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## Hume's Argument in *Treatise* 1.3.3.3: An Exposition and Defense

GREGG OSBORNE

*Abstract:* Hume claims to prove in *Treatise* 1.3.3.3 that the causal maxim is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain. The aim of this paper is to elucidate some puzzling features of his argument and thereby show that objections raised by James Beattie, Barry Stroud, and Harold Noonan can be answered. The conclusion is that Hume's argument goes through given convictions Hume expects his readers to share long before they reach this point of the *Treatise*. These convictions are that all ideas are imagistic entities, that all images must be fully determinate, and that there is no empirical evidence against the claim that nothing we can conceive or imagine in detail implies a contradiction.

Hume's contention that the causal maxim is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain must surely rank as one of his most famous and influential contributions to philosophy. That contention is found in a section of the *Treatise of Human Nature* somewhat oddly and perhaps ironically entitled "Why a cause is always necessary." His attempt to establish it falls into three major parts: (1) an argument in the second paragraph of that section (T 1.3.3.2; SBN 79) in support of the claim that the maxim is not intuitively certain, (2) an argument in the third paragraph of that section (T 1.3.3.3; SBN 79–80) in support of the claim that the maxim is not demonstratively certain and perhaps also in support of the claim that the maxim is not intuitively certain, and (3) attacks on various

attempts by such earlier philosophers as Hobbes, Clarke, and Locke to prove the maxim (and thereby show it to be demonstratively certain).<sup>1</sup> The argument in T 1.3.3.2 is almost universally found to be wanting.<sup>2</sup> The attacks on earlier attempts to prove the maxim are almost universally agreed to be devastating. There is no real consensus, however, on the argument in T 1.3.3.3. Not only such early critics as James Beattie but such recent commentators as Barry Stroud and Harold Noonan regard it as a failure.<sup>3</sup> Many others, such as Ralph Church, Norman Kemp Smith, and Antony Flew appear to think that Hume is clearly right in his contention that the contrary of the maxim is conceivable but do not show in any detail how the critics might be answered.<sup>4</sup> At least one recent author—namely, Georges Dicker—does respond to the objections of Stroud but in one case misfires and in the other stops short of what appears to be needed (see Dicker, 141–2).

The aim of this paper is to elucidate Hume's argument in the relevant paragraph and thereby make clear how the criticisms of Beattie, Stroud, and Noonan can be answered. What we shall find is that the argument goes through given convictions Hume expects his readers to share long before they get to T 1.3.3.3. The convictions in question are that memory and imagination are the only representative faculties, that all ideas are imagistic entities, that all images must be fully determinate, and that there is no empirical evidence against the claim that nothing we can conceive or imagine in detail implies a contradiction. There may be insuperable problems with one or more of these convictions, of course, but that does not diminish the need to show that and how this argument goes through if they are granted. This will not only allow us to see the depth and rigor of the philosophy developed on their basis; it will also allow us to move past the misguided objections most commonly raised so far to the deeper issues on which the success or failure of this argument actually depend.

## I

It is sometimes held that the apparent weakness of Hume's earlier argument in T 1.3.3.2 against the *intuitive* certainty of the causal maxim does not matter. "For on reflection," explains Dicker, for example, "it seems sufficiently clear that the causal principle . . . is not a proposition that can be known to be true just by understanding what it says" (135). A proposition is intuitively certain, Dicker thus takes Hume to hold, if and only if we can know it to be true just by understanding what it says. And since we cannot do this with respect to the causal maxim, he infers, the maxim fails to meet Hume's standard of intuitive certainty.

It is by no means clear, however, that the intuitive certainty of a proposition for Hume should be equated with our ability to know that it is true just by understanding what it says. To know that a proposition is true just by

understanding what it says would be to know that it is true just by grasping what it means.<sup>5</sup> If the intuitive certainty of a proposition depends on our ability to know that it is true just by grasping what it means, however, then it can be doubted whether numerous propositions Hume would regard as intuitively certain really are. Hume would surely hold that “nothing can be red all over and green all over at the same time” is intuitively certain, for instance, but it is not at all clear that we can know this proposition to be true just by grasping what it means. Anyone who does grasp what it means will presumably grasp that it is true, of course, but this does not entail that he or she will grasp that it is true *just* by grasping what it means.<sup>6</sup> So even if the causal maxim is not a proposition that can be known to be true just by understanding what it says, it cannot safely be inferred that the maxim fails to meet any standard of intuitive certainty Hume himself would accept.<sup>7</sup>

This must affect our approach to the argument in 1.3.3.3. The aim of this argument is at least somewhat unclear. “But here is an argument,” Hume announces, “which proves at once that the foregoing proposition [i.e. the causal maxim] is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain” (T 1.3.3.3; SBN 79). The most natural reading of this sentence, of course, is that the forthcoming argument will both (a) prove that the foregoing proposition is not demonstratively certain, and (b) serve as a second, independent proof that the foregoing proposition is not intuitively certain. In what follows, however, there is no explicit mention of intuitive certainty. Hume merely (i) identifies a condition under which alone the proposition could be demonstrated, (ii) purports to show that this condition cannot be fulfilled, and (iii) concludes that the proposition cannot be demonstrated. There is no explanation at all of why the considerations adduced might be supposed to rule out the claim that the proposition is *intuitively* certain. This raises the possibility that what Hume means in the sentence cited above is that he will now present an argument which will prove at once that the causal maxim is not demonstratively certain and *thus*—since it has *already* been proved that the maxim is not intuitively certain—that the maxim is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain.

This would be a major disappointment. The view that the maxim is intuitively certain was very widespread in Hume's day—even more widespread, he seems to imply in 1.3.3.1, than the view that the maxim is demonstratively certain.<sup>8</sup> Thus if Hume's only ground for saying that the maxim is not intuitively certain is the argument put forth in 1.3.3.2, he can hardly be held to have offered any serious challenge to the most widespread view of his day. It is very much to be hoped, therefore, that an account of Hume's argument in 1.3.3.3 can make clear how it might be taken to provide an independent proof that the causal maxim is not *intuitively* certain.

## II

Here is the whole of that argument:

We can never demonstrate the necessity of a cause to every new existence, or new modification of existence, without showing at the same time the impossibility there is, that any thing can ever begin to exist without some productive principle; and where the latter proposition cannot be prov'd, we must despair of ever being able to prove the former. Now that the latter proposition is utterly incapable of demonstrative proof, we may satisfy ourselves by considering, that as all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity; and is therefore incapable of being refuted by any reasoning from mere ideas; without which 'tis impossible to demonstrate the necessity of a cause. (T 1.3.3.3; SBN 79–80)

Hume speaks almost exclusively in terms of things beginning to exist. As Terence Penelhum points out, though, he also speaks of our inability to demonstrate the necessity of a cause to every new *modification of existence*, thereby showing that his concern extends to all events whatsoever.<sup>9</sup> What the causal maxim asserts, he would thus surely agree, is that all *events* have a cause.<sup>10</sup> In what follows, therefore, I will systematically replace terms like “new existence” and “beginning of existence” with “event.”

