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Simon Blackburn. *How to Read Hume*. London: Granta, 2008. Pp. ix + 118. ISBN 978-1847080332, Paperback, $12.95.

Robert J. Fogelin. *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study*. Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. xvii + 174. ISBN 978-0-19-538739-1, Hardback, $45.00

John P. Wright. *Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. xx + 316, ISBN 9780521833769, Hardback, $100.00, ISBN 9780521541589, Paperback, $31.00.

Simon Blackburn's *How to Read Hume*, Robert Fogelin's *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* and John P. Wright's *Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction* are all clear and highly readable works directed at audiences of students and other non-specialists. Given that all three of the authors are prominent and distinguished Hume scholars, I suspect these works will be of great interest to Hume specialists as well. This piece first summarizes the aims and methods of each book and next, by way of evaluation, compares and contrasts each author's work on four features that contribute to the general character of an introductory work devoted to Hume's philosophy. These features include selection of topics, situation of his philosophy in historical context, treatment of his significance in contemporary

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philosophy, and use of scholarly literature. This comparative approach reveals what I think are the strengths and weaknesses of each work.

Blackburn's book *How to Read Hume* is part of Granta's "How to Read" series.[1] The *How to Read* series, according to Series Editor Simon Critchley, are "beginners' guides to great thinkers" based on a "simple, but novel idea [that] to get close to what a writer is all about, you have to get close to the words they actually use and be shown how to read those words . . . in the company of an expert guide" (vii). Each author chooses ten or so short extracts from a writer's work and "looks at them in detail as a way of revealing their central ideas" (vii). Blackburn selects extracts from *A Treatise of Human Nature* for the first seven chapters to support his exploration of the science of human nature, empiricism, causation, the external world, personal identity, the principles of morals, and convention, in addition to extracts from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* and from 'Of the Standard of Taste' for the final three chapters on miracles, natural religion and taste.

Blackburn claims that Hume is "the greatest" and "most perplexing" British philosopher (1). He intends "to help the reader to understand how both these things can be true, for it is only when we work through the things that make Hume perplexing that we discover the things that make him great" (1). What makes Hume great, on Blackburn's account, is "the clarity of his vision, the fact that time and time again he sees so exactly how things stand with us," and to appreciate his greatness Blackburn situates Hume as one of the earliest evolutionary psychologists. Hume, he says, is a "Darwinian before his time" (13). For this reason, Blackburn stresses, for instance, "Hume's evolutionary story" of convention and how conventions "require a special . . . evolutionary story explaining how they might get going" (70, 66), noting that "modern day theories about the evolution of cooperation tread in exactly the same footsteps" (67). In matters of taste, Blackburn says that Hume, "like subsequent evolutionary psychologists . . . believes we are adapted to take pleasure in what is 'commodious' and 'useful'" (95). This "Darwinian perspective" also "gives Hume a relaxed attitude to ordinary mechanisms of living" as human beings are endowed with "natural faculties that enable our lives to go forward in the environment in which we find ourselves" (6). Nature "forces our minds and our motives into the shapes they have" to ensure that "we are minded to think that every event has a cause; we find it natural to believe in an objective order of events in space and time" and "we expect the future to resemble the past" (7). This emphasis on nature "sets the entire course of his philosophy" and his conception of human nature throughout is "clear-eyed and unflinching" yet also "infused with . . . benevolence" (6, 106).

