



**George Davie. *The Scotch Metaphysics:
A Century of Enlightenment in Scotland***

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GEORGE DAVIE. *The Scotch Metaphysics: A Century of Enlightenment in Scotland*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Pp. xi + 241. ISBN 0415242657, cloth, \$115.00.

This is the first book in a series entitled *Routledge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Philosophy*. Its author is well-known in studies of the Scottish Enlightenment; in fact, Davie could be called the dean of such studies. His previous books are *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century*; *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*; and two volumes of essays on the Scottish Enlightenment. The text of the present book was written in 1953 but was never published until now and was awarded a D. Litt. degree at the University of Edinburgh, which helps explain some things about its style.

The book's title, *The Scotch Metaphysics*, is a phrase "made by George III in the early days of the French Revolution in response to the attempt made by Dundas to overcome the King's scruples about signing the Catholic (one might say Irish) Emancipation Bill, which the government of William Pitt the younger wanted to pass into law" (7). Davie's use of the phrase refers to what he sees as a continuity of thought between the eighteenth-century quartet of Hutcheson, Hume, Reid, and Smith, and the quartet of nineteenth-century philosophers Stewart, Brown, Hamilton, and Ferrier. "The title serves also to mark off the debates of these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish philosophers," Davie adds, "from the debates engaged in by philosophers in England and Ireland" (8). The Scots, with the exception of Hume, practiced philosophy in an institutional setting, i.e., their universities, whereas the English and the Irish mostly practiced philosophy privately, outside the university setting. Consequently, the sense of continuity of thought and lively debate were intensified by the Scottish practice; most of these Scottish philosophers were either teachers or pupils of one another, friends and mentors who engaged in daily or weekly discussions. In spite of what Davie claims (193), the book is more about Reid and his reception than the other principals.

Davie is preoccupied with the problems of *traditional* metaphysics: the problems of abstraction, the relation between sensation and perception, universals and particulars, and the external world. This is interesting because Davie wrote this book in the early fifties when the climate of philosophy was antimetaphysical and downright hostile to such traditional endeavors. In addition to Scottish philosophy, what was Davie familiar with? Apparently, with

both phenomenology (he mentions specific works of Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty in the introduction—drawing parallels with the Scottish philosophers) and logical positivism. Davie’s use of “phenomenological” in describing the arguments of especially Brown, Hamilton, and Ferrier (two chapters on them) sounds like he means “phenomenal.” Davie doesn’t mention any logical positivists, but he does mention H. H. Price and Gilbert Ryle in the acknowledgments. The technical language of logical positivism is present in Davie’s interpretations of the philosophers he deals with. For instance, the term “sense data” is frequently employed without any indication of what it means. It probably comes from Price’s *Perception* (1932) and A. J. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), and what they mean is this: what is immediately given to us through the senses (and this is probably Davie’s sense of the term). In conjunction with this term, Davie uses “logical construction(s)” —sometimes in quotes, sometimes not. Perhaps most telling is the phrase “whiteness here now” (167), what Carnap and Ayer called “protocol statements,” that were sentences immediately verifiable by experience or were simple unanalyzable ultimate expressions. All of this is pertinent, because Davie classifies Hamilton as a positivist when it comes to Hamilton discussing the discrepancy between the real shape and size of objects and the visible and the tangible shapes and sizes of objects. “Hamilton does not explain himself very much on this topic of shape and size at all,” Davie writes, “but in so far as he [Hamilton] sets aside as frivolous the objection that common sense is deluded, because the visible size is not the same as the real size—the size believed by common sense—his point probably is that, so far as experience is concerned, real size and shape are a ‘logical construction’ out of tangible and visible size and shape” (203). Davie goes on to say that Reid’s line is similar to Hamilton’s: “for Reid the only problem is that of the relation of visible size and shape to real (= tangible) size and shape, Hamilton has to consider the relation to real size and shape not merely of visible size and shape, but of tangible size and shape” (204). So Reid adopts “a very ‘sophisticated’ or if you like, ‘positivistic’ view of the relation of the common sense size to the visible size” (204). Hume runs the two (real and visible) sizes and shapes together, and this is the reason, according to Reid, that he generates paradoxes (like contradicting common sense) and skeptical solutions to the problems of perception (that reason cannot provide answers to these questions). No doubt these are anachronistic interpretations of Hamilton and Reid. Their “constructions” are not “logical constructions,” and are more naive and intuitive than what Davie makes them out to be. Needless to say, Reid and the others lacked the rigor of Carnap’s *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928).

Hume's role in the book is rather limited, and justifiably so, given Davie's project. Passages are from Book 1 of the *Treatise*, and only those that have relevance to understanding Reid (two chapters on him) and the others. In particular, Hume's atomism ("atoms" of sense: the simple impressions; see 108) and nominalism (everything is particular) play the largest contextual roles. Thomas Brown resurrects Hume's atomism and Dugald Stewart exhumes Hume's nominalism, and of course, Reid stands against these positions by adopting a conceptualist/realist stance that takes universals to be real. The same issues that arose for Hume and Reid, did so later with Brown and Hamilton (150). A simple object, like a white globe, is clear and distinct for Hume, but for Reid, the object in question is vague, and judgment and belief (i.e., abstraction) is needed at the level of perception. (Abstraction is at the end of the perceptual process for Hume.)

