

Hume's Paradoxical Thesis and his Critics: Some Comments

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In *A Treatise of Human Nature* David Hume boldly asserts the following that he acknowledges will strike one as paradoxical:

Necessity, then, is the effect of [the observation of resembling conjunctions], and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a *determination* to carry our thought from one object to another. (*Treatise* 165: my insert and emphasis)

This identification of necessity with some determination of the mind is surprising, as Hume well knows. For Hume explicitly tells us that this is “the most violent” of all the paradoxes he will present us with in his *Treatise*, “and that ’tis merely by dint of solid proof and reasoning I can ever hope it will have admission...” (T 166) Unfortunately, a survey of the reactions to this thesis reveals that it has had a mixed reception among scholars. Recent literature, at least, on this identification strongly suggests that Hume’s “solid proof and reasoning” has not been successful, for this section of the *Treatise* has elicited a wide range of damning responses from the critics. Put broadly, these criticisms fall into one of three camps.

First, there are incredulous critics who charge that this is a baffling thesis that is not intelligible as it stands. David Pears, for one, shares this view. In his *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of his Treatise* Pears maintains that Hume knew what he wanted to avoid saying:

he must not on any account say that the necessity existed independently within the mind and was apprehended through the internal impression. But what he ought to have said instead was far less clear to him, and that is why he offered these strictly unintelligible identifications: both necessity and the determination of the mind *are* the internal impression. These identifications make it clear that the necessity has no independent existence even within the mind, but they do not convey any positive message which can be understood. (Pears 113)

Other commentators, while still incredulous, are less damning in their assessment of Hume’s paradoxical thesis. This more charitable response holds that the identification thesis *can* be understood, but that we need to tread warily in our attempts to grasp it. Annette Baier seems to represent this more muted set of critics. In her *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, she advises that “it is vital that we learn what Hume means by ‘the determination of the mind,’ since the feeling of that determination

is found to be the long-sought source of the idea of necessity....” (Baier 79) So for Baier the thesis is intelligible, at least as far as Hume is concerned. Had the explicans been unintelligible, this request from Baier would be otiose.

The third and in my view most radical criticism of Hume’s paradoxical thesis is the charge that the thesis is not as it appears. While it appears that Hume identifies necessity with some determination of the mind, it is argued that Hume’s actual thesis is that necessity is *the feeling* of the determination of the mind to pass from one object to another. Barry Stroud, in his *Hume*, heads this view of Hume’s account of necessity. Furthermore, and this is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of this interpretation, the claim is that for Hume, necessity is *not* the determination itself. Of the three, this interpretation seems to conflict most starkly with Hume’s text, and calls for closer attention. My paper will focus on this more extreme view to help us better understand Hume’s radical views on necessity.

In his *Treatise* Hume concludes early on that every simple idea that either is, or could develop in our minds “first makes its appearance in a correspondent impression.” (*Treatise* 33) Without the impression a corresponding idea could not form in the mind:

...all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent. (*Treatise* 4)

In his influential *Hume*, Stroud call this statement Hume’s first general principle in the science of man that he was attempting to found. As Stroud sees it, Hume’s subsequent analysis of necessity leaves him with two options, and in order not to infringe his priority principle, he ought to select only one of the contenders as the requisite impression as the source of the idea of necessity. Adopting the view that Hume’s priority principle is a causal hypothesis¹—and hence that the search for an impression, or the source of an idea, is the search for the cause of that idea²—Stroud suggests that Hume isolates two different candidates as possible causes of the idea of necessity: a determination of the mind to pass from the idea of one object to that of its usual attendant, and an impression or feeling of determination. If he says simply that the determination of the mind is what causes us to get the idea of necessity, then his “first principle” would be violated, since he would have found an idea which is caused by something other than an impression. Therefore, he should say that the idea is caused by the impression or feeling of determination. (Stroud 1977: 85)

But not only *should* Hume assert that the feeling, as opposed to its associated determination, is the cause of the idea, Stroud intimates that this

is how Hume in fact does see it. For Stroud goes on to explain how we ought to understand the presumably Humean suggestion that necessity is a particular feeling:

The impression or feeling of determination from which the idea of necessity is derived must therefore be understood as just a certain feeling that arises in the mind whenever a certain kind of mental occurrence causes another. (Stroud 1977: 85)

What are we to make of all this?

The first thing to notice about Stroud's argument is that it appears to contain a not very subtle shift from 'ought' to 'is'. Having told us what Hume ought to do, Stroud appears to conclude, on the basis of his "should-discussion", that this is what Hume in fact does. I find this move puzzling, for surely one does not attempt to show what someone *has* done merely by appealing to what *ought to be* done. While it may be logically expedient for Hume to opt for the course of action Stroud advises, saying so still leaves unanswered the question whether this is the course that has been taken. So my first qualm is a methodological one on the procedure relied on by Stroud to substantiate his interpretation. In the second place, Stroud's argument for his interpretation seems to rest on a contentious, if not false, assumption, namely, that Hume's so-called "determination of the mind" cannot qualify as an impression. If it can, Stroud's rationale for his interpretation, that centers on the need not to infringe the priority principle, is undercut. That is to say, if Hume's determination of the mind qualifies as an impression, whatever the feeling of this determination might be, Hume would not be contradicting his priority principle in suggesting that the source, or cause as Stroud puts it, of the idea of necessary connection is this determination. Clearly, the principal, if not final arbiter on these issues must be the text, so without further ado, let us turn to the *Treatise*.

