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What Can Causal Claims Mean?

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Abstract How can Hume account for the meaning of causal claims? The causal realist, I argue, is, on Hume's view, saying something nonsensical. I argue that both realist and agnostic interpretations of Hume are inconsistent with his view of language and intentionality. But what then accounts for this illusion of meaning? And even when we use causal terms in accordance with Hume's definitions, we seem merely to be making disguised self-reports. I argue that Hume's view is not as implausible as it sounds by exploring his conception of language.

Keywords Hume · Meaning · Language · Causation · Power

'Watching Charlie Rose last night put me to sleep.'

'If only I hadn't turned on PBS, I wouldn't have fallen asleep at 9.'

Claims such as these seem to assert something that goes well beyond the mere sequence of events. And yet, given Hume's first definition of 'cause,' this is all they do mean. It certainly feels as if there's a big difference between our first claim and 'last night I watched Charlie Rose and then went to sleep.' But if Hume is right, the difference is illusory. What is more alarming, when causal claims do assert something more than mere regularity, as is explicit in the second, counterfactual claim, they assert something about our own psychology, viz., that one's mind is determined to form one idea on the basis of another. Any such claim then belongs partly to the realm of autobiography. But the assertions above at least on their surface purport to be about how events are in fact connected, not how I happen to feel about them. How, then, can one *seem* to mean something one does not, and, I shall argue, cannot?

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Stroud's Problem

On Hume's first definition of 'cause,' to say that *x* causes *y* is just to say that they are constantly conjoined. But, as Hume acknowledges, this definition of cause as a philosophical relation omits a key ingredient, that of necessity. He is thus led to offer his second definition: "A CAUSE is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other" (T 1.3.14.31).[1] Whether the necessity in question is that between cause and effect or between 2+2 and 4, it "exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us to form the most distant idea of it, consider'd as a quality in bodies" (1.3.14.22).

Barry Stroud offers a nice formulation of our problem:

> [I]f necessity just *is* a determination of the mind, then that is what our idea of necessity is an idea *of*. But if our idea of necessity is an idea of a determination of the mind, then in ascribing necessity to the connections between things we are simply saying something about our own minds. We are saying that our minds do, or would, expect a thing of one kind after having observed a thing of another kind. This would commit Hume to the subjectivistic or psychologistic view that every causal statement we make, whatever its putative subject matter, is at least partly a statement about us. Rather than expressing a belief that something is objectively true of the connection between two objects or events, we would merely be asserting that something is happening or will happen in our minds when we observe certain objects or events. (Stroud (1977), 83).

On Stroud's view, this is an "implausible" account of causal discourse, and one that "Hume should wish to avoid." Stroud doesn't elaborate on what makes this account so implausible, but clearly one problem is that it would seem to close off the possibility of disagreement between subjects: each would be (in part) reporting on her own mental state, not making an assertion about the way things are, and hence neither's assertion will contradict the other's.

We shall get to Stroud's own solution later; for now, it is important to see just how Hume himself sets up the possible answers to our titular question. As P. Kyle Stanford has noted, Hume offers his readers a choice.[2] When they say that Charlie Rose has a dormitive power, or that there's a real, mind independent capital 'C' Causal connection between two events, they might be asserting:

(1) Nothing at all;
(2) That necessity or power is a mind-independent feature of the world that links the two events;
(3) That the two events resemble pairs of previously observed events (Hume's first definition of 'cause'); or

[1] References to Hume's *Treatise* (2000) are in the following form: book.part.section.paragraph. References to the *Enquiry* give the section and paragraph number.

[2] See Stanford (2002). What follows is not quite what Stanford calls 'the choice,' since that it is a choice between meaninglessness or acquiescence in Hume's own replacement for Causal talk. I think the situation is more complex.

(4) That their minds are determined to form the idea of the effect on the basis of the idea of the cause (the second definition)

Throughout the *Treatise*, Hume offers his opponents the first two alternatives, along with, of course, the chance to confess that all along they meant what Hume himself means [(3) or (4)]. For example, summing up his discussion of necessity, Hume writes, "[e]ither we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the mind to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc'd union" (1.3.14.22). (This offers options (1) and (4) above). Later, Hume argues that when we ask after the "ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves or talk without meaning" (1.4.7.5) (options (2) and (1) above).

The best way to answer Stroud's problem is to examine all of the options above. I shall argue that Stroud's own solution fails, but that a careful look at (3) and (4), together with an understanding of Hume's philosophy of language, takes the sting out of Stroud's problem. Moreover, I shall argue that our initial list omits another of Hume's options, one which does not emerge until T 1.4.3, and which embodies Hume's most plausible account of what the causal realist in the street means by causal language.

