



Some Counsel on Humean Relations

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SOME COUNSEL ON HUMEAN RELATIONS

In a paper published eight years ago I tried to bring out a neglected feature of Hume's theory of relations, namely the difference between philosophical and natural relations.¹ Now Imlay,² without referring to my work, has expanded some of its themes in an extremely interesting and, I think, important way. At least he has made me rethink the whole distinction between philosophical and natural relations and, what goes with relation theory, Hume's analytic-synthetic distinction. The strengths of his paper are, embarrassingly, the weaknesses of my own. I did not articulate clearly the connection between relation theory in Hume and the analytic-synthetic distinction. I shall turn to these strengths presently. My focus in this paper, however, will be on a central weakness in Imlay's; and the point, it turns out, is one I gave full credence to earlier. Imlay does not distinguish what in Hume can and must be distinguished if we are to make any sense (let alone full sense) of his theory of causation. The distinction is between necessity and certainty.³

In trying to explicate Hume's distinction between intuitive and demonstrative inference on the one hand, and probability on the other, Imlay finally reaches an impasse.

For, if the absence of the corresponding impression does not deprive mathematical necessity of... existence, why should it do so in the case of causal necessity?

This, as Imlay recognizes, is at least related to standard criticisms of Hume, most forcibly articulated by Prichard.⁴ Imlay fortunately does not recommend--as Prichard does-- throwing out the baby with the bath. If I understand him correctly, what he advocates is that we simply admit that Hume's attempts to ground necessity are inadequate. Before proceeding to details, let me issue two brief caveats.

First. It is of course not surprising that Hume fails to make a clear analytic-synthetic distinction. Has anyone? Lacking the logical tools of a Russell, or the mathematical understanding of a Leibniz, Hume labors under insuperable difficulties which, in many instances, are self-created. He is not clear as to whether necessity attaches to 'objects' or ideas (let alone sentences or propositions); he confuses, by invoking pseudo-psychological criteria involving conceivability, analytic with synthetic a priori truths; he has what many, including myself, consider to be a ludicrous theory about mathematics and mathematical objects. With these horrors to work with it is small wonder that necessity never gets grounded. Indeed, it is miraculous that the discussion even gets off the ground. But, Fritchard's sneeringly just comments notwithstanding, both he and Imlay miss something, and I hope to show precisely what that is.

Second. Hume is notoriously obscure in his discussion of what we would call ordinary physical objects. Sometimes (when he is in a psychologist or even ordinary-person mood) he speaks as if physical objects cause impressions. Sometimes (when in the philosopher's closet) he speaks as if it makes no sense to speak of anything but impressions and collections of them, ordinary physical objects being relegated to the fictions of the vulgar.⁵ His theory of relations rather obviously suffers from the same disease; it is not clear what the relata are. Are impressions related temporally? Spatially? Is it relations between objects 'out there' of which he speaks when he discusses causation? Imlay is quite aware of the confusion; he just lets it go. For now, I shall more or less follow suit. Later, as we shall see, one's choice makes a difference. In the long run, I think any coherent view of Hume will have to treat his analysis of physical objects in a way similar to Berkeley's.

At first glance it would seem easy to allay at least Prichard's fears. What, after all, is the connection between Hume's theory of relations, his attempt at distinguishing the necessary from the probable or possible, and his theory of causation? Hume claims that causation is a relation that, unlike some others, eg., resemblance, cannot be 'seen' to hold between its relata.⁶ But all of us believe that causal connections are necessary. Why do we all believe what is false? The answer can only be a psychological one. There is, first of all, a law of association which 'produces' an idea of an effect, e.g., the boiling of a particular specimen of water, from the impression of its cause, e.g., the heating of water. This law, that the mind passes from an impression to an idea when certain constant conjunctions have occurred, produces the habit of associating the heating and boiling of water. The habit itself causes an impression of reflection which Hume says is the basis of our idea of necessary connection.⁷ As far as I can see, sense is better served by calling this impression a feeling of certainty since, after all, impressions of reflection are feelings. Finally, we 'project' this feeling onto the 'objects' (what objects?) themselves, thus imbuing the alleged cause and effect with necessary connection.⁸ Thus there is really not in any sense an impression of necessity in the case of cause and effect. Whether there is any impression of necessity in any other case is, I take it, the central question raised by Imlay.

