



Genevieve Lloyd

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The Social Aspects of Pride: Comments on Taylor's *Reflecting Subjects*

GENEVIEVE LLOYD

My comments on Jacqueline Taylor's rich and interesting study¹ will focus on a theme which I found particularly thought provoking: the discussion of Hume's treatment of pride. I think the topic of pride is central to the book's structure—closely integrated with the recurring consideration of what is distinctive in Hume's approach to the social significance of the passions.

I am going to come at this theme indirectly—through consideration of the differences between Hume and Spinoza on the nature and significance of pride. Taylor shows that Hume has made it possible for pride to be considered as a positive trait, perhaps even as a virtue. Spinoza's attitude to pride in the *Ethics* is, in contrast, quite negative. The differences between Spinoza and Hume here are of more than incidental scholarly interest. They go to the heart of what this book brings out so well: Hume's capacity to engage both with the social *effects* of emotions and with the ways in which emotions are themselves shaped—and sometimes transformed—by their social contexts.

One way of putting the point here is that the history of the emotions *reflects* their changing social conditions; and indeed, on my reading, that is one aspect of this book's engagement with the idea of *reflection*. Our understanding of an emotion is deepened by considering attitudes towards it which have prevailed in different places and times. In some cases, these variations can be seen as changes in attitude towards states which have remained fundamentally the same. Sometimes, too, an apparent change in attitude may in fact indicate a mere change in terminology, rather than a deep conceptual shift. However, in other cases, it can be argued that the emotion itself becomes something different from what it was. I want to suggest that Hume's treatment of pride—as it emerges in Taylor's discussion—involves that deeper kind

Genevieve Lloyd is Emerita Professor in Philosophy, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, Australia.

Email: GenevieveLloyd@bigpond.com

of change; and that in this respect, *Reflecting Subjects* offers, more generally, an important engagement with conceptual issues about the philosophical history of emotions.

To clarify what is at stake here, let me refer briefly to a claim made by A. O. Hirschman in his book, *The Passions and the Interests*, published in 1977. Hirschman argued that there are *conceptual* shifts that happened throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in relation to attitudes to money-making pursuits. On his account, what happened was not just a matter of a change in attitudes towards the acquisition of wealth. Rather, there was an underlying realignment in a cluster of concepts, that helped make activities related to such acquisition come to be perceived as honourable, after having been previously regarded as enacting shameful vices of greed or avarice. Hirschman talked of a “marvellous metamorphosis” of destructive passions into virtues, via the intervening concept of “rational pursuit of interest,” which brought together what had previously been seen as opposed categories of “reason” and “the passions.”²

Has Hume brought a comparable conceptual shift in the understanding of pride? If he has, then what is it about his philosophy that makes that shift possible?

In his discussion of pride in Book 2, section 5, of the *Treatise*, Hume reflects on the striking fact that pride not only presupposes the idea of the self, but also, in some ways, transforms and enriches it. Pleasure in a beautiful house, which one owns, passes into pleasure in oneself—as its owner. Pride changes us; and that productive process involves not just how we perceive ourselves, but how we are perceived by others—and, in turn, how we come to perceive ourselves differently.

In her illuminating discussion—in Chapter 2 of *Reflecting Subjects*—of the central role of pride in Humean social theory, Taylor stresses the role of “mirroring” in those productive aspects of pride. Sustained pride, reflected back to us by the reactions of others, brings an enduring sense of self-worth. “Mirroring” is here conceived as “a *social process* occurring *between human minds* and in which passionate experiences are communicated, responded to, and sustained, and in some instances also created and shaped” (Taylor, 69). Hume thus shows insight into the social dimensions of pride’s productive power in relation to the formation and shaping of the sense of selfhood. The relation of ownership between person and house—which is presupposed by pride—is transformed by it to the sense of oneself as having the status of property owner, with a consequent place in a social system.

What I find interesting here is that Hume was able to articulate something which Spinoza seems unable to say. The difference is partly a consequence of the metaphysical framework which Spinoza brought to his treatment of pride. I want to argue that there is also a related difference which has to do with the changing genres of philosophical writing.

In defining pride, in his “Definition of the Affects” in Part III of the *Ethics*, Spinoza says that pride is thinking—out of love of oneself—more highly of oneself than one should. Pride, he explains, “is an effect or property of Self-Love.”³ It can, he continues, therefore also be defined as “Love of oneself, or Self-Esteem, insofar as it so affects a man that he thinks more highly of himself than is just” (Spinoza, 537). Pride is thus, for Spinoza, an excess of self-esteem—an *unjust* self-assessment—an error of judgment about our own qualities. A little earlier—at the

Scholium to Proposition 26 of Part III—he describes Pride as a form of self-delusion: “a species of madness.” For the proud man “dreams, with open eyes, that he can do all those things which he achieves only in his imagination” (Spinoza, 508).

