



H. O. Mounce. *Hume's Naturalism*

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H. O. MOUNCE. *Hume's Naturalism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999. Pp. 160. ISBN 0415191246, cloth \$85.00; ISBN 0415191254, paper \$27.95.

Mounce presents this book as a general introduction to Hume, not as a scholarly interpretation of Hume that is intended to engage other scholars in interpretive debate. He does, nonetheless, bring an interpretation to bear on Hume's writings. Mounce's focus is not limited to Hume's naturalism, as his title suggests; it is rather the relationship between Hume's naturalism and his empiricism. His claim is that Hume is both a naturalist and an empiricist, and that these two positions cannot sit easily with each other. Mounce does not present Hume as attempting to reconcile the two positions. Instead, he sees Hume as saddled with internal tensions of which he is often unaware. This, at least, is where Mounce begins, but he also goes further. After some introductory moves, he focuses each chapter on a particular issue in Hume, exposing the naturalist and the empiricist interpretations. He consistently decides that the naturalist Hume is entirely correct and the empiricist Hume is entirely wrong. Ultimately, the book fails to find its place as an introduction to Hume.

The first problem for an introduction focused on the unseen tension but ultimate triumph of naturalism over empiricism is that we are never given a very clear definition of naturalism. Empiricism is presented straightforwardly as the idea that "our knowledge has its source in sense experience," (2) and at some points Mounce discusses naturalism in direct contrast to this definition, e.g., "our knowledge depends on what is given us by nature" (11). Elsewhere, however, Mounce defines naturalism as the notion that "our knowledge has its source not in our experience or reasoning but in our relations to a world which transcends both our knowledge and ourselves" (2). Given that this is an introductory work, we should expect more in the way of explanation as to whether these two definitions are really the same (they clearly seem not to be), and if they are not, then how they are related.

The first topic to which Mounce brings his interpretation is Hume's account of causality. He begins with the problem of induction, and then moves to Hume's positive analysis of belief formation, in particular the formation of the belief in causality. Mounce has little good to say about Hume's account of belief, largely because it is entirely empirical. Although he admits that Hume's account of the difference between sensation and belief as a difference in vivacity is clever, he claims that "this analysis depends for its plausibility on our tacitly translating it into ordinary terms" (37)—that is, into the terms of external sensation and internal belief, terms that are only available to the naturalist who

sees our knowledge as the result of an organic interaction with the world. Hume's discussion of association between ideas occasioned by repeated experience is then criticized as not conforming to "ordinary circumstances" (37)—these being the circumstances of someone responding to an entirely novel sensation by associating it with something not yet experienced. In neither case do we see much of an argument in support of Mounce's assertion.

Mounce then moves on to Hume's positive analysis of how we come by our idea of causality. Here Mounce essentially holds to the same line: Hume was correct when he makes the naturalist claim that our idea of causality is essentially instinctive and so not arrived at by experiencing causes in the world, but wrong in his empirical account of how we arrive at the idea by noticing the instinctive reaction to the experience of constant conjunction. Mounce defends the second point this way: "when we speak of events as causally related we are really speaking about what passes through our minds when we observe them. The trouble with this is that it is absurd and it requires little charity to restate Hume's views in terms which are not only acceptable in themselves but are faithful to his fundamental insight" (40). Mounce thinks Hume's view is absurd because we do not in fact observe our natural disposition to treat constantly conjoined events as causally related, we simply treat them as causally related. Causal claims are claims about things, and not claims about ourselves. For Mounce, the empiricist presumption that ideas can only come about by sensation (in this case internal sensation) is here misplaced, and misses the intentional nature—the essentially external nature—of our idea of causality.

After chapters on the external world, the passions, and morality, all of which follow the same pattern of decrying Hume as empiricist and praising Hume as naturalist, Mounce tackles the *Dialogues*, making the striking claim that Hume was a deist, and that our idea of God is as natural as our idea of causality. This claim is based primarily on Philo's endorsement of the design argument in part 12. Previous to this, of course, Philo rails against the argument from design, suggesting that the evidence of order in the universe can be explained by something other than the divine mind. Clearly such arguments are incompatible with a deism motivated by apparent design in the universe. Mounce handles Philo's early arguments against design by saying that they "are somewhat wearisome in their detail. The reason is that they have a certain force ad hominem, but otherwise no force at all" (122). One problem for Mounce is that he has presented Hume up until now as unaware of the fallaciousness of his empiricist assumptions, yet now he seems to claim that Philo's empiricist arguments against a designer were self-consciously bad enough to warrant the inference to a designer.

I think we can see from these examples just where the difficulties with Mounce's approach lie. First, Mounce is presenting a rather esoteric account of Hume with which the majority of Hume scholars would no doubt disagree. The introductory nature of the work excuses him from having to engage these scholars directly, but the very fact that he is making such controversial claims seems to miss the point of an introductory text.

A second, related, concern is that Mounce spends a great deal of time deciding whether Hume is correct. In doing so, Mounce often corrects Hume where Mounce believes Hume went astray. For example, after presenting the initial arguments that Philo makes against the design argument, Mounce presents arguments that Cleanthes could have made from a naturalist perspective to counter them. Given the speed with which Mounce makes these moves, it would be all too easy for a beginner to Hume to miss the point where Hume ends and the interpretation of Hume begins, to say nothing of where interpretation ends and reinterpretation begins.

Finally, Mounce does not give a lot of attention to Hume's actual influences. The Scottish naturalists that Mounce wants to place Hume among are mentioned a few times, but empiricists are mentioned hardly at all. Locke does not come into the book until about two thirds of the way through, and there the treatment is brief. Since Mounce's goal is to present Hume as the simultaneous embodiment of two incompatible philosophical stances, this lack of historical context is striking.

Mounce wants to present Hume in a way that beginners can understand, while simultaneously advancing an interpretation of Hume. This is an ambitious project. Unfortunately, Mounce does not spend enough time placing Hume in the contexts of British empiricism and Scottish naturalism, and spends too much time defending naturalism itself. What we end up with is less of an introduction to Hume that focuses on his naturalism, and more of an introduction to naturalism that focuses on Hume.

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