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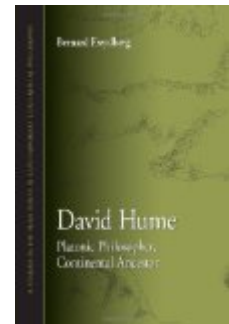


Bernard Freydberg. *David Hume: Platonic Philosopher, Continental Ancestor*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012. 129 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-4215-0.

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The title of Bernard Freydberg's short but provocative book, *David Hume: Platonic Philosopher, Continental Ancestor*, indicates his radical departure from the dominant view of David Hume's philosophy as setting out a form of philosophical naturalism. The theme of the 36th International Hume Conference, which took place in 2009, for example, was "Naturalism and Hume's Philosophy." Freydberg, in contrast, rejects an association between Hume's thought and any form of naturalism by situating his philosophy in relation to Plato's dialogues and European continental philosophy.

As Freydberg notes, Hume is usually read "within the standard empiricist-naturalist scope of interpretation" (p. 9). The naturalist interpretation is particularly apparent in Hume's "recourse to a natural impulse," that is, custom or habit, in explaining how we infer cause and effect (pp. 34-35). Freydberg, however, is not satisfied that the term "nature" has any definite meaning in Hume's philosophy, nor that his thought shows any consistent commitment to the idea of "natural instinct." Instead, he argues that Hume's thought "works against itself" (p. 35). In other words, Freydberg reconstructs aspects of Hume's philosophy in order to establish its connections to the Platonic dialogues and the work of later continental thinkers. For this reason, he does "not enter the various debates within Hume scholarship" as his book is a "reinterpretation along lines that have not been explored previously" (p. 6). While challenging the characterization of Hume as naturalist, he also takes continental philosophers after Immanuel Kant to task for neglecting Hume's thought and failing to engage it "with any seriousness" (p. 4). Gilles Deleuze stands out as a notable exception: his 1953 book *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature* is

the main inspiration for Freydberg's own postmodernist rereading of Hume, particularly Deleuze's emphasis on the "free exercise of imagination" in Hume and thus the entry of philosophy "into madness"—a key component of a number of the Platonic dialogues (pp. 11-12).

On this basis, Freydberg proceeds to analyze aspects of Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) to demonstrate Hume's "philosophy of imagination in which reason is subordinated to imagination" (p. 8). In contrast to Hume's own claim in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) "to explain the principles of human nature" and thus "to propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security," Freydberg interprets such principles as images that resemble the images of things in Plato's divided line in the *Republic*.^[1] The so-called Platonic Forms, Freydberg adds, are nothing but "ruling images" (p. 40). Hume was a "Platonist" insofar as he theorized human subordination to images. Cause and effect, in particular, is but "a fiction developed by an unbound imagination" (p. 36). Freydberg reads Hume (and Plato) as a fundamentally aesthetic philosopher whose texts should be read subversively and ecstatically; hence naturalism is itself a "very weak image of Hume's thought" (p. 37, italics in the original).

Similarly, Freydberg interprets against Hume's "Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects" (the subtitle of Hume's *Treatise*) to present his moral philosophy in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751) as a play of images of right and wrong. Hume did not demonstrate moral principles at all, but instead engaged in radical questioning of the conventions of morality which served to induce

Socratic *aporia* in the reader. For example, the principle of utility is revealed to be an empty or even false image, while social sentiment—in Hume’s words “a fellow-feeling with others ... experienced to be a principle of human nature” whose causes are unknown—is for Freydberg but a ruling image akin to Platonic *eros* and thus exists in the imagination alone.[2]

Finally, Freydberg turns to Hume’s essay “On the Standard of Taste” (1757). Given his conception of Hume’s philosophy as fundamentally aesthetic rather than naturalistic, he gives Hume’s explicit views on art central importance. Freydberg suggests that Hume’s notion of “delicacy” in artistic matters is in fact an impossible ideal, and hence “offers a rebirth of Socratic ignorance in aesthetic matters” (p. 99). But Hume’s comments on the arts, particularly poetry, are at odds with later continental views (such as Martin Heidegger’s) of poetry as the site of truth. Freydberg concludes that, paradoxically, Hume’s views on art are more reliant on reason than other aspects of his philosophy: “Hume’s philosophy presents human experience as *art*—except when it comes to art” (p. 111, italics in the original).

The significance of Freydberg’s radical reconstruction of Hume is obscure. Hume scholars will likely reject much of Freydberg’s interpretation unless they are committed to a contemporary continental and postmodernist approach to the history of philosophy and philosophical texts. In addition to sparse references to Hume scholarship, Freydberg’s challenge to the naturalistic Hume also downplays Hume’s rather bourgeois emphasis on sociability and social esteem, not to mention his idea of justice as the rules of property, as well as the importance of Humean utility to eighteenth-century discourses on happiness. Moreover, Freydberg largely overlooks Hume’s engagement with the work of his predecessors and contemporaries, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Bernard Mandeville, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Francis Hutcheson, and Adam Smith; his major contributions to Enlightened historiography, especially *The History of England* (1754–62); and his popular and influential essays on politics and economics. Can a reading of Hume as proto-continental philosopher take these aspects of Hume’s thought into account, or are they regrettable deviations (albeit rather large ones) from Freydberg’s reconstruction? Freydberg thinks that Hume’s philosophy can be interpreted in such a way as to counter the blatant prejudice informing Hume’s views on race and sex: thus the moral philosophies of Hume and Kant “enabled us to liberate ourselves from at least some of the defects from which you—towering thinkers as you are—were unable to

liberate yourselves” (p. 116). Even if such a strategy were intellectually honest, I am not sure it could be applied to all of the unpleasant social and political views held by Hume. Nor does it seem particularly helpful for assessing Hume’s (or Kant’s) position in Enlightenment thought to rescue him from his own ignorance (as judged from a twenty-first-century point of view). Indeed, considering Hume’s often disagreeable views on sexuality and culture is important, for example, to the exclusion of Hume from Jonathan Israel’s list of radical Enlightenment thinkers in *Radical Enlightenment* (2001) and *Enlightenment Contested* (2006), and to the assessment of Hume’s influence on Edward Gibbon’s historiography in volume 2 of J. G. A. Pocock’s *Barbarism and Religion* (1999).

Indeed, despite his assertion that “to try to think along with great thinkers ... requires entering into the thinker’s discourse in its own terms, so far as this is possible,” Freydberg concedes that Hume himself, based on the latter’s texts, would not agree with the interpretation of his thought as a “founding pathway to phenomenology” rather than a “confirmation of ... empiricism” (pp. 25,113). Freydberg’s quest, following Deleuze, to recover Hume as a “now-subterranean source” of continental philosophy depends on interpreting Hume’s philosophical texts within a continental philosophical framework: philosophy as aesthetic and post- or anti-metaphysical; texts as subversive works to be deconstructed (p. 10). Thus Freydberg finds in Hume what he has already forced into the text.

As a radical reconstruction, the achievement of Freydberg’s book on Hume is limited. Deleuze’s interpretations of Hume, like Heidegger’s of Friedrich Nietzsche, Hannah Arendt’s of Kant, and Carl Schmitt’s of Hobbes, are most persuasive not as scholarly commentaries but as striking contributions to contemporary theory. Freydberg’s book on Hume is much more modest. Hume’s “philosophy of imagination” as reconceived by Freydberg acts as a subterranean source of later insights rather than as a contemporary perspective yielding new avenues of thought. Freydberg’s entertaining book is less than satisfying from the standpoints of both historical scholarship and contemporary theory.

Notes

[1]. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 1:4.

[2]. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 109n19.

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