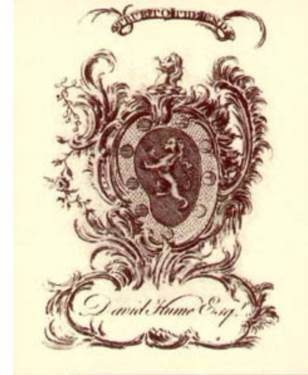

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TWO PUZZLES IN MOSSNER'S LIFE OF DAVID HUME

It is a tribute to the rare quality of Mossner's great Life of David Hume[1] that in those few instances where he seems to have got something wrong, one feels an irresistible urge to put the record straight.

The two puzzles that have perplexed me are: (1) Why was Adam Smith adamant in his refusal to take the responsibility for publishing the Dialogues after Hume's death?[2]; and (2) why, despite his long-standing resolution not to answer his opponents directly, did Hume in October 1775 take the step of drawing up the short Advertisement, disavowing his Treatise of Human Nature,[3] which was to be prefixed to the second volume of all future editions of Essays and Treatises?

The clue to the first puzzle is to be found in Boswell's Life of Johnson:

> On the 6th of March [1754] came out Lord Bolingbroke's works, published by Mr David Mallet. The wild and pernicious ravings, under the name of "Philosophy," which were thus ushered into the world, gave great offence to all well-principled men. Johnson, hearing of their tendency, which nobody disputed, was roused with a just indignation, and pronounced this memorable sentence upon the noble author and his editor. "Sir, he was a scoundrel and a coward; a scoundrel, for charging a blunderbuss against religion and morality; a coward, because he had not resolution to fire it off himself, but left half a crown to a beggarly Scotchman, to draw the trigger after his death!"

The editors of the 1934 Oxford Edition note: "Adam Smith, perhaps had this saying in mind when, in 1776, he refused the request of the dying Hume to edit

after his death his Dialogues on Natural Religion. Hume wrote back: 'I think ... your scruples groundless. Was Mallet any wise hurt by his publication of Lord Bolingbroke? He received an office afterwards from the present King and Lord Bute, the most prudish men in the world...'."[4]

I don't think that this letter of Hume's was an answer to a letter from Smith (who was a notoriously bad correspondent, see below). I think that, on his way back from London to his mother at Kirkcaldy, Smith had made up his mind to tell his beloved friend, to his face, that he was determined not to undertake this task. One must put oneself in Smith's position in 1776. He had (it is true) an annuity of £300 from the Buccleuch estates, and he had just spent ten years writing The Wealth of Nations. But he did not think this annuity sufficient for him to be justified in devoting the rest of his life to literary pursuits, despite the wealth of material which was already more or less complete, and has been posthumously published. He knew his masterpiece was not going to make him much money (single books did not do so in those days), but he hoped that it might put him in the way of a job or a royal pension -- as Beattie's Truth had secured a pension for him, three years earlier.

Moreover, Smith had just spent three years in London, where Boswell had engineered that he be elected to the celebrated dining Club presided over by Johnson and Burke (where Smith was none too popular), and he knew well that if he were to bring out the Dialogues after Hume's death, the members of the Club would say (and feel) the same sort of things about Hume and him, as Johnson had said (and felt) about

Bolingbroke and Mallet. London society was a small world, and this sort of gossip would not advance his (Smith's) chance of getting a job, nor would it enhance Hume's reputation. He decided to dig in his toes, and was perfectly justified in doing so.

So, of course, the modern editors of Boswell's Johnson are right in their conjecture. But Mossner says that Smith was suffering under a bad conscience about this refusal, when he came to write his marvellous letter (which caused him so much trouble), and which was appended to the posthumous publication of Hume's My Own Life. I do not think that Smith's conscience was in the least troubled. He refused to accept the bequest made him under Hume's Will in case it might be thought to have been conditional upon his (Smith's) bringing out the Dialogues. And there is plenty of evidence that Smith's refusal had no effect at all on Hume's affection for him. At the end of the same letter to Smith in which he refers to Mallet, Hume writes in his characteristic style (telling Smith about his projected visit to Bath): "If you write to me, hem! hem! I say, if you write to me, send your letters under cover to Mr Strahan, who will have my direction. I regret much, in leaving Edinburgh, that I shall lose much of your company which I should have enjoy'd this summer. I am, Dear Smith, Yours sincerely and affectionately." And he ends the second letter he wrote, directed to Smith and saying that he understood Smith's reasons, on the same day (but presumably for retention with the manuscript, and for publication with the Dialogues, if Smith should change his mind) "Your most affectionate friend and servant" (my underlining, but it was not a way in which Hume customarily 'signed off', even to his dearest and most

precious friends).[5] Hume quite understood Smith's scruples (even if he thought them groundless), and Smith's conscience could not reasonably have been uneasy about not acceding to Hume's dying wish.