Prichard had criticized Hume for inconsistency: when Hume says that "upon the whole, necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects," he is, according to Prichard, attributing to mind what he has denied of objects and which he might as well attribute to objects. Prichard argues that "in the case of a mind we really know that what takes place exhibits necessity." Though Imlay cites Prichard, his own criticisms are different, more subtle: he seems to be arguing that Hume gives no ground

for the claim that we ever have an impression of necessity, even in the case of relations among objects that are intuited. But this doesn't stop Hume from calling such relations necessary. So why not say the same about causal ones? Or, to flip the coin, why say any are necessary?

Imlay, as I have said, does not throw out the baby with the bath. If I understand him correctly, he wants to claim that Hume has given good reasons for denying the necessity of the causal relation, so his arguments there must stand even if we can't see how he grounds necessity in the cases where he wants to, and must, do so. But Imlay's conclusions seem arbitrary--as if he is saying that we must keep Hume's claims about causation because they are right and throw out his claims about intuitive and demonstrative necessity because they are wrong. Imlay's move is not justified in Humean terms, and of course it would be much better for Hume if we could construct a justification in Humean terms for dismissing the necessity of causal relations that did not also entail the dismissal of the necessity of, say, mathematical ones. Otherwise there is a clear danger that in assessing what goes wrong with his arguments about mathematical necessity, we will think ourselves forced to dismiss his views on causation as well.⁹

In short, the point is this: if Hume's theories entail that we must throw out both mathematical and causal necessity, then of course we cannot justify keeping both his insights about causation and throwing out the entailment that there is no mathematical necessity, unless we build another metaphysical system. Flipping the coin back over, we had better grant necessity to intuitive, demonstrative, and causal (not to say the other types of) relations. I take this as a full blown statement of the problem Imlay lays before us.

II. Some Counsel

In my own paper, I tried to distinguish the necessary from the non-necessary on the basis of the difference between internal and external relations. My model was the relation of resemblance. Two entities resemble when they have a common property and one can pronounce this resemblance, as Hume says—"at first sight." More accurately, if we agree to analyse an object A as the set of its properties, say, [F G H], and B as the set of its properties, say [H I J], and we further analyse the relation of resemblance in terms of overlapping of properties, then we can with some plausibility claim that "A resembles B" is a necessary truth. I don't think this analysis, even if it works in the case of resemblance, will do for all the relations that Hume thinks are necessary.¹⁰ But despite some flaws and omissions in my own analysis, I think it gets closer to the heart of the matter than Imlay's, as I shall now explain.

Hume says:

*There are seven different kinds of philosophical relation, viz. resemblance, identity, relations of time and place, proportion in quantity or number, degrees in any quality, contrariety, and causation. These relations may be divided into two classes; into such as depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together, and such as may be chang'd without any change in the ideas.*¹¹

Imlay's interpretation and criticism of this passage are far from clear to me, but the following is, I think, a plausible summary of his analysis. He introduces a reducibility thesis to explain the first division, i.e., those relations that depend entirely on the ideas:

One fairly plausible although, as we shall see, not entirely satisfactory interpretation of the phrase in question would associate it with a thesis concerning the reducibility of relations between

*exemplars of properties to relations between
the properties themselves.*

The second division, those relations that may change without any change in the ideas, is analysed by an essentialist thesis: those relations are necessary which hold between essential properties of objects. Imlay spends some time trying to reconcile these two theses: he thinks ultimately Hume is in trouble (or is it the theses? it just isn't clear),

The reducibility thesis is stated quite ambiguously; through several readings I was misled by Imlay's phrase "associated with", believing that (a) the thesis is that all relations between objects are a function of relations among properties of objects, and (b) the essentialist thesis tells which relations are necessary, namely those that hold between essential properties. But a more plausible interpretation of Imlay, I think, is this: the reducibility thesis makes those relations necessary which are functions of relations among properties. It of course follows that the other relations are not so reducible, hence must obtain among objects considered as 'wholes', and not among their properties (though Imlay never puts it this way). Unfortunately (again, for the reducibility thesis or for Hume?), Hume holds, according to Imlay at least, that places and perhaps even times are properties, which automatically puts at least some spatial and temporal relations into the camp of the necessary, where Hume says they do not belong. Indeed, Imlay holds out the possibility that upon analysis even identity and causality might be found to depend on properties, hence eliminating the reducibility thesis, by itself, from explaining the analytic-synthetic distinction.

