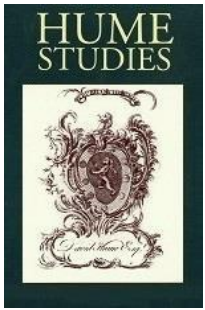

Willem Lemmens

Hume as a Social Theorist: Comments on Taylor's *Reflecting Subjects*

Hume Studies Volume 45, Number 1–2, 2019, pp. 147–159

Hume Studies
Volume 45, Number 1–2, 2019, pp. 147–159

Hume as a Social Theorist: Comments on Taylor's *Reflecting Subjects*

WILLEM LEMMENS

Reflecting Subjects (abbreviated "RS") by Jacqueline Taylor is a book of genuine Hume scholarship and a delight to read. Central to this monograph is a reconstructive reading of Hume's moral philosophy, and of Hume's account of the way the indirect passions and sympathy shape the practical and social identities of human subjects. Starting from a meticulous analysis of Books 2 and 3 of the *Treatise*, Taylor integrates into her reading a challenging interpretation of Hume's *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* and some of his essays. Taylor presents us a Hume who is at the same time an anatomist and painter of human nature. In Hume's hands, Taylor argues, a naturalist account of the human mind and its reflective capacity transforms into an innovative modern sentiment-based ethics of human dignity. For Taylor, the Second *Enquiry* forms the pitch of Hume's reformative and emancipatory moral discourse, from which we can still learn, despite its eighteenth-century prejudices and unavoidable blind spots.

1. Hume's Social Theory

There is much in this book to admire. Taylor highlights in a first chapter how Hume's *Treatise* reflects his revolutionary explanatory intentions. Hume, we learn, transcends the half-baked empiricism and naturalism of Locke and Hutcheson, still reminiscent of teleological conceptions of human agency and virtue, by developing his own experience-based, mechanistic moral psychology.

Chapter 2 derives from Hume's account of the indirect passions a "social theory," by which Taylor means: "an explanation of the indirect passions in relation to the distribution of wealth and property, and other forms of social power (typically grounded in government and other

Willem Lemmens is Professor for Modern Philosophy and Ethics at the University of Antwerp. Address: R214, Prinsstraat 13, B-2000 Antwerp.
Email: Willem.lemmens@uantwerpen.be

social institutions), as well as styles of living, learning, and working, and the commitment to various values" (RS 34). Taylor is original when she shows how for Hume, passions such as pride and humility (but also love and hate) gain significance through a web of culturally formed beliefs and values. Next to the natural hardware of the mind (for example, the double association of impressions and ideas), culturally transmitted beliefs and values determine *why* and *how* we feel pride when contemplating our achievements and social status, or *why* and *how* the poor feel a mixture of shame and respect for the wealthy to whom they are connected by rules of civil obedience through the institutions of property and government. Taylor stresses, following Duncan Forbes, that for Hume, our social and moral identities are the product of both nature *and* nurture: the human mind is "socially plastic" (RS 35). Indirect passions, in other words, have (formally) natural causes: an achievement based on the strength of character or the beauty of our body, for example, will universally cause pride in the self that exemplifies this achievement, and this self will be the object of love in the community that identifies with his or her achievement. But this causal relation always depends on social context and education, and thus on values and beliefs that may vary from culture to culture, which determine in which sense and how exactly qualities of body, character, or social status become significant, structure our passions, and shape our behavior.

As Taylor further shows, the indirect passions gain this full significance and power through the remarkable mental mechanism of sympathy. For Hume, sympathy appears to be "a key principle that helps to explain the meaning and value of our passionate life" (RS 44). Hume, as Taylor points out, sees sympathy not only as a mirroring capacity of the mind through which emotions of person x reverberate in the psyche of person y: sympathy is also a general tendency for the "sympathetic communication of the interconnected schemes of beliefs and values, especially those related to the causes and the nature of the indirect passions, that reflect a particular sociocultural context" (RS 37). Taylor discerns a strong interdependence between sympathy and culturally transmitted customs and habits, which transform natural causal relations (for example of sex and procreation or first possession), into symbolic relations (such as relations of family and property). Those relations have existential significance and shape our "practical" identities.[1]

