

# Hume on Our Impression of Necessary Connection: Representation or Mere Feeling?

Word Count: 2,969

## *Abstract*

In the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*, Hume argues that our idea of necessary connection arises from an impression of a “determination” of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant. But many have held that this impression is a mere feeling, and doesn’t represent that determination or have it as its intentional object; e.g., Stroud (1977), Allison (2008). But Hume generally the determination of the mind, and to interpret that determination as something more than just a regular succession of perceptions.

In both the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*, Hume traces our idea of necessary connection to an impression of a “determination” or “habit” of the mind to pass from the appearance of one object to the idea of its usual attendant (T 165, EHU 75). But most scholars do not read Hume as having identified an impression which could afford us a positive idea of (what Blackburn calls) a “thick connection”: a connection involving something beyond a regular succession (such a connection might instead be called ‘genuine’).<sup>1</sup> It’s argued that the impression to which Hume traces the idea of necessary connection is nothing but a *mere* feeling, having no intentional object at all, let alone having a genuine connection as its intentional object. This is argued particularly by Stroud (1977, 85-86), and upheld by many others, including Allison (2008), Kail (2007), Blackburn (1990), and some who defend the skeptical realist or “New Hume” reading, such as Wright (2007), Strawson (2007), and Flage (1981).

---

<sup>1</sup> Blackburn 1990, 237.

However, there are good reasons to suppose that, on Hume's account, the impression to which he traces the idea of necessary connection (henceforth **impression\***) *represents* that determination of the mind, or has that determination as its intentional object, where then the idea of necessary connection also represents that determination. There are also good reasons to suppose that this determination involves a genuine connection, in which case our idea of it may be, on his view, a "just" idea of necessary connection—that is, an idea of *an instance* of genuine necessary connection.

These reasons resolve into the following five claims:

1. Hume doesn't explicitly deny that we can trace the idea of necessary connection to an actual connection *in the mind*; he denies only we can trace it to a connection between either *the will and the body* or *the will and the mind*.
2. What Hume writes suggests that he believes we can ultimately *avoid* the conclusion that our idea of necessary connection cannot be traced to any actual connection.
3. The "determination of the mind" is an instance of the general principle Hume repeatedly attributes to the mind, *habit* or *custom*, which he treats as involving genuine connections (or connections irreducible to any perception or to any regular succession thereof).
4. While Hume does not attempt to justify the claim that some impressions are representations, he clearly suggests that we must nevertheless *accept* that at least some impressions are representations.
5. Though it's an impression of reflection, it seems unlikely that Hume regards *impression\** as a passion or an emotion, which he clearly denies are representations.

Here I'm unable to defend claims 1 and 2, since their defense requires exegesis which would exceed space limitations. But what follows is a defense of claims 3, 4, and 5. These last three claims

alone, if they can be sufficiently supported, point to the conclusion that Hume believes that we have an idea of a particular instance of genuine necessary connection. If he accepts that impressions are representations, except for passions and emotions (which are the only impressions he explicitly denies can be representations), and if he does not identify impression\* as either a passion or an emotion, then he might hold that impression\* is a representation; and it's unclear what it would represent other than that determination of the mind. In addition, if this determination cannot be identified with any mere regular succession of objects or perceptions, then it would seem to involve a genuine connection. In this case, something involving a genuine necessary connection would seem to be, on his account, the model for our idea of necessary connection.

In the next section, I'll offer points in defense of claim 3; and in the final section, I'll defend claims 4 and 5, which together suggest that impression\* is a representation, or has an intentional object.

## 1. Habit or Custom

Our idea of necessary connection is the focus of section 1.3.14 of *Treatise* and section VII of the first *Enquiry*. At the beginning of each section, Hume proposes to examine our idea of necessary connection—and to fix the meaning of the terms like “efficacy,” “cause,” “power,” and “connexion”—by locating that impression from which the idea is derived. What follows in each section is a negative account, in which it's clear that Hume denies that the idea is derived from any impression of connections among *external objects*. But, in each section, following the negative account is a positive account in which Hume identifies a feeling or impression of a “determination” (T 165), “propensity” (T 165) or “habit” (EHU 75) as the ultimate origin of that idea.

