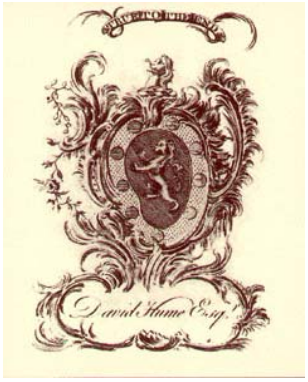

Hume's Debt to Kant
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Hume Studies Volume IX, Number 1 (April, 1983) 59-73.

HUME'S DEBT TO KANT

Various commentators on Hume's work have argued that his examination of our causal reasoning is not fundamentally at odds with the claims made by Kant in his supposed "answer to Hume". One way of making the connection, suggested by Wolff for example, is to emphasize the ways in which Humean epistemology depends upon a theory of mental activity.[1] If this activity itself can only be understood in terms of built-in "propensities" of the mind, these dispositions can be interpreted as psychological descriptions of a mind operating in accordance with something quite like Kantian categories. Another way of arguing for this compatibility between Hume and Kant is to bring out central principles (e.g., relating to causation) which Hume's account depends upon, but which are such that they cannot be given an experiential foundation. Lewis White Beck has offered such a Kantianization of Hume, arguing that beneath the surface of the official Empiricist Hume (and just outside Hume's view of what he was doing) there is a commitment to principles that have an a priori status in his theory.[2] If Beck is right about this, we might speak with tongue only partially in cheek, of Hume's debt to Kant, for the Kantian categories could be taken as the systematic working out of the underpinnings of Hume's theory.

In this paper I shall consider this problem only insofar as it relates to causal reasoning. I focus on Professor Wilson's defense of the Empiricist Hume, in which it is denied that our causal reasoning rests upon a priori principles.[3] The principles in question are that (1) Every event has some cause, and (2) That like causes have like effects, and like effects like causes . Wilson argues that these are both empirical generalizations within an account that is both plausible and Humean. I shall

argue briefly that, contrary to Wilson's claim, the Humean account of causation makes the second of these an a priori truth because it is analytic. The first is certainly not an analytic truth, but it could not have been derived from experience, at least as Hume depicts our experience. It thus seems to be a claim that is functioning as synthetic and a priori in Hume's account of our beliefs. Except in the general way that this phrase implies, this paper is not really about Kant, who will barely be mentioned again. In my discussion of Wilson's argument I will not deal with the formalizations which he has introduced, but will attempt to capture the main lines of argument in more or less ordinary language. In proceeding thus, I am siding with Hume in siding with the vulgar. Having listed the eight rules of causal judgment which are under discussion here, Hume says

> *Here is all the LOGIC I think proper to employ in my reasoning; and perhaps even this was not very necessary, but might have been supply'd by the natural principles of our understanding. Our scholastic headpieces and logicians shew no such superiority above the mere vulgar in their reason and ability, as to give us an inclination to imitate them in delivering a long system of rules and precepts to direct our judgment, in philosophy.* (T175)

1. The basic problem is whether or not Hume's explanation of our causal reasoning depends upon the assumption that all events have causes, and depends upon it in a way that makes this assumption a priori. Beck (and Wolff) have argued that this is the case, and hence that Hume is much closer to Kant than is commonly supposed. This Wilson denies. The argument revolves around the cases in which we fail to observe the causes we have come to associate with certain effects (or, in principle, vice versa) so that the conjunction of events is not "constant". The Humean account of what happens in such circumstances is that the imagination supplies the deficiency; we feign unobserved events to fill the gap.[4] But whereas Hume frequently disparages such

exercises of the fancy (as he calls them) he does not do so here. Hence, one may ask, what entitles us to paper over the cracks in our causal experience? It is Beck's view that it can only be the assumption that all events have causes. And since it is precisely this that is supplying the deficiencies of our experience, this universal generalization cannot itself have an experiential basis.

2. We need to complicate this account in one additional respect before considering Wilson's defense of the more traditional Hume. When Hume deals with the gap problem (as I will call it) he does not, of course, explicitly invoke the principle that all events must have causes. He utilizes instead the 'same-cause' principle.[5] Where we have witnessed an event but have not observed anything which we could designate its cause, we rely upon the supposition that like effects come from like causes. It is this that guides our feigning operation. And, this principle (Rule 4) Hume says is derived from experience. (Whether this is so is a point to which I shall return.)

