The Scots Philosophical Association and the University of St Andrews

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Deep Metaphysical Indeterminacy

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kingdom of wisdom and the kingdom of power (or mind and body) follow their own laws respectively. Garber concludes from this that the two kingdoms are independent of each other, do not interact with each other, and are therefore unrelated to each other. Instead, Nature in reality has two kingdoms, one included in the other, and the kingdom of power is subservient to the kingdom of wisdom. Most of Garber’s puzzlement about the relation between bodies and monads can be clarified by taking into account the relationship between these two kingdoms, as well as their special identity. It seems necessary to acknowledge that the two kingdoms function on different levels: the ‘kingdom of wisdom’ refers to the direct action of God in the world, the ‘kingdom of power’ to the mechanical action at work in the world. I believe that the use of kingdom should be understood literally: both kingdoms are divine, though the kingdom of power is dependent on the kingdom of wisdom, which is even more divine. The kingdom of wisdom and the kingdom of power were expressions which originated in the Kabbalah and the Bible. Through all his writings Leibniz quotes and refers to the text of the Bible, which provides no reason for an interpretation of kingdom as a metaphor. Study of how these two kingdoms relate to each other in Leibniz’s works shows that there is a way of understanding the relationship between the world of bodies and the divine world of monads on earth. (For further reference, see D. Hirschman, ‘The Kingdom of Wisdom and the Kingdom of Power in Leibniz’, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 88 (1988), pp. 147–59.)

To sum up, Garber does what he can to annihilate the spiritual dimension at work in the constitution of the Leibnizian system. As he himself stresses, his book is a story; as such, it is far from revealing of Leibniz’s mind.
affections'; (2) 'reason alone ... can never have any such influence' [inertia of reason]; (3) 'it follows that [morals] cannot be deriv’d from reason'. The common reading stems from treating this argument as equivalent to (a) moral judgements move us to act; (b) beliefs alone cannot move us to act [inertia of belief]; (c) therefore moral judgements are not (mere) beliefs.

Ch. 1 spells out problems which arise from interpreting Hume's argument in this way. One problem is in understanding his representation argument. Hume claims that the representation argument supports (2), but, Cohon argues, it is hard to see how it could support (b), for there is no clear connection between a state’s being representational and its lacking causal powers (nor its being non-representational and having causal powers). For this reason, and others which Cohon documents, the common reading does a bad job of making Hume consistent. We should try to do better for Hume before settling for such a reading.

Ch. 2 marks the beginning of Cohon’s offensive. She argues that we should resist ascribing the inertia of belief thesis to Hume, for he repeatedly allows hedonic beliefs to generate new passions and so ‘a hedonic belief is (in the ordinary case) sufficient to initiate a causal chain that terminates in action’ (p. 52).

One difficulty for following the dialectic here is that Cohon initially under-specifies her target, the inertia of belief thesis (which she claims is Humeanism about motivation). Its official presentation is ‘Beliefs cannot move us to action; we also need a desire or other conative or affective state’ (p. 11). Later, it is presented as the conjunctive claim that ‘beliefs ... alone can neither cause any actions directly nor cause any motivating passions (such as desire or aversion) that might in turn cause action’ (p. 17; my italics). Allowing hedonic beliefs to generate desires or aversions is inconsistent with this second version of the thesis. Nevertheless, someone might interpret the inertia of belief thesis, as first stated, as claiming only that every action requires a passion (or that no combination of beliefs alone could suffice to generate an action). Hume’s holding this would not be undermined by his allowing beliefs to generate passions (even passions that subsequently generate actions). So whilst Cohon ably shows that Hume is often read as holding an alternative view of how passions are generated, viz that hedonic beliefs cannot generate new passions but only redirect pre-existing passions, and she gives a convincing case against that interpretation, this need not undermine the claim that Hume holds the inertia of belief thesis as first presented. For Cohon’s argument to undermine ascribing the inertia of belief thesis to Hume (and thus show that Hume was not a Humean about motivation) we must interpret it in the stronger, later, form, and read Cohon’s argument as demonstrating that Hume does not hold the second part of the thesis.

Things are tighter in ch. 3, and this is where the action is in Cohon’s quest to overhaul our reading of Hume. She argues that attention to Hume’s empiricism shows that Hume’s inertia of reason (2) is not the same claim as the inertia of belief (b). The keystone of her interpretation is taking Hume’s talk of ‘Reason’ to refer to reasoning, the process of comparing perceptions to find relations among them. So when Hume claims that reason alone has no influence on actions and affections he is not delimiting the causal powers of beliefs, as the common reading supposes, but drawing the consequences of his conception of reasoning. The process of reasoning

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is just the comparing of perceptions and its only possible output is the enlivening of an idea, so it cannot produce passions or actions. Thus anything that generates actions or passions is distinct from reasoning.

Continuing this process-interpretation, Cohon claims that we should take Hume’s talk of moral distinctions to refer to processes of discriminating, e.g., virtue and vice. So when Hume claims that ‘moral distinctions are not deriv’d from reason’, he means that the process of distinguishing virtue and vice is distinct from reasoning. They are distinct because one process, moral distinguishing, produces passions and actions, something that reasoning (alone) cannot do.

Ch. 4 supplies (Cohon’s) Hume’s positive account of moral distinctions, or discriminations between virtue and vice, and an account of the nature of these properties. Compared with the space devoted to undermining the common reading, this is slightly compressed (though some of the issues have arisen earlier). Cohon’s ‘moral sensing’ interpretation depicts Hume as a cognitivist anti-realist who holds that moral properties are ‘reaction-dependent properties: they depend for their existence on the emotional responses of sensitive beings’ (p. 100). Thus Hume’s claims that virtue and vice, like sounds, colours, heat and cold, ‘are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind’, and that this discovery is an advancement, are not a profession of non-cognitivism (nor an error theory). For Hume thinks that virtue and vice are real, but that philosophy reveals to us that like other secondary qualities, they are response-dependent. Cohon’s most interesting claim here is that Hume held the view that we do not detect virtue and vice through reason (of course): we sense them, and thus feel the difference between them.

Ch. 5 is focused on Hume’s remarks about the ‘steady and general’ point of view. What exercises Cohon is to ensure first that Hume’s claims about the general point of view do not enable reasoning to detect virtue and vice (which it could if moral evaluations were judgements of what we would be caused to feel in certain circumstances), and secondly that his claims that we adopt this point of view to ‘correct’ our sentiments are consistent with his view of sentiments as non-representational. She provides an understanding of Hume’s remarks which meshes with her interpretation generally, although because there is comparatively little text to draw upon here, it is harder to judge whether she is giving us what Hume claimed or what he could consistently have claimed.

I have mentioned a fraction of the issues Cohon covers. She provides a plausible account of Hume’s views which makes him a more consistent and idiosyncratic meta-ethicist than previously supposed. The book’s greatest virtue is its scrupulous fairness. Cohon provides a convincing case for her interpretation, but helpfully explains which passages support the common reading and make most trouble for hers. The position she defends and the arguments she deploys should be of interest to anyone interested in Hume’s ethics and sentimentalist views generally. It is an excellent addition to the recent flurry of first-rate Hume scholarship, and even those unconvinced by Cohon’s interpretation will agree that it will yield progress in understanding Hume.

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