WILLIAM HAMILTON ON CAUSATION

ABSTRACT: The nineteenth-century British Philosopher William Hamilton defended his law of the conditioned in part on the strength of its ability to offer a satisfactory theory of causation. He maintained that our belief that every event is the outcome of some cause and the source of some further effect finds its ground, not in the world, but rather in the limitations of our own minds; specifically in our inability to conceive of either absolute commencement of being or its absolute annihilation. While radically unlike modern conceptions of causality, Hamilton's account is better able to defend itself than either its critics or its neglect might suggest, while its modest and negative formulation recommends it to those of a sceptical tendency.

KEYWORDS: William Hamilton, causation, law of the conditioned, creation-annihilation, Mill

Perhaps the greatest service that the history of philosophy can offer is to open our imagination to different ways of thinking about familiar subjects. Nowhere perhaps is this more needed than with causation, where the same small set of thinkers continue to shape virtually all current discourse. With such thoughts in mind we may look to William Hamilton's theory of causation, [1] for with respect to the predominantly Humean causal hegemony, Hamilton's theory offers us two new perspectives. It urges a way of thinking about causality that refuses to sign up to Hume's dogma of the conceptual – and hence metaphysical – separation of cause and effect. It further presents us with a quite different way of understanding the nature, and significance, of causal scepticism.

I

Hamilton's views about causation flow from his advocacy of a principle that he called the *law of the conditioned* which shaped his entire philosophy. Indeed, he regarded it was one of the great merits of that principle that it was able to supply a satisfactory account of causation. The law of the conditioned is a ruling about the compass or boundaries of thought. It may be expressed

[1] William Hamilton's theory of causation first saw the light of day in an Appendix attached to his volume of collected essays, *Discussions on Philosophy and Literature, Education and University Reform*. His posthumously published lectures contain a second account of the doctrine. The material in these accounts two is very similar – sometime even identical – and in many cases below the two references given are equivalent.

positively as a principle of the relativity of knowledge. 'That all knowledge consists in a certain relation of the object known to the subject knowing, is self-evident,' claimed Hamilton, 'all qualities both of mind and of matter are, therefore, only known to us as relations.' (*Works of Thomas Reid,* II:965) Or, in a slogan: 'to think is to condition.' ('Philosophy of the Unconditioned' 14) Alternatively, it may be expressed negatively as the claim that we are unable to think about the *unconditioned.* 'Of things absolutely or in themselves, be they external, be they internal, we know nothing, or know them only as incognizable.' ('Appendix' 643) More specifically, the law of the conditioned tells us that everything we can coherently conceive lies in a middle ground — 'the conditioned interval' or 'the mean' ('Appendix' 618; 'Philosophy of the Unconditioned' 15) – between two equally inconceivable opposites, one of which is '*infinite*' and the other of which is '*Absolute*.'

Hamilton maintains that this demarcation of the conceivable as a domain lying between two limit-posts of inconceivability is characteristic of a number of distinct metaphysical debates, but the idea is most clearly illustrated in our thinking about space and time. If we try to make sense of the *magnitude* of space and time our powers of conception seem caught between the equally absurd alternatives of *endless extent* and *boundedness*, while if we try to understand their *structure* we seem faced with an equally impossible choice between *endless divisibility* and *atomicity*.

In drawing attention to such paradoxes, Hamilton does not hide his debt to the Antinomies of the Critical Philosophy, but there is one important difference between his and Kant's thought on these matters. 'Speculative reason, on Kant's own admission, is an organ of mere delusion' ('Philosophy of the Unconditioned'18) laments Hamilton. That is to say, for Kant, since neither of the conflicting lines of argument puts a foot wrong, the proper lesson to be drawn is one of the utter incapacity of human reason to address questions of ultimate reality. By contrast, for Hamilton, although we cannot understand *how* either of the opposed conclusions could possibly be true, the law of excluded middle assures us that one of them *must* be, and hence that we do indeed possess the capacity both to conceive of the truth and to reason our way to it. Our inability to appreciate just when we are doing so does not in itself take away the fact that at least sometimes we can get such matters correct, making our

faculties 'weak, but not deceitful.' ('Philosophy of the Unconditioned'15) The significance of this fact Hamilton interprets in a theological light; contra Kant, 'Intelligence is shown to be feeble, but not false; our nature is, thus, not a lie, nor the author of our nature a deceiver.'('Appendix' 622)

