



It Ain't Necessity So ... (with apologies to George Gershwin)

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IT AIN'T NECESSITY, SO . . .

(With Apologies to George Gershwin)

I shall argue in this paper that what Hume calls the idea of necessary connection is mislabelled, and that what he ought to call the idea of necessary connection is not so labelled. My argument is not that there are, on Hume's view, real necessary connections between causes and their effects but rather that there is an idea of genuine necessary connection -- what I call logical necessity -- which we all mistakenly believe extends to causal connections. The genesis of this mistake is given a psychological explanation in the Treatise.

Precisely how does Hume account for the origin of what he calls our idea of necessary connection? I have argued elsewhere that, whatever the answer, it has little philosophical importance.¹ My reason was that, given Hume's view that causal connections are not necessary, the question must be viewed as one within psychology.

Recent work on Hume, however, has convinced me that my former opinion was much too quick. Imlay, for example, has challenged Hume's distinction between demonstrative and probable inference on the grounds that Hume gives only one account of necessity for both mathematical and lawlike truths.² As I now see much more clearly, there are important philosophical distinctions that must be made in any full explication of Hume's view of the origin of our idea of causal necessity.

I shall attempt an answer to the lead question of the second paragraph. My strategy is as follows. I shall first present a synopsis of Hume's account of our belief in causal necessity. Next, I shall develop

a view of logical necessity. Finally, I shall briefly examine the exact genesis of the confusion between logical and causal necessity.

Consider the following three propositions:

- (1) Hume does not believe that there are necessary causal connections.
- (2) All statements of laws of nature are on Hume's view descriptions of constant conjunctions, the logical form of which is captured by the Russellian " $(x)[fx \supset gx]$."
- (3) This logical form captures Hume's first definition of "cause."

On these three propositions I and many other philosophers agree. I and an ever-shrinking number of philosophers also believe that Hume is right. But everyone, according to Hume, in some sense believes that causal connections are necessary; the Humean philosopher knows they are not but acts otherwise, while the ordinary person simply acts without the knowledge. Since everyone believes what is false, only a psychological explanation can be given for why we believe it anyway. Thus, Hume's second definition of "cause", and the view that the idea of necessity arises from the determination of the mind to pass from the impression of a cause to an idea of its effect.³

The three most salient passages from the Treatise on the production of the idea of necessary connection follow. As we shall see, these passages cannot be understood without considering a number of others.

For after a frequent repetition, I find, that upon the appearance of one of the objects, the mind is determin'd by custom to consider its usual attendant, and to consider it in a stronger light upon account of

its relation to the first object. 'Tis this impression, then, or determination, which affords me the idea of necessity. (T 156)

Tho' the several resembling instances, which give rise to the idea of power, have no influence on each other, and can never produce any new quality in the object, which can be the model of that idea, yet the observation of this resemblance produces a new impression in the mind, which is its real model. For after we have observ'd the resemblance in a sufficient number of instances, we immediately feel a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and to conceive it in a stronger light upon account of that relation. This determination is the only effect of the resemblance; and therefore must be the same with power or efficacy, whose idea is deriv'd from the resemblance. The several instances of resembling conjunctions leads us into the notion of power and necessity 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. (T 164-165)

The idea of necessity arises from some impression. There is no impression convey'd by our senses, which can give rise to that idea. It must, therefore, be deriv'd from some internal impression, or impression of reflexion. There is no internal impression, which has any relation to the present business, but that propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant. This therefore is the essence of necessity. (T 165)
 [Emphases added]

I have argued in a paper on Hume's theory of relations, and recently against Imlay, that the above-mentioned impression of reflection is better looked on as one of certainty rather than necessity.⁴ Imlay's work made me realize that my interpretation, put forth in blithe ignorance of many relevant texts in Hume, takes

a much larger step than I had imagined. For if I am right, and Imlay is right in claiming that for Hume there is but one kind of necessity (see quote below), a problem immediately arises. If all necessity is merely a matter of certainty then, since certainty is patently a psychological state which, at best, accompanies belief (or perhaps is a certain sort of belief), how does Hume distinguish necessary truths from matters of fact?⁵ In order to save what seems to be an extremely important distinction in Hume, an account must be given of genuine necessity, and the origin of our idea of it, which is nonpsychological; even worse, it must be given in light of the following passage from the Treatise:

