

HUME, ASSOCIATION, AND CAUSAL BELIEF *

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Abstract

The associationist interpretation of Hume's account of causal belief is criticized. The origin of this mistaken interpretation is explained. The difference between Hume's views in the *Treatise of Human Nature* and in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* is examined.

Was Hume an associationist about causal belief? Did he really endeavour to explain causal thought by the mechanism of the association of ideas? Some of the most influential of his commentators have presented one form or another of this interpretation — among them Alfred Ayer, John Passmore, William Kneale, Antony Flew, John Mackie and Fred Wilson. And in the Index of the best known edition of the first *Enquiry* it is asserted that according to Hume causal belief “is produced by the principles of association, viz. resemblance, § 41; contiguity, § 42; causation, § 43” (1975:395).

But if we read, in the same work and edition, the last lines of § 40 carefully, we find that Hume, having established that “the sentiment of belief is nothing but a conception more intense and steady” than mere fictions, and is derived from “customary conjunction”, pretends only to supplement this by finding “other operations of the mind *analogous* to it”, in order to discover more general principles of human nature (1975:50; my emphasis).

Hume invokes the principles of association of ideas, presented in Section III of the same work, and asks whether in the relations that occur “when one of the objects is presented to the senses or memory, the mind is not only carried to the conception of the correlative, but reaches a steadier and stronger conception of it than otherwise it would have been able to attain”, exactly as in the case of causal belief (§ 41, 1975:50-

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51). And he goes on to present some “experiments”, in order to justify the suggested analogy.

He proposes a comparison between certain mental phenomena where *lively* perceptions, either impressions of sensation or ideas of the memory, are associated with *faint and dull* perceptions, that is, ideas of the imagination (EHU II, 1975:18), and another phenomenon: the formation of causal belief. One example of the first is when the *impression* derived from looking at the portrait of a friend, associated by resemblance with the *idea* of the same friend, communicates some of its vivacity to this idea, which is thus enlivened in the process (§ 41, 1975:51). Another is when we are in the presence of an object, and the impression of that object enlivens the ideas of other objects that are usually *contiguous* to it (§ 42, 1975:52). Other examples are seeing the relics of saints, if we consider them as connected with the latter by “causation”, or seeing the son of an absent friend, the father being also viewed as a “cause” — in these cases also, association by causation tends to give a new vivacity to the otherwise fainter ideas of the “effects” (§ 43, 1975:53).

Now, what exactly do we have here? Hume will conclude on the next page that the same very general principle of “transition from a present object” is responsible for the new liveliness acquired by the formerly faint ideas, in those examples of association, and also for the new liveliness acquired by the idea of the effect, when the impression of its present cause communicates to it its natural vivacity, through the channel established by causal inference (§ 44, 1975:53-4). A new, analogical step is thus taken in Hume’s theory — but it should be clear that this in no way amounts to an explanation of causal belief by the association of ideas.

Causal belief derives, first, from the frequent conjunction mentioned by Hume in § 40, and, of course, from the principle of human nature he identifies as “custom or habit” in part I of the same Section V (1975:43 ff). The new argument adds only that the same belief presents itself as “a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object” (1975:49), namely, the idea of the effect we expect to follow from its cause, and that this new vigour is received by this idea from the impression of the present cause, a mental process that is analogous to cases of association between other impressions (or ideas of the memory) and formerly dull ideas that resemble or are contiguous to them, or are taken as their causes or effects.

How could this be mistaken for a supposed “production” of causal beliefs by the mechanism of association itself? There is clearly no suggestion of such production or derivation in Hume’s philosophy — either in the *Enquiry* or, as we shall presently see, in the *Treatise of Human Nature*. We will see that many passages about this matter *are* ambiguous, especially in the *Treatise*. But first one must make up one’s mind about this: is there, at this point, any reasonable doubt that in the passages misinterpreted by, among others, the 1902 editors of the *Enquiry*, and which Nidditch failed to correct in the 1975 revised edition, Hume could never have meant to assert that causal belief derives from the association of ideas?

