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# Transcendental Inquiry and the Belief in Body: Comments on Rocknak's *Imagined Causes*

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The title of Stefanie Rocknak's book—*Imagined Causes: Hume's Conception of Objects*—neatly and concisely captures the book's central claim: Hume holds that thinking about objects is a matter of imagining the causes of our perceptions. Rocknak argues that in giving an account of how we think about objects, Hume is engaged in a transcendental project. My comments focus fairly narrowly on this central thesis, which unfortunately means that I have set aside a great deal of interesting material in the book, including Rocknak's provocative and challenging interpretations of Hume's views about the nature of mental representation, time, and justification. I propose to focus on three related issues: First, I consider the sense in which, on Rocknak's view, Hume is engaged in a kind of transcendental project, and raise some questions about how to understand Rocknak's view about this project. Second, I want to raise some questions about how to understand the claim that conceiving of objects, for Hume, is a matter of imagining causes. Finally, I will look more closely at some of the evidence that Rocknak appeals to in support of this interpretation, and suggest that the interpretation faces two challenges. I invite Rocknak to say more about these challenges in her reply.

## Part 1: Humean Transcendental Psychology

I begin with a confession: When I first received Rocknak's book and flipped through it, one of the first things I noticed was the liberal use of the word "transcendental" in the table of contents. I wondered whether this was going to be a book about Hume in which Kant is the hero. As it

turns out, it is not. The sort of transcendental project that Hume is engaged in, in Rocknak's view, turns out to be pretty far from anything that Kant would consider to be transcendental philosophy. When one looks at what Rocknak officially counts as transcendental inquiry, it does not turn out to be transcendental in any very controversial sense.

We can start by looking at what Rocknak says about her use of the word "transcendental." She writes,

Some might be wary of an account that characterizes Hume as a naturalist who appeals to transcendental notions, however implicitly. For, to some, transcendental inquiry must occur independently of the natural sciences; we do not do empirical research to come up with conditions of possibility for thought. Rather, transcendental inquiry is, somehow, "pure" in the respect that it operates independently of the natural sciences. However, I do not think that this is necessarily the case. Rather, generally speaking, these two modes of inquiry may be very compatible, particularly if we think of "transcendental" as merely being a way to think of those psychological tendencies that most are born with; they are literally conditions of possibility for normal human thought. (*Imagined Causes*, 74)

Rocknak here suggests that transcendental inquiry is a way of thinking about the conditions for the possibility of normal human thought. Her view seems to be that what counts as "normal human thought" is an empirical question, to be settled experimentally. But reasoning about what must be the case in order for someone to engage in normal human thought is transcendental inquiry. Thus, she continues, "In its essence, transcendental reasoning is nothing other than 'backwards reasoning.' In order for, say, X to be the case, we conclude that Z must be the case" (*Imagined Causes*, 74). She claims that this is the sense in which she uses "transcendental" in the book.

However, there is still, I think, a question about how committed Rocknak is to the *modal* character of such transcendental inquiry. She describes it as backward reasoning about what *must* be the case in order for something else to be the case or reasoning about the *conditions for the possibility* of normal human thought. In this way, transcendental inquiry still seems to be *a priori*, and its conclusions would still seem to be necessary. However, I do not think that this is actually Rocknak's view: she seems to count as transcendental inquiry anything that explains how normal human reasoning is likely to have come about, or inquiry that tries to establish by "backward reasoning" what *is* the case, rather than what *must* be the case. For example, she cites several contemporary studies as evidence of the compatibility of transcendental and empirical inquiry; she writes, "after conducting a number of behavioral tests, scientists have hypothesized that the behavior of at least some dogs is best explained if we assume that they are, to some degree, 'rational' (Kaminski et al. 2004)" (*Imagined Causes*, 74). And she asks us to "consider those scientists who hypothesize 'instincts,' or 'natural propensities,' or 'hardwired' abilities to explain both human and non-human behavior" (*Imagined Causes*, 74). Positing or hypothesizing about the causal mechanisms that underlie observable behavior

counts as transcendental inquiry, in this sense. In other words, Rocknak uses “transcendental inquiry” so broadly that any kind of abduction or inference to the best explanation counts as transcendental inquiry.

Taken in this sense, it seems to me right and even uncontroversial that Hume is engaging in transcendental inquiry in developing his science of human nature. The attempts to explain how we form beliefs about the unobserved, how we acquire the belief in body, our ability to think general thoughts, our ability to sympathize, and our ability to feel the indirect passions are all transcendental in this very undemanding sense. But they are not, it seems to me, transcendental in the stronger sense that they purport to show what *must* be the case for a creature to engage in normal human thought.

