

contra a John

Appendix to Chapter XVIII

HUME'S EXPLICIT DENIAL THAT HE HAD EVER THOUGHT OF ASSERTING THAT EVENTS ARE UNCAUSED

IN 1754 the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh (now the Royal Society of Edinburgh) issued a volume (the first of a series of three) entitled *Essays and Observations, Physical and Literary, read before a Society in Edinburgh and published by them*. The preface to the volume closes with the statement: "Whoever will favour the Society with any discourse which it comprehends in its plan, may send their papers to either of the secretaries, Mr. Alexander Monro, Professor of Anatomy at Edinburgh, or Mr. David Hume, Library Keeper to the Faculty of Advocates". The preface bears the unmistakable marks of having come from Hume's own pen. The second article, which has the title *Some Remarks on the Laws of Motion, and the Inertia of Matter*, is by John Stewart, M.D., Professor of Natural Philosophy, Edinburgh; and contains the following passage and accompanying footnote:

That something may begin to exist, or start into being without a cause, hath indeed been advanced in a very ingenious and profound system of the sceptical philosophy; * but hath not yet been adopted by any of the societies for the improvement of natural knowledge. Such sublime conceptions are far above the reach of the greatest physiologist on earth. The man who believes that a perception may exist without a percipient mind or a perceiver, may well comprehend, that an action may be performed without any agent, or a thing produced without any cause of the production. And the author of this new and wonderful doctrine informs the world, that, when he looked into his own mind, he could discover nothing but a series of fleeting perceptions; and that from

* *Treatise on Human Nature*, 3 vols. octavo. This is the system at large, a work suited only to the comprehension of Adepts. An excellent compend or summary whereof, for the benefit of vulgar capacities, we of this nation enjoy in the *Philosophical Essays* and the *Essays Moral & Political*. And to these may be added, as a further help, that useful commentary [by Lord Kames], the *Essays on Morality and natural Religion*.

thence he concluded, that he himself was nothing but a bundle of such perceptions.

The following letter, dated by Greig as written in February 1754 (cf. *Letters*, i, p. 185), is believed by both Burton and Greig to have been addressed to Stewart: its content seems conclusive in this regard.

Tuesday Forenoon [Feb. 1754]

SIR—

I am so great a Lover of Peace, that I am resolv'd to drop this Matter altogether, & not to insert a Syllable in the Preface, which can have a Reference to your Essay. The Truth is, I cou'd take no Revenge, but such a one as wou'd have been a great deal too cruel, & much exceeding the Offence. For tho' most Authors think, that a contemptuous manner of treating their Writings, is but slightly reveng'd by hurting the personal Character & the Honour of their Antagonists, I am very far from that Opinion. Besides, I am as certain as I can be of any thing (and I am not such a Sceptic, as you may, perhaps, imagine) that your inserting such remarkable Alterations in the printed Copy proceeded entirely from Precipitancy & Passion, not from any form'd Intention of deceiving the Society. I wou'd not take Advantage of such an Incident to throw a Slur on a man of Merit, whom I esteem, tho' I might have reason to complain of him.

When I am abus'd by such a Fellow as Warburton, whom I neither know nor care for, I can laugh at him: But if Dr Stewart approaches any way towards the same Style of writing, I own it vexes me: Because I conclude, that some unguarded Circumstance of my Conduct, tho' contrary to my Intention, had given Occasion to it.

As to your Situation with regard to Lord Kames, I am not so good a Judge. I only think, that you had so much the better of the Argument, that you ought, upon that Account, to have been the more reserv'd in your Expressions. All Raillery ought to be avoided in philosophical Argument; both because it is unphilosophical, and because it cannot but be offensive, let it be ever so gentle. What then must we think with regard to so many Insinuations of Irreligion, to which Lord Kame's Paper gave not the least Occasion? This Spirit of the Inquisitor is in you the Effect of Passion, & what a cool Moment wou'd easily correct. But where it predominates in the Character, what Ravages has it committed on Reason, Virtue, Truth, Liberty, & every thing, that is valuable among Mankind?

I shall now speak a Word as to the Justness of your Censure with regard to myself, after these Remarks on the manner of it. I have no Scruple of confessing my Mistakes. You see I have own'd, that I think Lord Kames is mistaken in his Argument; and I wou'd sooner give up my own Cause than my Friend's, if I thought that Imputation of any Consequence to a man's Character.

But allow me to tell you, that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as *that any thing might arise without a Cause*: I only maintain'd, that our Certainty of the Falshood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration; but from another Source. *That Caesar existed, that there is such an Island as Sicily*; for these Propositions, I affirm, we have no demonstrative nor intuitive Proof. Would you infer that I deny their Truth, or even their Certainty? There are many different kinds of Certainty; and some of them as satisfactory to the Mind, tho perhaps not so regular, as the demonstrative kind.

Where a man of Sense mistakes my Meaning, I own I am angry: But it is only at myself: For having exprest my Meaning so ill as to have given Occasion to the Mistake.

That you may see I wou'd no way scruple of owning my Mistakes in Argument, I shall acknowledge (what is infinitely more material) a very great Mistake in Conduct, viz. my publishing at all the Treatise of human Nature, a Book, which pretended to innovate in all the sublimest Parts of Philosophy, & which I compos'd before I was five & twenty. Above all, the positive Air, which prevails in that Book, & which may be imputed to the Ardor of Youth, so much displeases me, that I have not Patience to review it. But what Success the same Doctrines, better illustrated & exprest, may meet with, *Adhuc sub judice lis est*. The Arguments have been laid before the World, and by some philosophical Minds have been attended to. I am willing to be instructed by the Public; tho' human Life is so short that I despair of ever seeing the Decision. I wish I had always confin'd myself to the more easy Parts of Erudition; but you will excuse me from submitting to a proverbial Decision, let it even be in Greek.

As I am resolv'd to drop this Matter entirely from the Preface; so I hope to persuade Lord Kames to be entirely silent with regard to it in our Meeting. But in Case I should not prevail, or if any body else start the Subject, I think it better, that some of your Friends shou'd be there, & be prepared to mollify the Matter. If I durst pretend to advise, I shou'd think it better you yourself were absent, unless you bring a greater Spirit of Composition than you express in your letter. I am perswaded, that whatever a Person of Mr. Monro's Authority proposes will be agreed to: Tho' I must beg leave to differ from his Judgement, in proposing to alter two Pages. That chiefly removes the Offence given to me, but what regards Lord Kames is so interwoven with the whole Discourse, that there is not now any Possibility of altering it.— I am Sir, Your most obedient humble Servant,

DAVID HUME

P.S.— I hope you are very zealous in promoting the Sale of Blacklock's Poems. I will never be reconcild to you, unless you dispose of a Score of them, make your Friends, Sir John Maxwell and Lord Buchan pay a Guinea a piece for their Copy.