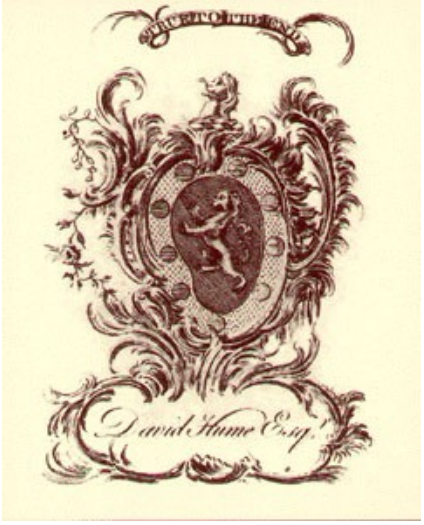

Peter Millican, ed. Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First Enquiry
Lorne Falkenstein
Hume Studies Volume 30, Number 1, April (2004) 183-187.
Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.
For more information on HUME STUDIES contact
humestudies-info@humesociety.org

http://www.humesociety.org/hs/

Hume Studies
Volume 30, Number 1, April 2004, pp. 183–187

Book Reviews

PETER MILLICAN, ed. *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First* Enquiry. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. Pp. xvi+495. ISBN 0-19-875211-3, cloth, £57.50 / $95.00; ISBN 0-19-875210-5, paper, £17.99 / $24.95.

Peter Millican's *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* is a comprehensive overview of the philosophy of the first *Enquiry* and of the secondary literature on that work. As Millican notes, the first *Enquiry* has standardly been received as "a watered-down version of Book I of the *Treatise*, a more elegant and less taxing easy-read edition for the general public, with the technical details omitted and a few controversial sections on religion added to whet their appetite and provoke the 'zealots'" (40). To the contrary, Millican views the first *Enquiry* as the canonical statement of the mature Hume's views. In Millican's estimation it corrects mistakes made in the *Treatise* and refocuses attention on those themes and arguments that subsequent philosophers have found to be the most enduringly valuable. For this reason alone it deserves more attention than it has been given. Together with Stephen Buckle's *Hume's Enlightenment Tract* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), *Reading Hume* goes a long way to remedying this oversight.

Reading Hume incorporates contributions from a number of the people whose names have come to be closely associated with work on the different sections of the first *Enquiry*, but it is an unusual anthology given the extent of the contribution made by its editor. Millican contributes almost 200 of the book's pages, beginning

with an introductory essay on the individual essays it contains, aimed at orienting those new to the study of Hume to the issues raised in those essays, to summarizing their main lines of argument, and to highlighting divergences and convergences in interpretation. Millican has further provided an introductory chapter on the context, aims and structure of the first *Enquiry*, in which he argues for that work's superiority to the *Treatise*. He also contributes a long paper on *Enquiry* 4, which provides a close exegesis of Hume's argument in that section, and is dedicated to demonstrating that, despite its skeptical conclusions concerning the warrant for causal inferences, *Enquiry* 4 provides the basis for distinguishing between good and bad causal inference, and so establishes the foundations for an inductive science. Finally, Millican has written an extensive bibliographical essay (running to over 60 pages) on the secondary literature on the first *Enquiry*. Works of this latter sort are few and far between, in large part because, while they are very time-consuming, the academic credit one receives for doing them does not sufficiently reflect the value they provide to the scholarly community. Because Millican has made that investment, future scholars will be able to review an outstanding collection of summary descriptions of books and articles on Hume and the first *Enquiry*, and will be that much more quickly able to focus their research and inform their reflections. We all owe him for that.

I do have reservations about Millican's argument for the superiority of the first *Enquiry* as a work of philosophy. In good part, this argument rests on the claim that Hume largely abandoned the associationist psychology so proudly presented in the *Treatise* (43). But Millican is far from denying that what Hume called "custom" plays a central role throughout the *Enquiry*, and it is hard to see how Hume could have retained a commitment to this particular associative mechanism while simultaneously doubting or abandoning associative psychology in general. In fact, the *Enquiry* continues to invoke other associative mechanisms. Witness its appeal to "the passion of surprize and wonder," which, "being an agreeable emotion, gives a sensible tendency towards . . . belief" (*Enquiry*10.16, cf. *Treatise* 1.3.10.4), its claim that "nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation, which they occasion" (*Enquiry* 7.29 n.17; cf. *Treatise* 1.4.5.12), its various ways of accounting for differences in the cognitive capacities of humans and animals (*Enquiry* 9.5 n.20; cf. *Treatise* 1.3.13), and its use of the "experiments" with resemblance and contiguity (*Enquiry* 5.13-20; cf. *Treatise* 1.3.9.8-10). Admittedly, the *Enquiry* does not invoke these other forms of association as frequently or study them in as much detail as the *Treatise*, and its background explanation of how the association of ideas causes belief is bracketed. Millican sometimes speaks as if its superiority is due more to its reticence on these matters than to any large-scale or even partial rejection—a reticence that purportedly avoids "giving hostages to fortune" (47). But this would at best argue

for the rhetorical, not the philosophical superiority of the *Enquiry*, and Millican at least sometimes seems to want to suggest more than that: that Hume did not just choose to focus on the account of custom, but that he lost confidence in the project of a fully executed associationist psychology (42). But then it is hard to see how he can have retained confidence in that species of associationist psychology he called "custom."

