

## Jan Fršlínek, *Skrytá podstata skutečnosti – Humovské pojetí. Diplomová práce. Posudek oponenta práce*

In his diploma thesis, Jan Fršlínek has two main projects. Firstly, he offers us an interpretation of David Hume's thought about the secret nature of causality and, indeed, of the secret nature of reality in general. This interpretation, which takes up roughly the first half of the thesis, draws on the 'New Hume', or 'sceptical realist', interpretation and treats Hume's positive characterisation of causality as relevant only at the epistemic or cognitive level, and as complemented by a positive ontological affirmation of an unknown real nature of things or "*skrytá podstata skutečnosti*". The author, then proceeds to reflect, in a more speculative and abstract vein, on the very concept of a secret nature of reality. He argues that such a reality can only be characterised as non-spatial, non-numerical, and free of all empirical properties (*prostá veškerých empirických vlastností*) (p. 48), and, 'in a certain sense', non-existent. The author uses two terms for this last putative property: *non-existentní* and *nejsoucí* (pp. 49-50). In later passages, however, inspired by neo-Platonism, he prefers *před-jsoucí* and *nad-existující* (p. 61). He seeks to express his thinking about the secret nature of reality by means of geometrical representation and by an extended analogy with the causal emergence of particles from an electro-magnetic field as understood by contemporary physics.

The first half of the thesis offers a detailed and intelligent interpretation of Hume's *Treatise*, and of the relevant passages in Hume's later *Enquiry*. The author has a good knowledge of the secondary literature in this area, although he might have considered the arguments of interpreters who take a different line on the central issues of the New Hume Debate (such as Peter Millican and Kenneth Winkler). Nevertheless, his interpretation of Hume is characterised by unity of purpose and depth of analysis.

A number of questions arise which should be addressed at the defence. (i) The author seems not to distinguish between external (*vnější*) to the mind (in the sense of objective) and external (*vnější*) to our knowledge (in the sense of unknowable). This leads him to claim that either there is a secret nature of objects (or causality) or they are 'in us' and 'ideal' (p. 40), and that the denial of external objects and their secret nature may be treated together as amounting to the same thing (thus, for example, his use of the phrase *'popření externích objektů a skryté roviny existence'*) (p. 43). However, he seems to be ignoring a third possible position which would treat external objects as real but would still deny that they have a secret nature. In other words, we should distinguish between the belief that external objects—such as tigers and trees—exist and the belief that they have an unknowable real essence. (ii) The author does not address an important objection to the New Hume Interpretation which draws on Hume's semantical theory which identifies meaning with 'ideas' (i.e. items derivable from perception). This semantical theory, runs the objection, leaves no way of referring meaningfully to a reality that transcends the possibility of perception and knowledge. While the objection is disputable when applied to Hume's agnostic position, it does raise the question of the semantical constraints in Hume's philosophy which, I think, will be relevant to the second speculative part of the thesis. (iii) The illustrative example of quarks (pp. 41-42) neglects to consider the instrumentalist interpretation of non-perceptible entities in physics which would consider them to be convenient fictions that render our description of the natural laws governing bodies more elegant and effective. (iv) I should also mention that I find the term 'cognitive scepticism' redundant. Does not all scepticism question our cognitive powers? Is there any non-cognitive scepticism? I take it that the author's welcome use of the phrase 'negative dogmatism' implies implicit recognition of the point that the denial of

parts of reality (matter, UFO's or whatever) is not scepticism in the philosophical sense, but a form of dogmatism (again in the philosophical sense).

While the first half of the thesis is relatively successful in interpreting Hume and delineating a sceptical realist framework in which to understand his thought, the second half of the thesis is, I think, less satisfactory. Certainly, the 'systematic' element is to be encouraged, as is an attempt to reconstruct Hume's thought using the concepts or analysis of other schools or traditions. However, as it stands the second part of the thesis departs too far from the professed aim and title of the diploma thesis '*Skrytá podstata skutečnosti – Humovské pojetí?*'. The views expressed are now no longer in the spirit of a Humean approach or conception as the title and abstract had stated. In employing the metaphysical concepts of neo-Platonism, and in questioning the binary category of existence-non-existence, in failing to recognise Hume's semantical constraints on sense, and in positing specific causal powers that transcend experience, the author would seem to have passed into another theoretical domain altogether. On the last point, the author writes, for example, the following:

*'Individuovanost se dělí na individuovanost (individuální entitu či jednotný komplex percepce) a na individuující individuovanost. Individuující individuovanost je taková individuovanost, která je ... schopná vykonávání procesu individuace z nediferencovanosti'* (p. 77).

'Individuující individuovanost' is here characterised as a causal power because it is an ability (*schopnost vykonávat*). Yet it transcends our possible experience since it is, as far as I can see, an unconscious or mysterious ability that makes the very experience of objects possible. While necessary connexions may exist in nature, or in us, according to the New Hume interpretation, it is vain to speculate about their character in this way, for there is no 'constant conjunction' of experienced events that might constitute the cause and effect and thus warrant talk of a specific causal power.

In addition, I should report that I have found the geometrical diagrams of little help in understanding the theoretical challenges posed by the secret nature of reality.

I have found it difficult to evaluate this diploma thesis. It contains many positive features in its first half, including a thorough-going interpretation of some of the most difficult parts of Hume's thought. However, the second half is significantly discontinuous with the first half and therefore the overall project underlying the thesis appears to be flawed.

**Navzdory těmto různým výhradám jednoznačně doporučuji práci k obhajobě. Zhodnotil bych práci jako velmi dobře.**

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