion. It is here that he inquires in detail and against a rich historical background of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century science, philosophy, religion, and literature

into the cultural milieu in which Hume was educated and in which his thought developed over several decades.

Buckle's reconstruction features a particularly insightful critical exposition of Hume's concept of experimentalism. The idea of experimental philosophy is essential not only for understanding the later Hume of the *Enquiry*, but also for the *Treatise*, which famously promises to apply the "experimental method of reasoning to the moral sciences." It is generally assumed that by this turn of phrase Hume means something vaguely associated with empirical methodologies that gained prominence after the decline of the great rationalist system building of the previous century. Buckle rightly sees Hume's experimental philosophy as more of a continuation of prior philosophical ideologies and at the same time underscores its unique innovations that are often lost sight of in less thoroughly informed explanations of Hume's methodology.

To grasp exactly what is meant by experimentalism in Hume is more difficult and elusive than seems to be recognized in much of the secondary literature on Hume. Buckle traces the central features of Hume's experimental philosophy through such obvious influences as Isaac Newton, but in greater depth and with more discernment than the usual accounts. More intriguingly, Buckle discovers vital roots of Hume's experimentalism in the scientific research methods and natural philosophical doctrine of Robert Boyle. Buckle highlights specific points of connection between Boyle and Hume indicated by similarities in their choice of terminologies that Buckle argues cannot merely be coincidental. The effect of Buckle's historical researches is to place Hume's theory of knowledge in an intelligible framework that permits a more informed comparison of the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. The fruitfulness of the approach is especially evident in the manner it permits Buckle to illuminate Hume's preoccupation with problems of skepticism in the *Enquiry*. Buckle turns to some surprising sources, such as Hume's eulogy to Newton in his *History of England*, in identifying the origins of Hume's experimentalist philosophical method. Buckle maintains and documents the influence of Newton and Boyle on Hume's philosophy as interwining skepticism and experimentalism from their very inception in the rise of Enlightenment science, arguing that skepticism provided the chief incentive for verifying the discoveries of natural philosophy. Hume in the *Enquiry*, according to Buckle, further exploits the connection between skepticism and experimentalism in staking out the precise limits of experimental science and philosophy and understanding the scope and limits of inductive reasoning in analogical proofs for the existence of God.

Although I have minor reservations about the content of Buckle's argument, I highly recommend his study of Hume's *Enquiry*. Buckle may go too far

in concluding that the *Enquiry* is more important than the *Treatise*. I prefer to see the two masterworks as equally significant in understanding Hume's thought as a whole, each in their respective ways and written from Hume's changing philosophical outlook at different times in the development of his philosophical career. For similar reasons, I would claim that Buckle exaggerates the extent to which contemporary scholars of Hume's ideas have tended to emphasize the *Treatise* at the expense of the *Enquiry*. If the *Treatise* is more widely read and more highly regarded as an expression of Hume's philosophy, I doubt it is for the reasons Buckle cites, having primarily to do with misinterpretations of Hume's assertion that in writing the later volume he sought "literary fame." I largely agree with Buckle's interpretation of this remark, given the conventions of the time and the connotations of these terms in their historical setting, which Buckle persuasively sets out. I think, however, that if Hume's remarks in this instance need to be read with a grain of salt, then so does his comment that he wishes the *Enquiry* only to be consulted as the definitive statement of his philosophy, as opposed to the *Treatise*, which, he reminds us, referring to its anonymous publication, he had never publicly acknowledged.

Whether, from a pedagogical as opposed to scholarly standpoint, there has been an unfortunate practice of anthologizing Hume's *Enquiry* in a disconnected fashion, mining it for arguments at the price of grasping its overall structure, is another issue. I do not doubt that this has happened, but I do not suppose that this has been done to any greater extent to the *Enquiry* than to the *Treatise*. There the distinction between impressions and ideas, the "analysis" of causation, typically confused as such for Hume's account of the origin of the idea of causation, and similar tidbits, are as much deplorably extracted from their proper holistic place in Hume's early system as are the fragments of Hume's later work on human knowledge. I, too, generally regret the practice of carving out interesting arguments from their philosophical contexts in larger more comprehensive philosophical works, both in philosophical inquiry and in teaching philosophy. Nor do I regard the constraints of the undergraduate classroom, of getting beginning students started somewhere and somehow as a legitimate excuse for severing arguments from their moorings in a great work of philosophy such as Hume's *Treatise* or first *Enquiry*. Yet, contrary to Buckle, I wonder whether this has been done to any significantly greater degree to the *Enquiry* than to the *Treatise*.

The detachable issue of whether or not the first *Enquiry* has been fairly treated by philosophical scholars or instructors in relation to the *Treatise* should not subtract anything from the fact that Buckle has written an extraordinarily insightful commentary on Hume's *Enquiry*. Buckle offers a well-integrated

interpretation of Hume's later and early texts and the development of his philosophy that will be useful to beginning students and professional scholars. Its solid coverage of each section of the *Enquiry* provides much of the expected overview for a work of this sort while containing new twists and surprising connections in every chapter. The book as a result is certain to be highly appreciated by philosophers, historians of thought, and teachers of these subjects, among those who have previously valued and undervalued Hume's later philosophical writings, and in general by all persons interested in Hume's contributions to the Enlightenment.

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