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Review of *Reading Hume on the Principles of Morals*, by Jacqueline Taylor (review)

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Jacqueline, Taylor, ed. *Reading Hume on the Principles of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 368. ISBN: 978-0199603732. \$35.00.

Readers of this journal know that Hume regarded an *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* as his finest work. It was, Hume said, “incomparably the best.” Yet, most of the scholarly work on Hume’s moral philosophy in recent decades focuses on the *Treatise*, which Hume wrote some three decades prior to the *Enquiry*.

There are good reasons to focus on the older work. It is much longer, so there is more to sink our scholarly teeth into. Many discussions and discursions appear in the *Treatise* that are absent, entirely or nearly so, from the *Enquiry*, such as the distinction between artificial and natural virtues and the claim that reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions. Nevertheless, Hume’s own confidence in the second *Enquiry* should perhaps cause Hume’s commentators to reconsider their preference for the *Treatise*, so we must be grateful to Jacqueline Taylor for putting together this collection of 15 chapters written by some of the most noteworthy Hume scholars working today.

Two-thirds of the chapters take up various sections of the *Enquiry*, including the four appendices and *A Dialogue*, and cover such issues as justice, sympathy, benevolence, personal merit, and cultural relativism. The final third of the chapters concern matters adjacent to the topics of the *Enquiry*, including aesthetics, religion, and the passions, and considers them in light of some of Hume’s other later work.

Other than Hume’s pronouncement about his preference, why exactly should we study the *Enquiry*? Taylor proposes one answer to this question: the *Enquiry* is substantively different from the *Treatise*. She says the *Enquiry* provides fundamentally new arguments and is not merely a recasting of Hume’s early philosophy. Let us call this view the Divergent Thesis. The Divergent Thesis allows that there is considerable overlap between the two works, but maintains that Hume’s theory nevertheless developed into a new and different theory by the time he wrote the *Enquiry*. Taylor frames the motivation for the volume in terms of the Divergent Thesis, and one would expect proponents of this thesis to be especially drawn to a project devoted to the more neglected text.

One problem with the Divergent Thesis is that it does not fit neatly with Hume’s conception of his work. For example, Hume writes in a letter from 1751 that “the philosophical Principles are the same in both.” Nor does it fit neatly, in my view, with a careful reading of both works, which deliver a moral theory that is a single, distinct version of moral sentimentalism founded on sympathy and responsive to useful and agreeable qualities. It is true that Hume says he fixed some of the arguments of the *Treatise* in his *Enquiries*, so we should expect to find some

amendments. Proponents of the Divergent Thesis, however, tend to fixate on these amendments and, in certain cases, seem to exaggerate them.

Consider, for example, both Taylor's and Angela Calvo de Saavedra's claim that the *Enquiry* leans more on utility than does the *Treatise*. While it is true that the *Enquiry* is more clearly *organized* around the role of utility, usefulness is nevertheless the main source of merit in both works. Hume argues in the *Treatise* that all of the artificial virtues and most of the natural virtues tend to the good of society (for example, T 3.3.1.10–11) and he concludes that useful qualities “form the most considerable part of morality” (T 3.3.6.2). “Mature” and “immature” Hume agree that most of the qualities we approve are useful.

Another example of the Divergent Thesis emerges in Remy Debes's chapter. Debes proposes some plausible reasons why Hume might have come to prefer thinking of praiseworthy qualities in terms of “personal merit” as opposed to “virtue” more narrowly. However, Debes further claims that Hume backtracks from his view in the *Treatise* that sympathy explains our approval of praiseworthy qualities. In the *Enquiry*, according to Debes, Hume's account of qualities immediately agreeable to others are significantly excluded from sympathy. This would be a pretty remarkable change, but I suggest that Debes is misled on this point because he fails to distinguish how Hume explains that qualities are agreeable from how Hume explains that we approve of such qualities.¹

Sympathy proves to be a popular focus for commentators who embrace the Divergent Thesis. Peter Millican contends *inter alia* that the Hume of the *Enquiry* abandons his associationist account and that Hume denies that our concern for others is explained by the mechanism of sympathy. Jane McIntyre in her chapter gives a more detailed reading of a similar view. This kind of view has received sustained criticisms by Hume's commentators in recent literature, which neither Millican nor McIntyre engage.² McIntyre, for example, argues that in the *Enquiry* Hume favors direct communication of the passions when he uses the language of contagion, but she fails to mention that Hume also uses this language in the *Treatise* (T 3.3.3.5).

Happily for this reviewer, many of the contributors to this volume do not accept the Divergent Thesis. And here we might revisit the reason(s) to pay attention to the second *Enquiry*. If the *Enquiry* does not differ substantively from the *Treatise*, why should we study it? There are at least four answers to this question.

First, we might illuminate Hume's moral theory by evaluating, interrogating, or otherwise examining Hume's arguments in the *Enquiry*—even if they are largely recast versions of arguments from the *Treatise*. When someone explains a set of ideas using different words, we can understand the ideas better. In his chapter, for example, P.J.E. Kail articulates the nature of the moral sense in the *Enquiry* (contending that it is Hutchesonian), and thereby improves our understanding of Hume as a moral sense theorist.

Second, there is the significance of context. Because Hume writes the *Enquiry* much later than the *Treatise*, we can expect the intellectual milieu to make a difference to his presentation of his moral theory. Several chapters discuss this milieu instructively.

Third, we can pay attention to genuinely new components of Hume's moral theory without insisting that Hume's views have changed. Colin Heydt sheds light on Hume's subversive goals in assembling his catalogue of virtues. And Dario Perinetti gives an excellent analysis of Hume's "A Dialogue," arguing that the common point of view is acquired and historical rather than innate. In the *Treatise*, meanwhile, Hume has no obvious interest in cataloguing virtues or discussing cultural relativism.

Fourth, because we know that Hume was frustrated by the reception of the *Treatise*, there is considerable reason to focus on the *Enquiry's* rhetoric and intended reception. The best chapter in this regard is supplied by Rachel Cohon, who pays attention to how Hume casts his argument that virtue is a means to happiness.

In the end, it is too simplistic to say that the chapters of this volume that resist the Divergent Thesis are the strongest and the chapters that accept it are the weakest. Even the chapters that argue for a modification of Hume's views nevertheless contribute a provocative perspective on Hume's work that is worthy of engagement and will greatly interest readers of this journal.

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NOTES

1 For an argument for this claim, see my "Hume on Sympathy and Agreeable Qualities," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 24.6 (2016): 1136–1156.

2 See, e.g., Rico Vitz, "Sympathy and Benevolence in Hume's Moral Psychology," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 42.3 (2004): 261–275; and Remy Debes, "Has Anything Changed? Hume's Theory of Association and Sympathy After the *Treatise*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 15.2 (2007): 313–318.