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Book Review of: The Concealed Influence of Custom: Hume's Treatise from the Inside out

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JAY L. GARFIELD. *The Concealed Influence of Custom: Hume's Treatise from the Inside Out*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 302. ISBN 9780190933401. Cloth \$78.

According to Jay L. Garfield in *The Concealed Influence of Custom*, the aim of David Hume's first book *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) is to reveal custom's hidden influence on human thought and behavior. To make the case, Garfield takes an unorthodox approach to the three books of the *Treatise*. Garfield thinks that the second book of Hume's *Treatise* on the social psychology of the passions is the 'real foundation' for the epistemology in first book and the morals in the third book (x). As such Garfield's interpretative strategy begins with custom in the context of the passions in Book II and then applies this framework to Books I and III. Garfield thinks to start with the passions in Book II of the *Treatise* integrates the 'mutually supportive' strands of skepticism, naturalism and communitarianism present in Hume's philosophy (xi). Garfield's book is an important addition to the secondary literature as the reading of custom contributes significantly to our understanding of a fundamental aspect of Hume's philosophy.

Garfield's book divides into four parts. The first part has two chapters. Chapter One outlines the five (defeasible) principles of interpretation that guide his reading of the *Treatise*. The first 'Cover Principle' recommends that whenever you are 'unsure about what Hume is doing, close the book and read the cover' (4). This reminds us of the subtitle: 'to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning into MORAL SUBJECTS.' The *Treatise* says Garfield is about the psychology of human nature and is an 'early text in cognitive psychology' (6). The second 'Skeptical Inversion Principle' aligns the skeptical parts of Hume's text with the Pyrrhonian tradition. Like the Pyrrhonian sceptics, Hume settles 'skeptical dilemmas about the justification of convention by arguing that convention is foundational to ontology' (9). The third 'Centrality

of Custom Principle' holds that Hume thinks of custom 'not as something to explain, but rather as that which explains' (17). Garfield distinguishes two senses of Hume on custom, 'custom as convention and custom as habit' (17). The first sense of custom is about social regularities, 'including conventions regarding language, individuation, explanation, praise and blame,' and custom as habit concerns 'individual psychological regularities, or our customary way of behaving' that includes habits that reinforce conventions (17). The fourth is the 'Nominalist Analysis of Pseudo-Ideas Principle,' which holds that Hume will often show via the copy principle that there is no genuine idea attached to many philosophical terms, although he 'often argues that it does not follow that the term itself cannot be used meaningfully' (22). The fifth 'Principle of the Uniformity of Method' assumes Hume consistently employs the same argumentative strategy and analyses across topics.

In the second chapter of Part 1, Garfield answers three questions: 'Why the *Treatise*? Why Book II? Why Custom?' (28). To the first, Garfield regards the *Treatise* as a masterpiece that comprises 'all of the elements of Hume's philosophical vision in an organic unity' (30). When it comes to the latter two questions, Garfield sees Book II on the passions as the 'conceptual foundation' of the *Treatise* and custom as the foundation of the passions in Book II (30, 33). For context Garfield situates Hume on custom in the history of British legal theory and maintains Hume assumes this legal understanding of custom in the *Treatise*. Garfield finds that Hume 'understood customary law—the law that emerged from local patterns of behavior and traditions—as constituting the foundation of the legitimation of positive law' (37). The source of normativity in customary law, 'is the legitimate expectation of the continuation of traditional forms of conduct as well as traditional rights and obligations,' allowing that certain practices are 'binding' and justified precisely because they are customary (38). Garfield also emphasizes that

customs may evolve and change over time and this allows for ‘a kind of progressiveness as law and morality develop in society’ (44). This sense of custom provides the normativity for Hume’s epistemology, ethics and politics. Custom permits Hume, Garfield says, to move from the experimental descriptions of ‘behavior and social regularities’ to ‘the characterization of moral and epistemic practices with genuine normative content’ (45).