Sympathy thus becomes a principle of great complexity, whose proper functioning depends on both imagination and judgment. Hume makes a great deal, as we learn from Book 3 of the *Treatise,* of the need to overcome our partial sympathy, for example, when we "reflect on someone's circumstances and make an evaluative judgment about why she might deserve greater compassion or contempt" (RS 48). As Taylor stresses, this process of correcting our passions by taking on a more "general point of view" through conversation and reflection hinges crucially on general rules, education, and social discourse. In particular, as Taylor explores in chapter 4, the attribution of moral blame and praise, and the "guilding" of characters with the epithet of virtue or vice often requires subtle reflection and judgment, whereby extended sympathy replaces its more emotive ancestor.

This brings us to Taylor's pivotal third chapter, "Power and the Philosophy of our Passions." In this most innovative part of her study, Taylor fleshes out this outline of Hume's social theory.

While in metaphysics the idea of "causal power" may be a fiction in a "strict philosophical way of thinking," in what Hume calls "the philosophy of our passions," this concept reappears and has a mighty influence on our imagination (RS 80; T 2.1.10.4; SBN 312). In Book 2 of the *Treatise*, as Taylor reads Hume, power becomes the quality we ascribe in social life to any social relation where the causal influence of the agency of one over the other is apparent: for example, the dominance of the rich over the poor, men over women, governors over subjects, and the judge over the accused. Fear of the potential exercise of power is a decisive mechanism of social stratification: Thus, when in the grip of fear, the poor, the oppressed and weak also develop attitudes of shame (humility) and respect towards the rich, while this latter group feels strengthened in its social role by attitudes of pride and self-esteem.

Here we see, as Taylor skillfully points out, how Hume's theory of the indirect passions contains a genuine social theory that accounts for the creation of *rank* and *political power*. In what sounds like a preliminary version of the master-slave dialectic of Hegel and Marx, Hume not only discerns this form of social stratification in the sphere of production and labor, but also in gender relations and the artifice of politics. Families are structured around power relations between men and women, but also between parents and children. In the same sense, relations of obligation and a sense of duty are established in politics through the indirect passions and the workings of sympathetic identification.

Gaining and sustaining social status is thus a fundamental drive of human sociability. Social status constitutes the symbolic capital or "lustre" that supports great families, their properties, the respect for their members, and the beauty and talents of their sons and daughters. Hume considers these relations of rank and power, with their connotations of distance and contiguity, as *constitutive* of social life, but also as the source of inequality and possible oppression and conflict.

2. Hume on Moral Evaluation: from Pride to the Sense of Humanity

In the second part of her book, Taylor evaluates the relation between Hume's theory of social power and his moral philosophy proper. Chapters four to six are devoted, respectively, to an analysis of Hume's account of "moral authority and competence"; an assessment of his views on the "dangers and dignity of pride"; and, finally, a presentation of Hume's sentiment-based ethics of humanity and dignity. While highly inspiring and innovative, this last part of Taylor's book is also the most challenging and controversial.

In chapter four, Taylor argues, against mainstream Hume scholarship, that the second *Enquiry* is more than just an adaptation of the moral theory of the *Treatise*. In Taylor's view, the methodology and approach of the *Enquiry*, and, in particular, the introduction of the principle of humanity, forms a real amendment to the account of moral evaluation of the *Treatise*, where the concept of sympathy does not meet the universalistic and impartial requirements of Hume's sentimental humanism.

In chapter 5, Taylor convincingly explains that Hume's theory of pride should be distinguished from the dismissive accounts of pride given by Hobbes and Mandeville. Where Hobbes

sees pride or "glory" as a potentially destructive source of cruelty, contempt, and arrogance, Mandeville identifies pride with a vain self-liking and a source of greed. Though socially a functional vice, pride is for Mandeville hardly a virtue. Hume, as Taylor explains, is not blind to pride's potential to slide into vanity and self-glorification, but, at the same time, regards a "well-regulated pride" a necessary virtue that "makes us confident and enterprising" (RS 140). Moreover, for Hume, shame (or humility) and pride, though self-regarding, are fundamentally social passions: our self-appraisal or lack of self-esteem is structurally dependent on the gaze and judgment of our social environment. Thus, stressing again the pivotal role of sympathy, Taylor concludes that pride is crucial for the development of our practical identity: pride gives us an intimate sense of our own dignity and standing as a moral subject.

