



Paul Russell. The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion

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Paul Russell. *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise: Skepticism, Naturalism and Irreligion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, February 2008. Pp. 424, 0-195-11033-1, Hardback, \$99.00

Professor Russell's book is a nice and rewarding book, well written, philosophically and historically instructive. It provides the reader with new and refreshing insights into Hume's *Treatise*, some of which are quite illuminating. The main argument is as follows:

How can we escape the skepticism/naturalism divide into which most commentaries get trapped? This riddle, this impossible conciliation, has become the test for any new book on the *Treatise*. But it might be the effect of not considering the true intention of Hume's book. It is a fact, if we carefully study the reactions to the book which followed after its publication, that the earliest critics believed that there was a close connection between Hume's skepticism and his more or less secret atheistic intentions. More precisely, there is evidence (and Russell goes deep into the details) that they regarded Hume's opposition to the dogmatic principles of Samuel Clarke as central for the understanding of this connection. Clarke, a much more important author in Hume's time than today, was committed to the defence of the rational credentials of the Christian religion and had a large influence at that time in Scotland and in the Universities. Beattie, especially, and one who knows that wickedness is a good analyst, suggests that, along with other skeptics, Hume is much more obliged to Hobbes than he seems willing to acknowledge. And so we get to the crucial argument of the book (chapter six): "the scope and structure of Hume's *Treatise* is modelled or planned after that of Hobbes's *The Elements of Law*, and in this respect there exists an important and unique relationship between these two works" (61). Hence, "we are in a position to begin to excavate and systematically uncover Hume's fundamental irreligious intentions throughout the *Treatise*." This excavation is the constant motif of the following chapters which, part after part, investigate the three Books of the *Treatise*, to support Professor Russell's thesis.

Let us take for instance chapter XI: "Induction, Analogy and a Future state." Russell claims that "Hume's account of the problem of induction, as originally presented in the *Treatise*, is significantly motivated by irreligious objectives" (129). In 1736, Butler published his *Analogy of Religion*, partly as a response to Tindal's *Christianity as old as creation* (1730), a book that had an enormous impact. In a letter to Lord Kames (December 1737) Hume expressed his wish to meet Butler and to show him his own book. It is evident that Hume was acquainted not only with Butler's *Sermons* devoted to Ethics, but also with the *Analogy*. Now, a close comparison between the *Analogy* and the *Treatise* shows that (on the Bishop's side): (1) Butler's

argument explicitly rests upon probable reasoning, which he clearly distinguishes from demonstrative reasoning; (2) analogy between the past and the future is the spring of probable reasoning; (3) Butler switches from the future in this world (A) to a future state in Heaven (B), arguing the uniformity principle; (4) he claims that (A) and (B) are equally credible and are naturally believed by the common sense. Now compare with Hume's doctrine on causation and the progress of part three in the first Book of the *Treatise*. It is easy to detect a relevant correspondence between the two texts and to see how much Hume's critical examination of causal inference antagonistically responds to Butler's philosophical commitment to the defence of religion. And so we discover the way out of the skepticism/naturalism riddle: the first stage of Hume's reasoning is to show that there is no foundation, a priori or a posteriori, for the uniformity principle; the second stage presents his positive "naturalism" for our causal inferences within *this* world (137ff.). It can be asked why Hume did not target his skepticism directly against religious inference and ran the risk of endangering every probable reasoning. But his naturalist account shows that his main concern is not so much to prove that all probable reasoning lacks any "rational justification" but that this form of reasoning depends on custom and imagination; and imagination has not much influence in religious inductive arguments concerning the existence of a future state, given that these arguments suffer from a lack of resemblance between this life and the next.

At first, the reader is a little startled by the novelty of the thesis. But Russell's erudition is monumental. And there is great coherence in his study. If you disagree on something, you have to match his scrupulous inquiry and discuss his point in detail. See, for instance, his discussion about the authorship of the *Specimen* (Russell suggests that Wishart did not write it but Andrew Baxter, an eminent follower of Clarke). There is something from Hercule Poirot in Russell's practice. Russell is able very artfully to pick up indices, even the smallest, to give them importance and significance, to link them together, to reconstruct the whole story by addition and composition. The result is impressive.

