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Alan Schwerin

# **The Reluctant Revolutionary**

**An Essay on David Hume's  
Account of Necessary Connection**



PETER LANG

New York • Bern • Frankfurt am Main • Paris



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## PREFACE

David Hume's contributions to Philosophy, especially that of causality and necessary connection, are monumental. Yet these views have long been a source of debate, and unfortunately, confusion. This essay has the specific objective of attempting to dissipate some of the perplexities that surround Hume's influential views on necessary connection or power. Through close critical analyses of Hume's texts I have attempted to develop an interpretative framework that makes Hume's arguments and positions more accessible, if not more plausible. More positively, *The Reluctant Revolution* is an attempt to defend what may be called a subjectivist interpretation of Hume's views on necessary connection. My central thesis is the suggestion that Hume *identifies* necessary connection or power with a specific psychological disposition of the mind - as he puts it in the *Treatise*: necessary connection 'is a determination of the mind to carry our thoughts from one object to another'. (T 165) Besides defending this interpretation, a good deal of my discussion is devoted to explaining the reasons for Hume's adoption of this radical thesis.

My prime focus is on Hume's discussion of the issues as presented in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. So I cannot claim that mine is an exhaustive analysis of Hume's account of necessary connection. Nevertheless, I hope that the material dealt with here has been assayed in a manner that shows clearly how Hume's view on this fundamental question is best to be understood and evaluated. Even if only partly successful, I believe that my treatment will make apparent some of the defects of the standard interpretations of Hume's account of necessary connection. However, the discussions here does not involve a survey of these competing interpretations. Instead, I have concentrated on articulating and defending my own picture of Hume's views of necessary connection. Throughout I have tried to present a perspective that is clear, true to the texts, and engaging. But that is for the reader to decide.

Many individuals have made generous contributions to the creation of this work. Foremost among them is my friend and teacher, Mark Kulstad, whose attention to detail helped eliminate numerous infelicities in the earlier drafts. Steven Crowell kindly read the manuscript and helped me to reconsider my arguments. Dagfinn Føllesdal, through his seminars and

Frank Toffoletto worked tirelessly with me to prepare the typescript, and a grant from the Shearman Research Fund of McNeese State University enabled me to meet some of the financial costs of this project. The editor of the *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Braam Roux, has kindly granted permission for the inclusion of my paper 'On Hume's search for the source of the idea of necessary connection' in Chapter Three.

Above all, I must thank my family, especially my wife Helen, for their constant encouragement and support: your love and understanding made all this possible.

Houston  
January, 1989

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## ABBREVIATIONS

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- A *An Abstract of a Book lately Published, entitled, A Treatise of Human Nature*  
(David Hume)
- E *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*  
(David Hume)
- G *The Letters of David Hume*  
(ed) JYT Greig
- M *The Life of David Hume*  
(Ernest Mossner)
- S *The Philosophy of David Hume*  
(Norman Kemp Smith)
- T *A Treatise of Human Nature*  
(David Hume)

I am at present castrating my work, that is, cutting off its nobler parts; that is, endeavouring it shall give as little offence as possible ... This is a piece of cowardice, for which I blame myself, though I believe none of my friends will blame me.

(David Hume to Henry Home: 2 December 1737)

My principles are...so remote from all the vulgar sentiments on the subject, that were they to take place, they would produce almost a total alteration in philosophy: and you know, revolutions of this kind are not easily brought about.

(David Hume to Henry Home: 13 February 1739)

## CHAPTER ONE

### On the significance of Hume's account of necessary connection

1. David Hume bequeathed an estate that has both exasperated and enchanted the philosophical community. Here are two representative assessments of his contributions. Selby-Bigge, perhaps Hume's most celebrated editor, is forthright:

He applies the same principles to such a great variety of subjects that it is not surprising that many verbal, and some real inconsistencies can be found in his statements. He is ambitious rather than shy of saying the same thing in different ways, and at the same time he is often slovenly and indifferent about his words and formulae. This makes it easy to find all philosophies in Hume, or by setting up one statement against another, none at all. (Selby-Bigge 1888, vii)

And in a recent, more amiable response, John Bricke suggests that

Hume makes very good philosophical company: he is sophisticated, inventive, surprisingly systematic, profound. He is extraordinarily stimulating, if also a source of very great perplexity. (Bricke 1980, 1)

In this essay I propose to explore one - arguably the most intricate and significant - of Hume's philosophical bequests: namely, his account of necessary connection.

2. Through a close analysis of Hume's texts, I shall attempt to satisfy three overall objectives in this essay. After a preliminary and *tentative* account of Hume's conception of the problem of necessary connection,

- a) I intend to determine, with as much precision as I can muster, Hume's views on necessary connection.
- b) Thereafter, I shall fully articulate, and critically evaluate, the arguments relied on by Hume for his views on necessary connection.
- c) Finally, returning to my point of departure, I shall broaden the scope of this analysis through an investigation of Hume's conception of the problem of necessary connection - and in the process provide an explanation for the adoption of a radical thesis on necessary connection that Hume himself acknowledged was little likely to endear him to the philosophical community.

