The Science of Man and the Invention of Usable Traditions

Eric Schliesser

Summary

In this paper, I scrutinize three sets of passages by David Hume. The first is from the Introduction to A Treatise of Human Nature; the second is from “An Abstract of a Book lately Published, entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature;” the third is really a collection of widely scattered vignettes from The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688. I argue that, in these works, Hume creates several distinct intellectual traditions leading up to him. I argue that the changes among them reflect, in part, tactical moves in response to changed circumstances and, in part, Hume’s changed understanding of the epistemic virtues underlying his project’s relationship to the ‘system’ of science. For example, I trace how high praise for Bacon and Locke gets replaced by praise for Galileo, Boyle, and Newton. While this little noticed aspect of Hume’s thought has independent interest, focusing on Hume’s historiographical strategy also helps illuminate Hume’s evolving understanding of the ‘science of man’ within the system of sciences.

Introduction

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1 This paper was inspired by reflection on my exchanges with Silvia Manzo over her “David Hume and Copernicanism” presented at the Hume Society, Halifax, August 2009; it is also a companion piece to Schliesser E., “The Obituary of a Vain Philosopher: Adam Smith’s Reflections on Hume’s Life”, Hume Studies 29 (2003) 327–362, where, among other things, I argued that in “My Own Life”, Hume attempts to fix the canon of his writings.

Abstract of a Book lately Published, entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature (hereafter Abstract); the third is really a collection of widely scattered vignettes from The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688.\(^3\) I argue that, in these works, Hume creates several distinct intellectual traditions leading up to him. I argue that the changes between them reflect, in part, tactical moves in response to changed circumstances and, in part, Hume’s changed understanding of the epistemic virtues underlying his project’s relationship to the ‘system’ of sciences. For example, I trace how high praise for Bacon and Locke gets replaced by praise for Galileo, Boyle, and Newton. While this little noticed aspect of Hume’s thought has independent interest, focusing on Hume’s historiographic strategy also helps illuminate Hume’s evolving understanding of the ‘science of man’ within the system of sciences.

In the next section, I show how in the Treatise Hume presents himself as a modern Socrates, simultaneously heir to and transformer of a distinctively and fairly recent English tradition. I also explain the function of Hume’s self-invention. In the following section I call attention to some important shifts between the Treatise and its summary in the Abstract. In the final section I show that in the History Hume re-invents himself as an heir to an entirely different, more cosmopolitan tradition, which has developed over many centuries. Nevertheless, in the History, Hume re-uses the language of ‘true philosophy’ to assert subtly the primacy of the science of man.\(^4\)

The New Socrates Invents Tradition

The main point of my paper is to provide a careful analysis of the following lines. My motivation for doing so is that they are interesting in their own right, but they can shed some light on Hume’s understanding of the ‘science of man’ with his system of sciences. I quote the main passage before I comment:

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\(^4\) One methodological clarification: while I use the language of ‘invention’, in the body of argument I am less interested in characterizing Hume’s mental state or intentions than I am in how Hume ‘presents’ himself to a knowledgeable reader. This is one reason why in what follows I draw on Hume’s published writings and historical events, but not, generally, on his (more private) letters (or biographical materials).