

The Moderate Modern

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Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary, by David Hume, edited by Eugene F. Miller, *Indianapolis, Indiana: Liberty Classics, 1985. lii + 680 pp. \$17.00 (paper \$8.50).*

A reader of the *Essays* cannot fail to be impressed by the breadth of Hume's learning. In the *Essays*, Hume ranges far beyond the great works of philosophy into every area of scholarship. One finds abundant evidence of his reading in the Greek and Latin classics as well as of his familiarity with the literary works of the important English, French, Italian, and Spanish authors. The essays reflect Hume's intimate knowledge not only of the history of Great Britain but also of the entire sweep of European history. He knew the important treatises on natural science, and he investigated the modern writings on political economy.

THESE OBSERVATIONS by Eugene Miller are part of his introductory comments to this fine edition of *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, by David Hume (1711-1776), the Scottish philosopher and historian. Professor Miller scarcely exaggerates. There are in all forty-nine essays, ranging from philosophical observations on Taste and Passion, Eloquence, Polygamy, Avarice, Love and Marriage, and Suicide, to reflections on more political and historical topics such as Passive Obedience, Civil Liberty, the Parties of Great Britain, and the Study of History. These essays are invariably stimulating, but they are by no means all equally persuasive.

This Liberty Classics volume is exceptionally well done and includes, along with the *Essays*, a quite sophisticated system of

notes and footnotes that should help even relatively uninformed readers. In addition to a more or less conventional method of footnoting at the bottom of the pages of the text (including notes from both Hume and Miller), there is a set of references (placed at the end of the text) to "variant readings" of other editions of the *Essays*. While these references may be of lesser interest to many readers, they should prove quite useful to the serious scholar. And still another system of notes yields a glossary explaining various terms and expressions that might seem peculiar to today's readers. Considering the number and complexity of the multiple notes used in this edition, Miller is to be congratulated that they are relatively unobtrusive and do not detract too much from the general readability of the text.

Besides his elaborate system of notes, Miller has also provided his readers with a useful index, a foreword, and an editor's note. In the latter he comments that he "first studied Hume's writings in research that was guided by Friedrich A. Hayek, Leo Strauss, and Joseph Cropsey." Having been guided by such distinguished authorities, Miller can be expected to approach the study of Hume's thought in a serious manner. It is also refreshing to find that, whatever the degree to which he is "Straussian" in his methodology, Miller's style and general use of the language are free of that peculiar jargon commonly recognized and labeled as "Straussian."

Perhaps Miller's writing was influenced for the better by the subject he has studied so well, David Hume himself. Hume's own style makes for generally easy reading, a quality which perhaps accounts to some degree for the great popularity much of

his work enjoyed in his own day. There is, however, another factor which serves to make Hume's observations fairly easy to read: his capacity for approaching his various subjects with moderation and common sense. Indeed, as a "common sense" philosopher Hume on occasion bears some surface resemblances to William James.

Perhaps the most striking instance of Hume's commitment to moderation occurs in his analysis of England's two parties, the Country Party (the Whigs) and the Court Party (the Tories). Admitting that "for my part, I shall always be more fond of promoting moderation than zeal," Hume time and again demonstrates that this self-assessment is accurate. In several essays he notes that the political arguments of both the Country Party and the Court Party have merit, though perhaps not as much as either party imagines. Similarly, both parties disclose merit in their respective interpretations of British history, though once again not as much merit as each party maintained.

Considering that Hume is often inclined to represent both sides of a controversy in forceful terms, it is interesting to ask whether he should be regarded as an "ancient" (*i.e.*, traditionalist) or a "modern" (*i.e.*, libertarian or egalitarian) political philosopher. This question does not admit of a simple answer. For example, Hume has often been charged with being a "monarchist" in the sense that his arguments and reasonings appear to favor the Tories more often than the Whigs, even though he makes a serious effort to give the Whigs their due. Whether this observation is true or not, it is relevant to the argument to note that when discussing the origins of government, specifically monarchy, Hume maintains that invariably the foundations rest on the successful use of force. Hume is not much interested in the concept of the philosopher-king as a serious possibility.

Similarly, Hume may be regarded as a "traditional" conservative in that he regularly notes the wisdom of cultivating a respect for "experience." In fact some of

his statements on the subject have a strong "Burkean" flavor. But it is also true that he points out the folly of blind obedience to customs and practices simply because they have been long established; he is not inclined to glorify the past merely because it represents "ancient" ways and customs. He wryly comments that "to declaim against present times, and magnify the virtue of remote ancestors, is a propensity almost inherent in human nature."

It may well be that Hume's attitude toward organized religion, particularly the "priests" of Christianity (and Roman Catholicism especially), is the most ambiguous element in his thought. With uncharacteristic passion he sharply denounces the priests and superstition he often associates with Christianity, his denunciations strongly similar in tone to those ventured by Thomas Jefferson sometime later, and even more vehemently by Ayn Rand in our own century. And yet, despite these sentiments, he seems to have espoused a belief in "natural" religion. It is noteworthy that Hume met his death (after a protracted illness) with a calm that recalls to mind the death of Socrates.

For the most part Hume's ability to recognize all sides of a controversial question was remarkable. Curiously, one of his greatest strengths ultimately becomes a kind of weakness as well. His efforts to consider controversial matters with fairness and objectivity give his essays an impressive dignity and balance, but also often seem to prevent his inquiries from achieving the depth of the great political philosophers. For example, on the question of the equality of the sexes, Hume observes that "nature has given man the superiority above woman by endowing him with greater strength both of mind and body." But in another essay he refers to "that nearness of rank, not to say equality, which nature has established between the sexes." Hume's apparent unwillingness to explore the great issues of political philosophy must be ranked as a serious weakness, notwithstanding the great erudition and detachment he generally brings

to his topic.

This weakness has been suggested by Miller in an excellent article on Hume's *History of England*, in which Miller states that in "the *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding* [Hume] attacks those philosophers who define their task as the discovery of the ultimate principles. . . . It is not surprising, therefore, that Hume fails to provide us with a definition of liberty or a thematic discussion of what liberty is." The same is true of the principle of equality: Hume rarely uses the term, and even more rarely investigates the interrelationships between equality and liberty, or the effect these two principles have initially and eventually in democratic societies.

Nor does the term "democracy" make up much of Hume's political vocabulary. We in the Western democracies in the late twentieth century are so accustomed to thinking of ourselves as "democracies," and are so uncritically devoted to the principles of equality and liberty, that it is difficult for us to imagine earlier times in which these principles were just beginning to emerge into prominence. Hume seems not to have appreciated the degree to which the principles of equality and liber-

ty could become both allies and adversaries, simultaneously working both with and against each other (forced school busing is a case in point, in which government backing of the principle of equality enhances the liberty of some members of society while simultaneously reducing the liberty of others).

The problems of democracy implicit in the struggles between the Court and Country parties of eighteenth-century England have by now become explicit in most Western democracies. These problems were foreseen to some degree by such theorists as Plato and Aristotle and Tocqueville, among others, but knowledge of the writings of these worthy thinkers is not alone enough to enable us to deal successfully with the problems of modern democracy. Even if we do not fully comprehend the wisdom and the depth of ancient philosophers, we can go a long way toward resolving present difficulties if we recapture some aspects of David Hume's ability to examine the strengths and the weaknesses of our democratic heritage calmly, fairly, and dispassionately.

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