

The Necessities “In Here”:

Detection and Projection in Hume’s Account of Causal Necessity

Hume’s projectivist account of causal necessity or connection is understood to be motivated by the rejection of the “detection account” of causal necessity (e.g. Kail 2007). On the detection account, we acquire the idea of causal necessity by becoming acquainted with some genuine instance of it. However, the projection of necessity onto external objects is *compatible* with the detection of a genuine connection *in the mind*. Though Hume is widely read as also rejecting the detection of genuine connections in the mind, I argue that he only denies that we can detect genuine mental connections in acts of will or volition. Though Hume argues that perceiving a connection would give us a priori knowledge of the effect, this argument does not apply to the connection embodied by *the determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant*—which is what we project onto external objects.

In “Realism and Projection in Hume’s Philosophy” (2007), P.J.E. Kail offers a richly detailed and sharply reasoned articulation of the projectivist interpretation of Hume on causal necessity. According to Kail, Hume’s account of causal necessity involves “feature projection”: the attribution of something “in here” or in the mind to something “out there” or in the external world. And, according to Kail, Hume’s feature projection account of our idea of causal necessity is motivated by a rejection of the “detection account” of that idea. On the detection account, we acquire the idea of causal necessity by becoming “acquainted with an instance of genuine causal necessity” (78). The detection account does not entail that we can detect any or all causal necessities; it entails only that we can detect at least one instance of causal necessity, since, per the Copy Principle, only one such instance would be sufficient to give rise to the idea.

In this work, I want to show how, contrary to Kail’s reading, the detection account and the feature projection account may actually coincide in Hume. It is generally agreed upon by scholars that Hume denies that we are acquainted with any instance of what might be called *genuine* causal necessity

or connection: a connection involving something more than just regular conjunction. An acquaintance with such a connection would afford us what Hume calls a “just idea” of power or connection (T 157-158).¹ This is undoubtedly true concerning genuine necessary connections *in the external world*. Hume directly and repeatedly says that we have no acquaintance with (or impression of) connections or powers among external objects. However, it’s less clear with respect to necessary connections *in the mind*. There are a couple deviant passages in the *Treatise* suggesting that, for Hume, genuine connections cannot be detected *either* in the external world or in the mind; and there is an argument in the first *Enquiry* that Kail takes to show definitively that Hume denies that we could detect genuine causal necessity *anywhere*. But this argument may have more limited applicability than Kail thinks. So here I will canvass the reasons to suppose that, in Hume, there is both projection and *limited* detection of genuine causal necessity—namely, the detection of a genuine necessity “in here” and the projection of it “out there”.

Section I:

The feature “in here” that we project “out there” is what Hume calls the “determination of the mind to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant” (T 165). This determination is the result of a mental association between the object and its usual attendant, formed through (what Hume calls) the principle of *custom* or *habit*. Once the association is formed, the mind is determined to pass from one object (the cause) to its usual attendant (the effect) upon the perception of the cause. But we take this determination, not as a mental connection, but as a connection between the objects themselves. As Hume puts it, we “transfer the determination of the thought to external objects” (T 168).

¹ Blackburn (1990) calls genuine connections “thick connections”.

But, on Kail's interpretation, we are not transferring a genuine but mental connection onto external objects, because this determination is not an instance of genuine connection. Kail bases this contention on an argument in the *Enquiry* that I will examine later. Instead, Kail believes, Hume regards our experience of this mental determination as similar to the effect that an experience of genuine causal necessity would have. And an experience of genuine necessity would, according to Kail, result in a psychological *inseparability* of our idea of the cause from our idea of the effect. Although a cause is always psychologically separable from its effect, our experience of the customary transition is the closest thing to the experience of genuine necessity; and for this reason, our idea of the determination becomes our idea of necessity. Kail explains: "The determination of the mind gives us an idea of necessity by mimicking the effects that a genuine experience of necessity would have" (108). So, while our idea of that determination is *not* the idea of a genuine connection, our minds project that idea onto external objects.

However, it is not inconsistent with the projection account to suppose that our idea of the determination *is* an idea of a genuine connection. If our idea of the determination of the mind were our *only* idea of genuine connection, then our idea of connections *among external objects* would still have to be a projection of it. We would still have to "spread" the idea of the mental determination onto things "out there". The projectivist explanation only requires that we have no acquaintance with necessities *in the external world*. It does not require that we have no acquaintance with necessities in our own minds.