In order to prove that the causal maxim is not demonstratively certain, Hume observes, we need only to show that its contrary—the claim that some event has no cause—does not imply a contradiction. This is then shown in five steps:

1. All distinct ideas are separable from each other.
2. The ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct.
3. It will thus be easy for us to conceive an event without conjoining to it (the idea of the event) the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle. The separation of the idea of a cause from that of an event, in other words, is plainly possible for the imagination.
4. The actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity.
5. The claim that some event has no cause does not imply a contradiction.

## III

It is often held that the second step is carelessly stated, and downright false as it stands.<sup>11</sup> This seems uncharitable. The term “effect” in this step is clearly supposed to refer to a particular event *we take to be* an effect. Hume’s contention in this step, therefore, is simply that the ideas of cause and of a particular event we take to be an effect (that of an event called  $E_2$ , let us say) are evidently distinct. There are two ways, of course, in which this might be understood. The first is that the idea of  $E_2$  (the movement of an entity of the sort any common person means by a billiard ball from point  $p_2$  to point  $p_3$ , for example) is evidently distinct from the idea of the event we take to be the actual cause of  $E_2$  (let us call this one  $E_1$  and say that it is the movement of another entity of the sort any common person means by a billiard ball from point  $p_1$  to point  $p_2$ ). The second—which Hume will clearly need in order to reach his conclusion that “some event has no cause” does not imply a contradiction—is that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause.

Just for the sake of argument, let us assume that the idea of  $E_2$  is indeed distinct from that of  $E_1$ . How can Hume get from there to the claim that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause?

The answer is rooted in his account of abstract or general ideas. The abstract or general idea of a cause, on that account, is just the idea of a particular event (that of  $E_1$ , for example) which achieves general signification by being annexed to the term “cause,” a term that revives the disposition to call up other ideas annexed to it, ideas which are themselves ideas of particular events. The set of such ideas is referred to by Don Garrett as the term’s “revival set.”<sup>12</sup> To determine whether or not the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause, therefore, what we have to determine is whether or not there is any member of the term “cause”’s revival set from which it is not distinct. To say that the idea of  $E_2$  is not distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause would thus be to say that there is at least one member of that revival set from which it is not distinct.

Now it must be acknowledged, of course, that the idea of  $E_2$  may *itself* be a member of that revival set.  $E_2$  is an effect, we might say, but is in turn the cause of yet another event (perhaps the movement of a third entity of the sort any common person means by a billiard ball from point  $p_3$  to point  $p_4$ ). And the idea of  $E_2$ , it must further be acknowledged, is not distinct from itself. Thus there is a sense in which it must be acknowledged that the idea of  $E_2$  is not distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause. This does not seem to matter in the present context, however.  $E_2$ , after all, cannot be the cause of itself (the cause of an event, according to Hume, must precede the event) (see T 1.3.2.7; SBN 76). With respect to  $E_2$ , it thus seems, the relevant revival set will not include the idea of  $E_2$ . To say that the idea of  $E_2$  is not distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause, therefore,

would be to say that there is at least one member of the term “cause”’s revival set *apart from the idea of  $E_2$  itself* from which the idea of  $E_2$  is not distinct.

This should make clear that and how Hume can get from (a) the claim that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from that of  $E_1$  to (b) the claim that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause. Having determined that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from that of  $E_1$ , he need merely show that considerations of the same sort that compel us to agree that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from that of  $E_1$  also compel us to agree that it is distinct from any *other* idea (except for itself) belonging to the term “cause”’s revival set. This point may seem fairly obvious; a failure to appreciate it, however, is what appears to underlie the objection to Hume’s argument recently raised by Harold Noonan.<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

“But what is it for two ideas to be ‘distinct’?” asks Barry Stroud (47). There are, he seems to think, only two possible answers: first, that the ideas can be separated from each other without contradiction, and second, that we can hold one of them in mind without the other or apply one of them to a certain thing without applying the other. The first of these answers, he points out, would eliminate any appearance that Hume has an actual *argument* in support of the claim that the contrary of the causal maxim does not imply a contradiction.<sup>14</sup> The second, he then claims, would result in a flawed test of the identity or non-distinctness of ideas:

According to Hume ‘the mind cannot form any notion of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of degrees of each’ [T 1.1.7.3; SBN 18], so it is impossible for us to form an idea of a straight line without forming an idea of a line of a certain specific length. But if on a particular occasion we form an idea of a straight line one inch in length, that does not show that the idea of being a straight line and the idea of being one inch in length are the same idea, or that the second is included in, or is part of, the first. (Stroud, 49)

Stroud’s point in regard to the first of these answers seems perfectly sound.<sup>15</sup> His critique of the second, however, seems wide of the mark. The suggestion with which he claims to be concerned, after all, is that there might be a sort of *thought-experiment* that will allow us to recognize whether or not two ideas are distinct (see Stroud, 48). But why then focus on the fact that there are occasions on which (a) we cannot hold a certain idea in mind without another, and (b) the ideas in question are nonetheless distinct? Shouldn’t the key to the thought-experiment be whether or not there are occasions on which we *can* hold one of these ideas in mind without the other?

There may be no need, however, to respond to Stroud's question with some suitably revised version of this second possible answer. There may be no need, in fact, to respond to Stroud's question at all. Ideas for Hume, it must be remembered, are—at least first and foremost—imagistic entities.<sup>16</sup> “What is it for two entities to be distinct?” Stroud might just as well ask. Would an inability to answer this very general question entail an inability to say what it is for two specific entities—two entities of the sort any common person means by a rose, for example—to be distinct? It does not appear that it would. “One is white while the other is red,” I might say. “And the one that is white stands to the left of the one that is red as we face them from the path.” Would I not then be saying what it is for *these* two entities to be distinct even though I am flummoxed by the more general question?

