

Tomasz Sieczkowski, *David Hume. Krytyka episteologii* [*David Hume. Critique of Epistheology*], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2017, pp. 257

When David Hume, disappointed with the lack of reactions to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, was putting the finishing touches to the modifications of its first part, he left there these memorable words: “When we go through libraries, convinced of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume – of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance – let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning about quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experiential reasoning about matters of fact and existence? No. Then throw it in the fire, for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion”. Although Hume removed those fragments of the *Treatise* which could directly negate the possibility of rational theology out of concern about its reception, his later works confirmed his scepticism in religious matters. However, not only does the quoted ending of *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* express his conviction about the impossibility of rational theology, but also his confidence about its detriment. The analyses conducted by Hume prove that what appeared to be the domain of reason, such as the argumentation concerning the existence of the Creator, turns out to belong to the affective aspect of human nature. They demonstrated that if religion can be considered as an element of individual human convictions, then it should lose its place in the domain of authoritarian rationality. The criticism of the ontological argument, causality argument, and the teleological argument held by Hume, subverted the traditional ways of argumentation justifying the existence of God. From this perspective, the entirety of Hume’s philosophical project appears to be an analysis of faults in earlier philosophical systems, in which the notion of absolute being played the crucial role. If we interpret the works of the Scottish philosopher from that perspective it will turn out that

in many aspects it contains a new metaphysics (which he mentions in the *Inquiry*) and epistemology (which he does in the *Treatise*), which should be independent of this notion.

Roughly speaking, this is the interpretative stance taken in the newly published book by Tomasz Sieczkowski, *David Hume. Krytyka episteologii* [*David Hume. Critique of Epistheology*]. The title signals a basic idea, to which *Treatise of Human Nature* submits: making the theory of cognition independent of the substantialist, 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics with its principal notion of God. In Hume's philosophy interpreted that way, the completeness of the process that was started in political philosophy by Thomas Hobbes, in ethics by Shaftesbury, in the process of rationalising religion by English deists, and whose epistemological sources could be found in John Locke's theory of ideas, is being done. The justification for turning the 'non-epistheological' perspective into the axis of the entire treatise, is provided, according to the author, by Hume's biography, the manner in which his philosophy was interpreted during his life (unanimous judgement about its anti-religious significance), the standpoint of contemporary researchers and, last but not least, the close reading of the works by the Scottish philosopher. Sieczkowski is conscious of the difficulties that the texts pose to their interpreters. He even highlights them by invoking the opinions of other commentators and providing his own analyses. Although contemporary scholars are not unanimous as far as interpretations are concerned, the acceptance of the thesis that the author of the *Treatise* consistently realised his philosophical idea is fertile in terms of cognition, and its results are interesting. The author's critical awareness deserves to be mentioned. He realises that the interpretation of Hume's philosophy, whose content is abundant, does not have to use atheism as its starting point. It is certainly a question of the assumed perspective: if such a thesis had not been used in the starting point, it may have as well been used as a conclusion of more detailed analyses. One may debate whether Hume's standpoint should be defined as atheism, or only agnosticism, but it actually may be interpreted as a coherent description of the consistency of a philosophical standpoint devoid of relations with religious theses which assume the existence of God (including epistemological issues, as well as broadly understood social issues).

The book is comprised of two, or in fact three main parts: two, as the first chapter is dedicated to the description of 17<sup>th</sup> century epistemology which is theologically conditioned (in Sieczkowski's nomenclature: «epistheology»); in the second part, which is dedicated to Hume, the author demonstrates the

destruction of epistheology in Hume's works. At the same time, we may talk about the division into three parts, as the second chapter is broken into two parts, the first of which refers to the criticism of theology and religion, and the other to a description of basic notions which are used by Hume at the beginning of his theoretical works: the *Treatise* and the *Inquiry*. The author suggests that Hume's works should not be interpreted linearly but in accordance with the idea which was expressed in a quote at the beginning of our review from *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. This operation has a twofold justification: firstly, it derives from the thesis of the nature of Hume's undertaking that is critical and sceptical towards 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, which has been assumed in Sieczkowski's monograph, and secondly, and this is my personal remark, it makes it possible to avoid many traps of the conceptual analysis of the *Treatise* itself. As far as the latter is concerned, the significance of certain solutions (e.g. as elementary as the division perceptions into impressions and ideas from the first chapter of the work) is revealed only later (in this case together with the role played by *belief* in human mind). Thus, such a non-linear presentation of Hume's philosophy is entirely justifiable.