To persist in that interpretation, one would have to show what else there is to be found in those pages besides an analogy between the formation of causal beliefs by the transmission of vivacity from the present cause to the idea of the effect, which thus approaches the liveliness of an impression — giving credibility to the *reality* of its imminent manifestation — and those cases where an association is established in such a way that a similar transmission takes place. Not, of course, an association between ideas of the imagination — for in that case all ideas involved would be weak and faint, and there simply would be no vivacity to be communicated.

It is impossible that causal belief could ever be produced by the association of ideas, in the original sense this has in Section III, because of the complete senselessness of the idea of transference of liveliness in that kind of association. On the other hand, an association between impressions (or memory ideas) and faint ideas is the kind of association where that transmission may take place, and this transmission is precisely analogous, according to Hume, to the transference of strength from the impression of the cause to the “common” idea of the effect, a transference that transforms the latter in the specially enlivened idea which is called “belief”. The same very general principle is at work here, but the belief, even as an enlivened idea, is not *produced* by any kind of association — only the process of its enlivening is analogous to the enlivening of certain ideas in some cases of association between forceful perceptions and faint ones.

Now, what could lead anyone to a different interpretation? The paragraph where the analogy is suggested ends with the following: “And if the case be the same with the other relations or principles of association, this may be established as a general law, which takes place in all the operations of the mind” (1975:51). That is,

what Hume's examples are intended to show is that the case of the other *relations* besides the causal relation, that is, the three principles of association, is the same as the said causal relation. If we find there the same communication of vivacity between perceptions, then what we have here is a new and very general principle of human nature, the principle of transference of vivacity. But it is impossible to read the phrase "the other relations or principles of association" as meaning that for Hume the causal relation is *also* a principle of association.

We clearly have *four* relations here: three *associative* relations (by resemblance, by contiguity and by causation) and the *epistemological* relation derived from the causal *inferences* whose origin the *Enquiry* explains in Part i of the same Section. No conflation should be allowed here of the causal relation that lies at the root of causal belief and the associative relation "by causation" that may come *afterwards*. Hume's theory of causal belief is not part of his "associationism". Maybe John Passmore (1952) was right when he detected in our philosopher an "associationist project" (1952:116). But in the case of causality, the project never succeeded, or simply never existed. On its success in other fields we shall presently comment. But causal thought and reasoning not only has the status of real *reasoning* in Hume's philosophy, it has no shadow of dependence on any associative mechanism.

In the case of Selby-Bigge himself, perhaps his "associationist" interpretation of Hume's theory of causal belief in the first *Enquiry* derives from his own reading of the *Treatise*. In his edition of that work, the Index (1978:648) quotes p.101, where Hume wrote about the formation of causal belief: "There enters nothing into this operation of the mind but a present impression, a lively idea, and a *relation or association* in the fancy betwixt the impression and idea" (emphasis mine). When Hume himself employs the term "association" in this context, it is probable that many interpreters are unable to resist the temptation to conclude that the *intention* of the philosopher really was to explain causal belief by the association of ideas, or of ideas and impressions.

Does Hume employ that term, in this passage of the *Treatise*, with the same meaning it has when he speaks of the association of ideas? The temptation to accept this should be resisted: that would imply a serious misunderstanding by the philosopher himself of his own philosophy. Granted, he could have failed to see in the

Treatise a problem he clearly understood in its recasting in the *Enquiry*. The possibility exists; but is it plausible that this was really the case? Or was Hume's use of the term "association", in the passage above, merely a case of careless and common use, simply in the general sense of "relation", with no other philosophical intention involved?

It should be noted that this passage appears in approximately the same context as the one in the *Enquiry* on which we have commented. In the *Treatise*, Hume is already presenting the same parallel between enlivened ideas in causal inferences and enlivened ideas in associations with impressions. The text is the same in the two works, §§ 41-43 of the second repeating the text between pp. 99 (5th line in the second paragraph) and p. 101 (13th line) of the *Treatise*, on associations between impressions and ideas by resemblance, contiguity and causation. The passage quoted in the Index comes in the paragraph that follows, comparing those cases of "a relation or transition of the fancy" enlivening an idea with the analogous case in "our reasonings from cause and effect". If Hume meant to say that belief is produced by association, in this context, he would have to assert it explicitly — which he is far from having done. So, the most plausible interpretation consists in taking the phrase "relation or association" in exactly the same sense as the phrase "relation or transition" above, in a common, non-technical sense, that is, with no reference to the association of ideas as a "producer" of causal beliefs.