As I see it, the text does not support Stroud's interpretation of Hume's view on the impression associated with the idea of necessity. If anything, it seems to corroborate the counter suggestion that Hume regards the determination of the mind as the source—and hence, given the priority principle, the impression—of the idea of necessity. A number of passages appear to support this suggestion of mine, but perhaps the most important in the *Treatise* is the following:

For after we have observ'd the resemblance in a sufficient number of instances, we immediately feel a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant... *This determination is the only effect of the resemblance; and therefore must be the same with power or efficacy, whose idea is deriv'd from the resemblance ... Necessity, then, is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind,*

or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.
(*Treatise* 165, my emphasis)

While Hume does mention the presence of a feeling in this passage—“we immediately feel a determination of the mind”—he says nothing more about it, and instead, focuses on the determination itself. For him, according to this passage, it is the determination—as opposed to the feeling of the determination—that is the source of the idea of power or efficacy. And as the last sentence above clearly indicates, in the *Treatise* Hume identifies necessity with a particular “*determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.*” But what about the possibility that Hume changed his mind on this issue between the completion of the *Treatise* and the composition of the *Enquiry*? Perhaps the *Enquiry*, that is viewed by Hume as a better rendition of some of the positions held in the *Treatise*, has shifted ground on this issue, and adopted the thesis that Stroud asserted ought to be adopted. In short, does the *Enquiry* contradict my suggestion here? I do not think so.

In order to be succinct, I shall refer only to those passages I think are central to the issue. Towards the end of his *Enquiry* investigation into the source of the idea of necessity, or necessary connection, Hume draws the conclusion that the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe, that it will exist.

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. (*Enquiry* 75, my italics)

Here we find Hume expressing a thesis that appears to be similar to that endorsed in the *Treatise*. Having made the observation that the mind feels that a connection exists between two perceived events, Hume goes on to suggest that it is the “customary transition of the imagination,” which we feel, that “is the sentiment or impression” he is after. So here the sought-for source, or cause of the idea of necessary connection, as with the discussion in the *Treatise*, does not appear to be a feeling, but some mental phenomenon *that happens to be felt*. Which explains why Hume later wraps up his *Enquiry* analysis on the source of the idea of necessary connection with this remark:

When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean *only*, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other’s existence. (*Enquiry* 76, my italics)³

If the impression Hume is after is some feeling, as Stroud suggests, this

explication would read differently. For then by "necessary connection" we would not mean that the objects had "acquired a *connexion* in our thought"—as Hume maintains above—but that a *feeling* of a connection had been acquired. But this latter suggestion is entirely excluded from Hume's explication above. All of which suggests, as I see it, that Stroud's interpretation does not square either with important passages from the *Treatise* or with central passages from the *Enquiry*. And given that Stroud fails to proffer *any* textual evidence for his interpretation, let alone any opposing textual evidence, from my analysis it appears that we can conclude that Hume's is a radical thesis on a specific determination of the mind, and not one on the feeling that is apparently associated with this determination.⁴ However, there is a second, and perhaps equally telling reason for rejecting Stroud's interpretation.

As Stroud sees it, Hume relies on the requirement that the priority principle not be contradicted in order to select the impression for the idea of necessity.⁵ Now according to Stroud, the decision to opt for the determination as the source of the idea would infringe this principle. Thus Stroud's interpretation appears to rest on the assumption that the determination Hume refers to cannot qualify as an impression. But the text suggests that Stroud's assumption here is false. For there is good evidence that Hume *does* view the determination of the mind that he is interested in as an impression, albeit an internal impression:

Necessity, then, ... is *nothing but an internal impression* of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another. (*Treatise* 165, my emphasis)

But if necessity is a specific determination—as this extract and my preceding discussion suggests—and if it "is *nothing but* an impression of the mind," the phenomenon that has been identified with necessity *must* be an impression. In that case, the assumption that Stroud appears to rely on for his interpretation is refuted. But this assumption appears to play an integral role in Stroud's argument against the suggestion that for Hume necessary connection is a determination of the mind. With this assumption out of the way, given the textual evidence cited above for the alternative reading, it appears that my interpretation of Hume's radical thesis is not only possible, but probable as well.⁶

The decision to view necessary connection as a specific determination of the mind has a number of ramifications, one of which ought to be mentioned here. It concerns Hume's application of the term 'perception'. The *Treatise* opens with an account of perceptions, and as Hume sees it, there are two types:

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS.... Those perceptions, which enter [the mind] with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. (*Treatise* 1, my insert)

Now what appears to be Hume's proposal that we view the determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant as an impression, strongly suggests that for him, this determination is a perception. But how can this determination of the mind—for that matter, any determination—qualify as a perception? For surely by 'perception' is meant some *process*, whereby the mind operates on various phenomena or mental entities, such as ideas. And while the designation "determination of the mind" is not especially perspicuous, it surely does not signify a process, but rather the precondition or determinant *of* some process? That is to say, if by 'perception' is meant a mental activity, or as Locke put it, "operation in the mind" (*Essay* II (IX) 1), what appears to be Hume's decision to view a specific determination of the mind as an impression, seems to commit him to a view that infringes the conventional wisdom on perceptions: for now it appears that Hume is mistakenly ascribing inactivity to (essentially active) perceptions.

