

DEMETER'S *OPTICKS*-INSPIRED INTERPRETATION OF HUME

Tamás Demeter, *David Hume and the Culture of Scottish Newtonianism: Methodology and Ideology in Enlightenment Inquiry* (Boston: Brill, 2016), Hardcover ISBN 9789004327313, e-book ISBN 9789004327320, 221 pp.

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In his insightful book, Tamás Demeter places David Hume's philosophy within the tradition of Scottish Newtonianism. As Demeter notes, commentators generally agree that both the moral philosophy and natural science of 18th century Scotland were shaped by Newton's work, and Demeter concurs. Regarding Newton's influence on natural science, and especially chemistry and physiology, many authors further agree that it was first and foremost the *Opticks*, rather than the *Principia*, that left its mark. With this too, Demeter concurs. Demeter characterizes this *Opticks*-inspired influence in terms of a "vitalistic" approach, thereby connecting Scottish natural inquiry with the contemporary tradition of "Enlightenment vitalism" on the continent (p. 3). This vitalistic approach, he writes, replaces "the mechanistic image of nature as inhabited by homogeneous inert matter and external forces acting on it, with an alternative image which emphasized qualitative differences, elective attractions, and organic interaction" (p. 82). In particular, the vitalistic methodology relies less on mathematics, and more on "comparative analysis and analogical reasoning" (pp. 38–39).

Demeter's primary disagreement with mainstream interpretation centers on Hume. He denies the standard view that Hume was mainly influenced by the *Principia* as opposed to the *Opticks*. In Demeter's view, this standard view typically goes hand-in-hand with an interpretation of Hume's theory of ideas as modelled on the "particulate inert matter and active forces acting on it" (p. 1). Instead, Demeter argues that Hume's main influence stems from the *Opticks*, which reveals itself in his vitalistic approach shared by the natural inquiries of chemistry and physiology. This interpretation results in a view of Hume's "actual enterprise" as being concerned first and foremost with active, real faculties within a "functioning anatomy" (p. 201).

In the first of the four parts of the book, Demeter focuses on Scottish Newtonianism in general by demonstrating the conceptual as well as methodological unity of natural and moral philosophy during that period. Taking the passion of anger as an example, he argues that philosophical discussions in moral, natural, and religious contexts were intertwined on account of employing the same concepts. Further, he characterizes moral and natural philosophy as relying on a shared method of "analysis and synthesis" (p. 33), where the analysis is either "mathematical" in the style of the

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Principia (p. 34) or “analogical” in the style of the *Opticks* (p. 34). Demeter mentions Hume as an explicit example of an author who follows the method of analysis proposed by the *Opticks*: Just as Newton observes and compares different rays of light to reveal “relevant properties” (p. 80), Hume compares (mostly) everyday phenomena and “generaliz[es] the findings” (p. 39). In a second part of the book, Demeter discusses the context of Hume’s methodology. One important argument here centers around Demeter’s interpretation of what he calls Hume’s “explanatory reductionism” (p. 60). According to Demeter, Hume follows in Copernicus’s footsteps in seeking to explain human phenomena via a minimal set of principles. This reductionism, he claims, is achieved by the *Opticks*-inspired comparative-analogical analysis of various human phenomena.

In the third and possibly most significant part of the book, Demeter discusses what Hume’s method and project owe to the concepts and methodology of natural inquiry. One important claim of this part concerns the characterization of Hume’s project in terms of the label ‘anatomy of the mind’ (e.g. *Treatise of Human Nature* [from now on ‘T’] 2.1.12.2). Demeter claims that this label expresses a commitment to studying human nature in terms of an “active and organic nature” as opposed to a composition of “inert matter” (p. 201). Demeter makes sense of this anatomy in terms of what he calls a “study of the normal functioning of mental faculties” (p. 5). So, he demonstrates chemical and physiological ways of looking at the natural cognitive and affective functions of human beings. In the fourth and last part, Demeter argues that moral philosophy and moral cognition in Hume are governed by “different epistemic values” (p. 9). In particular, while Hume argues for a certain “aperspectival objectivity” (p. 184) in making moral evaluations, Demeter notes that “accepting the conclusions of moral philosophy depends largely on subjective factors” (p. 199).

