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Hume: Between Leibniz and Kant (The role of pre-established harmony in Hume's philosophy)

Vadim Vasilyev

1. Introduction

In the history of eighteenth century European philosophy, Hume appears as an important connecting link between Leibniz and Kant. I mean, however, not only the well-known historical fact that Hume “awakened Kant from his dogmatic slumber” (and it was the “dogmatism” of Leibnizian metaphysics), but I shall try to show that it is true from the philosophical point of view as well. The first problem I would like to discuss is the actual relationship between Hume and Leibniz.

Hume never openly criticized the views of Leibniz. On the other hand, Hume did not admit himself to be a follower of him. Did Hume ever read any works of Leibniz? Hume has never said that he did. Hume also hasn't directly quoted these works, so it looks like Hume wasn't acquainted with them at all. Nonetheless, we can show that already in 1739 Hume had known *Theodiciée* which can be considered as the main treatise of Leibniz. In his *Abstract* Hume writes:

The celebrated *Monsieur Leibnitz* has observed it to be a defect in the common systems of logic, that they are very copious when they explain the operations of the understanding in the forming of demonstrations, but are too concise when they treat of probabilities, and those other measures of evidence on which life and action entirely depend, and which are our guides even in most of our philosophical speculations. In this censure, he comprehends *the essay on human understanding*, *le recherche de la verité*, and *l'art de penser*.¹

The fragment is a rendering of the following passage from *Theodiciée*:

car il n'y a rien de plus impartait qui nostre Logique, lorsqu'on va au delà des argumens necessaires; et les plus excellens philosophes de nostre temps, tels que les Auteurs de l'Art de penser, de la Recherche de la verité, et de l'Essai sur

l'entendment, ont été fort éloignés de nous marquer les vrais moyens propres à aider cette faculté qui nous doit faire peser les apparences du vrai et du faux: sans parler de l'art d'inventer.²

So, it is highly probable that Hume knew *Theodicee*.

The ideas of Leibniz in Hume's philosophy

The most important philosophical ideas of *Theodicee* are: the definitions of possibility and of two kinds of necessity, a theory of "the best possible world" and a conception of the pre-established harmony. As we shall see, all these ideas, one way or another, were assimilated by Hume.

In his *Theodicee* Leibniz states that a distinction should be made between two kinds of necessity and, correspondingly, between two kinds of necessary knowledge: metaphysical and moral.

Il ne faut donc que bien entendre des distinctions, comme celle que nous avons pressée bien souvent entre le nécessaire et le certain, et entre la nécessité metaphysique et la nécessité morale. (*Theodicee*, 284, par. 282)

Metaphysical or mathematical truths are such that propositions which are opposite to them imply contradictions.

Or les vérités de la Raison sont de deux sortes; les unes sont ce qu'on appelle *les Vérités Eternelles*, qui sont absolument nécessaires, en sorte que l'opposé implique contradiction. (*Theodicee*, 50, par. 2)

Not so regarding the moral truths; the opposite statements may be false but they imply no contradictions and are possible: "Il est vrai qu'il n'y auroit point eu de contradiction dans la supposition que Spinoza fût mort à Leide, et non pas à La Haye; il n'y auroit rien de si possible" (*Theodicee*, 218, par. 174). The possibility is equivalent to logical consistency and what is possible may be distinctly conceived:

puisqu'il y a bien des choses qui ne sont jamais arrivées et n'arriveront jamais, et qui cependant sont concevables distinctement, et n'impliquent aucune contradiction, comment peut on dire qu'elles sont absolument impossibles? (*Theodicee*, 257, par. 234)

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Hume uses all these definitions. The following fragment is a good example.

The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. The proposition, which affirms it not to be, however false, is no less conceivable and intelligible, than that which affirms it to be. The case is different with the sciences, properly so called. Every proposition, which is not true, is there confused and unintelligible.³

Hume uses the above-mentioned definitions when analysing the problem of causality and necessity and the problem of the relation between mind and body (T 247-48), when considering the possibility of rational proofs for the God's existence,⁴ and also when he discusses some mathematical paradoxes (T 32; E 157). Let us see how Hume argues that the existence of any thing cannot be proved by the means of demonstration.

Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable. (D 189)

Before going further we should note that, despite the fact that Hume may be called the successor of Leibniz regarding the distinction of two kinds of necessary knowledge, their principles have one essential difference. Leibniz treats of all mathematical principles as analytical and he repeatedly expresses his intention to deduce the axioms of mathematics from the law of identity alone. Hume thinks otherwise. For him, principles of mathematics could not be deduced from any concepts by means of analytic procedures only.

That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the other two sides, cannot be known, let the terms be ever so exactly defined, without a train of reasoning and enquiry. But to convince us of this proposition, that where there is no property, there can be no injustice, it is only necessary to define the terms. ... It is the same case with all those pretended syllogistical reasonings, which may be found in every other branch of learning, except the sciences of quantity and

number; and these may safely, I think, be pronounced the only proper objects of knowledge and demonstration. (E 163)

We can see that Hume maintains that the truths like “the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the other two sides” are not contained in the concepts “triangle,” “hypotenuse” and others as well as in all of them taken together. On the other hand, Hume says that mathematical reasonings are a priori (E 25). Consequently, Hume treats of mathematics (I mean, of course, his conception of mathematics as it is presented in the *Enquiry*, not in the *Treatise*) as a kind of a priori synthetic knowledge. And it is no mere chance that while Leibniz stresses that statements which are opposite to the mathematical truths imply logical contradictions, Hume emphasizes that they are non-conceivable.⁵

Now let us consider how Hume applies the definition of possibility and the other above-mentioned definitions when analysing the problem of causality. Hume propounds two questions: how is it possible for us to know that one thing is a cause of another, when there is a necessary connection between cause and effect, and why do we believe that every event must have a cause? Hume tries to find one answer to both questions.

His first step is to prove that we cannot infer a priori from the occurrence of one event to the occurrence of another which follows it, because if we could, it would be impossible to *imagine* any event following except the one which follows. But evidently this is not so and we can imagine every thing following every thing (E 29-30, 164). It means that we cannot demonstratively infer from one event to another and that reason can't help us in finding out causes and effects. Thus, only experience demonstrates the real succession of events.

But the idea of causality cannot be formed solely from experience either, because the most important part of the notion in question—the necessary connection between cause and effect—cannot arise from experience. Indeed, experience shows us that two events are connected together, but to be sure that this connection is necessary, we must know that they will be always connected. But with the aid of experience, such knowledge is unattainable because we can *imagine* that the course of nature will change in future; hence such a change is possible (E 35). Really, the identity between past and future cannot be proved demonstratively by reason, either with or without the help of experience.

After this Hume shows that while the idea of causality doesn't arise either from reason or from experience, still it has to arise from somewhere. If not, men could not exist at all, because every human action presupposes the idea. Men always judge about the future on the

basis of the past, and without this even the simplest aim could not be set. But this judgement presupposes the identity of past and future. Hence, the basis of this judgement is at the same time the ground of causation, and it is custom (E 43). Custom is a strong instinct which organizes the occurrences of ideas. It enlivens those ideas which are the usual correlates of present impressions. Hume connects "custom" with the essential qualities of imagination (T 225).

Thus, custom is an inner organizing principle. (This doesn't mean, however, that custom is a mere impression of reflection because it works with ideas of this kind of impressions too.) Hume, having admitted this, has chosen a type of apriorism which differs, however, from that of Kant.⁶ Custom is an a priori mode of thinking: it compels us to infer from past to future. The identity between past and future connections of events, in which we believe thanks to custom, answers both questions Hume has propounded. Indeed, to believe that every event has a cause, we must admit the identity between past and future and we must be sure that no event is the first in time, so that nothing happened before it.