Now, it appears to Beck that this manoeuvre has simply displaced the gap from our experience to Hume's account of it. For, even assuming that like effects are begotten by like causes, we can have no use for this principle unless we are dealing with something which is identifiable as an effect. Without this, we are stuck with the possibility that a given event may not be an effect at all. Of course our minds may have a tendency to feign the existence of some unobserved conjunct, just as we have a tendency to see after-image spots when we have stared at lightbulbs. The point is that the "like cause..." principle is useless in our reasoning unless we have some way of bridging the gap between events and effects.[6] On Beck's interpretation the principle that every event has some cause performs this function, but this cannot be something we have learned from our (gappy) experience.

3. Before turning to Wilson's grounds for rejecting

this interpretation it may be useful to illustrate these points. Hume's own example is that of hearing a door turn upon its hinges without seeing the door move (T196-7). It occurs in the discussion *Of scepticism with regard to the senses;* that is, in the midst of Hume's account of the origin of our belief in *body*, of the continued and independent existence of the objects of our perception. He gets at this problem by way of the common sense world of hinges and doors, letters and posts, stairs and ferries; but presumably we should treat these objects as heuristic devices (and hence as transparent) in this account of our arrival in this commonplace world. What we are to notice, really, is the series of impressions (the play of representations, as Kant would later say) from which, in particular, our causal beliefs derive. What we observe by means of Hume's squeaking hinge is that there have not been constant conjunctions in the phenomena (impressions) which underlie our causal beliefs. We must either drop the view that there is a uniform connection in cases such as this or introduce an assumption that allows for divergence between what is perceived and what is there to be perceived. The belief *in body* allows us to preserve the belief in constant conjunction without there being a constancy in the experience of such connections. But, one might ask with Beck, what moves us to maintain these connections at the price of this ancillary hypothesis? Consider a rough analogy: The native of Post Hoc has observed a previously constant conjunction between the ritual beating of the drums and the rise of the sun. When one day the drums are silent but the sun rises nonetheless, he can insist that there must have been drums he didn't hear. Alternatively he could treat this as showing (or at least as some evidence) that there is no uniform connection between drumbeat and sunrise. Hume's problem in the section that deals with experiential gaps is a vast generalization of this one. The belief that every event must have some cause is not being given the

direct support of experience; rather, it's being kept alive by means of an ancillary hypothesis whenever experience fails to provide the anticipated correlation. Beck takes this as sufficient to show that this principle is not gleaned from experience, but is functioning as a priori in the interpretation of experience.

4. Basic to Wilson's alternative account of these matters is the idea that the Humean mind is regulated in part by feedback. It is this that Hume is after when he speaks of the *indirect and oblique manner* in which certain of our beliefs arise -- as he does in characterizing our reasoning from the 'same-cause' principle, and in explaining our arrival at the belief in *body*.[7] If it can be shown that our way of dealing with the gaps in our experience can be accounted for by reference to the very "customs" which are products of experience, the basis of the argument for an a priori element in Hume's account will be undercut.

Wilson's first step in this re-establishment of Hume's empiricism is an attempt to show that "for Hume" the principle that every event has some cause is not logically independent of the principle that like causes have like effects. When properly understood, the 'same-cause' principle actually entails that whatever happens has some cause. The next step is simply to show that this omnibus principle is itself not a priori. On Wilson's account it turns out that this is a "law about laws" which are themselves directly based on experiential regularities. The final step is the feedback loop described above. It is the utilizations of this causal generalization which allows us to "supply the deficiencies" of our experience. Where the normal conjunct of an event is not experienced it is more reasonable to suppose that one has missed something than to alter one's expectation of constant conjunction. Moreover, the existential hypothesis entailed by the 'same-cause' principle is not disconfirmed by the so called "gaps" in our experience; such existential claims "are not

falsifiable". Let me consider each of these steps in turn.

5. How can the principle that like causes have like effects possibly entail that every event has a cause? Surely one can imagine a world in which some events (say, the sub-atomic ones) have no causes, but all others are causally ordered in a way that conforms to the like-cause principle. Surely it is not in the spirit of the Humean enterprise to rule this out a priori. One can easily invent a parody based upon Hume's own example: If we discovered as a sound empirical generalization that like husbands have like wives, could it possibly follow from this that all men are married?[8]

Wilson's way of representing this as an entailment of the one general principle by the other is misleading. But what he is really after, of course, is a formal interpretation of Hume's fourth rule, the rule which Hume designates as the principle that like causes have like effects. Since this principle is basic to the procedure of eliminative induction which Hume describes, and since that depends upon the assumption that every event has some cause, Wilson infers that Hume is relying on a version of the like-cause principle that embeds the thesis of universal causation. Combined, these two principles which Beck deals with independently become (roughly) the principle that for every event there are similar events (events with the same property) which have similar antecedent conditions, constantly conjoined.