The chapter on Stewart is a kind of transition between the Hume, Smith, Reid trio and the Brown, Hamilton, Ferrier trio, and Davie sketches that chapter as being

concerned with the same two questions as its predecessors—the question of the *external world* (i.e., do the objects of perception have a distinct existence?) and the question of the *primum cognitum* (i.e., are the objects of perception genuine complexes or sets of simples?)—and our purpose here is to describe the debate on these two points that comes as a sequel to Reid's reply to Hume. More precisely our theme will run from Dugald Stewart's attempt to clarify the two issues involved, through Hamilton's criticisms of Brown and Stewart and reappraisal of Reid. Not that these were the only philosophers who took up the questions where Reid and Hume left off, but this trio is especially interesting as constituting the chief intermediate links in an intellectual descent that went from Kames and Reid right down to Ferrier and beyond. (98)

"Descent?" Is that the right word? What about "ascent?" (I know the *OED* gives "descent" meanings of "sudden attack" and "lineage," besides "descending slope; way down; sinking in scale," but I think it is still misleading. Which meaning Davie had in mind is not clear, and, obviously, they convey different historiographical perspectives.)

With the exception of D. J. O'Connor's *John Locke* (1952), there is no discussion of scholarship or the secondary literature. I find this rather surprising, because in today's academe, no one would be permitted to ignore the literature that has grown up around these figures, especially Hume and Reid, who

have their respective journals. So the book doesn't reflect any recent (the past fifty years) scholarship on these figures. Perhaps Davie's stature in Scottish Enlightenment studies meliorates this condition. He has spent his whole life thinking about these figures; in fact, we could legitimately say that he is the end of this great Scottish tradition. He is so close to these figures that it is as if he is having a conversation with them that we are overhearing. Each person Davie deals with is allowed to speak through generous quotations, so the reader can get a feel for that individual's style. He parades these Scottish philosophers across the pages; in fact, he speaks of them as if "in the gallery we have been visiting" (221), with Davie as our guide. The informal conversational style of writing makes for easy reading.

The greatest novelty of the book is the extensive coverage of James Ferrier, Hamilton's pupil and tenacious critic. In his classic study, *The Scottish Philosophy, Biographical, Expository, Critical, From Hutcheson to Hamilton* (1875), James McCosh has only three brief references to Ferrier (422, 437, 445), and these give no clue of his contribution to Scottish philosophy. Davie corrects this situation and does so in dramatic fashion by the way he ends the book. None of the previous Scottish philosophers had a satisfactory "common sense" solution to the problem of externality and separateness. This is in large part due to Hume, who held that one can have only a single solitary perception at a time. Those who followed Hume took this claim to be self-evident, with the exception of Ferrier, who finally questioned Hume's maxim.

Ferrier's great law of sensation is this: "the senses are not merely *presentative*, i.e., they not only bring sensations before us," Davie declares, "but they are self-presentative, i.e., they bring themselves before us *as* sensations . . . [in other words] *the senses present one another*" (232, last two emphases added). Consider, for example, touching (holding) an object and bringing it up where you can see it. This sort of collaboration of the senses is how externality and separateness are achieved. This idea is partially taken from Reid's defense of common sense, according to which the sense-organs do not present just themselves, but only things other than themselves (233). Ferrier thinks they do both, but (as a second thought) it is with the aid of the imagination: "sight operates the same introtraction (pardon the coinage)," says Ferrier, "upon itself. It represents [i.e., imagines] itself, in its organ, as a minute visual sensation, out of and beyond which, are left lying the great range of all its other sensations [i.e., the given, present sensations]" (234). "This visual introtraction," Davie narrates, "is, Ferrier believes, a fact, an observed fact, and a fact, moreover, of a sort that gives us the transcendence of sense we are looking for" (234). This complementariness of sight and touch is difficult to explain and to elucidate, i.e., "to explain how this indirect visual awareness

of the eye can be justified by reference to tactual experience, reason or imagination" (234). Unfortunately, Ferrier makes no further attempt to solve it. In spite of this failure, Davie thinks that Ferrier is onto something and should have "gone on to suggest that the basic feature of perception as distinct from sensation is this inferential indirect appropriation of our organ of touch as a solid part of ourselves and our eyes as a coloured part of ourselves" (235). The comparison of one sense with another is what Davie sees as Ferrier's way out. Contrary to Hume and those who followed him, we have multiple sensations at the same time and they have different collaborative functions in cognition, among them "commenting" on one another in such a way that externality and separateness are realized. This is a natural process and becomes the foundation for the beliefs of common sense. This speculation is the "conclusion" of the common sense school of philosophy. A rather appropriate way for Davie to end his journey.

I found only one error: "first" should be "fist" (102, top line).

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