It thus seems clear (assuming the answer to my rhetorical question to be yes) that I can specify various features that make entity *x* distinct from entity *y*. What I cannot do is say *in general* what it is for two entities to be distinct. The same seems to be true with respect to *imagistic* entities. I may not be able to say *in general* what it is for two such entities to be distinct, but I can still identify features that make imagistic entity *x* distinct from imagistic entity *y*. The imagistic entities with which Hume is concerned in T 1.3.3.3 have events for their content. Imagistic entity *x*, let us say, has for its content the movement of an entity of the sort any common person means by a solid white billiard ball from point  $p_1$  to point  $p_2$ . Imagistic entity *y*, on the other hand, has for *its* content the movement of an entity of the sort any common person means by a striped billiard ball from point  $p_2$  to point  $p_3$ . To say that these two imagistic entities have different events for their content is surely to say what (or at least part of what) makes *these* two imagistic entities distinct. And this seems to hold whether or not I can say what makes two imagistic entities of *any sort whatsoever* distinct.

Once this is recognized, it becomes very hard to see how anyone could (a) accept Hume's conception of ideas as imagistic entities, (b) accept his account of abstract or general ideas, but still (c) reject his claim that the abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of a particular event we take to be an effect are distinct. The abstract or general idea of a cause, after all, must have some particular event for its content (this follows from Hume's account of abstract or general ideas). The event in question, moreover, cannot be that of the particular event we here take to be an effect (no event can be the cause of itself, according to Hume, so the idea of the particular event we here take to be an effect cannot be regarded as a member of “cause”'s revival set in this context). The abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of a particular event we take to be an effect must have different events for their content, therefore, and this, given that they are supposed to be imagistic entities, seems to make them distinct.

This all rests, of course, on (i) Hume's conviction that all ideas are imagistic entities, and (ii) the account of abstract or general ideas that fits in with that

conviction and with his further conviction that imagistic entities must be fully determinate. If one can sustain a strong case against one or both of these convictions, then one may be in position to reject this second step of the argument in T.1.3.3.3. Given these convictions, however—convictions Hume expects his readers to share before they leave the first part of the first Book of the *Treatise* and thus long before they get to T.1.3.3.3—the step seems in order.

## V

The claim that the abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of a particular event we take to be an effect are distinct is combined by Hume with the claim that all distinct ideas are separable from each other to yield the intermediate conclusion that it will be easy for us to conceive this particular event without conjoining to its idea the abstract or general idea of a cause. The content of this intermediate conclusion is then equated with the claim that the separation of the abstract or general idea of a cause from the idea of this particular event is plainly possible for the imagination. Now to conceive this particular event without conjoining to its idea the abstract or general idea of a cause is (at least for Hume) to conceive an event without any cause. And to say that the separation of the abstract or general idea of a cause from that of this particular event is possible for the imagination is (at least for Hume) to say that we can imagine an event without any cause. The content of the intermediate conclusion, therefore, can be fairly parsed as the claim that we can conceive or imagine (these being equivalent for Hume) an event without any cause.

The claim that we can do this was rejected by many of Hume's early readers and is still being challenged. Among the more eloquent of the early nay-sayers was Beattie. "In all my intercourse with others," he reports, "and after a careful examination of my own mind, I have never found any reason to think that it is possible for a human, or for a rational creature, to conceive a thing beginning to exist and proceeding from no cause" (Beattie, 64). "Can we conceive a thing beginning to exist and yet bring ourselves to think that a cause is not necessary to the production of such a thing?" he asks a few pages later. "If we cannot (I am sure I cannot), then is the contrary of the [causal] maxim, when fairly stated, found to be truly and properly inconceivable?" (Beattie, 68).

Beattie thus appeals to introspection.<sup>17</sup> And if introspection had to be acknowledged as the final court of appeal, Hume's position would be shaky. For in spite of his breezy assurance that "it will be easy" for us to conceive an event without conjoining to its idea the distinct idea of a cause, his own positive position concerning the causal maxim seems to imply that it will not be. We cannot help but believe, he seems to hold, that all events have a cause. Given the idea of an event, it thus appears he must hold, we cannot help but believe that the event has (or

would have) a cause. In order to believe *this*, however, we must (on his account) conjoin to the idea of the event the idea of a cause. It might easily seem, therefore, that Hume is being inconsistent and should actually say that we *cannot* conceive or imagine an event without any cause.

He need not do so, of course. For the above description of his positive position is perhaps a bit strong. What he may (and presumably does) really hold is that the belief that all events have a cause is like the belief that the entities any common person means by a hat or shoe or stone have continued and independent existence; a belief that can briefly be shaken in the course of intense philosophical reflection but springs back with full force as soon as such reflection starts to flag. What he may (and presumably does) really hold, in other words, is that we cannot help but believe *in the normal course of life and thought* that all events have a cause, not that we cannot help but believe it *full stop*. He can thus indeed say without being inconsistent that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause. He should surely not say "twill be easy," however, nor even expect that many who try it will succeed (not everyone is capable of intense philosophical reflection, after all). And if the basis of his claim that we can do it were the fact that it seems to him that he succeeds while engaged in intense philosophical reflection, it would seem that he should show a bit of caution. "Shouldn't he be at least somewhat shaken by the fact that so many of his contemporaries report that they cannot do it?" an objector might ask. "Shouldn't this lead him to consider the possibility that he is being beguiled; that he is not really managing to do it even though it seems to him that he is?"

Now the basis of his claim that we can do it, of course, is *not*—or not merely—the fact that it seems to him that he succeeds while engaged in intense philosophical reflection. The basis of that claim is supposed to be rather (1) the assertion that all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and (2) the assertion that the abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of a particular event we take to be an effect are evidently distinct. We have already considered (2) and found it in order given convictions that Hume expects his readers to share long before they get to T 1.3.3.3. But what about (1)?

Given that one version of the intermediate conclusion is that the separation of the abstract or general idea of a cause from the idea of an event is plainly possible *for the imagination*, the assertion that all distinct ideas are separable from each other is clearly short for the assertion that all distinct ideas are separable from each other *in the imagination*. Beattie takes the idea of an event and the abstract or general idea of a cause to provide a counterexample and thus a disproof of this assertion. He does so on the basis of introspection. If Hume's argument is to get off the ground, therefore, he must have a basis for the assertion that all distinct ideas are separable from each other in the imagination that is not called into question by Beattie's refusal to admit on the basis of introspection that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause.

