

On the Significance of Kant's Principle of Causality

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The significance of ~~of~~ what has come to be known as "Kant's principle of causality" can be easily misinterpreted or missed entirely, even after repeated readings of Kant's attempt to justify the principle in his Second Analogy. The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct Kant's argument about causality and to consider some important objections to it, in such a way that the sense of the principle of causality may be <sup>BETTER</sup> properly understood.

Before I reconstruct Kant's argument in detail, I shall give some indication of the reason that he thinks that the principle of causality is essential for causal investigations, <sup>sketch out</sup> and ~~two~~ <sup>two</sup> major objections to Kant's argument can be ~~sketched out~~ in anticipation of it. Then after the reconstructed argument for the principle has been presented, I shall return to the objections to show that they are not telling against a <sup>adequately</sup> properly understood sense of the principle.

As Lewis White Beck and Wrynn Smith have pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the purpose of the principle of causality, ~~according to~~ Kant, is not to determine directly the connection of a particular cause with its effect. Such specific determinations are the task of empirical investigation, utilizing experimental-inductive methods, such as ~~as~~ those of Hume and Mill, or a deductive-nomological method, such as that of Hempel. But while observation, experiment, and reasoning from empirically generated causal laws can determine what the cause is in a particular case, Kant argues that we

cannot by these means alone determine that some causing actually occurs in a particular case. Nevertheless, the empirical investigation of causal connections always presupposes that some causing is actually going on in the phenomenal field or "in the object." Nothing could be more self-evident about scientific investigation, than that we assume that something has a cause, and then try to determine what it is. But how do we come to make the assumption that there are causes in the first place? and can this assumption be true or false in particular cases? To Kant these are not idle questions; for unless our assumptions about whether some causing is going on are true, we have no point specified at which our investigation into particular causal connections can justifiably begin.

The purpose of Kant's "transcendental analysis" is to inquire into the nature of our prior assumptions about causing, and to determine the conditions of their truth. In the process of his analysis, Kant shows, though not very clearly, to be sure, that any particular causal judgment ("A causes B") depends on an assumption about a corresponding phenomenal <sup>FIELD</sup> or "object"; "B happens, comes into existence, or constitutes an event", <sup>in turn,</sup> and that the truth of this assumption depends on the validity of the principle of causality; "everything that happens presupposes a preceding state upon which it follows according to a rule".

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There are two major objections to the causal principle, each of which takes aim at a crucial aspect of Kant's analysis ~~of it~~. The first objection tries to undermine the validity of the principle, by alleging a fallacy in Kant's "proof" in the Second Analogy. A.O. Lovejoy, P.F. Strawson, and J.L. Mackie, among others, have argued that Kant commits the non-sequitur of attempting to derive a universal and necessary rule of succession, either of perceptions or of the appearances themselves, from a single instance of an irreversible order of perceptions.<sup>2</sup> BUT

OMIT FOR P. 8 [ If this objection holds, then we could not, according to Kant's analysis, determine the truth of the prior assumption that empirical investigators must make about the presence of causing in the phenomenal field.

The second objection seeks to lay to rest our qualms about the validity of the causal principle, <sup>WITH THE</sup> ~~by claiming~~ that we do not require it in order to know that an event has in fact occurred. In <sup>APPARENT</sup> defense of a "Humean" view of events and causation, Jeffrie Murphy has argued that we can immediately recognize that an event has occurred, by means of an "event-impression."<sup>3</sup> The prior assumption of causal investigations, that causing is going on, is presumably determined by observing repeated instances of similar events, each of which in turn has already been

"intuitively" known to occur through an event-impression.

which in turn we have some way of intuitively distinguishing from other impressions. Murphy concludes that the "discursive" procedure of

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applying a principle of causality to determine whether an event has occurred is superfluous.

