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PETER KAIL

Introduction: A Realist View of Necessity and the Key Objection

Those who seek to defend a skeptical realist reading of Hume on causal necessity have a number of textual and philosophical hurdles to clear. This paper attempts to clear *one* and *only* one hurdle. So one should not look here for a complete case in favor of a skeptical realist reading: I merely attempt to dispose of what looks like a decisive objection to a conception of objective necessary connection which, I believe, Hume endorses.

The skeptical realist Hume, as I and others read him, is a Hume who wishes to deny that human beings have the cognitive wherewithal to perceive or grasp the necessary connection which relates the objects of genuine causal relations. His “skeptical conclusion” is that we cannot grasp *in re* necessity, *not* that there is *no* necessity. That bald statement, of course, leaves us with a whole host of questions: why should we think that Hume believes that there really is causal necessity? Is this position compatible with his positive account of our idea of necessary connection, or his theory of belief (and of ideas in general)? What of Hume’s talk of “necessity in the objects” lacking a meaning? And how does

such a skeptical realist reading mesh with Hume's general philosophical project (or, indeed, what does it tell us about that)?

None of these questions can be addressed here.¹ Instead, as I said, I want to defend a conception of necessary connection that seems vulnerable to a decisive objection. First, then, I need to spell out what that conception is. Hume takes acquaintance with necessary connection (the "power, force or efficacy") to entail certain conceptual-cum-epistemological consequences. Roughly, acquaintance with necessary connection would entail (a) the possibility of *a priori* knowledge of the relevant cause's effect and (b) the impossibility of conceiving the cause without its effect. He tells us that:

From the first appearance of an object, we can never conjecture what effect will result from it. But were the power or energy of any cause discoverable by the mind, we could foresee the effect, even without experience; and might, at first, pronounce with certainty concerning it, by the mere dint of thought and reasoning. (EHU 7.1.7; SBN 63)

A similar claim is made in the *Treatise*:

We must distinctly and particularly conceive the connection betwixt cause and effect, and be able to pronounce, from a simple view of the one, that it must be follow'd or preceded by the other. This is the true manner of conceiving a particular power in a particular body. (T 1.3.14.13; SBN 161)

These aspects of Hume's treatment of necessity constitute what Galen Strawson has called the "AP Property."² Notice that the AP Property furnishes a thin, but nevertheless contentful, specification of that of which we are ignorant when Hume says we are ignorant of necessary connection. Necessary connection is that feature, acquaintance with which, would yield what is specified in the AP Property.

One can go further by suggesting that what the AP Property picks out are unknown (and, for reasons of deep contingency, *unknowable*) essences.³ This thought is intimated by a number of things Hume says:

'Tis easy to observe, that in tracing this relation, the inference we draw from cause to effect, is not deriv'd merely from a survey of these particular objects, and *from such a penetration into their essences as may discover the dependence of the one upon the other.* (T 1.3.6.1; SBN 86 (my emphasis))

And:

It has been observ'd already, that in no single instance the ultimate connexion of any objects is discoverable, either by our senses or reason, and that we can never penetrate so far into *the essence and construction of bodies, as to perceive the principle on which their mutual influence depends* (T 2.3.1.4; SBN 400 (my emphasis)).

Philo says in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that:

were the inmost essence of things laid open to us, we should then discover a scene, of which, at present, we can have no idea. Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition (DNR, 174–5 (my emphasis)).

And:

Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key, which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, *could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies*, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition (DNR, 191 (my emphasis))

A superficial reading of these passages (but not an incorrect one) would have it that Hume is telling us that, since we are ignorant of the essences of objects, we are ignorant of their causal powers. Putting this claim together with the AP Property, we could say that a cognitive penetration of the essences of objects would yield the kind of epistemic consequences specified by the AP Property.

This is I think the correct reading of Hume, but it is not possible to defend it here.⁴ What is of interest here is what looks like a decisive objection to necessity so conceived. This objection is best illustrated by a brief look at a related topic, *viz.* the discussion of necessary existence in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. There, the necessity of God's existence is

attempted to be explained by asserting, that, if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. (DNR 189)

Necessary existence is explicated as the notion that were we to know the whole essence of God, our capacity to conceive of God as non-existent would be closed down. We would simply fail to find the non-existence of God conceivable. This “attempted” explanation of necessary existence is obviously a counterpart of necessary connection as we have conceived of it.

