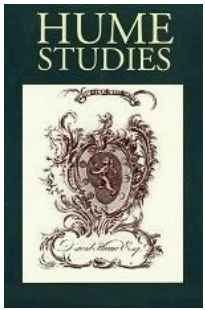

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Comments on Rocknak's *Imagined Causes*

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Stefanie Rocknak has written an ambitious and challenging book[1] in which she argues for a new interpretation of Hume's account of how we come to believe in external objects, and what it is we believe in. I am hampered by the fact that she and I seem to agree on so little. Thus, my criticisms run the danger of simply not seeing what she is up to.

A preliminary terminological point: where Rocknak uses the word "object," I will often use the word "body," since I think Hume sometimes uses "object" in a more general sense that includes perceptions.

If I understand correctly, Rocknak's Hume argues that we come to believe in bodies through a special kind of causal reasoning. We reason what must exist in order to cause sequences of sense impressions with constancy and coherence and in order to explain the fact that the impressions have these characteristics. Our conclusion is that bodies must exist and we come to the idea of body via an exercise of our transcendental imagination. Bodies are imagined causes, as she puts it: secret causes that we have never experienced and can never experience (118). To quote her,

> [B]y using a special kind of reasoning from causation—which is not based on experience—we "infer" that some continuous and distinct object must be the cause of the impressions . . . in order to explain the constancy and coherence that our impressions do clearly admit of. For how else, the idea is, could my impressions of say, a mountain, be constant and coherent, no matter how many times they are interrupted, unless there is some continuous and distinct object, causing those impressions? (117)

As near as I can tell, the rhetorical question here is what guides her interpretation.

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I myself do not see how the vulgar could feel the pull of the question when they first generate the idea of body as a result of tricks of the imagination. In my view, the idea that bodies cause impressions is much further downstream when the philosophers get into the picture, not at the origin of the idea of body (see T 1.4.2.43–46; SBN 209–12).

In any event, I will focus on some passages in Hume that Rocknak interprets as descriptions of this process of transcendental reasoning and imagining, and will give alternate interpretations.

First is the discussion in T 1.3.9.3–4 (SBN 107–108)[2] of the two systems of realities (58–60). Rocknak takes the first system of realities to consist of impressions and memories of impressions, and takes the second system of realities to consist of transcendentally imagined causes of the first system. I have trouble squaring this interpretation with the context. It seems to me that Hume is just continuing the previous discussion of everyday causal reasoning. The first system of realities consists of the things we sense or remember sensing, and the second system of realities consists of the things that we believe exist because the ideas and memories transport our minds to causally related ideas and enliven them. Our belief in Rome, if we have not experienced that city, is an enlivened complex idea consisting of ideas with a customary association with impressions of words or stories about Rome. The enlivened ideas that compose the complex idea are copies of impressions of ordinary experience. If Hume is switching from a discussion of causation as customary conjunction to a special sort of transcendental causation, he is doing it without any warning and without any need. Rocknak seems to be inferring from the fact that we do not see and feel the realities in the second system, that they cannot be seen and felt, and can only be grasped by the transcendental imagination. But this inference seems inconsistent with the fact that Hume is continuing his discussion of how observed constant conjunctions and present impressions lead to belief in things not currently sensed. Because the constant conjunctions have been observed, both types of things have been observed. There is no indication that he has switched to talking of things that cannot be sensed.

Second is Hume's discussion in T 1.3.2.2 (SBN 73–74) of the inconstant relations (97). As I read Hume, he is in the process of arguing that only ordinary causation enables us to infer the existence of objects we are not currently sensing. When we have observed that things of one type are always accompanied by things of another type, and we have an impression of something of the first type, we infer the existence of something of the second type that we are not currently sensing. In contrast, neither identity nor spatial or temporal relations support this inference. That I see something here now does not allow me to infer that something exactly resembling it, and uninterruptedly connected to it, did or will exist. That I see something here now does not allow me to infer that something else far away (that is, remote) or nearby (that is, contiguous) exists. If I can make such inferences, it is only because of causal connections of the currently sensed things with the currently unsensed. For instance, if I infer that there was previously something just like what I see now and uninterruptedly connected with it, it is because there is a causal explanation of why such things are durable and not momentary.