With these objections in mind, I shall now reconstruct Kant's argument. Since my purpose is to make clear what Kant means by the causal principle and to show that the above objections rest on a misunderstanding<sup>n</sup> of its true sense, my version of Kant's argument does not focus entirely on its validity as a "proof." This job has been done elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> My reconstruction runs as follows (references are to the A and B editions of Kemp Smith's translation):

The representations of the parts of a manifold are successive, and though they may succeed one another in an irreversible order in apprehension or perception, it still has not been determined whether the parts are also successive in the object (B235/A190). A subjective succession, <sup>or as succession of</sup> ~~of~~ representations, is always arbitrary, in so far as it cannot show by itself how a manifold ~~of~~ appearance<sup>1- 2-</sup> is connected in the object (B238/A193). What precedes and what follows cannot be determined in the object by relation to time alone (B234<sup>3-</sup>), and the objective relation between appearances cannot be determined from mere perception (B234<sup>3-</sup>).

Yet we have some clues about possible succession in the object from perception: if the manifold of appearance contains an event, ~~an~~ <sup>an</sup> objective succession of states or a coming into existence of a state~~s~~, then the order of

✓ perceptions of the states is irreversible in apprehension  
(B237/A192). <sup>IN OTHER WORDS,</sup> That we have such an order of perceptions in  
apprehension is at least a necessary condition for determining  
that an event has occurred.

But something other than a given order of perceptions  
is <sup>NECESSARY</sup> required, in order to determine what sort of connection  
in time belongs to the manifold of the appearances themselves.  
The concept that is <sup>EMPIRICALLY</sup> derived from the succession of  
representations in apprehension must agree with an object, <sup>OR</sup>  
~~the~~ <sup>A</sup> succession of the appearances themselves, in order  
that we may know that an event has in fact occurred. For  
"truth consists in the agreement of knowledge with its  
object" (B236/A191).

Now appearances can be represented as an object distinct  
from <sup>THEIR</sup> ~~its~~ representations in apprehension, only if ~~it~~ <sup>THE APPEARANCES</sup>  
(~~appearance~~) stands under a rule necessitating a particular  
connection of the manifold (B236/A191). <sup>MORE SPECIFICALLY,</sup> If we are to think  
of the appearances as successive in the object, then they  
must conform to the principle of succession in time, in  
accordance with the law of cause and effect; <sup>AND TO THE PRINCIPLE OF</sup> if we are to <sup>THE PERMANENCE</sup>  
think of the appearances as coexistent in the object, then <sup>OF SUBSTANCE</sup>  
they must conform to the principles of the permanence of  
substance and of coexistence. <sup>AND IF...</sup>

Since a state cannot be apprehended as coming into  
existence out of an empty time (B237/A192 and the entire

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First Analogy), only by reference to a preceding state in which the succeeding state did not already exist can the succeeding state be thought as coming into existence. But only if the subsequent state is, as to its existence, determined in time by something in the state preceding it according to a rule, can we know that the subsequent state did not already exist at the same time as the preceding state (B247/A202).

Thus, in order to determine whether appearances are successive in the object, their relation must be so thought that one appearance is necessarily before, and another necessarily after, and that they cannot be thought in the reverse relation (B234). Each appearance, viewed as consequent, is assigned through relation to preceding appearances, a position determined a priori in time (B245/A200)<sup>A 199</sup>. Only if one state follows upon another according to a rule, can a succession of states be assumed in the object (B240/A195). In so far as objects of experience are under conditions of succession, the principle of the causal relation of the sequence of appearances is valid of them (B247/A202).

We now have a way of thinking about an object, such that, if we can get our perceptual concept ~~of an irreversible~~ order of representations in apprehension~~},~~ to agree with it, we can know that both an event and some causing have actually occurred. For if perception is to contain knowledge of an

event as actually happening, it must be <sup>an empirical</sup> ~~an empirical~~ judgment in which we think the appearances themselves as determined (B247/A202), <sup>or a judgment of experience.</sup> The subjective synthesis of apprehension can be rendered objective only by reference to a rule in accordance with which the appearances in their succession are determined (B240/A195). The objective succession is the <sup>or</sup> order of ~~the~~ manifold of appearances, according to which, in conformity with a rule, the perception of one state follows upon that which precedes (B239/A194). Experience, <sup>or</sup> (knowledge that an event or some causing has in fact occurred), becomes actual when appearances ~~is~~ <sup>ARE</sup> regarded as determined in time, and as an object referred to by a connection of perceptions according to a rule (B246/A201).

