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Another “Curious Legend” about Hume’s *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature*

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I

In 1938, J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa edited and introduced for Cambridge University Press a reprinting of *An Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature*.¹ The *Abstract* they claimed in their subtitle was “A Pamphlet hitherto unknown by DAVID HUME.” Arguing against a number of nineteenth and early-twentieth-century scholars who attributed authorship of an abstract of the *Treatise* to Adam Smith, Keynes and Sraffa convincingly documented in their introductory essay many solid reasons for thinking that the pamphlet being reprinted was Hume’s.² Sixty years on, their account dispelling this “curious legend” of Smith’s authorship has now become the received opinion. T.E. Jessop accepted Keynes and Sraffa’s argument (having seen it in proof before the edition was published) in his bibliography of 1938, and Norman Kemp Smith gave their version an early supportive review.³ E.C. Mossner, in his well-known biography of Hume, accepted wholeheartedly Keynes and Sraffa’s findings.⁴ When in 1978 the Selby-Bigge’s edition of Hume’s *Treatise* saw its second edition the text of the *Abstract* was appended and a note gave P.H. Nidditch’s opinion that “Hume’s authorship is overwhelmingly likely.”⁵ More recently

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in the pages of this journal, Jeff Broome, David Raynor, and David Fate Norton have all helped buttress the case for Hume's authorship, as did R. W. Connon and M. Pollard elsewhere.⁶ Despite an occasional dissenting voice,⁷ the *Abstract* is now widely, and rightly (or so it seems to this author), thought to have been Hume's. But with all of this scholarly attention focused on confirming Hume's authorship, another much more contentious aspect of Keynes and Sraffa's interpretation has gone largely unnoticed.

Keynes and Sraffa's billing of the *Abstract* as "A Pamphlet hitherto unknown by DAVID HUME," suggested that before 1938 the *Abstract* had not been attributed publicly to Hume and that the contents of the pamphlet also had been completely unknown. "Students of Hume have known that an abstract of the *Treatise* was made and intended for publication," wrote a reviewer of Keynes and Sraffa, "[b]ut no copy of this abstract was known to exist: indeed it was usually supposed that the abstract had never been printed at all."⁸ Relying on Keynes and Sraffa it would be easy to suppose that the *Abstract* was never publicly ascribed to Hume and even that the contents of the pamphlet had been overlooked entirely until Keynes and Sraffa came along. One of the purposes of the present short essay is to dispel, once and for all, that misunderstanding about the *Abstract*.

Norman Kemp Smith went part of the way toward that end in 1938 when he reviewed Keynes and Sraffa's edition. But in the process Kemp Smith introduced another "curious legend" that has slipped into scholarly acceptance with little comment and no debate. We will see that it is a mistake to argue, as Kemp Smith did, that Hume's authorship of a sixpenny pamphlet was known to readers of *An universal biographical and historical dictionary*, published in 1800. There is no discussion of Hume's *Abstract* in that book. However, the *Abstract* was discussed in print in at least three different publications between 1818 and 1827, long after its initial publication in 1740 and long before Keynes and Sraffa brought it to the attention of their audience in 1938. While pre-1938 Hume scholars had overlooked the *Abstract*, at least one of Hume's early nineteenth-century critics knew of the *Abstract's* existence, attributed the work to Hume, and even quoted extensively from Hume's "Preface." Most interesting of all, Hume's authorship of the *Abstract* was interpreted in ways that are telling of the historical reception of Hume's thought and character.

II

In his review of Keynes and Sraffa's edition of the *Abstract*, Kemp Smith brought to light the fact that the 1827 edition of *The Universal Biographical*

Dictionary had an entry for Hume which made the case in print that Hume had written an “analysis” of the *Treatise*. Edited by John Watkins (fl. 1792–1831), the *Dictionary* recorded in one line that Hume had the *Treatise of Human Nature* “published in London in 1738, but its reception not answering his expectations, he printed a small analysis of it, in a six-penny pamphlet, to make it sell.”⁹ Clearly, then, in 1827 at least one scholar and his attentive readers were aware of the existence of a sixpenny pamphlet Hume was thought to have written. Kemp Smith admitted that he had not investigated any earlier editions of the *Universal biographical dictionary* but he presumed, nevertheless, “that the above passage occurs in the first, and in each successive edition.” But did it?