The account of pride leads us to the daring last chapter of *Reflecting Subjects*. Here, Taylor returns to the role of the sentiment and principle of humanity in Hume's second *Enquiry*. She evaluates the meaning of Hume's use of the concept of humanity in this, "of all my writings . . . incomparably the best" ("My Own Life," *Essays* xxxvi),[2] and highlights its role in some of Hume's *Essays*. According to Taylor, *humanity* has for Hume two meanings: it is a sentiment or *virtue*—indeed, the pivotal virtue in the second *Enquiry*—and a *principle* by which we are able to discern which virtues and character traits are generally beneficial for mankind or useful for society (RS 160–61). With the *Enquiry*, so Taylor is convinced, Hume develops a mature ethics of human dignity that transcends the still parochial tincture of the sympathy principle in Book 2 of the *Treatise*. The second *Enquiry* presents nothing less than Hume's own version of an universalistic ethics of equal dignity that hints towards a possible "kingdom of ends" thanks to the establishment of a shared sense of humanity. Taylor contends that a defense of the "requirement" to treat all as humans with equal dignity is prominent in Hume's criticism of the institution of slavery in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," and his propagation of the superiority of monogamy in "Of Polygamy and Divorces."

Taylor further ascribes to Hume the idea that opposing the cruelty of ancient slavery gives a voice to the resentment felt by those humans who are denied a place in the moral community. In the same vein, Hume maintains that a form of marriage where man and woman are equal friends is far superior to the oppressive institution of polygamy, where a man relates to his many wives as his property and in constant jealousy towards possible intruders of his extensive family. Hume therefore contends that polygamy blocks the possibility of the commerce of men and women as equals, as well as their cultivation of self-esteem and a proper sense of humanity crucial for the development of society and individual flourishing.

3. Some Critical Reflections

With *Reflecting Subjects*, Taylor has put us in her debt. However, I still feel the need for further clarification on some points. First, I am not wholly convinced by the presentation of Hume's moral philosophy as reformist and emancipatory; secondly, I think Taylor underestimates the ambivalent nature of Humean sympathy as a causal force in communication and social

interaction; and thirdly, I doubt whether her critique of Hume's account of moral evaluation in the *Treatise* is accurate.

3.1. Hume: Pagan Elitist or Liberal Reformist?

In a certain sense, labeling Hume a *reformist* moral philosopher is unproblematic. He undoubtedly challenged his contemporaries with his secular, a-religious presentation of the life of virtue in both *Treatise* and second *Enquiry*. And his provocative contention that moral distinctions are derived from sentiment, not reason, was equally an assault on the received wisdom of his time. With good reason, Annette Baier described Hume's presentation of pride as a virtue as a form of "Christian-baiting," as Taylor reminds us (RS 132). And Peter Gay had good reasons to call Hume a pagan Enlightenment philosopher, whose secularism aimed at debunking a religious inspired ethics of self-denial and guilt.[3]

However, in *Reflecting Subjects*, Taylor defends a bolder thesis with regard to Hume's reformist intentions. In her view, especially in the second *Enquiry*, Hume "shows a keen awareness of the strategies people develop to bridge socially constructed divisions as well as intercultural differences" (RS viii). If so, Hume intended to defend a twentieth-century ethic of equal dignity, where "a warm concern for the interests of mankind" (RS 161) stands out as a moral ideal. And, on Taylor's reading of the essays, Hume was eager to overcome oppressive inequality by cultivating a modern form of "eloquence" and reflection so as to correct our more selfish and comparison-based passions and sentiments. The author of the second *Enquiry* and the essays should be applauded for propagating an anti-relativist ethics of humanity which mobilizes "the *party* of human kind against vice or disorder, its common enemy" (EPM 9.9; SBN 275; RS 163).[4] In particular the *Dialogue* that forms an appendix to the second *Enquiry* would defend this universalistic humanist ethics.