Rocknak, on the other hand, takes this passage to support Hume's commitment to the exercise of transcendental reasoning in inferring a product of the transcendental imagination.

She says that "'remote' seems to mean, *distinct* from, i.e., *independent* of, our perception," and dismisses the obvious meaning of distant, even though spatial relations are under discussion (95). She then takes the 1.3.2.2 passage on identity to pre-sage the T 1.4.2.31–36 (SBN 201–205) passage about attributing identity to an interrupted succession of exactly resembling impressions, and says it is about imagining a secret cause—one with perfect identity—of the resembling impressions. All this seems out of keeping with the express overall purpose of Hume's discussion here. And again, it seems clear he is talking about ordinary causation, not transcendental causation.

Third is Hume's discussion at the beginning of T 1.4.2.18–19 (SBN 194–95) of constancy and coherence. Hume is concerned to explain why we attribute to body continued existence unperceived, as well as existence distinct from mind and perception. His answer is that these attributions are the effects on our imagination by interrupted successions of certain impressions that exhibit constancy, and interrupted successions of certain impressions that exhibit coherence. A succession is constant if each member exactly resembles any other. A succession is coherent if there is a sequence of changes between its members just like other sequences of changes in a number of other successions. A constant succession of impressions is interrupted if between some of its members are impressions with little resemblance to them. A coherent succession of impressions is interrupted if instead of some of its members are impressions not normally found in such sequences of changes.

In a complicated story, Hume says that the imagination takes distinct impressions in a constant sequence to be identical, and masks the absurdity by taking the imagined single lengthy impression to sometimes exist unperceived. Similarly, the imagination takes the missing impressions in a coherent succession to exist unperceived. Hume explicitly talks of impressions here. However, Rocknak takes this to be mere "terminological carelessness." She says we cannot imagine that an impression exists unperceived because impressions are not imagined and are perceived (108). However, Hume explicitly addresses such an objection at T 1.4.2.37–39 (SBN 205–207) and takes himself to have answered it. That seems a lot of care to expend in support of terminological carelessness. Rocknak's section is entitled "Impressions Are Never Imagined," but imagining something about an impression is not the same as imagining the impression.

At T 1.4.2.20–21 (SBN 195–98), Hume discusses how coherence leads to a belief in continued and distinct existence. The gist is that we imagine unobserved impressions to exist in order to preserve the regular sequence of changes that we are used to observing. Hume calls this a kind of causal reasoning. It is not garden variety causal reasoning because we suppose more regularity than we have actually observed. For instance, when we have our back to it and so are not looking, we suppose the door to be swinging when we hear the familiar creak. The explanation is what one might call regularity inertia—seeing some cases of a regularity impels one to imagine constant conjunction even when the conjunction has only been inconstantly observed.

Rocknak adds the word "mysterious" to Hume's word "kind" when he speaks of a "kind of reasoning from causation" (T 1.4.2.19; SBN 195) (115). She takes Hume to be introducing

transcendental causation between imagined causes and the impressions we have. But there is no mysterious transcendental causation here. Hume has told us what he means—regularity inertia.

In four parts, Hume explains how a constant succession of perceptions causes belief in the idea of body (T 1.4.2.25; SBN 199–200). Rocknak says that a detailed explanation of this system is lacking in the literature, but see my own explanation in Saul Traiger's *Blackwell Guide*.[3] In any event, Hume says that when we have an interrupted succession of exactly resembling impressions, we take each of them to be identical with the next. The interruption is clear evidence, however, that each is a new existence, distinct from the last. We are uneasy with this contradiction and resolve it by supposing that the identical impression which we suppose there to be, exists sometimes perceived and sometimes unperceived. The vivacity of the impressions lends vivacity to this supposition and we believe it. This process takes place on the supposition that our perceptions are our only objects, so that examples of the impressions at issue are what "the common man means by a hat, or shoe, or stone" (T 1.4.2.31; SBN 202).

