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On the Authorship of the *Abstract*: A Reply to John O. Nelson

Jeff Broome

In "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," John O. Nelson argues for the once widely held view that Adam Smith was the author of the *Abstract*.¹ Generally speaking, however, this view has not been seriously maintained since the 1938 reprinting of the *Abstract* by Keynes and Sraffa. There, in their introduction, Keynes and Sraffa argue that Adam Smith was not the author of the *Abstract*, but rather Hume was.² The central document from which the traditional view derived its authority comes in an early letter of Hume to Hutcheson (hereafter noted as H1). It is worth quoting the passage in full. Writes Hume to Hutcheson,

My Bookseller has sent to Mr. Smith a copy of my book, which I hope he has receiv'd, as well as your letter. I have not yet heard what he has done with the *Abstract*. Perhaps you have. I have got it printed in London; but not in *the Works of the Learned*; there having been an Article with regard to my Book, somewhat abusive, printed in that Work, before I sent up the *Abstract*.³

The once widely held view argues that Adam Smith is the Mr. Smith referred to in this passage, and therefore that Adam Smith is the author of the *Abstract*. The argument proceeds: Smith at the time of H1 was a pupil of Hutcheson, and it was a habit of Hutcheson to have his promising students write abstracts of standard and contemporary works. It is then assumed that Adam Smith had written the *Abstract*, that Hutcheson was so impressed with it that he sent a copy to Hume, and that Hume in turn was so impressed that he arranged for its immediate publication, and, as seemingly mentioned in H1, rewarded Smith with a presentation copy of the first two volumes of his *Treatise*.

The Keynes and Sraffa thesis argues that the Mr. Smith in H1 cannot be Adam Smith, but rather must be John Smith of Dublin, "at the Philosopher's Head on the Blind Quay" (*Abstract*, xxiii). Their argument hinges on the conjecture that Hume was interested in an Irish edition of the *Treatise*, and therefore, Hume is asking Hutcheson's assistance in securing John Smith's help in this endeavour (*Abstract*,

xxii). The removal of Adam Smith as the Mr. Smith referred to in H1 consequently seems to explode the Adam Smith authorship hypothesis.

John Nelson first argued fifteen years ago against the Keynes/Sraffa thesis,⁴ challenging as unlikely the claim that the Mr. Smith in H1 must be John Smith of Dublin, and in the April 1991 issue of *Hume Studies* he reasserts his position more forcefully, arguing instead that it is impossible that "Mr. Smith" could be John Smith. Since the Mr. Smith of H1 is not John Smith, Nelson goes on to ask "who could he be except the Adam Smith of the traditional theory?"⁵ A closer examination of each view, Nelson's and Keynes/Sraffa's, reveals an assumption concerning an Irish publication of the *Treatise* that precludes any fully coherent resolution of the issue. I shall argue that the proper conclusion to be drawn from H1 should be that the Mr. Smith is the Dublin publisher John Smith. On this point Keynes and Sraffa are correct; but against their thesis, I shall argue that Hume's purpose in referring to John Smith is not to see to his publishing an Irish edition of the *Treatise* (volumes 1 and 2, and the soon to be published volume 3), but rather to see to his publishing an Irish edition of the *Abstract*, in the hope that this would help to promote sales of the already published volumes 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*. Thus, H1 should not be taken to decide the authorship of the *Abstract*, as Keynes and Sraffa, as well as John Nelson, argue. If anything, deciding the authorship of the *Abstract* should be made from Hume's personal copy of the *Abstract*, annotated in Hume's own hand, which is preserved in the British Museum.

