

COMMENTS ON ANGELA COVENTRY'S *HUME'S THEORY OF CAUSATION: A QUASI-REALIST INTERPRETATION*

LÍVIA GUIMARÃES

*Department of Philosophy
Federal University of Minas Gerais
Av. Antônio Carlos, 6627
31270-901 BELO HORIZONTE, MG
BRASIL*

liviamguimaraes@gmail.com

Angela Coventry addresses Hume's solution to the problem of causation, which she, along with others, considers the most influential single contribution to the topic. The problem is here understood as: “[i] what we mean when we say that the cause brings about the effect and [ii] what is the nature of the connection between cause and effect” (p.2). She seeks the answer to these two questions in the *Treatise*, the *Enquiries*, and “Of the Standard of Taste”, in recent scholarly debate, and her own original intuitions. As a result, we are given a splendid book – coherent, consistent, and structured; entirely at ease with and well supported by the primary bibliography; wide reaching and inquisitive towards the secondary bibliography. Most importantly, the book not only offers a plausible solution, but also, by exploring the concept of ‘standard’ in the context of Hume's philosophy, and drawing the character of a ‘delicate and practiced causalist’ renders the debate more refined, as well as more intriguing to all participants.

Angela strives to position her view in-between the claims of two recent rival schools of interpretation, one of them defending the view that Hume is a causal realist, the other one arguing that he is a causal anti-realist. According to causal realists, there exist mind-independent, objective powers, forces, and necessary connections in the universe. Correspondence or not with these facts or properties makes our

statements true or false. In their view, Hume consents to the existence of causal connections, even though he may not trust our capacity to know them. For anti-realists, causal statements are “about regularities in nature or merely express feelings or sentiments and hence cannot be genuine propositions at all” (p.3-4). According to them, Hume denies the existence of objective causal connections, and the attribution of truth-value to causal statements. The dispute, as Angela correctly points out, concerns the appropriate notion of truth (p.10).

In Angela’s interpretation of Hume’s theory of causation “we form beliefs in necessary connections between causes and effects because we develop active mental habits in response to the experience of regularities ... [Hume] thereby denies that our discourse about causes implicates the existence of powers or forces linking causes to effects. At the same time, however, Hume recognizes causal judgements as genuine propositions, susceptible of truth and falsehood, that are not simply equivalent to statements of regularities in nature” (p.4).

This interpretation, she notes, “draws from Simon Blackburn’s quasi-realist theory” (p.4). Against most critics, she considers this a position that does not collapse into either realism or anti-realism, and that, by not holding their shared metaphysical presuppositions on the nature of causes, opens up a new space for the understanding of causation (p.68).

Blackburn’s character – the quasi-realist – adopts expressivism and projectivism without relinquishing the right to thoughts and practices supposedly distinctive of realism (EQR 4, p.43). First, he makes the claim that we project onto the world our attitudes of approval and disapproval. Then, he tackles the question of how a “non-descriptive psychological state ends up expressed, thought about, and considered in propositional form” (EQR 5, p.43), thus seeking to explain and justify the realist-seeming nature of the discourse. The response is that “when you assert things in a propositional style, you are articulating your stance, or attitude, or prescription, or desire.” Thus the quasi-realist maintains that propositions are capable of truth and falsehood, since ‘truth’ according to

him "corresponds to correctness in these mental states, by whichever standards they have to meet" (EQR 55, p.45). The standards, as he says, do not depend on objective facts of the world. With regard to causal discourse, "the exposure to regularities in the practices of our individual or collective lives gives sense to, and makes intelligible, our realist-sounding talk about causes" (p.65). In this manner, he supports standards of truth in the ordinary discourse, without having to yield to metaphysical and epistemological realism.

In ethics, the quasi-realist finds the source of normativity "in the way moral judgments express certain attitudes, or stances, or conative states, or pressures on choice and action," not on description of states of affairs, in particular not on the possession of properties (EQR 168, p.44). Projections vary and so does their value. Moral truth comes from the improvement of moral attitudes, which translates in their increasingly satisfying conditions such as coherence in first-order attitudes and endorsement by second-order ones, among others (p.51). The standard of moral knowledge is set by our attitudes. And we reach a standard when no improvement in terms of the best possible set of attitudes is possible (p.52).