. . . there is but one kind of necessity, as there is but one kind of cause, and . . . the common distinction betwixt moral and physical necessity is without any foundation in nature. (T 171)

Thus, either we have no ground for our beliefs about mathematical truths, or we have just as much ground for believing that causal connections are necessary as we do that mathematical ones are. Either way Hume is in trouble.

I must candidly admit that I cannot fully explain the above passage on the account that follows. What I can do, I believe, is give an account of genuine Humean necessity and its echo in the certainty we have about causal connections which reconciles a great many passages. To do this, I shall have to recommend some terminological and conceptual shifts in reading the text; these will suggest how to incorporate the above passage into the otherwise completed puzzle.

To begin, some comment must be made on what would seem a Humean howler. Hume notoriously tries to trace back every idea we have to impressions, either of sensation or reflection. Now this might do for colors

and shapes, but looking for an impression of necessity seems as ludicrous as looking for an impression of disjunction or conjunction. Even Hume must have realized that "necessity" and its brothers and sisters, "probability", "possibility", etc., function as modifiers of sentences, and that the origin of the corresponding ideas could not be in some 'atomic' sensation. I think it is a plus for the present interpretation that it does make sense of his search.

Hume claims over and over again that all simple ideas are derived from simple impressions and are copies of them. Hume does not tell us whether or not the idea of necessity is a simple or complex one; but if it has any more 'content' than the impression which causes it, he doesn't discuss that 'content'. The idea of necessity is an idea of reflection, derived from an impression of reflection; such impressions are *passions, and other emotions resembling them*. Hume does make it clear that passions are *original existences* and they do not contain any *representative quality*. (T 275;415) Since impressions of reflection are either calm or violent, and Hume mentions only the sense of beauty and deformity as calm impressions of reflection (T 276), it seems that the impression of necessity must be a violent passion, and the simple idea derived from it, a copy in some way of this impression. Nor does it seem, from his discussion of the passions, that he found necessity to be a very interesting one; he never mentions it outside the context of causation though he, of course, spends many pages discussing other passions. Small wonder, for the phrases "passion of necessary connection," "desire of (for?) necessary connection," "feeling of necessary connection," literally make no sense. I know what anger feels like, but what does necessity feel

like? On the other hand, I do in a certain sense know what certainty feels like, i.e., I know what it is like to feel certain about something. In this sense, I don't think that Hume's relegation of the crucial impression to the category of reflection is merely a result of his stultifying categories.⁶

Here, then, is what I think Hume is about. In discussing the seven philosophical relations, Hume divides them into two groups. (T 69 ff) Those that yield knowledge are such that if we vary the relation we may vary the relata. Those that yield probability are such that we may vary the relation without varying the relata. For example, if a shade of color c resembles a shade of color d, then we cannot change the relation without changing at least one of the relata. Such connections are, according to Hume, unalterable, invariable. (T 69 ff. See also T 79) On the other hand, we may vary the distance between two entities without changing them a jot. Hume, I submit, believes that in this distinction he has a model of necessity. Following Kemp-Smith, I shall call this logical necessity.⁷ Since this notion is absolutely crucial let me try to make it clearer.

