

## Hume on Causation: The Projectivist Interpretation

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### 1. Introduction

Hume's views on causation are notoriously hard to pin down. The traditional interpretation takes Hume to be a naïve regularity theorist: one event *a* causes another, *b*, just if *a* is prior to and contiguous with *b*, and events similar to *a* are constantly conjoined with events similar to *b*. Causation, on this view, just is regular association: there is no 'tie' or connection of any sort between *a* and *b*. The traditional interpretation of Hume has, of course, spawned an entire philosophical tradition, running from the logical positivists, through Quine, Davidson and others, to David Lewis's thesis of 'Humean supervenience' ('Humean' because Lewis, in line with the traditional interpretation, regards Hume as a 'denier of necessary connections' (1986: ix)), and the industry of providing a reductive analysis of causation.

In tandem with the waning in popularity of that tradition in the latter part of the twentieth century, the sceptical realist interpretation of Hume has been gathering support, and has been championed by, amongst others, John Wright (1983), Edward Craig (1987: Chapter 2), Galen Strawson (1989), and Stephen Buckle (2001). According to the sceptical realist interpretation, Hume held that regular association is all we can *know* about causation (hence 'sceptical'), but he did not question the existence of real, mind-independent causal powers in nature (hence 'realist').

Simon Blackburn gestures towards a third interpretation--projectivism--in various places (1984: 210-12; 1987: 55-7; 1988: 178-80; 1990: 107-111). According to the projectivist interpretation, Hume holds that our causal thought and talk is an expression of our habits of inference. On observing *a*, we infer that *b* will follow, and we 'project' that inference onto the world--the inference being the source of our idea of necessary connection. Thus to say that *a* caused *b* is neither to say merely that *a* and *b* are regularly associated, nor is it to assert the existence of any mind-independent relation of necessary connection.

Neither Blackburn nor (so far as I know) anyone else has articulated the projectivist interpretation in any great detail.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, given the lack of literature--both expository and critical--it is unclear whether one should even so much as claim that there is, at the moment, any such thing as 'the projectivist interpretation'. The purpose of this paper is to begin to remedy this deficiency: to put some flesh on the bones. Everything I say is, I think, consistent with everything Blackburn says about Hume on causation, but I may of course be wrong; and in any case there may be different ways of

cashing out a broadly projectivist interpretation, just as there are different ways of cashing out a broadly sceptical realist interpretation (compare Wright 1983 with Strawson 1989).

A full-blown defence of the projectivist interpretation would, of course, require a great deal more work: I make no attempt to defend the projectivist interpretation over rival interpretations in this paper, nor do I respond to the many possible objections that could be raised against the projectivist interpretation itself. My overall aim is simply to say enough about what a projectivist interpretation might look like to persuade the reader that such an interpretation is at least a *prima facie* viable alternative to the traditional and sceptical realist interpretations.

I shall proceed as follows. In §2, I introduce the projectivist interpretation by showing how it provides one way of resolving a problem Barry Stroud (1993) raises for Hume: the problem of how we can coherently think of objects as causally related when our so thinking of them appears to involve having an idea--the idea of necessary connection--which could not possibly represent how things really, mind-independently, are. In §3, I spell out the projectivist interpretation in more detail by making some (controversial) claims about Hume's conception of causal reasoning and showing how those claims fit with the claim that causal thought is a projection of causal reasoning. In §4, I argue that there is enough of a parallel between Hume's (arguably projectivist) view of ethical thought and what he says about causation to make the projectivist interpretation of Hume on causation a viable option. In §5, I address a different problem raised by Stroud (1977), concerning whether Hume has the resources to explain why the having of the idea of necessary connection plays an important role in our understanding of the world. I argue that the projectivist interpretation provides an answer to Stroud's worry by showing how the having of the idea allows us to conceive of our inferential habits as rational responses to the order of nature.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Stroud's Problem

Stroud's problem starts from the assumption that for Hume, the content of moral, aesthetic and causal beliefs derives, somehow or other, from our 'gilding or staining' the world with sentiment (in the moral and aesthetic cases) or an impression of reflection (in the causal case). Stroud wants to think of Hume as 'holding that we do really think of objects as causally or necessarily connected, or as evil or vicious, or as beautiful' (1993: 21). In other words, he wants to think of Hume as holding that we are capable of believing--and hence of thinking--*that c* caused *e*, or that *X* is beautiful, or that what *Y* did was vicious. But to be capable of having such thoughts, Stroud thinks, the relevant ideas--of necessary connection, of beauty, of viciousness--must be capable of *representing* the world as being a certain way: the idea of necessary connection must be capable of representing *c* and *e* as bearing that relation to each other, the idea of beauty must be capable of representing *X* as being beautiful, and so on. But, given that the content of those ideas is given by something internal--an impression of reflection or a sentiment--it seems that they cannot be capable of representing the *world* as being a certain way at all. As Stroud puts it for the moral case:

In explaining his view of morals Hume is careful to point out that: ‘We do not infer a character to be virtuous, because it pleases: But in feeling that it pleases after such a particular manner, we in effect feel that it is virtuous’ (T 471). But again, that a given character is virtuous is on Hume’s view not something that is or could be so as things ‘really stand in nature’. If we could have a feeling that a certain character is virtuous, it would have to be because we are already capable of intelligibly predicating virtuousness of some of the actions or characters we observe or think about. Simply feeling or thinking that an action pleases us in a certain way does not involve projecting or ‘spreading’ anything on to the action. But feeling or thinking that the action is virtuous does. The ‘gilding or staining’ operation which is supposed to lead to such thoughts could not therefore start from just such a feeling or impression. It must start from a feeling or impression which is ‘of’ something, or has an object, in the ‘intentional’ sense; but it cannot be ‘of’ any object or quality or relation which could be part of the way things ‘really stand in nature’. If it were, no ‘gilding or staining’ would be necessary. (1993: 27)

Stroud’s problem, then, is a problem about meaning. To hold that ‘we really do think of objects’ as causally connected, or whatever, is (*prima facie* at least) to hold that those thoughts are capable of representing how those things really are. But Hume seems to think that once we trace the impression-source of the idea of necessary connection, we will see that our causal talk and thought cannot represent how things really are, because the relevant impression itself is not an impression *of* any feature that objects as they really are could possibly possess: it is simply an impression that arises when we infer that one thing will happen on having observed another thing to have happened.

