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Manfred Kuehn

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I.

Kant was neither the only nor even the first German philosopher who publicly responded to Hume. Indeed, there were many. But there were none who came as close to **appreciating** Hume as did Johann Nicolaus Tetens, who, in his two main works, the *Über die allgemeine speculativische Philosophie* or *On General Speculative Philosophy* (1775), and the *Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung* or *Philosophical Essays on Human Nature and its Development* (1777), not only argued that Hume was a philosophical force to be reckoned with, but also seemed to think that philosophical progress was impossible without an extension and further development of Humean views. This alone would make him an interesting figure in the history of the reception of Hume's philosophy, but, since Tetens is one of the most important representatives of empiricism in eighteenth-century Germany, and since he put forward ideas that demonstrably influenced Kant, he is perhaps still more interesting. In any case, it is most regrettable that he still is so little studied in Germany today, and that he is almost completely unknown in English-speaking countries. Though Lewis White Beck has offered an interesting discussion of Tetens' critique of Hume in his book on *Early German Philosophy*, and though some Anglo-American Kant scholars are somewhat aware of Tetens' influence upon Kant, his name is almost never mentioned by philosophical scholars concerned with Hume.¹ If this paper were to remind them of Tetens and his possible importance for the discussion of issues raised by Hume, I would be very happy.

Nevertheless, I must admit to an ulterior motive, for I am not interested in the relationship of Tetens and Hume *per se*, but rather in how Tetens' discussion of Hume might have influenced Kant's conception of "Hume's problem." My question is: "What could Kant have learned from Tetens about Hume in 1777, that is, about four years before the publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason*?" To this end, I shall first briefly review the evidence for Kant's study of Tetens; secondly say something about Tetens' discussion of the self; thirdly sketch his theory of the causal principle as a special case of his laws of association; fourthly represent an important part of his theory of objective or necessary truth; and finally try to show how all of this might be significant for our understanding of the development of Kant's position *vis a vis* Hume.

II.

Johann Georg Hamann, always interested in literary gossip and always ready to spread it, wrote to Johann Gottfried Herder on May 12, 1779 that Kant was writing on his *Critique*, and that he had "always open on his desk" Tetens' work. Two years earlier, on October 12, 1777, he had already told him that Kant was "said to be very full of ... Tetens." Hamann, mischievous as he could be, not only wanted to bring Kant's former student up to date on the work of his teacher, but clearly also made a comment on Kant's originality. But there are other indications that Kant carefully studied Tetens between 1777 and 1781. Thus, Kant's correspondence with Herz in 1778 contains references to Tetens as having said things of importance, and his reflections of the period also mention him. One of the most telling indications of his rather close reading of Tetens is to be found in one of his letters to the publisher of his first *Critique*: On October 15, 1780 he writes to him that he would prefer not to have the book set in the type of Tetens' *Essays* because the latter is "really tiring" to his eyes.

That Tetens' work did not only tire his eyes, but also stimulated his thoughts can be seen from one of his preparatory manuscripts to his *Prolegomena* of 1783, for there Kant suggested that Tetens could have given people occasion to think about the very problem of the *Critique*. Though he considered Tetens' attempt concerning the possibility of *a priori* knowledge as failed, he also viewed it as one of the most important attempts in that direction.

III.

It is well known that Kant himself claimed that "Hume's problem" was what first woke him from his dogmatic slumber. Though there is no similar pronouncement by Tetens, it is clear that he not only knew Hume well, but that he also considered him most important for what he was doing. There are more than thirty-five explicit reference to Hume in his two main works, many of which are designed to defend him against the criticisms of his Scottish enemies, Reid, Oswald and Beattie. Furthermore, these reference show that Tetens had more than a mere cursory knowledge of Hume's texts, but was intimately acquainted with its particulars.