But why engage in a philosophical investigation of Hume's account of necessary connection? What follows in this chapter is an attempt to answer this important question. Through a brief account of the reception accorded the *Treatise* by the philosophical community, and a consideration of Hume's assessment of the situation, I want to argue that an adequate understanding of the overall thrust of the *Treatise* must draw on an understanding of Hume's views on necessary connection. With this external justification for my enquiry behind me, in section two I shall both provide a more philosophical, or internal justification for this essay, and indicate how my investigation will proceed.

**Section one:** The centrepiece of the *Treatise*.

3. Hume is characteristically candid in the *Abstract*: the problem of necessary connection is intractable, and demands a solution that is 'very new and extraordinary'. (A 657) But history has shown that the reception of new and extraordinary solutions to philosophical problems, however intractable, is far from smooth! So it comes as no surprise to find that Hume concludes his *Treatise* analysis of necessary connection on a sober note:

I am sensible, that of all the paradoxes, which I have had, or shall hereafter have occasion to advance in the course of this treatise, the present one is the most violent, and that 'tis merely by dint of solid proof and reasoning I can ever hope it will have admission, and overcome the inveterate prejudices of mankind. (T 166)

Unfortunately, Hume's worst fears were soon realized. Within months of its publication, the harsh notices and reviews of the *Treatise* that surfaced in the learned journals, culminating in the scathing forty-six page review in the prestigious *History of the Works of the Learned*, confirmed Hume's suspicions of the 'inveterate prejudices of mankind'. Well, confirmed at least his suspicions of the 'partiality and prejudice' of 'the Few' that had reviewed the *Treatise*. (A 644) Hume's 'very new and extraordinary' solutions were not going down very well with the philosophical community.

4. The first review of the *Treatise* - perhaps 'note' is more appropriate - if not determining the tune, certainly set the tone for the reviews that were to follow. Published in the Leipzig journal, *Neuen Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, this review appeared four months after the publication of the *Treatise*, on the 28 May 1739. Consisting of a mere three sentences, it reads as follows:

A new free-thinker has published an exhaustive *Treatise of Human Nature*, 2 volumes, octavo. In it he attempts to introduce the correct method of philosophising into moral matters, examining and explaining, first of all, the characteristics of the human understanding, and then the effects. The author's evil intentions are sufficiently betrayed in the sub-title of the work, taken from Tacitus: *Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quae velis; & quae sentias, dicere, licet*. (In M 120)

Displaying a greater sensitivity to Hume's 'evil intentions' than to the details of the *Treatise*, this notice reveals far more about the reviewer's prejudices than Hume's text! With jaundiced reactions like this, who would not dimly draw attention to the 'partiality and prejudice' that corrupted the critics? (A 644)

5. The response accorded the *Treatise* by the philosophical community distressed Hume.<sup>1</sup> For it meant that the revolutionary project of the *Treatise*, which was to introduce 'the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects' (T xi), faced an uncertain, if not downright bleak future. Days after the publication of the *Treatise*, in a letter to a friend, Hume anxiously confided - not without a hint of keen anticipation - that

[m]y principles are...so remote from all the vulgar sentiments on the subject, that were they to take place, they would produce almost a total alteration in philosophy: and you know,

revolutions of this kind are not easily brought about. (G 26)

Now that the reviews were out, and the sentiments of the philosophical community known, Hume had to concede that his optimism had been misplaced. Far from generating a philosophical revolution, the *Treatise*, given its initial hostile reception by its professional reviewers, was likely to be stifled by this community of readers, and not reach its intended audience, the public at large.<sup>2</sup> Which perhaps explains Hume's later acidic comment, made towards the end of his life, that no

literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise* of human [sic] Nature. It fell *dead-born from the Press*; without reaching such distinction as even to excite a Murmur among the Zealots. (G 2)

But why did the *Treatise* not survive the confines of the press, and presumably, the world of the critics? Why did it elicit such an immediate negative response that it did not even make it through, as Hume puts it, to the world of the Zealots, let alone the world of the general populace? Was it, as is suggested above, Hume's radical departure from the *status quo*, and the resultant conflict with the established (prejudicial) attitudes of his critics, that induced the unfavourable reception of the *Treatise*? Or was the hostility due to the paradoxical nature of the theses advanced by Hume's text? Or were the arguments of the *Treatise* at fault - perhaps through lack of logical rigour? Was it perhaps a combination of these, and other factors? Whatever the true explanation for the hostile response accorded the *Treatise*, there is a good deal to be said for a consideration of Hume's assessment of the situation. For one thing, and perhaps most important in this context, the consideration of Hume's diagnosis of the hostile reception of the *Treatise* is fruitful, in that it yields an invaluable insight into Hume's views on the significance of his account of necessary connection. Without further ado, let us turn to this issue.

6. As the *Abstract* is one of the clearest statements of Hume's views on the reasons for the hostile reception of the *Treatise*, I shall confine my attention to this document in my attempt to determine Hume's diagnosis of 'the shortcomings' of the *Treatise*. The *Abstract*, a sixpenny thirty-two page pamphlet, was intended as a counter to the scathing reviews of the *Treatise*, and was an attempt to make the *Treatise's* views accessible to as wide an audience as possible. However, before we consider its contents, let me say something on its authorship, about which there is some debate.

