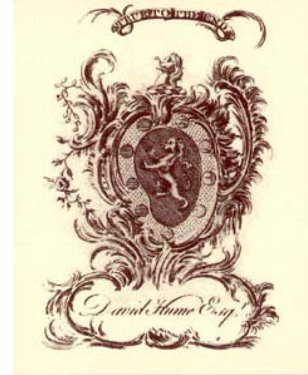

One Consequence of Hume's Nominalism

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Hume Studies Volume VIII, Number 2 (November, 1982) 102-118.

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ONE CONSEQUENCE OF HUME'S NOMINALISM

It is commonly assumed, and sometimes argued, that Hume held the Uniformity Thesis regarding causation: something, a, is the cause of something else, b, if and only if when a occurs, b occurs contiguous with and successive to a and whenever anything relevantly similar to a, "no matter where or when, observed or unobserved," something relevantly similar to b occurs.[1] Everyone knows that Hume denies there is any necessary connection between a cause and its effect. Since the invariability of conjunctions of causes and effects follows from their necessary connection and its possibility is not affected by the denial of that conjunction, the Uniformity Thesis seems a plausible retrenchment. Besides, we should deny that a causes b were any similar a to occur without the occurrence of a similar b. So the assumption of the Uniformity Thesis seems natural.

When the issue is argued on textual grounds, the appeal is to Hume's first definition of cause at the end of his long analysis of causation. A cause is

> *An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter* (T 170).[2]

This is construed as Hume's real definition of the causal relation and taken to state the Uniformity Thesis.

Both the argument and the assumption presuppose that Hume was concerned with the conditions for something's being a cause. But, I wish to argue, in the Treatise at any rate[3] Hume was concerned not with causal relations, but with causal judgments. He was

concerned with what must be true for us to call or judge a a cause and, only as a consequence of that concern, with what is true of a for a to be a cause. We must take seriously his asking us to *cast our eye on any two objects, which we call cause and effect* (T 75, my emphasis), and his saying, after introducing constant conjunction, that *contiguity and succession are not sufficient to make us pronounce any two objects to be cause and effect, unless we perceive, that these two relations are preserv'd in several instances* (T 87, my emphasis). To determine the conditions for causal judgments, one must determine what we observe of a cause, but in making that determination, I am claiming, Hume is not addressing the question he is commonly assumed to have answered.

Making that claim plausible requires a detailed analysis of what Hume is about when he gives two definitions of the causal relation[4] and an explication of how what he does in regard to causal judgments fits the paradigm of analysis for judgments in the 17th and 18th centuries, viz. that given by Boyle, Locke, and others of such judgments as "That ball is red."[5] I shall do neither here. I wish to concern myself with another point which is not necessary to make my claim plausible, but would help were it true. I shall develop this point informally, for it is prima facie implausible and I would like to see how it fares unadorned. If it fares well, there will be time enough to deck it out in symbols.

The point is that for Hume one literally cannot think the Uniformity Thesis. If this is true, it would certainly help my claim, for it would not help Hume to claim of him that he answers a question with what for him cannot even be thought. But it is certainly an implausible point prima facie. We can think it. Why can't Hume? The answer lies with his

nominalism.

Hume holds that everything that exists in nature is individual (T 19) and that this is true of ideas as well as of anything else that exists (T 19-20). Thus, when someone says, "Smoking causes cancer," then, if we understand what is being said and if anything comes to mind, what must come to mind according to those who hold the Uniformity Thesis is a particular instance of smoking, a, and a particular instance of cancer, b, and particular instances of the relations of contiguity and succession between a and b. We think, and think only, a is contiguous_1 and prior to_1 b. What comes to mind, that is, is the first conjunct of what is required for the Uniformity Thesis: when a occurs, b occurs contiguous with and successive to a.[6]

How is one to obtain the second conjunct? How, that is, can one, in thinking of particulars, think that whenever anything relevantly similar to a occurs, "no matter where or when, observed or unobserved," something relevantly similar to b occurs?

One possibility which must be rejected has its sources in Hume's curious remarks about distinctions of reason. He argues that in any particular instance of, say, a colored figure such as *a globe of white marble*, the mind would never dream of distinguishing the figure from the color since we are not *able to separate and distinguish the colour from the form* (T 25). We only come to make the distinction because we compare our perception of the globe of white marble with perceptions of e.g. cubes of white marble and globes of black marble. Making such distinctions requires, Hume says, practice by which

> *we begin to distinguish the figure from the colour by a distinction of reason; that is, we consider the figure and colour together, since they are in effect the same and indistinguishable; but still*

> *view them in different aspects, according to the resemblances, of which they are susceptible* (T 25).