Hume uses his principle that every simple idea must correspond to a simple impression, and the corollary that every complex idea must be decomposable into simple ideas, as a weapon against many traditional metaphysical views. In particular, in trying to trace the origin of the idea of causation, he finds that it 'consists' of some ideas traceable back to simple impressions, namely spatial contiguity and temporal priority. (T 74 ff). He also finds, of course, that part of our idea of causation consists in the idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect. But the best candidate he can find for the origin of this idea is constant conjunction. Why, though, doesn't Hume

identify constant conjunction as the origin of our idea of causal necessity? That is, why isn't the notion of constant conjunction satisfactory as a complete analysis of causal necessity? Hume must know, of course, what such necessity would be like if it did exist as some property or relation among causes and effects. He in a perfectly good sense knows what he is searching for -- namely, some invariant or unalterable relation which holds between every causal pair. His model must be that of the philosophical relations which are invariant, e.g., resemblance. Hume says about these that

All certainty arises from the comparison of ideas, and from the discovery of such relations as are unalterable, so long as the ideas continue the same. (T 79)

Thus, the idea of real necessity has as its model the invariability of a select group of philosophical relations. This invariability is what I have termed logical necessity.

However, there seems to be an insuperable objection. Why doesn't Hume put the matter the way I just have? Or, more accurately, why doesn't he state that there is an idea of real necessity whose origin is the simple impression of invariability?

The answer, which I shall defend, is that Hume does not believe that invariability is either a simple or a complex impression. The fact is that Hume knows that he cannot stick to his principle of tracing back simple ideas to simple impressions; he very often discusses ideas which are not so traceable. If I may offer a piece of motivational speculation, the cause for Hume's failure to discuss logical necessity is precisely his embarrassment at having to admit that there exist ideas which threaten his seemingly sacred cows -- the copy theory of ideas and the claim that there are no abstract ideas.⁸

Philosophers are notorious for giving back with

the left hand what they take away with the right. In his right, Hume holds ideas for which there are no impressions, among them abstract ideas. In his left, he holds ideas we have as a result of what he calls distinctions of reason, allegedly explained in the case of the white and black globes of marble. I think that it can be successfully argued -- though I shall not do so here -- that given the right hand, the left must ultimately be empty. Even so, Hume tries to put a great deal in that left fist. Since, after all, its contents don't really 'exist', one has a great deal of latitude. Consider, for example, the passages in the Appendix to the Treatise where he first admits that qualities, e.g., shades of color, are simple impressions (as if to get around the globe problem), then is forced to say -- the right hand at the throat, à la Dr. Strangelove -- that even here there is a problem, since there are resemblances even amongst such 'simples'. Hume goes even further. He asks us to consider the "very abstract terms, simple idea".

They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest. (T 637, Appendix)

Now "necessity", I submit, is a very abstract term like "simple idea". It represents a feature of four of the seven philosophical relations. There is a sense in which there is no simple impression, or complex impression, of necessity. Yet, either simple impressions of some sorts resemble one another in this respect (if relations are taken as simple impressions), or sets of simple impressions so resemble one another (if relations are taken, say, as sets of pairs). Invariability, on this view, is a property like transitivity. When Hume

admits that we can use a term like "simple idea" meaningfully, he does not invoke the notion that every simple idea must be traceable back to a simple impression, and that every complex idea must be composed of simple ideas. The same reasoning, I submit, would and should hold for logical necessity. So explained, Hume's search for the necessity of causation is a search for a relation between all causal pairs which, like resemblance, has the property of invariability. It is in this sense a search for a necessity de re.

Neither contiguity nor temporal priority have the requisite property. But what of constant conjunction? Exactly what is its role in Hume's analysis of the belief in causal necessity? In order to answer these questions, Hume's quest must first be redescribed in light of the notion of logical necessity.

Hume mentions cause and effect as a relation which yields only probable knowledge. Once we see this clearly, Hume's later quest becomes clear. Let me, then, rephrase the description of his search. Let us not say that Hume is looking for the origin of the idea of necessary connection, when he discusses our belief that causal connections are necessary. Let us say instead that Hume is trying to find out why we believe that causal connections yield knowledge when they only yield probability, i. e., why we all believe that causation falls into the group of philosophical relations that yield knowledge when it in fact does not. Then his claim about the origin of the idea of necessary connection becomes intelligible. It is not a quest for the origin of the idea of necessity per se, as one might search for the origin of our idea of anger, or of a particular shade of color or, even, of an idea of a unicorn. It is a search for a reason for why we confuse causal connections with logical ones. And what Hume finds

