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NORMAN KEMP SMITH

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1872-1958

THE death of Norman Kemp Smith on 3 September 1958 has deprived us, though we must add at a very ripe age, of one of the very few greatest scholars whom this country has known in the realm of philosophy, as well as of a quite outstanding teacher and personality of distinction. The present biographer had unfortunately only a very limited personal knowledge of the deceased, confined almost entirely to two short visits when he kindly asked me to stay with him in Edinburgh for a night or two, but I am indebted for the more biographical part of this notice to the kind help of several people, notably to Kemp Smith's daughter Mrs. J. Ludlam, Professor A. D. Ritchie, and Professor Hendel.

Born in 1872 in Dundee, the son of a cabinet-maker, Norman Smith was the youngest by five years in a family of six children. This difference in age gave rise to a certain loneliness which was enhanced in early childhood by the removal of his parents owing to financial troubles from Dundee to Cupar (Angus), and later by the inability of his family to share his intellectual interests—he was the only one who went to a university. His daughter thinks that a sense of loneliness and isolation remained to a greater or lesser extent all his life, but she sometimes wondered whether without it he could have been so great as a scholar and philosopher or as a man. He often used to her expressions such as 'life is a battle' and 'human relationships are the most difficult things in the world', at least with a view to preparing her for life, but the difficulty certainly did not prevent him from being most successful in his own human relations, as will be clear from what follows. The late Baron von Hügel, with whom he had a very frequent and intimate correspondence, once spoke of him as a 'great reader of souls', and while he would himself have disclaimed any such praise, his interest in persons as human beings, I understand, was most remarkable. I have hardly ever read such enthusiastic testimonials as those which former pupils have given to his personal qualities.

He was educated at the High School, Dundee, and the Harris Academy. He matriculated at the age of 17 at St. Andrews University, where he seems to have supported himself almost

entirely by prizes and scholarships. He appears to have had little to say in later years either of his school or of his university education, though he greatly welcomed the sense of intellectual release and stimulation which he felt when he first went to St. Andrews. He sometimes deplored the inadequacy of school education in his boyhood, and particularly the absence of any attempt to inspire. He had a brilliant university career, being first prizeman in all the philosophy classes. It is interesting to note that he first studied philosophy under Sir Henry Jones, and later after having graduated in 1893 and won the Ramsay and Ferguson scholarships, he held his first post under him in Glasgow. But the eloquent Welsh idealist was not a particularly congenial person to him philosophically, and he was much more influenced by Adamson, to whom he became assistant, still in Glasgow, in 1896. Indeed of contemporary philosophers at least, the latter was probably the one who influenced him by far the most, and there is an obvious connexion here with his interest in Kant. He suffered at this time from an overwhelming, if unfounded, sense of inadequacy as a teacher of philosophy, and this prompted him to take a year abroad (1895-6), when he studied in the universities of Zurich, Berlin, and Paris. In 1897 he was appointed to a full lectureship in Logic and Metaphysics at Queen Margaret College, where he conducted a complete degree course. When Adamson died in 1902, he carried out the entire work of the Logic Chair. In this year St. Andrews gave him the degree of Doctor of Philosophy for his *Studies in the Cartesian Philosophy*. One term, by special request of Alexander, he acted as his assistant at Manchester.

In 1906 he was appointed Professor of Psychology at Princeton, a post which, however, also involved philosophy courses. He was working under Woodrow Wilson as the President of the University, and it was interesting to discover among the many fine testimonials he presented when applying for the Edinburgh chair one by this statesman, written just at the time when he was in France negotiating the Treaty of Versailles. In 1914 Kemp Smith was transferred to the McCosh Chair of Philosophy at Princeton, where he was able to devote his whole teaching effort to philosophy. He spoke of his time in America with much pleasure, but this was more than reciprocated by those with whom he had to do. I have heard that his former American students still speak of his years at Princeton in association with A. A. Bowman as the greatest years of philosophy there. To take one example of many most enthusiastic tributes, Professor

