

Comments on Angela Coventry's *Hume's Theory of Causation: A Quasi-Realist Interpretation*

Let us begin with what I hope is obvious: it is impossible, given the time constraints, to do full justice either to Angie's book as a whole or to the kind of position adumbrated within its pages. So I shall confine myself to those aspects that interest me most. In outline, Angie's book 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' non-cognitive responses - 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 the old oppositions of 'realism' and 'anti-realism'. Exegetically speaking, Hume's account of causation can be seen as occupying a middle ground between an implausible reductionism or error theory, on the one hand and a metaphysical heavyweight realism on the other.

Clearly this raises many questions: I shall consider the following three:

- a) Is the quasi-realist's understanding of the metaphor of 'spreading the mind' – of 'projecting' - attributable to Hume?
- b) If, as the quasi-realist supposes, some non-cognitive state of mind is projected, what then is this state of mind?
- c) How does this state figure an explanation of the supposedly emergent disciplined form of causal discourse?

I'll go onto to discuss a) and b) presently. In doing so, I'll sketch an answer to b) not itself provide by Angie, and then answer a) in the negative. First however, let us look briefly at Angie's answer to c) (§5.4 *et seq.*).

Angie's answer turns on her offering interpretations of i) Hume's theory of truth, ii) its connection to an imaginary standard, iii) how this standard is connected to rule-based sentimental correction and iv) his theory of abstract ideas. The general idea is that standards of judgment, which are not based on something analogous to a correspondence theory of truth, can emerge out of conflicting subjective responses to certain kinds of input. Our capacity to form abstract ideas allows us to form an explicit concept of causation, and in particular that of necessary connection, which then allows us to reflect back upon the original input. From this emerge general rules, or the 'rules by which to judge of cause and effect'. These are the rules by which we 'ought to regulate our judgement concerning cause and effects' (T 1.3.11; SBN 175). These rules allow us 'to distinguish the accidental circumstances from the efficacious causes' (T 1.3.12.11; SBN 149).

This aspect of Angie's book is one of its more successful parts, but my one key reservation concerns how she attempts to connect Hume's view of truth with the kinds of imaginary standard that provide norms of causal judgment. Hume tells us that truth 'consists in agreement either to the real relations of ideas or to the real existence or matter of fact'

(THN 3.1.1.9; SBN 458). Now a natural way of taking this, and similar such statements, is to think in terms of a correspondence between a judgment and, informally speaking, the state of affairs that judgement represents. Shelving Barry Stroud's well-placed scepticism that Hume has any plausible theory of judgment, we can say that an idea complex that constitutes a judgment is true in one of two following ways. Either it represents how things stand in the empirical world faithfully (real existence or matter of fact) or when some genuine relation between ideas is correctly represented in judgment (e.g. squares have more sides than triangles). Now, Angie suggests that we can equate (or perhaps *also* equate?) 'real existence or matter of fact' with a 'true or decisive standard' (119). But I remain unpersuaded (not least because she is rather too brief here). Her evidence rests on the fact that in 'Of a standard of taste' Hume twice links 'real existence and matter of fact' with the notion of a 'standard'. She notes first that in 'characterizing the position that it is a waste of time to seek "real beauty or deformity" because beauty or deformity are qualities that exist in the mind only...he [Hume] equates the expression "real matter of fact" with "standard" (119). Indeed he does, but that does not give Angie what she wants. For the standard she wants is the joint verdict of the aesthetic judges, whereas the passage under consideration – EMPL 230 – seems to understand 'standard' along the correspondence lines sketched above. There is no standard, on this view, because 'no sentiment represents what is really in the object' (EMPL 230), and so there can be no correspondence between idea and object. To reinforce this, consider this passage from the earlier essay 'The Sceptic':

In the operation of reasoning...there seems to be always a real, though often an unknown standard, in the nature of things; nor is truth or falsehood variable in by the various apprehensions of mankind...But the case is not the same with qualities

of beautiful and deformed, desirable and odious, as with truth or falsehood. (EMPL 164)

This seems to point in quite the opposite direction to the one suggested by Angie. Truth and falsehood are connected with a standard that suggestive of the correspondence kind.

She also writes that ‘when discussing how to proceed when evaluating the contradictory judgments of art critics, Hume recommends that we “acknowledge a true and decisive standard” (C 119 – the quoted fragment is from EMPL 242). It’s quite true that Hume says that gives us ‘real existence and matter of fact’. But this does not itself yield a standard of *truth* but a *true* standard for judgments which may not themselves be susceptible of true and falsehood. The matter of fact is whether the judger here fulfils the criteria discussed in ‘Of a standard of taste’, something that we can determined empirically. But this does not introduce a notion of truth as conformity to that standard.

In the end, however, I don’t think the failure to find a non-correspondence conception of constructed truth in Hume matters. Angie’s response ought to be to abandon the search for a quasi-realist standard of truth on the grounds that it is simply too anachronistic to think that Hume has interest in disconnecting truth from correspondence and constructing an alternative. The materials are rich enough to say instead that Hume is interested in constructing a normative standard from non-cognitive responses and pursue (as she does) an account of how that is done. Hume may indeed be a proto-Quasi-realist without having something to say about every aspect a developed picture might have to consider in a post-Fregean world.