is that we can explain the confusion when we see that the mind, when considering an impression of a cause, in a sense feigns a logical connection by invariably producing an idea of an effect. We invariably think of water boiling when we have the impression of its being heated. The invariability of the transition makes us feel that the connection between the heating and boiling of water is invariable and thus necessary in the same sense that "3 is less than 5" is necessary. Indeed, this is the whole point of Hume's claims that anything can cause anything. If causal connections were really invariable, then we could not think of water being heated and water boiling except in a causal connection. But, as philosophers at least, we can so think it. We can think of water heating and not boiling (i.e., of some other effect); we can think of water boiling though it is not heated, but rather has had ice put in it. The objects or events are not necessarily connected, but because the ideas are invariably joined by the associative mechanism, we feel that they are. And we project this feeling onto the objects themselves.

'Tis a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses. Thus as certain sounds and smells are always found to attend certain visible objects, we naturally imagine a conjunction, even in place, betwixt the objects and qualities, tho' the qualities be of such a nature as to admit of no such conjunction, and really exist no where Mean while 'tis sufficient to observe, that the same propensity is the reason, why we suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them; notwithstanding

it is not possible for us to form the most distant idea of that quality, when it is not taken for the determination of the mind, to pass from the idea of an object to that of its usual attendant. (T 167)

Thus does nature save us from scepticism; that is the reason for the feint.

There are other supporting passages:

Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to conceive any connexion betwixt them, or comprehend distinctly that power or efficacy, by which they are united. Such a connection wou'd amount to a demonstration and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be conceiv'd not to follow upon the other: Which kind of connexion has already been rejected in all cases. (T161-162)

The point of this passage, I submit, is to show what Hume is looking for when he searches for the impression of necessity in the case of causation. What he seems to be seeking is some quality or relation such that its presence would yield the knowledge rather than the probability that A causes B. Thus, Hume argues, we cannot find such a quality or relation in the case of cause and effect. We just think we find it, because of the invariable workings of the associative mechanism.

To summarize the argument so far : To speak of logical necessity is merely to refer to the invariability of some 'states of affairs', of things or events or ideas in specifiable connections, e.g., resemblance. In the case of causal connections, the mind confuses the invariability of the production of the idea of an effect from the impression of its cause with a logical connection. But exactly how is this done? For the connection the mind notices in the case of the constant production of an idea of an effect from the impression

of a cause is itself a causal one. It is, as Hume says, the "determination" of the mind to make this passage which gives rise, somehow, to the idea of necessity. We must seek further, to see how the mind can confuse what is itself a causal connection, invariable in the sense of constant conjunction, between what appear to be 'mental' items, with invariable relations which are not causal, such as resemblances, and which appear to hold independently of their being perceived.

As I have explicated the notion of genuine necessity, it is a property of certain relations. If this is Hume's view, it is patently a philosophical one, made from within the philosopher's closet. It does not all follow that as everyday nonphilosophers, out of the closet, we believe that, say, "3 is less than 5" is necessary because we observe in some sense this property of the relation.⁹ Rather, I think it is Hume's view that it is the associative mechanisms that give rise to what he calls the impression of necessity -- what I would much prefer to call a feeling of certainty -- and that it is by a further 'act' of mind that we then attribute necessity to the relations themselves. And this indeed makes sense of Hume's comparison of the act of understanding by means of which we see the necessity of mathematical truth with the determination of the mind to pass from an impression of a cause to the idea of an effect. It is not that both acts are determinations of the mind; rather, Hume is claiming, however confusedly, that given that we have the feeling of certainty, we project the feeling onto the objects themselves. In the case of causation, at least, he makes this quite clear. (T 167)