(1) Nothing at all

In the *Abstract*, Hume writes: "when [the author] suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks, *From what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant" (T Abs. 7). And in the *Appendix*, Hume claims that if we wish to speak of 'self' or 'substance,' "we must have an idea annex't to these terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible" (T App. 11). Similar pronouncements can be found throughout Hume's writings.[3]

So any meaningful noun, at least, must signify an idea in the mind of the speaker. No idea, no meaning. This is the simplest possible case of nonsense, what I shall call ordinary nonsense. Now, given that one's ideas are immediately present to one's mind, it is hard to see how one could make a mistake here: how could one think one means something without meaning anything at all? The first step in Hume's answer is that we can be lulled into a kind of complacency. We take for granted that we have succeeded in signifying without being aware of having lapsed into nonsense. As Hume puts it, once terms, however insignificant, get used often enough, "we fancy them to be on the same footing with the precedent [i.e., words that are significant], and to have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection" (1.4.3.10).[4]

Given Hume's account of belief, we can see how easily this sort of mistake can happen. On Hume's view, a belief is nothing more than a lively idea (see note at 1.3.7.5) In the case of a statement of causal power, the whole string of symbols signifies a complex idea, which includes the ideas of two events. In the case we are considering, however, it includes nothing else. The whole sentence is not

[3] e.g., T 1.1.7: 21; 1.1.7: 23; 1.3.14: 162; see also *Enquiry* (2006) Part IV.

[4] In discussing the possibility of a relative idea of the external world, Daniel Flage (1981) offers an intriguing account of how one can seem to have a *relative* idea when none is to be had.

unadulterated nonsense, like a line from Jabberwocky; only one of the elements of the complex idea is missing. So an assertion of the dormitive power of public television comes close to making sense, insofar as it includes the ideas of two events. This makes it easier to commit undetected nonsense by including a word like 'power,' which, in this sort of case, signifies no part of the complex idea at all. By contrast, the traditional theory of judgment, whereby the object of belief is a pair of ideas connected by an affirmation or negation, is not as well-poised to account for this kind of nonsense.[5] On that view, someone attributing power as a connecting principle between events would be affirming no idea at all of the idea of those events. That is, one's judgment in that case would include only a (complex) subject and an affirmation, with no idea to stand in the predicate place.

Hume thinks this kind of ordinary nonsense is not typical of the Causal realist. More typical is the case in which an idea in the neighborhood, as it were, is pressed into service. This can happen in two very different ways: in the first, a perfectly legitimate idea comes to mind; in the second, one supposes one has an idea that one cannot have, because the two ideas that might form the complex idea in question are incompatible. The former possibility emerges in Hume's reply to an obvious objection: isn't the mere fact that there have been (and of course are) disputes in philosophy about Causation, and not just Humean causation, evidence for the conclusion that, rightly or wrongly, Causal realists are indeed asserting claims with cognitive content?

In another context, Hume addresses precisely this question. Having rejected the notion of a vacuum as unintelligible, Hume considers the objection that the word 'vacuum' must be significant, since it has been the subject of disputes (1.2.5.2.) Answering the objection at the end of that section, Hume writes,

> The frequent disputes concerning a vacuum…prove not the reality of the idea, upon which the dispute turns; there being nothing more common, than to see men deceive themselves in this particular, especially when by means of any close relation, there is another idea presented, which may be the occasion of their mistake. (1.2.5.22)

It takes some thought, in other words, to see that there is, after all, no idea of a vacuum. And when there is another idea in the area, people are easily misled into thinking that they have used a word significantly, even though it stands either for that other idea, or no idea at all. This, of course, is one choice Hume offers his readers: confess to committing nonsense or admit that all along one had in mind Hume's own idea(s) of causation.

There is still another possibility. When the realist uses such terms as force, necessity, power, and so on, as applied to objects,

> …in all these expressions, *so apply'd*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. But as'tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrongly apply'd*, than that they never have any meaning; 'twill be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject…(1.3.14.14).

[5] For a statement of the traditional view, see Locke (1975), III.vii.

Cases of out-and-out nonsense, then, are thin on the ground; what's more likely is that the speaker is using a word that signifies an idea in other contexts and transferring it to a new context in which it does not fit.

Thus we get option (2):

(2) That necessity or power is a mind-independent feature of the world

Hume, like Malebranche, thinks that the mind has a tendency to 'spread itself' on external objects. This is (*sometimes*) what is going on when we assume that events are necessarily connected. The question is whether and how this is different from option (1) above. That is, does (2) offer the possibility of believing something, whether justifiably or not, or is it just more nonsense? I shall argue that it is in fact just more nonsense, though of a special kind.

Recall that Stroud aims to provide Hume with a plausible account of the realist's talk of Causation. Such an account would show how the realist can legitimately think of objects as necessarily connected. If successful, Stroud's view would make the issue of causal realism not primarily one of meaning, but of justification: with what right does the realist hold that events are necessarily and causally connected?

To save the phenomenon of causal discourse from subjectivism, Stroud denies that the idea of necessity is an idea *of* a determination of the mind. Detached from its psychological source, it can then sensibly be applied to objects: "it is really *necessity*, and not just something that happens in the mind, that we project onto the relations between two events in the world" (1977, 86).[6] We can call this the 'coherent projection' account of Causal statements: when they mean something more than what Hume licenses, they embody the projection of necessity on to the natural world. This projection is not incoherent, though it might be unjustified or false.