The second part of the book consists of three chapters that cover the basics of the passions in Book II of the *Treatise*. Chapter Three covers the structure of the passions in Hume’s system. Garfield emphasizes that certain passions such as pride and humility have a social context and this allows a ‘robust social persona’ to emerge (70). The fourth chapter concerns the causes of passions, the relation of reason and passion, and the freedom of the will. Garfield shows that both sorts of custom, individual and social, are the ‘fundamental operating principle of cognition and motivation,’ that shapes not only ‘our actions and personality, but also our cognitive lives’ (82). Chapter Five takes up Humean moral psychology, which is, on Garfield’s reading, the ‘interplay between *original* or innate cognitive predispositions and those that emerge through natural human intercourse’ (90). Hume’s view on the moral sentiments starts with ‘the individual psychology of the moral sentiments’ (93). When we consider our own selves, we take into consideration how others view us, and so for Hume the self is ‘essentially social’ (94). Our responsiveness to others happens via sympathy and so sympathy ‘forms the foundation of social life and hence of morality’ (95).

In Part III of the book, Garfield turns to Hume on knowledge and morality in *Treatise* Books I and III. This is the longest part and has five chapters in which the five interpretive principles drive analyses of causality, reason, the external world, the self and morality. Chapter Seven uses the ‘Cover Principle’ to treat causality as being about human nature (150). Adding in

the second principle, Garfield thinks Hume is a skeptic about causality in that he denies there is a 'real causal relation' or 'some special necessary connection,' and that Hume shows we 'could not even know what such a thing is' (128). In line with the third principle, Garfield claims that Hume on causality depends on the two senses of custom (129). First, 'the customary habit of mind that grounds our causal discourse,' and second, 'the customs that govern that discourse' (150). The fourth principle then applies. The discussion of causality is 'an instance of Hume's general strategy of showing that we often believe that we have ideas that we do not' and then to show 'the idea that we do have that guides our causal reasoning in the absence of any proper idea of causation itself' (129, 133). The application of each principle taken together illustrates the fifth principle of interpretation (129). Garfield goes on to apply the same interpretive approach to the topics of skepticism about reason (Chapter Eight), the external world (Chapter Nine), personal identity as well as Hume's skeptical reflections about his own philosophy in the conclusion of Book 1 of the *Treatise* (Chapter Ten), and ethics (Chapter Eleven).

The final part of the book has two chapters. Chapter Twelve is about Hume's famous doubts on personal identity in the Appendix to the *Treatise*. Garfield canvasses some of the main strategies employed by scholars to diagnose and resolve the problem before offering his own diagnosis and solution. The problem that Hume sees in the Appendix, according to Garfield, is the 'impossibility of representing one's own mind,' and the solution is Hume's commitment 'to a socially embedded account of human nature' (265, 272). In the last chapter, Garfield reflects on the Humean vision of the life of humanity. Human beings are 'natural objects' that live in a natural world with thought and behavior patterns determined by natural laws (273). Moreover, humans are 'natural artificers' that invent 'currencies, communities, courts, and customs' as well as a self and external reality (276-7). Garfield contends these fictions for Hume are 'not *opposed*

to truth' but rather 'the fictions we create constitute truths' (277). On Garfield's Humean picture, humans are born into and 'unfold in the context of a collectively constructed social matrix' (279). Garfield describes that social matrix as 'a web of practices in which we are raised' that are local, contingent, adaptive and capable of normativity (279). Directed by custom, humans are bound up with, and 'ineliminably constituted by their social, as well as their biological, histories and contexts' (280).

Garfield's *Concealed Influence of Custom* is a rich and fascinating exploration of Hume's *Treatise*. Garfield does not claim that his interpretation of Hume's text is 'entirely original' (3), and admits that for the most part he is following in the tradition of the work of Annette Baier, his teacher and the legendary Hume scholar to whom the book is dedicated (ix). Yet what makes this book on Hume novel is the comprehensive range of sources drawn on in the book. There are connections to the many thinkers who influenced Hume's thought, the range of subsequent thinkers influenced by Hume, and the many ways his contributions intersect with current debates in topics across disciplines. Garfield covers Hume's philosophical predecessors and contemporaries such as Sextus Empiricus, Bayle, Malebranche, Locke, Berkeley, Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, and Mandeville. He also makes connections to philosophers after Hume such as Schopenhauer, Kant, Wittgenstein, Quine and Sellars as well as more current debates from behaviorism to connectionism, psychology and the social cognitive sciences. In addition, Garfield compares Hume's philosophy to Buddhist views on topics like causality, personal identity, psychology and custom. In sum, Garfield navigates the *Treatise* with attention to diverse historical and contemporary concerns on an array of topics.

