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Critical Study

Wayne Waxman's *Hume's Theory of Consciousness*

JOHN P. WRIGHT

WAYNE WAXMAN. *Hume's Theory of Consciousness*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1994. xvi + 347. \$54.95.

In *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* Wayne Waxman sees himself as recovering the orthodox interpretation of Hume's epistemology and metaphysics which has been subverted to a greater or lesser extent by many contemporary Hume scholars. Fortunately, according to Waxman, "Hume's contemporaries, nearly every major thinker since, and most philosophers today" have recognized that Hume is merely a "negative and destructive thinker" and a subjectivist. The scholars who, following the lead of Norman Kemp Smith, treat Hume as a positive thinker, have a number of motivations—foremost among them the "desire to reexamine orthodoxy and be original." In this book Waxman proposes to save us from their "new revisionism" through "new work to probe Hume's basic concepts and to take the analysis deeper than before"(xiii).

Orthodoxy in the history of philosophy, as in religion, often leads its adherents back into some strange doctrines. Oddly enough, at least one of Waxman's favourite ones—that which appears to have led to the book's title—derives from Kemp Smith himself. According to Kemp Smith, there are two strands in Hume's philosophy—a Newtonian strand which stresses a mechanistic associationism, and a Hutchesonian one which "rests on a fundamental distinction between mind in its character as observer, and the

items observed" (cited by Waxman on p. 14). This latter doctrine, which is more obviously derived from Husserl rather than Hutcheson,¹ is fully embraced by Waxman and his disagreement with Kemp Smith lies in his assertion that association, far from being a "blind sheerly reactive mechanism," is really "a *phenomenological* operation...essentially comprised of feeling-data immanent to consciousness"(15). These data of consciousness itself are neither impressions nor ideas. Rather, on Waxman's account, they are "various attitudes" which the mind adopts in confronting these perceptions (18). Thus, according to Waxman, the vivacity which, on Hume's analysis, constitutes belief in reality is a *phenomenological* attitude, not a quality of perceptions. Similarly, the feeling we have when we observe a causal sequence on a number of occasions is not itself an impression but "merely the verisimilitude instinctively attached to customary transitions of thought" (187). Both of these interpretations fly in the face of strong textual evidence.² Indeed, Waxman's very attempt to detach consciousness from perceptions seems to go against Hume's own claim that "consciousness is nothing but a reflected thought or perception" (T 625). In the final analysis Waxman himself admits that "Hume's theory of consciousness is sketchy and obscure" and that we "may suspect him of intentionally ignoring" (41) the distinction later developed by Husserl. Needless to say, this is a strange attribution of authorial intention.

Waxman rejects the objective validity of what Kemp Smith called "natural beliefs"—that is, the beliefs in an independent objective reality which result from the operations of the imagination. Waxman justifies this by giving precedence to what *he* calls "immediate consciousness." According to him, the natural beliefs of imagination are shown to be false by the natural beliefs of immediate consciousness. This latter is quite a remarkable faculty, available to ordinary people and philosophers alike, which shows us that "imaginative feeling is constitutive of everything that enters into objective conception," and that such feeling "can have neither sense nor significance outside and independently of the imagination." This immediate consciousness detaches itself from feelings engendered by imagination which "muddle our apprehension of the reality actually before us," and leaves us with a "truer" picture of that reality. Most importantly, it convinces us that "our natures condemn us, without possibility of reprieve, to know the falsehood of that which we are powerless to disbelieve" (273, 274, 268).