Before seeing how the projectivist interpretation resolves Stroud’s problem, we first need to get clear on what a projectivist conception of causation amounts to. Following Blackburn, let’s say that ‘we *project* an attitude or habit or other commitment which is not descriptive onto the world, when we speak and think as though there were a property of things which our sayings describe, which we can reason about, know about, be wrong about, and so on’ (1984: 170-1). (Blackburn goes on to claim that projecting so defined is ‘what Hume referred to when he talks of “gilding and staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment” ’ (1984: 171).) To be a projectivist about causation is thus to claim that we speak and think as though causation were a mind-independent relation, even though in fact our so speaking and saying really involves projecting some sort of attitude or habit or commitment onto the world. Moreover, that projection is ‘not descriptive’, which is to say that it does not involve representing the world either as containing mind-independent causal relations, or as being such that it *produces* that attitude or habit or commitment in us.

What attitude or habit or commitment is it that we project onto the world? Well, for Hume, in the most basic case, our thinking of one event, *a*, as cause and another, *b*, as effect arises in the first instance when, on observing *a*, we infer that *b* will follow; and we will do that just if we have had experience of the past constant conjunction of events similar to *a* (the *As*) with events similar to *b* (the *Bs*): ‘when one particular

species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning, which can alone assure us of any matter of fact or existence. We then call the one object, *Cause*, the other, *Effect*' (E 75). The impression of necessary connection, from which the idea of necessary connection derives, is the 'feeling' we get from the 'customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant' (*ibid.*)--that is, from the inference we draw from the impression of *a* to the belief that *b* will occur. So clearly, if Hume is a projectivist about causation, the relevant 'attitude or habit or commitment' will be something like the habit of inductively inferring that a *B* will occur on observing that an *A* has occurred.

What is it to 'speak and think as though' causation were a mind-independent relation? It is important to realise that, on a projectivist view, this does not involve our mistakenly *assuming that* there are mind-independent causal relations. The non-descriptive semantics of our causal talk would rule out the possibility of our even being capable of making this assumption: to think *that* there are mind-independent causal relations, in the representational sense, requires that the meaning of 'causal relations' is descriptive, which of course is what is being denied. What *would* be a mistake, on a projectivist view, would be to hold that the meaning of 'cause' is descriptive, and hence to hold that our causal talk so much as purports to be talk *about* mind-independent relations.

On a projectivist view, to 'speak and think as though' causation were a mind-independent relation is to speak and think in such a way that the habit or commitment in question--roughly, for Hume, the inductive habit--takes on what Blackburn calls 'propositional behaviour' (1987: 55). In the case of ethics (to put it rather crudely), 'Murder: Boo!' and 'Murder is wrong' express the same ethical attitude, but the second, and not the first, has propositional form. Similarly, the attitude expressed by 'Manslaughter: Boo! Murder: BOO!' takes on propositional form when one says instead, 'Manslaughter is bad, but murder is worse'. Such propositions, Blackburn says, 'stand at a needed point in our cognitive lives--they are objects to be discussed, rejected, or improved upon when the habits, dispositions, or attitudes need discussion, rejection or improvement. Their truth corresponds to correctness in these mental states, by whichever standards they have to meet' (*ibid.*).

Here is another way to put the point, this time borrowing from Huw Price (1998). Imagine teaching a novice speaker to use colour language. Two habits need to be instilled. The first is simply the habit of using the word 'red' (say) in *prima facie* appropriate circumstances, namely circumstances in which the novice speaker has red-experiences. The second is--as Price puts it--'the habit of taking redness to be something that falls under the objective mode of speech'. Price continues:

Against the general background of assertoric practice, the way to combine these lessons will be to teach novices to describe their redness experiences in terms of the notions of perception and belief--ordinary, world-directed perception and belief, of course, not any introspective variety. In treating the distinctive redness response as defeasible perceptual grounds for a corresponding belief, we open the way to such comments as 'You believe that it is red, but is it *really* red?' This in turn may call into play the standard methods of rational

reassessment. In virtue of their acquaintance with the objective mode *in general*, speakers will be led into the practice of subjecting their colour judgements to reflective scrutiny by themselves and others. The objective mode brings with it the methods and motives for rational enquiry. (1998: 125-6)

What about the causal case? Well, as with the ethical and colour cases, the basic idea would be that our coming to speak and think in causal terms--our expressing our inductive habits in propositional form, or adopting the 'objective mode of speech'--brings with it the resources for thinking of those habits as susceptible to critical scrutiny: as habits that can be refined, rejected, warranted or unwarranted, and so on. In Hume's case, the relevant standards against which the expressed commitment is to be judged will be his 'rules by which to judge of causes and effects' (*T* 173-5).

Care is needed here, for it might seem as though to say that we cannot so much as think *that* there are mind-independent causal relations, as I did above, is tantamount to giving up on the thesis that we 'do really think of objects as causally or necessarily connected', when part of the point of a projectivist interpretation of Hume is precisely that it allows him to uphold that thesis. The two claims are not really incompatible, however. To say that we cannot so much as think *that* there are mind-independent causal relations means, in this context, to say that we cannot genuinely think or say of two events that they stand in a mind-independent relation of causation to one another. As Hume says, we are 'led astray ... when we transfer the determination of the thought to external objects, and suppose any real intelligible connexion betwixt them; that being a quality, which can only belong to the mind that considers them' (*T* 168). By contrast, to say that we do really think of objects as causally or necessarily connected is to say that we are *not* led astray--we are not making any kind of mistake--when we 'speak and think as though' causation were a mind-independent relation, in the sense just described. For so to speak and think is merely for the expressed commitment to take on 'propositional behaviour'. On the projectivist view, the propositional behaviour of our causal talk and thought does not amount to our genuinely representing the world as being a world of mind-independent causal relations, but it *does* amount to our really thinking of events as causally related.