It was long unclear what could serve as such a basis. Recent work by Garrett, however, has finally revealed a substantive argument that could undergird Hume's adoption of the Separability Principle and thus his assertion that all distinct ideas are separable from each other. The Separability Principle states that whatever entities—including *imagistic* entities—are different are distinguishable and that whatever entities are distinguishable are separable by (and thus in) the imagination.<sup>18</sup> In view of Hume's conviction that memory and imagination are the only representative faculties, observes Garrett, "he could well have argued (i) that the *making of distinctions* is a cognitive operation that depends essentially on the *separation* of ideas in the imagination, and conversely (ii) that whenever a separation of ideas occurs, the mind is in a position to make a distinction" (Garrett, 69). But if this is truly Hume's implicit justification for the Separability Principle, it seems to me, then he can infer that the abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of a particular event ( $E_2$ , for example) can only be distinct in the first place if they have been separated in the imagination.<sup>19</sup> And given that they *have in fact been separated* in the imagination, it must surely be acknowledged that they *are separable* in the imagination. (If they had ceased to be separable, I am admittedly assuming, they would have also ceased to be distinct.) From the very fact that the idea of a particular event such as  $E_2$  is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause, he can thus say, it follows that these ideas are separable in the imagination and thus that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause. That we can do so may not seem clear to all (or even any) of us on the basis of mere introspection, but mere introspection, it can now finally be insisted on a principled ground, is not the last word.<sup>20</sup>

## VI

Might there be some other ground for rejecting Hume's claim that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause? Noonan may mean to assert that there is:

One can imagine water in a pot boiling without any heat under it. Thus it is plausible to say that one can know what it would be like to establish the existence of *this* phenomenon without *this* cause. And since heat is the *actual* cause of boiling water this provides support for the proposition *that there is no particular cause which must be the one which brings about the boiling of water*. But I cannot imagine, in any similar way, water boiling without *any* cause, and I cannot imagine what positive experience would count in favor of such a discovery. Thus no positive experience I can imagine provides support for the proposition *that water may boil without any cause*. (Noonan, 107)

Noonan first admits that we can imagine water in a pot boiling without any heat under it. Thus Noonan first admits, to put it in literal Humean terms, that the idea of water in a pot boiling is separable in the imagination from the idea of heat under it. Noonan then denies that we can imagine, in any similar way, water boiling without *any* cause. Thus Noonan then denies, to again put it in literal Humean terms, that the idea of water in a pot boiling is separable in the imagination from all ideas (except for itself) belonging to the term "cause"'s revival set. On what basis does he do so? The answer is not clear. It may be introspection, but it may also be his claim that we cannot imagine what positive experience would count in favor of the discovery that water is boiling without *any* cause. Now the claim that we cannot imagine *this* seems correct. Any and all positive experience seems compatible with there being a cause that we have somehow failed to notice. But why is this supposed to matter? Why would our inability to imagine what positive evidence would count in favor of the discovery that water is boiling without *any* cause entail that the idea of water in a pot boiling is not separable in the imagination from all ideas (except for itself) belonging to the term "cause"'s revival set?

Noonan, of course, may have an answer to this question. We can hardly be expected to assess it, however, unless he (or someone else) makes clear what it is. Until that is done, one is left with the impression that he has somehow failed to see how Hume can get from the claim that the idea of water in a pot boiling is distinct from the idea of heat under it to the claim that the idea of water in a pot boiling is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause.<sup>21</sup>

## VII

Having now established that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause, Hume boldly infers that the actual separation of "these objects" (an event and anything we might in principle take to be its cause) is "so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity."<sup>22</sup> He thus takes "we can imagine an event without any cause" to entail "the supposition that some event has no cause does not imply a contradiction." This has struck many readers as grossly invalid and has not, to the best of my knowledge, been clearly justified or explained in the literature.

One classic objection is invoked by Stroud.<sup>23</sup> Goldbach's conjecture—the claim that every even number is the sum of two primes—has never been proved or disproved, reports Stroud. The conjecture is either true or false, nonetheless, and if true *necessarily* true, if false *necessarily* false. If the conjecture is true, therefore, then its contrary—the claim that at least one even number is not the sum of two primes—implies a contradiction. If the conjecture is false, conversely, then the

conjecture itself implies a contradiction. And yet, asserts Stroud, we can conceive both of the conjecture's being proved and of its being disproved:

It seems easy to conceive of Goldbach's Conjecture being proved one day, although that is not to say that it is easy to believe that it will be proved. But I can also conceive of its being disproved, of someone proving its negation, perhaps by finding a very large even number that is not the sum of two primes. I can conceive of a computer's coming up with one tomorrow. (Stroud, 50)

Since either the conjecture or its contrary implies a contradiction, and since I can conceive or imagine both the conjecture's being proved and its being disproved, it simply cannot be true, according to Stroud, that my ability to conceive or imagine something entails that the thing in question does not imply a contradiction. If Goldbach's conjecture implies a contradiction, after all, then the conjecture's *being proved* implies a contradiction, and if the contrary of Goldbach's conjecture implies a contradiction, then the conjecture's being *disproved* implies a contradiction. In conceiving or imagining *both* the conjecture's being proved *and* its being disproved, therefore, I am conceiving or imagining something that implies a contradiction.

The only possible escape, it seems clear, is to deny that we can *either* conceive or imagine the conjecture's being proved *or* conceive or imagine its being disproved. This is presumably what Dicker wants to license in the following passage:

Stroud's conceivability claims seem to mean only that one can imagine someone doing some calculations and announcing that they prove Goldbach's conjecture, or imagine a person or computer identifying a very large number and telling us that it is not the sum of two primes. But it is questionable that this amounts to conceiving the truth or the falsity of Goldbach's conjecture itself. After all, one can imagine or "conceive" of a famous mathematician declaring that he has proved that  $1+1=3$ , or of a computer outputting that  $1+1=3$ , but it does not follow that one can conceive that  $1+1=3$ . (Dicker, 142)

The relevance of Dicker's last two sentences is not immediately clear. Stroud did not say, after all, that he could conceive the truth or falsity of Goldbach's conjecture *itself*; what he said was that he could conceive or imagine the conjecture's being proved or disproved. But to conceive or imagine *in detail* the conjecture's being proved or disproved, it might be replied, one would have to conceive or imagine the actual steps of a proof or an actual case that would constitute a disproof. And what Hume means when he maintains that our being able to conceive or imagine

something entails that the thing in question does not imply a contradiction, it might further be argued, is that we can conceive or imagine it *in detail*.<sup>24</sup> What Stroud can conceive or imagine in the sense of “conceive or imagine” Hume has in mind, it might therefore be concluded, is not the conjecture’s being proved or disproved but merely someone’s *claiming* to prove or disprove it.<sup>25</sup>

## VIII

This may be perfectly fine as far as it goes; the most it can do, however, is block the charge that Hume is clearly and obviously wrong to move from the claim that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause to the claim that “some event has no cause” does not imply a contradiction. To block the charge that a move is clearly and obviously wrong, however, is not to show that it is right or why a philosopher of Hume’s stature might feel confident about it.<sup>26</sup>