Watkins's *Dictionary* saw at least eight imprints before that of 1827.¹⁰ As Kemp Smith knew, the first edition of the book was published in London in 1800 with the title, *An universal biographical and historical dictionary*.¹¹ In that edition the entry for Hume remarked that Hume published the *Treatise* “at London in 1738” and that “[t]his work, however, met with an indifferent reception.” But there is no mention of Hume's assumed authorship of a sixpenny pamphlet. Indeed, the *Abstract* is not discussed at all. By 1807, with its third edition, Watkins's *Dictionary* was “Revised, corrected, and considerably enlarged.”¹² The entry from “Hume” was changed in a number of ways, some substantial, and not least of all by the addition of an uncomplimentary concluding summary statement about Hume's life and writings: “As a metaphysician he is sophistical and obscure, as a moralist lax and deceitful, and as an historian specious and partial.”¹³ On Hume's authorship of the *Abstract*, however, Watkins's text was as silent in 1807 as it had been in 1800. It was not until 1821 with the publication of “A New [fourth] Edition” that Watkins's text became that which Kemp Smith read in the edition of 1827. Kemp Smith drew a conclusion that stretched far beyond his concrete evidence when he stated that “The secret of the *Abstract* has thus, from 1800 at least, been a strangely open secret.”¹⁴ But Hume's authorship of the *Abstract* was discussed in print before 1821, and with much more detail than Watkins gave in the *Universal Dictionary*.¹⁵

III

In 1818, the *Abstract* was the focus of a lengthy discussion in the *New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, a miscellany published in London beginning in 1814. Founded by Henry Colburn and Frederick Shoberl, the *New Monthly* aimed to be “equally acceptable to the scholar and the philosopher, to the man of leisure and the man of business.”¹⁶ It was also designed, in part, as a

foil to Sir Richard Phillips's *Old Monthly Magazine*, a well-circulated publication known as a breeding ground for the views of religious and political radicals. It was in opposition to this liberal spirit that the *New Monthly* for September 1818 offered its readers an essay entitled "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality."¹⁷ Critical of the lives and characters of Hobbes, Spinoza, Toland, Bolingbroke and Mallet, the essay's longest treatment was reserved for the "infidel" Hume. Part-and-parcel of the attack on Hume's character was a significant discussion of Hume's *Abstract*.

Like the later discussion in Watkins's *Dictionary* entry of 1821, the *New Monthly* article of 1818 argued that after the initial failure of the *Treatise*, Hume had published a pamphlet to draw notice to his book: "When this subtle metaphysician and self-deceiving sceptic, published his first work, he at the same time printed a pamphlet for the purpose of exciting general attention to his book." Unlike the one-sentence *Dictionary* entry that referred to a "sixpenny pamphlet," the magazine essay gave the *Abstract's* full title and provided other details: "The title of this tractate," explained the *New Monthly*, "is 'An abstract of a book lately published, entitled, a Treatise of Human Nature, &c. wherein the chief argument of that book is farther illustrated and explained.'" The place of publication was identified as London and the publisher was corrected by the journal from the misprint of "C. Borbet" with the remark that "(it should be Corbet) at Addison's head, over against St. Dunstan's church, in Fleet-street." The price, too, was identified as "six pence." The journal explained further that the "pamphlet, consisting of two octavo sheets, is, in fact, an abridgement of the work which it recommends." These bibliographical details and comments about the pamphlet's contents immediately suggest that the author of the *New Monthly* piece was not only familiar with the *Abstract's* existence, but had even seen it and read it. The author certainly had access to the *Abstract's* "Preface," because a lengthy passage of 237 words was quoted in the magazine:

The book seemed to me to have such an air of singularity and novelty as claimed the attention of the public; especially if it be found, as the author seems to insinuate, that were his philosophy received, we must alter, from the foundation, the greatest part of the sciences. Such bold attempts are always advantageous in the republic of letters, because they shake off the yoke of authority, accustom men to think for themselves, give new limits, which men of genius may carry further, and by the very opposition illustrate points wherein no one before suspected any difficulty.

