**Tim Stuart-Buttle, *From Moral Theology to Moral Philosophy: Cicero and Visions of Humanity from Locke to Hume.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, 288 pp., £55 (Hardback) ISBN 9780198835585.**

Tim Stuart-Buttle’s first monograph investigates the development of moral philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the lens of Roman statesman and orator Cicero. In 1739, David Hume wrote to his critic Francis Hutcheson that he had taken his ‘Catalogue of Virtues from *Cicero’s* *Offices* [i.e. *De Officiis*]’ and ‘had, indeed, the former Book in my Eye in all my Reasonings’ when writing *A* *Treatise of Human Nature* (pp. 1, 188-9). A decade later, Hume identified his treatment of ethics and justice with Cicero’s throughout his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, which Hume regarded as ‘incomparably the best’ of all his own works.[[1]](#footnote-1) Hume shared this admiration of Cicero with John Locke, who owned more books by Cicero than he did of any other author apart from himself and Robert Boyle (p. 19). As Stuart-Buttle points out, the serious engagement with Cicero’s moral philosophy by Locke, Hume and others seemed incomprehensible to nineteenth-century historians such as T. B. Macaulay and Theodor Mommsen (p. 233). Much of this book centres on the question of what Locke and Hume found so compelling and useful about Cicero. It provides a lucid and convincing answer, and one which has wide implications for the historiography of early modern and modern philosophy.

Against much of the historiography, Stuart-Buttle argues against a dichotomised way of reading seventeenth and eighteenth-century thought as fixed on the rivalry between Stoicism and Epicureanism. Instead, he contends that Locke and Hume turned to Cicero in an attempt to transcend modern versions of these two Hellenistic schools, which in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stood for two extreme, often caricatured interpretations of human nature. In short, Epicureanism represented the view that human beings were fundamentally motivated by self-interest or self-love, and Stoicism that people were naturally benevolent and sociable. Rival Hellenistic views of the cosmos were not central to the later engagement with these philosophical labels, as they were more difficult to reconcile with Christian worldviews. For ‘neo-Epicureans’, justice was ultimately founded on utility. For Christian ‘Stoics’, by contrast, justice was intrinsically right and its own reward, as Leibniz stressed in a response to Samuel Pufendorf (p. 11). Epicureanism in particular could be a serious insult. Pufendorf, on his part, distinguished himself from the supposed Epicureanism of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes was indeed often taken as the arch neo-Epicurean – despite his own efforts to stress that he was not a follower of Epicurus. In the Scottish Enlightenment, Hume became regarded as the key representative of neo-Epicureanism, both in his own time and by later scholars. This raises many questions, however, as Hume did his best to distance himself from the Epicurean tradition, along with the Stoic.

In a footnote in the introduction to the *Treatise,* Hume cited Locke as the first example of ‘late philosophers in England’ who had applied experimental philosophy to moral subjects.[[2]](#footnote-2) This statement explicitly referred to the method of Francis Bacon, cited by Hume in the body of the text, but Stuart-Buttle argues that Cicero’s ‘academic scepticism’, which will be discussed below, was equally relevant as it was also founded on experience and empirical observation (p. 182). After Locke, Hume listed the third Earl of Shaftesbury, Bernard Mandeville, Hutcheson and Joseph Butler, with Hobbes being conspicuous by his absence. It should be noted that although this review largely focuses on Cicero, Locke and Hume, Stuart-Buttle devotes individual chapters to Shaftesbury, Mandeville, and the lesser-known Conyers Middleton, a heterodox Anglican clergyman and author of *The Life of Cicero* (1741).

