

John P. Wright

Hume's Treatise of Human Nature: An Introduction.

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Writing introductory texts to canonical works is always a difficult task for the specialist: he needs to present his subject's ideas in a disinterested way, distancing them from his own 'specialist' or partisan interpretation, so as to be accessible and sufficiently balanced for the non-specialist reader. And while this can be done with greater or lesser success, the presentation will inevitably bear the signs of his own interpretation, which is by now the natural looking glass for the specialist. John P. Wright is well-known for championing the interpretation of Hume as a skeptical realist—his is a Hume who believes that, despite the imperfections of our knowledge, there is a mind-independent world, and this presupposition is in the background of all human cognition. The influence of this reading by Wright is manifest even in the opening pages of this introduction to Hume's *Treatise* (xv, 81), but it is not disturbing at all: it simply serves as the background against which Hume's ideas get presented, and against which alternative interpretations are occasionally challenged.

While Wright's perspective does not prevent a fair introduction to the topics discussed in the *Treatise*, it makes it easier to overlook other possible interpretations. For instance, in discussing the problem of causation Wright concludes (128) that for Hume the ideas of cause and effect are '*inadequate representations* of reality', which entails the denial of the possibility of knowledge of causes, as well as the implicit assertion of the possibility of necessary connections inaccessible from a human point of view. But this seems to me too strong, as it would abolish the foundations of a truth-apt natural philosophy as well as of Hume's own project. As Wright himself rightly points out (xv), Hume's project is descriptive and explanatory; so the question is, how is an explanatory project feasible at all if adequate knowledge of causes is impossible? Perhaps it would be more fruitful to say that Hume's descriptive and explanatory project reveals that our concepts of cause and effect are not representations of something out there, but are instead projections (123). This, however, is not a shortcoming but rather an inevitability. In particular, projection does not entail inadequacy, but is simply an important feature of human nature; it is the only way we human beings can think of causation. From the human point of view it is simply impossible to form a different idea, and human cognition must conform to this basic limitation of human nature. Therefore, it does not make sense to allow for the possibility of necessary connections inaccessible to us: due to the cognitive limitations revealed by the science of human nature, we just cannot meaningfully conceive of such a thing.

This alternative reading casts doubt on the legitimacy of a skeptical realist interpretation, and it leads to my second point, namely that in Wright's interpretation there is much of the skeptical Hume, but much less of the naturalist Hume who is interested in exploring the capacities of that peculiar constitution, human nature. Hume's project is indeed descriptive and explanatory: it is a search for explanatory principles of various human phenomena, from cognitive capacities to sociability. These principles circumscribe the possibilities of what humans can know and how they can act. As it turns out, these possibilities are limited, thus some sort of skepticism is an inevitable consequence. One of the best features of Wright's book is discussion of several important principles of Humean human nature as, e.g. the famous copy principle, the identity substitution principle, the mental inertia principle, the separability principle, and of course custom and habit. The discussion of these principles is indeed very useful, but it could have been improved by revealing the structure of their interaction, and showing how within this framework *how* they contribute to the functioning of the 'organs of the mind', as Hume likes to put it: the senses, imagination and reason. One could thus reconstruct the 'anatomy of the mind'—the metaphor with which Hume frequently characterizes his project—as this anatomy consists precisely in the structure of interaction among the principles and faculties of the mind. So, to extend the anatomy metaphor, one could say that Hume's is a physiological study of the mind, a study of its normal functioning that takes us to its anatomy.

Wright presents Hume's occasional references to physiological considerations as an explanation of the principles of association (52ff.), of belief in general (110) or of disbelief in some instances resulting from abstract reasoning (135), and of some effects of custom (229). These are interesting points on which Hume's moral philosophy can be connected to contemporary physiology, and they also provide a context for understanding Hume. Wright presents these hints as possible deeper explanations of the phenomena Hume discusses and to which he is committed in his anthropology. But this representation of Hume ignores his commitment to an autonomous science of human nature which can reveal the foundation on which any further cognitive enterprise can be built. Viewed from this angle, Hume's passing remarks in terms of the Cartesian physiological heritage of animal spirits are just occasional detours to a peripheral field, rather than philosophically substantive points. Hume's metaphorical physiology of the mind, which is indeed central to his project, is more important than his occasional hints at physiology. From this angle Hume's vision of the mind may turn out to be more than a product of Minerva's owl flying after dusk. Without implying a direct line of influence, Hume's project may be closer in this metaphorical but central respect to the work of physiologists like Porterfield, Whytt and Cullen rather than to Descartes' or Cheyne's mechanical heritage. Given Wright's immense knowledge of this field, one must regret his choice to contextualize Hume only retrospectively, in relation to his past, rather in more contemporaneous intellectual terms.

A typical problem with introductions like this is that despite much

contextualization it is still difficult to gain a unified picture of Hume's project. Hume sketched a theory of human nature—it was his stated aim—but in what does this theory actually consist? Instead of seeing a unified account we get a reconstruction of philosophical problems, and Hume's work is portrayed as if it were a jigsaw puzzle of philosophical solutions addressing perennial problems of philosophy. While arguably this is an appropriate approach for introductory courses taking the history of philosophy as a continuous dialogue, adopting this perspective causes us, I fear, to lose sight of Hume's actual project. More attention to the connections between the various principles at play and manifest in phenomena of human nature might have more effectively revealed the coherence and aim of Hume's project. Several of these principles are indeed in Wright's account, and this is an important virtue of the book, since the principles sometimes get ignored. (In part, the issue is that, since on Hume's official doctrine it is perceptions only that constitute the mind, we are left to wonder what to make of these principles.) Still, Wright mentions these principles only in connection with central philosophical problems, and not in their own right. One must dig deep into Wright's introduction to reach these principles that really were important to Hume, and one must work hard to see the connections among them. Seeing those connections is most important for understanding those features of human nature that explain its peculiar, specific functioning, and also explain why and how our perceptions follow one another in the order they do.

Wright's book is a good conventional philosophical introduction: we get a helpful and clear presentation and analysis of the central philosophical arguments presented in Hume's *Treatise*, but we do not get a unified picture of Hume's project. The book is indeed useful for the purposes of philosophical introduction, if one wants to understand Hume in dialogue with the classical problems and authors of philosophy, and see his relevance for contemporary philosophical debates. But it is not as valuable as it might be, were one interested in grasping what the science of man meant for Hume and how he actually undertook that venture.

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