Smith probably knew that the Dialogues would be published anyway, and there was very little he could contribute to Hume's excellent manuscript. If he were to edit it, the members of the Club would simply recall Dr. Johnson's "memorable sentence" about Bolingbroke and Mallet and, knowing (as they did) that Johnson had not troubled to read Bolingbroke's book, would pour scorn and contempt on Hume and Smith alike, which would have been to neither's advantage. Hume was careful of his 'public image' when he was alive (viz. his permission to D'Alembert to publish the Concise Account of his quarrel with Rousseau during his lifetime); and of how his memory would be cherished after his death (viz. his leaving £100 for the monument over his grave, of which Adam Smith disapproved).[6] Smith may well have thought that he owed it to Hume's memory to have no hand in the publication of a work which was bound to excite disapproval among "all well-principled men."

The clue to the second puzzle is to be found in the diary which James Beattie kept on his visit to London in the summer of 1773 in search of a pension.

> Sunday, May 16, ... Mr Burke called upon me this day - gave Mrs B. & me a very kind invitation to visit him at Beaconsfield - took me with him to see some pictures.... Dined ... with Mr Strahan. After tea, I took him aside, and gave him a particular account of the state of my affairs. Mr Strahan thinks they are in a promising way; but wishes me to write to Sir Ad. Oughton and Lord Kinnoull for letters of recommendation in my favour to Lord North and other persons of distinction

> here. <u>He says, my Essay has knocked up the sale of Mr David Hume's Essays, which he has access to know, being a proprietor of those essays</u>.... Mr Strahan says, that nothing ever gave D. Hume so much pain as the success of Dr Robertson's histories; that Mr Cadel and he (Strahan) for fear of offending him, were obliged to print some Editions of Robertson's history of Scotland without alteration of date, as Hume could not bear to think that the sale of that work had been so extensive as it really was. Dr Sam Johnson called in a little before we left Mr Strahan's....[7]

Making all allowances for the fact that this sort of spiteful gossip against Hume (even if untrue) would have gladdened Beattie's heart, there seems to be more to it than that. George III, too, had heard the story that the sale of Hume's <u>Essays</u> had failed since Beattie's book was published, and when Beattie called upon the King and Queen on Tuesday, 24 August, he found that the King had heard stories from Edinburgh about how vexed Hume was with Beattie on this account. (On 26 August, Beattie recorded: "I forgot to mention, among other of the King's remarks on Tuesday, his opinion of Mr Hume's writings. He thinks there is something good enough in his history, but generally blames the liberties he has there taken in regard to religion, and thinks the style of it far inferior to Dr Robertson's; as to his Essays, both the King and Queen said, that they had attempted to read them last summer, but found them so very dull and obscure that they were obliged to leave off.")

His sales, and the money which came to him with new editions of his works, was no laughing matter to Hume. Anyone who reads (with fascination and astonishment) his long efforts to recover the £75 he

thought was due to him from the Annandale trustees for his (broken?) contract in 1746, will realize that Hume, even if he showed by his choice of vocation that he thought there were more important things in life, loved money. The fact that his sales might be suffering from Beattie's 'refutation' of his Treatise of Human Nature, called for urgent action. Hence the advertisement. Mossner is, I submit, being unfair when he writes:

> This "Advertisement," commented Hume to Strahan, "is a compleat answer to Dr Reid and to that bigotted silly fellow, Beattie." Complete answer it is not, nor is it an answer at all, but the petulant retort of an ageing man, tired of controversy, and sick in body.

We have Boswell's delightful account of how, on his death-bed Hume was not in the least tired of controversy. Of course he would not have deigned to 'answer' Beattie or Reid in the sense of 'answering his opponents directly' on the merits of their 'refutations'. But if his sales were being affected by the erroneous notions which were being propogated that his philosophy had been 'cut up at the roots' by Reid and Beattie (both of whose arguments were directed at the Treatise of Human Nature), he was surely entitled to point out that it was not the philosophy contained in his Essays and Treatises, then on sale.

This matter of sales seems to be a recurring problem with philosophers. When, in 1948, Dr. C.E.M. Joad (who had acquired some prominence in the British public's eyes as the resident philosopher on the BBC's highly rated serial "The Brains Trust") was found guilty of travelling on the railways without a ticket with the intent to defraud the railway company, his only sign of remorse (according to contemporary gossip

among philosophers) was to ask: "Will it affect my sales?"

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1. The Life of David Hume. 2nd ed. by E.D. Mossner, Oxford, 1980.

2. Ibid., p. 605.

3. Ibid., p. 582.

4. The Life of Samuel Johnson by James Boswell, (ed. Hill and Powell) Oxford, 1934. Vol. I, p. 269.

5. The Letters of David Hume (ed. Greig) Oxford, 1932. Vol. II, p. 316.

6. Mossner, op. cit., p. 591.

7. London Diary, 1773 by James Beattie, LLD, edited with an introduction and notes by R.S. Walker, Aberdeen University Studies, Aberdeen, 1946, p. 34.