



Jacqueline A. Taylor

Précis of *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy*

*Hume Studies* Volume 45, Number 1–2, 2019, pp. 143–145

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive at <https://www.humesociety.org/hs> indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' *Terms of Use*, which can be accessed at <https://www.humesociety.org/hs/terms>.

HUME STUDIES' *Terms 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](mailto:editors@humestudies.org)

## Précis of *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy*

JACQUELINE A. TAYLOR

In chapter 1, I argue that Hume well understands the experimental method and its role as what Geoffrey Cantor refers to as “a discourse of power,” insofar as establishing facts in terms of efficient causation properly delimits what counts as a science, which is, in Hume’s case, a science of human nature. With respect to the passions, I focus on parts 1 and 2 of *Treatise* Book 2, as an extended set of experiments meant to explain the origin, nature, and effects of the passion of pride, an indirect passion that reflects a person’s self-worth in virtue of her valuable qualities. Beginning with the observable phenomena of pride, Hume identifies various theoretical entities that constitute aspects of the cause and effect of pride, after which he examines the evidence that proves his hypothesis regarding the double relation of ideas and impressions as the cause of pride. His explanation in terms of efficient causes displaces the traditional appeal to final causes, especially to explain human agency. I argue that the experimental approach to explaining the indirect passions is a first stage that allows us to look more closely at the attention Hume pays to how institutions and conventions, and the social roles and relations they engender, profoundly affect how we experience and understand those passions.

In chapter 2, I begin to reconstruct a Humean social theory. The principle of sympathy plays a crucial role in transmitting meaning and values as these are reflected in our beliefs, passions, and sentiments. Our understanding and evaluative attitudes towards ourselves and others are, I argue, socially constituted, and our practical identities are formed within a system of dynamic social relations. Hume’s account of the principle of sympathy is an innovation in the modern period, and in this chapter, I focus particularly on its role with respect to belief and the formation of social knowledge.

Chapter 3 takes the account of social relations constituted by the sympathetic transmission of meaning and values, and places it in the context of Hume's detailed account of social power. This neglected part of Hume's *Treatise* is important as it explains why we ascribe various forms of social power to persons, and the influence of social power on the passions. I reconstruct Hume's account of social power, especially with respect to the person-evaluative passions of pride and humility, the passions of respect and contempt, and of fear. The power relations to which these passions are responsive inform our understanding of social identities, and of our own place in a nexus of social relations.

When we turn from Hume's social theory and moral psychology to his Book 3 system of ethics in the *Treatise*, it is striking how Book 2's deep and detailed account of social difference and division does not find a place in Hume's account of the moral sentiments and moral evaluation. Chapter 4 provides a critical analysis of *Treatise*, Book 3, pointing to a central problem with Hume's characterization of the common point of view from which we are supposed to calibrate our moral evaluations and sentiments. I argue that the more sophisticated account of moral evaluation in Hume's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, with its emphasis on a shared moral discourse regarding praiseworthy and blameworthy traits of persons, has a considerable advantage over the *Treatise*. In EPM, Hume emphasizes the importance of the virtues required for accurately assessing and responding to merit or demerit. By introducing the sentiment or principle of humanity, Hume puts an emphasis on active participation in striving for shared agreement.

In the *Treatise*, Hume gives a central place to the passion of pride. While the principle of humanity has the central place in EPM, Hume clearly continues to regard pride as important for a sense of confidence and competence. Secular accounts of pride as a vice, or frailty, had currency in the modern period, most notably in the works of Hobbes and Mandeville. Chapter 5 begins with an examination of the troublesome forms of pride as discussed by Hobbes and Mandeville. Understanding their views on the dangers of pride, and the solutions they offer to mitigate pride's effects, helps to highlight the importance of pride as a virtue in Hume's moral theory. Hume attempts to restore the dignity of the virtue of pride by arguing for the importance of modesty, as well as the essential role that a "due" pride plays in the formation of our moral identity.

Reconstructing Hume's account of humanity reveals a powerful moral concept that makes Hume's later ethics in EPM a crucial achievement of the Enlightenment. Chapter 6 gives a detailed account of our capacity for humanity, both as a moral sentiment that approves of useful character traits that contribute to well-being, while blaming pernicious traits, and as a motive to the decent treatment of others. Hume's "Of the Standard of Taste" and "A Dialogue" show that confronting and overcoming prejudice is an important component of humanity. The chapter also draws together the strands of Hume's discussions of humanity in his *Essays*, and considers how humanity and justice are mutually supporting virtues.

## WORKS CITED

- Cantor, Geoffrey. "The Rhetoric of Experiment," in *The Uses of Experiment: Studies in the Natural Sciences*. Edited by David Gooding, Trevor Pinch, and Simon Schaffer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.
- Hume, David. *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*. Edited by Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
- Taylor, Jacqueline A. *Reflecting Subjects: Passion, Sympathy, and Society in Hume's Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.