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Social Theory, Ethics, and Autonomy: Comments on Taylor's *Reflecting Subjects*

DARIO PERINETTI

Reflecting Subjects offers a bold and original reading of Book 2 of the *Treatise*, and presents a problem that has been little explored by Hume scholarship. Jacqueline Taylor's book argues that we can reconstruct what she calls a "social theory" out of Book 2 of the *Treatise*. Based on a detailed account of the passions that constitute social selves, the social theory of the *Treatise* offers, according to Taylor, rich and fine-grained explanations of the causes of difference and inequality among human beings, based on understanding the characters of individuals, their social statuses, and their differences in power. However—and this is one of the central problems that *Reflecting Subjects* seeks to tackle—in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, Hume uses the same moral psychology developed in Book 2 to build an account of ethics, in which human beings are to be considered as equals. In her reading, this generates a tension between the moral psychology of Book 2, which is particularly sensitive to the way emotions are related to the variability of social practices and social statuses, and the account of morals in Book 3, which seems to disregard this social complexity in explaining moral judgment. As she puts it, in the third Book of the *Treatise*, "Hume neglects the social inequalities he has examined and instead appears to regard all persons as having more or less equal moral standing."¹

Taylor argues that Hume eases this tension in his mature work. She claims that, in the second *Enquiry* and the *Essays*, Hume makes fundamental changes to his earlier moral theory, in order to produce a "more sophisticated" account of morals that take too moral evaluations as a kind of social practice (ibid). *Reflecting Subjects* sees the mature Hume as perfecting his earlier social theory by producing a more coherent account of the connection between social theory, moral psychology, and ethics.

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In the first chapter, Taylor argues that Hume abandons a common early-modern strategy of providing teleological explanations of the passions, and embraces an account solely based on an analysis of their efficient causes. She carefully shows that, once we properly understand what methodological experimentalism meant in the early-modern period, we can see that Hume's account of the passions was faithful to the project announced in the title of the *Treatise*: that of introducing "the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects." In this initial chapter, Taylor reaches the central conclusion that the elimination of teleological explanations and the adoption of experimentalism turn Hume's account of the passions into something that goes well beyond the limits of moral psychology and can be appropriately labelled a "robust social theory" (*Reflecting Subjects*, 31). Hume's robust social theory is one that focuses on how social institutions, understood as historically and culturally determined, are crucial for shaping human nature and engendering social roles and relations.

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to present in detail the social theory that Taylor sees as pivotal to Book 2 of the *Treatise*. These chapters provide a fascinating analysis of how the indirect passions, together with the mechanism of sympathy, serve to explain a great number of significant social phenomena: the generation of social statuses, the production of wealth, the distribution of property, the transmission of cultural values and attitudes, and the existence of different forms of social power. In this short piece, I cannot begin to do justice to the richness of Taylor's work in these chapters. But I would like to underscore here the originality and the importance of her reconstruction of Hume's social theory. This reconstruction provides a new and refreshing angle for reading Book 2 of the *Treatise*; and the meticulous analysis of a wide range of social phenomena will provide future scholars with very useful materials to further advance this kind of reading.

Two other important claims are put forward in these two chapters. The *first* is that the theory of sympathy cannot be reduced to Hume's associationism. There is much more to it (*Reflecting Subjects*, 48). For example, Taylor rightly draws attention to the importance of the process of mirroring that the mechanism of sympathy makes possible. As Hume puts it: "In general we may remark, that the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each other's emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees" (T 2.2.5.21; SBN 365). The mirroring process is what turns us not only into the social creatures that we are, but, most importantly, into the *reflective subjects* that we become in our social interactions. The mirroring process is responsible for the kind of reciprocal relations that Taylor sees as constitutive of selves. Reflective subjects are the ones who acquire reflective awareness of themselves in virtue of the fact that they see themselves reflected in others and that they, in turn, serve as mirrors for other subjects.

