



A Puzzling Passage in “Why Utility Pleases”

Phillip D. Cummins

Hume Studies Volume XXVI, Number 1 (April, 2000) 179-182.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

A Puzzling Passage in “Why Utility Pleases”

PHILLIP D. CUMMINS

It could hardly be controversial that in “Why utility pleases,” Section V of his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume purports to tell his readers why utility pleases. It is not controversial that in that section he rejected the deduction of morals from self-love, that is, the thesis that utility pleases because actions and policies possessing it inevitably are in the actual or perceived self-interest of the person who approves of them. This is not to deny there are interpretive issues. Nor is it to deny that there are passages which puzzle. Here is one:

This deduction of morals from self-love, or a regard to private interest, is an obvious thought, and has not arisen wholly from the wanton sallies and sportive assaults of the sceptics. To mention no others, POLYBIUS, one of the gravest and most judicious, as well as most moral writers of antiquity, has assigned this selfish origin to all our sentiments of virtue. But though the solid, practical sense of that author, and his aversion to all vain subtilties, render his authority on the present subject very considerable, yet is not this an affair to be decided by authority, and the voice of nature and experience seems plainly to oppose the selfish theory.

The quotation is from the new Oxford Philosophical Texts edition of the *Enquiry* edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, who is also responsible for the critical

edition. It should be noted that the quoted version agrees with both Nidditch's revised Selby-Bigge edition and the older but still useful Hendel edition. In short, this seems to be the standard wording.

Nonetheless, the passage seems both to need correction and to be easily corrected. Hume presents Polybius as a highly respected defender of the self-love theory,¹ one whose "authority on the present subject" is considerable. This asserted, he adds, "yet is not this an affair to be decided by authority, and the voice of nature and experience seems plainly to oppose the selfish theory." If we contrast the actual wording of the first conjunct to "yet is this an affair to be decided by authority," which expresses a genuine question, it is obvious that the first conjunct is a rhetorical question which implies that authority should decide the issue. The prior reference to Polybius seems to imply that he is the authority in question. Since, according to Hume, Polybius endorsed the selfish theory, the first conjunct itself seems to endorse the selfish theory. However, the second conjunct explicitly and directly challenges that very theory by asserting that both nature and experience oppose it. Thus, in the same sentential unit an appeal to authority is first endorsed, though it is in opposition to Hume's subsequent position, then rejected, as one would expect it to be, given that position. At worst there is inconsistency; at best a muddle.

The simple correction is to rearrange three words in the first conjunct, replacing "is not this" with "this is not." These two phrases are generally used in opposition to one another; consider, for example, "Is not this the time to celebrate?" and "This is not the time to celebrate." The former grammatically is a question but its rhetorical function is to imply that it is indeed the time to celebrate, which the latter flatly denies. Note that in the present case, "yet this is not an affair to be decided by authority, and the voice of nature and experience seems plainly to oppose the selfish theory" expresses a claim perfectly in keeping with the argument that follows. Hume will appeal to nature and experience to oppose even those important authorities who endorse the selfish theory.

It might be objected that my proposed correction is not needed because sense can be made of the key sentential unit, "yet . . . theory," as it stands. It might be argued that in the first clause of the sentential unit Hume knowingly endorses authority, as the standard wording requires, because he proceeds to contrast the strong or genuine authority of nature and experience to the weak or bogus authority of mere human authorities such as Polybius. Properly understood, the sentential unit as a whole means "this is a matter to be decided by authority, but the authority of nature and experience rather than that of Polybius." It must be conceded that this gloss in isolation is not unintelligible. However, it is highly suspect for several reasons. First, it does not make much sense in relation to the whole sentence of which it is a unit. That sentence is, "But though the solid, practical sense of that author, and his aversion to all vain subtilties, render his authority on the present subject very considerable,

yet is not this an affair to be decided by authority, and the voice of nature and experience seems plainly to oppose the selfish theory." In what precedes "yet . . . theory," Hume writes of the basis of the authority of Polybius, not evidential authority in general, so that in endorsing an appeal to authority, Hume prepares the reader for acceptance of that of Polybius. No contrast is provided between his authority and that of evidence in general. Hence, the final clause, which rejects the selfish theory endorsed by Polybius, is still at odds with the rest of the sentence. There is simply no preparation for the gloss, according to which Hume endorsed evidential authority in general, then indicated a preference for one kind over another.

A further point is that among philosophical and religious writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it was a standard rhetorical move to refuse to defer to authority (the testimony of experts or purported experts) in matters of belief. Protestant writers championed the way of examination in opposition to the way of authority, by which they meant Catholicism, and the new philosophers challenged the authority of Aristotle. Hence, Hume's introduction of a recognized authority on behalf of the self-interest theory fits nicely with his refusal to defer to authority. In contrast, appealing to authority, but championing the authority of nature and experience over the authority of authorities such as Polybius would have taken Hume's readers into rhetorically unfamiliar, even unrecognizable, territory.

Finally, on the proposed gloss, the final clause is comparative, with Hume preferring the evidence of experience to that of Polybius. But there is no explicit contrast of one authority to another. One must say it is implicit, and one's only reason for doing so is being able to take "yet is not this an affair to be decided by authority" at face value as endorsing authority. The main point, then, is preserving the standard wording as is.

But in proposing a simple correction, I am not demanding that future editions of the *Enquiry* use "this is not" rather than "is not this." That is one option. Another would be to provide an editor's note indicating how the alternative wording eliminates a puzzle. I recognize there may be good reasons for proceeding in this way. For example, unlike the case of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, there was more than one edition of the *Enquiry* during Hume's lifetime and he oversaw the publication of each. Hence, if the puzzling passage occurs in all of these editions, one must defer to the author even if one feels compelled to comment on his handiwork.

NOTE

1. Hume in a footnote to the passage quotes Polybius to support his interpretation, then notes an alternative reading which would make it inappropriate to call Polybius a defender of the selfish theory.