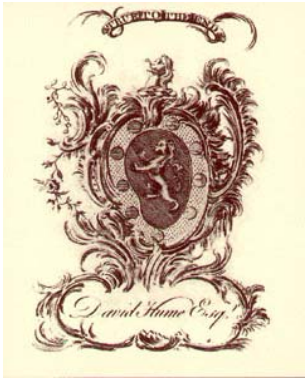

Review of Humes verborgener Rationalismus
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Humes verborgener Rationalismus. By Lothar Kreimendahl (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982) Pp. x, 222. DM 98.

Hume's hidden rationalism is here revealed in four fundamental and frequent debating moves or principles, which Hume can never fully justify or reconcile. Nor can we mend matters by tinkering with his formulae or by supplying extra reasoning to fill his gaps. Humean empiricism is a hopeless enterprise. The best we can do is to puzzle out how Hume came to build such a rickety structure, and to see where and when he obtained such an ill-matched set of second-hand materials.

The four principles are these: A. we cannot make up new ideas (but only repeat or re-combine those taken from impressions received through the senses); B. whatever we can distinguish could be separate; C. whatever we manage to think of could exist; D. thoughts express either relations of ideas (with certainty) or matters of fact (without).

Appeal is made to each of these principles as though it were a universal and necessary truth. But such truths cannot be known as such simply on the basis of experiences. Therefore a would-be empiricist like Hume has no right to appeal to such principles.

Appeal had better be made to each of these principles one by one, for if we take two together, and dig, we shall find an inconsistency. Thus B should enable us to separate an impression from 'its' idea, but the Copy-Theory says they must stick together, and A is based upon the Copy-Theory (134). C is 'irreconcilably opposed' to A and tends to cancel B (206). And so on.

Following Flew, D is referred to as Hume's 'Fork'; and the title 'Axiom' is proposed for B. (To complete this handy scheme, we shall call A the 'Dogma' (of empiricism), and C the 'Principle' (of possibility). Principle and Fork, it seems, were taken over from rationalist thinkers ready-made; the Dogma is a new and unpractical extension of Locke's theory of knowledge and ideas, while the Axiom derives from the notion of a complex idea, was mistakenly applied to things as well, and later dropped.

In deriving the Dogma, Hume says that impressions are more lively than ideas; but this criterion appears inadequate and (like any other) might not work next time. Hume thinks it a simple matter to distinguish simple from complex ideas: but it needs an expert to decide when we have really reached simplicity, e.g. in analysing chords. The copy-theory -- even if we give up attempting to refer to outward things -- will still require us to inspect an impression and its idea together, to note their similarity -- which seems impossible. Moreover that theory is presupposed in every instance brought to illustrate or enforce the theory; every case Hume cites, from God to pineapple, is inevitably circular.

The Axiom figures quite largely in the Treatise, Book I, and in the Appendix, first part, but not in Books II and III, nor in the Abstract of 1740, nor the Enquiry. It arises as follows: given that ideas may be either simple or complex, no impression can be indissolubly composite, and any distinction noted between ideas must involve their separability; so whatever is different can be distinguished and may be thought of separately (80). Applied to ideas, this might pass as a statement of our imaginative capacity; but Hume has it apply to things as well. Thus employed, it tends to atomise all phenomena.

Hume's main use of the Axiom is in showing that something cannot possibly be proved, for, behold, the contrary is conceivable. Thus no cause can be shown necessary to its effect, as we can imagine that cause having a different effect, or even that effect resulting from no cause at all. Hume is careful not to mention, at this point, that any causal argument for a God would also be undermined by this line of argument, but his imprecise footnotes refer to just that topic in Locke and Clarke, and a letter to Ramsay (29.9.1734) mentions an Abbé's library in Paris in which Hume had found Locke's Essays and Berkeley's Principles: surely an Abbé so well up would have purchased Hobbes and Clarke as well?

The Principle of Possibility derives from Descartes, via Malebranche and, perhaps, Leibniz. Anything can be thought of as existent, which we clearly and distinctly conceive. (Anything we do perceive is 'vividly' and so clearly conceived.) No doubt we can think of a 'golden mountain' and, thinking, imagine that there might be one -- we can't see why there shouldn't be, we can see no contradiction that would be involved. The trouble is that in using this principle in practice we should be arguing from a negative. The logical status of golden mountains cannot really be settled by noting the contradictions that we do not see. Goldbach's Conjecture puts this point neatly by posing alternatives, one of which must be wrong though we don't know which, and neither appears to us contradictory.

