Comments on Dario Perinetti's "Hume's Sceptical Solutions"

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Dario's Aim and Focus

"Understanding what is for Hume a sceptical solution is crucial for understanding the nature and scope of his scepticism and its relation to his positive science of human nature. In what follows, … I will discuss the relation between epistemological and semantic scepticism."

(p. 1)

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What is a "Sceptical Solution"?

- Phrase used only in title of *Enquiry* 5 (custom as solution to induction); nowhere else, even in other writers.
- Hence problematic to look for *general* account of what such a thing is.
- Even if there are thematic similarities between Hume's treatments of different sceptical problems, the phrase doesn't help us at all.

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Kripke's Definition

"a *sceptical* solution of a sceptical philosophical problem begins … by conceding that the sceptic's negative assertions are unanswerable. Nevertheless our ordinary practice or belief is justified because – contrary appearances notwithstanding – it need not require the justification the sceptic has shown to be untenable."

(Kripke 1982, p. 66)

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Epistemology and Semantics

- Dario seeks to understand "the relation between epistemological and semantic scepticism in Hume's writings"
  - But is there any such consistent relation?
  - Hume's one acknowledged "sceptical solution" involves no significant semantic element …
  - In the *Enquiry*, the problem of induction and its "sceptical solution" through custom are presented quite independently of, and prior to, any discussion of (or even allusion to) the question of the idea of necessary connexion.

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Two Standard Interpretations

- Old Hume
  - "epistemological scepticism entails semantic scepticism" (so real causes and external objects are denied as inconceivable)
- New Hume
  - "though real causes or external objects cannot be known, their existence is nevertheless a reasonable supposition"

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Dario's "Third Way"

"Epistemological scepticism leads 1) to the discovery that the ideas [concerned] are 'confused' or 'obscure' and 2) to a radical revision of the content of the beliefs under scrutiny. The practical significance of sceptical arguments lies in [their helping to reveal] the psychological mechanisms underpinning problematic beliefs."

(p. 2)

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Contrasting Treatments

- Causation (Dario's "Third Way")
  - Impression-source of the idea of power or necessary connexion is successfully identified, thus vindicating the idea and enabling the "essence of necessity" (*T* 1.3.14.22, 2.3.1.10, 2.3.2.2, *E* 8.22 n.18, 8.25 n.19) to be defined.
- External World
  - No *bona fide* impressions as the original of our ideas, which are revealed as "fictions" based on "trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by … false suppositions" *(T* 1.4.2.56*).*

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No Simple "Big Picture"

- Induction
  - Epistemological conclusion with no significant element of semantic scepticism.
- Causation
  - Clarification of our ideas, with implications that *can* be read as sceptical, but can equally be read as constructive (cf. *Mind* 2009 §4).
- External World
  - Investigation of ideas with sceptical semantic results, generating epistemological worries.

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Hume's Use of the Copy Principle

- But Dario is quite right to point out that Hume's use of the Copy Principle is usually "about the pretended *origin* of some key ideas" and "not about whether they do have an origin or are merely empty words" (p. 3).
- Only very rarely (e.g. *mental substance* and *inherence* at *T*1.4.5.26) does Hume unambiguously *reject* a term as meaningless using the Copy Principle, as opposed to *replacing* a confused notion.

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Dismissing Ideas, or Clarifying?

- "We have therefore no idea of substance, *distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities*, nor have we any *other* meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it." (*T* 1.1.6.1)
- "… we have no impression of self or substance, *as something simple and individual.* We have therefore, no idea of them *in that sense*" (*T App* 11)

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More "Big Picture" Worries …

- Dario groups together "time", "necessary connexion", "external object", "substance" and "God" (p. 4). But Hume treats these in very contrasting ways, and the last of them quite straightforwardly:

  "The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom." (*E* 2.6)

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Dario notes Hume's references to confused notions, ideas, or conceptions, leading to mistakes and sophisms (p. 4, n. xii). But these cover a varied range of phenomena:
- Losing track in complex arguments (*T* 1.3.13.6, *E* 9.5 n. 20);
- Mistaken "spreading of the mind" in the case of a fig's taste (*T* 1.4.5.13)
- Misunderstanding terms in discussions of liberty and responsibility (*T* 2.3.1.13)
- A speculated mechanism of association of ideas by "rummaging of cells" (*T* 1.2.5.20)

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Dario's 7-step Theory of Confusion

- Dario's theory of Humean confusion (pp. 5-6) is interesting, but inevitably speculative.
- Like Garrett's appeal to revival sets (which it builds on), the theory is based on very sparse references to the *T* 1.1.7 theory of general ideas (*T* 1.2.3.5-6, 1.3.14.13, 1.4.3.10, 2.3.6.2, *App* 2, *E* 12.25 n. 34).
- All this (inevitably) gives a meagre textual basis for a theory which is supposed to inform Hume's thinking quite generally.

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Taking It Further

- It would be good to see further development of Dario's theory, taking account of:
  - the varied cases of confusion that Hume discusses;
  - the significance of the distinction between individual and general ideas as applied to these various cases;
  - Hume's theory of "fictions", which plays a major role in some cases (e.g. our thoughts about external bodies).

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"Sceptical solutions"

- There is something of a tension in Dario's final section. He starts it by saying:

  "One of the consequences of the reading I am proposing is that problematic ideas about which sceptical doubts can be raised are not all problematic in the same manner."
  (p. 7)

  AGREED! …

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- … but after presenting various examples, he then goes on to say:

  "The examples just given do not exhaust the varieties of sceptical problems and solutions we find in Hume. But I hope they are sufficient to make plain the general features of Humean solutions."
  (p. 8)

- I see more variety here than Dario acknowledges. And the pattern he identifies does not fit with Hume's only thus-named "sceptical solution".

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To End on a Note of Agreement

- I agree with the spirit of Dario's final paragraph, on the constructive pur-poses behind Hume's scepticism …

  "Hume's science of human nature identifies the *particular* disquiets produced by obscure beliefs, and so is conducive to particular positive solutions. In other words … Hume's scepticism is compatible with positive revisions of beliefs and with positive reform of personal, social, and political practices." (p. 9)

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