

**Corey W. Dyck**

## Review essay

---

Paul Guyer's, *Knowledge, Reason, and Taste: Kant's Response to Hume* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008)

---

Kant is quite explicit regarding the influence that David Hume exercised on his thought, admitting that it was Hume who interrupted his 'dogmatic slumber'. Kant's commentators have sometimes interpreted this confession in a rather strong sense, as implying namely that Kant conceived his own critical philosophy as a direct rebuttal of Hume's various sceptical challenges. So, Lewis White Beck and Henry Allison take Kant's Second Analogy to rebut Hume's challenge to a general causal principle, and Robert Paul Wolff and Patricia Kitcher spot a Humean target in Kant's account of mental activity and defence of the unity of the self. This position is not universally held as some scholars, most notably Eric Watkins, have argued that careful attention to the historical context in which Kant's first *Critique* is embedded exposes the belief that Hume was Kant's direct or primary target as itself a piece of philosophical dogmatism. Paul Guyer's latest collection, *Knowledge, Reason, and Taste: Kant's Response to Hume*, is an attempt to moderate this discussion. Guyer's suggestion is the modest, and indeed typically Kantian, one, that Kant's texts should only be read *as if* they were responses to Hume, without making any historical claim of influence. While this thesis is rather cautious, the payoff is that it permits Guyer to engage in a far more ambitious analysis, leading him in the five essays contained in this volume to consider not only Kant's account of causality and general theory of knowledge, but also his practical philosophy, aesthetics and teleology in light of Hume.

This widening of scope is evident in the first chapter, where Guyer outlines a general reading of Kant's theoretical and practical philosophy which places a philosophical premium on the refutation of scepticism.

PHILOSOPHY & SOCIAL CRITICISM • vol 35 no 5 • pp. 613–619

**PSC**

Copyright © The Author(s), 2009.

Reprints and permissions: <http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav>

<http://psc.sagepub.com> DOI: 10.1177/0191453709103429

Guyer stresses, however, that scepticism *as Kant understood it* must be distinguished from the current preoccupation with Cartesian external-world and moral scepticism. The scepticism that would have been of interest to Kant, according to Guyer, is commonsensical rather than philosophically motivated. In particular, Guyer distinguishes Pyrrhonian scepticism, associated with that doubt arising from the conflict of two contradictory but equally well-supported claims, and Humean scepticism, by which is understood a doubt regarding the first principles of theory and practice. Kant's first *Critique* on one hand, and his *Groundwork* and second *Critique* on the other, are then considered with these distinct challenges in mind. Since the former is also covered in the second chapter, I will limit myself to a summary of Guyer's reading of Kant's response to moral scepticism. In responding to the Humean sceptic about the foundation of moral principles, Kant first shows that the principle of morality (the categorical imperative) lies implicit in both common moral understanding and philosophical treatments of morality. Second, Kant demonstrates that this principle must ultimately have its source in reason rather than experience inasmuch as our consciousness of the a priori law of morality requires an efficacious faculty of reason. Regarding the Pyrrhonian challenge, posed in the Third Antinomy as well as in the Dialectic in the second *Critique*, Guyer argues that Kant's transcendental idealism is intended as the solution: in the former case, the distinction between things as they appear and as they are in themselves allows us to admit without contradiction the respective claims of necessity and freedom, and in the latter case it permits a resolution of the competing unconditioned claims of virtue and happiness in the doctrine of the highest good by warranting our belief in God and the immortality of the soul.

In the second and third chapters, Guyer looks more closely at Kant's arguments in the first *Critique* (and the Introductions of the *Critique of Judgment*) in a Humean context. He thus considers Kant's responses to Hume's discussions of our idea of cause and beliefs regarding it (ch. 2) and our ideas and beliefs regarding objects and the self (ch. 3). Guyer admits that an initial survey of the texts produces a sense of a lack of fit between Hume's questions and Kant's replies, but a more careful analysis reveals that Kant does offer answers, albeit incomplete.<sup>1</sup> Beginning with chapter 2, Guyer boils Hume's questions regarding causation down to the following three: (1) What is the content of the idea of causation, or necessary connection? (2) What is the basis for our belief in the general causal principle that every event has some cause? And (3) what is the basis for our particular causal beliefs or inferences? Hume offers his own answers to these questions. In the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* he claims that the basis for particular causal beliefs is not a demonstrative inference, since that