The importance of the mirroring process can be fully appreciated in the details of Hume's explanation of the "indirect passions," or the passions directed at persons. These passions are all forms of pleasure or displeasure about ourselves or about others; and they are caused by some pleasant or unpleasant quality or object. Pride, for instance, obtains when "*agreeable objects [are] related to ourselves by an association of ideas and of impressions*" (T 2.1.6.1; SBN

290). If agreeable objects are related to another person, the double relation of impressions and ideas begets love. When the objects that cause the passions are disagreeable, the passions produced are, respectively, humility and hate. So, self-regarding and others-regarding passions are dependent on a) evaluative attitudes directed at objects that are b) judged to be somehow related to oneself or another person.

So far, this looks like a strictly psychological account. But Hume stresses that the psychology of indirect passions is crucially sensitive to social factors. Pride can only arise when the agreeable object is *closely related*, as opposed to loosely related to us (T 1.2.6.3; SBN 66). I can enjoy myself by attending to a great party, but only the person that threw the party can properly be proud of it (T 2.1.6.2; SBN 290–91). A close relation to a valuable object or quality needs also be *peculiar to us* to produce pride (T 2.1.6.4–5; SBN 291–92). Thus, the positive (or negative) value of an object or quality is, to a great extent, a function of its scarcity. I can enjoy, for instance, being considerate and sensible, but it is only when these personal qualities are both prized and scarce, that they can be a source of pride. For only then, our being related to this quality becomes a way of distinguishing ourselves (positively or negatively) from others. Similarly, it is not sufficient for pride that I value positively a scarce quality or object that is closely related and peculiar to me. It is also required that its value be publicly recognized (T 2.1.6.6; SBN 292). No matter how much pleasure we might retire from something we possess, or a quality we have, it will hardly produce pride if we cannot imagine anyone concurring in our positive assessment of it.

Thus, indirect passions are more than mere ways of experiencing pleasure or displeasure about persons. They also serve to evaluate oneself or others, they involve beliefs, assessment of what others believe, and reliance on social norms. Indirect passions are shaped by and dependent on socially determined evaluative attitudes and judgments. Hence, indirect passions are social passions because—unlike joys or mere dislikes—they simply cannot exist in the absence of social relations and the sympathetic communication of passions in society. The mirroring process is, thus, characterized by the way our own self is reflected in the evaluative attitudes of others, and by the way other selves are reflected in our own evaluative attitudes. Hence, Taylor is correct in stressing that the mirroring process plays a fundamental role in our acquiring the competence of evaluating oneself and others epistemically, socially and morally (*Reflecting Subjects*, 55, 59).

The *second* important claim that emerges from Taylor's reconstruction of Hume's social theory is that there is a two-way direction of explanation between indirect passions and social institutions. On the one hand, our natural sentimental responses are at the origin of social attitudes and generate the need for institutional arrangements. On the other hand, through the same mirroring process, social institutions and conventions play a fundamental role in shaping the character and emotional bent of our individual selves.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 are devoted to show how the same mechanisms that explain the emergence of our social attitudes are also responsible for the existence of our moral attitudes. In these chapters, Taylor seeks to explain how Hume's social theory connects with his sentimental ethics. She argues too that Hume's strategy for connecting his social theory with

his ethics was unsuccessful in the *Treatise*. The reason is, in her opinion, that Hume's excessive reliance on psychological explanations and on the mechanism of sympathy results in a neglect of "the importance of good judgment and . . . of cultivating the virtues of good moral judgment." The focus on the psychology of sympathy has also the side-effect of masking the implications that social inequalities have for the moral authority of agents in actual practices of moral judgment (*Reflecting Subjects*, 101). In her view, Hume only managed to solve this problem in his mature work, particularly in the second *Enquiry* and in the *Essays*. The solution comes when Hume decides a) to abandon explanations that are exclusively based in the psychology of sympathy and; b) to give a central role to the sentiment of humanity, to moral reasoning, and to discursive practices in regulating our moral attitudes.