This, however, is where I start to worry somewhat about Rocknak’s interpretation. It seems to me that her interpretation requires that we understand “transcendental” in a stronger sense. Rocknak claims that there is a transcendental imagination, she distinguishes between transcendental probable reasoning and three other forms of probable reasoning (natural, philosophical, and indirect), she distinguishes between transcendental belief and other forms of belief, and she claims that transcendental causation is a special and mysterious kind of causation, distinct from ordinary causation. Yet it is not clear to me whether, and if so why, all these things deserve the label “transcendental.” It seems that, for example, the principles of association deserve to be called transcendental, too, at least in the sense that they are appealed to in an explanation of normal human thought. Rocknak seems to be committed, as we will see, to the view that transcendental probable reasoning, transcendental belief and the transcendental imagination are all “transcendental” in a stronger sense than her official view about what counts as “transcendental” implies.

## Part 2: What is Transcendental Causation?

Here we need to turn more specifically to Rocknak’s claim that, according to Hume, conceiving of objects is a matter of imagining the causes of our perceptions. Rocknak calls “proto-objects” impressions and those ideas that exactly represent impressions, most importantly memories. She argues that Hume’s view is that when we have a series of perfectly resembling proto-objects, “we ‘always’ imagine that an idea of an object with perfect identity causes this [series],” and—she claims—that “this idea of an object is imagined to represent the properties of invariability and uninterruptedness” (*Imagined Causes*, 104).

Rocknak claims that our having an idea of the cause of a series of resembling perceptions involves a special kind of causal reasoning and a special kind of causation, which she calls transcendental causal reasoning and transcendental causation, respectively.

I want to raise a few questions about this part of Rocknak’s interpretation. First, I think Rocknak is clearly right that Hume does not think that ordinary causal reasoning is responsible for our believing that there are bodies with a continued and distinct existence. That is clear from *Treatise* 1.4.2.<sup>1</sup> However, I am not totally convinced by Rocknak’s claim that there is some other kind of *causal* reasoning and some other kind of causation that explains how we

come to think of their being invariable and uninterrupted causes of our perceptions. It is not entirely clear to me whether Rocknak really needs to claim that this is both a special kind of causal reasoning and a special kind of causation. Coming to think that there is an invariable and uninterrupted cause of a series of resembling perceptions involves a kind of inference that goes beyond observed regularities; this is why Hume denies in *Treatise* 1.4.2 that (ordinary) causal reasoning explains the belief in bodies with continued existence. So, if this is a case of causal reasoning at all, then it does seem to be a distinct type of causal reasoning. But if I believe that there is an invariable and uninterrupted *cause* of some series of resembling perceptions, why must it also be thought of as a cause in some different or special sense? This is Rocknak's official view, because she describes it as a mysterious kind of causation.

The trouble is I am not sure what kind of causation it is supposed to be: why do I not just imagine a regular-old cause of my resembling perceptions? And if this really is supposed to be a special and mysterious kind of causation, I am not sure why it should be the case that what I am imagining is a *cause* of my perceptions and not something else. In short, if transcendental probable reasoning is a distinct kind of reasoning about a distinct kind of relation, transcendental causation, why should we think of it as causation or probable reasoning at all?

### Part 3: The Priority of Transcendental Causal Reasoning and Belief

Rocknak claims that this special kind of reasoning is transcendental because she claims that Hume holds that it always occurs and because experience presupposes it. In this way, she argues that transcendental probable reasoning is prior to ordinary forms of probable reasoning. Moreover, transcendental belief seems to be prior to ordinary causal beliefs. And this is because ordinary causal reasoning depends on experience but experience presupposes transcendental causal reasoning. Rocknak claims, "this special 'kind of reasoning of causation' (T 1.4.2.19; SBN 195) appears to occur prior to the reasoning from causation that is based on 'common experience' (T 1.4.2.20; SBN 196)" (*Imagined Causes*, 115).

My worry about this, however, is that this argument for the priority of transcendental causal reasoning seems to equivocate on the word "experience." It seems clear that this mysterious kind of reasoning is distinct from ordinary causal reasoning, and it seems clear that the ability to think of bodies with a continued and distinct existence is a central and important part of ordinary human thought. So, this kind of reasoning is transcendental in Rocknak's official, undemanding sense. But one could equally claim that forming beliefs about the unobserved and beliefs about causal relations is a central and important part of ordinary human thought, and our ability to engage in ordinary causal reasoning, then, is transcendental in exactly the same sense. When Rocknak claims that ordinary causal reasoning depends upon experience (and so does not seem to be transcendental), "experience" here is used much more narrowly: ordinary causal reasoning depends on our having perceptions and these perceptions' exhibiting certain patterns, that is, certain types of perceptions are constantly conjoined. But what Rocknak calls transcendental causal reasoning equally depends on experience in this sense, since it depends on our having perceptions and these perceptions' exhibiting certain

patterns, though in this case their being series of exactly resembling perceptions. So, both transcendental and ordinary causal reasoning depend on experience in this sense, and both are important to explaining ordinary human thought.