Understanding this account requires understanding what Hume means by "identity." Identity, for Hume, is the "invariableness and uninterruptedness of any object, thro' a supposed variation of time" (T 1.4.2.30; SBN 201). Hume explains how "a single object, plac'd before us, and survey'd for any time without our discovering in it any interruption or variation, is able to give us the notion of identity" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201). It does so because of an irresistible fiction of the imagination whereby for any "unchangeable object" we take it "to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects, and in particular that of our perceptions" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 200–201). The object we are surveying, which is clearly steadfast, we take nonetheless to be also successive. Steadfastness is contrary to successiveness. So we alternate viewing the object as a single, steadfast thing, and as many successive things. This alternation between regarding the object as one thing and regarding it as many things is the idea of identity. "Here then is an idea, which is a medium betwixt unity and number, or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201).

Hume gives this strange account because he is concerned to explain how identity can be an inconstant relation. Constant relations are ones that "depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together," whereas inconstant relations are "such as may be chang'd without any change in the ideas" (T 1.3.1.1; SBN 69). Identity, Hume says, is an inconstant relation. We may think of something at one time and something exactly resembling at another, and without any change in our ideas alternately imagine that they are identical or imagine that they are distinct. After all, identity is something we can be unsure of. It is not a relation of ideas.

However, this banal fact about identity raises a very difficult metaphysical problem, what I have termed "Hume's difficulty concerning identity."[4] If we can suppose that things A and B are identical and then go on to suppose that they are distinct, then we can suppose that the identical thing we have taken them to be is distinct from itself. But that seems to be supposing an obvious contradiction. How can we conceive of identity as an inconstant relation while avoiding this obvious contradiction? How can we conceive of one thing as, for all we know, two? How can we conceive of two things as, for all we know, one? These would require us to be able to conceive of a genuine medium betwixt unity and number. In his discussion

of identity, Hume finesses the problem by appealing to the fiction by which we alternately conceive the object as one single thing or two distinct things. I have argued that Hume merely evades and does not solve the profound problem he has raised, and no-one else has solved it either. The closest approach is F. H. Bradley's concept of identity-in-difference, but Bradley himself calls it "a clear make-shift" that does not resolve the contradiction and "is not the truth about reality."[5] Analytic philosophers do not even see the problem because they confuse it with Frege's puzzle about identity.

I have said that understanding Hume's explanation of our belief in body from a constant, interrupted succession of impressions requires understanding his idea of identity. Understanding his idea of identity requires understanding the difficulty with identity being an inconstant relation, and the apparent need for a medium betwixt unity and number. Understanding why his purported solution appeals to the idea of time requires understanding that a steadfast and invariable object is one, and a succession is many. That is why the idea of identity is an idea of an invariable and uninterrupted object through a supposed variation in time. In this way, the object is supposed to be both one, in virtue of its steadfastness, and many, in virtue of its duration.

As Rocknak recognizes, the whole edifice of this interpretation depends on a proper understanding of what a steadfast object is supposed to be for Hume. Something is steadfast when it is a single thing coexisting with a succession of things.[6] Rocknak tries to topple the edifice by critiquing my interpretation of what Hume means by "steadfast." She takes "steadfast" to have two senses for Hume. In one sense, she says a steadfast object for Hume is an interrupted succession of exactly resembling impressions—in other words, a succession with constancy (137). In the other sense, she says that a steadfast object is a continued and distinct imagined secret cause of such a succession (138). As near as I can tell, both these claims are based on confusion. Rocknak uses "constant," "uninterrupted," "invariable," "continued," and "steadfast" interchangeably (131, 134). However, such readings cannot be sustained.

First, "constant" has a special use for Hume in this discussion, as I have noted previously. Constancy is the exact resemblance of the impression before losing sight (or touch, etc.) of something, and the impression after regaining sight of that thing.

> These mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear'd to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration. My bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner, and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them. (T 1.4.2.18; SBN 194–95)

Constancy is the exact resemblance of impressions in an interrupted succession. Sometimes the interruptions are impressions of the indistinct play of after images that one gets when ones eyes are closed, for instance. So, an example of a constant sequence would be impressions of one's books interspersed with impressions of one's after images.

