

Jaromír Lelek, “The Novelist as a Moral Physician: Fielding, Hume and the Moral Sense School of Thought”, Bachelor’s Thesis.

Report of the Opponent

This bachelor’s thesis is to be commended for its pioneering exploration of the relation between the novels of Henry Fielding (particularly *A History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*) and the moral philosophy of the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher, David Hume. It is written in fluent, sometimes quite ornate, English, and it is well-structured and clearly presented.

The work of Henry Fielding, and its background in the theology and cultural movements of his age, is described and interpreted in the first two chapters, and a comparison with Hume, and with other representatives of the moral sense school of philosophy is then to found in the third chapter. Although I am not competent to assess the parts dealing with Fielding, I should at least say that I found the first two chapters readable and informative and I was particularly impressed by the author’s defence of Fielding’s work against the charge of shallowness and comic frivolity (pp. 29-37).

With regard to the third chapter, I recognize the broad communality of Fielding and Hume in their grounding of moral judgement in sentiment rather than abstract reason. I also find convincing the author’s argument that Hume’s rejection of the ‘selfish school’ of thought of Hobbes and Mandeville, and his recognition of the benevolent and sympathetic instincts in man, is in some way parallel to Fielding’s view that goodness and sympathy are part of the innate make-up of man (p. 9). I believe that the author is also right to suggest that Hume’s rejection of egoistical ethics does not preclude a certain influence from this quarter (p. 46).

On the other hand, I was surprised that the author places such great emphasis, when treating of Hume, on his theory of the artificial virtues, particularly justice. I would have thought that Hume’s natural virtues—which barely get a mention here—would have made a good subject for comparison with Fielding. It is important to recognize that for Hume, as for Hutcheson before him, benevolence is a natural virtue, and that it is not the result of the conventions and considerations of utility that ground the artificial virtues. It should also be pointed out that, contrary to what the author suggests on pages 42-3, there is nothing in Hume akin to Hobbes’ state of nature as a state of war. The first primitive beginnings of man were always social, in Hume’s view, and therefore there is nothing akin to the radical individualism and mutual suspicion of Hobbes’ state of nature. I do not find it helpful, when talking of Hume’s thought, to speak of our ‘leaving of the jungle, the state of war’ as the author has it (p. 43). This is not to downplay the importance of the emergence of justice and the other artificial virtues that the author rightly draws attention to. But it is to say that the natural virtues and sentiments, including fellow-feeling and benevolence, should be treated as a fundamental part of human nature *ab initio* in Hume’s thought.

I certainly judge this bachelor’s thesis to be satisfactory to be defended in a viva. I tentatively recommend that the grade be a 2, or “velmi dobře”.

Doc. James Hill