

Hume on Thick and Thin Causation

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HUME ON THICK AND THIN CAUSATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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Marquette University, 2018

Hume is known for his claim that our idea of causation is nothing beyond constant conjunction, and that our idea of necessary connection is nothing beyond a felt determination of the mind. In short, Hume endorses a "thin" conception of causation and necessary connection. In recent years, however, a sizeable number of philosophers have come to view Hume as someone who believes in the existence of thick causal connections – that is, causal connections that allow one to infer a priori the effect from the cause, and vice versa. Hume doesn't wish to deny such connections, said philosopher's claim, he only seeks to demonstrate that we can't know anything about the nature of the thick causal connections that make up the natural world.

In this dissertation, I defend the old or traditional interpretation of Hume on causation. I draw attention to the important but neglected role of clear and distinct perception in Hume's thought, arguing that for Hume our impressions are clear and distinct perceptions, whereas our ideas are faint and obscure. Accordingly, Hume's copy principle – the thesis that our ideas are copies of our impressions – is Hume's way of rendering our naturally obscure and confused ideas distinct. One need only discern the impression from which said ideas are copied. In this way, I show that Hume's opinion concerning our idea of thick causation is that it's an obscure and confused idea, and that the only clear and distinct idea we can have of causation is thin causation. Furthermore, since meaning for Hume is a matter of a word's being associated with an idea, Hume thinks that an expression such as "thick causation" is meaningless or confused. In one sense, then, Hume is a positivist, and as such doesn't believe in thick causal connections.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
CHAPTER	
1. The Problem	1
Hume's Principles of Human Nature	1
Hume's Meaning-Empiricism	8
A Nasty Problem	15
Thick and Thin Causation	29
The New Hume Debate	42
Conclusion	46
2. Hume's Fork	48
Introduction	48
Initial Characterization	48
Owen on Demonstration	54
Kail's Lemma	66
Dicker's Interpretation	77
Polishing Hume's Fork	86
Chalmers on Conceivability	93
Conclusion	102
3. Thin Causation	104
Introduction	104
Single Instances of Causation	107
Multiple Instances of Causation	116

The Problem of Induction	119
Goodman's Dissolution	123
Thin Necessary Connection	135
Conclusion	139
4. Thick Causation	141
Introduction	141
The Criticism Stated	141
Strawson's Case for Skeptical Realism	146
Kail's Nuanced Realism	156
Retrospective Reinterpretation	161
A Footnote	167
Liberty and Necessity	169
Conclusion	176
5. Clear and Distinct Perception in Hume	178
Introduction	178
Descartes's <i>Meditations</i>	179
Clear and Distinct Perception in Descartes	187
Hume's Microscope of the Moral Sciences	193
Impression Hunts	199
Complicating the Picture	203
Conclusion	209
6. The Real Hume	210
Introduction	210
First Account: Words	211

Second Account: Projection	218
Third Account: Necessitation	221
Sticking with Hume through Thick and Thin	228
Fruit of the Hume	230
Conclusion	234
CONCLUSION	236
BIBLIOGRAPHY	238

Chapter One

The Problem

Hume's Principles of Human Nature

Hume divides all the perceptions of the mind into two distinct kinds: *impressions* and *ideas*. He characterizes the difference between these two as follows:

Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning. (T 1.1.1.1)¹

Impressions, therefore, are our forceful and violent perceptions, and as examples Hume mentions our sensations, passions, and emotions. Ideas, on the other hand, are our faint and weak perceptions. When we think or reason, says Hume, we think and reason with ideas.

Hume doesn't regard this as a novel distinction, and he doesn't anticipate much resistance to it. The distinction between impressions and ideas, as he soon puts

¹ The "T" abbreviates *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and the numbers indicate the book, part, section, and paragraph of the *Treatise*, respectively. Unless noted otherwise, the italics are in the original.

it, is simply the difference between *feeling* and *thinking* (ibid.).

Hume draws a further distinction within the class of impressions. This is the distinction between *impressions of sensation* and *impressions of reflection*. Impressions of sensation include visual, tactile, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory perceptions, as well as perceptions of pleasure and pain. Impressions of reflection, on the other hand, include our emotions and passions, such as love or hatred.

Hume's interested in these distinctions because he conceives of himself as embarking on a new science, what he calls the "science of MAN" (T Intro. 4).² The aim of this science is to discern (as far as we're able) the fundamental constituents of the human mind, and the fundamental principles that govern its operation. Only in this way, claims Hume, can we make any progress in the other sciences. Thus, for Hume, impressions and ideas constitute the fundamental constituents of the human mind.

The first principle in Hume's science of human nature concerns the manner in which impressions and ideas are related. It claims that ideas are ultimately caused by and resemble impressions. More specifically, it reads:

² "Intro" abbreviates Hume's Introduction to the *Treatise*, and the numbers indicate the paragraphs.

Copy Principle

"[A]ll our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent." (T 1.1.1.7)

Don Garrett (1997: 21) helpfully divides the copy principle into two main components: the Causal Thesis and the Resemblance Thesis. The Causal Thesis states that all simple ideas are initially derived from simple impressions, whereas the Resemblance Thesis claims that all simple ideas exactly resemble their corresponding simple impressions.³ Put differently, ideas are *copies* of impressions.

Accordingly, Hume believes that the mind first receives mental content from impressions of sensation, which are then copied and retained as ideas in the memory, and are such that they can be entertained and rearranged by the imagination. These three faculties – sensation, memory, and the imagination – constitute the three fundamental faculties of the understanding for Hume. The faculty of sensation works with impressions, whereas the memory and

³ I shall explain Hume's reasons for limiting the principle to simple perceptions below. In addition, while not all representation is a matter of resemblance, Hume intends only the relation of resemblance when stating his copy principle.

the imagination work with ideas. Hume helpfully illustrates this process as follows:

An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be call'd impressions of reflection because deriv'd from it. These again are copy'd by the memory and imagination, and become ideas; which perhaps in their turn give rise to other impressions and ideas. (T 1.1.2.1)

Hume intentionally restricts the copy principle to our simple perceptions. In order to understand Hume's reasons for limiting the principle in this way, we must first grasp the distinction between simple and complex perceptions.

Simple perceptions – whether they be impressions or ideas – “admit of no distinction nor separation,” whereas complex perceptions can be “distinguish'd into parts” (T 1.1.1.2). Hume's example is the perception of an apple. One's perception of an apple – insofar as it's conceived as having a certain color, taste, and smell – is a complex perception, and it's complex because it has parts (its color, taste, and smell) that can be distinguished and separated from one another. The parts themselves, however,

constitute simple perceptions for Hume, because they don't contain parts that can be distinguished or separated from one another.

As it pertains to the copy principle, Hume asserts that the Causal Thesis and the Resemblance Thesis each hold only with respect to *simple* perceptions. He does so for the following reason:

New Jerusalem Passage

I observe, that many of our complex ideas never had impressions, that corresponded to them, and that many of our complex impressions never are exactly copy'd in ideas. I can imagine to myself such a city as the *New Jerusalem*, whose pavement is gold and walls are rubies, tho' I never saw any such. I have seen *Paris*; but shall I affirm I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions? (T 1.1.1.4)

Hume claims here that it's false that all ideas are exact copies of impressions. Furthermore, he claims that it's false that all impressions are exactly copied as ideas. We sometimes have complex ideas – such as Hume's idea of the New Jerusalem – that never had any corresponding complex impression. Hume has never seen any such city. Similarly, while Hume has seen Paris, his idea of Paris doesn't exactly resemble his former impression; that is, his idea doesn't perfectly resemble what he saw on that occasion.

Thus Hume concludes that our complex ideas aren't always perfectly correspondent to complex impressions.

While Hume admits that complex ideas aren't always perfectly correspondent to complex impressions, he does believe that all *simple* ideas are perfectly correspondent. We never have a simple idea that isn't caused by, and that doesn't perfectly resemble, some simple impression;⁴ and we never have a simple impression that isn't exactly copied by some simple idea. This is Hume's reason for restricting the copy principle to our simple perceptions.

The simple/complex distinction is also relevant to two other related principles in Hume's science of human nature. These principles are the following:

Separability Principle

"[W]hatever objects are different are distinguishable, and... whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination." (T 1.1.7.3)

Inverse Separability Principle

"[W]hatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and... whatever objects are distinguishable are also different." (ibid.)

⁴ This isn't strictly speaking correct, however, for Hume does admit the case of the missing shade of blue (T 1.1.1.10). But, like Hume, I ignore this complication.

As an illustration of these principles, consider once more Hume's example of the perceived apple. Hume claims that the color, taste, and smell of the apple can all be distinguished from one another – that is, you can in some unspecified sense “tell them apart.” And thus, by the inverse separability principle, each of these constitutes a different quality of the apple.

In addition, since the color, taste, and smell of the apple can all be distinguished from one another, as was just indicated, they are – by the separability principle – each capable of being perceived separately from one another. That is to say, one can conceive of the taste of the apple, for example, without also conceiving of its color or smell.

Both principles do important work for Hume. Hume's separability principle plays a significant role in his discussion of causation, and his inverse separability principle plays an important role in his rejection of abstract ideas. It's worth considering this latter rejection now, for understanding Hume's dismissal of abstract ideas is helpful in understanding his overall theory of meaning, an aspect of Hume's thought that's relevant to the aims of this dissertation.

Hume's Meaning-Empiricism

For Hume, as for his philosophical predecessors, the meaning of a word is its associated idea. Thus the meaning of a word "T," for instance, as uttered by P, is the idea K associated with "T" in P's mind. Accordingly, words that lack an associated idea are deemed "meaningless." This was Locke's view, and Hume assumes it without question.⁵ Since ideas for Hume are the product of experience (as they were for Locke), this view is known as *meaning-empiricism*.

There are some details in the vicinity, however, that require elucidation. Suppose, for instance, that I utter the proper name "Trump." Hume claims that this word has the meaning that it does solely because I have a specific idea in my mind – in this case, an idea of Donald Trump⁶ – that I associate with the word "Trump." Moreover, the idea associated with a word doesn't merely account for the word's meaning; it's also the word's vehicle of reference. My uttering "Trump" is about Donald Trump because my idea resembles Donald Trump, in much the same way that a photograph of a landscape resembles the landscape itself.

⁵ See *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, III.ii.2, for Locke's statement of this view.

⁶ For reasons that will emerge, an idea of an orange-haired monkey would do just as well.

When we turn to general terms, however – that is, to terms that refer to more than one individual – matters become a bit more complicated.⁷ The word “man,” for instance, refers to many different individuals. And since reference, on meaning-empiricism, is achieved via the associated idea’s *resembling* the thing or things referred to, the associated idea of the general term “man” must in some way resemble *all* individual men. Indeed, Locke had introduced abstract ideas to serve this express purpose:

[T]he Mind makes the particular *Ideas*, received from particular Objects, to become general; which is done by considering them as they are in the Mind such Appearances, separate from all other Existences, and the circumstances of real Existence, as Time, Place, or any other concomitant *Ideas*. This is called *ABSTRACTION*, whereby *Ideas* taken from particular Beings, become general Representatives of all of the same kind; and their Names general Names, applicable to whatever exists conformable to such abstract *Ideas*.⁸

Hume, however, doesn’t endorse Locke’s theory about general terms. Instead, he follows Berkeley in denying the very existence of abstract ideas.⁹ Hume denies the existence

⁷ There are also complications relevant to proper names that I have skipped over. For example, Hume frequently uses “Adam” as a means of referring to the Adam of the Bible, but certainly Hume has never seen Adam, and so has no idea of Adam. Hume has a way of addressing such cases, but discussion of his account would take us far afield. Cf. T 1.3.4.2.

⁸ Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II.xi.9.

⁹ For Berkeley’s view, see his Introduction to *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

of abstract ideas because he thinks they present us with the following dilemma:

[H]ere is a plain dilemma, that decides concerning the nature of those abstract ideas, which have afforded so much speculation to philosophers. The abstract idea of a man represents men of all sizes and all qualities, which it is concluded it cannot do, but either by representing at once all possible sizes and all possible qualities, or by representing no particular one at all. (T 1.1.7.2)

In other words, on a Lockean view about general terms, Hume claims that the abstract idea associated with the word "man" refers to all men either because (i) it at once represents and resembles all the individual sizes and qualities had by men, or (ii) it represents all of the individual sizes and qualities had by men in some indeterminate fashion: that is to say, it doesn't resemble any particular man any more than any other. The problem, says Hume, is that neither (i) nor (ii) is true.

Hume denies the first horn – the claim that abstract ideas represent all the individual sizes and qualities had by men – because this implies an "infinite capacity in the mind" (ibid.). It's not entirely clear what Hume means by this, but the idea seems to be that our mental faculties simply aren't up to the psychological task of representing

all the individual sizes and qualities had by men. Hume believes that most proponents of abstract ideas agree with him on this matter, and so he dispenses with this horn of the dilemma rather quickly.

On the other hand, as characterized by the second horn of the dilemma, abstract ideas refer to all men by "representing no particular [man] at all" (ibid.). So as to best understand Hume's rebuttal, let's suppose that "S" refers to the idea of a man who is represented as six-feet tall, and that "F" refers to the idea of a man who is represented as five-feet tall. Recall that ideas are copies of impressions for Hume, and so S and F will resemble sensory images of a six and a five-foot tall man, respectively. For ease of exposition, let's also suppose that S and F are the only ideas of men that one has, and that any other quality factoring into S and F (for example, hair color) is precisely delineated. Hume labels an idea that's precisely delineated in this fashion a *determinate* idea (T 1.1.7.5).

Thus, on the present view, the abstract idea of man, in "representing no particular [man] at all" (T 1.1.7.2), can no more represent S than it can represent F. That is to say, it can no more represent a six-foot tall man than it

can represent a five-foot tall man. And since representation is a matter of resemblance for Hume, the abstract idea of man can no more resemble a six-foot tall man than it can resemble a five-foot tall man. Accordingly, this account of abstract ideas requires that abstract ideas be *indeterminate*.

Herein lies Hume's criticism of abstract ideas. If abstract ideas are indeterminate, then abstract ideas imply a separation. On the Lockean view, one's abstract idea of man is constructed by taking any particular quality had by S and F (for example, the quality of being six-feet tall and the quality of being five-feet tall) and *separating* these from what's common to both S and F. As Locke's comments above indicate, the abstract idea is what results after we've abstracted out all such uncommon qualities.

The problem, according to Hume, is that the required separation is impossible. Hume claims that we can't distinguish the particular qualities of a thing from the thing itself – that is, we can't distinguish a thing's particular qualities from its "common qualities." For example, Hume writes that "the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself" (T 1.1.7.3). But, if Hume's inverse separability principle is

correct, then what can be separated can be distinguished, and, since abstraction implies a separation, we ought to be able to distinguish the particular qualities of a line from the line itself, or the particular qualities of some man from the man himself. But Hume claims that we can't. And so Hume concludes that "the general idea of a line, notwithstanding all our abstractions and refinements, has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality" (ibid.). In other words, Hume concludes that all of our ideas are determinate, and thus horn (ii) cannot save Locke's account of abstract ideas.

This establishes an important constraint on any acceptable theory of meaning for Hume: if, as Hume claims, meaning is supplied by an idea, then even general terms must utilize a determinate idea in order to be meaningful. But how can a general term refer generally via a determinate idea, when reference is solely a matter of resemblance? Hume need not labor long here, however, for he claims that the discovery has already been made. The discovery has been made, he claims, by Berkeley, and Hume "look[s] upon this to be one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the Republic of Letters" (T 1.1.7.1).

Accordingly, we may put Hume's accepted theory of meaning as follows. First, Hume claims that we notice many different kinds of resemblance among our ideas. For instance, we see many lines of many different lengths, and, insofar as they're all lines, we recognize a resemblance among them. Second, we form the custom or habit of labeling each of these ideas (despite their perceivable differences) with the word "line." Thus I label a line of six inches with the word "line," and a line of eight inches with the word "line," and so on. To make matters more perspicuous, let's call my idea of a line of six inches "K," my idea of a line of eight inches "G," and any other idea that I happen to call a line an instance of "H." Garrett (1997: 24) calls the set of all ideas labeled by a certain term its *revival set*, and so our revival set for the word "line" consists of K, G, and any instance of H. When I happen to utter the word "line," one of the ideas in the word's revival set – in all its determinacy – comes to mind. Thus K, or G, or one of H, is called to mind. But we still manage to refer generally because, when we utter this word, *the custom* as well as the idea, is called to mind. And so, while every idea that we've labeled "line" is "not really and in fact present to the mind" when I utter this word, every such idea is present to the mind "in power" (T

1.1.7.7).¹⁰ Consequently, Hume concludes that “all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annex’d to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them” (T 1.1.7.1).¹¹

In this way, Hume accounts for meaning without relying on a Lockean conception of abstract ideas. In the next section, however, I shall indicate how Hume’s meaning-empiricism presents him with a problem.

A Nasty Problem

In the previous section, we saw that Hume identifies the meaning of a word with its associated idea. That is, for any term T, Hume claims that:

1. “T”’s meaningful \equiv “T” has an associated idea.

Accordingly, if a word lacks an associated idea, then that word is meaningless.

¹⁰ Hume’s theory of meaning, therefore, incorporates elements of a “use” view of meaning. What one means by the word “line” is in part determined by which ideas one has labeled by that word, and what future ideas one is willing to label by that word. In short, it’s partly a matter of how one uses the word.

¹¹ Hereafter, “associated idea” is shorthand for “associated revival set.”

In addition, Hume holds (via his copy principle) that ideas are copies of impressions. Thus:

2. "T" has an associated idea only if "T"'s associated idea is copied from some impression.

From (1) and (2), it follows that:

3. "T"'s meaningful only if "T"'s associated idea is copied from some impression.

Thus, to put matters in a way that Hume doesn't, a word is meaningful only if it has an associated impression.

These considerations famously lead Hume to endorse the following well-known test for meaning:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* (EHU 2.21)¹²

¹² "EHU" abbreviates *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, and the numbers indicate the section and paragraph, respectively.

Hume claims, then, that philosophical terms often lack associated ideas; and that the way to discern whether a word lacks an associated idea is to discern whether or not it has an associated impression. If the word lacks an associated impression, then the word is meaningless.¹³

As an important example, consider Hume's discussion of substance. Traditionally understood, a substance is that in which a thing's properties inhere. Thus Locke, for instance, describes the traditional idea of substance when he writes:

[W]hen we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal Substances, as *Horse, Stone, etc.* though the *Idea*, we have of either of them, be but the Complication, or Collection of those several simple *Ideas* of sensible Qualities, which we use to find united in the thing called *Horse* or *Stone*, yet because we cannot conceive, how they should subsist alone, nor one in another, we suppose them existing in, and supported by some common subject; which *Support* we denote by the name *Substance*.¹⁴

Thus an apple is a substance for Locke just in case it is "some common subject" or "support" with various qualities – such as its color, taste, and smell – inhering or

¹³ I have reservations about this way of characterizing Hume's method. I give voice to these reservations in Chapter Five. However, since my focus at present concerns the traditional account of Hume's test for meaning, I needn't detail such reservations here.

¹⁴ *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxiii.4.

subsisting in it. It's this "support," properly speaking, that constitutes the apple's substance.

Locke's description in the passage quoted above concerns material substance, that is, substances in which material properties (such as having a certain shape or smell) inhere. In addition to material substance, however, Locke believes there are mental substances:

The same happens concerning the Operations of the Mind, viz. Thinking, Reasoning, Fearing, etc. which we concluding not to subsist of themselves, nor apprehending how they can belong to Body, or be produced by it, we are apt to think these the Actions of some other *Substance*, which we call *Spirit*.¹⁵

Thus mental substance for Locke is any substance in which mental properties (such as thinking and reasoning) inhere.

In contrast, Hume applies his test for meaning to the notion of substance and finds it wanting. He writes:

I would fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident... whether the idea of *substance* be derived from the impressions of sensation or reflection? If it be conveyed to us by our senses, I ask, which of them, and after what manner? If it be perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by

¹⁵ Ibid., II.xxiii.5.

the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or sound, or a taste. (T 1.1.6.1)

Hume claims, therefore, that substance isn't the sort of thing that can be perceived by the senses, and thus Hume concludes that our idea of substance isn't derived from an impression of sensation.

Furthermore, Hume claims that our idea of substance isn't derived from an impression of reflection:

The idea of substance must, therefore, be derived from an impression of reflection, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflection resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possibly represent a substance. (ibid.)

Consequently, our idea of substance isn't derived from an impression of sensation or an impression of reflection.

Thus, given Hume's copy principle, Hume concludes that:

We have... no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it. (ibid.)

For ease of exposition, let's call a bundle conception of substance "substance_b," and the traditional conception of substance "substance_t." In the above passage, Hume seemingly claims that we lack an idea of substance_t, and thus claims that all that we can mean by the term is substance_b.

The standard reading of Hume, therefore, is that Hume departs from Locke insofar as Hume denies our having any idea of substance_t at all. According to the standard reading, Hume's account of substance is deflationary: to assert that an apple is a substance, for example, is merely to say that it's a bundle of various qualities – such as its color, taste, and smell – and nothing more.¹⁶ Hence, an idea of a "support" in which such qualities are said to inhere isn't really any idea at all. Consequently, Hume would regard a word like "substance_t" as meaningless.

Georges Dicker provides a nice articulation of this reading of Hume. Dicker writes that:

When Hume's test for meaning is applied to the notion of material substance, it yields the result that the notion is meaningless and that a thing can be only a bundle of properties. Likewise, when the test is applied to the notion of a mental substance, it yields the result that this notion is meaningless and that a mind can be only a bundle of conscious states.

¹⁶ A collection of qualities constitutes a "bundle" for Hume just in case these qualities are frequently found together, and are taken to be linked by a causal relation (T 1.4.6.4).

Meaning-empiricism leaves no room at all for the notion of substance as distinct from its properties, whether it be a material substance or a mind. (1998: 21)¹⁷

Alexander Rosenberg also endorses this reading of Hume.

Rosenberg writes that:

According to Hume's theory, since a term names an idea, the meaning of a term is ultimately given by a set of impressions that cause the idea that it names, and terms without such a pedigree are meaningless noises. In effect this theory of meaning constitutes a criterion of cognitive significance indistinguishable from one of the positivists' earliest attempts to frame a principle of verifiability. (1993: 66)

As Rosenberg intimates, Hume's often seen as a kind of proto-positivist. The logical positivists of the twentieth century held that a proposition is cognitively meaningful – that is, has a truth-value – just in case it's analytic or empirically verifiable.¹⁸ Thus it's been thought that Hume's a positivist insofar as Hume claims that sentences are meaningful only if the ideas contained in them are copied from impressions, which in turn are supplied by experience.

¹⁷ In the preface to his book, Dicker includes the meaninglessness of "substance" among a list of conclusions for which Hume is rightly famous. For instance, Dicker writes that "Hume is famous... for arguing that meaningful words must have an empirical reference, so that 'substance underlying all of a thing's perceivable qualities' and 'immaterial soul' lack meaning" (1998: ix).

¹⁸ For a classic expression of this view, see A. J. Ayer (1952).

In order for a cognitively meaningless sentence to count as meaningful, the logical positivists claimed that it must be relegated to the realm of emotive meaning. Their verifiability criterion wasn't meant to serve as a criterion of linguistic meaning generally, but merely as a criterion of assertoric meaning. In that case, the analogy between logical positivism and Hume can only go so far, for Hume's meaning-empiricism extends to linguistic meaning generally.

This, then, is the standard reading of Hume's test for meaning. But there's a problem for this interpretation of Hume. Simply stated, the problem is that Hume provides an *explanation* as to why philosophers believe in the existence of substance_t. But explaining why philosophers believe in the existence of substance_t seems to presuppose that we have some idea of substance_t. In order to see how this constitutes a problem for Hume, I turn to Hume's explanation of the philosopher's belief in the existence of substance_t.

Hume begins by reiterating that "our ideas of bodies are nothing but collections form'd by the mind of the ideas of the several distinct sensible qualities" (T 1.4.3.2). In this passage, Hume's claiming that our idea of substance is

nothing more than an idea of substance_b. Nonetheless, Hume claims that we commonly regard this complex idea "as ONE thing, and as continuing the SAME under very considerable alterations" (ibid.). That is, in Hume's terminology, we attribute a "simplicity" and an "identity" to our ideas of bodies, despite the fact that they're actually composed of several distinct ideas.

Hume next explains why we attribute a simplicity and an identity to this collection of ideas. Since Hume's explanation of our attribution of identity mirrors his explanation of our attribution of simplicity, I'll focus exclusively on the latter.

First, Hume claims that the act of the imagination when considering a simple and indivisible object,¹⁹ feels similar to the act of the imagination when it considers a complex idea "whose *co-existent* parts are connected together by a strong relation" (T 1.4.3.5). Since each of these distinct acts of the mind feel similar, Hume claims that we mistake a complex object for a simple one.

Hence the colour, taste, figure, solidity, and other qualities, combin'd in a peach or melon, are conceiv'd to form *one thing*; and that on account of their close

¹⁹ That is, the act of the imagination when considering a simple impression or idea.

relation, which makes them affect the thought in the same manner, as if perfectly un-compounded. (ibid.)

Thus Hume claims that the mind's attribution of simplicity to a complex object is explained in part by similar acts of the imagination.

Nonetheless, the mind isn't totally misled. For when the mind "views the object in another light" (ibid.), it recognizes that each of the object's qualities are separable: that is, the mind realizes that the idea is a complex idea, and that it doesn't constitute a simple thing. This realization

obliges the imagination to feign an unknown something, or *original* substance or matter, as a principle of union or cohesion among these qualities, and as what may give the compound object a title to be call'd one thing, notwithstanding its diversity and composition. (ibid.)

Thus Hume's explanation of how we come to have an idea of substance_t involves the following: (i) similar acts of the imagination lead the mind to attribute a simplicity to a complex object, (ii) the mind is uneasy about this

attribution, and so (iii) the mind “feigns” an unknown something or support of these qualities.²⁰

The problem, then, is that Hume claims that we have no idea of substance_t – at most, we have an idea of substance_b – and yet he provides an explanation as to why philosophers believe in the existence of substance_t.

In the words of Louis Loeb, these concessions create a “nasty problem” for Hume:

Hume declares “*substratum*” meaningless. [But Hume then] sets out to *explain* why the ancient philosophers *believe* in the existence of material *substrata*. These sections work at cross purposes. How can Hume consistently set out to explain the psychological causes of a belief that is without meaning or content in the first place? (2001: 147)

Robert Fogelin echoes Loeb’s concern. He asks, “What is the content of the false philosopher’s belief in substance? Hume’s answer seems to be that it is contentless, but then what does the belief amount to?” (1985: 11-12).

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that Hume acts in precisely the same way with respect to a host of other traditional metaphysical terms. For instance, Hume makes

²⁰ A “fiction” for Hume is a complex idea that’s arranged by the imagination, and is such that this complex idea was never copied from any complex impression. For instance, Hume would count his idea of the New Jerusalem as a fiction.

similar claims about the religious belief in invisible intelligent power, the self, external bodies, the existence of a vacuum, the idea of changeless time, and the idea of a cause. In light of this fact, Loeb identifies the following variant on the main problem:

All contentless concepts are the same, just as there is only one null set. Yet Hume provides different psychological explanations of the beliefs in the existence of material substrata, souls, external existence and necessary connection. The different explanations could be appropriate only if the beliefs somehow differ in content, but they do not differ in content if the key concepts are meaningless. (2001: 148)

On one hand, then, Hume makes clear claims of meaninglessness, claims about key metaphysical concepts like substance, self, body, and cause. On the other hand, Hume describes and explains the origin of belief in the existence of these traditional metaphysical concepts. But, as Loeb notes, these claims work at cross purposes.