It is difficult to see why, on Waxman's view, Hume should have given precedence to natural beliefs engendered by immediate consciousness. The only reason I can find lies in his claim that Hume "was, through and through, a subjective idealist. His vantage point, as a philosopher, was that of immediate consciousness, and his problem was explaining how we are able to break out beyond its solipsistic precincts" (139). But the notion of natural beliefs of immediate consciousness is an invention of Waxman, not Hume,

and there are good reasons to believe that the vantage point of Hume as a philosopher was *not* that of immediate consciousness. To take the most obvious, Hume begins his whole discussion of the Section of the *Treatise* entitled "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" by announcing that the existence of body, is something "we must take for granted in all our reasonings." By 'body', Hume tells his readers, he means that which is "DISTINCT from the mind and perception" (T 187–88). I have argued elsewhere that Hume does in fact presuppose the existence of body throughout the arguments in this Section, including the argument where he establishes that our perceptions have no independent existence. In the comparable discussion in his first *Enquiry*, he presents his own scepticism of the senses as being of a kind which, in contrast with the pre-scientific scepticism of Descartes, is "consequent to science and enquiry." He concludes this discussion by pointing out that even the rational correction of the common-sense belief engendered by the imagination cannot "convince an impartial enquirer" (EHU 150–55; see also T 212–18). But this does not mean that Hume adopts a solipsistic point of view, or abandons the objective natural attitude which his explanatory project presupposes.

I do not deny that Waxman's subjectivist interpretation of Hume has some historical antecedents. When he argues that on Hume's view "immediate consciousness" naturally convinces us that the "senses present only fleeting existents" (18) and that therefore it is impossible for our natural metaphysical beliefs to have any objective validity (17), he is echoing one of Hume's earliest interpreters, namely Thomas Reid. Reid clearly thought, like Waxman, that Hume's scepticism led to an ontology of subjective perceptions: "my impressions and ideas are the only existences of which I have any knowledge or conception; and they are such fleeting and transitory beings, that they can have no existence at all, any longer than I am conscious of them. So upon this hypothesis...all things without exception, which I imagined to have a permanent existence, whether I thought of them or not, vanish at once...."³ However, it should be noted that there were other eighteenth century thinkers, most notably Kant, who disagreed with the assessment of Hume's philosophy given by Reid and his followers. Kant claimed that "Hume suffered the usual misfortune of metaphysicians, of not being understood": Reid and those who followed him "were ever taking for granted that which he doubted, and demonstrating with zeal...that which he never thought of doubting." According to Kant, Hume never doubted that "the concept of cause was right," only whether it "could be thought by reason *a priori*." He did not deny that causation correctly implies objective necessity; he denied that our judgments of the "objective necessity" of causation arise "from insight."⁴ Kant's remark echoes Hume's own claim that experience "never gives us any insight into the internal structure or operating principle of objects, but only accustoms the mind to pass from one to another" (T 169). While Waxman

cites Kant as an ally for his Pyrrhonian interpretation of Hume, he does not bother to mention the precise nature of the scepticism that Kant ascribed to Hume (16–18; 191–92). Kant saw Hume as trying to show the limits of reason when he denied its role in determining the necessary connection between cause and effect; he thought that Hume's error lay in his adoption of the limited conception of reason which he inherited from his predecessors, that based on analysis of ideas (Kant, *Prolegomena*, 17–18).

An appreciation for the role of reason both in Hume's sceptical arguments and in his mitigation of that scepticism is absolutely essential for an understanding of his epistemology and metaphysics. However, Waxman follows a trend among recent writers on Hume's epistemology who seek to reduce the faculty of reason to that of imagination. For Waxman, the comparison of ideas is reduced to the association of ideas. Philosophical relations are reduced to natural ones. Hume's principle that every simple idea is derived from a corresponding impression becomes nothing but a principle of association. Association itself is reduced to a faculty which does nothing more than generate certain phenomenological feelings for consciousness. The "determination of the mind" from which our idea of necessity is derived gets reduced to a feeling of "ease of transition" (46–51, 77–84, 164ff.). These are just a few of the Humean concepts that get muddled in the labyrinth of Waxman's analyses in this book. In reading it I was constantly reminded of Hume's remark in the first section of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* of the importance of a "mental geography" which teaches us "the different operations of the mind, to separate them from each other, ... and to correct all that seeming disorder, in which they lie involved, when made the object of reflection and enquiry" (EHU 13). Indeed, he was specifically concerned to distinguish the faculty of reason from that concerned with "Tastes or Sentiments"⁵—the two faculties which Waxman seems most concerned to confound with each other!