Such "practice" is required because the relation between the figure of a (the globe of white marble) and the color of a is such that one cannot think of a being figured without thinking of it being colored and cannot think of it being colored without thinking of it being figured (T 25).

It thus may be that in thinking of a particular, like a, that is figured and colored, one is thinking that whatever is figured is colored, and vice versa. It is not clear that that follows or even what it means given Hume's nominalism, but in any event it would not help in the present case. What makes it impossible to think of a having one characteristic without another is that one is thinking of a single thing, a, with two characteristics which are somehow interdependent. But in regard to causation, we have not got just the one thing, a is contiguous$_1$ and prior to$_1$ b, but that particular conjunction and a number of other possible relevantly similar conjunctions,[7] and there is no relation between the one conjunction and any others such that one must think of the others when thinking of the one. There being distinct individual conjunctions guarantees, for Hume, the possibility of thinking one without thereby thinking the others. So this way of obtaining the second conjunct will not do.

There is a more obvious way, however. In Berkeley's theory of abstract ideas, one obtains generality by its being indifferent which particular among a set of relevantly similar particulars happens to come to mind. Were Hume to accept such a theory, he could claim that one comes to think the second conjunct by thinking the first and by its being indifferent which particular conjunction happens to come to mind. But, it

is usually thought, Hume does accept Berkeley's theory, only adding a psychological explanation of how it is that we can have one idea indifferently standing for another, i.e. how one idea can in fact replace another in the mind.[8]

Things are not, however, as they are usually thought. The differences between Berkeley's theory and Hume's are far more radical than that. We can best see why by comparing Hume's theory with Berkeley's.

In the first draft of the Introduction to The Principles of Human Knowledge, Berkeley argues that if "animal" in "Melampus is an animal" stands for the idea of a particular animal, it stands either for the idea "Melampus" stands for or it does not and that therefore the proposition is either a tautology or contradictory.[9] It is neither, but the conclusion, Berkeley argues, should not be that "animal" does not stand for the idea of a particular animal. We should not be led by the argument, that is, to introduce abstract general ideas. That would be to suppose (a) that "every [significant] name stands for an idea" and (b) that significant general names cannot stand for particular ideas without contradiction or tautology.[10] In the passage in question Berkeley is concerned only to deny (a). He insists that "animal" does not stand for any idea at all and that all that is meant is that "the particular thing I call Melampus has a right to be called by the name animal."[11] Elsewhere Berkeley denies (b) as well, arguing that the difference between the "proper or particular name," "Socrates," and the "appellative or general name," "man," is that "the one is peculiar and appropriated to one particular person, the other common to a great many particular persons, each whereof has an equall right to be called by the name Man."[12] "Man," as Berkeley puts it, stands indifferently for "a great many particular persons." Each of the particulars

"have an equall right to be called by the name Man" because, as Berkeley often loosely puts it, they are "of the same sort" or, as he sometimes more carefully puts it, there is "some likeness" between them.[13]

It is not clear whether Hume agrees with Berkeley regarding (a), for though he says that we do not need an idea in our mind for the name associated with it to be significantly used, he never says or implies that a name can be significant if no idea could be produced for it to stand for. But whatever Hume's differences from Berkeley regarding (a), it is not those I wish to pursue, but a crucial difference about (b).

This is a difference so far unnoticeable, for Hume agrees with Berkeley's position as it has so far been stated: (i) that there are names which are significant and yet are not "proper or particular" since they do not stand for a particular idea, (ii) that such general names are significant not by standing for abstract ideas, but indifferently for a number of particular ideas, and (iii) that the particular ideas mutually resemble. The disagreement between Berkeley and Hume concerns whether (iii) is a sufficient condition for entry into the set of particulars a general term indifferently denotes.

In the first draft of the Introduction, Berkeley tends to refer to the particular ideas as a "great many" without any further specification. In the final draft, with but one exception I can find, he specifically refuses to limit the particular ideas in that way.[14] He says in §15 that "the particular triangle I consider whether of this or that sort it matters not, doth equally stand for and represent all rectilinear triangles whatsoever, and is in that sense universal."[15] The same point is made in §12 where he says that "an idea, which considered in it self is particular, becomes general,

by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort."[16] That the "all other" is not meant to be limited by "ideas" is clear from the example with which Berkeley concludes §12. For he says that "a black line of an inch in length," drawn by a geometer for a proof, though "in it self . . . particular," "is nevertheless with regard to its signification general, since . . . it represents all particular lines whatsoever."[17] In the same way, he continues,

> the name line which taken absolutely is particular, by being a sign is made general. And as the former owes its generality, not to its being the sign of an abstract or general line, but of all particular right lines that may possibly exist, so the latter must be thought to derive its generality from the same cause, namely, the various particular lines which it indifferently denotes.[18]

For the Berkeley of the final draft of the Introduction, entry into the set of particulars a general term indifferently denotes is limited only by the requirement that they mutually resemble. Why is unclear. Berkeley may think that resemblance is a property of possible as well as actual particulars, or he may hold that all possible particulars exist in the mind of God and so are, in that sense, actual. Whatever the sources within Berkeley's system, he is committed to the position that a term is general only if it denotes indifferently any of all possible resembling particulars.

