

## HUME'S IDEA OF NECESSARY CONNECTION

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*Hume seems to tell us that our ideas are copies of our corresponding impressions, that we have an idea of necessary connection, but that we have no corresponding impression, since nothing can be known to be really necessarily connected. The paper considers two ways of reinterpreting the doctrine of the origins of ideas so as to avoid the apparent inconsistency.*

*If we see the doctrine as concerned primarily with establishing conditions under which we possess an idea, there is no need for an idea's "corresponding" impression to be one of which the idea is true. It would be enough that the impression be in some way appropriate for making us master of the idea.*

*Alternatively, if we see the doctrine as concerned primarily with fixing the content of ideas, we might see it operating in the case of causation rather as it must in the case of secondary qualities, conceived in a certain distinctive way. Even if there is "really" no red in the objects (but only in the mind), we may regard the idea of red as properly ascribed to any object apt to cause typical sensations in us (though this corresponds to no property "really" in the object). Likewise, we may regard the idea of necessary connection as properly ascribed to any pair of objects apt to cause typical habits in us (though this corresponds to no property "really" in the pair). This view may do justice to Hume's wish to affirm both that there is such a thing as necessity, resident in the mind, and that there are no knowable necessary connections.*



## 1. THE PROBLEM

Hume's theory of the origin of simple ideas says that they are copies of impressions. It's easy to assume, though this requires some qualification (see below), that the original impression derives in turn from some object, and an idea which copies it counts as an idea *of* that object, or of objects of that kind. We can use an idea to think about and refer to an object, which in turn must satisfy any condition involved in the idea. For example, red itself is what the idea of red is an idea of. We can use our idea of red to say that red is a colour; in using the idea, we refer to the object, red, which produced the original impression.

Hume says that we have an idea of necessary connection, and that its corresponding impression is of a determination of the mind to pass from one impression or idea or belief to another. This feeling of determination is a distinctive part of the psychological state of one who believes some causal proposition: it is a mark of the tendency for an activation of the belief, concerning the cause, that it has occurred to produce or activate the belief, concerning the effect, that it will occur; and for activation of the belief, concerning the effect, that it has occurred to produce or activate the belief, concerning the cause, that it occurred previously. The *de re* formulations are intended to do justice to Hume's famous idea that we can describe a subject's psychological state of believing that one thing caused another as a causal dispositional state relating the subject's non-causal impressions or beliefs.

If we insert the specific account of the origin of the idea of necessary connection into the general account of the origin



of ideas, we derive the conclusion that a determination of the mind is what the idea of necessary connection is an idea of, and thus what necessary connection is. We would have to say that there are, and are known to be, necessary connections, and that they invariably relate mental states. However, Hume is for the most part quite explicit that he does not believe this. This is our problem.

In short, it is hard not to ascribe to Hume the following views, which are inconsistent in the presence of undoubted premises:

- (a) A simple idea applies to its ultimate origin, that is, to the impression of which it is a copy, or to the cause of that impression.
- (b) The simple idea of necessary connection has a determination of the mind, or a feeling thereof, as its ultimate origin.
- (c) The idea of necessary connection cannot be known to apply to anything: there are no necessary connections, or at least none which can be known.

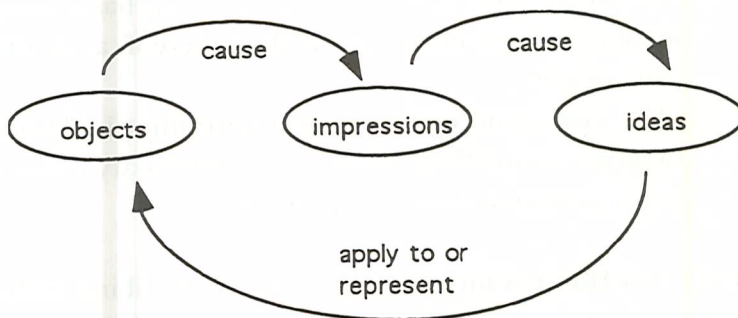
It may be that Hume is inconsistent. However, ascribing such a blatant inconsistency, especially on the point which Hume regarded as his most important and original contribution, should be avoided, all other things being equal. This note investigates two possible ways of doing this, the first involving modifying (a), the second (c). I do not attempt to justify either modification, in any detail, from the texts. But both raise lines of thought that I believe are worth keeping in mind in reading Hume, and on other occasions as well.



