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Alan Hausman and David Hausman

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Hume's explanation of our belief in the continuing existence of unperceived bodies is notoriously elusive.¹ Stroud, for example, despairs that it is difficult to see how Hume's elaborate discussion of the constancy and coherence of perceptions explains the origin of the idea of continuing existence, let alone our belief that there are continually existing things.² Yet Stroud, careful as he is, does not spot the key to the problem. It is not merely that constancy and coherence, the mainstays of Hume's four-part system, are obscure; rather, there is, we shall argue, a hidden assumption in the discussion which necessitates the construction of the system that embodies that obscurity. This hidden assumption is Hume's implicit idealism. That idealism, we shall show, fashions the entire discussion in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses," as well as key passages in his discussion of the derivation of the idea of the self. Its main influence is on Hume's claims concerning the place of causal reasoning in forming our belief in continued existence. Once that influence is understood, Hume's theory of causation can itself be seen in a new light.

Early in the *Treatise*, it does not seem as if there will be a problem in explaining belief in the continuing existence of independent, that is, unperceived, bodies.

We readily suppose an object may continue individually the same, tho' several times absent from and present to the senses; and ascribe to it an identity, notwithstanding the interruption of the perception, whenever we conclude, that if we had kept our eye or hand constantly upon it, it wou'd have convey'd an invariable and uninterrupted perception. But this conclusion beyond the impressions of our senses can be founded only on the connexion of *cause and effect*; nor can we otherwise have any security, that the object is not chang'd upon us, however much the new object may resemble that which was formerly present to the senses. Whenever we discover such a perfect resemblance, we consider, whether it be common in that species of objects; whether possibly or probably any cause cou'd operate in producing the change and resemblance; and according as we determine concerning these causes and effects, we form our judgment concerning the identity of the object.

Here then it appears, that of those three relations, which depend not upon the mere ideas, the only one, that can be trac'd beyond our senses, and informs us of existences and objects, which we do not see or feel, is *causation*. (T 74)

What is Hume committing himself to here? It certainly seems to be that, if there is causal reasoning going on via the principle of association of causation in the cases he cites, it is done upon the observation of the constant conjunctions of physical objects and events. Furthermore, if we consider causation as a philosophical relation, we have here genuine constant conjunctions which would justify the belief that physical objects exist unperceived.³ Granted that sometimes we associate causally on the basis of 'bad' constant conjunctions, there is no *prima facie* reason to think that this case is one of them. Given these implications, the knowledgeable reader of Hume must be taken somewhat aback; this does not sound like the arch sceptic of all time talking. Yet there are no qualifying passages around the one just cited.

Hume now embarks on his long analysis of the causal relation. He then turns, in the section "Of scepticism with regard to the senses," to a detailed explanation of our belief in the continuing existence of unperceived bodies. He uses as one illustration a fire that one observes, after leaving one's chamber then returning, to have changed in the interim. Since we are accustomed in other instances to seeing the fire burn down, we here reason from what he calls the coherence of the change to the belief that the fire existed when we were not in the room. We have in the past observed five log fires burn down to four log fires and then to three log fires. We light a five log fire, leave the room, and return to a three log fire. Using coherence as our guide, we reason that there was a four log fire in the interim.

What sort of reasoning is involved here? Surely it seems causal, just as in the case cited above from T 74; indeed, Hume's choice of the term "coherence" has a decidedly causal echo. We would ordinarily think of the cause of the four log fire to be the burning of one of the five logs, and the cause of the three log fire to be the burning of another of the logs. Thus, when we start with the five log fire we anticipate a four log fire even if we don't see it, and when we return to a three log fire, we reason that it was caused by the burning of one of the four logs that existed when we left the room. This explanation seems not only consistent with, but nicely illustrative of, the above quotation. But, after giving another set of examples of coherence involving the famous case of the porter ascending his stairs to deliver a letter to him, Hume pulls out the rug:

But tho' this conclusion from the coherence of appearances may seem to be of the same nature with our reasonings concerning causes and effects; as being deriv'd from custom, and regulated by past experience; we shall find upon examination, that they are at the bottom considerably different from each other, and that this inference arises from the understanding, and from custom in an indirect and oblique manner. (T 197)

Hume's denial of causal reasoning here is, to say the least, surprising. As we shall show, it focuses attention on the exact nature of what he believes causal reasoning to be.