Oliver Johnson (1995) points out that in Book I of the *Treatise* it is often difficult to tell whether terms have their ordinary meaning or the special meaning Hume gave them as "technical terms of his philosophy" (1995:3). I think that "association" is a case in point here, as a technical term in I, i, 4 and as an ordinary term, meaning the same as "relation" in the passage in question, as well as in several others. It is also plausible to think that Hume noticed this ambiguity, here and on p.93 (where "belief" was already defined as "an idea related to or associated with a present impression"), as one more example of those "negligences in expression", typical of his "juvenile work" that he came to regret in his famous Advertisement (*Enquiries*, 1975: 2) and decided to eliminate in the recasting — which he actually did. In the *Enquiry*, "association" is always employed as a technical term in Johnson's sense.

In his Index to the *Treatise*, Selby-Bigge only quotes Hume's passage, not risking any interpretation, as he unfortunately did in the *Enquiry*. But this derives

from the difference in style between the two Indexes, the first with abundant quotations and the second abstaining from them. Nevertheless, the mistake in the second has not been corrected to the present day, so that it is natural to suppose that Selby-Bigge's and his successors' interpretation of the *Treatise* was the same. That interpretation has been shared by several distinguished scholars and philosophers.

John Passmore has one chapter of his book on Hume dedicated to “the Associationist”, where he writes that for the Scottish philosopher causal connection “would form no part of the Universe for us (at least) were it not for the influence of association” (1952:116). And A.J. Ayer (1980) finds in Hume's philosophy a difference between the two first principles of association and the third, in that resemblance and contiguity “provide tracks for the movements of our attention”, whereas association by causation “is the main source of supply for our factual beliefs” (1980:56). William Kneale (1949) was “shocked” by “Hume's assertion that induction can be no more than association of ideas without rational justification” (1949:55). Also, according to Antony Flew (1961), in Hume's philosophy “the idea of association remains crucial for the whole account of learning from experience” (1961:18). All this is untenable in the face of textual evidence, as I hope is by now completely clear. It is unfortunate that such distinguished authors have contributed to perpetuate a very old muddle about the role of association in Hume's philosophy of knowledge.

Hume certainly was an associationist about the passions, the moral sentiments, and the rules of justice in society, and many other aspects of human life, as different as literature and superstition. There is plenty of evidence of this in Books II and III of the *Treatise*, in the *Dissertation on the Passions* and in the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. But the association of ideas has no **cognitive** role in his philosophy, beyond serving as “the cement of complex ideas”. Custom or habit does have such a cognitive role, as is well known. But there is no foundation for the legend of Hume's associationism about “induction”. In sum: according to Hume, causal belief does not **derive** from any kind of association of ideas. If a causal belief is an enlivened idea, like those of the saint and of the absent friend and the corresponding examples for resemblance and contiguity (1975:51-2), this means only that there is a partial analogy between the former and the latter.

So, in the famous passage in the *Abstract* where Hume (if he really was its author) proclaims that the principles of association are “the cement of the universe”, what he may mean is only that those principles “are the only ties of our thoughts” in something other than causal reasoning (1971:86). The *Treatise* comments on the principles of association that, with their “gentle force”, they are “nature in a manner pointing out to every one those simple ideas, which are most proper to be united in a complex one”. This explains, for instance, “why languages so nearly correspond to each other” (1978:10-11; cf. EHU III, 1975:23). If we had no complex ideas, we would obviously have no notion of the universe — which seems enough to justify Hume’s celebrated metaphor.

