

## COMMENTS ON JENNIFER SMALLIGAN'S "THE EFFECTS OF CUSTOM"

I have enjoyed and learned from Jennifer Smalligan's interesting paper "The Effects of Custom". In it she differentiates what she sees as four senses which 'custom' or 'habit' has in Hume. She then explores how Hume seems to think of how, in his psychological theory, custom is conceived as causing belief. An initial option is considered as a particularly natural construal of how custom produces belief. She raises what she sees as a critical difficulty with that natural construal. It would (she argues) produce entirely explanatorily empty understanding of the custom-causes-belief complex. She then proffers an alternative analysis, according to which Hume has in view a particular 'phenomenological' state which Jennifer calls a *feeling of facility*, and that is what effects the transition from repeated experiences to beliefs.

In keeping with the duties of a commentator, I will raise some difficulties I see in Jennifer's analysis of Hume's theory of custom and belief. Some are, I think, more fundamental or significant than others.

I will proceed more or less in sequence, as Jennifer's account unfolds. First, it seems to me in general, and not particularly only with regard to Hume, problematic to multiply senses. Sometimes it really is unavoidable, but if a philosopher's term of art *can* be explained without holding the term to be ambiguous, and requiring interpretation with distinct senses, it is better to do so. Like other entities, senses should not be multiplied beyond necessity. It is a methodological point, but I think that someone should go to trouble, do all that they can, to make a philosopher's technical terms comprehensible as single or unitary conceptions before going (as of course sometimes one must) to the conclusion that they have several distinct senses.

The first of the four senses Jennifer proposes for 'custom' in Hume seems to me both inherently implausible and not justified by Humean text. According to this notion, 'custom' sometimes, for Hume, is just a synonym for 'repeated experience'. But the passage she quotes (in a

footnote, from the *Enquiry*) allegedly to illustrate this sense, refers not just to repeated experience, but to a mental act or operation producing “a propensity to renew the same act or operation” (without the involvement of reason or the understanding). It is easy to imagine some mind, otherwise resembling a human mind, having repeated experiences—a blue light flashing a number (even a large number) of times, say, in its visual field, and nothing happening, one way or the other, as a psychological result, a *change* of state for that mind. Imagine that the mind senses the blue light, but doesn’t remember that this has happened, nor form any belief from the repetitions. There is no evidence in Hume’s texts, nor is it plausible to suppose, that *habit* (or *custom*) would be a name for these *merely repeated* experiences.

Jennifer’s second and fourth senses have to do with custom/habit as a disposition. The second is regarded as acquired disposition, the fourth as innate, and more general. Something in this territory does seem right. I.e., custom/habit *is*, I think, dispositional in character for Hume. I will have more to say about this presently. But first her third sense, which will play a central role in the explication of custom-causing-belief when the dispositional notion or notions allegedly fail.

Unfortunately, Jennifer’s third sense of ‘custom’ seems to be problematically unclear; and unjustified from anything in Hume. In the putative third sense, “‘custom’ refers to, or is at least closely associated with, a feeling of facility or ease that one has when one performs certain familiar or often repeated actions or operations of the mind” (p. 3). Jennifer goes on to say that this notion is not dispositional, is a matter, rather, of “the way” in which an agent performs an action—the way in question “feels easy, facile, and fluid” (ibid).

This idea is, I think, quite unclear. For one thing, people seem to differ with respect to whether, on repeating actions they successfully perform, they have an accompanying feeling of the action’s performance having been, or become successively or progressively, easy or smooth. It depends on the person, and on the action. No matter how many times I do twenty pushups, it just doesn’t feel easy. It is likewise, for me, with adding trios of prime numbers over 11 in my head. Even if (contrary to actual fact) I perform such acts often, and always, when I do, successfully,

feelings of its having been, or progressively become, easy, elude me. And some individuals, even if an observer might see them as an accomplished or seasoned veteran at doing something, don't find or feel it as something easy, facile, or fluid at all. (Nina Simone, I heard recently, felt astonishing stage fright before more or less every concert performance throughout her career.) Possibly the (alleged) *feeling of facility* is supposed to be quite different from the *ease* with which a repeated action *might* (and sometimes does) come to *feel easy*. If so, I don't really have a sense or grasp of what Jennifer may have in mind by this phenomenological state.