7. Hume hardly refers to the anonymous text in his correspondence, and to my knowledge, never refers to it as his own in his works. Furthermore, when he does refer to the *Abstract*, as in an important letter to Francis Hutcheson, Professor at Glasgow University, Hume does not do so in a way that establishes beyond doubt that he is its author. Consider this extract from a letter written on 4 March 1740, on the *Abstract* and a copy of Hume's book sent to Adam Smith, at the time a senior student of Hutcheson's. It is perhaps the best piece of evidence we have to help determine the authorship of the *Abstract*:

My Bookseller has sent to Mr Smith a Copy of my Book, which I hope he has receiv'd, as well as your Letter. I have not yet heard what he has done with the Abstract. Perhaps you have. I have got it printed in London; but not in *the Works of the Learned*, there having been an Article with regard to my Book, somewhat abusive, printed in that Work, before I sent up the Abstract. (G 37/8)

Clearly, we cannot conclude, merely on the basis of this extract, that Hume is the author of the *Abstract*. At best, we can infer that Hume appears to approve of its pending dissemination - otherwise, why oversee its printing in London? Greig seems to suggest that Adam Smith wrote the *Abstract*, or at least had a major role in its formation:

It was Hutcheson's practice to set his students to make abstracts of new philosophical works as they appeared. It would seem that in 1739 he set Smith to work at the *Treatise*, Books I and II, and that the abstract which Smith made pleased Hutcheson so well that he sent it on to Hume, and pleased Hume so well that he had it printed in London and sent Smith a presentation copy of the book. (G 37)

However, PH Nidditch has pointed out that an extant copy of the *Abstract* contains 'certain manuscript amendments; this copy is bound in at the back of the Hume copy of Volume III of the *Treatise* in the British (Museum) Library'. (T 667) As these amendments appear to be in Hume's hand, this suggests that Hume did have a say in the compilation of the *Abstract*, even if it does not show that Hume was its only author. Nevertheless, even if Hume is not the *Abstract's* only author, the fact that Hume made the effort to have it published, at least suggests that he endorsed its contents. For this

reason, I intend to regard the *Abstract* as Hume's i.e. as a statement that Hume endorses, if not as a statement that Hume sired.

8. With this important digression behind us, let us return to Hume's diagnosis of the hostile reception of the *Treatise*, through the consideration of the *Abstract*. The aim of the *Abstract* is 'only to increase [the *Treatise's*] auditory, by removing some difficulties, which have kept many from apprehending [its] meaning'. (A 644, my inserts) This suggests that Hume attributes at least part of the negative reception of the *Treatise* to his critics' failure to understand the work - a lack of understanding, in part due to certain 'difficulties' encountered by these critics. But what precisely are these 'difficulties' that Hume proposes to deal with, in order to render the *Treatise* 'more intelligible to ordinary capacities'? (A 643) Hume tells us in the preface of the *Abstract*. According to him, the 'failure' of the *Treatise* can be ascribed to two principal shortcomings:

- a) 'the abstractedness of the argument' in the *Treatise*,
- b) the 'partiality and prejudice' of the few learned critics who have passed judgement on the views expressed in the *Treatise*.

Now as he sees it, no amount of tinkering with the expression of his *Treatise* views is likely to alter his critics' entrenched dispositions. For unfortunately, 'they resolve not to relinquish their own systems. (A 644) Conceding that he can do nothing about the 'partiality and prejudice' of the few learned critics who have already read the *Treatise*, Hume turns to the 'shortcoming' that he thinks is amenable to his treatment: namely, the problem of 'the abstractedness of the argument' of the *Treatise*. And the way in which he proposes to overcome this alleged shortcoming of the *Treatise* proves instructive here. In order to counter the charge that the overall discussion of the *Treatise* is 'obscure and difficult', (A 643), Hume chooses to focus on one of its components, and to explain it further.<sup>3</sup> Of all the arguments in the *Treatise*, Hume deliberately selects only one to elaborate on in the *Abstract*: 'I have chosen one simple argument, which I have carefully traced from the beginning to the end'. (A 644, my emphasis) As it turns out, this is his argument on necessary connection. So it seems that, at least when the *Abstract* was written, Hume attributes the charge of abstractedness, and thus the hostile response to the *Treatise*, in large part, to the inability of his critics to understand his analysis of necessary connection. By clarifying this component of the discussion, intimates Hume, one ought to dissipate the aura of abstractedness that allegedly surrounds the *Treatise*, thereby preempting the hostility that

readers might display to the *Treatise*. All of which suggests, if I am correct here, that Hume regards his discussion on necessary connection as the centrepiece of the *Treatise*. The following seems to confirm this suggestion of mine.

