

Review Essay of Frederick Schmitt's *Hume's Epistemology in the Treatise: A Veritistic Interpretation* (Oxford, 2014), by Stefanie Rocknak

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In this book, Schmitt claims that Hume, however implicitly, employs a fully-developed epistemology in the *Treatise*. In particular, Hume employs a “veritistic” epistemology, i.e. one that is grounded in truth, particularly, true beliefs. In some cases, these true beliefs are “certain,” are “infallible” (78) and are justified, as in the case of knowledge, i.e. demonstrations. In other cases, we acquire these beliefs through a reliable method, i.e. when they are produced by causal proofs. Such beliefs are also “certain” (69, 81) and are (defeasibly) justified. Thus, although demonstrative knowledge and beliefs produced by causal proofs are produced by different psychological processes, and so, admit of specific *kinds* of “certainty,” they are nevertheless, both certain, and so, they share the same “epistemic status” (68-69). As a result, although it is clear that Hume makes a psychological distinction between demonstrations and causally produced beliefs (proofs) it may be argued that Hume does not make an *epistemological* distinction between knowledge (demonstrations) and causally produced beliefs (proofs). Thus, in regard to epistemic status, the latter are not necessarily inferior to the former. This has larger implications for Hume’s method; if we can say that he employs a method that invokes knowledge, or at least, beliefs that share the same epistemic status as knowledge, then Hume need not be entirely skeptical about the results of his method. Rather, the possession of true belief is Hume’s ultimate goal. (380)

Schmitt’s book is divided into 13 chapters, which are grouped into 4 sections, i.e. what Schmitt refers to as “divisions.” Chapter 1, however precedes Division 1. In this chapter, Schmitt presents an “epistemological framework” which, he thinks, could be a plausible motive for why

Hume would want to ascribe the same epistemic status to demonstrations (knowledge) and to some causal inferences (proofs). However, Schmitt admits that in this chapter he “offer[s] no textual evidence that Hume really subscribes to the epistemological framework. Such evidence must emerge from my direct support of the reliability interpretation, to be given in subsequent chapters.” (3)

Division 1, “Knowledge, Belief and Justification,” is divided into 3 parts, i.e. Chapters 2, 3 and 4. In Chapter 2, Schmitt presents an account of Locke’s notions of knowledge and probability, which, he argues, may be used as an “archetype” (95) for Hume’s notions of knowledge and probability. In particular, and most importantly, both Hume and Locke thought that knowledge equates to certainty, where in Locke’s case, this certainty amounts to indubitability and in Hume’s case, it amounts to infallibility. Moreover, as noted above, although Hume clearly distinguished probability from knowledge—particularly in terms of the psychological processes that respectively generate probability and knowledge—he thought that proofs (which are a kind of probability because they are the result of causal reasoning) produce beliefs through a reliable method. As such, these beliefs are certain and are (defeasibly) justified, although this certainty is somewhat different from the certainty that obtains of demonstrations, i.e. proofs are not “infallible.” (78) Demonstrations are also certain and justified, and thus, despite the “psychological dissimilarity” (95) between demonstrations and proofs, Schmitt concludes that: “knowledge and proofs imply certainty, discovery, and justified belief, as the text makes explicit.” (95) In Chapter 3, Schmitt argues that according to Hume, beliefs may be reliably produced and *true*, and thus, they have “the practical natural function of motivating action so as to avert calamities.” (114) In Chapter 4, Schmitt examines Hume’s notion of justified belief, where he focuses on showing that Hume made clear correlations between

“justificatory terms” and “veritistic terms.” (115) Schmitt writes: “All of [Hume’s] uses [of the terms ‘just,’ ‘justly,’ ‘justness’ and ‘justify ’] share some meaning—all of their meanings can be described as falling under one of these headings: right, correct, proper, fitting, or appropriate. The applications to ideas generally carry a merely veritistic meaning.” (115-116) Thus, Schmitt concludes: “Hume speaks of ‘just’ ideas, representations, notions, definitions, distinctions, and value, and the term typically means right or correct in the sense of *true, accurate, precise, or complete.*” (116)

