



Christopher J. Finlay. *Hume's Social Philosophy: Human Nature and Commercial Sociability in A Treatise of Human Nature*

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Christopher J. Finlay. *Hume's Social Philosophy: Human Nature and Commercial Sociability in A Treatise of Human Nature*. New York: Continuum, 2007. Pp. 202. ISBN 978-0-8264-9162-6, Hardback, \$88.10.

Christopher Finlay aims to show the importance of “the social” in Hume’s philosophy, and this in several respects. First, Finlay embeds and contextualizes Hume in the social context and intellectual disputes of eighteenth-century Britain. Hume’s Britain experienced a period of transition from feudal status and class rigidity to modern commercial consumerism, class mobility, bourgeois, middle-class life. Hume’s accounts of morality and human understanding are intended to make sense of this transition in terms that the emerging middling element would understand. For example, Hume’s emphasis on pride and self-esteem are intelligible against the backdrop of a society in which “conspicuous consumption of goods was used to identify members of a group whose social status was grounded in economic factors” (29). To Finlay’s credit, he does not rest satisfied with such contextualizing. Hume was not concerned merely to describe his contemporaries, but rather, in Finlay’s words, Hume saw “human nature was most fully instantiated in the eighteenth-century contexts of polite British and French society” (7). This forces Finlay to climb with Hume up the ladders of context toward Hume’s truest philosophic claims about human nature.

This brings us to the second way in which Finlay understands “the social.” For Hume, philosophy necessarily begins with the reflections on social life or, in Hume’s words, “common life.” Against the excessively abstruse concerns characteristic of early modern thinkers, Hume shows that philosophers could address the practical concerns of common life (e.g., morality, causality) and communicate these findings to a broader, practically-oriented public. It is probably a stretch to contend that the *Treatise* accomplished this goal (and Finlay implicitly concedes as much by discussing Hume’s other, more accessible books in this context), but it was just as clearly Hume’s aim. This reformation in how philosophers write constituted an important change in how philosophers think. A philosophy grounded in the concerns and nature of common life is necessarily more cautious, honest, humble, and modest than a philosophy promising demonstrative certainty or access to “ultimate principles” (46). When we think about human understanding, we come up immediately against its limits, and this should make philosophers less willing to offer what Hume elsewhere calls “abstract, speculative principles” to guide life. Not only do principles such as the right to revolution or social contract theory admit of too many exceptions, but they also cultivate a dangerous, utopian cast of mind dangerous to the gentle, humane modern republicanism that revealed human nature.

With an eye to showing that philosophy can be of a piece with human understanding in common life, Finlay offers an account of Hume's *Treatise*, in which its moral teaching follows from an anatomy of human understanding. Because Hume failed to draw this connection between Books 1 and 3 of the *Treatise* and between the *Treatise* generally and his later activity as an essayist and historian with sufficient clarity, it is necessary for Finlay to connect the dots. Finlay's argument proceeds as follows. The human understanding is put into motion by desires and aversions, and these are mediated by the indirect passions, which are shaped by a range of objects and qualities valued by society. What is valued in modern society is the acquisition of goods and the qualities of character that allow for the future acquisition. This must not be understood as merely a manifestation of self-love; rather, human desire and pride depend on mechanisms of sympathy and social concern uniquely available in the modern world. When we find that others love us for our wealth or character (both of which also flatter our self-worth), we find greater joy in ownership and seek to accumulate more and to perfect our character. When we see that others have similar tastes, ways, and sentiments, it increases the sympathy that is the basis for the social bond. The selfish and the social reinforce one another by making us better and better off. This marks a third sense in which Hume's philosophy is social: the mechanisms of human nature are fundamentally shaped by one's social environment.

Finlay's account is both true to Hume and entirely plausible as a description of our moral mechanism, yet I cannot say that Finlay is more successful than Hume in reconciling this third sense of social with the second. The problem, in my judgment, lies more in Finlay's communication than in his understanding, and this is inescapable given the extent to which Finlay follows Hume's anatomizing of the apparatus of the human soul. Finlay's account fails to engage and hence to guide. On the other hand, it is not clear that this is a decisive failure given Hume's emphasis on common life. Knowing the apparatus of common life may not be essential to using it: we can and do continue to cultivate a "standard of taste" as we attempt to figure out the causes of things and as we act using our judgment. What I am suggesting is that Finlay's argument requires that he state what we need to know in order to defend these reflections of common life, but that his concentration upon the technical aspects of Hume's *Treatise* distracts from this goal.

Allow me to illustrate this point while presenting a fourth sense in which Finlay sees Hume's thought as social. As Finlay sees it, Hume thinks human beings are social, and social here should be understood in distinction to the extremes of individual and political. Finlay sees Hume occupying a middle ground between possessive individualists and liberals (Mandeville and Locke), who see human beings as selfish, and classical republicans, who see human beings as political animals. This is Finlay's most important contribution. Against individualists

and rational choice theorists, Hume accounts for instances of sociability such as economic contracts or friendship without reducing this sociability to grease on the wheels of self-interested behaviors. The social has an independent existence; we live together because we live together, and efforts to reduce our sociability to manifestations of self-interest distort the phenomena. But Hume does not take the social to the level of the political. Finlay explains this partly in terms of Hume's willingness to tolerate greater economic inequalities and partly because Hume conceived of government as an institution of authority. The civic tradition, as Finlay relays it, required a basic level of equality among citizens so that none would be dominated; citizens would meet on a level ground in order to debate about and discover the common good. Hume, in contrast, sees such public debate as out of place in the modern commercial republic, which is too large for such happenings, too tied up with promoting economic inequalities, and too humane to elevate politics to such heights. Hume's hope is that commerce would replace the public square as that which would open up the number of people participating in our common life; refinement would spread not with the franchise nor was it connected to a particular constitutional order, but refinement follows the spread of commercial society.

There is much that is sensible in Finlay's book. My reservations relate more to its mode and manner than to its content. Finlay is, in my view, too modest in how he frames Hume's philosophy. He is unwilling to identify both what is at stake in many of Hume's particular arguments and who Hume's most serious philosophic opponents are. This leaves the underlying philosophic justification for the study underdeveloped and makes the book, frankly, much duller and uncritical than it need have been. It is now widely accepted among Hume scholars that his is a philosophy of common life. The time has come for us to concentrate on the adequacy of such an account or for us to delve into the more philosophic question of whether Hume is right or not. It is one thing, for instance, to aim at discovering human nature; it is quite another to have found it. Is Hume's philosophy of common life equipped to accomplish this task? It is a shame that Finlay does not attempt such philosophy, because he shows that Hume is more than a little relevant to much contemporary thinking about human nature.

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