Given all this, it should be pretty clear how a projectivist interpretation of Hume on causation would resolve Stroud's problem. Stroud presupposes that our 'thinking of objects as causally or necessarily connected' is a matter of our *representing* the world as being a certain way; and the problem is that of saying how it is possible for an idea whose origin lies in an impression of reflection to represent the world in any way at all. The projectivist interpretation resolves the problem by denying that Hume takes our thinking of objects as causally or necessarily connected to be a matter of representation in the first place. Once we have rejected that assumption on Hume's behalf, the impression from which the idea of necessary connection derives no longer needs to be an impression 'of' anything, in the representational sense (in Stroud's words, the 'intentional' sense), in order for us to be able coherently to think of objects as causally or necessarily connected.

### 3. Causal reasoning and the Image of God doctrine

One way to characterise Hume's overall project, so far as causation is concerned, is as the wholesale rejection of the idea that our beliefs about the causal structure of the world are, or could in principle be, a species of *a priori* knowledge. Edward Craig argues that this conception of our epistemic access to the world is motivated by what he calls the 'Image of God' doctrine: the thesis that the human mind is the same kind of thing as (though of course less perfect than) the mind of God (1987: Chapter 1). The epistemological upshot of the Image of God doctrine--what Craig calls the 'Insight Ideal'--is the thesis that the human mind can in principle have access to true beliefs in a way that is analogous to the way in which God can.

What must the world be like in order for the Insight Ideal to hold? Well, the human understanding is at its most perfect when engaged in demonstrative reasoning. So it would be natural, given the Insight Ideal, to think of the relationship between events in the world--that is, causation--as analogous to, or perhaps the same as, the relationship between stages in a logical or mathematical proof. The metaphysical upshot of the Insight Ideal is thus the view that causal relations are, as it were, the worldly correlates of inferential relations: 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 in an argument necessitate or guarantee the truth of their conclusion.

Hume shows that the epistemological consequences of the Image of God doctrine are completely untenable: *a priori* reasoning cannot supplement sensory experience to deliver any substantive knowledge about the world at all. We cannot penetrate into the essence of objects in such a way as to reveal anything analogous to an entailment relation between causes and effects: nothing at all in our experience reveals the world to have the quasi-logical structure suggested by the Image of God doctrine. Rather, our sensory impressions can deliver no more than a succession of events which--at least insofar as they are represented by those impressions--are 'entirely loose and separate' (*E* 74). Beliefs about what is not currently available to sensation are delivered not by *a priori* reasoning or by penetration into the essences of objects, but by a brute associative mechanism: by the inductive habits we share not with God but with other animals.

For present purposes, what is important about the metaphysical picture prompted by the Image of God doctrine is that it takes there to be an intimate connection between the nature of causation on the one hand, and the nature of *inference* (at least in ideal circumstances) concerning matters of fact on the other. Causation is conceived as a relation such that grasp of its nature licenses inferences from one matter of fact to another. So it is the (alleged) epistemology of the inference that drives the metaphysics: we start with a thesis about the nature of the inference, and end up with a thesis about the nature of causation. Now, suppose that we take Hume to have roughly the same conception of the explanatory order as do upholders of the Image of God doctrine, so that the story about what it *is* for one thing to cause another derives from the story about how it is that we infer one matter of fact from another. What follows most naturally is a projectivist interpretation.

Here's why. The difference between Hume and the upholders of the Image of God doctrine is that Hume rejects the Insight Ideal and replaces it with the claim that inferences from one matter of fact to another are due to the operation of an associative

mechanism: they are a result of habit rather than the operation of a special faculty of reason. (I shall call the associative mechanism the ‘associative mechanism of causation’: it is one of the mechanisms by which the mind is naturally ‘conveyed from one idea to another’ (T 11).) Given the supposition just made on Hume’s behalf about the explanatory order, it is the nature of the inference that leads him towards projectivism. The associative mechanism of causation itself is, by definition, a *mental* mechanism: a mechanism by which one idea ‘attracts’ another (see T 12) as a result of custom or habit. So, unlike upholders of the Image of God doctrine, Hume cannot hold that there is any feature of the world that *corresponds* to the operation of that inferential mechanism: the world cannot literally operate in a way that mirrors the associative mechanism of causation. (Billiard balls do not act on one another out of custom or habit.) So if we are to think of the world as somehow reflecting and justifying our inferential habits, that can only be because we project those habits onto the world. According to the Image of God doctrine, our inferential habits reflect pre-existing, mind-independent, inference-justifying relations. According to Hume *qua* projectivist, we impose our inferential habits onto the world. When we come to think of two events *a* and *b* as causally related, we take ourselves to be justified in inferring future *Bs* from *As*, and we do so in virtue of our taking them to be so related. But this is only because it is that very inferential habit that we projected onto them in the first place, in coming to think of them as causally related.

*Should* we take Hume to think that the story about what it is to think of two events as causally related derives from how it is that we infer one matter of fact from another? From a common-sense point of view, such a view might seem to be a reversal of the natural explanatory order: ordinarily, I think, we take it that causal reasoning--reasoning from causes to effects--takes causal belief as part of the input, so that a paradigm case of causal reasoning would look like this:

- (CR1) (P1) *As* cause *Bs*  
       (P2) An *A* has occurred  
       (C) *A B* will occur

On this view, we *start out* with a conception of what it is for *As* to cause *Bs*, and that conception will enable us to see why (CR1) counts as a legitimate inference. For example, we might hold that causation requires universal constant conjunction, in which case (CR1) turns out to be valid and hence, obviously, a legitimate inference.

This is not *Hume’s* conception of a paradigm case of causal reasoning, however. For in order to deploy (CR1), we need antecedently to believe (P1). But belief in (P1) could only come about by deploying an inference that takes us from beliefs about the past to beliefs about what will happen in the future--that is, an inference that generates *expectations*: beliefs about what is not present to the senses or memory. And it is that very inference that (CR1) is supposed to capture: (CR1) is supposed to explain how it is that we move from what is present to the senses or memory--the impression or belief that an *A* has occurred--to an expectation (the expectation that a *B* will occur).