Division II of this book, “Causal Inference,” is divided into four parts, i.e. Chapter, 5, 6, 7, and 8. In Chapter 5, Schmitt argues that despite the fact that Hume thought that causal inferences are psychological associations, guided by the imagination, Hume was not a skeptic about causal reasoning. Rather, Schmitt concludes: “causal inference is a defeasibly justifying operation.” (171) In brief, Schmitt comes to his conclusion as follows: According to Schmitt, in 1.3.6 of the *Treatise*, Hume attempts to show that if he were to adopt a *Lockean* account of causal inference, one would have to appeal to a “third idea” to justify the inference at hand. This is the case, because, according to Locke, “both demonstration and probability are forms of reasoning ... and reasoning involves a transition from one to another via a third intervening idea.” (135) According to Hume *pace* Schmitt, this third idea would have to be the Principle of Uniformity. However, Hume shows that the Principle of Uniformity is not demonstrably justified, nor can it be causally justified by Lockean probable reason, unless we engage in circularity. Thus, Schmitt concludes that according to Hume, we must reject a *Lockean* notion of causal inference. Instead, we must understand the causal inference in terms of “dispositions to infer.” (168) In Chapter 6, Schmitt addresses the status of the Uniformity Principle in more detail. In particular, he argues that Rule 4 of Hume’s General Rules—which is the product of a

proof—is the (defeasibly) *justified* version of the Uniformity Principle (177), where this justification does not occur via Lockean probable reasoning. Rather, this version of the Uniformity Principle, Schmitt argues, is a “meta-principle” because it is “infer[ed]...from ‘many millions’ of ‘experiments.’ These experiments provide the constant conjunctions needed for a proof of the Uniformity Principle.” (176). And thus, because *this* version of the Uniformity Principle is a product of a proof, and not Lockean probable reasoning, it is justified. In Chapter 7, Schmitt discusses the reliability of causal inferences in still more detail. In Chapter 8, he addresses the criticism that the causal justification of the claim that “If a causal inference conforms to the Uniformity Principle, then it is defeasibly justifying” (233) is circular. Schmitt’s response is that Hume *does* use “epistemically circular justifications” (240) and “that on any plausible interpretation, a justification that causal inference is defeasibly justifying must be epistemically circular.” (240)

Division III of this book, “Scepticism About External Existences,” is divided into 2 sections, i.e. Chapters 9 and 10. In Chapter 9, Schmitt discusses Hume’s skepticism regarding bodies, or objects in 1.4.2. In particular, Schmitt argues that Hume “negatively evaluates” (284) the process by which we infer a continued and distinct body from the constancy and coherence of our impressions because such an inference is unreliable. He also explains why Hume thinks that the vulgar and philosophical conceptions of bodies are unreliable. Schmitt argues that Hume thought that “only causal inference defeasibly justifies a belief in an unobserved object given the observation of another object.” (313). Schmitt claims that Hume makes this argument in 1.3.2.2 (an argument that Schmitt discusses in Chapter 5, pp. 137-141). In Chapter 10, Schmitt discusses what he calls “The Criterion of Justification” and Hume’s skepticism about matter in 1.4.4.

The final section of the book, Division IV, “Scepticism about Reason” consist of three sections, i.e. Chapters 11, 12, and 13. In Chapter 11 Schmitt examines a potential threat to his interpretation, ie. what he calls the “Norm of Reduction.” In Chapter 12, Schmitt addresses further doubts concerning the reliability interpretation in terms of what he calls the “Manifest Contradiction,” the “Illusion in Causal Ascription,” and the “Dangerous Dilemma.” However, he concludes that the “Title Principle” saves the day (378). In the last chapter of the book, Chapter 13, Schmitt argues that Hume’s ultimate philosophical goal is truth.

Schmitt’s book is very thoughtful and rich with insight. For those readers looking for an alternative version of Hume’s skepticism, it will prove very helpful. However, I did find the book quite difficult to read. This is the case for four reasons. First, Schmitt uses an abundance of jargon, that, at times, he does not fully explain. For instance, terms such as the “Norm of Reduction,” the “Manifest Contradiction,” the “Illusion in Causal Ascription” and the “Dangerous Dilemma,” etc. are, more often than not, presented with little or no initial explanation. As a result, the reader has to scramble to determine exactly what Schmitt has in mind. A glossary of terms would have been helpful. Second, I did not find Schmitt’s distinction between “psychological” and “epistemic” to be entirely convincing or clear, despite the critical role that it plays in this book. Third, Schmitt’s unsupported introduction of Hume’s “epistemological structure” in Chapter 1 was rather troubling. Rather than effectively framing the book, it seems to intermittently serve as a Procrustean Bed. Fourth, and relatedly, I don’t think that Schmitt sticks close enough to the text. Instead, at times, his analysis is guided more by the imposition of his epistemological structure, rather than by an exhaustive examination of the text (although I *am* sympathetic to some of Schmitt’s conclusions, e.g. his notion of a causal “meta-principle;” see Rocknak, (2013, 254-9)).

