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## Hume and Spinoza on the Relation of Cause and Effect

EMANUELA SCRIBANO

In his paper ‘Hume contra Spinoza?’, Wim Klever revived Richard Popkin’s earlier suggestion that we should mistrust Hume’s condemnation of Spinoza’s philosophy. According to Popkin, Hume’s conventional condemnation of the systematic atheist<sup>1</sup> would seem to hide the fact that Hume’s own views on the philosophy of religion derive from Spinoza.<sup>2</sup> Klever, for his part, broadened Popkin’s perspective and proposed to include in Hume’s debt to Spinoza his entire theory of knowledge. Klever later extended the argument and also included in Hume’s debt to Spinoza his analysis of the passions and morals, which, on this reading, are broadly dependent on parts III and IV of the *Ethics*.<sup>3</sup> In this way, Gilbert Boss’s thesis that Spinoza and Hume constitute a paradigm case of ‘difference’ between philosophers was overturned.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See *Treatise on Human Nature (THN)*, (1.4.5) 157 ff. References in parentheses are to book, part, and section of Hume’s *Treatise*; page numbers that follow refer to the Norton and Norton edition specified in the list of abbreviations at the beginning of this volume.

<sup>2</sup> W. Klever, ‘Hume contra Spinoza?’, *Hume Studies*, 16 (1990), 89–105. R. H. Popkin introduced the question of Hume’s debt to Spinoza in ‘Hume and Spinoza’, *Hume Studies*, 5 (1979), 65–93.

<sup>3</sup> W. Klever, ‘More About Hume’s Debt to Spinoza’, *Hume Studies*, 19 (1993), 55–79. On this see also A. C. Baier, ‘David Hume, Spinozist’, *Hume Studies*, 19 (1993), 237–51. Hume’s debt to Spinoza’s philosophy regarding the analysis of the passions constituted, according to Klever, a further and convincing argument that the young Hume had read the *Ethics*. The analysis of the passions was not part of Bayle’s presentation of Spinoza’s philosophical system and so the similarities with Spinoza’s text cannot be explained in the light of the reading of the famous article ‘Spinoza’ in Pierre Bayle’s *Dictionnaire historique et critique*.

<sup>4</sup> See G. Boss, *La Différence des philosophies: Hume et Spinoza* (Zurich: Éditions du Grand Midi, 1982).

Klever's first article was followed by some perplexed remarks by Frank J. Leavitt. Against Klever, who, among other things, had pointed out that both Hume and Spinoza held nominalist positions, Leavitt denied that Hume and Spinoza ever agreed on the doctrine of universals.<sup>5</sup> But, most importantly, Leavitt denied any possible agreement between Hume's and Spinoza's views on the relation of cause and effect. According to Leavitt, EIA<sub>4</sub>—'The knowledge of an effect depends on, and involves, the knowledge of the cause'<sup>6</sup>—represents an 'Aristotelian doctrine of causality the rejection of which was the occasion for one of Hume's most brilliant contributions to philosophy'.<sup>7</sup> Because of this it would be impossible to maintain that Hume's debt to Spinoza's philosophy was as extensive as Klever claimed. In his replies, Klever reconfirmed his own thesis on the identity of Hume's and Spinoza's views even with respect to the relation of cause and effect. In order to establish this, however, Klever did not hesitate to turn Hume into a rationalist. On Klever's reading, Hume would have opposed the idea that experience could ever justify the relation of cause and effect, as rationalists hold, but this opposition would not imply denying the necessity of the causal relation, a necessity that Hume would accept, in full agreement with Spinoza.<sup>8</sup> In sum, while Hume's critique of the relation of cause and effect takes account of the empiricist claim that it is possible to justify that relation on the basis of experience, Hume would not hold that all our knowledge is exhausted by experience. For this reason, as in Spinoza's case, Hume would have claimed that there is a necessary connection between the events that we call 'cause' and 'effect'—that is, a connection that is not reducible to constant conjunction.<sup>9</sup>

Leavitt's criticism clearly brought to light the strongest and most general objection to Klever's thesis: how can the philosopher who

<sup>5</sup> F. J. Leavitt, 'Hume against Spinoza and Aristotle', *Hume Studies*, 17 (1991), 203–8, at 204. Cf. Klever, 'Hume contra Spinoza?', 94.