To understand Hamilton's form of sceptical realism we must appreciate from the start that he operates with a dual sense of 'conception'; with a difference between what we might call *direct* and *indirect conceivability*. In its infinite and its Absolute forms alike, the unconditioned resists our direct efforts to think it and must therefore be judged *inconceivable*. But in so far as we recognise that one of these contradictory alternatives must in fact be the truth we are holding that, in another sense, it is *conceivable*. Indirectly, we can conceive that that which we cannot directly conceive might, after all, be true. The unconceivable might just conceivably be the case.[2] This dual-sense of 'conception' is not so terribly problematic. When we say that we cannot conceive what it is like to be a bat, we similarly conceive, in indirect fashion, that there actually obtains something – bat phenomenology – which we humans cannot directly conceive. However, the point is an important one to note explicitly least we be tempted to mistakenly accuse Hamilton of simple self-contradiction.

II

Hamilton holds that, properly understood, causation affords a further illustration of the law of the conditioned. Before making out his case, however, and in order to be sure that we have 'properly understood' the phenomena, he devotes considerable space to the criticism of alternative views. There is little novel in his enumeration or his analysis, but what emerges very clearly is his rejection of any sort of empirical approach. Empirical accounts are incapable of raising themselves above the particular and the contingent. Neither external nor introspective

[2] Hamilton himself uses a different terminology to mark this distinction contrasting what he calls *positive necessity* and *negative necessity*. A proposition is positively necessary if finding its opposite inconceivable we feel ourselves compelled to believe it. A proposition is negatively necessary inconceivable if, although we find its opposite inconceivable, the notion presents itself to us as equally inconceivable. Positive necessity reflects a mental *power* and is a mark of *truth*. Negative necessity records mere a mental incapacity and may not be used as a guide to ultimate reality. (*Discussions* Addenda pp.833-4; *Works of Thomas Reid*, volume II, 972; *Lectures* II:366, 526-7) Despite having it pointed out to him, (*Examination* p.370n) Mill ignores this distinction, and hence at several points raises several grounds charges of self-contradiction against Hamilton.

observation and neither inductive inference nor psychological habituation could ever yield the universality and necessity which are naturally and properly regarded the characteristic marks of causation.[3] In attempted dispute of that necessitarian analysis, Hume famously points out that we can always imagine any customary sequence of events interrupted, altered or reversed. But cleverly turning Hume's point against him, Hamilton counters that while we certainly could imagine such extraordinary episodes we could only do so by implicitly supposing that there had occurred some equally extraordinary cause of the aberration. (*'Appendix'* 615 / *Lectures* II:393) We seem to be imagining the suspension of some causal law, but really all we are picturing to ourselves is its modification at the hands of some deeper causal principle.

Having defended the thoroughly metaphysical character of the causal relationship, Hamilton proceeds to argue that our understanding of the world as subject to the reign of universal causation is precisely a case of the law of the conditioned. The pertinent boundaries to our thinking in this case, he argues, are absolute beginning and absolute ending. We simply cannot conceive of something altogether just coming into existence or altogether just ceasing to exist. Our nature, Hamilton maintains, 'compels us to refuse any real commencement of existence.' (*Lectures* II:401) Where we meet with what looks like an absolute beginning of existence, we assume that the thing must in fact have existed before, but in a different form. Unable to conceive an absolute commencement of being we find ourselves compelled to posit an earlier incarnation from which the object has grown, which, he maintains, is as much as to say that we must think of it as governed by a prior cause. For Hamilton, to say something had a cause is just the same as to say that it previously existed under another form. ('Appendix' 621 / *Lectures* II:408) The argument against absolute beginnings is then repeated for the case of absolute exterminations or annihilations. We cannot countenance that anything real should simply disappear from being and hence, wherever this appears to happen, our mind is obliged to assume that the apparently vanished item must in fact carry on, albeit in a different form. Unable to conceive an absolute end to being, we hold instead that every event has an effect.

[3] Hamilton is not always entirely consistent on this point. In the notes to his edition of Reid, he observes that "the consciousness of our own efficiency illuminates the dark notion of *causality*, founded, as I conceive, in our impotence to conceive the possibility of an absolute commencement, and raises it from the vague and negative into the precise and positive notion of *power*." (*Works of Thomas Reid*, volume I, 604n) This anomaly might be resolved if the sense of agency were taken in a moral rather than a psychological sense. See below.