9. Consider the titles of the *Abstract*. The *Daily Advertiser* of 11 March 1740 originally announced the anonymous pamphlet as *An Abstract of a late Philosophical Performance, entitled A Treatise of Human Nature, &c. Wherein the chief Argument and Design of that Book, which has met with such Opposition, and been represented in so terrifying a Light, is further illustrated and explain'd*. (M 124/5) This colourful title not only shows that its author was acutely aware of the *Treatise's* hostile reception - cf. the phrase 'which has met with such Opposition, and been represented in so terrifying a Light' - but also indicates that the *Abstract* is at least an attempt to abridge the central argument of the *Treatise*. Not any argument, but the central, or 'the chief Argument' of the book. So this original title clearly suggests that one argument in the *Treatise* has priority over the others. This view is borne out by a consideration of the later, less emotive title. For when the *Abstract* was reprinted, it had a new title. The expressions referring to the hostile reception of the *Treatise* had been removed, leaving a title that again emphasized that the *Abstract* was an account of the central component of that book's overall argument. The later rendition of the title reads as follows:

AN ABSTRACT of A BOOK lately PUBLISHED, entitled a  
TREATISE of Human Nature, &c. wherein The CHIEF  
ARGUMENT of that BOOK is further illustrated and  
explained. (T 640)

But if Hume is suggesting, through these titles, that there is such a thing as 'the Chief Argument' in the *Treatise*, and if the argument he considers in the *Abstract* is the argument on necessary connection, it follows that Hume views his discussion on necessary connection as the most important component of his discussion in the *Treatise*.<sup>4</sup> So a consideration of both the content of the *Abstract* and its titles, strongly suggests, as I have attempted to show above, that Hume views his account of necessary connection as the foundation of the general thrust of the *Treatise*. And in that case, any attempt to acquire an adequate understanding of the overall positions advanced in the *Treatise* ought to build on an understanding of Hume's views on necessary connection. In short, in order to understand the *Treatise*, one *must* at least understand Hume's account of necessary



connection.

10. To a large extent, it is this fundamental role of Hume's discussion of necessary connection in the *Treatise* that warrants, in my view, a close analysis of the issue. But are there any other reasons for this investigation - any philosophical, or internal reasons for an analysis of Hume's views on necessary connection? If so, how ought the investigation proceed? I would now like to say something on these two issues.

**Section two:** On the philosophical significance of Hume's account of necessary connection.

11. As with other issues in philosophy, the problem of necessary connection is enmeshed with a cluster of diverse philosophical issues. So Hume's account of necessary connection is not, and cannot be viewed as an isolated contribution to some self-contained philosophical problem. Thus one of the tasks of my analysis will be to place Hume's views of necessary connection in some broader framework - a task I shall tackle towards the end of the essay. Nevertheless, at this early stage it is possible, and in my opinion advisable to provide some preliminary and tentative indication of the major constituents of this background framework. One way to do this is to articulate the context for Hume's analysis of necessary connection. The tentative specification of this context, as I see it, will provide us with a useful preliminary background framework within which to intelligibly place Hume's account of necessary connection. Furthermore, and equally important, the articulation of this background, as I hope to show below, will generate a few invaluable markers for the analysis that is to follow in this essay. Equipped with some tentative insights into these elements of the environment that sustains the problem, we shall be in the position to understand why my subsequent analysis of Hume's account of necessary connection proceeds as it does.

12. Fairly early in the *Treatise*, Hume suggests that contiguity and succession characterize causal contexts. In his words, as a result of his investigations, he has 'discover'd or suppos'd the two relations of *contiguity* and *succession* to be essential to causes and effects'. (T 76) But this is not to say that these two features exhaustively characterize causal contexts, continues Hume. As he forcefully puts it,

Shall we then rest contented with these two relations of contiguity and succession, as affording a complete idea of

causation? By no means. An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being consider'd as its cause. (T 77)

For objects, or events, to use a contemporary word, can be contiguous and succeed one another, without being causally related. That is, two events, call them events A and B, can be contiguous, with event A preceding event B, suggests Hume, without A being the cause of B. For instance, I might jump from a rock off Cape Agulhas only moments before a large wave strikes that rock, yet we would not claim that my (prior) jump caused the (subsequent) wave to strike the rock. But if contiguity and succession do not exhaustively characterize causal contexts, what more is required?

13. The missing ingredient, reports Hume, is necessary connection. To claim that two events are causally related, is to claim not only that the events are contiguous and succeed each other, but also to ascribe necessity to the causal context. And of these three essential components of a causal context, necessary connection is viewed as the most important:

An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being consider'd as its cause. There is a NECESSARY CONNECTION to be taken into consideration; and that relation is of much greater importance, than any of the other two above-mentioned. (T 77)

So the notion of causality, as Hume sees it, encompasses the notion of necessary connection.<sup>5</sup> As a result, any attempt at a complete elucidation of the term 'cause' - in order to discover what a cause is - must include an elucidation of the term 'necessary connection'. Unfortunately, as Hume attempts to demonstrate in the *Treatise*, the need for this additional component raises a number of problems for attempts to elucidate the term 'cause', and hence for attempts to learn about causality itself. To be more specific: an adequate elucidation of the term 'cause', for Hume, amongst other things, calls for the identification of an impression that he alleges is associated with the term 'necessary connection'. This requirement, argues Hume - or so it seems - proves highly problematic, in that it gives rise to a dilemma. Now precisely what is this (alleged) dilemma, and why does Hume view the situation in such stark terms?

