



Review of Wayne Waxman. *Kant and the Empiricists: Understanding Understanding*

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Wayne Waxman. *Kant and the Empiricists: Understanding Understanding*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi + 627. ISBN 0-19-517739-8, Cloth, \$65.00 / £35.99.

Kant regards the reconciliation of rationalism with empiricism as a central objective of his philosophy. However, there is no consensus yet as to how exactly he accomplishes this task, to what extent it depends on rationalist or empiricist resources, or whether it is a reconciliation at all. Wayne Waxman's book *Kant and the Empiricists: Understanding Understanding* takes a definite stance in this debate. According to Waxman, Kant's transcendental philosophy is a continuation of British empiricist sensibility by non-empirical means, and even more, the culmination of this program. So he locates Kant's main resources clearly on the empiricist side, more specifically, in the philosophy of David Hume. At the same time, Waxman suggests a solution to one of the most debated problems with Hume's *Treatise*: whether the principle that there are no real connections can be rendered consistent with the bundle theory of mind, according to which our notion of a person is based on connections between perceptions, which therefore have to be real.

Regarding the overall structure of the book, it is important that it is intended as the first volume of two, the second one not yet available. The main arguments concerning the relationship of Kant and Hume are presented in the "General Introduction" to both volumes which covers nearly twenty percent of the first volume (1–116). However, these arguments do not figure into the rest of the first volume and will be discussed at length only in the second one, along with most of the secondary literature which is covered rather selectively here. The remainder of the first volume is composed of three parts on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, which deal at length with a variety of problems relatively independent of the main line of argument; with the exception of part 3, chapter 15 where Waxman briefly discusses innate ideas. This particular structure, with the second volume both unavailable and more important with regard to the main line of argument, renders a review based on only the first volume provisional.

In parts 1–3, Waxman discusses a large number of passages and issues in all three empiricists with great scrutiny. Part 1 is devoted to Locke and deals with the three powers of perception Locke attributed to the understanding: the perception of ideas in our minds, the perception of the signification of signs, and the perception of the relations between ideas. Part 2 focuses on Berkeley's critique of Lockean abstract ideas and its consequences for Berkeley's theory of the understanding, as well as his account of the mind and his theory of spatial representation. In part 3, Waxman gives a brief discussion of rationalist accounts of the origin of

metaphysical concepts and Locke's and Berkeley's criticisms thereof. He then addresses Hume's contribution to this debate with his principles of the association of ideas, as well as Hume's conception of empirical reason, the distinction between reasonable and unreasonable belief, and Hume's skepticism. What Waxman calls Hume's "quandary," that is, the problems he had with his own theory of personal identity—the main subject of the work concerning Hume, according to the General Introduction—is hardly mentioned in this part.

Waxman entitles the program common to both Kant and Hume "psychologism." One major aim of his book is to argue that the philosophies of Hume and Kant are both systematically psychologistic, and in such similar ways that they in fact share the same philosophical program (11). The only *major* difference in their approaches, according to Waxman, lies in the fact that Kant introduces a kind of representation alien to Hume, that is, pure sensible intuition. However, Kant would fully endorse Humean psychologism (22), and also, Hume's psychologism would at least have the potential to diverge from his empiricism which keeps him from considering a priori notions.

What does psychologism mean here? According to Waxman, both Kant and Hume seek to offer psychological accounts of "the concepts at the heart of traditional metaphysical disputes," that is, to explain "their origins as representations in the mind" (25). This, however, would not be different from any other psychological approach. What Waxman has in mind here is in fact more specific. The kind of psychological explanation he thinks of results in "determining whether the mind makes essential contributions to the content of these concepts" (25), as well as restricting the scope of their application. In Kantian terms, these contributions are the acts of synthesis the mind performs via the categories or the imagination on the manifold given in sensible intuition. Without this application, Kant argues, the concepts of the pure understanding do not have a meaning. Kant's main point, according to Waxman, is that the metaphysical concepts represented in the table of categories, like causality and substance, are basically to be understood as mental operations (rather than determinations of the things in themselves). It is exactly this, Waxman argues, that distinguishes Kant radically from the rationalist tradition. More precisely, as chapter 15 reveals, this distinction is based on Kant's rejection of innate ideas, to which pre-Kantians more or less subscribed. To believe in innate ideas is to assume that basic concepts exist and have their meaning *independent of and prior to any application*, whereas for Kant and Hume, they have a content only insofar they are internally perceived actions and affects (e.g., 378). It was Hume, according to Waxman, who was the first to translate consistently these concepts into operations of the mind, for instance, customary associations of events resulting in the concept of their causal relation. And here, so Waxman, lies the main agreement between Kant and Hume.