We can articulate the nasty problem more rigorously as follows. First, Hume often claims of some term "T" that

4. "T"'s a meaningless expression.

In addition,

5. Hume gives an explanation as to why we believe in the existence of entities denoted by "T".

But, finally,

6. Explanations as to why we believe in the existence of entities denoted by "T" presuppose that T's meaningful.

The problem is that (4)-(6) are inconsistent.

Moreover, (4)-(6) engender a contradiction at the level of ideas. To see this, recall Hume's meaning-empiricism:

1. "T"'s meaningful \equiv "T" has an associated idea.

(1) and (4) entail:

7. "T" lacks an associated idea.

But (1), (5), and (6) entail:

8. "T" has an associated idea.

Hume's saddled, then, with the following contradiction:

9. "T" has and doesn't have an associated idea.

It appears, therefore, that Hume's committed to a contradiction. In the case of substance, Hume seems to be committed to both our having and our lacking an idea of substance_t. Moreover, the purported contradiction is a serious one, as it's engendered by aspects fundamental to Hume's entire project. Hume seems motivated to explain away various traditional metaphysical concepts, despite the fact that he claims that we have no idea of them.

In the chapters that follow, I argue that Hume has the resources to escape the contradiction. In particular, I aim to show that Hume can avoid the nasty problem relative to our idea of causation. While my conclusions can be extended to other key metaphysical terms, my primary focus is on our

idea of causation. Accordingly, in the next section, I shall indicate how the nasty problem is relevant to Hume's discussion of causation.

Thick and Thin Causation

In the previous section, we saw that Hume faces a nasty problem relevant to his discussion of substance. In this section, I indicate how Hume faces a similar problem relevant to his discussion of causation.

Hume's views on causation are best appreciated when approached within their historical context. Edward Craig (1987), for instance, has argued that philosophy during Hume's time was strongly in the grip of what he calls the "Image of God doctrine" (13-17). As one might expect, this is the view that human beings are made in the image of God.

Craig claims that the Image of God doctrine engendered various metaphysical and epistemological implications. For instance, proponents of the Image of God doctrine regarded God's knowledge as the best and most perfect form of knowledge, and thus regarded it as the most certain. God's knowledge was conceived in terms of his having a priori

knowledge, and thus a priori knowledge came to be seen as the most divine and perfect form of knowledge.²¹

In addition, since God was regarded as the creator of the natural world, advocates for this view held that nature operates in a way analogous to a priori inference. This is *the metaphysical implication* of the image of God doctrine. Thus Helen Beebee, for instance, describes the metaphysical implication of the Image of God doctrine as follows:

The... claim is that nature itself operates in a way that is analogous to a *priori* reasoning. The way nature operates is, of course, via causation: the processes we see unfolding around us are *causal processes*, with earlier stages linked to later ones by causal relations. The metaphysical upshot of the Image of God doctrine, as far as causation is concerned, is thus the view that causal relations are, as it were, the worldly correlates of a *priori* inference: causes necessitate their effects, or guarantee that those effects occur, in a way that is somehow analogous to, or perhaps even identical with, the way that premises of an argument necessitate or guarantee the truth of their conclusions. (2006: 3)

Accordingly, proponents of the Image of God doctrine held that causes necessitate their effects, such that if one "could somehow penetrate into the essence of a cause, [one] would see that the effect could not fail to come

²¹ It's precisely for this reason that proponents of the Image of God doctrine consider mathematics and logic (and the certainty that each provides) as most worthy of the label "knowledge." For more on this, see my discussion in Chapter Two on the distinction between knowledge and probability.

about" (ibid.).²² Galen Strawson (2014: 109) has termed this feature of the causal relation its "AP property," for it's this feature that warrants an a priori inference from cause to effect, and vice versa. Simon Blackburn, in turn, refers to causal connections that possess the AP property "thick" causal connections (1990: 237). Thus a thick causal connection is one that furnishes an a priori inference from the cause to the effect, and vice versa.

As evidence for this view, consider Descartes's view that

it is manifest by the natural light that there must be at least as much reality in the efficient and total cause as in the effect of that cause. For where, I ask, could the effect get its reality from, if not from the cause? And how could the cause give it to the effect unless it possessed it? (Third Meditation: CSM II 28: AT VII 40)²³

A. O. Lovejoy explains:

That "there cannot be more in the effect than there is in the cause" is one of the propositions that men have

²² As is well known, Kant later utilizes the metaphor of containment in his *Critique of Pure Reason* to characterize the notion of analyticity (A6-7/B11).

²³ "CSM" abbreviates the edition of Descartes's works by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vols. I and II. The roman numerals indicate the volume, and the arabic numerals indicate the page. In turn, "AT" denotes the twelve-volume Adam and Tannery revised edition, *Oeuvres de Descartes*.

been readiest to accept as axiomatic; a cause, it has been supposed, does not "account" for its effect, unless the effect is a thing which the eye of reason could somehow discern in the cause, upon a sufficiently thorough analysis. (1962: 286)

And Spinoza says that he has

shown quite clearly (Pr. 16) that from God's supreme power or infinite nature an infinity of things in infinite ways – that is, everything – have necessarily flowed or are always following from that same necessity, just as from the nature of a triangle it follows from eternity to eternity that its three angles are equal to two right angles.²⁴

Hence it follows that God is the efficient cause of all things that can come within the scope of infinite intellect.²⁵

Accordingly, philosophers within the Image of God tradition held that causation was thick.

Since human beings are made in God's image, proponents of the Image of God doctrine also suggested an important *epistemological implication*. They held that since human beings are made in God's image, our cognitive capacities must mirror or approximate the cognitive capacities of God. Hence, Craig (1987: 18-27) claims that the epistemological

²⁴ *Ethics* 1p17s.

²⁵ *Ethics* 1p16c1. The preceding three quotations are taken from Dicker (1993: Ch. 3).

implication of the Image of God doctrine inspired the "Insight Ideal," namely the view that

Human beings are, in principle, capable of attaining a priori knowledge about the nature and structure of the natural world.

In other words, the Image of God doctrine suggests that the causal relation is thick, and the Insight Ideal says that humans can in principle discern this relation.

As we shall see, however, the view that causal connections are thick is diametrically opposed to Hume's own account of causation. Hume claims, for instance, that our idea of causation is a complex idea consisting of at least three elements:

- A. The cause is spatiotemporally contiguous with the effect,
- B. the effect succeeds the cause in time, and
- C. events like the cause are constantly conjoined with events like the effect.

By way of an example, consider bringing a pot of water to a boil. In this case, the flame's heating the water to a temperature of 212°F at 1 atm causes the water to boil. Heating the water causes it to boil, says Hume, because heating the water at that temperature and in those conditions occurs before and adjacent to the effect; and, whenever water is heated to that temperature and in those conditions, it boils.

This view is called the *regularity theory of causation*, and it derives its name from the third condition mentioned above: namely, that like causes are constantly conjoined with like effects. Hume's most explicit endorsement of this view is presented in his first definition of a cause. In this regard, Hume writes:

First Definition of a Cause

We define a cause to be, *An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter.* (T 1.3.14.35)

Hume's first definition of a cause omits the condition of a necessary connection between the cause and its effect.

Thus if we consider Hume's first definition in isolation, we discover that causes don't necessitate their effects.

Hume insists, however, that even if the objects that constitute the cause and the effect aren't necessarily connected, the concept of a necessary connection still factors into our idea of a cause (T 1.3.2.11). Accordingly, Hume addresses this issue with his second definition of a cause, which reads:

Second Definition of a Cause

We define a cause to be, *An object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.* (T 1.3.14.35)

Hume claims, therefore, that the necessary connection between a cause and its effect is solely a feature of *our minds*, and not *objects*. It's an impression of reflection – a determination or disposition of the mind to believe that the effect will occur, given the cause. Consequently, our idea of necessary connection is copied from an impression

of reflection, and thus is an "idea of reflection,"²⁶ to use a phrase of Harold Noonan's (2007: 28).

On Hume's conception, then, there's nothing intrinsic to the cause that necessitates its effect. It's not the case that causal relations contain the AP property. It's only after we've experienced a constant conjunction of causes and effects that we entertain the idea of necessary connection. To illustrate this, Hume provides the following example. Suppose that Adam, upon first being created, considers the causal relation between two billiard balls:

It would have been necessary, therefore, for *Adam* (if he was not inspired) to have had *experience* of the effect, which followed upon the impulse of these two balls. He must have seen, in several instances, that when the one ball struck upon the other, the second always acquired motion. If he had seen a sufficient number of instances of this kind, whenever he saw the one ball moving towards the other, he would always conclude without hesitation, that the second would acquire motion. His understanding would anticipate his sight, and form a conclusion suitable to his past experience. (A 14)²⁷

Thus, Hume claims that Adam requires experience to make any non-arbitrary inference from the cause. Herein lies Hume's repudiation of the Insight Ideal. He writes that:

²⁶ An idea of reflection is an idea derived from an impression of reflection.

²⁷ The "A" abbreviates Hume's *An Abstract of a Book lately Published; Entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature*, followed by the paragraph number.

Were a man, such as *Adam*, created in the full vigour of understanding, without experience, he would never be able to infer motion in the second ball from the motion and impulse of the first. It is not any thing that reason sees in the cause, which makes us *infer* the effect. Such an inference, were it possible, would amount to a demonstration, as being founded merely on the comparison of ideas. But no inference from cause to effect amounts to a demonstration. (A 11; cf. A 14 and T 1.3.14.13)

Adam can demonstrate the effect from the cause, apart from experience, only if Adam can perceive something about the cause that entails the effect. But, as we've seen, Hume claims that there's "not any thing that reason sees in the cause" (*ibid*). Thus, as Beebee eloquently summarizes the point, for Hume "the fundamental source of our empirical beliefs is something more animal than divine, namely custom or habit" (2006: 5).²⁸

We've seen, then, that Hume endorses a thin rather than a thick conception of causation. He claims that our idea of causation includes the idea of a necessary connection, but that our idea of necessary connection is thin: it's a determination of the mind that's based on an experience of the constant conjunction of causes and

²⁸ Note that Hume includes a chapter on animal reasoning in both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*.

effects, and not anything that's perceived to be the case in objects.

In order to have an idea of thick causation, one needs to have an idea of thick necessary connection, a necessary connection of objects of the causation, a necessary connection between cause and effect. But Hume, as we've seen, denies we have any impression corresponding to this idea. And thus Hume concludes that we lack an idea of thick necessary connection. According to him,

[W]e deceive ourselves, when we imagine we are possest of any idea of this kind, after the manner we commonly understand it. All ideas are deriv'd from, and represent impressions. We never have any impression, that contains any power or efficacy. We never therefore have any idea of power. (T 1.3.14.11)

And:

We wou'd not willingly stop before we are acquainted with that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect... And how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that this connection, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves... Such a discovery not only cuts off all hopes of ever attaining satisfaction, but even prevents our very wishes; since it appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning. (T 1.4.7.5)

Such claims echo Hume's earlier claim that "we have no idea of substance" (T 1.1.6.1), which generated the nasty problem above. Similarly, Hume claims that we "never... have any idea of power" (T 1.3.14.11). Given Hume's meaning-empiricism, then, it seems to follow that an expression like "thick causation" is meaningless.

The problem is that Hume frequently seems to refer to thick causal connections, or at least their conceptual blood relatives, powers and forces. For instance, he writes:

[T]he powers and forces, by which the [course of nature] is governed, [are] wholly unknown to us. (EHU 5.21)

[W]e are ignorant of *those powers and forces*, on which [the] regular course and succession of objects totally depends. (EHU 5.22)

[T]he scenes of the universe are continually shifting, and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession; but *the power or force*, which actuates the whole machine, is entirely concealed from us, and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of body. (EHU 7.8)

Even if Hume's speaking ironically in these passages, if his words are to have any meaning – if "the power or force, which actuates the whole machine" isn't pure gibberish –

then these words must have associated ideas. Here, for instance, is how Ken Clatterbaugh (1999: 204) puts the point:

In Hume's own theory of knowledge, when we talk of ultimate principles, etc., we are literally speaking nonsense; we are using words without ideas associated with them... To take Hume's talk about secret powers seriously, even to think that such sentences are meaningful, would mean that Hume would have to set aside the entire epistemological framework of his philosophy in the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*.

Asher Jiang makes a similar point:

Hume frequently states that we are ignorant of genuine power. There is a well-known internal difficulty concerning this claim concerning ignorance. According to Hume, we do not have an impression-based idea of genuine power; on the other hand, every noun needs a corresponding idea to be meaningful. Is his claim concerning ignorance, which makes use of the noun "power," meaningless in light of *his own* criterion of meaningfulness? (2015: 229)

In addition, Hume's entire focus in T 1.3.14 is to discern what our idea of necessary connection is, and to explain why philosophers falsely believe in the existence of thick necessary connections. For instance, Hume suggests that we project our idea of thin necessary connection on to objects. Famously, he writes:

Thus, upon the whole, we may infer, that when we talk of any being, whether of a superior or inferior nature, as endowed with a power or force, proportioned to any effect; when we speak of a necessary connexion betwixt objects, and suppose that this connexion depends upon an efficacy or energy, with which any of these objects are endowed; in all these expressions, *so applied*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. But as it is more probable that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong applied*, than that they never have any meaning; it will be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject, to see if possibly we can discover the nature and origin of those ideas we annex to them. (T 1.3.14.14)

As Hume intimates in this passage, he intends to give an explanation as to why we believe in the existence of thick causal connections.²⁹

Accordingly, Hume also seems to face the nasty problem in relation to his discussion of causation. Substituting “thick causation” for “T,” we can put the nasty problem relative to Hume’s discussion of causation as follows:

10. “Thick causation” is a meaningless expression.

²⁹ Janet Broughton has emphasized that Hume admits a thick idea of necessary connection — what she calls his “bare” idea of necessary connection (2007: 198) — which serves as Hume’s philosophical target.

11. Hume gives an explanation as to why we believe in the existence of thick causal connections.

But, finally,

12. Explanations as to why we believe in the existence of thick causal connections presuppose that "thick causation" is meaningful.

When conjoined with Hume's meaning-empiricism, (10)-(12) entail a contradiction: we both have and don't have an idea of thick causation.

This is the nasty problem relevant to Hume's views on causation. It's a problem for all interpretations of Hume, but it has appeared most frequently as a challenge to one side in the so-called "New Hume debate." In the next section, therefore, I indicate what this more recent debate is, and how the nasty problem is relevant to it.

The New Hume Debate

In recent years, a new interpretation of Hume – the so-called “New Hume” – has emerged in the literature. The manner in which one frames the various positions in this debate is controversial. At present, therefore, I shall stick to a fairly simple and intuitive formulation.

The traditional interpretation of Hume interprets Hume as making a metaphysical claim about causation. According to this account, Hume claims that causation, as it exists in nature, is nothing more than regular succession. Saul Kripke, for instance, expresses this view when he writes that, “If Hume is right,” then “even if God were to look at [two causally related] events, he would discern nothing relating them other than that one succeeds the other” (1982: 67). The main support for this interpretation of Hume is the deflationary reading discussed above. Hume’s typically understood to be a proto-positivist, and thus it’s argued that the only idea of causation that Hume admits is an idea of thin causation. Thus the “Old Hume,” as he’s typically called, denies any idea of thick causation.

In the early 1980s, however, a number of works on Hume appeared in the literature that challenged this account of

Hume's views on causation.³⁰ The leading proponent of this interpretation is Galen Strawson (2014).

Strawson argues that Hume's primary aim when discussing causation (as when discussing other topics) is epistemological, not metaphysical. Hume never doubts the existence of thick causal connections. Thus Hume's a *causal realist*, but a realist of a certain sort. Strawson and others argue that, while Hume's a realist, he's a *skeptical realist*. In other words, Hume claims that we can't know anything about the nature of the thick causal connections that exist in reality.

In contrast to the traditional interpretation of Hume, then, New Humeans claim that there's good evidence for thinking that Hume admits an idea of thick causation, and indeed believes in the existence of such connections.

Here, for instance, are two passages that New Humeans sometimes offer as evidence for their position:

It must certainly be allowed, that nature has kept us at a great distance from all her secrets, and has afforded us only the knowledge of a few superficial qualities of objects; while she conceals from us those powers and principles, on which the influence of these objects entirely depends. (EHU 4.16)

³⁰ These include John P. Wright (1983), Donald Livingston (1984), Edward Craig (1987), Janet Broughton (1987), and Galen Strawson (2014).

And:

The scenes of the universe are continually shifting, and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession; but the power or force, which actuates the whole machine, is entirely concealed from us, and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of body. (EHU 7.8)

Thus, according to the New Hume position, Hume admits the existence of thick causal connections in nature; he only means to claim that we can't know anything about it.

As one might have anticipated, the main criticism of the New Hume is that Hume's meaning-empiricism precludes the possibility of his believing in thick causation, for one can't believe in something that one can't have an idea of. Peter Kail, a proponent of the New Hume interpretation, puts the criticism as follows:

[I]t appears Hume's account of the derivation of the idea of necessity implies that no thought at all can be formed concerning genuine necessity and that the 'true meaning' of necessity is merely that it is a feature of our psychology. Either way, the very possibility of the barest thought concerning genuine necessity is undercut, and with that any possibility of realism. No content can be given to putative thoughts with respect to objective causal necessity and hence no question concerning its existence can be intelligibly raised. For even to raise the question of

whether there is genuine causal power requires content for such thoughts. The only thought we can form with regard to the objective component to causal relations is, roughly, that they fall under a pattern of regular succession, and that, therefore, is in what causation consists. (2007: 81)

Thus, a central aspect of the nasty problem – Hume’s dismissing metaphysical terms as meaningless – factors as a major premise in the main criticism of the New Hume. But, as has been hinted at, Old Humeans have to meet the nasty problem no less than New Humeans, and many Old Humeans seem to have overlooked this fact.

In this dissertation, I note the important role that clear and distinct perception plays in Hume’s philosophy, and indicate how this helps us solve the nasty problem. When applied to the New Hume debate, I argue – with Old Humeans – that Hume doesn’t believe in thick causation. Hume believes that the term is meaningless, or, when used in a sense that’s meaningful, its meaning lacks a certain pedigree. In every case, Hume considers the idea associated with the term to be obscure and confused.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I began by indicating the fundamental principles of Hume's science of human nature. In addition, I explicated Hume's meaning-empiricism, and the test for meaning that he derives from it.

We also saw that Hume claims that we have no idea of thick causation, and yet Hume explains why philosophers come to believe in the existence of thick causation. This is the nasty problem as applied to Hume's discussion of causation. Furthermore, I indicated how this problem has implications for the New Hume debate, since it is part of the main line of criticism leveled against the skeptical realist position.

In the next chapter, I discuss a necessary preliminary to my discussion of Hume's views on causation.

Chapter Two

Hume's Fork

Introduction

In Chapter One, we saw that Hume faces a nasty problem relevant to his discussion of causation. In this chapter, I discuss an important distinction in Hume, what has come to be known as "Hume's Fork." Hume's Fork plays a central role in Hume's account of causation, and so elucidating it is a necessary preliminary to Chapter Three.

Initial Characterization

Hume's Fork is Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. Hume presents the distinction at T 1.3.1.1 and at EHU 4. At EHU 4, for instance, he writes:

All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas*, and *Matters of Fact*. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation, which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. *That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides*, is a proposition, which expresses a relation between these figures. *That three times five is equal to the half of thirty*, expresses a relation between these numbers. Propositions of this kind are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without

dependence on what is any where existent in the universe. Though there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths, demonstrated by EUCLID, would for ever retain their certainty and evidence.

Matters of fact, which are the second objects of human reason, are not ascertained in the same manner; nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the foregoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality. *That the sun will not rise to-morrow* is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation, *that it will rise*. We should in vain, therefore, attempt to demonstrate its falsehood. Were it demonstratively false, it would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind. (EHU 4.1-2)

In this passage, Hume claims that there are two kinds of propositions: relations of ideas and matters of fact.

Relations of ideas, claims Hume, are propositions that (i) can be known by intuition or by demonstration, and that (ii) can be known a priori.¹ Accordingly, Hume claims that:

1. A proposition p is a relation between ideas just in case p can be intuitively or demonstratively known.²

¹ Hume claims that (ii) follows from (i).

² Since relations between ideas are known or certain propositions, there can't be false relations of ideas. Hence the proposition " $2 + 2 = 5$ " is neither a relation between ideas nor a matter of fact, although "it's not the case that $2 + 2 = 5$ " is a relation between ideas. We can speak of " $2 + 2 = 5$ " as a relation between ideas in a derivative sense, inasmuch as it's negation is a relation between ideas.

Hume's discussion of matters of fact, on the other hand, proceeds from a slightly different angle. Hume claims, for instance, that "the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible" and "can never imply a contradiction" (EHU 4.2). Thus, Hume claims that:

2. A proposition p is a matter of fact just in case $\sim p$ doesn't entail a contradiction.³

Consequently, the condition that Hume identifies when characterizing matters of fact isn't the same condition, or even the same spectrum of conditions, that he identifies when characterizing relations of ideas. In the case of relations of ideas, Hume asks whether the relevant proposition can be intuitively or demonstratively known. In the case of matters of fact, he asks whether the relevant proposition's denial entails a contradiction. But these two conditions aren't obviously mutually exclusive.

The chasm may be bridged, however, once we recognize that Hume claims that matters of fact can't be intuitively

³ But consider the proposition "red is yellow." On (2), this counts as a matter of fact, since "red isn't yellow" doesn't entail a contradiction. But wouldn't Hume count "red is yellow" as a relation between ideas, in the derivative sense outlined in the previous footnote? Hume would consider it a relation between ideas, but he would insist that when "red" and "yellow" are clearly and distinctly perceived, one will discern that they're contradictory notions. It nonetheless may be the case that the equivalence in (2) is too strong. Hume may intend only to identify a necessary condition of matters of fact.

or demonstratively known *because* they have denials that don't imply a contradiction. For instance, Hume claims that matters of fact aren't "ascertained in the same manner" (EHU 4.2) – that is, they aren't intuitively or demonstratively known – *because* the "contrary of every matter of fact is still possible" (ibid.). This suggests, therefore, that Hume's presupposing the following condition:

3. A proposition p can be intuitively or demonstratively known only if $\sim p$ entails a contradiction.

Given (1) and (3), therefore, it follows that:

4. A proposition p is a relation between ideas only if $\sim p$ entails a contradiction.

Thus, relations of ideas are those propositions that have denials that entail a contradiction, whereas matters of fact are those propositions that have denials that don't entail a contradiction. So understood, Hume's Fork amounts

to a distinction between two mutually exclusive and exhaustive kinds of propositions.

The preceding characterization may lead one to view Hume's Fork as the familiar distinction between the logically necessary and the logically contingent.⁴ In modern parlance, a proposition is (narrowly) logically necessary just in case its denial entails a formal contradiction, and a proposition is (narrowly) logically contingent just in case it doesn't entail a formal contradiction and its denial doesn't entail a formal contradiction. The truths of logic, for instance, are necessary in this sense. Consequently, a natural reading of Hume's Fork is that Hume intends to introduce the distinction between the narrowly logically necessary and the narrowly logically contingent.

However, there's another sense in which a proposition may be said to be logically necessary or logically contingent. It's sometimes said that a proposition is (broadly) logically necessary just in case it's true in every possible world, and that a proposition is (broadly) logically contingent just in case it's true in some possible world but not true in every possible world. The truths of metaphysics are said to be necessary in this

⁴ In what follows, I use the term "contingent" in the technical sense of possibly p and possibly not- p .

sense – as in the fact that no person is a prime number or that Hesperus is Phosphorus – and so this modality is sometimes called metaphysical necessity or metaphysical contingency, respectively. Accordingly, some may contend that Hume's Fork amounts to the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent.

These are natural readings of Hume's Fork, but they're incorrect. In this chapter, I show why Hume's Fork isn't the distinction between the narrowly logically necessary and the narrowly logically contingent, and why it isn't the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent. In addition, I show that Hume's Fork doesn't amount to the distinction between the epistemically necessary and the epistemically contingent, as has been recently suggested by Peter Kail. I also criticize and reject a characterization of Hume's Fork introduced by Georges Dickel. I then put forward an interpretation of my own. My conclusions in this chapter will better enable us to see the nature of Hume's views on the causal relation. In order to get a proper handle on Hume's Fork, I begin with Hume's conception of demonstration.

Owen on Demonstration

David Owen (1999) has convincingly argued that Hume inherits his conception of logic largely from Descartes. In the early modern period, "logic" was conceived as the study of "the principles and operations of the reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas" (T Intro. 5). In order, therefore, to best appreciate Hume's views on logic and demonstration, we need to briefly discuss Descartes's views on the matter.

Owen argues that Descartes preferred a non-formal conception of reasoning. On this conception, inferences should be assessed by attending to the content of one's ideas, rather than to the logical form of one's argument. Owen claims that Descartes held to this conception because he was primarily interested in the discovery of new truths, as opposed to the mere preservation of truth. Hume's conception of demonstration descends from this tradition.

The dominant conception of inference and reasoning during Descartes's time was syllogistic or term logic. Term logic assesses arguments by first identifying their logical form, and then by distinguishing valid from invalid forms. To give an example, consider this argument:

(A) Socrates runs.

Anything that runs, moves.

Therefore, Socrates moves.

In assessing the propriety of (A), Aristotelian logicians begin by asking whether (A) has a valid or an invalid argument form. For instance, they might note that the first premise contains a singular term; that is, a proposition about a specific individual, in this case Socrates. While there's some debate over how to handle singular propositions in term logic, the standard approach is to translate singular propositions into universal propositions.⁵ Accordingly, "Socrates runs" would be translated into "All things that are Socrates run."

Having made this translation, we are now in a position to identify the form of (A). According to the Aristotelian tradition, the form of this inference is:

(B) All *S* are *R*.

⁵ For instance, Kant writes that "Logicians are justified in saying that, in the employment of judgments in Syllogisms, singular propositions can be treated like those that are universal" (A71/B96).

All *R* are *M*.

Therefore, all *S* are *M*.

The scholastics called this argument form "Barbara," and noted that it's valid. Since (A) is an instance of (B), (A) is a valid argument. This is the manner in which a term logician would assess an inference.

But now consider this argument:

(C) Socrates runs.

Therefore, Socrates moves.

Taken as it is, Aristotelians wouldn't recognize (C) as instantiating a valid argument form. They might contend that it's an enthymeme, and that when the missing premise is provided the argument may be shown to instantiate a valid argument form. But the point to observe at this juncture is that even if we don't interpret (C) as an enthymeme, *Descartes* would take (C) to be a perfectly acceptable inference. For instance, *Descartes* was held to have argued:

(D) I think.

Therefore, I exist.

Furthermore, Descartes was insistent that (D) shouldn't be interpreted as an enthymeme. Thus, he writes:

[W]hen we become aware that we are thinking things, this is a primary notion which is not derived by means of any syllogism. When someone says "I am thinking, therefore I am, or I exist," he does not deduce existence from thought by means of a syllogism, but recognizes it as something self-evident by a simple intuition of the mind. This is clear from the fact that if he were deducing it by means of a syllogism, he would have to have had previous knowledge of the major premise "Everything which thinks is, or exists"; yet in fact he learns it from experiencing in his own case that it is impossible that he should think without existing. (Second Set of Replies: CSM II 100: AT VII 140).