Tetens knew not only the first *Enquiry*, but also the *Treatise*. At the very least, he mentions both. What is perhaps interesting in this regard is that in his earlier work, *On Speculative Philosophy*, published in 1775, he refers to the author of the *Treatise* as if he were a different person from Hume, asking why "**Barkley, Hume, and the heroic skeptic**, the author of the *Treatise of Human Nature* who pushed skepticism to its *non plus ultra*" were not attacked in accordance with their own principles by Reid and his followers. They "should have let

reason itself judge its own aberrations."² But in 1777 he clearly identifies Hume as the author of the *Treatise*. This becomes especially clear in his theory of self. Thus, in discussing the "origin of our knowledge of the objective existence of things," he finds it necessary to analyze our concept of the self as an object. This analysis starts from Hume, for

Hume, as author of the infamous work **about human nature** [followed by a reference to the English text] declared the idea which we have of our **self**, or of our soul, *as a collection of many particular sensations which follow each other, but are individual as well as separate and scattered, and from whose connection our fantasy has created the idea of one whole which is a subject that supports particular sensations as qualities of it*. From this he concluded that we can justifiably say no more about the soul than that it is a collection of qualities and changes. The latter, since they are immediately sensed, exist; but we cannot say that the soul is an identical object, a complete unity, or a real thing.³

After rejecting Reid's critique of Hume as being "not false, but unphilosophical," he tries to show that "Mr. Hume has overlooked one important circumstance." Our sensations are not given as completely isolated entities. They are always given against the background of other sensations. Sensations always have already a context. Particular sensations "stand out," as it were, from a felt background. And this background, though obscure, remains, Tetens claims, always the same. He goes on to claim that our concept of an identical self derives from this obscure context or background of our sensations. Therefore, he concludes, the self cannot be a collection of particular representations or ideas which are actively united by the imagination because they are already unified and connected when we first encounter them. "The unification lies in **sensation** itself, in nature, and not in a connection which we have made ourselves."⁴

Thus, Tetens does not so much offer a fundamental criticism of Hume's approach or philosophical method, as claim that Hume has made a mistake in one of the particulars. He has failed to attend carefully enough to what is given to us in sensation. This is a phenomenological or descriptive point, not one of radical systematic opposition, and though it has important consequences for how we describe the human mind, it does not touch one of the important results of Hume's analysis, as Tetens knows very well. While he thinks Hume is wrong about the origin of our concept of identity, he is also careful not to assume "anything more as really existing than what Hume also assumes, namely, only those things of which we are immediately

conscious." Hume, the "fine metaphysician," simply has overlooked something in sensation, or so Tetens thinks.

IV.

Tetens is sometimes referred to as the "German Locke." But this is misleading. For Tetens also believes that Locke's method cannot exhaust all of philosophy. It is only an important preparation to philosophy. As he puts it:

Let it be allowed that we should first cultivate the **doctrine of the elements** as a physiology of the human understanding, and that we should find and collect by observation its real concepts and principles. This is the analytic method, according to which **Locke, Hume, Condillac**, and others (including some German philosophers), have worked. It will become clear that when this part of the work, which admittedly is the most important and most difficult one, is done, there is still another part left for speculation on the basis of general reasons. (AS 85-6)

Tetens believes that speculative philosophy is still possible, and much of his work is meant to show that, once the human mind has been correctly described, once its fundamental concepts and principles have been catalogued, metaphysics will cease to be riddled by contradictions and progress without further difficulties. Indeed, he thinks that, even without a complete delineation of the basic features of the human mind, metaphysics is possible:

There exist already, at present, many particular speculative theories from general concepts, which our metaphysicians have developed, and which secure for the understanding that knows how to use them great, extensive and fertile vistas just as they are. No further realization of their basic concepts may precede them because they either contain no confusion, or, if they do, these confusions are without consequence for what follows, or they are corrected incidentally by applying the concepts themselves.