Though Hume agrees with Berkeley that resemblance is a necessary condition for the application of a general term to a set of particulars, he denies that it is sufficient. He says that

> *all general terms are nothing but particular ones, annexed to a certain term, which* [term] *gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them* (T 17).

For a term to be general there must be a set of ideas that not only resemble, it being indifferent which actually comes to mind upon hearing or uttering the word, but also are recallable if not actually called to mind.

Such remarks about particulars being recallable are usually construed as part of a psychological explanation of how the members of the set are actually brought to mind -- an interesting, but philosophically neutral theory of the mental mechanism. There is no denying that Hume does have such a psychological explanation, but, I am suggesting, it is tied to something of philosophical import. Hume thus sums up his theory of abstract ideas before he begins his psychological explanation, which he calls the remaining difficulty (T 22), and he says

> *'tis certain* <u>*that*</u> *we form the idea of individuals, whenever we use any general term;* <u>*that*</u> *we seldom or never can exhaust these individuals; and* <u>*that*</u> *those, which remain, are only represented by means of that habit, by which we recall them, whenever any present occasion requires it* (T 22).

I read this as saying that "that collection, which [the mind] intends to express by the general term," is limited by the capacity of the mind to recall ideas: only those which are recallable are represented by any particular idea one has in mind. And this is what he says in the last sentence of his summarization:

> *A particular idea becomes general by being annex'd to a general term; that is, to a term, which from a customary conjunction has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination* (T 22).

The range of particulars that enter into the set indifferently denoted by a general term is thus limited to those resembling particulars which we can recall.

There are conditions for the existence of what Hume

calls *a customary conjunction.* We are, he says, disposed to recall. That disposition comes into existence only if a person at least has experienced other resembling objects, has noted their resemblance, and has marked them off with the same term. A child, for example, may treat "dog" as a singular term because it lacks experience of any but the family dog, or (more worrisome) fails to note the resemblances between the family dog and other dogs, or (more likely) has failed to mark off thé resembling instances with the same term. An idea may fail to be a general idea, the term associated with it may fail to be a general term, for a number of different reasons: lack of experience, an inability to note resemblances, a failure to mark resembling cases with the same term, a memory so poor that past resembling cases are forgotten, and so on. Some of these things regularly go wrong in children, the senile, idiots, and the insane, and they can go wrong with any of us. When they do go wrong, Hume is committed to saying, the idea and the term involved is not a general one or not as general for that person as, perhaps, for others. In short, the set of particulars is limited not to those that relevantly resemble, but to those which have been noted as relevantly resembling, have been marked as being of a sort, are remembered, are, in brief, now recallable as of a particular sort.

This view has its problems. For one thing, it makes for an unsteady conceptual (or perceptual) universe. There are continual memory losses for all of us, for example, and the consequence, on Hume's theory, is that the very meaning of a term may alter radically just because some memory impressions are no longer available. In addition, it becomes a standing issue what new impressions will be accepted (not just 'acceptable') as falling under a term, and it becomes

unclear how impressions are accepted, what the psychological mechanism is for Hume.

But these are relatively minor problems, and that is a good thing since Hume also has them, I am suggesting, for causation. For generality is achieved in regard to causation in the same way in which it is achieved for general terms. When someone says, "a causes b," what immediately comes to mind is a being contiguous and prior to b. If we understand what is being said in the way in which a normal speaker of English does, i.e. if we understand the person to be saying that a kind of object, of which a is an instance, causes the occurrence of another kind of object, of which b is an instance, then by Hume's theory there is a set of resembling cases of which a's being contiguous and prior to b is one and any one of which we can call to mind. The size of the set may vary from two to a 'great many' depending upon our experience, our memory, and so on. If we can recall other cases, then we are thinking not of this determinate fire, a, being conjoined with this determinate burn, b, when touched, but of fires being conjoined with burns when touched. That is, being able to recall other cases is just what it is to have the general idea of fires being conjoined with burns when touched.

