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An Enquiry Concerning Humean Understanding:  
A Criticism of Hume's Conception of Causal Events

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume provides an empirical account of knowledge that hinges upon the Copy Principle. The Copy Principle states that for every idea there is a corresponding impression or set of impressions that gives rise to the idea itself or its component ideas. With this foundation, Hume criticizes the idea that we have access to causation as the necessary connection between cause and effect. Considering the collision of two billiard balls, Hume identifies no sensory impression from which we copy our notion of causation. Therefore, he concludes that we perceive nothing in the collision that necessitates the outcome, as it is “consistent and conceivable” that they remain still or “a hundred different events might as well follow from [the collision]” (Hume, 172). Hume thinks this demonstrates that the cause and effect are distinct events, at least in our experience of them, and the necessary connection between the two remains a mystery. Additionally, he asserts that the negation of any matter of fact is just as possible as its affirmation. To say otherwise, Hume argues, would suggest that the claim “that the sun will not rise tomorrow... would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind” (Hume, 170). Therefore, Hume affirms the conceivability of causes without their ordinary effects and the Conceivability Implies Possibility (CIP) principle. This implies the possibility of causes producing various effects and breaks the necessary connection between the two. Therefore, contrary to what Hume believes, his view does not buy us mere skepticism concerning causation but rather outright denial. To avoid this undesirable consequence, I can either undermine the CIP principle or the notion that Hume properly conceives of causation. However, the contrapositive of the CIP principle seems nearly unassailable. Therefore, in this paper I seek to demonstrate that Hume cannot be certain that he is properly conceiving of the cause and effect, whether he conceives of them imaginatively or propositionally, such that the CIP principle is not satisfied.

To my knowledge, Hume allows for two modes of ideas: imaginative ideas and propositional ideas. Imaginative ideas, such as visualizations, are merely representations of their corresponding objects. For example, an imaginative idea of a stop sign involves our idea of red confined to the shape of an octagon with the white, boxy letters that spell “STOP.” In this way, our mental image of stop sign resembles the actual stop sign because it is a composite of our ideas of red and white that the actual stop sign inspires in us. Therefore, we should think of imaginative ideas as amalgamations of our ideas of sensory perceptions that we interpret to represent something. In contrast, the propositional idea of a stop sign would be given in sentence form, such as “A stop sign is a metallic octagonal traffic sign that is largely red but has white, boxy letters that spell ‘STOP.’” While the truth value of this proposition is true, if the stop sign were not to exist or if it had different properties than the proposition purports it to have, then the proposition would be false. Propositions, unlike mental images, have truth values that tie them to their referents more directly. For example, I can have a mental image without there being an object that the image resembles, and objects can exist without us having mental images of them. However, the proposition "Tables exist" cannot be true unless there are indeed tables, and the same proposition cannot be false unless tables, in fact, do not exist.

If Hume conceives of the causal and effectual events as imaginative ideas, then the CIP principle will not speak to the events themselves but only their representations. Since imaginative ideas are composites of several of our ideas of sensory perceptions, we can think of two forms of the CIP principle for imaginative ideas. The first principle states that a representation’s conceivability implies the representation’s possibility, and the second states that if a representation is conceivable, then the representation’s object is possible. While I take the first principle to be valid, I doubt the second and Hume requires this stronger principle in order to demonstrate that negations of matters of fact are possible. For example, when conducting proofs I could use the symbol  $\perp$  to represent a contradiction, but contradictions are not possible. So it seems that it is possible for one to conceive of a representation for an impossibility, and this counterexample would break the strong CIP principle for imaginative ideas. However, one might argue this is not a true counterexample, as the symbol  $\perp$  does not resemble a contradiction whereas the mental image of a billiard ball resembles a billiard balls, at least in some respects. I will accept that resemblance entails possibility, but this misunderstands how we assess

resemblance claims. If you told me that a cloud resembled a rabbit, to assess your claim I would have to view the cloud and compare my imaginative idea of the cloud with my imaginative ideas of rabbits. For this to be possible, the cloud must exist. Since all actually existing things are possible, for me to assess whether one thing resembles another, both have to be possible. Therefore, the only CIP principle that properly applies to imaginative ideas does demonstrate the possibility of the kinds of events that Hume requires to be possible for him to demonstrate that the causal and effectual events are distinct.