It's not immediately clear from the text, however, whether or not Hume believes that this determination exists over and above our feeling or impression of it. But while he doesn't think we can

*demonstrate* the existence of anything beyond our perceptions, just as the textual evidence has been argued to show that he *accepts* that there are external objects, so I think the textual evidence shows that he at least accepts that the determination or habit has a real existence.

Between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume refers to a determination, custom, or habit in explaining not only the origin of our idea of necessity, but also belief (T 102), general signification (T 20), all inferences from experience (T 103; EHU 44-45), and all knowledge beyond what we immediately sense and remember (EHU 45). He takes custom or habit as a general principle of the mind, of which the determination or propensity to which he traces the idea of necessary connection is a particular instance or effect (T 165). This seems clear in the *Enquiry*, as there he says explicitly that custom or habit is a fundamental principle of human nature, albeit a principle whose own deep nature is unknown to us (EHU 43). He declares that custom “is the great guide of human life”, and that “[i]t is that principle alone, which renders our experience useful to us, and makes us expect, for the future, a similar train of events with those which have appeared in the past” (EHU 44). It would seem very odd if, here, Hume meant that it’s merely a certain *feeling* that makes us expect a similar train of events to those in the past. Moreover, he says that “after a repetition of similar instances, the mind is carried by a habit upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant” (EHU 75). Hume does not say that the mind *feels* carried by a habit. He says it *is* so carried. So, it at least seems that when he refers to “custom” or “habit,” he isn’t referring just to another perception or to a regular succession thereof, but to an independent principle which actually determines the courses of and the combinations of our ideas.

Though it’s often recognized that Hume freely employs causal terminology in his account of human understanding,<sup>2</sup> some have disputed that Hume must, at any point, assume real causes

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance, Baier (1991) remarks that “[Hume’s] own analysis has been transparently causal from the very beginning of the *Treatise*” (65).

involving genuine connections. For instance, Stroud (1977, 92) contends that Hume is not exempting his own theorizing from his account of how we come to believe in causes: all his causal talk in accounting for belief in causes can be interpreted according to the account itself: Hume is drawing causal inferences about the mind where he has observed only regular successions, which is what the theory says would happen. But the problems with this are: (1) Hume never says he has observed only regular successions in the mind; and (2) if we are supposed to interpret Hume's theorizing according to his own theory, then we would still have to say that Hume was *determined by custom or habit* to infer causal connections in the mind, since the principle of custom or habit is as indispensable to his account of human understanding as his theory of perceptions.

Indeed, Hume explicitly says that the imagination must be guided by some “universal principles” if we are to give any account of its operations at all:

[N]othing wou'd be more unaccountable than the operations of [the imagination], were it not guided by some universal principles, which render it, in some measure, uniform with itself in all times and places. Were ideas entirely loose and unconnected, chance alone wou'd join them; and 'tis impossible the same simple ideas should fall regularly into complex ones (as they commonly do) without some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another. This united principle among ideas is not to be consider'd as an inseparable connexion; ...but we are only to regard it as a gentle force, which commonly prevails[.] (T 10)

The “universal principles” to which Hume refers in the above are the three principles of association—resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect—the last of which, at least, is based on the principle of custom or habit (T 183). He argues that if there were no such principles, chance alone would join simple ideas, where then it would be “impossible” that they should fall regularly into complex ones.

Nonetheless, one might argue that the principles of association cannot involve genuine necessary connections, because such connections are “inseparable connections” and Hume explicitly says that the principles of association do *not* produce inseparable connections. However, at another place he claims that *any* connection beyond a mere chance conjunction *is* a necessary connection:

As objects must either be conjoined or not, and as the mind must either be determin'd or not to pass from one object to another, 'tis impossible to admit of any medium betwixt chance and absolute necessity. In weakening this conjunction and determination you do not change the nature of the necessity; since even in the operation of bodies, these have different degrees of constancy and force, without producing a different species of that relation. (T 171)

Hume says that weakening a conjunction or association does not change the nature of the necessity: so, the mind may be “more or less” determined to pass from one idea to another, yet there remains a necessary connection (as awkward as this might sound to a modern ear).