14. In the opening section of the *Treatise*, as well as the second section of the *Enquiry*, Hume argues for a contingent thesis on the relationship between ideas and impressions. The *Treatise* expresses this as the thesis

that 'all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent'. (T 4) Referring to this as 'the principle of the priority of impressions to ideas' (T 6), Hume proposes to use the principle in his attempt to satisfy a major objective of the *Treatise* - which, according to its subtitle, is 'to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects'. (T xi) As it turns out, this principle, or general maxim, as he later calls it in the *Enquiry*, functions as a semantic principle, by means of which one can determine whether a theory is intelligible or not. To be more accurate, as Hume sees it, his priority principle can be used to decide on the meaningfulness or significance of the terms of a theory:

Here, therefore, is a proposition, which not only seems, in itself, simple and intelligible, but, if a proper use were made of it, might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace upon them. All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure: The mind has but a slender hold of them: They are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas; and when we have often employed any term, though without a distinct meaning, we are apt to imagine it has a determinate idea, annexed to it. On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: The limits between them are more exactly determined: Nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them. When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea deriv'd?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light, we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality. (E 22)

But how can the priority principle, that is ostensibly about *ideas* and *impressions*, be used to help settle issues on the *meaning* of linguistic expressions, or terms? According to Hume, as this passage clearly indicates, this principle is able to accomplish this task by virtue of the assimilation, if not identification, of the meaning of a term with the idea(s) associated with that term. That Hume commits himself to this equation is amply illustrated in the above passage from the *Enquiry*, especially when he

offers the following advice:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea deriv'd?* (E 22, my underlining)

Suppose then that it is the term 'necessary connection' that needs to be elucidated. How would we proceed? Hume's response, as the passage above suggests, is to search for the impression that apparently gives rise to the idea necessary connection.<sup>6</sup> And this is where the problem begins, argues Hume. Let us see why he adopts this stance.

15. The requirement that we identify an impression for the term 'necessary connection' proves problematic, according to Hume, because the (empirical) evidence at hand - or rather, the lack of it - suggests that this term has no associated impression:

...I turn the object on all sides, in order to discover the nature of this necessary connection, and find the impression, or impressions, from which its idea may be deriv'd. When I cast my eye on the known qualities of objects, I immediately discover that the relation of cause and effect depends not in the least on *them*. When I consider their *relations*, I can find none but those of contiguity and succession; which I have already regarded as imperfect and unsatisfactory. (T 77)

Now this outcome has a number of potentially serious ramifications, according to Hume. In the first place, what appears to be at stake for him, is the meaningfulness of the term 'necessary connection', and hence that of the related term 'causality'. Secondly, the failure to find an impression for the term 'necessary connection', according to Hume - given what appears to be his views on the existence of the idea of necessary connection - can be construed as a counter-example to the priority principle: thereby raising questions about the viability of this principle. Furthermore, as I shall attempt to show below, it can also be argued that there is far more at stake than the two issues mentioned here. As I see it, a case can be made that the overall objective of the *Treatise* is itself on the line. Let us consider each of these alleged possible problem areas in turn.

16. To begin with, the failure to identify an impression for the term

'necessary connection' has potentially serious repercussions for the significance of this term, and hence for that of the related term 'causality'. Given what appears to be Hume's theory of meaning, and especially the role of his priority principle in this theory, the failure to discover the impression for 'necessary connection' strongly suggests that this 'term' is employed without any meaning or idea'. (E 22) That is to say, it appears that this term is meaningless, and hence that the term 'cause', if not also meaningless, at least has a complex meaning different to that usually attributed to it. Unfortunately, the problem does not end here, as Hume sees it. For the difficulty, referred to above, over the impression for the term 'necessary connection' not only influences our views on the significance of this term, but for Hume - given what appears to be an assumption of his on the existence of the idea of necessary connection - also appears to raise questions about the adequacy of the priority principle. Let us see why Hume subscribes to this additional and different view.<sup>7</sup>

17. The initial failure to discover the requisite impression for the term 'necessary connection', as Hume sees it, can be perceived as a major challenge to the priority principle - a principle that he is loath to relinquish:

Shall the despair of success [of finding an impression for the term 'necessary connection'] make me assert, that I am here possess of an idea, which is not preceded by any similar impression? This would be too strong a proof of levity and inconstancy; since the contrary principle has been already so firmly establish'd, as to admit of no farther doubt; at least, till we have more fully examin'd the present difficulty. (T 77, my insert)

Reluctant to adopt the view that the (presumably existent) idea of necessary connection is not preceded by a resembling impression - a position that runs counter to the allegedly entrenched priority principle - Hume suggests that we persist in our search for the requisite impression.<sup>8</sup> In short, Hume is here pleading for a stay of execution: delay the decision to eject, or even modify the priority principle, until such time as all the options have been explored. For with the priority principle undermined, we are likely to find that we have returned to the position where we are unable to 'render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace upon them'. (E 21)