The reason that Descartes insists that (D) shouldn't be interpreted syllogistically is that he believes that term logic is unhelpful – indeed, a positive hindrance – toward the discovery of new truths or the better security of old ones. Descartes writes that

on the basis of their method, dialecticians are unable to formulate a syllogism with a true conclusion unless

they are already in possession of the substance of the conclusion, i.e. unless they have previous knowledge of the very truth deduced in the syllogism. It is obvious therefore that they themselves can learn nothing new from such forms of reasoning, and hence that ordinary dialectic is of no use whatever to those who wish to investigate the truth of things. Its sole advantage is that it sometimes enables us to explain to others arguments which are already known. It should therefore be transferred from philosophy to rhetoric. (Rule Ten: CSM I 36: AT X 406)

In this passage, Descartes clearly takes issue with the term logician's focus on the *preservation* of truth: when the premises are true the conclusion *must* be true. But the preservation of truth, as such, says nothing about whether the premises are in fact true; only when we know that the premises are true are we warranted in taking the conclusion to be true. But since the conclusion is already "contained" in the premises, Descartes contends that we never in fact learn anything new from syllogisms. Hence, Descartes contends that formal conceptions of inference are a positive hindrance to the discovery of new truths; demonstrations in term logic merely present truths that are already known.

In addition, Descartes argued that formal conceptions of inference encourage us to blindly and dogmatically follow rules without properly engaging our intellect or reason. He, in turn, proposed rules of inference that would

help us engage our reason by forcing us to attend to the content of our ideas.

For instance, Descartes proposed the following method of reasoning: inference should involve a chain of linked intuitions. To make this clear, consider the following schema:

$K = M$	(intuition)
$M = L$	(intuition)
$K = L$	(demonstration)

Descartes's conception of demonstration involves four elements: (i) demonstrations commence when the mind attends to the content of some idea K . (ii) Upon clearly and distinctly perceiving the content of K , one intuits that K stands in relationship R to some intermediate idea M . (iii) Having clearly and distinctly perceived the content of M , one intuits that M stands in relationship R^* to some third idea L .⁶ Finally, (iv) one attentively runs through (i)-(iii) until the whole chain approaches the strength of an intuition. Here's an example provided by Descartes:

⁶ R may be identical to R^* . In the above schema, for instance, the relevant relation is "equality."

The self-evidence and certainty of intuition is required not only for apprehending single propositions, but also for any train of reasoning whatever. Take for example, the inference 2 plus 2 equals 3 plus 1: not only must we intuitively perceive that 2 plus 2 make 4, and that 3 plus 1 make 4, but also that the original proposition follows necessarily from the other two. (Rule Three: CSM I 14-5: AT X 369)

Accordingly, when we fill out the above schema with Descartes's example, we arrive at the following:

$2 + 2 = 4$	(intuition)
$4 = 3 + 1$	(intuition)
$2 + 2 = 3 + 1$	(demonstration)

Descartes doesn't wish to deny that demonstrations can be represented in syllogistic form.⁷ But, as noted above, the only benefit of doing so is the mere preservation of truth:

[Dialecticians] prescribe certain forms of reasoning in which the conclusions follow with such irresistible necessity that if our reason relies on them, even

⁷ Descartes distinguishes between "analysis" and "synthesis." Synthesis is putting arguments in syllogistic form in the typical Aristotelian manner. Analysis, on the other hand, is Descartes's preferred method of attending to the content of one's ideas.

though it takes, as it were, a rest from considering a particular inference clearly and attentively, it can nevertheless draw a conclusion which is certain simply in virtue of the form. But, as we have noticed, truth often slips through these fetters, while those who employ them are left entrapped in them. (Rule Ten: CSM I 36: AT X 405-6)

Truth, therefore, often slips through the "fetters" of syllogistic reasoning. In turn, Descartes's proposed method "guard[s] against our reason's taking a holiday" (CSM I 36: AT X 406), so that we may discover and appreciate new truths.

We've seen, therefore, that Descartes adopts a non-formal conception of inference. Owen convincingly claims that Hume falls within this tradition. For instance, in explicating Hume's example of a relation between ideas, the Pythagorean Theorem, Owen writes:

[S]uppose we wanted to reason towards the proposition "the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the other two sides." Hume says that this "cannot be known, let the terms be ever so exactly defined, without a train of reasoning or enquiry"... If I am right, such a train would be constituted by a chain of ideas the first of which is the idea whose content is "the square of the hypotenuse" and the last of which is "the squares of the other two sides". Connecting these ideas is a series of intermediate ideas. The link between each pair of adjacent ideas is a relation which must be seen to hold, and one that must enable us to see that the first idea stands in the relation of equality to the last idea. (1999: 2-3, cf. 19)

Thus, for Hume, a demonstration isn't about form, it's about intuiting the content of one's ideas, and noting what relations hold (or don't hold) among them. A proposition is intuitively known just in case it's "discoverable at first sight" (T 1.3.1.2) or "comprehended in an instant" (T 1.3.1.3), and a demonstration is simply a series of linked intuitions. Indeed, Owen's account nicely explains why Hume uses the name "relations of ideas."

An implication of this interpretation is that "Hume's distinction between demonstrative and probable inference is quite unlike our distinction between deductive and inductive inference" (1999: 5). Deduction is about the preservation of truth, whereas a demonstration for Hume is about the preservation of certainty (cf. 1999: 19). As Don Garrett helpfully puts it: "[A]n argument with false or weak premises may be deductively *valid* for us, although it would not have been demonstrative for Hume" (1997: 94). It's helpful to keep this distinction in mind.

Hume doesn't receive this conception of inference directly from Descartes. Locke also preferred a non-formal conception of inference (cf. Owen 1999: Ch. 3). But a consequence of Locke's empiricism was that the realm of

knowledge, as compared to Descartes, was seriously reduced. *Knowledge* for both Descartes and Locke consisted of those propositions that can be known with certainty, and anything that was less than certain was relegated to the domain of *belief* or *opinion*. Locke consequently made use of the notion of probability in his philosophy to account for the domain of rational belief.

Probable reasoning for Locke also involves a chain of ideas, but the links or relations among them are based on experience rather than intuition. Hume follows Locke in this regard: knowledge is provided by relations of ideas, whereas matters of fact (as we shall see) culminate in belief. Thus Hume admits two faculties of reason: demonstrative and probable reason.

This, therefore, constitutes Hume's conception of intuition and demonstration. But let's return now to the sorts of propositions that Hume thinks can be intuitively and demonstratively known. Hume's examples will shed light on whether or not we can understand Hume's Fork as the distinction between the narrowly logically necessary and the narrowly logically contingent. For instance, Hume writes:

Three of these relations are discoverable at first sight, and fall more properly under the province of intuition than demonstration. When any objects resemble each other, the resemblance will at first strike the eye, or rather the mind; and seldom requires a second examination. The case is the same with *contrariety*, and with the *degrees* of any *quality*. No one can once doubt but existence and non-existence destroy each other, and are perfectly incompatible and contrary. And though it be impossible to judge exactly of the degrees of any quality, such as colour, taste, heat, cold, when the difference betwixt them is very small; yet it is easy to decide, that any of them is superior or inferior to another, when their difference is considerable. And this decision we always pronounce at first sight, without any enquiry or reasoning. (T 1.3.1.2)

Consider, for instance, the proposition "nothing red is green." Hume claims that this can be intuitively known because our idea of red is contrary to our idea of green. Since it can be intuitively known, "nothing red is green" is a relation between ideas for Hume, and not a matter of fact.

But notice that this proposition isn't logically necessary in the narrow sense, and thus Hume's Fork can't be the distinction between the narrowly logically necessary and narrowly logically contingent. Indeed, Hume's own examples at EHU 4.1 – the Pythagorean Theorem and the claim that $3 \times 5 = 30 \div 2$ – foreclose the possibility that Hume's distinction concerns narrow logical possibility, for

mathematical propositions aren't typically taken to be logically necessary in the narrow sense.

Accordingly, this seems to lend support to the idea that Hume's Fork concerns logical necessity in the broad sense. If this interpretation of Hume's Fork is correct, then it has important implications for our discussion of causation. The reason is that if Hume's Fork is the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent, then skeptical realism is in trouble. For on this interpretation matters of fact are expressed as metaphysically possible propositions, but — as we'll see in the next chapter — Hume unequivocally takes the causal relation to be a matter-of-fact relation. In that case, the causal relation isn't metaphysically necessary, and so Hume must not believe in thick causation, for thick causal connections are metaphysically necessary.

This argument has been thoroughly discussed by Peter Kail, who, as an advocate of the skeptical realist interpretation, aims to show that it's misplaced. In the course of doing so, Kail comes to view Hume's Fork as the distinction between the epistemically necessary and the epistemically contingent. While I find Kail's rejection of the distinction in terms of metaphysical necessity correct,

I find his own characterization in terms of the epistemic misplaced. It's worth considering this, then, as we aren't far off from the correct interpretation of Hume's Fork.

Kail's Lemma

Thus far, we've seen that Hume's Fork doesn't amount to the distinction between the narrowly logically necessary and the narrowly logically contingent. On the contrary, the counterexamples of the previous section suggest that Hume's Fork may involve the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent. I explore this interpretation in this section.

Understanding Hume's Fork as the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and metaphysically contingent receives some support from Hume's conceivability principle. This principle makes the following claim:

Conceivability Principle

"Whatever can be conceiv'd by a clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence."
(T 1.2.4.11)

According to the conceivability principle, since I can conceive of a golden mountain, a golden mountain can exist. This of course isn't to say that there is any such mountain, only that its existence is possible.

In his *Abstract* to the *Treatise*, Hume explains the conceivability principle in a manner that seems to lend support to the view that the modality at issue here is metaphysical possibility. For instance, Hume writes that:

The mind can always *conceive* any effect to follow from any cause, and indeed any event to follow upon another: whatever we *conceive* is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense: but wherever a demonstration takes place, the contrary is impossible, and implies a contradiction. (A 13)

Hume claims in this passage that if a proposition is conceivable, then it's possible, *at least in a metaphysical sense* (ibid.). Thus Hume's conceivability principle appears to claim that if p is conceivable, then p is metaphysically possible. This has implications for our understanding of Hume's Fork for the following reason.

First, matters of fact are those propositions that have denials that don't entail a contradiction. In other words, the denials of matters of fact are conceivable, and thus – by the conceivability principle – matters of fact

are metaphysically possible propositions. Second, relations of ideas are those propositions that have denials that entail a contradiction, and thus are impossible (in some sense).⁸ Thus, in light of Hume's comments at A 13, it's natural to interpret Hume's Fork as the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent.

If Hume's Fork does amount to the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent, then, as I intimated above, the skeptical realist interpretation is in trouble. Harold Noonan, for instance, notes that the separability and conceivability principles imply the denial of thick causal connections:

Together these principles imply that if any objects are distinct they can exist separately – either can exist without the other. And it is this consequence Hume appeals to in rejecting the possibility of real connections between distinct existences, which rejection in turn underpins his rejection of necessary connections between causes and effects. (2007: 5-6)⁹

⁸ The conceivability principle isn't helpful in drawing the conclusion that the denials of relations of ideas are *metaphysically* impossible. Instead, one needs to introduce an inconceivability principle: if *p* is inconceivable, then *p* is metaphysically impossible. Whether Hume endorses the inconceivability principle is controversial — cf. D. Tyckerium Lightner (1997). In my view, Hume does endorse an inconceivability principle, but not one in which the modality involved is metaphysical.

⁹ See also Peter Millican (2007).

Peter Kail, however, has done the most to meet this objection. We've seen that thick causation involves the AP property, such that a knowledge of the cause enables one to infer the effect a priori. Accordingly, Kail writes:

Hume takes acquaintance with necessary connection... to entail certain conceptual-cum-epistemological consequences. Roughly, acquaintance with necessary connection would entail (a) the possibility of a *priori* knowledge of the relevant cause's effect and (b) the impossibility of conceiving the cause without its effect. (2003: 44)

But Hume claims that we can always conceive of the cause without the effect (A 13). Thus, Kail claims that we must face the following argument:

[Hume presents] a modal principle (MP) to the effect that anything we can conceive is metaphysically possible. Second, we have a claim to the effect that we can *always* conceive some cause without its effect. Since we can always conceive some cause A independently of its effect B (and *vice versa*, and for any substitution of A and B) it follows, by the MP, that it is always *metaphysically possible* for A to exist independently of B. The MP will then entitle us to *know* that A and B are not necessarily connected (in the sense in which we are working). (2003: 47)

We can put this argument as follows:

1. If p is conceivable, then p is metaphysically possible.
2. We can always conceive a cause without its effect.
3. Hence, there's no metaphysically necessary connection between cause and effect.

There's good reason, then, to think that Hume isn't a skeptical realist.

Kail responds by challenging (1). Kail doesn't deny that Hume's conceivability principle concerns metaphysical possibility. Rather, Kail questions whether Hume intended the principle to apply to conceivability *simpliciter*. On the contrary, Kail claims that the conceivability principle applies only to "adequate" representations.¹⁰

Hume doesn't say much about what renders a perception "adequate," and so Kail appeals to Locke in order to make sense of the notion. He (2003: 49) notes that, for Locke, an idea is adequate if it "perfectly represents those archetypes which the mind supposes them taken from,"¹¹ whereas inadequate ideas are "partial or incomplete."¹² Hence, for Locke, inadequate ideas are ideas of a thing's surface or sensible properties (what he calls the object's

¹⁰ He also notes that Hume means "clear and distinct" by this expression, and so Kail at least goes further than most commentators in recognizing clear and distinct perception in Hume.

¹¹ Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxxi.6.

¹² *Ibid.*, II.xxxi.1.

"nominal essence"), whereas adequate ideas are ideas of the object's real essence.

As evidence that Hume employs the notion, Kail appeals to the following passage:

Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of ideas are applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge... The plain consequence is, that whatever *appears* impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be *really* impossible and contradictory, without any further excuse or evasion. (T 1.2.2.1)

Despite the fact that the term "adequate" doesn't occur frequently in Hume, Kail has all the resources he needs to meet the objection.

First, he notes that while some ideas may adequately represent their source (impressions), it's an open question whether impressions adequately represent their source (external objects). Hume, it's commonly held, is agnostic about whether or not external objects exist, "for the examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral; and, therefore, shall not at present be entered upon" (T 1.1.2.7). Thus the question is open as to whether we have adequate impressions

of external objects. Hume sometimes puts this in terms of whether we can discern the "essence" of objects:

'Tis easy to observe, that in tracing this relation, the inference we draw from cause to effect, is not deriv'd merely from a survey of these particular objects, and *from such a penetration into their essences as may discover the dependence of the one upon the other.* (T 1.3.6.1, my emphasis)

And:

Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key, which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, *could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies,* we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, that they could ever admit of any other disposition. (DNR 9.10, my emphasis)¹³

According to Kail, Hume holds that we don't perceive the essence of objects, and so we don't have adequate ideas of them. Since we don't have adequate ideas of objects, the conceivability principle doesn't apply. Kail illustrates this with the following example:

¹³ "DNR" abbreviates Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, and the number indicates the part and respective paragraph.

Suppose Edmund does not know that Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus... Edmund further thinks that Hesperus has been destroyed, but Phosphorus survives. Is he thereby conceiving the simultaneous existence of Phosphorus and the non-existence of Hesperus. Well, if the two "ideas" are separable in the imagination, we can grant that such a possibility is conceivable but any possibility revealed is not metaphysical possibility. Instead, Edmund's imagination reveals an *epistemic* possibility, that is a possibility *relative* to his limited information (and of course he is unaware that his information is so limited). This illustrates the point that it is only under situations of adequate information about the relevant objects that MP has a chance of being compelling. We need to know enough about the objects of conception before we can be sure of getting to a metaphysical possibility. Edmund is merely separating his Hesperus *idea* apart from his Phosphorus *idea*: he is not genuinely conceiving *Hesperus* apart from *Phosphorus* because his ideas of those objects are not adequate to the task. (2003: 50)¹⁴

First, let me note that Kail's suggestion that the conceivability principle concerns epistemic possibility is incorrect. Kail provides the following two interpretations:

4. If p is conceivable, then p is epistemically possible,

and

¹⁴ Kail isn't attributing the view that Hesperus is necessarily Phosphorus to Hume. That of course would be anachronistic. I take Kail to simply be using a common example — due to Kripke — to illustrate the importance of adequate conception in drawing metaphysical conclusions.

5. If p is adequately conceivable, then p is metaphysically possible.

Accordingly, if Kail's interpretation is correct, then since we don't have adequate impressions of objects (or at least we don't know as much), Hume's Fork, on Kail's view, is merely the distinction between the epistemically necessary and the epistemically possible. Needless to say, I wish to argue that Hume's conceivability principle is neither (4) nor (5). Let's begin with (4).

Hume doesn't understand his conceivability principle as (4) because this would render Hume's Fork subject-relative. There's no indication, however, that he so understands his Fork. Suppose, as is the case, that both of my brothers have college degrees, and I know as much. It follows that the denial of this isn't epistemically possible for me, for I know that both of my brothers graduated from college. Epistemic possibility is here understood in the traditional sense, as that which is possible given what I already know. This implies that the proposition "both of my brothers have college degrees," does not express a matter of fact, but a relation between

ideas, at least for me. However, for those who don't know this, it would count as a matter of fact.

But Hume clearly intends this to be a matter of fact proposition, and one that isn't subject-relative. Thus Hume's Fork – and the conceivability principle upon which it relies – doesn't concern epistemic possibility.

As for (5), I wish to argue that while Hume uses the term "metaphysical," he doesn't mean it in the sense that we use it today. Hume's use is idiosyncratic. And here a comparison with Descartes may again shed some helpful light on Hume's usage. In the Third Meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, for instance, Descartes writes that

[S]ince I have no cause to think that there is a deceiving God, and I do not yet even know for sure whether there is a God at all, any reason for doubt which depends simply on this supposition is a very *slight* and, so to speak, *metaphysical* one. (Third Meditation: CSM II 25: AT VII 36, emphasis mine)

In this passage Descartes claims that his most powerful reason for skepticism – the mere possibility that there's an evil demon deceiving him – while a reason for doubt, is farfetched and "metaphysical." In other words, it's not impossible, and so by the parameters that he's set

for himself it needs to be addressed, but it's far from a serious matter.

This is the sense of "metaphysical" that Hume's using when he states his conceivability principle at A 13. If p is conceivable, then p 's not "metaphysically" impossible. Here Hume's use actually approaches "logical possibility" more than anything else, but the specific modality at issue here remains to be elucidated, and I shall do so below. This reading also explains Hume's use of "at least" in the passage under discussion, which is clearly employed to denote a less stringent form of modality. And so, Hume's interest in the "metaphysical" isn't the contemporary one, as he so forcefully indicates:

When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasons concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. (EHU 12.34)

Thus, Hume's Fork and his conceivability principle don't concern epistemic necessity and possibility. Moreover, neither concerns metaphysical necessity or possibility.

Before I provide my own interpretation of Hume's Fork, however, there's one more prominent interpretation that requires discussion. I turn to this in the next section.

Dicker's Interpretation

In his book *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction*, Georges Dicker characterizes Hume's Fork by identifying two sets of contrasting features. With respect to relations of ideas, for instance, Dicker (1998: 40) claims that relations of ideas are:

- C1. self-evident or demonstrable, and that they
- C2. don't assert or imply existence.

In contrast, Dicker claims that matters of fact

- C3. do assert or imply existence, and that they
- C4. are neither self-evident nor demonstrable.

Dicker's interpretation, then, characterizes Hume's Fork as two sets of two opposing prongs. In this way, Dicker paints Hume's Fork more in the fashion of a utensil, than in the fashion of a road, as in Frost's famous "yellow wood."

But Hume never ate from this Fork, and for good reason. In order to see why this characterization is inadequate, it's necessary that I first explain some of Dicker's terminology. In particular, I need to introduce his use of the terms "assert" and "imply." Accordingly, my focus in this section will be on Dicker's criteria (C2) and (C3).

A proposition "asserts" existence, claims Dicker, just in case a non-abstract object must exist in order for the proposition to be true. He counts "physical objects or minds or physical or mental events or states" (1998: 36) as non-abstract. As an example, consider the proposition "Trump has a toupee." In order for this proposition to be true, Trump must exist.¹⁵ On the other hand, the Pythagorean Theorem can be true no matter what non-abstract objects happen to exist in the world. Dicker seeks to avoid controversial metaphysical issues such as whether mathematical objects exist, and so the question as to whether or not the Pythagorean Theorem asserts the

¹⁵ It also must be the case that the toupee exists.

existence of mathematical entities such as numbers is bracketed. This is why he limits matters to non-abstract objects. Accordingly, "Trump has a toupee" asserts existence, whereas the Pythagorean Theorem doesn't.

As Dicker emphasizes, Hume seems to claim that matters of fact assert existence, whereas relations of ideas don't. For instance, Hume claims that relations of ideas don't depend "on what is any where existent in the universe," and "[t]hough there never were a circle or triangle in nature, the truths, demonstrated by EUCLID, would for ever retain their certainty and evidence" (EHU 4.1).

In addition, Hume's example of a matter of fact – the proposition "the sun will not rise tomorrow" (EHU 4.2) – asserts existence, for it asserts the existence of the sun and the earth. Moreover, throughout the first *Enquiry*, Hume frequently employs expressions such as "matter of fact or real existence" (EHU 5.1.8; cf. EHU 4.1.3, 4.2.19, 5.2.20). Dicker reads this as Hume's claim that matters of fact assert existence.

However, a problem for Dicker's interpretation is that not all propositions that Hume regards as matters of fact assert existence. An important example is the causal maxim:

Causal Maxim

"[W]hatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence." (T 1.3.3.1)¹⁶

Another is the uniformity principle:

Uniformity Principle

"[T]he course of nature continues always uniformly the same." (T 1.3.6.4)¹⁷

As will become apparent in Chapter Three, Hume regards both principles as matters of fact. But notice that neither asserts the existence of anything.

Dicker recognizes this, and so he argues that the causal maxim and the uniformity principle are matters of fact because they "imply" existence. It's important to realize that this is a sense of implication distinct from logical entailment or material implication. Here's Dicker's account of what the relevant notion of implication is:

This is any proposition that, taken together with a proposition(s) reporting what is observed at a given time t , or a set of times t_1, t_2, \dots, t_n , implies the existence of some non-abstract entity which need not

¹⁶ As is common, I shall sometimes express the causal maxim as *every event has a cause*.

¹⁷ Hume sometimes describes this claim as "*instances, of which we have had no experience, must resemble those of which we have had experience*" (T 1.3.6.4) or "*the future will resemble the past*" (EHU 4.2.36).

be observed at t , or any of t_1, t_2, \dots, t_n . (Dicker 1998: 38)¹⁸

In other words, a proposition p implies_d another proposition q just in case (i) there's another proposition r that reports an observation at a time (or set of times), such that (ii) p and r logically imply q . A final condition is that (iii) q must make an existential claim, and one that need not be observed in order for p and r to logically imply q . There are a number of things worth noting here.

First, Dicker refers to the proposition that implies the existence of some non-abstract entity, when taken together with a proposition or propositions reporting what's observed, as a *bridging proposition*. Here's his example (*ibid.*):

Every event has a cause (bridging proposition).

Event e was observed at t (observation).

∴ Event e had a cause, c (item that need not be observed).

¹⁸ Dicker's use of "implies" in this quotation is synonymous with "logically implies." This isn't to be confused with the sense of "implies" for which the quotation constitutes a *definiens*.

Second, in order for a proposition to be a bridging proposition, it must be capable of factoring into an argument, the conclusion of which must concern the existence of some non-abstract entity. In the example that Dicker provides, the entity appears to be an event, *e*, and so Dicker must regard events as non-abstract.

Third, Dicker says that the state of affairs expressed by the conclusion "need not be observed" (*ibid.*). What Dicker intends by this is that the state of affairs *may* be observed, but that its being observed isn't *required*. In this way Dicker can rule out propositions such as *every effect has a cause* (1998: 58) as qualifying as a matter of fact proposition. For consider this argument:

Every effect has a cause (bridging proposition).

Effect *e* is observed (observation).

∴ Effect *e* has a cause, *c*.

To know that *e* was an effect, and so to be able to correctly assert the second premise, we'd have to observe

that it has a cause. Thus Dicker's condition that the conclusion needn't be observed enables him to rule out *every effect has a cause* as a matter of fact proposition, for Hume clearly wouldn't regard it as one.

Fourth, the bridging proposition implies^d the existence of some non-abstract entity only when taken together with some other proposition about something *observed*, such that the two logically imply the conclusion. Nonetheless, Dicker's explicit that it doesn't always need to be a single instance of observation, for he also offers this as an example (1998: 39):

The future will resemble the past (bridging proposition).

Past lightning flashes have been followed by thunderclaps, and there is now a flash of lightning (observations made at $t_1, t_2, \dots t_n$).

∴ There will be a thunderclap (the as yet unobserved event).

In this case, there are many past observations of lightning followed by observations of thunderclaps.

On Dicker's interpretation, therefore, matters of fact assert or imply_a existence, whereas relations of ideas don't. Accordingly, for Dicker, assertion and implication are characteristics that differentiate relations of ideas from matters of fact (1998: 38).

But Dicker's account of Hume's Fork is incorrect, for relations of ideas can also serve as bridging propositions. Consider the following inference:

If a is taller than b , and b is taller than c , then a is taller than c (bridging proposition).

a is taller than b (observation).

b is taller than c (observation).

$\therefore a$ is taller than c (unobserved).

Hume would classify the first premise of the above argument as a relation between ideas, because it can be known a priori by way of demonstration. And yet, given the second and third premises, it implies_a the conclusion.

Moreover, it may be the case that *b* is a tree at the crest of a hill, and initially I happen to observe that tree *a* is taller than tree *b*. Moving around the side of the hill, such that tree *c* comes into view just as tree *a* moves out of view, I may see that *b* is taller than *c*. In this case, I can know that *a* is taller than *c* without actually perceiving that *a* is taller than *c*. This shows that the proposition that *a* is taller than *c* needn't be observed.

Accordingly, some relations of ideas may serve as bridging propositions, and so some relations of ideas imply_a existence. But in that case there's no reason to classify propositions like the causal maxim and the uniformity principle as matters of fact, while excluding relations of ideas – such as the one just provided – that may also serve as bridging propositions. In other words, Dicker's criteria (C2) and (C3) can't do the work they're intended to do, and so are irrelevant to understanding Hume's Fork.

Put differently, Dicker claims that relations of ideas satisfy (C2): they don't assert or imply_a existence. In addition, Dicker claims that matters of fact satisfy (C3): they assert or imply_a existence. In this way, (C2) and (C3) do some work for Dicker in differentiating relations of ideas from matters of fact.

But I've argued that (C2) is false: some relations of ideas imply_d existence. In addition, we've seen that some matters of fact – for example, the causal maxim and the uniformity principle – don't assert existence. Thus, whether a proposition asserts or implies_d existence isn't relevant to understanding Hume's Fork.

We've seen, then, that Dicker's interpretation of Hume's Fork does little to advance our understanding of it. In the next section, I indicate the correct account of Hume's Fork.

Polishing Hume's Fork

Thus far, we've seen that Hume's Fork doesn't amount to the distinction between the logically necessary and the logically contingent (narrowly or broadly construed), or the distinction between the epistemically necessary and the epistemically contingent. In addition, we saw that Hume's Fork doesn't involve Dicker's criteria of assertion and implication. In this section, I indicate what Hume's Fork amounts to.