Perhaps the essentialist thesis can help patch things up. Suppose, for example, one claims that spatial properties are not essential to objects. Then, for example, "Object A, which has place p_1 as a property, is to the left of object B, which has place p_2 as a property," is not a necessary truth. We then no longer have to worry about the possibility that analysis might show that even identity and causality depend on properties, as long as we could show

they depend on non-essential properties. But Imlay has an objection: Hume cites examples of the relation of degree of quality where the relata are colors, sounds, etc., i.e., the relata are what are traditionally considered secondary, hence mind-dependent and non-essential, properties. The problem is obvious: both essential and non-essential properties fall into the domain of at least the relations of resemblance and degree of quality, if not contrariety. Though Imlay does not suggest it, Hume could possibly escape this objection by claiming that only essential properties are connected necessarily by such relations as resemblance, but this would be a difficult thesis to maintain. Imlay suggests that his objection to the essentialist thesis leaves only proportion in quantity or number as a necessary connection. Of course one could drop the essentialist thesis, but then one is caught in the objection about spatial and temporal properties.

Imlay is open to the following objections:

(1) What evidence is there that Hume would agree that some relations of place and time are reducible to properties? Imlay in his interesting and ambiguous footnote 3, claims that Hume did not seem to realize that place is a relation and that he seemed to identify an object's place with its extension. Far from showing what Imlay wants, the identification of an entity's place with its extension shows that, for Hume at least, place is a relation. Over and over again Hume analyses extension as a complex idea whose components are objects ordered in a certain way.

*...the idea of space or extension is nothing but the idea of visible or tangible points distributed in a certain order.*¹²

This point is not made just with respect to extension in general, but the extension of particular bodies:

*Suppose that in the extended object, or composition of colour'd points, from which we first receiv'd the idea of extension...*¹³

Granted Hume is none too clear about this ordering; today we would speak of an ordering relation. What is clear is

that Hume's instincts here are right, that he sees that an object's extension is not some 'simple' property of it. Indeed, I think one could make the case, though I shall not make it here, that Hume deems spatial relations non-necessary because he thinks of them as holding between (in the visual realm) colored points, and colored points have no properties to ground such relations. This would vindicate the reducibility thesis.

(2) Imlay is too quick about colors. The minimum sensibles of which Hume speaks in his discussion of extension are colored points. Indeed, his whole argument against the independent existence of extension rests on the claim that without color in the realm of the visible, we do not see extension.¹⁴ What the vulgar call external objects are colored points in a set of relations. Thus I think one could make a case that the 'essence' of visible objects includes color. What confuses the issue, or at least what confuses Imlay, is Hume's vacillations about the sorts of objects relations obtain between. Here, as I indicated earlier, one's view of Hume's notion of objects makes a big difference. I don't see how one can ignore, when speaking of spatial relations and properties of color, sound, etc., Hume's discussion of all of these in the context of impressions.

(3) Imlay does not discuss how the reducibility thesis fits with the rather popular view that Hume is a nominalist. There is no question, indeed, that Hume often talks like a nominalist.¹⁵ But, as in so many other cases in the Treatise, he is of two minds. There is good evidence that when Hume speaks of philosophical relations he does not think that such relations hold only between objects, whether objects be 'out there' or just impressions. In the Appendix to the Treatise he speaks of simple ideas, e.g., blue and green, as more resembling than blue and scarlet.¹⁶ Such passages again strengthen a reductionist thesis. But curiously, they can also give credence to a modified version of the essentialist thesis. For wherein lies the greater resemblance between blue and green in the previous

example? Certainly it is tempting to say that they resemble more closely by nature, i.e., in some sense, essentially; and Hume yields to this temptation:

*And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest.*¹⁷

Nor is this an afterthought; the same idea is expressed in the Treatise proper:

*Two colours, that are of the same kind, may yet be of different shades, and in that respect admit of comparison.*¹⁸

I don't think Imlay sees this clearly. Hume's claim that those relations are necessary which depend on the essential nature of the objects related need not be interpreted to apply only to objects 'out there' or impressions like color spots. Such passages as those just cited may account for the fact that Hume cites colors and other secondary qualities when speaking about resemblance and degrees of quality; the essentialist thesis can apply not just to the qualities of objects, but to the qualities themselves. I find it tempting to treat Hume's use of "object" pronominally, plugging in whatever are his objects at the time--sometimes external objects, sometimes ideas, sometimes impressions, sometimes properties.

Thus I think that a clearer version of Imlay's discussion would go like this. Consider first what we might call perceptual objects, e.g., momentary color spots. Consider two color spots that are a distance d apart, one a slightly different shade of blue from the other. The spots resemble because (a) they have colors, and (b) the colors resemble by their very nature. But the fact that the spots are at a distance d apart is not reducible to any properties that the spots have. Hence we can alter d without altering the spots. This idea, that some relations are a function of properties of the relata and some are not, is the usual way of drawing the internal-external

relation distinction. I don't think it too far-fetched to suggest that Hume's division of relations corresponds to (1) relations which are a function of the properties of the relata if the relata are complex, or the natures of the relata, if they are simple, and (2) relations which exist between such complex objects which are not functions of their parts, i.e., their properties. Whether there are simple properties that have no natures is questionable.

To elaborate: Causality is not a relation that exists among properties, i.e., one property is not the cause of another. Spatial and temporal relations exist among color spots, but not colors or shapes or sounds or smells. As for identity, when Hume explains the relation it is clear that he is speaking of identity over time of complexes, e.g., color spots. Notwithstanding the fact that the perception is interrupted, he says, we attribute identity to these perceptions when we are convinced that, if we had kept our eye on the object, it would have conveyed an "invariable and uninterrupted" perception. The conclusion, he continues, goes beyond the impressions of our senses and must be founded on causation--though how it is is far from clear.¹⁹ What is clear is that identity is not directly a function of properties of the presentations, since identity goes beyond the perceptions. All other relations among complexes, with the possible exception of contrariety, seem reducible to relations among properties of the complexes, i.e. the parts of complexes.

About contrariety: I agree with Imlay that it presents special problems. But then so does Hume's whole ex cathedra list of relations. The list itself defies rational analysis, and indeed Hume himself seems to be sensitive to the point, because in the Enquiry he does not repeat the list of philosophical relations, nor does he contrast the philosophical with the natural relations. Selby-Bigge, in his introduction to his edition of the Enquiry, professes bewilderment at the whole enterprise over relations, as has most everyone else.²⁰ Imlay sees, though, that despite its obscurity, the doctrine of rela-

tions is of fundamental importance to Hume's discussion of necessity. What I think he misses, as I now hope to show, is the exact detail.

The problem Imlay outlines is this: if we can't get clear on why some relational statements are necessary, we can't get clear as to why statements about causation are not necessary. His argument is ingenious and plausible. His mistake is to confuse, as I have said, necessity with certainty; that is the most important of the exact details just mentioned.

Here is Imlay's argument as I see it: Hume speaks of degrees of quality, resemblance, and contrariety as being more properly regarded as objects of intuition than of demonstration. Imlay focuses on the meaning of "intuition". Dismissing its equivalence with sense perception as absurd, he tries an interpretation which makes intuition intellectual. But of course he immediately runs afoul of Hume's notorious failure to distinguish mental acts from their intentions, and his rather pathetic attempts to accommodate them at some places in the Treatise, e.g., belief is nothing but the vivacity of impressions or ideas. Imlay finds a very disconcerting passage in which Hume compares the necessity which makes two times two equal to four and the necessity which unites causes and effects. The former necessity lies only "in the act of understanding by which we consider and compare these ideas" and the necessity of the latter lies in the determination of the mind to pass from cause to effect.

