



Alessio Vaccari. *Le etiche della virtù. La riflessione contemporanea a partire da Hume.*

Sarin Marchetti

Hume Studies Volume 39, Number 1 (2013), 123-127.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact

humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

Book Review

Alessio Vaccari. *Le etiche della virtù. La riflessione contemporanea a partire da Hume*. Firenze: Le Lettere, 2012. Pp. 320. ISBN 9788860876324, Paper, €29.00.

Alessio Vaccari's volume represents a major achievement in Hume scholarship as well as in contemporary reflection on philosophical ethics. *Le etiche della virtù. La riflessione contemporanea a partire da Hume* (*Virtue Ethics: From Hume Onwards*) will be of much value to both historians of moral philosophy and contemporary ethicists who are versed in the ongoing discussions over the nature and point of moral thought. In an intellectual landscape dominated by a legalistic conception of ethics, Vaccari's investigation is a historiographically committed and theoretically inspired inquiry into (and re-evaluation of) the health of and current regard for the paradigm of the virtues. On the one hand, the author is interested in challenging the influential narrative—voiced by Elizabeth Anscombe (1958) and Alasdair MacIntyre (1981)—according to which modern moral philosophy has been characterized by the most unfortunate eclipse of the language of the virtues; on the other, he aims at reconstructing an effective, viable understanding of virtue ethics along those Humean lines best suited to address the distinctive difficulties facing our contemporary progressive societies. (The challenge of environmental sustainability and future generations is taken as exemplary.) Against Anscombe and MacIntyre, and following the lesson of Jerome B. Schneewind (1990, 1998), Vaccari argues that in the post-Enlightenment moral debate, we have not paid enough attention to distinctively modern articulations of the central features of

virtue ethics, including the cultivation of one's character as a prime moral goal, an enriched understanding of the qualitative dimension and intrinsic value of human happiness, and the acknowledgement of the moral significance of both personal and social relationships for the realization of the good.

These historiographical and theoretical concerns represent two sides of the same coin, as Vaccari compellingly argues that the oversight (if not disregard) of the typically modern conception of the virtues finely elaborated by Hume in his works—partly reprised and further refined by John Stuart Mill—deprives us of precious analytical resources to resolve some general impasses that are features of contemporary moral reflection (for example, the demandingness of duty based ethics and the limits of impartial accounts of moral principles) as well as the tensions internal to virtue ethics, especially of neo-Aristotelean and neo-Kantian sorts, (for example, their conflicting pictures of the virtuous agent and the experiential unsoundness of their accounts of the stabilization of moral responses). Humean virtue ethics is depicted, in the first instance, as a radical approach to—and style of—moral philosophy: descriptive and yet normative, explicative without being prescriptive. It is thus Vaccari's claim that by re-discovering neglected and yet central aspects of Hume's practical philosophy, illuminated by Mill's romantic utilitarianism and contrasted to both Kant's rationalism and (partly) Nietzsche's perfectionism, we would gain access to a fresh conceptual possibility about how best to reflect on the moral life. This operation also opens up a fertile space for a metaphilosophical investigation of the very character and stakes of moral thought itself, whose lack of reflexivity upon its philosophical credentials is often at the basis of the aforementioned difficulties.

The two tasks are brilliantly coordinated, resulting in a volume that is a gold mine of both historical and speculative details that provide a critical store of intellectual resources for thinking through these issues. Besides firmly mastering the primary sources, Vaccari digests an impressive body of secondary literature, which is clearly explained and skillfully assessed. Targeted at scholars of Hume and virtue ethics, *Le etiche della virtù* is highly recommended for advanced undergraduate courses as well as for graduate seminars both on the history of modern moral philosophy and on contemporary meta-ethics and normative ethics. An English translation of the volume would surely widen its audience and boost its circulation.

The volume comprises a preface, five chapters, and an exhaustive bibliography. In the preface, Vaccari sets the stage for his defense of a sentimentalist version of virtue ethics in the wake of Hume, whose advantages compared with its pre-eminent pre-modern varieties (say Aristotle's and its theological elaborations) consist in its naturalistic framework and utterly secular nature, its emphasis on reflexivity and responsibility, and its ability to account for the quintessentially modern goals of (and striving for) liberty and equality. The first chapter is dedicated to a meticulous and cutting-edge presentation of Hume's elaborated ethical

machinery, with a useful appendix on Hutcheson's moral sense theory designed to mark the radical differences between the two thinkers. Chapters two to four tackle, respectively, Kant's, Mill's, and Nietzsche's speculations on the role and weight of the virtues in both the explanation and the refinement of the moral life. In these central chapters, Hume's sentimentalist articulation of an aretic conception of the good—whose opportunity and promises are reinforced with further particulars—functions as an ideal yardstick to measure the strengths and flaws of those alternative conceptions. The last, lengthy chapter vindicates the fecundity as well as the legacy of the Humean approach. By discussing the literature on virtue ethics of the last thirty years, Vaccari shows both how the most interesting themes in contemporary moral philosophy (for example, anti-theory in ethics and the critique of moral systems) are consistent with Hume's spirit and how the most influential contemporary moral thinkers either directly (for example, Annette Baier) or indirectly (Bernard Williams) applauded his letter. Finally, a close confrontation with the recent major interpretations of Hume as a virtue ethicist (those of Kate Abramson, Simon Blackburn, Rachel Cohon, Julia Driver, Peter Kail, Eugenio Lecaldano, and Michael Slote among others) is used to highlight the key features and assets of the sentimentalist approach to our ordinary moral experience that is at the heart of Hume's philosophy.