Furthermore, in the case of Hume's billiard balls, his imagination of the collision does not resemble causation. For Hume to properly conceive of the causal and effectual events as imaginative ideas at least some part of the idea must resemble causation; however, on both my view and Hume's such a resemblance is impossible for imaginative ideas. Consider Hume's example of the colliding billiard balls clearly represents a case of causation extended through time, so a static imaginative idea cannot resemble causation in the case of the billiard ball collision. If he conceives of the balls via imaginative ideas, then I take him to be thinking of a sequence of mental images of balls on a pool table. As Hume runs through the sequence, one ball translates across his mental field of view until arriving at a location adjacent to the second billiard ball. Then, Hume runs through another sequence of images of the second billiard ball moving in whatever direction he wants. In this way, he conceives of causes with effects other than those we observe them to have. However, notice the natural analogy between the imaginative conception of the billiard ball collision and a film depicting the same event on a digital screen. Films also resemble the events they represent via a sequence of discrete frames; however, a sequence of frames does not resemble causation. To say otherwise would suggest that contiguity resembles causation. However, suppose that I obtain two pictures of the same room, one with tables and chairs and one without, and then I run the two images through a projector. I have not conceived of objects coming from nothing or going into nothing, as I am not privy to the intermediate events between the two images<sup>2</sup> (Pruss, 47 – 50). Thus, contiguity in representation does not resemble causality in objects, so it seems that sequences of imaginative ideas do not resemble causality either. Since neither singular imaginative ideas nor sequences of such ideas can resemble causation, Hume does not properly conceive of the colliding of the billiard balls if he conceives of them as imaginative ideas.

Hume's position fares no better if we use of a propositional version of the CIP principle. I take the propositional CIP principle to state that if a proposition is possibly true then the proposition's referents are possible. For example, if the statement "God exists" is possibly true, then God possibly exists. Hence, if Hume affirms the proposition concerning the occurrence of the cause but denies the proposition regarding the occurrence of the effect, then he commits himself to the existence of a possible world in which the billiard balls collide but the balls behave differently than they actually do. This denies altogether the necessary connection of causation and precludes Hume from restricting his critique to just human understanding of causation rather than causation itself as he intended. Indeed, Hume refrains from arguing against causation as the necessary connection between events, stating "a man is guilty of unpardonable arrogance who concludes, because an argument has escaped his own investigation, that therefore it does not really exist" (Hume, 176). However, the application of the propositional CIP to the collision overlooks the fact that the structure of the billiard balls might necessitate the effect in the cases of ideal collisions. Perhaps, the nature of matter necessitates the physical laws, and, therefore, it is not the case that there is a possible world in which these particular billiard balls collide and behave other than they actually do. Consequently, so long as it is possible that an object's properties necessitate its behavior, then Hume is not justified in claiming that the effect is not necessitated by the cause.

At this point, one could claim that my criticism of Hume entails what we might call epistemic fatalism, in which the only possible world we are aware of is the actual world. For example, suppose that I claim that it is possible that George Washington crossed the Delaware on Christmas Eve as opposed to Christmas Day. One could argue that such an assertion of possibility assumes that matter is not constructed in such a way that every event in history was necessitated by every prior event and that humans do not have free will. Therefore, the objector would say, we are not justified in claiming that it is possible that Washington crossed the Delaware a day earlier. Since this objection could apply to virtually any matter of fact, if we accept my objection to Hume's use of the propositional form of CIP as valid, then we are not justified in asserting any possibility beyond those that are demonstrated in this possible world.

While this line of reasoning does not directly attack the truth of my criticism, many might reject my view given the plausibility of knowledge of other possible worlds.

While it might be impossible that the billiard balls behave differently than they actually do, it is possible that ball-like objects behave differently than balls actually do. Suppose that balls in our universe are made of matter that necessitates that balls behave as we observe them to behave after collisions. This does not preclude the possibility that in some other possible world balls are made of a differently structured matter or a different substance altogether such that balls necessarily leap vertically from tables upon collision. Likewise, it might be that George Washington could not have crossed the Delaware a day earlier than he did, but perhaps Washington-like persons could have in other possible worlds. Therefore, my objection to Hume's use of the CIP would not prevent us from making claims about other possible worlds, but it might preclude us from affirming that any particular object in the actual world could take on properties other than those that they actually possess.

In conclusion, this paper casts doubt on the idea that Hume conceives of the billiard balls correctly such that he can employ the CIP principle either in its imaginative or propositional form. I have called into question whether the CIP principle implies that the object of a representation is possible if the object's representation is possible to conceive. Further, I have argued that an imaginative idea of the collision of billiard balls does not adequately resemble a causal event and, therefore, adding resemblance into the formulation of the stronger version of the imaginative CIP does not demonstrate the possibility of the billiard balls behaving differently. Finally, I attacked an application of a propositional form of the CIP and defended my criticism from possible charges that it entails that the only possible world that we know of is the actual world. Hume's affirmation of the CIP principle and his assertion that he can conceive of causes with various effects attacks not only our perception of the necessary connection of cause and effect but the existence of such a connection. By undermining our confidence in Hume's proper conception of causal events, we can rationally avoid accepting the conclusion that causes do not necessitate their effects.

### References

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