Let me focus here on the problem of connecting Hume's social theory with his ethics. One of the great merits of *Reflecting Subjects* lies in shedding light on a tension between Hume's sentimental account of social relations and his sentimental ethics. The problem is the following: does Hume have the resources for explaining how the same sentimental mechanisms that are responsible for social inequalities and differences in power also underlie the adoption of impartial moral attitudes that suppose accepting the equal worth and moral autonomy of human beings? In Book 2 of the *Treatise*, the indirect passions and the mechanism of sympathy serve to explain how we acquire the competence to identify and to evaluate the social significance of objects and persons. But Hume's social theory shows that the passions and sympathy generate unequal and asymmetrical relations between human beings. How can this theory also explain our capacity to identify and evaluate the moral significance of persons, a capacity that crucially depends on our seeing each other as equals?

This is an interesting question, and, as pointed out above, Taylor's answer is that Hume failed to give a satisfactory answer to it in the *Treatise*, but succeeded in the second *Enquiry* and the *Essays*, where his account of moral evaluation gives more room to the sentiment of humanity, to social practices of moral regulation, and to moral reasoning. Hume's account of moral evaluation in the *Treatise* is defective because, Taylor argues, it is exclusively based on the psychological mechanism of *extensive* sympathy. Extensive sympathy is the capacity to experience pleasure or pain regarding the actions of people that are not closely related to us, by imagining the effects that their actions tend to have on people close to them. Unlike it, *limited* sympathy is determined by the way someone's actions affect us or people in our circle. Extensive sympathy results from imaginarily projecting ourselves in social circles that have no close connection with us or, even, with groups or persons whose interest are in conflict with ours (see, for example, T 2.2.9.14–15, T 3.3.1.23 and T 3.3.6.3; SBN 386–87, 586–87, 615). This imaginary projection establishes what Hume calls a "common point of view," that is, a point of view in which, by disregarding our own interest, we can understand and experience the emotions of persons distant from us, in time, space, culture, or interests.

The problem that Taylor sees in the *Treatise* account is that the theory of sympathy forces Hume to adopt an implausible view of moral evaluation. Moral evaluation occurs when, failing to immediately sympathize with the observed agent, the moral observer places herself in the common point of view and sympathizes instead with the effects that the agent's actions

have on her own circle. In this point of view, we consider how the agent is evaluated by the persons belonging to her circle and we sympathize with these evaluations. For Taylor this account turns the responses of people in the agent's circle in *our* criterion for evaluating the agent's virtue. This leads, in her view, to "assume that the circle's responses will be appropriate ones, and that sympathy with the agent's circle is therefore sufficient to guide the approval or blame of those adopting the common point of view." Thus, "the *Treatise* account depicts the responses of an agent's circle as reliably attesting to her character" (*Reflecting Subjects*, 113).

Now, if the common point of view is supposed to correct or neutralize *our* personal interest so that our evaluations of characters become genuinely *moral* evaluations, how can this procedure neutralize the interests and biases of the persons in the observed agent's circle? If extensive sympathy is merely sympathy with the emotions and responses of those who are close to the observed agent, then adopting the common point of view is tantamount to always legitimizing the situated and interested evaluations produced by the persons in the observed agent's circle. There is no room in this account for assessing the correctness of *their* evaluations.

Taylor contrasts this view of moral evaluation with the one that Hume presents in the second *Enquiry* and in "Of the Standard of Taste." She claims that "in the *Enquiry*, Hume stresses the importance of general conversation and good reasoning to establish a standard of virtue, rather than appealing to sympathy with the responses of an agent's associates" (*Reflecting Subjects*, 121–23). Taylor sees the *Enquiry's* appeal to the *sentiment of humanity* as the source of moral responses as symptomatic of this shift in focus. Although ultimately based on the psychological mechanism of sympathy, the sentiment of humanity is, in her view, more than mere extensive sympathy. She argues that "the sentiments arising from the principle of humanity *require* reason and reflection" (*ibid.*, 128, see also 122), and imply a general concern with society, rather than a more narrow sympathetic connection with specific social circles.