Among the many arguments of the volume, always keenly argued so as to fashion a brisk dialectic, three intertwined themes deserve particular credit. They are, respectively, (a) the emphasis on the reflective (vs. innate) dimension of our moral constitution, according to which the natural sentimental endowment shaping our moral character is constantly re-negotiated in the light of the stabilization of those habits and dispositions that we find agreeable from a disinterested point of view—although the latter is always shifting in relation to the interests of those individuals and circles with which we establish stable and meaningful relationships; (b) the valorization of the perspective of the agent (versus that of the mere spectator) in moral evaluations, with the latter depicted as dependent on the capacity to resonate sympathetically with the passions of others and thus being actively involved with their life projects; and (c) the reference to individual responsibility (versus the reference to abstract and impersonal principles) as the sole source of moral justification and thus of practical normativity, with contingency and luck as the background and horizon of human practices against which we test our characters and judge those of others accordingly. These claims, all having to do with the distinctive kind of naturalism the author finds in Hume, are particularly interesting as they hit on crucial notes of the current moral debate, in which what is at stake is exactly the very feasibility of employing wholesale naturalistic ethical projects to account for the complexity of the moral life.

The articulation of these claims convincingly dislodges the picture of Hume's moral sentimentalism as a form of the bald, unsophisticated empiricism

often unwittingly ascribed to him, and yet this operation inevitably raises new questions about the very stability and consequences of Hume's philosophical posture. By offering a most engaging interpretation of Hume as a philosopher who wanted to keep together a thoroughly naturalistic (that is, non-metaphysical and non-scientific) account of the moral life with an understanding of ethics as an autonomous sphere of experience, reflection, and conduct that is irreducible to the psychological traits of the agent or the occasional problematic situations he or she faces (although internally related to both), Vaccari sketches a powerful framework to address the central ethical issues of agency, autonomy, and community. However, this generates new questions about the very nature of this paradigm of the virtues. By way of a conclusion, I shall briefly elaborate on this point and raise some questions in the hope of fostering further debate.

What the history of ethics has taught us is that appeals to human nature to provide evidence for a particular moral view, principle, or even system are wanting at best and dangerous at worst. They either are incapable of making sense of the critical and directive nature of moral reflection or run the risk of inscribing substantive moral views into our very constitution, making us incapable of envisioning new moral possibilities worth exploring. The open question facing virtue ethicists is thus whether their position is immune to those well-known charges, as they purportedly balance keeping ethics a feasible human alternative without making it too constrictive. The quest of the ethical naturalism endorsed by virtue ethics is that of working out a notion of human nature broad and versatile enough to accommodate moral criticism and transformation and yet close enough to what we historically know and value about human beings to be practically attainable. This is surely a difficult philosophical balance to achieve: we want an ethics *for* human beings, without it being an ethics condemning us to a definite picture *of* them.

Hume's naturalism, as Vaccari presents it, is surely a program moved by analogous intentions (unlike the British moralists with whom Hume has been customarily associated), and in this respect, its promises are high. Vaccari is well aware of the urgency of the critical issues surrounding ethical naturalism, and in this volume he presents Hume as the first modern moral philosopher who offered a convincing answer to such concerns: his insistence on the importance of the critique of received moral customs and on the conventional nature of our ethical landscapes lie at the heart of a process of de-transcendentalization and re-humanization of the moral life still to be fully assimilated. The volume by Vaccari has, in this respect, an important methodological lesson to teach: there is a strong message about the very content and strategies of moral reflection (that is, about what ethics *is* and *does*) constitutive of Hume's virtue ethics. A philosophical inquiry into the moral life should proceed from what individuals in the midst of their ethical activities and reflections might do of themselves given their partiality, vulnerability, and interdependence, but also granted their capacity for sympathy and imagination,

through which they might develop new ways to understand ethical notions and put them to work.

That being the gist of his sentimentalist virtue ethics, Hume's readers seem to face a choice (at once interpretative and theoretical) about how to understand the sort of metaphilosophical operation suggested by this approach—a choice which would affect its exegetical reconstruction as well as its classification among the contemporary alternatives: either insist that one's reflective capacity has to be described itself as an essential feature of human *nature* and thus read Hume's characterization of virtue as one philosophical anthropology among others, or take (the goal of) reflexivity at face value and thus acknowledge the small, almost honorary role played by the very concept of *human nature* in ethics. That is, in asking what we should do with Hume's references to human nature, and in which sense, if any, virtue ethics practiced in a Humean vein marks a radical distance from traditional moral theories and conceptions with their loaded (that is, foundational) philosophical anthropologies, we should decide whether Hume simply "described" human nature in a better way—namely, by taking into consideration more congenial features or by focusing on more important aspects overlooked by alternative approaches—or offered us an alternative conception altogether of what the very reference to human nature might be and do in ethics—for example, one in which a certain picture of human life functions as a critical signpost for further ethical reflection and debate.

On this latter reading, which I personally find more intriguing, references to human nature in ethics should always be in the service of a certain line of moral reasoning and never be either points of departure or points of arrival, because the philosophically interesting work from a moral point of view (one avoiding moralistic troubles at least) is precisely that of seeing what would follow from picturing human life in a certain way and how that would affect our own concept of ethics (that is, of its subject matter and its methods). Hume appears as a particularly valuable fellow traveler in this venture, but one whose contribution is tricky to characterize, as it sometimes seems to lean toward the former, more conservative reading. It is my guess that where we stand on this issue has not insignificant philosophical and ethical consequences. We owe thanks to Vaccari for bringing into focus this extremely important matter and giving us rich material to ponder.

SARIN MARCHETTI

School of Philosophy

University College Dublin

Belfield, Dublin 4

Ireland

E-mail: sarin.marchetti@ucd.ie