It should be observed that Wilson is here much closer to Beck than he represents himself as being. Regarding these two principles Beck argued that the first "would be of little use" or "practical benefit" without the second; and that "while the first is independent of the second, we cannot maintain the second without the first."[9] Since Wilson's logical formulations are attempts to capture what Hume needs as backing for the eliminative method, Beck would have no reason to disagree about this; he said it

himself. Thus, when one notes that what Wilson has formalized is simply the complex principle that one needs for experimental purposes, the claim of interdependence turns out not to be in dispute. On the other hand there is significant disagreement regarding the possibility of deriving this complex principle from experience.

6. Wilson's account of the empirical origin of the belief that every event has a cause does seem Humean. He argues that we learn of particular causal relations through constant conjunctions of events with resembling properties. In this way we come to expect an effect that is similar to the effects we have observed in the past, given similar events (which we come to identify as causes). Now, in the course of developing numerous such habits of causal association, we also come to have another disposition, viz., that of looking for events which can be incorporated within such conjunctions. Thus, we not only develop specific causal associations, but also the general disposition to persist until we have put new aspects of our world together causally. The rules which Hume offers for the guidance of our causal reasoning simply capitalize on the dispositions which experience has generated in us. The tendency to keep looking whenever we fail to observe similarity in the events which precede a particular type of event can be represented propositionally as the belief that like causes have like effects. But this is just inadequate if it is not construed as involving as well the belief that everything which happens is caused, for we are here dealing with an expectation which carries us beyond experiential regularities, to cases in which no specific connection has been discerned. As Wilson further points out, the tendency to act on the second order expectation (that there must be something which would make this an expected outcome) itself receives confirmation, or at least support, when we do continue our investigation and do discover a pattern in events which have not been experienced in a way that has connected them

causally. Success in this experimental endeavor, this enterprise of looking and finding, is precisely the basis of the claim that we are justified in relying on this causal assumption wherever we turn. Thus, experience gives rise to and ultimately support for the supposition that every event has some cause.

It is worth pointing out here that this fits well with what Hume has said about necessity. The questions which he raised were (i) why we suppose that a cause is always necessary and (ii) why we conclude that particular causes necessarily have particular effects (T82, the emphases are his.) There is, Hume argues, no intuitive or demonstrative necessity in either case. The supposition of necessity has, rather, a psychological foundation. The supposed necessity of a particular object dropping when its support is withdrawn has its basis in our habit of connecting the events. Similarly, the *opinion of the necessity of a cause* for every new effect (as Hume phrases it) comes from the awareness of our own expectation that what has not yet found a place among experiential continuities will be found to belong there on closer inspection. Thus, the same answer is given to both questions, as Hume initially suggests. We have, then, a natural extension of Wilson's interpretation which allows us to capture what Hume said about necessity.

7. Beck's claim to have found an a priori element in the Humean theory is a claim about the way in which this principle functions in the face of recalcitrant experience.

> ...a priori is as a priori does ...
> When a principle is called upon to correct experience, it is functioning in an a priori manner, regardless of its origin.[10]

Failures in constancy of conjunction (gaps) are not deemed to be evidence against the 'same-cause' principle; but to prevent this from being falsified, Hume "rescues" it by relying on the other causal principle, which "remains on dry land."[11] Clearly, the point of Beck's metaphor is that

the principle of universal causation is not functioning as falsifiable. In Wilson's treatment of the gap problem this element of non-falsifiability is preserved, but the inference to a non-empirical (or a priori) principle is blocked. This is achieved by observing that the existential hypothesis implied by the complex causal generalization described above is not falsified by observation failures. Here Wilson relies on the general point that existential claims are not (directly) falsifiable and the corresponding common-sense point that the existence of an X (e.g. a common property) is perfectly compatible with the failure to observe X. Thus, the characteristic which Beck's case turns upon, viz., non-falsifiability, turns out to be a feature of some paradigmatically empirical claims. Moreover, as Wilson's subsequent discussion is designed to show, such claims are by no means functioning as necessary truths.

This is a neat reply, but does it work? Though it may be true in general that observation failures do not falsify existential claims, it is not clear that this can have application here. The dispositions which we acquire from experiential regularities are expectations about experiential connections. Hume does not yet have a continuing external world of events and objects to draw upon whenever an anticipated correlation is not observed. Thus, the "existential hypothesis" which articulates a specific causal expectation is a hypothesis about what will be observed about the order of impressions. An observation failure does falsify this existential hypothesis. It is for this reason that Hume can speak of these situations as *contradictions to common experience*, and *objections to those maxims,... we form concerning... causes and effects* (T196). Of course it is true that Hume will salvage these maxims by postulating an independent order of events, one that corresponds to the correlate which we "feign". But the problem that Beck was intrigued by must precede this

salvaging operation, for there are no "contradictions" or "gaps" except in relation to the supposition that there is greater uniformity than we actually perceive.