<sup>6</sup> All the translations from Spinoza's *Ethics* are taken from C, which will not be cited independently.

<sup>7</sup> Leavitt, 'Hume against Spinoza and Aristotle', 205.

<sup>8</sup> W. Klever, 'A Vindication', *Hume Studies*, 17 (1991), 209–13.

<sup>9</sup> Referring to EIA<sub>4</sub>, Klever wrote: 'But I must confess that I find nowhere in Hume's work a negation of this axiom!' ('A Vindication', 211), and then: 'That, on the contrary, Hume was fully convinced of the truth of Spinoza's axiom, becomes apparent in his practice . . . Hume never reduces causality to a constant conjunction . . .'.

has shown that it is impossible to ground the connection between cause and effect on reason agree in any way with another philosopher who opened his principal philosophical work with the claim that such connection is necessary? And, more generally, how can a skeptical empiricist like Hume be so indebted to a dogmatic rationalist like Spinoza?<sup>10</sup> This is the question, and Klever's way of solving it and replying to Leavitt is, frankly, unacceptable; it consists, essentially, in denying that Hume was a true empiricist and that on the basis of this empiricism he undermined the rationalist conception of cause and effect. Klever's defense of the agreement between Hume and Spinoza on the relation of cause and effect was so doubtful that, although she revived the thesis that Hume's theory of the passions and morals was dependent on Spinoza, Annette Baier did not have the courage to include the analysis of causality among the points of agreement between the two philosophers.<sup>11</sup> Baier justifies this unlikely filiation with an important remark: 'That Hume makes his epistemological home in what Spinoza regarded as the "mutilated and confused" realm of ideas of sense, imagination, and historical narrative is of course a huge departure from Spinoza, and since Hume's concept of cause is one derived from this realm... his concept of cause is far from Spinoza's.'<sup>12</sup> Hume's theory of the origin of the relation of cause and effect is to be understood in the light of his analysis of the ideas of the imagination and their association—that is, in the light of what, according to Spinoza, is the realm of inadequate knowledge. The relation of cause and effect, according to Spinoza, is, instead, one of the first axioms that guides the concatenation of adequate ideas that, in the *Ethics*, lead to true knowledge of God and the universe. If this were the whole story, we should conclude with Baier that, at least when it comes to the relation of cause and effect, there are no similarities between Hume and Spinoza. But this is *not* the whole story.

<sup>10</sup> This is the ultimate reason of V. Maxwell's rejection of Klever's thesis. See V. Maxwell, 'The Dialectic of Enlightenment: A Critique of recent Spinoza–Hume Scholarship', *Animus*, 7 (2002), 1–23, at <http://www.swgc.mun.ca/animus/2002vol7/maxwell7.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> Baier, 'David Hume, Spinozist'. Baier warned that 'of course Spinozism in an empiricist mode is Spinozism with a considerable difference...' (p. 237). In sum, if the empiricist Hume inherited some doctrines from the rationalist Spinoza, well then, we should expect to find considerable modifications in these doctrines.

<sup>12</sup> Baier, 'David Hume, Spinozist', 240.

In order to place the question of the relation of Hume and Spinoza in the right perspective, we must take into account that, although, according to Spinoza, it is true that only rational and intellectual knowledge is adequate, it is also true that a very large part of Spinoza's interest in the *Ethics* is devoted to a reconstruction of the processes underlying non-rational knowledge—that is, the imagination. The imagination produces obscure knowledge, but it is not itself obscure; rather, it is possible to give a philosophical account of it, since it depends entirely on the necessary mechanisms of human nature. It is certainly superfluous to remind the reader of Spinoza's polemic against those who write about the passions as if they were dealing with 'not of natural things, which follow the common laws of nature, but of things which are outside nature', and 'who prefer to curse or laugh at the Affects and actions of men, rather than understand them' (EIIIPref). Likewise, it is certainly superfluous to remind the reader of Spinoza's claim that, on the contrary, the affects 'acknowledge certain causes, through which they are understood, and have certain properties, as worthy of our knowledge as the properties of any other thing', so that we can discuss the human actions and appetites 'just as if it were a Question of lines, planes, and bodies' (EIIIPref). The faculty—if I may use this notion disliked by Spinoza—that produces inadequate ideas—that is, the imagination—was subjected to the same program of scientific study in part II of the *Ethics*. If Hume's renowned philosophical thesis—that is, the explanation of the relation of cause and effect—has any source in Spinoza's philosophy, this source can be found only in Spinoza's analysis of the imagination—that is, in the 'mutilated and confused realm of ideas'. So this is the question: besides a relation of cause and effect grounded in reason, is there also in Spinoza a relation of cause and effect grounded in the imagination?