We notice in H1 that Hume asks two favours. The first is meant to draw upon Hutcheson's experience in publishing. Hume merely wants to know what to expect in "copy-money," or royalties, as he seeks to bargain with booksellers in London for the publication of volume 3 of his *Treatise*. Hume wants Hutcheson's advice on this matter. The second favour is more personal. Hume wants to know if Hutcheson could recommend any honest publishers, so that he (Hume) will be able to bargain with more than one man. It would seem that Hume was reluctant to bargain with John Noon, the publisher of volumes 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*, even though he was aware that Noon was eager to publish volume 3 (*Letters*, 36-37), and consequently he was seeking Hutcheson's advice on any other publishers in London with whom he might bargain, in order to secure a better deal for volume 3. In another letter to Hutcheson (hereafter noted as H2), dated but twelve days later, Hume identifies Thomas Longman as the publisher he has decided to have print volume 3 of the *Treatise* (*Letters*, 38). In this letter, Hume reveals several things relevant to our contentions. First, it is to Longman that Hume requests Hutcheson "to write that letter you was so kind as to offer" (*Letters*, 38). This would indicate that Hutcheson

was indeed willing to write a letter of recommendation in order to help Hume in his attempts to secure a better publication offer for volume 3, which, of course, was one of Hume's requests in H1. However, as John Nelson indirectly argues, the letter of Hutcheson's asked for in H1 is not in fact this letter of recommendation (*Letters*, 37). But nothing so far said controverts the possibility that Hutcheson is being asked in H1 to write to John Smith a letter recommending his publishing an Irish edition of the *Abstract*.

Another point of interest in H2 is Hume's stated desire for a second edition of the *Treatise*, "principally on Account of Alterations I intend to make in my performance" (*Letters*, 38). Hume admits that without the contractual possibility of a second edition, "I should have been guilty of a great Temerity to publish at my Years so many Novelty's in so delicate a Part of Philosophy" (*Letters*, 38). But Hume never was able to publish his second edition, due to a clause in his contract that bound him to "take all the Copys remaining upon hand at the Bookseller's Price at the time" (*Letters*, 38). Unfortunately for Hume, the first two volumes of the *Treatise* never did sell out during his lifetime. In fact, several hundred copies remained unsold at Hume's death. Consequently Hume's corrections to volumes 1 and 2 were doomed to consist merely in a short appendix attached to volume 3. This led Hume to finally completely recast the *Treatise* into his two *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*.

As John Nelson has argued, if we suppose that in H1 Mr. Smith is being referred to in connection with publishing volume 3 of the *Treatise*, then John Smith of Dublin could not have been the Mr. Smith in H1, because it would not make any sense of Hume's request in H1 regarding Hutcheson knowing any honest booksellers, as it would already be assumed by Hume that Hutcheson's publisher, John Smith, was in fact considered by Hutcheson to be honest.⁶ Writes Nelson: "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."⁷ But this assumes that Hume was sending to John Smith a copy of the *Treatise*, in order for Smith to consider publishing volume 3. Nelson's argument loses its force when one considers the possibility that Hume wanted John Smith to publish the *Abstract* in Dublin, which would hopefully help with the sales of the first two volumes of the *Treatise*. When we take account of Hume's desire to print a second edition of the *Treatise*, and the fact that Hume must first see to the sale of all copies of the *Treatise*, we can appreciate his desire to include a Dublin publisher in his endeavours to help push the sales of the *Treatise*.

This reasonable conjecture helps us to recognize that Hutcheson's writing Mr. Smith was in all probability meant to praise the *Treatise* as a meaningful philosophical work. What we can rest assured of was that the letter accompanying the *Treatise* was not the letter of recommendation that Hume sought in order to bargain with an honest bookseller. We can know this because in H2, Hume now asks for that letter of recommendation to be sent to Longman. We can imagine that Hume, in his bargaining with London booksellers for publication of volume 3, would consider it an ace up his sleeve, so to speak, in being able to secure a letter of recommendation from Hutcheson, if needed. A good word from Hutcheson, given Hutcheson's reputation in philosophical publishing circles, would carry some weight in negotiations regarding volume 3. And so it is no surprise that Hume now asks for the promised letter of recommendation from Hutcheson in H2. Hume should have had no desire to secure a publisher for the *Treatise* outside London. But what he did desire was a more favourable publishing contract. Hence, Longman enters the publication picture.

