

Review

*Custom and Reason in Hume:
A Kantian Reading of the First Book
of the Treatise* by Henry E. Allison

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In *Custom and Reason in Hume*, eminent Kant scholar Henry Allison turns his attentive and penetrating gaze towards Hume, to provide a Kantian reading of the first book of the *Treatise*. Allison offers a characteristic close and – perhaps surprisingly – sympathetic reading of Hume’s text, whilst also detailing important similarities and differences with (his) Kant. The result is an important work, which deserves to be read by both Humeans and Kantians alike.

In general, Allison follows Hume through the first book of the *Treatise*. Accordingly, he begins with the building blocks of Hume’s empiricism – his elements (chapter 1) – before moving

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through Hume's account of space and time (chapter 2), noting how both Hume and Kant view space and time as manners in which sensory data are given to or received by the mind in experience (10).¹ He continues to consider 'Hume's fork' (chapter 3), before turning to the crucial issues of causality and induction (chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7). This is followed by a discussion of Hume's scepticism (chapters 8 and 9), where Allison argues that Hume is best read as a meta-sceptic; his scepticism is not directed towards our first-order empirical reasoning, but rather at our second-order philosophical attempts to ground such reasoning within the logical space of reasons (4). He concludes the book with a discussion of Hume's and Kant's philosophical therapy (chapter 10), Hume's paralogisms (chapter 11), and philosophical insouciance (chapter 12). In these sections, Allison claims that Hume's critique of metaphysics anticipates themes central to Kant's Transcendental Dialectic, whilst also posing what he sees as important Kantian challenges to Hume's approach.

In this review, I restrict myself to what I take to be the key issues of the book – Hume's and Kant's models of cognition, and how these inform their respective views on (amongst other things) causality and the scope of reason. I finish by considering Paul Guyer's review of this book, and in particular his criticism of Allison's focus on Hume's perceptual model of cognition. I argue, pace Guyer, that this is the key to Allison's work.

¹ Page numbers in brackets refer throughout to the 2008 hardback edition.

Two Different Models of Cognition

In the introduction, Allison notes that, “a distinctive feature of my approach is its focus on the two thinkers’ contrasting models of cognition, which I believe to be the key to the issues separating them” (5). Throughout the book, he contrasts what he calls Hume’s perceptual model, with Kant’s discursive model of cognition. The perceptual model “regards the paradigm of cognition as the immediate apprehension of a particular content that is before the mind, that is, as a kind of seeing with ‘the mind’s eye’” (6). This model of cognition, Allison contends, is not exclusive to Hume, nor even to empiricists, but to transcendental realism in general (we shall return to address this later).

Following on from (the second edition of) his *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism* (2004), Allison emphasises the discursive nature of cognition for Kant. For Kant, he notes that the primary act of cognition is judgement, rather than perception (8). Judgement here is “an act through which a sensory content (intuition) is related to objects by being brought under concepts” (8).

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Causality

Allison believes that the differences between Hume and Kant on causality provide an “excellent entrée” to understanding their differences on empirical knowledge in general. Let us accordingly turn to consider this now.

In one sense, Allison points out, both Kant and Hume are internalists; they both share the “recognition of the impossibility of standing, as it were, outside one’s representations in order to compare them with an objective state of affairs” (108). They both, however, differ in their account of this internalism. This becomes clear when we consider their contrasting models of cognition.

For Kant, there is a difference between a series of perceptions and experience (206). Experience is a normative notion that involves cognition and the bringing of what is given in experience under concepts (the discursivity thesis) (*ibid*). Kant differentiates between judgements of perception and judgements of experience (4: 298; 92); Allison attributes the former to Hume (which he calls ‘Hume-judgements’) and the latter to Kant (which he calls ‘Kant-judgements’) (206). Kant’s view is that, without the presence of the pure concepts of the understanding (the categories), there is no objectivity (207); for Kant, only Kant-judgements can make a claim to objectivity.

As Hume denies the existence of pure concepts of the understanding, for him, there are only Hume-judgements. Allison

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considers two possible avenues for Hume here – one sceptical, the other constructive. The sceptical claim is that, as all judgements are Hume-judgements, there is accordingly no objective validity (208). Allison finds the constructive avenue much more interesting (*ibid*). This is the claim that there are rules by which we can differentiate between subjective connections (or regularities) and objective ones, but that such rules are empirical rather than a priori (*ibid*).

This is where causality comes into play. Allison asks us to consider the Kant-judgement: The sun warms the stone. He notes that the function of the category of causality here is not (as it is often assumed) “to convert an incidental relation between the shining of the sun and the warmth of the stone into a causal connection by interjecting an a priori necessary connection between them” (209), but rather “to convert the successive perception of states of the stone ... into the cognition of an objective succession” (*ibid*).