Spinoza suggests there, in effect, that pride rests on an inadequacy arising from flawed imagining. In a well-functioning rational mind, the imagining of one's own achievements would be accompanied by corrective ideas—ideas which exclude from existence those grand deluded imaginings about ourselves. So, pride arises from a flaw in imagination—uncorrected by the clear ideas of reason. This account of pride of course involves some reference to other people. They enter the analysis as objects of the erroneous unjust comparisons between self and others which are the core of pride. Those supposedly inferior others are objects of Scorn, which for Spinoza consists in wrongly considering ourselves as more worthy than them.

Those passages from the *Ethics* make it clear that Spinoza sees pride as a flaw. Yet, that does not of itself indicate that there is any deep conceptual difference between him and Hume. For Spinoza, after all, does not in these passages criticise *rightful* self esteem; he condemns self-esteem only in its excessive, *unjust* form. Might what seems at first a difference in attitude towards pride turn out to reflect merely a difference in terminology? There is, however, a deeper difference here which does seem to take us into the territory of conceptual difference.

To clarify the differences, we need just a little more from Spinoza. In elaborating his account of pride as “unjust over-estimation of self,” he says something which may well seem counter-intuitive. Pride, he says, strictly “has no opposite.” He acknowledges that this claim is at odds with common usage: for we are often accustomed to oppose Humility to Pride. But this, he insists, is because we are attending, not to the nature of the two states, but to their effects. “For we usually call him proud who exults too much at being esteemed . . . who tells of nothing but his own virtues, and the vices of others, who wishes to be given precedence over all others, and finally who proceeds with the gravity and attire usually adopted by others who are placed far above him. On the other hand, we call him humble who quite often blushes, who confesses his own vices and tells the virtues of others, who yields to all, and, finally, who walks with head bowed and neglects to adorn himself” (Spinoza, 538).

For Spinoza pride is a character flaw; and in describing it he seems to talk in the language of virtues and vices. Yet for him, pride does not—as we might have expected—have virtuous humility as its opposite. The rationale for Spinoza's insistence that pride and humility are not opposites is that, in his cartography of the emotions, they are derived from different, more basic passions. Pride is derived from Joy—via the pleasure of self-esteem. He argues that if pride really did have an opposite, it would have to be something derivable from sadness. Pride's opposite then would be, not a virtuous humility, but rather Despondency, which he defines as “thinking less highly of oneself than is just, out of sadness.” “For as Pride is born of Self-Esteem so Despondency is born of Humility” (Spinoza, 538).

What is important for my purposes here is that, although Spinoza describes pride as a flaw, what passes in his social context as humility is also an unattractive trait—because of its associations with despondency. His discussion of humility and despondency concludes with a wry observation: these affects—humility and despondency—are both, in fact, very

rare. “For human nature, considered in itself, strains against them, as far as it can. . . . So those who are believed to be most despondent and humble are usually most ambitious and envious” (Spinoza, 538).

When we read that passage now, it may well resonate with what we find unlikeable in the fawning “humility” of Charles Dickens’s character, Uriah Heep, in *David Copperfield*. Hume, too, often offers ironic observations of the passions in action which still resonate with us. Spinoza and Hume share a distrust of the posturing at play in the public enactment of emotions. At the level of acute observation of behaviour, their insights can agree. Yet, there are significant theoretical differences. To clarify those differences, it is important first to note their shared appreciation of the role of imagination in shaping the emotions.

Spinoza stresses that a flawed *imagining* of our powers and capacities can have debilitating effects on the adequate *understanding* of them; and that this inadequate understanding can in turn come to limit the capacities themselves. It can, he says, happen that “while someone sad considers his weakness, he imagines himself to be disdained by everyone—even while the others think of nothing less than to disdain him” (Spinoza, 537–8). Moreover, it can happen that such a person “denies something of himself in relation to a future time of which he is uncertain.” The despondent person comes to deny his own capacity to do, in the future, anything but what is wrong or dishonourable. Or, perhaps from too much shame, he becomes timid, so that he does not “dare things that others equal to him dare” (Spinoza, 538).

Spinoza’s remarks about despondency are perceptive about its pathology as a negative emotion. Those insightful remarks come in the context of an insistence on the debilitating effects of imagination—despite the role it plays in the formation of the adequate ideas of reason, by allowing us to grasp what things have in common. For Spinoza, what allows us to overcome despondency is the exercise of the mind’s powers of rational thought. Unlike Descartes, he does not attribute the “remedy” of the passions to the exercise of a virtuous will. But nor does he treat one emotion as able of itself to overcome the power of another, without the exercise of the mind’s desire for better understanding of its passions. Pride and humility alike are, for Spinoza, products of flawed imagining. For Hume, in contrast, it is the emotion of pride itself that allows us to overcome the debilitating effects of the lack of confidence in our own abilities. Reason, he famously claims in Book 2, section 3 of the *Treatise*, is not the master of the passions, but their slave—fit only to serve and obey them.