What then, we might ask, was the purpose of writing to John Smith, if it was not to secure consideration in publishing volume 3? I contend it was an attempt to have the *Abstract* published. Now, if a publisher was to consider bringing out an abstract to a longer philosophical work, would it not make sense for the publisher to have a copy of that longer work? Hence Hume has his volumes 1 and 2 publisher, John Noon, send to John Smith a copy of the *Treatise*. When Hume says "I have not yet heard what he has done with the *Abstract*," this would indicate that Hume has in all probability already been in correspondence with Mr. Smith, because he had earlier sent him a copy of the *Abstract*. Imagine a bit, if the traditional view were correct and the Smith mentioned here was in fact Adam Smith. What possibly could this sentence mean but that Adam Smith were himself trying to publish the *Abstract*, possibly somewhere in Scotland! But this is clearly absurd, because Hume has already secured its publication where it really counts, namely, in London. And are we to imagine Adam Smith, merely sixteen years of age, trying to bargain with publishers? One might object to this suggestion by claiming that Adam Smith had sent the *Abstract* to John Smith in Dublin, and that Hume is merely commenting that he is unaware of what has happened with the *Abstract* via Adam Smith's endeavours for its publication. This hypothesis, however, fails for two reasons.

First, if Hume is securing publication of the *Abstract* in London, we have no explanation why Adam Smith would be trying to secure its publication elsewhere. And yet this would have to be what was happening, or else Hume's comment that he has not heard what Smith has done with the *Abstract* loses meaning. That is, Hume would not be

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writing in H1 that comment unless it meant that Hume was already aware that Smith's intentions were also to secure its publication outside of London. But there is no reason for Smith to do this. If Adam Smith had really written the *Abstract*, Hume's securing its London publication was sufficient.

The second reason to deny that Adam Smith was hopeful that John Smith would publish the *Abstract* is simply that there is no textual evidence for this claim whatsoever. Mr. Smith is mentioned only once in the Hume letter, and this Mr. Smith is either Adam, John, or an unknown Mr. Smith. The mention of Mr. Smith only permits one of these three designations, not two. And so we are left to decide, given our meagre evidence, which Mr. Smith it is more reasonable to believe.

It seems to me that the answer to this enquiry leads us to John Smith, for reasons I will give below. But before doing this, let me first eliminate the "some other Mr. Smith" hypothesis. It might be argued, for example, that Mr. Smith is a common name, and that there could certainly be an unknown Mr. Smith that Hume is referring to. Perhaps Hume had an early mentor at Edinburgh who had inspired him in his earlier studies, and Hume is now desirous of having his publisher send a presentation copy to this unknown Mr. Smith. What counts against this suggestion is that it fails to make sense of the fact that Hutcheson's letter is sent with the copy, nor does it explain why the *Abstract* is mentioned in H1 in connection with this same Mr. Smith. If the "some other Smith" hypothesis were true, then why was there any need to send the presentation copy along with a letter from Hutcheson that was already in John Noon's hands? What possibly could a Hutcheson letter contain that would make Hume want to send a copy of the *Treatise* with this letter? If this Mr. Smith were in fact an unknown early mentor to Hume, there would be no reason to add a letter of Hutcheson's with the *Treatise*, even if it were the case that this Mr. Smith were a known acquaintance of both Hume and Hutcheson. Hutcheson could merely send his letter via Hume's request, much like we find Hume asking of Hutcheson in H2.

