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Hume Against Spinoza and Aristotle¹

Frank J. Leavitt

It is always good to try to make peace, to try to resolve differences between what some believe are conflicting points of view. Nevertheless, sometimes the points of view which are believed to be opposed to each other really do oppose one another and so the most ingenious attempts at reconciliation turn out to have been ill-conceived.

Wim Klever has brought considerable scholarship to bear in his attempt to show that Hume and Spinoza were not so far apart as we thought.² It was an especially pleasant surprise to see the comparison of their views on personal identity,³ for example. And he has made a convincing case for doubt that Hume's "sharp anti-Spinozistic utterings"⁴ in *Treatise* 1.4.5 were really sincere.

In my opinion, however, Klever has gone too far in trying to bring together what should have been left asunder. Some of his points of the purportedly common ground shared by Hume and Spinoza are based on what I believe to be a blatant misreading of Spinoza. Other points show a failure to appreciate a fundamental disagreement between Hume and Spinoza on central issues in the old Aristotelian tradition.

Hume and Spinoza, like other philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, can be best understood when one is aware of the Aristotelian background against which they were writing and with which they expected their readers to be familiar. Hume shows familiarity with Aristotelianism in his discussion of the "ancient philosophy" at *Treatise* 1.4.3 as well as in his various remarks about scholasticism.⁵ Spinoza's relationship to Christian Aristotelianism has been discussed by Wolfson⁶ and by myself,⁷ among others. And his relationship to Maimonides, who was his link to Jewish Aristotelianism, has been discussed by Harvey.⁸ I shall base my claim that Hume and Spinoza were much further apart than Klever makes them out to be upon an attempt to identify some scholastic and Aristotelian issues and doctrines with respect to which Hume and Spinoza took very different stands.

The first thing which I want to draw attention to is Klever's reading of the scholia to 2 *Ethics* 40, which bears on medieval disputes over the nominalistic, conceptualistic and realistic approaches to Aristotle's treatment of the problem of the universals. Since Spinoza allows that universal notions "are not formed by all men in the same way,"⁹ Klever

makes him out to be holding the same position which Hume expresses when he adopts Berkeley's opinion that "all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annexed to a certain term" (T 17). And Klever claims "Hume and Spinoza are both thorough nominalists."¹⁰ But Klever misses the point that Hume denies that there are, in addition to particular ideas, universal ones, that is, common notions, while Spinoza clearly admits, in the second scholium to 11 *Ethics* 40, the difference which Hume denies. According to Spinoza we have (1) confused representations of particular things, and (2) remembered ideas which are "similar to those through which we imagine things." These latter are ideas of the sort which Hume recognized. But in addition to these two, which Spinoza calls "opinion" and "imagination," Spinoza claims that we have (3) "notions common to all men, and adequate ideas of the properties of things." These are notions of "those things which are common to all, and which are equally in a part and in the whole [and which] cannot be conceived except adequately" (2 *Ethics* 38). These notions, which parallel Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas" are the general abstract ideas which Hume denies in *Treatise* 1.1.7. There Hume denies that ideas can be general "in their nature" but allows that they can be general "in their representation." To the extent to which Hume's position can be called "nominalism," the passages to which I have referred show that Spinoza, who basically accepted the Cartesian doctrine of clear and distinct ideas, was not a nominalist.

Aristotle drew a sharp distinction between imagination and thought in *De anima* 2.3. Descartes preserved the distinction between imagination and intellection at the beginning of the fourth *Meditation*, among other places. The passage from the second scholium to 2 *Ethics* 40, which I have already cited adheres to this distinction, which was already heralded in the explanation to 2 *Ethics* d2: "I say *conception* rather than perception because the word perception seems to imply that the mind is passive in respect of the object; whereas conception seems to express an activity of the mind." Hume, however, rejects this ancient distinction when he announces his intention to "destroy this artifice," of "this notion of some spiritual and refin'd perceptions" (T 72). By failing to recognize this point Klever obscures a fundamental Berkeleyan-Humean departure from an ancient doctrine, from which Spinoza did not depart.