The close connection between the sentiment of humanity and moral reasoning leads Hume to an alternative understanding of the standard of virtue. Taylor argues that this alternative account can be found in "Of the Standard of State," where "Hume argues that the standard is the collective verdict of those who exercise certain virtues of good judgment" rather than, simply, anyone in the close circle of the observed agent (*Reflecting Subjects*, 113). In the mature view, moral reasoning makes us sympathize with the evaluations of judges closer to the agent than we are, but only on the condition that they be good judges, namely, that they too adopt the common point of view. This is, in Taylor's reading, a major improvement with respect to the "weakness" of the *Treatise* account. For the mere mechanism of extensive sympathy "renders us impartial but not necessarily reflective" (*Reflecting Subjects*, 129).

I am not convinced that Taylor is right in suggesting such an important change between the *Treatise* and later work in Hume's account of moral evaluation. Furthermore, I think that if she were right, her own account of how Hume solves the tension between the inequality proper to social relations and the equality required for moral evaluations would be weakened as a result. Let me explain. In the *Treatise*, Hume does not say that extensive sympathy is merely a way of endorsing the evaluations of persons in the observed agent's circle. What Hume says is that when evaluating the character of someone not related to us:

we confine our view to that narrow circle, in which any person moves, in order to form a judgment of his moral character. When the natural tendency of his passions leads him to be serviceable and useful within his sphere, we approve of his character, and love his person, by a sympathy with the sentiments of those, who have a more particular connexion with him. (T3.3.3.2; SBN 602)

True, extensive sympathy, here, is sympathy with the sentiments of the persons immediately affected by the character of the observed agent. But that sympathy is based on *our own* evaluation of the passions that are durable traits of the agent's character. We have to judge that the character traits of the observed agent turn her into someone "serviceable and useful within his sphere." This judgement is based on a reasoned assessment of the effects that the agent's actions have on people on her circle, and on the sentiments these actions might generate in them. The idea we form of these sentiments, converts by sympathy into a moral sentiment, and we approve or disapprove the character of the person under observation. It is not sympathy with *their* assessment of the same character. Our attitude towards the agent's character rests on our evaluation of her durable traits of character and their imagined effect on the sentiments of persons in her circle. *We* are the ones who "consider the tendency of any passion to the advantage or harm of those, who have any immediate connexion or intercourse with the person possess'd of it" (T 3.3.3.2; SBN 602–603). This is something we can only do by reasoning. And it is only when *we* do that, that "our sentiments *concur* with those of others" (*ibid.*, italics added). In other words, we are not deferring to the judgments of people in the agent's circle. We reason and judge, and our judgments count as a moral evaluation of the agent's character, only insofar as we abandon our own point of view and consider the effects of this character on her circle. The crucial point here is that *our* judgment must "concur" with that of anyone adopting the same perspective, that is, with anyone who impartially considers the effects of this character on other people. This view is quite consistent with rejecting the partial or biased evaluations of those in the narrow circle of the observed agent. To put it briefly, it is not a consequence of the *Treatise* account, that we must approve the dreadful character of someone because the equally dreadful people in his circle find him praiseworthy and benefit from his actions. The standard of virtue remains the reasoned judgment of an observer adopting the common point of view, not the one passed by the people in the observed agent's circle.

I agree that there certainly are significant differences in emphasis between the *Treatise* and Hume's later works. But I do not see sufficient evidence of an important shift in Hume's views here.² Even Taylor acknowledges that there are many passages in the *Treatise* that suggest a view quite similar to the one she thinks Hume developed only in his mature work.³ But she claims that although those passages "point to the possibility of a more complex account of moral evaluation," they "do not square with the official *Treatise* line grounding the standard of virtue in the responses of those on the agent's sphere of influence" (*Reflecting Subjects*, 117). My previous remarks show that I do not think that this was Hume's "official line" in the *Treatise*.