And here resides Angela Coventry's original contribution to quasi-realism. Her book comes first to clarify, strengthen, and enrich the concept of 'standard', starting from Simon Blackburn's appeal both in *Spreading the Word* and the appendix in *Ruling Passions* to Hume's essay "Of the Standard of Taste." She complements the analysis of this essay with Hume's multiple references to standards in morals and knowledge.

Angela begins her argument with the claim that "Hume thinks that arriving at a genuinely true judgment of [a] matter will depend on the existence of a 'decisive standard' or a 'certain criterion' that arises naturally in the imagination: those judgements which conform to the standard can properly be called true and those judgements which diverge from the standard are false" (p. 116). We call judgments true or false on the basis of a standard, which, in its turn, is the outcome of "a critical process

involving a good deal of review, discussion and engagement in social discourse, experimentation and critical reflection on rules” (p.116).

From part 2 of book 1 of the *Treatise*, on our ideas of space and time, she highlights the role of review, comparison, reflection, and repeated experiences in the formation of a standard. From Hume’s ethical theory in the *Treatise* and second *Enquiry*, she explains how through reflection and the intercourse of sentiments in society we arrive at a standard by which we adjust and correct our moral sentiments (p.129). From “Of the Standard of Taste” she describes the process of correcting our sentiments by reflecting on the general rules of art and conforming to a standard founded on experience, practice, and comparison, good sense, delicacy of imagination, and freedom from prejudice (omitting only the joint verdict of critics).

Angela widens and deepens our understanding of Hume’s concept of a ‘standard’. While working the distinction between rules and standards, she introduces a new character, ‘the practiced causalist’, who is endowed with a delicate imagination, and sets the standard for judging of truth in causal propositions, just as the critic sets the standard for judging of beauty in works of art (p.135). The ‘causalist’ feels the appropriate sentiment, or determination of the mind, because she possesses the appropriate attributes listed above. This is Angela’s second contribution to quasi-realism. Rather, both the concept and the character are greatly significant to Hume scholarship at large.

I should now like to present a few brief questions and observations.

Angela appeals to “Of a Standard of Taste” in search of a better account of Hume’s theory of truth. What seems especially to interest her is elucidating what Hume means “by agreement with or conformity of our ideas of objects to their real existence and matter of fact” when he

establishes the concept of truth regarding causation (p.118). I think the essay is indeed illuminating, but perhaps, at least in part, not in the same way in which she concludes it to be. The way I see it, what we can take for the truth or falsehood of causal judgements is already established in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* – where “real existence and matter of fact” would consist in regular experience. Hume in the essay examines the possibility of a standard of taste as firmly grounded in matter of fact or experience as is the standard for causal judgments. He succeeds, but admitting to two irreducible sources of variation, one being “the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country” (ST 243).

I should note that it is always conceivable that Hume’s attempt to, as he says, “mingle some light of the understanding with the feelings of sentiment” (ST 234) in the study of taste reflect back in the standard previously set to judge of causes and effects. In this mirror image, the ‘feelings of sentiment’ would mingle with the ‘light of the understanding’ in judging of causes. The emergence of the ‘delicate and practiced causalist’, whom Angela so intriguingly describes, could point in that direction.

What I have in mind is: Although I am not sure Angela is entirely aware of it, we may trace a parallel between her approach in the book and Hume’s strategy in the analysis of liberty and necessity – which weakens natural necessity while strengthening moral necessity. Necessity, or “a constant conjunction of objects and the determination of the mind to pass from the cause to the effect” (T 2.3.1.4), applies no less to motives, circumstances, and actions, than it does to physical objects. Now, by appealing to “Of the Standard of Taste,” where Hume is able to bring a standard to a sphere where there seemed to be none, Angela arrives at a concept of ‘standard’ that is apt to sustain aspirations to truth in epistemology and morals, but not so strong as to alienate aesthetics from truth. As she observes, Hume brings knowledge or probable reasoning

closer to taste and sentiment (p.89), and the “feeling of determination in the mind then is the ‘essence of necessity’” (p.92).

