



Review of The Sceptical Realism of David Hume

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The Sceptical Realism of David Hume. By John P. Wright (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983) Pp. 269. £19.75.

Wright distinguishes two well-established but conflicting interpretations of Hume's philosophy.

(1) Hume's central aim is to show how far it is possible to construct our ordinary conception of man and the world out of impressions of sense and reflection. Some see Hume as partially successful in this project and interpret him as a precursor of latter forms of positivism, phenomenalism and even of logical empiricism. Others who see the project as unsuccessful view him as a witting or unwitting sceptic whose philosophy ends in the self destruction that must attend any consistent attempt to follow out the modern "way of ideas" approach to philosophical problems.

(2) Hume's central aim is to discredit the rationalistic conception of man as a being independent of nature. On this view, Hume accepted the theory of ideas from his predecessors but supplemented it with a theory of natural belief which functions to fill the gaps and discontinuities which a rigorous examination of our ideas reveals. The sceptical parts of his philosophy serve only to eliminate the rationalistic conception of man and to show what must be added to the theory of ideas to account for our common sense, scientific conception of the world.

While granting a grain of truth to both interpretations, Wright argues that they distort what is distinctive about Hume's philosophy. He explores in some depth the historical background of Hume's epistemology and shows that Hume's conception of knowledge is firmly rooted in the Cartesian framework of Descartes, Malebranche, the Port Royal Logic, and, with some qualifications, Berkeley. One barrier to apprec-

iating the peculiarities of Hume's scepticism and realism is that most of us have inherited a post-Kantian, positivistic conception of knowledge according to which the concept of knowledge applies to phenomena. Hume, however, accepted the Cartesian ideal that knowledge is a grasp of ultimate reality through a rational analysis of our ideas. But in Hume's hands this rationalistic thesis yields sceptical results. For what Hume discovered is that rational analysis of our ideas shows that, except for mathematics, our ideas are inadequate representations of the reality they purport to be about. Such a conception of knowledge places Hume in the classical humanist tradition of learned ignorance and cuts off all possibility of a positivistic or phenomenalist reading. Nor can natural beliefs (Kemp Smith and Stroud) be added to our ideas to form our common sense conception of the world, for Hume shows that rational analysis of such natural beliefs as causality and matter lead us to reject both common sense and scientific beliefs. The aim of Hume's philosophy, Wright concludes, is to show that we are related to a world of independent objects through natural judgments which involve a systematic confusion of ideas. Natural judgments cause us to ascribe properties to objects which do not belong to the sense-derived ideas which represent them. Against all forms of positivism and phenomenism, the rationale of Hume's scepticism is not to constrict our scientific conception of reality to our ideas but to push beyond our ideas to reality by showing their limits.

Questions of whether Hume is or is not a sceptic are often misplaced within a post-Kantian concept of knowledge. Viewed this way, the question is whether Hume thought the basic beliefs and inferring procedures of common sense and science are justified, where justification means roughly the Kantian notion of

applying a rule grounded in the structure of experience. But Hume's scepticism is not the problem of justifying judgments within experience. His problem is how, given our ignorance of the world due to the inadequacy of our ideas, is it possible (for philosophers especially) to have any beliefs at all? Similarly, following Kant, the problem of moral philosophy is, what is right action and what justifies it? Hume's problem, by contrast, is, what is the source of action? Against the background of the learned ignorance, gained by working through the inadequacy of our ideas, Hume offers a psycho-physical, causal account of our scientific and moral conventions. Given these conventions justificatory rules can be derived which justify moves within the convention. And Hume produces eight such rules for justifying causal judgments within the convention of science (T 173-75). But such problems of justification are not Hume's main concern in either science or morality. His main concern is to find the source in human nature of all conventions. Hume, in contrast to Kant, is more concerned with the nature of the knower than with the nature of knowledge.

This interpretation of Hume's scepticism is established in Chapter One, entitled "Hume's Philosophy of Scepticism." Chapter Two, "Scepticism with regard to the senses," deals with the difficult section ii, Part IV, Book I of the Treatise, shedding new light on it by showing how Hume's discussion throughout is rooted in Malebranche's conception of the problem of external existence and how Hume critically transformed Malebranche's analysis into his own sceptically realistic position. Chapter Three, "Knowledge and Objective Scepticism," discusses Hume's conception of space, time and matter, showing how Hume's discussion is set in a Cartesian context. Here and throughout the

book Wright shows how Hume's thought moves dialectically. There is a dialectic between the rational analysis of our ideas of space and time and the natural judgments we make about space and time, the former showing, in a manner similar to Kant, that our ideas of space and time are phenomenal and are inadequate representations of what the ideas purport to be about. The discussion looks backwards to the strong Cartesian influence on Hume's conception of space, the problem of infinite divisibility, and the vacuum, and forwards to Kant where there is a useful discussion of the similarities and difference between Hume's realistic and Kant's formalistic conception of space and time.

Chapter IV, entitled "Causal scepticism and necessary natural powers," deals with Hume's conception of causality and the nature of his causal scepticism. The latter is due to the Cartesian ideal of knowledge according to which reality is an ultimately intelligible scheme of things understandable through clear and distinct ideas. Although he accepts the Cartesian idea of knowledge, Hume denies that our ideas are adequate conceptions of the causal reality they purport to be about. Our notion of causality is due to a natural instinct which founds a convention of causal judgment. From this convention Hume abstracts rules for making causal judgments. These rules do not give us knowledge of ultimate reality, but Hume believes that by systematically applying them, we may approach the ideal.

The final chapter, "Hume's science of human nature," discusses the psychological foundation of Hume's theory of natural judgment. Such judgments are rooted in the Cartesian vision of man as a mechanical psycho-physical system. Hume follows the Cartesians in thinking that the mechanical processes of natural judgment have an adaptive function when directed to

external objects and causal connections. But Wright shows that Hume breaks with the Cartesians in claiming that the mechanical processes of natural judgment are not adaptive when directed to political society.

This book brings a breath of historically fresh air to the study of Hume's epistemology and metaphysics by its full references to Hume's contemporaries (philosophical and otherwise) but especially by its exploration of the neglected Cartesian influence on Hume's conception of knowledge and reality.

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