Waxman suggests that the way out of Hume's "quandary" proceeds roughly as follows (56–7): Hume takes the succession of the perceptions in our mind as a brute datum, thereby presupposing (1) a temporally enduring consciousness that is (2) antecedent to association. Because Hume does not encounter any impressions of a real substrate or real connections among the perceptions, he is unable to explain this consciousness prior to the succession of perceptions. Waxman now suggests, inspired by a certain reading of Kant, that this prior consciousness might be explained by an act of the imagination antecedent to association, a kind of a priori representational condition of the possibility of perception itself. Waxman acknowledges that Hume himself would never have endorsed such an a priori act (60), so this avenue of solving the problem was closed to him—but taken up by Kant.

According to Waxman, it is possible to distinguish two kinds of understanding in Kant: understanding as the faculty of discursive representation, and as the faculty of a prediscursive unity of apperception (71–2). Whereas the categories are located in the discursive understanding, the prediscursive unity of apperception determines the unity of time in the imagination, as a requirement for the succession of perceptions. Waxman holds that the unity of apperception is more fundamental than the categories and argues in favour of a two-stage conception of understanding, where the first prediscursive and noncategorical unity (the unity of pure space and time) is followed by the discursive and categorial one (75). Waxman concedes that a lot of textual exegesis and more detailed elaboration remains to be done in order to fully establish this interpretation of Kant, which is the objective of volume 2.

This reading of Kant, with its prediscursive synthetic unity of apperception in the guise of pure time, is intended as a key to solving Hume's problem. Whereas Hume merely accepts the succession of perceptions as a given, Kant is able to give a psychologistic explanation of it, according to Waxman, insofar as he considers it a product of the imagination. Hume's problem arose from the fact that on the one hand, there cannot be real connections, whereas on the other hand, the self as a compound of perceptions requires real connections. Here, Waxman's main argument seems to be that Hume's problem is caused by considering the succession of perceptions transcendently real, and that it vanishes if the succession of perceptions is deemed transcendently ideal (82–84).

The strength of Waxman's book lies in the detailed and careful examination of a broad variety of passages in Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. It takes a clear and, one might be inclined to say, provocative stance regarding Hume's significance for Kant. This is at the same time its potential weakness: By concentrating almost exclusively on empiricist resources, the book neglects the discussion of possible alternative understandings. A definitive statement about Kant's relation to Hume

would require, in my opinion, to contrast it with the rationalist resources available for Kant (which Waxman addresses only in chapter 15). Psychological accounts from the rationalist side are not restricted to innate ideas but deal with questions quite similar to those Waxman discusses. For instance, Christian Wolff, still the most influential figure on the German philosophical scene at Kant's time, attempts in his *Psychologia empirica* to trace all kinds of perceptions back to their origin in different mental faculties (*Psychologia empirica*, 2nd ed. [Frankfurt: Renger, 1738]). It would be useful to compare this approach with the kind of psychologism Waxman describes, as the latter is precisely based on tracing perceptions back to their origin in the mind. It might also be important, on another note, that many of Kant's German contemporaries, like Ernst Platner or Johann Bernhard Merian, understood his philosophy not as a *criticism* of Humean skepticism, but rather as a *contribution* to it, which actually could support Waxman's approach from a different angle (see, for example Platner, *Philosophische Aphorismen*, 2nd ed. [Leipzig: Schwickert, 1784], 281–6; John Christian Laursen and Richard Popkin, "Hume in the Prussian Academy: Jean Bernard Merian's 'On the Phenomenalism of David Hume'," *Hume Studies* 23.1 (1997): 153–91).

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