The author must be contented to wait with patience for some time before the learned world can agree in their sentiments of his performance. 'Tis his misfortune that he cannot make an *appeal to the people*, who in all matters of common reason and eloquence are found so infallible a tribunal. He must be judged by the FEW whose verdict is more apt to be corrupted by partiality and prejudice, especially as no one is a proper judge in these subjects, who has not often thought of them; and *such* are apt to form to themselves systems of their own, which they resolve not to relinquish. I hope the author will excuse me for intermeddling in this affair, since my aim is only to increase his auditory, by removing some difficulties which have kept many from apprehending his meaning.

The author of the *New Monthly* essay concluded that "This may be called *critical puffing*; but as reviews were not then in request, the effects produced by it must have been inconsiderable."¹⁸

"Anecdotes of Infidel Morality" was signed, but only with the initials "W. J." John Watkins, the author of the *Universal Dictionary*, immediately presents himself as a plausible candidate. It was a common practice for contributors to Victorian periodicals to reverse their initials when wishing partially to hide their identities which would nevertheless easily be guessed by their friends and acquaintances. Watkins was the periodical's editor when "Infidel Morality" was published and the foremost modern authority on the *New Monthly* asserts that Watkins was one of the magazine's "most prolific authors" during its early years, to which the essay belongs.¹⁹ Reviewing the contents of all numbers of the *New Monthly* published prior to 1820 shows that other essays and printed letters were signed "W.J." Numerous other pieces were signed "J.W.," "J. Watkins," and even "John Watkins;" but it is difficult to establish if all of these came from the same pen. Watkins's publications, including the *Universal Dictionary*, were also frequently noticed and even reviewed in the *New Monthly*, which was known for its own "critical puffing." Watkins clearly had a long affiliation with the *New Monthly Magazine*. The circumstantial evidence supporting Watkins's authorship of "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality" is strong, but inconclusive. Whoever wrote it, however, the essay is informative of Hume's nineteenth-century reception.

For W.J. the *Abstract* was presented as evidence of Hume's deceitful and dishonest ways. If "the writers on the side of infidelity are better guides than Christian teachers," he wrote, "the excellence of their principles must be apparent in their conduct. . . . With this view I send out some anecdotes of leading infidel writers."²⁰ "Hume has been cried up by his admirers as a

man of benevolence, and the most equable temper,”²¹ but Hume’s silent authorship of the *Abstract* was marshaled with other supposed evidence to cast suspicion on these estimates. Hume was accused, “out of vanity and enmity to religion,” of having “caused two pamphlets, compiled from Spinoza’s *Tractatus Politico Theologicus*, to be reprinted at London in 1763.”²² W.J. ridiculed a dedication to David Hume, “the most accomplished man, the noblest and most acute philosopher of this age!” explaining “that both pamphlets, though taken from two obscure octavo volumes of miscellanies, printed at Amsterdam, are passed off as entirely original articles. Such is the honesty of moral philosophers, who take upon them to dispel the clouds of superstition, and to purge the visual organs of man’s understanding.”

He then told a final anecdote casting Hume’s character in a negative light. It concerned Hume’s supposed abandonment of his mother at her death-bed. “What must that man’s sensibility have been, who first undermined his mother’s faith in the doctrines of the gospel; and when at the last she wanted the solace of his presence, and the comforts of his philosophy, to smooth the path of death, denied her both the one and the other?—Yet such was David Hume, who artfully made a convert of his parent, and then avoided her sight when she stood in need of his consolation!”²³ While the specific charges leveled against Hume in this essay are very particular and notable for their singularity, the general tone of censure was one commonly struck by Hume’s nineteenth-century critics as I have shown elsewhere.