Some of the best pages of Taylor's book are devoted to Hume's predilection for a modern ethics of humanity versus the austere moral culture of magnanimity and the martial sublime prominent in antiquity. For Hume the moral climate of antiquity clearly exemplifies inhumanity and cruelty, and thrives on a culture of division between masters and slaves, men and women, common people and nobility, rich and poor: here, the resentment of the oppressed remains without a voice.

However, in my reading of the second *Enquiry*, Hume's account of the principle of humanity is not driven by such outspoken normative intentions. In *A Dialogue,* for example, Hume seems rather eager to show that, despite first appearances, a common human nature underlies differences in moral values and norms: but this explanatory device leaves open whether we can derive from this fact any normative moral system. After all, Hume reminds us at the same time in *A Dialogue* that moral standards might differ considerably from culture to culture. Moreover, as Taylor herself explains brilliantly, the moral life of humans depends on a larger social reality of social rank and differences (of gender, talent, power) that forms the solid ground on which moral evaluations thrive and from which we can only abstract to a limited extent. Of course, change and historical evolutions might gradually alter this

ground: but this should not imply that an ethics of deliberate change and emancipation is most in tune with human nature, or that, from a normative point of view, this ideal should form the core of morality.

Therefore, I am not convinced that the introduction of the principle of humanity in the second *Enquiry* serves the normative ends Taylor ascribes to Hume. I think the principle is more explanatory than normative. As Hume stresses, his investigation of morality concerns more "the speculative than the practical part of morals" (EPM 2.5 SBN 177–78). In the same vein, I remain unconvinced that Hume was more aware in the *Enquiry* than in the *Treatise* of the dynamics of social inequality and the need for an enlarged vision of humanity and equal dignity. The explanatory starting point in both works is different, but the implicit social imaginaries that guide Hume's discourse and his theoretical presuppositions remain, in my view, overall the same.

Of course, the principle of humanity in the *Second Enquiry* reflects Hume's preference for a pagan ethics that values ordinary life and opposes religious zeal and enthusiasm. But I think the principle of humanity is less universalistic than Taylor suggests. It is a *sentiment* that is triggered by the specific evaluative context wherein the moral evaluator finds herself. It springs from a spontaneous, but limited affection for the woe and weal of the other, and in this sense, it is, after all, a product of sympathy. Over the whole second *Enquiry*, Hume is eager to stress the limited character of our spontaneous benevolence or love of mankind as a motive of action and evaluation of specific characters and institutions. On this point, he did not substantially change his mind from the *Treatise*.

In his essays, Hume also remains fairly elitist in his attitudes towards the traditional institute of marriage, when he claims that the intercourse of politeness and calm friendship should not be too much disturbed by reflective corrective attitudes towards distinction and rank. Taylor puts great weight on the practice of "making resentment felt" by the oppressed, but when Hume introduces this idea, it is not as part of an emancipatory practice, but merely an explanatory condition which accounts for the need for general rules of justice in civil society. Indeed, in light of his social theory of power in the *Treatise*, it appears even plausible that Hume would favor a society of rank and distinction, based on economic relations, but also gender, as most in tune with human nature. It might be, as Alasdair MacIntyre claims, that a web of typical eighteenth-century beliefs and presuppositions made Hume rather unaware of the parochial character of his moral theory.[5]

In the critique of the institution of slavery in "Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations," Hume does stress its inhumanity, but he contrasts without much ado the cruel life of "submission to a pretty prince" with the "obedience to a great monarch." As Hume observes: "The more the master is removed from us in plank and rank, the greater liberty we enjoy; the less are our actions inspected and controlled; and the fainter that cruel comparison becomes between our own subjection, and the freedom, and even dominion of another" ("Populousness of Ancient Nations," *Essays* 383). In other words, the ideal of equal liberty of the citizens is from a political and economic point of view much more valuable, and from a moral point of view more humane than the ancient institution of slavery: but for Hume it remains a fact

that liberty should be in balance with authority, even of the monarchical kind. And in his political essays, as in his *History of England*, Hume is always very sensitive to the need for political authority and the rule of law as a bulwark against too much freedom and equality.[6] In that context, as James Harris argues, it comes as no surprise that Hume showed no real reformative zeal towards slavery in the colonies of his days.[7]