18. Now it is important to note that the failure to discover an impression for the term 'necessary connection' can compromise the priority principle *only if the idea of necessary connection is already in existence*. Without this idea, the failure to discover the requisite impression cannot count against the priority principle. At best, it has repercussions only for the term: for what seems to be entailed is merely the suggestion that the term 'necessary connection' is 'a philosophical term...employed without any meaning'. (E 22) So it comes as no surprise to find that when Hume presents the possibility of a threat to his priority principle, it appears that he tacitly assumes that there already is an idea of necessary connection. Having suggested that the 'compleat idea of causation' encompasses that of necessary connection - as we saw earlier - Hume goes on to ask a question that appears to presuppose that the idea of necessary connection not only is a possibility, but that it exists:

Shall the despair of success [of finding an impression for the term 'necessary connection'] make me assert, that I am here possess of an idea, which is not preceded by any similar impression? (T 77, my insert and emphasis)

Now this, admittedly, is not *conclusive* evidence that Hume is committed to the view that there is an idea of necessary connection. Nevertheless, it does at least support my suggestion that when Hume raises the possibility of a threat to the priority principle, he *appears* to do so on the basis of an assumption on the existence of this idea. Given this crucial assumption - a position that the preliminary evidence suggests Hume is committed to - the failure to discover an impression for 'necessary connection' can be viewed as a threat to the priority principle. But this principle, based as it is on observation and experience, is a cornerstone of the 'experimental method' that Hume intends to rely on in his attempt to help establish 'a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new'. (T xvi) So a threat to this principle may well delay, if not undermine Hume's attempts to aid in the erection of a new science.

19. In the introduction to the *Treatise*, having argued that there 'is no question of importance, whose decision is not compriz'd in the science of man' (T xvi), Hume goes on to suggest that the science of man ought to be founded on experience:

...as the science of man is the only solid foundation for the other sciences, so the only solid foundation we can give to this

science itself must be laid on experience and observation. (T xvi)

But if Hume is intent on establishing 'a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new' (T xvi), an important question arises: are there any tools fit for this daunting task? That is to say, are there any tools that Hume, and others, can rely on that will aid in the task, and hopefully ensure that the new foundation survives the vicissitudes likely to be encountered? Yes, intimates, Hume: there are reliable tools for the builder of this new foundation - namely, those tools that have been refined through 'experience and observation'. Most important, the priority principle appears to possess the requisite credentials. An ostensibly contingent proposition, based on Hume's observations and experiences of the interactions of, and relations between his impressions and ideas, the priority principle is viewed by Hume as an invaluable, if not indispensable tool for the attainment of his objective in the *Treatise*: namely, of contributing, through 'the introduction of the experimental method', to the erection of an *a posteriori* science of man.<sup>9</sup> For it turns out that the priority principle features prominently in Hume's account of necessary connection - a component, as we have seen, that Hume views as the centrepiece of the *Treatise*. Bereft of this principle, it seems that for Hume, attempts to argue for the results of his (subsequent) analysis not only become difficult, but impossible. For if the term 'necessary connection' constitutes a counter-example to the priority principle, it does so by virtue of the existence of an idea of necessary connection, and the non-existence of an impression of the term. But then any subsequent attempt to argue for the presence of an (hitherto undiscovered) impression for this term involves the assertion of the existence of a non-existent impression. And given the centrality of this issue, the general thrust of the *Treatise* is likely to suffer from Hume's inability to secure his views on necessary connection. For the strength of the overall argument of the *Treatise* can be no greater than the weakness of its strongest link. So any serious threat to the priority principle, for instance, through the unearthing of potential counter-examples, such as that that might be produced by the term 'necessary connection', not only diminishes the viability of this principle, but more importantly for Hume, could seriously threaten the stated overall objective of the *Treatise* to help establish a science of man that is based on experience and observation.

20. This suggests, if my reasoning above and interpretations of the texts are correct, that as Hume sees it, the stakes are high where the search for

an impression for 'necessary connection' is concerned. For it appears that the meaningfulness of this term is not the only item on the line, as it were. If my arguments above are correct, and if we grant that Hume appears committed to the assumption that he already possesses an idea of necessary connection, it also seems that the viability of the priority principle, if not the viability of the *Treatise*'s overall project, stand to be compromised if no impression for the term is found. Now unfortunately, the evidence at hand suggests that there is no impression for the term, according to Hume. Neither the study of the sensible qualities of external objects, nor the investigation of his ideas reveal the sought for impression. As we have seen, when Hume turns 'the object on all sides, in order to discover the nature of this necessary connection, and find the impression, or impressions, from which its idea may be deriv'd', no impression is to be found. (T 77) This initial failure to discover an impression for the term 'necessary connection' raises a serious problem, suggests Hume. For it gives rise to a dilemma on the meaningfulness of the term.

