Leon Pompa. Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel, and Vico
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LEON POMPA. *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel, and Vico*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990. First paperback edition, 2002. Pp. viii + 234. ISBN 0521381371, cloth, $70.00; ISBN 0521892201, paper, $25.00.

This book, now available in paperback, was not reviewed in this journal when it first appeared, but that omission is corrected here. Since its first appearance, the book has established itself as an important contribution to the philosophy of history and Hume's place in it.[1] Because of the scope of this journal, I shall mainly focus on Professor Pompa's discussion of Hume, but the three thinkers—Hume, Hegel, and Vico—are a nice contrast. (Contrasts are what primarily interest Pompa.) In his concluding chapter 4, Pompa sums up this contrast in the following way.

> In the foregoing chapters it has been argued that, despite the many differences between them, Hume, Hegel and Vico shared the belief that knowledge of human history presupposes a theory of human nature or of the development of human nature. According to Hume, knowledge of human history is impossible unless it presupposes the constancy of human nature or of human consciousness and is grounded upon an experimental knowledge of the latter. . . . Hegel, on the other hand, while agreeing that there is a problem about the presuppositions of historical knowledge is explicitly opposed to the uniformity of nature thesis. . . . Vico is shown to be aware of the same problem as Hegel, i.e., of providing a framework for establishing historical knowledge while allowing for the possibility of historical change, but to have a different understanding of it in so far as he believes that the solution must lie in a properly grounded form of first-order history, provided by an account which is at once both an history and a philosophy of the development of human nature. The account which he offers is very much less rationalist than Hegel's. (192–3)

Is this a valid contrast and assessment of Hume? I have my doubts and I will give a few of my reasons for thinking so here.

First, this is much too tidy and neat; Hume's view is much more complicated than this suggests. Pompa derived this contrast and assessment from examining the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. Left out are the *Essays* and *The History of England*. For there to be an adequate, complete account of Hume on human nature and historical knowledge, these works need to be consulted. Pompa's approach is analogous to that of scholars who treat the *Treatise* by examining only Book 1 and ignoring Books 2 and 3, yielding only a partial perspective on what Hume

is up to. We are in a unique position with Hume concerning history, because he not only contemplated the nature of history, but practiced the craft. Because both theory and practice are seen in Hume, we have an unusual opportunity to balance these modes of inquiry and to achieve a better portrait of him. In the past thirty to forty years in Hume scholarship, we have seen this balance, but there is still a tendency to ignore the *Essays* and the *History*. What Pompa does in his account of Hume based on the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* is not inaccurate or wrong, but incomplete. My reservation with Pompa on Hume concerns the methodology of interpretation he employs. He is perpetuating an old methodology of interpretation, the focus of which is too narrow.

Pompa anticipates this criticism by saying that his approach takes Hume's view as being "reasonably well reflected in the order of his major discussions of topics" (14) which stems from Norman Kemp Smith (1941),[2] where the more fashionable and recent approach takes his view as being "grasped only by attempting to render coherent a very much wider range of his remarks on specific subjects, no matter where they are to be found" (14). Pompa cites Donald Livingston[3] as an exponent of this latter approach. According to Pompa's account the key to Hume's idea of history is his belief in the constancy of human nature. This belief is grounded on the science of man which Pompa takes exclusively from the Introduction to the *Treatise*. So what Pompa takes away from Hume's discussion here is that the principles which make up the science of man are analogous to the laws of Newton's physics. By "analogous" Pompa means "the same," whereas Livingston takes "analogous" to mean "like" only: the science of man is "primarily a historical science" (ix). Science implies, for Livingston, development, but not for Pompa. He sees no development or sense of change in Hume's view. If one stresses the identity between the laws of Newtonian physics and the principles of the science of man, we have serious problems making sense of Hume on history. For example, chapter 1 of *The History of England* illustrates his historiographical illuminism (a school of historical thought that took little interest in the remote past). Hume begins with a contrast between civilized nations and barbarous nations or civilians and barbarians. The latter's behavior is guided by caprice and has no moral explanation where the former's actions have moral explanations—like our own does, so that is what ends up being studied by historians. Consequently Hume begins with the Britons. Any earlier than the Britons and we don't have reliable records and no sense of sympathy with noncivilized folks, according to Hume. But how do the civilized emerge from the uncivilized or the nonbarbarians from the barbarians? "The only certain means, by which nations can indulge their curiousity in researches concerning their remote origin," Hume asserts, "is to consider the language, manners, and customs of their ancestors, and to compare them with those of the neighbouring nations."[4] And Hume could have added, "and to compare them with ourselves," when we begin

to examine the *History*. To make a long story short, this comes very close in the end to what Pompa makes history out to be.

What Pompa finds wrong in our trio of thinkers is that the foundation of historical knowledge is sought external to history rather than internally. Furthermore this external basis is a priori and necessary rather than contingent. Contingent facts come from history itself, i.e., from a set of inherited beliefs about the past and the development of our own historical consciousness. Pompa describes it this way in his conclusion (chapter 4):

> Thus the function of the over-arching truth, for which both Vico [theologically eternal history] and Hegel [self-development of reason] sought, [and we can add Hume (Newtonian universal laws of human nature)] is fulfilled not by some external theory, in light of which the historian might try to interpret the evidence and establish the truth, but by the historical development within historians, as a community, of a body of belief without which they could not operate as historians. (215)

Hume works very much within the community of historians—some say too much so; his footnotes and appendix notes testify to that. Since Hume did not have evolutionary theory available to explain the emergence of civilians from noncivilians, all he had to rely on was historical theory to explain development and change. So contrary to Pompa, Hume has the very traits of history that Pompa accuses him of not having. You just have to look beyond the first *Enquiry* and *Treatise* passages that deal with history to see that Hume recognizes those traits. Pompa claims that Hume has an ahistorical foundation for history, that he is an externalist, and that these are a priori and necessary (noncontingent). I don't have the space to argue this out in detail (I have done this in several articles and a book), but I will give just a glimpse of why these claims are counterintuitive to Hume's view.

Hume used the *situation* as a way to account for historical change or development and uniqueness. John Burke first noticed this novel category.[5] Charles I's actions which "led to disastrous results both for himself and for the situation." Burke's point is that Hume's uniformity of human nature is balanced by the situation in which individuals find themselves. Their circumstances led to different expressions of emotions and dispositions; consequently, human nature does change from person to person, period to period. But the difference was so great, Hume thought, between the barbarous age and the civilized age that the civilized historian cannot understand the actions that flow from barbarous human nature. So the principles of human nature are not "universal" in the Newtonian sense, i.e., exceptionless and omnitemporal. The constancy of human nature passages are overworked and oversimplify Hume's view because when he was actually engaged

in historical inquiry and writing, he would rethink ideas and concepts of history. So I find what Pompa has done less than satisfying when it comes to understanding Hume on the nature of history.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Leon J. Goldstein's review in *History and Theory* 31 (1992): 56–65.

2 Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1966). This older, traditional methodology has been displaced in recent years by a new one exemplified by Annette C. Baier's *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's* Treatise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), and *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Her approach is very similar to Livingston's; see below.

3 Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

4 David Hume, *The History of England*, ed. William B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), I: 4.

5 John J. Burke, Jr., "Hume's *History of England*: Waking the English from a Dogmatic Slumber," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 7 (1978): 243.

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