

## ‘Projection’ in Hume

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A while ago now (2007) I published my *Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford University Press – henceforth abbreviated to P&R). That book had a number of different aims, but one primary aim was to understand the metaphor of projection. Something about Hume’s writings – in a great number of different areas - occasioned many commentators to use the projection metaphor.<sup>1</sup> Of course he is not the only thinker with whom that metaphor is connected (Feuerbach and Nietzsche are obvious examples) but in contemporary philosophy it is with Hume’s name that ‘projection’ is most associated. However, aside from two exceptions, Barry Stroud and Simon Blackburn, the metaphor is used in the literature without any attention to what it might actually *mean* and what its implications might be. Now, in order to explore the metaphor of projection I decide to start with Hume first and develop my understanding of it through exploring his thought, rather than starting with some definition of ‘projection’. What lies behind the metaphor should emerge from trying to understand just what it is about Hume’s writings that explains why people are apt to use it.

In the book I draw on a number of different texts, including the Natural History of Religion, ‘The Sceptic’, ‘Of the Standard of Taste’, the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, *The Enquiry Concerning the Principles of*

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<sup>1</sup> For references only some of the many uses of the metaphor see the introduction to P&R.

*Morals* and, of course, *The Treatise*, and it is the *Treatise* to which we now turn, and in particular Hume's treatment of causal necessity.

Perhaps the most famous projective metaphor is the following. Hume tells us that it 'a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects' (T 1.3.14.25; SBN 167). This remark is made during Hume's discussion of the origin of the idea of necessary connection. In crude outline, Hume is hunting for the impression from which the idea of power is derived and claims to discover it not 'in the objects' but in the mind's *reaction to* constantly conjoined objects. This impression is variously called a 'determination' (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 156), a 'propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant' (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165), a 'customary transition' (T 1.3.14.24; SBN 165). Necessity and power are 'qualities of perceptions, not of objects, and are internally felt by the soul, and are not perceiv'd externally in bodies' (T 1.3.14. 24; SBN 166).

At first glance, the notion of 'projection' or 'spreading the mind' seems a matter of some sensation or 'feeling' being falsely attributed to an external object. Thus, in the first *Enquiry* Hume writes

..as we *feel* a customary connexion between the ideas, we transfer that feeling to the objects; as nothing is more usual that to apply to external bodies every internal sensation, which they occasion (EHU 7.2.29n17; SBN 78n)

Clearly there is something right about understanding the projective metaphor of 'spreading the mind' in this way. We represent something that is a feature of our minds to be a feature of something else. I call this interpretation 'feature projection'. But it is deeply unsatisfactory to leave things here. First, without further explanation, the claim is barely intelligible: our belief that there is causal power 'out there' is supposed to owe itself to some 'sensation' or 'feeling' being taken as a power of

objects. What kind of feeling could that be? What feeling when taken as a property of causes explains why we think not only that the fire *will* burn but also that it *must*?

Second, talk about the attribution of features of our minds to other objects should not obscure the fact that the projection metaphor need not carry with it such an implication. Consider, for example, Emily claiming that John's belief in the afterlife is nothing but a projection of his fear of death. Clearly there is no attribution of his state of fear to something. Instead Emily is alluding to the fact that it is *because* of his fear that John believes in the afterlife. It is his fear that explains why he believes as he does and why the belief is said to be a projection *of* his fear. Furthermore, in saying it is a projection there is an implicit criticism of the belief, which we may put like this. John is projecting his fear and in doing so we can't think of his belief as *reflecting* how the world stands. His belief is not explained in terms of some epistemically respectable route, such as being determined by a proper grasp of the evidence or being the product of a truth-conducive method or process. In being a 'projector' one is not a 'detector'.

Phenomena such as John's belief fall under what I call 'explanatory projection'. The subject takes the world to be thus and so not because they are appropriately sensitive to the world but because of some feature of their psychology *of which* their taking the world to be thus and so is a projection. Now, talk about 'taking the world to be thus and so', of being a 'detector' or 'appropriately sensitive', and 'some feature of their psychology' is vague but deliberately so since how these notions are filled out will depend heavily on context. So 'taking the world to be thus and so' might be a matter of having a particular perceptual experience, the tokening of a belief, having an interpretative orientation or taking there to be properties of a certain kind falling under concepts. Similarly, what is going to count as a detective

explanation against which the projection is contrasted will vary depending on what is trying to be explained. What it is to have a veridical perceptual experience is different from what it is for one's belief to be fixed in epistemically respectable ways. And just what psychological state and how it explains the subject's taking the world to be a certain way will vary considerably. So when approaching an area deemed to be 'projective' it is useful to come armed with these questions:

- 1) What is the privileged notion of 'responsiveness' or detection against which the projective explanation is articulated?
- 2) What is the *explanandum*? Are we trying to explain the presence of a belief? The presence of a distinct area of content? Of an experience? Or something else?
- 3) On what grounds is it thought that we are not so responsive?
- 4) Of what mental state is the projected appearance (the belief, the content, the experience) a projection?
- 5) What is the mechanism of projection? What *kind* of explanation is invoked to explain the appearance?

