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Hume's Skeptical Enlightenment by
Ryu Susato (review)

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Book Review

Ryu Susato, *Hume's Sceptical Enlightenment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015. Pp. 360. Hardcover ISBN 9780748699803, \$97.04.

Ryu Susato's book is a comprehensive assessment of Hume's thought that defies usual labels and categorizations while operating in an unprecedented interdisciplinary spirit. It is slightly iconoclastic on two levels: from a Hume-studies point of view, Susato contextualizes Hume's oeuvre as a dynamic and ultimately unclassifiable whole within its 18th century context. In this sense, this book is an idiosyncratic follow up on the recent, path-breaking intellectual biography of Hume given by James Harris. In the same vein, 21st century labels prove to be equally inadequate to cover Hume's multiform intellectual production. Intellectual history, history of ideas, (history of) philosophy, political theory and history of political thought claim Hume's legacy on legitimate grounds. Similarly, Susato is original in adding a closing chapter on Hume's reception in 19th century British thought, which itself bequeathed us various lenses through which we still envision Hume's thought. Overall, Susato uses the Sceptical Enlightenment frame to accommodate Hume's multilayered approach and style without (too much) anachronism.

The title, *Sceptical Enlightenment*, combines together two highly-debatable conceptual and historical spaces: skepticism and Enlightenment. Susato discusses the complex and controversial statuses of both. Instead of using the frame of moderate, radical (J. Israel), pragmatic (D. Rasmussen), or other typology of Enlightenment, Susato locates Hume's oeuvre—including rare pieces such as “A true account of the behavior and conduct of Archibald Stewart” and various letters

that go often unnoticed—within the Scottish enlightenment, focusing on Hume’s French, English and Scottish predecessors, interlocutors, and critics. In doing so, he opts for a conception of Enlightenment as an “historical awareness” (7) of partaking in a common “civilizing process” (23) in Europe, potentially involving non-Europeans in the long run. In the context of Hume scholarship, it remains a matter of speculation whether the very distinction between civilization and barbarism, or, put in the period’s phrasing, between rudeness and refinement, is a normative one. To be sure, Hume clearly sides with modernity regarding the undeniable progress of “industry, knowledge and humanity.” The advancement of worldly pleasures and refined sociability leads to individual and social betterment. However, it always takes place over grey areas of uncertainty and black holes of relapse into barbarity or novel forms of rudeness. At this point the Skeptical nature of Humean Enlightenment kicks in. At first glance, as Susato acknowledges, it may appear, as conservatism. Hume’s reception from his own times onwards abounds with such interpretations. For more perceptive eyes though, Hume’s attitude is anti-dogmatic, with strong demystifying tendencies: “In sum, Hume’s Sceptical Enlightenment is the concept representing his distinctive way of supporting what he believes to be the core of modern values (refinement and politeness), while avoiding falling into any kind of dogmatism, including philosophical dogmatism. In doing so, Hume levels his criticism against what has been considered the alleged ‘Enlightening’ credo of ‘Reason and Progress’, while simultaneously refusing to side with naïve traditionalism” (21).

Susato deals with the issue of Hume’s skepticism in an original way. Firstly, he shifts the debate about Hume’s skepticism from the theory of knowledge and, less often, moral epistemology, to social and political philosophy. Indeed, Susato presents a path-breaking view of Hume’s skepticism as grounded in a pervasive, multilayered, and variously-expressed skeptical *spirit* permeating Hume’s oeuvre. Susato demonstrates the importance of the status of “Sceptical spirit” that inextricably links morality, politics, aesthetics, history and philosophical anthropology. To this extent, Popkin seems to be right: Hume is a rather unique case of an idiosyncratic skeptic. Despite obvious connections with Bayle or ancient skepticism, Hume’s mitigated Skepticism grows out of multiple, often non-skeptic sources, far beyond the religious, mainly fideist context. Susato strategically sets up a gateway between epistemology and the rest through the first chapter on the status of imagination and the association of ideas in social philosophy.