The late J. L. Mackie wrote a beautiful book with that beautiful title, *The Cement of the Universe*. And in another book he summarises Hume’s central position about causal inference in the following terms: “The truth of the matter is just that when sequences of a certain kind have been observed a number of times an association of ideas is set up, so that on observing the antecedent we expect a successor like those which have commonly followed similar antecedent events” (1985:181). Fred Wilson (1997), notwithstanding his firm position about the rationality of Hume’s theory of knowledge, also believes that the association of ideas lies at the root of his conception of causal inference. He says, for instance, that among the “different kinds of associations” Hume includes “those involved in causal inferences” (1997:34). I believe that Wilson’s defence of Hume’s philosophy would be more convincing if he lost faith in the myth of a Humean “cognitive” associationism. His Hume, like Norton’s (1982) and Flage’s (1990), to mention just two more examples of commentators with a positive evaluation of the Scottish philosopher, does not stand for the destruction of science or common sense. This positive evaluation is incompatible with an acceptance of that myth.

I believe that all those who do accept it are the victims of a special kind of illusion, a “reading illusion” produced by the “negligences” of which Hume was admittedly guilty in the *Treatise*. J. A. Robinson (1968) has long ago commented on “the characteristic contrast between local lucidity and global obscurity which renders Hume’s meaning so often elusive” (1968:129). But in Hume’s first book there is also *local* obscurity: some passages do look, even by themselves, like symptoms of some

kind of cognitive associationism. In fact, they are nothing of the kind, but only explanations, indeed by association, of something other than causal thought or belief.

Hume did write that, besides resemblance, contiguity and causation, there is a further “principle of union among ideas” which seems different from the other three “but will be found at the bottom to depend on the same origin”, and this principle is the well known constant union between two species of objects of experience, when “the appearance of any new individual of either species naturally conveys the thought to its usual attendant” (THN I, iii, 6, 1978:93). But speaking of a common origin is far from saying that repetition, or habit, is at bottom another kind of association, in any technical or philosophical sense.

What our philosopher is presenting here is a special *psycho-linguistic* hypothesis about the use of causal terms: “Because such a particular idea is commonly annexed to such a particular word, nothing is required but the hearing of that word to produce the corresponding idea; and it will scarce be possible for the mind, by its utmost efforts, to prevent that transition. In this case it is not absolutely necessary, that upon hearing such a particular sound, we should reflect on any past experience, and consider what idea has been usually connected with the sound. The imagination of itself supplies the place of this reflection, and is so accustomed to pass from the word to the idea, that it interposes not a moment’s delay betwixt the hearing of the one, and the conception of the other” (*ibid.*). He goes on to say that the linguistic process in this hypothesis is “a true principle of association among ideas”, to which he adds: “I assert it to be the very same with that betwixt the ideas of cause and effect, and to be an essential part in all our reasonings from that relation” (*ibid.*). And here he already employs an expression (“related or associated”; the same in I, ii, 7, 1978:96) similar to the one in I, ii, 8, p. 101, quoted in the Index (“relation or association”).

What this amounts to is, I believe, the following. According to Hume, what happens *after* a causal inference has already been made, with the corresponding belief and expectation, is that every time an *impression*, occasioned by the observation of one of the objects in the conjunction, appears in the mind, the *idea* of the other object also immediately arises. *Only* after this process is “entrenched” is it possible to make the same transition from the *idea* of the first to the idea of the second, for instance when the *name* of the first object is heard by someone already persuaded that this object is always followed by the second.

What we have here is nothing like an identification of the “fourth” principle, repetition or habit, as another case of the association of ideas, or of the association of impression and idea. What we have is simply a Humean theory about what happens when *language* becomes part of causal reasoning — that is, in a late phase of the process. For Hume, causal reasoning and belief is obviously possible without, or before, the use of language — his discussion of “the reason of animals” clearly proves this (THN I, iii, 16; EHU IX). As we have seen above, in a technical sense, there is nothing associative in the making of a causal inference or the formation of a causal belief. Only causal language presents phenomena that seem to justify an explanation by associative mechanisms. This is obviously insufficient even to suggest the existence of any Humean associationism about causal belief. Still, this passage may have been one of those responsible for the interpretation that is being criticised here.