Price discusses the question of why Hume believes that the case of coherence does not yield to a causal analysis.⁴ His argument centres on constant conjunctions. Price notes that in his discussion of necessary connection—and, we may add, in the quotations above about continuing existence—Hume generally uses examples of constant conjunctions between physical objects and processes. But of course Hume believes that the notion of physical objects and processes is built up from sense impressions by means of the imagination; that's the whole point of the discussion of continuing existence. That is, the idea of a physical object *essentially includes* the idea of continuing and *independent* (non-perceived) existence; the latter ideas both logically and psychologically precede the former. So, at least to begin with, the problem seems to be that Hume's examples are at best ill-conceived. Talk, as in T 74, about belief that, say, a mountain exists when we are not perceiving it, already presupposes that we have the idea of the mountain as a physical object. But this idea surely depends already upon the belief in unperceived entities; after all, that's part of what we understand by "mountain." The upshot is that Hume's examples need to be redescribed before we can assess the proper place of causation in reasoning to the existence of unperceived entities.

Let us try to make this point clearer. Hume believes that, whether the vulgar know it or not, what we are presented with in sense experience are momentarily existing impressions.⁵ Therefore, Hume's examples of both the fire and the porter are, on his own grounds, at best quite misleading, since they invoke physical objects, which are continually existing things, as the elements upon which reasoning to the existence of non-perceived entities takes place. A more careful analysis will have to start with perceptions and show how the idea of continuing, unperceived existence is built or derived from them. Notice, too, that the causal connections, in the first quotation from Hume above, are between what we already believe to be continuing existents. The question then, is whether we can clean up Hume's examples by

using only perceptions as the building blocks, and by so doing, perhaps resolve the discrepancy between the earlier and later view of the place of causation in the process. The issue then becomes whether or not causal reasoning plays a crucial role in the building of the idea of physical objects.

On the face of it, there are some causal connections among sense perceptions. Hume formulates laws—laws of association, the copy theory of ideas—whose relata are sense impressions. Such laws involve constant conjunctions. What is the correct description of the data on which such claims of constant conjunctions are based? In order to answer this question, let us turn to an example which, we think, presents some alternatives.

Suppose someone has some impressions of sensation, say seeing some moving shapes and colours, and then hears a squeak. We assume, to put the subject in the situation we think Hume must be envisioning in his analysis of the derivation of the ideas of independent and continuing existence, that she does not yet have these ideas. Later, she will identify the shapes, colour and squeak as those of a moving door. Now assume we have a situation in which our subject observes, say, the first members of the conjunction. Then, by the associative habit known as cause and effect she should expect, given Humean principles, to hear a squeak. Finally, let us suppose, she actually hears the squeak. The habit has been reinforced, and this is nothing less than the belief that the moving coloured shapes cause the squeak.

Let us now suppose that for some reason the subject stops her ears, leaves the room, turns her attention elsewhere—and thus does not hear the squeak. Hume addresses this situation in detail, in a passage which we think is at the heart of the *Treatise*:

For 'twill readily be allow'd, that since nothing is ever really present to the mind, besides its own perceptions, 'tis not only impossible, that any habit shou'd ever be acquir'd otherwise than by the regular succession of these perceptions, but also that any habit shou'd ever exceed that degree of regularity. Any degree, therefore, of regularity in our perceptions, can never be a foundation for us to infer a greater degree of regularity in some objects, which are not perceiv'd; since this supposes a contradiction, *viz.* a habit acquir'd by what was never present to the mind. But 'tis evident, that whenever we infer the continu'd existence of the objects of sense from their coherence, and the frequency of their union, 'tis in order to bestow on the objects a greater regularity than what is observ'd in our mere perceptions. We remark a connexion betwixt two kinds of objects in their past appearance to the

senses, but are not able to observe this connexion to be perfectly constant, since the turning about of our head, or the shutting of our eyes is able to break it. What then do we suppose in this case, but that these objects still continue their usual connexion, notwithstanding their apparent interruption, and that the irregular appearances are join'd by something, of which we are insensible? But as all reasoning concerning matters of fact arises only from custom, and custom can only be the effect of repeated perceptions, the extending of custom and reasoning beyond the perceptions can never be the direct and natural effect of the constant repetition and connexion, but must arise from the co-operation of some other principles. (T 197-98)

Hume's conclusion is that the situation in which the person turns her head or her attention constitutes a counter-example to the habit she has hitherto formed. What is his reasoning here? It seems that in order to take not hearing the squeak as a counter-instance to the habit, he must assume that the anticipatory belief is that a squeak will be *heard*, not merely that the squeak will exist whether heard or not. But clearly it is because we have described the situation in terms of expecting to *hear* a squeak that there could even be the problem that our expectation is frustrated. Ordinarily, we do not describe what we experience in terms of the fact that it is experienced. We say that we observe the colours and shapes, not that we observe that the colours and shapes are being observed by us. Thus, we describe the situation in question as the constant conjunction of colours and shapes, on the one hand, and squeaks on the other. Of course, speaking colloquially, we expect to hear a squeak. But in order to describe the constant conjunctions in terms of heard squeaks and seen colours and shapes, Hume must believe that the fact that the colours, shapes, and squeaks are perceived *is a relevant variable* in the content of the constant conjunction, an identifiable feature of both cause and effect. If Hume did not have this belief, then there is no reason whatever for him to think that the squeak is going to be *heard*.

What *is* the correct description of the subject's state of mind in the case we (and Hume) have constructed? Surely, the question of what the person would actually do here is a psychological one, answerable only by empirical means, whereas Hume seems to be, without apparent argument, assuming that the philosophical view must be the correct psychological description. He simply assumes that the vulgar mind could not make the causal inference because in fact sense impressions are momentary and mind-dependent. We are not questioning Hume's claim that the mind will not, in causal reasoning, go beyond the

constant conjunctions it has recorded. Our point is that his reason for the claim that the mind will not go beyond the *conjunctions in question* must be idealistic. This is the only reason that makes his otherwise puzzling claims about causation in the case of coherence sensible.⁶ Hume is assuming that the correct description of the subject's habit is that she has conjoined perceived colours and shapes with perceived squeaks; that they are perceptions is part of what she is experiencing. The only reason for that assumption is Hume's idealism.

One might wish to claim that Hume's idealism, however, is of the weak variety—that it need only imply that as a matter of fact, each perception is perceived by, and in that sense depends upon, the mind that is aware of it. Each perception, in other words, as a matter of fact must occur in some mind. After all, following his discussion of coherence and constancy Hume reminds us, via the arguments from illusion and perceptual relativity, of the fleeting, mind-dependent status of impressions. One might construe these arguments to show merely that perceptions as a matter of fact are always perceived. Since for Hume the mind is in fact merely a bundle of its impressions and ideas, the fact that a perception is mind-dependent in the proposed weak sense means that it as a matter of fact belongs to a certain bundle that constitutes a self. This will not help Hume. The fact that a perception belongs to this bundle is surely not part of the data that makes up the conjuncts of a constant conjunction for example, of the colours, shape and squeak of our previous example. The bundle that constitutes a self includes the past history of each self. How could a relational property like the one in question—a relational property which changes character at each moment of one's existence, whose nature extends beyond the present moment—be an element in the causal process, that is, an element in the conjuncts of a constant conjunction? In order for the fact that each perception is perceived to be a relevant variable in a constant conjunction, that fact must be intrinsic to, in some sense a constituent of, the present impression in question.