Before answering this question we should dwell on two points. First, we should inquire into the very appropriateness of the question. Spinoza's mental universe divides into two spheres: the imaginative sphere—that is, the world of inadequate ideas—and the rational and intellectual sphere—that is, the world of adequate ideas.<sup>13</sup> Both worlds

<sup>13</sup> On the metaphysical foundation of this theory, see my *Angeli e beati: Modelli di conoscenza da Tommaso a Spinoza* (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 1996), 259 ff.

encompass within themselves coherent systems. Reason and intellect produce their own metaphysics and theology, which stand in contrast with the theology and metaphysics produced by the imagination. Reason and intellect have their own rational and universal morality, and the imagination has its own morality, variable from individual to individual, breeding ground *par excellence* for skepticism.<sup>14</sup> Reason and intellect have universal knowledge, but the imagination also produces ‘universals’, those of the schoolmen, that vary depending on the features that most repeatedly have affected the observer (EIIIP4oS). Reason and intellect know the necessary existence of the finite modes through their dependence on God,<sup>15</sup> whereas the imagination—enclosed within the phenomenology of its own perceptions—attributes existence to anything that affects the body, including dreams and fictions,<sup>16</sup> and so on. It would not be surprising, then, if there were a relation between events that depends on the associations of the imagination that corresponded to the logical necessity that, according to reason, relates cause and effect.

Secondly, it is appropriate to clarify that not only does Spinoza hold a rationalist conception of the relation between cause and effect, but he is also one of the polemical targets, among others, of Hume’s brilliant analysis of the fallacies in the rationalist explanation of the relation between cause and effect.<sup>17</sup> Hume’s critique of the principle of causality as a principle founded on reason is articulated in two stages. First, Hume refutes those who believe that the principle of causality, according to which ‘whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence’ (*THN* (1.3.3), 56) is intuitively true. Then, Hume opposes those who believe that the principle is demonstrable. Among the latter, Hume chooses to refute Hobbes’s, Clarke’s, and Locke’s

<sup>14</sup> The reference is, of course, to the *EIApp.*, which is dedicated to the analysis of the prejudice that ‘all things in Nature are like themselves in acting with an end in view’ and to the roots of skepticism, after Spinoza’s explanation of the metaphysics of reason in part I. The universal morality of reason is announced instead in *EIVPref.*

<sup>15</sup> *EVP3oD*: ‘Therefore, to conceive things under a form of eternity is to conceive things in so far as they are conceived through God’s essence as real entities; that is, in so far as they involve existence through God’s essence.’

<sup>16</sup> See *EIIIP17C*, *D*, and *S*.

<sup>17</sup> The only study dedicated to this subject—C. J. Sullivan, Jr., ‘Spinoza and Hume on Causation’, *Atti del XII Congresso Internazionale di Filosofia*, xii (Florence: Sansoni, 1961), 431–7—is useless.