Why has Hume become associated with neo-Epicureanism, as in the distinguished scholarship of James Moore and John Robertson? The key question in the early-modern and modern debate about Epicureanism and Stoicism was whether morality and justice were natural or artificial. As Hume notoriously called justice an artificial virtue, he has influentially been linked with Epicureanism. However, scholars have also tried to associate Hume with neo-Stoicism, perhaps most notably David Fate Norton. Both of these readings are mistaken, Stuart-Buttle argues, highlighting that Hume was explicitly critical of both Hellenistic schools (p. 182). Moreover, the emphasis he placed on sympathy sat especially uneasily with neo-Epicureanism and neo-Stoicism alike (p. 196). Instead, the tradition we should place him in is that of ‘academic scepticism’, a label which united him with Locke (as well as Middleton). This academic scepticism must be distinguished from Pyrrhonian scepticism, which boiled down to a dogmatic denial of questions of true or false, and right or wrong, as well as the almost equally extreme Cartesian scepticism. Stuart-Buttle defines the academic sceptic as someone who ‘refused to embrace unverifiable speculative hypotheses to profess to understand perfectly what he could and did not.’ (p. 23) Cicero is key to understanding this tradition of thought, the book stresses, because the ancient philosopher had probed the limits of reason in this way. According to Middleton, Cicero’s moral philosophy was founded on probability, not certainty (p. 172).

As Stuart-Buttle cautions, Locke and Hume’s Cicero, together with all ancient philosophy, was mediated by centuries of humanist and Christian scholarship. In other words, he does not argue that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were particularly good at understanding ancient thought on its own terms. ‘There *were* no genuine ‘Epicureans’ or ‘Stoics’ in this period, and it is rather fruitless to search for them’, he emphasises (p. 17). True, many acknowledged their debts to ancient philosophy, as with ‘academic scepticism’ in the case of Locke and Hume – but this was an exercise in appropriation and redefinition rather than strict discipleship. What is more, Stuart-Buttle shows that Hume read Cicero in different ways at different times in his career (p. 184). This discussion could have been expanded to include Hume’s views on other aspects of Cicero than his philosophy, especially his oratory. Indeed, in one of his finest essays, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’ (1757), Hume stated that ‘The abstract philosophy of Cicero has lost its credit: The vehemence of his oratory is still the object of our admiration.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Stuart-Buttle cites this essay but not this notable remark (p. 195). This is not to suggest that he would struggle to reconcile this rather sweeping statement with the argument and narrative of his book, but I would have liked to see it discussed in any case.

Locke’s reading of Cicero led him to develop a naturalistic explanation of how individuals acquire moral ideas and a sense of obligation to adhere to norms and rules (pp. 24-5). The key to this was the ‘Law of Reputation or Opinion’; in other words, the desire for esteem. This bears a strong resemblance to the social theory of Hume and others in the Scottish Enlightenment, notably Adam Smith, who is discussed in the book’s epilogue (pp. 226-30). A key important difference between Locke and Hume, however, was that the former believed that the writings of Cicero could bolster moral theology whereas the latter, who was notoriously also a religious sceptic, thought that it undercut it and paved the way for ‘a truly naturalistic moral philosophy’ (p. 7). This is the key to the book’s title: *From Moral Theology to Moral Philosophy*. For Locke, the origins and sanctions of moral law was God’s will and eternal rewards or punishments. But these truths were unavailable to human reason without the help of revelation. Accordingly, Locke turned to the desire for esteem to explain why people in general followed the natural law. In contrast, Hume – who in private said he wanted churches to be ‘converted into Riding Schools, Manufactories, Tennis Courts or Playhouses’ (p. 220) – went further than Locke by ‘unequivocally confin[ing] morality to human life’ (p. 183).

As the author highlights in the epilogue, this book could have been expanded, both temporally and geographically, to include thinkers from Augustine to Montesquieu. The absence of Adam Ferguson is conspicuous in the book’s epilogue, when Stuart-Buttle canvasses Scottish critics of Hume, from James Beattie to Alexander Carlyle, who sought to reclaim Cicero as a Stoic.[[4]](#footnote-4) Edward Gibbon makes a brief but important appearance at the end of the book. Gibbon’s early interest in Cicero which he shared with Hume and Middleton waned as he turned from the western to the eastern empire. Stuart-Buttle suggests that Gibbon’s intellectual trajectory is indicative of a development which would lead to the general depreciation of Cicero in the nineteenth century, illustrated by the references to Macaulay and Mommsen cited above.