When entering the path of apriorism Hume was faced with new difficulties, and he tried to overcome them with the aid of an invention of Leibniz, the idea of the pre-established harmony. Indeed, custom is an organizing principle which combines ideas together, but custom is not the force which connects impressions with each other. In the world of impressions, we cannot find anything like force or power; hence, "those powers and forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends" (E 55) are absolutely unknowable (ibid.). But ideas should correspond to impressions; consequently, the operations of custom should correspond to the operations of these unknown forces (it is a condition of human existence). The question is, How is it possible? In order to answer this question Hume propounds a theory according to which, "Here, then, is a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas. ... Custom is that principle, by which *this* correspondence has been effected" (E 54-55, emphasis added). In other words, Nature has "implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects" (E 55). As we have seen, this instinct is a custom and thanks to the existence of the pre-established harmony, the custom is no more a subjective principle only.

As Hume uses the term "pre-established harmony" which was introduced in the philosophy of Leibniz, it may be interesting to consider some explications of the notion to be found in the works of Leibniz.

Firstly, pre-established harmony for Leibniz is more than the statement that something coincides with something; it is also an attempt to explain this coincidence. Secondly, the idea of pre-established harmony is closely connected with the theory of the best possible world; this universal harmony is a consequence of God's desire to make the world as good as possible. Thirdly, the pre-established harmony takes place where a real interaction of things is impossible (say, between mind and body or between perceptions of monads). And last, pre-established harmony presupposed general and necessary coincidence.

Hume treats of this notion in the same sense. He tries to *explain* the correspondence between "the course of nature and succession of our ideas" by assumption of the pre-established harmony. Custom has no connection with those forces on which the changing of objects depends. Moral conclusions which are founded on custom can form the basis of the natural sciences, and this is due to the fact that pre-established harmony implies a necessary correspondence "between the course of nature and successions of our ideas."⁷

But what about a theory of best possible world? It seems that Hume accepts it.

'Tis very safe for us to affirm, that, whatever we know the Deity to have actually done, is best; but it is very dangerous to affirm, that he must always do what to us seems best.⁸

The last proviso is important. Let us compare it with the following passage:

Could I meet with one of this species [atheists] (who, I thank God, are very rare) I would ask him: Supposing there were a God, who did not discover himself immediately to our senses; were it possible for him to give stronger proofs of his existence, than what appear on the whole face of Nature? What indeed could such a divine Being do, but copy the present oeconomy of things. (D 215)

If a hypothetical god is not able to make a world which would be better than ours, the present one is best.

Such arguments are founded on supposition that we cannot *imagine* the world which is better than ours. In other words, in accordance with the first passage, we cannot a priori decide what will be best, but may be sure that the world we live in is the best one.

So, Hume accepts the theory of the best world. But in his application of it he disagrees with Leibniz, who treats it as a

constitutive principle, while Hume believes that we cannot establish a harmony a priori but must discover it in Nature (E 54-55). It seems to me, however, that for Hume the supposition of the best world and pre-established harmony is not a mere regulative idea or something like a subjective form of explanation as it is for Kant. Here Hume really is between Leibniz and Kant.

It is interesting that all the notions we have just considered are linked together in Hume's philosophy and imply one another. Indeed, in his definitions of possibility and two kinds of necessity Hume begins analysing the problem of causality and, at the same time, tries to prove that the present world is the best among all possible worlds. But the idea of the best world implies an idea of pre-established harmony and only the latter makes it possible to accomplish the analysis of causes and effects. Only by means of pre-established harmony (for Hume) is it possible to explain the correspondence between ideas, which are combined by custom, and objects, which are combined by unknown forces. The use of pre-established harmony answers the question, How is it possible that the principle of causes and effects which is founded on custom is no less reliable than the necessary principles of mathematics?

Now, taking into account that all these ideas (pre-established harmony, possibility, and so on) play an important role in Hume's philosophy, we can assert that Leibniz's influence on Hume should not be neglected, since it is more than significant.⁹

Pre-established harmony and transcendental deduction

To illustrate the role of pre-established harmony in Humean philosophy, we can compare it with that of the transcendental deduction of the categories in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The transcendental deduction of the categories answers the question of how it is possible to apply categories to experience. This question is in turn the main part of the more general problem of how a priori synthetic judgements are possible.