arguments. Hume does not provide any example of those authors who defend the intuitive character of the necessary connection between cause and effect. But Spinoza certainly belongs to this class of authors, since he presents the principle of causality as an axiom, the third, to be exact, of part I of the *Ethics*: ‘From a given determinate cause the effect follows necessarily; and conversely, if there is no determinate cause, it is impossible for an effect to follow’ (EIA3). And certainly Spinoza would have agreed with those who maintain that it is contradictory, and not simply false, to say of something that begins to exist that it does not have a cause. EIA4, in fact, states: ‘The knowledge of an effect depends on, and *involves*, the knowledge of its cause.’ Now, the only argument that Hume provides against those who maintain that the truth of the principle of causality is intuitive is that the ideas of cause and effect are separable: ‘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’ (THN (I.3.3), 56). Whether or not Hume had in mind EIA4, certainly his argument on the separability of the ideas of cause and effect would be sufficient to threaten that axiom. There is a further hint that the generic reference to those who defend the intuitive character of the principle of causality hides a reference to Spinoza. Those who defend the intuitive character of the principle of causality claim it to be ‘one of those maxims, which tho’ they may be deny’d with the lips, ’tis impossible for men in their hearts really to doubt of’ (THN (I.3.3), 56). This characteristic of Hume’s adversaries fits well with Spinoza’s criticism of Descartes’s theory of judgment. Spinoza accused those who maintain that the mind is free of assenting to or dissenting from the contents of the intellect of confusing ‘words with ideas’; because of this they ‘think that they can will something contrary to what they are aware of, when they only affirm or deny with words something contrary to what they are aware of’ (EIIIP49S). In sum, according to Spinoza, those who deny self-evident truths like the principle of causality deny them ‘only ... with words’; and, according to Hume, those who maintain that principle of causality is intuitive believe that those who deny it do so only ‘with the lips’ but not ‘in their hearts’.

So, Spinoza would seem to be one of Hume's adversaries in his analysis of the relation between cause and effect. And there would be nothing else to add were it not for the fact that there is a notion of causality in Spinoza that relates to the imagination rather than to reason. Spinoza not only elaborates a theory of causality based on adequate ideas—the one expressed in *EIA*<sub>4</sub>—but he also proposed a theory to account for how causal explanation emerges within the realm of the obscure and confused ideas of experience and, hence, guides the knowledge and behavior of the people who are prisoners of the imagination. This theory is presented in *EIIP*<sub>44</sub>, in the first corollary, the scholium, and the body of the demonstration.

*EIIP*<sub>44</sub> states that 'it is of the nature of Reason to regard things as necessary, not as contingent'. Since reason 'regards' things 'as necessary', Spinoza feels obliged to explain the origin of the widespread, and obviously false, notion of contingency. He provides such explanation in Corollary I: 'From this it follows that it depends only on the imagination that we regard things as contingent, both in respect to the past and in respect to the future.' Spinoza takes obvious pleasure in explaining the origin of error; he already gave a celebrated example of this in *EIA*<sub>App</sub>. In this case, however, Spinoza does not limit himself to what we might call the 'negative' explanation to account for why people believe that they are free that he offered in *EIA*<sub>App</sub>.—that is, the explanation grounded in their ignorance of the causes of their actions.<sup>18</sup> To this negative reason, Spinoza adds an explanation that employs the mechanism of association in the imagination, investigated earlier in *EII*. The principle of association of the ideas that belong to the imagination is of basic importance in explaining why the mind regards things as contingent. As a preliminary, Spinoza recalls the principle of association described in *EIIP*<sub>18</sub>: 'If the human Body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the Mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also.' Memory is created this way. In fact, memory, as Spinoza clarifies it in *EIIP*<sub>18</sub>S, 'is nothing other than a

<sup>18</sup> 'men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]'.

certain connection of ideas involving the nature of things which are outside the human Body—a connection that is in the Mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human Body'. That is, if some past experience has connected two affections of the body with one another, when one of them presents itself again then mind will also imagine, that is, remember, the impression that in the past was connected with that affection. Spinoza is careful to emphasize, again in *EIIP18S*, that this 'connection ... is in the Mind according to the order and connection of the affections of the human Body', and so it is casual and variable from individual to individual, in order to distinguish it from the connection of ideas in accordance with the order of the intellect. This connection, or, better, this 'association' of ideas that belongs to the imagination, reflects the causal order of experience rather than that of the ideas of reason. The order of the ideas of the intellect—that is, the rational and scientific explanation of things—is that 'by which the Mind perceives things through their first causes, and which is the same in all men'.

The mechanism of association of the mind in accordance with the order of experience explains the phenomenon of the union of ideas that are dissimilar from one another. As in the case of language, although there is no similarity between the words and the things they refer to, the mechanism of association connects the former with the latter due to the frequency with which a certain sound is uttered in the presence of a thing. By the same mechanism, the mind of the soldier, seeing the tracks of the horse, will pass on from thinking of the horse to thinking of the rider and the war, whereas a peasant will associate the horse with the plough, the field, and so on (see *EIIP18S*).