So far so good. The readers of this journal, however, will know what is coming next:

But it is evident, that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present. It will still be possible for us, at any time, to conceive the non-existence of what we formerly conceived to exist; nor can the mind ever lie under necessity of supposing any object to remain always in being; in the same manner as we lie under a necessity of always conceiving twice two to be four. (DNR 189–90)

Here is the worry: we have said necessary connection amounts to the unknowable essences of objects, but, were we to know the essence of some particular object, we would (a) be able to infer *a priori* the relevant causal consequences and, crucially, (b) find it impossible to conceive that cause without its effect. But it looks as if Hume himself thinks that we *can always* conceive some effect without a cause. Furthermore, as we shall see, he thinks that whatever we can conceive is possible. This implies that necessary connection, so specified, is not itself possible. Thus:

The mind can always *conceive* any effect to follow from any cause, and indeed any event to follow upon another: Whatever we can *conceive* is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense. (T Abstract 11; SBN 650 (italics original)).

And:

'Tis easy to observe, that in tracing this relation, the inference we draw from cause to effect, is not deriv'd merely from a survey of these particular objects, and from such a penetration into their essences as may discover the dependence of the one upon the other. There is no object, which implies the existence of any other if we consider these objects in themselves, and never look beyond the ideas which we form of them. Such an inference wou'd amount to knowledge, and wou'd imply the absolute contradiction and impossibility of conceiving any thing different. But as all distinct ideas are separable, 'tis

evident there can be no impossibility of that kind. When we pass from a present impression to the idea of any object, we might possibly have separated the idea from the impression, and have substituted any other idea in its room. (T 1.3.6.1; SBN 86–7)

These two passages appear to provide all the premises necessary to mount a conclusive argument against necessary connection conceived along the lines of the AP Property. The first quotation alludes to a modal principle (MP) to the effect that anything we can conceive is metaphysically possible. Second, we have a claim to the effect that we can *always* conceive some cause without its effect. Since we can always conceive some cause A independently of its effect B (and *vice versa*, and for any substitution of A and B) it follows, by the MP, that it is always *metaphysically possible* for A to exist independently of B. The MP will then entitle us to *know* that A and B are not necessarily connected (in the sense with which we are working).

The second quotation above omits the MP, but introduces the relevant sense of conceivability. Conceivability, at first pass, is explicated as the capacity to “separate” ideas in the imagination. So to conceive A apart from B is to separate A from B in the imagination. The ideas of cause A and effect B are “distinct,”⁵ and hence separable in the imagination. Since we can always perform such a separation “’tis easy to observe” or “’tis evident” that there can be no modal property (no “impossibility”) of the kind we are presently considering.⁶ In fact, these considerations license a stronger conclusion. We have introduced the notion of necessary connection as that, acquaintance with which, would close down the possibility of conceiving A apart from B. But if it is true that for any A and B we can *always* conceive it possible for A to exist independently of B, then there *can be* no such necessary connection between A and B. The very notion of necessary connection, so conceived, is incoherent.

Or so it seems. I shall argue that we can keep the conception of necessity we have been working with and allow Hume the claim that whatever we can conceive is metaphysically possible. The joker in the pack, as we shall see, is that the scope of the MP is limited to *adequate* representations of objects and there is no non-question-begging reason to suppose that Hume thinks that impressions *are* adequate representations of objects.

Conceivability and Hume’s Modal Maxim

First, some more detail on the relevant account of conceivability and the MP. The notion of conceivability adumbrated by Hume revolves around the notions of distinctness and separation. Thus he writes:

[W]hatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. (T 1.1.7.3; SBN 18)

But what sense of “different” is being exploited here, and how are we to relate “different” to “distinguishable,” and “distinguishable” to “separable”? One sense of “different” objects which would explain why such objects are *distinguishable* is to think of *phenomenally* different objects, objects occupying distinct regions of phenomenal space (which we can call p-space). Let us take for example (the experience “as of”—ideas of) two white circles beside each other. They are *different* in virtue of having non-overlapping boundaries in the p-space they occupy. Such objects are *distinguishable*, in virtue of their difference, in that one can identify those objects in p-space independently of each other, and are *separable* in the imagination in that we can imagine a type-phenomenally identical circle on the left hand side of the p-space without having to imagine a circle—or anything else—on its right hand side. Hence the imagined circles are different, distinguishable and therefore separable in the imagination.