Thus it appears that Hume is implicitly assuming that impressions are perceived by their very nature, that they are in some way intrinsically mental entities. Either he implicitly assumes the existence of intrinsically mental acts of perception, or the existence of a substantial self.⁷ This conclusion, of course, sharply contrasts with Hume's stated position with regard to the analysis of the self. Hume's view of the self is that it is a bundle of perceptions, with causal connections holding between different perceptions in the bundle. But as we have just shown, the view of the self as a bundle cannot be consistently maintained with the idealistic assumption. If the self is a bundle, the idealistic assumption no longer makes sense and the door

is opened to justifiable inductions to the existence of unperceived *perceptions*. Hume cannot maintain both that the self is a bundle and that the world is constructed out of mind-dependent perceptions. Thus, Hume's entire criticism of our belief in physical objects and a continuing self rests not on problems about induction, but on his refusal, because of his idealism, to allow a particular application of induction.

The discrepancy between the treatment of belief in continuing existence at T 74 and at T 197 is now explainable. Hume believes that, beginning with impressions and ideas, belief in continuing physical objects is unjustifiable. But we believe in them anyway, and coherence (and constancy) are invoked, distinct from causal principles, to show why. However, Hume's discussion rests on the assumption that the contents of the vulgar mind are fleeting, dependent entities. At T 74, then, his claim is about physical objects and it would appear that, given the beliefs the vulgar have about *them*, causal inferences can be supported to fill in perceptual gaps. But of course, our initial belief in such objects, that is, that they are independent and continuing existents, is illusory. Still, once we have the concept of, say, a ball as a continuing independent entity, we can—using the argument at T 74—conclude that the ball exists unperceived. The reason that the later argument at T 197 is not operative, is that the idealistic assumption is not made at T 74. The ball is, to the vulgar mind, independent and continuing, and so these characteristics support an induction to the unperceived. It is not merely that the vulgar now have an idea of unperceived existence, hence can extend it; it is that the fetters present in the case of the squeak have been removed.

Price has an explanation of Hume's denial of causal reasoning in the case of the anticipated squeak that does not require the assumption of idealism. He would argue that we have misconceived the example to begin with, since there cannot be causal connections between impressions. Consider by contrast what Price would say if the case involved physical objects, objects that we assume continue to exist unperceived. Here, we would never think that the turning of our head produces a counter-example to an observed conjunction; if we walk out a door before the water actually boils, the mind is not outraged, and does not henceforth refuse to anticipate the boiling of water when it heats. But in the case of impressions, returning to the case of the squeak, Price says that we never have constant conjunctions to cause the mind to anticipate the squeak in the first place, and he clearly thinks this either is or consistently could be Hume's view.

Is this what Hume is claiming? If it were, we could easily understand that despite appearances to the contrary, the reasoning in the case of coherence is not causal.⁸ So Price's reconstruction of Hume saves him from what appears to be an inconsistency in his claims about

causation. But we believe Price's interpretation of what Hume *actually* says is in fact mistaken. What is important is why he felt that turning one's head was in fact a counter-example to a conjunction heretofore perceived. Consider again his words:

Any degree, therefore, of regularity in our perceptions, can never be a foundation for us to infer a greater degree of regularity in some objects, which are not perceiv'd; since this supposes a contradiction, *viz.* a habit acquir'd by what was never present to the mind. But 'tis evident, that whenever we infer the continu'd existence of the objects of sense from their coherence, and the frequency of their union, 'tis in order to bestow on the objects a greater regularity than what is observ'd in our mere perceptions. We remark a connexion betwixt two kinds of objects in their past appearance to the senses, but are not able to observe this connexion to be perfectly constant, since the turning about of our head, or the shutting of our eyes is able to break it. (T 197-98)