So for Hume, causal reasoning in general cannot start from an antecedently-held belief in some causal claim. Instead, Hume holds that it is causal reasoning *itself*--the operation of the associative mechanism of causation--that delivers our capacity to think of event *a* as a cause of event *b* (and hence of *As* as causes of *Bs* generally). For Hume, I think, the paradigm case of causal reasoning is just this:

(CR2) (P1) *a* has occurred  
 (C) *b* will occur

Such reasoning is *causal* reasoning because we will infer (C) from (P1) (that is, infer *b* from *a*) just when we think of *a* and *b* as cause and effect. And in the first instance--on the first occasion on which the associative mechanism generates the inference from *a* to *b*--the mechanism is *also* what makes us think of *a* and *b* as cause and effect. As Hume says, 'when one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning, which can alone assure us of any matter of fact or existence. We then call the one object, *Cause*; the other, *Effect*' (E 75). On the projectivist interpretation, our so thinking of them is not a matter of our performing any further cognitive feat--our ascertaining that the truth conditions for '*As* cause *Bs*' are met, say; rather, it is simply a matter of our projecting the inference itself onto the events.

There is a parallel here between causation and entailment that might make this point clearer. I just claimed that, for Hume, paradigm causal inference does not proceed by starting out with a causal claim as a premise. The parallel claim is true for entailment: if I infer, say, 'P' from 'P&Q', the inference does not proceed like this:

(E1) (P1) 'P&Q' entails 'P'  
 (P2) P&Q  
 (C) P

Rather, it proceeds like this:

(E2) (P1) P&Q  
 (C) P

The fact that 'P&Q' entails 'P' is what makes the inference from the former to the latter a legitimate inference; but it does not make the inference legitimate by functioning as an additional premise. My grasping the fact that 'P&Q' entails 'P' just *is*, in a sense, my grasping the fact that (E2) constitutes a valid inference.



This, I claim, is a pretty close parallel to Hume's conception of *causal* reasoning. My thinking of *a* and *b* as cause and effect is not an additional premise, *belief* in which legitimises the inference. Instead, my thinking of *a* and *b* as cause and effect just *is*, in a sense, my thinking of the inference from *a* to *b* as a legitimate inference.

There are two important disanalogies between *a priori* reasoning and entailment on the one hand, and causal reasoning and 'causes' on the other. First, entailment holds between mental items--ideas--whereas causation is a relation between events in the world. This is precisely where projection comes into the story: in thinking of *a* and *b* as causally related, we project the inferential relation between the *idea* of *a* and the *idea* of *b* onto *a* and *b* themselves.

Second, *a priori* reasoning is guaranteed to be truth-preserving, whereas causal reasoning is not. Of course, the question of where this leaves the epistemological status of causal reasoning, according to Hume, is a thorny one. It has recently been argued by several authors that Hume is not, as has been traditionally supposed, an inductive sceptic, in the sense of believing that no belief at all about the unobserved is justified (see for example Owen 2000: Chapter 6). There are good reasons to think that this is right. Hume draws clear distinctions between good and bad causal reasoning, for example when he lays down 'rules by which to judge of causes and effects' (*T* 173-6). Moreover, he describes the project of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* as a 'science of man', which is 'the only solid foundation for the other sciences' (*T* xvi). It would be very peculiar indeed for Hume to say this, knowing full well that within a hundred pages or so he would be concluding that no belief based on empirical investigation is any more reasonable than any other (see Owen 2000: 146 and Baier 1991: 55).

This non-sceptical interpretation of Hume's attitude towards inductive inference fits well with the projectivist interpretation. Recall that, according to projectivism about causation, the expression of our habits or commitments takes on 'propositional behaviour'--we adopt the 'objective mode of speech'--because of the need to conceive of those habits or commitments as susceptible to critical scrutiny. If Hume is no inductive sceptic, then he holds that our inferential habits *are* susceptible to critical scrutiny. According to the projectivist interpretation, our accepting or rejecting causal claims just *is* the projection of our attitudes towards particular inferences: in accepting that *a* caused or will cause *b*, we endorse the inference from *a* to *b*, and in rejecting the claim that *a* caused *b*, we reject the inference.

#### 4. Causal and ethical projectivism

A large part of the motivation for the projectivist interpretation comes from seeing a parallel between Hume's views on causation and his views on ethics and aesthetics, where a projectivist interpretation more clearly has some textual support, most notably in Hume's claim that '*taste* ... gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. [It] has a productive faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours, borrowed from internal sentiment, raises in a manner a new creation' (*E* 294). In this section, I shall argue that there is enough of a parallel between the causal and ethical cases to make a projectivist interpretation of Hume on causation at least a *prima facie* viable option.

Hume's views on ethics are, of course, no less a matter for interpretative dispute than are his views on causation. However the difference between the viable interpretative positions in the case of ethics is more subtle than in the case of causation: it is generally agreed that Hume is what Mackie calls a 'sentimentalist' about ethics (Mackie 1980: Chapter 5), and this rules out the possibility that Hume intends either a reductionist analysis of vice and virtue or a realist view according to which vice and virtue are mind-independent features of characters or actions. Hence in the case of ethics a projectivist interpretation, being a variety of sentimentalism, is more obviously a serious interpretative option, along with (amongst other options) a secondary-quality view (what Mackie calls 'dispositional descriptivism'), emotivism, and what Mackie calls 'the objectification theory', according to which moral features are 'fictitious, created in thought by the projection of moral sentiments onto the actions (etc.) which are the objects of [moral] sentiments' (Mackie 1980: 74).