Before turning to the possible modifications, I briefly establish *prima facie* cases for Hume's subscription to (a)-(c).

## 2. PRELIMINARY EXEGESIS

(a) It is quite clear that, for Hume, every simple idea is a copy of a simple impression, and so is causally dependent on the impression. It is less clear what role is played by objects, understood as potentially distinct from perceptions. On one straightforward view, an object gives rise to an impression, which gives rise to an idea, and the idea is of, or represents, or applies to, that object. Pictorially:



However, objects sometimes get left out of the story, and ideas are described as representing or applying to impressions.<sup>1</sup> We will see that a special case of this general uncertainty affects Hume's account of the origin of our idea of necessity.

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<sup>1</sup> Among many other things, including men, streets, qualities, acts, extension and events.



What matters most for the puzzle I am concerned with is Hume's clear insistence that ideas apply to or represent their origin or model, regardless of whether this is best thought of as an impression or as something else. Thus:

Ideas always represent the objects or impressions, from which they are deriv'd, and can never without a fiction represent or be apply'd to any other. (T37)

The doctrine is repeated in the thick of the discussion of the idea of necessary connection:

Ideas always represent their objects or impressions; and *vice versa*, there are some objects necessary to give rise to every idea. (T157)<sup>2</sup>

*We have establish'd it as a principle, that as all ideas are deriv'd from impressions, or some precedent perceptions, 'tis impossible we can have any idea of power and efficacy, unless some instances can be produc'd, wherein this power is perceiv'd to exert itself.* (T160)

An instance of an idea is a satisfier of it, something in its extension or to which it refers. This is enough to give rise to the puzzle, if Hume holds that there is an acceptable account of the origin of the idea of necessity, yet that there is no such thing as necessity and hence, on natural presumptions, no impression of necessity.

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<sup>2</sup> The vice versa condition is much weaker, since it does not mention representation. This suggests a weakening of (a) to be considered below (§3).



(b) The thesis that the idea of necessary connection has a determination of the mind as its ultimate origin is explicit:

After a frequent repetition, I find, that upon the appearance of one of the objects, the mind is *determin'd* by custom to consider it in a stronger light upon account of its relation to the first object. 'Tis this impression, then, or *determination*, which affords me the idea of necessity. (*T* 156)

This connexion, therefore, which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion. (*E*. 75)

This determination, customary transition, or, as Hume also calls it, propensity to pass from one idea to another, could, we might think, exist in a subject unaware of its existence. It is a dispositional mental state. On this natural view, the determination is in the structural position of object, and we would look to an impression of this state as the proximate model for an idea. However, that is not how Hume seems to see the matter, most of the time.<sup>3</sup> He vacillates, as in both these quotations, between a mental state (of a kind which it is not absurd to think we might be in unawares) and an impression thereof.

The vacillation does not affect the puzzle. All that matters is that Hume takes himself to be giving a satisfactory explanation of the origin of the idea of necessity: it arises from our being in, or our being aware of being in, a state in which

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<sup>3</sup> Some formulations appear to make the distinction in just the way the "natural view" would recommend, thus: "*the observation of this resemblance produces a new impression in the mind, which is its [the idea of power's] real model.*" (*T* 165)



we are disposed to effect certain transitions between beliefs. I will refer to this mental state as being in the grip of a regularity. The puzzle is that this grip is the origin of the idea of necessity and so should be what the idea applies to or represents, in which case we could know that necessity really exists. Yet Hume's view seems to be that the idea does not apply to or represent anything; or, at any rate, that we cannot know that it does.

(c) To show that Hume thought that there are no necessary connections, or none which can be known, we need to divide the places in which such a connection could be found: on the one hand, there is the world outside ourselves ("the objects"), on the other, the world of our perceptions. Most would agree that Hume affirms that there is no necessary connection (or none we can know or form an adequate idea of) in the former group. Thus:

These ideas [of necessity, of power, and of efficacy], therefore, represent not any thing, that does or can belong to the objects, which are constantly conjoin'd. (T 164)

True, we do attain an idea of necessary connection, from an internal impression, but this:

neither discovers nor causes any thing in the objects. (T 166)

So we still get no idea of necessary connection as a relation among external objects:

if we ... ascribe a power or necessary connexion to these objects; this is what we can never observe in them. (T 168-9)