There are complications lurking here, but this sketch will suffice for our purposes.⁷ So we can conceive A apart from B, and that fact, together with the MP (that whatever we can conceive is metaphysically possible), is supposed to license a conclusion to the effect that it is metaphysically possible that A exist apart from B. Does Hume buy the MP? There is much to suggest he does. Here are a few representative texts:

Nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible (T 1.1.7.6; SBN 19–20)

’Tis an establish’d maxim in metaphysics, *that whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence*, or in other words, *that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible*. (T 1.2.2.8; SBN 32 (emphasis original)).

Whatever can be conceiv’d by a clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence (T 1.2.4.11; SBN 43)

Such statements make it very difficult to say with John Wright⁸ that Hume ultimately rejects this maxim, and I agree with those who think Wright is in the wrong here.⁹ So let us accept that Hume accepted the MP.

One thing to take note of is that Hume is subtle enough to accept the MP only under a suitably finessed guise. Note please the reference in these quotations to “clear and distinct ideas,” and to whatever the mind *clearly* conceives. Elsewhere, Hume states that the MP applies only when our representations are “adequate.”

Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of ideas are applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge . . . The plain consequence is, that whatever appears impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be really impossible and contradictory, without any further excuse or evasion. (T 1.2.2.1; SBN 29 (emphasis original, except for the first phrase))¹⁰

Now, “adequacy” is, as we shall see, a stronger condition on representations than clarity and distinctness. It is certainly true that this is, to my knowledge, the only time the MP has the adequacy proviso attached, but its presence is nevertheless important. It is, in effect, the restriction on the MP which prevents the objection to our conception of necessary connection going through.¹¹ This is how it should be, if Hume is not to beg the question against some of his rationalist opponents; for them, the illusion is not one of necessity, but of *contingency*. Though we can apparently conceive A apart from B, such a state of affairs is *not* metaphysically possible, and the explanation of this appearance is owing to *confused* or *inadequate* understanding of, or our *ignorance* of, the essences of things (see e.g. Spinoza, *Ethics* I, p 33, Scholium 1; II, p 31, corollary; and II, p 44). You may think that A and B are metaphysically independent of each other, but if you knew more about the matter you would see that they are not.

We can illustrate the notion of adequacy with a brief look at Locke. He also connects the notion of some idea being “inadequate” with ignorance of (real) essence (*Essay* 2.31.6).¹² Adequate ideas are those “which perfectly represent those archetypes which the mind supposes them taken from,” whereas inadequate ideas are “partial or incomplete” (*Essay* 2.31.1). We know at most the surface or sensible properties of objects (which constitute their nominal essence), but we lack knowledge of their real essences. The matter is different with respect to mathematics (and morality): the nominal and real essences of e.g. geometrical figures coincide, so that there is no “gap” between our ideas and the essence of the relevant items.

So that *all our complex Ideas of substances are imperfect and inadequate*. Which would be so also in mathematical Figures, if we were to have our complex *Ideas* of them, only by collecting their Properties in reference to other Figures. How uncertain, and imperfect, would our *Ideas* be of an *Ellipsis*, if we had no other *Idea* of it, but some few of its Properties? Whereas, having in our plain *Idea*, the whole Essence of that Figure, we from thence discover those Properties, and demonstratively see how they flow, and are inseparable from it. (*Essay 2.31.11* (emphasis original))

