PENELHUM Themes in Hume

Themes in Hume

The Self, the Will, Religion

TERENCE PENELHUM

CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP
Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide in
Oxford New York
Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Calcutta
Cape Town Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul
Karachi Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai
Nairobi Paris São Paulo Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw
and associated companies in Berlin Ibadan
Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries
Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

First published 2000

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Penelhum, Terence, 1929–
Themes in Hume : the self, the will, religion / Terence Penelhum.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Hume, David, 1711–1776 2. Self (Philosophy) 3. Religion—Philosophy. 4. Will.
I. Title.
B1499.S45 P46 2000 192—dc21 00-021967
ISBN 0-19-823898-3
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2
Typeset by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by
Biddles Ltd
Guildford and King's Lynn

To Edith

PREFACE

THE essays in this volume were written over a period of no less than forty-five years, though most of them are quite recent. Three are published here for the first time. All deal with aspects of Hume's thought on which I have had occasion to reflect repeatedly, and now and again to change my mind. With two exceptions (Chapters 1 and 7) they make no claim to provide a general overview of Hume's system, although as time has gone by I have become increasingly convinced that Hume saw all his main philosophical positions as systematically interrelated, and that the common practice of reading and reflecting on him by discussing isolated extracts from his writings is one that misleads us when trying to interpret him, and impoverishes us philosophically into the bargain. I have expressed myself at some length elsewhere on the nature of Hume's philosophical system, however. Here I shall merely try to place the discussions in these essays in context, and make the changes in emphasis and judgement that I now feel to be necessary.

I see Hume as a philosopher who is squarely in the Socratic tradition. He is in the Socratic tradition because he sees philosophy as a source of liberating self-knowledge. On the other hand, if we think of Socrates as the teacher of Plato, and forget (for example) that the ancient Sceptics saw themselves as the heirs of Socrates too, we shall be more inclined to liken him to Democritus or Protagoras. For he certainly saw human nature as being subject to scientific understanding in the same way as the physical world, and he certainly saw our emotional lives and our practical judgements as determined by our social natures and the sentiments of our fellows. These latter features of his system account for the increasing esteem in which his thought has come to be held in the latter part of the twentieth century. But he is a Socratic figure because he is convinced that life must be examined to be fully lived; and that the philosopher, in examining it, can remove hindrances to the living of it.

What makes Hume a modern figure, indeed more clearly the incarnation of modernity than his competitors, is the way he thinks that self-understanding is to come about, and the hazards that beset

us as we try to attain to it. For philosophers have been schooled, since Plato, to see themselves as able to rise above the prejudices and conventions of common life, to take or leave them after examining them, and even to forge alternative systems of thought to compete with them. As Hume sees the matter, the hubris of philosophy should be the first casualty of genuine self-knowledge, since when we come to see what we are really like we shall see that the traditional ambitions of the philosopher are vain ones. There are two strands in Hume's thought that he sees as combining to bring about this essential insight. One, the more fundamental, is the 'science of man'. This is the science that shows us how, in fact, our beliefs and our moral commitments arise; and its fundamental explanatory doctrine is that of the association of ideas. It is a mentalistic science—which distinguishes it from the naturalisms of the present day. It shows us how our beliefs, our sentiments, and our choices are causes and effects of one another; and the stories it tells leave only the most modest place for reason, which Hume sees as instrumental and ancillary: as the slave of the passions, which are the real driving forces of human nature. To suggest that philosophical reasoning could enable us to rise above these forces is to invert the real relationship between the intellect and the passions it exists to satisfy.

The second strand in Hume's thought that enables us to see the limits of reason is the sceptical strand. This is a prominent feature of Hume's thought, and those interpretations that seek to deny this cannot explain why his contemporaries found its prominence so obvious, even when Hume sought, for quasi-political reasons, to underplay it. The Sceptical tradition, since antiquity, has used philosophical dialectic to undermine our confidence in reason as a source of truth. Hume rejects the rationalist attempts to provide these justifications (or foundations, as they have been called since Descartes). But he does not follow the classical Sceptics in supposing that it is possible to adopt some uncommitted or beliefless form of life in which we manage without them. We are creatures of belief and commitment. Yet the Sceptic is right to argue that reason cannot underpin them. They are made possible by our passions, or instincts, which entrench the beliefs we need to live by and the commitments we need to mingle successfully with our fellows in society. The Sceptic is answered, but not refuted. The moral is that we must accept the purely instrumental role that reason has in our lives, and recognize our nature for what it is. If we fail to do this, we are left

with one of two alternatives: one is the fairy-land of rationalist metaphysics, and the other is the anxiety-ridden attempt to follow the Sceptical formula of life without belief. Neither is viable outside the study, and each is a form of philosophical vanity. Hume shares with the Sceptics of antiquity the desire to be reconciled with the customs of common life that philosophy examines; but he rejects their aspiration to pretend to conform to them without inner commitment.

