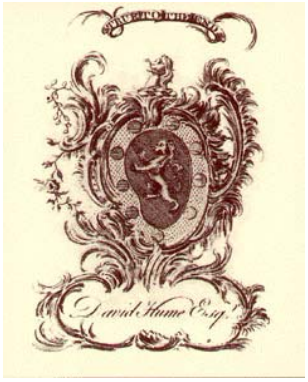

Georges Dicker. ***Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction***
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GEORGES DICKER. *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction.* London and New York: Routledge, 1998. xii + 216. ISBN 0-415-16318-8, $75, cloth. ISBN 0-415-16319-6, $24.99, paper.

The Preface's first sentence sketches an ambitious agenda: "The purpose of this book is to present and assess David Hume's most influential contributions to epistemology and metaphysics in a manner that does not presuppose familiarity with Hume on the reader's part and yet is sufficiently deep and rigorous to interest more advanced students" (ix). Although it is difficult to achieve such lofty aims, Dicker accomplishes the task he sets for himself in this exceptional book. In what follows, I will first selectively summarize the book before evaluating (i) its appropriateness for beginners and advanced students, (ii) its interpretation of Hume, and (iii) its assessments of Hume's claims.

In the first chapter, Dicker tackles "Hume's Theory of Meaning and its Implications." He begins by explaining Hume's "principle of empiricism" that states, roughly, that every idea is ultimately derived or copied from some corresponding impression. To avoid the notorious missing-shade-of-blue example, Dicker contends that it is helpful to understand Hume's principle of empiricism as a theory about the meaning of terms and not as a psychological theory about how we acquire our ideas. He then proceeds to show how this principle of "meaning-empiricism" rules out talk of both material substance and mental substance (self) as meaningless. Dicker himself defends Hume's assault on substance ontologies, at least for material objects; on the other hand, he draws on Kant and Charles Campbell to contend that Hume's bundle theory of the self cannot account for the awareness of the passage of time. Such an awareness requires that the same conscious subject, and not just a bundle of different subjects, exist throughout the perceived interval of time. Nevertheless, Dicker argues that the term "conscious subjects" can be meaningful for an empiricist if we modify meaning-empiricism "to allow also that any term designating something which is a logically necessary condition of the sorts of experience that we have, is meaningful" (34).

Dicker takes up "Hume's Theory of Knowledge" in the next two chapters. In chapter 2, he explains "Hume's Fork," while he tackles "Causal Reasoning and the Problem of Induction" in the third chapter. Hume famously divides knowable propositions into those expressing relations of ideas and those expressing matters of fact. The former are, in Hume's terms, self-evident or demonstrable and yet do not imply the existence of anything, while the latter are neither self-evident nor demonstrable and yet do assert or imply the existence of something. According to Dicker, the key implication of "Hume's Fork" is that it destroys the rationalist dream of demonstrating by reason that anything (e.g., God, the material world) exists simply because matters of fact can-

not be demonstrated. Before elaborating on Hume's rationale for this claim, Dicker offers a modernized version (MV) of the Fork: "All knowable propositions are either analytic a priori or synthetic a posteriori" (41). In discussing the MV, he contends roughly that rationalists are different from empiricists because they maintain that synthetic propositions can be known a priori. Dicker then argues that just as the logical positivists' "verifiability theory of meaning" was self-refuting, so too the MV is hoist on its own petard, and is thus unknowable because it is neither analytic a priori nor synthetic a posteriori. Nevertheless, he contends that Hume's (original) Fork is not self-refuting because, to put it in more Kantian terms, it "leaves open the possibility that some . . . synthetic propositions may be knowable a priori" (54). If I understand Dicker correctly, his interpretation leaves open the possibility that Hume is, in some sense, a rationalist!

Dicker broaches Hume's thoughts on induction in the third chapter. After revealing the plausibility of Hume's claim that knowledge of matters of fact is based on causal relations, he explains and defends Hume's view that we obtain our knowledge of causal relations from past experience and not a priori. (Once this thesis is granted, Dicker shows how Hume can easily infer that matter-of-fact propositions are not demonstrable.) Part of Dicker's defense consists in explaining the rationalist conception of causality and displaying how Hume's text contains a withering attack on it. Dicker claims that this attack contains two of Hume's most important philosophical contributions: (i) causes and effects are events rather than objects, and (ii) causal relations differ significantly from logical relations. He then goes on to argue that Hume shows that inductive inferences cannot be rationally justified because any argument designed to show that inductive inferences are acceptable already presupposes their legitimacy. Nevertheless, Dicker draws on P. F. Strawson's "ordinary-language" defense of induction to contend that inductive inferences can be rational even if they cannot be rationally justified (i.e., supported by an argument). His exposition of Strawson's argument is outstanding; in fact, it is much better than some of the discussions I have seen in some of the ubiquitous newly minted encyclopedias, companions, and various other philosophy reference books.