Another distinctive feature of Garfield's work is the legal background of Hume on custom and its relevance to the *Treatise*. This is much appreciated for despite the integral role of

custom and its effects in Hume's philosophy, he does not conduct an inquiry into the foundation of custom. Hume emphasizes in the later work, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, that custom is a 'universally acknowledged' principle of human nature and that 'we can push our enquiries no farther, or pretend to give the cause of this cause; but must rest contented with it as the ultimate principle' (EHU 5.5). Garfield's interpretation of Hume on custom makes sense of this. On Garfield's reading, in Hume's science of the mind, 'the central explanans is custom' (17). The fundamental principle of custom is assumed to carry its own justification and is utilized by Hume as a tool for explanation. This approach to custom contrasts with principles that require an explanation, like the causal maxim, '*whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence,*' where Hume must examine in detail '*how experience gives rise to such a principle*' (T 1.3.3.9).

Still, one might question Garfield's interpretive approach that places the middle book of the *Treatise* as the first foundation of the system. Garfield thinks Book I is grounded in Book II, and that without the customary individual and social psychology of human nature in Book II, 'the constructive skepticism developed in Book I would be impossible' (224). Further, Book III, like Book I, assumes the results of the theory of passions in Book II (228). However, there are some limits to the approach of beginning with Book II of the *Treatise* on at least three counts. First, the approach to start with Book II of the *Treatise* seems somewhat forced. This is because it requires we go against the order in which Hume himself deliberately presented the text to the audience in publication: we must ignore the first book and skip to the second. Second in the Advertisement to Book III of the *Treatise* on morals, Hume explicitly states that apart from the distinction between impressions and ideas, Book III can be read independently of Books I and II.

This indicates that Hume thought that Book II was not necessary reading for the comprehension of Book III.

Third, on Garfield's approach, the crucial role of custom in Book I is diminished. According to Garfield, 'while Book I precedes Book II in publication, it rests upon Book II conceptually' (224). But a natural and straightforward reading is that Book I comes before Book II because Book II is based in Book I. After all, the first instance of custom in the *Treatise* occurs right at the beginning of Book I to explain abstract ideas (T 1.1.7.7). Further, causal reasoning (T 1.3.8.12), belief (T 1.3.8.10), and necessary connection (T 1.3.14.1) all depend on custom. One might think the framework of custom set down in Book I is presupposed and elaborated in Book II, meaning Book II depends on the foundation of Book I. And indeed, Book II on the passions depends crucially on at least two key topics of Book I: space and time, and reasoning, both demonstrative and probable.

Hume devotes two sections to the influence of space and time on the passions in Book II (T 2.3.7-8). The analysis of space and time from Book I, Part II explains how the different properties of space and time affect our passions in different ways (see e.g., T 2.3.7.4-5). Garfield recognizes sympathy as 'one of the most important concealed mechanisms of custom' (95). Yet sympathy too is influenced by space and time. Hume allows that our sympathy with people who are distant from us in space and time may be less lively and vivacious than our sympathy with those people who are present and nearby (T 2.1.11.6). This effect of spatial and temporal distance on sympathy has implications for Hume on morality (T 3.3.1.14-15). When it comes to reasoning, Hume's Book I, Part 3 division of two kinds of reason, demonstrative and probable, is foundational to Books II and III of the *Treatise*. The two kinds of reason are central to his Book II arguments that reason alone cannot motivate us into action (T 2.3.3.2-3), and further, to his

Book III arguments that moral distinctions are not derived from reason (T 3.1.1.18-26). Moreover, Hume's account of probability plays a role in the fluctuating passions of joy, sorrow, hope and fear (T 2.3.9). Starting with Book II risks minimizing and overlooking how the fundamental epistemological background of Book I is extended to the passions in Book II of the *Treatise*.

I highly recommend Garfield's *The Concealed Influence of Custom: Hume's Treatise from the Inside Out* to anyone interested in Hume's thought. The work will be of particular interest to Hume scholars as Garfield engages extensively in the vast secondary literature throughout. Garfield's approachable style of writing, and the wide range of topics and sources covered also makes this book an excellent first stop for students at all levels and from a variety of backgrounds, who are looking for a way into Hume's *Treatise* or his philosophy in general.

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