Stroud (1977: Chapter 8) argues, in effect, that Hume holds the objectification theory, and that this interpretation 'coheres better than any alternative with [Hume's] general philosophical aims' (1977: 185):

More of Hume's aims would be served by a theory of moral judgments that follows the same general lines as I suggested for the case of necessity. I contemplate or observe an action or character and then feel a certain sentiment of approbation towards it. In saying or believing that *X* is virtuous I am indeed ascribing to *X* itself a certain objective characteristic, even though, according to Hume, there really is no such characteristic to be found 'in' *X*. In that way virtue and vice are like secondary qualities. In saying that *X* is virtuous I am not just making a remark about my own feeling, but I make the remark only because I have the feeling I do. In 'pronouncing' it to be virtuous I could also be said to be expressing or avowing my approval of *X*. Hume thinks that approval is a quite definite feeling, so for him it would be expressing my feeling towards *X*. (1977: 184)

As we saw in §2, Stroud later expresses the worry that the view thus ascribed to Hume cannot, in the end, be made to work. The problem, remember, is that we cannot intelligibly 'ascribe to *X* itself a certain objective characteristic'--that is, *represent X* as possessing that characteristic--if our doing so involves 'gilding or staining' *X* with a feeling or impression. The projectivist interpretation was supposed to solve that problem in the case of causation by denying, on Hume's behalf, that 'ascription' amounts to representation; and of course the same move can be made in the ethical case. In fact, Stroud comes slightly closer to projectivism in the ethical case than in the causal case, because he holds that in the ethical case, 'in "pronouncing" it to be virtuous I could *also* be said to be expressing or avowing my approval of *X*' (my italics). But he rejects an 'emotivist' interpretation on the grounds that Hume 'thinks of a moral conclusion or verdict as a "pronouncement" or judgment--something put forward as true' (1977: 182). Again, a projectivist interpretation solves this problem, since according to projectivism the projection of sentiment does indeed involve our putting forward moral conclusions, pronouncements or judgements: that is what 'adopting the objective mode of speech' (to use Price's phrase) amounts to.

Of course, a full defence of a projectivist interpretation of Hume on ethics requires more than merely showing that it solves Stroud's problem. But suppose that Stroud's argument for the claim that the objectification theory coheres better with Hume's aims than do any of the other alternatives that he canvasses is correct. (Stroud does not consider the projectivist interpretation.) If so, we do have reason to think that the projectivist interpretation is the best interpretation. This is partly because it solves Stroud's problem, but also because it allows Hume not only to make sense of our moral pronouncements, but to endorse them. According to the objectification theory, our moral pronouncements are all, strictly speaking, false: we ascribe to actions or characters features which they do not possess. But Hume does not suggest that he thinks this. He does not suggest that there is anything defective about our moral pronouncements, or that, from the perspective of concern for truth and falsity, no moral pronouncement fares better than any other. Instead, he seems straightforwardly to endorse some moral pronouncements and reject others. Hence, at least *prima facie*, the projectivist interpretation makes very good sense of what Hume says about our moral thought and talk.

Unfortunately, there appear to be some significant disanalogies between what Hume says about virtue (and beauty) on the one hand, and what he says about causation on the other. So, even assuming the viability of a projectivist interpretation in the moral case (and the aesthetic case), there are *prima facie* grounds for suspicion that Hume does not endorse a projectivist view of causation. I shall argue, however, that the differences are not as great as might be thought.

Perhaps the most significant problem is that Hume explicitly *contrasts* the 'boundaries of *reason* and of *taste*' (*E* 294). Reason 'conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood' while taste 'gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue'; reason 'discovers objects as they really stand in nature', while taste 'has a productive faculty' which 'raises in a manner a new creation'; the standard of reason is 'founded on the nature of things', while the standard of taste arises 'from the internal frame and constitution of animals' (*ibid.*). ('Reason' here is to be understood to include reasoning from experience.) If Hume had more or less the same--projectivist--view about causation as he has about beauty, deformity, vice and virtue, then he would surely have to hold that causal beliefs or judgements stand on the side of taste rather than reason. But surely Hume holds that causal beliefs stand on the side of reason rather than taste: surely he holds that causal beliefs are beliefs about 'matters of fact', while moral judgements are not. Indeed, if 'reason' is supposed to include reasoning from experience, then it includes *causal* reasoning, since that is just what Hume takes reasoning from experience to be. So it seems that causal beliefs stand on the side of reason by definition.

A second problem, related to the first, is that Hume asks, right at the beginning of his discussion of ethics in the *Treatise*, '[w]hether 'tis by means of our ideas or impressions we distinguish betwixt vice and virtue, and pronounce an action blameable or praise-worthy' (*T* 456); and his answer is 'impressions'. This sets up a second apparent difference between his treatment of vice and virtue on the one hand and necessary connection on the other. As Stroud says:

In the case of necessity we are said to have an *idea* of necessity that we employ in formulating our *belief* that two events are necessarily connected, but Hume nowhere mentions a corresponding *idea* of virtue or goodness and he never talks explicitly about moral *beliefs*. (1977: 185)

Instead, Stroud points out, Hume tends to talk about moral ‘pronouncements’ and ‘judgements’.

So it seems that Hume is drawing a clear distinction between, on the one hand, belief, reasoning, and matters of fact; and, on the other, ‘pronouncements’ and matters of taste. And it seems that he intends causation to fall into the first category, while vice and virtue fall into the second category. I shall argue, however, that it is not at all obvious that Hume *does* take causation to fall into the first category.

Consider, first, Stroud’s claim that ‘we are said to have an *idea* of necessity in formulating our *belief* that two events are necessarily connected’. Well, Hume undeniably does say that we have an idea of necessity. But, so far as I can tell, he nowhere talks about the ‘belief’ that two events are necessarily connected. Instead, he says that ‘we call the one [event] *cause* and the other *effect*’ (T 87; see also E 75), and that we ‘pronounce ... two objects to be cause and effect’ (T 87; see also E 75).

In fact, given Hume’s restrictive sense of ‘belief’, this is just what we should expect: Hume restricts ‘belief’ to what is inferred on the basis of a present impression (of sensation or memory) together with past experience of constant conjunction (see T 94-8). Whatever it is we do when we ‘pronounce’ *a* to be a cause of *b*, the only candidates for being the objects of *belief* here are *a* and *b*. One might therefore object that Hume’s unwillingness to talk about our believing *that a* caused *b* is merely a by-product of his somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term ‘belief’. But this would be unwarranted, for Hume’s notion of ‘matter of fact’ is similarly restricted. ‘Reasoning concerning matters of fact’, for Hume, is reasoning *from* one matter of fact *to* another; that is, from cause to effect. He does not need to think, and nowhere says, that *a*’s *being* a cause of *b* is an *additional* matter of fact.