Tortuous though it may seem, this reconstruction of Kant's argument should help to reveal the misinterpretations on which the objections to it rest. With respect to the first objection, it should be clear that Kant does not commit the alleged non-sequitur of deriving a necessary rule of succession or causality from an irreversible order of perceptions. Kant says that only by first regarding the manifold of appearances as an object under conditions of succession, with one appearance following upon another according to a rule, can we then determine that the corresponding perceptions also follow one another according

SEE P. 3  
 to a rule (though they may in any case have an irreversible order in mere apprehension). If this rule were in fact derived from the order of perceptions, then it would be pointless to think of a succession of appearances in the object with which our perceptual concept of succession might or might not agree; for our concept would always agree with its "object" on this assumption. Only by thinking of the relation of appearances as determined in advance by a necessary and universal rule of succession, can we have an object or possible event with which our sequence of perceptions may agree ~~and~~ thus be evidence of an actual event~~y~~. It is Kant's great insight that such a necessary and universal rule is an a priori function of judgment, and can never be discovered simply by perceiving and comparing repeated instances of events, much less by having a single instance of successive perceptions (B240/A195).

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We have seen that the second objection involves the claim that we can dispense entirely with an a priori causal principle, if two conditions are met: first, that we can determine that an event or succession of states actually occurs without employing the causal principle; and secondly, that we can then determine that some causing is going on by observing repeated instances of this succession.

