

Uwe Meixner · Albert Newen (eds.)

Logical Analysis and History of Philosophy

Philosophiegeschichte und logische Analyse

Special Issue

13
David Hume:
Epistemology and Metaphysics


Guest Editors / Gastherausgeber
Helen Beebe · Markus Schrenk

mentis

Paderborn

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte
bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über
<http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier  ISO 9706

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(mentis Verlag GmbH, Schulze-Delitzsch-Straße 19, D-33100 Paderborn)
www.mentis.de

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Printed in Germany
Umschlaggestaltung: Anna Braungart, Tübingen
Satz: Rhema – Tim Doherty, Münster [ChH] (www.rhema-verlag.de)
Druck: AZ Druck und Datentechnik GmbH, Kempten
ISBN 978-3-89785-162-7
ISSN 1617-3473

LOGICAL ANALYSIS AND HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

PHILOSOPHIEGESCHICHTE UND LOGISCHE ANALYSE

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Prof. Dr. Uwe Meixner (uwe.meixner@psk.uni-regensburg.de), Institut für Philosophie, Universität Regensburg, 93040 Regensburg, Germany

Prof. Dr. Albert Newen (albert.newen@rub.de), Institut für Philosophie, Ruhr-Universität Bochum, Universitätsstr. 150, 44780 Bochum, Germany

Reviews should be sent to: / Rezensionen an:

Dr. Markus Schrenk (markus.schrenk@uni-koeln.de), Philosophisches Seminar, Universität zu Köln, Albertus-Magnus-Platz 1, 50923 Köln, Germany

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Individual copies – Einzelbezug: EUR 44,- / Subscription – Abo: EUR 38,-
mentis Verlag, Schulze-Delitzsch-Str. 19, D-33100 Paderborn, Germany; www.mentis.de

On David Hume: A Preface to the Special Issue

Helen Beebee, University of Birmingham

The articles in this volume all concern, in one way or another, Hume's epistemology and metaphysics. There are discussions of our knowledge of causal powers, the extent to which conceivability is a guide to modality, and testimony; there are also discussions of our ideas of space and time, the role in Hume's thought of the psychological mechanism of 'completing the union', the role of impressions, and Hume's argument against the claim that our perceptions are 'locally conjoined' with any entity (namely, a soul).

The term 'metaphysics' – and to some extent also 'epistemology' – needs to be taken with a large pinch of salt, however, in this context. While Hume is often credited with distinctive metaphysical views (phenomenalism, for example, or the view that there is no such thing as causal necessity or the soul), many interpreters now take his project to be antithetical to, or at least largely tangential to, metaphysics. On this view his main focus is on finding out how, as a matter of psychological fact, we acquire the beliefs we do (about the nature of reality, personal identity across time, causal necessity, and so on). The consequences for Hume's metaphysics, strictly so-called, are not often easy to discern or widely agreed upon. For example, according to a 'sceptical realist' interpretation of Hume, he is a firm believer in (or perhaps agnostic about) the existence of real, mind-independent causal necessity; his claim is only that we can have no cognitive access to its true nature, and not that it does not or cannot exist. According to other interpreters, Hume's conclusion is that we cannot so much as form an idea of mind-independent causal necessity, so that he is not endorsing the negative metaphysical claim that such necessity does not exist, but rather the conceptual claim that we cannot even successfully achieve any thoughts, whether positive or negative, about so-called mind-independent necessity, since no genuine meaning attaches to those words. Similarly – as Harold Noonan argues in his contribution – we are naturally disposed to ascribe tastes and smells to external objects, but the mechanism by which we do this – 'completing the union' – is flawed: tastes and smells cannot be located outside the mind, and so we talk without meaning when we ascribe them to objects.

Hume's (alleged) interest in the mechanisms of idea- and belief-formation also provide a different perspective on his epistemological views. For example, Hume is often characterised as a sceptic about inductive inference or 'reasoning from causes to effects'. However, he generally appears to regard such reasoning as a reliable and legitimate belief-forming mechanism – a fact appealed to both in Aisling Crean's contribution, which argues that on Hume's view we can and do have warrant for believing in causal necessity, and in Axel Gelfert's contribu-

tion, which claims that on Hume's view, causal reasoning delivers reasonable general beliefs about people's propensity to tell the truth. Noonan's contribution highlights Hume's concern with belief-forming mechanisms, and concludes that Hume's scepticism about the external world derives from the fact that two natural and irresistible tendencies – completing the union on the one hand, and causal reasoning on the other – are in conflict, and the fact that both are natural and irresistible makes it impossible to ascribe normative force to one rather than the other. Anik Waldow's contribution also highlights psychological mechanisms, arguing that the question of how our thoughts can 'reach out' to the external world is to be answered by focussing on Hume's account of how we distinguish reality from fiction, so that the thorny question of whether our impressions resemble external reality can be set aside.

Having presented this caveat concerning 'Hume's epistemology and metaphysics', I now summarise the main theses and arguments of the articles contained in this volume. While the articles individually cover distinct topics, so that there are few points of direct agreement or disagreement between them, they collectively enshrine a variety of perspectives on Hume's arguments. They also give a flavour of the immense subtlety and range of those arguments, and will, we hope, stimulate further interest and debate.

Aisling Crean's article addresses a potential epistemological problem for the sceptical realist interpretation of Hume on causation. On the one hand, Hume appears to hold that we can have no knowledge of causal powers or necessary connections in nature. On the other hand, on (some versions of) the sceptical realist interpretation, Hume believes in such connections, and so, presumably, must think that such a belief is justified. But how can we be justified in believing in something to which we have no epistemic access? Crean resolves this puzzle by arguing that it results from an ambiguity between internalist and externalist senses of justification. The sense in which we can have no knowledge of causal powers is an internalist sense: such powers are not possible objects of experience, and so we lack awareness of them. In an externalist sense, however, our belief in causal powers *is* justified. Crean here appeals to a tradition, developed by Louis Loeb and others, that takes Hume to be a reliabilist concerning the justification of causal reasoning. Her claim is that on a sceptical realist reading, that justification extends beyond the mere belief that a given effect will occur; it is also justification for the belief that the relevant causal power exists.

Daniel Dohrn's article also concerns, in part, an apparent tension between Hume's metaphysics, *qua* sceptical realist, and his epistemology. Dohrn's interest is in whether, or to what extent, Hume takes conceivability to be a reliable guide to modal facts. He argues that Hume endorses both the principle that what is (clearly and distinctly) conceivable is possible, and the principle that what is inconceivable is impossible (so that if *not-p* is inconceivable, then *p* is necessary). Moreover, Hume can in principle hold that both principles track *de re* modality: facts about real necessities and possibilities.

Attributing these claims to Hume is problematic, however. First, Hume sometimes seems to claim that necessity is merely a product of the human mind, and so cannot be a feature of reality itself; hence it appears that he cannot, after all,