8. We have seen already that Wilson's way of construing Hume allows for the possibility of rules for the correction of experience which are themselves founded upon experiential continuities. One way of assessing this interesting possibility that our most general causal principles are feedback rules is to consider whether Hume's account of the way in which our experience is given is consistent with the formation of rules of the sort Wilson depicts. Let's suppose first that our experience is largely patterned by the sorts of conjunctions which causal belief requires, with only occasional "discrepancies". We can then imagine that our expectations would easily carry us over the gaps, whether these be perceptions out of conjunction with their normal correlates or new experiences, not yet assimilated. Here Wilson's interpretation seems plausible. But, contrast with this an alternative picture of the given of experience, in which failures of correlation are vastly more prevalent than conjunctions. Under this latter assumption, the principle that all events have causes would be poorly supported by experience, and the discovery that we were in fact dealing with our experience in a way that assumed this principle would strongly suggest that it was a priori. Two questions arise here: (a) What is Hume's position on the relative prevalence of "gaps"? (b) Which of these contrasting views of the regularity of our experience is more descriptively accurate?

8.1 The answer to the first (exegetical) question is not entirely unproblematic. But, after the passage that is central to this whole discussion - the one about the door and the porter - Hume makes the surprising claim that

> *There is scarce a moment of my life, wherein there is not a similar instance presented to me, and I have not occasion to suppose the continu'd existence of*

> *objects, in order to connect their past and present appearances, and give them such an union with each other, as I have found by experience to be suitable to their particular natures and circumstances.* (T197, emphasis mine.)12

What I wish to focus on here is the claim that *scarce a moment* of one's experience is free from discontinuities. If this is true, then we must have already been quite selective in our arrival at the conjunctions which are incorporated into our causal reasoning. And this, indeed, would provide backing for Beck's claim that the way in which Hume has us dealing with "gaps" requires us to construe the principle that every event has a cause in a way that gives it an a priori function. Neither uniform expectations nor safe inductions are derivable from correlations which are generally missing from our experience.

8.2 Perhaps the best thing is to ignore the Humean passage which generates this difficulty, in the way that Wilson has done; it is always necessary to be somewhat selective in reconstructing Hume. My own view is that charity constrains us to preserve this claim if there are good reasons for thinking that it is true; and reflecting on my own experience leads me to think that it is. I hear the sound of cars passing, typewriters typing, the Xerox machine vibrating impatiently. I do not now, or "normally", experience the objects which I have designated as the source of these sounds together with these effects. I feel the wind, notice an ache in my head, see an image on the T.V. screen, smell the unpleasant smoke of a cigar, hear the phone ring, see words written in a treatise before me, and so on and on. In none of them does such a correlation begin to approach half the occasions, much less constancy. It's true that there are a few classroom examples in which the correlation does approach constancy: I flick the switch and the light goes out; my fingers open and the chalk falls. But even here there is probably more that

illustrates fragmentation than constant conjunction. Do I generally play with the lights? Do my fingers always open when they are holding chalk? Does the chalk constantly break, or break in this pattern, when it falls? As an empirical claim about the way in which experience is given, the principle that every event has a (Humean) cause is not even a hasty generalization; it's more like the claim that all swans are black. As Hume says, at every moment one faces exceptions to these generalizations. It may be true nonetheless that it is only because we sometimes observe regularities that we can come to reason causally. The problem is to get from these few conjunctions to the expectation that everything is caused without being defeated by the spectacular lack of correlation in the way our experience is given.

9. A different worry can be raised about the status of the principle that like causes have like effects and vice versa. Wilson, Beck, and even Hume seem satisfied that at least this principle is gleaned from experience. But a quick look at Hume's own accounts and definitions of causation seem to make it quite dubious that we could have discovered otherwise. Moreover, if we do allow this claim to function as an empirical generalization, then again it seems open to serious doubt. Let me explain each point.