What I am suggesting here is that Hume’s explicit contrast between reason and taste can be read as a contrast between the *objects* of reason (including causal reasoning) on the one hand--what reason leads us to *believe*--and the ‘objects’ of taste on the other. Reason leads us to form beliefs about matters of fact: beliefs about ‘objects as they really are in nature’. In the case of ethics, by contrast, there are no such matters of fact to represent. There are no ‘objects’ of moral thought, since such thought does not attempt to represent matters of fact; it does not attempt to capture objects as they really are in nature. Moral thought, unlike reasoning, does not deliver belief in matters of fact; rather, it involves moral ‘pronouncements’, in which sentiment plays an ineliminable role. *This* contrast between reason and taste is one that makes no implicit claim about causal thought--as opposed to the objects of causal reasoning--at all. Hume need not think of causation as an *object* of reason, in the sense that our causal pronouncements or judgements are themselves beliefs that purport to represent matters of fact. So the contrast is entirely compatible with the claim that causal pronouncements, like moral pronouncements, are not beliefs in matters of fact, do not discover objects as they really stand in nature, and ‘raise in a manner a new creation’.

This still leaves us with a version of the difference noted by Stroud, however. While I have denied that Hume holds that we have causal *beliefs*, strictly speaking, Hume nonetheless does appear to think that the *idea* of necessary connection plays a role in our causal thought, whereas in the case of moral thought, it is the *impressions* of vice and virtue that are supposed to play the role: in his discussions of ethics, he does not talk about the *ideas* of vice and virtue.

However, we can resolve the apparent discrepancy between causal and moral thought by pushing Hume towards the view that there *are* ideas of vice and virtue, which play a role in moral thought, even though he does not say that there are. There are three reasons for thinking that Hume can be pushed towards that view. First, at the beginning of the *Treatise*, Hume talks quite freely about ‘the ideas of passion and desire’ (*T* 7) and ‘the idea of pleasure or pain’ (*T* 8). And he goes on to say that these ideas in turn produce ‘the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear’ which ‘again are copied by the memory and imagination, and become ideas’ (*ibid.*). If Hume thinks we have ideas of desire, aversion and the like, he has no principled reason to deny that we have ideas of vice and virtue.

Second, as Stroud points out, the fact that Hume denies that the idea of virtue or goodness plays a role in our moral pronouncements presents him with a problem: ‘what could a moral “pronouncement” be? It would seem to consist only of an impression or feeling, but how do we employ that very feeling in formulating a “pronouncement”?’ (1977: 185). Stroud goes on to say that what Hume *ought* to do here is to say what he says in the case of necessary connection: ‘I make the distinction [between vice and virtue] on the basis of my impression or feeling, but I use an *idea* of viciousness or virtuousness in making my pronouncement’ (1977: 186).

Third, Hume *needs* to hold that we can *think* about vice and virtue without actually having the relevant impressions--in which case we must do so by deploying the *ideas* of vice and virtue rather than the impressions--even if he holds that we cannot *pronounce* a person or action to be virtuous without having the corresponding impression. For otherwise we would not be able even to entertain the possibility that our moral judgements are mistaken, or wonder what the appropriate moral attitude in a particular case is. For example, I might judge that a certain politician is deplorably insincere and manipulative, and do so because of the moral sentiment I feel when I consider his actions; but I am still capable of considering the possibility that I have misjudged him. Or I might, on meeting someone for the first time, form no moral view of her at all; but this does not stop me wondering whether or not she is considerate, selfish, generous, dishonest, or whatever. Again, feeling no moral sentiment whatever towards her, I am not in a position to *judge* her to be any of these things; but I can perfectly well imagine that she might be.

The claim I have been trying to establish is that *if* projectivism is a viable interpretative position in the ethical case, then it is also a viable interpretative position in the causal case. Admittedly, I have not given much by way of argument for the claim that, in the case of ethics, a projectivist interpretation is a viable option. But I think it is at least pretty clear that a projectivist interpretation does the best justice to Hume’s claims that taste ‘raises in a manner a new creation’ (*E* 294). Insofar as there are parallels between Hume’s treatment of the ethical case and his treatment of causation (as Stroud (1993) argues), we thus have at least some reason to think that the

projectivist interpretation is a serious contender when it comes to Hume's conception of causation.

##### 5. What does the idea of necessary connection add?

Finally, I want to address a different worry, which Stroud raises (1977: 224-34), concerning whether, given Hume's views, our having the idea of necessary connection really adds anything to our understanding of the world. He brings the worry out by considering how we differ from hypothetical beings whose minds work just like ours do, *except* that they lack the impression--and hence the idea--of necessary connection. Let's call such beings 'connectionless beings'. Stroud notes that, since their minds operate according to just the same associative principles as ours do, connectionless beings come to have just the same expectations, on the basis of past regularities and current experience, as we do: they too would infer, and be just as certain as we are, that the black will move on seeing the white make contact with it.

Connectionless beings, however, 'would presumably differ from us in never saying or believing that certain things *must* happen, or that two sorts of things come together *of necessity*' (1977: 227). Stroud's worry is that Hume is not in a position to think that this difference amounts to anything very significant:

... it would seem that the notion of necessity does not serve to describe or refer to some objective feature of the world that we, but not they, have discovered. All their beliefs about the actual course of their experience would be the same as ours. And although our minds do differ from theirs in 'possessing' the idea of necessary connection, surely we are not actually describing or referring to that difference, or to anything else in our minds, when we use the word 'must' or attach the idea of necessity to something we believe. What then is the difference? According to the theory of ideas, we, but not they, are simply the beneficiaries of an additional mental item that forces itself into our minds on certain occasions, and we then go through the otherwise empty ritual of adding that unanalysable idea of necessary connection to some of our beliefs. (*ibid.*)

The worry, then, is that, according to Hume's theory of ideas, the having and deploying of the idea of necessary connection can be no more than a mere 'empty ritual'. The mere possession of a mental object--the 'having' of the idea of necessary connection--cannot explain the important role that thinking of the world in causal terms has in our judgement and reasoning. What 'needs to be understood before Hume's programme can succeed', Stroud says, is 'how it is possible for us to think about more than the actual course of events in the world, or what is involved in our accepting statements whose modality is stronger than "existence" or what is actually the case' (1977: 230).