Why is the comparison so disconcerting? I have argued in my earlier paper that the natural relations are, for Hume, all causal relations.²¹ Resemblance, for example, is a natural relation--which simply means that an idea we have of an entity A may cause us to have an idea of entity B if A resembles B in some way. Hume sometimes identifies necessity with the causal sequence itself, sometimes with an impression caused by that sequence. Is the necessity, then of "2+2=4" also resident in the comparison of those

ideas together or, alternatively, in the impression caused by that comparison? What then is the difference between a causal and a mathematical proposition? Are both equally necessary?

I am ready to admit that in the long run there may be no way to save Hume from disaster here. I want to try, though, by invoking the distinction I earlier insisted upon between necessity and certainty.

First, it does seem clear that in the case of causal connections, Hume is describing an impression of reflection when he speaks of the necessity involved in causal reasoning. Impressions of reflection are derived from ideas of sensation and are described as passions, desires and emotions.²² That is why I think it clearer to speak of a feeling of certainty, than an impression of necessity. It seems clear that Hume has shifted the subject from necessity to certainty precisely because he denies there is anything in the cause or effect to ground the idea of necessity.

This of course shifts the issue over to what grounds for the idea of necessity would be like. What is Hume looking for? It is clear from his discussion of necessity with respect to causation that he is looking for an impression of sensation. But of what? Of necessity as some sort of property, like and alongside a color property? Hume indicates something like this when he speaks of searching for the impression of power, as if power were itself a quality.²³ We get a bit farther, perhaps, when we note that Hume cites contingency and temporal priority as relations which all causes and effects stand in. He speaks as if this would be enough to ground the notion of causation if it were not for the fact that contingency and temporal priority were only necessary conditions; that there are entities which stand in the requisite relations without being causally connected. Nor does constant conjunction help, since there is no reason, says Hume, to assume that the future will resemble the past.²⁴ It is as

if we want to find a property from which one can, 'read off' the future, perhaps in the same way one can read off the conclusion from the premisses in a deductive argument, or the fact that A resembles B from their color overlap. If this is the case, then it appears that Hume has simply made an error in comparing the determination of the mind which connects causes and effects to the act of understanding by which we compare ideas. It is because we can read off a resemblance, say, that we pronounce the relationship necessary.

Perhaps this will be felt to be unfair to Imlay, as well as unfaithful to Hume. But I take it that Hume has some point in his distinction between relations that depend on ideas and those that do not. There is necessity in the former, and it is quite true that Hume never clearly explain what that is. It is also quite true, (as Imlay points out) and prejudicial against my own case, that Hume says there is only one sort of necessity, and this must include a determination of the mind to make a transition between ideas.

It is just at this point that the distinction between necessity and certainty becomes crucial. My own feeling is that Hume gets so caught up in the search for causal necessity, and the question of why we believe that causal connections are necessary, that he simply forgets that there are real necessary connections--at least on his view--that he must account for clearly. To see this point from a different angle, simply ask whether, when Hume says that we must seek the origin of the idea of necessary connection, he means this in general or just with respect to causality. If he wanted to raise it in general, why not raise it with respect to mathematical relations, or relations of resemblance? Surely when Hume begins his search he has some intuitive idea of what necessity is; his whole point is that we believe that causal connections are necessary though in fact they are not. So he must give an explanation of why we believe they are necessary. On my view of it, Hume, to be consistent, would have to claim

that the idea of real necessity is derived from an impression of a rather complex nature. Or, at least, the idea itself is complex, being the idea of entities in a particular sort of relation. It might be the case, too, that Hume thinks he has to include in his discussion of genuine necessity the intuitive act of mind with which we comprehend the relation in question, thus accounting in part for why he compares that act of mind to that connection between causes and affects.²⁵ In both the phoney and the genuine case there is an act of mind of a certain kind; but they are radically different kinds, the one being a cognitive act of intuition (the comparison), and the other, a causal connection (the determination of an idea by a preceding impression). The latter is not cognitive and is not even necessarily noticed consciously.