The general principle on which Hume must implicitly rely here is that nothing we can conceive or imagine in detail implies a contradiction. What could he possibly cite in support of this principle? Experience, perhaps. It seems quite possible that he takes this principle to be a well-supported empirical claim, somewhat like the Copy Principle. Though often accused of treating the Copy Principle as an a priori axiom immune to putative counterexamples, Hume clearly takes it to be (a) established on empirical grounds, and (b) susceptible to refutation.<sup>27</sup> “Those who would assert that this position [that expressed in the Copy Principle] is not universally true nor without exception,” he famously allows, “have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing that idea, which in their opinion, is not deriv’d from this source [a corresponding impression]. It will then be incumbent on us, if we would maintain our doctrine, to produce the impression, or lively perception, which corresponds to it” (EHU 2.6; SBN 19–20).<sup>28</sup> Now a similar challenge might be offered in the case of the principle on which he must implicitly rely here. “Those who would assert that this position [the position that nothing we can conceive or imagine in detail implies a contradiction] is not universally true nor without exception,” such a challenge would run, “have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing a case in which it must be admitted that we can conceive or imagine something in detail and the something in question implies a contradiction.”

At least two objections might now rear their heads.<sup>29</sup> First, it might perhaps be held—as Jonathan Bennett takes William Kneale to have held—that not all contradictions are “displayable” (Bennett, 274–5). If some contradictions aren’t displayable, then our inability to *show* that one is implied by something we can conceive or imagine in detail cannot be taken to entail that there *isn’t* one. If some

contradictions aren't displayable, in fact, then we might be stuck in the position of correctly "sensing" that "some event has no cause" implies a contradiction but of never—even in principle—being able to figure out what it is. And second, the fact (assuming it to be a fact) that the challenge outlined above has never been met is not decisive even if the first objection is ruled out.<sup>30</sup> For even if (a) all contradictions are displayable, and (b) we have never found a case in which it must be admitted that we can conceive or imagine something in detail but the thing in question implies a contradiction, it does not follow that such a case will not eventually be found.

The second of these objections would not disturb Hume. He is clearly willing to admit, after all, that the Copy Principle could turn out to be false. This does not prevent him from using it with a great deal of confidence in the meantime. The case is similar with respect to the principle on which he must implicitly rely here. The mere admission that it could turn out to be false need not prevent him from using it with a great deal of confidence in the meantime.

The first of these objections is perhaps harder to deal with. There are reasons, however, why Hume might not have felt threatened by it. In order to see this, we need merely note what he would now see as the price of allowing that "some event has no cause" might imply a contradiction. He has been committed all along to the view that conceivability implies possibility—to what might be called the conceivability criterion of possibility.<sup>31</sup> He is now committed, moreover, to what seems to him a compelling argument in support of the claim that we can conceive an event without any cause. In order to abide by these commitments and nonetheless allow that "some event has no cause" might imply a contradiction, he would have to allow that "*p* implies a contradiction" does not entail "*p* is impossible" and thus "*p* is false." In order to abide by these commitments and nonetheless allow that "some event has no cause" might imply a contradiction, in other words, he would have to allow that "*p* implies a contradiction" is compatible with "*p* is true." It should thus come as no surprise that he feels safe in inferring that "some event has no cause" does not imply a contradiction. An undisplayable contradiction is no less a contradiction for not being displayable, however. This ground for Hume's feeling of safety, therefore, would not be affected by the supposition that not all contradictions are displayable.

Now this ground, one might insist, could still be cut from underneath him. Instead of inferring that "some event has no cause" does not imply a contradiction, one could question or give up the conceivability criterion of possibility.<sup>32</sup> One could then accept the claim that we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause without having to either (a) conclude that "some event has no cause" does not imply a contradiction, or (b) admit that "*p* implies a contradiction" is compatible with "*p* is true." The considerations outlined in the preceding paragraph, therefore, cannot really *justify* Hume's move from the claim that we can

conceive or imagine an event without any cause to the claim that "some event has no cause" does not imply a contradiction. Any *justification* of that move will have to be of the empirical sort suggested earlier. The considerations outlined in the preceding paragraph, nonetheless, can at least help us understand why a philosopher of Hume's stature might (a) feel confident about a move that has struck so many readers as grossly invalid, and (b) feel unthreatened by the supposition that not all contradictions are displayable.

## IX

We have now examined the crux of the argument from T 1.3.3.3, which concludes with the claim that the causal maxim is not demonstratively certain. Given convictions that Hume expects his readers to share long before they reach this paragraph and what Hume presumably sees as the empirical evidence with respect to "nothing we can imagine in detail implies a contradiction," the argument goes through. But what about the claim that the maxim is not *intuitively* certain? Can the considerations introduced in this paragraph also serve to establish that claim?

The answer is yes. What rules out the maxim's being *demonstratively* certain, after all, is (a) that something corresponding to its contrary can be conceived or imagined, and (b) that its contrary does not imply a contradiction. And the only difference between a proposition's being intuitively certain and a proposition's being demonstratively certain, it appears, is the process by means of which we come to feel that something corresponding its contrary cannot be conceived or imagined. In the case of demonstrative certainty, this process involves a number of steps. In the case of intuitive certainty, on the other hand, no steps are required. The relevant ideas are directly compared and we come to feel without further ado that something corresponding to the contrary of the proposition cannot be conceived or imagined.<sup>33</sup> This difference, however, does not seem at all relevant with respect to our present question. A proposition can no more be intuitively than demonstratively certain if (a) its contrary can be conceived or imagined, and (b) its contrary does not imply a contradiction. The argument in T 1.3.3.3 can thus suffice *by itself* to prove that the causal maxim is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain. The apparent weakness of Hume's argument in 1.3.3.2 does not mean that he fails to offer any serious challenge to the most widespread view of his day.

## X

"But is this really a *proof*?" it might finally be asked. The principle that nothing we can imagine in detail implies a contradiction, I have suggested, is regarded by Hume as a well-supported empirical claim—a claim that could still turn out to be false. If that is really how he regards it, however, then he would have to

acknowledge that the conclusion of an argument based on it could also still turn out to be false. The causal maxim, he would thus have to acknowledge, could still turn out to be demonstratively certain. Doesn't this show that my suggestion must be wrong? How can he claim to have proved that the maxim is *not* demonstratively certain and also acknowledge that the maxim could still turn out to *be* demonstratively certain?