Rejecting in this fashion both absolute creation and absolute annihilation, the mind can only process what it seems to be experiencing as merely the appearance of such changes, masking a more genuine underlying continuance. The failure to think of *real change* (creation-annihilation) leads us to produce the notional construction of *apparent change*, which by another name (Hamilton tells us) is called 'causality.' Unlike Kantian causality, Hamiltonian causality is thus a rich metaphysical theory working at both the noumenal and phenomenal level, but its operation at each level is diametrically opposed; underlying constancy appearing as surface change.

An alternative way to understand the theory is to say that for Hamilton cause and effect are at root identical. The 'concurring or co-efficient causes… constitute the effect' while an effect is 'nothing more than the sum or complement of all the partial causes, the concurrence of which constitute its existence.' (*Lectures* I:59, *Lectures* I:97) Cause and effect are 'tautological' he says; 'an effect always pre-existed potentially in its causes; and causes always continue to actually to exist in their effects.' (*Lectures* II:540)

Now, undoubtedly this is an odd view of causation, but it will not do to exaggerate its oddness, for clearly *some* cases of causation do involve a change in the appearance of some underlying substantial unity and Hamilton takes as his paradigm model for causation just such causal sequences. Any case of internal development or growth will be described in precisely these terms. We might think (for instance) of the way in which bud brings forth blossom which in turn brings forth fruit. And thinking a little more broadly, any physical interaction which falls under the law of the conservation of mass-energy will offer a further instance. The kinetic energy of the colliding vehicles (for instance) is transformed into heat and sound energy.[4]

There are numerous puzzles with Hamilton's analysis of causation to which in due course we shall return, but first we must complete the account of his position, for thus far we have before us only one half of the story. The inconceivability of real commencement or real termination picks out merely one form of the unconditioned, the *absolute unconditioned*, and to fully expound Hamilton's theory it is necessary to note the other form, namely the *infinite unconditioned*. Parallel to the impossibility of anything's suddenly beginning or suddenly

[4] That Hamilton's theory of causation anticipates the conservation of energy was noted by Bain, *Logic* II:36

ending, Hamilton urges the impossibility of anything's having existed forever or its continuing to exist forever (as he puts it infinite non-commencement or infinite non-termination). ('Appendix' 618, 620-1 / *Lectures* II: 406-7, 539) Just as we did that of absolute creation or annihilation, so too we find utterly inconceivable the notion of continuous changeless existence.[5] And just as the mind rejects absolute change, regarding it as the phenomenal mask of an underlying noumenal continuity, so likewise it resists the thought of something's having existed forever or its continuing to exist for ever, believing instead that underneath there must be found a process of change and judging any appearance to the contrary phenomena or illusion. Where faced with the *Absolute unconditioned*, beneath the veneer of change the mind adds continuity. Faced with the *infinite unconditioned*, beneath phenomenal constancy we find ourselves forced to think continuous noumenal change.

Hamilton leaves this second side of his theory undeveloped. Indeed, in a rather offhand way, he suggests that the infinite plays little role in our thinking about causation. He is right about this, but his failure fully to explain this part of his theory leaves the whole structure open to misunderstanding, and a few words more are in order. Failure to grasp the first form of the unconditioned results in a belief that where we seem faced with absolute change (commencement or annihilation) this must be judged but the apparent mask of an underlying constancy. In more familiar form, we understand this as *the rule every event has a cause and an effect,* that is, *the law of universal causation*. But in its own way failure to grasp the second form of the unconditioned is no less interesting. It results in the belief that absolute constancy too must be deemed merely apparent; the camouflage of a hidden process of change. In more familiar form, we see this *as the law of mutability*; the principle that everything is constantly changing. This second law is perhaps even older than the law of universal causation. We tend to associate it's origin with Heraclitus. Mutability is rarely considered alongside universal causation, and as noted Hamilton himself barely explores the connection but, nonetheless, in offering up a conceptual scheme that links together these two principles Hamilton performs a

[5] The impossibility of imagining something continuing to exist without any change all, is perhaps that is no different from thinking of it as existing at just one moment; without change how can we say that time is passing at all? We might think that things are always in motion, or perhaps even more simply that existence at a time causes existence at a later time. Why is the object here at time t? Because it was here a moment before, at t-1, and nothing intervened to destroy it.

vital philosophical service, counter-balancing the reason why the history of the universe must divide itself into many distinct events with the reason why those events must combine together to form one unified history. Despite its importance more widely, Hamilton may be forgiven his neglect of mutability in this particular context, for he is correct that it has but little impact on our thinking about causality itself. It is worthwhile to appreciate why this is so. We tend only to acknowledge the first law, for while experience presents to us much apparent change, it presents hardly any apparent constancy. That is to say, the inability to conceive of absolute creation or annihilation is a far more pressing feature of our cognitive makeup than our inability to think of unending continuity. At every turn we face apparent beginning and ending which we cannot take literally, while only rarely do we ever face apparent continuity. Where we do, however, it is equally impossible to accept, argues Hamilton.

