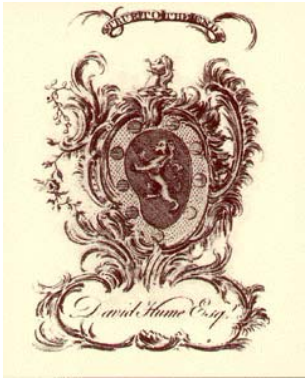

Marina Frasca-Spada. ***Space and Self in Hume's Treatise***
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Book Reviews

MARINA FRASCA-SPADA. *Space and the Self in Hume's Treatise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xiii + 220. ISBN 0-521-620-910, $59.95, cloth.

Marina Frasca-Spada's *Space and the Self in Hume's Treatise* proposes a subjective idealist interpretation of Hume's account of space in part ii of Book I of the *Treatise*. The book is divided into four chapters. The first deals with Hume's position on infinite divisibility in I ii 1–2, the second with his position on the origin of the idea of space in I ii 3, the third with his account of geometrical knowledge in I ii 4, and the final chapter with his position on vacuum in I ii 5. The subject matter of I ii 6 on the idea of existence is dealt with over the course of the third chapter (146–149). Between the second and third chapters, the exposition is interrupted by what Frasca-Spada calls an "Intermezzo." This piece begins by promising to explain why Hume's theory of space is "central to the philosophical substance of the *Treatise*" (85), but turns to other topics before delivering on the promise. Its relation to the other parts of the book is unclear, and it would have been better included as a preface or appendix, or omitted altogether.

The thesis of the first chapter is developed by way of commentary on a particularly problematic text: Hume's claim at *Treatise* 27 that while it is possible to have distinct ideas of the thousandth and ten-thousandth part of a grain of sand, it is not possible to have distinct images of these parts, and that the idea of a grain of sand is not separable into twenty, much less ten thousand, parts.

Frasca-Spada resolves the apparent inconsistencies in this text by distinguishing between four different types of objects that figure in Hume's claims:

ideas of numbers and proportions, mental images of things and their parts, visual images of things and their parts, and the things themselves.

As Frasca-Spada reads Hume, he means to say that we can form conceptions of arbitrarily small quantities by relating our ideas of numbers to one another. Since there is no limit to the smallness of the ideas of fractions that we can form, there is no lower bound to this process. But the mental images that we form to represent these arbitrarily small numbers do not get smaller as the numbers do. While we can think that there are ten ten-thousandth parts of a grain of sand in a one-thousandth part of a grain of sand, the mental image we form to accompany our thought of the ten-thousandth part is no different from the one we form to accompany our thought of the one-thousandth part. Both are points that have color but zero extension. Frasca-Spada points to an analogy with Hume's account of abstract ideas. With abstract ideas, a term gives rise to the thought of a particular individual that stands in for a whole group, and the mind has a tendency to very readily substitute any other member of the group for the representative idea. With very small objects, a mental image of a minimum stands in for any of a number of different numerical proportions and the mind uses the same image to stand for any of them.

Frasca-Spada takes it that, for Hume, visual minima exist at a number of different levels. Any object will appear as a minimum if viewed from a sufficient distance. Upon approach or upon viewing the object with a telescope or microscope, the object appears as extended and it is its parts that appear as minima. Closer scrutiny expands these minima in turn. Having once moved down through a number of these "levels," the mind develops a tendency to carry on in the process and suppose that increasingly close scrutiny will continue endlessly expanding previously minimal visual images into further, only apparently minimal parts. Frasca-Spada compares this to the process Hume appeals to in order to account for the development of a standard of equality in *Treatise* I ii 4.

The conception of the infinite divisibility of objects that arises from this inertial tendency of the imagination is ultimately groundless, however, and cannot be taken to reflect what objects are like in reality. Frasca-Spada locates Hume's justification for this claim in the arguments of *Treatise* I iv 2 and I iv 4, which she interprets as establishing that we cannot suppose external objects to have features incompatible with those exhibited by our impressions (52). The fact that all our images and impressions are only finitely divisible therefore entails that somewhere the division of objects must stop.