He can do so, of course, if and only if he does not restrict the term "proof" to arguments in which the conclusion is supposed to follow with deductive validity from premises that are one and all intuitively certain. And of course he does *not* restrict the term "proof" to such arguments. "By proofs," he explains, "[I mean] those arguments, which are deriv'd from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty" (T 1.3.11.2; SBN 124). Arguments derived from the relation of cause and effect are arguments based at least in part on induction. This being the case, it seems fair to say, an argument based in part on the inductively grounded claim that nothing we can imagine in detail implies a contradiction can be described (though somewhat oddly to our ears) as an argument derived from the relation of cause and effect. The claim that proofs are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty, moreover, cannot be taken to entail that the conclusion of a proof could not turn out to be false.<sup>34</sup> The contrary of any causal or inductively grounded claim is conceivable, Hume insists, and whatever is conceivable is possible. He clearly implies in the very paragraph from which the above citation is drawn that "the sun will rise tomorrow" is the conclusion of a proof, but he would hardly say that we cannot conceive a change in the course of nature that would lead to the sun's not appearing above the horizon during the twenty-four hour period commencing several hours from now. The claim that proofs are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty, therefore, must simply mean that they are *extremely* convincing.

We should thus not be misled by Hume's announcement in the first sentence of T 1.3.3.3 that he will now present an argument that will "prove" at once that the causal maxim is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain. This is not meant to imply that he will now present a deductively valid argument based on premises that are one and all intuitively certain or that the conclusion of the argument he is about to present is a necessary truth that could not still turn out to be false. It is simply meant to make clear that he will now present an argument he takes to be *extremely* convincing—as convincing as any argument we have in support of the claim that the sun will appear above the horizon during the twenty-four hour period commencing several hours from now. If one somehow fails to see this or to bear it in mind, one may too quickly assume that Hume cannot regard "nothing we can imagine in detail implies a contradiction" as empirically grounded. If one somehow fails to see this or to bear it in mind, moreover, one may reject the argument merely because it is not something Hume never meant to imply that it is and does not establish something Hume never meant to imply that it does.

## NOTES

I would like to thank two anonymous referees, and also Peter Loftson and Peter Millican, the editors of *Hume Studies*, for many helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions in regard to this paper.

1 References to the *Treatise* refer to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter cited in text as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers, and to the corresponding pages in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter "SBN" in text.

2 "All certainty arises from the comparison of ideas," writes Hume in this paragraph, "and from the discovery of such relations as are unalterable, so long as the ideas continue the same. These relations are *resemblance, proportions in quantity and number, degrees of any quality, and contrariety*, none of which are imply'd in this proposition, *whatever has a beginning has also a cause of existence*. That proposition therefore is not intuitively certain. At least any one, who wou'd assert it to be intuitively certain, must deny these to be the only infallible relations, and must find some other relation of that kind to be imply'd in it; which it will then be time enough to examine" (T 1.3.3.2; SBN 79). This argument seems open to attack on two fronts. First, the claim that all certainty arises from the comparison of ideas. For what would Hume say about the existence of the perceptions that he takes to constitute his own self at any given moment? Would he say that their existence is uncertain? And if he would not, would he say that the certainty in question results from a comparison of ideas? Second, the claim that certainty is possible only in regard to the four relations mentioned. "A full-scale evaluation of this argument would require asking whether the four relations Hume specifies are the only possible source of self-evidence," writes Georges Dicker: "That there are only these four seems doubtful: the statement 'if I am thinking, then I exist,' for example, is self-evident, but seems not to involve any of Hume's four relations." Dicker, *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1998), 135. A similar claim is made by Jonathan Bennett: "Now, Hume argues that (a) [i.e. the class of relations which 'depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together'] contains only four species of relations, whence it follows that every necessary truth—everything in the province of 'knowledge'—involves a relation belonging to one of those four species. Hume himself draws this conclusion, when he says that these four are 'the only infallible relations.' This would be an extremely important and powerful result, if it were true; but in fact it is false." Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley and Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 252.

3 See James Beattie, *Essays* (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1776), 63–71; Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977), 46–50; and Harold Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1999), 105–7.

4 See Ralph Church, *Hume's Theory of the Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1935), 69–70; Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: MacMillan, 1941), 405; and Antony Flew, *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 70.

5 Dicker himself appears to acknowledge this: "An intuitively certain proposition, as Hume is here using the term, is one that we can know to be true *just* by understanding

what it says; or, as some philosophers would put it, one that can be known ‘ex terminus’ (‘from the terms’ or words in the proposition)” (Dicker, 36).

6 This point is very well made by Laurence Bonjour. See Laurence Bonjour, *In Defense of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chaps. 2 and 4; and Laurence Bonjour, *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chap. 5.

7 This might be held to go against a very common view in the literature—the view that Hume’s contention that some *p* is concerned merely with relations of ideas is in essence a claim that this *p* is analytic, analyticity usually being equated with truth purely and simply in virtue of meaning. Among the works in which this view is expressed are: Farhang Zabeeh, *Hume: Precursor of Modern Empiricism* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960); Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley and Hume*, and Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge*. Underlying this view are the correct points that ideas double as meanings for Hume and that propositions concerned merely with the relations of ideas can in his view be known to be true without going beyond the sphere of ideas (simply through the comparison of the relevant ideas). Whether or not what I have said really goes against this view depends on whether or not the claim that some *p* is true purely and simply in virtue of its meaning is supposed to entail that we can know it to be true just by grasping its meaning. Works that explicitly deny that Hume takes all propositions concerning mere relations of ideas to be analytic are: John Laird, *Hume’s Philosophy of Human Nature* (London: Methuen, 1932), 54, and W. A. Suchting, “Hume on Necessary Truth,” *Dialogue* 5 (1966–1967): 47–60. Both do so, however, with respect to narrower (and more rigorous) conceptions of analyticity.

8 “’Tis a general maxim in philosophy,” Hume reports in that paragraph, “that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of its existence*. This is commonly taken for granted in all reasonings, without any proof given or demanded. ’Tis supposed to be founded on intuition. . . . But if we examine this maxim by the idea of knowledge above explain’d, we shall discover in it no mark of any such intuitive certainty” (T 1.3.3.1; SBN 78–9). The view that the maxim is *intuitively* certain is exemplified in the response of his early critic Beattie: “This maxim . . . he [Hume] affirms, and I allow, to be not demonstrably certain. But he further affirms, that it is not intuitively certain; in which I cannot agree with him” (Beattie, 65).

9 See Terence Penelhum, *David Hume: An Introduction to His Philosophical System* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1992), 117.

