V

CONDORCET AND HUME AND TURGOT

Keith Baker in his very important study of Condorcet advanced a somewhat surprising thesis, that Condorcet was significantly influenced by the views of David Hume, principally ones that only appear in a work of Hume’s that was not translated into French in the eighteenth century.\(^1\) Hume has usually been seen as much too sceptical to have had much in common with the optimistic philosophes. Hume was personally very friendly with such figures as D’Alembert, Diderot, D’Holbach, Voltaire and Turgot. They admired his essays on social and political and literary topics; they admired his wit, and his style. But, as became evident, they did not share his extreme doubts about the possibility of human beings attaining genuine knowledge, or his cynicism about improving the human scene. Hence, it seems prima facie questionable that Hume could have seriously influenced the last of the philosophes, Condorcet. Baker argues that Condorcet’s mathematization of the probabilities of human beliefs was most likely influenced by the strange chapter in Hume’s A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part III, sec. 11, on the probability of chances, a chapter that has usually been passed over by Hume’s many, many commentators, or excused as just Hume’s confusing mathematics with psychology.\(^2\)

When I was first asked to write an article for Condorcet Studies II, I had thought of doing some historical detective work on how and when Condorcet could have come across Hume’s Treatise. The work was published in 1739-1740 and, as Hume said, it fell still-born from the presses.\(^3\) It was hardly mentioned among philosophers in Great Britain, and it only became important when it was attacked by Thomas Reid in his Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense in 1764. The book was never re-issued after the

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\(^1\) Keith M. Baker, Condorcet, From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics (Chicago, 1975), chap. 3, pp. 181ff.

\(^2\) Ibid, pp. 139-155. On p. 155 Baker says: “Hume, in effect, brought together the probability of the philosophers and the probability of the mathematicians. It is to this latter that we must now turn if we are to appreciate the importance of Hume’s analysis to a mathematician such as Condorcet.”

\(^3\) David Hume, Autobiography, in Ernest C. Mossner, The Life of David Hume, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1980), p. 612: “Never literary Attempt was more unfortunate than my Treatise of human Nature. It fell dead-born from the Press; without reaching such distinction as even to excite a Murmur among the Zealots.”
first printing. So, where could Condorcet have seen it? Baker tells us that Condorcet’s disciple, Silvestre François Lacroix,\(^4\) who published a treatise on the calculus of probabilities, left notes on Hume’s *Treatise*, so the work was known in Condorcet’s circle. Hume was trying to sell off the unsold copies of the *Treatise* during the 1760s, so that he could put out a new edition. His arrangements with the original publisher specified that before a new edition could appear, the original edition had to be sold out, or the remaining copies bought back by the author. Advertisements in English periodicals in the 1760s indicate efforts were being made to sell off the rest of the first edition. I had hoped to trace Condorcet’s knowledge of the text to this remainder sale, but have had no success.\(^5\)

I have also not been able to find any evidence that Hume and Condorcet ever met. They could have met in the salon of Mlle. de Lespinasse when Hume was a British diplomat in Paris.\(^6\) Condorcet was the protégé of some of Hume’s best friends. But nothing in the correspondence or the writings of either philosopher indicates that they knew each other. Of course, Hume was much older, in his fifties, and was at the height of his fame during those years in Paris. Condorcet was just a beginner, aged twenty in 1763. So, though they may have met, it made no significant impression on either of them. If they met, it was probably through the offices of Turgot, who was so active in Hume’s affairs, and who was preparing the mathematical prodigy, Condorcet, to help him in his researches into economics in order to improve the human situation in France. Whether Condorcet read Hume, or made a sensible mathematics of the probabilities of belief out of Hume’s muddled discussion, I do not know. Baker’s case seems plausible and attractive. But if this did occur, it happened as Hume and Turgot parted company ideologically. Condorcet, as Turgot’s prime disciple, moved further and further from Hume’s social and political position. Baker mentions that Condorcet in an unpublished note cites Locke, Berkeley and Hume as the three who had presented the “little exact metaphysics” that was yet known.\(^7\) In his published picture of the sweeping development of ideas in the Enlightenment, Condorcet omitted Hume entirely from his pantheon of heroes and enlighteners. Since I do not know when and if Condorcet

\(^4\) Baker, *op. cit*, p. 140.

\(^5\) Cf. Mossner, *op. cit*, p. 328. David Fate Norton told me of the ads in the 1760s to sell the remaining copies of the *Treatise*.

\(^6\) Baker, *op. cit*, p. 139.