In order to make some headway, it will be helpful to consider Hume's characterization of the distinction in the *Treatise*. At T 1.3.1.1, Hume writes:

There are seven different kinds of philosophical relation... These relations may be divided into two classes; into such as depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together, and such as may be chang'd without any change in ideas. (T 1.3.1.1)¹⁹

Consider, first, Hume's characterization of matters of fact in the above passage. Hume claims that these are relations that "may be chang'd without any change in [the] ideas" (ibid.). Thus take, for example, one's idea of the Dalai Lama and one's idea of the Pope, and suppose that the Dalai Lama is ten feet from the Pope. The question that one needs to ask oneself, at this point, is whether one can coherently replace this relation – being at a distance of ten feet – with an incompatible relation.²⁰ Is it, for

¹⁹ I explain what Hume means by a "philosophical" relation in Chapter Three.

²⁰ There are two important claims made here that might otherwise go unnoticed: First, the question is whether one can *coherently* replace the relevant relation. Hume understands coherence in terms of whether or not the proposition entails a contradiction. Second, the question concerns the possible replacement of *incompatible* relations. For instance, the relation "being at a distance of less than twenty feet" isn't incompatible with the relation "being at a distance of ten feet," and thus showing that the latter can be replaced with the former would indicate that the proposition "the Dalai Lama is ten feet from the Pope" is a matter of fact proposition. But this is too weak of a test, and, while Hume doesn't make this qualification explicit, it's clear that he intends his test to apply only to incompatible relations. For instance, the question should be framed in terms of whether one can replace "being at a distance of ten feet" with "being at a distance of a thousand feet." Indeed, given his characterization at EHU 4.1-2, Hume likely intends that incompatible relation would constitute the proposition's denial (for example, "isn't at a distance of ten feet").

instance, coherent to suppose that the Dalai Lama is at a distance of a thousand feet from the Pope? Certainly. Thus, in this case, the ideas involved stay the same – one's idea of the Dalai Lama and one's idea of the Pope – and yet the relation can be coherently changed. This means that the relation "being at a distance of ten feet" and the relation "being at a distance of a thousand feet" are matter of fact relations, and thus the claim that the Dalai Lama is ten feet from the Pope is a matter of fact proposition.

Let's turn, then, to Hume's characterization in the *Treatise* of relations of ideas as those relations which "depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together" (ibid.). As an illustration, Hume provides the idea of a triangle:

It is from the idea of a triangle, that we discover the relation of equality, which its three angles bear to two right ones; and this relation is invariable, as long as our idea remains the same. (T 1.3.1.1)

In fact, there are really two ideas involved here: one's idea of the three angles of a triangle and one's idea of two right angles.²¹ Hume claims here that, so long as we

²¹ It can't just be one idea of a triangle because no triangle can have two right angles. Moreover, Hume's interest is with a relation and a comparison (which demands at least two objects).

don't alter either of these ideas, the relation – in this case, equality²² – must remain the same. That is to say, we can't coherently replace this relation with an incompatible relation, such as inequality. It's on account of this that Hume claims that relations of ideas are "unalterable" and "invariable" (T 1.3.3.2, T 1.3.3.1, respectively).

What, then, does the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact amount to? Hume's Fork amounts to the distinction between the *conceptually necessary* and the *conceptually contingent*. Relations of ideas, claims Hume, are conceptually necessary propositions, whereas matters of fact are conceptually contingent propositions.

In modern parlance, Kit Fine describes the relevant modality in this way:

Consider the case of conceptual necessity – the necessity that holds in virtue of the identity of concepts. It will be necessary in this sense that nothing is both red and green, though not necessary that I am a person. (2002: 254)

In Humean terms, concepts are ideas, and thus when Hume claims that relations of ideas are relations that can be changed only when one alters at least one of the

²² This is the philosophical relation of "proportion in quantity or number."

component ideas, he's claiming that relations of ideas are conceptually necessary truths. Matters of fact, then, aren't conceptually necessary truths; that is, they're conceptually contingent truths (if true at all).

We can now see why Hume sometimes describes matters of fact propositions as a "real existence or matter of fact" (EHU 5.8). Pace Dicker, Hume doesn't claim that matters of fact assert existence. He's merely claiming that matters of fact are *conceptually contingent* truths. That is to say, they aren't knowable solely on the basis of the concepts or ideas involved. It's for this reason, for instance, that Hume can claim that the causal maxim is about a "real existence," even though it doesn't entail the existence of any non-abstract object. It's a real existence because it's true but it could have been false. It's a contingent fact about the world, and our knowledge of its truth depends upon our experience of the world.

Accordingly, Hume's Fork is the distinction between the conceptually necessary and the conceptually contingent. A conceptually necessary proposition is a proposition that's true solely in virtue of the concepts or ideas involved, and thus can be known solely on the basis of the concepts involved. In turn, a conceptually contingent

proposition is one that isn't true (if true at all) solely on the basis of the concepts or ideas involved. It therefore can't be known – or so Hume claims – solely on the basis of the concepts involved; experience of its truth is needed in order to know it.

But what, then, are we to make of Hume's previous characterization of relations of ideas as having denials that entail a contradiction, and matters of fact as having denials that don't entail a contradiction?

Take, for instance, the proposition "nothing red is green." Is this a relation between ideas or a matter of fact for Hume? Hume's procedure is as follows. First, consider its denial: "it's not the case that nothing red is green." The proposition's denial, by itself, doesn't logically entail a contradiction, and so it's narrowly logically possible.

But that's no matter, for Hume's interested in attending to the concepts or ideas involved. Hume associates an idea of red with the word "red," and idea of green with the word "green." Thus, like Descartes and as emphasized by Owen (1999), we shouldn't be distracted by the formal properties of the proposition, but should instead attend to the concepts or ideas that factor into it.

In this way, Hume claims that one can intuit that the content of our idea of red isn't identical to the content of our idea of green, and thus that nothing can be both red and green at the same time. Hume's test, therefore, is phenomenological or psychological, not formal.

This also explains why Hume's Fork shouldn't be characterized as the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic, as it's traditionally understood. Hume, for instance, would count a proposition such as *my house resembles your house* as a relation between ideas (assuming its truth), or a proposition such as *the Winklevosses resemble one another* as a relation between ideas. This is because I can't change the relation – resemblance – without also changing one of the ideas. But of course such claims aren't analytic.

Accordingly, the way to determine whether a proposition is a relation between ideas or a matter of fact is first to ask whether its denial entails a contradiction. The way to discern whether or not its denial entails a contradiction is to attend to the ideas involved, and if one conceives of a contradiction, then one's original proposition is a relation between ideas. If one doesn't

conceive a contradiction, then one's original proposition is a matter of fact.

But more can be said about this process, and what more is said is illuminating, for it reveals how central a role the notion of clear and distinct perception plays in Hume's philosophy. In order to indicate as much, however, I need to anticipate some of the conclusions of this dissertation. I turn to this in the next section.

Chalmers on Conceivability

David Chalmers (2002) has introduced terminology that can help situate Hume's Fork, and the procedure that Hume recommends that distinguishes relations of ideas and matters of fact. We've seen that central to Hume's method is the notion of conceivability. In particular, Hume first asks us to conceive of the proposition's denial. But what is it to do this? Chalmers can help us answer this question, because he has distinguished three sets of contrasting kinds of conceivability.

Chalmers first distinguishes between what he calls *positive conceivability* and *negative conceivability*. A proposition is negatively conceivable, just in case it's

not ruled out a priori. The test for ruling out something a priori is whether or not the proposition entails a contradiction. Thus, Chalmers writes that "S is negatively conceivable when S is not ruled out a priori, or when there is no... contradiction in S" (2002: 149). The proposition "there are two polar bears in my backyard" is negatively conceivable, for no contradiction follows from this claim. In turn, positive conceivability requires that one form "some sort of positive conception of a situation in which S is the case" (2002: 150). In other words, positive conceivability involves *imagining* the relevant state of affairs.²³

At first sight, Hume's characterization of his Fork seems to suggest that he intends it to be understood in terms of negative conceivability. He claims, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, that relations of ideas have denials that entail a contradiction, whereas matters of fact don't. But in fact positive conceivability is more fundamental to Hume. A few sections back, it was noted that demonstration, for Hume, is non-formal, and that it involves conceiving the content of one's ideas and the relations between them. Accordingly, for Hume, one

²³ Chalmers distinguishes between *perceptual imaginings* and *modal imaginings*. The former involve a perceptual mental image, whereas the latter doesn't. In light of Hume's copy principle, the relevant sense for Hume is perceptual imagining, whereas Descartes would be concerned with modal imagining.

ascertains that some proposition is negatively conceivable by *first* positively conceiving the proposition's constituent ideas, and positively conceiving that no contradiction follows. In this way, Hume builds claims about negative conceivability on claims about positive conceivability.

Chalmers's second distinction is between *prima facie* conceivability and *ideal* conceivability. He writes that "S is *prima facie* conceivable for a subject when S is conceivable for that subject on first appearances," and that "S is ideally conceivable when S is conceivable on ideal rational reflection" (2002: 147). It may be the case, for instance, that a proposition is *prima facie* conceivable but not ideally conceivable. Chalmers provides the following example:

An example is provided by any mathematical statement M whose truth-value is currently unknown, but which will later be proved to be true. Here $\sim M$ is *prima facie* conceivable in the sense above (i.e., *prima facie* negatively conceivable) at least for current subjects. But it is not ideally conceivable, as ideal reflection will rule out $\sim M$ a priori. (ibid.)

Goldbach's conjecture, for instance – the claim that every integer greater than two can be expressed as the sum

of two primes – is either true or false. Moreover, since we don't know whether it's true or false, its truth or falsity is prima facie conceivable. Nonetheless, since it's either true or false, ideal rational reflection will come down on only one side of the question of its truth or falsity.

Hume clearly intends ideal conceivability when putting forward his Fork. For instance, "arguments that have the form of denying the antecedent are fallacious" would itself constitute a relation between ideas for Hume, but as logic teachers are well aware, some logic students conceive such arguments to be valid. Thus what interests Hume is ideal conceivability, not prima facie conceivability.

But, as Chalmers notes, "the notion of ideal rational reflection remains to be clarified" (2002: 148). What renders something an instance of ideal conceivability?

Chalmers introduces – but doesn't commit to – a number of possible candidates. For instance, he writes that ideal conceivability may be defined in terms of an ideal reasoner or in terms of undefeatability by better reasoning. But my interest at present isn't how we should characterize it, but how *Hume* characterizes ideal rational reflection. And here we do have an answer.

Hume's criterion for ideal rational reflection hinges on the notion of clear and distinct perception. For instance, when presenting his Fork in the *Enquiry*, he claims that p 's a matter of fact proposition just in case $\sim p$ "is conceived by the mind with the same *facility* and *distinctness*," and is such that it's "no less *intelligible*" (EHU 4.2, emphasis mine). In turn, p 's a relation between ideas just in case $\sim p$ can't be "*distinctly* conceived by the mind" (ibid., emphasis mine). Thus, for Hume, a proposition can be *prima facie* conceivable but not ideally conceivable, for instance when it's initially conceived obscurely or confusedly. When it's conceived clearly and distinctly, it may turn out that the proposition isn't conceivable after all. Here, then, is one instance in which clear and distinct perception factors into Hume's philosophy. Indeed, it's central to understanding Hume's conceivability principle and the nature of Hume's Fork.

Chalmers's final distinction involves the distinction between *primary* and *secondary conceivability*. A proposition is primarily conceivable "when it is conceivable that S is *actually* the case" (2002: 157) – that is, it's conceivable that S is the case in the actual world, as opposed to some merely logically possible world. In turn, a proposition is secondarily conceivable "when S conceivably *might have been*

the case" (ibid.).²⁴ In other words, the proposition is conceived to be the case in some logically possible world other than the actual world.

Chalmers provides the following example to illustrate the distinction between primary/secondary conceivability:

Primary conceivability is grounded in the idea that, for all we know a priori, there are many ways the world might be. The oceans might contain H₂O, or they might contain XYZ; the evening star and the morning star might be the same or distinct; and so on. We can think of these ways the world might be as *epistemic possibilities*, in a broad sense according to which it is epistemically possible that S if the hypothesis that S is not ruled out a priori. (ibid.)

As this passage suggests, the distinction between the primary and secondarily conceivable is motivated by Saul Kripke's discussion of the necessary a posteriori. Let me (very) briefly note Kripke's claims in this regard.

Kripke (1972: 48) claims that proper names are *rigid designators*. In other words, proper names pick out the same object in every possible world in which they exist.²⁵ Thus the proper names "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" each pick out

²⁴ Chalmers also calls primary conceivability "epistemic conceivability," and secondary conceivability "subjunctive conceivability." It's worth noting that if this is the sense of epistemic possibility that Kail has in mind in our discussion above, then our accounts don't differ. But Kail nowhere indicates that he intends Chalmers's idiosyncratic sense of epistemic possibility.

²⁵ Kripke also thinks that some descriptions can serve as rigid designators — for example, "The Holy Roman Empire" — but we needn't worry about this complication here.

Venus, and they do so in every possible world in which the object – Venus – exists. Consequently, Kripke claims that the identity claim “Hesperus is Phosphorus” is necessarily true.²⁶ But, as Kripke notes, the fact that Hesperus and Phosphorus are one and the same was something that we *discovered* to be true, and thus is known a posteriori. Kripke concludes that certain identity statements are necessary a posteriori.

The point that Chalmers is making – see also Kripke (1972: 100-105) – is that there’s some sense in which it’s conceivable that Hesperus isn’t identical to Phosphorus. For most people in the past believed that Hesperus wasn’t identical to Phosphorus, and thus in some sense conceived them to be nonidentical. Chalmers claims that the sense of “conceivable” at work here is primary conceivability. The ancients conceived Hesperus and Phosphorus to be actually distinct, not distinct in some logically possible world other than the actual world.

When it comes to secondary conceivability, however, Chalmers presents the following example:

²⁶ More rigorously put, Kripke claims that “Hesperus is Phosphorus” is *weakly* necessary — that is, it’s true in every possible world in which the object (Venus) exists.

Take an imagined situation in which the morning star is distinct from the evening star. Along with Kripke, we can say that if this situation had obtained, it would not have been the case that Hesperus was not Phosphorus. So when this situation is considered as counterfactual, it is revealed not as a situation in which Hesperus is not Phosphorus, but rather, as a situation in which at least one of the objects is distinct from both Hesperus and Phosphorus (at least if we take for granted the actual-world knowledge that Hesperus is Phosphorus, and if we accept Kripke's intuitions). The reason is that (if Kripke is right) the application of a term like "Hesperus" to a counterfactual situation depends on whether the actual Hesperus (i.e., the planet Venus) is present within that situation, and of course the actual Hesperus and the actual Phosphorus are one and the same. So, when considered as counterfactual, this conceivable situation does not verify "Hesperus is not Phosphorus." More generally (if Kripke is right), there is no coherently imaginable situation, considered as a counterfactual, that verifies "Hesperus is not Phosphorus." If so, "Hesperus is not Phosphorus" is not secondarily positively conceivable. (2002: 158-9)

Thus Chalmers claims that the proposition "Hesperus isn't Phosphorus" isn't secondarily conceivable. Since both "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" refer to the same object, Venus, I can't imagine a world in which Hesperus isn't Phosphorus. When I conceive of a logically possible world and claim that "Hesperus isn't Phosphorus," I must be conceiving of a situation in which one of the objects isn't Venus, or so Chalmers and Kripke claim.

Whatever the merits of Kripke's account, the point to observe is that, if correct, then necessarily false

propositions for Kripke aren't secondarily conceivable. Thus, if Hume intends the denials of matters of fact – say, the denial of “the fire caused the water to boil” – to be secondarily conceivable, then the connection between the cause and the effect can't be necessary. In other words, if Hume intends secondary conceivability, then the skeptical realist interpretation is incorrect.

But there's no reason to think that Hume intends secondary conceivability. Indeed, everything Hume says suggests that he intends primary conceivability, and to read Kripke's views on naming into Hume would be anachronistic. Nonetheless, Chalmers's distinctions are helpful in situating how Hume understands his Fork and the conceivability principle implicit in it. We may say that Hume's sense of conceivability is primary positive conceivability. The negations of matters of fact are primarily positively conceivable, whereas the negations of relations of ideas aren't primarily positively conceivable.

In brief, I've claimed that Hume's Fork maps on to the distinction between the conceptually necessary and the conceptually possible.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I initially characterized Hume's Fork as follows: (i) relations of ideas are propositions that have denials that entail a contradiction and (ii) are propositions that can be known a priori. In turn, matters of fact have (i) denials that don't entail a contradiction and (ii) are knowable only a posteriori. This means that relations of ideas are known by intuition or by demonstration, and that matters of fact aren't known in either of these ways.

Hume's Fork, I've argued, isn't the distinction between the narrowly logically necessary and the narrowly logically contingent, and isn't the distinction between the metaphysically necessary and the metaphysically contingent. Moreover, I've argued that it's not the distinction between the epistemically necessary and the epistemically contingent, nor should it be understood in terms of Dicker's criteria of assertion and implication.

Having dispensed with these accounts, I argued that Hume's Fork amounts to the distinction between the conceptually necessary and the conceptually contingent. This fits nicely with Hume's understanding of demonstration as conceptually based, as Owen has shown. In addition, I indicated the role that clear and distinct perception plays

in Hume's characterization of relations of ideas and matters of fact: the denials of relations of ideas aren't primarily positively ideally conceivable, in that ideal conception is a matter of clearly and distinctly perceiving whether a contradiction follows from their denials. Matters of fact, on the other hand, have denials that are clearly and distinctly primarily positively conceivable.

All of this has important implications for the New Hume debate, for it leaves room for the thesis that Hume believes in metaphysically necessary causal connections. The reason is that it leaves room for an account in the spirit of Kripke, such that our conceptual conclusions don't always match up with the metaphysics involved. Reading this into Hume would of course be anachronistic, but perhaps Hume himself presents some indication that he conceives of matters in this way. More on this in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three

Thin Causation

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw that Hume divides all of human knowledge into two distinct kinds: matters of fact and relations of ideas. Hume claims that relations of ideas are conceptual truths, whereas matters of fact aren't. In addition, Hume claims that relations of ideas can be known a priori, whereas matters of fact can only be known a posteriori.

It's easy to see how Hume could justify the truth of relations of ideas, for relations of ideas are knowable solely on the basis of the concepts involved. It's less clear, however, how Hume could justify the truth of matters of fact, for these are propositions that can't be known solely on the basis of the concepts involved. It's these very considerations that lead Hume to entertain the causal relation, for he claims that the justification of matters of fact is based on causation.

Hume claims that inferences concerning matters of fact require a knowledge of the various causal relationships that exist in the world. For instance, he writes that:

'Tis evident, that all reasonings concerning *matter of fact* are founded on the relation of cause and effect, and that we can never infer the existence of one object from another, unless they be connected together, either mediately or immediately. In order therefore to understand these reasonings, we must be perfectly acquainted with the idea of a cause. (A 8)

Hume provides a helpful illustration to make his point. Suppose that Jim stumbles upon a watch while walking across some deserted island. Upon picking up the watch and having a look, Jim exclaims, "There had once been humans beings on this island" (EHU 4.4). In this way, Jim infers that there must have been humans on the island on the basis of his seeing the watch.

Notice that Jim's conclusion – that at some point in time there were humans on this island – is a matter of fact proposition. It's denial doesn't entail a contradiction, and consequently it's neither intuitively nor demonstratively known. According to Hume, then, in order for Jim to adequately reason to this conclusion, Jim must be implicitly asserting some causal connection between the existence of watches and the existence of human beings. The connection between watches and human beings isn't a conceptual link: simply attending to the qualities

contained in the idea of a watch won't lead Jim to the idea of a specific cause (or vice versa). Thus, in order to be justified, inferences about matters of fact must assume some causal connection, and so Hume turns his attention to the nature of our idea of a cause.

This indicates, therefore, that the causal relation does important work for Hume. All nonconceptual knowledge depends upon a knowledge of various causal connections.¹ This raises the interesting question as to whether Hume's discussion of causation actually indicates that he's more interested in epistemology than metaphysics, for here his interest is in *how we know*, and less about *what there is*.

In this chapter, however, I shall spell out Hume's account of causation. We shall see that Hume claims that our idea of causation is an idea of thin causation – that is, a knowledge of the cause isn't sufficient to infer, a priori, the effect. These considerations lead us into some familiar territory, such as Hume's infamous problem of induction and Hume's two definitions of a cause. I say what I can with respect to each of these topics.

¹ The only exception for Hume is substantive knowledge based on perception or memory – for example, my knowing that a crane is flying past my window because I'm seeing it fly past my window, or because I remember that it flew past my window (T 1.3.2.2).

Single Instances of Causation

Hume commences his analysis of the causal relation by reiterating his test for meaning:

To begin regularly, we must consider the idea of *causation*, and see from what origin it is deriv'd. 'Tis impossible to reason justly, without understanding perfectly the idea concerning which we reason; and 'tis impossible perfectly to understand any idea, without tracing it up to its origin, and examining that primary impression, from which it arises. (T 1.3.2.4)

As we saw in the case of substance in Chapter One, Hume seeks to find the impression associated with the word "cause." He begins by picking out a particular instance of causation, such as:

billiard ball *A*'s striking billiard ball *B*, and causing *B* to move.

By proceeding in this way, Hume begins his analysis of causation by considering it as a *philosophical* relation. In order to understand Hume's procedure, therefore, I need to

say a few words on Hume's distinction between natural and philosophical relations.

Hume introduces this distinction by noting the following:

The word *relation* is commonly us'd in two senses considerably different from each other. Either for that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and the one naturally introduces the other... or for that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them. In common language the former is always the sense, in which we use the word, *relation*; and 'tis only in philosophy, that we extend it to mean any particular subject of comparison, without a connecting principle. (T 1.1.5.1)

The first sense of "relation" that Hume identifies in this passage is what he calls a *natural relation*. Natural relations are relations that involve some kind of psychological association. As one might expect, therefore, such relations are "natural" to the extent that they involve ideas that are *naturally* related – that is, spontaneously and without reflection – on account of some observed quality. Hume famously refers to these relations

as “principles of the association of ideas,” and considers this concept to be one of his chief contributions (A 31).²

As an example, Hume mentions the relation of resemblance. “The imagination,” he writes, “runs easily from one idea to any other that *resembles* it,” and “this quality alone is to the fancy a sufficient bond and association” (T 1.1.4.2). Nonetheless, Hume’s quick to point out that this bond or association isn’t an “inseparable” bond or association. Rather, the association is nothing more than a commonly prevailing “gentle force” (T 1.1.4.1), one that introduces ideas “with a certain degree of method and regularity” (EHU 3.1). Betraying his affinity for Newton, Hume goes on to put the matter as follows:

Here is a kind of *attraction*, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to shew itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are every where conspicuous; but, as to its causes, they are mostly unknown, and must be resolved into *original* qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain. (T 1.1.4.6)

² Hume often describes natural and philosophical relations as relations between *ideas*; but as Hume’s views on belief make evident, he also conceives of these relations as extending to impressions.

Philosophical relations, on the other hand, are those relations that lack a psychological association. These are called “philosophical” because they’re relations that occur to someone who is engaged in philosophical reflection.³ Put differently, philosophical relations are “comparisons” or “arbitrary unions” in the imagination (T 1.1.5.1, emphasis mine).

By way of an example, imagine a unicorn. The mere fact that you’re entertaining the idea of a unicorn doesn’t lead you to think of an antelope. If it does, then you probably have some odd fascination with unicorns and antelopes, such that, for you, these two ideas are naturally related. But in all likelihood this isn’t the case. In other words, it’s safe to say that your idea of a unicorn and your idea of an antelope aren’t naturally related. Nonetheless, now that you’re considering both unicorns and antelopes (now that you have both ideas before your mind), you may notice some similarities between them – for example, the fact that both unicorns and antelopes have (or usually have) horns. This aspect of similarity or resemblance is a philosophical relation, for it’s based on a reflective comparison, one that’s not grounded merely in a psychological association.

³ Presumably one needn’t actually be engaged in *philosophical* reflection. All that Hume intends here is that, as in philosophy, philosophical relations are the product of reflection.

At this point it's worth recognizing an important corollary of this distinction. I have used the relation of resemblance as an example of both a natural and a philosophical relation. This is because Hume believes that natural relations also sometimes function as philosophical relations, although not all philosophical relations function as natural relations. For instance, Hume identifies the following as philosophical relations: resemblance, contiguity, causation, proportion in quantity or number, degree in quality, identity, and contrariety (T 1.1.5). However, the first three relations – resemblance, contiguity, and causation – can also function as natural relations (T 1.1.4). Indeed, Hume claims that resemblance, contiguity, and causation are the *only* natural relations.

Thus, to return to our singular case of causation, Hume initially considers this as a philosophical relation. What sort of comparison or arbitrary relations can we discern about some particular cause and effect? Hume writes:

Let us therefore cast our eye on any two objects, which we call cause and effect, and turn them on all sides, in order to find that impression, which produces an idea of such prodigious consequence. (T 1.3.2.5)

In considering this single instance of causation (recall billiard ball *A* and billiard ball *B*), Hume claims that there's no discernible quality that makes *A* the cause and *B* the effect. He writes:

At first sight I perceive, that I must not search for [our impression of cause and effect] in any of the particular *qualities* of the objects; since, which-ever of these qualities I pitch on, I find some object, that is not possest of it, and yet falls under the denomination of cause or effect. And indeed there is nothing existent, either externally or internally, which is not to be consider'd either as a cause or an effect; tho' 'tis plain there is no one quality, which universally belongs to all beings, and gives them a title to that denomination. (T 1.3.2.5)

Hume thus claims that there's no simple perceptual property that renders something a cause or an effect. Instead, Hume claims that causation consists in a *relation* between objects, and thus it's this "relation that we must now endeavor to discover" (T 1.3.2.6).

In considering a single instance of causation, Hume manages to identify two essential relations that constitute our idea of causation: these are the relations of *contiguity* and *temporal succession*. As for contiguity:

I find in the first place, that whatever objects are consider'd as causes or effects, are *contiguous*; and that nothing can operate in a time or place, which is ever so little remov'd from those of its existence... We may therefore consider the relation of CONTIGUITY as essential to that of causation. (T 1.3.2.6)

Causes, therefore, must be contiguous in time and place with their effects. Hume's condition of contiguity, however, has come under some scrutiny. Barry Stroud (1977: 43-44), for instance, claims that Hume isn't entitled to make this claim, for Hume also admits that:

Tho' distant objects may sometimes seem productive of each other, they are commonly found upon examination to be link'd by a chain of causes, which are contiguous among themselves, and to the distant objects; and when in any particular instance we cannot discover this connexion, we still presume it to exist. (T 1.3.2.6)

Stroud correctly argues that, given that Hume admits that we sometimes perceive instances of causation in which contiguity isn't perceived, Hume can't infer that all causation involves contiguity. But, as J. L. Mackie (1980: 19) correctly retorts, Stroud mistakes Hume's intentions. Mackie claims that Hume isn't making a claim about causation as it exists in the objects; he's merely making a claim about our *idea* of causation. Since we presume a

contiguity to exist when we don't perceive one, we take contiguity to be an essential element in our idea of causation. And it's our idea of causation that interests Hume at this point.

