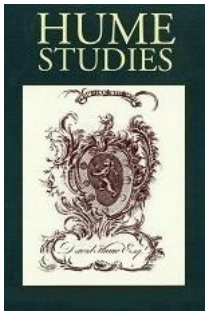

Karl Schafer

Jacqueline Taylor. *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy*

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Book Review

Jacqueline Taylor. *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 240, ISBN 9780198729525, cloth, $60.00.

Reflecting Subjects is an important and timely book, both as a piece of Hume interpretation and as a work of philosophy more generally. Let me begin with the first. It has increasingly become a commonplace in Hume interpretation that the passionate and social dimensions of human life play an unusually fundamental role in Hume's philosophy. But we are only beginning to appreciate the significance of this side of Hume in a systematic way. (Indeed, Taylor's book may be the first piece of Hume scholarship focused primarily on the passions since Páll Árdal's—although the centrality of the passions is also a major theme of Annette Baier's work.) It is precisely here that Taylor focuses her attention, providing us with a new perspective on why the passions stand at the center, not just of the books like the *Treatise*, but also of the philosophy they expound.

For Taylor, the heart of Hume's social philosophy lies in his account of the passions and, in particular, in the manner in which they reciprocally inform and are informed by our social context and relations. In this way, Taylor finds in Hume's account of the passions the foundations of a truly *social* psychology, as well as a theory of social relations and power that has surprising critical potential. It is here that the broader philosophical relevance of Taylor's book is perhaps most obvious. A signal development in recent "analytic philosophy" is a renewed interest in the social dimensions of human life. Topics like race and gender—and

the forms of social oppression associated with them—are finally returning to the center of contemporary philosophical discussion. One of the main themes of Taylor's book is that Hume is a worthy contributor to the renewal of interest in these topics. Indeed, if Taylor is right, is was precisely Hume's concern for these issues that explains some of the major developments in Hume's philosophical view over his career.

Thus, the time is doubly ripe for Taylor's book. Despite its relatively short length, Taylor's discussion is extremely rich, so there is no possibility of doing justice to it here. Instead, I will simply try to present a few of the main themes of her discussion, while raising a few questions along the way. As should already be clear, I am very sympathetic to the story Taylor has to tell, although, of course, as a professional picker of nits, I will do my best to find some details to bicker over.

Taylor begins *Reflecting Subjects* by situating Hume's account of the passions within his larger project of developing a "science of man." In doing so, Taylor takes aim at the popular perception of Hume as a philosopher whose methodology falls far short of his own experimental ambitions. Here Taylor makes two important points. First, she convincingly argues that the conception of "experimental method" operative among Hume's contemporaries was importantly different from our own. Thus, if we are to fairly evaluate Hume's methodological claims, we must read them as expressing a commitment to "experimental method" in Hume's sense of these words.

This might seem to save Hume from the charge of methodological inconsistency at the cost of allowing that his methodology is in fact naive and simplistic by present standards. But Taylor goes on to argue that while Hume's experimental method differs from our current conception of experimental practice, it nonetheless represents a serious and systematic approach to the nature of the human mind.

With this background in place, Taylor moves on to discuss the details of Hume's theory of the passions—focusing on the key passion of pride. Taylor's discussion here is too rich to summarize, but a central theme is again the links between Hume's account of the passions and his social philosophy. As noted before, this connection is twofold. First, Taylor convincingly argues that the psychological character of the Humean passions is deeply informed by our own particular social context, both in terms of the ideas and beliefs associated with these passions, and in terms of our understanding of the significance and appropriateness of them. In this way, for Taylor, our implicit understanding of the meaning of our passions is one of the central mechanisms by which we internalize the values and prejudices of our society.

At the same time, Taylor shows how Hume makes use of his account of the passions—and in particular the role of sympathy and general rules in guiding their development—to provide a basis for a rich, and often surprisingly critical, account of the nature of social categories and relations. In short, for Taylor, although there

is shared pallet of passionate responses that all humans share, the particular passions we experience are both socially constituted and socially constituting. It is here (as opposed to, say, his famous treatment of the artificial virtues) that Taylor believes that Hume's discussion of the nature of society is at its richest.

I learned a great deal from these chapters. But there were some points where I would have liked to see Taylor's view worked out in more detail. Consider for example, the perennial question of how to reconcile Hume's assertion that the passions are "simple perceptions" incapable of further definition, with his rich discussion of the significance of these passions in terms of the ideas that accompany them. Quite reasonably, Taylor takes the "character" of the passions, for Hume, to be informed by both these elements, that is, by "the complex set of beliefs about the cause and oneself as advantaged by one's relation to it, the affective quality of pride as pleasurable, and the phenomenology of pride" (53). But I was never completely clear about how exactly Taylor understood the relationship between the simple perception of pride and pride in this richer, intentionally-laden sense.