The former story views Kant as requiring a priori principles for a task that Hume sees as only requiring empirical principles or rules, and thus puts the burden of proof on Kant to explain why we need to go beyond empirical principles (*ibid*). The latter account presupposes a cause. Allison points out, that it is only now that Hume’s rules come into play: “Assuming that the occurrence ... has a cause, [Hume’s empirical rules] provide the means for determining that the cause is the heat emanating from the sun” (*ibid*). Here however, it is already assumed that

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every event has a cause, and as such, “rather than making an appeal to a priori principles redundant, Hume’s rules take such principles for granted” (*ibid*).

Allison ends his discussion of causation by posing a challenge to Hume’s idealised observer. The idealised observer for Hume is a particular observer who manages to get it right, and can differentiate between contingent regularities and genuine causal connections (*ibid*). Kant’s challenge to this “Humean naturalistic form of idealisation is to provide the ultimate norms on the basis of which this discrimination is possible” (209-210). Allison notes that the Humean will likely respond that the aforementioned (empirical) rules are sufficient for this task. To which, he concludes that, “the Kantian will reply (and I believe correctly) that they may well be necessary, but they are not sufficient, since they presuppose a priori concepts and principles” (210).

Hume’s Meta-Scepticism

One of the main reasons why Allison offers a Kantian reading of the *Treatise*, rather than the *Enquiry*, is because, in the former work, Hume offers “remarkable metacritical reflections on the possibility of his own project” (12) – he is concerned with the conditions of the possibility of his own naturalistic program (311). Towards the end of the first book of the *Treatise*, Hume finds himself in a quan-

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dary. There is a conflict between the core principles of the imagination, namely, the reliability of causal reasoning, and the belief in the continued and independent existence of body (313). Hume faces a decisive normative question, “how far ought we yield to these illusions?” (314).

Allison finds Hume’s answer to this question in what Don Garrett has termed the ‘Title Principle’. This is a normative principle governing those who philosophise upon sceptical principles: “Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate on us” (*Treatise*, 1.4.7.11)

Allison believes that the Title Principle concerns the self-referential implications of Hume’s critique of philosophy. Hume, he writes, “was not so insouciant as to dispense with all normative principles in the manner of a post-modernist” (324). Instead, Allison contends, he sought a principle that would “warrant certain beliefs in spite of their seemingly disreputable genealogy, while allowing for the rejection of others not withstanding their apparently impeccable credentials (*ibid*). The Title Principle fulfils this role, “making it possible for Hume’s diffidence regarding his philosophical doubts to trump his diffidence regarding his philosophical conviction” (*ibid*). Conceived as such, Hume is a meta-sceptic.

In the last few sections of the book, Allison turns to consider whether Hume is entitled to the Title Principle. Allison notes that, in appealing to the Title Principle, Hume is not introducing

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an external principle, but merely affirming the norm that is already implicit in our cognitive faculties (as he has analysed them) (327). Allison contends that this reasoning is circular, in two ways (*ibid*): Firstly, it assumes the soundness of Hume's (deflationary) analysis of our cognitive faculties, an analysis itself that is based on reasoning governed by the Title Principle, which is then appealed to, to justify this very principle; Secondly, his justification of his diffidence regarding doubts about the reliability of these faculties supposes the validity of the Title Principle.

Allison however, believes that this circularity is not vicious. As noted above, the appeal is not to an external ground, but rather one that is immanent to the cognitive faculties themselves (328). That is, "it is a matter of the cognitive faculties approving of their own operations, insofar as they accord with the Title Principle and disapproving of them insofar as they do not" (*ibid*). Hume's vindication of both the trustworthiness of the cognitive faculties and the Title Principle comes down to a kind of self-approval or reflective endorsement of the cognitive faculties (*ibid*).²

Allison believes that this internal defence of the Title Principle creates "space for an insouciant mode of philosophising, whose foundations (though not its inductive method) lie outside

² Here, Allison departs from Christine Korsgaard. Korsgaard famously argues that reflective endorsement plays an important (and legitimate) role in Hume's moral theory, but also claims – in contrast to Allison – that Hume's theoretical philosophy fails the reflexivity test (328).

the logical space of reasons” (330). Allison sees this an impressive philosophical achievement, but also believes that once one steps back from the terms of Hume’s project, and questions his underlying assumptions, problems emerge.

The Perceptual Model and the Space of Reasons

Allison locates the crux of Hume’s problems in his commitment to a perceptual model of cognition (331). The main issue with such a conception of cognition (especially in the imagistic form it takes in Hume) is that “it makes it virtually impossible to appreciate the role of concepts and judgment in cognition” (*ibid*). Allison believes that the Kantian alternative – with its discursivity thesis – provides a viable and systematic alternative to Hume’s empiricism (*ibid*).

