

A FEW QUESTIONS ABOUT ANGELA COVENTRY'S HUME'S THEORY OF CAUSATION: A QUASI-REALIST INTERPRETATION

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Making sense of Hume's account of causation is such a vast, complex affair that his readers have yet to reach a consensus about how it should be understood, though their interpretations fall into two main categories. Realists, like John Wright and Galen Strawson, claim that he recognizes objective, mind-independent causal powers or necessary connections, while anti-realists, such as Richard Taylor and Barry Stroud, insist that he instead accepts either a regularity or projectivist view that denies that these powers or connections exist. Angela Coventry adds a new dimension to this conversation by introducing an interpretation designed to defy these categories. It promises to change the landscape of the debate in interesting and fruitful ways, and to deepen our understanding of Hume's position. In what follows, I identify some difficulties with the account, difficulties that in the end make me reluctant to accept it. But this dissatisfaction is fully compatible with recognizing that her proposal makes a significant contribution to discussions of Hume's work. I begin by presenting the main components of her interpretation.

Angela focuses on Hume's treatment of causal statements, in which she finds both anti-realist and realist elements. She maintains that projectivists rightly regard Hume as tying causal claims to sentiments or feelings, rather than to objective powers or necessary connections, but she

adds that these anti-realists are wrong to think that the claims are not genuine propositions (115). She proposes that Hume views the statements as real judgments that can be either true or false, and because of this, she takes them to involve a tincture of realism. Hume's view falls short of bona fide realism, however, since he ties a causal claim's truth not to worldly states of affairs but to standards in the mental states of those considering the claim, along the lines Simon Blackburn advocates in *Spreading the Word* (116). In brief, making a true judgment requires "a 'decisive standard' or a 'certain criterion' that arises naturally in the imagination: those judgments which conform to the standard can properly be called true and those judgments which diverge from the standard are false" (116).

Much of the textual evidence that Angela advances to develop and support her stance stems from "Of the Standard of Taste," in which Hume associates real existence with this sort of standard, first when talking about beauty and deformity, and later when considering disagreement among art critics. As Angela reads these passages, Hume suggests that true judgments correspond to a mental standard produced by the imagination, and that generating this standard requires considerable critical review and reflection. One cannot create the standard unless healthy, free from prejudice, and in possession of good sense, a serene mind, and a delicate imagination (123-4). Moreover, one must reflect on the general rules of art, which one can discover by inspecting "works of genius" (provided one has also studied human nature, society, and history), but that one cannot understand – or appropriately apply – unless one has already satisfied the other conditions (122-123). When the standard is in place, and beauty and deformity are acknowledged to belong to sentiments rather than to objects, truth conditions for aesthetic judgments exist.

Angela proposes that a similar story can be told not only for moral qualities and judgments, but for causal properties and claims. In the case of causation, Hume relies on projectivism to develop an account of the content of our judgments, for he asserts that custom or habit leads us to

project a feeling of anticipation onto constantly conjoined objects (137). The fact that we project this sentiment explains why our belief in an objective power or necessary connection is mistaken, but our judgments about necessary connections can nonetheless be true or false as long as the appropriate ideal standard exists. When they conform to the standard, they are true, and when they diverge, they are false (138). The standard is produced along the same lines as the standards for aesthetic and moral judgments, which means that its genesis requires extensive reflection and analysis (138). Angela provides further support for her theory by identifying four main respects in which Hume's approach to causation resembles his treatment of aesthetics and morals: He claims that we attribute qualities that exist only in the mind to objects (133); he holds that our discourse involves general terms (133); he thinks that general rules provide guidelines for evaluating the feelings that ground our judgments, and he believes that our feelings will not always match our judgments (134-37).

This is a provocative proposal quite unlike other interpretations of Hume's account of causation, and it opens new avenues for discussion. In addition to inviting us to step back from current conversations and reconsider the very framework in which they appear, it suggests tantalizing, deep, and inadequately appreciated connections between Hume's metaphysics and epistemology, on the one hand, and his morals and aesthetics, on the other. But I am not yet persuaded that it is right. In part, I wonder whether the feelings involved with causal judgments are appropriately analogous to the sentiments associated with moral and aesthetic claims. Like colors, smells, and sounds, beauty, deformity, and other aesthetic and moral qualities present themselves as belonging to the fabric of the world in a particularly robust way; even if one is convinced that they exist only in the mind, one cannot help but experience them as located outside it. Feelings of expectation or anticipation, however, are utterly different, more akin to pain, and once one recognizes that one is projecting them onto objects, one appreciates how very odd this is, and

the properties no longer so stubbornly present themselves as qualities of the world. What exactly we are supposed to project when we make causal judgments is thus unclear. But this is a problem for any projectivist-leaning reading of Hume rather than a difficulty peculiar to Angela's interpretation.