I think this is significant because it bears on Rocknak's claim that the transcendental causal reasoning that is responsible for our coming to imagine causes of our perceptions is distinct from the imaginative processes by which the vulgar come to believe in bodies, and also distinct from the reasoning that leads philosophers to believe in bodies that cause our perceptions. This is central to Rocknak's view, because she argues forcefully that the transcendental account she attributes to Hume is distinct from both the vulgar view and the philosophical view about bodies in *Treatise* 1.4.2. (Strictly speaking, Rocknak argues that there are two vulgar views, and both are distinct from the transcendental view, but I will set this aside for simplicity.)

Thus, Rocknak holds that the transcendental reasoning that leads us to imagine the causes of our perceptions is prior to ordinary causal reasoning, but also prior to the imaginative processes that give rise to the vulgar belief in body. And as a result, it is prior to (and distinct from) the philosophical belief in body, since the philosophical belief in body presupposes the vulgar belief. That the transcendental account is prior to and distinct from the vulgar and philosophical accounts is one of the central features of her interpretation.

I want to raise two problems facing this claim. One of them she recognizes and discusses at length in the book; the other she does not. The first problem, which she recognizes, is that Hume seems to hold that philosophers' coming to believe in bodies that cause perceptions depends on rejecting the vulgar view, but according to Rocknak's interpretation we always (transcendentally) conceive of bodies as the causes of our perceptions, prior to experience. Rocknak thinks that this is a serious problem for Hume and marks a serious rift in his thought. However, I worry that she underestimates the extent to which it is a serious problem for her interpretation. She argues that this is the problem that Hume has in mind when he has his second thoughts about personal identity. But it seems to me that the problem that she thinks Hume faces just would not arise without her interpretative claim that there is a transcendental account of our belief in body that is prior to, and distinct from, both the vulgar and philosophical views.

Moreover, it seems that the textual evidence for this distinct, transcendental account does not support the claim that this account is prior to the vulgar belief in body. One of the key pieces of textual evidence Rocknak cites in support of her view is *Treatise* 1.3.2.2. Here is the part of the passage that most strongly supports her view:

'Tis only causation, which produces such a connexion, as to give us assurance from the existence or action of one object, that 'twas follow'd or preceded by any other existence or action. . . . There is nothing in any objects to persuade us, that they are either always *remote* or always *contiguous*; and when from experience and observation we discover, that their relation in this particular is invariable, we always conclude there is some secret *cause*, which separates or unites them. The same reasoning extends to *identity*. We readily suppose an object may continue

individually the same, tho' several times absent from and present to the senses; and ascribe to it an identity, notwithstanding the interruption of the perception, whenever we conclude, that if we had kept our eye or hand constantly upon it, it would have convey'd an invariable and uninterrupted perception. But this conclusion beyond the impression of our senses can be founded only on the connexion of *cause and effect*. (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74)

It does seem that Hume here claims that *causal reasoning* is responsible for our believing in the continued existence of an object despite interruptions in our perception. And it looks like this is in clear conflict with his claim in *Treatise* 1.4.2 that causal reasoning cannot explain how we come to believe in bodies with a continued and distinct existence. One way of avoiding the conflict would be to claim that the kind of belief that Hume is attempting to explain in this passage is distinct from the various kinds of belief in body that Hume attempts to explain at *Treatise* 1.4.2. Indeed, this is exactly what Rocknak argues, and she argues that the belief explained here is the transcendental belief in body that is prior to the vulgar and philosophical belief. However, I want to suggest that this gets things the wrong way around—Hume seems here to be describing a kind of causal reasoning that depends on our already having a belief in body, rather than explaining how we come to think of bodies in the first place. Thus, when Hume claims that “we conclude, that if we had kept our eye or hand constantly upon it, it would have convey'd an invariable and uninterrupted perception,” it seems that the belief that we acquire by causal reasoning presupposes that we already think of the object we are sensing as having a continued and distinct existence: this is the referent of “it.” Indeed, Hume also seems to presuppose that we think of the object as distinct from our perception of it. The passage does not seem to me to support the priority claim.

The second problem for the claim that the transcendental belief in body is prior to the vulgar belief in body is one that Rocknak does not discuss. If Hume indeed held that we always imagine invariable and uninterrupted causes of our perceptions, and that this is prior to the vulgar belief in body, why would we need the vulgar belief? If there is this basic, transcendental belief in bodies, what is left for the vulgar account to explain? Moreover, if the transcendental belief involves imagining the causes of our perceptions, it seems that the transcendental belief requires that we distinguish between our perceptions and their causes. But this suggests that we ordinarily distinguish between bodies and our perceptions. It seems odd to me to think that we first distinguish between perceptions and their causes, and then when we come to have the vulgar belief in body we begin to conflate perceptions and bodies. Yet I think that Rocknak's interpretation commits Hume to exactly this. I want to conclude by asking Rocknak to say something more about why there should be a vulgar belief in body, assuming that there is a prior transcendental belief in body.

## NOTES

1 References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph number, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as “SBN” followed by the page number.

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