

# Hume on Our Notion of Causality

ALAN SCHWERIN

1. In his recent 'David Hume and Necessary Connections' (*Philosophy* 62 (1987), 49–58), T. F. Lindley has suggested that Hume's subjective explication of necessary connection has been designed 'to weaken our notion of causality' (57). Citing a well-known passage from Hume's *Enquiry* in support of his suggestion, Lindley goes on to claim that we need not accept Hume's explication of the term 'necessary connection', and by implication, his (negative) assessment of the notion of causality. For as Lindley puts it:

I have argued that there is a least one use of 'necessary connection' that refers to an objective relation. And if Hume had taken note of it, he would have had to distinguish, at the very least, between it and some more nebulous idea for which he had no antecedent impression (58).

Now Lindley may, or may not, be correct in his specification of an objective use of 'necessary connection'. I shall not take issue with him on this score: this is something that others may want to decide on. However, where his interpretation of Hume's account of necessary connection is concerned, as I see it, Lindley is wide of the mark. For it appears that Hume does *not* maintain that the idea of necessary connection lacks an impression. Rather than argue that the idea of necessary connection is a 'nebulous idea for which he [i.e. Hume] had no antecedent impression' (58), my contention is that Hume endorses the quite different view according to which the idea of necessary connection is associated with an impression, and that this impression is a specific internal propensity, or determination of the mind. Before we consider the case for my interpretation, consider the basis of Lindley's version of Hume's views on necessary connection.

2. Lindley rests his suggestion that Hume wants to weaken our notion of causality entirely on a reading of the following passage, which he attributes to Hume's *Enquiry*.<sup>1</sup>

So that, upon the whole, there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion which is conceivable by us. All events

<sup>1</sup> Lindley's reference is to David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Niddich (eds) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 74.

seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem conjoined, but never connected. And as we can have no idea of any thing which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion seems to be that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings or common life (57–58).

But this is not how Hume puts it! For he places three of the terms from this passage in italics—namely, ‘conjoined’, ‘connected’, *and most important*, ‘seems’. The italics on ‘seems’ cannot be overemphasized. In resorting to the clause ‘the necessary conclusion *seems* to be . . .’, with the stress on ‘seems’, Hume appears to be drawing attention to the *tentative* nature of a conclusion that we *might be tempted* to draw from our failure to discover one conceivable instance of connection. Now Hume clearly could have made this point without the italics on ‘seems’. But the fact that he takes the extra step to stress this word in his discussion is surely significant. For it appears to signal a (strong) cautionary note from Hume against opting for the most obvious conclusion suggested by his preceding analysis. That is to say, Hume appears to be suggesting here that we do not need to conclude that the idea of necessary connection has no antecedent impression because an impression for the idea has not yet been discovered. Unfortunately, it seems that Lindley has not heeded Hume’s advice, for he appears to have done precisely what Hume desires we do not do.

3. The evidence suggests that Lindley has overlooked the significance of Hume’s ‘seems’. For not only does he fail to place ‘seems’ in italics in the passage purportedly extracted from the *Enquiry*, as Hume does, he boldly goes on to suggest that Hume endorses the view that the idea of necessary connection is a ‘nebulous idea for which he had no antecedent impression’ (58). *But this is the possible conclusion that Hume warns us against!* Had Lindley read on, he would have seen that Hume believes that we need not accept the view that the idea of necessary connection lacks an impression. More particularly, Lindley would have realized that the view he foists on Hume *is the very position that Hume is intent on escaping*. For the sentence that follows on immediately from the last one cited in Lindley’s passage makes clear that, according to Hume, there is an alternative to the conclusion one might be tempted to draw from the failure to discover a conceivable connection:

And as we can have no idea of any thing which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion *seems* to be that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these

## Discussion

words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings or common life.

But there still remains one method of avoiding this conclusion, and one source which we have not yet examined.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, not only does Hume suggest that there is an alternative to the obvious conclusion one might be tempted to adopt, he later goes on to tell us what this alternative is:

This connexion, therefore, which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion.<sup>3</sup>

In short, contrary to Lindley, Hume *does* think that the idea of necessary connection has an impression—what Hume in the *Enquiry* refers to as the ‘customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant’. Or as Hume puts it, perhaps more forcefully, in the *Treatise*, the idea of necessary connection is associated with an internal impression—namely, a particular psychological propensity, or determination of the mind:

The idea of necessity arises from some impression. There is no impression convey'd by our senses, which can give rise to that idea. It must, therefore, be deriv'd from some internal impression or impression of reflexion. There is no internal impression, which has any relation to the present business, but that propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant. This therefore is the essence of necessity.<sup>4</sup>

But Lindley rests his case for the view that Hume’s ‘object is to weaken our notion of causality’ (57) on his suggestion that, for Hume, the idea of necessary connection is a ‘nebulous idea for which he [i.e. Hume] had no antecedent impression’ (58). Given that Hume declines the conclusion that the idea of necessary connection lacks an impression, and actually endorses the contrary thesis that the idea of necessary connection has an (internal) impression, as I have shown above, we must raise serious questions about Lindley’s overall suggestion that Hume’s intent is ‘to weaken our notion of causality’ (57).

*Rice University (Houston)*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 74, my underlining.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>4</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (eds) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 165.