Or, perhaps, the interpretation was inspired by passages like the following: “Reason can never satisfy us that the existence of any one object does ever imply that of another; so that when we pass from the impression of one to the idea or belief of another, we are not determined by reason, but by *custom or a principle of association*” (THN I, iii, 7, 1978:97; emphasis mine). This does *look* like an identification of custom as a principle of association, but that interpretation obviously will not do: the principles of association of ideas are resemblance, contiguity, and causation, and custom is something else — it is an instinct, also called “habit”, that acts in us when we experience repeated conjunctions. What this *must* mean is that causal belief, not being produced by reason, derives *in part* from the sensitivity to repetition we call custom or habit, and *in part* from association in a *non-technical* sense, between an impression and the idea to which it communicates part of its vivacity. Granted, this is a particularly “negligent” passage, more so, perhaps, than any other one in the *Treatise* — but this could never allow us to conclude that Hume *really* meant that habit is one of those principles of association we know from the first chapters of the same work, for this would be a plain absurdity.

On the other hand, Hume explains probability by the “*association of ideas to a present impression*”, and it is from habit that the association is derived (THN I, iii, 12, 1978:130). What does this mean? It means, again, that a relation (or “association” in a non-technical sense) between perceptions is established following their repeated conjunction in experience, by the influence of custom or habit — *not* in the least by

any principle of association of ideas in the technical sense. Resemblance and contiguity, as natural relations, have nothing to do with this, and causation, as a principle of association, has in this its condition of possibility, not the other way around. Nothing here even suggests that probability derives from the association of ideas properly so called — no more than does causal belief in general.

Other passages in the *Treatise* may, when their precise context is ignored, present an associationist appearance. Most of those passages let themselves be interpreted along the lines I have tried to sketch here. But suppose that someone opens the *Treatise* directly on p.112 and simply reads this: “all belief arises from the association of ideas, according to my hypothesis”. Is it not tempting to take this as evidence in favour of the interpretation of Hume as an associationist about causation? The temptation must, I believe, be resisted, until we are able to see this text in perspective, that is, in its proper context.

This context is that of a two-pages-long argument, purporting to present a new “proof” of Hume’s theory that causal belief “is nothing but a lively idea related to a present impression”, a proof consisting in showing that the associative principles of resemblance and contiguity, although their effect in the formation of opinion is much weaker than that of causation, “still have some effect, and augment the conviction of any opinion, and the vivacity of any conception”. He begins with contiguity, presenting the example of *religious* beliefs enlivened by actually visiting holy places, like Mecca and Jerusalem: “The lively idea of the places passes by an easy transition to the facts, which are supposed to have been related to them by contiguity, and increases the belief by increasing the vivacity of the conception. The remembrance of these fields and rivers has the same influence on the vulgar as a new argument; and from the same causes” (1978: 110-1).

The second step in the proof is concerned with resemblance: “Some philosophers have imagined that there is an apparent cause for the communication of motion, and that a reasonable man might immediately infer the motion of one body from the impulse of another, without having recourse to any past observation”. If this opinion were true, it would amount to a demonstration, “and must imply the absolute impossibility of any contrary supposition” — and this is easily “refuted”, simply by clearly conceiving a completely different behaviour in the second body (1978:111; cf. EHU IV, I, 1975:29: “may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as

well follow from that cause?”). This well-known Humean argument is here the instrument of a refutation by *modus tollens*: if we have the contrary of what was predicted by a certain theory, that theory must be rejected.

But *why* did those philosophers (the Leibnizians, I presume) make such a terrible mistake? It is here that Hume resorts to association by resemblance, but only to explain that mistaken *philosophical* opinion, just as association by contiguity explained the religious opinions mentioned above. And the phrase we are trying to clarify appears at the end of that explanation — with no room for doubt about its real significance, as will be immediately obvious: “The reason why we imagine the communication of motion to be more consistent and natural (...) than any other natural effect is founded on the relation of *resemblance* between the cause and effect, which is here united to experience, and binds the objects in the closest and most intimate manner to each other, so as to make us imagine them to be absolutely inseparable. Resemblance, then, has the same or a parallel influence with experience; and as the only immediate effect of experience is to associate our ideas together, it follows that *all belief arises from the association of ideas, according to my hypothesis*” (1978:111-2; last emphasis mine).