3.2. Sympathy's Many Faces

This brings me to a second point where I feel the need for some clarification: Hume's account of sympathy. The concept of "sympathy" has in Hume a notoriously broad meaning. As I sketched already, Taylor very effectively shows that sympathy is for Hume much more than a mental mechanism of quasi-spontaneous emotional transfer: it also refers to the, often deeply cognitive, reflective communication of values, beliefs and opinions within communities. Taylor further highlights the crucial role Hume reserves for sympathy in the mirroring of self and other in the indirect passions: sympathy here refers to the practice of mutual evaluation and self-evaluation of characters wherein reflection and judgment plays a crucial role.

Taylor compares Hume's broad and inclusive account of sympathy with contemporary social psychological and neuroscientific research on *empathy*. For example, Preston and de Waal, like Hume, consider empathy to be a sort of container concept, integrating various forms of mental activity whereby the self (his or her emotions, beliefs and opinions) undergoes a perspective shift through the direct enlivening of the mental perspective of another person. In this way, the mental state of the self merges with the mental state of another, causing—and this is the most important—the sympathizing self to integrate this perspective of the other into his or her own beliefs and opinions, and act in accordance with this shift in standpoint (RS 41, 41n14).

Preston and de Waal have been criticized for defending a too broad and vague concept of empathy.[8] One might wonder whether this critique could also be applied to Hume's concept of sympathy. There is, after all, a deep divide between the quasi automatic mirroring of mental states (empathy as a sort of emotional contagion) and the culturally and social mediated process of sharing ideas and values, let alone the conscious perspective taking in moral evaluation. Hume's official view appears to be that sympathy always involves a form of emotional transfer, but Taylor defines Humean sympathy so broadly that it encompasses any form of sharing and transferring mental states: even the identification with values and cultural meanings. Humean sympathy becomes in Taylor's terms "*the* means of reproducing and sustaining forms of social life and schemes of values" (RS 70). This is a very broad conception of sympathy. It might be Hume's, but it remains unclear whether he really succeeds in integrating all forms of sympathy in a coherent explanation.

But even if one grants Hume this conceptual vagueness, it remains a fact that sympathy might not be that unequivocal *positive* social force that Taylor derives from Hume's account. As Taylor points out, Hume observes in the *Treatise* how sympathy can yield an attitude of resentment through the uncanny principle of comparison—a sort of equivalent of Nietzschean

resentment. And in the second *Enquiry* Hume mentions "popular sedition, party zeal, a devoted obedience to factious leaders" as "some of the most visible, though less laudable effects of this social sympathy in human nature" (EPM 5.35; SBN 224). Moreover, when it comes to the way pride is formed and sustained by sympathetic mirroring, Taylor herself stresses that Hume considers self-deceit and vanity as typical products of the "love of fame" so typical for humans. Not only does this remind us of the less rosy features of Hobbes's "sense of glory" or Mandeville's "self-liking": it also indicates that Hume's account of sympathy might be more ambivalent in its practical outcomes than it might at first seem. Sympathy or the empathic mirroring of self and other might be potentially more disruptive and less socially harmonious than Hume himself suggests.

Taylor shows a great sensitivity to some of the dark sides of Humean sympathy when she analyses the notion of social power in the *Treatise*. But here, it seems that, for Hume, the social stratification of gender relations, family life and economic and political rank through sympathetic mirroring is a necessary, constructive mechanism for the sustenance of society. In fact, one wonders how Hume could account for the turning point where the productive and positive influence of sympathy and mental mirroring turns into a disruptive force? When, for example, is the "reverential fear" of the servant for his master a factor of social cohesion and a source of due esteem for the rich, in contrast with a fear that engenders hatred, resentment and possible turmoil and political sedition (RS 89)? I think Taylor analyses Hume's account of sympathy in a way that brings forward these pressing questions, but also leaves them largely unanswered.

