Constantine Sandis, *Character and Causation: Hume’s Philosophy of Action*, London: Routledge, 2019, hb pp. xiii + 148, £115, ISBN 9781138283787.

*Character and Causation*: *Hume’s Philosophy of Action* is an innovative and much needed contribution to current Hume scholarship. Constantine Sandis develops here a line of research, which he has been exploring over the last ten years, reshaping many valuable contributions scattered among various journals and edited volumes. Painting a coherent picture from Hume’s work, Sandis offers a new insight into his philosophy, thus overcoming an array of misleading interpretations of it. *Character and Causation* is an essential piece of reading not only for anyone working on Hume’s moral psychology, ethics and epistemology widely conceived, but also for scholars in contemporary philosophy of action.

Sandis presents his book as a collection of interconnected (but still independently readable) essays, generally attempting to reassess Hume’s “volitionism”—the view that actions are bodily movements produced by volitions—in order to show that it “forms but a tiny part of his philosophy of action as a whole” (1). Given the extent to which volitionism has been interpreted as Hume’s theory of action *tout court*, the seven chapters composing Sandis’ book boast a high degree of innovation such that *Character and Causation* fosters a new dialogue between Hume studies and contemporary philosophical debate. Sandis’ book also equips its readers with a thorough understanding of Hume’s account of causation and personal identity, alongside his ethics, moral psychology and his historical writings. In addition, it contains significant contributions to the New Hume debate and the methodology of historical research and has the additional merit of connecting Hume’s theory to contemporary philosophy of action. Though it may not be “the first ever book-length treatment of David Hume’s philosophy of action” as advertised by the publisher, *Character and Causation* certainly is the first book to provide a strong and well-argued discussion of what Hume’s theory of action can bring to the ongoing philosophical debates in action theory. For this reason, it will likely occupy a place among other excellent discussions of the same topic, such as John Bricke’s *Mind and Morality: An Examination of Hume’s Moral Psychology* (Oxford, 1996), and Elizabeth Radcliffe’s recent *Hume, Passion, and Action* (Oxford, 2018).

As a whole, *Character and Causation* attempts to show that the so-called Humean theory of motivation is *not* Hume’s actual position. Controversial as it may sound, this is not news; what is original, however, is that Sandis aims at presenting an anti-Humean Hume by offering an innovative reconstruction of Hume’s theory of action, making a strong case for its relevance in the more general project of the anatomy of human nature.

The starting point of Sandis’ analysis is the famous Copy Principle, the “basic empirical supposition that there can be no idea without a corresponding impression” (2). This drives Sandis’ Hume to a form of “soft conceptual revisionism.” To put it simply, the point is that there are some wide-spread concepts based on ideas, which have no corresponding impressions. Sandis’ thesis is that Hume’s position should be read as a form of soft conceptual revisionism consisting in his revising ideas on the basis of the Copy Principle. By tracing back every idea to an impression (or a set of them), Hume manages to revise a series of key concepts and our use and understanding of them, freeing them both from the metaphysical definition and the “vulgar” usage (chapter 1).

Causation is the first concept to be revised. Upon examination, Hume claims, our idea of cause appears not to stem from a simple impression and has, therefore, to be conceived of as a complex idea. Hume famously holds the view that such a complex idea is made up of three simple ones: (a) contiguity in space; (b) priority in time; and (c) necessary connection. While corresponding impressions for (a) and (b) do not give any trouble, (c) is puzzling. Given the fact that we do not have any impression of it, where does the simple idea of necessary causation come from? To solve this conceptual impasse, Sandis refers to a long passage from the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, in which Hume asserts that “when one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, […] call the one object, Cause; the other, Effect.” We do so because we begin to feel a connection “in the mind” due to the “customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant”: this connection we *feel* “is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion” (E 7.27-28, quoted by Sandis p. 45).

According to Sandis’ reading, Hume is here redefining the concept of necessity “in such a way that it refers to our impressions of something that one would have *prima facie* thought would fail to live up to the name” (44). Again in the name of conceptual revisionism, Sandis’ Hume draws an account of causation which *does* involve necessity. The latter, however, has been twisted into a softly revised version of the common concept, and has been conceptually reduced to constant conjunctions between regularities in the natural world and impressions in the human mind. This revised concept, Sandis argues, is the bedrock for Hume’s compatibilist account of free will. Freedom of the will and causal determinism (based on revised necessity) are not only compatible, but also symbiotic. In so doing, Sandis’ text has a double revisionary force. On the one hand, he is offering a reading of Hume as a philosopher who is revising concepts; on the other, Sandis himself revises our standard reading of Hume with his new interpretation (chapters 2 and 3).