So the situation so far is this: in the case of genuine necessity, there is a cognitive act of comparing two relata and noticing a certain sort of relationship. In the case of causality, there is an act, not necessarily cognitive but a habit, really, that relates an impression with an idea. Hume's point then must be that in either case, the mind at least sometimes observes its own operations, and just as in the phoney case an idea of reflection is produced, so also is it produced in the genuine case. But note that in either case, since what arises is an impression of reflection, we do not have a copy of anything that occurs in the mind. This new impression, if it were one of necessity, would be strange indeed. It would not in any way mirror what it is that is necessary anymore than belief, on Hume's analysis, has an intentional component. Better then to label this impression a feeling of certainty than an impression of necessity. Because the mind feels certain when its acts connect ideas either intuitively or causally, we feel that even causal connections are necessary.

I would be the last to deny that there are obscurities here, if not in Hume then in my attempted vindication. There is no question that Imlay has put his finger on a most sensitive spot in Hume's analysis. But I see no reason, despite Hume's own language, to label the impression of reflection in question one of necessity. Hume may not successfully ground genuine necessity, but there is no need to compound the error by confounding acts of intuition with habits of mind, and then confounding both with necessity. The point, if there is one, of Hume's comparison of intuition with the determination of the mind to move from cause to effect is, on my view, merely to show that in each case the mind relates 'ideas', that relation being the ground of the certainty we feel about each. To say the least, then, I do not take Hume's own words literally. Imlay does. The difference between us, I think, is that my view twists the text into sense, while his smoothes it into nonsense. What a pity that we cannot call upon Prichard for adjudication!

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1. Alan Hausman, "Hume's Theory of Relations", Nous, 1 (1967), 255-282.
2. "Hume on Intuitive and Demonstrative Inference," this journal, this issue.
3. Hausman, p. 275.
4. H. A. Prichard, Knowledge and Perception (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 174-199. See especially pp. 188-189.
5. Hausman, pp. 257-258. In that paper I wrote a particularly misleading sentence about this issue:

Impressions, indeed, are simply chairs and tables, etc.

What I meant to say, and ought to have said, is that for Hume--when speaking in the philosopher's mode--ordinary objects like chairs and tables are analysed as classes of impressions, just as Berkeley claims (with deliberate shocking language) that chairs and tables are nothing but ideas.

6. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 75 and p. 77. I surround "seen" with single quotes (just as I do throughout, with other problematic uses) because it is unclear as to whether this vision is sensuous or intellectual. See Imlay.
7. Treatise, pp. 164-166.
8. Ibid., p. 167.
9. Perhaps this is what Imlay is getting at in the last paragraph of his paper. But I am not sure; he is too succinct.
10. Hausman, pp. 261-264.
11. Treatise, p. 69.
12. Ibid., p. 53.

13. Ibid., p. 34.
14. Ibid., p. 33ff.
15. Hausman, pp. 277-280.
16. Treatise, p. 637.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 15.
19. Ibid., p. 74. It is tempting not to take Hume literally here, since it is obvious that we often make such identity connections even when properties of the presentations are not invariable. Hume seems to be allowing for precisely this when he says:

...nor can we otherwise have any security, that the object is not chang'd upon us, however much the new object may resemble that which was formerly present to the senses.

The implication is that there are degrees of resemblance in the compared presentations, and not necessarily perfect resemblance. The less the resemblance, of course, the clearer it is that identity is not a clear function of properties of the presentations. Of course we soon reach the famous problem of the ship repaired at sea and its identity over time.

20. David Hume, Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. xv ff.
21. Hausman, pp. 256-259.
22. Treatise, p. 8.
23. Ibid., pp. 75-77. Hume speaks of searching for the impression of necessity, and of turning the object on all sides looking for the impressions from which the idea of necessary connection is derived.
24. Ibid., pp. 87 ff.
25. It is of course never clear in Hume what the difference is between an impression of, say, A related to B, and the act of mind by means of which we comprehend the impression. Thus, if impressions are them-

selves the grounds for comparing, they also seem somehow to include the very act of comparing.