This question of the Hutcheson letter also counts against the Adam Smith hypothesis. Why would Hume have his publisher send Hutcheson's letter along with the *Treatise* to Adam Smith? Hutcheson was Smith's mentor, and if Smith had actually written the *Abstract*, why would there be in John Noon's possession a letter written by Hutcheson that Hume would direct be sent to Adam Smith? The traditional hypothesis assumes that Hutcheson sent the *Abstract* to Hume, indicating that it was written by one of his pupils, namely, Adam Smith. Would this be the letter Hume has given to Noon to send along with a copy of the *Treatise*? But this too makes no sense, for two reasons. The first is that there is no reasonable explanation for having it sent

to Adam Smith. After all, it would not be saying anything that Smith would not already be aware of. Further, it is reasonable to assume that Smith was aware of Hume's favourable impression of the *Abstract*, either from correspondence now lost to that effect from Hutcheson to Hume, or from Hume to Smith. This conjecture is reasonable because of Hume's claim to Hutcheson that he has not yet heard what Smith has done with the *Abstract*. Hume had to be aware of something concerning Smith's intentions with the *Abstract* in order for him to show interest in knowing the final outcome with it.

But one might object that the Hutcheson letter was written not to Hume but rather to John Noon, praising the *Abstract* and encouraging its publication by Noon. This fails, however, because if the content of this Hutcheson letter were to encourage Noon's publication of the *Abstract*, it had already failed, for the *Abstract* was published by a C. Corbet (misspelled Borbet on the title page of the *Abstract*), and not Noon. And it is hard to see why this failed letter should be sent back to Adam Smith who would no doubt have been aware of Hutcheson's endeavours in his behalf. Having this letter sent to Smith, if that indeed were the content of the letter, would have to seem rather silly to both Hutcheson and Smith. Further, even if Hume had sent such a letter on to Adam Smith, it certainly would not have warranted Hume informing Hutcheson of this fact.

From the above conjectures, it seems that the best interpretation we can give of Hutcheson's letter mentioned in H1 is to subsume it under the John Smith hypothesis. We can certainly understand the importance of a Hutcheson letter, as Smith was already a publisher of Hutcheson's works.⁸

There are two possibilities as to what Hume's intentions were in having his publisher send this letter to John Smith. One possibility would be that Hume was desirous of having John Smith publish volume 3 of the *Treatise*. It seems plausible to have Hutcheson write a letter recommending publication because Hutcheson had been given the manuscript to volume 3 and made several comments, to which Hume performed several emendations before deciding on having it published. But further analysis weakens this possibility. As John Nelson has effectively shown, why would Noon be in agreement to encourage a competitor at his own expense?⁹ After all, Noon is interested in sales of volumes 1 and 2, and to send a letter to a rival publisher extolling the virtues of a third volume of the *Treatise* would directly compete against his own sales. It would be more reasonable to assume that Hume would not have put such a letter in the possession of his own publisher, but rather would have made arrangements for Hutcheson to send the letter himself. But one might argue that this is in fact what did happen. Hume had written in H1, "My Bookseller has sent to Mr.

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Smith a copy of my book, which I hope he has receiv'd, *as well as your letter.*" This does not imply that Noon had the Hutcheson letter, for the sending of the book and Hutcheson's letter could be ~~separate~~ events. But it does not matter if Noon was or was not aware of Hutcheson's letter, he would clearly not be in favour of sending a copy of his published *Treatise* to a rival publisher for possible publication, especially a publisher in Ireland, where copyright infringements against London publishers were apparently commonplace occurrences (*Abstract*, xx).

Our remaining hypothesis is lent credence by the failure of the alternatives. We are left to consider that John Smith was sent a copy of the *Treatise*, at Hume's request, in order for Smith to publish a Dublin edition of the *Abstract*, and not volume 3 of the *Treatise*. The *Abstract*, favourably received in intellectual circles, would promote the sales of volumes 1 and 2, which of course would please Noon and Hume both. It would please Noon because of sales. But moreover, it would please Hume because more sales would mean an opportunity to publish a second edition, something at this time which Hume was very desirous of doing. It seems, then, the best explanation of Noon's sending John Smith a copy of the *Treatise* would be that Hume was attempting to solicit a Dublin publication of the *Abstract*. But why, we might ask, would it be necessary to have Noon send Smith the *Treatise*? Would it not be enough to simply have Hume attempt this arrangement, with just Hutcheson's letter of recommendation? Not really. Imagine a publisher willing to engage in publishing a brief abstract of a work already published by another publisher. What possible benefits could this serve Smith? Hutcheson's praise for the *Treatise*, as a philosophically well argued work (here it is not necessary to assume that Hutcheson approves of the *Treatise*), would mean to Smith that Hutcheson's philosophical reputation would be helpful in garnering sales in Scotland and Ireland. But it would not make sense to extol a work unknown to Smith. Hence the necessity in having Noon send a copy of the *Treatise* to Smith.