One cannot deny that there are passages in Hume's early *Treatise of Human Nature* which provide a basis for Waxman's reductions. However, Waxman often takes a remark in isolation from its surrounding text, as when he discusses the last paragraph of Section iv of Part 1 of Book I of the *Treatise*, where Hume notes that complex ideas, including relations, "generally arise" from association. Waxman (cf. 81–82) disregards the paragraph that follows—the first paragraph of Section v—where Hume explicitly says that we may compare ideas to form philosophical relations even when there is no natural or associational relation between them. At other times, there certainly is textual evidence in the *Treatise* to support his readings. Waxman (1ff) makes much of Hume's claim in the Conclusion to Book I that, in following the reasoning of "Of scepticism with regard to reason" we can only choose "betwixt a false reason and none at all" (T 268). However, the validity of the argument in *Treatise* I iv 1—where Hume concludes that comparison leads us

to repose absolutely no evidence in our faculty of reason—is very questionable. It is an argument which is not repeated in the first *Enquiry* where Hume claims to correct “some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression” (see Hume’s “Advertisement,” *Enquiries* 2). Waxman excuses himself from following Hume’s “own expressed view” in asking us to rely on this book as the ultimate arbiter of his philosophical principles on the ground that “almost certainly he was...motivated by a long history of suffering on account of material present in the *Treatise* but absent from the *Enquiry*” (20). This kind of hyperbole, which cannot be based on a serious reading of the events of Hume’s life and letters, can hardly give the reader much faith in Waxman’s own judgments about Hume’s philosophical intentions.

According to Waxman, Hume aimed to teach us “to free ourselves from the myth that scientific methods take us in the direction of objective, independent truth” (174). This would indeed have been a remarkable project for a man who, in 1751, was elected secretary to the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, forerunner of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Waxman claims that Hume sought to free his readers from the assumptions of thinkers like Locke and Berkeley who “took for granted the objective validity of general principles of necessary connection” such as the principle “that every beginning of existence must have a cause” (17). But Hume made exactly the same assumption himself. In 1754, as Secretary of the Philosophical Society, Hume edited a collection of scientific papers which included an exchange between his friend Lord Kames, and John Stewart, Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University. Kames had claimed that there are active causes in nature over and above purely mechanical ones and, in opposing this claim, Stewart had identified it with what he took to be Hume’s view in the *Treatise* “that something may begin to exist, or start into being without a cause.”⁶ In a letter to Stewart Hume denied that he ever “asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that any thing might arise without a Cause.*” He went on to express his regret that he published his *Treatise* so early because of the misunderstandings that that book might engender: “Where a man of Sense mistakes my Meaning, I own I am angry: But it is only at myself: for having exprest my Meaning so ill as to have given Occasion to the mistake.” He then expresses his hope that his reformulation of his doctrines in the book we know as the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* will meet a better fate (HL I 187). But what is even more revealing is that, in spite of Stewart’s attack on Hume’s claim in the *Enquiry* that Newton ascribed active causes to nature, Hume continued to reject Stewart’s own view of Newton. Hume denied that Newton sought to “rob second causes of all force and energy” and he commended “that great philosopher” for having “recourse to an ethereal active fluid to explain his universal attraction; though he was so cautious and modest to allow, that it was a mere hypothesis, not to be insisted on, without more experiments”

(EHU 73n.). All this is a very far cry from Waxman's view that Hume thought "the true efficacy of experimentation, unbeknownst both to the vulgar and to the scientist, is to *instill a new custom*"—that is, merely to produce changes in the subject. The issue behind Hume's dispute with Stewart was materialism and the question was whether Newtonian "active forces" required an immaterial cause—namely, the Deity.

In Hume's own day philosophical issues concerning causality were clearly bound up with religion; this cannot be missed by any careful reader of his first *Enquiry*. The bulk of Hume's discussion of necessity in Section VII is directed against philosophers—including Locke, Berkeley and Malebranche—who thought we have some special understanding of the underlying force of the universe by examining the operation of minds. Hume is especially concerned to refute the latter philosopher who sought to "rob nature, and all created beings, of every power..." (EHU 71). By showing that we have no rational insight into causation, and that all knowledge of it must be derived from experience, Hume undermined the theological claims of his contemporaries. As Kant wrote, Hume sought to deprive reason "of its most important prospects" (Kant, *Prolegomena* 6n.).

