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DID BEATTIE DEFER TO HUME?

Robert Paul Wolff, in his essay, "Kant's Debt to Hume Via Beattie,"¹ points out a 'rather interesting mistake' made by Norman Kemp Smith in his Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. In the Commentary Kemp Smith considers the similarities of the respective theories of self of Kant and Hume and finds it intriguing that the two philosophers agree "...that there is no single empirical state of the self which is constant throughout experience".² In spite of this agreement of doctrine Kemp Smith insists Kant must have arrived at his conclusions independently of any reading of Hume. We are told this is so because "Hume's view of the self is not developed in the Enquiry, and is not mentioned by Beattie".³ And since, as Kemp Smith argues, Kant had only the Enquiry and certain passages of Hume's Treatise as quoted by James Beattie in An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth available to him, this agreement must be considered an accident rather than evidence of an influence of Hume on Kant.⁴

Here then is the 'interesting mistake'. Wolff does not wish to dispute the more or less canonical assessment that Kant's knowledge of Hume rested on first hand acquaintance with the Enquiry and Beattie's Essay rather than the Treatise. However, Wolff does want to question Kemp Smith's account of how much Hume Kant could have gleaned from Beattie. Kemp Smith tells us that in the Essay Beattie says nothing of Hume's theory of self. But as every reader of the Essay knows Beattie spent no less than six pages on Hume's discussion of self and personality, and considered it very important: at least important enough that he seems to have felt that a mere description of Hume on the self would serve as a reductio on the Humean body of beliefs.⁵

Still, according to Wolff, what appears to be a mistake made by Kemp Smith turns out not to be one at all. Wolff infers from the 1776 date of Beattie's Essay which

Kemp Smith cites that he was working from the sixth edition, the edition which Beattie, responding to Hume's attempt in the Advertisement for the Enquiries to deny responsibility for the Treatise, "...altered his discussion of Hume's philosophy so that his criticism would not apply to the Treatise alone".⁶ Such an alteration of the Essay meant, according to Wolff, making the topics of the Essay line up in number and content with those of the Hume's Enquiry.⁷ But as we all know Hume does not discuss personal identity in the Enquiry. Thus this topic is omitted from the sixth edition of Beattie's Essay. And thus Kemp Smith's "mistake" turns out not to be one at all.

Even if this dissolution by Wolff of what appears to be a mistake by Kemp Smith were correct we would still have puzzles to contend with. For example, the discussion of causation in the Enquiry has long been recognized to differ significantly from that of the Treatise.⁸ One would then expect that Wolff would also cite some change in the sixth edition of the Essay on this score. Yet Wolff does not mention any alteration in the sixth edition account of causation, and in fact a comparison of the relevant sections of the sixth with an earlier edition will not yield any significant difference in the texts.

But, be this as it may, where before we had one seeming mistake and the promise of its being dissolved, we now have two strange mistakes both irresolvable. For the discussion of Hume on personal identity which Wolff and Kemp Smith say does not occur in the edition of Beattie's Essay of 1776 is really there, substantially unchanged from earlier editions.⁹ For the sake of completeness it should be noted also that even though Wolff refers only to the sixth edition printed in 1776 there are also at least three other printings of the sixth edition (in 1777, 1778 and 1805), but this makes little difference since Beattie's treatment of the topic of personal identity will be found in the sixth edition of any date.

I have said that Beattie's discussion of Hume on personal identity is substantially unchanged in the sixth edition. Not only will one find the long quote on personal identity from the Treatise which Wolff says is missing,¹⁰ but one will also discover precisely the same number of paragraphs in the sixth edition discussion with the same structure and the same points argued.

But there are some minor changes. A careful comparison of the discussion of personal identity in the sixth edition with that of the fifth will show just nine deviations in the later edition over and above simple changes in punctuation.

Here are the nine changes. I have used the fifth edition of the Essay as a model to show the deviations and I have underscored the changes in the sixth edition in each instance.¹¹

1. (a) 5th edition (p.255): "...it is well; Mr. Hume will allow..."
 - (b) 6th edition (p.226): "...it is well; he will allow..."
2. (a) 5th edition (p.255): "...of power or energy. No says Mr. Hume..."
 - (b) 6th edition (p.226): "...of power or energy. No, says he;..."
3. (a) 5th (p.255): "That I deny, says Mr. Hume;..."
 - (b) 6th (p.226): "That I deny, says our author;..."
4. (a) 5th (p.256): "But though Mr. Hume deny..."
 - (b) 6th (p.227): "But though the author deny..."
5. (a) 5th (p.258): "...but I (Mr. Hume) am certain..."
 - (b) 6th (p.229): "...but I am certain..."
6. (a) 5th (p.259): "Such, if Mr. Hume's words have any meaning is the result of his system."

- (b) 6th (p.229): "Such, in regard to existence, seems to be the result of this theory of the understanding."
7. (a) 5th (p.259): "If he or his admirers can prove..."
 (b) 6th (p.229): "If the author can prove..."
8. (a) 5th (p.259): "If he or they can prove..."
 (b) 6th (p.229): "If he can prove..."
9. (a) 5th (p.259): "If he or they can prove..."
 (b) 6th (p.229): "If he can prove..."