is undermined by his challenge to the rationality of induction; instead they are the result of that customary disposition formed by repeated observation of the appearance of one object following the other, the impression of which (in accordance with the copy-principle) is the content of the idea of causation. Neither of these two answers constitutes a genuinely sceptical conclusion, but Hume's conclusion regarding our belief in the general causal principle (broached only in the *Treatise*) does, since as wide as our past observation might be, it will never provide experience of every kind of event and thus never supply sufficient warrant for the principle. Guyer takes Kant to offer more or less convincing alternatives to Hume on all three questions, but accuses him of avoiding Hume's fundamental challenge to the rationality of induction. In the (Metaphysical and) Transcendental Deduction, and Schematism chapter, Guyer takes Kant to show that the 'content' of the concept of causality is the a priori logical function of hypothetical judgement (and that it requires the pure forms of intuition in order to be applied). Kant's Second Analogy then rebuts Hume's sceptical conclusion regarding the general causal principle by proving that the cognition of an event is only possible if the succession of (our perceptions of) states of an object can be shown to follow in a determined order by being subsumed under *some* causal law; thus, every event must have a cause. Both of these answers, however, depend upon our knowledge of particular causal laws, and thus an answer to Hume's third question. According to Guyer this is found only in the Introductions to the third *Critique*, in the idea of a system of nature that regulates our investigation and makes possible the discovery of empirical laws, though Guyer claims that this is not a response to Hume so much as a concession of his essential point that, ultimately, we can only assume that nature conforms to the laws we frame for it. In any case, through all this, Kant leaves Hume's fundamental challenge to the rationality of induction untouched.

In chapter 3, Guyer turns to Kant's claims to have 'generalized' (cf. AA 04.260) Hume's problem regarding causation, which is taken to mean the extension of the challenge to ideas of, and beliefs regarding, external objects and the self. Guyer points out that Hume had already presented his objections in an appropriately general form in the *Treatise*, evidently unbeknown to Kant. Yet, even assuming that Kant intended this by his claim to have generalized Hume's problem (which is not obvious), there is good reason to think that he had at least a second-hand knowledge of the relevant sections through Hamann's *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* of 1759.<sup>2</sup> In any case, Guyer finds the same argumentative structure in Kant's response to Hume's account of the content of the idea of, and our beliefs regarding, persisting objects. For Kant, the content is once again taken to be an a priori logical function of (categorical) judgement, and the justification for our beliefs in persisting

objects found in the principle of the First Analogy (and ultimately the Refutation of Idealism in B). Finally, Kant addresses Hume's worries that we cannot form a genuine idea of the self or have empirical cognition of its continued existence. Rather than being rooted in a particular logical function, the idea of the self has as its content the *I think*, and while Kant shares Hume's doubts about the possibility of cognizing, for instance, the simplicity of the self (as reflected in the Paralogisms), Kant nonetheless allows for cognition of the successive states of the empirical self (in the Refutation, and a series of later *Reflexionen*).

Chapters 4 and 5 turn to a consideration of Kant's practical works and the third *Critique*, though Guyer is now as interested in drawing attention to the common premises as in pointing out the different conclusions. In chapter 4, the familiar meta-ethical differences between Hume and Kant are set aside and their respective accounts of moral determination compared. The result is an unexpected agreement on three points: (1) the internalist claim that a moral principle must be capable of motivating action, (2) the claim that change in moral behaviour is possible through modification of passions and natural desires, and (3) that the motivational force of morality is ultimately founded in a conception of the good life in terms of self-mastery rather than slavery to passion and inclination. That there is agreement on the first claim is perhaps least surprising. Hume shows that he endorses it in his denial that reason, whether operating in causal inference or in determining the agreement of our ideas, is capable of influencing the will; Kant also adheres to it, though he allows that practical reason can motivate by means of moral feeling. Regarding the second claim, Hume contends that change in unwelcome behaviour is possible, or at least more likely, through modification of our passions rather than through the appeal to reason. This is initially less obvious in Kant's case, but the importance Kant later ascribes to the particular moral feelings of benevolence and self-esteem (in the *Metaphysics of Morals*) suggests that he is interested in the modification, rather than the complete humbling, of self-conceit. This leads to a more complex, and intriguing, analysis of moral determination: the strength of the general moral feeling, caused by the moral law, leads us to cultivate these particular moral feelings which are in fact the proximate causes of our actions. That Hume and Kant agree on the third point of comparison, however, is much less obvious. Relying on sparse evidence from minor sources, Guyer argues that Hume thought of the good life in terms of the tranquillity that results from the mastery, rather than extirpation, of our passions. To show that Kant endorses the ideal of self-mastery as the ultimate source of the motivating force of the moral law, and for which reason provides the means, Guyer draws a parallel between Kant's pre-critical and critical lectures on ethics and anthropology. Kant had earlier proceeded on the basis of a fact of our

psychology, namely, that we abhor servitude, to argue that freedom is only possible when a rule of consistency among the principles of our, and others', actions is adopted. In the later works, Kant is thought to replace the psychological premise with a normative one to the effect that freedom is the sole condition of moral value, the means of realizing which is provided by the law of reason, though Guyer (after rejecting Christine Korsgaard's apparently sympathetic account of the unconditional value of the freedom of choice) is hard-pressed to offer much evidence for this.