Waxman's total disregard of the context of Hume's opposition to traditional metaphysics is accompanied by a perverse unwillingness to acknowledge the frequent references in Hume's writings to the unknown "powers and forces, by which (the course of nature) is governed" (EHU 54; see also EHU 30, 32–33, 63–64; T 159, 400–01; cf. Waxman, 191–99). Perhaps, if he had taken more care with his analysis of what Hume calls *fictions* of the imagination, Waxman would have understood how Hume thought that beliefs—such as that in absolute space or external existence—can be generated in cases where we have no distinct ideas. He might even have been less willing to distort the writings of contemporary scholars who have sought to show how Hume's sceptical account of the limits of human understanding complements his realism.

In his Preface, Waxman claims that an interpretation of Hume "stands or falls by the quality of its textual analyses and its success in elaborating basic notions of Hume's system" (xiii). My own view is that the book fails on both counts, as well as in the author's complete disregard for the historical context of Hume's arguments. While Waxman denies that he has embraced any form of "negative dogmatism," it is difficult to agree. In his last chapter he denies that Hume in any way mitigates his scepticism by accepting the veracity of any aspect of natural beliefs. Hume's mitigated scepticism in Waxman's hands is based merely on our willingness to "retain our composure and be content to let nature take its course" while "remaining cognizant of the illusory, antinomial character of our natural beliefs" (268, 271). But Hume describes the "philosophical decisions" of his own "*mitigated scepticism or academical philosophy*" very differently; they are based on "the reflections of common

life, methodized and corrected" (EHU 161, 162). The correction of the instinctual judgments of the imagination comes from an autonomous reason which, however limited in its ability to discover truth, is still able to compare ideas and determine probabilities and possibilities. No one who has studied Hume's greatest work in metaphysics—his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*—can doubt Hume's use of reason to speculate about the unknown forces of nature. And only a philosopher like Kant, who still hankered after the goals of rational religion, could regard such as use of reason as purely "negative", and as causing "positive injury" to mankind (*Prolegomena*, 6n). One would hope that it is not merely a desire to be orthodox and unoriginal which has led Waxman to follow Kant in regarding the goals of Hume's philosophy as merely negative and destructive.

NOTES

1 Waxman cites Husserl in note 19 at the bottom of page 15. Later on, appealing to Husserl's distinction, Waxman writes that, for Hume, the feelings of consciousness like vivacity and facility are "situated on the hither ('noetic') rather than the thither ('noemic') side of awareness" (42). For Hutcheson's opposition to a Hume-like conception of the mind see the letter from Francis Hutcheson to William Mace reproduced by David Berman in "Francis Hutcheson on Berkeley and the Molyneux Problem," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 74 (1974), 263–65

2 In his Appendix discussion of belief Hume is careful to *refute* the view that it is "only annex'd to (the simple conception), after the same manner that *will* and *desire* are annex'd to particular conceptions of good and pleasure" (T 625). In Husserlian terms it seems clear that he is placing it on the noemic rather than the noetic side of consciousness. As to the feeling connected with necessity, Hume's whole project is to find the impression—it turns out to be an impression of reflection—from which our idea is derived.

3 Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, edited by Sir William Hamilton, 8th ed., vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1880), 96.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, translated by P. Carus, revised & edited by L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), 5–7.

5 See David Hume, *The Philosophical Works*, edited by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 2nd. ed. (London, 1882–7; reprinted by Aalen, 1964), vol. 4, 10n. This note to the discussion of "mental geography" was included in the first two editions of the first *Enquiry*—before the publication of the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Thereafter the remark was incorporated into Appendix I of this latter work. See EPM 294.

6. "Some Remarks on the Laws of Motion and the Inertia of Matter," *Essays and Observations, Physical and Literary, Read before a Society in Edinburgh and published by them*, edited by David Hume and Alexander Munro, vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1754), 130.