In order to prepare the ground for an in-depth discussion of Hume’s philosophy of action, the author also considers the “exegetical nightmare” (59) involved in interpreting Hume’s account of the self. Hume, according to Sandis’ reading, does *not* claim that the self does *not* exist, but only that “empiricist philosophy gives us no reason to believe in anything more” (64). This claim is explicitly in line with Galen Strawson’s well-known interpretation put forward in his *The Evident Connection* (Oxford, 2011). However, against Strawson, Sandis insists that we need to “reject the purported corollary that he [Hume] allows for the metaphysical existence of anything more than what we are empirically entitled to believe” (64). In other words, we have no reason to suppose that Hume believed in the metaphysical existence of selves. On the other hand, when it comes to stable character traits, things are radically different: a character, Sandis claims on Hume’s behalf, is stable enough to have a causal role in human action (chapter 4).

Sandis’ main concern is to provide a unified account of Hume’s philosophy of action. In contrast to the many commentators who have seen Hume as switching from a philosophical point of view (concerning self and identity) to a common sense one (concerning character), Sandis suggests that there is no switch from philosophy to everyday life here at all. There is no deep inconsistency between the historian and the philosopher either. Both volitions—specific impressions in one’s mind—and character traits are possible causes of actions, and both can be accounted for in Hume’s philosophical system without postulating any fracture in his perspective of enquiry. As a consequence, merely volitionist interpretations of Hume fail to grasp the philosophical relevance of his account of character (chapter 5).

Retracing the distinction between Humeanism (the thesis that “we are motivated by reasons for acting that are constituted by our desires and beliefs”) and anti-Humeanism (“we are motivated by reasons for acting that need only be constituted by beliefs”), and crossing it with the opposition between Psychologism (“we are motivated by reasons for acting that are psychologically real”) and anti-Psychologism (“we are motivated by reasons for acting that are not psychologically real”) (95), the author shows how Hume does not properly fit into any of these positions. In contrast to all of them, Hume’s actual theory of motivation distinguishes the reasons for which we act from the things that motivate us to act. Pivoting from this elaboration of his moral psychology, Sandis shows how Hume’s theory could provide hints for an improvement of the contemporary debate on the philosophy of action, opening a new space between apparently mutually exclusive positions (chapter 6).

What does all this bring to our understanding of Hume’s philosophy as a whole? The final chapter shows how softly-revised concepts of character and causation are applied by Hume to his discussion of history and historiography. In what is perhaps the most passionate contribution of the book, Sandis dives into Hume’s method for “attributing motives to any given individual,” namely, asking which of his character traits “would reveal him as acting characteristically” (108). In order to do so, the historian has to find a *via media* between excessive distance and deforming proximity, both emotionally and in space-time. Such a position can be acquired only through sympathy, a human faculty which is essential to our comprehension and appreciation of history. In so doing, the author is adding a valuable contribution to our understanding of an overlooked function of sympathy in Hume’s philosophy. What Sandis leaves us with is not only a much deeper understanding of the technicalities of Hume’s philosophy of action, but also a colorful fresco of human behavior extending far beyond the limits of Hume’s philosophical writings to include his *Essays* and *History of England* in a unified project of investigation which will have an long echo up to the contemporary debate (chapter 7).

As I have indicated in this review, Sandis is able to consider a wide range of themes in little more than one-hundred pages, making sense of them in his overarching and systematic interpretation of Hume’s works. However, Sandis’ work might have been expanded in many directions. His project would have benefited especially, I think, from discussing Hume’s account of society and social interaction, and its influence on his view of human action, which are not included in the book. *Le bon David* famously affirmed that we “can form no wish which has not a reference to society” (*Treatise of Human Nature* 2.2.5.15), and an account of his philosophy of action cannot but be incomplete if it does not engage the wider theory of society to be found in the *Treatise* and the *Second Enquiry*. Nevertheless, as it stands, *Character and Causation* does not need any addition to be regarded as a very rich and thought-provoking book.