But we still lack the idea of cause. For that we must note the resemblance of our idea of fires being conjoined with burns when touched to other such general ideas. That is, we must note the resemblance of the set of conjunctions of fires and burns to the sets of other conjunctions and mark them with the common terms 'cause' and 'effect.' Only if we do that will we understand what is meant by saying that a causes b, for only then will 'cause' be a general term. It will be indifferent which set of conjunctions, i.e. which constant conjunction, we are disposed to call to mind.

In sum, when we understand 'a causes b,' in the

sense of Hume's first definition, our understanding is constituted by our being able to have a particular idea of some determinate oonstant conjunction, of *e.g.* some particular billiard balls, flames from striking matches, and so on, and by our being able to recall some other particular idea of some other determinate constant conjunction. That is, we call to mind some remembered determinate constant conjunction and are capable of calling to mind some other remembered case, and, most crucially, we are not calling to mind anything but such cases of past observed conjunctions.

So, on this view, we really do not think, when we think a causes b, that whenever anything relevantly similar to a occurs, "no matter where or when, observed or unobserved," something relevantly similar to b occurs. That is, we, as Humeans, do not think the second conjunct necessary for the Uniformity Thesis.

This is, as I say, a view which is *prima facie* implausible. But there are at least two compelling reasons for holding it, one textual and one based on an understanding of Hume's attack on induction.

The textual argument has in part been given: Section VI, Part 1, Book 1, the section on Abstract Ideas, supports the view. This support is not as decisive as one might wish. Some of it may be questioned, and some of it seems countered by other remarks Hume makes. I think Hume was more than a little unclear about what he was about. I say this not to dismiss the counter-evidence, but to emphasize that one cannot assume the evidence clear and so dismiss the evidence I have given.

That evidence seems more plausible when it is placed alongside specific remarks Hume makes about causation and about constant conjunction in particular. For immediately after introducing constant conjunction, which some seem to take for invariable conjunction, Hume says

> *To tell the truth, this new-discover'd relation of a constant conjunction seems to advance us but very little in our way. For it implies no more than this, that like objects have always been plac'd in like relations of contiguity and succession; . . .* (T 88, my emphasis).

He then goes on to make clear that the only idea we have of constant conjunction is one derived from our observation of past instances:

> *The idea of cause and effect is deriv'd from experience, which informs us, that such particular objects, in all past instances, have been constantly conjoin'd with each other . . .* (T 89-90, my emphasis).

A third passage, which deserves being italicized in full, occurs three pages later:

> *We have no other notion of cause and effect, but that of certain objects, which have been always conjoin'd together, and which in all past instances have been found inseparable* (T 93)

That is, our idea of constant conjunction is not just derived from our observation of past instances, but limited by those observations.

Hume's remarks about constant conjunction thus support the view of abstract ideas I have attributed to him and support the claim that he is not committed to the Uniformity Thesis. There is a great deal more textual evidence that must be sifted to feel confident about a final judgment, but the textual weight certainly seems against attributing the Uniformity Thesis to him. This is especially so since Hume takes only contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction to be relevant to causation and never introduces any other relation -- in particular not invariable conjunction.

The other argument is that we, as Humeans, do not think the second conjunct of the Uniformity Thesis depends upon an understanding of his argument against induction.

In the Enquiry, after giving two definitions of causation and rejecting both because each is 'drawn from something extraneous and foreign to' causation, Hume goes on to say what is needed:

> *though both these definitions be drawn from circumstances foreign to the cause, we cannot remedy this inconvenience, or attain any more perfect definition, which may point out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connection with its effect. We have no idea of this connexion, nor even any distinct notion what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it* (E 77, my emphasis).

What is needed has at least three features: (1) it is something discoverable 'in the cause' alone (see e.g. T 161-162), (2) it is something that holds in single instances of the causal relation, as contiguity and succession do, and (3) it is something that *gives it a connexion with its effect.*

The interesting features for us are (1) and (3): how can something discoverable 'in the cause' alone provide 'a connexion with' something else? The appropriate model is drawn, I suggest, from Hume's remarks about distinctions of reason: there one discovers some circumstance in a single entity which provides a connection with something else. What is more, the connection is just the sort one would need for causation: it is a necessary connection and, though particular, is such that in thinking it, one may thereby be thinking that whatever has the one circumstance is connected with something else.