Notice the explicit link drawn here between “uncertain,” “inadequate” and “imperfect” ideas, essences, and the related notions of demonstration and inseparability. Our ideas of substance and essence are imperfect and inadequate, but where some idea involves “the whole Essence” of the relevant item we “thence discover those Properties, and demonstratively see how they flow, and are inseparable from it.” The drift of this—and other many passages in Locke—is that if we *did* have adequate ideas of substances we would “thence discover those Properties, and demonstratively see how they flow, and are inseparable from [them].”¹³

Now, if the ideas figuring in some thought experiment involving conceivability are “inadequate,” a potential gap opens up between some state of affairs being metaphysically possible and some state of affairs only seeming so. Let me illustrate this point with a relatively uncontroversial example. Suppose Edmund does not know that Hesperus is identical to Phosphorus (he has “partial” or “incomplete” ideas). Edmund further thinks that Hesperus has been destroyed, but Phosphorus survives. Is he thereby conceiving the simultaneous existence of Phosphorus and the non-existence of Hesperus? Well, if the two “ideas” are separable in the imagination, we can grant that such a possibility is conceivable but any possibility revealed is not metaphysical possibility. Instead, Edmund’s imagination reveals an *epistemic* possibility, that is a possibility *relative* to his limited information (and of course he is unaware that his information is so limited). This illustrates the point that it is only under situations of adequate information about the relevant objects that MP has a chance of being compelling. We need to know enough¹⁴ about the objects of conception before we can be sure of getting to a metaphysical possibility. Edmund is merely separating his Hesperus *idea* apart from his Phosphorus *idea*: he is not genuinely conceiving *Hesperus* apart from *Phosphorus* because his ideas of those objects are not adequate to the task.

No doubt that the matter is more complex than this,¹⁵ but these remarks are sufficient to get the point across. A further point is worth making. We

can *explain* Edmund's finding¹⁶ the separate existence of Hesperus from Phosphorus conceivable in virtue of the fact that he lacks crucial information with respect to the conceived state of affairs (he does not know that they are *identical*). In other words, his ideas are inadequate or insufficiently clear. But presumably, he would no longer find such a state of affairs conceivable once this inadequacy or unclarity is removed. The explanation, then, of Edmund finding some metaphysically *impossible* state of affairs conceivable rests on his ignorance of key facts.

If Hume's endorsement of MP is restricted to representations which are adequate, the following gap opens up. Hume, recognising that conceivability entails possibility only under the assumption that the representations involved are adequate, should not countenance a move from conceivability to possibility when there are grounds for thinking that the relevant representations are inadequate. This naturally leads to this question: of what, if anything, are our ideas "adequate" representations?

Adequate Ideas of "objects" and the Scope of the MP

Of what items are ideas "adequate" representations? In the above quotation, Hume tells us in effect that the MP applies when ideas are adequate representations of "objects," but the notion of object is a notorious one.¹⁷ What seems relatively uncontroversial is that if ideas can be adequate with respect to any "object," the "objects" concerned are *impressions*. Ideas are (sometimes at least) "exact copies" of impressions, and "exactly represent" them. So, ideas can be adequate representations of impressions, and epistemic possibility disclosed through the exercise of the imagination will, in turn, reveal metaphysical possibility with respect to impressions. Thus when ideas A and B are exact copies of impressions A and B, our ability to conceive A apart from B (separate them in the imagination) will reveal the metaphysical possibility of impression A existing apart from B.

Still, what does that show us about the *in re* objects of the *impressions* A and B? If the MP requires that the representations involved in the separation be adequate representations of the relevant object, we shall need to be confident that we have adequate representations of those objects before we can be certain that our capacity to conceive A apart from B reveals the metaphysical possibility of A existing apart from B.

There are however plenty of reasons to doubt that Hume thinks that impressions are adequate representations of objects. Some commentators will, no doubt, think that the whole idea of impressions representing "external objects" is a complete non-starter anyway. I do not think that this is a credible

reading of Hume, but I will not discuss the issue here.¹⁸ The first point to mention is that Hume is explicit in acknowledging that we cannot *know* whether impressions represent objects or not. This is a weaker thesis than an idealist position (or at least, it is, in Kant's terminology, "problematic" rather than "dogmatic" idealism).