It is rather harder to establish that Hume held that there is no necessary connection in the mind; for, indeed, he seems to say just the opposite, a point to be discussed shortly. However, I believe that any reader sympathetic to Hume would appreciate that he cannot hold that there are genuine necessary connections in the mind, and in at least two passages he is explicit:

when we change the point of view, from the objects to the perceptions; in that case the impression is to be considered as the cause, and the lively idea as the effect; and their necessary connexion is that new determination, which we feel to pass from the idea of the one to that of the other. The uniting principle among our internal perceptions is as unintelligible as that among external objects ... (T169)

the actions of the mind are, in this respect, the same with those of matter. We perceive only their constant conjunction; nor can we ever reason beyond it. No internal impression has an apparent energy, more than external objects have. (T633)

The thought in the first of these quotations seems to be that the determination of the mind which gives rise to our idea of necessary connection, at level one, is not itself an instance of this idea, a case of necessary connection, as we can see by reflecting that all we can find there is a constant conjunction which creates a determination of the mind at level two. Search up the hierarchy as we may, we can never trap a necessary connection, only a constant conjunction and an attendant feeling. So whether in the external world or within us, we have no idea of a pair genuinely related by necessary connection.



### 3. IDEA POSSESSION VERSUS EXTENSION DETERMINATION

We might think of thesis (a) (an idea applies to its ultimate origin, that is, to the impression of which it is a copy, or to what caused that impression) as the standard and proper way in which an idea relates to its original impression, or to what that impression is of, while allowing that the relation may be different on other occasions.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that Hume's first thought, in his theory of origin, was to describe conditions necessary (and perhaps sufficient) for possessing an idea, rather than to describe conditions under which an idea would have a certain content. The problem of content was not one he ever seems to have posed explicitly, despite, in a way, stumbling upon it continually. So we get closest to Hume if we focus firmly on the question "under what conditions could one possess such-and-such an idea?", recalling that youth and sensory deprivation are Humean examples of conditions which defeat possession.

Seen in this light, it is an open question whether a condition for the possession of an idea would or would not contribute to a determination of the reference or extension of the idea. Perhaps a certain amount of socialization is necessary for a person to have the idea of his or her self, but the socializing conditions may not be present in any proper specification of the reference or extension of the idea a person associates with the word "I". Perhaps one cannot be credited with the idea of

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<sup>4</sup> He is explicit that an impression of red can give rise not only to the idea of red, but also to the idea of ... the idea of red. Hence his reformulation of the origin thesis in terms of mediate or immediate origin. (T 6-7)



some specific number, for example the number 1, unless one can also be credited with the idea of addition, but it would not follow that addition somehow forms a condition for determining the reference or extension of the idea of the number 1.

In the standard and normal case, origin and extension coincide. They may also coincide in virtue of complex considerations relating to secondary qualities (in a way to be taken a little further in §4 below). One cannot have the idea of red unless one has experienced red. If we believe that the extension of the idea of red is determined by our experiences, we do so for reasons having nothing special to do with the theory of the origins of ideas. To make the point vivid: within many perspectives, it is quite consistent with the view that one has no idea of red unless one has experienced red that one should have an idea of red while never having encountered anything red. One's experiences of red might all have been illusory. So if we think of the extension of the idea of red as just red objects, surfaces and lights, one can have the idea of red, in a way which does justice to what animates Hume's theory of origin, without having encountered anything in the extension of the idea. So there might be nothing in the extension, for all this aspect of the theory of origin cares; or what is in the extension might never impinge on one's cognitive mechanisms.

Applying this line of thought to necessary connection yields this view: you cannot have the idea of necessary connection unless you have been in the grip of a regularity. But this does not mean that the idea of necessary connection has this grip as its extension, or that it has anything as its extension. Origin ought to determine extension and normally it does so,



but it cannot be relied upon to do so, and it fails to do so in this case.

This suggestion promises a definitive and satisfying line on a question which has perplexed readers of Hume. He says early on in the *Treatise* that our idea of causation is incomplete without necessary connection. Given that he goes on to say that necessary connection is only in the mind, does this mean that he thinks that causation is only in the mind? And given that he also seems to suggest that there is no such thing as necessary connection, or at least nothing knowable answering to this idea, does this mean that he thinks that there is no such thing as causation, or nothing knowable answering to this idea? The implicit inferences are good only if one takes a necessary condition for idea possession to be a necessary condition for something to belong to the extension or reference of the idea. Throw away this needless connection, and Hume's view is without inner tension. He can consistently say all these things: that our idea of causation is incomplete without the idea of necessary connection, so that we could not have a complete idea of causation without having felt the grip of a regularity; that something answers to our idea of causation; and that nothing answers to our idea of necessary connection. The idea has an origin conforming to the demands of the theory; but it is not an extension-determining origin. The explanation of the divergence is that instead of allowing our idea of necessary connection to have as its extension the grip from which it causally derives, we use the idea to try to project that grip onto something else. This projection is either incoherent (on one reading of Hume) or at least takes us into territory beyond actual, or even possible, knowledge (on another read-



