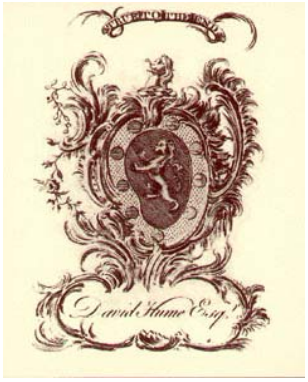

In Defense of Kemp-Smith

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Hume Studies Volume 1, Issue 2 (November, 1975), 66-69

IN DEFENCE OF KEMP SMITH

D.C. Stove argues against Kemp Smith's contention that Hume's philosophy "was intended not to subvert but to endorse our natural beliefs" in general, and our belief in the Causal Principle in particular.[1] His arguments are insufficient. Kemp Smith does not need to deny that the falsity of the Causal Principle is believed by Hume to be possible in the strongest of Stove's three suggested senses:[2] it is not merely self-consistent, but the Principle is unverifiable and unconfirmable in the sense that no empirical proposition is relevant to its truth. However, to say flatly that its falsity is possible is to say that it is not impossible in any way at all; and that is what is at stake both in Hume's letter to Stewart and in the use Kemp Smith makes of it.

If Hume had written a letter to Stewart or to any scientific enquirer urging him to desist from his labours on the ground that "something may begin to exist, or start into being without a cause," he would have been a fool, and in representing Hume's position in this way Stewart is in fact calling Hume a fool. It is not surprising that Hume is indignant. The problem is whether, and how, one can hold both that the Causal Principle is undeniably true and that it can be supported neither by deductive nor by inductive argument, and whether Hume on the most reasonable interpretation of his published works held both these views. Clues to the answer lie in the in tradition of sceptical philosophy, and in the difference between a cause and a reason.

Hume's philosophy is indeed, as he says, 'very sceptical'. But scepticism is a kind of philosophy with a long history, from Sextus Empiricus to Bayle, and it is reasonable to suppose that Hume was aligning himself with this position, especially since so much of the argument in

the Treatise is derived from Bayle. But sceptics do not behave otherwise than ordinary men. Scepticism is not directed against everyday beliefs but against arguments: this is a point on which Sextus insists.[3] It would not be the part of a sceptic to doubt that every event has a cause, but to refute all arguments purporting to show that such is the case. To assert "that any thing might arise without a Cause" would not be scepticism, but an inverse dogmatism: to infer from a philosophical argument a belief about the real world that is at variance with everyday belief.

The crucial step in Stove's argument occurs in his gloss of Hume's claim that he had maintained "that our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration; but from another Source" phrase "sic., experience, of course".[4] This could be misleading. It could mean that Hume here claims that experience gives us reason to believe that the Causal Principle is true; and this Hume has denied, as Stove urges ad loc. But nothing in what Hume says in his letter requires us to interpret him thus. And his sceptical principles tell against it: an argument from experience, whether inductive or by analogy or whatever, is still an argument and thus liable to sceptical attack. What Hume could mean, and what Kemp Smith took him to mean, is that our experience causes us to regard the principle as necessary: experience is not a premise in any sort of argument at all, but a causal explanation for a universal propensity to believe in the Causal Principle. It is true that Hume's citation as analogues of such empirical affirmations as "That Caesar existed" is misleading. But it is not in fact the case that Hume represents these as in any way 'parallel' with the Causal Principle: he says only that, like it, they are believed without recourse to Reason and Intuition. In

point of fact, Stove is going a bit far when he says that this is (like "There is such an Island as Sicily") an observation-statement; but that point is hardly relevant here.

It is worth noting that in the offending passage of the letter to Stewart, Hume does not speak of 'the necessity' but of "our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition" (my emphasis), and what it 'proceeds from.' To explain what our certainty proceeds from is prima facie a psychological, rather than a logical, undertaking. And surely the explanandum in the whole of Hume's discussion of causality is the nature of the necessity of the Causal Principle; nowhere does he enquire into its truth. His conclusion is that no grounds for its necessity can be given: that we simply find ourselves unable to doubt it. Hume would clearly be contradicting himself if, after asserting that it could not be doubted, he went on to say that its truth was not certain; but this is what Stewart accused him of saying, and what Stove thinks he should have said.

I do not mean to say that Hume's position is tenable. A man who says "I am psychologically unable to doubt p" is in fact expressing disbelief in p, as J.-P. Sartre insists.[5] But I know of no reason to think that this consideration had occurred to Hume.

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1. D.C. Stove, 'Hume, the Causal Principle, and Kemp Smith', Hume Studies, I (April 1975), 1-24; p. 21.

2. Stove, p. 12.

3. Cf. Sextus Empiricus, Outlines of Pyrrhonism I, 23-24.

4. Stove, p. 15.

5. J.-P. Sartre, L'être et le néant (Paris, Gallimard, 1943), 110-111.