This is also relevant for Tetens' relation to Hume. For, he thinks that the

theory of the **general relation of effects to their causes, which consists in analogy**, belongs among those speculative theories. If Hume had not so much neglected the insight

into the connections of universal truths of reasons, I would have wondered how somebody of his acuity could have missed, or circumvented the point so often in the investigations concerning the rational knowledge of the creator of the world, and brushed over it without penetrating more deeply than the surface. But the despised basic science has taken revenge on him. It now appears that metaphysics, considered as a science, is the property of German philosophers, even though some of them also swear off it, which is something that contributes to an obvious weakening of our usual and good national German inclination to thoroughness.

Thus, Tetens believes that (i) metaphysics is a science based on general concepts; (ii) Hume neglected these general concepts and principles; (iii) therefore, Hume is wrong; (iv) metaphysics is possible, if only because fragments of it are actual (in books written in German); (v) the theory of causality is one of the fragments of metaphysics.

This does not seem to bode well for his discussion of Hume's analysis of causality, for all that Tetens seems to have to offer is a re-affirmation of the old dogmatic theories. As Professor Beck puts it: "He made the egregious mistake of trying to correct Hume, when it was the intrinsic destiny of Hume to correct the Germans."⁵ But perhaps there is more to Tetens' critique than that.

Tetens discusses Hume's analysis of causality in the context of his fourth essay, "On the Faculty of Thought and on Thinking." Since the faculty of thought is for Tetens a "faculty of relation" (*Beziehungsvermögen*), this discussion turns out to be an attempt to analyze how we relate things to one another; and since relating things as causes and effects is one of the most important of these, it is not surprising that the causal relation is one of the most important subjects of this analysis. It is most interesting that for Tetens the causal relation, or better, "the concept of causal connection," forms only part of a wider problem, the wider problem being the explication of the faculty of thought as a faculty that enables us to relate objects. He sees the causal relation as representative for all relations, saying that he is using it as an "example" to clarify the problem of relations in its entirety.

Characteristically, Tetens argues again that Hume has overlooked something. Indeed, he thinks that Hume has missed one of the essential characteristics of the causal relation. He did not recognize "its true inner strength" (313).⁶ Though he thinks that Hume's discussion shows how acutely he has investigated the nature of human understanding (313), and though he admits that "much is correct" in the Humean explanation of causality, he thinks that Hume's one-sidedness led him to misdescribe what we mean by causality. He agrees that to say A

causes B presupposes either that we have previously observed a connection between event A and event B, or that we now observe them as connected. He also agrees that the cause necessarily suggests its effect. When we think A we must think B with a certain necessity. Finally, he also accepts as true that we use the constant succession of two events as a completely reliable criterion for their causal relatedness.

However, he also thinks that Hume himself would have considered his explanation as insufficient, if only he had not been too one-sided in his investigation (313). Constant succession does not exhaust what we ordinarily mean by causality.

We really consider the **effect as depending upon the cause**, as being **created** by it, and as having become real **through** it. And doesn't this last view imply other secondary ideas besides constant succession? We consider the effect as something which **can be understood** from its cause ... and is **intelligibility** merely a consequence of a previous association of ideas? (316)

Tetens' answer is: "No, it is not." Our judgment about the dependency of the effect upon the cause contains more than mere association can provide. We actually suppose that there exists a necessary connection among the objects that correspond to our ideas. "For we see the ideas in us in a **necessary** succession." While we may not know what made the connection necessary, "we still consider it as necessary, and suppose that there exists a necessary connection corresponding to it in the objects." We actually think the causal connection as an objective connection, but Hume's account implies that we think of it as merely subjective. This is wrong. As soon as we transform a causal relation into one of a merely subjective connection of ideas, we no longer have a causal relation, so Hume misdescribes the concept of causality. At the purely phenomenological level, there is already a problem. Hume has misidentified the *analysandum*. Even if Hume's explanation of the origin of the causal principle were correct, and even if our belief that causal connections are objectively necessary were imaginary, we must take into account that this belief forms an essential part of what we mean by causality — or so Tetens thinks.