Spinoza, despite his reputed “rationalism,” recognised the importance of both imagination and emotion in the life of the mind. In many respects, his treatment of the interactions between reason, imagination, and emotion can be seen as foreshadowing Hume. Yet, his insight into the power of the passions in their own right falls short of Hume’s; and that difference is particularly striking in Hume’s treatment of the positive effects of pride. Taylor shows its relevance, for example, to understanding how pride can strengthen self-confidence, especially for those socialised not to believe in their abilities: women and marginalised minorities.

In comparison with Spinoza, Hume highlights the direct effects on emotions of the ways in which selves perceive one another. There are intimations, in the *Ethics*, of the idea that a well-lived human life thrives on the perception of the virtues of others. Yet, Spinoza’s system

cannot really capture the powerful effects of the intersubjective connections which Hume describes as “sympathy.” Taylor presents Humean sympathy as a principle of communication between selves—captured in the metaphor of dynamic, reciprocal “mirroring.”

As I said earlier, Spinoza of course recognised that pride involves thinking about others—making comparisons between them and ourselves. He did not treat pride as capable of existing in absolute solitude. He also recognised—as we have seen in his discussion of despondency—that our emotions can be affected by how we think (rightly or wrongly) others think of us. Yet, when we compare it with Hume’s, Spinoza’s version of pride is strikingly “internal.” It pictures the mind as taking notes, as it were, on the basis of which it makes judgements on the comparative worth of itself in relation to others. Under the influence of inadequacies in imagining, it often gets those judgements wrong—thus falling into the flawed conditions of pride or despondency. For Hume, in contrast, sympathetic “mirroring” can make pride of itself a sustaining force in the shaping of selfhood. Put briefly, Humean sympathy opens up space for the productive social role of pride to be articulated.

So far, I have focused on the differences in content between Spinoza and Hume on pride. Let me now make a few brief remarks about what I think are relevant differences between them, in relation to genres of philosophical writing. I want to suggest that Spinoza’s insights into the emotions are in tension with the rigid deductive structure of the *Ethics*—that his thought strains at the limits of the genre in which it is expressed. Thus, although he mentions the social dimensions of pride, those observations can seem at odds with the static cartography of the emotions, laid out in the *Ethics*. Spinoza cannot readily capture in that form the dynamism which Hume encapsulates in his treatment in the *Treatise* of the *productive* power of the passion of pride.

The subtlety—and at times the obvious irony—of Spinoza’s observations pulls against the rigidity of form imposed by the structure of the *Ethics*. The relatively free flowing *Corollaries*—in which Spinoza adds general observations to his logical deductions—are sometimes able to escape that restraint; and it is in those sections that the affinities between Spinoza’s insights and Hume’s become most apparent. It is also worth noting here that the prose of the *Tractatus-Theologico-Politicus*—whatever its title might suggest—is more free-flowing. There, Spinoza is able to talk more directly about the constructive interplay of imagination, emotion, and understanding, offering an integrated view of the human mind, the theoretical basis for which is formulated in the *Ethics*.

Issues of genre cannot always be sharply separated out from the philosophical insights expressed through them. Yet, it is interesting to reflect on their relevance here. Hume did not write about the emotions in a rigid geometrical mode. Yet, in his early writing, he did try to conform his observations to what he took to be an emerging “science of human nature”—appropriately expressed in the genre of *Treatise*. In keeping with his self-imposed task of laying bare the intricacies of human nature, the work evokes a unitary structure of the mind, within which all the interactions of “impressions” and “ideas” goes on.

In an intriguing section in his Appendix to the *Treatise*, reflecting on his treatment of personal identity, Hume seems to express his own sense of dissatisfaction with the restraints

of that model of the mind. On reviewing his treatment of personal identity, he says, he finds himself in a “labyrinth” from which he can find no escape. There would be no difficulty if it were the case either that our perceptions inhered in something simple and individual, or that the mind perceived some real connection among them. But, having rejected both those possibilities, he disarmingly acknowledges, he must “plead the privilege of a sceptic” and confess that the difficulty is too hard for his understanding⁴ (T App. 21; SBN 636). Hume articulates his “labyrinth” as a perplexity about the conditions of personal identity. But there is a deeper issue which relates to the underlying model of the self as the “theatre” within which the whole show can go on.

