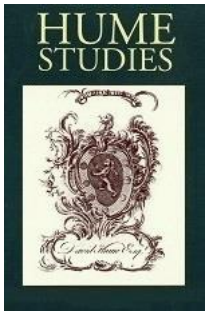

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Whence the Chemistry of Hume's Mind?
David Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism: Methodology and Ideology in Enlightenment Inquiry by Tamás Demeter (review)

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Book Reviews

Whence the Chemistry of Hume's Mind?

Tamás Demeter. *David Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism: Methodology and Ideology in Enlightenment Inquiry*. Boston: Brill, 2016. Pp. 221. Hardcover ISBN 9789004327313, e-book ISBN 9789004327320.

Reading Tamás Demeter's recent book, "David Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism," feels like visiting a curiosity shop. There are some general themes that are meant to harmonize the work, such as the emphasis on the conceptual and methodological unity of natural and moral philosophy. This merging of cultures of inquiry is nicely illustrated with the case study of anger in the period. There is the main thesis: that Hume's science of mind was influenced, not as much by Newton's *Principia*, as by Newton's *Opticks*. Newton's *Opticks* informs the "sciences of quality," such as chemistry and physiology in eighteenth-century Scotland, and then chemical and anatomical thinking makes its way to Hume's science of mind. These discussions are often fascinating, and long-standing readers of Hume will be delighted to find Hume in this fresh intellectual landscape. Here Hume joins remarkable figures like George Cheney, William Cullen, William Porterfield, and other instrumental "vitalist" thinkers who, inspired by Newton's *Opticks*, developed new conceptual tools for theorizing about natural phenomena that resisted the rigorous mathematization and mechanization of the dominant Principia-style culture of science.

Like a curiosity shop, the book displays its items or themes in a somewhat haphazard manner, and connections are often hinted at rather than established. I did, however, discern in Demeter's book a philosophical hidden gem. "Hume's chemistry," a permanent new term in my vocabulary, is indeed, I believe, a philosophical diamond in the rough, one that has the potential to change in important ways how we understand some of Hume's most controversial claims.

It seems to me that it is Hume's "chemical thinking" that sends Demeter in the directions we witness in the book, although the subject of Hume's chemistry appears rather late, when Demeter discusses a number of passages, mostly from Hume's discussion of the passions in Book 2 of the *Treatise*. Reading these passages as Demeter collects them made it vividly obvious to me, for the first time, that there is an important phenomenon that deserves to be labeled and studied: the chemistry in Hume's mind. Here are some of the passages that struck me with particular force (I leave my favorite for the end).

> Are not these as plain proofs, that the passions of fear and hope are mixtures of grief and joy, as in optics 'tis a proof, that a colour'd ray of the sun passing thro' a prism, is a composition of two others, when, as you diminish or encrease the quantity of either, you find it prevail proportionably more or less in the composition? I am sure neither natural nor moral philosophy admits of stronger proofs. (T 2.3.9.19; SBN 443–44)

I fancy this passage to be the reactant, the element that sets off the reaction that turns into Demeter's book. What is the significance of Hume's startling comparison of the passions with the phenomenon of the prism that so occupies Newton in the *Opticks*? Elsewhere Hume depicts "hope and fear" as arising "from the different mixture of these opposite passions of grief and joy, and from their imperfect union and conjunction." (T 2.3.9.16; SBN 442–43). How much did Hume grasp of chemistry? What did *anyone* in the time know about chemistry? How exactly did Hume imagine that mental phenomena behaved like "chemical preparations, where the mixture of two clear and transparent liquids produces a third, which is opaque and colour'd" (T 2.3.10.9; SBN 452)?

Most fundamentally, chemistry is about the qualitative novelty referred to in this passage from T 2.3.10.9 (SBN 452). You mix two clear and transparent liquids and it produces a third liquid that is opaque and colored. The third liquid has a reality that is lacking in its constituents. Hume obviously considers the passions to behave in this way. But how far or to what extent did chemical thinking influence Hume's understanding of the mind?

Demeter identifies the chemistry of the time as infused with a vitalist philosophy that had re-emerged during the Enlightenment. Vitalists view matter as more than quantity, identifying some internal principle of activity that explains

changes in quality and ultimately, living matter. Against this background, Demeter puts forward an original reading of Hume's principles of association. Rather than conceiving of these principles on the model of gravity, which acts on matter *qua quantity*, Demeter highlights some features that allude to a more vitalist approach, in particular, what vitalists considered as "elective attractions." Whereas gravity acts on any quantity in the universe, the principles of association are selective. The principle of contiguity, for example, applies to what is contiguous, but not to everything that is contiguous. Context and content matters. When driving home I am reminded of the dinner awaiting me, but not of the rocks on the ground that I saw in the morning before I left. This difference between the force of gravity and the force of association seems fundamental, and it does indicate the need for a more adequate model for understanding association. I believe Demeter points us in the right direction.

The book, in its curiosity shop-style leaves it to the reader to make more of it all. This reader has already accepted the challenge. It was somewhat surprising to me to find that Demeter does not seize on a number of very well known passages that now, against his chemical interpretation, appear undeniably chemical to me: the spreading of the mind passage, the gilding and staining passage with its "new creation":

> 'Tis a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses. (T 1.3.14.25; SBN 167)

> Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: The latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: The other has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises, in a manner, a new creation. (EPM 1.21; SBN 294)

The spreading phenomenon is supposed to explain how we come to think of objects in the world as necessarily connected. Hume claims that the mind has a tendency to "conjoin" internal impressions with objects. I suggest that this spreading and conjoining is much less metaphorical than we have assumed, that there is a mixing of the impression of reflexion and the impression of sensation that results in a new object: the necessarily connected event. A similar mixing results in the *new creation* of moral objects and aesthetic objects. Hume appeals to this mixing in my

new favorite, rediscovered passage:

> Ideas may be compar'd to the extension and solidity of matter, and impressions, especially reflective ones, to colours, tastes, smells and other sensible qualities. Ideas never admit of a total union, but are endow'd with a kind of impenetrability, by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture. On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union; and like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression, which arises from the whole. Some of the most curious phaenomena of the human mind are deriv'd from this property of the passions. (T 2.2.6.1; SBN 366)

Some of the most curious phenomena of the human mind are due to chemical-like reactions. I believe that anyone who attempts to understand what these curious phenomena are will have to start with Demeter's curious book.

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