As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses. (T 1.3.5.2; SBN 84)

Notice that the last sentence in this quotation certainly allows for the possibility that impressions represent objects. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that we can leave to one side the general skeptical issue of whether Hume can, in good conscience, allow us to believe that there are "external objects" and, relatedly, that impressions represent such objects.¹⁹ Plenty of what Hume says about impressions seems to presuppose as much, and we shall proceed on the assumption that impressions represent external objects.²⁰ But even if we grant that (as I think we should),²¹ there is still a question about the "adequacy" of impressions *qua* representations of external objects. What information about external objects do such representations yield?

In order to be secure in inferring the modal properties of objects from the modal properties of impressions—their separability—we need to think that they are adequate in the sense that we can be sure that there is no further hidden fact, knowledge of which would show that the epistemic possibility revealed by separability conceals metaphysical impossibility. Remember Edmund lacked knowledge of a crucial fact about Hesperus and Phosphorus (namely their identity) which would show that the epistemic possibility entertained by Edmund in his state of ignorance does not reveal genuine metaphysical possibility. Now, if impressions *qua* perceptual experiences tell us anything about "external objects" they reveal at most their *sensible properties* and not their internal structure (or, more pointedly, their essences). So we cannot be sure that the separability of impressions ensures the separability of the objects of impressions unless we are in a position to believe that there are no hidden features of objects (their essences) which would spoil

the move from separability of impressions to the metaphysical possibility of the independent existence of their objects.

One critic of Hume, William Kneale, makes what is effectively this point and at the same time chides Hume from moving from the modal properties of experiences to the modal properties of the objects of those experiences.

My imagination of a bright visual sensum not followed by a loud auditory sensum does, indeed, enable me to know that I might experience the one without the other. For while imagining this course of experience I can recognise its possibility. But imagination is powerless to prove a lack of connexion between lightning and thunder. For there may well be truths concerning lightning and thunder which are not open to inspection to me when I imagine the experiences needed for the perception of lightning and thunder.²²

This reading would have Hume committing the fallacy of total information: all I know about external objects is sensible properties (or sense impressions), so all there *is to know* about external objects is their sensible properties. Hence I can infer, with impunity, the separability of *in re* objects from the separability of impressions. But Hume himself is aware of such a fallacy, and counsels against it.

I say then, that since we may suppose, but never can conceive a specific difference betwixt an object and impression; any conclusion we form concerning the connexion and repugnance of impressions, will not be known certainly to be applicable to objects. . . . As an object is suppos'd to be different from an impression, we cannot be sure, that the circumstance, upon which we found our reasoning, is common to both, supposing we form the reasoning upon the impression. 'Tis still possible, that the object may differ from it in that particular. (T 1.4.5.20; SBN 241)

If objects are different items from impressions (which would have to be the case on the supposition that there are external objects), then any properties which the impressions have (including, we must add, their separability), cannot be “known certainly to be applicable to objects.” The most that impressions will reveal is the sensible qualities of objects, and there may indeed be key differences between impressions and their objects. So Hume knows that it is a mistake to take the separability of impressions to reveal unproblematically the separability of the objects of impressions.

Skepticism and the Explanation of Conceivability

We are now in a position to defuse the objection against the notion of necessity which we are presently defending. Roughly put, the idea is that necessity amounts to some feature of an object (its essence), acquaintance with which would yield *a priori* knowledge of its causal consequences and close down the thinker's capacity to conceive cause without effect. The objection was that necessity so conceived is impossible since (a) conceivability implies metaphysical possibility (the MP) and (b) we can always conceive of cause without effect: hence there could be no necessity so conceived. This argument can be rebutted, not by rejecting the idea that Hume subscribed to the MP (I think he did), but by pointing out that the MP, as adumbrated by him, requires that the representations involved be adequate representations. We explicated the sense in which such representations had to be adequate, namely, representations that reveal enough information about such objects to move from conceivability to metaphysical possibility. The way to block the simple argument against necessity is to point out that given what Hume says, the separability of impressions could only yield the separability of the objects of impressions on the assumption that impressions are adequate representations of such objects (otherwise he is guilty of trading on the fallacy of total information). But as we have seen, there is at least one passage where Hume marks his awareness that impressions need not reveal total information concerning their objects.