I mention this, in part, because how we read such passages is crucial for the sense in which the Humean passions are "socially constituted." But I also believe that thinking about these issues lends further support to some of Taylor's claims about the social constitution of our passionate lives. In particular, one step in resolving these difficulties might be to note that there are actually two quite different definitional tasks within Hume's system. First, there is the task, familiar from Locke, of defining some particular perception in the mind. This, for both Locke and Hume, will be possible only if that perception is itself complex. But there is also the task of defining some shared linguistic general term, and the general idea associated with it.

Once we see this difference, it becomes natural to see Hume's insistence that the passions (as simple perceptions) cannot be defined, in terms of the first of these tasks. But, while the passions are indefinable in this sense, this need not rule a positive definition of terms like "pride" and "humility" in terms of, in part, the normal causal context of the passions that fall under these terms. Crucially, in engaging in this second task, we are concerned with linguistically-informed categories whose boundaries are sensitive to the prevailing conventions and prejudices of our community. Thus, if something like this is right, it helps to support Taylor's contention that these categories are, at least in part, socially constructed for Hume.

With these ideas in place, in the final three chapters of the book Taylor turns to consider the significance of these ideas for Hume's moral theory. Here Taylor argues that Hume's official account of virtue in Book 3 of the *Treatise* does not match his nuanced account of the social passions in Book 2. In particular, Taylor claims that, "in Book 3, Hume neglects the social inequalities he has examined [in Book 2] and instead appears to regard all persons as having a more or less equal

moral standing, in terms of weighing in on the moral evaluation of one another's character, as well as regarding themselves as morally competent, and taking pride in good moral character. I think this is a significant lapse on Hume's part, although it is one on which he makes good in his later, more sophisticated account of moral evaluation" in the *Enquiries* (100).

Thus, for Taylor, Hume's presentation of his moral theory in the *Treatise* is fatally flawed in ways that he was in a position to notice, given the Book 2 account of our social psychology. Fortunately for lovers of Hume, Taylor argues that Hume himself recognized these flaws with time. Indeed, for Taylor, the need to rectify these errors provides one of the main motivations for the changes in Hume's moral theory between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries*. In this way, Taylor's book makes a major contribution, not just to our understanding of Hume's moral philosophy, but also to the debate about how Hume's philosophy developed over his lifetime.

I found Taylor's discussion of these issues insightful, and, as someone generally inclined to emphasize the continuities across Hume's work, was grateful for the challenge to this view that it provided. But I did wonder whether Taylor was completely fair to the Hume of the *Treatise* on some of these points. For example, Taylor takes the official view of the *Treatise* to be that the standard of virtue is determined solely by one's sympathy with an agent and her narrow circle, however odd the psychology of this circle may be, or however odd one's own psychology is. But even in the *Treatise*, Hume does not deny that the "correction" involved in the proper use of moral terms goes beyond the adoption of such a point of view in a number of ways. For example, as he notes in his famous discussion of "virtue in rags," Hume takes the proper use of moral terms to be governed not by the idiosyncratic responses of any particular individual or individuals, but rather by the "natural tendency" of a character trait to yield certain sorts of responses. Taylor is well aware of these passages, but she does not see them as part of the "official" *Treatise* view of these issues, which I found surprising. After all, while Hume stresses that the distinctively moral sentiments only arise when our sentiments are guided by sympathy with an individual and her narrow circle, he does not claim that this is the end of the process of "correction" involved in the proper use of moral terms.

Once again, it seems to me important to think about these questions in the context of Hume's general account of how the meaning of shared linguistic terms is fixed. If we do so, I think we can see that the official view of the *Treatise* must be a good deal richer than Taylor's discussion sometimes suggests. But I agree with Taylor that Hume is much less clear in the *Treatise* about this than he ought to have been. And there is no doubt that these chapters raise a series of important challenges to the manner in which Hume's views in the *Treatise* are often understood.

In any case, I hope these brief comments have given the reader a sense of just how rich and thought-provoking Taylor's book is. I doubt that the readers of this

journal need to be told this, but this is a book that anyone interested in Hume, or social philosophy more generally, should read. It will leave your understanding of both much the richer.

KARL SCHAFER
Department of Philosophy
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA
92697-4555
schaferk@uci.edu