But, as I have pointed out, the model will not do for causation. The two things connected in a distinction of reason are 'circumstances,' or features, of a single entity — like a white cube. But Hume argues, or claims to observe, that a cause and its effect

are distinct entities, and what (1) and (3) thus require is that there be discoverable in a cause some feature which connects it with another distinct entity. The connection required is such that that second entity, the effect, must come into existence if the first entity does. But if the cause and effect are distinct, Hume argues, then each could exist without the other's existing, and it is thus not possible to discover some circumstance in the cause which connects it with an effect. It is no wonder *we have no idea of this connexion!*

What we do have, and all we have, are particular instances of conjunctions. That is, we have a_1 contiguous $with_1$ and prior to_1 b_1, a_2 contiguous $with_2$ and prior to_2 b_2, and so on. Hume is a nominalist in regard to relations as well as perceptions. In short, all there are are particular relations -- with the degrees of quantity and quality necessary to make them particular. And since the particular relations relevant to causation are not such that in thinking them one is thereby, perhaps, thinking a universal proposition, one can only treat them as one treats personal terms. One's thoughts become general to the extent one collects similar instances, marks them appropriately, and can recall them.

Hume thinks one can generate a great deal of generality in that way, but not, I suggest, the second conjunct of the Uniformity Thesis. If one could generate that conjunct, one would not need to. For what makes it impossible to think it is just what creates the problem of induction.

Such a conclusion means that Hume's first definition of causation is not his real definition. His second definition is not either. And those conclusions are some evidence that in providing two definitions of cause, Hume was not answering the question he is commonly

thought to have been asking. It is some evidence that he was concerned not with causal relations, but with causal judgments.

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1. J. A. Robinson, "Hume's Two Definitions of 'Cause'," in Chappell, ed., Hume, Doubleday Anchor (Garden City: 1966), p. 144. I have not put Robinson's claim as he does, but there is a very good reason for that. a and b are particulars for Hume (events, objects, impressions, or what have you), and as such they cannot be invariably conjoined. Robinson's solution to this difficulty is to identify the class of "particular occurrences x, x', c", . . . , and the class . . . of particular occurrences y, y', y" . . . . , [with] the event X and the event Y" and then to say that for Hume "an occurrence x causes an occurrence y, if and only if x is an occurrence of an event X, and y is an occurrence of an event Y, and y are juxtaposed [i.e. y follows immediately after z is z's immediate vicinity], and X and Y are universally juxtaposed" (Ibid). It is, however, no solution to the difficulty to call two classes events and then say of them, the classes called events, that one of them always follows immediately after the other in the other's immediate vicinity.

   In speaking of something being the cause of of something else, I mean not to commit myself to a Humean cause and effect being any particular kind of entity. For a clear statement of the difficulties in determining what kinds of entities Hume might have had in mind, see Jaegwon Kim, "Causation, Nomic Subsumption, and the Concept of Event," The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. LXX, No. 8 (April 26, 1973), pp. 217-218. All that my analysis requires is that the cause and effect be particulars.

2. Hume is also committed to an argument which proves that there can be no necessary connection between a cause and its effect, but that is of no relevance to my concerns here.

3. See e.g. Robinson, op. cit., pp. 138-139.

4. The restriction is put in only so that I shall not

have to refer to special problems created by differences in the presentation in the Enquiry.

5. I have given a short version of such an analysis at the APA Pacific Division Meetings in 1973 and at the Third Hume Conference in 1974.

6. That explication is given for casual judgments in my "David Hume: Naturalist and Meta-sceptic," D. W. Livingston and J. T. King, Hume: A Re-evaluation, Fordham University Press (New York: 1976), pp. 23-49.

7. That they are distinct individuals related by contiguity and succession prevents one from appealing to relations between ideas and arguing that because, by definition, ideas related in that way cannot be what they are without being so related and cannot change without changing relations, in thinking of a particular pair of ideas related in that way one is necessarily thinking of any pair. For assuming (what I am not arguing) that that is true, the relations that hold between a cause and its effect are not relations of ideas.

8. See e.g. R. I. Aaron, The Theory of Universals, The Clarendon Press (Oxford: 1952), pp. 67-68.

9. George Berkeley, First Draft of the Introduction to the Principles, in The Works of George Berkeley, Vol. II, ed. T. E. Jessop, Thomas Nelson and Sons (London: 1949), p. 137.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., p. 136.

12. Ibid., p. 127.

13. Ibid., p. 128. On this point see Julius R. Weinberg, Abstraction, Relation, and Induction, University of Wisconsin Press (Madison: 1965), pp. 27-28.

14. For the exception see Vol. II of The Works, op. cit., p. 36. I think this exception is simply not consonant with his mature theory. See in this regard Kenneth Barber, "Gruner on Berkeley on General Ideas," Dialogue, June 1971, esp. pp. 340-341.

15. Principles, op. cit., p. 34.

16. Ibid., p. 32.

118.

17. *Ibid*.

18. See Robinson, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 142-143.