Now, of course, it might be that, if *feeling easy* is as indicated, then, these matters being so, we are just noting a problem for *Hume*. It would be a problem for Hume if there was any indication that he had an idea, or committed himself to a view, that human minds typically have phenomenological feelings of how easy an act is from repeated performances of the act. In fact, though, nothing in Hume's texts seems to support such an interpretation. In the passage Jennifer quotes, from *Treatise* 1.3.9, Hume, referring to cases where we have experienced constant conjunctions, says that from an impression of the first conjunct "we must from custom make an easy transition to the idea of" the second conjunct. That is, we effect this transition (at least more or less) automatically, mechanically, effortlessly. The *transition*, when habit causes it to occur in us, is easy. This won't require, or imply, that we have a "that was easy!" *feeling* when this transition takes place. I don't see any evidence that Hume identifies, still less gives a substantive theoretical role, to any such feeling as the one indicated. Later, on p. 11, Jennifer says that "Hume holds that the feeling of facility in the transition between perceptions explains how force and vivacity is transferred from the impression to the idea". But, again, *facility* in a transition can happen without any feeling that there has been such a facility. The facility may well explain, or help explain, the transference of force and vivacity (like grease on wheels diminishing friction). But nothing Hume says implies that there is characteristically or generally (no doubt there *sometimes* is) any such feeling as Jennifer supposes.

It is probably a good thing that Hume has no such notion as this, i.e., of a facility feeling playing an explanatory role in belief formation, for the further reason that it is difficult to see how

such a feeling as this could fail to include, as part of what it *was* or involved, beliefs about that which was sensed as easy, or about the performance-sequence which engendered that feeling. That is to say, if this were intended as a basis for explaining how there come to be *beliefs*, the explanation looks like it would be circular. Of course, that might just be Hume's problem. Except, again, there is no satisfactory evidence that he has the notion here assigned to him.

Now custom/habit as a disposition which causes beliefs. Here, I think, Jennifer's argument that the proposed Humean account meets with difficulty, itself suffers from difficulty. The Humean line concerned—I myself think that some form of it is Hume's actual view—holds that we have dispositions which lead us from repeated closely resembling experiences to states of consciousness, including imaginative anticipations, about what will happen next following another (new) first member of the oft-experienced pair. As Jennifer rightly notes, on this picture we won't, and don't, experience the *habit* (the disposition) itself, but rather its singular manifestations. That the habit or disposition has been involved is something the human nature *theorist* knows, or conjectures. Since theorists are also human beings, and since lay—non-theorist—human beings sometimes have reflective and/or theoretical moments in which human experiences, and their structure and components are sometimes *analyzed*, we can frequently achieve theoretical understanding of the causal role that dispositions have had. But this is not, and need not be, the normal lived case of conjunctions leading to beliefs.

Jennifer says that “if it is a necessary condition for our forming a belief that one event causes another that we observe that they are regularly conjoined, then it seems that we must be able to experience having a disposition followed regularly by particular manifestations, if we are to form the belief that the disposition causes those manifestations.” (p. 6f.) *Non sequitur*. The last of the beliefs indicated is the (human nature) theorist's belief, not that of the ordinary human in his/her quotidian experiences who forms the belief that one (particular) event causes another.

It is true that Hume faces challenge with respect to (some, at least, of) his theoretical conceptions, his *theorist of human nature* terms of art, including, among them, *habit*. (The latter is