Hume clearly is not denying that there are noticed patterns among impressions. What he is claiming, rather, is that the pattern is broken, when there is one, by turning one's head or shutting one's eyes. This view has radically different implications from Price's: for Price, there is no pattern to be broken because impressions are too fleeting and variable for one to be built without the intervention of principles of association, for example, resemblance. But Hume must think there are such constant conjunctions among perceptions. Indeed, he says so in many crucial places. For one thing, there is the causal connection between simple impressions and simple ideas. For another, there is his view that, in the vulgar construction of the idea of the self, the mind apparently notices causal connections amongst its impressions. So we are left with explaining why he thinks that the patterns in question are broken. The only plausible answer, we think, is that he counts the very fact that impressions and ideas are perceived as part of the pattern itself. Impressions, the building blocks of our belief in continuing, distinct existence are dependent on being perceived.

Southern Methodist University

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978) (hereafter cited as "T").

2. Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, 1977), 96ff. The distinction between accounting for the acquisition of the ideas of continuing and independent existence, and accounting for the belief that those ideas apply to anything, is discussed below.
3. As will become clear, the issues we are interested in with respect to justification of our belief in the continuing existence of bodies are raised by Hume independently of worries about justification of *any* induction, whether about continuing bodies or not.
4. H. H. Price, *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford, 1940), 6ff., 53ff. This point is a focus of Price's book. But not all commentators think the point important. Stroud (above, n. 2) does not even mention the apparent discrepancy between the earlier and later view concerning the place of causation in reasoning to and believing in the existence of unperceived bodies; indeed, he concentrates on a different aspect of Hume's account of continuing existence, namely Hume's attempt at explaining the constancy of our perceptions, for example, in the case of seeing a mountain, looking away, then looking back.
5. As will be seen presently, this is how Hume sees the situation. This would put the vulgar mind in a philosophical frame, *if* what is implied is that the vulgar must *know* unconsciously that sense impressions are momentary and fleeting. (Certainly we don't seem to know consciously in everyday life that what we are aware of in sense perception are mind dependent impressions.) Not that Hume is above such attributions; as Stroud (above, n. 2) documents, he often gives the vulgar mind philosophical views. In this case it is idealism. But, at several places in the *Treatise*, Hume also insists that the vulgar take their perceptions as their objects. If this is taken as it seems intended, the vulgar would take what Hume calls impressions as already at least independent of perception, and hence would never dream of the idealist description in question; indeed, this seems to be his position in the *Enquiry*. In his discussion, Stroud claims that "Hume provides no description of the state of the vulgar consciousness before the acquisition of the idea of continued and distinct existence, out of which that idea could naturally arise. What he needs is a description of the way the vulgar take things to be that attributes to them neither a belief in the continued and distinct existence of what they perceive nor the philosophical view that all they perceive are 'internal and perishing existences'" (p. 106).

On the other hand, it could be argued that given Hume's theory of association as a model, it is not necessary that the characteristics of impressions be grasped in order for these characteristics to be causally efficacious. That is, if the existence

of mind dependent momentary impressions is the true state of things, such impressions might be the causes of our ideas of continuing and independent existence in the way that Hume describes without there being any awareness at all of the characteristics of these impressions.

6. Given that we are not justified in filling gaps in our perceptions by inductive means, Hume cannot give the ordinary phenomenalist reconstruction of physical objects. It is only when his idealism is ignored that one can construe Hume in the way that many twentieth century philosophers themselves construe him—as their forefather. See our “Hume’s Use of Illicit Substances,” *Hume Studies* 15, no. 1 (April 1989): 1-38.
7. See Hausman, “Hume’s Use of Illicit Substances” (above, n. 6).
8. Price (above, n. 4) believes that there are no genuine constant conjunctions between impressions and, since physical objects are in effect ontological fictions, there are no genuine constant conjunctions among them, either. But surely Hume did not think he was, in his first definition of “cause,” defining a vacuous concept. As we have construed matters, Hume does believe there are constant conjunctions among impressions, at the price of assuming idealism.