The categories are subjective forms of thinking, as they contain an idea of necessity and do not arise from experience. But they get their meaning only by application to the manifold which is given in our sensations, and so this manifold should correspond to the categories. If not, the possibility of a priori synthetic judgements becomes problematical; hence, the transcendental deduction of the categories, which explains the inevitability of this correspondence, is a necessary part of Kant's transcendental philosophy.

We see that Kant and Hume are faced with a similar problem: how can subjective forms, or modes of thinking (categories or custom), which

don't create any things, be, nonetheless, in necessary correspondence with them?¹⁰

Hume tries to resolve the problem with the aid of pre-established harmony, Kant by means of transcendental deduction of the categories. Consequently, the role of pre-established harmony in Hume's philosophy is analogous to that of transcendental deduction in Kant's system.

Already in 1772 Kant understood that pre-established harmony is a kind of explanation of the necessary correspondence between forms of understanding and phenomena.¹¹ Kant, however, rejects it. He summarizes his objections to it in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant considers two possible ways in which any notions may be in necessary relations to things: (1) when the things make the notions possible, and (2) when the notions make the things possible. The first way is useless as regards categories—they cannot arise from experience. Kant notes, however, that there is yet another way, according to which “categories are neither innate and first *a priori* principles of cognition, nor derived from experience, but are merely subjective aptitudes for thought implanted in us contemporaneously with our existence, which were so ordered and disposed by our Creator, that their exercise perfectly harmonizes with the laws of nature which regulate experience.”¹²

For Kant, pre-established harmony is a kind of *deus ex machina* (see his letter to Herz 1772) and, after all, it doesn't solve the problem:

Now, not to mention that with such an hypothesis it is impossible to say at what point we must stop in the employment of predetermined aptitudes, the fact that the categories would in this case entirely lose that character of *necessity* which is essentially involved in the very conception of them, is a conclusive objection to it. (*Critique*, 95)

So, Kant could not accept any theory which presupposes anything like a pre-established harmony. But let us ask a question: could Hume ever agree with Kant's solution of the problem of necessary correspondence between understanding and phenomena? In other words, could he agree with the method of Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories? I think that because of his nominalism he couldn't.

Indeed, an essential part of Kant's transcendental deduction of categories is a distinction between an objective unity of apperception and a subjective one.

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It is by means of the transcendental unity of apperception that all the manifold given in an intuition is united into a conception of the object. On this account it is called objective, and must be distinguished from the subjective unity of consciousness. ... The transcendental unity of apperception is alone objectively valid; the empirical possesses only subjective validity. (*Critique*, 80-81)

We see now that objective and subjective unities of apperception play quite independent roles: the subjective unity is accidental and doesn't necessarily obey the rules of understanding, while the objective unity of apperception is the main structure of understanding. If, then, this distinction is not made, the whole deduction fails. But for Hume with his nominalism it is impossible to distinguish in consciousness between two different levels—transcendental and empirical. Unlike Hume, Kant is sure that this distinction is correct. As a result, he transfers Humean “unknown forces” (only those of them, of course, on which the regularity of objects depends) into the sphere of human transcendental abilities: now their place is occupied by transcendental imagination.

This transference is connected with an even more profound difference between Hume and Kant. I mean Kant's theory of consciousness, on which the transcendental deduction of categories is founded. For Kant, consciousness is more than simply “reflected thought” (T 635) as it is for Hume. It is the source of every conjunction and is itself a spontaneity. It is not too difficult to show that to avoid the pre-established harmony, Kant should have accepted such a theory. Indeed, employing the notion of pre-established harmony presupposes that “somewhere” there exists a common source of all substances, as Descartes would have said, between which there is no real connection. Hume, as well as Kant, wants to find a common source of the correspondence between the subjective forms of thinking and the impressions to which they correspond. The source in question should necessarily be a creative essence (Nature, or God are its usual names). If Kant wants to transfer this source into the sphere of human transcendental abilities, then he must admit that consciousness is creative. That is precisely what he has done. And quite the reverse: if Kant understands consciousness as a creative essence, then he can get rid of pre-established harmony in its usual form.