Fogelin's 1985 book, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, downplayed the naturalist themes of Hume's *Treatise* and played up the skeptical themes to counteract the dominance of naturalist interpretations popular at

that time. In this recent work, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis*, Fogelin revisits much of the same territory, but there is important new material reflecting developments in his thinking about Hume's *Treatise*.[2] This time he provides a more "balanced account of the relationship between Hume's naturalism and his skepticism" (ix). Fogelin grants that much of Book 1, Part 3 supports a naturalist reading, that is until "we turn pages and enter into the skeptical realm of Part 4" (28). He aims to show how "Hume's pursuit of a science of human nature itself generates a skeptical challenge that calls his naturalistic program into question" (x). This "radical skepticism" that "subverts his entire enterprise" drives Hume to "philosophical despair" at the end of Book 1, and Fogelin shows how he attempts to "extract himself from this melancholy state" (5). Nature of course provides the way out: the "destructive mechanisms of Pyrrhonism"[3] are counterbalanced by the natural "mechanisms that produce common belief" (6). As a result of a "vector of these two opposing forces," the mind "naturally settles into the standpoint of a mitigated and moderate skepticism," adopted in the closing section of the *Enquiry* (6). Hume's mitigated skepticism, then, is a "product of the interaction between Pyrrhonian doubt on one side and the persistence of our common modes of believing on the other," and so understood, mitigated skepticism emerges as "an explicable event in the natural history of philosophy" (158).

As the subtitle indicates, Fogelin's book is literally a "textual study" in that it concerns itself solely with Hume's actual written words, following closely the text of Parts 3 and 4 of Book 1 of the *Treatise* and some parts of the Appendix, and Section 12 of the *Enquiry*. He is "not . . . much concerned with the sources of Hume's ideas," and he makes only infrequent comparisons with other philosophers (8). Fogelin also does not engage with the "rich and impressive" secondary literature, as "he does not see how this can be done in a fair and accurate way without interrupting the flow of the narrative [he] is presenting" (8). He also makes no effort to analyze or assess Hume's philosophy or show that Hume's writings are relevant to contemporary philosophical debates. Fogelin provides, instead, what he calls a "narrative account": he tracks the progress of Hume's "unfettered pursuit of the naturalistic program" to show, first, how the skeptical crisis arises "naturally" in the text, and second, how the crisis is eventually overcome in his more mature work (x, 11).

Wright's *Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction* is a recent addition to Cambridge's "Introductions to Key Philosophical Texts" series, which offers "introductory textbooks" on philosophical classics.[4] The back cover states that each book is supposed to "guide readers through the main themes and arguments" of the philosophical text in question and provide some insight into the relevant philosophical context within which the book was written as well as an appreciation of its reception. No philosophical background knowledge is assumed, so the book should "be suited to introductory university-level courses." In nine

chapters Wright covers Hume's intellectual development, the science of human nature, causation, skepticism, determinism, the passions, motivation, the moral sense, and the foundation of morals. In the course of these chapters, Wright defends his own "unified" reading of the *Treatise* (ix). Following his 1983 book, *The Skeptical Realism of David Hume*, Wright claims that the label "skeptical realism" is the best description of Hume's philosophy (xv). As a skeptical realist, Hume "naturally supposes both the existence and basic characteristics" of a world independent of us, "although we do not understand its nature through our cognitive faculties" and the findings of experimental science builds upon these "natural suppositions" (xvi). The case for skeptical realism is based on how Hume's views relate to those of his predecessors, in this case "both in the text of the *Treatise* and in his contemporary correspondence" (ix).

Wright regards his "task as a historian of philosophy" as that of revealing the "basic principles and presuppositions of [Hume's] philosophy," and he identifies the association of ideas as the "principle that runs through and unifies the hypotheses" in the *Treatise* (xvi, 47). Wright stresses the fact that the principles of association are grounded in the Cartesian tradition and the "standard" eighteenth-century mechanical theory of the imagination (x). This "Cartesian theory of the imagination provided a hypothesis concerning the workings of the brain in associating perceptions," and Hume "presupposes this model" to explain the first principle, the Copy Principle, and the transfer of force and vivacity from impressions to ideas (x).[5] Force and vivacity is mental energy that is "transferred from one perception to another via associational links" in the brain and generates a natural belief in "the existence of an "unknown necessary connection" or "a real ontological necessity" in both physical events and the human will, "belief in unobserved objects, the indirect passions, and sympathy with other human beings" (x–xi, 51). In morals, Hume appeals to the further associational principle, the principle of projection, as "a mechanism" by which human beings project moral sentiments onto an "objective world" that is "indifferent" to morality (122, 254–55). It is the "central goal" of Hume's philosophy, according to Wright, to postulate such processes of the imagination "to explain how we construct the reality in which we naturally and inevitably believe" (78).