As pointed out, a central contention of Taylor's book is that Hume elaborates a social theory from which one could derive an ethics of social justice and equality. Perhaps this emancipatory ethics is *implicit* in Hume's account, proposing in an indirect way strategies and correctives to remedy the social hierarchies and inequalities in social life caused by the particularist workings of sympathy. But is this Hume's view? Or did he rather consider the maintenance of social rank and distinction to be a *constitutive* and unavoidable factor of political society and human sociability? I would rather think that Hume feared that a too egalitarian society would ignite an emancipatory zeal and undermine political authority.

3.3 Sense of Humanity and the Judicious Moral Spectator

A last point in *Reflecting Subjects* that puzzles me is the analysis of Hume's account of moral evaluation in the *Treatise*. Sympathy, so we learn from chapter four, is a major structuring force in moral evaluation that needs amendment through reflection and general rules. Taylor recognizes that the *Treatise* account of this process of amendment of sympathy has its merits, but she sees also some serious flaws: by introducing the "sense of humanity," so she argues, Hume succeeds in the second *Enquiry* in better explaining the dynamics of moral evaluation and the creation of a corrective moral point of view.

Through Book 3 of the *Treatise* Hume shows how the partiality and bias of our natural sympathy should be overcome to arrive at a correct, more or less objective moral judgment.[9]

With his account of corrected or extended sympathy, Hume explicitly introduces the idea that our moral judgments, in order to be appropriate, often require reflection and a sort of calibration of our moral feelings or sentiments. The judicious moral spectator is for Hume, as Taylor stresses, a "man of taste" who is able to judge characters and actions from some "common points of view" or a standard of vice and virtue that transcends somehow our immediate feelings of moral praise and blame.[10]

Following Henry David Aiken and Annette Baier, Jacqueline Taylor reminds us how for Hume, moral evaluation derives from *both* sentiment and reasoning: it depends, like all intersubjective evaluation, on socially and culturally shared values and norms, on customs and moral discourse.[11] In other words, Humean moral evaluation is *a form of social praxis* with both emotive and cognitive ingredients. I agree wholeheartedly with this.

However, commenting on the *Treatise* account of moral evaluation, Taylor says: "I would argue that Hume's Book 2 account of how sympathy works—for example, of our tendency to be more influenced by those in position of authority or with the trappings of power, or to have contempt for those deemed socially inferior because of markers such as gender or socio-economic status—indicates rather that some voices will not be heard, or not given as much weight" (RS 116). Taylor further observes that Hume, in the *Treatise,* "neglects the importance of cultivating the virtues of good moral judgment" (RS 101). Indeed, he here allows for an account of moral evaluation whereby "persons with wealth and other forms of social power or authority are likely to regard themselves, and be so regarded by others, as having a greater *moral* authority" (RS 100). So, even when Hume comes to pay tribute to the need for the "common" moral point of view in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, his account remains flawed, in Taylor's view. She gives a specific citation to make her point. Towards the end of the *Treatise* Hume says:

> Every particular person's pleasure and interest being different, 'tis impossible men cou'd ever agree in their sentiments and judgments, unless they choose some common point of view, from which the might survey their object, and which might cause it to appear the same to all of them. Now in judgment of characters, the only interest or pleasure, which appears the same to every spectator, is that of the person himself, whose character is examine'd; or that of persons, who have a connexion with him. And tho' such interest and pleasures touch us more faintly than our own, yet being more constant and universal, they counter-balance the latter even in practice, and are alone admitted in speculation as the standard of virtue and morality. They alone produce that particular feeling or sentiment, on which moral distinctions depend. (T 3.3.1.30; SBN 391; RS 108)

For Taylor, with this account of the creation of a "common point of view," Hume's judicious spectator remains trapped in a shared perspective that might be too culturally determined and too biased given its dependence on social rank and position. For, in abstracting from his or her "interests," he or she appears to take the interests of the agent and his or her bystanders as

constitutive of the standard of virtue. Hume appears confident that in so doing, a universally valid ethical point of view will come to undergird moral evaluation. But why, so Taylor asks, should the sympathetic feeling of agreement on the side of the spectator with the interests (the points of view) of the bystanders, be *normative* for our moral praise and blame? Suppose, so Taylor suggests, that the character we morally praise is of the proud and self-confident husband in a society that esteems polygamy? Suppose, furthermore, that the judicious spectator identifies impartially with the actual "interests" of the many women who live in humble obedience to this patriarch, unaware of their submission? Should we not say that these women lack the power to make their resentment felt, and that by implication, the judicious spectator lacks a genuine capacity or criterion for moral reflection? In short, should the common point of view not integrate a more objective perspective of morally relevant common interests?