Thus, the transcendental apperception is a common source of conjunctions in the spheres of understanding and sense. “It is one and the same spontaneity which at one time, under the name of imagination, at another under that of understanding, produces conjunction in the manifold of intuition” (*Critique*, 93).

We have seen that the role of pre-established harmony in Hume's philosophy is quite analogous to that of the transcendental deduction of the categories in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. We can assert the even more general proposition that their systems are analogous in the whole. This similarity is a result of the conception of metaphysics which both of them propound. For Hume, as well as for Kant, it is evident that we "must cultivate true metaphysics" (E 12) which is to be turned into exact science. This is possible only when metaphysics is treated as the analysis of human understanding or the critique of reason by which the bounds and limits of its validity must be set.

So, Hume really is between Leibniz and Kant. What brings Hume closer to Kant, the new conception of metaphysics, is at the same time the main difference between Leibniz and Hume. And quite the reverse: what is common between Leibniz and Hume is the point of disagreement between Hume and Kant.

Conclusion

I believe that our inquiry of the role of pre-established harmony in the philosophy of Hume helps us to answer some questions, both historical and philosophical.

1. It helps us to understand the actual relationship between Leibniz and Hume.
2. It provides us with an argument that Kant has not ever read *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.¹³
3. By it, the essential affinity between Hume and Kant could be better illustrated.
4. And finally, it helps to give an adequate interpretation of Humean philosophy which is far from one-sided empiricism as well as from scepticism, and is one of the forms of apriorism.¹⁴

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1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1987), 646-47 (hereafter cited as "T").
2. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Essais de Theodicée*, ed. K. I. Gerhardt, *Philosophischen Schriften*, Bd. 6 (Berlin, 1885; reprint, Hildesheim, 1961), 68, par. 34. Further references will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.

3. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 164 (hereafter cited as "E").
4. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), 189 (hereafter cited as "D").
5. See on this topic D. Gotterbarn, *Kant, Hume and Analyticity*, in *Kant - Studien*, 65, H. 3 (1974).
6. R. A. Mall calls it "flexible" and "natural" in opposite to Kant's "merely logical." See R. A. Mall, *Naturalism and Criticism* (Hague, 1975), 39.
7. Cf. David Hume, *A Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1967), 22, where Hume writes, "Moral certainty may reach as high a degree of assurance as mathematical."
8. David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 2 vols. (London, 1898), 2:400.
9. F. H. Heinemann was the first, as far as I know, who emphasized the fact that Hume is much in debt to Leibniz, an idea which he did not fully expound. See F. H. Heinemann, *David Hume: The Man and his Science of Man* (Paris, 1940), 49. It must be noted that the problem of the relationship between Hume and such philosophers as Leibniz, Descartes, and Malebranche is closely connected with that of the relation between rationalism and empiricism. It seems to me that these terms are inapplicable to most philosophers—to Hume as well as to Descartes or Leibniz. It is possible that when the exact definition is given to the word "experience," the distinction between rationalism and empiricism vanishes completely. Cf. D. M. Clarke, *Descartes' Philosophy of Science* (Manchester, 1982); N. Jolley, *Leibniz and Locke* (Oxford, 1984), 193; and C. J. McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford, 1983).
10. I agree with R. A. Mall, R. P. Wolff and others who believe that custom can be interpreted as a form of thinking, and categories as first propensities of human nature. Thus, the difference between Kant's and Hume's conceptions of understanding is not an essential one.
11. I mean Kant's letter to Herz (February 21, 1772).
12. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (New York, 1900), 95. Further reference (*Critique*) will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.

Although it may look as if Kant has Hume in mind, actually this is not so. It is Crusius whom he criticizes. See his "Prolegomena" and letters to Herz (1772) and Reinhold (1789). The fact is noticeable: it demonstrates, as well as Kant's

misunderstanding of Hume's conception of mathematics, that Kant did not ever read either the *Treatise* or *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

13. See above, n. 12.

14. In writing this paper I have benefitted from the comments and suggestions of A. F. Griaznov. I am grateful also to M. McKinsey.