## 2. Does Impression\* Represent?

But if our idea of necessary connection is an idea of that determination, then it seems that impression\* (from which that idea is copied) must itself be a copy or a representation of that determination.

While it's generally agreed that, on Hume's account, *ideas* represent their impressions as copies<sup>3</sup>—first, by being causally derived from their impressions and, second, by resembling their impressions in their intrinsic character<sup>4</sup>—some have denied that Humean impressions represent at all (e.g., Allison [2008, 312] and Owen and Cohen [1997]). But it's unclear why they cannot, at least in principle, also represent as imagistic copies. For Hume, the only difference between ideas and impressions in their intrinsic character is that ideas are less vivid and forceful than impressions (T 1). Moreover, as Garret (2001) observes, Hume never explicitly denies that impressions of *sense* represent; and he even sometimes writes of such impressions representing (e.g., see T 28, 38, and 84).<sup>5</sup>

Further, in section 1.4.2 of the *Treatise*, the enquiry of which concerns “[w]hy we attribute a continu'd existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses” (T 188), Hume

---

<sup>3</sup> See T 161.

<sup>4</sup> Shaffer 2013, 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> Garrett 2001, 304.

distinguishes between “the vulgar opinion”, which identifies our perceptions as the external objects themselves, and “the philosophical opinion” which supposes a “double existence” between perceptions and objects, or between the “representing and represented” (T 205). He writes: “[A] little reflection destroys” the vulgar opinion. However, “tho’ we clearly perceive the dependence and interruption of our perceptions, we stop short in our career, and never upon that account reject the notion of an independent and contin’d existence” (T 214). “That opinion,” Hume explains, of an independent and continued existence, “has taken such deep root in the imagination, that ‘tis impossible ever to eradicate it” (ibid.). The philosophical opinion thus pleases both our instinct and reason by ascribing “interruptions to perceptions, and the continuance to objects” (ibid.).

So while Hume doesn’t attempt to justify this “double existence” view, he seems to accept it. He writes: “philosophers have so far run into this [vulgar] opinion, that they change their system, and distinguish, (as we shall do for the future) betwixt perceptions and objects” (T 211). Here Hume is clearly signaling that he too distinguishes between perceptions and objects, or between the *representing* and the *represented*. Though he claims that “our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something distinct, or independent, and external, is evident” (T 189), he also claims we must “set ourselves at ease as much as possible, by successively granting to each [reason and instinct] whatever it demands, by feigning a double existence” (T 215). And though he says that “we never can conceive anything but perceptions,” he concludes that we “therefore must make everything resemble them” (T 216)—that is, “[w]e suppose external objects to resemble internal perceptions” (ibid.). Hume doesn’t deny that bodies distinct from perceptions are conceivable; he denies only that we can conceive of bodies as being specifically different from (or as having no resemblance to) perceptions.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Garrett 2001, 7.

However, Hume says that impression\* is an impression *of reflection*, and not of sense (T 165), and that “impressions of reflexion resolve into passions and emotions” (T 16), where the only intrinsic difference he attributes to emotions is that they tend to be “calmer” than passions (T 276). Additionally, he’s clear that *passions* cannot represent anything: “A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification” (T 415). So, citing this passage, some have argued that because Hume classifies all impressions of reflection as either passions or emotions, he couldn’t have regarded the impression\* as a representation.<sup>7</sup>

But this isn’t clear. First, while passions and emotions seem to exhaust our impressions of reflection, nowhere does Hume actually say that impression\* is a passion or an emotion; and neither does he appear to mention that impression anywhere in Book II of the *Treatise* (“Of The Passions”). Second, he claims that passions, both direct and indirect, are “founded on” pain or pleasure (T 438); but it seems unlikely that he held that impression\* is founded on pain or pleasure. Not only does he *not* explicitly assign any role to pain and pleasure in his account of our idea of necessary connection, it’s completely unclear what role pain and pleasure would have in that account. Third, impression\* seems quite unlike any direct or indirect passion he mentions: pride, humility, grief, joy, hope, love, etc.. So, it’s plausible that Hume either didn’t mean that passions and emotions exhaust impressions of reflection, or that he simply forgot about impression\* where he suggests that they do.

