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Hume Studies Volume 2, Number 1 (April, 1976), 47-52.

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Hausman on Certainty and Necessity in Hume

Professor Hausman in the course of a painstaking and often illuminating examination of my paper "Hume on Intuitive and Demonstrative Inference" fortunately has occasion to make some positive suggestions of his own regarding the best way to interpret Hume's philosophy.¹ One of the most interesting and provocative of these suggestions is that we should discount Hume's claim to have found an impression of reflection which is at the same time one of necessity. Rather, we should regard the impression of reflection in question as one of certainty. Such a manner of proceeding would, moreover, in Hausman's view have the advantage of explaining why we all believe that causal connections are necessary when in fact they are not. For the same impression of certainty, as Hausman envisages it, will be generated by both the cognitive act of comparing two relata wherein genuine necessity is reflected and the determination of an idea by a preceding impression wherein causal inference consists and wherein genuine necessity plays no role.

But how can Hausman be so sure that they will be the same? For he insists that the cognitive act of comparing two relata is radically different from the determination of an idea by a preceding impression. Why then should we expect that observation of the two should generate comparable feelings of certainty? And if they do not generate comparable feelings of certainty what is the purpose served by postulating them? Moreover, I use the term "postulating" advisedly: by Hausman's own admission there is little or no textual evidence for their presence in Hume's theory of causal inference.

Hausman's purpose would be no worse served - at least incoherence would be avoided - by emphasizing what a cognitive act of comparing two relata and a determination of an idea by a preceding impression have in common as opposed to what distinguishes them. They have, moreover, more in

common than he seems to think. For, while the one requires reflection according to Hume and the other does not, they both involve a determination of the mind.² Nor is Hume's use of the concept of intuition in connection with the former incompatible with such a determination, as Hausman seems to think. On the contrary, it implies it. For intuition as Hume understands it seems to pertain to immediate inference. And such inferences consist as far as he is concerned in determinations of the mind to move from one idea to a second one.³ Indeed, it is just the supposed infallibility of such determinations that allows him to distinguish them from the more haphazard principles of association.⁴

A cognitive act of comparing two relata and a determination of an idea by a preceding impression are sufficiently alike, then, to explain why we all believe that causal connections are necessary when in fact they are not. This does not mean, of course, that necessity need reside in such a cognitive act of comparing. As a matter of fact, as we shall see in a moment, this is not the view that Hume usually takes of the matter. But a cognitive act of comparing, as we shall also see in a moment, is close enough to the area in which necessity does reside to allow Hume to explain in the manner indicated how our mistaken belief about causal connections arises. Hausman's comparable feelings of certainty are not required.

Nor has Occam's razor finished cutting. More specifically, the idea of real necessity of which Hausman speaks could have, as far as I can see, no role to play in Hume's philosophy which is not already played by the cognitive act of comparing two relata. There is, moreover, no such idea anymore than there is any idea of causal necessity. The "idea of entities in a particular sort of relation" presumably like resemblance will not do.⁵ For resemblance is not necessity. And to say as Hausman does that "it is because we can read off a resemblance, say, that we pronounce the relationship necessary" is to state a problem, not to

solve it.⁶

What then is the solution? It seems to me that Hume's predominant tendency is to regard genuine necessity as a dispositional property of certain relations infallibly to determine the operations of the attentive mind.⁷ And it is through these operations and not through any idea of impression - Hume has not the conceptual material at his disposal to make this distinction between mental operations and mental objects he clearly wants and needs to make - that we observe genuine necessity. It is, however, easy enough in some cases to confuse a purported dispositional property with what under the appropriate conditions it is supposed to bring about, as Berkeley's misinterpretation of Locke's secondary properties as sensations instead of dispositions of material objects to cause sensations shows so clearly. Hume, moreover, seems to play Berkeley to his own Locke when in the passage I cited in my original paper he identifies genuine necessity with an operation of the mind.⁸

If genuine necessity is in Hume's considered view a dispositional property of certain relations like resemblance infallibly to determine the operations of the attentive mind, why not regard causal necessity as a similar dispositional property of certain relations like spatial contiguity and succession taken together? If, moreover, the one is genuine, why is not the other equally genuine? Hume's answer is that spatial contiguity and succession are not sufficient infallibly to determine an operation of the human mind. Constant conjunction is required. Constant conjunction, however, is a relation of a different order from spatial contiguity and succession. For it presupposes repeated instantiations of the latter two. As a result, no arbitrarily chosen instance of spatial contiguity and succession will yield necessity. And what is true of any arbitrarily chosen instance of a class is true of all instances of the class. Nor is anything changed in this regard by constantly conjoined instances. If none of them yields necessity, we shall never by constant conjunction

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discover one that does. The constant conjunction itself, on the other hand, does yield necessity. But constant conjunction, as should now be evident, is a property of classes of instances of spatial contiguity and succession. Classes of such instances in their turn are mental because the instances "have no union but in the mind which observes them, and collects their ideas. 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."⁹

Note the occurrence of "then" in the passage just cited flagging an inference. It makes it perfectly clear that in the final analysis it is not Hume's admitted failure to find an appropriate impression of sensation, as a human would have it, which forces him to deny an objective, that is, a non-mental status to causal necessity. Rather, it is his nominalism regarding classes.¹⁰ Note further, however, that to deny a non-mental status to causal necessity is not, as Hume seems to think, the same as identifying it with a determination of the mind. Indeed, even if constant conjunction is somehow mental, causal necessity will remain one of its dispositional properties. And Hume could even consistently admit that this is genuine necessity as long as we do not confuse the genuine with the non-mental.

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1. Alan Hausman, "Some Counsel on Humean Relations," Hume Studies I, 2 (November, 1975) pp. 48-62. My paper appears on pp. 31-47 of the same issue.
2. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), pp. 103-04. Hereafter cited as Treatise.
3. Treatise, pp. 96-97. He insists here that "we may exert our reason without employing more than two ideas, and without having recourse to a third to serve as a medium betwixt them." To have recourse to a third idea is to produce what Hume seems to mean by "demonstration." It is worth noting, moreover, that Hume in the passage in question actually takes causal inference to be a species of immediate inference and ascribes a degree of certainty to it on those grounds traditionally reserved for intuition.
4. Treatise, p. 10. Treatise, p. 92. I take "inseparable" in the first passage to be synonymous with "infallible" in the second one. And when in the former he explicitly excludes inseparable connections from the imagination I take there to be an implied contrast here between imagination and reason.
5. Hausman, p. 61.
6. Hausman, p. 60.
7. Treatise, p. 104. He remarks here that the mental transition which constitutes causal inference "proceeds from experience and not from any primary connexion betwixt the ideas." The assumption, on which we traded in note 2, seems to be that there are other mental transitions. Furthermore, they are caused by - what else could "proceeds" mean? - relations of ideas of which resemblance in Hume's view would seem to be one. Indeed, that resembling perceptions, of which ideas are a species, can cause a mental transition similar to the one caused by identical perceptions is a key assumption in Hume's explanation of why we be-

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lieve in the "fiction" of a continuous, independent world. See Section 11, Part IV of Book 1 of the Treatise entitled "Of scepticism with regard to the senses." Unfortunately, Hume never explains how it is that relations come to be endowed with such causal powers.

8. See p. 40 of my original paper already cited for the reference.
9. Treatise, p. 165.
10. That this should escape Hausman is somewhat surprising in view of his explicit recognition of Hume's nominalist tendencies. See Hausman, p. 55.