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# Review of: Jonathan Kramnick, Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson

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# Review of: Jonathan Kramnick, Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson

#### Abstract

Book review/compte rendu

Jonathan Kramnick, Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson

#### Keywords

Book review

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### Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Jonathan Kramnick. *Actions and Objects from Hobbes to Richardson*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xii+308pp. US\$24.95. ISBN 978-0-8047-7052-1.

In his Essay Concerning Human Understanding, John Locke imagined what would happen if, after being severed, his little finger remained conscious. The point of Locke's thought experiment is that "self depends on consciousness, not on substance" (Essay, 27.17). In other words, matter does not move itself; only the mind can will the body to move, and hence the mind is the location of selfhood. This power of self-motion is also what, according to Locke, sets man apart from machine. For human beings, motion comes from within, while for a pocket-watch, all motion originates "from without" (Essay, 27.5). In 2011, more than three centuries after Locke's death, scientists at Johns Hopkins University began human trials with a robotic prosthetic arm whose motions are controlled entirely by thought. Advances in neural prosthetics have sparked predictions that future decades will witness the dawn of "bionic" men and women who will blur the boundaries between mind/ machine in productive and unsettling new ways. Questions about whether or not cybernetic body parts will enhance or inhibit autonomy point us back to Locke: is the self safely rooted in the mind, or does substance also determine personhood?

Jonathan Kramnick reminds us that the ineluctably human capacity for free will—the mind's control over the body's actions—has been under threat since long before thought-controlled prosthetics. In his preface, Kramnick argues that many Restoration and eighteenth-century writers did not envision a clear boundary between the "inner" mind and the "outer" world. The motivations for one's actions were just as likely to be found outside the head as inside it. Kramnick's aims thus differ from those of prior studies that explored the "rise" of a new language of interiority in eighteenth-century fiction. *Actions and Objects* is concerned as much with what Kramnick calls "externalism"—theories that locate the source of action outside the mind—as with theories of internal volition and self-control. What if it is not only one's mind that controls one's little finger, but also gravitational laws, market forces, even the minds of others? What then becomes of selfhood?

Kramnick synthesizes key Enlightenment philosophical debates with an admirable clarity and lively style that make *Actions and Objects* both enjoyable to read and eminently teachable. The book's structure adds to its accessibility. While the introduction and chapter 1 take wide-angle views of the philosophy of action from Thomas Hobbes to David Hume,

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later chapters function as zoomed-in case studies. Chapters 2 through 6 analyze how theories of mental causation influenced form and content in a wide range of genres, from John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester's obscene poems and Locke's correspondence with William Molyneux to Eliza Haywood's amorous fiction and Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*.

Three conceptual nexuses structured Enlightenment inquiries into the mental causes of action, according to Kramnick. The introduction details, first, the debates over free will versus necessity: does Alexander Pope's Baron choose to cut off Belinda's lock, or is he compelled by forces beyond his control? Philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Hume challenged this binary opposition and argued for a compatibilist model in which liberty and necessity were not mutually exclusive. From a compatibilist standpoint, actions are caused both by internal mental states such as desire and by external pressures, whether physical or social. By concentrating on compatibilism, Kramnick reveals that eighteenthcentury characterization depended not only on a proto-psychological model of internal subjectivity but also on the notion that mental states extended outward into the world, to external happenings and even to objects. Externalism is particularly pertinent to chapter 6, in which Kramnick convincingly argues that Richardson's prime movers— Clarissa, Lovelace, and the Harlowes-each have fundamentally different views on what constitutes an action.

The second set of questions with which Kramnick grapples concerns the relationship of mind to matter: how can mental states cause changes in the physical world? A strict dualist would claim, of course, that mind and matter are made up of fundamentally different kinds of stuff. If this is so, then how does one instigate change in the other? While questions about mental causation are central to all six chapters, they receive particularly compelling treatment in chapter 5, which focuses on issues of consent. For Locke, consent has a "double-aspect"; it is internal to a person's mind and yet revealed only by external actions. Kramnick contends that Haywood's shifting third-person focalization in *Love in Excess* (1719) and *Fantomina* (1725) turns "thought outward into the external world" (177). As a result, consent adheres to neither Amena's heart nor Fantomina's mind, but seems to float free, operating entirely outside of individuals.

Mental causality leads us to the third philosophical puzzle, what is now known as "the hard problem of consciousness." When Locke's little finger is attached to his hand, it, like the rest of his body, is in some way conscious of the world. Sever that finger, and Locke has lost nothing but a lump of flesh; his selfhood is still intact. And yet, were we to pluck the brain from his skull, we would have a very different story. Why does consciousness arise from some configurations of atoms (that is, the brain) and not from others (a finger)? How is it that, in certain arrangements, matter seems to have the power of thought? Kramnick

The question of how a person moves herself (or, for that matter, her little finger) has plagued mankind since the beginning of plaguing questions. In the *Physics*, for example, Aristotle divided the universe into two categories: things that can be moved (a bed, a garment) and things that have the power of self-motion. I would have liked to see *Actions and Objects* explore in greater detail the classical origins—before and after Lucretius—of Enlightenment philosophy of action. And yet, with such breadth of philosophical material already in play, Kramnick was probably wise to concentrate on British writing between 1650 and 1750. As it stands, Kramnick's excellent study points to future avenues for research into how eighteenth-century writers—many of whom did not distinguish between "philosophical" and "literary" texts—attempted to reconcile ancient and modern theories about volition and causality.

Sara Landreth, an assistant professor of English at the University of Ottawa, is writing a book about how eighteenth-century writers turned to Aristotelian, Hobbesian, and Newtonian models of motion to explain all kinds of change, from a chemical reaction to a poem's influence on a reader's passions.

Christian Thorne. *The Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009. xii+377pp. US\$49.95. ISBN 978-0-674-03522-5.

This lengthy book is a reconstruction and analysis of selected "anti-foundational" texts and ideas from antiquity and early modernity. Its basic aim is to demonstrate that a long tradition of Pyrrhonian scepticism, which began in ancient Greece and was revived in sixteenth-century Europe, is actually politically reactionary in both its intentions and its effects, despite sharing many formal similarities and argumentative strategies with contemporary "Left anti-foundationalism." Thorne's general conclusion is that the critique of knowledge that lies at the heart of such scepticism can be stylistically innovative and radical without necessarily being socially or politically subversive. The moral of his story is that, although recent anti-foundational intellectual movements