The crux of this objection is the view that an impression, as a perception, is *ipso facto* a process. As it happens, however, Hume's conception of perceptions, differs from that espoused here. Furthermore, Hume knows it, and draws our attention to this specific issue. As the following passage clearly indicates, Hume is well aware of his terminological, and presumably conceptual, departure from the traditional Lockean account of perceptions.

I here make use of these terms, *impression and idea*, in a sense different from what is usual, and I hope this liberty will be allowed me. Perhaps I rather restore the word, *idea*, to its original sense, from which Mr. *Locke* had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions. *By the term of impression I would not be understood to express the manner, in which our lively perceptions are produced in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves*; for which there is no particular name either in the *English* or any other language, that I know of. (*Treatise* I: footnote 1, my italics)

In suggesting that the expression 'impression' does not designate a mental activity, or process whereby the mind operates on its contents, but that the expression instead refers to the contents themselves, Hume appears to be suggesting that perceptions are (mental) *entities*, and not processes. Now if Hume, in the extract above, is willing to talk about "*lively percep-*

tions" (my emphasis), he is surely also willing to talk about perceptions that are not lively, i.e. those that are faint, difficult to perceive, or—on the most speculative note—still to be perceived. That is to say, perhaps Hume is here implicitly sanctioning the possibility of unperceived perceptions. If so, this would suggest, as I see it, that for Hume, the term 'perception' can designate unperceived mental entities, such as an impression not yet perceived. But is this not at least part of the meaning of Hume's phrase "the determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant"? That is to say, is this determination for Hume, for the most part, not an unperceived mental phenomenon, that can be activated under certain circumstances, and other things being equal, can make its presence known—through some feeling, perhaps, as Hume suggests? If so, it appears that, given Hume's characterization of perceptions, especially that of impressions, it appears that his proposal is that the determination of the mind he appears to identify with necessary connection can qualify as a perception. So if my interpretation is correct that the impression Hume selects as the source of the idea of necessary connection is a specific determination of the mind, given these comments on 'perception' and particularly 'impression', the implication appears to be that Hume is willing to sanction references to dormant perceptions. In that case, his implicit suggestion may well be that the impression for the idea of necessity is some elusive phenomenon, not readily accessible to researchers.

Notes.

¹ "[O]ne must remember that [Hume] puts forward his 'general maxim' [i.e. the priority principle] that simple ideas are derived from simple impressions as a straightforward causal hypothesis." (Stroud 1977:34, my inserts) (For more on this interpretation by Stroud, see his *Hume*, Chapter Two, especially pp 21-35.)

² "[A]ccording to the theory of ideas the cause or source of every idea is an impression..." (Stroud 1977: 80, my insert.)

³ Is this to say that Hume is reifying a process here? For impressions are presumably mental *entities* of some sort, and if the amorphous phrase "customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant" is to be viewed as an expression that refers to, or even names an impression, as Hume appears to be suggesting here, it seems that a transition, or process, is to be viewed as an entity. Or is this awkward characterization of the impression perhaps a manifestation of Hume's inability to describe the impression with precision? If so, why is there this inability? These important issues cannot be dealt with here.

⁴ Given that Annette Baier also suggests that Hume's necessity is the feeling that accompanies the determination of the mind involved in causal inferences, it follows that her account on this issue is mistaken as well. (cf Baier 78-79)

⁵ David Pears maintains that a lot more is going on here than merely satisfying this requirement on the priority principle:

it is not true that he merely postulated the internal impression to meet the requirements of his theory. He did not postulate it but found it and even tried to describe it. No doubt his description is faulty, but it does pick out something essential to the experience of making causal inference, the feeling of inevitability. (Pears 104)

⁶ If the source of the idea of necessary connection is some psychological disposition, as I have argued against Stroud, and not some feeling, what function does Hume's references to feeling play in his analysis? Unfortunately, Hume is silent about the nature of this feeling that supposedly arises in causal contexts, and to the best of my knowledge, nowhere explains its role in his account of necessary connection. Which suggests that comments on this issue are likely to be highly speculative. For what it is worth, here is one thought on the subject. Perhaps Hume's comments on the issue—as expressed, for instance, in his *Enquiry* assertion that in causal contexts we “*feel* a new sentiment or impression ...” (E 78), with the emphasis on ‘feel’—can be read as a proposal that we become aware of the source of the idea of necessary connection through some (primitive?) non-intellectual process, and not as the result of any prior, carefully executed reasoning? If so, the feeling functions as a manifestation or sign of the psychological disposition that is the true source of the idea of necessary connection. But to repeat: given the highly speculative nature of this issue, as I see it, the question on this feeling must remain open.

References.

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