Finally, Guyer turns to an analysis of the key themes of the third *Critique* – the accounts of systematicity in the Introductions, judgements of taste in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, and teleological judgements – in light of Hume's various challenges. The first was already discussed in chapter 2, so I will proceed directly to the latter two. In the single work he devoted to aesthetic matters, the brief essay 'Of the Standard of Taste', Hume claims that lacking firm precepts for judging beauty, the consensus among critics, achieved over time and in ideal conditions, constitutes a (suitably empirical) standard of taste. While Kant rejects Hume's conclusion, he nonetheless accepts his formulation of the fundamental problem, namely, accounting for the universality of judgements of taste without relying on determinate concepts. This is reflected in Kant's strategy in the 'Analytic of the Beautiful', where Kant offers the philosophical basis of our ordinary practices in making judgements of taste. Kant thus identifies such judgements as both synthetic and a priori and he attempts the deduction of their validity, first by, tracing our pleasure in beautiful objects to the free play of our cognitive powers and, second, by showing that these cognitive powers necessarily operate in the same way in everyone. Guyer spots a weakness in Kant's case for the latter claim, however, since he seems to assume simply that individuals with the same powers cannot have divergent aesthetic responses; still, Kant's account is considered an improvement on Hume's at least insofar as it is flexible enough to distinguish various species of beauty without losing sight of their common origin. Guyer then considers Kant's 'Critique of Teleological Power of Judgment' as a reply to Hume's criticism of the argument from design in the *Dialogues*. Guyer stresses that Hume only takes issue with the inference to a *perfect* creator without contesting the naturalness and usefulness of teleological inferences generally. Once this is conceded, we can see a familiar structure in Kant's response: he agrees with Hume that such judgements are important and even irresistible, but disputes his empirical account of their origin. So, based on the need for explanations of organisms as products of design (rather than merely mechanically), Kant claims that we ought to employ the idea of an intelligent design for the whole of nature, not in competition with, but parallel to, mechanical explanation by means of the

distinction between appearances and things in themselves. Viewing nature teleologically as well as mechanically will lead us to expand the scope of mechanical explanation (as mechanical explanations are sought for phenomena explained previously only teleologically) on the one hand, and on the other it underwrites the investigation of the end of nature itself, the only plausible candidate for which is the human *qua* moral being.

As Guyer makes clear in the Introduction, the thread that connects these five, otherwise self-standing essays is the contention that reading Kant's texts *as if* they were responses to Hume is 'fruitful' (7) or 'illuminating' (8), and that it even elucidates 'Kant's deepest philosophical assumptions and ambitions' (9). That Guyer achieves the former is, to my mind, indisputable. He is certainly correct to warn as he does in the introduction of the philosophical cost of removing Hume from Kant's cross-hairs altogether: 'Hume raised more serious concerns about causality than had been raised by Leibniz's fanciful monadology . . . [and] Hume's concerns required a far more powerful and general solution than Sulzer or Tetens had offered' (17). However, that Guyer succeeds in showing that this reading elucidates Kant's *deepest* philosophical assumptions is less clear. For Guyer, the doctrine of transcendental idealism, which Kant claims 'runs through my entire work' (AA 04.374), evidently plays no part in his response to Hume, at least not in the theoretical and practical contexts. Instead, Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves is thought to be urged against the Pyrrhonian sceptic in the first *Critique*, and the similarities Guyer catalogues between Hume's and Kant's practical philosophies are limited to 'the phenomenal level', and thus are quite independent of the defence of the freedom of the will that so underpins Kant's moral thought. This runs both ways, however, as Hume's central challenge to the rationality of induction, as Guyer stresses, goes completely unnoticed by Kant. This is hardly news to Guyer – in fact he views the alleged separability of transcendental idealism from the argument of the *Analytic* as a virtue – but what it suggests is that Kant's and Hume's deepest philosophical assumptions and ambitions were not necessarily those they happened to share with one another.

*Philosophy Department, University of Western Ontario, Canada*

**Note**

- 1 It bears noting that Guyer does not consider the discussions of causation in Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, with which Kant was familiar through the (selective) translation of J. G. Hamann finished in 1780. Though not adding much in the way of detail, the *Dialogues* present these results in a context Kant would certainly have found appealing: among the passages Hamann supplies is Philo's discussion of the misuse of the idea of cause beyond experience (cf. *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. III, ed. Josef Nadler [Vienna: Verlag Herder, 1951], pp. 255–6).
- 2 Strikingly, Hamann reports in a letter to Jacobi (27 April 1787) that '[i]ch war von Hume voll wie ich die Sokr. Denkw. schrieb. . . . Unser eigen Dasein und die Existenz aller Dinge ausser uns muss geglaubt und kann auf keine andere Art bewiesen werden' (quoted in J. O'Flaherty, *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967], p. 200; see also pp. 166–8 for specific mention of Hume in this context).