While ignored entirely by modern scholars, it is difficult to know how widely “Anecdotes of Infidel Morality” was read in the nineteenth century. Circulation figures for the *Monthly Magazine* are not known, but we do know that it was advertised extensively in well-known London papers, such as the *Literary Gazette*. In one of those advertisements the essay “Anecdotes of Infidel Morality” was even singled-out for special mention.²⁴ The essay is also known to have made its way to America. In fact, immediately after it was first printed in Britain “Anecdotes of Infidel Morality” was reprinted in its entirety in *Robinson’s Magazine*, a short-lived miscellany published in Baltimore by Joseph Robinson.²⁵

IV

While Hume’s nineteenth-century biographers uniformly overlooked it, the *Abstract* was discussed in the pages of early nineteenth-century periodicals on opposite sides of the Atlantic almost eighty years after its first publication but one hundred and twenty years before Keynes and Sraffa “rediscovered” it. From 1818 to 1827 the *Abstract* was known to some and may have affected

the interpretations which they and others made of Hume's life and works. These publications not only recorded the *Abstract's* existence, they documented its bibliographical details, were familiar with some of its contents, and even guessed at Hume's authorship. The "secret" of Hume's *Abstract* was kept alive by at least one nineteenth-century critic who used Hume's presumed authorship to deride Hume's character by depicting him as a cheat.

From what source did W.J. and/or Watkins derive information about Hume's *Abstract*? Kemp Smith speculated that Watkins may have tapped into a "living tradition" at the Longman's firm, as Longman published both Watkins's *Dictionary* and Book III of Hume's *Treatise*. Perhaps equally plausible is a "living tradition" through Hume's publisher, and the printer of the *Abstract*, William Strahan, whose son, Andrew, carried on the business and lived until 1831. There are other possible sources besides those in London. Watkins lived and studied in Bristol for a time, and was close friends with Hannah More, to whom he dedicated a book in 1796. M.A. Stewart has postulated that a Hume manuscript fragment may have passed from Hume's friend, John Peach, a Bristol draper, to More's sister, Martha.²⁶ Could Watkins have gathered his details from that circle? Possibly. But it is just as possible that Hume's authorship survived in a printed tradition the details of which have yet to be uncovered by modern scholars. Why the *Abstract* dropped out of sight is not known either. When in 1832–4 Robert Chambers compiled his *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* he made no mention of the *Abstract* although he did mention most of Hume's works. Perhaps that is the date at which this sixpenny pamphlet may be said to have become lost only to be "rediscovered" in 1938.

NOTES

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1 *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature 1740: A Pamphlet hitherto unknown by David Hume*, ed. J. M. Keynes and P. Sraffa (Cambridge: The University Press, 1938). The full-title of the original publication was, *An Abstract of a Book lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the Chief Argument of that Book*

is *farther Illustrated and Explained* (London, 1740). Keynes and Sraffa's edition has been reprinted by Archon Books (Hamden, Connecticut, 1965) and Thoemmes Press (Bristol, 1990).

2 For the Smith legend see John Hill Burton, *Life and Correspondence of David Hume* (Edinburgh: W. Tait, 1846), Leslie Stephen entry for "David Hume" in *Dictionary of National Biography*; John Rae, *Life of Adam Smith* (London: Macmillan, 1895), William Robert Scott, *Francis Hutcheson: His Life, Teaching and Position in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1900), James Orr, *David Hume and his Influence on Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903), J.Y.T. Greig, *David Hume* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931), J. Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature* (London: Methuen, 1932).

3 T.E. Jessop, *A Bibliography of David Hume and of Scottish Philosophy from Francis Hutcheson to Lord Balfour* (London: A. Brown & Sons, 1938), 14; Norman Kemp Smith, review in *Mind* 47 (1938): 520–2. For similarly approving early assessments see Ralph W. Church's review in *The Philosophical Review* 48 (1939): 643–4 and "S.P.L.," *The Journal of Philosophy* 35 (1938): 639–40.

4 E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1954), 124.

5 Hume David, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), quotation at 667. The *Abstract* is also included in the Oxford Philosophical Texts edition of the *Treatise* edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

6 Jeff Broome, "On the Authorship of the *Abstract*: A Reply to John O. Nelson," *Hume Studies* 17 (1992): 95–103; David Raynor, "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," *Hume Studies* 19 (1993): 213–15; David Fate Norton, "More Evidence that Hume Wrote the *Abstract*," *Hume Studies* 19 (1993): 217–22; Robert W. Connon, "Some Hume MS Alterations on a Copy of the *Abstract*," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (1976): 353–6; R. W. Connon and M. Pollard, "On the Authorship of 'Hume's *Abstract*,'" *Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1977): 60–6.

