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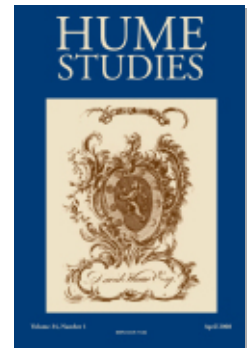
L'io morale. David Hume e l'etica contemporanea (review)

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Book Reviews

Lorenzo Greco. *L'io morale. David Hume e l'etica contemporanea*. Postfazione (Afterword) di Eugenio Lecaldano. Naples: Liguori Editore, 2008. Pp. 302. ISBN 9788820741419, Paperback, € 25.00.

This is a remarkable book, both as an impressive *tour de force* in Humean scholarship, and as an ingenious philosophical work bearing on a variety of issues such as personal identity, the nature of the self, general metaethics, and normative ethics. Greco has two recognizable ambitions. The first is to show that the notion of the self, once properly understood in sentimental terms, is the hinge of Hume's ethics (parts I–III). The second is to argue for the superiority of a Humean virtue-ethical outlook, on the grounds of the notion of the sentimental self (hereafter “SS”), over other contemporary perspectives (part IV). Since the second project only occupies a limited portion of the book, I have chosen to focus on the first one.

We should stress the scholarly and philosophical audacity of giving the self the centre stage. Hume is often thought to deny the existence of anything worth calling “the self,” if the self is nothing but a bundle of perceptions. On the other hand, he repeatedly asserts that the self exists, that we are aware of it, and seems to absent-mindedly forget his former skepticism when discussing the role that the idea of the self plays in the workings of the passions, and therefore in ethics too. Here, the self is not depicted as if it were purely a bundle of perceptions. Hume's

problem, cast in traditional terms, is how to square the bundle of perception view with the self as involved in the passions and in ethical conduct. The traditional answer is that Hume is simply guilty of incoherence. All the braver must then appear Greco's project of putting the self at the centre of Hume's ethics, whatever that means: if Hume's ethics is to be at all plausible, one would have thought it had better not rely on such a troubled concept.

Greco's first strategy is to pre-empt the traditional challenge. What Hume shows in the section on personal identity of the *Treatise* (T 1.4.6; SBN 251–63) and in the despairing Appendix is not the failure of any philosophy of the self, but the defeat of a theoretical approach that treats the self as a natural object among others. The outcome of this approach is the bundle of perception view. But this blatantly fails to make sense of our self-awareness, of the feeling of unity of our consciousness, and of ourselves as agents. Therefore we seem to need a different take on the self, though one that is still empirically and naturalistically constrained. For Greco, Hume should be read as adopting a different, sentimentally grounded point of view from Book 2 of the *Treatise* onwards. Traditional interpreters fail to see this dialectic internal to the *Treatise*.

So it is the passions that shake us from skepticism and give access to a better self, one that finds its definitive completion in the moral domain. In particular, the mechanisms of pride and humility implicate the idea of the self. Suppose we are proud of our beautiful house. For Hume, pride is an impression of pleasure generated by an impression of pleasure deriving from the beauty of the house plus the idea of the relation of the house to ourselves. We are pleased to know that something related to us gives pleasure: we are proud. On the other hand, it is painful to know that something related to us gives pain (e.g. a nasty friend of ours): this is humility (or shame). Hume adds that pride and humility have the self as their "object," and that we never "lose sight" of ourselves in such circumstances (T 2.1.5; SBN 286). What is this self? It is a "succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness" (T 2.1.2; SBN 277), or of "that individual person, of whose actions and sentiments each of us is intimately conscious" (T 2.1.5; SBN 286). Two questions arise: (1) Is this idea of self merely the idea of a bundle of perceptions? (2) Is the idea of self discovered or created by the experiences of pride/humility?