21. As Hume sees it, this failure compels one to conclude either that the term 'necessary connection' is not associated with an impression<sup>10</sup> - which for Hume, given what appears to be his assumption that he already possesses an idea of necessary connection, has the undesirable consequence of undermining the priority principle, and perhaps the overall objective of the *Treatise* - or one persists with the view that the term is *meaningful*.<sup>11</sup> And if the latter is our course of action, given both our adherence to the priority principle and the assumption that there is an idea of necessary connection, we need to redouble our efforts to discover the required impression. An unenviable task, for this second alternative is likely to be the source of further difficulties, because neither the investigation of external objects nor that of (internal) ideas has produced the desired impression. Therefore, as Hume sees it, one finally either concedes that there is no idea associated with the term 'necessary connection', or one is compelled to open up entirely new avenues of investigation for the evasive impression, thereby ultimately opting for a non-standard, and hence likely controversial, impression for the term. As Hume bluntly puts it in the *Treatise*,

[e]ither we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects, and from effects to causes, according to their experienc'd union'. (T 166)

In short, Hume appears to view the problem of necessary connection as a dilemma that compels one either to renounce 'necessary connection' as a vacuous term, or to pursue an impression in uncharted territory. And as it happens, Hume appears to pursue the latter course of action in his way out of the dilemma. For he suggests that we

...must, therefore, proceed like those, who being in search of any thing, that lies conceal'd from them, and not finding it in the place they expected, beat about all the neighbouring fields, without any certain view or design, in hopes their good fortune will at last guide them to what they search for. (T 78)

This decision to explore new pastures, as I intend to argue in the next chapter, takes Hume into the mysterious realm of psychological dispositions, inclinations and instincts. However, while the beating in this field initially proves productive, it remains to be seen whether the beast that is flushed out is really what Hume is after.

22. This scenario of Hume's assessment of the problem of necessary connection raises a number of questions. It is my intention in this essay to explore some of them. In particular, the broad objective of this enquiry is to investigate the central philosophical questions that arise from what appears to be Hume's attempt to safeguard the meaningfulness of the expression 'necessary connection'. In the next chapter, given this preliminary and tentative background framework as an introduction to the essay, I shall attempt to determine, as precisely as possible, Hume's solution to 'the problem of necessary connection'. As I shall argue, close analysis of the texts reveals that Hume appears to endorse a complex thesis on necessary connection, two components of which must be distinguished if we are to fully grasp his contribution to this metaphysical issue. But what are Hume's arguments for his views on necessary connection? Equally important, how adequate are these arguments? These are the central questions of Chapter Three: questions that cannot be dealt with adequately, without revealing the underlying assumptions of Hume's views on necessary connection. Now as we have seen in this introductory chapter, a fundamental component of Hume's conception of the problem of necessary connection is his theory of meaning. So it is to be expected that Hume's views on meaning feature prominently in his solutions to the problem. Hence Chapter Three, that is devoted to the articulation, and evaluation of Hume's arguments for his account of necessary connection, amongst other things, will involve an investigation of aspects of this theory of meaning. Finally,

Chapter Four is an attempt to broaden the scope of this investigation through a detailed analysis of Hume's conception of the problem of necessary connection. Having set out with a preliminary and tentative account of Hume's conception of the problem, with Hume's views on necessary connection before us, and with insight into some of the assumptions that underlie these views, I think that by Chapter Four we will be in the position to return to our point of departure, and as more seasoned explorers, reconsider the fibres of the dilemma that Hume appears to regard as endemic to the problem of necessary connection. As we shall see, this preliminary account of Hume's assessment of the situation is not entirely adequate, in that it proves to be incomplete in some important respects.

#### Notes.

1. For a thorough, and systematic account of the early reception of the *Treatise*, see Ernest C. Mossner: 'The Continental Reception of Hume's *Treatise*, 1739-1741', in *Mind*, LVI (1947), 31-43.
2. In his advertisement for the *Treatise*, Hume explicitly points out that what he really seeks is the approval of the public at large:

*The approbation of the public I consider as the greatest reward of my labours; but am determin'd to regard its judgment, whatever it be, as my best instruction.* (T xii, Hume's emphasis)

Unfortunately, as subsequent events were to make clear, the youthful and naive Hume had not reckoned on the influence of the community of reviewers.

3. This move by Hume has been regarded by some as further confirmation of their view that Hume was a charlatan, more concerned with popular appeal, than the truth. Here are three examples of this interpretation of Hume's attempts to make his (paradoxical) ideas more accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Dr John Brown, in his *Estimate of the Manners and Principles of the Times* (London 1757), complained that

Hume was a writer 'of our own Times, bent upon *Popularity* and *Gain*'. (57) The Danish scholar Vinding Kruse, went a step further when he suggested that while Hume 'was, indeed, a man with many irons in the fire, a man with divers aims', he was not a seeker of truth: 'for among these aims the realization of truth was not the most important; for Hume was possessed by literary ambition to such an extent that he set aside all considerations, even the consideration of truth, in order to win the favour of the public'. (Kruse 1939: 8) Finally, John Randall boldly asserts that 'Hume wrote for two purposes: to make money, and to gain a literary reputation'. (Randall 1947: 289) For an investigation of this set of noncharitable interpretations of Hume's philosophy, see Ernest Mossner: 'Philosophy and biography: the case of David Hume'. *The Philosophical Review*, Vol LIX (1950)

4. Or at least Hume's agent. While we cannot be certain that it was Hume who formulated the titles of the *Abstract* - just as we cannot be certain that Hume is the author of its contents, as I pointed out earlier - I contend that the fact that Hume oversaw its publication is at least circumstantial evidence that Hume endorsed the wording of the title, if not authored it himself. Furthermore, the fact that he did not impede the publication of a subsequent edition of the *Abstract*, with a title that replicates the non-emotional component of the original title, strongly suggests that Hume at least approved of this component of the titles. So, while we cannot be certain that it was Hume who wrote the titles, their appearance - especially that of the subsequent edition - as I see it, is proof that he at least endorsed the component we are interested in, if not wrote it himself.