Let us take an example (chapter 7). I can imagine that you (like me) did not pay much attention to the features of Hume's title in the *Treatise*, except for the subtitle: "An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects." But there is another important feature of Hume's title pages: his use of epigrams from Tacitus and Lucan. Tacitus says: « rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; et quae sentias, dicere licet ». You can take this quotation as a sign by a young author of his confidence in the spirit of free inquiry in the *République des Lettres*. But follow Russell on his track. This quotation is clearly reminiscent of the subtitle of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza being regarded as an atheistic follower of Hobbes. And look at the title of the final chapter of the same book: you will find the same quotation. You may find Russell's conclusion

too bold: "Given the historical context, it seems clear that the epigram on the title page of Hume's *Treatise* is a direct and unambiguous reaffirmation of a major theme of Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*" (71). But you would be wrong. The brief notice of Hume's work that appeared in the German journal, *Neuen Zeitungen*, says that "[t]he author's evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the subtitle of the work." The same comment is in the *Specimen*. If you say that Hume did not read Spinoza, but knew him only through Bayle's *Dictionary*, Russell sets forth seven good reasons to prove that Hume read Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*. Moreover, there is evidence that Hume had personal contact with Pierre Desmaizeaux, when he was living in London (1737–1739) and many things suggest that Tacitus and Spinoza had special significance for the circle of free-thinking to which Desmaizeaux belonged.

Now are we going to say that we are fully convinced of the whole demonstration?

It happens that Professor Russell's demonstrations prove too much. For instance, let us come back to the Butler/Hume comparison. In the introduction of his book, Butler derives his conception of probability from Locke's *Essay*, and his question is not so much to know whether analogy can be a foundational kind of proof, but whether in certain conditions we are justified in giving our assent to analogical, that is, probable reasoning. Butler is much more concerned with the question of belief as a practical decision. And his claim is that, concerning the belief in a future state, we are justified in giving our assent. In this respect, we can doubt that Hume's doctrine of causal inference is so consonant with Butler's basically practical (and religious) philosophical commitment.

There are, too, several methodical moves. The first one is the *larvatus prodeo*. We are required to read between the lines of the *Treatise* to solve the riddle and, while reading between the lines, we are supposed to discover Hume's intentions. But we can raise the general objection that Hume is used to saying plainly what he has to say. Nevertheless, let us suppose that it is useful (and it is) for the reading of a book to know its author's intentions, and allow that an immediate reading does not give the full extent of the author's intentions, it remains that the intention is one thing and the text is another, and the text cannot be reduced to the intention, because it says what it says. Moreover, an author can have several intentions at the same time and we ought to say that explicit intention (to give the science of human nature, by using the experimental method) is of more consequence than an indirect intention (even if it is established). Lastly, it is a problem whether a contextual study is the best way to find out a veiled intention (and, a fortiori, to solve interpretative problems); and if so, to what point (for instance, I could say that at Hume's time, accusations of atheism were common stuff and that one should not rely too much on that kind of *topos*).

All these points could be discussed at length and Russell is quite conscious of these methodical aspects, since he devotes his last three chapters to the appreciation of the strength and bearing of his “irreligious interpretation.” The reader will readily consent that Russell’s book is an important contribution to the understanding of Hume’s commitments on the subject of religion, and that the myth of “castration” of all religious concern in the *Treatise* should be discarded. Maybe, too, he will agree that exhibiting Hume’s irreligious intention adds something to the plain reading of the text, without giving the key for it. But Russell’s claim is much more ambitious. He says: there is no way to give the solution for the riddle of the *Treatise* and to account for the fundamental unity and coherence of the book without rejecting the “castration” hypothesis and understanding the irreligious intention of Hume; in this respect, we have to reconsider from the bottom the whole nature of Hume’s skepticism and naturalism and to seize the real significance of the *Treatise*: Hume’s aim was to develop a secular and scientific account of the foundation of social and moral life and to sever morals from religion. Such is the “strong version” of the argument defended by Russell.

Readers will make up their own mind by considering the evidence presented by Russell: all of it is worthy of notice and further discussion.

Ajoutons pour conclure, et sans nous faire prier, que la lecture de l’ouvrage du Professeur Russell est un plaisir pour l’esprit.

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