Hume's second essential element that factors into our idea of causation is temporal succession. This holds that the cause must precede the effect in time. Hume recognizes that this condition is controversial:

The second relation I shall observe as essential to causes and effects, is not so universally acknowledg'd, but is liable to some controversy. 'Tis that of priority of time in the cause before the effect. Some pretend that 'tis not absolutely necessary a cause shou'd precede its effect; but that any object or action, in the very first moment of its existence, may exert its productive quality, and give rise to another object or action, perfectly co-temporary with itself. (T 1.3.2.7)

In short, Hume recognizes that some philosophers accept the possibility of co-temporaneous causation, that is, causation in which the cause is co-temporaneous with the effect. Despite the opinion of these philosophers, however, Hume thinks that temporal succession *should* be included in our idea of causation. Considering Hume's argument for this claim would take us too far afield, but in brief Hume argues that co-temporaneous causation would

imply the nonexistence of time. Since time clearly exists, Hume argues that co-temporaneous causation isn't possible. Thus, temporal succession should be included among our idea of a cause.

So far, Hume's identified two essential components of our idea of causation – contiguity and temporal succession. When we confine ourselves to single instances of causation, Hume claims that this is as far as we can go (T 1.3.2.9). Nothing else is relevant to our search when we consider a single case of causation.

But contiguity and temporal succession don't furnish a *complete* idea of causation. A complete idea for Hume is an idea that contains all of its component ideas. There's some other element, Hume contends, that "enters into our idea of cause and effect" (T 1.3.2.13). This missing element is none other than the idea of *necessary connection*. We suppose, that is, that there's a necessary connection between cause and effect. Thus, Hume writes:

Shall we then rest contented with these two relations of contiguity and succession, as affording a complete idea of causation? By no means. An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being considered as its cause. There is a necessary connexion to be taken into consideration; and that

relation is of much greater importance, than any of the other two above mentioned. (T 1.3.2.11)

In order to discern the nature of our idea of necessary connection, Hume believes that we must take an oblique or circuitous route. We must “beat about all the neighboring fields, without any certain view of design” (T 1.3.2.13). The “neighboring fields” that Hume considers are the causal maxim – that every event must have a cause – and the nature of causal inference. In the end, Hume asks why it is that we suppose that the causal maxim is demonstrable: Why do we think that what exists *must* have a cause? In order to answer this question, Hume proceeds to study the nature of our causal inferences, which eventually leads him to our idea of a necessary connection. Accordingly, I turn to the nature of our causal inferences in the next section.

Multiple Instances of Causation

Hume has identified three essential elements to our idea of causation: (i) spatial and temporal contiguity, (ii) temporal succession, and (iii) necessary connection. But Hume doesn't know what to make of our idea of necessary

connection. For this reason, Hume doesn't immediately proceed to an analysis of this idea; instead, he intends to "beat about all the neighbouring fields, without any certain view or design" (T 1.3.2.13), in the hope of discovering the nature of this idea. The neighboring field that's most relevant is his discussion of causal inference and his attendant discussion of belief, which is the result of our causal inferences.

Hume's account of belief involves three elements: First, belief always involves a perception of an impression-like force – namely, a sensation or a memory. Second, this force is transferred to an idea that's conjoined to it, such that, third, belief is the having of a vivacious idea. Thus Hume defines a *belief* as "a *lively idea related to or associated with a present impression*" (T 1.3.7.5).

Since all causal inferences result in belief, Hume contends that all causal inferences must begin with a perception of impression-like force: an impression or an idea of memory (T 1.3.4.1). If the inference doesn't begin with a perception of impression-like force, then the inference is merely hypothetical, and thus can't culminate in belief (T 1.3.4.2). For ease of exposition, I shall

refer to the impression-like content that factors into causal inference as an "impression."

In a causal inference, the mind undergoes a transition from an impression to the idea believed. Hume first reiterates a point he made above, that the transition or inference isn't due to a "penetration into their essences" (T 1.3.6.1). That is, we don't infer the effect because of some discernible quality about the case (or vice versa).

Hume thinks that this can be easily shown. The idea of a cause is distinct from the idea of its effect, and so, by the separability principle, cause and effect are separable. No contradiction follows from our supposing that the effect doesn't follow from the cause. Hume's claiming that cause and effect aren't related in the manner of relations of ideas, and thus the inference involved is one of probability and not knowledge.

The transition, then, must be based on experience. We remember past experiences of regularity – that is, we perceive that like causes are contiguous and successive with respect to like effects. Moreover, we observe that these conjunctions are constant (T 1.3.6.2). Hume therefore identifies this as an additional essential element of our concept of a cause: namely, a *constant conjunction* between

cause and effect. We delineate something as a cause or an effect only if the two relations of contiguity and succession are preserved *in several instances* (T 1.3.6.3).

But on what basis does the mind move from a knowledge of constant conjunction to belief in the unobserved, that is, a necessary connection? Hume puts this question in terms of whether causal inference is founded on reason or the imagination. He argues that reason can't be the source of this inference, and this leads to his infamous problem of induction. I turn to an explication of this argument in the next section.

The Problem of Induction

Hume claims that inferences based on sense experience aren't based on reason, for this leads to a circularity. This, in short, is Hume's infamous problem of induction. Because he thinks they're not based on reason, they must be based on the imagination (T 1.3.6.12).

Hume summarizes his contentions about inferences concerning matters of fact as follows:

When it is asked, *What is the nature of all our reasonings concerning matter of fact?* the proper answer seems to be, that they are founded on the relation of cause and effect. When again it is asked, *What is the foundation of all our reasonings and conclusions concerning that relation?* it may be replied in one word, EXPERIENCE. But if we still carry on our sifting humour, and ask, *What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience?* this implies a new question, which may be of more difficult solution and explication. (EHU 4.14)

Hume asserts that claims about matters of fact are founded on the relation of cause and effect. As we saw above, Jim finds a watch on some deserted island, and claims, "There had once been human beings on this island" (EHU 4.1.4).⁴ In order for Jim to reason to this claim from his observation of the watch, he must implicitly assert some causal connection between the existence of watches and human beings.

Second, Hume observes that the relation of cause and effect depends upon experience (EHU 4.7). Simply attending to the qualities contained in the idea of "watch," or "*this* watch," will not lead your thought to a specific cause; nor will simply dwelling on the qualities of the idea of "human being" lead you to an idea of "*this* watch," and so Jim must

⁴ Some of Hume's examples in this section of the *Enquiry* suggest that, in speaking in terms of how cause and effect factor into inductive reasoning, the notions of *cause* and *effect* are quite broad. The claim "My friend is in France" is said to be the effect of "My friends (trustworthy) testimony of this claim." Obviously, claiming one will be in France does not *cause* one to be in France, properly speaking, though we do sometimes speak loosely and say something like, "My friends (trustworthy) testimony *to this effect*."

have had some previous experience that connected the two. What this leads to is the natural idea that our idea of a causal connection emerges when we witness a constant conjunction of events of two types, and some degree of contiguity and priority between the cause and effect, and are thus propelled by custom into belief about a necessary connection.

The relevant notion for our current purposes, however, is constant conjunction. Consider the following cases:

- A. a_1 strikes b_1 in circumstances c_1 , and b_1 moves in manner k ;
- B. a_2 strikes b_2 in circumstances c_1 , and b_2 moves in manner k ;
- C. a_3 strikes b_3 in circumstances c_1 , and b_3 moves in manner k .

Here we have a case of constant conjunction (assuming that there are no other cases of a 's striking b 's in circumstances c_1 that fail to react in manner k). Suppose someone were to conclude, based on A , B , and C , that, *if* a_4 strikes b_4 in circumstances c_1 , *then* b_4 will move in manner k . This is a case of inductive reasoning, or reasoning

concerning a matter of fact. But such a conclusion, on Hume's understanding, involves an inference of the following kind: from "*I have found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect*" to "*I foresee, that other objects, which are, in appearance, similar, will be attended with similar effects*" (EHU 4.16). In short, the implicit premise is that the future will resemble the past, or, better, that nature is uniform. For Hume our experiential conclusions, our inductive reasoning about matters of fact, all function in this way.

Where's the problem? Let's call the implicit premise that factors into inductive reasoning – namely that objects similar in appearance will be attended with similar effects (and vice versa) – *H*. Can we be certain of the truth of *H*? Given the distinctions noted above, one can only possibly justify *H* by way of intuition, demonstration, or probability. Since it's conceivable that similar causes will not always have similar effects, intuition and demonstration are not possible forms of justification.

When I see, for instance, a billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another; even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me, as the result of their contact or impulse; may I not conceive, that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls

remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. (EHU 4.10)

Since probability is itself a species of inductive reasoning, justifying H by way of probability would entail one's employing H in justifying H , which is clearly circular.⁵ This is the problem of induction, and it's quite formidable.

But is this really a problem, as Hume thinks? Nelson Goodman doesn't think so. Indeed, Goodman claims to "dissolve" Hume's problem. But Goodman's mistaken. As it happens, Goodman's dissolution is very much similar to Hume's solution. It will therefore benefit us to consider Goodman's dissolution.

Goodman's Dissolution

Nelson Goodman claims that Hume's problem of induction – what he calls "the old problem of induction" – has been solved, or rather "dissolved" (1979: 59). Goodman observes that Hume's problem of induction is the problem of

⁵ "But you must confess, that the inference is not intuitive; neither is it demonstrative: Of what nature is it then? To say it is experimental, is begging the question. For all inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities" (EHU 4.21).

justifying judgments about unobserved cases. The problem, as Goodman puts it, is that "such judgments are neither reports of experience nor logical consequences of it" (ibid.). Goodman primarily focuses on predictions – that is, inferences to future cases – and so I shall also limit my discussion to prediction. Thus:

Predictions, of course, pertain to what has not yet been observed. And they cannot be logically inferred from what has been observed; for what *has* happened imposes no logical restrictions on what *will* happen. (ibid.)

The question, then, becomes: Why prefer one prediction over rival predictions? Suppose that I predict that my youngest son will spill his drink sometime tomorrow, but a soothsayer predicts that he won't. Do we have any grounds for supposing that my prediction is more probable than the soothsayer's? After all, the soothsayer has never met my son and merely makes his or her prediction by looking into a crystal ball, which is hardly a reliable belief forming process. Moreover, I have experienced for nearly two years of his existence, my youngest son spilling the overwhelming majority of the drinks that have been handed to him. Indeed,

he's likely doing just that right now. Certainly my prediction is more probable than the soothsayer's, right?

Goodman believes, however, that this way of putting things confuses matters. He claims that Hume's *description* of what occurs in induction also answers the justificatory problem. Indeed, the latter isn't really a problem to be solved, and so Goodman takes himself to have "dissolved" the problem. In short, Goodman claims that once we see *how* induction works (a descriptive claim), we will see that no further justification is needed (a normative claim).

Goodman's dissolution of the old problem of induction begins with an analogy to the justification of deduction. He explains:

How do we justify a *deduction*? Plainly, by showing that it conforms to the general rules of deductive inference. An argument that so conforms is justified or valid, even if its conclusion happens to be false. An argument that violates a rule is fallacious even if its conclusions happens to be true. To justify a deductive conclusion therefore requires no knowledge of the facts it pertains to. Moreover, when a deductive argument has been shown to conform to the rules of logical inference, we usually consider it justified without going on to ask what justifies the rules. Analogously, the basic task in justifying an inductive inference is to show that it conforms to the general rules of *induction*. Once we have recognized this, we have gone a long way towards clarifying our problem. (1979: 63)

Thus Goodman claims that particular deductions are justified because they conform to the general rules of deduction. Suppose, then, that we have a particular deductive argument, *A*. Goodman claims that:

1. *A* is justified

because

2. *A* conforms to the (justified) rules, *R*, of deductive inference.

He recognizes that in order for *R* to justify *A*, *R* must itself be justified. Thus, he writes:

Yet, of course, the rules themselves must eventually be justified. The validity of a deduction depends not upon conformity to any purely arbitrary rules we may contrive, but upon conformity to valid rules. When we speak of *the* rules of inference we mean the valid rules – or better, *some* valid rules, since there may be alternative sets of equally valid rules. But how is the validity of rules to be determined? (ibid.)

His answer to this last question is:

Principles of deductive inference are justified by conformity with accepted deductive practice. Their validity depends upon accordance with the particular deductive inferences we actually make and sanction. If a rule yields unacceptable inferences, we drop it as invalid. Justification of general rules thus derives from judgments rejecting or accepting particular deductive inferences. (1979: 63-4)

Thus the rules of deduction are justified by not yielding any unacceptable inferences.

I have said that deductive inferences are justified by their conformity to valid general rules, and that general rules are justified by their conformity to valid inferences. But this circle is a virtuous one. The point is that rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other. *A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.* The process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either. (1979: 64)

This is Goodman's method of *reflective equilibrium*, later appropriated by John Rawls. Goodman claims that the circularity exhibited here is a virtuous one.

Naturally, Goodman claims that what holds for deduction also holds for induction.

All this applies equally well to induction. An inductive inference, too, is justified by conformity to general rules, and a general rule by conformity to accepted inductive inferences. Predictions are justified if they conform to valid canons of induction;⁶ and the canons are valid if they accurately codify accepted inductive practice. (ibid.)

This is Goodman's dissolution of the problem. A particular inductive inference is justified if it conforms to the inductive canon, and the inductive canon is justified if it doesn't yield any unacceptable inferences.

Hume's problem remains, however. It's easiest to see why if we discuss matters in terms of deduction. Goodman offers us the following picture:

3. A is justified

because

4. A conforms to rules of deductive inference R.

⁶ Goodman (1979: 65) recognizes that, unlike deduction, there aren't any well-established principles or canons of inductive inference.

And

5. R is justified

because

6. R conforms to accepted deductive practice P .

The idea is that P contains many different argument forms – *modus ponens* (MP), *modus tollens* (MT), *disjunctive syllogism* (DS), *hypothetical syllogism* (HS), and so on – and that none of these forms leads to “unacceptable inferences.” In other words, no form has a counterexample (or widely recognized counterexample). Consider MP:

(MP)

(i) $p \supset q$

(ii) p

(iii) Therefore, q

To say that (MP) lacks a counterexample is to say that there's no substitution instance in which its premises are true and its conclusion false. Over the course of human history, we've never found an "unacceptable" inference that had this form. In light of this, we exalt it to the status of a rule of deductive inference.

Things are rather different, of course, with something like the fallacy of denying the antecedent. That is:

(DA)

- (i) $p \supset q$
- (ii) $\sim p$
- (iii) Therefore, $\sim q$

This is no less a candidate as a rule of deductive inference, but we don't accept it as one because it has counterexamples. For instance, a counterexample to (DA) is:

- (i) If $1 + 1 = 3$, then I'm not God.
- (ii) It's not the case that $1 + 1 = 3$
- (iii) Therefore, I'm God.

Although I myself believe this conclusion, the inference, unfortunately, isn't acceptable. Thus (MP) constitutes a valid rule of deductive inference – alongside (MT), (DS), (HS), and so forth – but (DA) doesn't.

But notice that the move from (5) to (6) stipulates that *R* is justified because *R* conforms to accepted deductive practice *P*. In other words, when we take (MP) as the relevant rule,

7. (MP) is justified

because

8. (MP) conforms to accepted deductive practice.

(8) implies that (MP) has no counterexamples, and thus that all (MP) instantiations are valid (or that all [MP] instantiations so far observed have been valid).

But notice that here we must rely on induction. Thus, on Goodman's account, we have:

9. All (MP) instantiations are valid (or all [MP] instantiations so far observed have been valid).

is justified because

10. Some past argument, *B*, has form MP and doesn't have true premises and a false conclusion, and
11. Some past argument, *C*, has form MP and doesn't have true premises and a false conclusion, and
12. Some past argument, *n*, for any number of *n*, has form MP and doesn't have true premises and a false conclusion.⁷

Clearly, the inference from (10)-(12) to (9) is an inductive argument. Thus Goodman's dissolution requires that argument forms be justified on account of accepted practice, and yet the way that they are justified by accepted practices relies on induction.

Thus, if Goodman were right, deduction would rely on induction, and induction itself is justified by reflective equilibrium. The justification of induction involves a

⁷ And there's no argument that we have observed that has form MP that has true premises and a false conclusion.

circularity, but one that Goodman regards as virtuous. In short, we observe that certain inductive principles of inference *work* – that is, they lack counterexamples or common occurrences of counterexamples. This is the pragmatist strand in Goodman. Since they work, we can then use them to make further inferences.

According to Helen Beebe (2006: 66-74), Hume isn't an inductive skeptic, for the problem of induction is intended to show only that inductive inferences aren't justified by our *reason*. Rather, induction is "more animal than divine" (2006: 11), and thus Hume's interest has more to do with the *source* of justification than with its existence. Consider, for instance, Hume's remarks on the causal maxim, which is a proposition he takes to be inductively grounded:

I only maintain'd, that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeded neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source. *That Caesar existed, that there is such an island as Sicily;* for these propositions, I affirm, we have no demonstrative nor intuitive proof. Wou'd you infer that I deny their truth, or even their certainty? There are many different kinds of certainty; and some of them as satisfactory to the mind, tho perhaps not so regular, as the demonstrative kind. (L 1.91)⁸

⁸ "L" refers to the volume containing Hume's letters, and the numbers indicate the volume and the letter, respectively.

Hume doesn't deny that everything that exists has a cause; he merely denies that our knowledge or certainty of this truth is demonstrative or intuitive.

The same point is reiterated in *A Letter to a Gentleman*, where, again, he's responding to critics. There he writes:

The author is charged with opinions leading to downright atheism, chiefly by denying this principle, *that whatever begins to exist must have a cause of existence*. To give you a notion of the extravagance of this charge, I must enter into a little detail. It is common for philosophers to distinguish the kinds of evidence into intuitive, demonstrative, sensible, and moral; by which they intend only to mark a difference betwixt them, not to denote a superiority of one above another. Moral certainty may reach as high a degree of assurance as mathematical; and our senses are surely to be comprised amongst the clearest and most convincing of all evidences. Now, it being the author's purpose, in the pages cited in the specimen, to examine the grounds of that proposition; he used the freedom of disputing the common opinion, that it was founded on demonstrative or intuitive certainty; but asserts, that it is supported by moral evidence, and is followed by a conviction of the same kind with these truths, *that all men must die, and that the sun will rise tomorrow*. (LG 21)⁹

Hume's point is that the causal maxim is known with *moral* certainty, not any other species of certainty. Indeed, "a

⁹ "LG" abbreviates Hume's *A Letter to a Gentleman*, the numbers indicating the paragraph.

man must have lost all common sense to doubt" the causal maxim, claims Hume (ibid.).

According to Beebe, then, Hume believes that the uniformity principle is justified because it's reliable – "causal reasoning tracks the truth" (2006: 73). Accordingly, the problem of induction, while a bit of an aside to our aims here, is merely intended by Hume to show that induction is based on the imagination, not reason.

Thin Necessary Connection

Thus, to return to our idea of necessary connection, Hume claims that the essential elements in our idea of causation are the following: (i) spatial and temporal contiguity, (ii) temporal succession, (iii) necessary connection, and (iv) constant conjunction. But we still don't know what our idea of necessary connection consists in, and Hume claims that the transition from an impression to belief isn't founded on reason.

Thus, at this point, we merely perceive a constant conjunction of like causes and like effects. Hume claims, however, that the world "can never produce any new quality

in the object, which can be the model of our idea of necessary connection" (T 1.3.14.20). In other words:

There is, then, nothing new either discover'd or produc'd in any objects by their constant conjunction, and by the uninterrupted resemblance of their relations of succession and contiguity. (T 1.3.14.19)

Nonetheless, Hume claims that the observation of these constant conjunctions "produces a new impression *in the mind*, which is its real model" (T 1.3.14.20).

For after we have observ'd the resemblance in a sufficient number of instances, we immediately feel a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and to conceive it in a stronger light upon account of that relation... Necessity, then, is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another. Without considering it in this view, we can never arrive at the most distant notion of it, or be able to attribute it either to external or internal objects, to spirit or body, to causes or effects. (ibid.)

Hume claims, in other words, that our perceiving a constant conjunction between like causes and like effects produces a new impression – a felt determination or propensity of the mind. This is an impression of reflection

(T 1.3.14.22). It's the feeling that like effects will be followed by like causes.

Accordingly, our causal inferences are based on our experience of past constant conjunctions of contiguity and succession. Our idea of necessary connection is copied from an impression of reflection, which is produced on account of our experiencing these past constant conjunctions.

For Hume, then, our idea of necessary connection is an outcome of our causal inferences, rather than vice versa. I perceive a constant conjunction of like objects, and this forms the "customary transition" of inferring similar objects from similar causes.

Hume summarizes his conclusions pertaining to his discussion of causation with his two definitions, which I briefly detailed in Chapter One. These two definitions are:

First Definition of a Cause

We define a cause to be, *An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter.* (T 1.3.14.35)

Second Definition of a Cause

We define a cause to be, *An object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the*

imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other. (T 1.3.14.35)

There has been considerable debate over Hume's two definitions of a cause. One common charge is that Hume's definitions aren't extensionally equivalent, and thus as definitions they're suspect.

But Hume's procedure here isn't all that surprising. Recall that Hume takes the term "relation" to be ambiguous. This may refer either to natural relations or philosophical relations. Philosophical relations are arbitrary comparisons that don't rely on any psychological association, whereas natural relations are principles of association within the imagination (T 1.3.6.13).

Moreover, causation functions both as a philosophical and a natural relation. And thus the term "causation" is itself ambiguous, depending upon which kind of relation – philosophical or natural – one intends. Thus it's not surprising that Hume offers two definitions.

Thus, taken as a philosophical relation, and considering only that which is pertinent to the objects, causation is simply spatial contiguity and temporal succession, as per the first definition. When we speak of a

cause in this sense, nothing pertaining to the imagination is relevant. On the other hand, when we consider it as a natural relation, we see that the customary transition of the mind needs to come into play, which is made explicit in the second definition.

Strictly speaking, then, there's no necessary connection *in objects*. However, the second definition more accurately reflects our *idea* of causation, for our idea of causation includes the idea of necessary connection. This idea of a necessary connection is based on an impression of reflection, not an impression of sensation. It seems evident, therefore, that Hume endorses a *thin* idea of necessary connection, as it's a feature of our minds and not objects, grounded as it is in our experience, not the world.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined Hume's account of our idea of causation. Hume claims that our idea of causation is composed of three elements: (i) contiguity in time and place, (ii) temporal succession, and (iii) necessary connection, and that the latter results from the constant conjunction of the former two.

His account of necessary connection is thin: that is, our idea of necessary connection is based on no more than an impression of reflection, and thus is produced by our minds rather than an impression of sensation. The idea of a necessary connection is ultimately grounded in us, in particular in the operations of our minds. It is not ultimately grounded in the world of objects.

This account is very much the standard one. It's what Old Humeans appeal to in defending their position. In the next chapter, I consider how Old Humeans rely on Hume's account to argue against the New Hume interpretation, and consider the various responses on the part of New Humeans.

Chapter Four

Thick Causation

Introduction

In Chapter Three, we saw that Hume claims that our idea of necessary connection is copied from an impression of reflection – namely, a felt determination of the mind. Since this impression is the product of our experiencing a constant conjunction of like events, Hume takes our idea of necessary connection to be thin.

Hume's account of necessary connection constitutes the basis for the most forceful and persistent criticism of the New Hume interpretation. Briefly put, the objection is that Hume can't believe in thick causation, for one can believe in thick causation only if one can have an idea of thick causation. But, the argument goes, Hume denies that we have any idea of thick causation. Hume, as we've seen, takes the idea of necessary connection that factors into our idea of causation to be thin, not thick. Thus Hume can't believe in thick causation. In this chapter, I consider the main lines of argument in this debate.

The Criticism Stated

Ken Winkler (1991) has argued that Hume's theory of ideas – the view that all ideas originate in experience – forecloses on the possibility of any idea of thick causation.¹ Since Hume can't have an idea of thick causation, he can't believe in thick causation. Winkler explains:

Every thought or perception must be derived from impressions, and although Hume is vague about the constraints on derivation – the creative power of the mind amounts... "to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience" – a "thought" or "perception" whose derivation fails to satisfy those constraints is not a thought or perception at all. (1991: 560)

This reading gains support from the observation that the "scope of the theory [of ideas] seems to be universal, and its force unforgiving: it seems to say that any alleged thought or conception lacking an appropriate pedigree is unintelligible or meaningless" (1991: 552).

Accepting the gauntlet, Galen Strawson (2014: 14), a New Humean, has formulated the challenge to New Humeans in terms of three fundamental interpretative claims, epistemic, semantic, and ontological:

¹ Winkler's article is what gave rise to the name "The New Hume."

- E. All we can ever know of causation is regular succession.
- S. All we can legitimately manage to mean by expressions like "causation in the objects" is regular succession.
- O. All that causation actually is, in the objects, is regular succession.

Strawson contends that proponents of the Old Hume argue from (E) to (S), and then from (S) to (O). He puts the argument as follows (2014: 15):

1. E.
2. If E is true, then S is true.
3. If S is true, then O is true.
4. Therefore, O.

First, Old Humeans interpret Hume as claiming that all that we can know about causation is that it consists of regular succession. This is the account of causation that I attributed to Hume in Chapter Three. From it, I concluded that Hume's view of causation is thin.

In addition, Old Humeans argue that (2) follows from Hume's meaning-empiricism: if the only idea we can have of causation is an idea of thin causation, then that's all that we can ever manage to mean by the term. The reason is that on Hume's meaning-empiricism, the meaning of a term is provided by its associated idea.

This brings us to the third premise. As (3) indicates, proponents of the Old Hume contend that the semantic claim has ontological implications. Here, for instance, is how Strawson puts the point:

Why does (O) follow from (S)? Because, given (S), when the phrase "causation in the objects" comes out of our mouths or pens, or occurs in our thought, it inevitably just means regular succession. So (O) causation in the objects – here is the phrase, meaning "regular succession" – just is regular succession. After all, regular succession is regular succession. (2007: 34)

The idea is that, given (S), the phrase "causation in the objects" is synonymous with the phrase "regular succession in the objects." Thus (O), the claim that "causation in the objects is regular succession," turns out to be trivial. For if we replace "causation in the objects" with "regular succession in the objects" in (O), then we get "regular succession is regular succession."

Thus Old Humeans claim that Hume can't even *think* about or *contemplate* thick causation. Helen Beebe puts the point this way:

If we hold [Hume] to the doctrine that the impression-source of an idea provides its meaning, and put it together with the thesis that the impression-source of the idea of necessary connection is the "feeling" we get when we infer effects from causes, we appear to rule out the possibility of our even being able to *contemplate* the possibility that there are real necessary connections in nature. We have no idea that corresponds to the expression "real necessary connection in nature," since the alleged idea does not have its source in any sensory impression. Rather, when we say or think that one event is necessarily connected to another, and hence that the first caused the second, what we really turn out to mean by that claim must have something to do with the transition of the mind from the observation of the first event to the expectation that the second event will follow, and nothing to do with any alleged real connection between the two events. (2006: 9)

Likewise, Peter Kail calls this the "semantic threat" to causal realism, and notes that "if we cannot detect power – have an impression of it – it seems as if we cannot form any thought at all and so uses of the word 'power' are mere noise" (2007a: 31).

Consequently, New Humeans have devoted much of their attention to showing how Hume can make room within his

theory of ideas for an idea of thick causation. In the next section, I turn to these considerations.