Murphy says, 'It was from Kemp Smith that I learned that philosophy could be an enterprise in which a man found and gave the best of himself in a just understanding of the greatest issues of human life. I decided that semester that I wanted to become Kemp Smith's kind of philosopher. To this continuing task my life has since then been devoted.' In 1938, when everyone was faced with the threat of war, he added: 'I found in him the strength, integrity and steadiness of mind I needed to go on with the job to be done. I was never a disciple of Kemp Smith's doctrines when he had doctrines to offer. . . . But in the way in which Socrates had disciples I am proud to count myself in that category and to say in gratitude and deep affection that, of all the men of his time whom I had known, he was the wisest and justest and best.' He also played a very great part in administration at Princeton, being appointed chairman of the department in 1913. He was visiting Mills Professor in the University of California in 1923, and lecturer on British Philosophy of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries at Columbia University.

It was not only academically that these years were of importance to him. In 1910 he married Miss Amy Kemp of Manchester, I understand a very successful school teacher with great social gifts. They had only one child, a daughter. After this marriage Kemp was prefixed to his own name. It was in these years in America also that he produced his *magnum opus*, the commentary on Kant. During the First World War he obtained leave of absence to serve in the intelligence section of the British Admiralty, and later, when America joined in the war, in the American Section of the Ministry of Information.

In 1919 Kemp Smith returned to this country to take up the Chair of Logic and Metaphysics at Edinburgh. Here he remained till his retirement in 1945, delayed three years by the war, during which concluding period he actually supervised the department of Moral Philosophy in addition to his own. During the Second World War he also served on the Edinburgh tribunal for dealing with conscientious objectors. He took his full share of administrative duties, being dean of the faculty from 1929 to 1933 and representing the senate in the university court from 1924 to 1931. He had no doubt ample capacities for such work and could have gone further in it if he had wished, but he shone most as a teacher. To quote from an obituary notice in the *Scotsman*, 'one recalls the crowded class-room of nearly 300 students, most of them Service men, restless and expectant, ready to show their impatience of teaching which seemed to be

merely a carry-over from pre-war days, then the realisation, when Kemp Smith began to speak, that they were in the presence of a supremely great teacher and a personality of commanding force'. A friend described him to me as 'outstanding as a lecturer to the ordinary class' and added that to take the class was a 'wonderful experience for an undergraduate'. Meanwhile academic honours were numerous. In 1921 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, in 1926 a Fellow of the British Academy. He received honorary degrees from St. Andrews, Glasgow, and Durham universities. Probably philosophy in Edinburgh never stood higher than in those days when the chairs were held by him and A. E. Taylor, though the two were philosophers and men of very different types.

The years of Kemp Smith's retirement must have been somewhat lonely. He lost his wife in 1936, when he was only 64, and later he lived by himself with his housekeeper. But his life was enlivened by a great number of friends and by his daughter at Carlisle with her family. She says that 'as a father he was a wonderful person. He was always young in spirit, and his grandchildren adored him—particularly one of them, who treated him as if he were the same age as herself—which delighted the grandfather. I do not think we made much allowance for his age, because we were rarely aware of it. He had a great capacity for making friends with younger as well as with older people.' He continued to work at philosophy almost to the end, but I understand that his last year was one of lingering weakness, waiting wistfully, if patiently, for death.

In his philosophical work Kemp Smith, while certainly well capable of original thought of high quality, by preference devoted himself mainly to the history of philosophy, making contributions of great importance to the study of Descartes, Hume and, above all, Kant. This makes it the more difficult to give an account of his books since, while you can sometimes bring out in a short space the main salient features of a system of philosophy, you can hardly do this with a commentary, the value of which will depend on a host of details. His earliest and latest works (*Studies in the Cartesian Philosophy*, 1902, and *New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes*, 1952) were both on the first-mentioned philosopher. They do not altogether cover the same ground, and the emphasis is distinctly different. Thus the earlier book dwells more on the metaphysics of Descartes and his relation to subsequent philosophers, the later more on his conception of the physical world. A major purpose of the first

work was to represent Descartes' philosophy as leading logically to occasionalism; other tendencies in Descartes which conflict with this received more attention in the second. Kemp Smith insists that Cartesian studies had been radically transformed in the interim.