The second point which I want to draw attention to is Klever's reading of Spinoza's discussion of the "Third Kind of Knowledge." Klever quotes Hume's remark about "propositions, that are prov'd by intuition or demonstration" (T 95) and hastens to assert, "Spinoza would call this the third kind of knowledge."¹¹ Klever's assertion is, however, totally gratuitous. Spinoza's famous Third Kind of Knowledge "proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of certain

attributes of God to the adequate knowledge of the essence of things" (2 *Ethics* 40s2), and I am willing to wager that no reader of *Hume Studies* can recall that Hume ever recognized the existence of a kind of knowledge which is based upon an idea of the absolute essence of certain attributes of God. I have argued elsewhere that the divine origin of Spinoza's Third Kind of Knowledge makes it clear that Spinoza intends this kind of knowledge to be identical with prophecy, as prophecy is understood in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.¹² But a further discussion of this would take me far beyond the purposes of an essay devoted to Hume.

Nowhere is the difference between Hume and Spinoza more apparent than in their approaches to the Aristotelian doctrine of causality, which Hume rejected and which Spinoza basically accepted. Klever quotes Spinoza's 2 *Ethics* 7 ("The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things") as part of his attempt to back up his claim that both Hume and Spinoza were nominalists.¹³ But not only is Klever totally vague about his intentions as to the connection between 2 *Ethics* 7 and nominalism, he also fails to appreciate that Hume could not possibly have used the word "connection" in the way in which Spinoza uses it in 2 *Ethics* 7. For 2 *Ethics* 7 is, as Spinoza states in the proof, intended as a direct consequence of 1 *Ethics* a4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause," which is an Aristotelian doctrine of causality the rejection of which was the occasion for one of Hume's most brilliant contributions to philosophy. Let me explain.

Aristotle distinguishes between two senses of "necessity."¹⁴ One is "in the sense of violence." The second is "that which we appeal to in demonstrations." The first sense of necessity, the sense of "violence," is the power of efficient causes, that is, the power of "what causes change of what is changed."¹⁵ The second sense of necessity, "that which we appeal to in demonstrations," is also a kind of causal necessity for Aristotle. For Aristotle believed that the relationship between the premises and the conclusion of a demonstration¹⁶—or, more strictly speaking, the relationship between the middle term and the conclusion of a syllogistic scientific demonstration¹⁷—is a causal relationship.

Although Hume's denial of the first of the two kinds of Aristotelian causal necessity, his denial of "efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, ... productive quality" (T 157), has been frequently discussed, less attention has been paid to his denial of the second kind of Aristotelian causal necessity. If there is a difference between an empiricist and a rationalist, then it is this denial which makes the difference.

One who denies the first kind of Aristotelian causal necessity is merely making a point of empirical observation: there is no such thing as an observed *energy* which passes between causes and effects. This

is only to claim that there is one less thing—this *energy*—in the inventory of the empirical world. And this is hardly a claim about which there is much reason for philosophers to get excited. But Hume's rejection of the second kind of Aristotelian causal necessity is unquestionably grounds for excitement. For here Hume rejects a *logical* doctrine: the Aristotelian belief that there is a connection "of the kind which we appeal to in demonstrations" (as Aristotle put it) between causes and effects.

Hume, himself, obscures the fact that he is rejecting two distinct kinds of Aristotelian causal necessity. For he claims that "all causes are of the same kind" and that "there is but one kind of *necessity*" (T 171). But a close comparison of Hume to the Aristotelian texts previously mentioned shows that Hume is carrying on two separate arguments, of which only one—the sustained argument that we have no impression of power except as a "determination of the thought" (T 166)—has to do directly with Aristotle's first kind of necessity, what Aristotle calls "violence" and what Hume calls "*efficacy, agency,*" etc.