ing). If the idea of necessary connection were a component of the idea of causation, these defects would affect causation itself; not so if the situation is, rather, that possessing the idea of necessary connection is requisite for possessing the idea of causation.

I offer some amplification on two points: (i) Why should getting into the grip of a regularity be required for having the idea of causation? (ii) How is this account to be reconciled with Hume's apparent claim that necessary connection is in the mind?

(i) Hume was aware that our idea of causation is not the same as our idea of constant conjunction. It's just an empirical matter how the causation idea is distinguished from the constant conjunction idea. The theoretical constraint, within Hume's perspective, is that the distinction should not be extension-affecting, for the extension of our idea of causation is fixed as constant conjunction, as his first definition of causation insists.

(ii) Hume claims that:

necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects ... the necessity or power, which unites causes and effects, lies in the determination of the mind to pass from the one to the other. The efficacy or energy of causes is neither plac'd in the causes themselves, nor in the deity, nor in the concurrence of these two principles; but belongs entirely to the soul, which considers the union of two or more objects in all past instances. 'Tis here that the real power of causes is plac'd, along with their connexion and necessity. (*T* 165-6)

There is an innocuous interpretation of "necessity is in the mind": the ultimate original for the idea of necessity is in the mind. Some passages which seem to ascribe necessity to the



mind can be re-interpreted along these innocuous lines. However, I do not believe that this is so for the passage just quoted. The current interpretation must see the passage as a mistake: Hume overshoots his mark. This would need laborious justification by the weight of the evidence favouring an interpretation of Hume upon which necessity, whether among mental or non-mental objects, is something that cannot exist, or cannot be known to exist. Passages close to the one just cited argue that since all that gets us into the grip of a regularity is similarity, and similarity cannot be what we mean by power or efficacy, the origin of our idea of necessity prevents it from doing the work we wish (T 164-5).

It is tempting to ask *why* we should need to experience grip in order to have the idea of necessity.<sup>5</sup> Hume should say that this question simply cannot be answered in any way that throws philosophical light. It's just an empirical fact that if you haven't experienced grip, you don't have the idea. However, it does indeed seem to me a fact: part of how we come to understand what we mean by saying, of a predicted effect whose cause is manifest, "it must happen" is: "you must believe it will happen". Someone who felt his beliefs about the future to be free and easy, unconstrained by his singular non-causal beliefs, in short, someone gripped by no regularities, is someone who has not latched on to the idea of causation.

#### 4. ANALOGY WITH IDEAS OF SECONDARY QUALITIES

One reason for being disinclined to affirm that the above story is true to Hume's texts is that there is a distinct

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Dauer put this question to me.



one, not obviously less well supported by the texts, which makes as much sense, though a different sense.

Hume reports, and seemingly accedes to, a doctrine about secondary qualities, supposedly taken from Locke and Berkeley, which allows one to say, with horrible obscurity, that they are "only in the mind". One extreme version of the doctrine is that a secondary quality is nothing but a power in the object; meaning that it is a power without any categorial base. Red things are those which typically cause a certain kind of experience in us, but this property does not consist in anything else: not in the arrangement of the particles, nor the disposition to reflect certain wavelengths, nor anything specifiable without reference to our experiences. The human response is where this spade turns. Being red is as fully mind-dependent as anything truly ascribable to something other than a mind could be. From the austere metaphysical perspective, there is no such thing as being red, considered as a property of the objects themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Consider how the theory of the origins of ideas looks in this setting. The standard model of it cannot be in play for a secondary-quality idea, since properly speaking there is no secondary quality to cause the impression which the idea of a secondary quality copies. However, we can see the impression-idea relation as invariably content-determining (unlike on the previous story). Our idea of red issues from a certain kind of impression (experience), and impressions of this kind fix the content of the idea: the idea can be applied to objects which are apt to cause the relevant kind of experience. Red things

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<sup>6</sup> A supposed demonstration is that a change in us (in our sensorium) could change what things are red, so red must be "in us" too.



are not as such mind-dependent, but they have a highly mind-dependent property: their redness is in the mind, even if the rest of them lies elsewhere. To understand the "in the mind" claim, we need to distinguish between speaking with full metaphysical seriousness, in which case we have to say that there is *really* no such thing as being red; and speaking "with the vulgar", or in the common way, according to which we can classify ascriptions of being red as true of objects which cause the right kind of experience. Metaphysically speaking, there is no such thing as red, since there is no such thing in the objects; commonly speaking, however, many things are red.