The scope of Hume's philosophy is wide-ranging. Hume wrote on many different topics in metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, aesthetics, morals and politics; however, the author of a general work must be selective in the topics covered given the limited space available. Fogelin's work is the narrowest in scope, as he confines his discussion mostly to Parts 3 and 4 of Book 1of the *Treatise* and so limits his focus to Hume's metaphysics and epistemology. Both Blackburn and Wright's works, on the other hand, include an impressive array of topics in Hume's philosophy. But even here there are limitations. As is inevitable with this kind of project, some topics must lose out to others. Blackburn admits that the short space

prevents him from discussing Hume's other "seminal contributions" such as "the metaphysics of space and time and the problem of freedom and responsibility" (3).

Wright's book covers well most aspects of the *Treatise* with only one rather noticeable omission: there is no systematic discussion of space and time.[6] I found this to be a bit unsatisfactory for two reasons. The first is that the account of space and time is an absolutely fundamental and integral part of the *Treatise*. Hume devoted an entire part of the first book of the *Treatise* to space and time, and much scholarly work has been done recently to show the importance of space and time to other parts of his philosophy, such as causality, the external world, and the immateriality of the soul.[7] In fact, Wright himself even relies on a key passage from the section on space and time at *Treatise* 1.2.5.20 to support his "psychophysiological" interpretation of the associative links understood literally as pathways between brain-traces to allow for an easy movement of the animal spirits (51–58).[8] The second reason is that the account of space and time, particularly the section on the vacuum, is notoriously dense and extremely difficult. Anyone unfamiliar with Hume's works as well as scholars introducing the *Treatise* to students in the classroom would appreciate an introduction to this puzzling, yet central, part of the work. Some historical scene-setting for Hume's account of space and time and how it relates to views of his predecessors, such as Descartes and Locke, would have been an appropriate and welcome addition.

Hume not only wrote on a variety of topics but his writings on these topics were influenced by a wide array of thinkers. To explain this influence the author must consider how to introduce the historical sources of Hume's philosophy to the non-specialist. Both Blackburn and Fogelin's works contrast with Wright's on this front. Blackburn and Fogelin make infrequent references to the sources of Hume's ideas, and most of those references are made in passing. On the other hand, Wright's work goes far to introduce students to the richness and depth of the "irregular pearl" that is the *Treatise* by paying close attention to historical context, particularly the influence of thinkers such as Descartes, Malebranche, Hutcheson, Locke and Berkeley among others (viii). This historical setting is complemented by Wright's detailed biographical account in the first chapter. Wright documents Hume's "intellectual and personal struggles" when he was writing the *Treatise* and explains in the book how these struggles "influenced his conclusions about skepticism and human nature" (x). The close attention paid to the historical context of Hume's philosophy is illuminating, and in this regard Wright's work is an outstanding and significant contribution.

The significance of Hume's philosophy is not just historical: Hume has had a tremendous impact on current philosophical debates. To explain this influence, the author must consider how to engage the non-specialist on the issue of his influence on contemporary philosophy. This may be done in many ways, perhaps by comparing his ideas with important subsequent philosophers or by addressing questions