There is as yet no general agreement as to the fundamentals of Descartes' teaching. What has been achieved is a more adequate appreciation of how well aware he came to be of the difficulties to be overcome, and how tenaciously, honestly and candidly he wrestled with these difficulties; and how, as the years passed, he dissociated himself, ever more definitely, from several of the positions to which he had at first inclined—from the occasionalism retained and developed by Malebranche and Geulinx, from the parallelism made more precise by Spinoza, and from the type of rationalism held to, and further elaborated, by Leibniz—outlining in their place theses which, in general tendency, are, not infrequently, more suggestive of Locke than of any one of his other successors. Accordingly my *New Studies* is not in fact a revision of my earlier work; as the title is intended to indicate, it is a completely new book. (*New Studies in the Philosophy of Descartes*, pp. v-vi.)

Thus we find Kemp Smith here, as with Kant and Hume, concerned especially to qualify and render more balanced the orthodox view of an author, unravelling the different threads which point in reverse directions. All these philosophers are depicted as pioneers, who yet at the expense of at least verbal inconsistency reached beyond the apparent rigidity of the system they adopted, and a strenuous attempt is made to trace the changes in their views historically as far as this is practicable.

Kemp Smith's *magnum opus* was of course his *Commentary to Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (1918), which as a work of scholarship certainly immensely surpassed anything that had been published in English before on Kant. The book has suffered somewhat in reputation because its way of approach is based on a view which is generally rejected today, i.e. on what its opponents call the 'patchwork theory'. It is certainly not unreasonable to hold that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was made by putting together hastily (after some revision) notes written at different times and that some inconsistencies and repetitions are due to this, but it would be generally held nowadays that Kemp Smith and Vaihinger, the leading German exponent of the theory, who influenced Kemp Smith profoundly, were very over-optimistic as to the possibility of determining reliably the relative order of composition, and that it is rarely safe confidently to dismiss a passage as 'pre-critical'. Further, the theory was carried to a

point at which it seemed to many altogether to discredit Kant as a philosopher by making him appear thoroughly and almost perpetually inconsistent, and it was this especially that elicited Professor Paton's fervent attack on such doctrines. Kemp Smith did not himself regard the view as derogatory to Kant. He maintained that insight is more important than consistency, and that Kant was wise in not sacrificing any of the apparently inconsistent lines of thought, because they all embodied fruitful points of view, of which account had to be taken if we were to do justice to the situation. Their inconsistency prevented Kant from producing a finished system, he admitted, but he thought Kant's philosophy all the more valuable on that account because of the room it left for development. But even if we disagree thoroughly with Kemp Smith's historical (it has been called by opponents 'philological') approach, this must not lead us to underestimate the very great importance of the commentary. As A. E. Taylor remarked in a testimonial, 'it is the first work in our own language in which an attempt has been made to do for a great work of modern philosophy what would be expected in an historical and exegetical commentary of the first rank in scholarship upon a work of Plato or Aristotle'. It constituted the first large-scale attempt in this country to study Kant as he really was as an end in itself and not merely as a means to showing that his views represented an inconsistent half-way house on the way to Hegel or to refuting them as an example of vicious idealism, and in this respect there is not likely to be a general retreat from the position reached by Kemp Smith. He made a valiant attempt to link together the idealist and the realist sides of Kant and also his resolute metaphysical agnosticism so as to do justice to all three. He brought out many inconsistencies in Kant (perhaps more than are really there), but at any rate they are illuminating inconsistencies as representing Kant's struggle to attain an improved point of view. Personally I owe a great debt of gratitude to the author of the commentary in that, while I was working for my doctorate on Kant and till the appearance of Paton's work in 1936, it was far and away the book on Kant which influenced me most. In his second edition Kemp Smith added a summary account of Kant's *opus postumum*, thus providing the English reader for the first time with some information about the latter.