More broadly, that we lack adequate ideas of "external objects" feeds into the general skeptical orientation for Hume's philosophy. He says in several places that the essences of objects are "unknown" to us, and that external objects are "revealed" to us only by their "external properties." This fact is also explicitly linked to the unknowability of power:

For to me it seems evident, that the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies, it must be equally impossible to form any notion of its powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments . . . (T Introduction, 8; SBN xvii)

[M]y intention never was to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations. For besides that this belongs not to my present purpose, I am afraid, that such an enterprise is beyond the reach of human understanding, and that we can never pretend to know body otherwise than by those external properties, which discover themselves to the senses. (T 1.2.5.26; SBN 64)

And, finally:

If we carry our enquiry beyond the *appearances* of objects to the senses, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty (T 1.2.5.26n12; SBN 639 (my emphasis))

If our cognitive relation to objects is mediated by sensory impressions then the “essence” or “nature” of body is something that is not revealed to the senses. The impressions or “sensible qualities”—the phenomenally distinct modes of presentation under which objects are given to us in experience—are themselves “loose and separable,” but that reveals a fact about our sensory experiences, not about the nature or essence of *in re* objects.

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68 (emphasis original))

That the (inadequate) impressions of particular causes and effects, and, hence the ideas of them, are “loose and separable” will of course have profound skeptical implications. Those ideas will be separable by the imagination, and disclose no contradiction in the epistemic possibility of some A being followed not by its usual B, but by C. It will prevent us, for example, showing the demonstrative certainty of the claim that every event has a cause:

[A]s all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next . . . This separation, therefore, of the idea of a cause from that of a beginning of existence, is plainly possible for the imagination; and consequently the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity . . . (T 1.3.3.3; SBN 79–80)

As far as we can tell (“is so far possible”) the actual separation of the objects implies no contradiction: we can only determine that the actual separation of the objects is *metaphysically* possible if our representations of those objects are adequate; but we have little reason to think that.

Furthermore, that the input impressions are loose and separable is sufficient to show that we cannot derive our idea of necessity from an impression of genuine necessary connection and allow us to conceive (without apparent

contradiction) a change in the course of nature. Indeed, all the other arguments which trade on conceivability which inform Hume's thought can go through when the relevant modality is epistemic, rather than metaphysical, possibility. However, such skepticism rests on our ignorance of the modal nature of the world outside of experience, not the impossibility of the relevant *in re* modal features. It may be, for *all we can tell*, metaphysically impossible for the course of nature to change, but given our limited cognitive resources, such a proposition, when entertained by us, contains no obvious contradiction. But then Edmund, given his ignorance, thought that the simultaneous existence of Phosphorus and non-existence of Hesperus contained no contradiction.

A further point. The looseness and separability of impressions, and thence ideas would explain our capacity to conceive of the separate existence of *genuinely* causal related items (those which are necessarily connected) when, in reality, metaphysically impossible for the cause to exist independently of its effect. The inadequacy of impressions as a route to knowledge of the world external to experience explains our ability to separate ideas in the imagination, and correlatively our inability to comprehend genuine *in re* necessity. Our route to the world is mediated by sensory impressions that do not reveal the internal structures or essences of objects, and so leaves open to us a whole realm of *epistemic* possibilities. For aught that we can *tell* a priori, anything may be the cause of anything else: but that is a reflection of our ignorance, (as Hume repeatedly says), not because there is no necessity in the world. That is skepticism aplenty.²³

A Final Objection

Supposing one agrees with what has been said thus far, one might direct one's line of fire away from conceivability and towards acquaintance. We have been working with the thought that acquaintance with essence would yield the relevant *a priori* inferential grounds and close down our imaginative capacities. But, the objection would now go, the only items with which we are acquainted are *impressions*, and those are not essences; so we cannot be acquainted with essences and so yet again the relevant conception of necessity contains an incoherence in its specification.