Finally, Hume's Fork is traced back to several predecessors and particularly to Tillotson's Four Grades of Evidence (proof, sight, induction, hearsay), thus linking Hume once again with a theological debate which he thought it wiser not to enter at that point. It is not clear how a consistent empiricist could get

hold of such a fork, and its use would seem to condemn the user to just swopping relations of ideas.

This book contains many references and suggestions of interest to a specialist anxious to decide just where Hume got his notions from. For the ordinary reader, who would like assistance just in thinking through Hume's thoughts, the value of this work must lie mainly in its systematic character: -- 'Here are four pillars of Hume's empiricism, and this is what is wrong with them'. Our comments are mostly on this point.

Any argumentative writer must appeal to many principles, that is, to points he thinks his reader will grant, but whose implications, he hopes, will carry that reader further on. Only a few writers, however, arrange all their points and arguments in a logical system, so that all are shown to depend on a small set of basic axioms. Now the four 'principles' which our author takes such care to analyse are certainly argument-starters, but they are not presented by Hume as axioms, for he was not writing more geometrico. Could it be, then, that Hume was expounding in a popular synthetic manner a system, whose logical skeleton our author has at last managed to reveal? *Yes*, it could. But it *isn't*.

We should also remember, when reading Hume, that the terms 'rationalist' and 'empiricist' were invented in the nineteenth century. We may not attribute to Hume whatever we think a good empiricist must think, nor criticise him for having thoughts which we think only a rationalist could entertain. As to the actual structure of Hume's system, that can only be elicited by reading what he wrote.

According to a popular misconception, Descartes' whole metaphysic was spun out of his Cogito: it was not just the first, but the only really basic

principle of that scheme of thought. Our author seems to expect a similar pattern in Hume, for conflicts detected between the Dogma and other items are treated as most serious, and it is made a complaint that they do not derive from it. But Hume has said nothing to suggest such a single-source system of philosophy. Even if we see him as constructing a scheme with principles, we shall expect those principles to be independent, i.e. not derivable one from another.

Hume's thought was of course systematic: it was meant to hang together, and not contain inconsistencies, some parts of it were seen as following from other parts, some parts needed to be expounded first. But the system was not thought out or presented as a deductive one. We may of course choose to undertake an axiomatic analysis, of his theories, and that exercise may be of great benefit to us; but it may also be dangerous, misleading us into mistaking Hume's intentions and misjudging his performance. The Hume-critic also may have his hidden rationalism, and we should beware of it.

The Axiom is of particular interest in deciding what sort of system is appropriate for Hume. According to our author, the Axiom was dropped early in 1739, perhaps in response to a reviewer's crack (Warburton). In the Treatise the Axiom is used 13 times, mostly on topics which do not recur in the Abstract, or Enquiry, but also and centrally on Causality and Belief, which are there discussed but without using the Axiom (99). But surely an item which can be sacrificed so easily is not a very basic principle? (In fact, Hume employs examples to insinuate much the same principle: you can think of the sun not rising tomorrow, you can't think out that water will drown or fire burn, Enquiry § 21, 23). Perhaps we ought to concede Hume's own estimate of the changes as corrections to 'some negligences in

his former reasonings and more in the expression' (Advertisement, 1777).

It remains of course true that Hume set out to build a science of Human Nature on the basis of perceived ideas; and ran into difficulties. These difficulties will get even worse, if we use terms and theories of a later age in formulating them. Thus 'what we can learn from our ideas' is different from 'what we can learn from experiences', or, 'empirically'; these later phrases having an objective and external ring. From our ideas we can learn -- with certainty -- that a square is not a triangle: so, while truths learnt by induction will never be known to apply universally, nevertheless some mathematical truths can be acquired by 'the way of ideas'.

Of what is it true that 'anything you can think of could exist'? This seems to apply to complex ideas, which it would take a proposition to describe, e.g. a regular dodecahedron, described in 'some regular solids have twelve sides'. If we think this out very fully and clearly (says Descartes), if we try it out in thought (says Kant) we can make sure that no open or hidden contradiction is involved -- so that this item really can be thought. Whereas if we think our way carefully through 'Bicycle polo is the only sport to have been invented twice' we shall see that this cannot strictly be thought as a whole, but only in incompatible bits, brought alongside to make an amusing paradox. Here again, there may be better or more modern ways of stating these points, but these are likely to hinder us in the task of making out what it was Hume had to say.

This is cautious well-documented, patient work, meant to help put Hume in his place in the history of ideas. The source-critical learning will be of value to the learned, and I hope the analytical scheme will

provoke the debate it deserves among the rest of us. The Bibliography refers to work in English and German, to 1980.

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