If this reading of Hume is the right one, then his science of man and his scepticism reinforce one another and are not at odds. His naturalism and his scepticism are blended, and neither undermines the other. This is a result of the fact that Hume is a post-Cartesian thinker. For him, as for Descartes, the contents of the mind are known to us. They form the data of the science of man. The post-Cartesian sceptic, unlike the sceptic of antiquity, questions only our inferences from these data to the world 'outside' them; and one of the purposes for which Hume uses his science of man is that of explaining how our natures bypass the sceptical doubts about these inferences by supplying us with the beliefs we need to function together in our world.

The essays here all reflect this understanding of what Hume is about, and although most of them deal with detailed aspects of Hume's system, I hope they play a part in supporting this understanding of his work.

On the surface, it should seem that Hume should be most at ease when he describes how our nature delivers our doxastic and practical commitments. In one way he is. In Book II of the *Treatise of Human Nature* he is leisurely, serene, even tedious, in describing the mechanisms whereby our passions come and go; in Book III he applies the psychology he has developed there to explain the origins of our commitment to justice. And even in Book I, he is at his most creative and ingenious when he tells us how our beliefs in causal necessity, external objects, and personal identity are generated by the associative mechanisms that Book II is to delineate more fully. Yet it is his views on personal identity that he singles out for what is almost a retraction in the Appendix, in a passage that has baffled many scholars. It is probably a mistake to read too much into this passage; but many have felt that his account of self-identity, or rather of our belief in it, is one of the least satisfactory parts of his system, and it is tempting for a critic to think that when Hume himself expresses discontent with it, he has come to acknowledge the error

that the critic has seized upon. Whatever error he is recognizing there, his views of the self have left even his most admiring readers discontented. Chapters 2 to 6 are concerned with different puzzles that these views have raised.

Chapter 2, the oldest here, was written without much recognition of the motives at work in Hume's philosophy. As its first paragraph makes clear, I was more concerned then to uncover conceptual errors in Hume's account of how we attribute identity to all changing objects, and as a young philosopher of the mid-century I felt confident that once these errors were recognized, the puzzlement that fuelled Hume's scepticism about this attribution would be largely dissipated. I still think I was right to accuse him of these errors, and to deny that our relevant linguistic practices are shot through with mistake and paradox in the way he says. His mental science tells him the truth about what makes us ascribe identity in the ways that we do, but does not support his judgement that such ascriptions are mistaken ones. And if he is guilty of these errors, then the unnamed opponents whose theories he ridicules at the outset of his discussion were guilty of them too.

In Chapter 3, prompted by criticisms of the earlier analysis of Hume's text, I had occasion to probe more deeply into the nature of Hume's mental science, and to distinguish it from other theories often thought to be latter-day versions of it. Hume thinks that his science of man enables us to see that our belief in self-identity conceals the deeper truth that our minds consist of mere bundles of mental phenomena that lack the unity we ascribe to them. Just as he supposes our common sense ascription of self-identity to these bundles is ultimately paradoxical, so he in turn is often criticized on the ground that he is guilty of paradox himself in supposing there is a unitary mind that ascribes the identity he denies. I suggest that this criticism is unfounded.

Chapters 4 and 5 address a distinct but equally baffling interpretative problem: the relationship between Hume's discussions of the self in Book I of the *Treatise* and that in Book II. In Book I he goes out of his way to indicate that personal identity as it concerns the passions is not his immediate topic; but when he comes to deal with it in Book II, what he says seems disconcertingly at odds with what he has said earlier, even when the change of theme and emphasis is recognized. I offer my own versions of the standard lame defences: that it is the real self, the bundle of perceptions that I have, that he

claims to be the object of pride and humility, and not the simple and identical soul of his rationalist predecessors. But these palliative responses are not satisfying, and these two essays argue additional theses: the first, that for the actual mechanisms of pride and humility to be understood, and to be subjected, as in life they are, to moral criticism, the self whose idea is central to those emotions must have its boundaries already set and recognized; the second, that since the indirect passions depend essentially on the familiar contrast between oneself and others, what Hume tells us in his account of those passions requires him to assume the mind to have the ability to draw this contrast, when his mental science has not supplied any account of how we come by this ability.