The remaining papers in the collection are devoted to particular sections or themes in the *Enquiry*. M. A. Stewart contributes a paper on Hume's distinction between the popular and technical "species" of philosophy in *Enquiry* 1. Stewart's examination of this issue spills over into a wide-ranging and informative study of Hume's purposes in initially composing the work and of his reasons for subsequently reassessing its role. We tend to forget that the text we usually read as the *Enquiry* evolved through changes of title, excision of parts, and the addition of authorial pronouncements on how it should be read. Stewart investigates the historical circumstances surrounding these events, and argues for the intriguing conclusion that Hume only came to view the *Enquiry* as an alternative statement of the philosophy of the *Treatise* rather late in life.

Jonathan Bennett writes on *Enquiry* 2. He is critical of the imagistic theory of thought that Hume presents in that section, but argues that a plausible empirical account of meaning can be extracted from the section by glossing over Hume's "genetic" view of understanding as arising through having ideas that copy impressions, and instead focusing on what the section suggests about the importance of having publicly accessible criteria for ascribing an understanding of terms to a speaker.

Martin Bell and Justin Broackes consider Hume's theory of belief as it appears in the *Treatise*, Appendix, Abstract, and *Enquiry* 5, part 2. Both argue that Hume came to be dissatisfied with the account of belief initially put forward in the *Treatise* and that he never reached a completely satisfactory resolution. According to Bell, Hume abandoned an early view that belief is the product of associative mechanisms transmitting vivacity in favour of a leaner view that treats belief merely as an instinctive manner of conception, but chose to bracket this view to avoid drawing undue attention to its skeptical consequences. Broackes argues that Hume wavered between considering belief as a more vivacious idea, as a more vivacious conception of an idea, and as a sentiment attached to an idea, and was prevented from fully committing himself to the most plausible of these options by his rejection of a substantival self.

Papers by Edward Craig, Galen Strawson, and Simon Blackburn examine the extent of Hume's commitment to the notion that causes are nothing more than events that regularly precede other events. Craig and Strawson champion the "New Hume" interpretation, according to which Hume's aim was just to examine the

conditions that lead us to believe that a causal relation exists and not to define what makes something a cause, a result that opens the possibility for a belief in causes that are more than regular antecedents. Blackburn questions this interpretation, principally by appeal to Hume's claim that the course of nature could change, which means that no antecedent event could be regarded, before the fact, as a "straitjacket" necessitating the occurrence of a particular future event.

George Botterill's paper focuses on identifying the core contribution that Hume had to make to the free will debate. According to Botterill, that contribution does not consist in contributing to the Hobbes-Locke-Schlick-Ayer compatibilist tradition. Rather than argue for the existence of a kind of liberty that is compatible with through-going causal determination, Hume made two rather different points, a highly dubious one concerning the psychological necessitation of human actions, and a rather more profound one concerning the impossibility of attributing moral responsibility to agents whose actions are not caused by their psychological states.

Don Garrett's paper combines a close analysis of the arguments of *Enquiry* 10 with a response to a number of objections that have been classically raised against that essay: most notably that Hume's account of a law of nature relies upon the testimony of others, even though he questions that same testimony when it gives accounts of miracles, that his definition of a law of nature makes it trivially true that there can be no such thing as a miracle, and that his own inductive skepticism puts him in no position to discount reports of miracles or treat them as any more dubious than any other sort of report.

In contrast to Garrett's broadly exegetical piece, David Owen's paper examines the argument of *Enquiry* 10.i in the light of the theory of probability and focuses on a particular objection: the charge that Hume "double counts" the evidence against miracle reports insofar as he first asks us to make an estimate of the probability that testimony is true, and then asks us to further reduce this measure in the light of an assessment of the likelihood of what it reports. Owen argues that the "double counting" objection confuses two different ways of assessing the probability of testimony.

John Gaskin is principally concerned to show that sections 10 and 11 of the *Enquiry* are the "real, practical focus of the whole" work. Gaskin's principal concern is with the arguments of *Enquiry* 11, which he subjects to careful analysis in light of the epistemological principles articulated in earlier sections of the *Enquiry*.

David Norton combines a nice exegesis of the arguments of *Enquiry* 12 with an inquiry into how Hume's academic skepticism, which involves doubting beliefs that we are nonetheless naturally impelled to accept, is both coherent and feasible. Norton places Hume's skepticism at the front and center of the *Enquiry* as a whole, showing how its earlier sections establish core skeptical results while its later sections apply those results to mitigate religious dogmatism.

The various papers in this anthology differ in style. Millican's paper on *Enquiry* 4 and the papers by Garrett, Gaskin, and Norton present detailed analyses of Hume's arguments in particular parts of the *Enquiry*. The papers by Bennett, Bell, Broackes, Botterill, and Owen do not offer the same sort of close textual exegesis of particular passages in the *Enquiry* but are rather critical investigations of Hume's position on particular issues and of the relevance of those positions to current debates. Millican's first paper and those by Craig, Strawson and Blackburn contribute to debates between Hume scholars on the proper interpretation of Hume's works. Stewart's paper brings historical research to bear on questions regarding the proper interpretation of Hume's works. The authors are also by no means unanimous in their views of Hume. But Millican's introduction does a good job of making the more advanced discussions accessible to novices to the debate, and all of the papers make substantive, well-argued (though not uncontroversial) contributions to our understanding of Hume's philosophy in the *Enquiry*.

In sum, this is a very valuable book, which succeeds admirably in its aim of providing a guide to advanced study of the first *Enquiry*. It would be an excellent choice for a graduate seminar, and it deserves to be on every Hume scholar's reference shelf.

LORNE FALKENSTEIN
Philosophy Department
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
N6A 3K7
lfalkens@uwo.ca