



Emily Kelahan

*Hume's Science of Human Nature:
Scientific Realism, Reason, and Substantial
Explanation*, by David Landy (review)

Hume Studies vol. 44, no. 1 (2018), pp.
109-12

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive at <http://www.humesociety.org/hs/> indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.humesociety.org/hs/termsofuse.asp>.

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 the journal, or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact: editors@humestudies.org

Book Review

David Landy. *Hume's Science of Human Nature: Scientific Realism, Reason, and Substantial Explanation*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018. Pp. 278. ISBN 978-1-138-50313-7, Paperback, \$48.95; Hardback, \$160.00.*

As the title suggests, David Landy's *Hume's Science of Human Nature: Scientific Realism, Reason, and Substantial Explanation* defends a staunchly realist interpretation of Hume on scientific explanation. Landy's forward-looking view sees Hume's methodology in the *Treatise* as anticipating developments much later in history. He gives Hume a Sellarsian update, making his philosophy of science more impactful and contemporary than previously thought. The motivation for his view is twofold. First, he wants to respond to the long line of Hume critics who think his "science of human nature" is hardly science at all. According to this interpretive tradition (the Deductive-Nomological view), Hume's "science" is merely the collection of empirical generalizations with no explanation involved. Far from deploying this lazy, shallow method, Landy's Hume has a sophisticated methodology at the heart of which is a "perceptible model." Just as Bohr proposed that we understand the structure of an atom (not directly observable) as analogous to the solar system (directly observable), Hume is best understood as treating simple ideas as theoretical posits in an experiential model based on purely descriptive phenomenology that both resemble and differ from direct experience. Secondly, Landy wants to distance himself from other recent attempts to update our understanding of Hume on scientific explanation, most notably the New Humean view. While Landy and the New Humeans agree that

Hume intends to do more than collect generalizations, the New Humeans think Hume concludes that a satisfying explanation is impossible, as the explanans is unknowable. The Deductive-Nomological view sees Hume as failing to reach for substantial explanation. The New Humean view sees Hume as failing to grasp substantial explanation. Landy's interpretation has Hume reaching for substantial explanation *and* it aligns Hume's grasp with his reach.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay out Landy's perceptible model-based interpretation. He begins with Hume's theory of mental representation, introducing the basic distinctions between simple and complex perceptions and between impressions and ideas, but then quickly treks into controversial territory. Landy elucidates something about which Hume is not explicit but which he likely cannot deny. We never experience simple ideas as simple. Experience is always complex. Simple impressions always enter the mind as parts of complex impressions. Because experience is always complex, our revival set for "simple idea" consists exclusively of complex ideas. What does this mean for the status of simple ideas? Simple ideas are like atoms. We cannot see them but we commit to them as theoretical posits because they make sense of what we do see. Landy sees us as having a choice. Explain the novelty of human thought and give up strict nominalism or give up a satisfying explanation of the novelty of human thought and keep strict nominalism. Experience alone licenses only nominalism, but to properly explain experience, you cannot be a strict nominalist. Landy opts to give up strict nominalism by construing simple ideas as unobservable theoretical posits. By basing them on a perceptible model, he minimizes the risks posed to Hume's naturalism. As for substantial explanation, Landy argues that Hume takes no issue with substantial explanation *per se*. His problem, Landy explains, is with substantial explanation of *inappropriate putative objects of explanation*. Hume rejects and strongly condemns non-empirical methods. If a substantial explanation is explaining a bona fide empirical phenomenon, there is no problem by Hume's lights.

Chapter 3 offers a deeper analysis of Hume on substantial explanation and explores the role of reason. Because Hume's science of human nature is so rich and covers such an array of experience, it can be difficult to track Hume's own ontological commitments. The vulgar and especially the false philosopher often *talk* of the substance undergirding human experience, but Hume clearly denies the legitimacy of their claims. They are not advancing anything like an acceptable substantial explanation of descriptive phenomenology. However, Hume's true philosopher, Landy argues, does reflect a real commitment on Hume's part. The scientist of human nature is positioned to use reason to formulate theoretical representations of experience that accurately represent and explain it. For many, this will be an expansion of the role reason plays in Hume's philosophy, but Landy argues compellingly for it. He surmises that the emphasis on the faculties memory and imagination when trying to explain how the mind forms representations is

due to developments in the secondary literature, but, if we go back to the text of the *Treatise*, we will see that Hume's taxonomy of cognitive faculties includes an important role for reason. Reason is like memory in that it has a clear function, and it is like imagination in that it is a recombinatorial faculty. Its function is to explain, and its recombinations, unlike those of imagination, are not arbitrary. Therefore, in addition to induction and deduction, reason also *explains* by inference to the best explanation the universal regularities of experience and forms theoretical representations.

The rest of the book catalogs and explains the virtues of seeing Hume as a relaxed nominalist-realist armed with theoretical posits and open to substantial explanation, as opposed to a mere inductivist or skeptical realist, by deploying the interpretation to resolve lingering interpretive difficulties. In chapter 4, Landy examines Hume on the external world. What calls out for explanation in this case is the constancy and coherency of our perceptions. Both the vulgar and the false philosopher posit the existence of something based on imagination and without explaining how their posits relate to experience. In this case, it is not that the true philosopher-scientist of human nature succeeds in developing a posit using reason that is appropriately related to experience, but rather that she rejects the need for a substantial explanation of the phenomenon at all. The explicandum itself in this case is rooted in the imagination and thus requires no further explanation. In chapter 5, Landy advances a similar treatment of necessary connection—the vulgar and false philosopher try to explain it with an unjustified posit, while the true philosopher-scientist of human nature realizes that there is nothing to explain. Landy's chapter 6 treatment of Hume's second thoughts on personal identity takes a different shape. It is not that Hume realizes that the persistence of the self does not require an explanation, but rather the opposite. Hume sees that his representation of the self *is* based on inductively-established universal regularities and, therefore, *does* call for a substantial explanation, but there is no such explanation available that he can see.

Many who read this book will find themselves resisting the notion of simple ideas as theoretical posits despite all of the interesting work Landy does with them. They will object that Hume does not describe them that way, and that it is a stretch to say he even thought of them that way. Furthermore, it is not clear that Hume would accept them as a friendly amendment to his view, or that he is under as much pressure to accept them given the way his theory of representation works as Landy thinks. However, if you are sympathetic to this sort of modernizing project, you might be less bothered by these concerns than curious about other updating options. For example, why not opt for Hume with a Van Fraassenian twist? On this view, Hume is no mere inductivist, he is committed (in some sense) to unobservable theoretical posits, he is not an unreasonably strict nominalist, and he gives a more expansive role to reason than is commonly thought (that

of constructing empirically adequate scientific explanations). What this view is missing that the Landy view has is a commitment to realism. As a contemporary view, constructive empiricism may have nothing on scientific realism, but, as an understanding of Hume on scientific explanation, it may better accord with Hume's overall philosophy.

EMILY KELAHAH

Illinois Wesleyan University

P.O. Box 2900,

Bloomington, IL 61701

*This review was commissioned by the Editors-in-Chief, not the current Book Review Editor (David Landy).