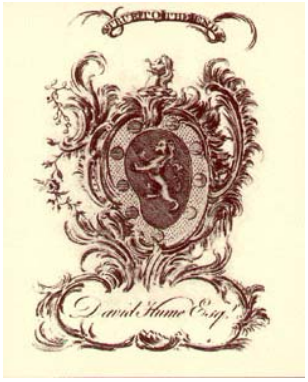

Review of Ezra Talmor, *Descartes and Hume*
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Descartes and Hume. By Ezra Talmor. Oxford; Pergamon Press, 1980. Pp. xviii + 174. Price £7.50 ($17.00).)

Dr. Talmor challenges the conventional view of the relationship between the philosophies of Descartes and Hume. Hume, the extreme empiricist, thoroughgoing sceptic and radical subjectivist, is often seen as the more or less complete antithesis of Descartes, the anti-sceptical rationalist who argued for the existence of a benevolent God as the guarantor of the objectivity of scientific knowledge. This view, however, according to Talmor, rests on a misguided view of both philosophers, derived more from the preoccupations of twentieth-century analytical philosophy than from a sympathetic effort to see the two men against their own historical background and in terms of their own concerns. (Thus, Talmor has a good deal to say about the general problems of writing the history of philosophy, as well as about the interpretation of Descartes and Hume themselves.) If seen in this way, Talmor contends, the two philosophers turn out to have a lot in common: in particular, they share the programme of undermining and replacing scholasticism, Descartes more especially in physics, Hume more in morality and the human sciences. In effect, this involved them both in an attempt to substitute a whole new language and conceptual scheme for the one used to express the scholastic (and to a certain extent the common-sense) picture of the world. Above all, they had to elaborate a language which would make it perfectly clear that such mentalistic concepts as "purpose" and "value" had no place in the description of external or physical nature. Part of Talmor's claim, if I understand him rightly, is that the strategy for advocating such a wholesale conceptual innovation (a "paradigm-change" in Kuhnian terminology) cannot be that of straightforward demonstrative argument, such as is favoured by analytical philosophers. For such arguments depend on a background of shared assumptions, and so can work only if a certain

conceptual scheme is taken for granted. Rather, Talmor seems to be saying, Descartes and Hume should be seen as adopting something more like rhetorical methods of persuasion: even the demonstrative form of Descartes' arguments is more of a rhetorical appeal to scholastic conceptions of respectable methods for presenting a case, which works hand-in-glove with the method of doubt to undermine confidence in the validity of purposive explanations ("substantial forms") of physical phenomena.

The point of Cartesian dualism on this view, is not so much to emphasize the subjectivity of the mental ("ideas" etc.) as to introduce the new conception of the purely objective character of the physical. In this sense, Talmor contends, Hume was a complete Cartesian, simply continuing Descartes' work and extending it into new fields. For instance, to say, as Hume does, that our idea of the necessary connexion between cause and effect is derived, not from any impression of the relations between external objects, but from a determination of our own minds by custom, is not, Talmor would argue, to propound a subjectivist or sceptical account of causality: on the contrary, it is to emphasize the wholly objective and non-mysterious character of causal relationships. To say that necessary connexion is an "idea" is to say that everything about the causal relationship is fully perspicuous to the intellect, that there is nothing hidden or mysterious about it as there was about the scholastics' substantial forms. Similarly, to say that moral or aesthetic value resides in our sentiments about objects rather than in the objects themselves is not, Talmor would claim, to propose an "emotivist" theory of ethics. Unlike modern emotivists, Hume saw moral values as rooted in objective facts about human nature and human society, but wanted to stress that their role was to provide reasons for action rather than to form part of our knowledge of facts.

Even from this fairly brief summary, it will be clear that Talmor has a number of original and provocative things to say about both Descartes and Hume (and indeed about the general problem of how to deal with the classics of philosophy). It is always refreshing to look at the great philosophers from a new angle. Unfortunately, however, whatever may be said about individual passages, his book fails to carry conviction as a whole. This is partly because of its style: it is written in an obscure, repetitious, rambling manner which often makes it difficult to see precisely what point is being made, at least without a number of re-readings. But it also springs from the sheer implausibility of what appears to be its central contention. It is surely true that both Descartes and Hume were concerned with much more than an assault on the scholastic picture of the world (even assuming one can speak of the scholastic picture in this way). Both have to be seen in their place in the philosophical tradition, concerned with well-established problems about knowledge and reality, God and the soul, and so forth; and, when they are seen in this way, the differences between them come to seem much more significant than their similarities. Seen in this way too, they seem to have much more in common, both in their preoccupations and in their methods of presentation, with modern analytical philosophy than Talmor is willing to allow. His book's pretensions to offer a new insight into Descartes and Hume are not really justified.

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