7 See John O. Nelson, "Has the Authorship of *An Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature* Really Been Decided?" *The Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1976): 82–91; John O. Nelson, "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," *Hume Studies* 17 (1991): 83–6.

8 "S.P.L.," 639.

9 Norman Kemp Smith, review of Keynes and Sraffa, 522. On John Watkins see Thomas George Baney, "John Watkins," in *Dictionary of National Biography*; S. Austin Allibone, *A Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors* 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1882).

10 *The National Union Catalog Pre-1956 Imprints* lists imprints for 1800, 1806, 1807, 1821, 1822, 1823, 1825, 1826, and 1827.

11 John Watkins, *An Universal Biographical and Historical Dictionary. Containing a Faithful Account of The Lives, Actions, and Characters, of the Most Eminent Persons*

of *All Ages and All Countries; also the Revolutions of States, the Successions of Sovereign Princes, Ancient and Modern* (London, 1800).

12 *A Biographical, Historical and Chronological Dictionary: containing accurate accounts of the Lives, Characters, and Actions, of the most Eminent Persons of All Ages and All Countries; including also The Revolutions of States, and the Succession of Sovereign Princes* (London, 1807).

13 It is interesting to note here the change in the estimation of Hume as historian.

14 Norman Kemp Smith, review of Keynes and Sraffa, 522. David Raynor has referred to Kemp Smith's findings without pointing out the fundamental error that the 1800 edition had no such passage; see "The Authorship of the *Abstract* Revisited," 215 (note 4).

15 It is not entirely certain that Watkins wrote the entry for "Hume" in the *Universal Dictionary*. But every edition of the book was said to be "By John Watkins," and in the "Preface" to the third and fourth editions Watkins refers to himself, a number of times, as "the author" of all entries.

16 "Preface," in *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register* 1 (1814): ii.

17 "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," in *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register* 10 (1818): 120–3. In the index to the volume the connection with Phillips's periodical is drawn explicitly when the essay is referred to as "Infidel Morality of the Old Monthly Magazine."

18 "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," 122.

19 Neil Gilbert Grill, "The *New Monthly Magazine: 1814–1820*," (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1970), 111. Watkins was editor from February 1814 through December 1818. For Watkins's editorship see Houghton, ed., *The Wellesley Index*, 3: 169; Henry Richard Teddler, "Henry Colbourn," in *Dictionary of National Biography*. Watkins also had other dealings with the magazine's publishers. In 1816, Watkins collaborated with Frederick Shoberl to write *A Biographical Dictionary of the Living Authors of Great Britain and Ireland*. That book was published in London by Henry Colbourn.

20 "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," 120.

21 "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," 122.

22 "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," 122, where the pamphlets were identified as "Tractatus de Miraculis auctore spectatissimo," and "Tractatus de primis duodecim Vet." The *Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue* has an entry for a 52-page pamphlet, *Tractatus de primis duodecim veteris testamenti libris: in quo ostenditur eos omnes ab uno Solo historico scriptos fuisse . . .* (London, 1763).

23 "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," 123. I thank Jim Fieser for pointing out that this anecdote had circulated earlier in print in Benjamin Silliman, *A Journal of Travels in England, Holland and Scotland, and of Two Passages over the Atlantic, in the years 1805 and 1806* (1810; 2 vols., Boston, 1812) and also in the *Quarterly Review*

where Silliman's account was quoted ("Works on England," *Quarterly Review* 15 [1816], 562) and then refuted (16 [1816], 279).

24 See, for instance, *Literary Gazette*, no. 81 (9 August 1818): 512; no. 85 (5 September 1818): 576; no. 86 (12 September 1818): 592. For special mention of "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality" see *Literary Gazette*, no. 84 (29 August 1818): 560.

25 See "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality," *Robinson's Magazine, A weekly Repository of Original Papers; and Selections from the English Magazines* 2 (1819) 164–8. For a modern reprinting of "Anecdotes of Infidel Morality" as found in *Robinson's Magazine* see *Hume's Reception in Early America*, ed. Mark G. Spencer, 2 vols. (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 2002), 2: 251–3.

26 M.A. Stewart, "An early fragment on evil," in *Hume and Hume's Connexions*, ed. M. A. Stewart and John P. Wright (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 160.