His second question seems to be whether "the additional aspect in our concept of causality, the one which Hume overlooked, really is a fiction or not"; but it really is a much more limited question, for what Tetens is asking is whether it can be a "fiction" in what he takes to be the Humean sense: Can we account for it simply by means of imaginative associations? Since he has a much more narrow conception of imagination than Hume, he can easily show that this is impossible. By

means of a number of examples, Tetens can show that causal connections have what he calls "a necessity of the understanding," and not one of the *imagination*. Thus, we usually do not need induction to tell us how bodies will behave, or how two events must be connected.

The understanding connects them in accordance with a customary law of thought. It follows this law, though it does not follow it with the same irresistible necessity with which it must assume the necessary truths of reason, such as the principle of contradiction, for instance. Such general thoughts are true thoughts, preceding all experience. We do not learn these through abstraction, and it thus does not depend upon a several times repeated exercise that such connections of ideas establish themselves (320).

Furthermore, in cases of complex causal connections we do not, at first, know how particular effects are to be traced to particular causes. We must predict effects without ever having observed them. We can observe a rainbow, but it takes a Newton to explain how it is caused; and Newton did not explain it by looking at it again and again, but by using his understanding. Finally, we can understand an effect from its cause. This means for Tetens that we can in some sense deduce the effect from its cause as we can deduce one truth from another. And deduction or proof is different from associations of the *imagination*. There is a clear phenomenological difference between a connection we have imagined in our fantasy, and a real causal connection. The distinction is very much like the difference between somebody who has learned geometry by rote and somebody who has understood the proofs.

These considerations lead Tetens to the following results: "First, it is probably not the **mere succession of sensations** upon each other, from which we take the concept of a causal connection. Rather, there are certain special kinds of associations of ideas, from which we abstract it. These are such that they contain something more than that one idea precedes and the other follows it" (323).

Second, we get this first from our own striving and its causes from *Selbstgefühl*, and from it we transfer it to the external relations. Even if there were nothing in us from external object but a succession of sensations, we put more into them as soon as we think about it, and apply the concept of causal connection. Therefore, he thinks that the intelligibility, or objectivity of the causal relation is a consequence of our own inferences and concepts, but this means that the intelligibility of causality, the objective dependency of the effect upon the cause, is "a presupposition" we **make**. It is "postulate" and a "principle" which we bring towards objects, not something that we simply read off them. As

he puts it: "We have no other idea of the objective causality than this subjective causality in the understanding" (327).

This means that Tetens has not refuted Hume in the sense that he has shown causality not to be a "fiction" in any sense, but only in the sense that it is not a fiction of the imagination, but one of the understanding. And it is far from obvious that Hume would have rejected Tetens' account, for the distinction he makes between principles of the imagination *which are changeable, weak and irregular*⁷ (such as *faculty and occult quality ... sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum* [T 224]), and those *which are permanent, irresistible, and universal ... [and] are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin* (T 225) is not so different from the distinction at which Tetens is aiming, and I think Tetens is quite aware of that. However, since the causal principle for Tetens is only a special case of the more general problem of subjective versus objective necessity, he has more to say about objective causality in later chapters.

In general, Tetens believes that subjective necessity comes first, and that objective necessity comes later.

We know the **subjective** necessity to think in accordance with general laws of the understanding from observation. We feel that it is impossible for us to think square circles, and that we cannot think an object as different from itself. Upon this subjective necessity we found an **objective** one. We transfer the impossibility of thinking things differently to things external to the understanding. Our ideas are now no longer ideas within us, but things external to us. (531)

He claims that this is an effect of instinct, or of common sense (532). We cannot help but view things that we encounter in sensation as objectively real and as being objectively connected with one another. This does not mean that we could somehow compare what is given to us in sensation with the objects themselves. It only means that some things given in sensation are necessary in a different way than others. What Tetens really suggests is that we should replace the words objective and subjective with the words "subjectively unchanging" and "subjectively changing." Objective are those things that never change, subjective are those that do change.

Accordingly, the causal principle is objectively valid only because everything we can think of, we must think of as being subject to this principle. Indeed, we cannot even imagine an understanding that does not obey this principle (and others like it). "This means that these truths are objective truths, and that they are such truths is so certain

as the fact that they themselves are truths. We can doubt the one as little as the other" (546).