It is hard not to find a strain of desperation in this solution. If all our images and impressions prove to be divisible upon further scrutiny, why should we not draw an opposite conclusion? A better approach might have blocked the regress by observing that when we give ourselves a closer view of a minimally visible point, we do not, in all strictness, view smaller and smaller parts of the "same" object. Rather, as Berkeley had observed when discussing

microscopical eyes, we view quite distinct objects. These objects may be associated with one another (e.g., one may be thought to be the object that is viewed after placing the other under a microscope), but the view through a microscope cannot be imaged as a part of the macroscopic object without exceeding the capacity of the mind to form distinct, coordinated images of the many different parts the macroscopic object would have to be supposed to have. The microscopic object is really only ever seen or imaged as a distinct, finitely divisible microscopic object, and never as a part of a macroscopic object.

Frasca-Spada may have resisted this option because it would have prevented her from drawing a subjective idealist conclusion that appears quite innocuously in her first chapter, but that quickly takes on disturbing proportions in the second: the conclusion that the structure of objects (or ideas and impressions, which are our only objects) is determined by mental capacities and operations rather than brute-factually given.

Be this as it may, Frasca-Spada's distinction between the four different levels of discourse operative throughout Hume's discussion of infinite divisibility in *Treatise* I ii 1 and 2 is illuminating and points the way towards the resolution of a problem that has heretofore appeared intractable.

The problematic text for Frasca-Spada's second chapter is *Treatise* 33–34, where Hume claims that the idea of space or extension is not copied from any one impression, but rather from the manner in which a number of impressions are disposed. As many commentators have observed, this thesis sits uneasily with Hume's claim that all simple ideas are copied from antecedent simple impressions.

As Frasca-Spada sees it, Hume's copy thesis is merely a maxim, not a law that must be satisfied in every instance (64). Moreover, the copy thesis is merely an investigative maxim. It does not tell us what we must find, but rather describes the manner in which we are to go about looking. It directs us to identify the simple impressions constitutive of our experiences as a first step in accounting for the origin of our ideas, but it does not rule out the chance that we might identify some "residue" or "point of singularity" that is not a simple impression (74, 75). In the case of the idea of extension, this residue is the manner of disposition of unextended colored and tangible points.

Having gone this far, Frasca-Spada suddenly "proposes" to treat the manner of disposition as "an original contribution of the mind to sense experience" (75, cf. 179–180). There is no direct textual warrant for this proposal. Frasca-Spada thinks there could not be. The mind and its activities are theoretically inaccessible for the Hume of Book I of the *Treatise*. Accordingly, any reference to mental activity in constituting the manners of disposition would have to be allusive and evocative at best. The manners of disposition signify "traces" of the mind's activity (56), where "trace" does not simply mean a trace presence, but a trace acknowledgment of a central and constitutive role.

Accordingly, all of Frasca-Spada's reasons for attributing this subjective idealist position to Hume are analogical and circumstantial. We are told that reference to manners of disposition constitutes "loose language," and that this is indicative because "loose language" is all that can be employed to describe actions of the mind, which is a "something I know not what" (69, 81). This is so much the case that the "very vagueness and ambiguity of Hume's language" is supposed to "intimate" a direct, original contribution of the mind (83). We are also told that the language of "manners" is used to refer to belief. But Frasca-Spada takes it that, for Hume, belief is produced by mental operations. Therefore, our ideas of space and time might analogously be produced by mental operations (76). Again, we are told that since space, time, and belief cannot be ideas obtained from any distinct impression of the senses, and cannot "exactly" derive from the passions, no alternative remains but to suppose that they are traces of mental operations and activities (194).