Chapter 6, a new essay in this volume, is an attempt to deal with some problems in the earlier pieces; and it contains some (unoriginal) reflections on Hume's puzzling second thoughts in the Appendix, which I have pusillanimously avoided writing about before this.

If the arguments in Chapters 4 and 5 have weight, Hume is wrong to distinguish as sharply as he does between personal identity as it concerns the thought or imagination, and personal identity as it concerns the passions. But this sharp distinction only mirrors his pervasive and fundamental insistence that reason is the slave of the passions and cannot be their master. This is the central theme of his moral psychology, and he sees it as the primary lesson that the search for self-knowledge teaches us. It is the primary sign that we are part of nature, and that our aspirations to rise above nature are self-destructive and self-deceiving. He opposes this vision to that which Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates in the *Phaedo*, according to which the human soul is an alien prisoner in the natural order and can rise above it by following reason and shunning the bondage of the passions. In Chapter 7 I argue that Hume's vision of our natures exaggerates the truths it teaches, and that the common opinion that Hume is anxious, in the moral sphere, to support rather than to undermine, already embodies a middle way between the Platonic and Humean polarities by recognizing that the passions can themselves be reasonable.

The naturalist is usually a determinist, and Hume is no exception. The rationalist is likely to be attracted by some form of libertarianism. Hume is the major source of the claim that determinism is not at odds with common moral judgement in the way it seems to be. The purpose of Chapter 8 is to examine his 'reconciling project'

and its place in his system. I argue that it is more at odds with common moral judgements than he claims it is, and that his moral psychology has us apportioning praise and blame to features of human personality that are the result of endowment and fortune, thus allowing him no response to the problem of what is now called moral luck.

One of the reasons for the distance I claim to find between Hume's moral psychology and common opinion, is the fact that common opinion has been partially Christianized. Hume, as a neo-Hellenist, is hoping to ease philosophical opinion back towards classical models, and away from Christian forms of rationalism. The most difficult interpretative question the Hume scholar faces is that of deciding whether he has any degree of real (rather than assumed) tolerance towards a diluted Christian religion based on custom and tradition, of the sort that the Sceptical Fideists might approve as their ancient forebears did. It is this question, and those allied to it, that are the topics of Chapters 9, 10, and 11. The question comes to a head when we try to interpret the calculated ambiguities of Part XII of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.* These essays, composed over twenty years, do not arrive at the same answers; but I reproduce them here essentially unchanged for two reasons. First, no one can be sure that he or she has this perplexity completely resolved. It is obvious that Hume is hostile to revealed and insitutionalized religion, and that he thinks it is the enemy of the modes of adjustment to the needs of common life with which our nature has endowed us. It is also obvious that he thinks he has undermined much of the classical Design Argument for the existence of God. But that is all that is obvious. It is unclear whether he thinks there is an inescapable core of belief that the Design Argument expresses, and unclear what the 'man of letters' should identify as that inescapable core, if it exists. And it is similarly unclear how Hume thinks the man of letters should relate to the religiousness that is clearly so much a part of the common life to which he must defer in other spheres. Hume's readers continue to differ quite radically on this. So there is an excuse for airing one scholar's uncertainty by offering differing, though equally tentative, responses to it.

The second reason for presenting these essays in sequence is that each approaches the question of Hume's attitude to religion from a different perspective. Chapter 9 approaches it through an examination of the differing phases in Hume's scepticism, from the *Treatise*,

through the first *Enquiry*, to the *Dialogues*, where the proper role of scepticism in relation to religion is one of the explicit themes. Chapter 10 examines most particularly the relation of Hume to the Sceptical Fideist tradition, and some of the twists and turns of the interchanges between Philo and Cleanthes in Part XII. Chapter 11, an essay not previously published, is an attempt to view the *Dialogues* in the light of the probable import of the two Sections on religion in the first *Enquiry:* the famous 'Of Miracles', and the subtler and under-read 'Of a Particular Providence and of a Future State'. This essay shows where my views rest at present, but Hume has deliberately left us with what seem to be conflicting signals, and I have no doubt that the controversy over his detailed intentions will continue.