The reason why it is important to stress the second form of the unconditioned is that it brings to the fore the fundamentally problematic status of causal thought for Hamilton. Not only is our belief in the law of universal causation the by-product of our failure to conceive absolute creation or destruction, but it stands opposed to the law of mutability to which we are equally committed by our failure to think of infinite non-commencement or infinite non-termination. The law of the conditioned maintains that all possible thought works in a mid-ground between a pair of opposed impossibilities, hovering in a space between two failures. Reason tells us that the world is marked by either absolute change (creation-annihilation) or unending continuance but, unable to conceive either possibility, the mind balks and, rendering change as phenomenal atop an underlying constancy or (less often) rendering constancy as phenomenal atop an underlying change, the only currencies with which the mind ever deals are ones that it issues itself, the product of its own unsuccessful attempts to think the unconditioned.

At this point we must remember the deeper import of law of the conditioned. The way in which we think about existence in time is merely the product of our inability to think about it using either form of unconditioned existence. But since these two modes of unconditioned being are mutually contradictory, by the law of excluded middle (to which Hamilton gives unqualified assent) one of them must in fact be the case. We, however, are

unable to say *which*.[6] While both seem impossible to us, absolute creation-annihilation and infinite continuity of existence are contradictory options, and if one is genuinely impossible the other must after all be possible. Consequently, in one or other of its two forms the necessities of our thinking push us *away from* the way things really are. Focusing on the principle of universal causation, we face the paradoxical situation that although we have to think of the world in accordance with this law, it may not hold of reality at all. The law of universal causation marks a failure on our part to think the world a certain way. If that way is genuinely impossible, then the law is true. While if that way is after all possible, then the law marks no truth at all. But, for our part, we cannot say which of these two cases holds.

Not all of Hamilton's readers have fully appreciated this point. For example, as one part of his case for the supposed impossibility of conceiving an absolute commencement of existence in time, Hamilton takes up the example of *theistic* creation *ex nihilo*. We can make no sense, he argues, of the thought that God creates out of nothingness. We can only regard him as having created the world out of himself. This claim has caused a certain degree of confusion and led a number of commentators to accuse Hamilton of being a pantheist.[7] However, it is important to remember that Hamilton is speaking here merely of the limits of our understanding. The only sort of creation *we can entertain* in this context is pantheistic creation. But whether our failure to conceive of creation *ex nihilo* means that it is, indeed, absolutely impossible we cannot say. Room remains – on faith grounds – for holding that it is both possible and actually the case.

The mention of faith brings to the fore one last component of Hamilton's understanding of causation. Thus far I have painted it as a species of *agnosticism*. But it should also be noted that for Hamilton, with respect to at least *some* cases of causation, our ignorance is tempered. On separate, ethical, grounds he is convinced that human beings have free will

[6] A slight qualification is in order here. While there is only one space, one time, and one God, ruling out a complex answer in those cases, there is nothing in Hamilton's scheme to require that we decided all causal schemes in the same way. Perhaps absolute creation and annihilation wins out everywhere, or perhaps infinite continuance wins out everywhere, or perhaps since there are many individual cases of causation some of them involve one while some involve the other.

[7] See Calderwood, *Philosophy of the Infinite,* 352-61; Hunt, *Essay on Pantheism,* 338-40. That Hamilton did not intend his comments at this point to imply pantheism is made clear from his letter to Calderwood included as Appendix III(d) to his *Lectures* (II:535).

and he holds that free acts must be understood as absolute beginnings. Unconstrained by any determining antecedent, significant moral freedom calls for absolute commencement of existence. To Hamilton, it was one of the great merits of applying the law of the conditioned to the domain of causality that it opened up metaphysical room for such freedom. The opposed impossibilities of the law of the conditioned leave open the possibility that what we cannot think may still be true. And if absolute creation may occur in at least some cases then conceptual space is created to believe in what our moral nature tells us must truly obtain – namely our own human freedom. To this extent, at least, we know that the law of causation cannot have absolutely universal sway. With a faith this time moral rather than religious, even if we cannot see *how* it is that we have significant metaphysical freedom, we may yet believe that *we do*. ('Appendix' 624 / *Lectures* II:412-13)

III

Hamilton's theory of causation found few supporters, either among those otherwise friendly to his philosophy or among his philosophical opponents.[8] But the doctrine has been not a little misunderstood, and consideration of a number of the objections commonly raised shows it more defensible than might be thought. Let me note three such challenges.