The response that Kail and many others would give is that the mental determination cannot be an instance of genuine necessity because Hume denies that we are acquainted with any instance of genuine necessity in the mind. I call this the "No Necessities In Here" reading. But the textual support for this reading is not as solid as one might think—at least, not if the first *Enquiry* is taken as more representative of Hume's views on causal necessity than the *Treatise*.

There are two passages in the *Treatise* that comprise the most compelling evidence that Hume denies we are acquainted with any genuine connections in the mind. In the negative phase of his account, Hume argues that neither reason, external impressions, nor God can be the source of our idea of necessary connection (T 157-160). However, only after he has traced our idea of necessary connection to the determination of the mind does he seem to deny that that idea is copied from an *internal* impression of a genuine connection. He declares: “The uniting principle among our internal perceptions is as unintelligible as that among external objects” (T 169). Here we are led to assume here that, while our idea of necessary connection arises from the mental determination, our idea of that determination, which we spread onto outward objects, is not an idea of a genuine connection. But notice that this is only implied, and not explicitly stated. It is not clear that Hume’s phrase “uniting principle” refers to *all* connections or only to *essential* ones. We cannot know the essence of mind; but we might know some non-essential or derived powers of it (such as the acquired habits of passing from one perception to another).

The closest that Hume comes to denying explicitly that the mental determination affords us an idea of necessary connection is in the Appendix, where he writes that “no internal impression has an apparent energy, more than external objects have” (T 633). This seems to be a blanket denial that we perceive any genuine connections in the mind. He makes what appears to be another such blanket denial in the Abstract; although here by “mind” he seems to be referring more specifically to *will* or *volition*. He argues:

Now our own minds afford us no more notion of energy than matter does. When we consider our will or volition a priori, abstracting from experience, we are never able to infer any effect from it. And when we take the assistance of experience, it only show us objects contiguous, successive, and constantly conjoined. (T 656-7)

Hume does not go on to deny that mental determinations to pass from one idea to another afford us a notion of energy. He only directly denies that will or volition affords us such an idea. Instead, he goes on to claim that either “we no idea at all of force and energy, and these words are altogether

insignificant, or they can mean nothing but that determination of thought, acquir'd by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect" (T 657).

The famous Advertisement suggests that we should look to the first *Enquiry* to clear up any ambiguities in the *Treatise*. In the first *Enquiry*, Hume argues that "[w]e have no sentiment or consciousness of this power in ourselves" (EHU 72). This would seem sufficient to show that, on Hume's view, our impression of the mental determination does not afford us an idea of power or genuine connection—except that there, again, he only specifically denies that we have an idea of power from acts of volition on the mind or on the body. He does not directly deny that we have an idea power from *habitual* acts of mind. If he were denying that we have *any* idea of power from perceptions of the mind, it is unclear why he would focus only on perceptions of volitional acts of mind, and not also habitual acts of mind (especially given how much emphasis he places on habitual acts). The obvious explanation is that he *does* take the perception of our own mental determinations to be the source of our idea of necessary connection.

Though Stroud (1977) and others interpret this perception as a mere feeling, and not as any type of representation, Hume directly identifies causal necessity with the mental determination itself, and not with the impression to which the determination gives rise, which suggests he thinks that have some acquaintance with the determination itself. Hume writes: "[e]ither we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of thought to pass from causes to effects" (T 166). Also: "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 of the mind, then we *do* have an idea of necessity, from which it follows that we have an idea of that determination. And given this direct identification of causal necessity with the mental determination, his apparent blanket denials

that we can detect such necessity in ourselves should be more narrowly interpreted as denials that we can detect causal necessity in our own acts of will or volition.

Section II:

Kail's primary evidence that Hume's account is not a detection account lies in an argument that Hume makes in relation to the causes or connections among external objects, according to which "if the power or energy of any cause [were] discoverable by the mind, we could foresee the effect, even without experience; at might, at first, pronounce with certain concerning it, by the mere dint of thought and reasoning" (EHU 63). As Kail interprets this passage, Hume believes that any perception of genuine connection would allow us to infer *a priori* the effect from the mere perception of the cause. The first instance we perceive the cause, our minds would immediately pass to an idea of the effect, without ever having had an impression of it first (violating the Copy Principle). However, while this is correct, Hume's argument here does not apply to the perception of the mental determination as a perception of genuine connection. Because the connection in this case is between two ideas that have already been associated in the imagination, the mind would pass from the antecedent idea to the consequent one *whether or not* the connection were perceived. There is no *a priori* knowledge of an effect, since the effect (the consequent idea) is already known from experience before the connection is first perceived.