Steadfastness is something different. To show this, let me appeal to things Hume says about what can give us the idea of time. Note that a succession of impressions with constancy can give one the idea of time. There is, after all, "a perceivable succession of changeable objects" (T 1.2.3.7; SBN 35): the succession changes from impressions of books to after images. Note, second, that "an unchangeable object, since it produces none but co-existent impressions, produces none that can give us the idea of time" (T 1.2.3.8; SBN 36, my emphasis). Hume just below calls such an object "stedfast and unchangeable" (T 1.2.3.11; SBN 37). The impression it produces is steadfast as well—that is, not successive. Thus, an example of constancy of impressions can produce the idea of time. An example of steadfastness of impression cannot. So constancy is not to be confused with steadfastness.

Nor is steadfastness continuity in the sense in which Hume uses it at the beginning of T 1.4.2. Hume talks of attributing "CONTINU'D existence" as short for attributing "CONTINU'D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses" (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188). But an object can be steadfast even when perceived, such as when it is producing "none but co-existent perceptions" (T 1.2.3.8; SBN 36), or when one is surveying "a single object, plac'd before us . . . for any time without discovering in it any interruption or variation" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201). So, something can be steadfast when it is not continued in Hume's special sense. Likewise an altering body that one sees interruptedly can be continued in Hume's special sense, even when it is not steadfast.

Rocknak justifies these confusions as the only way to understand Hume's talk of steadfastness, invariableness, and uninterruptedness. She says that there is clear evidence that we never have a steadfast perception (130–33).

First she cites T 1.3.2.2 (SBN 74) and says, "Hume explicitly tells us here that we do not perceive an object that is both invariable and uninterrupted; such an idea is a 'conclusion beyond the impressions of our senses'" (131). But Hume is only saying that when an object goes out of sight or touch and then returns, we cannot be sure it is the same object again, unless there are some causal reasons why it must be. We appeal to causation to tell us about the existence of things we are not currently sensing. Hume is not talking about secret objects that it is impossible to sense.

Second, Rocknak appeals to T 1.4.6.2 (SBN 251) in which Hume says "there is no impression constant and invariable" (131). However, Hume's previous sentence is, "If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner." Hume is only denying the existence of such a life-long impression, not generally asserting that there is no impression coexisting with any succession. Rocknak responds to this argument by citing Hume's mind as theater analogy including, "They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind" (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 253) (132). But this is not inconsistent with what I say. Any steadfast impressions would be part of the bigger succession of perceptions in the mind. Being steadfast is being a single thing coexisting with a succession. It is certainly not being a single thing that exists for all eternity in no succession.

Rocknak concludes by saying, "Hume is not excluding just the possibility of an impression of the self that somehow, would last the course of our lives. Rather, he is ruling out the possibility of any impression of an invariable and uninterrupted self" (132). But this claim is not relevant to my point that some single perceptions co-exist with some succession. My defense of steadfastness is a separate point from any discussion of a steadfast self.

Rocknak notes that Hume says, " 'Tis impossible for the mind to fix itself steadily upon one idea of any considerable amount of time (T 2.1.4.2; SBN 283)" (133). This passage must be put in contrast with Hume's discussion of a man "strongly occupy'd with one thought" (T 1.2.3.7; SBN 35). Thus, it must be possible to have a single idea while some succession is occuring. It just is not possible for it to happen while a succession of considerable duration occurs. Confirmation is at T 1.4.2.33 (SBN 203) where Hume says, "When we fix our thought on any object, and suppose it to continue the same for some time, 'tis evident we suppose the change to lie only in the time, and never exert ourselves to produce any new image or idea of the object. The faculties of the mind repose themselves in a manner, and take no more exercise, than what is necessary to continue that idea, of which we were formerly possest, and which subsists without variation or interruption." Thus, there are steadfast ideas.

Rocknak hopes to undermine my account of Hume on time and identity by criticizing my interpretation of Hume on steadfast objects. However, her criticisms seem based on misunderstanding of what steadfastness is meant to be, and of the passages she cites. To my admittedly not-unbiased eye, most of the arguments in support of her ambitious account of Hume on body suffer similarly.

NOTES

1 Rocknak, *Imagined Causes*.

2 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.

3 Baxter, "Identity, Continued Existence, and the External World."

4 Baxter, *Hume's Difficulty*, chs. 4, 6.

5 Bradley, *Appearance and Reality*, 19, 21.

6 Baxter, *Hume's Difficulty*, ch. 3.

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