In drawing this contrast, Allison looks to explicitly connect the two interpretive theses that run through the book as a whole (331). The first thesis is that, “reasoning for Hume occurs in part, but only in part, in the logical space of reasons” (*ibid*). Allison employs this metaphor to express the normative ambiguity of Hume’s project (*ibid*). That is, while reason makes normative distinctions with reference to general rules, the principles underlying such rules and reason are not themselves grounded in reason (*ibid*). The second interpretive thesis concerns Hume’s commitment to the perceptual model. Allison’s

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claim is that, “rather than being two independent strands of Hume’s empiricist naturalism, his views on a non-rational grounding and the nature of thought are intimately related” (*ibid*).

Allison holds that Hume’s attachment to the perceptual model of cognition commits him to two forms of the ‘Myth of the Given’ (334). The basic form of this myth is that experience yields an immediate non-propositional cognition of objects, which is independent of concepts and which provides a foundation for further knowledge (*ibid*). What makes such a ‘given’ mythical (for Sellars) is that nothing non-propositional can play such an epistemic role, since it lies outside the logical space of reasons (*ibid*). The second form of the myth concerns the grounds of belief, which for Hume, ultimately lie in custom, and accordingly outside the logical space of reasons (*ibid*); “Considered as such, custom supplies what, in McDowell’s terms, is an exculpatory rather than a justificatory reason for adopting the Uniformity Principle” (*ibid*). Custom, Allison notes, has its abode in the space of causes (*ibid*). As such, our belief in, for example, the Uniformity Principle – which is the normative ground of all of our inferences from the observed to the unobserved – “seems to float in a logical limbo, without any anchor in the space of reasons” (334).

Allison sees this as leaving Hume’s philosophy lacking when it comes to the normativity his principles require (*ibid*). For Hume, he notes, custom may very well be reason enough, but

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this is only because he has no place for concepts, which together with judgments, are the “legitimate denizens of the logical space of reasons” (*ibid*).

Recognising this, he holds, “provides the framework in terms of which we must interpret and evaluate ‘Kant’s answer to Hume’, insofar as it is concerned with the normative grounding of principles regarding objects of possible experience” (335). That experience, for Kant, requires conceptualisation, “opens up the possibility for a new kind of a priori grounding, a ‘transcendental proof’, which asserts that a certain mode of conceptualisation is a necessary condition of the possibility of experience” (*ibid*). Such a mode of argumentation, he holds, unlike Hume’s, lies firmly within the logical space of reasons (*ibid*).

There is also the key issue of whether reason begs or commands. Allison concludes the book by emphasising this fundamental difference between Kant and Hume: “[A]t the end of the day, whether reason merely begs or also commands is the fundamental issue separating Hume and Kant in the theoretical as well as the practical domains” (336). Furthermore, Allison claims that this manner of framing the difference between Hume and Kant complements the distinction between the perceptual and the discursive models of cognition: “[T]he discursive model is one in which reason necessarily commands, where in the perceptual model, in which epistemic primacy is

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given to what is present to ‘the mind’s eye’, it can only obey” (*ibid*).

Guyer’s Review

Another eminent Kant scholar, Paul Guyer, has recently reviewed Allison’s book (*Hume Studies*, 2009, vol. 35 pt 1-2, pp 236-239). Guyer applauds the book, but offers a criticism – he finds the book’s structure lacking. Allison, as I have noted, follows Hume through the (first book of the) *Treatise*. Guyer notes that it might make more sense to divide the book thematically, to consider Hume’s perceptual model of cognition, and then his meta-scepticism. Guyer also holds that Allison spends too much time on the former issue, and not enough time developing the latter (which Guyer considers the most interesting and novel aspect of the work). Regarding the former project, he writes that, “[Allison] spends more time than is necessary on the critique of Hume’s perceptual model of cognition, which after all has long had no serious defenders” (236-7).

I think that Guyer is misguided here. Allison does indeed criticise Hume’s specifically imagistic perceptual model of cognition, but his crucial Kantian challenges concern the broader paradigm of the perceptual model of cognition in general (8). Furthermore, for Allison, such a model of cognition is not exclusive to (historical) empiricism, but instead goes hand in

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hand with transcendental realism (Allison, 2004: 27-8). The denial of the discursivity thesis requires that objects themselves somehow be given to the mind; as such, transcendental realism and the perceptual model of cognition “are merely two sides of the same coin” (Allison, 2004: 28).

Recognising this brings (Allison’s) Kant’s challenge to Hume alive. It is not merely a historical comparison – a Kantian reading of Hume – but also a fundamental challenge to a prevalent model of cognition (and one that Guyer himself subscribes to).

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