This book will certainly be sufficiently wide-ranging and complex for most readers, however, and one could indeed make the opposite case: it could be condensed and recast with an even closer look on the Locke-Hume connection. However, such a book would have to revisit the more familiar territory of the two thinkers’ important disagreements in political philosophy. Bringing Hume and Locke into conversation with each other will neither be controversial nor unusual among historians of philosophy who are interested in the development of British empiricism. However, since Stuart-Buttle positions some of his argument against John Dunn – who has argued for a fundamental chasm between seventeenth-century natural law and eighteenth-century Scottish analysis – some readers may want more in terms of conventional political thought. One important point here is that Hume is perhaps most famous in political philosophy for the demolition of Locke’s contractarianism. In this context, we should also note that Hume came to loathe Locke’s brand of Whiggism more generally. As he wrote in the *History of England,* the Whig dominance since the Glorious Revolution had meant that ‘Compositions the most despicable, both for style and matter, have been extolled, and propagated, and read; as if they had equalled the most celebrated remains of antiquity.’[[5]](#footnote-5) Hume listed Locke as one of the examples*.* As with the Cicero quotation above from ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, however, the point is not that this quotation is a problem for the book’s argument, which is about moral philosophy. Yet it does suggest that at least one question for Hume may have been comparable to that of an essay title of John Dunn: ‘What is Living and What is Dead in the Political Theory of John Locke?’.[[6]](#footnote-6) We can imagineHume, at the end of his life, answering: ‘Locke’s politics is not quite dead yet, even though I have done my best to kill it off once and for all. If I live a few years longer, I may have the satisfaction of seeing the downfall of this prevailing system of superstition, along with others.’ According to Jeremy Bentham, Hume’s great achievement as a political philosopher was demolishing social contract theory.[[7]](#footnote-7) Examples from Immanuel Kant to John Rawls, however, show that Adam Smith’s Charon may have had the last word when responding to Hume: ‘You loitering rouge, that will not happen these many hundred years.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

The reflection above merely confirms that the afterlife of Locke in the eighteenth century was complicated and multi-dimensional, and one of the great achievements of this book is opening up a new perspective of thinking about Locke’s legacy, along with that of Cicero. The power behind the book is Stuart-Buttle’s breath-taking erudition and exemplary scholarship. One of his many virtues is that he is not only well read in all the relevant books (primary and secondary) but also uses more manuscript sources than is common among conventional intellectual historians. For the chapter on Locke, he made use of Locke’s remarkably vast archive. The chapter on Shaftesbury is similarly augmented by Shaftesbury’s unpublished writings. Stuart-Buttle’s archival research also extends to correspondence, including that between Middleton and William Warburton and Lord Hervey. In short, his deft use of unpublished material contributes to the extraordinary richness of this fine book.

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1. Hume, ‘My Own Life’, in *Moral Political and Literary* (Indianapolis, IN, 1985), xxxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), xvi-xvii. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hume, *Essays, Moral Political and Literary*, 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As Hume had told Hutcheson, however, the definition of the *summum bonum* by the Stoic Cato in book III of *De Finibus* was refuted by Cicero himself as the academic sceptic in book IV (p. 189 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hume, *The History of England* (1754-61), (6 vols., Indianapolis, IN, 1983 [1778]), VI, 533. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility: Essays 1981-89* (Cambridge, 1990), 9–25 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bentham, *A Fragment on Government* (Cambridge, 1988 [1776]), 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Letter from Adam Smith to William Strahan* (1776), in Hume, *Essays, Moral Political and Literary,* xlvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)