Stroud sees this problem with the idea of necessary connection as part of a much wider problem whose root lies in the theory of ideas--in the view that the ability to think about the world, to deploy concepts, is merely a matter of the presence in the mind of a 'mental item'. I shall not discuss whether or not Stroud is right about this in

general; rather, I want to argue that, in the case of the idea of necessary connection, there is no real problem given the projectivist interpretation.

Note first that Stroud takes it for granted that on Hume's view, connectionless beings' 'beliefs about the actual course of their experience would be the same as ours'. There is a sense in which this is true. Once we have been persuaded by Hume's arguments that there is no *sensory* impression of necessary connection, our *beliefs* about the actual course of *sensory* experience will be the same as those of the connectionless beings. But there is still, on Hume's view, a *phenomenological* difference between us and the connectionless beings, since our sensory experience is accompanied by the impression of necessary connection, and theirs is not. I shall argue later that this phenomenological difference is important, even though it generates no difference in beliefs about the actual course of experience.

Stroud also seems to think that it is relevant that, on Hume's view, 'the notion of necessity does not serve to describe or refer to some objective feature of the world that we, but not they [that is, connectionless beings], have discovered'. So, now, suppose that the notion of necessity *does* serve to describe or refer to genuine, mind-independent necessary connections which we 'discover'. Suppose, in other words, that the view that Hume is attacking--the view that we detect genuine, mind-independent, *a priori* inference-licensing necessary connections between events--is correct. For current purposes, I'll call that view 'casual realism'. Stroud appears to think that if causal realism is true, the problem does not arise.

Why might this be? Well, Stroud seems to demand two related things of an adequate account of the 'having' of the idea of necessary connection. First, it must explain how we are able to think of the world as being such that something *must* happen, or that one event happens *because* another event happens, and so on. And second, it must explain how we are able to think about more than what *actually* happens: how we are able to 'go beyond beliefs about the course of all actual events, past, present and future' (1977: 229), which is what we do when we engage in counterfactual reasoning: when we come to believe that if an *A* had occurred, a *B* would have occurred. We can see how causal realism succeeds on both counts. It succeeds on the first count because, according to causal realism, our causal thought (and experience) unproblematically *represents* the world as being such that, given one event, another *must* happen, or such that one event happens *because* another happens. And it succeeds on the second count because if we are capable of believing that *As* and *Bs* as necessarily connected, then presumably we are also perfectly capable of believing that, had an *A* occurred, it *would* have been necessarily connected to a *B*--and hence believing that if an *A* had occurred, a *B* would have occurred.

In fact, we can add a third requirement on an adequate account of the having of the idea of necessary connection--one that lies at the heart of Hume's interest in causation. (Whether this is a requirement that *we* ought to endorse is a controversial question, but I don't think there is much doubt that Hume would have endorsed it.) The account must explain how an impression of, or a belief in, one matter of fact can be a *good reason* to believe in some other matter of fact. That is, the idea of necessary connection must be such that it allows us to conceive of our inferences from causes to effects as *rational* inferences. Again, causal realism satisfies this requirement: if our sensory experience reveals one event--the cause--to be such that another event--the

effect--is *guaranteed* to follow, then of course our having of the impression (and idea) of necessary connection explains why an impression of the cause constitutes a good reason to believe that the effect will follow. Indeed, if we think of the issue in terms of the Image of God doctrine, it is the whole *point* of causal realism that it satisfies this requirement: the whole point of holding that the world is a world of detectable, *a priori* inference-licensing necessary connections is precisely that their detection licenses *a priori* inference.

So causal realism satisfies the three requirements for an adequate theory of what is involved in having the idea of necessary connection. What about Hume's own view? Is Stroud right to say that *that* view fails to satisfy the requirements? Well, there are very large differences between Hume's view, *qua* projectivist, and the causal realist view he is attacking. *Qua* projectivist, Hume rejects the epistemological thesis that inference from causes to effects is *a priori* inference, and he rejects the corresponding metaphysical thesis that necessary connection is the relation, or a feature of the cause, that makes such *a priori* inference possible. He also rejects the semantic thesis that our thinking of events as causally or necessarily connected is a matter of *representing* them as standing in such a relation. Despite these differences, however, there is a close connection between causal realism and the projectivist view I am attributing to Hume; for according to both views, our deployment of the idea of necessary connection is inextricably linked with our conceiving of causes as *grounds* of our expectations. Our having the idea of necessary connection just *is* a matter of our conceiving of the world as a world of causal relations: as a world whose causal structure is revealed by and serves to justify our inductive inferences. Of course, the major difference between causal realism and projectivism is that on the projectivist view, our inductive inferences only 'reveal' the causal structure of the world because that causal structure is itself a projection of our inferential habits. But this (from a projectivist perspective) does not make our conception of the world as causally structured any less central to our conception of our inferential habits as rationally constrained by the world. Given all this, projectivism seems to me to meet the three requirements just as well as causal realism does; the fact that, on the projectivist view, our thinking of events as causally or necessarily connected is a matter of projection rather than representation does not make the having of the idea of necessary connection any more of an 'empty ritual' than it is on the causal realist view.

