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REVIEW ARTICLE

REASON, CUSTOM AND THE TRUE PHILOSOPHY

P. J. E. Kail

Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy. Donald W. Livingstone. University of Chicago Press, 1998. pp. xviii + 433. ISBN 0-226-48716-4 hb. 0-226-48717-2 pb.

This book is in a class of its own. Within its many pages, Livingstone seeks to discover and elucidate Hume's conception of philosophy, broadly conceived, and show how his idea of 'true philosophy' informs his view of history, politics, religion, ethics and literature. It is an immensely impressive achievement, and Livingstone's philosophical and historical learning effortlessly manifest themselves in every chapter. Of course Livingstone's interpretation, like any interpretation, can be challenged, but any such challenges, in order to be more than simply *mere* challenges, will require the articulation of an overarching picture of Hume's thought comparable to the one penned by Livingstone. I do not know of such a work. Together with his *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, we have, I think, one of the most complete and systematic studies of Hume's philosophy to date.

The book comprises two parts. The first, 'Humean Reflections', represents Livingstone's reading of Humean philosophy, and the second, 'Humean Intimations', is an application of this reading to a number of issues, including Hume's view of the American crisis, a Humean conception of the state, the philosophical meaning of secession, and the relationship between humanity and philosophy. I shall be concentrating on the first part of Livingstone's book, partly because I have little to say about the second. However, I would like to voice a worry about the wisdom of having a section about secession in a book such as this. Whilst it is a good discussion of the topic, I found it difficult to see how Livingstone's reading of Hume really did feed into this discussion and, furthermore, whilst it is a topic dear to Livingstone's heart, he will be the first to admit (p. 358) that it is not of widespread interest, and, *a fortiori*, unlikely to be of interest to those studying Hume. Given that the length of the book tests the reader's stamina (though never the reader's patience), I would have preferred to see this aspect of Livingstone's thought pursued in specialist journals.

In the first chapter, 'Is Hume an empirist?' Livingstone rejects the idea that Hume's project in Book I of the *Treatise* is to erect a theory of knowledge on

the sure foundations of sense experience. Instead Hume's intention is to examine the dialectic between reason and custom. This dialectical process offers a form of self-understanding, 'the true philosophy', the nature of which we will come to presently. A key moment in the first section of the book comes in the second chapter with Livingstone's suggestion that we should read Book 1, Part iv of the *Treatise* with bifocals; that is to say, we should see in 'Of the sceptical, and other systems of philosophy' both a first order investigation into philosophical topics *and* a second-order reflection on the nature of philosophy. Livingstone's Hume sees philosophy itself as structured by three principles, those of Ultimacy, Autonomy and Dominion. The Principle of Ultimacy is that the end of philosophy is an understanding that is final, absolute and unconditioned. The Principle of Autonomy is that philosophy is free of custom and prejudice, and is a self-justifying enquiry. The Principle of Dominion is that one must regard the end product of philosophical reflection as ultimate and exclusively correct. Hume's dialectic shows that these principles are neither consistent with each other nor with human nature. The conclusion of the dialectic is a reshaping of philosophy itself into what Hume calls 'the true philosophy'. The act of philosophical reflection shows that the Autonomy Principle must be abandoned, otherwise total scepticism results. The fact that most philosophies do not end in total scepticism is, according to this Hume, symptomatic of the self-deception of false philosophy, an unacknowledged mental block on the consistent application of these principles. The dialectic of this *Treatise* – and especially Book 1, Part iv – is an exercise in transcending the self-deception of false philosophy and arriving at the true. The true philosophy rejects the Autonomy Principle and recognizes that it is neither possible nor desirable; instead philosophy and reason are not radically autonomous from custom or inherited practices. Philosophy is instead to be, as Philo puts it in Part I of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, nothing but 'a more regular and methodical operation' of the custom of common life. The philosopher is then no longer sovereign and removed from custom and practice but a critical participant within them. Livingstone believes this to be the best account of the dialectical and dramatic aspect of Book I Part iv of the *Treatise*, and we should be pleased that he takes that aspect seriously (I have heard people say that the drama of the *Treatise* is just 'personal' and therefore not an essential part of Hume's thinking). In effect we get a conservative Hume, a thinker who is worried about the effect of unhampered theorizing on long-established practices, though not a conservative who is blind to the possibility of reform or change. Thus when Hume expresses the 'philosophical melancholy and delirium' that his reflections, guided primarily by the Principle of Autonomy, have led him into, we should read this as the crossroads, the point at which the philosopher recognizes the bankruptcy of the false philosophy, and the beginnings of the rejection of the Autonomy Principle. Freed of this demand, we can then enter the world of custom with confidence.