(1) Hamilton maintains that to say something had a cause is just the same as to say that it previously existed under another form. ('Appendix' 621 / *Lectures* II:408) A caused B is to be analysed as A became B, where this is a question of one underlying reality appearing to us first as A and then as B. *Prima facie*, as an analysis of our concept of causation, this seems just wrong. Where we would typically think in terms of change and novelty (Does not causation involve the bringing about of what is new rather than continuance of what is already the case?) Hamilton appears to be asserting changelessness and continuity. His analysis seems open to the charge that it just fails to capture what we all ordinarily *mean* by causation. Such a complaint is unfair, however. It is simply mistaken to suppose that Hamilton excludes all change from the causal relation, for he recognises it as an essential part of the experience of causation; he

[8] Mansel, *Metaphysics,* 271n; Veitch, *Hamilton*, 258-60; Martineau, 'Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy' 271-81; Calderwood, *Philosophy of the Infinite*, 340-387; Mill, *Examination,* 359-70; Fraser, *Essays in Philosophy*, 181-9

simply recasts such change as the phenomenal appearance of an underlying continuity. [9] As such, his metaphysical picture of causation bears more than a passing resemblance to Kant's.

(2) It was noted that Hamilton takes as his paradigm examples transformative cases where a single substance of some given nature comes to take on a quite different form or appearance, but (even if it accommodates change) it may be doubted how well-chosen a paradigm this is. For are there not many other cases where a cause brings about its effect in a substance *quite different* from it, for example, where water extinguishes a fire, where a thrown rock smashes a window or where a virus kills some person? Indeed, even with Hamilton's paradigm examples, if we look more closely, it is tempting to complain that his analysis mis-locates the proper place of causation. It may be tempting to think that the milk produces cheese, that the seed produces the plant, or that a match produces a flame, but if we reflect more deeply about such cases in which some object in state A is transformed to take on new state B, we realise that often enough the causal agent is not A itself but rather some third *external factor* which enters in and accounts for the change from A to B. Once again, the cause looks to be something *distinct* from the effect.

Now, there certainly is a sense in which Hamilton's analysis rejects the ontological separation of cause and effect, putting in its place a continuous identity. But this is perhaps no bad thing, for the utter distinctness of cause and effect is the rock on which Hume's thinking about causality so notoriously flounders. The supposition that causation might be understood as a matter of one thing bringing into existence something else, brand new and wholly discontinuous with it, *does* indeed seem to suffer from something like the incoherence that Hamilton suggests. With no continuity from one to the another, what substance can there be to a claim that the first *caused* the second, rather than saying simply that the first ceased to exist as the second began to exist in its place? Again, for Hume, *any* two events — however different from or incommensurable with each other — may stand to one another as cause and effect. The interaction of Cartesian dualism, for example, is something which must be found quite

[9] "My doctrine of Causality is accused of neglecting the phænomenon of change… This objection precisely reverses the facts. Causation is by me proclaimed to be identical with change… change, however, only of appearance." "Change (cause and effect) must be *within existence*; it must be merely of phenomenal existence. For change can be for us only as it appears to us, — only as it is known by us ; and we cannot know, we cannot even think a change either from non-existence to existence, or from existence to non-existence." (Appendix V(a), *Lectures* II:538, 541)

unproblematic. Avoiding these absurdities, Hamilton's account, by contrast, returns us to a conception of causality which does justice to our sense of the *continuity* between cause and effect, recognising an identity of process that carries over from the one to the other. Any viable theory of causation must genuinely *link* cause and effect. Finding some thread of identity between them, its workings must involve a *combination* of unity and difference. For Hamilton this combination is achieved through the framework of an underlying substantial continuity overlaid by a phenomenal difference. Thus if it is said that Hamilton replaces the distinctness of cause and effect by identity, it must immediately be noted that that is not indeed an absolute or 'bare' identity, but rather the identity-in-difference of one underlying reality manifesting in two different forms.