In the case of the four philosophical relations that yield knowledge, this projection is justifiable; in the case of causation, it is not. If this view is correct, then it is the associative mechanisms which

give rise to the impression of necessity (the feeling of certainty). Just as the observation of a resemblance produces an association, so the observation of constant conjunction produces an association. Associations, of course, are all causal.¹⁰ In this sense, Hume could have cited the associative mechanism based on resemblance (what he misleadingly calls the natural relation of resemblance) as the cause of the impression of necessity just as easily as he cites the associative mechanism based on cause and effect (which mechanism he misleadingly calls the natural relation of cause and effect). Any connected sequence could cause the impression; probably Hume cites the mechanism triggered in the case of causation because, being the foundation of so much of our thinking -- on his view -- it is the most likely one to be 'noted' by the mind, where "being noted" is explicated simply in terms of the production of the feeling in question.¹¹

To summarize: certainty is a feeling we have about causal sequences (among others). Of course making sense of such an intentional notion, given Hume's categories, is impossible. The impression of necessity is a passion. Passions are merely conjoined with their objects: if I feel angry at Jones, I wouldn't know that the anger was directed toward Jones unless I noted that whenever I think of Jones I have a feeling of anger.¹² In the same way, one must somehow notice the conjunction of the feeling of necessity with causal sequences (associations) before one projects the feeling onto the connected events. Even Berkeley, who argues for the collapse of the act-object distinction, did not go that far. Hume should have read him.¹³

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1. Alan Hausman, "Hume's Theory of Relations," Nous, 1 (August, 1967), 255-282; "Some Counsel on Humean Relations," Hume Studies, I (November, 1975), 48-63. References to Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature are to the edition by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960). Herein referred to as T.
2. Robert A. Imlay, "Hume on Intuitive and Demonstrative Inference," Hume Studies, I (November, 1975), 31-47. My paper, "Some Counsel on Humean Relations," is a reply to this paper.
3. The exact nature of the idea of necessity, and its production, has been a focus of considerable disagreement among Hume scholars. Prichard, for example, thought that Hume was reintroducing genuine necessary connections among ideas, and quite rightly assumed that, were he (Prichard) right, Hume was blatantly inconsistent. See H. A. Prichard, Knowledge and Perception (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1950), pp. 188-189. The fault lies with Hume (though he is not inconsistent). Not even the most loyal Hume supporter could claim transparency for the relevant texts.
4. "Hume's Theory of Relations," p. 275; "Some Counsel on Humean Relations," p. 61.
5. The point is that whatever we call the impression, it is of reflection, and is thus mental in a sense in which impressions of sensation are not.
6. For a brilliant discussion of how these categories stultify, see Robert Paul Wolff, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. V. C. Chappell (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 99-128.
7. Norman Kemp-Smith, The Philosophy of David Hume (London: Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1964), p. 393, fn 1. Unfortunately, Kemp-Smith cites no passages as evidence for the distinction between logical and causal necessity.
8. That may be a bit unfair to Hume. Many commentators have argued that Hume's copy principle is tentatively adopted, and is meant by him to be an empirical hypothesis; I have some sympathy with this view. However, the abstract ideas doctrine, with its theory of general terms, is closely related to the copy principle and, I believe, is a sacred cow. For an excellent discussion, see George S. Pappas, "Hume and Abstract General Ideas," Hume Studies, III (April, 1977), 17-31.

9. However, I think that one could make a case for the claim that Hume views everyone's mind as constantly performing metaphysical strategies. See, for example, his discussion of our ordinary belief in continuing physical objects. The mind constantly fills in gaps in our reasoning or, more accurately, provides 'reasons' for believing what we have no justification for believing. Like a good metaphysician, it posits entities.
10. See my "Hume's Theory of Relations."
11. There is a hint of this at T 92. It is, of course, mysterious that Hume limits the associative principles, based as they are on observation of the philosophical relations, to three of the seven relations. Why couldn't any relation do the job? Hume indicates on p. 92 that his claim is an empirical one; there is no reason why other relations could not cause associations; they just don't (at least, not as general principles).
12. See especially Hume's discussion of belief and the passions in the Appendix, T 623 ff.
13. I wish to thank George Pappas of Ohio State University and Louis Loeb of the University of Michigan for many very helpful discussions. A version of this paper was presented at the XX Hume Conference in Dublin, August 1981.