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Book Review

Louis E. Loeb. *Reflection and the Stability of Belief: Essays on Descartes, Hume, and Reid*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvii + 369. ISBN: 978-0-19-536876-5, Cloth, \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-536875-8, Paper, \$45.00.

This book is (almost entirely) a collection of previously published essays by Louis Loeb. The first three essays focus primarily on advancing the general interpretive claim that Descartes's main epistemological goal is achieving *unshakable* beliefs. While essays 5–10 address many topics in Humean interpretation, they all contribute in various ways to supporting Loeb's claim that Hume's primary epistemological goal is achieving *stable* beliefs. Essay 12 compares the naturalisms of Hume and Reid. All of the collected essays are excellent.

Such excellence is not surprising, for Loeb is an influential interpreter of early modern philosophy, justly renowned for the ingenuity of his readings. Spanning the last three decades, these essays display many fine qualities that have helped make Loeb such a prominent historian. Here I will briefly mention three of these qualities. First, Loeb has remarkable command of the primary historical texts and the secondary literature. This mastery is perhaps best seen in his "What is Worth Preserving in the Kemp Smith Interpretation of Hume?" (essay 9). In addition to providing a detailed exposition of a wide range of texts from Hume and Norman Kemp Smith, Loeb also makes adroit comments about the literature discussing the secondary literature when he addresses the "Canonical Understanding" of Kemp Smith (246–47). Second, Loeb effortlessly integrates historical and contemporary concerns. His "Hume's Agent-Centered Sentimentalism" (essay 8), for instance, has

an interesting discussion of how Hume's moral theory might aid contemporary utilitarians (238–44). Moreover, essays 5 (“Integrating Hume’s Accounts of Belief and Justification”) and 10 (“Psychology, Epistemology, and Skepticism in Hume’s Argument about Induction”) fruitfully discuss Hume’s epistemology in light of issues important to the contemporary distinction between internalism and externalism. Third, Loeb’s intuitive knack for isolating important connections amongst various texts and figures allows him to tell a concise story about the evolution of certain philosophical ideas that panoramically covers large portions of the history of philosophy. His “Locke and British Empiricism” (essay 11), which connects epistemological themes in Locke with Descartes, Hume, Berkeley, Malebranche, and Reid, among others, is one example. (Because this essay is, as of this writing, still forthcoming, it is the only essay that is not previously published.) Finally, all three of these qualities are prominently on display in “Sextus, Descartes, Hume, and Peirce” (essay 4), which interestingly uses contemporary views about belief (especially as developed by David Velleman) to understand Descartes and Hume “against the backdrop of Sextus and Peirce” (107). To my mind this essay is the best in the book.

There are at least two main advantages of collecting these excellent essays into a book. First, the collection allows Loeb to systematically emphasize the similarities between different early modern thinkers in a way that typically strengthens the cumulative case he makes for his readings of these philosophers. Second, the volume permits us to catch a rare glimpse of how an interpreter’s views can change over time. Considering the cumulative effect of the arguments as well as the changes in Loeb’s views also provides us with a great opportunity to reflect critically on many important issues in a fruitful way. The rest of this review will focus on such critical reflections.

Let us start with Descartes, as Loeb does. In his introduction to the essays, Loeb helpfully contextualizes his discussions of Descartes. He points out that his paper “Was Descartes Sincere in His Appeal to the Light of Nature?” (not included here) maintains that the arguments Descartes presents are so poor that they “suggest” that “Descartes was insincere in offering his proofs of the existence of God and in appealing to Divine veracity to validate clear and distinct perception” (9; cf. 35). Of course others have likewise contended that Descartes was a dissimulator. But in the first four chapters Loeb reverses course to some extent and argues that Descartes’s reasoning is not as defective as some think. More specifically, he reads Descartes as proposing “a naturalistically conceived hierarchy of cognitive faculties” (10) that can help him to avoid the (in)famous Cartesian Circle problem that sometimes leads to the dissimulation charge. To elaborate a bit, Loeb argues for an epistemically normative thesis that sense perception must “submit” to reason but not vice versa (75). As a result, Loeb claims that his view “weighs heavily” against the dissimulation charge (10). I believe that Loeb has offered a *possible* way to in-

interpret Descartes's reasoning that avoids the circularity problem. Whether this is *actually* Descartes's view is, in an important sense, beside the point. For consider the seriousness of the charge against Descartes. The question-begging nature of the circularity is "so *obvious* [emphasis added] that one wonders whether Descartes could have failed to be aware of it" (35). If I am right that Loeb has a *possible* way of reading Descartes such that his reasoning is hierarchical and foundational and not circular, then it is difficult to sustain the charges that the circularity is "*obvious*."