According to Greco, this idea of the self is new. It is neither a bundle of perceptions, nor is it a fiction invented by the imagination: that was the self as theoretically studied. So what is it? It is a SS, entangled with the pleasure and pain of pride and humility. And the "new" self is neither created nor discovered by these passions: "There is no self which precedes or follows pride and humility . . . To feel pride and humility means to become aware of ourselves, and we cannot understand what it means to be aware of ourselves unless we feel these passions.

Feeling pride and humility and being aware of ourselves are therefore *the same thing*. . . . Two sides of the same coin" (72–73).

This sounds like an overstatement. First, it seems false that we cannot understand what it means to be aware of ourselves unless we feel these passions. Self-awareness can be triggered by many different mental episodes: simple pain, for instance, may be enough to turn our attention upon ourselves without necessarily producing the further pain involved in humility. Self-awareness need not even involve any hedonic experience: cannot we be aware of ourselves as active, for instance, in the operations of the imagination? What is so special about pride/humility?

Second, even if self-awareness and pride/humility were coextensive, this would only tell us that in having these emotions we think or feel we have a self, perceived as "that individual person, of whose actions and sentiments each of us is intimately conscious" (T 2.1.5; SBN 286). But it does not tell us whether we are justified in thinking or feeling we have such a self. The experience of pride does not earn ontological rights for the self any more than does the experience of ourselves as active in imagining. Greco asserts that "awareness of ourselves is what allows us to claim the existence of the self, that is, of that which we feel concern and responsibility for" (105). But why should we take these experiences as self-validating and validating the self?

Perhaps these difficulties find a solution in the moral expression of SS. Greco explains two essential features of SS: content and stability. First, content. Pride/humility take the self as their object: but what does this self consist of? It is a self with a character. It is the sympathetic reaction to our "mental qualities" (rather than, say, to our fancy car) which primarily excites these passions, and thus provides us with an idea of ourselves (139). Our sentimental identity takes a shape when we sympathetically receive and react to other people's judgements about our character. This is part of why SS is essentially a moral self.

Here perhaps Greco answers the doubts above. Pride/humility are the privileged experiential route to the self, because they portray it as owner of a character, and confirm its existence as such through the gaze and sentiments of others. In this sense, the self-awareness provided by those passions is not empty, and tends to be a self-validating experience. This may be what makes *sentimental* self-awareness a vantage point rather than purely cognitive forms of self-awareness.

Second, stability. Others' reactions to our character may be partial, or based on false beliefs; and there are simply too many of them to go about. Pride/humility are for this reason constantly changing and possibly misleading as to determining who we are. If these passions are to constitute an identity that is both reasonably stable over different perspectives, and in some sense recognizable to ourselves, they need to be well-grounded (143ff, 162). Well-grounded pride/humility will be responsive

to the well-grounded reaction of others to our character: in Humean terms, to others' judgements as corrected by the adoption of the "steady and general point of view" (chapter XI). Only by regarding such judgements as authoritative can pride/humility afford us a stable and faithful picture of our character.

In turn, a contentful and stable SS is the key to the central features of morality (chapter XII). Learning about our selves is coextensive with adopting the objective viewpoint that characterizes morality. And well-grounded pride/humility involve the internalization of an ideal of character that we recognize as providing us with reasons for action (169–70). The order of explanatory priority is clear for Greco. Moral objectivity is gained as a result of our sentimental self-discovery. And moral motivation is possible because to judge that a trait is virtuous is to feel rightly proud for having it, or to feel rightly ashamed for lacking it: in both cases the passions will motivate us to display said trait or try to acquire it if we can.

I conclude with a worry. There is no identity without pride/humility. But only well-grounded passions give us an identity worth the name. Now for Hume, "well-regulated" pride is also a virtue (T 3.3.2; SBN 600). Like any other virtue, human beings can easily lack it. Are we to say that in such an event we are *therefore* less than genuine selves? Can we not have a full self that is all too (or too little) full of itself? If it is worth pondering over such questions, it is because Greco's sentimental self proves to be a fresh and thought-provoking contribution to Humean scholarship and moral philosophy alike, a contribution to which I could not but do far less than full justice here.

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