10 A stronger formulation is suggested by T 1.3.3.1 (SBN 78). The maxim is there said to hold that whatever begins to exist *must* have a cause. In T 1.3.3.2 (SBN 79), on the other hand, the content of the maxim is implied to be that whatever has a beginning *has* also a cause. The first of these formulations seems stronger than the second; the truth of the first would entail that of the second but the truth of the second might not entail that of the first. This apparent modal difference might have some importance. In what follows, however, I will take Hume to be concerned with the second and possibly weaker formulation. To show that this second and weaker formulation is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain, after all, would suffice to show that the first or stronger formulation isn’t either.

11 “If ideas are meanings and distinctness is a logical relation,” writes Bennett, “then ‘The ideas of cause and effect are distinct’ is false: it is analytic that every cause has an

effect, and vice versa" (Bennett, 289). "Step (2) is carelessly stated," agrees Dicker, "for Hume is trying to show in step (3) that we can conceive a[n] . . . event occurring without any cause, not that we can conceive an *effect* without a cause, which would be absurd" (Dicker, 136).

12 Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24.

13 Noonan's objection is that we cannot imagine an event without *any* cause. "One can imagine water in a pot boiling without any heat under it . . .," he allows. "But I cannot imagine, in any similar way, water boiling without *any* cause" (Noonan, 107). The upshot of this objection is that step (3) of Hume's argument is false. The truth of step (3) would clearly follow from that of steps (1) and (2), however, and Noonan is explicitly willing to grant Hume's Separability Principle and thus the truth of step (1). His objection, it follows, must be rooted in a rejection of step (2), the step with which we are presently concerned. It seems clear, however, that he would not reject the claim that the idea of a particular event we take to be an effect ( $E_2$ ) is distinct from that of the particular event ( $E_1$ ) we take to be the cause of  $E_2$ . (This is evidenced by his willingness to admit that we can imagine water in a pot boiling without any heat under it.) What he must refuse to admit, it thus seems, is that Hume can move from the claim that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from that of  $E_1$  to the claim that the idea of  $E_2$  is distinct from the abstract or general idea of a cause. If he were to admit *that*, after all, then his willingness to grant the Separability Principle would leave him no option but to admit step (3) of Hume's argument and thus drop his objection.

14 The so-called "argument," after all, would then "move" from (a) the assertion that the idea of some event can be separated from the idea of a cause without contradiction to (b) the assertion that the contrary of the causal maxim—namely "some event has no cause"—does not imply a contradiction.

15 Dicker's attempt (see Dicker, 141–2) to get around this point is very hard to get a grip on and seems to me to misfire. Stroud has certainly shown, he admits, that sameness/distinctness of ideas and contradiction (along with conceivability and possibility) are interdependent notions. Having made this admission, he then appears to run together two different attempts to avoid Stroud's charge that Hume has no actual *argument* in support of his claim that the contrary of the causal maxim does not imply a contradiction. One boils down to the contention that Hume's move from (a) the claim that the idea of a cause and the idea of  $E_2$  are distinct, to (b) the claim that " $E_2$  has no cause" does not imply a contradiction, is better seen as "exhibiting the interconnections between the notions involved" than as a linear defense of (b). This seems like a veiled admission that Stroud's charge is correct and will thus not do as a defense of Hume against it. The other rests on the claim that (a) is independently plausible, which would presumably allow the move from (a) to (b) to be seen as a linear defense of (b) after all. If (a) is to be independently plausible, however, it simply must (or so I would think) mean something other than (b) does. Otherwise it may be plausible, but not *independently* plausible; plausible independently of (b). But if Dicker is going to insist after all that (a) means something other than (b) does, then he surely owes us one of two things; either (i) some account of what it is that (a) means that does not end up making it identical with (b), or (ii) some case as to why no such account is required. He does not give us either. Hence this will not do either as a defense of Hume against

Stroud's charge. (What I try to do in this section is provide the second of these things; namely a case as to why no such account is required.)

16 They are also meanings or concepts, as Bennett (among others) points out. And this equation of meanings or concepts with imagistic entities, as Bennett makes very clear, is laden with problems (see Bennett, 242–3). Even such an erudite and sympathetic commentator as Garrett feels compelled to admit this: “Hume’s doctrine of the essential role of images in representation and meaning . . . serves to impose greater determinacy on the doctrine of conceptual empiricism,” he observes. “But it does so chiefly by oversimplifying the nature of concepts and human cognition through an identification of concepts with images (or, as in the case of abstract ideas, of concepts with images used as associative exemplars)” (Garrett, 56). Yet the fact that ideas are also meanings or concepts for Hume and that the equation of meanings or concepts with imagistic entities is laden with problems does not alter the fact that ideas are first and foremost imagistic entities for him. Nor does it alter the fact that this may be crucial in understanding the ground of his claim that the idea of a cause and the idea of some particular event we take to be an effect (such as  $E_2$ ) are distinct.

17 In view of Beattie’s dismal (and often well-deserved) reputation for crude misunderstanding of his opponents, it may be well to note that he does not take Hume to question the truth (as opposed to the intuitive and/or demonstrative certainty) of the claim that every event has a cause. He correctly sees that the question raised by Hume is merely the explanatory one of why we believe that claim to be true and feel so certain about it. He actually takes Hume to be correct in his contention that the claim is not amenable to proof (see Beattie, 65); what he wants to maintain is that it is *intuitively* though not demonstratively certain.

18 This is first explicitly stated in T 1.1.7.3 (SBN 18).

19 The meaning of the claim that the abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of  $E_2$  are distinct, once again, will be that all ideas belonging to the general term “cause”’s revival set except for that of  $E_2$  itself are distinct from that of  $E_2$ . The claim that the abstract or general idea of a cause and the idea of  $E_2$  would not be distinct in the first place if they had not been separated in the imagination will then be that it would not be the case that all ideas belonging to the general term “cause”’s revival set except for that of  $E_2$  itself are distinct from that of  $E_2$  if all ideas belonging to that set except for that of  $E_2$  itself had not been separated from that of  $E_2$  in the imagination.