Applying this to necessary connection yields the following picture. We form the idea of necessary connection from consciously being in the grip of a regularity. This grip is extension-determining, in the roundabout way that the experience of red is extension-determining. For a pair of objects to be necessarily connected is for the pair to be apt to get people into the grip of a regularity. This is a mere power, that is, it is a feature of the pair which has no categorial base. So from the most austere metaphysical perspective, things are not really necessarily connected, for necessary connection is in the mind. Causation, that is, constant conjunction, belongs to the objects, and on occasion explains how we get gripped, just as various features of objects, on occasion, may explain our experience of red. But the necessary connection we ascribe to a constantly conjoined pair lies in the mind, as does the red we ascribe to a mind-independent object. Commonly speaking, some objects are really red and some are really necessarily connected; that is, they really are apt to produce experiences of red or of grip. Metaphysically speaking, objects are not



really red and are not really necessarily connected, for, from the most austere perspective, there is no such thing as red (in the objects) or necessary connection (in the objects).

Although there is some arbitrariness, I classify this as a modification of (c) (the idea of necessary connection cannot be known to apply to anything: there are no necessary connections, or at least none which can be known). For the notion of "application" is now equivocal, depending as our speech is metaphysical or vulgar. Commonly speaking, objects are necessarily connected and can be known to be so; metaphysically speaking, there are no necessary connections. It is clearly a drawback of this account that Hume does not engage in the common way of speaking. However, he does something close: he freely attributes causal connections, and also insists (and never retracts) his opinion that the idea of necessity is an essential component of our idea of causation. This, of course, is to repeat an aspect of our original puzzle. But what is a drawback of the interpretation in one way is an advantage in another: in freely ascribing causes, Hume speaks with the vulgar. He has a special reason for being unconcerned, and he explicitly manifests it on more than one occasion:<sup>7</sup> if pressed, he can retreat to ascribing nothing involving necessary connection, but instead plain old constant conjunction (in accordance with the first definition of causation). On this interpretation, his so doing should be described thus: he departs from the vulgar

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<sup>7</sup> E.g.: "As to what may be said, that the operations of nature are independent of our thought and reasoning, I allow it; and accordingly have observ'd, that objects bear to each other the relations of contiguity and succession; that like objects may be observ'd in several instances to have like relations; and that all this is independent of, and antecedent to the operations of the understanding." (T 168) Cf. E 77



supposed idea of causation but shows that what the vulgar suppose to be true can be so reinterpreted as to be metaphysically true.

## 5. COMPARISON

Both pictures do justice to many of Hume's sayings. They both make it right for him to have said that necessary connection lies only in the mind. On the first story, this remark correctly locates the origin of the idea; on the second, it locates a relatively complex kind of mind-dependence, modelled on one view of secondary qualities. They both allow him to appeal to both "subjective" and "objective" matters in an account of causation. On the first story, the objective, extension-determining, components of the idea of causation are exhausted by proximity and conjunction, and the subjective feature is not a component of the idea of causation, but something whose possession is a precondition for possessing the idea of causation. On the second story, the objective and the subjective are alike extension-determining components of our idea: causes must be constantly conjoined and proximate, and must be apt to put us in the grip of a regularity, though the second, subjective, feature is not a genuine property of causal pairs at all.

Admittedly, this second interpretation has a drawback additional to the one already mentioned: it saddles Hume with the consequence that every causal pair is apt to give rise to a grip in suitably placed subjects. That means that every causal pair is knowably such, which seems rather too strong a view to attribute to a self-confessed sceptic. However, the other inter-



pretation had the drawback of having to attribute to Hume, at one point, a failure to understand the implications of his own views. Neither drawback seems to me decisive against its respective interpretation. So I offer them both as possibilities worth keeping in mind in detailed textual investigation.<sup>8</sup>

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