



**Review of Angela Coventry. *Hume's Theory of Causation: A Quasi-Realist Interpretation***

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Angela Coventry. *Hume's Theory of Causation: A Quasi-Realist Interpretation*. London: Continuum, 2006. Pp. xi + 166. ISBN 0-8264-8635-5, Cloth, \$130.

In *Hume's Theory of Causation*, Angela Coventry develops hints dropped by Simon Blackburn regarding Hume's view of causal modalities. Blackburn has long intimated that Hume has been "shamefully abused by his commentators" (*Spreading the Word* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984], 221). The abuse consists in the idea that Hume is to be categorized either as a realist or anti-realist. Instead, suggested Blackburn, we should pay more attention to Hume's idea that we project, "spread the mind" and "gild and stain" natural objects with internal sentiments. Hume is best viewed as a "projectivist." Very crudely, a projectivist maintains that our commitment to apparently metaphysically intractable features such as causal modalities can be explained by our "projecting" habits or sentiments onto the world. This view of the nature of modal commitment is then supplemented by the philosophical enterprise of "quasi-realism," the attempt to show that such projecting is entirely legitimate and provides the resources to explain our modal thought and practice without appeal to anything metaphysically heavyweight or suspicious (such as causal powers). The combination of projectivism and quasi-realism is supposed to break old oppositions of "realism" and "anti-realism." Claiming Hume as the "first great projectivist" (*Essays in Quasi-Realism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993], 5), Blackburn supported this reading in two primarily exegetical essays, "Hume and Thick Connexions" (in his *Essays in Quasi-Realism* and elsewhere), which concerns causal modalities, and "Hume on the Mezzanine Level," in *Hume Studies* 19.2 (1993): 273–88, which discusses moralizing.

Coventry begins the hunt for her quarry—Hume's view of causal modalities—by beating the neighbouring fields. To provide a backdrop to the supposed quasi-realist alternative to the old realist/anti-realist oppositions, she offers a brisk trot through different forms of realism and anti-realism. She then introduces quasi-realism, in order to show how it emerges through a contrast between it and the traditional realist/anti-realist paradigms. Coventry discusses the issues quasi-realism raises, including the notorious Frege-Geach problem and the complaint that quasi-realism is not an intermediate position because it either collapses into realism, or its realist clothes are too diaphanous to disguise its truly anti-realist bones. She then enters the field of Hume's account of causation, first by offering a general account of its topography, and, second, by bringing quasi-realism to bear on this ground. In doing the latter, she appeals to a wider range of Hume's writings than those on causation proper, including his account of moral evaluation and "Of the standard of taste."

What is the intermediate position? The idea, it seems, is that the subjective reaction, projected onto the objects, is a starting point for modal thought, which is then subject to refinement. Such refinements lead to the construction of a standard of truth for modal claims. This claim is built upon the parallels between Hume's account of causal judgement, on the one hand, and his account of evaluation on the other. Coventry sees four key parallels: (1) that there is the projection of sentiments or something "inner" onto the world (133), (2) we then form Humean abstract ideas on this basis (133), which in turn feed into (3) general rules (134) which can correct (4) mismatches between judgment and actual sentiments (136). The interplay of these factors is supposed then to lead to a standard of truth for modal judgments akin to that developed in "Of the standard of taste." The sense in which this position is not realist lies in the fact that true causal statements, of the relevant kind, are not made true by the instantiation of irreducible causal powers. The sense in which this position is not anti-realist lies in the idea that what emerges are judgments which nevertheless "earn the right" (to use Blackburn's phrase) to truth and falsity. Coventry supports this contention with what is her most original take on the issue. Hume claims that truth involves either relations of ideas or agreement or conformity of ideas with "real existence and matter of fact," and Coventry offers an interpretation of this second claim as allowing for an "imaginary standard" of the kind constructed by general rules (she also supports this with a reading of the *Treatise's* discussion of space and time).

Coventry has chosen to approach the topic informed by contemporary concerns rather than historical context, and, therefore, this will not suit the taste of all readers of this journal. The long discussion of the various forms of realism and anti-realism with which Coventry opens her book is a testament to the problems inherent in trying to understand what might or might not be "realist" about Hume's thought, and its length might make one wonder more whether engagement with Hume's texts in discussing this issue might have made things easier. Nevertheless, her attempt to navigate this issue by drawing upon the quasi-realist resources is a laudable one, particularly regarding the difference between accidental and causal regularities. (Compare Helen Beebe's *Hume on Causation* [Routledge: London, 2006].) But any development of the position sketched in Coventry's book will need to consider a number of different things. First, Hume's talk of "spreading the mind" does not lend itself easily to the expressivist interpretation of the metaphor favoured by Blackburn and Coventry. Indeed, Allan Gibbard finds Blackburn's use of "projection" a misleading label for expressivism (see "Projection, Quasi-Realism, and Sophisticated Realism: Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism*," *Mind* 105.418 (1996): 331–5). Hume's projective metaphors, on the other hand, suggest something more perceptual. Second, the original reading of Hume's view of truth needs much more work to begin to be convincing.

Third, and finally, any attempt to steer a middle course between realism and anti-realism in Hume's account of modality by appeal to quasi-realism is faced with a problem regarding a feature of the evidence adduced for the realist reading of Hume on causal power. Hume apparently refers to powers that are "totally shut up" from human understanding. That is to say, the realist avowals are matched by a skepticism about the reach of our cognitive capacities. This then raises the following: quasi-realism is supposed to show how the projection of habits or sentiments can develop into a disciplined discourse and "earn the right" to truth or falsity. Let us concede that this position can be developed with sufficient detail to convince. One can imagine how the quasi-realist might explain how talk about contingently hidden or underlying causal relations might emerge. Suppose we start by projecting sentiments onto manifest regularities. It is not implausible to think we might subsequently redirect our projective tendencies when we discover more fundamental regularities upon which the manifest ones depend. We might then start thinking in terms of a distinction between manifest and hidden causal powers. But although this particular explanation may explain thoughts about *contingently* hidden powers, there is no obvious reason why we should think in terms of powers that are *in principle* hidden to human cognitive capacities. But if the main evidence for Hume's realism involves the thought of our being cognitively closed to such powers, the quasi-realist reading needs to offer an explanation of that feature of Hume's treatment of causal power to be a satisfactory intermediate position and it is not obvious (to say the least) why quasi-realism should (or even how it could) lead us to such a position (the skeptical side of Hume's realism is something that Blackburn also ignores). Much remains to be done, but Coventry's work is the beginning of an interesting project.

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