The book’s main topics are: imagination and its problematic institutionalization (chap. 2), opinion and its fragile normalization (chap. 3), innocent refinement and vicious luxury (chap. 4), priesthood and its resilience to civil peace (chap. 5), the “refinement of democracy” and culture of liberty through an indirect calibration of political passions (chap. 6), the “pendulum” view of civilization and its discontents (chap. 7). Throughout these, Susato refers skeptical spirit to disillu-

sionment, auto-sarcasm, and demystifying strategies. Hume has never accepted the comfortable position of a *maître à penser*, a spiritual guide without critical self-reflection. Indeed, he is worried about what we could call the “natural” history of religious, and political fetishism, a particular pathological turn of human imagination, including obsessions with sacred symbols and leader worship, both nurturing fanaticism and extreme violence. During his life, Hume had a first-hand knowledge of the idolizing spirit proper to religious *and* political, parliamentary, and extra-parliamentary movements and their disastrous outcomes. To be sure, one can speculate about whether Hume ever considers seriously the possibility of secular or religious popular movements without *any* sacred moments, rituals, and symbols. Still, Susato rightly focuses on Hume’s unrelenting desacralizing spirit that permeates his spirit of skepticism. The idealization of allegedly foundational moments such as the Ancient constitution or the Scottish medieval past becomes the target of scathing irony and straightforward deconstruction. Hume’s skepticism is *profoundly iconoclastic*. Susato perfectly demonstrates this demystifying eagerness that permeates and supports Hume’s anti-foundationalism; any mystical, religious or secular, foundation of authority, even the most cherished, regardless of its origins, refined or vulgar, Scottish or English, Tory or Whig, should be deconstructed and discarded as such.

In the context of the book’s subversive spirit, there are two issues I deem important to discuss further: the relationship between skepticism and normativity and the status of philosophical discourse in Hume.

Susato faces head on the core issue of the relationship between normative claims and “Sceptical spirit” in Hume: “Hume is the philosopher who most consciously aimed scepticism at himself in his own enquiry. Thus, one of the biggest intellectual challenges for Hume is how to avoid all types of dogmatism, including the philosophical variety, while recognising the overall social benefits of civilisation. This is why his endorsement of modern values is often conditional to the extent that its seriousness appears dubious” (274). It is noteworthy that Susato rarely gives prominence to Hume’s normative claims. He does it twice: once regarding the distinction between barbarism/civilization (20, 21), and then again regarding the concept of general opinion (70, 84) in the context of politics. In the latter case, the issue of Hume’s conservatism resurfaces as it does quite a few times in the book. Pace Burke, “What is important for Hume is not blind reverence for what is established, but rather to trust it as a current a tentative guide while simultaneously keeping a skeptical eye on its changeability and instability” (85).

By refuting the alleged Hume’s traditionalism, Susato deals straightforwardly with the correlative issue of inertia of manners and institutions. At this juncture, Hume leaves us with some unresolved riddles: how is it possible to identify and gauge well established yet bad manners or customs, decadent institutions or outdated conventions? The abovementioned “skeptical eye” refrains from drawing a

normative clear-cut borderline; the anatomist makes room for the fine genealogist, and the style matters more than any normative standard. Hume closes his essay “The Sceptic” by stating: “To reduce life to exact rule and method, is commonly a painful, oft a fruitless occupation: And is it not also a proof, that we overvalue the prize for which we contend? Even to reason so carefully concerning it, and to fix with accuracy its just idea, would be overvaluing it, were it not that, to some tempers, this occupation is one of the most amusing, in which life could possibly be employed.” This highly original book reminds us that philosophical perspicuity can still be amusing for some tempers. It suffices to be able to think across borders in order to lend visibility to nuances that often pass unnoticed between the inertial past and the potential of an unforeseen future.

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