Strawson's Case for Skeptical Realism

Strawson's 1989 book, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume*, has arguably done more than anyone else to generate interest in the New Hume.² Accordingly, I shall primarily focus on the main line of response offered by Strawson. Strawson explains and defends the skeptical realist position.

Strawson commences his case for skeptical realism by noting the well-known fact that Hume was dissatisfied with the reception of the *Treatise*. Upon its first publication, it received very little attention, and what attention it did receive was largely hostile. Thus, when Hume essentially rewrote the material of Book One of the *Treatise*, and then published it as his first *Enquiry*, he asked his publisher to include the following disclaimer:

Most of the principles, and reasonings, contained in this volume, were published in a work in three volumes, called *A Treatise of Human Nature*: a work which the author projected before he left college, and which he

² In addition, see John Wright's 1983 book, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*.

wrote and published not long after. But not finding it successful, he was sensible of his error in going to the press too early, and he cast the whole anew in the following pieces, where some negligences in his former reasoning and more in the expression, are, he hopes, corrected. Yet several writers, who have honoured the author's philosophy with answers, have taken care to direct all their batteries against the juvenile work, which the author never acknowledged, and have affected to triumph in any advantages, which, they imagined, they had obtained over it: a practice very contrary to all rules of candour and fair-dealing, and a strong instance of those polemical artifices, which a bigoted zeal thinks itself authorized to employ. Henceforth, the author desires, that the following pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles. (EHU Advertisement)

Strawson takes Hume's denouncement of the *Treatise* in this Advertisement very seriously, and consequently derives an exegetical or interpretative principle from it:

Strawson's Exegetical Principle

We have an obligation to read the *Enquiry* back into the *Treatise*, and not vice versa.

Accordingly, Strawson claims that, if a passage in the *Treatise* appears incompatible with a passage in the *Enquiry*, it is to be discarded. He claims that only if (i) the passage in the *Enquiry* is unclear, and (ii) the passage in the *Treatise* isn't incompatible with something else in the

Enquiry that's in dispute – only then can we rely on the *Treatise*.

Accordingly, Strawson claims that the “negligences in... expression” (ibid.) that Hume mentions in the Advertisement are “doubtless his phrasings of epistemological points in a dramatically ontological idiom” (2007: 49, fn. 4). Consider, for instance, Hume’s use of the term “external.” His use seems to suggest that, when he writes of “external objects” he’s referring to objects that exist in the natural world, independent from the mind. This, however, is at odds with his relegating questions of external existence to the realm of the natural philosophers. Instead, he likely intends to use the term to refer to objects that we *regard* as external, and wishes to say nothing about whether such objects really are externally existing objects. Accordingly, this would be a case in which Hume’s language misleads; for his point is epistemological, not ontological. Consequently, Strawson notes that “Hume deserves [our] sympathy, for it is bad to be attacked for views one never held, and worse to be praised and famous for holding them” (2014: 11).

Strawson claims that the criticism of the New Hume presented above rests on this very misunderstanding. That is to say, it mistakes an epistemological claim for an

ontological claim. According to Strawson, Winkler's argument stipulates that an idea of thick causation is unintelligible for Hume. But Strawson argues that there are two relevant senses of the terms "intelligible" and "unintelligible." These, says Strawson, are as follows.

In the modern sense, Strawson says, something is unintelligible just in case it's *incoherent* or doesn't make sense. Thus, anything unintelligible in this sense can't exist, for, like a square a circle, it lacks consistency. But Strawson argues that Hume intends "unintelligible" in a sense distinct from this, one that doesn't prevent us from having an idea of thick causation. Hume "means that we cannot form an idea of it... that has any positive descriptive content on the terms of the theory of ideas. To say this, however, is not to say that we cannot refer to it, or that the notion of it is incoherent" (2007: 35). Thick causation is unintelligible, but not in the sense of its being incoherent. Rather, it's unintelligible in the sense that it can't be *adequately understood*, or understood in a particular way. This is the second sense of "unintelligible." In order to understand the way in which our idea of thick causation is unintelligible, we need to turn to the eighteenth-century distinction between positive and relative ideas.

Proponents of the New Hume point to the distinction between *positive/direct* and *relative* ideas in order to make room within Hume's meaning-empiricism for an idea of thick causation. This distinction is also sometimes described as the distinction between *conceiving* and *supposing* an idea, and it has been most fully articulated by Daniel Flage.³

To see this distinction at work, consider Thomas Reid's distinction between direct and relative conceptions in his *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*. Reid writes:

Of some things, we know what they are in themselves; our conception of such things I call *direct*. Of other things, we know not what they are in themselves, but only that they have certain properties or attributes, or certain relations to other things; of these our conception is only *relative*.⁴

An example that Reid provides is the following:

[I]n the university library, I call for the book, press L, shelf 10, No. 10; the library keeper must have such a conception of the book I want, as to be able to distinguish it from ten thousand that are under his care. But what conception does he form of it from my words? They inform him neither of the author, nor the subject, nor the language, nor the size, nor

³ See Daniel Flage (1981), (1982), and (2007).

⁴ Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, 1.1, p. 9.

the binding, but only of its mark and place. His conception of it is merely relative to these circumstances; yet this relative notion enables him to distinguish it from every other book in the library.⁵

In this passage, Reid tells the librarian the book he desires by noting certain properties of it – it's the book that has the attributes of "press L, shelf 10, No. 10." In specifying the book in this way, the librarian doesn't have any "picture" of the book before his or her mind. But, as Reid notes, the librarian must still have some "conception of the book I want" (ibid.). In short, Reid claims that the librarian lacks a direct idea of the book, although he or she does have a relative idea of it.

Flage notes that Reid wasn't the first to employ this distinction in early modern thought. Locke, Flage says, and Berkeley, made use of it, and Descartes and Spinoza likely did as well (2007: 139-140).

In addition, Flage contends that the direct/relative idea distinction is analogous to Bertrand Russell's later distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.⁶ A relative idea, claims Flage, is the "cognitive analogue of a definite description," and thus he describes his account as the *describing model of relative*

⁵ Ibid., pp. 9-10.

⁶ See Bertrand Russell (1912).

ideas (2007: 138). As for Hume, Flage argues that while “positive ideas are nothing more than copies of impressions or compilations of simple ideas copied from impressions, relative ideas allow one to single out ideational or nonideational objects on the basis of putative relations to positive impressions or ideas” (ibid.).

There are three passages in Hume that constitute evidence for thinking that Hume recognized and employed the distinction between positive and relative ideas. Toward the end of his brief discussion of our idea of existence and of external objects in Part Two of the *Treatise*, Hume writes:

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. (T 1.2.6.9)

In this passage, Hume claims that when conceived as something different in kind from our perceptions, we can't form a *positive* idea of external objects.⁷ But, Hume claims, we can form a *relative* idea of them. In this case, a candidate correlate description of our relative idea of

⁷ Cf. Berkeley's "Master Argument" in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I, 22-3.

external objects would be something on the order of, "the resembling cause of our perceptions."⁸

A second piece of evidence that Hume recognizes and employs the positive/relative idea distinction is based on the following passage:

To make this evident, let us remember, that as every idea is deriv'd from a preceding perception, 'tis impossible our idea of a perception, and that of an object or external existence can ever represent what are specifically different from each other. Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt them, 'tis still incomprehensible to us; and we are oblig'd either to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative, or to make it the very same with a perception or impression. (T 1.4.5.19)

Hume's claim that we can conceive of an external object as a "relation without a relative" seems to indicate that he permits relative ideas. The relation in this case would be something like "causing our perceptions," and "the relative[s]" would be the objects that satisfy this relation. Thus we can only conceive of the object in terms of how it's related to our perceptions, as opposed to our conceiving of it in itself.

Finally, a third piece of evidence that Hume endorses the positive/relative idea distinction is the passage:

⁸ Cf. Kail (2007a: 60).

According to these explications and definitions, the idea of *power* is relative as much as that of *cause*; and both have a reference to an effect, or some other event constantly conjoined with the former. When we consider the *unknown* circumstance of an object, by which the degree or quantity of its effect is fixed and determined, we call that its power: And accordingly, it is allowed by all philosophers, that the effect is the measure of the power. But if they had any idea of power, as it is in itself, why could not they measure it in itself? The dispute whether the force of a body in motion be as its velocity, or the square of its velocity; this dispute, I say, need not be decided by comparing its effects in equal or unequal times; but by a direct mensuration and comparison. (EHU 7.2.29, fn. 17)

These passages are the only places in which Hume seemingly mentions relative ideas. In them, he seems to grant their legitimacy.

New Humeans emphasize this distinction and claim that Hume has the resources to avoid the criticism of their position advanced above. Thus Strawson claims that Hume's belief in thick causal connections is based on a relative idea of causal power. While we can't positively conceive of causal power – and thus it's not "intelligible" in this sense – we can still *suppose* its existence on the basis of what we do perceive: the regular, constant connections, between like causes and like effects.

Accordingly, Strawson claims that our relative idea of thick causation is expressed in the description "that in reality in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is" (2007: 37).

As evidence, Strawson notes numerous cases in which Hume seems to refer to both secret powers and hidden connections, and our "profound ignorance" with respect to these secret powers and hidden connections. Hume speaks, for example, of "the power or force, which actuates the whole machine" (EHU 7.8), of "that very circumstance in the cause, by which it is enabled to produce the effect" (EHU 7.17), and of various "secret springs and principles" (EHU 1.15). Accordingly, Strawson claims that

Anything that is to count as a genuine *conception* of something must be descriptively contentful on the terms of the theory of ideas: it must have directly impression-based, impression-copy content. By contrast, a supposition that something exists or is the case can be a genuine *supposition*, genuinely about something, and hence intelligible in our present-day sense, without being contentful (or meaningful or intelligible) on the terms of the theory of ideas." (2007: 37)

Thus, Strawson claims that there's room within Hume's theory of ideas for an idea of thick causal power. Indeed, Hume *supposes* – that is, *assumes* and *believes* that there

are such powers – “not only in common life but also as a philosopher” (2014: 3). Thick causal power is unintelligible in the sense that we can’t have a positive idea of it and can’t understand how it operates, although it’s intelligible in the sense that we can still refer to it. This, in the main, is Strawson’s response to the criticism of Old Humeans.

Kail’s Nuanced Realism

Peter Kail has put forward a more nuanced skeptical realism than that of Strawson. According to Kail, realism can be understood only when contrasted with some specified kind of anti-realism (and vice versa). The contrasting anti-realism that Kail has in mind when discussing Hume’s realism is the view that Hume’s theory of ideas debars us from having any coherent thought about thick causation. Realism, accordingly, is the view that Hume’s theory of ideas *does* permit a coherent thought about thick causation. As Kail explains:

At a minimum, realism holds that we can form thoughts that reach beyond the deliverances of impressions and thereby allow for the possibility of an ontology that

includes genuine causal power and external objects.
(2007b: 255)

Accordingly, Kail's realism is more nuanced than Strawson's, for realism on Kail's interpretation isn't necessarily about Hume's *assuming* the existence of thick causal connections, let alone his *believing* or *justifiably believing* in them. Thus, for Kail, as long as Hume countenances a coherent thought about thick causation, he's a realist. This is compatible with his being an error theorist, Kail claims, or his being agnostic about thick causal powers, or his assuming such powers (2007b: 255-6).

How does Kail account for thought – coherent, contentful thought – about thick causal power? He begins with the following concept:

Reference-Fixer for "Power" (RFP)

That which, were we to grasp it, would furnish the capacity to (a) "read off" what effect some object must have and (b) find it impossible to conceive of the cause without its effect.

Kail explains the notion as follows:

The RFP is not an *idea* of necessity or a relative idea of necessity. We have no understanding of what feature

it is that would yield those consequences. It does not "represent" if by that one takes it to be a copy of genuine necessity... The RFP tells us that power is *that which* would yield such and such consequences while giving us no conception of *what* that might be... Nevertheless, the formal specification of the RFP allows us to form thoughts precisely about that of which we can have no conception. (2007b: 256)

Thus Kail claims that a "thought of a certain kind" fixes the reference of thick causal power, but this thought isn't an idea of causal power, since it isn't copied from an impression.

Accordingly, Kail distinguishes between an "idea" and a "thought" in Hume's philosophy. He claims that Hume's copy principle is primarily a genetic claim – about how ideas arrive in the mind – and not necessarily a semantic claim. Thus, it's a mistake to attribute some kind of meaning-empiricism to Hume. While ideas are copies of impressions, Kail admits, his interpretation of Hume leaves room for thoughts that outrun ideas. Consequently, "the RFP is... a way of capturing that of which we have no idea so that a 'thought of a certain kind' can be had concerning it" (2007: 268, fn. 14).

But the claim that Hume lacks a theory of meaning is misleading. It's true that Hume doesn't devote as much attention – say, as Locke – to spelling out his theory of

meaning. But Hume clearly does suggest a strongly Lockean conception of meaning, for instance in his discussion of abstract ideas canvassed in Chapter One. In addition, at T 1.1.1.1, Hume claims that we think and reason *with ideas*, suggesting that all thoughts involve ideas, and thus that there can't be "thoughts of a certain kind" that outrun our ideas, as Kail suggests. Needless to say, in Chapter Six I will be able to make sense of a distinction that Kail seems to be aiming at with his distinction between ideas and thoughts, but one that can be understood solely in terms of Hume's theory of ideas.

Returning to Kail's discussion of the RFP, Kail notes that the felt determination of the mind is the clue to understanding our thought of thick causal power. He notes that the determination of the mind "effects an *immediate* and *non-reasoned* transition from cause to effect" (2007b: 258). For instance, when we see a brick rapidly approaching a window, we *immediately* think that the window will break, and this "phenomenological immediacy of the inference mimics that of simply reading the effect from its cause" (ibid.). Accordingly, Kail claims that the determination of the mind can account for condition (a) of the RFP, namely that we can "read off" the effect from the cause.

With respect to condition (b) – that we be incapable of conceiving the cause without the effect – Kail notes that Hume provides a psychological explanation. He quotes the following passage:

'Tis natural for men, in their common and careless way of thinking, to imagine they perceive a connexion betwixt such objects as they have constantly found together; and because custom has render'd it difficult to separate the ideas, they are apt to fancy such a separation to be in itself impossible and absurd. (T 1.4.3.9)

In this passage, Hume seems to suggest that conceiving of the cause without the effect is *psychologically* impossible. Kail claims that this satisfies condition (b) of the RFP, that we be incapable of conceiving the cause without the effect. Hence, conditions (a) and (b) of RTF are fulfilled, and so Kail contends that Hume does have room within his meaning-empiricism for a thought of thick causal power.

The problem with Kail's interpretation is that the thought of thick causal power isn't about the cause and effect being *psychologically* impossible to separate, but that they be *conceptually* impossible. Even if it's psychologically impossible, this doesn't mean that it's conceptually impossible. And indeed Hume denies that it's

conceptually impossible to separate the cause from the effect. Thus, while Kail is correct to note that the determination of the mind "mimics" a thought of thick causation, such mimicking doesn't amount to a necessary connection. Thus, Kail hasn't provided reasons for thinking that Hume has room within his theory of ideas for a thought about thick causation.

Retrospective Reinterpretation

Thus far, we've seen that proponents of the New Hume – most notably, Strawson – appeal to a number of passages in which Hume seemingly refers to "secret powers" and "hidden connections" as evidence of their interpretation. Winkler (1991), in turn, claims that these seeming avowals of causal realism aren't as unambiguous as one might think. For instance, he (1991: 544) claims that most of these seeming avowals occur prior to Hume's two definitions of a cause at EHU 7. Accordingly, Winkler suggests that these avowals need to be *retrospectively reinterpreted* in light of Hume's later two definitions. Thus, at EHU 8, Hume writes that:

It is universally allowed that matter, in all its operations, is actuated by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause that no other effect, in such particular circumstances, could possibly have resulted from it. (EHU 8.4)

But, Winkler notes, now that Hume's two definitions are behind us, Hume's quick to note his meaning in making this claim. He writes:

Our idea... of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *reference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexions. (EHU 8.6)

As further evidence that Hume wants his seeming avowals retrospectively reinterpreted, Winkler points to an informative footnote. At EHU 4, and thus prior to his two definitions, Hume writes:

[N]otwithstanding this ignorance of natural powers and principles, we always presume, when we see like sensible qualities, that they have like secret powers, and expect that effects, similar to those which we have experienced, will follow from them. (EHU 4.16)

Hume addends the following footnote to this passage:

The word, *power*, is here used in a loose and popular sense. The more accurate explication of it would give additional evidence to this argument. See Section 7. (EHU 4.16, fn. 7)⁹

Thus Winkler contends that when we see putative avowals of causal realism – when we see references to hidden powers and secret connections – we need to read Hume’s later account of causation back into these passages.

When we reinterpret Hume’s seeming avowals in this way, Winkler contends that the evidence for causal realism disappears. Consider, for instance, the following passage:

As nature has taught us the use of our limbs, without giving us the knowledge of the muscles and nerves, by which they are actuated; so has she implanted in us an instinct, which carries forward the thought in a correspondent course to that which she has established among external objects; though we are ignorant of those powers and forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends. (EHU 5.22)

Strawson claims that this counts as “decisive” evidence that Hume believes in thick causation (2014: 185),

⁹ See also Kenneth Winkler, “Causal Realism and Hume’s Revisions of the *Enquiry*,” unpublished.

as he appears to suggest that he's assuming secret powers which explain the regularities we observe. But Winkler contends that when this passage is reinterpreted in light of Hume's settled position, we get a very different picture.

According to Winkler, this passage "can be read as saying that we are ignorant of certain *objects* whose behavior is constantly conjoined with the behavior of the objects we observe" (1991: 547). In short, Hume isn't claiming that there's some power *X*, in the natural world. He's only claiming that there's some *X* that, if we could discover it, we would see that it's constantly conjoined to the effects that we do perceive. Thus, for Winkler, Hume's merely claiming that our knowledge of *what* the cause is may become more sophisticated, although what *constitutes* a cause remains the same.

Consider, for a second example, Hume's claims about a "secret opposition of contrary causes":

A peasant can give no better reason for the stopping of any clock or watch than to say that it does not commonly go right: But an artist easily perceives, that the same force in the spring or pendulum has always the same influence on the wheels; but fails of its usual effect, perhaps by reason of a grain of dust, which puts a stop to the whole movement. From the observation of several parallel instances, philosophers form a maxim, that the connexion between

all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes. (EHU 8.13)

In speaking of a "secret opposition of contrary causes," in this passage, Hume's referring to something in the cause that we currently can't discern. In addition, his point is that if we could observe it, we would see that it's constantly conjoined with the regularities that we do observe.

Thus, Winkler seems to be right in many cases. When we retrospectively reinterpret Hume's seeming avowals, he isn't referring to thick causal connections. However, while Winkler's reinterpretation seems to work in some instances, perhaps most instances, it doesn't seem to work with all passages. At times, Hume does seem to be referring to secret powers or connections. Consider, for instance, the following passages, in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*:

Chance has no place, on any hypothesis, sceptical or religious. Everything is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws. And were the inmost essence of things laid open to us, we should then discover the scene, of which, at present, we can have no idea. Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for

them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition. (DNR 6.12)

and

It is observed by arithmeticians, that the products of 9 compose always 9 or some lesser product of 9, if you add together all the characters, of which any of the former products are composed. Thus, of 18, 27, 36, which are products of 9, you make 9 by adding 1 to 8, 2 to 7, 3 to 6. Thus, 369 is a product also of nine; and if you add 3, 6, and 9, you make 18, a lesser product of 9. To a superficial observer, so wonderful a regularity may be admir'd as the effect either of chance, or design; but a skillful algebraist immediately concludes it to be the work of necessity, and demonstrates, that it must for ever result from the nature of these numbers. Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition? (DNR 9.10)

These passages clearly indicate that Hume isn't merely referring to some X that, when discovered, will be seen to be constantly conjoined to the regularities that we observe. Rather, he's referring to some X that, if discovered, would reveal the conceptual necessities that exist between causes and effects. Thus, while Winkler's reinterpretation of Hume's putative avowals of secret powers and hidden

connections correctly interprets some of the passages in Hume as not expressing belief in thick causation, his interpretation isn't sufficient to interpret all seeming "thick causation" passages as not really such.

A Footnote

A second objection, also advanced by Winkler, is that at one point Hume seems to deny that we can have a relative idea of power. The relevant passage is:

The "By Which" Passage (BWP)

[I]f a cause be defined, *that which produces any thing*; it is easy to observe, that *producing* is synonymous to *causing*. In like manner, if a cause be defined, *that by which any thing exists*; this is liable to the same objection. For what is meant by these words, *by which*? (EHU 8.25, fn. 19)

Here Hume seems to identify a relative idea similar to Strawson's: "*that which produces anything*" or "*that by which any thing exists*" (ibid.). But he claims that the "by which" – or Strawson's "in virtue of" – relation is meaningless, and thus one can't form a relative idea of thick causal power.

Hume's point in this passage echoes a criticism put forward by Berkeley in connection with his discussion of "notions." With respect to material substance, Berkeley writes:

But let us examine a little the received opinion. It is said extension is a mode or accident of matter, and that matter is a *substratum* that supports it. Now I desire that you would explain what is meant by matter's *supporting* extension: say you, I have no idea of matter, and therefore cannot explain it. I answer that you have no positive idea, yet if you have any meaning at all, you must at least have a relative idea of matter.¹⁰

Thus, it's argued that Hume can't admit a relative idea of thick causation, because a relative idea is a "relation without a relative," and Hume denies any such relation in the case of thick causal connections. This is a serious objection that New Humeans - or at least those that rely on a relative idea of causal power - haven't adequately addressed. I shall have more to say about this aspect in Chapter Six.

In recent years, however, a new objection to the New Hume interpretation has emerged in the literature. I turn to this in the next section.

¹⁰ *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I, 16.

Liberty and Necessity

In recent years, Peter Millican (2009) has put forward an argument in defense of the Old Hume.¹¹ His argument relies on Hume's discussion of liberty and necessity – that is, on Hume's discussion surrounding the issue of free will. In this section, I consider Millican's argument.

Hume discusses the issue of free will at T 2.3.1, EHU 8, and briefly in the *Abstract*. For ease of exposition, I will focus largely on the *Enquiry*. There are no noteworthy differences between the three accounts.

Hume begins his discussion by noting that, in disputes that have persisted for a long time, we should expect some agreement on the meaning of our terms, and so be able to “pass from words to the true and real subject of the controversy” (EHU 8.1). He explains:

For how easy may it seem to give exact definitions of the terms employed in our reasoning, and make these definitions, not the mere sound of words, the object of future scrutiny and examination? But if we consider the matter more narrowly, we shall be apt to draw a quite opposite conclusion. From this circumstance alone, that a controversy has long been kept a foot, and remains still undecided, we may presume, that

¹¹ Cf. Millican (2007).

there is some ambiguity in the expression, and that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy... [N]othing, one would think, could preserve the dispute so long undecided, but some ambiguous expressions, which keep the antagonists still at a distance, and hinder them from grappling with each other. (ibid.)

Thus Hume claims that the dispute over free will has persisted because the terms are ambiguous. The various sides have been talking past one another.

But then Hume seems to make a contrary claim. He soon claims that in fact we're all "of the same opinion" on this matter (EHU 8.2), and that the dispute has "hitherto turned merely upon words" (EHU 8.3).

[A]ll mankind, both learned and ignorant, have always been of the same opinion with regard to this subject, and that few intelligible definitions would have immediately put an end to the whole controversy... I hope, therefore, to make it appear, that all men have ever agreed in the doctrines both of necessity and of liberty, according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms; and that the whole controversy has hitherto turned merely upon words. (EHU 8.2-3)

Hume appears to be making contrary claims. First, he seems to claim that disputants in this debate are talking past one another; the words we employ are ambiguous. On the other hand, Hume claims that we're all "of the same opinion"

on the matter (*ibid.*). But if the terms are ambiguous, how can we all be of the same opinion? This is a problem that needs to be addressed, but I won't be in a position to do so until Chapter Six.

Hume continues his discussion by noting what necessity *in nature* is commonly thought to consist in.

It is universally allowed, that matter, in all its operations, is actuated by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause, that no other effect, in such particular circumstances, could possibly have resulted from it. (EHU 8.4)

But he quickly observes that this isn't the correct account of necessity. Instead, he presents his regularity theory of causation and his account of causal inference. In short, Hume provides his two definitions of a cause. Thus, beyond "the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity, or connexions" (EHU 8.5).

Having done so, Hume spends a number of pages showing how human volition satisfies these two definitions. Indeed, he claims that everyone acknowledges that voluntary human actions satisfy these two conditions. Thus he writes:

It is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: The same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit; these passions, mixed in various degrees, and distributes through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprizes, which have ever been observed among mankind. (EHU 8.7)¹²

His point is that everyone agrees that there's a constant conjunction between our motives and actions, and that these constant conjunctions lead us to predict things about our behavior and mental states. Thus, in addition to causation in *nature*, there's causation in *human nature*.

Despite this universal agreement that voluntary human actions are necessary, Hume wonders why this hasn't settled the matter. He writes:

I have frequently considered, what could possibly be the reason, why all mankind, though they have ever, without hesitation, acknowledged the doctrine of necessity, in their whole practice and reasoning, have yet discovered such a reluctance to acknowledge it in words, and have rather shown a propensity, in all ages, to profess the contrary opinion. (EHU 8.21)

¹² He presents his account of how voluntary human actions are explicable in terms of constant conjunction at EHU 7-17, and how voluntary human actions ground a customary inference at EHU 17-20.

In other words, despite the fact that everyone agrees on the doctrine of necessity, Hume wonders why some have argued against it. His explanation is that a stronger conception of necessity has entrapped them – thick necessity.

[M]en still entertain a strong propensity to believe, that they penetrate farther into the powers of nature, and perceive something like a necessary connexion between the cause and the effect. When again they turn their reflections towards the operations of their own minds, and *feel* no such connexions of the motive and the action; they are thence apt to suppose, that there is a difference between the effects, which result from material force, and those which arise from thought and intelligence. (ibid.)

In other words, Hume claims that since people associate necessity with thick necessity, when they introspect and find that they appear to have the power of contrary choice, they claim that voluntary human actions aren't governed by necessities. Instead, they claim to be free.

But Hume then seeks to show that, in fact, advocates of liberty actually have nothing else in mind than his own account of causation in terms of constant conjunction and a customary transition.

[W]hat is meant by *liberty*, when applied to voluntary actions? We cannot surely mean, that actions have so little connexions with motives, inclinations, and circumstances, that one does not follow with a certain degree of uniformity from the other, and that one affords no inference by which we can conclude the existence of the other. [T]hese are plain and acknowledged matters of fact. (EHU 8.23)

In addition, he claims that the alternative to his view of necessity is mere chance, and that no one thinks that freedom consists in mere chance.¹³ Accordingly, he claims that

all mankind have ever agreed in the doctrine of liberty as well as in necessity, and that the whole dispute, in this respect also, has been hitherto merely verbal. (ibid.)

This is Hume's discussion of liberty and necessity. He claims, therefore, that the dispute is "merely verbal," and that in fact all have agreed that voluntary human actions are just a matter of constant conjunction and a customary transition of the mind.

¹³ Hume thus endorses compatibilism. He advocates for a "hypothetical liberty" (EHU 8.23) according to which we are free if we can act on our wishes, so long as we're "not a prisoner and in chains" (ibid.).