In order to explain the origin of the firm belief that there are contingent events it is also necessary to keep in mind the principle presented in *EIIP17* (and its corollary and scholium), according to which the mind imagines the things that affect the body as existing until some idea excludes the existence of these things. This principle predicts that the idea of an existing external body does not add anything to the bare idea of the same body. The idea of an external body, in the end, is nothing but a modification that the affected body suffers as a result of an encounter with an external body. It follows that, when the body suffers the same modification as the one

suffered in the past due to the encounter with an external body, the mind that is nothing but the idea of the affected body, according to Spinoza, imagines that the external body exists, even if it actually does not: 'although the external bodies by which the human Body has once been affected do not exist, the Mind will still regard them as present, as often as this action of the body is repeated' (EII17CD). Spinoza invokes experience for this principle: 'all those postulates which I have assumed contain hardly anything that is not established by experience ...' (EII17S).<sup>19</sup>

On the basis of the association of ideas that produces what we call 'memory', and on the basis of the equivalence between the idea of a body and the idea of its existence, Spinoza is able to explain the origin of the notion of contingency:

if the human Body has once been affected by two external bodies at the same time, then afterwards, when the Mind imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the other also, i.e., it will regard both as present to itself unless causes occur which exclude their present existence. ... Let us suppose, then, a child, who saw Peter for the first time yesterday, in the morning, but saw Paul at noon, and Simon in the evening, and today again saw Peter in the morning. ... as soon as he sees the morning light ... he will imagine the whole day, and Peter together with the morning, Paul with noon, and Simon with the evening. *That is, he will imagine the existence of Paul and of Simon with a relation to future time. ... And he will do this more uniformly, the more often he has seen them in this same order.* But if it should happen at some time that on some other evening he sees James instead of Simon, then on the following morning he will imagine now Simon, now James, together with the evening time ... His imagination, therefore, will vacillate and he will imagine now this one, now that one, with the future evening time, i.e., he will regard neither of them as certainly future [*certo ... futurum*], but both of them as contingently future. (EII144S; emphasis added)

Let us imagine the young Hume at La Flèche, bent over the book by the systematic atheist, and let us try to guess what he would have made of these propositions of the *Ethics*. First of all, Hume would have been struck by the theory of association of ideas by the imagination and its explanation of how it is possible for stable

<sup>19</sup> On the role of experience in Spinoza, see P. F. Moreau, *Spinoza: L'Expérience et l'éternité* (Paris: PUF, 1994).

aggregates of ideas to form independently of any logical connection among the ideas. And then Spinoza's appeal to experience would have caught his attention. A good suggestion, undoubtedly, to explain the origin of those truths that Leibniz had called 'matters of fact', or, to use Hume's terminology, to explain those propositions whose truth does not depend on the relation of ideas alone. He would then have read with particular attention the explanation of the origin of the imaginative notion of contingency. He would have thought that it contains all the elements needed to provide an excellent explanation of the origin of the idea of necessary connection—that is, the origin of that which is opposite to contingency. In fact, claims Spinoza, the mind of the observer will imagine the *existence* of Paul and Simon as soon as Peter appears if it has frequently seen Paul and Simon appear after Peter. That is, the mind of the observer, by its own laws, cannot help imagining the existence of Paul and Simon as soon as Peter appears, even if there is no logical relation among the ideas of Paul, Peter, and Simon. And the strength of the compulsion to think of Paul and Simon after seeing Paul will depend on how frequently Paul and Simon have appeared after Peter. All the elements are present for the young Hume to write a first draft of the sections of book 1 part 3 of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, the parts devoted to an analysis of the relation of cause and effect. Following out references contained in EIIP44S, Hume might go back to read EIIP18—that is, the proposition devoted to the association of ideas and memory. There he would notice that Spinoza used that proposition to explain how it happens that, in the presence of an impression, the mind brings back to consciousness ideas of events that in the past occurred together with the event that is presently causing the impression. From the phenomenon of the association of ideas it follows that the observer 'will imagine the existence of Paul and of Simon with a relation to future time. ... And he will do this more uniformly, the more often he has seen them in this same order.' Certainly, Hume would have thought, the first step towards tracking down the link between the two ideas that we call 'cause' and 'effect' consists in their past constant conjunction:

'Tis therefore by EXPERIENCE only, that we can infer the existence of one object from that of another. The nature of experience is this. We remember

to have had frequent instances of the existence of one species of objects; and also remember, that the individuals of another species of objects have always attended them, and have existed in a regular order of contiguity and succession with regard to them. (*THN* (1.3.6), 61)

It would then have been established that the first condition for the formation of the relation of cause and effect is the 'constant conjunction' of two events (*THN* (1.3.6), 61).