Demeter’s strategy in arguing for his main conclusion that Hume ought to be read in a light shed by the *Opticks* in great part consists in finding a sufficient number of instances within Hume’s work that support such a reading. In the following, I want to press on two such instances. The first point concerns Demeter’s view on Humean faculties, which plays a crucial role throughout his book: According to Demeter, Hume’s main project boils down to an understanding of our mental faculties. Demeter interprets Hume as taking a “realistic stance” (p. 87) towards faculties, but granting that our knowledge of them is contingent on their manifestations. His main argument for such a realist reading is connected to his interpretation of the label ‘anatomy of the mind’. He spells out this anatomy of the mind in terms of its “natural” (p. 201) or “normal” (p. 134) functioning. This standard of naturalization, he suggests, allows for a derivation of normative conclusions, where deviations from the standard “are possible in cognitive, emotive, behavioural, and thus moral matters—and, due to their unwelcome consequences, deviations ought to be avoided” (p. 134). In this sense, the anatomy may be regarded as a “middle-range theory that connects the discourses of organic nature and normative morality” (p. 201).

I grant that it makes sense (although it may not be necessary) to interpret Hume’s account in terms of such a natural functioning of the mind if Demeter wants to claim that Hume developed his project under the influence of the *Opticks*. I also grant that interpreting Hume’s project in terms of a natural functioning of the mind

allows us to derive various normative conclusions. However, I think that both claims can be made without accepting that additional third claim that Demeter makes: namely, that this natural functioning is to be understood as a natural functioning of faculties, where faculties are understood in a realist sense (p. 201). I think that it may suffice for Demeter to offer a counterfactual reading of faculties in terms of their manifestations, such that a certain faculty to φ (where φ is a perception or a behavior) under specific conditions C *just is* φ 's regularly occurring, or occurring sufficiently often, under C . And in fact, Demeter does not seem to make an argument for why this more metaphysically modest counterfactual reading of faculties is not enough. But especially since Demeter nevertheless wants to hold on to the interpretation that perceptions are the only mental "content" (p. 201), he might be better off considering a non-realist reading of faculties.

My second point concerns Demeter's re-interpretation of the standard *Principia*-inspired vivacity-distinction between ideas and impressions. Demeter gives up this reading and instead argues for an *Opticks*-inspired suggestion that ideas and impressions differ in their "ability to enter into reactions" (p. 137). As Demeter notes, following Hume, ideas possess a "solidity" (T 2.2.6.1) that impressions lack, which makes it impossible, as Demeter explains, for the former to "lose their identity" (p. 137) when mixed with other ideas. Rather, while impressions transform into new impressions when mixed, ideas can only ever form compounds "whose integrant parts can never lose their original identity" (p. 137). This reading neatly maps onto how matter was understood in 18th century Scottish chemistry. Demeter takes his lead for this solidity-reading from the passage in T 2.2.6.1, where Hume writes that while ideas "never admit of a total union," impressions and passions "are susceptible of an entire union." This does suggest a certain chemistry-inspired difference in kind that is not entailed by the standard vivacity-reading. However, as Demeter himself notes, there is a lot of textual support for the vivacity-reading. In fact, when introducing this difference, Hume explicitly states that ideas and impressions resemble each other "in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity" (T 1.1.1.3). Further, it seems that Demeter's interpretation of the difference involves more than just textual difficulties: passions, as Demeter correctly states, are in fact not divisible into constituents, but this is just due to the fact that they are "simple and uniform impressions" (T 2.1.2.1). However, passions are not typical of *all* impressions. We *do* have complex impressions and they *do* allow for segmentation into simple parts. For example, my impression of a dog can be segmented into simpler impressions of parts of the dog which differ in color and shape. Interestingly, Demeter does not consider impressions besides the passions in his argument for the solidity-reading. It might be interesting for him to consider whether there remains a chemical difference in kind once we include complex impressions.