5. In fact, in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant not only acknowledges this essential role of necessary connection in causality, but even cites it as a mark against Hume's account of necessary connection. Kant goes as far as to suggest that the idea of necessary connection occupies such a fundamental and dominant position in the idea of causality that attempts, such as that made by Hume, to place the source of the idea of necessary connection in experience, are misguided *ab initio* :

...indeed, the very concept of a cause so manifestly contains the concept of a necessity of connection with an effect and of the strict universality of the rule, that the concept would be altogether lost if we attempted to derive it, as Hume has done, from a repeated association of that which happens with that which precedes, and from a custom of connecting represen-

tations, a custom originating in this repeated association, and constituting therefore a merely subjective necessity...(Kant 1978, 44)

Chapter Four contains an assessment of Kant's conception of the problem that underlies Hume's views on necessary connection.

6. Many commentators have traced this procedure to Locke. (Cf. Stroud 1977, 17; Kemp Smith 1964, 3; Flew 1986, 16 - to give but three examples.) Now it is true that in his *An essay concerning human understanding*, John Locke does attempt to establish a relationship between the meaning of a term and the idea associated with that term. For instance, in his account of communication in Book III, Locke does suggest that the primary signification of words are ideas. However, while it can be shown that for Locke there is a considerable overlap between the two notions of meaning and idea, as I see it, it remains to be seen whether Hume is operating with Locke's theory of meaning.

7. Jonathan Bennett appears to be more forthright in his interpretation, and depicts Hume's argument on 'necessary connection' as follows: '...since it cannot be verbally defined, the phrase 'necessary connection' does not have a complex meaning; and since we do not experience instances of 'necessary connection', that phrase does not have a simple meaning; so it has no meaning at all'. (Bennett 1977: 257) However, as my discussion will later testify, this does not appear to be an accurate portrayal of Hume's position, for Hume does not conclude that 'necessary connection' is a meaningless term, as appears to be suggested here by Bennett. In fact, as I shall argue, Hume is at pains to preserve the meaningfulness of the term.

8. Barry Stroud has also drawn attention to Hume's desire to save his 'main methodological principle' by searching for an impression for 'necessary connection'. (Stroud 1977: 45) But then he later suggests that Hume's theory of ideas, of which his priority principle is the central component, 'impedes the development of his [naturalistic] programme'. (Stroud 1977: 224, my insert) This latter suggestion strikes me as problematic, and clearly departs from my view on the role of the priority principle. The issue is dealt with in Chapter Four.

9. According to Hume, there already are major contributions to the science of man that is based on experience and observation. Contributions have already been made by 'some late philosophers in *England*', namely by

'Mr. Locke, my Lord Shaftsbury, Dr. Mandeville, Mr. Hutcheson, Dr. Butler, &c'. (T xvii)

10. For Hume, a term is meaningless if one cannot identify an impression for that term: 'When we entertain...any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea...we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion'. (E 22)

11. Had one to adopt the first option here, given Hume's views on the relationship of a term's meaning and its impression, the further implication might be that the term 'necessary connection' is meaningless. But then we would have an instance of a meaningless term that was associated with an idea - and this would run counter to the received view that for Hume, terms with ideas are *ipso facto* meaningful.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Hume's view on necessary connection

1. The notion *power*, or *energy* is part and parcel of our everyday lives and conversations. It is not uncommon for us to talk about the strength of powerful athletes, or of children who are especially energetic, of financial systems that are economically powerful, and of motor vehicles that lack sufficient power to haul heavy loads. But what is it that we are talking about when we use these expressions? In particular, what is power, or energy?
2. As I intend to show in this chapter, David Hume has an answer to this question - an answer that one might find startling. However, his novel view on power, as we shall soon realize, is not especially lucid, and is far from unambiguous. As a prominent critic has observed, Hume's views on power have been expressed in passages that are 'extremely obscure and confusing'. (Stroud 1977: 79) Presented under the rubric of necessary connection, it can be argued that section XIV of Part III, Book I of the *Treatise*, and section VII of the *Enquiry*, contain a series of terse, unclear and not least, controversial statements on power, as well as a complex defence of this position. We need to carefully consider both these components of Hume's discussion. In this chapter let us determine the nature of Hume's thesis on power, or necessary connection, and leave it to the chapter that follows to articulate and assess the support for Hume's view. But first an important, preliminary issue needs to be raised and attended to. It concerns Hume's claim that a number of expressions are nearly synonymous with 'necessary connection'.

**Section One:** Hume's claim on the near synonymy of certain terms.

3. As the two paragraphs above intimate, Hume views the expression 'necessary connection' as a catch-all phrase, for as he sees it, this expression has almost the same meaning as various other expressions, such as 'power', 'energy' and 'efficacy':