This is an extremely sensitive reading, with welcome emphasis on the importance of the conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise* (for another discussion of the conclusion, see the first chapter of Annette Baier's *A Progress of Sentiments*). It is important, I think, that we do not simply write off Hume's dramatic pronouncements, and the shifting tone of the work from confidence to despair and then to a tempered confidence, as an inessential appendage to Hume's thought. An alternative reading, or perhaps, better, a change of emphasis, is to understand the conflict between reason and custom and Hume's subsequent, but transient, despair by focusing on a more concrete target than philosophy in general, namely, the ethical ramifications of a particular, religiously infused philosophy, most clearly expressed in the philosophies of Malebranche and perhaps Pascal. In both these philosophies, we have a bifurcated view of human nature, of Reason corrupted by Original Sin, leading to human beings yoked to the body and slavishly concerned with sensual pleasure. As Hume puts it in 'The Platonist; or, the man of contemplation and philosophical devotion' we are to view a human being as 'a rational soul, made for the contemplation of the Supreme Being, and of his works, {a being who can never therefore} enjoy tranquillity or satisfaction, while detained in the ignoble pursuits of sensual pleasure or popular applause' (pp. 155–6 in *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Miller, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 1985). Our ethical duty (and nowhere is this better expressed than in Malebranche's *Treatise of Ethics*, 1684) is to exercise and perfect Reason, and suppress as much as possible the senses, imagination and passions. To achieve this one should engage in solitary contemplation, away from the pull of mechanical sympathetic responses to other people, for this sympathy issues in an involuntary and morally worthless love of other people. Real love is for God, the source of perfection, and ordinary affection for others is either morally worthless (since it is mechanical and involuntary) or sinful (it is love for the created rather than the creator). But exercising reason, one more closely resembles God, and since God loves his own likeness, one will become loved by him.

What Hume does, I suggest, in the drama of part iv of the *Treatise*, is push the solitary idea of reflection, of pursuing Reason over the senses and the imagination, to its terminus, and show that ethics of solitary contemplation, far from leading to happiness, leads to despair and near-destruction. The more Hume wanders through the 'labyrinth' in his unwavering pursuit of reason, the worse his despair becomes. This is evident in the dialectic of the external world; the vulgar view, though false, is both a useful and pleasant one to hold (remember being useful and being pleasant are the two *ethical* virtues for Hume). The use of the faculty of reason upsets this and leads to the rejection of the confidence that the imagination gives us, and it is carelessness and inattention, away from the solitary exercise of reason and into the light of ordinary life, which restores it. Consider this:

I am at first affrighted and confounded with that forlorn solitude, in which I am plac'd in my philosophy, and fancy myself some strange uncouth monster, who not being able to mingle and unite in society, has been expelled all human commerce, and left utterly abandoned and disconsolate.

(*A Treatise of Human Nature* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge. 2nd edition with text revised and variant readings by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p. 264. Henceforth: *THN*)

What does get Hume out of his 'philosophical melancholy and delirium' are precisely the 'vices' of Malebranche and Pascal – pride and pleasure:

I feel an ambition arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind and of acquiring a name by my inventions and discoveries. These sentiments spring up naturally in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other business or diversion, I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of pleasure; and that is the origin of my philosophy.

(*THN*, p. 271)

These two features – pleasure and the ambition to make a name for oneself – are picked out by Malebranche as two of the most egregious forms of 'concupiscence' (*Treatise on Ethics*, Part I, ch. 12). 'Making a name for oneself' is one of the worst forms of pride imaginable. It is surely no coincidence then that Book II of the *Treatise* opens with a discussion of pride and humility, and Hume's account of pride is central to his conception of virtue and well-being. Without a due pride, one's natural virtues will not realize their true value, and nothing supports a due pride more than acquiring a name for oneself (see 'Of the love of fame' in Book II of the *Treatise*). Part iv contains within it not only a discussion of first-order philosophical topics, but also an attack on an ethics born of a marriage between religion and philosophy. This is not to deny that Livingstone's over-arching reading is incorrect; far from it. But I think it does point to the fact that some of Hume's targets were rather more local and concrete than the rather grand notion of philosophy itself.

That Christianity is one of Hume's primary targets is of course something of which Livingstone is aware and although he takes this seriously, I am not sure he takes it seriously enough. Livingstone goes onto describe the character of the true philosopher, which comprises the traits of humility, piety, eloquence, greatness of mind and extensive benevolence. There is much to agree with here, but I believe that Livingstone is wide of the mark in his inclusion of the first two traits. Livingstone contrasts philosophical pride with philosophical humility, the former an arrogant and deluded confidence in one's 'philosophical system'. But is the rejection of philosophical pride a form of 'humility'? I suppose that the rejection of 'philosophical pride' is a recognition that one is a participant in custom. But I think to describe this as a form of humility is misleading. First, humility is a thoroughly Christian virtue, a fact that should make us pause when ascribing it to Hume's conception of the 'true philosopher'. Second, throughout Books II and III of the *Treatise*, Hume constantly emphasizes the need for