the better term to focus on—better than *custom*—since it more naturally is taken as a count noun, admitting straightforward pluralization.) He has committed himself, by the copy principle, to a *concept empiricism* which will apply to theoretical and general terms just like all others. Thus, he needs to be able to produce a causal account which will reduce *habit*, and *disposition*, to impressions and their copies, just like any other term. I don't myself see why he can't succeed in this endeavour at least in the case of *habit*. We can (and do) notice in the case of others, or ourselves, that we engage in repetitive re-performances (and imaginative anticipations), in patterned ways, sometimes in cases where it seems that we are doing so non-rationally, even irrationally. It seems allowable, i.e., allowably empiricist, to conclude from such observations that humans have *propensities*—dispositions—to do such things. *Disposition* is of course the more general theoretical term; a creature might have dispositions that weren't habits. Both, though, *look* to be able to be treated, as Jennifer styles it, *nominalistically*, i.e., as *summations* of observed patterns. And if they can't, or if there are intractable difficulties posed for concept empiricism by (some) theoretical terms, then that will be something requiring modification of concept empiricism—i.e., of the copy principle. It won't, as such, provide a reason to disbelieve Hume's account of how custom produces belief.

Jennifer notes that there are queries—possible problems—vis à vis dispositions, in general, and says that she will side-step them. Dispositions *as such* may be theoretically satisfactory, but the particular case of (Humean) custom/habit as a disposition producing belief, she argues, is not. It will be, she argues, explanatorily empty. The argument in this case, though, requires Hume being prepared to agree that in some instances habit produces belief, and in others it doesn't. I don't think this is correct, for Hume. He appears to believe in a uniformity of human nature such that, if there were comparably closely resembling patterns of experience, closely resembling outcomes would ensue. Thus, we need Adam and the human he is compared to both to have had lots and lots of A-conjoined-with-B experiences, with no A-cum-non-B ones. Then, Hume thinks, *both* will find themselves believing that A and B are causally mutually implicated. So, for Hume, custom (habit) won't be like the fragility or dormative power of Jennifer's (and Molière's) examples, if the latter can have exceptions. More importantly, these dispositional notions will, and do, point to more

needing explaining in the *mechanism* side of the causal structure. They are, to that extent, promissory. (We need to learn about the fine physical details of things like vases, and of physical details of opium and of sentient beings who consume it, and of the makeup of repeated-conjunction-experiencing animals.) Hume is not sanguine that those promissory notes will, at least in the psychological cases, be able to be paid, in real human science (not necessarily, in principle). He seems to think that these are among the cases where explanation (the explanation, at any rate, that we will likely ever be able to produce) comes to an end. We have natures such that repeated-conjunction experiences (suitably elaborated, or qualified) produce beliefs. Other creatures, which we can readily imagine, would not have such natures. Just by reaching its end (if that is what has happened) explanation is not thereby *vacuous*. If it is granted (as, at least for the sake of argument, Jennifer has) that we know what a disposition (or propensity), in general, is, then a habit or custom can be taken, non-vacuously, to be the sort of disposition that is involved when minds like ours produce new states from sufficiently large numbers of constant-conjunction experiences—just as Hume says.

A last point. Like other philosophers, Hume is sometimes not the best friend of the most persuasive or subtle versions of his views. He does sometimes say that beliefs are just particularly vivid ideas. But he also sometimes says that *belief* is *sui generis*, a unique sort of state, which we recognize in ourselves, and cannot define. This is said particularly clearly at *Enquiry* v.ii: “Were we to attempt a *definition* of this sentiment, we should, perhaps, find it a very difficult, if not an impossible task; in the same manner as if we should endeavour to define the feeling of cold or the passion of anger, to a creature who never had any experience of these sentiments. Belief is the true and proper name of this feeling; and no one is ever at a loss to know the meaning of that term; because every man is every moment conscious of the sentiment represented by it.” Pretty much the same idea of belief appears also in the Abstract of the *Treatise* (Hume says that he is “sensible, that ‘tis impossible by words to describe this feeling, which every one must be conscious of in his own breast”). The latter line is the more persuasive and subtle one. Would that he always stuck to it. At any rate, just as, if we say that phenomenally experienced *yellow* (say) is indefinable or primitive, we still can say that it is, e.g., more like red than it is like purple—i.e., we can *characterize* it—so,

even if belief were said to be primitive and indefinable, it could also, consistent with that, be said that belief is, typically or usually, an ideate state that is more intense and vivid than (mere) contemplating, or simply thinking about, typically and usually is.

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