But in order to obtain the relation of cause and effect we need something more: the idea of a necessary connection between the cause-event and the effect-event. It is necessary to distinguish between a simple succession of events, and a connection between two events such that the second occurs if and only if the first occurs. Only the latter is called a relation of cause and effect. What is the origin of the idea of a necessary connection? Spinoza claims that the mind will imagine Paul and Simon as soon as Peter appears 'the more often he has seen them in this same order'. The link between the ideas of Paul and Peter is then a matter of degree. The more often Paul would have followed Peter, the more inevitable it will be for the mind to imagine the one when the other appears. Let us imagine what would happen if Paul had *always* followed Peter in past experiences. The mind would then regard Paul as certainly (*certo futurum*) existing in the future. Then Hume can write: 'from the constant conjunction the objects acquire an union in the imagination. When the impression of one becomes present to us, we immediately form an idea of its usual attendant...' (*THN* (1.3.6), 65). The necessary connection is nothing but the psychological compulsion to pass from one event to another, and this psychological compulsion occurs when two events have always been conjoined in the past.

However, there is still something missing. The mind does not limit itself to imagining the fire when smoke is present but *believes that there is fire*. Spinoza lays the groundwork for explaining this phenomenon. In Peter's presence, the mind does not limit itself to imagining Paul, but it imagines him as existing—that is, it believes that Paul will appear after Peter: 'he will imagine the existence of Paul and Simon with reference to future time'. And this happens because, according to *EIIP17*, 'even though things do not exist, the Mind still imagines them always as present to itself, unless causes occur which exclude

their present existence' (EIIIP44S, with reference to EIIIP17)—that is, it is equivalent to think of something and to think of that something as existing. After having clarified how the mind, in the presence of smoke, necessarily imagines fire, Hume will devote sections 7 and 8 to trying to explain why, in the presence of smoke, the mind will not limit itself to imagining fire but will *believe* that there is fire. Again Spinoza will be of help here: 'the idea of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object, and when after the simple conception of any thing we wou'd conceive it as existent, we in reality make no addition to or alteration on our first idea' (THN (1.3.7), 65–6). This time, however, Hume will feel obliged to add something to Spinoza's *Ethics* in order to explain the belief in the existence of the fire when smoke is present: the present impression of the smoke transfers part of its vivacity to the idea of fire that the mind has imagined as existing.<sup>20</sup> Hume, in this way, includes the *Ethics*' analysis of association of ideas in his own theory of the origin of belief. However, in this analysis too Spinoza has precedence over Hume. In the second chapter of the *Tractatus theologico-politicus* Spinoza had explained the prophets' certainty about the existence of non-present events by the vivacity with which they imagine those very events. Afterwards, Malebranche had extensively developed this thesis in book two of *De la recherche de la vérité*, where the difference between sense and imagination is related to their different degree of vivacity, a difference that can be reduced so much as to make indistinguishable imagination and sensation.

If Paul's presence has always followed Peter's presence in the past, what guarantee do I have that things will be the same in the future? None, it is evident. Likewise, Hume will say, there is no guarantee that the sun will rise tomorrow. And, yet, both Spinoza and Hume claim, it is impossible not to believe that it will rise.

If Spinoza's analysis of the origin of the belief in contingency provides the material for explaining the origin of the belief in necessity, *a fortiori* Hume will follow Spinoza's analysis in his explanation of the origin of the representation of contingency, when the past has not

<sup>20</sup> THN (1.3.8), 69: 'when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity'.

presented a conjunction of contrary events: ‘’Tis evident, that when an object is attended with contrary effects, we judge of them only by our past experience, and always consider those as possible, which we have observ’d to follow from it’ (*THN* (1.3.12), 91–2). Spinoza, to repeat, had written: ‘But if it should happen at some time that on some other evening he sees James instead of Simon, then on the following morning he will imagine now Simon, now James, together with the evening time ... His imagination, therefore, will vacillate and he will imagine now this one, now that one, with the future evening time, i.e., *he will regard neither of them as certainly future, but both of them as contingently future*’ (EIIP44S; emphasis added).

