

Hume Studies, 12, 1986, 92-98.

A NOTE ON SMITH'S TERM "NATURALISM"

The reader of contemporary Hume literature may feel exasperated when reading recent authors. A conspicuous example is A.J. Ayer (*Hume*, 1982; see index, Art, Natural beliefs), who declares they endorse Kemp Smith's view of Hume's "naturalism" without sufficiently clarifying what they - or Smith - might exactly mean by this term.

Charles W. Hendel, in the 1963 edition of his 1924 *Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume*, adds eight pages of a new preface and thirty-one pages of a review of Hume scholarship between 1925 and 1962, and he speaks at great length there of his life-long friendship and cooperation with Norman Kemp Smith and appreciation of his work. He says (p. xlviii), "There is a disposition today to assimilate Hume's thought to naturalism as understood in the contemporary sense." He does not say what this "contemporary sense" is, and the statement just quoted seems to have served as the seal of approval and the legitimation of this questionable practice.

Hendel's new (1963) material mentions Smith's discussion of Hume's "naturalism" - but refers only to Smith's early work, "The Naturalism of Hume," *Mind*, 14, 1905, 149-173 and 335-347, not to Smith's famous *The Philosophy of David Hume* of 1941, even though he deems that work "of great consequence for Hume scholarship" (p. xxxviii) and a "masterwork" (p. xxxix). The early work (1905) of Smith is already mentioned by Hendel in the body of the 1924 work (p. 361), although there, clearly, the word "naturalism," whatever its meaning is, and however contemporary then, is not necessarily the "contemporary sense" of 1962.

The work which clearly (if implicitly) distinguishes between the traditional sense and Smith's 1905 sense of "naturalism" is John Laird's

Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature, 1932, 1967. We find there a discussion of Hume's naturalism (beginning of Chapter II), as well as of Hume's “Naturalism” (Chapter VI, fifth and fourth paragraphs from the end), with reference to Smith's 1905 work.

Now, the traditional sense of “naturalism” is straightforward and seems to have been instituted by Pierre Bayle to designate the view of the world as devoid of all supernatural intervention, the view of the world as “disenchanted,” to use the equivalent term accredited to Max Weber. Clearly, all Epicureans and neo- Epicureans, Hume included, were naturalists in this sense. This is not the sense in which Smith uses it in his 1905 essay, “The Naturalism of Hume.” The first part of this essay opposes T. H. Green's traditional reading of Hume as a philosopher who streamlined the ideas of Locke and of Berkeley and proposes to replace it with the view of Hume's view as “naturalism.” “Hume's ... naturalistic view of reason,” we are told (p. 158), “is a new theory of belief”: Humean belief, on Smith's new reading, “is not caused by knowledge but precedes it, and as it is not caused by knowledge it is not destroyed by doubt” (p. 165). Smith declared his reading quite revolutionary, yet it may be endorsed without rejecting Green's reading. Smith does not even attempt to re-interpret in detail the passages which *prima facie* conform to Green's reading. The second part of his essay is the application of his revolutionary reading to psychology and to ethics.

Smith devotes the preface of his *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941) to a revision of his 1905 study. It seems he did not alter his attitude towards the first part but only to the second: he thought the starting point of Hume's study was his concern not for “naturalism” but for “moral philosophy, or the science of human nature” (opening words of Hume's

Inquiry, cf. Hendel, *op. cit.*, p. xlvi). This statement has to do with emphasis, not with the meanings of terms or with ascriptions of views (and it is erroneous, or at least limited; but this is another matter).

This is not to deny that Hume was a naturalist in Bayle's sense, as everyone today agrees. Most philosophers today share this naturalism with Hume. "His attitude and way of thinking are virtually ubiquitous," says Hendel (p. xl), "no matter what the topic of discourse may be," yet he says this in the context of a discussion of Hume's naturalism in Bayle's sense. It is doubtless true that Hume was deeply concerned with that naturalism and linked it with moral philosophy and with his own "naturalism" in Smith's sense. (See E. C. Mossner, "Hume's Earliest Memoranda," *J. Hist. Id.*, 9, 1948, 492-518 and Mossner's later works.) I have myself explained in "The Unity of Hume's Thought," *Hume Studies*, 10, 1985, why I share Smith's reading of Hume's "naturalism" as an essential ingredient of his "moral philosophy, or the science of human nature," but unlike Smith I do not read this as the basis of Hume's "mitigated skepticism" or of any other epistemology which we might attribute to Hume. This, too, is an open matter. What is obvious, however, is that anyone who endorses Smith's reading of Hume's "naturalism" and its role should explain his meaning with some care, and, in the light of the criticism of Smith's reading of Hume's use of his "naturalism" in epistemology, perhaps also try to do better than Smith.

