

*Hume Variations*

Jerry A. Fodor

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003

ISBN 0-19-926405-8

Contemporary philosophy has had a difficult relationship with its own history. One extreme view conceives of the task of philosophy purely in terms of solving certain given problems, and considers the history of philosophy to have no more relevance to this project than the history of physics has to physics itself. Certainly the history of philosophy is an important intellectual discipline, they argue, but just as physicists do not need to read Newton's *Principia* in order to make progress, philosophers do not need to read Aristotle or Kant. At the other extreme are the sceptics who believe that creative philosophy is, for some reason or another it is no longer possible, and that all that can be done is to provide 'readings' of the great thinkers of the past. As the late Burton Dreben is supposed to have remarked: 'junk is junk, but the history of junk is scholarship'.

Many philosophers today locate themselves a little uneasily between these two extremes. The great works of the philosophy of the past must be studied, to be sure; but nonetheless what we are trying to do is to address philosophical problems directly and provide answers to them. Some might find inspiration in the works of Kant or Aristotle and might therefore call the results of their inquiries 'Kantian' or 'Aristotelian'. But those who say this are not too worried about sticking too closely to Kant's or Aristotle's texts; what they are doing is preserving the insights of these thinkers while discarding what is confused, unacceptable or just anachronistic. A paradigm of this approach is P.F. Strawson's 1966 interpretation of Kant's *Critique of*

*Pure Reason*, which ignored Kant's idealism – his view that reality is, in a certain way, fundamentally mind-dependent – in an attempt to make his views more acceptable to a 20<sup>th</sup> century audience. When criticised by scholars about their lack of textual fidelity, defenders of this approach sometimes say that their concern is not with the 'historical Kant' or the 'historical Aristotle'. A literal-minded critic might wonder what other Kant or Aristotle there is. Nonetheless, what the approach involves is essentially the idea of learning from those ideas of the past which still can speak to us today, in whatever way we can.

Jerry Fodor is refreshingly untroubled by these methodological questions. He is not too concerned with the 'historical' David Hume, but nonetheless finds inspiration in some of the central ideas of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40). There are a number of things Fodor likes about Hume. First, there is his naturalism: Hume described his *Treatise* as an 'attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral [i.e. human] subjects' and Fodor, like many philosophers today, sees this as fundamentally the right approach. Second, there is Hume's theory of ideas. Hume divided the contents of the mind into 'impressions' (sensory experiences) and 'ideas' (thoughts) and held that every idea is derived from a corresponding impression. Fodor thinks some of this is true. He agrees with Hume that there must be a distinction between perceptions and concepts (Fodor's version of impressions and ideas) and also that Hume 'was right about his most fundamental architectural claim: there must be simple concepts and there must be mechanisms that are able to construct complex concepts from them'. In other words, Hume's conception of how the mind works is closer to the truth than many would suppose today.

Fodor's advocacy of Hume might surprise some readers. Traditional histories of philosophy divide the philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries into 'Empiricists' who hold that all knowledge derives from experience, and 'Rationalists' who deny this. With his doctrine that every idea must derive from a corresponding impression – that is, from experience – Hume is the archetypical empiricist. Fodor, by contrast, is perhaps best-known for his defence of philosophical ideas which have more of a rationalist or even Cartesian pedigree: the mind is a representational system, and many of our ideas or concepts are innate. That is, concepts do not derive from experience; we are born with them. Moreover, Fodor's famous 'language of thought' hypothesis, that our mental representational system is like a language with a syntactic and semantic structure, was partly influenced by Noam Chomsky's conception of our 'tacit' (or non-conscious) and innate knowledge of the rules of grammar. And Chomsky himself has always acknowledged his roots in Cartesian rationalist philosophy.

However, it is plain that it is not Hume's empiricism which interests Fodor (in fact, he explicitly rejects it). Empiricism is fundamentally a view about the sources of human knowledge, and Fodor is not very interested in the traditional philosophical problems of knowledge. What he is interested in is the nature of concepts or ideas; and this is where he thinks that Hume was right: he was right about the structure of ideas, even if he was wrong about their sources. According to Fodor, Hume's basic insight, one which he is supposed to share with Descartes and contemporary cognitive science, is that mental activity involves mental representations: 'for Hume, as for our contemporary cognitive science, the mind is preeminently the locus of mental representation and mental causation. In this respect, Hume's cognitive science is a footnote to Descartes's and ours is a footnote to his.'

You might wonder: what is so exceptional about the idea that the mind or mental activity involves representations, such that it needs to have its ancestry traced back to these illustrious predecessors? Much mental activity involves thinking; but what is thinking if not representing things in the world? Fodor's concern is to defend this natural idea against the battering it has received in twentieth century philosophy. These critics – whom Fodor labels 'pragmatists' – are the enemies in *Hume Variations*. In their various guises of procedural semanticists, conceptual role semanticists, holists and Wittgensteinians, they have been the regular targets of much of Fodor's work on mind and meaning over the last thirty years. The latest book re-launches the attack on pragmatism from the perspective of Hume's theory of ideas, or something like it. It is Fodor at his polemical best: imaginative, irreverent, sceptical, argumentatively assured – and funny, too, in Fodor's effortless, inimitable way.