The final two chapters deal with Hume's debts and responses to two of his predecessors. Both Butler and Pascal are Christian thinkers with objectives Hume rejects; but both are writers towards whom he felt some degree of respect, in the latter case very grudging. I have great admiration for both of them, and have been intrigued to find how much similarity there is to be found between the details of his views and theirs, when one looks past the obvious opposition between the morals they and he would draw from these details.

Some of these essays are confined to exegetical and interpretative issues, whereas others offer critical judgements, sometimes severe ones. To some extent these differences are the result of the occasions for which they were originally composed; and I trust no one will suppose that where I confine myself to deciding what Hume thinks, I think that what he thinks is true. Most particularly, I trust no one will make this inference in the case of religion. While I have from time to time stated the common view that Hume has definitively refuted the Design Argument, I am no longer confident of this, or of much else in the philosophy of religion except of the need for those who practise it to respond to the criticisms of which he is the classic source.

It is impossible to record here all the debts I owe to fellow scholars and colleagues, but I will mention some of them. First, I should express my gratitude to those individuals and groups whose meetings gave me the occasion and opportunity to assemble my thoughts on the questions discussed here. Most prominent here is of course the Hume Society, whose meetings I have always tried to get to since it

began in the early 1970s. Chapters 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 all began their existence as presentations to its meetings, and are improved by the discussions that took place there. I have found no more congenial environment for scholarly discussion anywhere. The Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies kindly asked me to speak to its 1991 Calgary meeting, thus stimulating me to write what is now Chapter 13; I also had an opportunity to present it to the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1992, and wish to record my gratitude to them and to the Royal Society of Canada and the British Academy, who jointly sponsored a lecture and research tour of which this appearance was a part. Chapter 7 first saw the light in a preliminary version at the 1990 Hume Society–NEH Institute on Hume's philosophy which was held under the benign directorship of Wade Robison at Dartmouth College. The Royal Society of Canada kindly asked me to take part in a commemorative symposium on Adam Smith and Hume at Laval University in 1976; hence the essay that forms Chapter 1. In that same year I was able to present what is now Chapter 9 to the McGill Hume Congress that David Norton directed. My thanks to the sponsors of all these occasions.

My personal debts to colleagues are very numerous, and cannot all be listed. I do, however, wish especially to thank the following for personal kindness and for the stimulus of their work: David and Mary Norton, Donald Livingston and Marie Martin, James King, Lorne Falkenstein, Jane McIntyre, John Gaskin, Peter Jones, Charlotte Brown, and Donald Ainslie. Peter Momtchiloff of Oxford University Press has been the source of much help and wise advice.

My wife's love and support at a time of supposed retirement have been indispensable, and for this no thanks can ever be enough.

T. P.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I WISH to express thanks to the original publishers of those essays that are reprinted here for permission to reproduce them.

Chapter 1, 'David Hume: An Appreciation', originally appeared in the *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, XIV, 1976, under the title 'David Hume 1711–76: A Bicentennial Appreciation'. It appears here by kind permission of the Society. Chapter 2, 'Hume on Personal Identity', first appeared in the *Philosophical Review*, 64, 1955 (copyright 1955 Cornell University) and is reprinted by permission of the publisher. Chapter 3, 'Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited' was originally published in *Dialogue*, 14, 1975, and appears by permission of the journal and its editors. Chapter 4, 'Self-identity and Self-regard', first appeared in *The Identities of Persons*, edited by Amélie Rorty, published by the University of California Press in 1976 (copyright 1976 The Regents of the University of California), and is used here by permission of the University of California Press. Chapter 5, 'The Self of Book I and the Selves of Book II' appeared first in *Hume Studies*, 18, 1992, and is reproduced here by permission of the journal.

Chapter 7, 'Hume's Moral Psychology', was first published in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, edited by David Fate Norton, copyright Cambridge University Press 1993, and is reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press. Chapter 9, 'Hume's Scepticism and the *Dialogues*', first appeared in *McGill Hume Studies*, edited by David Fate Norton, Wade Robison, and Nicholas Capaldi, published by Austin Hill Press in 1979; it is reprinted here by permission of David Fate Norton. Chapter 10, 'Natural Belief and Religious Belief in Hume's Philosophy' originally appeared in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 33, 1983, together with a reply by Stewart Sutherland, and appears here by permission of Blackwell Publishers.

Chapter 12, 'Butler and Hume' appeared first in *Hume Studies*, 14, 1988, and is reprinted by permission of the journal. Chapter 13, 'Hume and Pascal' first appeared in *Lumen*, 12, 1993, and is reprinted here by permission of the journal.

REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

In common with most readers of Hume, I have until now made continual use of the Oxford texts edited more than a century ago by L. A. Selby-Bigge. This volume is being prepared at a time when the new Oxford edition of Hume, under the editorship of David Norton, Tom Beauchamp and M. A. Stewart, is beginning to appear. There is no doubt that it will become standard, and no one who publishes on Hume should do anything that can hinder its universal adoption. But there is also no doubt that the Selby-Bigge editions will continue in use for a long time. Since this book is being prepared at the very beginning of the transition, I have tried to make in-text references in a form that will cause minimal inconvenience to any future readers using it who have access to the new edition when I at present do not.

For the *Treatise of Human Nature*, I have used the abbreviation *T* followed by the Book, Part and Section numbers in upper-case roman, lower-case roman and arabic numerals respectively. These are followed, wherever required, by the page number in the second Selby-Bigge edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 1978. An example: *T* I. iv. 6. 251.

For the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, I have used the abbreviation *EU*, followed by the Section number in upper-case roman and the Selby-Bigge page number (e.g. *EU* x. 127), and for the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* I have used the abbreviation *EM*, plus the Section and page numbers. In both cases the page numbers are those of the third edition of the Selby-Bigge text of the two *Enquiries*, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 1975.

For the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, I use the abbreviation *D*, followed by the number of the Part and the page number in the edition of Norman Kemp Smith, published in 1947 by Thomas Nelson, Edinburgh, and reprinted by Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis (14th printing 1980); e.g. *D* XII. 227. The abbreviation *NH0R* stands for the *Natural History of Religion*. I have used the edition edited by H. E. Root, published in London by Adam and Charles Black in 1957 and in Stanford, California by Stanford University Press.

The abbreviation *LDH* stands for *The Letters of David Hume*, edited by J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols., Oxford University Press, 1932. *NLDH* stands for *New Letters of David Hume*, edited by Raymond Klibansky and E. C. Mossner, published by the Clarendon Press, Oxford, in 1954.

The abbreviation *A* stands for *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature 1740*, with an Introduction by J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge University Press), reprint Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965.

CONTENTS

References and Abbreviations xviii

1. David Hume: An Appreciation 1
2. Hume on Personal Identity 23
3. Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited 40
4. Self-identity and Self-regard 61
5. The Self of Book I and the Selves of Book II 88
6. Hume, Identity and Selfhood 99
7. Hume's Moral Psychology 127
8. Hume and the Freedom of the Will 156
9. Hume's Scepticism and the *Dialogues* 177
10. Natural Belief and Religious Belief in Hume's Philosophy 204
11. Religion in the *Enquiry* and After 222
12. Butler and Hume 244
13. Human Nature and Truth: Hume and Pascal 261

References 283
Index 291

1

David Hume: An Appreciation

IT would be generally agreed that David Hume was one of Edinburgh's most illustrious citizens, and the most notable intellectual figure of the Scottish Enlightenment. The city thinks of him with pride, and its university has named one of its buildings after him.[1] But his community's estimate of him has not always been so high. One of the best-known facts of his career is the failure of his candidacy for the chair of Moral Philosophy in 1745. The position was awarded instead to a bright young man who never published.[2]

This typifies what has happened to Hume's reputation. It has taken a long time for his stature as a philosopher to be fully recognized. His own contemporaries could not fully take the measure of him; and although he was *famous*, and was lionized and vilified by turns, this was because his readers were drawn to those aspects of his work which he made easily palatable or consciously shocking. By now it is commonplace for us philosophers to say that he is the greatest of us ever to have written in English. But even though his present-day admirers will say this, they will still quite often do so on the basis of a very narrow selection of his achievements—confined usually to his epistemology. Although they owe him so much of their own doctrines and methods, they still incline to attend only to those aspects of his work which can be stated in twentieth-century idiom. Even now, Hume is very little appreciated as a *systematic* thinker.

Of course no philosopher can avoid having his successors pick and choose among his doctrines. This is the price he pays for being read by later generations. But there are special reasons in Hume's case

[1] Since this essay was originally written, Edinburgh has honoured Hume further. A statue was erected in his honour near the top of the Royal Mile in 1997. It was funded by public subscription on the initiative of the Saltire Society.

[2] These unhappy events are described in Chapter 12 of Mossner 1954. For more recent accounts see Emerson 1994 and Stewart 1995.