Whatever one may think of the strength of these arguments, there is an alternative that Frasca-Spada neglects. This is that the manners of disposition are contributed by experience rather than by the mind. On this view, over the course of one's sensory experience, a number of simple impressions occur, and just as they occur one after another, so they occur one above, below, before, behind, and beside another, so that space and time, considered as manners of disposition, are not "loose" or vague notions at all; they are the orders in which simple impressions are presented as experience expands, sweeps, and progresses. There could hardly be an experience of a number of simple impressions without those impressions being presented in some order or other; and three-dimensional, Euclidean space and classical Newtonian time are the orders that our experience brute-factually happens to exhibit.

Perhaps the most serious problem with Frasca-Spada's idealist reading of Hume's position on manners of disposition is that it contradicts what she herself goes on to claim in the following chapter, on Hume's account of geometrical knowledge. One would think that if Hume really took the spatial manner of disposition to be "an original contribution of the mind to sense experience," then he should be credited with having scooped Kant (or at least, with having scooped the classic, subjective idealist interpretation of Kant). After all, it was Kant who more famously maintained that "while the matter of all appearances is only given a posteriori, their form must lie ready a priori in the mind."[1] Hume should also, one would think, have gone on to draw the same conclusion that Kant did: that if the spatial form of disposition is dependent on the way the mind is rather than on the way sense experience is, then descriptions of this form (and the principles of geometry are just descriptions of space) would be in no way dependent on sense experience. But Frasca-Spada instead takes Hume's view of geometry to be "a radical alternative" (128) to Kant's insistence on the synthetic a priori status of geometrical principles, and

even goes so far as to say that Hume maintains that geometry is grounded on "perception" (129).

It is not clear how these observations are to be reconciled with Frasca-Spada's results in chapter 2. Kant, on the first page of the Introduction to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, famously observed that though all of our knowledge begins with experience (or what Hume would call "perception"), not all arises out of it, and he explained this observation by noting that experience itself may result not only from the way objects happen to affect us, but also from something that the mind itself contributes on the occasion of affection. Such a subjective contribution to experience, Kant had admitted, might only be discovered through consulting experience. Indeed, it might be quite difficult to separate it from those components of our experience that result from affection by objects. But that would not change the fact that it would be independent of the way we are affected by objects and accordingly would be valid a priori (logically independent of our experience of objects even if not temporally antecedent to that experience). Frasca-Spada's interpretation in her chapter 2 runs Hume's position into this one.

The bulk of Frasca-Spada's third chapter is devoted to explaining how Hume could take geometry to be grounded on "perception" while still considering it to be a form of demonstrative knowledge along with arithmetic and algebra (135). This is an intriguing problem in its own right, and Frasca-Spada proposes a plausible solution, but it is not a solution that significantly distances the idealism about manners of disposition she attributes to Hume in chapter 2 from the views of Kant.

Frasca-Spada begins by noting that Hume distinguished probabilistic from demonstrative knowledge. She claims that the former depends on discerning relations (of contiguity, identity, and causality) that can only be discovered through experience, whereas the latter depends on relations (of resemblance, contrariety, and degrees of quality and quantity) that can be discerned simply by inspecting and comparing ideas of the related objects, without consulting how it is that impressions corresponding to those ideas are presented in experience. Thus, knowledge of the latter relations is "a priori" in a way that knowledge of the former relations is not.

However, the latter relations—resemblance, contrariety, degrees of quality, and degrees of quantity —are not all on quite the same footing. Degrees of quantity (and hence arithmetic and algebra) permit of a classic, Kantian conceptual analysis (though Kant himself would of course have resisted accounting for arithmetical and algebraic propositions in this way). For Hume (unlike Kant), these propositions are made true by the fact that the predicate concept is contained in the subject concept, and it is possible to construct chains of demonstration, based on analysis of the predicate and subject concepts, to prove that this is the case when it is not immediately evident.