What is the significance of these changes in Beattie's discussion of the theory of the self of Hume's Treatise? Clearly, as I remarked previously, the changes in the sixth over the fifth edition are not substantial; Beattie, in the sixth edition, in no way alters the substance of his searing attack on the treatment of personal identity to be found in the Treatise. Nonetheless the changes Beattie makes are interesting. At the very least they help us to understand Beattie and thereby to correct a mistaken impression one would get of him from reading historians such as Wolff and Kemp Smith.

Recall that it is Wolff's theory that Beattie responded to Hume's Advertisement in the Enquiry by simply omitting discussion of personal identity and thereby deferring to Hume's wish to be recognized as the author of the Enquiry and not of the Treatise. Certain of Beattie's remarks in the preface to the sixth edition could lead one to the conclusion that he was led to such a drastic response. After sniffing sarcastically at the tone and content of Hume's Advertisement, Beattie acknowledges that alterations are called for in the sixth edition of the Essay:

In consequence of his Advertisement, I thought it right to mitigate in this Edition some of the censures that more especially refer to the Treatise of Human Nature: but as that Treatise is still extant, and will probably be read as long at least as any thing I write, I did not

think it expedient to make any material change in the reasoning or in the plan of this performance.¹²

Now if one were to center attention on the first part of this pronouncement of Beattie's, it might be tempting to suppose that he is promising to excise the sections of critical discussion which apply solely to the Treatise and not to the Enquiry. Yet when one goes on to read the rest of Beattie's remarks and looks to see what sort of changes are to be found in the sixth edition, it becomes crystal clear what he is up to when he is 'mitigating some of the censures'. For from the passages I have quoted above, as one can see, in the first six of the nine changes which occur in the discussion of Hume's theory of the self in the sixth edition of the Essay, Beattie simply exchanges a term like Hume's name for an indefinite term like 'the author of the Treatise' or the simple pronoun 'he'. Thus when Beattie makes his sixth edition promise to mitigate censure of certain parts of the Treatise he is really remarking (and, no doubt, with sarcasm) that he no longer holds Mr. Hume to blame for those topics of the Treatise which are not to be found in the Enquiry. At the same time this does not keep Beattie from quoting at length from the Treatise on personal identity (nor on causality), nor does it stop him from remarking derisively on the quality of philosophical work to be found there -- both features of every previous edition of Beattie's Essay. Rather, he only finds himself constrained from finding fault or blame-worthiness with 'Mr. Hume'. In the sixth edition the blame for the faulty discussion of personal identity falls on the shoulders of 'the author of the Treatise'.

On Robert Paul Wolff's account Beattie capitulates before Hume's ill-tempered Advertisement. We have seen that the evidence is utterly conclusive against such an interpretation.¹³ In fact, given Hume's stature in Beattie's day, the evidence I have cited supports a picture of Beattie as

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a tenacious and arrogant man -- and one with a measure of wit and cunning as well. And maybe -- just perhaps -- James Beattie had a better understanding of the importance of certain parts of the Treatise than we are often wont to grant.¹⁴

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1. Journal of the History of Ideas, 21 (1960), pp. 117-123.

2. Quoted by Wolff, "Kant's Debt," p. 121.

3. Quoted by Wolff, Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Thus Beattie's conclusion of his discussion of Hume's bundle theory of the self:

Such, if Mr. Hume's words have any meaning is the result of his sytem. And what is this result? If he or his admirers can prove, that there is a possibility of expressing it in words which do not imply a contradiction I will not call it nonsense. If he or they can prove, that it is compatible with any one acknowledged truth in philosophy, in morals, in religion...I will not call it impious. If he or they can prove, that it does not arise from common facts misrepresented, and common words misunderstood, I shall admit that it may have arisen from...the enlarged views of true philosophic genius.

An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, by James Beattie, Dilly and Creech (Edinburgh, 1774), pp. 260-61.

6. Wolff, "Kant's Debt," p. 121.

7. Ibid.

8. Wolff acknowledges this fact, "Kant's Debt," p. 119.

9. I am grateful to the interlibrary loan services of the Lutheran Theological Seminary Library and the Harvard University Library for providing me with xerox copies of the relevant sections of the sixth editions of Beattie's Essay. Although the sixth editions of these libraries are exactly the same in pagination and preface

date (1776) the copy of the Lutheran Theological Seminary was printed in 1776 and the one at Harvard in 1777. The printing of 1776 was for Dilly at London. The 1777 printing was published at London and Edinburgh for Creech, Dilly and Cadell.

10. Wolff, "Kant's Debt," p. 121.
11. For the fifth edition see note 5, above. The page numbers to the sixth edition refer to both printings mentioned in note 9, above.
12. Beattie, Essay, 6th ed., p. xvi.
13. In fairness to Wolff, however, I should underscore that his main interest in discussing Beattie is different than that of this note. Wolff is concerned to illuminate what Kant picked up from Beattie about Hume. The aim of this note is to establish a set of historical facts about some philosophical differences between Beattie and Hume.
14. Although it would go beyond the scope of this note to offer a detailed gloss of Beattie's interpretation of the Treatise, it is interesting to appreciate that Beattie put forward at least one criticism of Hume's theory of the self which subsequently has been broadcast about and troubled over at length -- particularly in the first half of this century. I am referring, of course, to the familiar criticism that Hume cannot consistently say that he is nothing but a collection of percepts since he, Hume, that self, perceives them. Beattie alludes to this supposed inconsistency in text quoted above in footnote 5. ("If he or his admirers can prove, that there is a possibility of expressing [this theory of the self] in words which do not imply a contradiction I will not call it nonsense."), and details the criticism as the Essay proceeds.