Even more troubling, it is difficult to see how such accusations could have been lodged in the first place; for to say that a philosopher's reasoning is *obviously* flawed in its circularity, one is presumably suggesting that *there is clearly no possible way* to interpret such reasoning in a noncircular manner. And I am unaware of an interpreter who has made a start on presenting an argument with such a strong modal conclusion. Moreover, even if all interpreters eventually discard Loeb's noncircular interpretation of Descartes, it still would not follow that Descartes's reasoning is obviously defective (as even Loeb seems to suggest at 82, note 48). For since the time that Loeb advanced his interpretation, several other philosophers have provided interpretations of Descartes that absolve him of this defective reasoning. Now I am not claiming that Descartes's arguments are good; nor am I claiming that these interpreters' readings are correct. My point is simply that it is implausible that Descartes's reasoning is *obviously* defective if so many others do not find it to be faulty. Overall, then, reflecting on Loeb's change of mind on this matter helps to reveal a major weakness in some approaches to Descartes.

Earlier I noted how collecting these essays can increase the cumulative effect of the force of Loeb's views. At times, though, this effect is misleading. In particular, although Loeb often skillfully covers lots of textual terrain with his ability to isolate the most important ideas in complex arguments, he occasionally draws conclusions much too quickly in key contested areas. Let me focus on two examples from his discussions of Hume. First, in the course of defending the claim that Hume was not a skeptic about induction, Loeb claims that "it is necessary to insulate the question of whether Hume is a skeptic specifically with respect to induction from his overall skeptical tendencies" (271). On an abstract level, this strategy sounds sensible. But at least one key piece of evidence to which Loeb appeals is Hume's project in the *Treatise* as the pursuit of the science of human nature (270–71). I do not see how one can appeal to Hume's overall project *without* raising issues about Hume's overall skeptical tendencies. So I do not see how Loeb's actual argument about Hume's discussion of induction can be isolated from broader issues. To put this point another way, if one reads Hume's project as skeptical, then one is not going to see such an appeal as providing any evidence against the more specific claim that Hume is a skeptic about induction. More explanation or argument seems to be required, especially if Loeb wants to support the strong thesis that the Hume-as-skeptic-about-induction reading "*cannot* be correct" (273; emphasis added).

A similar problem affects some of his arguments about the nature of Humean belief. Although Loeb admits that two passages from the *Treatise* (1.3.8 and 1.4.1) provide “some encouragement to [Kemp Smith’s] idea that all belief is solely a matter of taste or sentiment” (261), he argues that “these passages offer only superficial support for attributing to Hume a general sentimentalist theory of belief” (261) and concludes that the “textual evidence” for this reading is “thin and readily neutralized” (263). So Hume’s explicit claim that “[A]ll probable reasoning is nothing but a species of sensation” (T 1.3.8.12; SBN 103) is, according to Loeb, “extravagant” (263). Although I lack the space to explain fully why I disagree with Loeb’s argument here, let me state one major problem. Loeb’s treatment leaves the impression that Hume’s text explicitly addresses this issue only in two places. But in summarizing his overall claims of the *Treatise*, note Hume’s language: “the philosophy contain’d in this book is very sceptical. . . . Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit” (T Abs. 27; SBN 657). The existence and placement of this passage suggests that Kemp Smith’s view is not as textually thin as Loeb contends. Moreover, it seems extremely difficult to characterize such a carefully placed summary statement as “extravagant.” At least, it is difficult to characterize it so without further argument.

In short, this is a fine book. Although I am unconvinced by some of Loeb’s arguments and have contended that certain claims require more argumentative support, I still believe that this book is well worth reading, especially for those who are not as familiar with the broad scope of Loeb’s work.

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