With characteristic hyperbolic gloom Fodor calls pragmatism 'the defining catastrophe of analytic philosophy of language and philosophy of mind in the last half of the twentieth century.' Its attempts to do without (something like) the theory of ideas is 'a shambles from which philosophy has yet fully to recover'. But what exactly is pragmatism? The essence of the view is that thinking or having concepts should be understood in terms of certain abilities: for example, in terms of the ability to classify things, or of to make inferences, or to able recognise things and so on. What pragmatism is opposed to is the theory that (in Barry Stroud's words) 'having an idea is fundamentally a matter of contemplating or viewing an "object"' – in other words, that ideas are mental *particulars* or *objects* in the mind. The pragmatist argues that this view, supposedly one of the targets of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, is fundamentally flawed because it cannot account for the *function* of thinking or having concepts; instead, this function must be explained in terms of practical or mental

*abilities.*

The idea that thinking is a kind of ability or activity or capacity is initially attractive; until one starts to try and figure out what kind of ability it might be. Consider the idea that the ability to think about Xs, say, is the ability to distinguish Xs from other things. But what is it to 'distinguish' something from something else? The pragmatist cannot say that it is distinguishing them 'in thought', since thought is what they are trying to explain. Perhaps distinguishing Xs should be construed as an practical ability to sort things physically into those which are Xs and those which are not. One difficulty here is that there surely are thinkers who, through paralysis or some unfortunate accident, are able to think about Xs without being able to sort them. Pragmatists may respond that these thinkers still have the *disposition* to sort things, even if they are unable to activate this disposition. This suggestion brings other difficulties, though; for how can the relevant disposition be characterized in a way that doesn't beg the question? I don't now have the disposition to play the violin just because I would be able to play it if I were taught it; similarly, the paralysed person does not now have the disposition to walk simply because they would be able to walk if they weren't paralysed. The same applies to the idea of the 'ability to sort Xs'.

Even if we ignore this worry, though, Fodor has an independent argument against any version of the 'sorting' proposal. The objection is that even if one were able to sort the Xs from the Ys – let's say by putting them into two piles – this would not show that one was sorting Xs from Ys *as such*. Suppose someone had the task of sorting triangles from squares, by putting all the triangles in one pile and the squares in another. The problem is that although the piles are the result of sorting the triangles from the squares, they would also be the result of sorting the trilaterals from the squares, since all triangles are trilaterals and vice versa. Sorting Xs from Ys is

therefore compatible with not sorting them *as* Xs and Ys.

Fodor's conclusion from this discussion is that ideas like 'being able distinguish things' or 'being able to tell things apart' cannot explain thinking, since they presuppose it: 'how is one to suppose that a mind can tell a X from a Y unless it is already able to think about Xs and Ys?'. The same applies to ideas like inference: how can one infer X from Y unless one were already able to have X and Y as the contents of one's thoughts? Fodor is not saying, of course, that thinking never involves distinguishing things, or that inference has no role in a proper account of thinking. His point is rather that 'thinking about something is prior to inference and discrimination'.

Fodor's claim that 'to have the concept C is to be able to think about Cs (or C-ness) as such' is, in itself, very plausible. But this raises the question of what thinking itself is: what is Fodor's alternative to the pragmatist account of thought? What makes a thought about Cs a thought about Cs? And in particular, can this be described without mentioning notions like *idea*, *concept* or *mental representation*? This massively difficult question is not directly addressed at length in *Hume Variations*, though Fodor has written widely about it elsewhere. His favoured account is that thinking about something has its roots in a causal relationship with the kind of object thought about. But the details of this account have remained elusive and intractable. What kind of causal relationship is required, and how does it allow the possibility of misrepresentation? How can it explain thought about the non-existent? And, more to the present point, it is still unclear how can a causal account solve the above problem for the pragmatist account – for since every triangle is a trilateral, every instance of a concept that is typically caused by a triangle will also be typically caused by a trilateral, so causation cannot explain the difference between the concepts of

triangularity and trilaterality. In the final chapter of this book, Fodor does discuss the question of how one can think of the same thing in more than one way. His account appeals to the idea of distinct mental representations of the same thing: ‘what distinguishes intentionally distinct but equivalent ideas is the way they specify their contents’. This answer is not viciously circular or uninformative, since it is backed up by the account of concepts or ideas defended in the rest of the book: concepts are mental particulars which have effects in the physical world; they can be simple or complex; simple concepts are innate; complex concepts have a constituent structure; many simple concepts are atomistic in the sense that their content does not essentially depend on the content of any other concept. This is quite a bundle of commitments, and the theory which holds them is far from trivial or circular. But traditionally, philosophers have wanted to say more: what it is it, in non-mental terms, to think about something as such? And all the answers – reductive pragmatism included – seem rather feeble.

However, perhaps the reason the answers are so feeble is that the question is badly posed. For as *Hume Variations* shows, a lot can be said about thought and thinking – a lot that is controversial, interesting and explanatory – without embarking on this reductive project. In 1987, Fodor claimed that if thought is real ‘it must really be something else’. He still thinks this; but his latest thoughts on the nature of ideas and concepts show how much can be achieved without assuming it.

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