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*Kant, Hume, and the Interruption of  
Dogmatic Slumber*, by Abraham  
Anderson (review)

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## *Book Review*

Abraham Anderson. *Kant, Hume, and the Interruption of Dogmatic Slumber*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. 180+xxii. ISBN 978-0-19-009674-8, Hardback, \$74.

The Germans have a lovely word: *Millimeterarbeit*. Literally, it means “millimeter work” but a more accurate translation would be “very precise work.” Abraham Anderson’s *Kant, Hume, and the Interruption of Dogmatic Slumber* qualifies as *Millimeterarbeit*, because the entire book (180 pages plus a ten-page preface) is devoted to unpacking the meaning of a single sentence from page 4:260 of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*: “I freely confess: it was the objection of David Hume that first, many years ago, interrupted my dogmatic slumber” (Anderson, xi).

Anderson indicates that there is a fairly standard reading of what Kant means by that sentence. According to this reading, advanced by Norman Kemp Smith, the dogmatic slumber Kant enjoyed was the belief that he did not have to justify the causal axiom that every event has a cause. The “objection of David Hume” that “interrupted” Kant’s “dogmatic slumber” was his showing, in the *Treatise*, this causal axiom to be rationally groundless. Consequently, to save this causal axiom, Kant had to show that we have some synthetic a priori knowledge about causality, which he did in the Second Analogy of the first *Critique*.

This reading, though, is not standard among Kant scholars. As Anderson shows in a forty-three page chapter entitled, “Introduction: The State of the Question,” Kant scholars have understood Kant’s dogmatic slumber and Hume’s objection in a number of different ways over the decades.

Some scholars do not take Kant's declaration very seriously. After all, though Kant in the 1783 *Prolegomena* claimed that Hume roused him, he tells a different story in a 1798 letter to Garve. There, Kant writes that it was not Hume, but rather the "Antinomy of pure reason" that "first woke" him (Anderson, xii). So, which stirred Kant: Hume or the Antinomy of pure reason?

Abraham responds that both could have: Hume "first interrupted" Kant's dogmatic slumber, but the Antinomy of pure reason "woke" him (Anderson credits this reading to Lorne Falkenstein; see Anderson, 16–19). That is, Hume stirred Kant, Kant fell back asleep, but then awoke for good when he envisioned the Antinomy of pure reason. Abraham fills Falkenstein's reading in by suggesting that Hume interrupted Kant's dogmatic slumber by showing to him the rational groundlessness of the principle of sufficient reason (PSR). This, in turn, inspired Kant to articulate the Antinomies of pure reason. In a nutshell: Hume roused Kant via attacking the PSR, and this in turn inspired a groggy Kant to come up with the Antinomy of pure reason, at which point Kant was wide-awake.

Here, we get to the meat of Abraham's reading. On Abraham's view, accepting the causal axiom—every event has a cause—did not constitute Kant's dogmatic slumber. Rather, that dogmatic slumber amounted to accepting that reason can know the truth of the PSR. It is the PSR, after all, that allows us to achieve metaphysical knowledge, in particular the knowledge that God exists and is responsible for the creation of the universe. Anyone who undercuts claims to know the truth of the PSR not only undercuts our ability to know (via the cosmological argument) that God created the universe, but also undercuts any claim to any metaphysical knowledge (that is, knowledge that reaches beyond experience) in general.

At this point, I want to present Abraham's argument. It goes like this: the "dogmatic slumber" that Kant referred to could not have been a belief in the causal axiom, because Hume himself never denied the causal axiom. Indeed, he asserted that we *can* know that every event has a cause; it is just that we can know this only from experience. Consequently, Kant's dogmatic slumber must have been believing in the propriety of theology and metaphysics. And once Hume showed to Kant's satisfaction that we could not justifiably claim to know the truth of the PSR, Kant realized he no longer could lay claim to theological, and more generally, metaphysical knowledge, which amounted to the cessation of his dogmatic slumber.

To establish his argument, Abraham tries to prove the following propositions. (1) Kant read Hume as attacking the PSR. (2) Hume attacked the PSR in the *Enquiry*. (3) Hume attacked the PSR in the *Treatise*. Abraham tries to establish (3) because he thinks that if (3) is true, then (2) is more likely. And Abraham tries to establish (2) because he thinks that if (2) is true, then (1) is more likely. That is, if Hume really attacked the PSR in the *Enquiry*, then Kant probably would have read him as attacking the PSR in the *Enquiry*.

The reason Abraham focuses on the *Enquiry* rather than the *Treatise* is that we do not know that Kant read any of the *Treatise*; claims that he did are generally speculative, whereas claims that he read the *Enquiry* depend on information available in contemporaneous accounts of Kant. In addition, and most important as far as I am concerned, Sulzer, the German translator of the *Enquiry* in 1755, noted in his preface to his translation that he hoped Hume's work would "rouse German philosophers from their leisurely rest" (Anderson 90). Since Sulzer's translation was reissued in 1781, to some fanfare (Anderson 64), it stands to reason that when Kant used his "dogmatic slumber" phrase in his 1783 *Prolegomena*, he was thinking of Sulzer's translation of the *Enquiry*.

How good is Abraham's case that Hume attacked the PSR in the *Enquiry*? I would say it is solid. It convinced me (though I do not have a dog in this fight). Abraham spends a lot of energy trying to show that Hume attacked the PSR—or rather, the principle, *Ex nihilo, nihil fit*, which either supports or depends on the PSR, depending on how you understand it—at *Enquiry* 12.28 and 12.29 note (d). His view is that, even though Hume explicitly attacks only "the ancients" at 12.29 (d) (probably Lucretius), he really has modern rationalism, espoused to varying degrees by Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, and Clarke, in mind. Probably right, I think.

I end with two criticisms, one substantive and one stylistic. The substantive criticism is this: throughout the book, Abraham says that Hume accepts a "restricted" causal principle (for example, all events in experience have causes) while denying an "unrestricted" causal principle (for example, everything that comes to exist, whether in experience or not, has a cause). But since Hume does not make a noumenon/phenomenon distinction, it is not clear what the realm of experience is for Hume. What are its limits? Why is inquiring about the cause of the universe a question that takes us beyond experience while inquiring about, say, the Big Bang is not?

The stylistic criticism is that the book is often tedious reading. Section headings like "Comparison of *Treatise* 1.3.3.3 with *Enquiry* 4.11 and 4.13 and with *Enquiry* 12.28–29 note (d)" are not exactly euphonious. Moreover, Abraham presents *lots* of arguments, and some of them are much less convincing than others. This has the side-effect of making me question the convincing ones. That is really a reader-problem rather than a writer-problem, but it is one I expect other readers to share.

Overall, Abraham's book is a one-stop shop for people interested in Kant's dogmatic slumber and how Hume roused him from it, as well as for people wanting to read an alternative take on what Hume is up to in the *Enquiry*.

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