It should furthermore be acknowledged that Hamilton's analysis is more accommodating than might first be thought to supposed counter-examples of the sort just raised above. This is because he employs a generous principle for the identification of causes. He is as aware as any modern philosopher that the item we typically pick out as 'cause' is but one element in a fuller set of 'causal conditions' all of which are necessary to bring about whatever we identify as the effect, and he insists that the proper philosophical analysis of any causal transformation must take as its subject that fuller set, not merely some sub-element thereof. To use one of his own examples, where water turns into vapour to form a cloud and we might be inclined to name as cause the sun's heat, strictly it is the sun's heat *together with* the water that are the full cause and this larger set which has transformed itself into a cloud. (*Lectures* II:408) Or to take another of his cases. A neural salt is made up of four proximate causes, an acid, an alkali, the water that by dissolving both binds them together, and the force (say, a human hand) that brings the material ingredients together. 'These… all are causes of the effect; for abstract any one and the salt is not produced' he argues.[10] If a narrow focus on

[10] *Lectures* II:540. Mill in his *Examination* (p.367-8) attacks one of Hamilton's earlier presentations of this example, (*Lectures* I:97) for his assertion that the force bringing the three elements together should be discounted since it is something transitory. Jumping on Hamilton's words Mill triumphantly declares that of course you can make causation a matter of permanent identity if you simply dismiss out of hand everything transitory. But Mill here is being opportunist and uncharitable. Hamilton is clear that a cause includes "all without which the effect would not be" and there are other more generous readings of his meaning here. Of the human agency that in this example combines the three ingredients he says "this last, as a transitory condition, and not always the same, we shall throw out of account." And his point here may just be that since there are many different mechanisms by which

materials that have been transformed seems to miss out the efficient cause of their transformation, a wider perspective will incorporate it into the overall picture

(3) A third difficulty with Hamilton's account is that he does not follow the modern idiom of treating causation as a relation between *events*. Loosely and informally he talks of *things* causing each other but, in fact, as we have just seen, his actual view is more generous than that and allows within the fold of cause, or part-cause, *any* element or factor whatsoever without which the effect would not occur. For Hamilton the essence of causation is apparent novelty. Something comes to be the case which was not so a moment before. But whether you explicate this transition via the categories of 'thing', 'property', 'condition', 'event' or 'matter' is really not so important to his mind. This willingness to break free from the straight-jacket of 'event causation' and to take account of any form of, or factor involved in, the apparent genesis of novelty might well be seen as a strength of Hamilton's approach. But the chief point he wishes to make is that underneath that seeming transition the underlying 'quantum' or 'complement' of existence remains unchanged. ('Appendix' 619, 621 / *Lectures* II:377, 400) It is the 'quantum of existence' in the sun shining on the water that is carried over entire into the being of the resulting rain cloud, or the 'amount of being' in the acid, alkali, water and method of their combination that refashioned into the form of the neutral salt. Understood in this way we cannot be struck by the similarity with *Descartes'* Third Meditation thesis that 'there is nothing in the effect that was not previously in the cause.' (Descartes, *Philosophical Writings* II: 97, 252, 28, I: 198)

However, it must be confessed that Hamilton (like Descartes) wholly fails to provide the sort of metaphysical backing that such a claim calls for. For example, is the existence carried over from cause to effect a *particular* or merely a *generic* quantity? If the former, how is it re-identified beneath its changing appearance? And if the latter, how on earth is it measured?[11] It must frankly be confessed that Hamilton offers no answers to these questions, and rather than a concept standing on its own metaphysical legs, his notion of a continually conserved quantum

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acid, alkali and water could be combined into the same neutral salt, the precise agency at work – be it human or natural – is not important in this case.

[11] Hamilton was prone to somewhat careless appropriations of quasi-mathematical terms in his philosophical thinking and, as with the somewhat unhelpful use of the term 'mean', his notion of a continuous 'quantity' of existence should not be allowed to carry too much weight.

of existence is perhaps better seen as a theoretical posit designed to ease the mystery of causal creation or annihilation.

IV

With talk of the mystery of causal creation and annihilation we reach the heart of the matter for undoubtedly the central contention of Hamilton's theory of causation is that regarding the inconceivability of absolute creation and annihilation. What are we to make of this? Hamilton offers two arguments — although it must be straightaway confessed that neither is especially well-developed.