Accordingly, Millican contends that Hume's discussion on this topic presents a problem for the New Hume interpretation:

For the New Humean position is clearly that of Hume's opponent, who claims that there is something more to "genuine necessity" than is captured by Hume's two definitions (namely an AP power or whatever). Hume takes himself to have a quick and decisive answer to this claim, in denying that there can be any such conception. (2009: 698)

Thus Millican argues that, if the New Hume interpretation is correct, then the debate over liberty and necessity can't be "merely verbal." But Hume of course claims that it is. So Hume doesn't think that there's any idea of thick causation.

Thus Hume's main argument concerning "liberty and necessity" utterly explodes the New Humeans' position. For Hume is here denying exactly what they assert, namely, that we can coherently ascribe to things some kind of "upper-case" Causation or "thick" necessity that goes beyond his two definitions. If we could indeed do this, then his imagined opponent would be able to ascribe that thick necessity to matter but not to minds, and thus undermine Hume's claim of equivalence between the necessities of the two domains, which is the entire point of his argument. (2009: 699)

I concur with Millican that Hume's discussion of free will and necessity is problematic for the New Humeans. In Chapter Six, I shall revisit the above issue.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I noted the main lines of discussion surrounding our putative idea of thick causation. The traditional interpretation is that Hume's theory of ideas has no room for such an idea, whereas more recently some commentators have argued the opposite.

Most notable in this regard is Strawson, who claims that Hume admits a relative idea of thick causation. In this way Hume can refer to thick causal connections, the nature of which we can't adequately grasp. I presented numerous objections to this view, and assessed them.

In addition, I presented Kail's weaker version of skeptical realism. And, finally, I discussed Hume on the debate over liberty and necessity, and presented Millican's criticism of skeptical realism, which is based on Hume's discussion.

In the next chapter, I begin the journey toward a solution to the nasty problem, and an overall assessment of

the New Hume debate. As we shall see, central to adequately understanding Hume is an appreciation of the role of clear and distinct perception in his thought.

Chapter Five

Clear and Distinct Perception in Hume

Introduction

In Chapter One, we saw that Hume faces a nasty problem relevant to his discussion of causation. We saw, for instance, that Hume's committed to our having and our lacking an idea of thick causation. In this chapter, I argue that a fully adequate answer to this problem requires a proper grasp of the role of clear and distinct perception in Hume's philosophy.

It's a striking fact that no one, no commentary on or critic of Hume, addresses the role of clear and distinct perception in his philosophy. At most one will find rare, isolated remarks; remarks that merely intimate some latent use of the distinction in Hume.¹ Nonspecialists on Hume may not find this surprising, as the notion of clear and distinct perception seems as far removed from Hume as the principle of utility is from the categorical imperative. But my inclination is that this is more a matter of neglect than ignorance, on the specialists' part.

¹ Examples include Galen Strawson (2014: xi), D. Tyerium Lightner (1997: 114), Daniel Flage (2007: 146), and P. J. E. Kail (2003: 49). A more focused analysis is provided in Kenneth Winkler, "Causal Realism and Hume's Revisions in the Enquiry," unpublished, particularly in relation to Hume's growing dissatisfaction with the obscurity of Locke. This list is by no means exhaustive.

My aim in this chapter is to show the important role that clear and distinct perception plays in Hume's philosophy. I argue that Hume takes our impressions to be clear and distinct, whereas our ideas are obscure and confused. Hume's *modus operandi*, moreover, is to render our ideas clear and distinct by discerning the impressions from which they're copied. This interpretation, therefore, attributes prime of place to Hume's copy principle.

So characterized, Hume appears to reverse the rationalist project proposed by Descartes. Descartes wants to turn away from the senses (which he regards as obscure and confused) and toward the ideas of the intellect (which he considers to be clear and distinct). This contrast between Hume and Descartes, however, is only partly accurate. In the remainder of the chapter, I shall explain the extent to which Hume rejects the project inaugurated by Descartes: it may come as a surprise that Hume isn't as far off from Descartes as one might initially think. For these reasons, I begin with Descartes.

Descartes's Meditations

Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy* contains six Meditations, each written from the perspective of a fictional meditator. This work constitutes a nice summary of Descartes's overall project. Since Meditations I and II are the most important for our purposes, I shall confine my main line of discussion to them.

In Meditation I, the meditator begins by noting the many falsehoods he's believed since childhood. As a result, he expresses his desire to place his beliefs on a stable, indeed unshakeable, foundation, and so he adopts the method of assuming everything to be false that isn't known with certainty. If a proposition can be doubted, he says, then belief in it should be suspended (CSM II 12: AT VII 18). In this way, the meditator hopes to find some indubitable Archimedean starting point, upon which he can securely hoist his subsequent beliefs (CSM II 16: AT VII 24).

In an effort to discern what can be known indubitably, the meditator introduces three reasons for doubt. The first reason for doubt is that "from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once" (CSM II 12: AT VII 18). It sometimes happens, for instance, that when viewed at a distance, round buildings look square, or

sticks look bent when submerged in water. Thus the fact that the senses are fallible constitutes the meditator's first reason for doubt.

The meditator doesn't think this form of skepticism sweeps away large portions of his belief system, however. For while the senses may deceive us occasionally "with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance" (ibid.), there are numerous instances in which doubt about the senses doesn't arise. Such examples include "that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands" (CSM II 13: AT VII 18). Only mad people would doubt such things, claims the meditator, and "I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them [that is, mad people] as a model for myself" (CSM II 13: AT VII 19). Thus, while the fallibility of the senses provides some reason for doubt, such grounds aren't devastating.

This brings the meditator to his second and more troublesome reason for doubt:

As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am

here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! [...] As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep. (ibid.)

While the first reason for doubt isn't reason enough to doubt that "I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire," such claims don't survive the Dream Argument. There appears to be no criterion by which one can distinguish dream-perceptions from wakeful-perceptions, and so the meditator can't be certain that he's in his dressing-gown, sitting by the fire.

But again, the doubt occasioned by the Dream Argument has its limitations, for the meditator observes that "it must be admitted that certain... simpler and more universal things are real" (CSM II 14: AT VII 20). These simpler and more general things include "arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not" (ibid.). Indeed, the meditator holds that the simpler and more universal things are real even in the midst of a dream. Thus a square has no more than four sides, and two plus three equals five, "whether I am awake or asleep" (ibid.).

Consequently, the meditator has found a means of escape from the skeptics initial two reasons for doubt. But problems come to a head when the meditator considers the third and most devastating ground for doubt:

[F]irmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? (CSM II 14: AT VII 21).

This third argument – the Deceiving God Argument – challenges the credentials of what's taken to be our most secure and perfect knowledge. Not even mathematical knowledge is immune from doubt. By the end of Meditation I, then, the meditator has been reduced to a state of indecision, uncertainty, and universal doubt.

Charles Larmore has observed that the skeptical arguments introduced by Descartes in Meditation I aren't original to him, and that the significance of these arguments has more to do with the "manner in which they are

deployed" (2006: 18). As he emphasizes, Descartes's aim is to place pressure on the contention that the senses are sources of certainty and knowledge. According to Larmore (2006: 19), Descartes's aim is to challenge the Aristotelian empiricism prevalent at the time, by showing that it leads to skepticism; and thus it's the Aristotelian who is ultimately reduced to uncertainty.²

As evidence of this reading, consider that prior to offering his three reasons for doubt, the meditator observes that "[w]hatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses" (CSM II 17: AT VII 18). In addition, in the Synopsis that precedes Meditation I, Descartes writes that:

Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions, and providing the easiest route by which the mind may be led away from the senses. (CSM II 9: AT VII 12)

Thus Descartes believes that the senses distract the mind from attaining truth and certainty, and thus the aim of his method of doubt is to force his readers away from

² Larmore (2006: 19) cites Aristotle's *De Anima*, "[S]ince no one can ever learn anything without the use of perception, it is necessary even in speculative thought to have some mental image to contemplate" (432a7). It's just such reliance on sense perception that Descartes takes issue with.

the senses. In addition, and while Larmore doesn't make this explicit, it's clear that Descartes more generally intends to stop us from relying on *images*, whether they are presented via sensation or the imagination.³

Having done so, Descartes proceeds in Meditation II to show how certainty and knowledge can be attained. This is achieved via the perceptions of the intellect. Thus, famously, Descartes writes:

I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it not follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind. (CSM II 17: AT VII 25)

The meditator claims, therefore, that he clearly and distinctly perceives his own existence – that is, he clearly and distinctly perceives that he's a thinking thing.

³ This explains, for instance, the purpose of Descartes's Dream and Deceiving God Arguments. Descartes's turn away from the imagination is of course significant in light of Hume's later use of the imagination.

Accordingly, Descartes initiates a line of rationalist thought (in the early period) that privileges the perceptions of the intellect over the perceptions of the senses and the imagination. For Descartes, clear and distinct perceptions are provided by the intellect, whereas the ideas of the senses and the imagination are obscure and confused. Consider, in light of this, the meditator's discussion of a piece of wax in Meditation II.

The meditator has us "consider the things which people commonly think they understand most distinctly of all," namely "the bodies which we touch and see" (CSM II 20: AT VII 30). In the case of a piece of wax, we perceive its color, shape, and smell, alongside its other sensible properties, and falsely take ourselves to be perceiving these clearly and distinctly. When the wax is moved towards the fire and begins to melt, however, its color, shape, and smell begin to change. Nonetheless, we still regard the melted wax as the same piece of wax, and thus hold that the wax must not be identical to any of its sensible properties. The conclusion that the meditator draws from this simple example is the following:

[T]he perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination – nor has it ever been,

despite previous appearances – but of purely mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect or confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what wax consists in. (CSM II 21: AT VII 31)

Thus Descartes privileges the intellect over the senses and the imagination. The latter, of course, serve their respective roles for Descartes, but in the main it's the intellect that furnishes clear and distinct perceptions. As we shall see soon, however, Hume dispenses with the intellect as a faculty of the mind, and instead claims that clarity and distinctness reside in the senses.

However, while it's clear that Descartes believes that the senses generate confused and obscure perceptions and that the intellect provides clear and distinct perceptions, we haven't yet discussed what clarity and distinctness are for Descartes. I address this question in the next section.

Clear and Distinct Perception in Descartes

The only definition of clear and distinct perception that Descartes offers is presented in his *Principles of Philosophy*.

I call a perception "clear" when it is present and accessible to the attentive mind – just as we say that we see something clearly when it is present to the eye's gaze and stimulates it with a sufficient degree of strength and accessibility. I call a perception "distinct" if, as well as being clear, it is so sharply separated from all other perceptions that it contains within itself only what is clear. (CSM I 207-9: AT IIIA 22)

In other words, a perception is clear just in case it's "present and accessible to the attentive mind," and distinct just in case it's (a) clear and (b) "sharply separated" from all other perceptions. It follows, then, that while distinctness entails clarity, clarity doesn't entail distinctness.⁴

As an example of a clear but confused perception, Descartes provides the following case:

[W]hen someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. Hence a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear. (CSM I 208: AT VIIIA 22)

⁴ Perceptions which aren't clear are obscure, and perceptions which aren't distinct are confused.

In this case, one's perception of pain is clear, but when one judges it (or supposes it) as existing in the body, its confused.

While Descartes presents this helpful example to illustrate distinctness, his discussion of clarity is, so to speak, less than clear. In the Fifth Set of Objections, for instance, Gassendi argues that Descartes lacks a suitable criterion for distinguishing clear and distinct ideas from those that only appear to be clear and distinct. Descartes admitted, after all, that there was a time when he regarded sensory ideas to be clear and distinct, when in fact they weren't.

James Humber (1989), however, has convincingly argued that Descartes's criterion of clear and distinct perception is none other than his method for producing such perceptions.⁵ In Meditation II and *The Search for Truth*, for instance, Descartes seeks to get clear on what the term "I" denotes. His initial response in both works is that "I" denotes a man, but he then contends that this answer is obscure. Moreover, Descartes claims that the obscurity of this answer stems from an *inattentive* mind. But a clear perception, Descartes explicitly states, is one that's

⁵ This is plausible in light of the fact that Descartes was preoccupied with the importance of method. See his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and *Discourse on Method*.

present and accessible to an *attentive* mind. And again, in *The Search for Truth*, Eudoxus asks Polyander what he is, and Polyander replies that he's a man. Eudoxus, however, responds:

*You are not paying attention to my question, and the reply you give me, however simple it may seem to you, would plunge you into very difficult and complicated problems, were I to press you even a little. If, for example, I were to ask even Epistemon himself what a man is, and he gave the stock reply of the scholastics, that a man is a "rational animal," and if, in order to explain these two terms (which are just as obscure as the former), he were to take us further, through all the levels which are called "metaphysical," we should be dragged into a maze from which it would be impossible to escape. (CSM II 410: AT X 515-6)*⁶

Thus, to say that "I" denotes a man, or to provide the answer of "rational animal" to the question, "What is man?" is to give the "stock reply of the scholastics." Such responses, Descartes says, drag us into a philosophical maze, one that's "impossible to escape." In short, Eudoxus (and by implication Descartes) is arguing that the standard response of the scholastics isn't conducive to *ascertaining the truth*; indeed, Eudoxus thinks it prevents us from attaining that end.⁷

⁶ Emphasis mine.

⁷ The importance of discerning new truths was discussed in Chapter Two.

Accordingly, an attentive mind is a mind that doesn't give the conditioned response, but rather considers and attends to the content of one's ideas. As Humber (1989: 488) notes, Polyander is inattentive because he's attending solely to the words or terms, and not to the meanings of such terms. His response is thus superficial, for "when Polyander says that he is a man he is not thinking about *what* he is saying, i.e., he is not paying attention to *content*. Rather, he is merely hearing words and responding as he had been trained from youth to reply" (ibid). Since Polyander has no clear understanding of what he's saying, he can have no assurance that what he's claiming is true. As Descartes puts it:

[B]ecause of the use of language, we tie all our concepts to the words used to express them; and when we store the concepts in our memory we always simultaneously store the corresponding words. Later on we find the words easier to recall than the things; and because of this it is very seldom that our concept of a thing is so distinct that we can separate it totally from our concept of the words involved. The thoughts of almost all people are more concerned with words than with things; and as a result people very often give their assent to words they do not understand, thinking they once understood them, or that they got them from others who did understand them correctly... [W]hat has been said appears to be sufficiently intelligible to help us distinguish those of our concepts which are clear and distinct from those which are obscure and confused. (CSM I 221: AT VIIIA 38)

For Descartes, then, an attentive mind is a mind that attends to its ideas, and not merely to the words that are employed.

This, in fact, is a recurrent theme among early modern philosophers. Berkeley, for instance, frequently emphasizes the distracting nature of words. He writes:

Unless we take care to clear the first principles of knowledge, from the embarrass and delusion of words, we may make infinite reasonings upon them to no purpose; we may draw consequences from consequences, and be never the wiser. The farther we go, we shall only lose our selves the more irrecoverably, and be the deeper entangled in difficulties and mistakes. Whoever therefore designs to read the following sheets, I entreat him to make my words the occasion of his own thinking, and endeavor to attain the same train of thoughts in reading, that I had in writing them. By this means it will be easy for him to discover the truth or falsity of what I say. He will be out of all danger of being deceived by my words, and I do not see how he can be led into an error by considering his own naked, undisguised ideas.⁸

Thus Berkeley, like Descartes, warns us of the danger of words, and calls us to consider our own "naked" ideas.

In sum, Descartes claims that perceptions are clear to the extent that they are present and accessible to the

⁸ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Introduction 25.

attentive mind – in other words, the ideas are perspicuous to those who aren't led astray by the words associated with them. In the next section I indicate the importance of this notion for Hume.

Hume's Microscope of the Moral Sciences

In the previous two sections, I indicated the role that clear and distinct perception plays in Descartes's philosophy. In this section, I indicate the important role that clear and distinct perception plays in Hume's philosophy.

In order to make clear that the notion is of moment in Hume, I turn to his conceivability principle. Hume sometimes states this principle in a loose way, and sometimes in a rigorous way. Thus, at one point, he describes it as follows: "*whatever we can imagine, is possible*" (T 1.4.6.35). It's important to recognize, however, that this is a loose formulation of the conceivability principle. When Hume states it more rigorously, he explicitly applies it only to clear and distinct perceptions.

Consider a more rigorous formulation of the principle:

“’Tis an establish’d maxim in metaphysics, that whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible.” (T 1.2.2.8)

In this formulation, Hume limits the scope of the principle to clear perceptions: everything that’s clearly conceivable is possible. This, however, isn’t his final word on the principle. He soon further qualifies it, adding a condition of distinctness. I take the following to be his settled account: “Whatever can be conceiv’d by a clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence” (T 1.2.4.11).⁹

These different formulations of his conceivability principle indicate that Hume sometimes writes loosely, and that in the background is the caveat that his principle applies only to clear and distinct perceptions. It’s important to keep this in mind, for Hume doesn’t always state his views as rigorously as a referee of a journal of philosophy in the twenty-first century would insist on.¹⁰

⁹ Hume even extends this principle to *manners of perception*: “Whatever is clearly conceiv’d may exist; and whatever is clearly conceiv’d, after any manner, may exist after the same manner. This is one principle, which has been already acknowledg’d” (T 1.4.5.5).

¹⁰ Hume also sometimes uses terms that are synonymous with “clear” and “distinct,” but which aren’t always recognized as such. In this he’s following Locke. For instance, Locke uses words like “exact,” “precise,” or “determinate” to indicate that a perception is clear and distinct. In his *Epistle to the Reader* (added to the fourth edition of his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*), Locke’s explicit that his use

There is clear evidence, then, that Hume recognizes and employs the concept of clear and distinct perception. But how central is the notion to his project? In order to gauge its importance for Hume, the Introduction to the *Treatise* needs to be considered.

Hume opens the Introduction by noting the "present imperfect condition of the sciences" (T Intro. 2). Indeed, even a casual observer "may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within" (ibid.). Thus Hume claims that the present state of philosophy is in disarray. He offers a litany of charges against the status quo.

Principles taken upon trust, consequences lamely deduc'd from them, want of coherence in the parts, and of evidence in the whole, these are every where to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seem to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself... There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision. Disputes are multiply'd, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are manag'd with the greatest warmth, as if every thing was certain. (T Intro. 1-2)

of "determinate" is synonymous with "clear and distinct." Hume, too, often uses terms like "exact," "precise," and "determinate." It's not clear whether he always uses these as synonyms of "clear and distinct," but at times he seems to.

Hume echoes this assessment in the first *Enquiry*. In its very first section, for instance, he contrasts an “abstruse” or speculative kind of philosophy with a more practical and down-to-earth kind of philosophy. His aim in the section is to discern whether it’s worth the time to pursue more speculative philosophy. He notes that many people decry the speculative philosophy because it’s “painful and fatiguing” (EHU 1.10); indeed, it’s painful and fatiguing because it’s immersed in obscurity. Hume explains that the “chief obstacle, therefore, to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and the ambiguity of the terms” (EHU 7.2). Elsewhere, Hume claims that “moral ideas are apt, without extreme care, to fall into obscurity and confusion” (EHU 7.2),¹¹ and that “[f]ew men can think long without running into a confusion of ideas, and mistaking one for another” (EHU 9.5, fn. 20). His aim, therefore, is “to bring light from obscurity” (EHU 1.10).

Hume then opens the *Enquiry* by noting that the aim of his project is to bring clarity to our metaphysical discourse. In addition, for Hume, the most obscure and uncertain of concepts in metaphysics is our idea of *causation*. Thus, he writes:

¹¹ By “moral ideas” Hume means ideas about moral beings, such as human beings.

There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of *power, force, energy, or necessary connection*, of which it is every moment necessary for us to treat in all our disquisitions. We shall, therefore, endeavour, in this section, to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms, and thereby remove some part of that obscurity, which is so much complained of in this species of philosophy. (EHU 7.3)¹²

Since the idea of causal power is obscure, the *meaning* of the term must be more precisely determined. But the meaning of a word is supplied by its associated idea, and thus to render "causation" more precise is to more clearly perceive the associated idea. In addition, Hume suggests that there's a division between two kinds of meaning: precise and imprecise meaning. As we shall see, Hume also calls this distinct or indistinct meaning, depending on the distinctness of the associated idea.

How, then, is this to be done? How are we to render our meaning more precise? Just as the new concepts and instruments of science employed by Newton enables advances in the realm of the natural world, the empirical realm, so new conceptual instruments and principles employed by Hume can be used with the aim of making advances in the newfound

¹² This "species" of philosophy, of course, is the speculative philosophy mentioned at EHU 1.

science of human nature. What Hume calls his "microscope of the moral sciences" is simply his copy principle, and Hume claims that this principle can help render our ideas clear and distinct.

[W]hen we have pushed up definitions to the most simple ideas, and find still some ambiguity and obscurity; what resource are we then possessed of? By what invention can we throw light upon these ideas, and render them altogether precise and determinate to our intellectual view? Produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied. These impressions are all strong and sensible. They admit not of ambiguity. They are not only placed in a full light themselves, but may throw light on their correspondent ideas, which lie in obscurity. And by this means, we may, perhaps, attain a new microscope or species of optics, by which, in the moral sciences, the most minute, and most simple ideas may be so enlarged as to fall readily under our apprehension, and be equally known with the grossest and most sensible ideas, that can be the object of our enquiry. (EHU 7.4; cf. EHU 2.9 and EHU 8.25)

By applying his "microscope" to obscure ideas, we can more clearly and distinctly discern their exact nature. In other words, progress can be made.

In the background here is Hume's belief that impressions are all clear and distinct, whereas ideas are "naturally faint and obscure" (EHU 2.9). But, since ideas are copies of impressions, if we apply the microscope and

discern their origin in experience, we can render our ideas clear and distinct.

Thus, "since all impressions are clear and precise, the ideas, which are copy'd from them, must be of the same nature, and can never but from our fault, contain any thing so dark and intricate" (T 1.3.1.7). Indeed, "[t]he examination of the impression bestows a like clearness on the idea; and the examination of the idea bestows a like clearness on all our reasoning" (T 1.3.2.4). This is the basis of Hume's methodology in a nutshell.

So not only does Hume have a role for the notion of clear and distinct perception in his thought, it's central to his most pivotal empiricist principle: the copy principle. In the next section, I indicate how the role of clear and distinct perception helps us understand his test for meaning.

Impression Hunts

In Chapter One it was noted that Hume's meaning-empiricism – the view that the meaning of a term is its associated idea, which is grounded in experience – led to Hume's well-known test for meaning:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* (EHU 2.21)

Hume claims here that the way to tell whether a word lacks an associated idea is to determine whether it has an associated impression. In other words, in order to know whether some term has an associated idea, we need to go on an impression hunt.

The notion of clear and distinct perception can help us grasp the nature of these impression hunts. Consider, for example, Hume's impression hunt for our idea of necessary connection. In general, commentators have understood an impression hunt as an examination of the contexts in which the associated term's employed. These contexts constitute "neighboring fields." Thus Hume considers the causal maxim and causal inference, because, as far as "necessary connection" is concerned, they reside in neighboring fields.

This procedure is as fine as it goes, but Hume needn't regard an impression hunt as restricted to contexts in which the word is used. Since Hume recognizes and employs a

clear and distinct/obscure and confused perception distinction, we can also understand impression hunts as informed with this distinction. In short, if for some word we have an obscure or confused idea of its meaning, our obscure or confused idea serves as our *analysandum*, and the impression hunt aims to reduce this obscurity and confusion. The impression hunts help to more clearly understand and demarcate the concept.

As an example, consider Hume's discussion of substance. Locke, as we've seen, admitted a relative idea of substance_t. But he also held that substance_t was something "we know not what"¹³ and of which "we have no clear" or "distinct *Idea*."¹⁴ At most, we have only an "obscure and relative *Idea* of Substance in general."¹⁵ Hume's view is similar. He notes that philosophers who believe in the existence of substance_t deny that it's a color, or a sound, or a taste, and so on. But they must have some idea of what a substance_t is. Hume's point isn't to deny an idea of substance_t. His point is to claim that the only distinct idea of substance is an idea of substance_b.

Some commentators have suggested that Hume must have some "bare" idea of necessary connection, one that serves

¹³ *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II.xxiii.2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II.xxiii.4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II.xxiii.3.

as the object of his polemic. Janet Broughton (2007), for instance, claims that Hume admits a bare idea of necessary connection – which isn't identical to the thin idea of necessary connection that he settles on – which is the aim of all of our studies. She cites this passage from Hume:

We wou'd not willingly stop before we are acquainted with that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect; that tie, which connects them together; and that efficacious quality, on which the tie depends. This is our aim in all our studies and reflections... (T 1.4.7.5)

Based on such remarks, Broughton claims that Hume admits an idea of thick causation. It's this idea that serves as his philosophical target. Likewise Peter Kail observes that "Hume's negative arguments... actually imply a certain anemic grasp of causal powers" (2007: xxxiii).

The point to observe is that the clear and distinct/obscure and confused perception distinction can help us make sense of these claims. Hume wishes to render our obscure and confused ideas clear and distinct.

Complicating the Picture

In the previous section, I argued that Hume puts clear and distinct perception to considerable use. Impressions – which are our sensations, passions, and emotions – are clear and distinct; and our ideas are rendered clear and distinct by discerning the impressions from which they're copied. In this way, Hume reverses the rationalist project of Descartes, who held that the ideas of the intellect provide clear and distinct perceptions, whereas the senses provide obscure and confused perceptions.

However, this characterization is too simplistic.¹⁶ As it happens, Descartes has a place for clear and distinct sensations, and in this respect Hume isn't as far removed from Descartes as one might think.

Marleen Rozemund (2006), for instance, contends that Descartes both broadens and narrows the conception of the mind prevalent in the Aristotelianism of his time. According to Rozemund, the scholastics believed that the intellect and the will alone belong to the soul or mind, and that the senses and the imagination inhere in the soul-body composite (2006: 50). In support of this, consider this passage from Aquinas:

¹⁶ See Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (1992: 371) for a similar point.

Certain powers are related to the soul alone as their subject, such as the intellect and the will. And such powers necessarily remain in the soul when the body is destroyed. But other powers inhere in the composite as their subject, such as all the powers of the sensitive and nutritive parts.¹⁷

Thus, for Aquinas, only the intellect and the will properly belong to the soul alone, whereas the sensitive and the nutritive powers reside in the composite of body and soul. Aquinas, of course, is working with the Aristotelian conception of the soul as consisting of three "parts." "The soul," Rozemund explains, is the principle of life, and life is manifested in a range of activities: nutrition and growth in plants; in animals, also motion and sense perception; in humans, intellectual activity and will" (2006: 49).

There are times at which Descartes seems to embrace this conception. In Meditation II, the meditator emerges from doubt by identifying himself with his intellect, and explicitly omits nutrition, movement, the imagination, and sensation as features of the mental. For instance, the meditator writes:

¹⁷ *Summa Theologicae*, I.77.8.

Nutrition or movement? But I do not now have a body, these things are nothing but imaginings. Sensation? This also does not happen without a body, and I seem to sense many things in dreams that later I notice I did not really sense. Thinking? I have found it: it is thinking; this alone cannot be taken away from me. I am, I exist, that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I think, for certainly it could happen that if I cease to think, I thereby entirely cease to be. I now do not admit anything unless it is necessarily true; I am then strictly speaking only a thinking thing, that is, a mind, spirit, *intellect* or *reason*, words whose meaning was previously unknown to me. I am real thing, and really exist, but what of kind thing? I have said it, a thinking thing. (CSM II 18: AT VII 27)

While it's tempting to interpret Descartes's claim that he's a thinking thing "in light of the broad list of mental states that includes sense perception and imagination," in fact the meditator only identifies himself with "the intellectual aspect of the scholastic soul" (2006: 51). Accordingly, Descartes seems to concede the better part of the scholastic conception, claiming that he is only an intellect; sensation, imagination, nutrition, movement, etc., are all features of the body.