In the next two chapters, Dicker continues to discuss causality, but from a more metaphysical perspective. The fourth chapter ("Hume's Theory of Causality") opens with Dicker retracing Hume's search for an impression of necessary connection or power—notions that are often implicated in causal discussions. After explaining Hume's point that we never see a connection between two physical events, he recounts Hume's arguments against the thesis that one can introspectively detect a power or connection between one's will and its effects. Dicker rightly points out that these arguments questionably presuppose that to be aware of such a connection or power, one must understand how the connection works; nevertheless, he insists that Hume's overall

point emerges unscathed because "even if we do have an idea of power derived from human volition, this idea cannot help us to understand causation in inanimate objects" (105). Turning to Hume's positive account of causation, Dicker discusses Hume's (in)famous two definitions and canvasses various alternative interpretations. Instead of trying to pin down Hume's exact intentions, he finesses the issue by looking "into the implications of Hume's definitions for their own sake" (115). He takes the Humean view of causality (and laws of nature) to consist in a regular succession of events that doesn't involve any necessity. In the remainder of the chapter, Dicker mounts a lengthy and rigorous defense of this regularity theory against objections raised by J. L. Mackie and Richard Taylor.

The focus of the fifth chapter is "Hume's Critique of the Causal Principle." After noting that Hume never denies the causal principle that every event has a cause, Dicker points out that Hume did contend that this principle is neither self-evident nor demonstrable. He extracts a nine-step argument from Hume's text and defends the argument against criticisms from Barry Stroud. For example, Stroud argues that Hume's suppressed premise that "Nothing that we can conceive implies a contradiction" is vulnerable to a decisive counterexample because one can conceive of Goldbach's Conjecture being proven and also conceive of it being disproven. Because one of these "conceivable scenarios" implies a contradiction, Hume's conceivability test fails. In response, Dicker maintains that while one can imagine, say, someone announcing that Goldbach's Conjecture has been proven to be true, one cannot imagine the truth of Goldbach's Conjecture if it is indeed false. Dicker rounds out the chapter with a discussion of Kant's attempt to establish the causal principle with his transcendental argument contained in the "Second Analogy of Experience." Drawing on the work of Lewis White Beck, Strawson, and Paul Guyer to reconstruct Kant's argument, Dicker maintains that even if the argument is successful, it does not show that every event has a cause. At most it reveals that if events did not have causes, then "we would be unable to know by perception that events were occurring" (153).

Dicker returns to epistemological issues in the sixth and final chapter ("The Belief in the Existence of Body"), concentrating on "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" from the *Treatise*. Although Hume insists that our beliefs in external material bodies can not be rationally justified, he recognizes and attempts to explain the fact that we have a powerful propensity to retain such beliefs. Dicker carefully recounts how, on Hume's account, the imagination falsely assigns a continuous existence to our impressions because the constancy and coherence of those impressions "trick" the imagination into confusing the impressions with distinct and continuous bodies. Hume labels this confusion "the vulgar system." Dicker critically analyzes the assumption driving Hume's rejection of "the vulgar system": namely, that our impressions are the objects of our perceptions. In particular, he shows the weaknesses in the argu-

ments employed to support this "sense-datum theory." Along the way he provides a lucid description of the "sense-datum fallacy": inferring that a cognizer S perceives an impression or idea that really is Y simply because S perceives something that appears Y. Although Hume's discussion operates in a "sense-datum" context, Dicker points out that Cartesian evil-demon hypotheses generate epistemological problems about our knowledge of the external world even if we are not "sense-datum" theorists. He criticizes Jonathan Bennett's attempt to employ Hume's discussion of constancy and coherence to argue that the best explanation of many features of our perceptions is that there is an external material world. Dicker then turns to a discussion of Kant's attempt to deduce transcendentally the necessity of employing concepts of physical objects. Although Kant was a skeptic insofar as he affirmed that one cannot know how things are "in themselves," Dicker points out that Kant rejected skeptical hypotheses because they construct a scenario of the way that things are "in themselves" independently of human conceptualization. Fittingly, in the end Dicker leaves it to the reader to judge the effectiveness of this Kantian response to external-world skepticism.

