



Russell Hardin. *David Hume, Moral and Political Theorist*

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Hume Studies Volume 33, Number 2, (2007) pp. 358–360.

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Russell Hardin. *David Hume, Moral and Political Theorist*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Pp. 240. ISBN 9780199232567, Hardback, \$49.50.

Hume scholars treasure the fact that the card catalogue entry in the British Library reads “David Hume, Historian.” It is a reminder that once upon a (quaint) time, Hume was known for his best-selling *History of England* while his writings on metaphysics went largely unstudied. The title of Russell Hardin’s thorough and provocative book reads like a new card catalogue entry, one that would have us view Hume in yet a different light. Hardin wants to show that Hume has a systematic project in moral and political theory, and, more controversially, that this project is of a particular kind. There are two propositions to which Hardin thinks Hume is committed. First of all, there is a psychological thesis: whatever views we hold about morality may be traced back to features of our psychology, and these features are entirely sufficient to explain our holding them. The objective truth and falsity of these views play no role. Second, there is an anti-realist thesis: knowledge of the objective truth about morality is not simply unnecessary for the purposes of moral science; there is in fact no such truth for us to know (51). While Hardin acknowledges that Hume occasionally lapses into praising certain virtues over others, Hardin says that these statements should be disregarded as “mere panegyric.”

Hardin thinks Hume’s explanation of our moral beliefs is based on what Hardin calls a “functional” view of moral motivation. That is to say, all statements of the form “you ought to do this” are conditional rather than categorical. They tell us that *if* we have certain interests, we ought to take certain actions (13). This entails that whatever moral obligations we feel ourselves to have, they are at bottom “entirely self-regarding,” in that they are part of a long-term strategy to fulfill our desires (which are taken as given) (52). Social institutions arise as the unplanned result of the actions of such self-regarding agents, who see these institutions as vehicles to allow the most efficient fulfillment of their desires (30). Unlike Hobbes, whose doctrine this obviously resembles, Hume makes room for “at least a little bit of benevolence” through sympathy—benevolence is, Hardin says, just another desire that Hume takes as a given, like the desire “to enjoy a hike in the hills” (63). But Hardin says that “Hume and Hobbes blur the normative sense of obligation in the same way” (52). For both philosophers, obligation is to be explained entirely through reference to our own interests.

Hardin thinks Hume does more than just appropriate Hobbes’s central thesis, however; he improves upon it. Hobbes errs in seeing society and its institutions as the product of agents trying to solve what Hardin calls a “one-time coordination

problem.” Hume discerns the importance of “iterated interactions,” and is thus able to produce a more nuanced explanation of how particular social institutions evolve and why they take the form they do (56). (Hobbes can do no more than tell us that whatever institutions *have* evolved must be accepted.) Hardin is excellent on the ways in which what he calls Hume’s “strategic categories” both anticipate, and, in many cases, improve upon, those current in modern game theory. This is in my view the strongest aspect of the book. Hardin also tries throughout to relate Hume’s insights to debates in contemporary political philosophy.

I find Hardin’s second thesis, that Hume believes virtue and vice have no objective status, both less well-defended and less persuasive. In challenging the interpretation of Hume as a kind of moral realist, argued by David Norton and Nicholas Capaldi among others, Hardin acknowledges that “there are textual warrants for both views.” He claims his own account renders Hume “more systematic” (3). As I have said, Hardin claims that Hume only advocates for a particular moral position when he falls into “panegyric.” By panegyric Hardin means an “expression of [Hume’s] own personal feelings” about right and wrong (7). He describes as “slips” cases where Hume indulges in such panegyric, and claims that Hume “worries” about cases where such indulgences find their way into print. Hardin’s claim here is very close to being circular, since he can seemingly classify almost any text that does not fit his thesis as panegyric. How do we tell, when Hume praises a virtue or condemns a vice, whether he is speaking as a philosopher, making a claim about what is objectively right or wrong (which would constitute a counter-example to Hardin’s interpretation), or whether he has merely “slipped” into expressing his own personal, emotional views? I do not think Hardin’s claim is *quite* circular, however, because I think there is evidence to suggest it is false.

Hardin admires the “tough minded” *Treatise* over the second *Enquiry*, and he clearly likes the *Essays*, to which there are virtually no references in the book, least of all. This is not surprising. The *Essays* are filled with praise for such things as learning, “delicacy of taste” and “the middle station in life,” all of which, he thinks, make us more sensitive to the distinction between virtue and vice. Can all these claims be dismissed as “slips” into “mere panegyric”? Problematically for Hardin, it seems as though Hume’s entire point in writing these essays is to convince us of his opinions. Indeed, he says in one essay, “On Suicide,” that the very purpose of philosophy is to “cure the human mind” of vice (*Essays*, 579). This essay is itself particularly difficult to read in a way that is consistent with Hardin’s overall interpretation of Hume. Hume argues that suicide is not just perfectly permissible on moral grounds, but that under certain circumstances, where “it is no longer in my power to promote the interest of the public” and where I have in fact become “a burthen to it,” suicide is “not only . . . innocent but laudable” (*Essays*, 587). What could it mean to say suicide is *laudable*? On Hardin’s view, we (as scientists)

expect morals to be in the long-term self-interest of the agent. But the long term of a person contemplating suicide is decidedly Keynesian. So Hume's praise of suicide must be "mere panegyric." But it is hard to believe he would write such an essay because he was carried away by his enthusiasm for self-annihilation. I find it much more plausible to say that Hume is alluding to some more impersonal, even objective, notion of public interest, and that it is from this perspective that the "superstition" forbidding suicide constitutes a "vice."

Hardin has, as I have said, appealed to "systematicity" as the deciding factor in favouring his own reading over the rival one. I do not know quite how to take this as a principle of decision. People who read Hume as a moral realist (of whatever sort) have also, I think, succeeded in making Hume internally consistent and even systematic. It would have been helpful if Hardin had taken more time to engage with these rival interpretations, and to explain what to make of at least some of the apparent "textual warrants" for them. Hardin has, however, given us the most thorough presentation to date of the case for Hume as the constructor of a systematically anti-realist theory of morality and politics. While his book will not settle the debates surrounding Hume's moral philosophy, it will certainly advance them, and will give scholars much to think about.

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