Maybe my emphasis was superfluous. It is now clear, I am sure, that “all belief” means here only “all those mistaken philosophical opinions”, and not belief in general. How could it be otherwise? Much stranger than the admittedly strange phrasing would be to read it as meaning that Hume’s present hypothesis has to do with anything besides the proposed explanation of a mistaken philosophical belief, by a process of association of ideas by resemblance, following another similar explanation of (supposedly mistaken) religious beliefs by a process of association of ideas by contiguity. Curiously enough, Selby-Bigge’s Index is silent about p.112, although it notes that on p.111 “resemblance and contiguity augment the vivacity of any conception” (1978: 649).

What is here produced by the association of ideas, according to Hume, is only a mistake and a philosophical illusion: some philosophers have imagined or fancied that the resemblance between cause and effect *in this exceptional case* — in general they are quite distinct, as is Hume’s well known doctrine (“the effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it”, EHU, V, I, 1975: 29) — may serve as grounds for believing that they really “find the effect in the

cause”. This is simply a Leibnizian illusion, produced by an associative or psychological trick in the fancy. That is all there is to it. As is noted further along in the *Treatise*: “Nothing is more apt to make us mistake one idea for another than any relation between them, which associates them together in the imagination, and makes it pass with facility from one to the other” (I, iv, 2, 1978: 202).

The influence of the interpretation I criticise here is such that even Kant has been its victim, in some of the translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In Part II of the Introduction, he regrets the direction taken by Hume’s theory of causality, mainly because the Scottish philosopher derives the concept of cause only from “frequent concomitancy” (“*öftern Beigesellung*”) (1956:41). This was correctly translated into English by F. Max Müller (1881:401), before the turn of the century, and earlier than that Tissot (1864:35) had chosen “liaison fréquente”, which is quite acceptable. But in the present century many translations have “association” or its equivalent instead of “concomitancy”, or “concomitance”, or “conjunction” as would also be correct¹, thus transforming Kant into one, perhaps the first, of those who read Hume as an associationist about causality — which Kant certainly never did! Those were all interpretative translations. *Traduttori, tradittori?* Maybe all translators are, in some measure (myself included) — but these, I think, went beyond measure. They “corrected” the text of the *Critique*, introducing into it what they thought was the true version of the Humean theory there criticised by Kant. And this may have given strength to that interpretation, due to the prestige of Kant, *at least* as a philosopher who was saved from his “dogmatic slumbers” by reading Hume — and reading him correctly, it is to be presumed. How could Kant be wrong about this? Well, he was not — only his translators in the twentieth century were, as well as many interpreters of the philosophy of David Hume.

Hume’s theory is that effects and their causes are linked by something other than *deduction*, but he never dreamed of replacing “demonstration” by the association of ideas. The relation between effects and their causes may be called a simple “association”, in contrast with the deductive union they cannot have, as was Hume’s most celebrated discovery — but only in a popular sense, not in the Humean technical

¹ Those translators include, at least: J. Barni (revu par P.Archambault) (1976:59); A. Tremesaygues & B. Pacaud (1950:34); Alexandre D. L. Delamarre & François Marti (1980:76); J. Perojo (1967:149);

or philosophical sense of the “gentle force” of the association of ideas (THN I, iii, 4, 1978:10), which may or may not lead the mind from an idea to another that resembles the first, or is “contiguous” to it. This corresponds only to a certain tendency of the human mind to follow, in some cases, certain associative paths.

In complete contrast with this, there is nothing “gentle” about the forces that generate causal belief, whose operation is strong and unavoidable: Let Hume’s philosophy speak for itself: “This belief is the necessary result of placing mankind in such circumstances [repeated experience]. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the understanding is able either to produce or to prevent” (EHU V, i, 1975:46-7). I think this well known passage counts against any attempt to derive Hume’s conception of causal belief from any merely associative process. When in 1748, nine years after the *Treatise*, Hume published his definitive philosophy of knowledge in the *Enquiry*, all “negligences” of expression about these matters had been definitely left behind.

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