Because of space limitations, I will focus on just one example where I think that Schmitt does not stick close enough to the text: his analysis of objects, or bodies in 1.3.2.2. Consider first, a pivotal sentence from that paragraph: “There is nothing in any objects to persuade us, that they are always *remote* or always *contiguous*; and when from experience and observation, we discover, that their relation is invariable, we always conclude that there is some *secret cause*, which separates or unites them.” (T 1.3.2.2) Schmitt’s initial analysis of this sentence is: “when we infer from our observation of one object that an unobserved object of a certain sort is nearby, we do so by causal inference, not by a non-causal spatio-temporal inference.” (138) In other words, according to Schmitt, this sentence quoted above from 1.3.2.2 concerns how the relations of contiguity or remoteness may obtain between *two* distinct objects, rather than how they may obtain of *one* object.¹ Schmitt continues: “ a belief in identity or relation of time or space between an observed and an unobserved object is justified by an inference from the observed object to the unobserved object only if a belief in the existence of the unobserved object is justified by a causal inference (defeasibly, as I take it).” (138) That is, we may, using causal reasoning, infer the identity of an unobserved object (B) from the existence of an observed object (A); i.e. the existence of A causes us to believe in the existence/identity of B (see also Schmitt, 313).

However, we have to ask, how exactly, would this work? It seems to makes sense that in *some* cases, an observed object might cause us to believe in the existence/identity of an unobserved object. But this could not be Hume’s complete account of our justified notion of identity. For instance, if I am not currently observing my car, which is parked in a distant garage, how could my belief in its existence/identity be caused by the objects that I am currently

¹ See Rocknak (2013, 91-104), where I argue that they obtain of one object; this helps to explain why Hume thinks that the cause here is “secret,” i.e. unobserved.

observing, e.g. the walls of my room, my computer, my cat, etc.? Moreover, do we first have to believe in the existence/identity of the *observed* object before it causes us to believe in the existence/identity of an unobserved object? How does that happen? Another observed object? This just does not make for a plausible interpretation. Better it seems, to *not* attribute this reading to Hume, but to take a closer look at the remainder of 1.3.2.2.²

Immediately after the sentence cited above, Hume writes:

The same reasoning extends to *identity*. We readily suppose an object may continue individually the same, tho' several times absent from interruption of the perception, whenever we conclude, that if we had kept our eye or hand constantly upon it, it wou'd have convey'd an invariable and uninterrupted perception. But this conclusion beyond the impressions of our senses can be founded only on the connexion of *cause and effect*, nor can we otherwise have any security, that object is not chang'd upon us, however much the new object may resemble that which was formerly present to the senses (1.3.2.2)

Here, Hume says that the “same reasoning *extends* to identity” (emphasis added). That is, for the sake of argument, let's assume that Hume *is* speaking of two objects when he discusses “secret causes” in the immediately preceding sentence. Following, Hume asks us to “*extend*” (emphasis added) the “same reasoning” to “identity.” This means that when he is discussing how contiguity and remoteness may obtain of two objects, he is *not* discussing identity. Rather, he is setting up an *analogy*, a point that Schmitt overlooks. Again space considerations prevent me from explaining exactly how this analogy works (where Hume has only one object in mind in the first part of the analogy; recall fn 1 of this paper). But for our immediate purposes, we might conclude that it works as follows: just as an observed object A can cause us to believe that another object B is either remote or contiguous from it, when we observe a “perfect resemblance” that obtains of “a species of objects” (B), we conclude that some unobserved (and

² Granted, Hume does speak at length elsewhere about how the causality is related to the production of our belief in the existence of ideas (which are *not* necessarily conceived of as mind-independent objects). For more detail see Rocknak (2013, 29-66). However, Schmitt does not effectively distinguish between this kind of causally produced belief and the causally produced belief discussed in 1.3.2.2.

thus, “secret”) object (A) *caused* that resemblance. *This* phenomenon—where we speculate that an unobserved object causes, or is responsible for the resemblance that obtains of some of our perceptions—captures the spirit of Hume’s notion of identity. It must not to be confused with what it is analogous to (i.e. an observed object causing us to believe that another unobserved object is remote or contiguous to it). And thus, Hume ends 1.3.2.2. with:

Whenever we discover such a perfect resemblance, we consider, whether it be common in that species of objects; whether possibly or probably any cause cou’d operate in producing the change and resemblance; and according as we determine concerning these causes and effects, we form our own judgment concerning the identity of the object.

I discuss this analogy at great length and how this interpretation is related to 1.4.2 in Rocknak (2013; printed in 2012). Meanwhile, I discuss 1.4.2 at great length in Rocknak (2007). Curiously though, Schmitt does not cite this work, nor does he cite or engage Baxter (2008), whose entire book is devoted to Hume’s notion of time and identity. Rather, as noted above, Schmitt seems to be too preoccupied with making his epistemological structure work. As result, I found that throughout his book, he tends to overlook pivotal moments in the text—such as the one explained above—as well as some of relevant recent secondary literature.

References

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