If that is the case, Angela might wish to grant less support to realist claims than she does in her final conclusions. If she remains close to the standard of taste, she will concede that Hume leaves room if not for disagreement, at least for diversity. As we recall, he concludes the essay in acceptance of unavoidable and irreducible differences in judgment, and of the fact that there is no standard by which they can be decided. In addition, he situates the standard in the joint sensibility of critics. Transferred to causal judgments, these findings would result in less, not more fixity. If Angela distances herself a little from the essay, then she may have to allow a disanalogy between the epistemic and aesthetic standards of truth. She will certainly be able to keep the benefits of better explaining the concept of standard, and of portraying the ‘practiced causalist’. She will remain entitled to causal realist discursive practice, but she will not be any closer to satisfying its epistemic ambitions.

Thus, I do not see:

- How a standard, as drawn from Hume’s and Angela’s texts, can provide correspondence with real forces and powers (p.139). She herself indicates that for Hume, “we are led astray by a ‘false philosophy’ when ‘we transfer the determination of the thought to external objects, and suppose any real intelligible connexion betwixt them’” (p.110);
- Why Angela chooses to name the standard ‘ideal’ (p.116), when her argument and textual evidence suggest instead an ‘imaginary’ standard. The latter would be in better agreement with the letter of Hume’s text as well.
- What is meant by “an ideal causal network,” which “reveals the causal structure of the world” (p.145ff). This statement sounds bolder than the boldest causal realist reading of Hume. Moreover, for the quasi-realist, use of the vocabulary of causation does not necessarily entail representation

of a real aspect of the world, and there precisely lays the originality of his position (p.103).

Angela does not need to make what seem to me unnecessary concessions to realism. I admit to sympathizing with the anti-realist Hume and, if faced with alternatives, I would feel a stronger pull to the anti-realist camp, especially because it adopts, when not both, at least one of Hume's two definitions of cause, and presents itself as committed to Hume's analysis of causal inference. In addition, I am inclined to think that Hume, the causal anti-realist, is under-explained and often misunderstood by contemporary readers. The critical, not to say negative, depictions of him are almost always 'caricaturesque'. They emphasize one of Hume's two complementary definitions of cause in detriment of the other. Furthermore, by denying the anti-realist the right to state causal propositions, the critics belittle the consequence of experienced regularities that are inscribed within more comprehensive regular networks and accompanied by a feeling of determination of the mind, of which the critics are simply oblivious. For Hume, a feeling is not, and in causal inferences it most definitely is never, a "mere" feeling.

Actually, I can conceive a regularist who navigates the world intelligibly, and who uses the causal discourse without metaphysical commitments. But, then, of course, I may be straying into an equivocal position, for I am even more sympathetic to the quasi-realist interpretation. I take it to be a fair reading of Hume's anti-realism, combining regularist and projectivist accounts; or to be anti-realism freed from the realist biases commonly directed against it. But, after all, these are labels, and what matters is that quasi-realism resignifies 'true' and 'false' to mean how propositions appear or feel to us, under certain conditions, and according to certain criteria, without failing to pay due attention to Hume's definitions of cause, his commitment to experience, and enquiry on the mind's principles. With Angela's valuable contribution, which reconciles the 'standard' with the 'delicate causalist',

quasi-realism, I believe, opens not just an intermediate, but a wholly new space. For that, I should like, once again, to congratulate Angela!

A few further questions:

How would Angela explain a ‘non-reductionist truth-value of causal statements’, first mentioned on page 4 of the book?

Angela often stresses that causal propositions are ‘genuinely’ capable of truth and falsehood. How does she define ‘genuine’?

How would she compare her quasi-realism with Simon Blackburn’s?

A few doubts:

I was somewhat confused both by Angela’s explanation of Bas van Fraassen’s constructivism (p.23-29), and of Barry Stroud’s projectivism (p.114).

On page 92, Angela paraphrases EHU 7.1.16-19, where Hume affirms that we must conclude that the power by which the human mind produces an idea “is beyond our comprehension.” In its context, I believe the passage raises doubts about the very meaning of the word ‘power’.

On page 94, Angela declares: “Consequently, whenever we find that both of these conditions have been satisfied – the constant union and inference of the mind – we may infer justly that the cause and effect are necessarily connected.” Her phrasing implies an inference above and beyond the occurrence of the two conditions mentioned. I do not quite understand the need for this third step.