9.1 Consider whether it would really be possible to discover that, e.g., like effects do not always come from like causes. Within Hume's analysis, at least, when we go from a mere contiguity of events to a basis for a causal claim, we get there by means of a correlation of like instances, of resembling cases, constant conjunction. If the successions which occur are different either in their prior or posterior events, so that in either case they are not seen as resembling instances (ones to which a common attribute can be applied) then we will not claim to have discovered a causal connection. That there is no way in which we could discover causes without discovering lawfulness

(constant conjunction) is a point which Hume makes countless times in his lengthy discussions of causality and necessary connection. Thus, Hume's fourth *rule by which to judge of causes* is, like the first three, a rule which presents the outcome of an investigation of what causes are, of an analysis of the concept. Just as there is no question of our discovering that some causes come <u>after</u> their effects, there is no question of our observing that like effects do not have like causes.[13]

9.2 But let's set aside the details of the Humean analysis, in order to see what results we get if we <u>do</u> treat this as an empirical generalization. Consider barn fires, divorces, headaches, exam failures, cars stalling, and other things for which we discover causes. That there are dozens of ways of arriving at what is (at least in a general sense) the same effect is just a piece of common sense, one represented in the claim that there can be more than one means to the same end. One might argue I suppose that the burning of a barn caused by faulty wiring and the same sort of conflagration originating from lightning are really different effects, only <u>roughly</u> grouped together as "the same". But, it is not obvious that we can take this line without trivializing the 'same-cause' principle (by giving the cause as a part of the description of the effect). Nor, is it obvious that we will always succeed in finding a difference in events that have different causes. Does experience prove that headaches which are virtually indistinguishable can't have quite different sources? ... that two students could not fail a test - even by the same margin, though one studied the wrong book and the other drank whisky all night? Here again I think we find that if the principle in question is not given a non-empirical status it will <u>fail</u> the test of experience. When we do rely upon it to guide our investigations we allow the principle to function as an <u>a priori</u> claim. In Hume's account the 'same-cause' principle has an <u>a priori</u> status

because it is an analytic truth, a "relation of ideas."

10. In his discussion Wilson has shown that Beck's "Kantian" interpretation of Hume overlooks ways in which experience can come to be self-corrective, given the mental apparatus available to an empiricist. No doubt there is more to be said in behalf of this interesting thesis. But, if I am right, Wilson is mistaken, first, in supposing that there is some logical deduction of the principle of universal causation from the principle that like causes have like effects (and vice versa) and, secondly, in supposing that the latter is itself an empirical generalization. Hume's account of what we are discovering when we discover causes makes this as much a necessary condition as is temporal priority. We have seen as well that some "hard wiring" may be discoverable in the way in which, even on Hume's view, we arrive at causal connection without the experience of constant conjunction.

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1. R. P. Wolff, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," Philosophical Review, 69 (1960); reprinted in Hume, ed., V. C. Chappell (Anchor, 1966), pp. 99-128. Wilson has criticized Wolff's version of a Humean a priori in a paper of the same title in McGill Hume Studies, ed., Norton, Capaldi, Robison (Austin Hill, 1979), pp. 101-120.

2. L. W. Beck, "A Prussian Hume and a Scottish Kant," McGill Hume Studies (1979), pp. 64-78.

3. See "Is There a Prussian Hume ...?" in this journal, April 1982, pp.1-18. This essay continues the defense of the Empiricist Hume which Wilson undertakes in "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," supra note 1.

4. Treatise, p. 208. All references to the Treatise are to the Selby-Bigge edition. This "feigning" is central to Hume's account of our arrival at the belief in the external world.

5. It is important to bear in mind that what I will refer to as the "like-cause" (or "same-cause") principle means

both that like causes have like effects and *like effects imply like causes* (T174).

6. See Hume's discussion of this distinction between events and effects, T82:

> *Every effect necessarily pre-supposes a cause; effect being a relative term, of which cause is the correlative. But this does not prove, that every being must be preceded by a cause; no more than it follows, because every husband must have a wife, that therefore every man must be marry'd.*

7. Wilson calls attention to this parallel reference to the "indirect and oblique manner" in which custom operates in these two cases. I have added here the connection between this indirect operation of custom and the more modern conception of "feedback" which Wilson utilizes.

8. See quotation, supra, note 6.

9. Beck, L. W., "A Prussian Hume and a Scottish Kant," pp. 74-5.

10. Ibid, p. 75.

11. Ibid, p. 71.

12. See Brett, N., "Scepticism and Vain Questions," Dialogue, XIII: 4, pp. 657-73 for a discussion of this passage in relation to the belief in "body".

13. Just as causal connections are not generally experienced as constant, so, if we consider the way in which experience is given, we discover that what we take to be a cause is often perceived after what we take to be the effect. The sounds of typewriters, passing cars, etc., mentioned above, for example, will commonly be experienced before their sources.