I want to suggest that the perplexity Hume expresses in the Appendix concerns the difficulty of adequately conceptualising the social world—the world of inter-acting selves—within a frame set by the model of an individual mind inspecting its own contents. In the case of the passion of pride, Hume’s insights into the fluid social dimensions of selfhood are especially difficult to fit into the fixity of the model of a mind inspecting its mental contents. Perhaps Hume came to see that he had a difficulty in articulating—within the genre of *Treatise*—philosophical insights into the dynamic changeability of sociable selves, whose identities are formed and shaped by interactions with one another.

It may be helpful here to try to bring *Reflecting Subjects* into relation with issues about philosophical writing raised in another important recent book on Hume, James Harris’s intellectual biography.⁵ Discussing the evolution of Hume’s writing style, Harris argues against the common view that he had, in effect, already reached all his main philosophical conclusions in the *Treatise*, so that the later writings amount to little more than a process of reformulating ideas for purposes of more accessible communication. On Harris’s account, Hume developed in his later works a more nuanced idea of what it was to write philosophy, and of what it was for a philosopher of his times to engage in an “objective” study of human nature. Thus, Hume developed as a curious, observant, philosophically informed “man of letters”—rather than as a would-be “scientist of human nature.” Instead of continuing to model his writing on the concerns of a systematic “experimenter,” he became progressively a detached observer of human ways, as they were played out in the social context of his times. As Harris describes it, that change amounts, not so much to a repudiation of the ideal of a “science of human nature,” as to a different way of pursuing it. Thus, the philosophy Hume came to write is best seen not as a specific subject matter or body of doctrine, but rather as a habit of mind, which could be applied to a range of subjects.

Harris’s approach to the sequence of Hume’s works allows a new emphasis to be put on the significance of Hume’s shift away from the model of formal *treatise* to the genre of *essay*. Hume himself celebrated that free-flowing form of writing in his essay “On Essay Writing.” Already in the *Treatise*, his insights sometimes take off in ways that can seem a digression—or at any rate a detour—from the main business, just as Spinoza’s *Corollaries* do. There is, for example, the chapter on “Curiosity or the Love of Truth,” which marks the end of part 2—with its playful comparison of intellectual inquiry to hunting and gaming. That section reads like a mini essay; so, too, does the matching “Conclusion to this Book” in part 1—with its moving

descriptions of the “careless scepticism” appropriate to the life of the contemporary man of letters. Rather than confirming to a model of ordered sub-sections in a systematic *Treatise*, those chapters seem close—both in content and in mood—to his later essays on the “Platonist,” the “Epicurean,” the “Stoic,” and the “Sceptic.” In that set of essays he sketched divergent forms of intellectual character, as enacted by contemporary men of letters, through the prism of classical ideas of the philosophical life.

I have argued that the consideration of modes of writing can enrich our understanding of Hume’s insights into the social dimensions of emotion. At the level of theoretical content, he provides a basis for recognising the productive force of pride within the structures of sociability operating in his time and place. His observations on the passions are grounded in philosophical insights into their social roles. Yet, that shift in content is also in tune with the evolution of his writing practice. He comes to write philosophy in ways attuned to modern lives of philosophically inclined *men*—as they mostly were—*of letters*.

Thus understood, Hume’s later writings are not just a popularisation of what he had already done in the *Treatise*. On this way of looking at Hume’s intellectual trajectory, the shift away from the *Treatise* genre gave him more flexibility and freedom for direct engagement in observing the passions in action. His writing remained informed by an understanding of the systematic methods of scientific investigation. Yet, if we want to see him as a precursor of contemporary ways of understanding the emotions, it may be that we will find him personified more fully in the spirit and style of the essay writer, rather than that of a contemporary cognitive scientist.

These issues of genre bear also, I think, on Taylor’s interesting discussions of Hume’s insights into the status of *humanity* as a modern virtue. Perhaps it is partly his concern with issues of philosophical writing that allows Hume to identify a general positive trait, describable as *humanity*—though that trait can take different forms, in different contexts. In Hume’s intellectual trajectory, perhaps, that fluid construct comes to replace the comparative fixity of the notion of a unitary “human nature” discoverable through systematic methods of inquiry. Perhaps the open-ended world of social interaction, in which emotions take different forms in changing contexts, came for Hume to provide an escape from the “labyrinth” imposed by the inward “theatre” of the self.

Humanity—thus construed as a virtue of sociability, arising within inter-subjective relations—might prove, in our contemporary social contexts, a less contentious virtue than *Pride*.

NOTES

- 1 Taylor, *Reflecting Subjects*, hereafter cited in text by page number.
- 2 Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*, 17.
- 3 Spinoza, *Ethics*, 537, hereafter cited in text by page number.
- 4 References to the *Treatise* Appendix are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, cited in text as “T App.” followed by page number, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited as “SBN” followed by the page number.
- 5 Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography*.

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