The first revolves around an analysis of the notion of potential. Since only what is possible can come to pass, where we are inclined to say that something has sprung into being we must allow that prior to that point its existence was a possibility which, argues Hamilton, is the same as to say it has moved from existing *in potentia* to existing *in actu*. 'The cause, or rather the complement of causes, is nothing but powers capable of producing the effect; and the effect is only that now existing actually, which previously existed potentially, or in the causes. We must, in truth, define: — a cause, the power of effectuating a change; and an effect, a change actually caused.' 'Causes and effects are thus, *pro tanto*, tautological: an effect always pre-existed potentially in its causes; and causes always continue actually to exist in their effects.' (*Lectures* II: 538, 540) Mill finds it ridiculous to suggest in this fashion that potential existence is the very same as actual existence (Mill, *Examination,* pp.363-4) – one and the same reality presented in a different guises – but while the notion is contentious, it is not ridiculous. Many (including many empiricists) have thought that there is no such thing as 'bare possibility' in which case a potential must in some fashion exist, grounded in the actual natures of things. Yet once granted reality in some manner, there is no reason why it should not counted as making its contribution to the quantum of being which Hamilton maintains is conserved beneath the veneer of changing appearances.

Hamilton's second argument is a quasi-Parmenidean one. The claim that creation and annihilation are inconceivable will no doubt be challenged. It will be objected that we can easily suppose such things. All we need do is think that some object is present at t_1 but absent at t_2 or

vice versa. What could be easier? As Anscombe argued against Hume, however, it is no easy matter to be sure that we have really imagined what we take ourselves to have imagined. To seriously conceive that something has come into being at a given time and place without antecedent cause one must tell oneself a story detailed enough to exclude other possibilities, such as the alternative that it somehow migrated there from elsewhere, or somehow transformed out of material that was previously there. (Anscombe, 'Times, Beginnings and Causes' 160-2) And that may be harder than it first seems. One will need to describe an earlier time at which it may definitively be said that the object in question is absent. And here enters in Hamilton's Parmenidean argument. To think of something is necessarily to think of it as existing in time, he insists. But if we are to think of something as genuinely created or annihilated and not simply removed or transformed we must think of it – the very thing itself – as non-existent at an earlier or later time. And that we can never do. 'We can not know, we can not think a thing, except under the attribute of *existence*.' ('Appendix' 618) Unless we think of it, we cannot think it absent. But we never can think it absent, only ever existent. (It must be remembered here that Hamilton's point here concerns distinct individuals, rather than merely quantified generalities.)

A swift and contentious analysis of potential and an argument from the impossibility of reference are thin threads on which to hang a metaphysics of causation, but perhaps argument is not really the point here, anyway. For in truth Hamilton goes to no great lengths to defend his supposed impossibility. Rather, he presents it as something basic with which he thinks everyone will agree. And in this he may not be so far wrong. *Nihil ex nihilo fit* remains a plausible axiom, whether supported by argument or not. It should be remembered that Hamilton's point is not that that absolute commencement and extinction are utterly impossible (for in the end, as one of two contradictory alternatives, they *may* after all occur) but rather that we cannot conceive or imagine them. For all that we may 'name' or 'delineate' such occurrences, they lack the 'substance' of genuine thoughts to us. And thus construed, Hamilton's contention is plausible. Genuine commencement or annihilation *does* seem beyond the possibility of conception. The point is perhaps best appreciated as one stemming from the very nature of experience itself. The only existent of with which we have direct or immediate

perceptual contact — ourselves — comes to us, not as a sequence of discrete and differentially qualified point-moments, but rather as that of a unitary continuant in time undergoing a continuous change in character. We may say loosely that different experiences come and go, but if we stick to the actual phenomenology and speak more precisely we must say rather that the content or the quality of our experience is something that continually changes. The metaphysics of persisting substances is fractured by the debate between endurance and perdurance theories,[12] but first-person experience speaks unequivocally for the former. We experience our own lives not as a succession of existences but as an on-going identity constantly changing its dress. From this point of view creation is as inconceivable as annihilation. But once again the limited nature of Hamilton's restriction must be stressed. What we are unable to conceive may, for all that, nonetheless be the case. And this too, of course, is clearly illustrated in our own case; for the fact that we cannot *imagine* our being born or our dying does not prevent us from *believing* that nonetheless we were born and we shall die.

