

Annette Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatises*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Considering the number of thorough analyses already written on the subject, to write yet another commentary on David Hume's 'Treatise of Human Nature' (1739) might seem superfluous, perhaps even slightly arrogant. But Annette Baier's excellent book 'A Progress of Sentiments' is a worthy contribution, and brings a fresh perspective to Hume's work. Most previous interpretations have looked on each of the three books of the 'Treatise' in isolation from one another, over-emphasising the apparent scepticism of Book One and largely overlooking the discussion on the passions and morals in Books Two and Three. As a result, Hume is often seen as an inconsistent and insincere philosopher, who forsakes his early conclusions in order to establish an enlightened liberal moral system.

While it is true that the 'Treatise' was published serially, with the first two books appearing in print before the third, Baier takes the 'Treatise' to be one work, that 'we understand none (of the books) properly unless we understand all off them, and the progression of thought within the work as a whole' (p. vii), that the meaning of each section can only be fully grasped if the connections to earlier & later sections are appreciated. (It seems surprising that such a holistic approach hasn't been taken before - Hume himself claiming at the beginning of Book Three that his work is intended to acquire more force as it proceeds). Nor must the 'Treatise' simply be regarded as a dry philosophical work - but also as a work of literature in itself, in which Hume portrays a self-reflecting thinker's dramatic development from inadequate and dubious foundations to a more secure and satisfactory philosophy. The easy trap of trying to pigeon-hole Hume's standpoint is avoided - he certainly must not be seen simply as the insincere sceptic Kant thought him: 'Hume's project all along has not been so much to dethrone reason, as to enlarge our conception of it' (p. 278). Nor is Hume's philosophy in the 'Treatise' confused or diluted with his later writings, or with the works of later philosophers.

Baier's interpretation is certainly novel, perhaps controversial at times. (For example in her analysis of Hume's account of the role of reason in intention-formation — one of the most oft cited and criticised sections of the 'Treatise' — Baier claims that the confusion is due to an

ill-considered passage, misread and magnified by Hume's over-selective critics). But her account is also highly persuasive. She begins her commentary at the peak of Hume's apparent scepticism — the conclusion of Book One and the opening of Book Two; not keeping to any strict chronological order, but by raiding earlier and later sections in the search for insights and information, she charts the voyage of Hume's uncertain thinker as he makes the transition from a one-sided reliance on intellect and its methods, to using all of the capacities of the human mind: memory, passion, sentiment, as well as chastened intellect. Baier's perceptive commentary (especially on Hume's account of necessity and causation, and on his moral philosophy) guides the reader through Hume's often subtle and understated arguments, justifying each step and often placing his work in the context of his contemporaneous.

Baier is not blind to Hume's faults - but one is sometimes left with the feeling that her commentary is perhaps too forgiving, her interpretation perhaps more complete and consistent than Hume's own. By picking and choosing which parts of the text are to be taken as seriously meant, or as merely ironical, or of understated importance, or 'reductio ad absurdum' sceptical, or are simply errors which should be overlooked, Baier paints a highly attractive picture of the philosophy of the 'Treatise' — but is it Hume's? And, although Baier's work is impressively thorough, Hume's important discussions on mathematics and probability theory are only touched upon.

Annette Baier has written an illuminating and impressive work, an important new commentary on Hume's 'Treatise' which not only demonstrates that the subject is by no means closed, but that Hume is a philosopher of contemporary relevance. And, apart from being of academic interest, 'A Progress of Sentiments' is well-written — an enjoyable read.

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