about the tenability of Hume's philosophical doctrines, such as empiricism, causality, and psychology, given recent developments in the sciences, mathematics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language and logic. Both Wright's and Fogelin's books contrast with Blackburn's on this front. Wright's emphasis on historical context means that the reader gets little sense of the contemporary relevance of the philosophy expressed in the *Treatise*. To be sure, the exploration of this area is too much, given the aim of the work, but still some detection of his presence in present-day philosophical debates would have been welcome to highlight the lasting importance of his philosophy and its impact on current thinking, both of which can help to motivate the beginning reader. Fogelin is not concerned with any philosophical assessment, and he makes no effort to show that Hume's writings are relevant to contemporary philosophical debates because it would be "patronizing to Hume" (8). This is not exactly evident to me. At times, it would have been good to see more in-depth analysis and assessment of the details of Hume's arguments as well as the impact of Hume's skepticism. For example, to emphasize Hume's mitigated skepticism as a so-called "event" in the history of philosophy, it would have been useful to assess the weaknesses and strengths of mitigated skepticism or explore the impact of this event on subsequent philosophy.

Blackburn's identification of Hume as an early evolutionary psychologist provides a fruitful background to draw attention to Hume's enduring philosophical legacy and to defend him against criticisms. There are useful comparisons with a variety of thinkers such as Kant (7–8, 18–19, 22–23, 52–3) and Nietzsche (11, 60, 69). Blackburn defends Hume as "not at all out of touch with philosophies of mind and experience that are often thought to have supplanted him;" his treatment of perceptions is the "the deepest and most insightful . . . in the modern period;" his discussion of miracles and natural religion taken together "annihilate the attempt to found religion on reason," and his essay on taste is a "brilliant success" (23, 34, 94, 106). On all topics considered in the book, Blackburn considers Hume "either the most profound thinker of the modern world, or if not, then at least [he] occupies the very front rank" (106), and his evident admiration for Hume's philosophical contributions makes for an enjoyable and lively read. Blackburn's book provides a stimulating outlook on Hume's sweeping influence on the history of philosophy and sheds light on the plausibility of Humean positions in current philosophical debates.

It should come as no surprise that there is much disagreement between the authors on the positions attributed to Hume. For example, each author presents a different account of Hume's infamous second thoughts about personal identity in the Appendix. Wright's Hume commits to the existence of real but unknown objective causal powers in objects (126), while Blackburn's Hume remains agnostic about the existence of such powers, and so his causal theory is "*metaphysically conservative*" (28, 32). Now, given that virtually every area of Hume's work has

spawned vastly different interpretations, the author must decide the level of detail suitable to engage in the complex debates between various scholars in an introductory work. Fogelin's book contrasts with both Wright and Blackburn on this score. Fogelin deliberately bypasses all the secondary literature, although he does suggest some works that might be useful to read along with his work (x, 8–9). This is somewhat unfortunate because an effective means for grounding his thesis might have been to show how his reading contrasts with other accounts of the relation between Hume's skepticism and naturalism. Given the lack of contrasts with other positions defended in the scholarly literature, the reader is left somewhat unconvinced that Fogelin has presented the proper reading of Hume. I, for one, simply could not help but want to see the interpretation justified and argued for in more depth.

Both Wright and Blackburn take care to distinguish their interpretation from others in the secondary literature. Wright thinks the fact that there are many interpretations of the *Treatise* poses a "particular problem" for the scholar who seeks to introduce the *Treatise* to beginners (ix). Given that there are so many rival interpretations of it, if you try to explain all of them, you run the risk of making it appear that the *Treatise* is very unclear, but if you explain just a single interpretation, then you run the risk of "oversimplifying" Hume's arguments and "leaving the reader with little appreciation of the richness of the philosophical ideas" (ix). Wright takes a "middle course," one that defends a unified reading of the *Treatise* against other interpretations (ix). The middle path ensures that Wright's work will be of use to beginners and scholars alike: the beginning reader is provided an overview of the different interpretations ascribed to Hume along with plenty of resources for further reading, if needed, and for scholars, Wright's original and provocative analysis of the *Treatise* is an excellent counterpart to his earlier book *The Skeptical Realism of David Hume*, which relied more heavily on key passages in the *Enquiry*.

