



Hume's Letter to Stewart

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HUME'S LETTER TO STEWART

A Note on a Paper by D.C. Stove

In a recent paper¹, D.C. Stove raises an historical problem. There exists a letter, written in 1754 by Hume to John Stewart, then Professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh, in which the following words occur:

... I never asserted so absurd a Proposition, as that any thing might arise without a Cause: I only maintained, that our Certainty of the Falsehood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration; but from another Source.

Some commentators, most notably Norman Kemp-Smith, take this as telling strongly in favour of a non-sceptical reading of Hume. Stove undertakes to show beyond reasonable doubt that the claim made in the letter is in blatant contradiction with central theses of Hume's published philosophy, so that it has to be regarded as useless as evidence for the interpretation of the latter. There is a mystery as to how Hume came to say something so clearly false about what he himself had written; Stove offers certain conjectures, none of which he finds wholly satisfactory.

As the conclusion of the first, exegetical, part of his article, Stove advances the thesis that Hume held the falsity of the Causal Principle to be possible in at least three senses of "possible". These senses he specifies accurately, but doesn't wish to rest anything on the detail of his specification of the third; it is important only that it be stronger than either of the preceding two.

This done, he takes a look at the letter to Stewart, and says, with reference to the first part of the

passage quoted above:

That something might begin to exist without a cause, is evidently equivalent to the proposition that it is possible for something to begin to exist without a cause. That, in turn, is evidently equivalent to the proposition that the falsity of the Causal Principle is possible. (Stove's underlining)².

It follows that what Hume says in the letter is simply false. It could be true only if the "might" referred to some sense of possibility even weaker than the weakest of Stove's three senses. But since that is mere self-consistency, there is no such sense.

Now the argument to the contradiction relies on reading "might" as "it is possible", in some sense of those words. Stove says, as we have seen, that they are "evidently equivalent", but the equivalence is certainly not evident, and it may well be asked whether it exists at all. After all, there are English constructions with "might" which don't have modal force:

"Do you think something might have happened to them without our knowing about it?"

The hearer is not, of course, being asked whether it is possible that something should have happened without their knowledge; he is being asked for his opinion on whether something actually has so happened. "Most unlikely", would be a perfectly natural and acceptable response. Again:

"You stay here, to take care of any problem that might arise before we get back".

Obviously it is not intended that the hearer should start taking precautions against all possibilities, only that he should cope with whatever actually arises, if anything.

This is quite normal modern usage, and I know no reason to think that it wasn't also normal usage in the 18th Century. Admittedly, it isn't modern philosophers' usage - we would be very careful, in writing on logical matters, not to use the word "might" unless it was definitely the modal proposition that we had in mind, but earlier times haven't always been so professional about their vocabulary.

Certainly, if Hume, in the letter to Stewart, was denying that he had ever asserted the possibility of the falsehood of the Causal Principle it would be, as Stove shows, extremely hard to see what he could have been thinking of. But if what he meant could have been as well expressed by

"I never asserted ... that anything arises without a cause"

then most of Stove's problems are over, for there is no conflict with any of the theses (1) - (3)³ which he, I believe rightly, attributes to Hume.

My suggestion, then, is that that is what it does mean, and that Stove has erred in projecting a little too much of our own philosophical situation (in this case, our concern for terminological hygiene) back onto Hume. What Hume is saying is that he never said that the Causal Principle was false, and this is quite compatible with his thinking, firstly, that the supposition of its falsehood was self-consistent, secondly that it was consistent with all observation statements, and thirdly that if only Reason guided the formation of our beliefs, we would regard the probability of its falsehood as in no way decreased by observation. It is not only true but certain, and has the sort of certainty which arises from the operations of the psychological associative mechanism. Of this sort of

certainty it cannot be said (contra Stove's implication⁴) that it must be denied by anyone who maintains the possibility of the Causal Principle's being false. In so far as Hume has made a mistake in the disputed paragraph it is a minor one with no serious consequences: when he asks what the reader would infer from his statement that

for these Propositions ... we have no demonstrative or intuitive Proof

his use of the last four words does make it sound as if he had asserted at most Stove's (1) and (2), and were therefore, in Stove's terminology, an inductive fallibilist but not an inductive sceptic.

Stove suggests⁵ that Hume may have been misled into his "error" by the inappropriate examples he adduces in the relevant paragraph of the letter. I hardly think so, nor do I find them at all inappropriate. The trouble, Stove tells us, arises from the circumstance that the examples (Caesar existed; there is such an island as Sicily) are observation statements, and "that is why Hume is at liberty to regard them as certain". But surely Hume was not thinking of these two propositions as observation statements, but rather as beliefs which he held as a result of a chain of cause-effect inferences, hence as a result of the operation of the belief-forming mechanism, since he was not, either at that time or previously, perceiving Caesar or Sicily. One may recall the passage in the Treatise⁶, where Caesar's assassination is used as an example of just this sort of belief.

One might equally well draw attention to another feature of the examples: they are not modal propositions. That is to say, Hume does not compare the belief "it is not the case that anything might arise without a cause" to the belief "it is necessary that Caesar existed", but simply to

"Caesar existed". If anything, the choice of these examples tells in favour of the non-modal reading of "might arise without a cause".

This, however, is not the sort of argument to clinch anything. The real argument in favour of that reading is that it nips in the bud a problem which, once allowed to grow, threatens insolubility. And it is linguistically possible, so - why not?

Where does this leave the case against Kemp-Smith? It is clear from pages 407-9 of his book The Philosophy of David Hume that he takes "might" non-modally, as recommended in this note, which means that on his understanding of it the letter does not conflict with any of the three theses extracted from Hume's published philosophy by Stove. Agreed, anyone who said that Hume was not a sceptic would be wrong, if he meant to deny that Hume held these three views. But what reason is there to suppose that this was what Kemp-Smith meant by it? None. On the contrary, he was referring to Hume's advocacy of a different dimension of certainty, the type which attaches to those beliefs which are generated by an irresistible psychological mechanism. To say that a belief has this kind of certainty is quite compatible with, perhaps even complementary to, the view that its falsity is possible in each of Stove's senses.

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1. D.C. Stove, "Hume, the Causal Principle, and Kemp Smith", in Hume Studies I, 1(1975).
2. Hume Studies I,1, p. 14.
3. Hume Studies I, 1, p. 12.
4. Hume Studies I, 1, p. 16. Here I am thinking of the identification of denying the certainty of the Causal Principle with Maintaining the possibility of its falsity; this occurs twice in the paragraph beginning "Stewart was perfectly entitled..."
5. Hume Studies I, 1, p. 19.
6. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature Bk. I, Pt. III, Sect. IV.