Hume's rejection of the second Aristotelian kind of necessity becomes clear when we contrast Hume's language with Aristotle's own.

We have, according to Aristotle, unqualified scientific knowledge, as opposed to accidental sophistic knowledge, of a thing or fact when we know the cause on which that thing or fact depends.¹⁸ To know a thing's "essential nature," Aristotle says, is "the same as to know the cause of a thing's existence."¹⁹ The causal relationship here is a *logical* relationship of the kind "to which we appeal in demonstrations" such that the very *knowledge* of the effect depends upon the knowledge of the cause. But it is precisely this relationship the existence of which Hume denies when he says "*there is nothing in any object, consider'd in itself, which can afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion beyond it*" (T 139, Hume's emphasis) and that "there are no objects, which by the mere survey, without consulting experience, we can determine to be the causes of any other" (T 173).

It is, however, this second kind of causal necessity which Spinoza affirms at 1 *Ethics* a4: "The knowledge of an effect depends on and involves the knowledge of a cause."

As I have already said, Klever takes 2 *Ethics* 7 ("The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things") to be a proposition which Hume could accept.²⁰ But Spinoza proves 2 *Ethics* 7 directly from 1 *Ethics* a4. So it is clear that for Spinoza the order of ideas parallels the order of things because of the necessary (in Aristotle's second sense) connection between the idea of a thing and the idea of its cause. But for Hume the correspondence between the order of ideas and the order of things cannot be ascribed to any stronger principle than the Association of Ideas, which is certainly not an

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Aristotelian necessary connection of the sort which Spinoza adopted, but merely "a gentle force, which commonly prevails" (T 10).

Spinoza and Leibniz were the last greats in the grand old Aristotelian school which distinguished between intellection and imagination and which saw causality as an internal, logical, relation. Hume followed Berkeley in rejecting intellection as a separate faculty. And Hume did the most to bring about the acceptance of the modern view of causality as an external relationship reducible to constant conjunction. Klever's attempt at reconciling Hume to Spinoza obscures fundamental issues in Hume's departure from Aristotelianism.

Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

1. Thanks to Haim Marantz for helpful suggestions.
2. Wim Klever, "Hume Contra Spinoza?" *Hume Studies* 16, no. 2 (November 1990): 89-105.
3. *Ibid.*, 91f.
4. *Ibid.*, 104.
5. See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1978; reprint, Oxford, 1987), 312 (hereafter cited as "T"). In addition to this reference to scholasticism, which Selby-Bigge recognizes in his "Index," there are references to the "schools" or scholasticism on at least the following pages: 40, 44, 175.
6. Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (1934; reprint, New York, 1969). See, e.g., p. 9.
7. Frank J. Leavitt, "The Christian Philosophy of Benedictus de Spinoza" (in Hebrew), *DAAT, a Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 26 (Winter 1991): 97-108.
8. Warren Zev Harvey, "A Portrait of Spinoza as a Maimonidean," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 19 (1981): 151-72.
9. Translations are taken from Benedict de Spinoza, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, 2 vols. (1883; reprint, New York, 1955). The following abbreviations are used when reference is made to the *Ethics*: a: axioma; d: definitio; s: scholium.
10. Klever (above, n. 2), 94.
11. *Ibid.*, 97.
12. See n. 7, above. Esp. pp. 102f.
13. Klever (above, n. 2), 95.
14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, tr. W. D. Rossin, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, 1941), K.8.1064b.34f. All of my references to Aristotle will be to the various translations in this Random House edition of the Oxford translation.

15. *Physics* 2.3.194b31. See Aristotle's discussion there of the four kinds of causality: (1) material, (2) formal, (3) efficient, and (4) formal.
16. *Posterior Analytics* 1.2.71b22, 71b29, tr. G. R. G. Mure.
17. *Ibid.*, 2.2.90a5f.
18. *Ibid.*, 1.2.71b8ff.
19. *Ibid.*, 2.8.93a4f.
20. Klever (above, n. 2), 95.