But relations of resemblance, contrariety, and degrees of quality elude analysis. Blue, for example, is not said to be more like green than like scarlet because it contains green or shares some analytically identifiable feature in common with green. The ideas of blue, green, and scarlet are simple and distinct and not further analyzable, yet it is possible to discern a greater resemblance relation between blue and green by simply inspecting and comparing them. But this is not to say that resemblance relations are dependent on experience in the way that relations of contiguity, identity, and causality are. I can only know that one object is beside another, the same as another, or the cause of another, by referring to how my impressions of these objects were originally presented in experience; but to tell that one object resembles another I merely need to consult my ideas of those objects, without having to make any further reference to the manner in which those objects were originally presented in experience.

Geometry, insofar as it is unable to access an exact standard of equality or congruence, is effectively reduced to a science of resemblance relations, and hence acquires the peculiar status exhibited by our knowledge of those relations. It is not analytic, but the only experience it depends upon is the experience that gives us ideas of the objects to be compared. The relations between these objects can then be directly intuited (up to certain tolerances) independently of any reference to how impressions of those objects were originally presented in experience.

Frasca-Spada claims that this is a position on geometrical knowledge that is quite different from the Kantian notion of a synthetic a priori proposition. However, whether this is so or not depends on how we understand manners of disposition. If we follow Frasca-Spada in taking a subjective idealist line, and suppose that the mind itself determines that colored and tangible points will be disposed in three spatial dimensions and in a way that approximates Euclidean metric over medium distances, then the resemblance relations we end up intuiting between geometrical objects are ultimately dependent on the way the mind constitutes experience in advance and independently of how it happens to be affected by objects. The result is that there is no relevant difference between Hume's position and Kant's. It is only when our ideas of geometrical objects are taken to have been copied from impressions that are brute-factually given as consistently disposed in an approximately Euclidean, three-dimensional space—and that could turn out tomorrow to be given in radically non-Euclidean ways—that our intuitions of resemblance relations between these objects can be taken to be contingent and divorced from Kantian apodictic propositions.

Frasca-Spada recognizes that Hume, unlike Kant, did not take geometrical propositions to be apodictic (128). But she does not recognize that this militates against her subjective idealist account of his position on manners of disposition.

The main contribution of Frasca-Spada's final chapter is its analysis of the Humean notion of imperceptible distance. Imperceptible distance is a distance that is not occupied by any perceptible object, such as the distance between two outspread fingers held up against the night sky. The notion should be unproblematic for Hume, given that he identified space with the manner of disposition of impressions. If impressions are disposed in space, then it should be possible for one impression to be disposed at one point, say at 12 o'clock, or in my left hand, and another to be disposed at a separate point, say at 2 o'clock, or at my left elbow, and for there to be nothing else perceptible in between them. But, strangely, Hume denied the existence of a vacuum, at least in certain places (e.g., T 40, 53, though Frasca-Spada notes a contradictory claim at T 639). He claimed that since space is composed of points, since these points have no extension, and since they cannot therefore exist unless there is something else "real" (i.e., perceptible) to them, such as color or solidity, there can be no vacuum. But then how can there be an "imperceptible" distance? As Frasca-Spada sees it, this problem points to an unresolved tension within Hume's account of space as manner of disposition of impressions (164).

Frasca-Spada's solution to this difficulty is one designed to underwrite her claim that Hume is an idealist about manners of disposition. She proposes that rather than understand Hume's simple impressions to be instanced by Berkeleian *minima visibilia* and *minima tangibilia*, we instead take them to be something like Carnapian temporary total states. A simple impression is the whole that is immediately given at any given moment (182). As so understood, simple impressions are "primordial" and we are normally not aware of them (80). They also, Frasca-Spada declares, do not consist of points set at a distance from one another. "'Distance'," she writes, enclosing the word in quotes for reasons that are unclear, "is not to be found in the crude sense-impression, but only comes out through an act of judgment" (180; cf. 183: "the notion of 'distance' arises as a result of our judgment's interpretation of visual data").