Positive evidence that Hume took impression\* as a representation lies in his claim that *either* the idea of necessity is impossible, or else there is some instance in which necessity or efficacy is “plainly discoverable to the mind”:

If we pretend, therefore, to have any just idea of this efficacy, we must produce some instance, wherein the efficacy is plainly discoverable to the mind, and its operations to our consciousness or sensation. By the refusal of this, we acknowledge that the idea is impossible and imaginary[.] (T 157-58)

---

<sup>7</sup> Enç 1985.



This passage comes after Hume identifies impression\* as the source of our idea of necessary connection. So his conclusion can't be that the idea is impossible and imaginary, since he has already traced that idea to an impression. Thus, by his own disjunction, necessity must be discoverable in "some natural production, where the operation and efficacy of a cause can be clearly conceiv'd." It seems that the only "natural production" which could satisfy this role, in his account of our idea of necessary connection, is the determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant.

Later, Hume stresses a similar disjunction: "[e]ither we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes" (T 166). Here Hume implies that, if we have an idea of necessity, then it's the idea of the determination of thought to pass from causes to effects. This is also implied by the following: "it is not possible for us to form the most distant idea of [necessity], when it is not taken for the determination of the mind to pass from the idea of one object to that of its usual attendant" (T 167). The implication here is that when necessity *is* taken for that determination, then we *do* have an idea of necessity, from which it follows that we have an idea of that determination. And by the Copy Principle, in order to have an idea of that determination, we must first have an impression of it; and it's unclear in what sense we could have an impression of this determination, given that it exists apart from that impression, if that impression didn't in some way represent it.

To conclude, the interpretation on which Hume holds that we have an idea *of an instance of* genuine necessary connection, by means of an impression representing the determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, would make alternative sense of his claim that "[u]pon the whole, necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects" (T 165-66). This need not be interpreted as saying that necessity is an illusion or mere mental construction. It can be read through a realist lens: necessity exists in mind—not as a mere feeling, but as a quality of the principles by which the mind operates.

## Works Cited

- Allison, H. (2008). *Custom and Reason in Hume: A Kantian Reading of the First Book of the Treatise*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baier, A. (1991). *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Blackburn, S. (1990). "Hume and Thick Connexions". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, 237-250. Reprinted in *The New Hume Debate* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (eds). London: Routledge, 2007. 100-112.
- Craig, E. (2002). "The Idea of Necessary Connexion". In *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, Peter Millican (ed). Oxford: Clarendon Press, 211-229.
- Craig, E. (2007). "Hume on Causality: Projectivist and Realist?" on *The New Hume Debate* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (eds). London: Routledge, 113-121.
- Enç, B. (1985). "Hume on Causal Necessity: A Study from the Perspective of Hume's Theory of Passions". *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2(3), 235-256.
- Flage, D. E. (1981). "Hume's Relative Ideas". *Hume Studies* 7: 55-73
- Garrett, D. (2006). "Hume's Naturalistic Theory of Representation". *Synthese* 152(3), 301-319.
- Grene, M. (1994). "The Objects of Hume's *Treatise*". *Hume Studies* 20(2), 163-177.
- Hume, D. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited By L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978 (original edition first published in 1740).
- Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* contained in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975 (reprint from the 1777 edition).
- Kail, P. J. E. (2007). *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy*. Oxford: OUP.
- Owen, D. & Cohen, R. (1997). "Representation, Reason, and Motivation". *Manuscripto* 20, 47-76.
- Strawson, G. (2007). "David Hume: Objects and Power" in *The New Hume Debate* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (eds). London: Routledge, 31-51.
- Stroud, B. (1977). *Hume*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Schafer, K. (2013). "Hume's Unified Theory of Mental Representations". *European Journal of Philosophy* 21(3), first published online 7 May 2013.

Wright, J. P. (2007). "Hume's Causal Realism: Recovering a Traditional Interpretation". In *The New Hume Debate* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (eds). London: Routledge, 88-99.