According to Sieczkowski, modern philosophy, which has been developing since Descartes, was driven by the ideal of contemplative, theoretical cognition. It was founded on Plato's theory of ideas and rooted in Christian philosophy. According to this interpretation, the validity of knowledge is dependent on the notion of the absolute being which, in a religious dimension, is equivalent to the Creator of the world, whereas in the cognitive dimension, it is the guarantor of the authenticity of cognition. In other words, modern philosophy developed the motif which was presented in a distinctive manner in René Descartes' *Meditations*: as far as cognition is concerned, only scepticism that has been left behind by the 'evil genius' is possible, or reliable cognition guaranteed by the benevolent God. Although the thesis in such a form is rather general, and using it as the key to interpreting contemporary philosophy simplifies many issues (e.g. relationship between the order of metaphysics and knowledge about nature), the author skilfully manages to defend it using numerous analyses of works, not only by Descartes, but also by Leibniz, Spinoza, Malebranche, and others. At this juncture, the author's erudition should be given credit to.

The second part contains an analysis of Hume's criticism of religion. Although it is usually interpreted as an independent part of his philosophy, or as a result of him taking over certain epistemological theses, the order in the

reviewed monograph is reversed: it is not about the issue whether one may justifiably speak about the existence of God on the basis of assumed epistemological premises, or whether standpoints within the philosophy of religion may be subjected to criticism. Quite the contrary; according to Sieczkowski, Hume seems to be asking: “If there is no God, or if the question of faith belongs only to the ‘order of the heart’ then what do we know?”. We were faced with an analogical situation in the case of George Berkeley, who used the assumptions of empiricism to the opposite end, asking “There is God – what next?”, which corroborates with the thesis from the monograph concerning the predominance of practical issues over theoretical ones, at least in relation to most of modern British philosophy.

The last part of the book, which is dedicated directly to Hume’s theoretical philosophy and contains detailed analyses concerning the network of categories for the most essential notions which describe, according to the intentions of the author of *Treatise* – the whole of human nature. Apart from some detailed analyses of Hume’s basic concepts (referring to perceptions and their types) and issues such as the plausibility of existential judgements, personal identity, the matter of human will or causality, Sieczkowski presents a convincing metaphor of Hume’s undertaking as “the geography of mind”. In fact, if we take seriously the subtitle of the *Treatise*, in which Hume writes that it constitutes “an attempt to introduce experimental reasoning into moral subjects”, the first two books of that work may be taken for an attempt to describe direct component elements of thinking. Hence, the ‘cartographic’ metaphor seems to be quite accurate.

The author does not avoid syntheses. On the one hand, he tries to capture the full nature of Hume’s philosophy, and on the other, the predilection for illustrative shortcuts relates also to larger intellectual formations. In the part devoted to tradition that Hume referred to, we read: “Notably, leaving continental Europe means the change of the language used by philosophy, and the elevated ideal, which operates with the concepts of good, happiness, love and delight, turns into banal and mundane practical calculation” (p. 32). Although one may find exceptions which would contradict such generalisations (Cambridge Platonists or Shaftesbury could serve as an example), they enable an overall review and are supported by accurate examples. When reading modern British philosophers, it is hard to resist the temptation to think that theoretical solutions were indeed meaningful for them if they provided a back-up for discussing or criticising practical matters: religious, moral, political, or social. Hence, the chapter that ends Sieczkowski’s book titled:

“Conclusion: from the epistheological ‘self’ to socially affective ‘self’” crowns not only the book and Hume’s philosophy, but also constitutes a summary of various processes which took place in the contemporary British philosophy of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The only reservation that one may have about the book reviewed is not concerned with the analyses or interpretations of Hume’s philosophy, as the author is too competent to suspect him of sloppiness or superficiality, but with Locke. Ample references to the 17<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, especially to the Cartesian tradition, must be deemed justifiable and needed, if British empiricism emerged from the discussion over the 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics. However, it is difficult not to get the impression that in juxtaposition with them, the English philosopher was slightly neglected, and his genetic empiricism was deemed as unfinished and reduced to a faulty philosophical project. Certainly, from the point of view of Hume’s solutions, such an interpretation may be justifiable; however, a remark that Locke allegedly did not see the problem of the status of empiricism and, in connection with that, did not conduct the proper criticism of knowledge would require a few words of comment.

It is clear that in many issues, especially the issue of religion, Locke’s attitude was rather conservative, whereas the critical prowess of his philosophical conception and the project of rationalising religion was only observed by the deists such as John Toland or Anthony Collins. Truly, it is hard not to agree that in this case Locke stopped half-way between, as if he had been disturbed by the possible consequences of his philosophy. Yet Locke’s ‘new way of ideas’ was to allow him to combine subjectivism and individualism of experience with proving the possibility of knowledge. Suffice it to say, if the second book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* contains a presentation of the history of ideas, then the subsequent books complement this conception by the description of the manner in which the language allows to mediate experiences and how knowledge is built. Thus, the theory of ideas (largely psychological in nature) is complemented by providing the conditions for natural knowledge both as natural history and the philosophy of nature. The crowning of the entire structure is provided by metaphysics; however, the notion of God plays only a regulatory role. It is worth mentioning for several reasons. Firstly, Locke so frequently indicates various deficiencies of human understanding which stand in the way of building knowledge that anyone arguing that the true title of his work should be *Essay Concerning Human Un-understanding* would be quite correct. Hence the allegation that Locke did not note the status of empiricism seems to be misguided and refers