Spinoza also showed that the strength of the link between ideas depends on the frequency in which they appeared linked in the past: ‘he will imagine the existence of Paul and Simon with reference to future time ... *and this train of events will be more consistent the more frequently he sees them in that order*’. And Hume will explain in this way the notion of probability, that increases or decreases depending on the frequency of the constant conjunction: ‘’Tis evident, that when an object is attended with contrary effects, we judge of them only by our past experience, and always consider those as possible, which we have observ’d to follow from it. And as past experience regulates our judgment concerning the possibility of these effects, so it does that concerning their probability; and that effect, which has been the most common, we always esteem the most likely’ (*THN* (1.3.12), 91–2).

Hume does not even stop at the extreme implication of Spinoza’s reconstruction of the mechanism of association—that is, the identification of the process that links unrelated events in the relation of cause and effect with the process that links words to things. In the relation of cause and effect, dissimilar ideas are so strongly united that the mind is compelled to think of the one when it thinks of the other. This relation cannot be explained in any way through an analysis of the ideas: they are not correlative ideas and they are logically independent of one another.<sup>21</sup> Now, the paradigmatic case of a link between totally

<sup>21</sup> Hume argues against those who try to argue that any event must have a cause by naming ‘effect’ the event and then pointing out that the very notion of ‘effect’ implies the correlative one of ‘cause’ as follows: ‘But this does not prove, that every being must be

unrelated ideas that is so strong that it is impossible to think of the one without the other is the link that human institution establishes between words and things. Spinoza had discussed this particular association of ideas in *EIIP18*. That proposition plays a crucial role in the explanation of the imaginative notion of contingency: 'If the human Body has once been affected by two or more bodies at the same time, then when the Mind subsequently imagines one of them, it will immediately recollect the others also.' And this is the reason why:

Mind, from the thought of one thing, immediately passes to the thought of another, which has no likeness to the first: as, for example, from the thought of the word 'pomum' a Roman will immediately pass to the thought of the fruit [namely, an apple], which has no similarity to that articulate sound and nothing in common with it except that the Body of the same man has often been affected by these two, i.e., that the man often heard the word 'pomum' while he saw the fruit. And in this way each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one's association has ordered the images of things in the body. (*EIIP18S*)

As in the case when the ideas of Paul and Simon appear, as soon as Peter appears, so the link between the sign and the thing signified is not justified by their corresponding ideas but by their constant conjunction. Hume agrees with Spinoza on this as well. The origin of the link between sign and thing signified is the same as that of the link between cause and effect. There are only three principles of the association of ideas, according to Hume: 'I assert that the only *general* principles, which associate ideas, are resemblance, contiguity and causation' (*THN* (1.3.6), 65). The relation between the sign and thing signified can only belong to the last principle:

There is indeed a principle of union among ideas, which at first sight may be esteem'd different from any of these, but will be found at the bottom to depend on the same origin. When ev'ry individual of any species of objects is found by experience to be constantly united with an individual of another species, the appearance of any new individual of either species naturally conveys the thought to its usual attendant. Thus because such a particular idea is commonly annex'd to such a particular word, nothing is requir'd but the hearing of that word to produce the correspondent idea; and

preceded by a cause; no more than it follows, because every husband must have a wife, that therefore every man must be marry'd' (*THN* (1.3.3), 58).

'twill scarce be possible for the mind, by its utmost efforts, to prevent that transition. . . . But tho' I acknowledge this to be a true principle of association among ideas, 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. We have no other notion of cause and effect, but that of certain objects, which in all past instances have been found inseparable. (*THN* (1.3.6), 65; emphasis added)

Now, the analogy between the relation of ideas that constitutes the origin of the imaginative notion of contingency and the relation between words and things in Spinoza underscores the fact that the strength of the association of ideas is utterly compatible with its sheer arbitrary and fortuitous character. At the appearance of a horse, the soldier and the farmer will inevitably imagine different things:

a soldier, having seen traces of a horse in the sand, will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, etc. But a Farmer will pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a plow, and then to that of a field. etc. And so each one, according as he has been accustomed to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another. (*EIIP18S*)

