

**PRÉCIS OF *RECASTING HUME AND EARLY MODERN
PHILOSOPHY***

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021)

Paul Russell
Lund University
Email: paul.russell@fil.lu.se

Recasting Hume and Early Modern Philosophy is a collection of essays that are all concerned with major figures and topics in the early modern philosophy.¹ Most of the essays are concerned, more specifically, with the philosophy of David Hume (1711-1776). The sixteen essays included in this collection are divided into five parts. These parts are arranged under the headings of: (1) Metaphysics and Epistemology; (2) Free Will and Moral Luck; (3) Ethics, Virtue and Optimism; (4) Skepticism, Religion and Atheism; and (5) Irreligion and the Unity of Hume's Thought. A particularly important theme running through many of these essays is the subject of Hume's irreligious aims and intentions. The fifth and final part of the collection is devoted to an articulation and defence of this specific understanding of Hume's philosophical thought.

Although this volume is oriented around issues arising from Hume's philosophy, and the relevance of irreligion to these issues and arguments, a number of essays cover other thinkers and topics – often with a view to relating them to Hume's philosophy and/or problems of irreligion. Apart from the papers devoted specifically to Hume, there are two papers concerned with Adam Smith, one on moral luck and the other on irreligion and ethics. There is also a paper concerned with the debate between Thomas Hobbes and Bishop Bramhall on free will. Several of the papers discuss Hume's philosophy in relation to other major figures, ranging from Samuel Clarke, George Berkeley and Bishop Butler to Bernard Williams and P.F. Strawson. Throughout the collection, an effort is made to display not only the range and depth of Hume's philosophy, but also its relevance to contemporary issues and debates.

The first part of this collection, concerned with metaphysics and epistemology, consists of four papers. The first three cover Hume's views on causation and necessity (i.e. his "two definitions"); probability, induction and the doctrine of a future state; and the material world and natural religion. The fourth paper concerns the relevance of causal reasoning to the limits of philosophical speculation regarding cosmology and religion. The second part, on free will and moral luck, begins with a paper on the Hobbes-Bramhall debate. It continues with two papers taking up Hume's views on free will, responsibility and punishment, and finishes

¹ I would like to thank the editor, Plínio Smith, for kindly arranging for this symposium in *Sképsis*. I would also like to thank my critics - Peter Fosl, Claude Gautier, and Todd Ryan - for their stimulating comments and critical discussion.

with a fourth paper on Smith's views on moral luck. The discussion of these issues then moves on to two papers concerned with Hume's ethics, which serves as the third part of the collection. The first of these two papers provides an "anatomy" of Hume's account of virtue and the second contrasts Hume's views on moral philosophy with those of Bernard Williams (and his critique of "the morality system").

The fourth and fifth parts of the collection are closely connected. All the papers in these two parts directly address matters of religion. The fourth part contains three papers that discuss various aspects of Hume's "atheism". The first of these papers argues that Hume's "Lucretian Mission" to dislodge religion from human life is not inconsistent with his account of the roots of religion in human nature and the human predicament. The second argues philosophy is properly understood as "atheistic" and that this is consistent with his skeptical commitments. (Given its focus on the relevance of Hume's scepticism for his irreligious aims and objectives, this paper is likely to be of particular interest to readers of this journal.) The third aims to show that Hume endorses neither "true religion" (of a kind that Spinoza advocates) nor a form of "militant atheism" (that might be associated with Baron D'Holbach or the leading representatives of contemporary "new atheism"). The fourth paper addresses the question of Adam Smith's views about religion, arguing that there are significant irreligious undertones apparent in his views on ethics as presented in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

The fifth and final part of this collection consists of two papers that relate Hume's irreligious intentions to his fundamental philosophical aims and objectives. One of these is a paper devoted to an assessment of Hume's philosophical "legacy". It is argued that although Hume has been widely presented as the main pillar of British Empiricism – and the culminating figure of the "Locke-Berkeley-Hume" triumvirate – we have every reason to question this way of interpreting his philosophical aims and concerns. More specifically, a more plausible interpretation would give Hume's irreligious concerns prominence in this context. This is something that plainly separates Hume from the two other leading members of the triumvirate of "British Empiricism" and puts Hume in direct opposition to their own contrasting efforts to provide a philosophical defence of the Christian religion. The tradition that Hume ought to be placed in is not that of being a follower of Locke and Berkeley but rather an irreligious thinker following in the "atheistic" tradition of Hobbes and Spinoza.

The final paper of the whole collection returns to these irreligious themes and concerns. This paper provides an overview of the irreligious interpretation of Hume's entire philosophical system, beginning with the *Treatise* and extending to his later works. The primary historical context in which Hume's philosophy should be read and understood concerns the debate between "religious philosophers" and "speculative atheists". The issues that were fundamental to this debate concerned the relationship holding between philosophy, religion and morality. Prominent philosophical defenders of (Christian) religion – such as Locke, Clarke and Berkeley, among others – argued that philosophy could serve to support religion, and that religion was essential to support morality. Hume, along with leading figures in the "atheistic" tradition (e.g. Hobbes and Spinoza) argued that philosophy was not only incapable of supporting religion, it served to discredit many of its central doctrines. He also argued that not only did morality did not require religion, religion had a strong tendency to corrupt and distort morality. It is these core themes that are central to Hume's entire philosophy and that structure and shape his various works.

As the above summary makes clear, I have made no effort to provide readers with an outline of each and every paper in the collection. The general overview

provided should, nevertheless, give readers a clear enough idea of the general contents of this collection and its dominant concerns and problems. In the replies to my critics that follow I offer a more detailed account of the specific papers that they discuss or examine. The papers that they are especially concerned with are: “The Material World and Natural Religion in Hume’s *Treatise*” (Ryan) [Essay 3], “Hume’s Skepticism and the Problem of Atheism” (Fosl) [Essay 12], and “Hume’s Philosophy of Irreligion and the Myth of British Empiricism (Gautier) [Essay 16].