~~Now~~ one might argue that though the use of the causal

principle could be avoided, it would be helpful to do so only if something were wrong with this usage itself, or if one could find a more effective means of determining that some causing is going on. (Kant, as I have pointed out, thinks that the causal principle is essential for this determination).

~~~~~ Murphy, Mackie, and other critics agree that the employment of the causal principle has one major drawback: that it does not fit in a description of our intellectual history.<sup>5</sup> This accusation goes beyond the silly charge that children, morons, or even scientists <sup>CAN ONLY IF THEY</sup> must understand the Second Analogy or wait for others to give a valid proof of the causal principle, ~~in order to~~ know that an event or some causing has occurred, Murphy argues that in order to determine that an event has occurred by means of the causal principle, one's perception must be made to "go through" a conceptual criterion in a "discursive" way.

Recognition of an event by means of the causal principle is mediate, as opposed to the alleged immediate recognition

we obtain from an "event-impression." <sup>can</sup> Now Murphy does ~~not say~~ <sup>claims that</sup> that the discursive approach <sup>can't think that</sup> to event-recognition <sup>is impossible, superfluous, for</sup> is the wrong way to go, but <sup>only</sup> that Hume and most of the rest of us take the immediate, intuitive, and apparently more effective road of event-impressions. On this view, we decide that an event has occurred directly from the

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 same "marks" or "schema" of the event in perception that  
*itself* *relied* *on* *immediate* *distinctions* *Confused*  
 the Kantian method must use; so that the move to a  
conceptual level for any further criteria of events  
 would be a waste of time.

However, there are two ways in which Murphy's objection  
 may not be telling. Beck has made the interesting point  
 that the "integrative functions" of the nervous system  
 usually perform the task of regulating the imagination  
 according to rules of succession and coexistence, in such  
 a way that the rough equivalent of a conceptual dimension  
 plays a role in our ordinary immediate recognition of  
 events.<sup>6</sup> On this view, Murphy's distinction between  
 intuitive and discursive recognition of events breaks down,  
 as does his relegation of the causal principle to the pages  
 of the Second Analogy. One might then ask why Kant  
 distinguishes the intuitive element of knowledge from its  
 discursive element. Apparently, he does so only for  
 purposes of analysis in the Critique. As we have seen,  
 for Kant both elements, ~~perception~~ and ~~judgment~~, are  
 necessary for knowledge that an event has occurred. The  
 problem is precisely to discover the relative contribution  
 of each element, in such a way as to reveal the conditions  
 of true ~~for false~~ judgments that events or causes have  
 occurred.

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 The second problem ~~for~~ Murphy's approach involves an

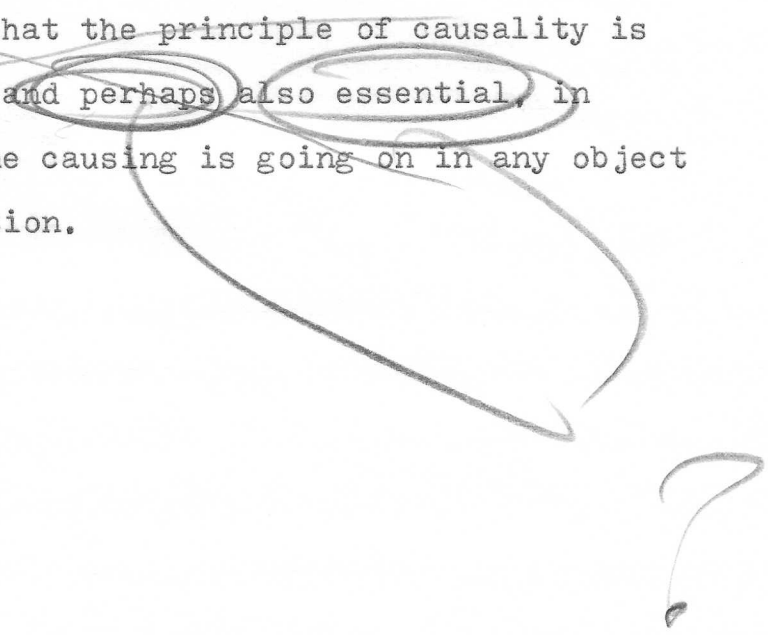
internal inadequacy of the "Humean" notion of an intuitive recognition of an event by means of an event-impression. ~~In a recent article,~~ <sup>the</sup> S.C. Patten pointed out that on the basis of Hume's principles governing impressions, one cannot have an impression of a succession of two states or an event.<sup>7</sup> According to these principles, each idea or impression is absolutely distinct, and the things or states to which they refer in the objective world are also absolutely distinct, ~~so~~ <sup>therefore</sup> one can have at best a succession of impressions, each of a state in the objective world, but never an impression of a succession of states or an event itself. One is then thrown back to Kant's initial problem: that is, how one determines whether a given succession of representations refers to a succession of states in the object or to a coexistence of states in the object.

If this interpretation of the principle of causality has indeed overcome the two objections outlined above, then an important positive insight follows. As soon as one has determined with the principle that a succession in the object or an event has occurred, one has also determined, ~~with absolute certainty,~~ that the event has a cause. Furthermore, since one apparently requires only a single instance of successive perceptions, ~~together with the~~ principle, to determine whether an event has occurred, the

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sometimes troublesome need to rely on repeated instances of succession for determining that causing has occurred, characteristic of the impression-regularity method, is eliminated.

One can conclude that the principle of causality is at least very helpful, and perhaps also essential, in determining whether some causing is going on in any object of empirical investigation.

A large, loopy handwritten scribble originates from the word "perhaps" in the second paragraph, extending downwards and to the right. At the end of this scribble is a large, hand-drawn question mark.

Notes

1. Beck, Lewis White, "Once More Unto the Breach: Kant's Answer to Hume, Again," Ratio, 9 (1967), p. 36; Smith, Wrynn, "Kant and the General Law of Causality," Philosophical Studies, 32 (August, 1977), p. 118.

2. Lovejoy, A.O., "Kant's Reply to Hume," in Gram, Moltke S., ed., Kant: Disputed Questions. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1967, p. 303.

Strawson, P.F., The Bounds of Sense. London: Methuen & Co., 1966, p. 137.

Mackie, J.L., The Cement of the Universe. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974, p. 104.

3. Murphy, Jeffrie, "Kant's Second Analogy as an Answer to Hume," Ratio, 11 (1969), pp. 76-78.

4. See Beck, Lewis White, "Is there a Non-Sequitur in Kant's Proof of the Causal Principle?," Kant-Studien, 67 (1976), pp. 385-88.

5. Murphy, supra note 3, pp. 76-78.  
Mackie, supra note 2, pp. 106-7.

6. Beck, Lewis White, Essays on Kant and Hume. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 139-40.

7. Patten, S.C., "Scepticism and the Second Analogy: A Modest Proposal," Dialogue, Vol. 18, No. 1 (March, 1979), pp. 27-40.

8. See Taylor, Richard, Metaphysics (second ed.), Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974, pp. 95-96.

→ You Missed Beck's  
Reply pp 82-86