20 It may seem that Hume is here put in danger of proving too much; of proving, for example, that the ideas of a triangle and of a figure possessed of interior angles adding up to 180 degrees can be separated in the imagination and that we must therefore be able to conceive or imagine a triangle without interior angles adding up to 180 degrees. “We distinguish between these ideas, of course,” an objector might say, “but it can hardly be taken to follow that they can be separated in the imagination.” Hume’s response, I believe, would proceed in three steps. He would first point out that there is a sense in which the ideas of a triangle and of a figure possessed of interior angles adding up to 180 degrees *can* be separated in the imagination. (We can easily imagine a figure possessed of interior angles adding up to 180 degrees but not enclosed by three straight lines.) There is thus only a limited sense in which these ideas cannot be separated in the imagination. (We cannot imagine a figure enclosed by three straight lines but not possessed of interior angles adding up to 180 degrees.) He would then infer that the

relevant ideas in this case are those of a triangle and of a figure *enclosed by three straight lines and* possessed of angles adding up to 180 degrees. This would put him in position to maintain, finally, that the relevant ideas in this case are not *really* distinct and that any distinction we draw between them is a mere distinction of reason. What we learn by working through the Pythagorean theorem, he would thus be able to maintain, is that the revival sets of "triangle" and "figure enclosed by three straight lines and having interior angles adding up to 180 degrees" are in fact the same set.

21 See note 13 above for explanation.

22 It might well be asked what Hume means by "contradiction." Various possibilities are canvassed by Stroud (see 47–8). Suchting (see 52) rejects the supposition that what he means is *formal* contradiction. But this issue, somewhat surprisingly, is not crucial to our attempt to make sense of his argument in T 1.3.3.3.

23 The same objection had been discussed by Bennett in a slightly different context; the reply to Stroud offered by Dicker and cited below seems to be drawn from Bennett's stellar attempt to show that Hume's move from "we can imagine a change in the course of nature" to "a change in the course of nature implies no contradiction" is (though perhaps not well grounded) neither grossly circular nor grossly invalid. For details see Bennett, 272–5.

24 This was first suggested, so far as I know, by Bennett (see 274).

25 On this reply to Stroud, of course, it must be held that we will not know whether or not we can conceive or imagine the conjecture's being proved until someone succeeds in actually proving or disproving it.

26 It will not do to simply say that this move is grounded on (1) Hume's subscription to the conceivability criterion of possibility, and (2) the assumption that something's being possible is incompatible with its implying a contradiction. For first of all, it does not seem like he moves from (a) the claim that the separation of an event and anything we might in principle take to be its cause is possible, to (b) the claim "some event has no cause" does not imply a contradiction. The order of argument seems to be the reverse. What he really seems to do, in other words, is move from (b) the claim that "some event has no cause" does not imply a contradiction, to (a) the claim that the separation of an event from anything we might (in principle) take to be its cause is possible *at least in a narrowly defined sense*. And second, such a construal of the move would leave us to wonder why Hume accepts (and expects *us* to accept) the conceivability criterion of possibility. (Does he take the assertion that conceivability implies possibility to be intuitively or demonstratively certain? How would that fit with the idea of knowledge explained in T 1.3.1 and then invoked in T 1.3.3.2?) "These seem to be two entirely different subject matters," Paul Tidman observes, "one having to do with facts about what we can do in our minds, the other with facts about how things could be. Why should the fact that I can conceive of something lead me to think that it is possible?" Tidman, "Conceivability as a Test for Possibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994): 306. (Hume does accept the conceivability criterion of possibility, of course; my contention is merely that a blank assumption of it is not what grounds his move from "we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause" to "the supposition that some event has no cause does not imply a contradiction.")

27 For an extended and convincing discussion of this issue, see Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, chap. 2.

28 Citations from the first *Enquiry* ["EHU"] refer to *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter cited in text by section and paragraph, and to the corresponding pages in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

29 A third possible objection will be discussed in section 9.

30 Is it really a fact that the challenge has never been met? What about the sort of case discussed by Hilary Putnam in "Meaning and Reference" (and again in "The Meaning of 'Meaning'")? "We can perfectly well imagine having experiences that would convince us . . . that water is not H<sub>2</sub>O," asserts Putnam. "In that sense, it is conceivable that water isn't H<sub>2</sub>O. It is conceivable but it isn't logically possible!" Putnam, "Meaning and Reference," *Journal of Philosophy* 70 (1973): 709. To treat the issues raised by this assertion would vastly exceed the scope of this paper. Several points may be noted in passing, however. First, this assertion rests on a theory of meaning far removed from that of Hume. (This, of course, is not to say that Hume's is right—or even tenable—and Putnam's wrong.) Second, the sense in which Putnam takes it to be conceivable that water isn't H<sub>2</sub>O is not the sense of conceivability with which Hume is concerned. And third, Putnam himself has backed off from this assertion. "I won't insist (any more) that 'it is conceivable that water may not turn out to be H<sub>2</sub>O but it isn't logically possible that water isn't H<sub>2</sub>O.'" Putnam, "Is Water Necessarily H<sub>2</sub>O?" in *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 70.

31 As mentioned in note 26 above, however, he does not appear to move from (a) "we can conceive or imagine an event without any cause" to (b) "an event without a cause is possible" and thence to (c) "the supposition that some event has no cause does not imply a contradiction." The order of inference in T 1.3.3.3, on the contrary, appears to be from (a) to (c) and *thence* to (b).

32 The obvious question, of course, is what one could then put in its place. "[I]f there is a seriously alternative basis for possibility theses, philosophers have not yet discovered it," writes Stephen Yablo, "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 2. It is not immediately clear, however, that one must have something to put in its place in order to question it. And even if one ends up appealing to something that might reasonably be referred to as conceivability, it may not be conceivability in the sense Hume has in mind. Beattie seems to regard believability as the appropriate guide to possibility, for instance, but also seems to use "conceivable" as a synonym for "believable" on occasion. What James Van Cleve calls *strong* conceivability and Yablo himself calls *philosophical* conceivability seem very close to what Beattie means by "believable," moreover. (Van Cleve, after all, takes strong conceivability to involve "just seeing" that something is possible while Yablo takes philosophical conceivability to involve the appearance of possibility. What Beattie would clearly argue, however, is that we do *not* "just see" that an event without any cause is possible, and that "some event has no cause" does *not* involve an appearance of possibility. What we "just see," he would counter, is that an event without a cause is *impossible*. "Some event has no cause," he would furthermore counter, involves an appearance of *impossibility*. See James Van Cleve, "Conceivability and the Cartesian

Argument for Dualism," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 64 (1983): 37; Yablo, *Conceivability*, 5; and Beattie, *Essays*, 64–5.)

33 What we do or do not come to feel is not always decisive, of course. Part of what Hume tries to show in T 1.3.3.3 is that something corresponding to the contrary of a given proposition (the causal maxim) can actually *be* conceived or imagined even though many people (such as Beattie) may not *feel* that it can.

34 "Hume thinks that even 'proofs' leave room for doubt or uncertainty," affirms Bennett, immediately after citing the above passage from T 1.3.11.2 (see Bennett, 235–6).

