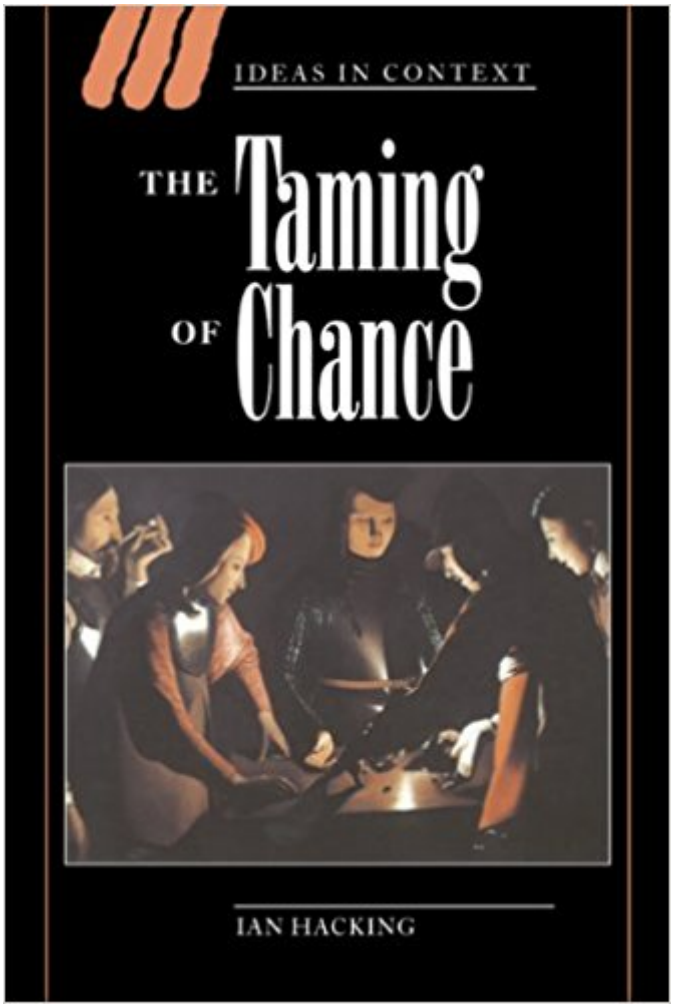
The Taming Of Chance (Ideas In Context)



Synopsis

In this important new study Ian Hacking continues the enquiry into the origins and development of certain characteristic modes of contemporary thought undertaken in such previous works as the best-selling The Emergence of Probability. Professor Hacking shows how by the late nineteenth century it became possible to think of statistical patterns as explanatory in themselves, and to regard the world as not necessarily deterministic in character. In the same period the idea of human nature was displaced by a model of normal people with laws of dispersion. These two parallel transformations fed into each other, so that chance made the world seem less capricious: it was legitimated because it brought order out of chaos. Professor Hacking argues that these developments have led to a new style of scientific reasoning gaining its hold upon us. The greater the level of indeterminism in our conception of the world and of people, the more we expect control and intervention in our lives, and the less we expect freedom. Combining detailed scientific historical research with characteristic philosophic breadth and verve, The Taming of Chance brings out the relations between philosophy, the physical sciences, mathematics and the development of social institutions, and provides a unique and authoritative analysis of the ’probabilisation’ of the western world.

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Customer Reviews

good

This is an extended essay by the distinguished philosopher Ian Hacking on the theme of probability versus determinism. Something of a hybrid, this is not strictly a philosophical work but a historical commentary on how ideas of chance and probability developed in the 19th century. As Hacking points out at the beginning of the book, a deterministic view of the world was demolished by the emergence of quantum mechanics in the 20th century. In The Taming of Chance, Hacking covers the development of statistics as a discipline and ideas of probability to demonstrate the gradual undermining of the notion of determinism in the course of the 19th century. Hacking opens with Enlightenment ideas of causation, very much under the influence of Newtonian mechanics, and concludes with the thought of CS Peirce, whom he sees as exemplifying acceptance of essentially stochastic views of causation.Hacking presents this change in world view as driven by a number of intersecting, complex, and unexpected phenomena. A major one was the expansion of the state and systematization of government, particularly associated with Napoleonic France. This leads to the generation of large demographic and social datasets that often reveal unexpected regularities, such as the persistent uneven male to female birth ratio. These datasets not only require new methods of analysis but led to the idea of the idea of statistical 'laws.' Hacking emphasizes that the collection and analysis of this kind of data was driven in part, and in turn fed, by a desire to achieve a higher level of social control. The emergence of social statistics combines with a number of other trends, such as the idea of organ pathology in medicine, the increasingly physiological orientation in biology, and a general emphasis on quanitification in the sciences, to generate a set of new attitudes towards data and ideas of causation. In several aspects, Hacking presents a series of apparently paradoxical or perhaps ironic events, such the desire for improved social control contributing to recognition of stochastic causation, which ultimately transform ideas of causation.In many respects, this is a somewhat exploratory essay and Hacking's narrative is not laid out smoothly. This book presupposes some prior knowledge of 19th century science and philosophy. It is also dense in the sense that Hacking has compressed a great deal of analysis into a relatively

short book. Nonetheless, its worth taking the effort to read it carefully because of Hacking's insightful analysis and knowledge of a broad range of 19th century intellectual history. His reconstruction of how we got from the Enlightenment to Peirce is really impressive.This book is notable also for Hacking's interesting comments on a number of other features. He has an interesting discussion, for example, of the development of the concept of normality and its consequences. His brief comment about the relationship between Peirce's pragmatism and 19th century idealism is really illuminating.

If you look at the table of contents in this book, you'll see that it has 23 chapters. Nearly all of them are less than 10 pages long, with uninformative headings like "Bureaux", "Regimental chests" and "The mineralogical conception of society". This is a good indication of how fragmented and confusing this book is.You wouldn't know it from the strange headings, but each chapter deals with some particular field of inquiry where statistical methods and statistical thinking became prominent in the 19th century. That may sound interesting, but unfortunately the author just dumped a truckload of short biographies into every chapter. Person A studied this and that, worked here and there and was in regular contact with persons B and C. They in turn studied this and that and thought so and so about chance and statistics. It goes on like this for the entire book, detail after detail after detail. But these collected details aren't very interesting without a broader perspective. A good account of the history of ideas should include some generalizations too.The author actually states on page 1 that his intention is to argue that two 19th century transformations are connected. The first transformation is the idea of a world which is regular without being causally determined. The second transformation is the emergence of a society governed by statistical information. So apparently his intention was to make a general argument, but he really fails miserably in putting it together. I just finished the book and I don't recall a single passage where he would have clearly argued the connection he claims on page 1. Whereas good books in the history of ideas contain a general analysis supported by selected examples, this one seems to contain only examples. There's no general argument so readers are forced to draw their own conclusions.Maybe this book will have some appeal to people with biographical interests. But I like books that concentrate on broader developments which took place above and beyond any particular researcher. I was disappointed to find that this book did not offer anything on that front. So if you're looking to understand the growth of statistics as a general phenomenon, you'll have too look somewhere else.

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