This is a mistake. That we are only acquainted with impressions is certainly true for Hume, but it is not a *necessary* truth. All we need to allow is that if our cognitive relation to objects *were different*, then we could be acquainted with essences and so penetrate the structure of the world beyond sensory impressions. In other words, all we need to allow for the coherence

of necessity so specified is to allow for the possibility of the rationalist faculty of the *intellect*, a non-sensory mode of cognition which would yield acquaintance with essence. Hume of course thinks that we lack such a mode, but his reasons for that are *a posteriori*. This means that it might indeed be a deep contingency that the only input into the cognitive machine is “loose and separable” sensory impressions, but we cannot rule out a priori a superior mode of cognition which would, precisely, yield acquaintance with essence. There are at least two passages where Hume leaves open the possibility of such a superior mode of cognition. The first brings us back to the passage from the *Dialogues*, concerning necessary existence:

[T]his necessity . . . is attempted to be explained by asserting, that, if we knew his whole essence or nature, we should perceive it to be as impossible for him not to exist as for twice two not to be four. But it is evident that this can never happen, *while our faculties remain the same as at present*. (DNR 189 (my emphasis))

Here we have Hume connecting conceivability with the contingent limitations of our “faculties”: we can conceive of the non-existence of God, and so we cannot exploit the “argument a priori,” but it is “while our faculties remain the same as at present” that we can always conceive of him as non-existent. But were our faculties different? Who knows?²⁴ Again, in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* Hume leaves open the possibility of a superior mode of cognition:

It is readily allowed, that other beings may possess many senses of which we can have no conception . . . (EHU 2. 7; SBN 20)

Limited Conclusions (and an Advertisement for Another Argument)

I conclude that Hume’s subscription to the MP is perfectly compatible with the possibility of necessary connection as we have conceived it. We do not need to say that Hume rejects the claim that anything we can conceive is metaphysically possible: we merely need to point out that the inference is licensed only when the representations involved are “adequate,” and that impressions can certainly be thought to be inadequate. The fact that our relation to the world is mediated by impressions (which are themselves “loose” and “separable”) explains why the ideas we have, and the relations among them, leave open to us a realm of epistemic possibilities which a

more accurate scrutiny of an object's modal properties might show to be illusions fostered by our cognitive limitations.

The reader might (rightly) feel that there is another issue to be discussed which I have thus far suppressed. I have focussed on the notion of Humean perceptions under the aspect of representations, or, more precisely, differences among the quality of their representational contents. But perceptions are also *objects*, and Hume of course wants there to be causal relations among those objects as well as "external objects." Now, surely, there is no scope for inadequacy of representation when it comes to perceptions themselves, and so it looks as if there can be no necessary connections between perceptions as we have thus far conceived of it.

That is a perfectly solid objection. The reason why it cannot be properly addressed here is that it opens up another issue to which it is impossible to do justice within the compass of a single essay. Let me, however, advertise where I think this leads us. It certainly seems, to skeptical realist ears, that Hume thinks there are hidden connections among perceptions as well,²⁵ and yet we appear to have undercut any grounds for ignorance that appeals to the inadequacy of our representations (those who listen with different ears will draw different conclusions). This problem, I believe, is not a problem with the reading presented here but presents problem to *Hume*. Moreover, it is a problem that bears on a piece of text that has plagued readers of Hume for a long time. In the Appendix, he writes:

In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounces either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*. Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in the case. (T Appendix 21; SBN 636 (italics original))

Clearly *this* problem has to do with what connects perceptions together. It seems to me that the problem about causal relations among perceptions is the key to understanding this problem. That, of course, takes some arguing and I shall leave it for another occasion.²⁶

NOTES

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1 For these and other issues, see, *inter alia*, John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983); E. J. Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987); Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). See also the contributions to *The New Hume Debate*, ed. Rupert Read and Ken Richman (London: Routledge, 2000) and my *Projection and Realism in Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Quotations from the *Treatise* are from David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), cited throughout as "T," followed by book, part, section, and paragraph number. I also provide page references to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), cited as "SBN." Quotations from the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are from David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), cited as "EHU," followed by section and paragraph number. I also provide page references to *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), also cited as "SBN." Quotations from the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* ("DNR") are from Norman Kemp Smith's edition (London: Thomas Nelson 1947), and are cited by page number.