In the absence of any decisive passage backing Taylor's interpretation, I think it safer to assume that Hume already had this more complex account in the *Treatise*. Actually, I believe that

assuming the continuity of Hume's views on moral evaluation would serve to strengthen, rather than to undermine, what I see as Taylor's most important claim, namely, that in the mature works, Hume was primarily concerned with explaining the role that reasoning and discursive practices play in shaping our social and moral attitudes. For if it is true, as Taylor claims, that Hume's account of moral evaluation in the mature works does not rely on the *Treatise's* detailed psychology of sympathy and is, instead, based on the sentiment of humanity; and if it is also true that the sentiment of humanity is not just shorthand for sympathy, then Hume will be in trouble. For, Hume's account of moral judgment in terms of the theory of extensive sympathy in Book 3 of the *Treatise* is supported by the robust and detailed moral psychology developed in Book 2. But, if we were to suppose that, in the second *Enquiry*, Hume replaced the theory of sympathy by an appeal to the sentiment of humanity, Hume's sentimentalist ethics would be weakened as a result. For Hume's treatment of the sentiment of humanity in the EPM is too brief, if not sketchy, with respect to the psychology that underlies it. On Taylor's reading, the mature work strengthens the connection between the social theory and the moral theory. But, if I am correct, it would do so by losing the connection with Hume's moral psychology. On the contrary, assuming the continuity of Hume's views on moral judgment will be better to Taylor's more general aim of explaining the connection between these three aspects of Hume's thought. Assuming continuity will also be consistent with Taylor's claim that there is a significant evolution in Hume's mature works. The story, as I see it, would go as follows. Having achieved a consistent account of the connection between moral psychology and ethics in the *Treatise*, Hume became increasingly interested in giving a more detailed account of the role of social practices and moral reasoning in shaping our moral attitudes and evaluations. This would explain the change of focus in the second *Enquiry* and much of the content of his *Essays*. The shift of focus will also explain Hume's increasing interest in providing historical explanations for social practices and moral attitudes, such as we find them in the *Natural History of Religion*, some of his essays and, of course, in the *History of England*.⁴

Let me now return to the general problem of connecting the inequality that is assumed in Hume's social theory with the equality required for his ethics. In several passages of chapters 5 and 6, Taylor advances an important contention that may otherwise pass unnoticed. She argues that Hume offers a substantial account of moral autonomy that importantly differs from the usual Kantian one (*Reflecting Subjects*, 182). The advantage of a Kantian approach to autonomy (assuming for the sake of argument that it offers a coherent one) is that, given that autonomy is taken as the offspring of human practical reason, individuals are not required to be socially equal in order to be morally equal. In his writings on history and perpetual peace, Kant certainly shows awareness that the full exercise of the moral autonomy of human beings depends on their being able to create in history a rationally governed commonwealth.⁵ But it remains true that human beings are autonomous irrespective of whether their social environment is optimally adapted to the exercise of their autonomy. In the case of Hume, the situation is more complex. Taylor's contribution here lies in underscoring that Hume has a view on moral autonomy, but that he considers it to be *acquired* in social interactions and, hence, *dependent* on them. This contention is consistent with her claim that the sympathy-based mirroring

process plays a pivotal role in constituting selves. The interesting point is that she argues, both by referring to Hume and to contemporary works in psychology, that interconnectedness is integral to having a self. But interconnectedness does not, as some Kantians might fear, turn agents into heteronomous individuals. As Taylor puts it, a “connected self has received the kind of mirroring that allows her to make independent judgments” (*Reflecting Subjects*, 156).