In Taylor's view, Hume fails in the *Treatise* to account for such a more reflective and universal stance of moral evaluation and judgment. With the introduction of the principle of humanity, the second *Enquiry* appears more sensitive to these requirements. With this principle in hand, Taylor explains, Hume can account for the equal dignity of everyone concerned, irrespective of their partial involvements or interests. Through the principle of humanity, the second *Enquiry* opens a perspective upon Hume's universal humanist ethics, where the utility of virtue for the good of mankind forms the ground of the standard of virtue.

I am not convinced by this line of thought. As Taylor admits, the sketch of the way the general moral point of view is created through sympathetic identification in Book 3 might be vague, but there are other places in the *Treatise* where Hume offers more details about the requirements for genuine moral evaluation, for example when he stresses the role of "taste" in moral judgment (RS 113, 117) and the reliance on "strength of mind" on the side of the moral spectator to overcome not only his or her own interests, but also take in consideration "the commonality of interest among humankind" (RS 119).[12] In this sense, as Taylor quotes Hume, through an established practice of moral evaluation "we gradually form a "general inalterable standard" to which our moral sentiments should conform, so that our moral evaluations become correspondingly "constant and establish'd (T 3.3.3.2)" (RS 108–109).

But if the moral spectator, exemplifying an established practice, has thus a general moral standard to rely on, she is also in a position to take *distance* from the actual interests of the smaller circle affected by a character or institution judged. In other words, the citation by which Taylor justifies her critique of Hume's concept of extended sympathy as too partial and prejudiced could be read differently. As I read him, Hume wants to say that the stance taken by the judicious moral spectator *presupposes* a moral standard that is *independent* of any actual interests and which allows him to judge what *might* be appropriate interests of the people affected by a character or institution (these interests thus possibly being hypothetical). If you interpret this passage as part of a phenomenology of moral evaluation stressing the need for a "common point of view," Hume leaves open the possibility that the judicious moral spectator distances herself significantly from particular biases and interests shared by her narrow social circle.

In my reading of the *Treatise*, *what* Hume's account of moral evaluation highlights is exactly the always contextually and culturally embedded nature of our practice of moral evaluation. A fundamental correction of a particular standard of morality—that affects our own cultural values and norms and the way these relate to our social rank—is always possible and might over time be deemed necessary by a certain group or the majority of a moral community. But these factual historical shifts and turns cannot be regulated by a universalistic ethics that derives from a standard of virtue that is grounded in an abstract and generalized "sense of humanity." Moreover, the impartiality required in concrete moral evaluation does not rely on such a general and abstract perspective to judge the moral propriety of characters and actions. Even in the second *Enquiry*, as I read Hume, moral evaluation always implies the assessment of how we should *interpret* the requirements of our sense of humanity in particular settings and in relation to particular virtues and institutions, in order to really grasp what the good of mankind in this or that context might require from us.

Therefore, we should not misunderstand Hume's reference to the "interests" of mankind writ large when he contemplates the need for some "common point of view" as the ground of the standard of morality. Sometimes, of course, the concept of "mankind" might refer to all possible humans affected by, say, the general and abstract principles of justice—for example when it comes to climate change or the need for social justice. But sometimes, "the good of mankind" might just refer to the manner in which a certain virtue, or range of virtues, is exemplified by specific characters in a particular social role and the interests of the narrow circle to which these characters relate. In other words, the "impartiality" and "universalism" of Hume's common point of view is unavoidably—so I think—a view "from somewhere" and refers to a standard of virtue that is culturally dependent and embedded in the actual situation of the spectator. This embeddedness of the moral point of view is for Hume no failure, but an inevitable aspect, even a precondition, of the practice of moral evaluation.