2 Strawson, *The Secret Connexion*, 109ff.

3 For a recent reading along these lines see Stephen Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

4 See further my *Projection and Realism in Hume*.

5 Notice that "distinct" here better not *mean* "not necessarily connected," otherwise we are taking a brisk walk around a very small and boring circle. "Distinct" had better mean "conceptually distinct," and on Hume's imagistic account of the mind this is going to mean phenomenologically separable.

6 For a related discussion, which focuses on the impossibility of an *impression* of necessity so conceived, see Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64–5. Garrett seems to accept the unqualified version of the MP, which implies the conclusion that there is no necessity as we have conceived it.

7 For a recent and very helpful discussion, see Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, chapter 3.

8 Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*, 92 and 108.

9 See, e.g., D. Tyckerium Lightner, "Hume on Conceivability and Inconceivability," *Hume Studies* 23 (1997):113–32.

10 One referee for this paper suggests that we may read this passage as attaching to the adequacy proviso, whatever is inconceivable is impossible, rather than what is conceivable is possible. That is certainly consistent with the passage, but it is not obvious to me that it is mandatory to read it as such.

11 In this paper the adequacy proviso is stressed, but it is not clear to me that the demand that representations be clear and distinct is not itself sufficient to do the job. To anticipate: MP goes through when representations are clear and distinct; ideas can be clear and distinct representations of impressions—but are impressions clear and distinct representations of objects *in re*?

12 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975)

13 Like readings of Hume, this line of thought with respect to Locke is also controversial. For a spirited (and to my mind convincing) defence of a reading of Locke much like this, see (*inter alia*) M. R. Ayers, *Locke*, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1991), vol. 2, part 2.

14 My suspicion is that no such specification is possible. That is to say that a condition of "adequate representation" is going to have to smuggle in knowledge of the relevant modal facts. So if we cannot have a notion of adequate representation without including knowledge of modal facts, we cannot infer from something's being clearly conceivable to its being possible, since we shall need to know its modal properties before we can be sure that we are clearly or adequately conceiving such a state of affairs.

15 For a more finessed discussion, see Stephen Yablo, "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 1–42.

16 Does "finding conceivable" mean one is conceiving it or is one taking something to be *apparently* conceivable which is not really so? That depends. On a "subjective" view of conceivability, conceivability and apparent conceivability amount to the same thing. So Hobbes, in thinking that he squared the circle, conceived that he squared the circle. On an "objective" view, by contrast, conceivability must involve some genuine modality, either epistemic or metaphysical possibility (so Hobbes believed an inconceivable proposition). So Edmund is genuinely conceiving an epistemic possibility, but not conceiving a genuine metaphysical possibility.

17 For a discussion of these complications see Marjorie Grene, "The Objects of Hume's *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 163–77.

18 See my *Projection and Realism in Hume*.

19 For a recent defence of such a view see Cass Weller, "Why Hume is a Direct Realist," *Archiv für Geschichte de Philosophie* 83 (2001): 258–85.

20 See Grene, "The Objects of Hume's *Treatise*."

21 For a fuller discussion see my *Projection and Realism in Hume*.

22 William Kneale, *Probability and Induction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), 79. I owe this reference to Edward Craig.

23 What use is the MP to Hume then? In the passage quoted above (T 1.2.2.1; SBN 29) I omitted a sentence where Hume says that we have an adequate idea of extension, and *seems* to use it to draw conclusions about space and time (for example). But, in line with the thrust of this paper, Hume is interested not in the metaphysics of space and time but the genesis of our ideas of them and is not prepared to go further than the appearances or impressions (cf. "If we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the sense, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty" (T 1.2.5.26n12; SBN 639). Ideas can certainly be adequate representations of impressions because it is possible to verify that fact by tracing the idea back to the impression, and so the MP can licence all sorts of modal claims within the realm of perceptions. That, together with the separability principle, gives Hume quite a skeptical weapon.

24 Cf. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*, 148.

25 Cf. "The uniting principle among our internal perceptions is as unintelligible as that among external objects, and is not known to us any other way than by experience." (T 1.3.14.29, SBN 169)

26 See my *Projection and Realism in Hume*, chapter 5.