V.

What could Kant have learned from Tetens about Hume through his reading of the *Philosophical Essays*? If he did not know it before, he would have found out that Hume had written another work, namely the *Treatise of Human Nature*. He would also have learned that this work contained a different version of Hume's analysis of causality, as well as an analysis of the self that put into doubt all talk about a substantial self. Since the *Treatise* was available in Königsberg, and since one of his best friends is said to have appreciated this work so much that he knew it by heart, it would have been very easy for Kant to find out further details about the work. While I do not think that Kant really needed Tetens to remind him of Hume, Tetens' discussion probably renewed his interest in the work of the Scotsman.

Kant also may have received important suggestions for his own formulation of Hume's problem. Indeed, much in Tetens' formulation of the problem clearly reminds one of Kant, who viewed his critical enterprise in general, and the deduction of the metaphysical deduction of the categories in particular, as a generalization of Hume's problem of causality. Tetens has already generalized the problem. Though his account is not as systematic as is Kant's, it is an attempt at establishing the possibility of metaphysics against Hume.

However, I believe that one of the most important consequences that his reading of Tetens had for his conception of Hume's problem was mainly a negative one. Thus, he observes in one of his reflections of the period that

he is not concerned with the evolution of concepts as Tetens is (all actions by means of which we create concepts), and not with analysis like Lambert, but only with their objective validity. I am in no competition with these men;

and

Tetens investigates the concepts of pure reason merely subjectively (human nature), I do so objectively. His analysis is empirical, mine is transcendental.

He sees a clear difference between himself and Tetens. This is interesting, for only a short period before he wrote this, he also was much more interested in the origin of concepts and empirical analysis, as is revealed by the reflections of the Duisburg Nachlass. So Kant may very

well have conceived the sharp distinction between the transcendental and the empirical through his reading of Tetens. Since he makes very clear in his *Prolegomena* that only a transcendental account can do justice to Hume's problem, and that his *Critique* essentially is such an account, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Tetens made this clear to him, and revealed a dimension of Hume's problem that Kant had not seen very clearly before.

In any case, he certainly must have considered Tetens' move from subjective to objective necessity a disappointing one. Hume, as we just saw, and Kant clearly knew and never doubted that there are principles of the human mind that do not change, and that they are indispensable for our ability to know. Nor did he ever doubt that we actually do believe that the causal connection is not merely a connection among our ideas, but also one among objects. He was mainly interested in how we come to move from the one to the other, thinking that ultimately it cannot be justified by **philosophy**, but only by common life. Tetens' appeal to instinct and common sense clearly was not very different from that of Reid and some German contemporaries like Feder and Lossius, for instance. They all did not understand the important question which Kant identifies as the key question of the entire *Critique*, namely "what and how much can the understanding and reason know apart from all experience." Instead, they all used such concepts as cause, which they believed to have established as indispensable for experience, also uncritically in contexts that go beyond any experience. Tetens himself did just that in his next work, entitled *On the Reality of our Concept of God*. Kant was much more radical, answering the question "what and how much can we know apart from all experience" with "absolutely nothing" — just as Hume would have done.

Purdue University

1. Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969), 412-25. There is also an article by G. Tonelli in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edwards, that is of some interest, and a paper by Jeffrey Barnouw, "The Philosophical Achievement and Historical Significance of Johann Nicolaus Tetens," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 9 (1979).
2. Tetens, *Speculative Philosophy*, 17ff.
3. Tetens, *Essays*, 392-3.
4. Tetens, *Essays*, 394.
5. Beck, *Early German Philosophy*, 425.
6. He thinks that "this was also the most important reason for his committing the same mistake with regard to the entire extent of

human knowledge. Because he did not recognize its true inner strength, he believed that he could shake it by means of his skeptical cavils (Vernunfteleyen)" (312-13).

7. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1987), 225. Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.