In fact, the explanation of the creation of the moral point of view in the *Treatise* reflects a crucial feature of Hume's moral theory, highlighted elsewhere in *Reflecting Subjects*: namely, the idea that moral evaluation always hinges on an internal understanding of moral values and norms that is shaped by culture and custom. To return to the example of polygamy: a judicious spectator might have good reasons to integrate into her estimation of the patriarchal husband considerations about the undue submission of his many wives, and thus to criticize this character. Hume's account of moral evaluation clearly allows this. But it might, indeed, also be the case that the position of the moral judge remains positive about polygamy, for considerations that derive from an equally subtle "common point of view" that, influenced by a particular culture, proposes a different view of the situation judged. In a same vein, there is in Hume's moral theory no a priori *parti pris* in favor of a universalistic ethics that wants to overcome all forms of social division and inequality that might feature in a certain society or be taken for granted by particular groups in certain historical contexts.

In line with Taylor's analysis of Hume's social theory, I would therefore argue that for Hume, social distinction and rank play a role in our assessment of whom we consider to be appropriate moral spectators, and why we grant some among us greater moral authority than

others. Of course, changes in social life and culture might make us suspicious about the moral authority claimed by some on the basis of their social status and power. We might also think that Hume was too much of an eighteenth-century conformist when he alludes, in specific examples, to characters of moral authority and virtue. But it would be very un-Humean, and in contradiction with the gist of his moral theory to believe that in his view our moral evaluations should radically transcend and reform the social structures and cultural practices which make us flourish as reflective moral subjects.

NOTES

1 Taylor is influenced here by Donald Ainslie who speaks of the importance of our "existential connections" following Hume's claim that the causes of pride and humility must be "connected with our being and existence" (T 2.1.8.8; SBN 302) (RS 58n49). References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph number, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as "SBN" followed by the page number.

2 References are to Hume, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller, hereafter cited in the text as *Essays*, followed by the page number and preceded by essay title.

3 Cf. Gay, *The Enlightenment. The Rise of Modern Paganism*, chapter 7.3: "David Hume: The Complete Modern Pagan."

4 References are to Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as "EPM" followed by section and paragraph number, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, hereafter cited in the text as "SBN" followed by page numbers.

5 MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, chaps. XII and XV.

6 Cf. EPM: "Perfect equality of possessions, destroying all subordination, weakens extremely the authority of the magistracy, and must reduce all power nearly to a level, as well as property" (EPM 3.26; SBN 194).

7 Harris, "Review of *Reflecting Subjects*" in *Intellectual History Review*.

8 Coplan, "Understanding Empathy: its Features and Effects."

9 Illustrative is the following passage from the beginning of Book 3: "An action, or sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious; why? Because its view causes a pleasure or uneasiness of a particular kind. In giving a reason, therefore, for the pleasure or uneasiness, we sufficiently explain the vice or virtue. To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very *feeling* constitutes our praise or admiration" (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471).

10 Taylor is here influenced by Mary Mothersill (RS 113).

11 Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments*, chap. 8, "The Contemplation of Character"; Aiken, "An Interpretation of Hume's Theory of the Place of reason in Ethics and Politics."

12 Cf. also T 3.3.1.19 (SBN 584). Taylor further refers to the essay "Of the Standard of Taste," and the article of Mary Mothershill on this essay (cf. RS 113): Mothersill, "Hume and the Paradox of Taste."

WORKS CITED

Aiken, David Henry. "An Interpretation of Hume's Theory of the Place of Reason in Ethics and Politics." *Ethics* 90 (1979): 66–80. https://doi.org/10.1086/292134

Baier, Annette. *A Progress of Sentiments. Reflections on Hume's* Treatise. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Coplan, Amy. "Understanding Empathy: Its Features and Effects." In *Empathy. Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*. Edited by Amy Coplan and Peter Goldie, 3–18. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Gay, Peter. *The Enlightenment. The Rise of Modern Paganism*. New York/London: Norton & Company, 1966.

Harris, James. "Review of *Reflecting Subjects*." *Intellectual History Review* May (2016). http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17496977.2016.1168644

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hume, David. *Enquiries Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975.

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: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

Mothersill, Mary. "Hume and the Paradox of Taste." In *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology.* Edited by G. Dickie, R. Sclafani, and R. Roblin, 269–86. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989.

Taylor, Jacqueline. *Reflecting Subjects.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.