a due pride as central to character and ethics. Indeed in Hume's discussion of greatness of mind (another of Livingstone's virtues of the philosopher), Hume explicitly discusses the importance of pride. Recognition that one is not sovereign in the sense of the Principle of Dominion, allows one to take pride in being a participant in custom and all the kinds of features that custom prizes, *because* one rejects the philosophical perspective that views custom as delusive and needing to be transcended. Again, piety seems to be an inappropriately religious way of describing the respect and confidence which the true philosopher will have for custom. Part of the problem here is that Livingstone seems to draw most of his catalogue of virtues from *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, Hume's last-ditch attempt to secure a chair at Edinburgh. Hume mentions humility and piety there, but of course the letter has its own agenda, notably in rebutting the charge of atheism. Livingstone is aware of the complexities of reading any text at face value, but he does seem curiously optimistic that Hume's true sentiments are expressed in this piece. Elsewhere (pp. 51–52) Livingstone attempts to lessen the gap between Hume's ethics and Christian ethics, but I for one did not find his arguments very cogent.

Two chapters have religion as their main topics, Chapter Three: 'The Origin of the Philosophy Act in Human Nature' and Chapter Five: 'Philosophical and Christendom'. In the first of these, Livingstone argues that the true religion and the true philosophy are one and the same. Roughly put, Hume's genealogical method, instanced most explicitly in the *Natural History of Religion*, plots the emergence of our conception of the world from its beginnings in our natural state of an animal governed by hopes and fears and a propensity to anthropomorphize the unknown causes of our fortunes which are the objects of our hopes and fears. This gives birth to polytheism, and, modeling the pantheon on civil society, we pick out a particular god as prince, leading to the notion of one sovereign god and thence to monotheism. Coeval with this is a philosophical rejection of anthropomorphic models of the universe (in this regard Hume mentions the Presocratics whom he dubs 'superstitious atheists'). We are also given a contrast between vulgar theism and philosophical theism, between a religion born of hope and fear (in the manner just described), and one born of curiosity and wonder. Philosophical theism is monotheism deriving from the latter psychological causes.

Does Hume endorse philosophical theism, and if so, why? Livingstone notes that the deity for the philosophical theist is the object of awe, not of fear and then offers this quote from the *Natural History of Religion* in support of a Humean endorsement of philosophical theism: 'What a bold privilege is it of human reason to attain knowledge of the supreme being; and from the visible work of nature, be enabled to infer so sublime a principle as its supreme Creator' (Livingstone, p. 73). But how can that square with the devastating critique of reason as a justification of belief in God in the *Dialogues*? As is notorious, Philo seems to change his mind in Part XII,

and endorse something like the argument from design. But we ought to be careful here. Hume is willing to endorse such a belief (or better, attitude) because the notion of the deity thus acknowledged is virtually devoid of content, and thereby has very little effect on action. Philo describes the dispute between the atheist and theist as merely verbal, in attempting to forestall the factionalism which might split theist and atheist. To call Hume a 'philosophical theist' is in similar fashion a matter of words, that the causes of the universe 'might bear some remote analogy' to human intelligence, a fact that every atheist can happily endorse.

As for Christianity, Livingstone's Hume sees its vices as intimately linked with its status as a false philosophy, one embodying the principles mentioned with a concomitant failure to follow them to their end. Livingstone suggests that Hume might have accepted a Christianity purged of false philosophy, construed instead as gaining its authority from custom (p. 116), but also recognizes the impossibility of such a separation. This is an interesting suggestion, given that Hume's critique of religion is at least as much (and I think probably more) targeted as its social consequences as at its epistemological basis. Whether such a separation of Christianity from philosophy would leave anything recognizable as Christianity is another question. In any case, some of Hume's criticism of monotheisms in general seems not to depend on monotheism's marriage to philosophy – perhaps Livingstone sees monotheism as embodying the Principle of Dominion (monotheism is the ultimate truth), and therefore philosophical, but if that is the case, it is very difficult to see how any monotheism can fail to embody a false philosophy, if the Principle of Dominion is one of the marks of false philosophy.

The remaining chapters see the true philosopher in action, and Livingstone pieces together Hume's conception of the history of philosophy, and our use of it, of scepticism, of liberty, and barbarism. There is a lot of ground covered here, and covered extremely well. The comparison of the overarching views of Hume and Rousseau is extremely adept and enlightening, comparing Rousseau's assertion that 'Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains' with Hume's rather less romantic view that 'Man, born in a family, is compelled to maintain society from necessity, from natural inclination, and from habit' (Livingstone p. 250). Here again we get a contrast between a false philosophy and a true one. Rousseau has a conception of the natural state of humanity as somehow prior to civil society, as having a real nature independent of custom, whereas Hume sees the refinement of human nature and civil society as one and the same.

The book is a considerable achievement, and an unusually stimulating one, and I have been able only to scratch the surface of this excellent work even in an extended review such as this. Though there is plenty of room for disagreement, Livingstone has essayed an articulate, well-supported and complete picture of Hume's thought, and I cannot think of a better work on Hume's overall philosophy.