Besides producing a commentary on the *Critique of Pure Reason* he also provided a translation (in 1929). It was in connexion with this work that I stood in my only professional

relation to Kemp Smith. The latter kindly suggested that I should become his partner in the project, each doing a portion of the translation himself and the other revising it, but our styles were found too different for the arrangement to work, and consequently the partnership project was abandoned, and he took full responsibility for the whole translation, only sending it to me to read afterwards. It was a source of considerable regret to me at the time that I could do so little to help because the translation was so very good that there were very few amendments within my power to suggest, though for what help I did render he paid me over-liberally. Certainly my contribution was so very slight that I do not feel that there is any tinge of vanity in singing the praises of the book, and I may recount what is surely as good a testimonial as could be produced for such a work. I have been told, namely, that a distinguished German philosopher, Rudolf Metz, once said that, if only his students could read English adequately, he would ask them to read the *Critique of Pure Reason* in Kemp Smith's translation rather than in the original German itself! A very useful abridgement of the translation was published in 1934, but it is greatly to be regretted that the cheaper Everyman edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* fell back on an earlier translator. Kemp Smith, I am told, said that he found his translating of Kant and Descartes more like recreation than like work, having something of the attraction of crossword puzzles to him.

In his work on Hume, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941), Kemp Smith found the main key to the interpretation of the latter writer not, as most had done, in the early part of the *Treatise* with its empiricist insistence on the derivation of ideas from impressions, but in Hume's views on ethics and particularly in the doctrine that 'the determining influence in human life is feeling, not reason or understanding, i.e. not evidence, whether *a priori* or empirical' (op. cit., p. 11). For Hume's doctrine of the primacy of feeling in ethics both confirmed and was confirmed by his parallel view in the theoretical field, which reduced belief to a feeling even there, where people are usually far less inclined to adopt such a line than in ethics. Kemp Smith does not aim at giving a thorough account of the whole of Hume's philosophy, but he treats the subject with a historical sense hardly approached by any other commentator. Students of Hume are very greatly indebted to him especially for his account of Hume's ethics and of its relation to the earlier part of the *Treatise*, and for the way in which he criticizes the traditional

interpretation of Hume as a sceptic and suggests subtle alternatives to it. His edition of *Hume's Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1935) is also a very important contribution. In the extensive comments on the *Dialogues* contained in the book he contends that Philo rather than Cleanthes represents Hume's views and that Hume is in no real sense a theist, and I should hope, largely settled these questions, though I think myself that the account somewhat underestimates the appeal for Hume of the argument from Design, in reaction from the opposite extreme.

Only one book other than historical works has been produced by Kemp Smith. This is his *Prolegomena to an Idealist Theory of Knowledge* (1924). When first published the work must have caused considerable surprise, as I recall it caused myself when I first read it, and one can understand an old-fashioned idealist on its perusal praying more fervently to be delivered from his friends than from his enemies. Today the negative part of the thesis, namely that we must not base idealism in the sense in which Kemp Smith defines it, i.e. the view 'that spiritual values have a determining voice in the ordering of the universe', on any Berkeleyan epistemology, would be very generally accepted, but as a reviewer, J. S. Mackenzie, suggested, the book might have been described as 'an introduction to a realist theory of knowledge, serving as prolegomena to a spiritual interpretation of reality'. Perhaps light may be thrown on it by Kemp Smith's inaugural lecture when he entered on the Edinburgh chair in 1919, in which he insists that it is not only compatible with idealism but very important for idealism to do justice to the naturalist insistence on the validity of science, and this for two reasons:

In the first place the supreme concern of idealism is to show that the aesthetic and spiritual values have a more than merely human significance; and there is apparently not the least hope of so doing if the values that hold in the intellectual domain cannot be substantiated as possessing objective validity. . . . If knowledge is itself a deception, and its conclusions are merely practical devices for temporary adaptation, there can be no hope of vindicating for the other values in life any supra-human significance. . . . But there is also a second reason why idealism welcomes, as no small advance towards eventual agreement, the recognition by naturalism of the absolute validity of the logical criteria. If, as idealism maintains, intellectual and spiritual values stand on the same plane of objectivity, and therefore justify parity of treatment, half the battle is won when the human mind, its natural history notwithstanding, is allowed to be capable of transcending not only its

subjective but even its planetary limitations. That the human mind should possess the power of comprehending its own natural origins, and of ranging in what we call thought over the entire material universe, of which, as an animal existence, it is so minor and transitory a product, is, in the view of idealism, a fact of such central and supreme significance that agreement in regard to it must, in consistency, bring other important consequences in its train. (*Philosophical Review*, 1920, pp. 15-16.)

At the same time Kemp Smith was one of those who helped to demolish the representative theory of perception, an enterprise with which most present-day philosophers would, rightly or wrongly, sympathize. But his own special positive theory of perception has found less support. Kemp Smith retained 'sensa' as entities dependent for their existence on the brain and (he thought probably) the mind of a human percipient, but insisted that we have also an immediate mode of awareness of the physical which he calls by the name of 'intuiting'. This gives us space and time, but not by itself the secondary qualities, which are derived from our senses, and which we have no reason to suppose exist physically. Space itself is apprehended 'in terms of', although not 'through' sensa. A very paradoxical feature of the theory is that, since space is given in intuition and not in sense, the sensa are not spatial, so that colour itself is not extended, a view that many would say was logically impossible. Perhaps this accounts largely for the failure of the theory to gain support, though I am told that Whitehead accepted it gratefully. Besides sense and intuition categorial thinking is also needed for perception, Kemp Smith insists, so his philosophy here may be regarded as that of a good Kantian turned realist, though idealist in his ultimate view of the world as spiritual.

The fundamentally religious character of Kemp Smith's outlook is brought out by his British Academy lecture *Is Divine Existence Credible?* (1931). This struck me as one of the best defences I have read of the view that the existence of God is known not by argument but non-inferentially. Present-day religious thinkers of a much less philosophical type would be attracted by his making the otherness, the non-creatureliness of God fundamental, though less so by the way in which he connects it, even exclusively, with the apprehension of nature. As a contribution to philosophy we should also mention three articles on 'Universals' in *Mind*, 1947, which are devoted mainly to a criticism of the doctrine of concrete universals and of Stout's doctrine that qualities are really particular and that the ultimate concept here is that of the 'distributive unity' of a class; and an

article on 'Fear' in *Philosophy*, 1957. The thesis maintained in the latter is that fear is not to be regarded as essentially an evil, but as having a value of its own not only instrumentally but positively as a component of certain desirable states of mind. I understand that he left practically nothing in the way of manuscripts at his death, but there is a project to collect and publish in book form a number of his scattered articles, which I much hope will be carried into effect.

He certainly has left much in the way of influence, intellectual and personal. To quote from the *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Edinburgh*,

Kemp Smith was a philosopher who, by reason of his large endowment of common sense and humanity, was also a sage, and one to whom everyday problems could be referred for as shrewd solutions as he could give for the abstruse. He had administrative gifts which might well have been turned to greater account, had his natural modesty permitted. But he was a shy man, and brilliant as he was on the rostrum he was always happier in the society of a few than in a crowd. He had a host of devoted friends, many of whom had been his equally devoted pupils. They knew and admired the honesty and directness of the man, his complete lack of anything remotely like affectation, his generosity, sympathy and humour.

Or quoting the *Scotsman* again,

his personality and his thought were integrated in an unusually intimate way, and his intellectual quality was of a kind in which judgement of essentials, though combined with great powers of coordination, was the outstanding feature. This same judgement he brought into personal relations with an effect at first disconcerting in its directness, but when combined as it was in him with such unfailing kindness and humility it formed an enduring basis for friendship. Many will continue to think of him as perhaps the greatest single personal influence in their lives.

A. C. EWING