Blackburn's use of the secondary literature constitutes a potential strength but also a potential weakness when thinking about how best to introduce Hume's thought to the non-specialist. Blackburn has a tendency to make generalizations about the secondary literature without giving any examples of the people who hold the views to which he refers. He uses phrases such as "some think," "a popular suggestion" "some writers," "some philosophers," often without citations (30, 42, 49–51, 62). In writing such a short introductory book, it is understandable why Blackburn is tempted to use generalizations about the secondary literature: he might not want to interrupt the flow of the prose or to complicate the narrative with side discussions of the vast, complicated, and nuanced commentary on Hume and the complexities involved in negotiating the debates between various scholars. But this gain in the simplicity of reading also constitutes a loss in some ways. For example, the reader is left without any resources to locate the commentators that

Blackburn has in mind. Those familiar with the literature will almost always know about whom Blackburn is talking, but this book is not meant for the specialist. The reader who wants more information about competing interpretations will not be able to find such information in Blackburn's book. Blackburn does include a brief bibliography, but the bibliography is simply an alphabetical list of titles, so the reader will not be able to match up particular secondary sources to the "some writers" or "some philosophers" Blackburn mentions throughout the book. An annotated or topical bibliography and specific representative examples at crucial junctures in the book itself would have been extremely helpful in this regard.

In sum, Wright's *Hume's 'Treatise'* provides an excellent introduction to the three books of the *Treatise* and both its composition and reception in a historical setting. Blackburn's *How to Read Hume* is a lucid, concise introduction that presents the lasting importance and plausibility of a Humean philosophy today. Fogelin's own narrative is worth following to the final chapter that contrasts the openings and closings of *Treatise*, Book I and the first and last sections of the *Enquiry*. To support his main thesis, Fogelin draws out the difference between Hume's early brave optimism for his science of human nature and later melancholic despair over its collapse into radical skepticism together with the modest reserve of his mature mitigated skepticism. It was most instructive to see the two texts presented together in a way that highlights Hume's early and late thoughts on his science of human nature and skepticism. Fogelin's *Hume's Skeptical Crisis* makes an ideal companion to *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, and I would say that for anyone looking for a way to guide their way through the themes of skepticism and naturalism in the *Treatise*, the sophisticated picture that emerges from both books together is an excellent place to start. Indeed, all three books are informative sources of inspiration for those just starting out to read Hume.[9]

NOTES

1 Simon Blackburn, *How to Read Hume* (London: Granta, 2008).

2 Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). I am indebted to Annette Baier's "*Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Review)," *Hume Studies* 35 (2009): 231–35; and Benjamin Hill's "*Hume's Skeptical Crisis: A Textual Study* (Review)," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48.4 (2010): 530–31.

3 According to Fogelin, Pyrrhonism is Hume's label for radical skepticism, "rightly or wrongly" (6, 155).

4 John P.Wright, *Hume's 'A Treatise of Human Nature': An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). I am indebted to Charlotte Brown and Ted Morris's

book review of John Wright's *Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature: An Introduction* for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 2010 retrieved at http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=21510.

5 Supporters of this mechanical interpretation include Stephen Buckle in *Hume's Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of "An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and P. J. E Kail in *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

6 There are two brief mentions of space and time on pages 53 and 76.

7 See Lorne Falkenstein's "Space and Time" in the *Blackwell Guide to Hume's* Treatise, ed. Saul Traiger (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) 59–76; and Donald Baxter's "Identity, Continued Existence, and the External World" in the same volume, 114–32. See also Baxter's "Hume's Theory of Space and Time in Its Skeptical Context," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, Second Edition, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 105–46; and Baxter, *Hume's Difficulty: Time and Identity in the* Treatise (London: Routledge, 2008).

8 Wright's defense of skeptical realism also relied on passages concerning space and time in his earlier book, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), see for example chapter 3.

9 I would like to thank Donald Ainslie, P. J. E Kail, Peter Millican, Nick Nash, David Owen and the audience at the book panel session at 38th International Hume Society Conference in Edinburgh, July 23rd 2011. I would also like to thank the editors of *Hume Studies*.