It is not surprising that Hume would also want to follow Spinoza on this point. The analysis of the relation between cause and effect, in fact, has this provocative result: there is no difference between the link that unites natural signs (smoke and fire) and the link that unites conventional signs (words and things). The strength of both links depends only on a constant conjunction. After all, it is on that very page of Spinoza's text that Hume might have come across the concept that will be a key-concept in his analysis—that is, custom: 'And so each one, according as he has been *accustomed* to join and connect the images of things in this or that way, will pass from one thought to another.'

Anybody who has studied Hume's famous critique of the claim that the relation of cause and effect is grounded on reason knows that Hume seems to have been inspired by Malebranche, who, in support of his occasionalism, explained that all causal reasonings are based on the notorious fallacy according to which what follows is caused by what precedes it: *post hoc propter hoc*.<sup>22</sup> We do not have to

<sup>22</sup> The original suggestion that Malebranche was the philosopher who inspired Hume's critique of the relation between cause and effect can be traced back, at least, to C. W. Doxsee,

give up this belief. On the contrary. Malebranche's philosophy surely played a crucial critical role and was essential to Hume's criticism of the rational conception of causation, held, among others, by Spinoza in an extreme form; we should not forget that it was an axiom for him. But the beneficial awakening Hume's reading of Malebranche caused left something unexplained. Why do human minds fall into the gross error of thinking that what follows has a necessary relation to what precedes it? Spinoza's theory of the association of ideas in the imagination provides the missing explanation. So, Hume completely reversed Spinoza's program of replacing the inadequate ideas of the imagination with the ideas of reason: the Spinoza who theorizes about the imagination has replaced the Spinoza who theorizes about reason, having fallen under the attack of Malebranche's critique.

In conclusion, the weakness of the currently available attempts to draw a parallel between the philosophies of Spinoza and Hume is due to the lack of understanding that Spinoza held two theories of knowledge, that of reason and that of the imagination. After all, as we have seen, Spinoza explicitly referred to this twofold theory while introducing the analysis of the association of ideas in the imagination: 'I say ... that this connection happens according to the order and connection of the affections of the human Body in order to distinguish it from the connection of ideas which happens according to the order of the intellect, by which the Mind perceives things through their first causes, and which is the same in all men' (EIIPI8S). Once we clarify that the human mind, according to Spinoza, can be structured in accordance with either the laws of reason or the associations of the imagination, we will no longer need to turn Hume into a rationalist in

'Hume's Relation to Malebranche', *Philosophical Review*, 25 (1916), 692–710. The hypothesis was influentially revived by N. Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (1941; New York: St Martin's Press, 1966), 80–90. Hume knows and quotes Malebranche both in the *Treatise* (THN (1.3.14), 106) and in the *Enquiries* (EHU, sect. 7.2, 58 n; EPM, sect. 3.2, 22 n). Two of these occurrences regard passages where Malebranche discusses causality (THN 1.3.14; EHU, sect. 7.2). Malebranche had begun to criticize the efficacy of secondary causes since the first edition of the *Recherche de la vérité* (III. 2. iii) OC i. 426: 'je ne croi pas qu'on puisse douter, que ceux qui assurent, que l'esprit peut se former les idées des objets, ne se trompent; puisqu'ils attribuent à l'esprit la puissance de créer, et même de créer avec sagesse et avec ordre, quoiqu'il n'ait aucune connoissance de ce qu'il fait: car cela n'est pas concevable. Mais la cause de leur erreur, est que les hommes ne manquent jamais de juger qu'une chose est cause de quelque effet, quand l'un et l'autre sont joints ensemble, supposé que la véritable cause de cet effet leur soit inconnuë.'

order to acknowledge his debt to Spinoza, nor will Hume's empiricism constitute a reason for denying such debt.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Translation from the Italian by Raffaella De Rosa and Daniel Garber. An earlier version of this chapter appeared in C. Ginzburg and E. Scribano (eds.), *Conversazioni per Alberto Gajano* (Pisa: ETS, 2005), 323–39. I would like to thank Eugenio Lecaldano for his valuable remarks.