Let us now ask these questions of Hume's account of causal power. Hume's is asking about the origin of the idea of necessary connection, so the *explanandum* seems to be our concept of necessary connection. In fact, the *explanandum* is a little richer than just the mere idea, but for the time being we shall concentrate on the concept alone.

What, then, is the putative detective account of the concept's origins with which the projective account is contrasted? The place to start is where Hume tells us that necessity and power are 'qualities of perceptions, not of objects, and are internally felt by the soul, and are not perceiv'd externally in bodies' (T 1.3.14. 24; SBN 166). This

indicates that our folk epistemology of causal power involves perceptual awareness of power, and, given Hume's rejection of nativism, a correlative implication for the origin of the concept. We must acquire the concept of power through perception of power. Or, to use Hume's language, the idea of power must be derived from an impression of power. However, this is not the case: we

...deceive ourselves, when we imagine we are possess of any idea of this kind, after the manner we commonly understand it. We never have any impression, that contains any power of efficacy. (T 1.3.14.11; SBN 162)

Matters are, however, not so straightforward. For Hume also says that we *do* have an impression of necessary connection, albeit one that is not derived 'from the objects'. The impression is the 'feeling' I alluded to above. Doesn't this make the explanation *detective*? Don't we have a concept of necessary connection because we have an impression of it? The answer to this is that Hume is working with a distinction between what would constitute a genuine experience of causal power on the one hand and the experience we actually have on the other. Let us begin by seeing what Hume thinks a genuine experience of power would be. He writes:

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)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. T 1.3.14.13; SBN 161:

Hume is telling that if we were to have a perception of a particular power it would have certain epistemic implications. We could simply ‘read off’ what effect the relevant object produces prior to that effect’s manifestation in experience. Second, such an experience would render it impossible to conceive the effect without the cause: it would imply ‘the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be *conceiv’d* not to follow’ (T 1.3.14.13; SBN 162). This, he says, ‘the true manner of conceiving a particular power in a particular body’ (T 1.3.14.13; SBN 161).<sup>3</sup>

This feature of Hume’s treatment of necessity equips us with a more precise way of specifying just why we cannot detect necessity. Our minds are such that we could never have an experience of power. The ideas we have of the *relata* of causation are distinct ideas, any two distinct ideas are separable in the imagination. This fact grounds our capacity to conceive of any cause *without* its effect and also precludes any possibility of inferring *a priori* effect from cause. So we cannot have an genuine impression of necessary connection, i.e. one that could ground *a priori* inference and render it impossible to conceive a particular cause without its effect. Hence we cannot detect necessity.

So what is the projective explanation? Hume drops a hint much earlier in the *Treatise* when he is discussing causal inference. ‘Perhaps’, he writes, ‘’twill appear in the end, that the necessary connexion depends on the inference, instead of the inference’s depending on the necessary connexion’ (T 1.3.6.3; SBN 88). We have just

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‘We must distinctly and particularly conceive the connexion 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’.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see P&R, chapter 4.

examined the sense in which the inference could depend on the necessary connection and why it doesn't. How then could the necessary connection depend on the inference? Well, the impression of necessary connection is the effect on the imagination of repeated experience of causally related pairs. Such repeated experience alters the psychological disposition of the observer in a way that mimics the experience that a genuine impression of necessity would yield. First, the 'determination of the mind' is such that the inference becomes utterly immediate and unreflective. Thus:

The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of the memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflection. (T 1.3.8.13; SBN 104)

The change in the imagination that is the impression of necessity is that the subject *feels* these events to be *connected* in his imagination, and he can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other' (EHU 7.2.28; SBN 75-76). The 'readily foretell' here records the immediacy of the mental transition. This fools the observer into thinking that they are simply reading the effect off the cause. Second, recall that a genuine impression of necessity would render it impossible to conceive cause without effect. This too is a feature explained in terms of the 'customary transition of the imagination'. Consider this passage:

'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)

At one point Hume goes as far as to say that the ideas of objects standing in what are deemed causal relations are inseparable:

We have no other notion of cause and effect, but that of certain objects, which have been *always conjoin'd* together, and which in all past instances have been found inseparable. We cannot penetrate into the reason of the conjunction. (T 1.3.6.15; SBN 93)

Both the immediacy of the transition and the inseparability come together in a single passage:

The idea of sinking is so closely connected with that of water, and the idea of suffocating with that of sinking, that the mind makes the transition without the assistance of memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflection. The objects seem so *inseparable*, that we interpose not a moment's delay in passing from the one to the other. (T 1.3.8.13; SBN 104 (my emphasis))

This yields both an account of what the projected mental state is and the mechanism by which it is created. But there is one last thing, which returns us to 'spreading the mind' and the idea of something 'in the mind' being represented as a feature of the world external to it. The phenomenology of causation is that we think perceive the power operative in the objects rather than experience it as a psychological reaction to them. Hume credits ordinary or vulgar thought with the view that we *perceive* or *experience* causal power in the world, rather than only 'supposing' that there is (unknowable) power in the object. The 'generality of mankind...suppose, that...they perceive the very force of energy of the cause, by which [a cause] is connected with its effect' (EHU 7.1.21; SBN 69). He writes of the

‘vulgar error’ of thinking that ‘there is a natural and perceivable’ connection between cause and effect (T .1.4.3.9; SBN 223), and that it is ‘natural for men, in their common and careless way of thinking, to imagine they perceive a connexion betwixt [causally related] objects...’ (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223). Given the perceptual-sounding metaphors that Hume exploits in the context of projection, and his claim about what the vulgar hold, it may seem that Hume is trying to account not merely for a belief in power but the vulgar notion that we experience power in causal transactions.

Hume refers us to a discussion of the localization of smells and sounds in ‘Of the immateriality of the soul’, a discussion of how we come to attribute non-spatial perceptions – smells and sounds – to extended impression objects by ‘feigning’ a local, though impossible conjunction between them. He gives an associational explanation of this feigning, in terms of causation and contiguity in time (T 1.4.5.12-14; SBN 237ff). What is important for our concerns are not the details of this account but its emphasis on the perceptual. Hume is trying to account for something experiential. This point is further supported when we come to consider the source of the metaphor. As suggested by his remark that it is a ‘common observation’ that the mind spreads itself, Hume is appealing to what he thinks is an established phenomenon. And, as with so much of the *Treatise*, the metaphor is borrowed from Nicolas Malebranche’s *Search After Truth*. Malebranche argues that we experience bodies as coloured because the soul is ‘content, as it were, to spread itself onto the objects it considers by clothing them with what it has stripped from itself’.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Malebranche *The Search After Truth*, trans. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997: 58 For Malebranche’s discussion of spreading the mind in relation to causation, see Elucidation 15 of the *Search*. ‘Spread’

There is one last thing I want to add to this, something that I didn't discuss in the book since it didn't occur to me until long after I finished. This has to do with the precise character in which Hume's treatment is naturalistic. Hume tells us that he arrives at his conception of causation by the 'seemingly preposterous' method of 'examining our inference from the relation before we had explain'd the relation itself' (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 169). Now, remember that almost all of Part 3 of Book I of the *Treatise* is a discussion of causal inference. One might have thought that it would be appropriate then to begin by defining what the causal relation is first and then proceed to examine the nature of the causal inference. But Hume does precisely the opposite. His (in)famous two definitions of 'cause' emerge from examining the inference. Why? Well, this is because rather than making assumptions about what we represent in thought about causation, and building a metaphysic on them, Hume focuses on our cognitive life and seeks to understand what is involved in the concept of causation by illuminating the role it plays in the explanation of human inferential faculties. Once we understand *how* causation figures in inference we then grasp better *what* we represent by the concept. So the definitions emerge from the account of the role causation plays in our inferential lives rather than a prior attempt to articulate a metaphysics of causation.

In this Hume expresses his naturalism, and in particular what Huw Price characterizes as a 'subject' rather than an 'object' naturalism. Object naturalism takes science to tell us the character of the natural world and, depending on the character of the natural world, generates 'placement problems', roughly problems concerning how

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(*répandre*) is one of Malebranche's favourite terms, occurring frequently in the *Search After Truth* and other of his works.

we are to understand phenomena whose status is somehow problematic in the natural world. So, for example, the early modern conception of the physical world generates issues about how to understand consciousness in such a world. It also generates problems about how to place active power in such a world. For some (e.g. Malebranche) a non-natural solution is the only way out, but more contemporary responses to the placement problem include reduction or elimination. At first blush, it might seem that Hume is offering a reductionist approach to the problem of placing active power. But his approach is not that of object naturalism (not least because is modest about the extent to which we can understand the natural world). Instead, his science of the mind investigates our cognitive faculties and approaches problematic concepts from its perspective. It is a form of 'subject naturalism' whereby science is exploited to explain our thought and behaviour. Any placement problems are also approached from this perspective. Object naturalism asks: what is the nature of causation? Subject naturalism asks: why do we think in these terms? In explaining how we acquire causal language and thought it may turn out that certain assumptions that motivate metaphysical worries are misplaced.