The first two questions I asked are not addressed by Angie but I think they are worth asking. The first concerns ‘spreading the mind’, and what Hume means by this. The second is quite what state of mind is so ‘projected’. Let us begin with the second question. Quasi-

realism, as I understand it, is the philosophical business of offering explanations of the kind sketched above of how a disciplined form of discourse can emerge without thinking of it as responsive to some class of metaphysically problematic properties or facts. What the explanation is supposed to start with, however, is a 'projected' non-cognitive response. It seems to me that it is difficult to make headway on any projectivist explanation without a conception of the projected state. Now, Angie doesn't tell us much about that idea and it is tempting to lay the blame for this at Hume's door, since his talk of a 'determination of the mind' in the key section 'Of the idea of necessary connexion' doesn't enlighten us much. We can be relatively sure that it is a non-cognitive response since the idea of necessary connection is not a copy of any genuine power. But we can construct a more positive conception of the idea that I think is also congenial to the non-cognitivist interpretation. We need first to note that Hume yokes the causal power to absolute necessity when he argues that we have no idea of power 'drawn from the objects'. For him, the detection of genuine causal necessity would a) equip us with a capacity to infer what effect a particular cause must have, prior to its effect's manifestation in experience, and b) render it impossible for us to conceive that cause without its effect. In short, Hume rejects our possession of a genuine impression of necessity on the grounds that, as we are so equipped, we *cannot* simply 'read off' what effect a particular object may have and we *can* always conceive such and such a cause being followed by something other than what we called its effect. It is this grasp of causal necessity that the impression of necessary connection that we *do* have is supposed to mimic.¹

¹ For detailed discussion, see my *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy*, Part II.

How? Well, the impression we *do* have – the ‘customary transition’ – is the effect of repeated experience of constantly conjoined pairs of objects, and, as Blackburn suggests, this effect is a ‘functional change’. First, the sense in which the impression is a ‘determination of the mind’ is reflected in the phenomenology of the inference. Without the customary transition, the kind of inference we would make would involve an explicit grasp that As have always been followed by Bs in the past. Upon seeing an A one would have to consciously consider the fact that one has observed, and then think something like ‘behold, another A – I think it will be followed by B, given that A’s have always followed Bs in the past’. With the customary transition, the inference is instead immediate, an immediacy which is the effect of repeated experience of A and B. Seeing the brick hurtling towards the window, one’s mind turns immediately to the thought of the breaking of the pane; we don’t stop to consider whether there has been a conjunction of these event types in the past, and form an inference in light of that knowledge. The immediacy of the transition mimics the thought that we can simply ‘see’ that such and such effect follows from such and such cause without having to draw the inference in light of past experience.

The second aspect of this functional change is the surrogate for the claim that a genuine grasp of necessity would render it impossible to conceive of a cause without its effect. For Hume, conceivability and inconceivability are glossed as ‘separability’ and ‘inseparability’ respectively. The ‘custom transition’ attempts to mimic this notion by rendering the ideas *psychologically* inseparable, rather than a form of inseparability that grounds conceptual independence. Thus:

'Tis natural for men, in their common and careless way of thinking, to imagine they perceive a connexion betwixt such objects as they have constantly found united together; and because custom has render'd it difficult to *separate* the ideas, they are apt to fancy such a separation to be in itself impossible and absurd. (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223, my emphasis)

So we have a good grasp of what kind of functional change yields a modal character. We can, furthermore, provide a principled reason for treating this response as *non-cognitive*: since the impression is not a copy of any genuine necessity, but instead of the functional change described above, it does not represent anything 'in the objects'.

Now, we might want to ask for more detail about this modal response but I have not difficulty at all in seeing this as precisely the sort of thing that the projectivist (*qua* non-cognitivist) wants, and indeed, its plausibility exerts a strong pull to read Hume straightforwardly as a modal non-cognitivist. I am not immune from this pull either, but other considerations, which I won't rehearse here, make me think things are less straightforward. But there is also the question asked about whether Hume's talk of 'spreading the mind' should be read the way the quasi-realist reads it. Projecting, on that account, consists in the way in which a fundamentally non-cognitive response is *expressed* in speech and other behaviour. Thus, to use a crude example, Edmund's desire for coffee is expressed by the utterance 'Coffee is good', where the predicate 'good' functions as though some property were being ascribed to the coffee. Thus the predicative use of 'good' is a projection of the desire inasmuch as that desire is expressed in a form of speech that is apparently descriptive.

But, to put matters briefly and somewhat dogmatically, Hume seems to have something rather different in mind when he says we ‘transfer of a ‘feeling [of necessity] to objects; as nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation, which they occasion’ (EHU 7.2.29n17; SBN 78n), namely the attribution of something ‘in here’ to something ‘out there’. His projective metaphors, that is, seem to suggest that projecting results in something phenomenological rather than linguistic or behavioural. This is supported when we consider that Hume tells us it is a ‘common observation’ that mind spreads itself on external objects. This must be an allusion to others making that observation. We know, on independent grounds, that Hume was much engaged with the thought of Nicolas Malebranche and it is Malebranche who uses the metaphor of ‘spreading’ (*répandre*) in connection with secondary quality experience. Hume also refers us, in connection with spreading the mind, to a discussion of the ‘absurd conjunction’ of extended with non-extended perceptions in T1.4.5 ‘Of the immateriality of the soul’. These considerations suggest that Hume is trying to explain a certain *perceptual* phenomenology by drawing upon models of secondary quality experience and that ‘projecting’ does not consist in expressing that state in a linguistically-descriptive shape. Now, Angie seems to recognise that Hume means something like this (C113-115) but refers us back to a discussion of projectivism (C30) that interprets the projective metaphor expressively. But the ‘transfer of the feeling’ is a rather different projective phenomenon from that of linguistic expression. Indeed, I can see no evidence for the view that Hume’s projective metaphors invite an expressivist gloss. Instead, I see it as conditioning our perceptual experience of the relations among objects in the manner thus described above I don’t say

that this tells decisively against the quasi-realist interpretation: but I think there nothing in Hume's own projective metaphors to tells in its favour.

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