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*Hume Studies* Volume XVII, Number 1 (April, 1991) 83-86.

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# The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited

John O. Nelson

More than a dozen years ago, in the pages of *The Philosophical Quarterly*,<sup>1</sup> this writer contested Sraffa and Keynes' claim, advanced in the introduction to their edition of the *Abstract*,<sup>2</sup> that it was Hume and not Adam Smith (as traditionally supposed) who was the author of that work.

The traditional view, which might be called the Adam Smith authorship-theory, was largely inspired by and seemed nailed shut by Hume's reference to a "Mr Smith" in a letter to Francis Hutcheson, dated March 4, 1740.<sup>3</sup> There appeared to be good reasons for identifying this "Mr Smith" with Adam Smith and then the latter with the undivulged author of the *Abstract*.

It was known, for instance, that previous to March 4, 1740, Adam Smith had been a student of Hutcheson's and that Hutcheson was in the habit of setting his students the task of writing abstracts of newly published philosophical works.<sup>4</sup> Since Hutcheson had originally looked with favor on both the *Treatise* and its author,<sup>5</sup> it had to seem more than likely that he had set his students the task of writing an abstract of the newly published *Treatise* of Hume. It was known, too, that Adam Smith was in possession of a copy of the *Treatise* soon after the date of H.<sup>6</sup> Who, then, might be the "Mr Smith" adverted to in H's "My Bookseller has sent to Mr Smith a Copy of my Book, which I hope he has receiv'd, as well as your Letter," except that same student of Hutcheson's, Adam Smith? What other Smith might have been known to Hutcheson, whom Hume could have wanted to refer to? No other Smith appeared to fit the bill. But why should Hume have wanted to refer in his correspondence with Hutcheson to an obscure, sixteen-year-old student of Hutcheson's, besides going to the trouble of having his bookseller send him a copy of the *Treatise*, unless that student had in some way made himself not only known to Hume but so highly regarded that Hume would want to favor him, presumably at his own expense, with a copy of the *Treatise*?

The only tenable answer had to seem to be that this same student had composed such a perceptive and laudatory précis of the *Treatise* for Hutcheson that the latter had shown it to Hume and Hume, in the honest attempt to excite interest and sales of that languishing work, had seen to its publication as the *Abstract*! These are the reasonings

and considerations that inspired and seemed to confirm the Adam Smith authorship-theory.<sup>7</sup>

As can be perceived, these reasonings and considerations all revolve around the reference to a "Mr Smith" in H and the identification of that Smith with Adam Smith. When, therefore, Sraffa and Keynes in the introduction to their edition of the *Abstract* pointed out that there existed another Smith who might arguably be the Mr Smith referred to in H, namely, the Dublin publisher of two of Hutcheson's works, John Smith "at the Philosopher's Head on the Blind Quay," its major prop being seemingly knocked out from under it, the Adam Smith authorship-theory crashed—at least in the eyes of the general world—to the ground. And in the latter's place, various of its supporting reasons being given a lease on life, such as Hume's well-known endeavors and desires to excite interest in this first work of his, the Hume authorship-theory, so to speak, seated itself.

In my previous venture into this subject, "Has the Authorship of *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature* Really Been Decided?"<sup>8</sup> I tried, I believe with some success, to show that Sraffa and Keynes' arguments were not so unanswerable as they were generally taken to be and that, in fact, they presented various difficulties which the traditional theory avoided. But what then occasions this new excursion into these troubled waters? What more is to be said that I did not say in "Decided"?

In "Decided" I presented various arguments and considerations that showed that it was *unlikely* either that Hume was the author of the *Abstract* or that the Mr Smith referred to in H was John Smith, the Dublin publisher. On the basis of a re-reading of H, however, in which some obvious implications of its contents, which had previously escaped my notice and presumably Sraffa and Keynes', forced themselves finally upon my attention, I want now to argue that it is not merely unlikely but impossible that the Mr Smith of the letter should be the Dublin publisher, John Smith.

In this same letter of Hume's, H, Hume, addressing Hutcheson, writes, "if you know any honest Man in this Trade [bookseller, publisher] ... send me a letter of Recommendation to him that I may have the Choice of more than one Man [Noon] to bargain with." Now let us suppose that the Mr Smith referred to in H were the Dublin publisher, John Smith of the quaint "Philosopher's Head on the Blind Quay."

