



**Claudia M. Schmidt. *David Hume: Reason in History***

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## Book Reviews

CLAUDIA M. SCHMIDT, *David Hume: Reason in History*. University Park: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Pp. xiii + 473. ISBN 0-271-02263-9, cloth, \$85.

Claudia Schmidt begins her new book, *David Hume: Reason in History*, by noting how recent literature has tended either to offer an overview of Hume's thinking or to develop a "unified account of a number of themes" from it; there are no extant studies, she emphasizes, that both display the "explicit order of a systematic survey" and provide "a unified interpretation of his thought" (2). Schmidt takes this to be a "lacuna in the literature," one she intends to fill by combining a "systematic survey" of Hume's contributions to the various branches of philosophy, history, and the social sciences, with a "distinctive interpretation" of her own (10). In so doing, she casts her net over a wide audience: the book is intended to bring in those starting out on their study of Hume, as well as attract the more seasoned specialist in search of a new interpretation, the non-specialist with an interest in recent scholarship, and those outside philosophy who are curious about Hume's place in the methodology and history of their own disciplines.

The "systematic survey" part of the study is an unmitigated success. Schmidt arranges the material explicitly to correspond to the order of Hume's intellectual development (8), and in a way that inadvertently reflects her own considerable knowledge of both Hume and the secondary literature. Beginning with the early sections of the *Treatise* and ending with the *History of England*, the reader is led accordingly through some thirteen chapters covering in near exhaustive fashion

every conceivable theme in Hume's wide repertoire. Even where much of this ground is familiar and well-trodden—in matters of epistemology, metaphysics, moral theory, and religion, for instance—Schmidt's descriptions are fresh, combining concise, elegant, and informative summaries with judiciously chosen forays into complexities of interpretation and debates in the literature. Other chapters take on themes less familiar even to the Hume devotee—his writings on economics, aesthetics, and history, for example—and here well-seasoned Humean and novice alike will find something of value in Schmidt's detailed descriptions and informed surveys.

While the systematic presentation of Hume's ideas will undoubtedly satisfy a large section of her intended audience—beginning students, non-specialists, and parties from outside philosophy—the specialist will be more interested in the “distinctive interpretation” side of Schmidt's study. Here, needless to say, success is harder won. Schmidt's thesis is that the various strands of Hume's thought can be woven into a broad cloth by teasing out the “constructive account of human reason” that she claims to see running through his writings. This “account,” the reader is told, consists “of the elements and principles of human cognition, by which he [Hume] intends not only to explain but also to justify and improve our reasonings in both the natural and human sciences . . . , establish the limits of human reason and . . . trace out . . . the social and historical dimensions of human consciousness” (2). Thus “Hume's study,” one learns a few pages later, “can be understood . . . as an examination of ‘reason in history,’ or as an account of the historical dimension of rationality” (6). Or, as Schmidt writes in the Conclusion, Hume “presents an account of reason in history, by examining both the historically relative aspects of human cognition and the standards of objectivity that we articulate, as principles of criticism, through reflection upon our historical experience as individuals and members of a community” (421).

In the course of defending this thesis, Schmidt offers up one or two interpretive gems. Her discussion of the passions (chapter 6) is particularly illuminating, and the treatment of the self in terms of “concern” clearly breaks new ground (182ff.). Schmidt also develops a provocative account of character as the “prevailing passions and dispositions of an individual . . . expressed in the actions of that person,” which she integrates convincingly with Hume's view of judgment, causal connection, the prediction of human behavior, moral sentiments, and the portraits of individuals in the *History*; Schmidt illustrates the latter with extended discussions of Joan of Arc, Elizabeth I, and Charles I (see 200ff., 231–4, 396ff.). There is also much to be said for Schmidt's treatment of human action (chapter 7) as a “bridge” between Hume's “general philosophy . . . and his writings in the various branches of the human sciences” (195), and for her various remarks on progress (see 213–16; 256–7, and 406) and a spirited defense of Hume against the

charge that he failed to put into practice his own recommended principles for understanding human action (408ff.).

While these moments are notable, and stand out against what is already a narrative of a very high order, it is never quite clear how they, or the account of Hume's thought generally, are intended to support the claim about "reason in history." Indeed, for long stretches of the book, Schmidt proceeds quite happily without referring to her thesis at all, with references to stages of the human mind (79), the historical dimension of probable reasoning (106), critical tradition (336), historical or social context (175, 296, 382–3), and the like, appearing en passant as occasional remarks to remind the reader that the "survey" is also intended to serve some higher interpretive purpose. Part of the problem lies in the sheer amount Schmidt has tried to pack into a single philosophical excursion: it is a high impossible task to provide a survey for beginners and develop a sophisticated interpretation for the specialist all in the same book, and she might have done well to have trimmed the itinerary and focused her sights on a smaller section of the intended audience.

Even on its own terms, however, given the explanatory weight resting upon "reason in history," Schmidt provides the reader with relatively little information for deciphering what the phrase is intended to convey; the appeal to Hegel—whose *Encyclopedia* is its source and thus subtitle to the book (11, 421)—does little to help. As it stands, the set of criteria Schmidt does provide for understanding the proposed unity—constructivism, context, and the limits of human reason—cut such a wide swath through Hume's writings as to undermine its purported ability to "unify" the texts in any meaningful way. Besides, all three are long-established coin in the currency of Hume scholarship, and it is difficult to see how they could provide the "distinctive interpretation" the study promises at the outset. While these are significant shortcomings, in the final analysis they do not undermine the scholarly achievement the book represents, nor do they obscure the fact that Schmidt has provided the philosophical community with a valuable resource on Hume and his work.

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