Admittedly, it is difficult for those familiar with Hume's philosophical work to evaluate a book with the needs of beginners in mind; in this case, though, it seems clear to me that Dicker's book will be superbly helpful even for philosophical novices. His writing is perspicuous; he often illustrates complex ideas with enlightening examples; he simplifies complex issues without oversimplifying them and helpfully provides summaries of some of the more complicated arguments (e.g., the problem of induction). Moreover, he usually explains key philosophical and logical terms (e.g., "a priori", "validity") when he first employs them so that they are not too daunting to neophytes. (One small lapse in this regard is that he explains the technical meaning of soundness/unsoundness [205 n. 9] only after he has already used it a few times [53, 199 n. 16].) Another example of the book's user-friendliness occurs on page 27. There Dicker informs the reader that the next four paragraphs are a more technical and detailed exposition of some points that he has just explained and that those not interested in such details can skip these paragraphs without any loss of understanding.

More advanced students (and even philosophers unfamiliar with recent Hume scholarship) will benefit not only from Dicker's clear reading of Hume's texts, but also from the way in which he relates Hume's ideas to contemporary philosophical discussions and interpretative controversies— for example, the New Hume debate and Hume as Skeptic versus Hume as Naturalist. His up-to-date scholarship makes this book suitable for undergraduate courses as well as for graduate courses devoted to Hume. Needless to say, more advanced students will desire additional secondary sources; but at present it is difficult to think of a better place to begin reading about Hume.

Even if Dicker's *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics* is written in such a way that beginning students will understand it, the book will be helpful only if the interpretation is adequate. Given the disparate and even contradictory interpretations of Hume, it is almost impossible to provide a reading that will be universally accepted. Nevertheless, Dicker handles this problem splendidly. In proffering plausible accounts of Hume's texts, he alerts readers to alternative interpretations and explains why he chooses a certain path in light of these alternatives. For example, when discussing the rationality of induction he wisely informs the reader that some view Hume as more skeptical about induction than others. Although I read Hume as more of a skeptic than Dicker does, I found his comments in this context to be entirely appropriate and fair-minded. Likewise, he provides judicious remarks on the New Hume debate and shows how it bears on his own discussion of Hume's account of causality. In addition, Dicker displays good instincts in avoiding difficult interpretive quagmires that might unnecessarily bog him down. As I mentioned, although he discusses different approaches to Hume's two definitions of causation, he wisely abstains from entering the fray. Instead, he focuses more fruitfully on discussing the regularity theory that is famously associated with Hume. Granted, others might find more interpretive differences with Dicker; but overall I found his readings wholly apropos given the various contexts. I hope that the partial summary I have provided not only accurately outlines Dicker's reading of Hume, but also testifies to its appropriateness.

A noteworthy feature of this book is its willingness to grapple with the philosophical issues raised by Hume. Dicker quarrels not only with Hume and other early modern philosophers (most notably Kant) but also with contemporary philosophers. While Dicker usually defends Hume (or Humean positions), he also notes flaws in Hume's positions. The resulting dialectic effectively conveys the importance of seeing Hume not just as an influential historical figure but also as a catalyst for current philosophical debates.

Although I do not agree with all of Dicker's assessments, on the whole his arguments struck me as both appropriate and instructive. In the spirit of ongoing constructive debate, though, let me lodge two objections. The first is perhaps pedantic. In discussing the importance of Hume's Fork and its implications, Dicker notes that "more than just a few contemporary philosophers" assume "that knowledge requires certainty" (41). But other than Peter Unger (who, according to his own writings, does not even exist!), it is difficult to think of any other contemporary philosopher or epistemologist who assumes that knowledge requires certainty. Most contemporary philosophers deny that knowledge requires certainty.

On a more substantive note, Dicker's defense of the regularity theory of causality was the least convincing to me. Here I will single out the following argument:

> suppose that Hume simply conceded that we have an idea of power derived from an impression of power that we have when we exercise our wills. Could this idea be what we have in mind when we assert, for example, that one billiard ball exerts power or force on another, or that there is a necessary connection between the collision and the movement of billiard balls? Surely not. For a billiard ball is an unconscious, inanimate object; it cannot have an impression of power like the one we have in voluntary action or deliberate thinking. (104)

Leaving aside the issue of a necessary connection, Dicker's reasoning about the idea of power escapes me. If we do acquire such an idea or concept in one context, it is unclear why it would be inapplicable in other contexts. True, billiard balls do not themselves have impressions of power as we do; but that does not show that our idea of power is totally unhelpful in understanding how and why one billiard ball moves another. If I understand Dicker, then his point requires more support. Moreover, a dyed-in-the-wool naturalist like David Armstrong expresses similar misgivings about Hume's reasoning on these issues; so perhaps an acknowledgment of the positions along the lines of Armstrong's would have been appropriate. But let me reiterate that although I disagree with some of Dicker's assessments, overall they were informative and even-handed.

I enthusiastically recommend this splendid book. It will greatly aid students in understanding Hume and stimulate their general philosophical reflections. Quite simply, I know of no better introduction to Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics.[1]

NOTES

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