Though priority problems are distasteful and, at least in philosophy, very hard to settle, I feel I should mention a prior expression of Smith's 1905 revolutionary thesis that since according to Hume beliefs are prior to reason, Hume deemed the critique of reason as irrelevant to beliefs. It is to be found in the work of an American expatriate, Ezra Albert Cook, *Humes*

Theorie über die Realität der Aussenwelt, Inaugural Dissertation, etc., Halle, 1904. Even the table of contents of this 40 page book should suffice, with titles like, “Ch. 1. The Faith in the Outer World is Unavoidable,” or “The Faith in the Outer World not from Reason Deduced” (my stilted translation). He concludes by quoting both Hume’s and Kant’s insistence that realism is unavoidable. The only difference is that this author declares Hume’s view to be skepticism, and he sides with Kant against Hume. Thus, his reading of Hume is traditional, and yet Smith introduces the same reading as if it were opposed to tradition and therefore revolutionary. I have argued in “The Unity of Hume’s Thought” that a position like Cook’s is more logical than Smith’s since there is no contradiction between the view that beliefs are irrational and phenomenalism, so that we may ascribe both to Hume without thereby imputing to him an inconsistency: both ascriptions agree that Hume allows no justification of realism either by reason or by sense-experience. This very reading, endorsed by both Cook and Smith, and by everyone before and up till World War II, is now challenged, as I have described in “The Unity of Hume’s Thought,” where I ascribe to him the moderate view between justification and skepticism, as he wished, though without considering his effort successful.

As to the origins of naturalism and of “naturalism,” the former doctrine is ancient, the latter modern. It was known in the Talmudic literature as Epicureanism. It is the corollary to Democritus’ doctrine of atoms and the void; the fragments indicate he was aware of it; certainly Plato was, and this explains his unbounded hostility to Democritus. “Naturalism” was a reaction to attempts to impose beliefs, i.e., to religious wars. Robert Boyle has clearly expressed it in his *Occasional Reflections* (sec. 4, Disc. xi): “A senate or a monarchy may indeed command my life and fortune: but

as for my opinions, ... I cannot in most cases command them myself, but must suffer them to be such, as the nature of things." The same view is also expressed by Spinoza, *Tractatus Politico-Theologicus*. The importance of "naturalism" for Boyle, however, is that it supports freedom of thought; it was not meant to conflict with the Baconian rationalistic demand for giving up received opinion and accepting only empirically founded belief. Hume denied the claim that belief is rational. Yet, clearly, Hume thought belief can be rational, as his *History of England*, Appendix to Reign of King Charles II, clearly indicates: "...there flourished during this period a Boyle and a Newton, men who trod with cautious, and therefore, with more secure steps, the only road which leads to true philosophy." Newton, he says, was "cautious in admitting no principles but such as were founded on experiment; but resolute to adopt every such principle, however new and unusual." Thus, whereas Boyle held "naturalism" with respect to all humans, Hume held it only with respect to "the vulgar," not the philosopher. The revolutionary claim of Smith, namely the view that "naturalism" makes criticism irrelevant to belief and hence mitigates it, is thus inconsistent with other claims of Hume. For more detail see "The Unity of Hume's Thought."

Hence, it was a misreading of Hume's philosophy that invited the claim that it has opened the floodgates for irrationalism (Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, chapter on Hume; Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, Chapter 1). At most it was this misreading that is responsible for that. More likely it was the failure of the French Revolution. Hence, the boot is on the other foot: it was the philosophy that Hume criticized as too cock-sure that has opened the floodgates for irrationalism.