We can conclude from our speculations that John Nelson erred in assuming that if the *Treatise* had been sent to John Smith, it was done in order to solicit publication of volume 3 of the *Treatise*. His arguments lose their force once we consider the possibility that John Smith was sought for publication of the *Abstract*, and not volume 3. That this was indeed the case is strengthened by looking at H2, where Hume has decided upon securing efforts to have Longman as the publisher of volume 3. H2 was written less than two weeks after H1, which should indicate to us that John Smith was in all probability not being considered as a potential publisher of volume 3. But, as I have already shown, not having John Smith as a potential publisher of volume 3 does

not preclude his being considered as the Dublin publisher of the *Abstract*. So, when John Nelson states "that it is not merely unlikely but impossible that the Mr. Smith of the letter should be the Dublin publisher, John Smith,"¹⁰ he fails to realize that it is only impossible given the assumption that the motive for sending John Smith a copy of the *Treatise* was for considerations that he publish volume 3. Impossibility vanishes when the *Abstract* is the considered publication. I have given what appear to be sound reasons why we should consider that it is in fact the *Abstract* that Hume is hoping for a Dublin publication.

Likewise, Keynes and Sraffa err when they assume that Hume is desiring John Smith to publish volume 3 (*Abstract*, xix). But they do not err when they identify the Mr. Smith as John Smith, the Dublin publisher. Hopefully, the considerations I have given in this paper will resolve any ongoing disputes as to who the Mr. Smith in H1 refers to. But should anyone still be tempted to entertain any doubts as to whether or not Hume himself was the author of the *Abstract*, one needs only consider the fact that the copy of the *Abstract* in the British Museum was Hume's own copy, and that it contains stylistic corrections in Hume's own handwriting. We know from Hume's surviving letters that he had a penchant for correcting his published works. To see these corrections in his own handwriting should alleviate all doubt as to whether or not Hume was the author of the *Abstract*. For what possible reason would Hume correct stylistically a pamphlet that he himself did not write? And should it actually have been written by Adam Smith, why would it be attached to Hume's copy of volume 3 of the *Treatise*? The *Abstract* was published anonymously. Had Adam Smith been its author, why would Hume have not written Adam Smith's name to the title of his copy? Hume had kept this copy from 1740 until his death. He obviously wanted it to be preserved. Why then, would he preserve Adam Smith's anonymity? Our only reasonable conclusion, I suggest, is that Hume was himself the author of the *Abstract*.¹¹

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1. John O. Nelson, "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," *Hume Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 1991): 83-86.
2. David Hume, *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature, 1740*, reprint, with introduction by J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge, 1938; Hamden, Connecticut, 1965), xxix (hereafter cited as *Abstract*).

3. David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Grieg (Oxford, 1969), 1:37-38 (hereafter cited as *Letters*).
4. 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.
5. Nelson, "Authorship Revisited" (above, n. 1), 85.
6. *Ibid.*, 84-85.
7. *Ibid.*, 85.
8. Ernest Campbell Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford, 1970), 136.
9. Nelson, "Authorship Decided?" (above, n. 4), 84.
10. Nelson, "Authorship Revisited" (above, n. 1), 84.
11. I would like to thank John O. Nelson, James King, and Oliver Stutchbury for helpful comments of earlier drafts of this paper.