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Book Review

Historical Ontology, Ian Hacking. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press. pp. 279. Hardcover, $41.00. ISBN 0-674-00616-X.

Ian Hacking's *Historical Ontology* is a collection of "occasional" papers given over the past three decades. The papers demonstrate Hacking's astounding versatility, his erudition and his conspicuous place amongst analytical philosophers working today; not only is Hacking at home discussing technical matters friendly to philosophers of science, but he can also speak the language of the continental philosopher while domesticating that language for an analytical audience. *Historical Ontology* is also a contribution to the philosophy of history: an area of philosophy that today remains largely neglected both professionally and in academic programmes of philosophy. Of course, the release of this text is timely and it may speak to a general change in philosophical attitude amongst the highest ranking in the profession; Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness* and Frank Farrell's *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism*, both noteworthy recent responses to Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, are worth mentioning if only for their having revitalised debates around history and its relationship to philosophical understanding.

> *Historical Ontology* is an excellent collection of fifteen essays, and while it is, in part, (as I claim) a work in the philosophy of history, it is neither genealogical in its treatment of philosophical matters nor are the essays especially *historicist* when read in isolation from Hacking's underlying thematic. I return to this point shortly. The collection does appear, by way of the table of contents, to be disconnected. The essays are topically wide ranging and, for those familiar with Hacking's other work, are carried by an approachable and systematic style. Included are essays on self-improvement, philology and style for historians and philosophers. Three papers especially stand out, in my view: "Leibniz and Descartes: Proof and Eternal Truths," "Wittgenstein as Philosophical Psychologist," and "How, Why, When and Where Did Language Go Public?" These papers expose Hacking's original contribution to the study of the history of philosophy and his ability to read carefully and critically. For the interested scholar, compelling arguments are presented; for the undergraduate or graduate student they are wonderfully instructive papers, and many are worthy of systematic response. The essays can be read individually, but this may, I gently suggest, underdetermine Hacking's aim.

> What makes this collection especially interesting is the Foucault-inspired theme that Hacking claims "looms in the background." It is this imminent thematic compass that I wish to comment on for the remainder of this review.

Hacking's choice of "historical ontology" is quite deliberate; the book's first sentence introduces the title's "self-importance." Hacking claims to have "always disliked the word 'ontology'." Of course, we might take it to be a "study of being" but Hacking rightly points out the difficulties involved in giving an account of such a study. He writes:

> If, like myself, you can understand the aims of psychology, cosmology, and theology, but are hard pressed to explain what a study of being in general might be, you can hardly welcome talk of ontology. In the twentieth century the word attracted significant philosophers such as W.V. Quine and Martin Heidegger, but their pronouncements on the subject were sometimes bizarre as well as profound. Think of Quine's ontological aphorism, "To be is to be the value of a variable." (1)

In spite of Hacking's deep reservations about the term "ontology," he resolves to stipulate a *relatively* uncontroversial definition:

> ... suppose we want to talk in quite a general way about all types of objects, and what makes it possible for them to come into being. It is convenient to group them together by talking about "what there is," or ontology. (1)

Hacking points out that *historically* philosophers have emphasised "demarcation," in their concerns about ontology; they have wondered where to draw their boundaries in deciding on what candidates for existence to include. Hacking circumvents those sorts of disputes. Rather, he tells us that he is a "dynamic nominalist." In Hacking's words, he is "interested in how our practices of naming *interact* with the things that we name ... [but also he] could be called a dialectical realist, preoccupied by the *interactions* between what there is (and what comes into being) and our conceptions of it" (emphasis mine. 2). There is a tenuous relationship between this sort of nominalism and realism, but we can leave out any substantive appraisal in this brief discussion. Still, one might wonder at what sort of commitment we might understand ourselves to be making to an object or class or whatever it is we individuate when it is only in its individuation that we can properly think of it as *existing*? What sort of "interaction" is there between what is individuated and what is conceived? Is not this merely a matter of a conceptual relation? Hacking's responses are interesting.

Hacking dovetails, as his title suggests, an understanding of *history* with ontology. Our worries about the individuation of an object, if explained by way of our concerns about *ontology*, involves, it seems, giving an account of how that object came to be individuated. In other words, introducing an object into our practices of naming objects of that particular kind can be given an account, but what sort of account might we be in need of? Hacking observes that our interest is in the object's "coming into being" and what might this be if not an historical account? He is careful to quarantine criticisms that might charge him with constructivism. Instead, Hacking's historical ontology takes the historically imminent categories of the social sciences as "presenting themselves as positive knowledge, the bearers of general facts and testable truths about the human condition" (24). Any given category in the social sciences may alter our understanding of "social reality," but in its role in making such a change possible, the category is no less real than those individuated existents that seem to resist the individuating practices prone to theory-oriented flux.

It is from Michel Foucault's (1984) "What is Enlightenment?" that Hacking borrows the idea of an

historical ontology. In Hacking's hands such an ontology speaks, in one of its aspects, to how "various concepts, practices, and corresponding institutions … disclose new possibilities for human choice and action..." (4). Hacking fashions this idea around *his* historical ontology; namely, an ontology "concerned with objects or their effects which do not exist in any recognizable form until they are objects of scientific study" (11). By linking our concerns with our scientific practices, Hacking is making a bold claim: there are "styles of reasoning" which force our powers of discrimination to illuminate certain aspects of reality; a tribunal that can then adjudicate candidates for truth and falsity does so only in its own jurisdiction. Hacking says of truths under a certain jurisdiction, "styles of reasoning," that they are "curiously immune to anything akin to refutation" (192). It is in a future work that Hacking will fill-out this position.

Overall, *Historical Ontology* is worth our time and our effort. Hacking's insights into the practices of philosophers and the place of history in those practices is not only significant, but as I suggested at the start of this review, timely. While many of Hacking's main insights are left unattended, we are treated to brilliant essays and a promise of more to come. I highly recommend this title.

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