to empiricism in Hume's later version. Locke's empiricism largely aims at justifying the possibilities of the 17<sup>th</sup> century scientific knowledge and in this respect Locke was fully aware of its limitations. However, one should agree here with the author's opinion that Locke's philosophy is strongly embedded in the 17<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics, and the allusions to Descartes or Malebranche are rather strong. Secondly, the distance between us and the achievements of modern philosophers causes that, as much the researchers often focus on epistemological problems or metaphysics, they often pay less attention to discussing the issues related to the philosophy of science, as it has greatly evolved since those times. Nonetheless, extensive fragments of Locke's *Essay*, of several writings by Berkeley, together with certain fragments of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, refer to it.

In conclusion, it is worth drawing attention to some additional circumstances as regards the publication of Sieczkowski's book. Firstly, except for Berkeley, Hume is the most thoroughly interpreted modern British philosopher in Poland. Practically all of his works are available (soon a volume containing the last of his previously untranslated essays will be published by Toruń philosophical circles) and the recently published monographs by Mirosław Rutkowski (*Rola rozumu w decyzjach moralnych. Etyka Davida Hume'a* [*Role of mind in moral decisions. David Hume's ethics*], 2001), Tomasz Tulejski (*Konserwatyzm bez Boga. Dawida Hume'a wizja społeczeństwa, państwa i prawa* [*Conservatism without God. David Hume's vision of society, state and law*], 2009) and me (*Kategorie „podmiotu” i „przedmiotu” w Dawida Hume'a nauce o naturze ludzkiej*, [*Categories of 'subject' and 'object' in David Hume's science on human nature*], 2005) provide an insight into various aspects of his philosophy. Although for researchers who deal with Hume's philosophy, his religious agnosticism may seem quite obvious, it has not been properly handled yet. What is more, contrary to the frequently asked question "Was Hume an atheist?" the issue of his atheism is treated by Sieczkowski in terms of a philosophical, rather than historical or biographical issue. This is about presenting the whole of Hume's philosophy as an attempt to rebuild the entire epistemology in a way that makes it independent of relations with religion and theology.

I am very glad that the book has been published, and even more so, as it was written by an expert and an erudite. The author of the book has been previously known as a translator and editor of works dedicated to Hume: in 2004, together with Dawid Misztal, he published a new translation of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, whereas in 2007, he edited a special

double issue of “Nowa Krytyka” journal dedicated to Hume, in which, apart from an article and translations he included a bibliography of the Scottish philosopher in Polish. This versatility is important as Hume’s writing teems with all sorts of difficulties such as ambiguities, and even purposeful throwing off the trail, especially with regard to his standpoint in the philosophy of religion. As much as in the *Treatise*, the difficulty in unambiguously interpreting the work was observed, which often gave rise to accusations that it is incoherent, then in the case of religious criticism an exact establishment of Hume’s standpoint still remains a mystery for some scholars. This can be blamed on the author’s stratagem to present different critical arguments in various works. He was also very implicit about expressing certain opinions (the best example being the XI chapter of the *Inquiry* entitled *A particular providence and a future state*). In short, Hume’s oeuvre puts great demands on its interpreter. Not only does it require his attention, but also good will, if he is to find its systematic character.

Eighty years ago, Etienne Gilson presented an equally synthetic description of Hume’s philosophy in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*. That interpretation was made from a different standpoint for Gilson was an inquisitive researcher of Christian philosophy, chiefly St. Thomas and St. Augustine. However, the conclusions were quite similar to those formulated now by Tomasz Sieczkowski. Gilson interpreted Hume’s scepticism and his negation of modern metaphysical tradition as the fall of philosophy, even if it was to be a recurring fall and possible to overcome. The author of the *Critique of epistheology*, with all due respect for Hume, admits that although the effort of the Scottish philosopher led to widespread, radical and thorough philosophical studies, their destructive result may be considered, as he writes, “a spectacular, yet unsuccessful philosophical attempt to constitute that which is impossible (e.g. a corresponding model of cognition) after a previous rejection of theological allusions” (p. 26). One should agree that in a cognitive sense a failed attempt does not have to mean a failure. Moreover, Sieczkowski’s interpretation is well-justified and the distinctness of the thesis will make it an important landmark for any future researchers who will deal with modern British philosophy.

Adam Grzeliński  
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland  
e-mail: grzelinski@wp.pl