Appeal to intuition is far from being a science, however, and it is interesting to note how Hamilton's recourse to common sense contrasts with certain other present-day appeals. In contemporary metaphysics suggestions that the universe had a temporal beginning are often countered by recourse to the supposed principle that whatever begins in time must have a prior cause, implying that any suggested point of origin was not the beginning after all. In effect Hamilton *reverses* the conceptual priority of these two thoughts. Rather than taking the fact that everything has a cause to show the nothing could begin in time, he takes the absurdity that things might just begin in time to show that everything has a cause.[13]

V

Hamilton's theory of causality is of philosophical interest for a further reason. The law of universal causation is normally regarded as a positive statement of how things stand in the world at large. Hamilton, however, takes a quite different view of its nature and status.

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[12] See Hawley, *How Things Persist*

[13] In partial support of Hamilton here we might cite the failure of the causal theory of time to demonstrate our understanding of causation as foundational to our understanding of time. See Van Fraassen, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Time and Space*, ch.VI

(1) In the first place, for Hamilton, the law of causation is primarily a *regulative* principle about the workings of the human mind, not the world. It may be that creation-annihilation is after all possible in which case the principle is a pure fiction, the direct opposite of what is actually the case. But even if matters are otherwise, the principle is still just a doomed attempt to express a truth about the permanence of substance (about infinite non-commencement and infinite non-termination) which really must remain utterly inconceivable to us. Either way the law of causality can hardly be regarded as telling us about *the world itself*. Rather it tells us about *ourselves*. It records how we must think about the world.

(2) In the second place, for Hamilton, it is a *negative* principle. Even taken as a rule governing our thought, it should be understood not as the requirement to think about the world in a certain way, but rather as *the failure* to think about the world in a certain other way. Causal thought for Hamilton is merely *an inability* to understand something. The theory makes no new positive claim, but merely reflects what he calls 'a general imbecility.' ('Appendix' 622) The idea may be elucidated by a pair of illustrations. In thinking about modern physics people often become excited about *singularities*, but a singularity is not a certain special kind of phenomena, it is merely a point at which we can see that our current laws of physics break down and fail. Or, to take a second example, Spinoza argues that the widespread belief that we possess free will is not properly a positive vision – an understanding that our actions are spontaneous and uncaused – but merely an inability to recognise the true causes of our action. In similar fashion to these two cases, Hamilton's thesis is that the meaning of the law of causality, rather than something positive (a statement of the conservation of being), must rather be understood as something negative (a failure to grasp absolute commencement-annihilation). ('Appendix' 624 / *Lectures* II:412) From a parking space, to a shadow to a bank overdraft, an absence can look like a very real thing. And in the same way, Hamilton tells us, our language and our imaginations are held captive by the picture of some positive force which brings into being some effect when in truth there is nothing more to our thought than a disguised failure to think of anything as brought into being at all. Hume takes the idea of 'necessary connection' to be a positive one, precipitating him into a search for the impression from which it is supposedly derived. To Hamilton, this is just so much wasted effort, for the idea

is what Descartes described as a 'materially false' one – the absence rather than the presence of understanding.

There are advantages to this way of understanding causation. The first we have already met. Pressed to the last on issues of fundamental metaphysics Hamilton will confess himself an agnostic – we simply cannot say whether or not the law of universal causality actually holds. But such agnosticism leaves open the possibility to believe, however inconceivable our intellects may find it, that our faith in such matters as human free-will or divine creation *ex nihilo* may not be misplaced.

But even if (or in so far as) the law of causality does hold there may be further advantages. Hume is commonly read these days as arguing that whatever may or not be the case in the world itself, all that we can know about causation must be thought of as deriving from ourselves. Now, Hamilton, in so far as he maintains that the requirement to view the world as subject to the law of causation finds its originating ground in our faculties rather than in reality itself, might be thought of as standing in a measure of agreement with this position of Hume. (Although given his opposition to the general empirical approach, he would dissent strongly from the further claim that this was merely an issue of *psychological* law.) Indeed, to one given to epistemic caution, Hamilton's account might even be thought to have certain advantages over Hume's more elaborate, *ad hoc* and implausible story. On Hume's scheme, the impression of necessary connection which he so admirably argues is to be found nowhere in our experience, magically turns up after all in the experience we have of being habituated or conditioned, an impression which he then proclaims — without the slightest positive evidence this is so — that we 'project' onto the world. Hamilton's account by contrast is more purely negative; causal law to him consists in nothing but our 'inability' to think of absolute beginning or absolute ending, its 'necessity' residing simply in that inability.

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