



**Anik Walkdow. *David Hume and the Problem of Other Minds.***

Emily Kelahan

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Anik Waldow. *David Hume and the Problem of Other Minds*. London: Continuum, 2009. Pp. ix + 206. ISBN 978-0-8264-3304-6, Cloth, \$130. ISBN 978-1-4411-2343-5, Paper, \$44.95.

As the title of her book suggests, Anik Waldow brings the philosophy of David Hume to bear on the problem of other minds. This is an interesting and worthwhile endeavor given Hume's reputation as one who exacerbates rather than mitigates this intractable problem. Waldow argues that Hume offers us a way of justifying our belief in other minds. Her strategy is two-fold. First, using only Hume's austere resources of perceptions and relations between perceptions, Waldow explains how a person can form a general idea of the mind and come to think of herself as one mind among others. Second, she argues from within Hume's framework, and on his behalf, that this belief is not only explicable but also "fully legitimate" and justified (12). Her explanation of the formation of a general idea of the mind and of a conception of the self as one mind among others is carefully constructed, novel, and compelling. However, her argument that the belief in other minds is justified or that Hume believes it to be is less convincing.

The book consists of three chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. In chapter 1, Waldow stakes out a position in the long-standing skepticism-naturalism debate. She sees Hume's skepticism as crucial support for his naturalism and argues that Hume's skepticism has a strategic aim: it promotes modesty in the practice of philosophy and discourages speculative metaphysics. It is not, she argues, directed at natural beliefs. Her grounds for this claim are as follows: as natural beliefs are the fundament on which philosophy is built, a philosophical system cannot consistently attack these beliefs because doing so would be self-undermining. Additionally, she argues that we are epistemically required to abandon natural beliefs *only when we have reason to do so*, and such reasons arise only on reflection. If we have no occasion to reflect on our natural beliefs or do not find any inconsistency as a result of reflection, then there is nothing epistemically irresponsible about holding them. This conclusion is important to the overall project of Waldow's book. If she can make the case that the belief in other minds is a member of the set of natural beliefs, she can make the case that the belief in other minds is insulated from skeptical criticism.

Chapter 2 advances an explanation of how, within Hume's framework, a subject forms a general idea of the mind and comes to think of herself as one mind among others. Here Waldow takes up the difficult task of responding to perhaps the most significant obstacle facing any attempt to offer a Humean solution to

the problem of other minds: *prima facie*, Hume cannot begin to offer a solution to the problem of other minds because he does not have the resources even to account for the existence of our belief in other minds let alone to justify it. The copy principle limits the ideas one may use in a Humean explanation of any phenomenon to those that are copied from impressions. There are no impressions of other minds, so it would seem that there can be no legitimate basis for a solution to the problem of other minds. Waldow offers a novel Humean way of accounting for a general idea of the mind. She argues that our general idea of the mind is the product of combining introspectively generated ideas from our own case (our thoughts and feelings) with ideas of our behavior and the behavior of others. In our own case, there is a constant conjunction between mental states and behavioral states. Through the Humean mechanism of sympathy, we make a special connection with creatures that appear similar to us. When we see them behave in ways that are associated with particular mental states in our own case, our thought naturally moves from the behavior we observe to the mental state typically associated with that behavior. In this manner we attribute mental states to others. Having a general idea of the mind allows one to think of oneself as a single mind among others.

In chapter 3, Waldow advances a Humean justification of the belief in other minds. She notes that beliefs are generated through a variety of mechanisms, some of which are more reliable than others. Since the belief in question is in large part the product of sympathy, she devotes several pages to discussing the conditions under which beliefs generated by sympathy are justified, or, alternatively, the conditions under which such beliefs are susceptible to skeptical doubts. She argues that causal reasoning can and should correct sympathy-generated beliefs, but only when they produce irritation and prevent us from interacting in our ordinary lives successfully. Reason is prompted to scrutinize such beliefs only when they produce “conflict and irritation, and thereby prevent successful interaction” (154). The belief in other minds, she contends, prompts no such scrutiny and promotes successful interaction in our ordinary lives. It is, for these reasons, a justified belief.

I offer two critical reflections on this book. First, Waldow attempts to insulate natural beliefs from skeptical criticism on two grounds—first, that Hume does not intend his skepticism to apply to natural beliefs, and secondly, that natural beliefs are the fundament on which philosophical views are built and cannot be consistently criticized for that reason—but these grounds are not sufficient. Certainly philosophers are more epistemically culpable than the vulgar, and Hume arguably has harsher criticisms of speculative metaphysics than of ordinary beliefs, but this does not imply that natural beliefs are immune to criticism or that Hume believes them to be. After all, Hume does criticize natural beliefs on skeptical grounds.

Recall, for example, Hume's criticism of the rational grounds for our natural belief that the future will resemble the past. Furthermore, the fundamentality of natural beliefs does not render them immune to skeptical criticism. Natural beliefs are the foundation on which philosophy is built as a matter of fact (they are our one and only starting place), but this is not tantamount to a principled reason to insulate them from skeptical criticism. Hume seems to insulate some beliefs from *sustained* skepticism, but not on principled grounds. In his descriptive account of human nature, he explains that custom will not allow us to take our skeptical doubts about some beliefs to heart, but this is not to say that such beliefs are completely immune to skepticism.

I find it surprising that Hume's treatment of the problem of induction does not make an appearance in the book, as our natural belief that the future will resemble the past is analogous to our natural belief in other minds. In the case of the belief that the future will resemble the past, Hume deftly demonstrates that this belief is not justified (or is justified only on inductive grounds), but reassures us that we will continue to hold it anyway because the principle of custom prevails where reason does not. He explains the belief and why we retain it in the face of the problem of induction, without going so far as to justify it. An analogous treatment of the belief in other minds is attractive and available. Our rational grounds for having the belief in other minds are shaky, but human nature will ensure that we continue to attribute mental states to creatures that resemble us. That is, the belief is explicable but perhaps not justifiable.

Second, related to Waldow's strategy of insulating natural beliefs from skeptical criticism is her claim that reason needs authorization to scrutinize beliefs and finds no such authorization in the case of the belief in other minds, as this belief causes no "conflict or irritation" (154). I am not convinced that there is no "conflict or irritation" associated with this belief even under ordinary circumstances. One can find oneself in a completely ordinary circumstance, and then suddenly the occasion to philosophize presents itself. You may find that your dinner companion hates cilantro whereas you love it, or you may feel lonely and isolated when no one seems to understand your feelings. Such ordinary occurrences naturally draw your attention to the dearth of evidence around the mental lives of others and the significant assumption you make in attributing to others what is true in your own case. This arguably produces "conflict and irritation." You believe something heartily, but upon examination you realize that your credence ought to be lower than it is.

Overall, I enjoyed this book, and I recommend it to Hume scholars. Though I have reservations about some components of Waldow's overall project, I think very highly of her explanation of the formation of a general idea of the mind. It offers Hume some defense against what is perhaps the most devastating criticism

facing his theory of ideas: he does not have the explanatory resources to account for many of our ordinary beliefs. Waldow accounts for the ordinary belief in other minds and in so doing shows great respect for the original text.

**EMILY KELAHAH**

Philosophy Department  
Illinois Wesleyan University  
201 Beecher St.  
Bloomington, Illinois, 61701, U.S.A.  
ekelahan@iwu.edu