Analysis and critique of two notable areas helps account for this rich and thought-provoking character. A first point is Sandis’ contribution to the New Hume Debate, which over the last twenty years has opposed upholders of an anti-realist Hume (the so-called Old Hume) to the interpreters of his philosophy as a form of (skeptical) metaphysical realism (the so-called New Hume). Discussing this issue at length in chapters 2 and 3, Sandis does not merely choose one of the two sides in order to develop his discussion of the main topic of the book; on the contrary, by attempting to provide a more general interpretation of Hume’s philosophy as a whole, he puts forward a new interpretation of Hume on causation that brings an addition to the debate. Through the lens of soft conceptual revisionism, the author brings further evidence in favor of not labeling Hume as either a realist or anti-realist but proposes the idea that on “Hume’s view … we cannot meaningfully say *anything* about Necessary Connections, for we cannot meaningfully conceive of them” (47). Revising the concept of necessity in the light of the Copy Principle, Sandis suggests that Hume has shown that necessary connection is just an idea in the mind emerging from an impression of determination stemming from constant conjunction. Since, therefore, the only idea of necessary connection we can have is the softly-revised one reducible to constant conjunction, whether or not necessary connections really exist in things is knowledge beyond our reach. As for the self so in the case of necessary connections, we must not cross the line of what an empiricist philosophy gives us warrant to believe.

The second point is a pivotal hinge of Sandis’ reasoning, namely, Hume’s account of belief and its alleged motivational role, which I find problematic, but still a reason for the thought-provoking character of the book. The so-called “Humean Theory of Motivation” is traditionally seen as a strong form of conativism consisting in the idea that only a combination of a *desire* and a *belief* can motivate one to act. This thesis is an elaboration of Hume’s emphasis on the limitations of reason as a motivating power: as he says, for example, “[r]eason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will” (T 2.3.3.1) and “reason has no influence on our passions” (T 3.1.1.7). Hume is clear that reason alone has no motivational drive. The contemporary so-called Humean theory of motivation differs from Hume’s actual text given the fact that the former conflates reason and belief, consequently having to accept that *belief* is no motivation unless in pairs with a *desire*. As a result of marking the difference between reason and belief to be found in Hume’s work, Sandis challenges the accuracy of Humean interpretations of Hume, and proposes that he is better read as a non-Humean about motivation. The author insists on the fact that “Hume does not equate belief with reason across his philosophical writings” (15). This is certainly true, and one cannot but agree with Sandis on this point. However, showing that reason and belief are different does not count as an argument for the fact that the characteristics of the latter are *ipso facto* different from those of the former. Sandis argues that reason produces judgments, which have no motivational power. However, he says, we can rationally judge that *p* without bringing ourselves to believe that *p*. This means that beliefs are different from judgments, which are inert products of reason that issue from an inert faculty, and, unlike the latter, they must be motivating. Reason produces judgments, which can be believed or not, and this means that belief is independent of reason. Even if “belief” here is not to be taken as a common language concept, but rather in the conceptually-revised form stemming from the Copy Principle, this does not seem to be in line with what Hume says. Drawing on T 3.1.1 (“Moral Distincions not deriv’d from Reason”), Sandis affirms that when “Hume states that *morals* motivate alone, he may well be conceiving of morals as sentiments/beliefs, but not judgements/conclusions of reason” (22); he consequently introduces the expression “moral belief” to describe Hume’s position. Hume himself never uses this expression, however, and affirms clearly that “belief is a lively idea” (T 1.3.7.6). Since there is no discontinuity in the line which leads from impressions to ideas (as the Copy Principle says, the difference is only in the *degree* of their intensity), one could arguably uphold the Humean view that beliefs are closer to ideas than to impressions, and when (if ever) they approach the latter, they are no longer *beliefs* but rather *impressions*. Sandis is both right and wrong when he states that beliefs can alone motivate to action. When a belief is strong enough to do so, according to Hume, it is simply to be better counted among impressions. A belief is a motivation only *qua* impression. An alleged “moral belief,” then, is but a moral sentiment or a passion and it comes as no surprise that it should have motivational force, something that does not to fit into Sandis’ anti-Humean Hume.

Stemming from the pivotal importance attributed to the Copy Principle, Sandis attempts to show how the whole corpus of Hume could shine with new light. With the exegetical *passe-partout* of “soft conceptual revisionism,” the author is able to open many otherwise closed doors in Hume’s philosophical palace. Sandis makes a strong case for identifying the Copy Principle as the keystone of Hume’s general account of human nature, and in doing so he makes a genuinely innovative contribution to Hume scholarship. Whether or not Hume was indeed such a systematic thinker, however, remains a matter for further inquiry.

Enrico Galvagni

University of Cologne