What about the connectionless beings? Does the projectivist interpretation provide a conception of what the having of the idea of necessary connection amounts to, which makes us importantly different to connectionless beings? Is there an important difference between being able to think or say that the black *must* move, and being able to think or say only that the black *will* move? I think so. For, in saying or thinking that the black *must* move, we conceive of ourselves of having good *reasons* for thinking that the black will move. In his discussion of Hume on inductive inference, Stroud says: 'To say that the murderer *must* have only four toes on the left foot is to indicate that what you already know is good or conclusive reason to believe that about the murderer, and not just that he does have only four toes on the left foot' (1977: 63). On the projectivist interpretation, the causal case--one's thinking that the black *must* move--is just the same. Indeed, Stroud's case *is* a causal case--at least for Hume, given that he holds that *all* reasoning concerning matters of fact is causal reasoning. Our having good or conclusive reason to believe that the murderer has only four toes on the



left foot, and our consequently coming to hold that the murderer *must* have only four toes on the left foot, is a matter of reasoning from effects to causes. The inference from crime-scene evidence--footprints in the sand, say--to facts about the murderer's anatomy just *is* a matter of thinking of the footprints as effects, and drawing a conclusion about what caused them. In other words, Hume would, I think, deny that there is any special epistemic, as opposed to causal, sense of 'must' at work in the claim that the murderer must have only four toes on the left foot: connectionless beings would be no more able to think or say that the murderer must have four toes than they are able to think or say that the black ball must move.

It does not follow from any of this that we are in a *better* position than are the connectionless beings, if our ultimate aim is to track the regularities in nature--that is, to make, and have confidence in, predictions that turn out to be true. As Stroud notes, it is 'implausible to suggest that [connectionless beings] would differ in being less *certain* than we are about, say, billiard balls, falling bodies or death. If their minds worked according to the [associative principle of causation], there is no reason to suppose that less force and vivacity, and therefore less certainty, would be transmitted from impression to idea in their case than in ours' (1977: 227). And of course connectionless beings can 'indicate' that they have good reason to believe that the murderer has four toes on the left foot by saying so, rather than saying (as they cannot, because they lack the idea of necessary connection) that the murderer *must* have four toes on the left foot. On the other hand, it is no part of Hume's thesis that we are in a better position than connectionless beings; it is no part of his thesis that we, armed as we are with the idea of necessary connection, will be better able to get around in the world, or will be better scientists, or whatever, than connectionless beings. Because we project our habits of expectation onto the world and they do not, we think of inductive reasoning as causal reasoning--as reasoning from causes to effects and vice versa--while they do not. But there is a sense in which it is the having of the habit, and one's thinking of the habit as legitimate or justified, that is important, and not the ability to project the habit onto the world in such a way that one gets to think of the world as a world of causes and effects.

Having said that much, there is still a sense in which Hume can hold that we are better off than our connectionless counterparts. Connectionless beings have the associative mechanism of causation (though of course they would not call it that). That mechanism will generate just the same expectations as it does in us, and will track nature's regularities just as successfully. But, because the impression of necessary connection arises from the operation of the mechanism, we, but not they, can track the operation of the mechanism much more easily than they can; and we will therefore find it much easier to conceive of the inferences generated by the operation of the mechanism as rational.

To see why, consider what is needed in order for connectionless beings to conceive of the inferences generated by the associative mechanism of causation as rational. The mechanism will generate expectations, given observed constant conjunction and a present impression as input, just as ours does. Connectionless beings will be able to tell that there is such an associative mechanism, because they will be in a position to notice that sometimes an expectation will naturally arise thanks to their having previously observed the relevant constant conjunction, and so they will come to realise that an associative mechanism, with experienced constant conjunction of *As* and *Bs* and a present impression of an *A* as input, generates belief that a *B* will occur. And

they will be able to consider the expectations generated by the associative mechanism, as opposed to those generated by some other means (superstition or education, say), as justified, just as we are. So far, so good. But none of this will be *obvious* to connectionless beings. The expectations generated by the associative mechanism are accompanied by no special phenomenology. A given expectation--that the black will move, say--will simply appear in the mind *as* an expectation; it will not, as it were, wear its genesis in the associative mechanism on its sleeve. In order to think of a given expectation that a connectionless being finds herself with as rational, she will have to consciously think about how that expectation arose--about whether it arose thanks to the associative mechanism, or whether it is due to some other, less reliable mechanism: education, say.

We, on the other hand, thanks to the impression of necessary connection, do not have to go through any such laborious procedure. When *we* come to expect that the black will move, that expectation *does* wear its genesis on its sleeve, for it is accompanied by a phenomenology that is lacking in cases where expectation is generated by, say, education. It is that phenomenology, and the corresponding projectivist semantics, that allows us automatically and legitimately to think of ourselves as rationally responding to a causally structured world, rather than to a world of loose and separate events.

Consider how things are with dogs. Dogs' expectations, according to Hume, are generated by the same associative mechanism as ours (see *T* 176-9). But dogs, unlike us, are not capable of caring about *how* their expectations are generated: they are not capable of conceiving of one expectation as more or less rational than another. Dogs thus have no use for an impression of necessary connection; for them, such an impression would be (or perhaps is) merely a 'feeling' they get when they expect *walk soon* or *dinner now*. Connectionless beings, unlike dogs, *are* capable of caring about how their expectations are generated, and they are capable of conceiving one expectation as more or less rational than another. But their ability to do so is hampered by their lack of an impression, and hence an idea, of necessary connection. If they had such an impression, they would be able to think of themselves as reasoning from causes to effects--rather than succumbing to superstition, say--without having consciously to consult past experience in order to work out what generated their expectation on a given occasion. We, unlike connectionless beings, can do just that. As Hume says, albeit in a slightly different context: 'Those, who delight in the discovery and contemplation of *final causes*, have here ample subject to employ their wonder and admiration' (*E* 55).

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<sup>1</sup> Plenty of commentators hold that Hume takes ‘projection’ to have *something* to do with the genesis and/or meaning of our causal thought and talk; for example, Kemp Smith (1941), Stroud (1977) and Wright (1983)). However, none of these authors attribute to Hume a ‘projectivist’ view in Blackburn’s sense.

<sup>2</sup> Hume’s *Treatise* (1739-40) and *Enquiries* (1748/51) are referred to by ‘*T*’ and ‘*E*’ respectively.