The textual warrant for attributing this view to Hume is again unclear. While it is incontestable that Hume takes the idea of a vacuum to be a fiction produced by the imagination, and that he takes "imperceptible" distance to be something we judge to be present between impressions based on what we have experienced in the past, it is far from clear that Hume takes judgment to constitute distance, rather than merely discover it. Hume holds that it is only through imagining an "imperceptible" distance to be one that would otherwise hold a certain number of perceptible points, or judging that the objects on either side of an "imperceptible" distance are affecting us in the same way as objects previously experienced to be set at a particular perceptible distance from one another, that we come to identify an "imperceptible" distance between objects. But then our judgments of imperceptible distance presuppose an antecedent experience of perceptible *minima visibilia* or *minima tangibilia* as disposed alongside one another in space, and do not create that experience.

Frasca-Spada actually cites a passage from Cassirer that closes by making this very point (179), but she seems to have missed its import.

The view Frasca-Spada would instead have us attribute to Hume is a cure that is worse than the disease. Supposing that, when I look up at the night sky, my "primordial" impression of the heavens is of an amorphous whole, in which white and black minima are all present in a heap, as it were, without any relations of adjacency or distance being given, and that the spatial arrangement of these points is rather set to my judgment as a task, what could possibly determine me to impose one set of distance relations on the elements rather than another? Why should I not place all the stars together to build a triangle or a square or any other shape, rather than distribute them in their familiar constellations? There can be nothing in the impressions of the stars themselves to guide me, since they are all identical—or if they vary, it is only in brightness and color, and those variations give me no clue how to localize them. Unless the stars were disposed in their constellations and set at varying "imperceptible" distances from one another in those constellations to begin with, it is hard to see how I could be guided to localize them in one way rather than another.

It is worth noting that this problem of localization has standardly been raised as an objection to the classic Kantian notion that spatiotemporal form is imposed by the mind on sensory material.[2] Frasca-Spada's idealist reading of Hume on manners of disposition opens Hume to the same objection.

Frasca-Spada's book is not an easy read, chiefly because of its author's stream-of-consciousness style of writing. The exposition is chopped up by irritating sermonizing and bewildering digressions and asides, and the author frequently appears to be building toward a particular conclusion only to suddenly abandon it and strike off in a new direction. But the book contains a number of valuable insights and it will reward the patient reader with an appreciation of the force and sophistication of Hume's much-maligned account of space. This is the best defense of Hume's account of space in the literature to date and it makes a strong case for taking that account seriously. While I have devoted most of this review to a critique of the overarching subjective idealist interpretation Frasca-Spada attempts to draw from her more immediate conclusions, those more immediate conclusions, concerning the levels of discourse involved in Hume's account of infinite divisibility, the way relations of ideas figure in Hume's account of geometrical knowledge, and the role of the notion of a simple impression in Hume's account of vacuum are illuminating, and even the overarching attribution of subjective idealism to Hume is not patently wrong. Frasca-Spada's work deserves to be carefully studied and considered. Her book not only shows that Hume's views on space are in many ways more coherent and plausible than has previously been supposed, but also that there are challenging interpretative questions surrounding

part ii of Book I of the *Treatise*. It should prove to be a valuable stimulus to further work in this neglected area of Hume studies.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Johann Friedrich Hartknopf, 1781 and 1787), 20 (1781) and 34 (1787).

2. See most recently Anthony Quinton, "The Trouble with Kant," *Philosophy* 72 (1997): 5-18, though the objection goes back to Kant's contemporary, Feder. In my view, the proper response to this objection is to take Kant to be more empiricist (and hence, if I am right about Hume, more Humean) in his view of the nature of the forms of intuition, rather than to take Hume to be more idealist (and hence more Kantian as Kant has traditionally been understood). See "Localizing Sensations: A Reply to Anthony Quinton's Trouble with Kant," *Philosophy* 73 (1998): 479–489.

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