If that is true, and I think Taylor is on the right track here, it seems that Hume faces the problem of explaining how moral attitudes that suppose recognizing each other as equals can emerge amid institutional settings and cultures that are based on social and political inequality. To put it otherwise, interconnected Humean agents are shaped by the inequalities characterizing their social connections that constitute them. In the absence of any Kantian noumenal standpoint—the one provided by the categorical imperative—how can such agents be brought to recognize each other as equals? The only route available for Hume seems to be to add an account of the historical progression of morality and autonomy to his social theory.

On this issue Taylor credits Hume with what I think is a weak (and Whiggish) conception of moral progress in history. The basic story will be the following: the more people interact and the more different countries enter into mutual commerce, the more a common human point of view develops and makes possible the flourishing of genuinely moral attitudes in society. The progress of industry, the arts, and knowledge fosters all sorts of social commerce and exchanges and, so, is instrumental in nurturing the development of moral attitudes. As Hume puts it in “Of Refinement in the Arts” (1752): “Industry, knowledge, and humanity, are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished, and, what are commonly denominated, the more luxurious ages” (E-RA 271). Now, it is not obvious to me that Hume espoused this rather simple-minded conception of moral progress. At least later in his life, Hume must certainly have been aware that people like Rousseau or Adam Ferguson, had compellingly argued that the development of complex commercial societies does not necessarily result in a parallel development of human moral attitudes. Rousseau argued for the contrary view, and Ferguson claimed that social progress implies moral progress only for the privileged people who possess the leisure necessary to cultivate their moral virtues. Here is where I regret that Taylor has not devoted more time to understanding Hume’s social theory and its connection to morality in their historical dimension. The *History of England*, which is the place to go for investigating Hume’s view on these matters, is remarkably absent in Taylor’s book.

Let me close my comments by stressing again what I see as Taylor’s major contributions in *Reflecting Subjects*: a) a truly novel reading of Hume on the passions that uncovers a rich and complex social theory, b) the discussion of an important but neglected problem: the connection between Hume’s social theory and his ethics, and c) the stress on the evolution of Hume’s thinking about these issues. Taylor’s layered discussion of these important topics leads her to raise important questions about the moral autonomy that essentially social beings can expect. Thus, *Reflecting Subjects* is not only a significant achievement in Hume’s studies. It also opens very promising research paths for future scholarly endeavours.

NOTES

- 1 Taylor, *Reflecting Subjects*, 100. Hereafter cited in text by page number.
- 2 This is a vexed issue in Hume's scholarship. It mostly turns on whether Hume abandoned in the second *Enquiry* the sympathy-based account of moral sentiments that he adopted in the *Treatise*. Norman Kemp Smith argues that the sympathy-based account of ethics is incompatible with a moral sense theory. He also claims that, in EPM, Hume abandoned the theory of sympathy in order to adopt a Hutchesonian moral sense theory. See Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 150–52. Kate Abramson agrees that a sympathy-based account is incompatible with moral sense theory, but she claims that Hume did not give up sympathy and, hence, that he never held a moral sense theory. See Abramson, "Sympathy and the Project of Hume's Second Enquiry," 52. Remy Debes agrees that Hume did not abandon the theory of sympathy, and that Hume's use of the sentiment of humanity in the *Enquiry* is "shorthand" for the principle of sympathy. See Debes, "Humanity, Sympathy and the Puzzle of Hume's Second Enquiry" and "Has Anything Changed?" In chapter 4 of *Reflecting Subjects*, Taylor claims that, on the contrary, the principle of humanity, which Hume introduces in his mature works replaces the sympathy-based account. See also Jacqueline Taylor, "Hume's Later Moral Philosophy." I have discussed the issue in Perinetti, "Moral Pluralism and the Historical Point of View."
- 3 See *Reflecting Subjects*, 117–20, where she comments on Hume's remarks in T 3.2.7.2, 3.3.1.13, 3.3.2.15–17; 534–35, SBN 580, 600–601, among other passages.
- 4 I have discussed that connection in Perinetti, "Moral Pluralism and the Historical Point of View."
- 5 See, for example, Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim" and "Toward Perpetual Peace."

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