Hume presumably would, when referring to this Mr Smith, be already cognizant of his existence and perhaps even in previous communication with him, since he says that his bookseller has sent him (Mr Smith, the publisher on the present hypothesis) a copy of the *Treatise*. But this being so, Hume would not ask Hutcheson if he knew

“any honest Man in [the] Trade.” He would naturally assume that Hutcheson’s own publisher was one such man, first because Hutcheson had had that publisher print not only one but two of his works and second, and of more force, because Hume had sent that publisher (on the present hypothesis) a copy of the *Treatise*, which he would not have done if he had any slightest suspicion of that publisher’s not being an honest man. (We are still, it must be remembered, proceeding on the hypothesis that the Mr Smith referred to was the John Smith of Dublin.) Accordingly, if the Mr Smith of H were the Dublin publisher, Hume, already cognizant of his connection with Hutcheson, would have asked Hutcheson, not if he knew any honest man in the trade, but if his own publisher, John Smith of Dublin, were an honest man in the trade. But it is not even credible that Hume would have gone that far, in that his sending the Dublin publisher Smith (on the present hypothesis) a copy of his book as much as says that Hume had no suspicion concerning the honesty of that person and so had no reason at all to ask if Hutcheson knew an honest man in the trade. In short, if the Mr Smith referred to had been John Smith of Dublin, Hume would not have asked the question that he did ask: namely, if Hutcheson knew of any honest man in the trade. Hence, if we are to assume that H makes coherent sense, the Mr Smith of H could not have been the John Smith “at the Philosopher’s Head on the Blind Quay” that Sraffa and Keynes argue for. That it can be proved that such a Smith existed and was the publisher of two of Hutcheson’s works and even that the same John Smith advertised copies of the *Treatise* does not matter in the least. Hume, for the reasons given, could not have been referring to him in H.

But if the Mr Smith of H was not John Smith “at the Philosopher’s Head on the Blind Quay” (a title that might seem to say something about Sraffa and Keynes’ identification), who could he be except the Adam Smith of the traditional theory? To be sure, there existed any number of Smiths in both Scotland and Ireland at that time (as of this). But, excluding as we now must John Smith of the Blind Quay, what Smith other than Adam Smith do we have any ground whatsoever for thinking Hume might have had his bookseller send a copy of the *Treatise* to? Or that Hutcheson knew and that Hume might have known too? As we previously noted, there is none. But if the Mr Smith of H is Adam Smith, as (with John Smith removed) it seems it has to be, then all the reasons previously adverted to that supported the traditional Adam Smith authorship-theory re-assert themselves and it becomes absolutely inconceivable that Adam Smith was not the author of the *Abstract*.

Simultaneously, of course, Sraffa and Keynes’ Hume authorship-theory has to be abandoned, resting as it finally does on the

replacement of Adam Smith with John Smith as the reference of H's "Mr Smith." But abandoning the Hume authorship-theory ought not to dismay admirers of Hume; indeed, the very opposite. For what we replace is the dismaying picture of Hume writing, in a sharper's cloak of anonymity, a puff of his own work with the picture of Hume recognizing, in a school-boy's précis of the *Treatise*, the genius of Adam Smith and Hume taking the first steps of many in his subsequent generous forwarding of Adam Smith's career and philosophical education.

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1. John O. Nelson, "Has the Authorship of *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature* Really Been Decided?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 26, no. 102 (January 1976): 82-91.
2. David Hume, *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature, 1740. A Pamphlet hitherto unknown by David Hume*, reprinted, with an introduction by J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge, 1938) (hereafter cited as *Abstract*). What Keynes and Sraffa mean by "hitherto unknown" is not, of course, that the *Abstract* had previously been unknown, but that, until their discovery, it had not been known that Hume was its author.
3. David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932), 1:37 (this letter hereafter cited as "H").
4. *Letters*, 1:37, n. 4; see also *Abstract*, xvii.
5. See Nelson (above, n. 1), 84.
6. Nelson, 90.
7. See Grieg's traditionally representative account of the matter, *Letters*, 1:37, n. 4:

It was Hutcheson's practice to set his students to make abstracts of new philosophical works as they appeared. It would seem that in 1739 he set Smith to work at the *Treatise*, Books I and II, and that the abstract which Smith made pleased Hutcheson so well that he sent it on to Hume, and pleased Hume so well that he had it printed in London and sent Smith a presentation copy of the book.

8. Nelson (above, n. 1); hereafter cited as "Decided."