But matters become more complicated once we recognize Descartes's broadening of the scholastic picture. For while sensations, imagination, movement, etc., aren't mental for Descartes, he soon backpedals:

But I am also the same who imagines; for although perhaps, as I have supposed, no imagined things are at all real, the very power of imagination does, however, really exist and is part of my thinking. And again I am the same who senses, or who notices corporeal things as if through the senses; for instance, I see light, I hear noise, I feel heat. These things are false, for I am asleep. But certain I seem to see, hear, become warm. This cannot be false, and this properly what is called sensing in me, and this strictly speaking is nothing other than thinking. (CSM II 19: AT VII 29)

It seems, then, that Descartes does include the senses and the imagination as features of the mind. Indeed, a mind for Descartes is a *res cogitans*, a thing that thinks. But elsewhere Descartes defines thought as "everything that is in us in such a way that we are immediately conscious of it. Thus all operations of the will, intellect, imagination, and the senses are thoughts" (CSM II 113: AT VII 160). In this passage, Descartes includes the senses and the imagination as features of mind, in addition to the will and the intellect. Properly speaking, then, sensation involves the ideas I have of *seeming* to see, or hear, or feel, etc. What I seem to see may be false – the object may not exist – for I may be dreaming, but I still sense. Moreover, Descartes claims that these ideas are clear and distinct.

How can we make sense of this? On one hand, I've claimed that Descartes takes the senses to be confused, and indeed this is the standard interpretation of his view: Meditation I is intended to take us away from the senses. On the other hand, Descartes claims that, properly speaking, the senses are clear and distinct. The resolution requires that we recognize that Descartes introduces three "grades" of sensation.

If we are to get a clear view of what sort of certainty attaches to the senses, we must distinguish three grades of sensory response. The first is limited to the immediate stimulation of the bodily organs by external objects; this can consist in nothing but the motion of particles of the organs, and any change of shape and position resulting from this motion. The second grade comprises all the immediate effects produced in the mind as a result of its being united with a bodily organ which is affected in this way. Such effects include the perceptions of pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, colours, sounds, taste, smell, heat, cold and the like, which arise from the union and as it were the intermingling of mind and body.. The third grade includes all the judgments about things outside us which we have been accustomed to make from our earliest years – judgments which are occasioned by the movements of these bodily organs. (CSM II 294-5: AT VII 437)

The second grade concerns the union of soul and body. It therefore has a mental and a physical part. The mental counterpart of this union includes the seemings mentioned

above, and this is sensation *properly speaking*. It's this grade of sensation that Descartes regards as clear and distinct.

Confusion only emerges in grade three. In short, it's not the seemings that are confused, but rather the third grade that introduces the possibility of confusion. Sensory perceptions are confused because they're being intermingled with body. Thus, for instance, Descartes writes that "sensations of hunger, thirst, pain and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body" (CSM II 56: AT VII 81:").

Back to Hume: Hume doesn't totally upend Descartes, but merely abstains from any discussion of the causes of our impressions. In essence, Hume begins with the mental aspect of Descartes's second grade – the senses proper. But Descartes thinks these are clear and distinct no less than Hume, for confusion emerges only when we make a judgment. For Descartes, the confusion and error is first and foremost applicable to common empirical judgments, such as "that's a cat." For Hume, the confusion and error is first and foremost applicable to metaphysical judgments, or how they "infect" common empirical judgments. Thus, Descartes

would agree that what Hume characterizes as "impressions" are, in fact, clear and distinct.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I indicated that Hume takes impressions to be clear and distinct, and that ideas can be rendered clear and distinct by discerning the impressions from which they're copied. Hume's copy principle is the basis of the latter claim. And, in fact, the copy principle is Hume's microscope; it's the means by which we can make progress in the moral sciences and thus elucidate the nature of our knowledge about the world and ourselves.

Chapter Six

The Real Hume

Introduction

In Chapter One, we saw that Hume's seemingly committed to a contradiction, that we both have and lack an idea of thick causation. In addition, New Humeans claim that Hume has room within his theory of ideas for an idea of thick causation, whereas Old Humeans contest this claim. In this chapter, I show how Hume isn't committed to a contradiction, and why the skeptical realist interpretation is incorrect.

To recap, thick causation involves a causal connection between cause and effect that has the AP property; that is, a property such that, one can infer the effect from the cause, a priori. Hume, as we've seen, denies that we have any impression-based source for this idea. In this chapter, I analyze Hume's discussion of our causal talk, in order to discern what Hume takes us to be thinking about when we putatively speak about thick causation. This will help us solve the nasty problem and see whether the New Humean interpretation is viable.

I shall argue that Hume provides – whether implicitly or explicitly – three accounts of the ideas we employ when

putatively speaking about thick causation. In the course of doing so, I indicate how the notion of clear and distinct perception factors into these three accounts.

It may prove helpful, however, to give a broad outline of what these three accounts are. Hume's first account of what we're thinking about when we are putatively thinking about thick causation is an *obscure* perception of the words that factor into our causal talk.¹ In contrast, his second and third accounts involve *confused* perceptions. In general, Hume claims that we mistakenly project our idea of the felt determination of the mind onto objects. In this case, when one speaks about a cause determining its effect, one misunderstands one's meaning in saying so. Finally, Hume claims that we're involved in confusion when we conceive of the relation of causation as a relation between ideas.

First Account: Words

Hume's initial account hasn't received much, if any, attention. It's an extremely interesting account, and it can help us solve a number of interpretative problems.

¹ I hope it goes without saying that my interest isn't solely with causal speech. I'm using "causal talk" loosely, as Hume's interest is in causal thought more generally.

When considering the nature of our causal talk, Hume writes:

Thus upon the whole we may infer, that when we talk of any being, whether of a superior or inferior nature, as endow'd with a power or force, proportion'd to any effect; when we speak of a necessary connexion betwixt objects, and suppose, that this connexion depends upon an efficacy or energy, with which any of these objects are endow'd; in all these expressions, *so apply'd*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. (T 1.3.14.14)

In this well-known passage, Hume claims that when we talk about an object as endowed with a power or force, we (i) "have really no distinct meaning," (ii) "make use only of common words," and (iii) do so without "any clear and determinate ideas" (ibid.). This, I hope, sounds familiar.

In the previous chapter it was noted that for Descartes, a perception is clear and distinct when it's perceived by an attentive mind; and that an attentive mind is a mind that attends to its ideas rather than to the words it employs. Thus, in the *Search for Truth*, Eudoxus asks Polyander what he is, and Polyander answers that he's a man. But Eudoxus responds that this is merely to "assent to words," as it's "very seldom that our concept of a thing

is so distinct that we can separate it totally from the concept of the words involved" (CSM I 221: AT VIIIA 38).

Hume's making a similar claim at T 1.3.14.14. He's claiming that when people attribute some power to an object, they're often merely making use of "common words," words without any associated ideas. He mentions, for instance, a number of cases in which we think we have an idea associated with a word, but in fact are merely substituting a synonymous word:

I begin with observing that the terms *efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion,* and *productive quality,* are all nearly synonymous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest. By this observation we reject at once all the vulgar definitions, which philosophers have given of power and efficacy; and instead of searching for an idea in these definitions, must look for it in impressions, from which it is originally deriv'd. (T 1.3.14.4)²

In this passage, Hume clearly claims that many people – philosophers among them – don't explain or clarify their terms, but merely redefine them by means of synonymous terms. It's no use searching for the idea of necessary connection "in these definitions" (*ibid.*), for there's no idea there to be had.

² Hume charges Locke with making this mistake (T 1.3.14.5).

Consider, in light of this, Hume's remarks:

The "By Which" Passage (BWP)

Thus, if a cause be defined, *that which produces any thing*; it is easy to observe, that *producing* is synonymous to *causing*. In like manner, if a cause be defined, *that by which any thing exists*; this is liable to the same objection. For what is meant by these words, *by which*? (EHU 8.25, fn. 19)

and

Shou'd any one... pretend to define a cause, by saying it is something productive of another, 'tis evident he wou'd say nothing. For what does he mean by *production*? Can he give any definition of it, that will not be the same with that of causation? If he can; I desire it may be produc'd. If he cannot; he here runs in a circle, and gives a synonymous term instead of a definition. (T 1.3.2.10)

Thus Hume claims that, when people speak of a cause as endowed with a power, they're saying something without any content – they repeat the words without knowing that they lack associated ideas. In Descartes's terms, they do so *inattentively*.

This creates a problem for New Hume interpretations that depend upon relative ideas. Unless we can have some

impression-based idea of the relation, Hume would consider the idea to be inattentive and preoccupied with words. Thus when Strawson contends thick causal connections are "that in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is," he must have impression-based source for the "in virtue of" relation, or else his words are meaningless. And it's just such an impression-based source that his words seem to lack.

Accordingly, Hume's initial account of causal talk seems to suggest that it is empty because merely circular verbiage. So as to illustrate Hume's first account of causal talk, consider the following example:

K: The moon has the power to move the tides.

Suppose that someone defines the word "power," in *K*, in the following manner:

L: "Power" is that by which the movement of the tides is constantly conjoined with the location of the moon.

This provides a synonymous definition of the term "power," as suggested by BWP. But does it give "power" a meaning?

The answer is no. The first thing to note is that Hume frequently makes claims on the order of: "we have no idea of connexion or power at all," and that "power" and "energy" are words "absolutely without any meaning" (EHU 7.26). The way to read Hume – at least at this stage of the argument – is to note that Hume admits that one can have an idea of *K*. *K* is a complex idea that contains one's idea of the moon, one's idea of the tides, and one's idea of motion, etc., as component ideas.

However, Hume also claims that a component idea that factors into *K* is the word "power," and not an idea simply annexed to this word. Thus we can have an idea of *K* – an idea which contains what people take to be an idea of thick causation – but it's an obscure idea, because it depends merely upon one's idea of a word. This isn't an idea of thick causation – one doesn't, for instance, conceive the effect following a priori from the cause. It's nothing more than an obscure idea of *what one takes to be* thick causation. Thus, when Hume claims that "we have no idea of power at all," and that "these words are absolutely without any meaning" (EHU 7.26), he's claiming that we have no

impression-based idea associated with the word "power," not that we lack an idea of *K*.

This discussion also helps us see why Hume considers the debate over liberty and necessity to be "merely verbal." Hume's point is that proponents of necessity and proponents of liberty have the very same ideas of both necessity and liberty, and thus they agree. In short, the only idea of necessity and liberty that both camps can clearly and distinctly conceive – and which both camps recognize in their "practice and reasoning" (EHU 8.21) – is one which resolves the dispute between those who affirm and those who deny freedom. Thus, they "dissent to [this] in words only, not in their real sentiment," and consequently merely show "a reluctance to acknowledge it in words" (ibid.).

Accordingly, as far as causation is concerned, Hume's first account of what we take to be our idea of thick causation is an obscure perception of words rather than content. Once we apply Hume's microscope of the moral sciences and attend to our ideas, we clearly and distinctly perceive that we have no idea of power.

While Hume clearly believes that such obscurity sometimes affects our causal talk, he doesn't believe that pointing out such obscurity solves all the problems. In

other words, he doesn't believe that the word "power" is actually meaningless. This takes us to his second account of our causal talk.

Second Account: Projection

Hume has thus far argued that people sometimes employ words without any meaning, and thus only obscurely take themselves to conceive of thick causation. Having noted as much, he moves on to what he thinks is a more common problem.

But as 'tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong apply'd*, than that they never have any meaning; 'twill be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject, to see if possibly we can discover the nature and origin of those ideas, we annex to them. (T 1.3.14.14)

Here, Hume seems to admit that we do mean something by "power," but he believes that this meaning is "wrongly applied," basically, misunderstood. We think we mean one thing when we really mean another. In other words, Hume thinks that our idea is confused.

Here again there's a parallel with Descartes. Recall that Descartes, when providing an example of a clear but confused idea, notes that

[W]hen someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. Hence a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear. (CSM I 208: AT VIIIA 22)

Hume's projective account of causation – in which we “gild and stain” natural objects with “the colours borrowed from internal sentiment” (EPM Appendix 1, 19)³ – is very similar to the kind of account that Descartes offers in this passage.

Descartes claims that we *clearly* perceive the nature of pain, but that we perceive it in a *confused* way when we apply or attribute it to body. Similarly, Hume claims that we *clearly* perceive the nature of power – as the internal impression or determination of the mind – but that we perceive it in a *confused* way because we wrongly apply it to natural objects. This, says Hume, is a confused idea of

³ “EPM” refers to *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, and the number indicates the paragraph.

power. The extent of the error is brought out forcefully in the following passage:

[T]he case is here much the same, as if a blind man shou'd pretend to find a great many absurdities in the supposition, that the colour of scarlet is not the same with the sound of a trumpet, nor light the same with solidity. If we have really no idea of power or efficacy in any object, or of any real connexions betwixt causes and effects, 'twill be to little purpose to prove, that an efficacy is necessary in all operations. We do not understand our meaning in talking so, but ignorantly confound ideas, which are entirely distinct from each other... [W]hen, instead of meaning these unknown qualities, we make the terms power and efficacy signify something, of which we have a clear idea, and which is incompatible with those objects, to which we apply it, obscurity and error begin then to take place, and we are led astray by a false philosophy. This is the case, when we transfer the determination of the thought to external objects, and suppose a real intelligible connexion betwixt them; that being a quality, which can only belong to the mind that considers them. (T 1.3.14.27)

Thus, Hume claims that the idea that we associate with thick causation is a confused perception: it's a clear idea of an internal impression that's wrongly applied to natural objects. Hume applies his microscope to this confused idea – which enlarges the simple ideas – and discovers that our idea of necessity exists *in the mind*.

Thus Hume claims that there are two kinds of necessity, and both exist in the understanding. He writes:

Thus as the necessity, which makes two times two equal to four, or three angles of a triangle to two right ones, lies only in the act of the understanding, by which we consider and compare these ideas; in like manner 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 connexions and necessity. (T 1.3.14.23)

It's here that the "real power of causes" is placed – not in "the causes themselves" or "in the deity" – contrary to what New Humeans wish to claim.

Nonetheless, there's an additional account of our idea of thick causation that hasn't been adequately addressed. I turn to this account in the next section.

Third Account: Necessitation

It may be that when we engage in causal talk and take ourselves to be speaking of thick causal power, we aren't attending solely to the words or projecting the internal impression of the mind.

The third account of necessitation is as follows. First, the mind has an idea of the cause and an idea of the effect. These ideas, of course, originate in experience and thus have impression-based sources. Second, the mind has an idea of relations between ideas. This idea, too, has an impression-based source, since our ideas of various relations of ideas – the Pythagorean Theorem, that the Winklevoss's resemble one another, and so on – consist of ideas that originate in experience.

Accordingly, the idea that we take to be an idea of thick causation emerges when the mind *asserts* or *judges* that the cause and the effect are relations between ideas. This, of course, is a confused perception, because as Hume repeatedly emphasizes, causes and effects aren't relations between ideas.

Hume doesn't provide this as his explicit account of our idea of thick causation, but it's clearly implicit in a number of his remarks. Consider, for instance, his comments at T 1.3.14.13, in which he first expounds and then responds to the following conception of a cause:

[W]e must be able to place this power in some particular being, and conceive that being as endow'd with a real force and energy, by which such a

particular effect necessarily results from its operation. We must distinctly and particularly conceive the connexions betwixt the cause and effect, and be able to pronounce, from a simple view of the one, that it must be follow'd or preceded by the other. This is the true manner of conceiving a particular power in a particular body... Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to conceive any connexion betwixt them, or comprehend distinctly that power of efficacy, by which they are united. Such a connexion wou'd amount to a demonstration, and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be conceiv'd not to follow upon the other: Which kind of connexion we have rejected in all cases. (T 1.3.14.13)

In this passage, Hume claims that such a connection "wou'd amount to a demonstration" (ibid.) – that is, this conception of causation considers it in terms of a relation between ideas. Thus one of the ideas that we have when we take ourselves to be thinking about thick causation is when we conceive causation as a relation between ideas; but Hume of course claims that we can never "*distinctly* comprehend that power or efficacy" (ibid., emphasis mine). Nonetheless, we can have a confused or indistinct idea of it, and the component ideas in this confused perception all have their origin in an impression-based source.

There's a corollary to this necessitation conception of our causal talk, one discussed by Kail and that's suggested by his RFP. The RFP is:

Reference-Fixer for "Power" (RFP)

That which, were we to grasp it, would furnish the capacity to (a) "read off" what effect some object must have and (b) find it impossible to conceive of the cause without its effect.

This is distinct from the necessitation conception that I considered immediately above, in that Kail's RFP concerns only "that which" – that is, some unknown feature in the cause – necessitates the effect. In Chapter Four, I took issue with Kail's taking the RFP to concern the felt determination of the mind. But perhaps that's because the RFP expresses a thick idea of necessary connection, an idea that Hume admits.

The truth is, Hume considers the RFP to express an incoherent notion, and thus a confused one. To see why, consider the following passage in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. The passage concerns God's essence and his purported necessary existence. Cleanthes says:

It is pretended, that the deity is a necessarily existent being, and this necessity of his existence is attempted to be explained by asserting, that, if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist, as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident, that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same

as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under a necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. The words, therefore, *necessary existence*, have no meaning; or, which is the same thing, none that is consistent. (DNR 9.6)

This passage centers around an unknown feature of God's nature which, if known, would render his nonexistence inconceivable. But Hume seems to claim here that the very notion of such a feature is incoherent, and thus such talk has no meaning.

Kail responds to this, however, and claims that this notion can't be incoherent for Hume. He provides two reasons for this claim. First, if correct, then the argument turns out "a little short, given what else happens in the text" (2007a: 100). Indeed, if Hume does in fact regard the notion of necessary existence to be incoherent, then "Hume lets a stone-dead horse suffer a few pages of unnecessary flogging" (ibid.).

These unclear remarks become clearer if we consider what follows next in Hume's text, for the discussion soon turns to whether matter could be a necessarily existent

entity (as opposed to God's being such). Thus, in response to Cleanthes, Philo says:

To a superficial observer, so wonderful a regularity [in algebra] may be admired as the effect either of chance or design; but a skillful algebraist immediately concludes it to be the work of necessity, and demonstrates, that it must for ever result from the nature of these numbers. Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key, which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural bodies, may it not happen, that, could we but penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition. (DNR 9.10)

But, argues Kail, Philo's entire response is pointless if the notion of necessary existence is incoherent. Thus Hume must not regard the notion as incoherent.

There are two things that can be said in response. First, if Kail is correct, then Hume's discussion turns out, at worst, to be a little too long. Sometimes arguments don't convince,⁴ and thus one must resort to further arguments.

Kail's second reason for thinking that Hume doesn't endorse the incoherence of the RFP, is that when Cleanthes

⁴ I'm reminded of Robert Nozick: "Perhaps philosophers need arguments so powerful they set up reverberations in the brain: if the person refuses to accept the conclusion, he *dies*. How's that for a powerful argument?" (1983: 4).

first suggests the incoherence of necessary existence, he qualifies it with "while our faculties remain the same as at present" (DNR 9.6). Thus, "it is not that necessity so characterized is incoherent, but rather as we presently are we cannot grasp any such feature" (2007a: 100).

But Kail fails to note that our faculties at present demarcate what can be coherently thought and said. In addition, as I've argued, that alone is a sufficient rebuttal to his response, Hume distinguishes clear and distinct perceptions from obscure and confused ones. The meaning of our pronouncements is either distinct or confused (cf. T 1.3.14.13) depending upon whether the ideas associated with our terms are distinct or confused. Thus, just as the idea that results from our projecting an internal impression on to objects is confused (and incoherent), so too the idea of necessary existence is confused (and incoherent). To say that the determination of the mind exists in the objects, or that the existence of some object is necessary, is of a par with "honesty weighs ten pounds" or that "persons are prime numbers." Such remarks are incoherent.

Accordingly, Hume denies that we have an idea of thick causation, conceived as a connection that possesses the AP

property. Indeed, Hume would claim that when I utter or write these words, I don't have any idea distinct from the words employed, or distinct from the idea that results from my projecting the internal impression of the mind, and so on.

This is important. In the next section, I indicate how this helps solve the nasty problem.

Sticking with Hume through Thick and Thin

The nasty problem is that for some term "T," say "substance_t" or "thick causation," Hume claims that:

1. "T"'s a meaningless expression.

In addition,

2. There's an explanation as to why we believe in the existence of entities denoted by "T".

and

3. Explanations as to why we believe in the existence of entities denoted by "T" presuppose that "T"'s meaningful.

However, on Hume's meaning-empiricism:

4. "T"'s meaningful \equiv "T" has an associated idea.

But (1)-(3) entail:

5. "T" has and doesn't have an associated idea.

The solution to the nasty problem is to recognize that Hume distinguishes between two kinds of ideas: ideas that are obscure and confused, and ideas that are clear and distinct. Thus Hume would reframe (5) as:

6. "T" has an associated idea that's obscure, and doesn't have an associated idea that's clear.

In other words, in asserting (1), Hume intends to assert that "T" doesn't have a distinct meaning, that is, an associated idea which is a distinct idea. Instead, an expression like "thick causation" has an obscure or confused meaning, and it's this obscure or confused meaning that Hume seeks to explain. In the case of causation, our obscure meaning is supplied by our attending to our words, and our confused meaning is supplied either by our projecting our idea of the determination of the mind onto objects, or our applying our idea of a relation between ideas to objects.

Thus, Hume has an answer to the nasty problem. When one uses the word "power," the only clear and distinct idea – and thus meaning – that one can have is an idea of the felt determination of the mind. In short, the only idea of power that we have is thin.

Fruit of the Hume

Thus far, we've seen that Hume denies that we have any clear and distinct idea of thick causation. Our causal talk is either (i) obscure, because we attend to words that lack associated ideas, (ii) confused, because we project an idea

of reflection onto objects, (iii) confused, because we take causes and effects to be conceptually linked, or (iv) clear and distinct, because we conceive of causation as thin.

The nasty problem doesn't arise, because, when we talk about causation in a manner other than (iv), the idea that we're employing is either (i)-(iii). Thus, our causal talk is either clear and distinct, or obscure and confused.

When we fully appreciate this, we can clearly see how later positivists drew inspiration from Hume. Consider, for instance, Antony Flew's famous gardener example:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in a jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees, 'There is no gardener.' So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. 'But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the Sceptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener

differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all? (1955: 96)⁵

Thus, when the believer states "[T]here is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible, etc.," he or she isn't actually asserting anything at all. Flew doesn't deny that this sentence is linguistically meaningful. His point is that it's not cognitively meaningful: it doesn't make an assertion that's either true or false. The assertion has no content.

It's difficult to definitively see whether Hume's a positivist in the sense that Flew, for example, is. There's some indication that he may be. Consider, for instance, Hume's discussion of the concept of God. Demea contends:

The question is not concerning the BEING but the NATURE of GOD. This I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us. The essence of that supreme mind, his attributes, the manner of his existence, the very nature of his duration; these and every particular, which regards so divine a being, are mysterious to men... They are covered in a deep cloud from human curiosity: It is profaneness to attempt penetrating through these sacred obscurities. (DNR 2.1)

⁵ The example originally comes from John Wisdom.

The nature of God is immersed in obscurity, Demea claims, and that is precisely as it should be. But – and this is the relevant point – Cleanthes retorts as follows:

It seems strange to me, said *Cleanthes*, that you, *Demea*, who are so sincere in the cause of religion, should still maintain the mysterious, incomprehensible nature of the deity, and should insist so strenuously, that he has no manner of likeness or resemblance to human creatures. The deity, I can readily allow, possesses many powers and attributes, of which we can have no comprehension: But if our ideas, so far as they go, be not just, and adequate, and correspondent to his real nature, I know not what there is in this subject worth insisting on. Is the name, without any meaning, of such mighty importance? Or how do you *mystics*, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the deity, differ from sceptics or atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible? (DNR 4.1)

Thus, Cleanthes concludes that since Demea has removed experience-based content from his idea of God, he's an atheist "without knowing it" (DNR 4.3). But if Demea isn't asserting anything different from atheism, then Demea isn't asserting anything at all. This supports the view that Hume's a positivist of the sort Flew is.

But even if this interpretation of Hume isn't ultimately sustainable, it's clear that something weaker but still very important can be attributed to Hume. His statements about the science of human nature make it clear

that: only statements informed by clear and distinct ideas are *worth* asserting or believing. We can put the point as follows: a proposition *p* has distinct content (or meaning) only if *p* is traceable to an impression (or experience), and a proposition *p* is worth asserting (or believing) only if *p* has distinct meaning. Thus if causal talk is obscure or confused, that's a good reason to refrain from indulging in it. Indeed, as has been noted, the principal objection of Hume's science of human nature is to remove obscurities and confusions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Hume explains our causal talk by appealing to four possible kinds of ideas: (i) an obscure idea of words that lack associated ideas, (ii) a confused idea based on the mind's projecting an idea of reflection onto natural objects, (iii) a confused idea of the cause and effect that takes the two to be conceptually linked, and (iv) a clear and distinct idea of causes and effects understood in terms of Hume's two definitions.

I argued that Hume's distinction between distinct and indistinct meaning – which hinges on whether the associated ideas are clear and distinct, or obscure and confused – certainly leans in a positivist direction. It's unclear whether Hume is a positivist in the full-blooded, twentieth-century sense of the term, but it's clear that Hume recommends that we pursue only what can be clearly and distinctly understood, and that in the case of causation the only thing that can be clearly and distinctly understood is an idea of thin causation.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters, I argued that clear and distinct perception has an essential role in Hume's philosophy, indeed that failing to appreciate its importance leads to misunderstanding key components of his philosophy. Hume considers the moral sciences be immersed in obscurity and confusion, and his self-proclaimed "microscope of the moral sciences" is intended to expose and ultimately remove this obscurity and confusion.

Hume aims to do this because he believes that a correct science of human nature is a prerequisite for progress in the other sciences. According to Hume, then, our impressions are naturally clear and distinct, whereas our ideas are naturally faint and obscure. Since ideas are ultimately traceable to impressions, Hume's microscope involves our discerning the origin of our ideas, thereby rendering them clear and distinct.

In the case of causation, Hume claims that the only clear and distinct idea of causation that we have is an idea of thin causation, that is, a felt determination of the mind to infer like effects from like causes. However, when characterized solely in terms of the objects, Hume

claims that causation is nothing more than regular succession. Nonetheless, some have advocated for – and Hume's own project seems to demand – an idea of thick causation. This, as we've seen, is the foundation of the New Hume interpretation.

I've argued that Hume denies that we have an idea of thick causation, for we can't clearly and distinctly conceive of the relationship between causes and effects as conceptually necessary. At most, the ideas that we have when take ourselves to be contemplating thick causal connections are obscure and confused. Hume believes that we should stop theorizing about such connections, thereby permitting progress in the other sciences. Despite the exciting nature of the New Hume, it turns out that it's not the real Hume. If I were playful, I would say that despite the current boom in the New Hume, the proper attitude is gloom, for textual evidence indicates that the figure is a cartoon for which there's no room, and thus I advocate his doom. It's a good thing I'm a serious philosopher and thus would never say such a thing.

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