But Kail thinks that, on Hume's view, the perception of a genuine connection would also result in an inseparable psychological connection between two ideas, where we would be unable to conceive the cause without the effect. But in the case of associations by cause and effect, the connection is always separable. This conjecture is based in a passage in the *Treatise*, where Hume claims that the perception of a connection would "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" (161-

162). It is curious that this inconceivability claim appears to be omitted in corresponding passage in the *Enquiry*, which may be taken as a sign of a retraction of that claim. Kail would deny any such retraction, and he would argue that, for Hume, there is no necessity but absolute necessity, so that causal necessity cannot be any “less necessary” than *logical necessity* or the necessity “which makes two times two equal to four” (T 166).

Though it is true that, in the *Treatise*, Hume claims that there is no medium between chance and absolute necessity (171), he does not appear to make this claim in the *Enquiry*. For good reason: it’s inconsistent with the fact that he identifies a connection that is less than absolutely necessary—namely, the *associations among ideas*: he writes that we should not regard an association as “an inseparable connexion” but rather as “a gentle force, which commonly prevails” (T 10). Associations are neither pure chance conjunctions nor inseparable connections. It is not of the *essence* of mind to pass from the idea of one particular object to the idea of another that is regularly succeeds it in experience. Hume does not regard Custom as an essential mental property. In the *Enquiry*, he writes that “By employing that word [Custom], we pretend not to have given the ultimate reason of such a propensity. We only point out a principle of human nature which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects” (43). For Hume, custom itself may have a cause or a hidden nature. But custom is still “the great guide of human life”, for it “is that principle alone which renders our experience useful to us” (EHU 44). It cannot be the case, then, that ideas can be connected only in an inseparable manner. There is no reason, then, to suppose that the perception of separable but genuine connection (going beyond mere regular succession) would give rise to an inseparable connection. So it might be best to read the inconceivability claim in *Treatise* as one of the “negligances” that, in Advertisement, he says are “corrected” in the *Enquiry*.

Section III:

Scholars have acknowledged Hume's own use of causal terms ("determination", "connection") in his account of human understanding. But some, such as Stroud (1977, 92), have argued that his causal language is explained by his very account of how we come to believe in causes, so that he is not committed to the proposition that some genuine mental connections are perceived. But this does not work with respect to the mental determination and the feature projection account, for then the account would be hopelessly circular. It would run like this: we experience a regular conjunction of ideas and then we project the determination to pass from one idea to the other on to the mind and suppose there to be a determination to pass from one idea to the other. There would be a projection of something "in here" onto very same thing "in here"; and the explanans would be virtually identical to the explanandum. Hume cannot be committed *only* to perceptions of regular conjunctions of ideas, for then there would be nothing but ideas of regular conjunctions to project or "spread" onto external objects. And there would be no point for the mind to do so, since Hume grants that we already perceive regular conjunctions of external objects.

One might argue that the account would not be circular because, according to Hume, we are not projecting the determination of the mind itself, but merely a feeling or impression. Hume says that after one observes several instances of one event following another, one "*feels* these events to be connected" (EHU 75-76) which suggests that a mere internal feeling is spread onto the events. In this case, we may take that very same feeling to indicate a connection between the ideas. Thus, the feeling leads us to suppose there to be an *internal* connection (the determination), which in turn we use to explain the feeling itself and why we believe in external connections. However, Hume explicitly says that we experience this determination: "The appearance of a cause always conveys the mind, by a customary transition, to the idea of the effect. Of this also we have experience." (EHU 76-77)

Moreover, as we have seen, it is not a mere feeling with which Hume identifies causal necessity; he identifies it with the customary transition or mental determination.

Hume stresses that “[i]n all single instances of the operation of bodies or minds, there is nothing that produces any impression ...of power or necessary connection” (EHU 78). But in the case of the mental determination to pass from one idea to another, it is not a *single* instance of the operation of the mind that produces an impression of power or necessary connection. Only upon repeated instances do we begin to experience the determination itself; and this experience is, as Hume says, “the original of that idea which we seek for” (EHU 78).

To conclude, the interpretation on which Hume holds that our experience of the mental determination affords us a “just” idea of necessary connection in no way conflicts with the feature projection account, since external impressions still do not afford us a just idea of necessity. But it allows us to make literal 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. It can be read through a realist lens: necessity exists in mind—not as a mere feeling, but as a determination to pass from the perception of an object to that of its usual attendant.

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