My remaining reservations attach to distinguishing features of Angela's proposal: the suggestion that the imagination produces a causal standard that resembles the standard of taste, and the idea that we appeal to this standard to make causal judgments (i.e., genuine statements that have truth values). Angela emphasizes that generating an aesthetic standard demands considerable cognitive sophistication, for the critical reflection involved is extensive and requires, among other things, understanding and applying general rules. This suggests that insofar as creating the causal standard is analogous, it too calls for significant critical reflection that includes understanding and applying rules. Angela does say that establishing the standard takes "a good deal of review, discussion and engagement in social discourse, experimentation and critical reflection on rules" (116, 138¹), and Hume does identify rules by which to judge causes and effects. But Hume also insists that when we infer one object after observing another, after already having found that the two are constantly conjoined, we do not engage in any sort of deliberate or conscious reasoning or rely on any process of the understanding. The role he attributes to custom or habit strongly suggests that he thinks these judgments do not require the careful consideration and application of rules, much less the social discourse and experimentation that Angela supposes. Further, the idea that we can make causal judgments without engaging in this kind of process seems *right*, for we do so all the time. Animals and children who identify causes and effects do so, too. The conditions for making causal judgments thus seems to differ significantly from those associated with moral or aesthetic claims.

¹ Social discourse is not explicitly mentioned on p. 138.

A case could be made that these concerns are misguided for they stem from failing to distinguish genuine causal judgments from mere utterances that masquerade as such. According to this proposal, animals, children, and even the vulgar may appear to make causal judgments, but insofar as they lack a standard, they cannot in fact make the assessments. They may still identify causes and effects, or infer one object when presented with another, but only as long as this does not require the judgments. To put the matter bluntly, Angela's account identifies the conditions that must be met for causal utterances to have truth values and achieve the status of genuine claims; it says nothing about what animals, children, or the vulgar do when they seem to make causal judgments. This is an interesting idea that deserves consideration in its own right, and if Angela has something like it in mind, my objections are misplaced. But so understood, her account faces a new set of problems, for whether it captures Hume's view is far from clear. Establishing that it does would require providing evidence that he distinguishes genuine causal statements from mere causal utterances that lack truth values, and showing that he thinks that the vulgar (and children and higher animals) cannot make bona fide causal judgments. Assembling this material strikes me as a daunting task, and it is not a project that Angela pursues in her book.

Alternatively, my doubts might be discounted on the grounds that Angela never claims that developing and employing a causal standard is completely analogous to the processes by which aesthetic and moral standards are cultivated and applied. Since she even claims that Hume believes we are "instinctively determined" to make genuine causal judgments (115), she clearly does not think the judgments demand the sort of careful consideration and conscientious appeal to a standard that judgments in aesthetics or morals take. While a standard is essential for causal claims, we can establish and apply it in a dramatically different, and much less deliberative or intentional, fashion. In short, the dissimilarities that I identify between the two approaches are real but unimportant. If this is Angela's position, though, more needs to be said to show that these

differences are insignificant, for if careful, critical reflection plays an essential role in aesthetic and moral contexts, but not in causal ones, the value of modeling Hume's treatment of causal judgments on his handling of moral and aesthetic claims becomes unclear.

Developing a satisfactory understanding of Hume's account of causation is tremendously difficult, in part because he discusses the relation in a variety of places, but also because he offers several definitions, which are both individually difficult to explicate fully and hard to reconcile, since they seem to pick out different things. While I have doubts about how well Angela's interpretation articulates his position, I suspect that some of my concerns might be resolved if she revealed more about the details of her proposal, and that other worries may rest on misunderstandings. But even if the difficulties I have identified cannot be dismissed, exploring Angela's account remains worthwhile, for it can expand one's appreciation of Hume's view in interesting and rewarding ways. Given the large number of attempts to explain Hume's stance, and the fact that his readers have yet to come to any settled conclusions, this is a significant accomplishment.