

Daniel Goldstick

Reason, Truth, and Reality.

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Textbooks that look at seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy tend to leave the impression that Immanuel Kant's response to David Hume's skepticism was unrivaled in its time. This perhaps explains the historical neglect of Thomas Brown's response to his fellow Scot. Brown, a figure in the Common Sense School of Philosophy, advanced an *ad hominem* argument using Hume's practical confidence in inductive reasoning to ascribe to Hume a belief that such reasoning is able to generate truths.

In *Reason, Truth and Reality*, Dan Goldstick develops this Common Sense method in an effort to undermine Humean and subsequent philosophies in so far as they support comprehensive skepticism. His strategy is to convince readers that they ascribe to principles relating to deduction, induction and ethics whose veracity is established *a priori*. Goldstick describes his thesis as a defense of Pre-Kantian rationalism (ix) with its characteristic confidence in what after Kant would come to be characterized as synthetic *a priori* truths. Goldstick's defense does not, however, translate into an effort to resurrect the rationalist tradition of comprehensive metaphysical system-building. Those familiar with the author's well-known political beliefs will recognize that, at its core, this book is addressing the Marxian concern with relating theory to practice.

This challenging and unfashionably wide-ranging book consists of three parts. The first part, described as introductory, offers a defense of rationalism against empiricism. After briefly making the case for beliefs being '*objectivity-claiming*' and dressing-down Kant's response to Hume, the author introduces the concept of 'M-implicated' statements (the 'M' being in honor of G. E. Moore). A statement M-implies another statement whenever denying the second statement and assenting to the first statement would result in self-contradiction. For example, there is no logical contradiction in assenting to the uniformity of nature while denying one can tell whether or not it is true (à la David Hume); however, assenting to the uniformity of nature does M-imply that one believes that this uniformity truly obtains (24). M-implication, is then used by the author to argue that when we believe something, this M-implies that we believe this belief is useful and that we believe others should believe it. From here, the discussion turns to making the case for analytical *a priori* truths that are essential to deductive reasoning. Particular attention is paid to the principle of non-contradiction. Goldstick carefully distinguishes the evolutionary/practical/inductive grounds for being justified in believing the principle, from how it is true (which must be *a priori*) (50). So, if we utilize the principle, this means we believe it to be true, and *why* we think it is true does not detract from the fact that our belief in the principle M-implies a belief in a principle that can only be true *a priori*; thus we believe in an *a priori* truth. In the final chapters of Part 1 the author critically assesses the efforts to justify empiricism that avoid resorting to the kind of a synthetic *a priori* claim that forces that epistemological

viewpoint into self-contradiction. Goldstick examines the strategies discussed or intimated by Rudolph Carnap, Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. I. Lewis and others, to then develop an argument that the only kind of claim that could work is *ad hoc*, synthetic and *a priori*.

The second part of the book offers an extensive discussion on the *a priori* assumptions that explain our confidence in induction. This begins with an assessment of various views on inductive reasoning: sensationalism, naturalism, inductivism, pragmatism, nihilism, skepticism and decisionism. The defense of induction that then follows begins with the compelling notion that if empirical evidence can ever serve as the basis for a particular valid probability claim, this must be accepted as true independently of the presence of this empirical evidence. In other words, if we believe inductive reasoning works (i.e., we use inductive reasoning and accept its conclusions), this M-implies a belief in an *a priori* proposition about the legitimacy of inductive reasoning itself (120). After the case for justifying our confidence in inductive reasoning, the most difficult part of the book offers *a priori* arguments for universal impermanence, simplicity and determinism. In the latter case, Goldstick argues that our sense of time—our ability to see events as following in succession—is incompatible with indeterminism. This part of the book ends with a frustratingly brief discussion of how his arguments for pre-Kantian rationalism—relying as they do on developments from twentieth century analytical philosophy—have the effect of undermining metaphysics.

The third and weakest part of the book deals with morality. It begins by offering a critical assessment of the various philosophical positions in support of, and in opposition to, moral realism. In the middle section, he argues against the possibilities of consciencelessness and a genuine belief in ‘moral non-dogmatism’—the belief that the only duty each of us has is to follow our own conscience. The latter issue is handled deftly; the former, not so much. With respect to the possibility of being conscienceless, the author asserts that first-language learning involves adopting the viewpoint of others, resulting in the empathy and sympathy that instills in us moral sentiments and beliefs which we have regardless of our meta-ethical viewpoints. He then tackles the obvious challenge to this position—the psychopath. Goldstick’s brief analysis of, and response to, this challenge focuses on the fact that psychopaths are characterized by impulsive behavior rather than specific types of motivations, so sometimes moral dictates may serve as the motivation behind their impulsive actions. To make this point he presents a brief quotation from Ted Bundy that, whatever else it may suggest, does not offer an example of impulsive, yet morally-driven, behavior. (Here, Goldstick might have made use of the fictional character Dexter, from the HBO television series of that same name. Dexter is a psychopathic serial killer who was taught by his adoptive father to kill only those who wrongly kill others—what Dexter calls ‘taking out the trash’. But this moral discipline of Dexter’s, while it may make him endearing as a protagonist, also makes him unbelievable as a psychopath.) The underlying problem with Goldstick’s argument is that it is not clear why empathy is the necessary result of placing ourselves in the position of others. Why couldn’t loathing or indifference sometimes be the outcome?

In the final section of the last part of the book, a case is made for utilitarianism. In

preparation for a ‘proof’ of the principle of utility in the penultimate chapter, a variety of well-known challenges to utilitarianism are addressed, in most cases far too briefly. For example, Derek Parfit’s well-known Repugnant Conclusion is the focus of a chapter entitled ‘Population’. After explaining why average utilitarianism is not an acceptable solution, Goldstick attempts to explain away the problem. He suggests that all possible parties would choose to risk non-existence in order to have a guarantee that if they did live, their lives would be considerably better than barely worth living. It is not at all clear why possible people should be part of Goldstick’s ‘hypothetical electorate’, or why utilitarianism would be concerned with what such an electorate had to say if what was voted for was less than utility maximization. Goldstick wants us to see utilitarianism as ‘a demand to *serve people* to the fullest extent possible’ (311, n. 1). However, possible people are no more people that can be *served* than possible plants are plants that can be nurtured. His final comment is to dismiss the issue as being of no practical importance. However, he has overlooked a micro-version of choices between different numbers of people. If individual reproductive decision-making is to be guided by the principle of utility along with consideration of all possible people, the resulting dictates will be extremely intrusive on adults, making most of us deserving of moral criticism for omissions and commissions that in fact leave no one worse off and often leave some better off. As a result of such problems, the ‘proof’ of the principle of utility ends up not having much steam behind it.

This book is well-written and free of unnecessary jargon. It is unfortunate that summaries were not attached to the end of each of its three parts. Footnotes throughout relate the author’s ideas to those of figures in the history of philosophy and direct readers to some of the author’s own seemingly innumerable publications. A useful discussion on tautologies and another on desires are appended.

Responses to this book are bound to be divided. Those who take offence at the suggestion that their practice can be used to argue against their philosophical commitments will want to critique Goldstick’s strategy. Those who cannot help but think the self-proclaimed philosophical skeptic a hypocrite for refusing an invitation to step in front of an oncoming bus may not accept all of the conclusions reached by means of this strategy, but they should, nevertheless, acquaint themselves with Goldstick’s impressive effort.

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