Unfortunately, the coherent projection view is doomed, at least as a reading of Hume. For it to work, one must have an idea of necessary connection that is intelligibly applied to objects. The problem is that, our idea of necessity being what it is, to apply it in this way is to make a category mistake.[7] Consider Hume's diagnosis of the 'spreading' tendency, common to Malebranche's 'pagans':

> 'Tis a common observation, that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses. Thus as certain sounds and smells are always found to attend certain visible objects, we naturally imagine a conjunction, even in place, betwixt the objects and qualities, tho' the qualities *be of such a nature as to admit of no such conjunction*, and really exist no where. (1.3.14.25, emphasis mine)

Thus, for example, we are tempted to think that the taste of a fig has a spatial location (1.4.5.11). The taste "is suppos'd to lie in the very visible body." But tastes

[6] One worry here is what content to give to this idea of necessity, so construed. Indeed, Stroud thinks that, as a simple idea, the idea of necessity cannot be characterized other than as that relation we take to hold between events: our idea of necessity, he writes, "will simply be an idea of whatever it is we ascribe to the relation between two events when we believe them to be causally or necessarily connected" (86).

[7] As Stanford (2002) persuasively argues.

are not the right kind of thing to have a location; they exist nowhere, and do not even 'admit' of place. This does not stop us from making the supposition. This is not because it is an intelligible, though necessarily false, belief; it is because one can suppose absolutely anything.[8] To say that *x* has a power to φ, in the realist's sense, is *like* saying that a sensation of taste exists in an object, and, most of the time, even the realist cannot be this confused.

Note that this is an analogy: it is no objection to say that powers do not have spatial locations. My point here is that, from Hume's point of view, attributing powers to objects *makes no more or less sense* than does attributing phenomenal qualities to them. As should be clear, I am not arguing against causal realism or realism about powers; my point is that these positions cannot be attributed to Hume.[9]

Recall that when we ask after the "ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves or talk without meaning" (1.4.7.5).[10] Discovering the true nature of necessity as a mere determination of the mind "prevents our wishes" for an ultimate principle because it exposes them as incoherent. We can call this view, in opposition to Stroud's, 'incoherent projection.'

There is an obvious consequence for revisionist readings of Hume: Hume cannot be a causal realist. Absent an idea of Causation, there is nothing to be a realist about. A typical move for the realist is to claim that Hume thinks we can have a *relative* idea of Causation. Now, Hume never uses the phrase 'relative idea' in the context of causation or necessity.[11] All three uses are confined to the question of the external world. And this makes sense, since relative ideas cannot help us to think of Causation. Causation is a relation; the notion of a relative idea, by contrast, takes a relation of which we have already formed an idea and applies it to new objects. The hypothesis of the external world might perhaps use the idea of causation to think of something lying behind and giving rise to our perceptions.[12] But the nature of the case prevents such a strategy from even getting off the ground where causation itself is concerned. For there what is at issue is not what fills a certain gap in a relation (i.e., the nature or kind of thing that stands in a relation to something else), but that relation itself. So it is useless to appeal, as defenders of the New Hume often do, to relative ideas when trying to establish the intelligibility of Causation. Janet Broughton, for example, thinks Hume's view can produce an idea of Causation as "some feature of objects that underlies"[13] the constant conjunctions we observe. But this relation of underlying, or explaining, or what have you, just is the relation of causation.

[8] See Winkler (1991) on eighteenth century uses of 'suppose.'

[9] Thanks to an anonymous referee for making me see the necessity of making this absolutely clear.

[10] Note that, as Winkler shows, the operative notion of contradiction is not the formal contemporary notion but the mentalistic notion of contradiction as intuitively introspectible repugnance or incompatibility. So my talk of incoherence and Hume's talk of self-contradiction need not be incompatible.

[11] As Blackburn (1993) has noted.

[12] This won't work, of course, since the idea of causation that Hume thinks we *do* have is one that connects perceptions that have been conjoined in previous experience. The external world (construed as the realist does), however, is by hypothesis not an object of perception. For a much more thorough treatment of these issues, see Flage (1981).

[13] Broughton (1987), 235, also quoted in Winkler (1991).

Nor is there space for an agnostic or skeptical reading, which takes Hume to stop short of denying that there is Causation. This is the kind of position carved out by Winkler: Hume refrains from affirming that there are Causes, while not denying that there are.[14] At the same time, Winkler agrees that, for Hume, we cannot "in any way" conceive of Causation (1991, 576). Having gone this far down the road toward what is mistakenly referred to as Hume's 'positivism,' I think Winkler should go further. Why should Hume hold back from denying that there are Causes? Not being able to conceive of them, he must obviously refrain from affirming their existence. But the only sense in which, if Winkler and I are right, Hume can be said to refuse to deny them is that in which I do not deny that *fongs* exist. That is, if a word is truly nonsensical, it is equally silly to assert or deny propositions involving it. This is not because there might *really, after all* be fongs; it is because there is nothing there to argue about until we specify the meaning of 'fong.'

There is an important difference, however, between 'fong' and what the true believer's causal claims might mean. 'Fong' is plain-old Jabberwocky-style nonsense: a word without a use in the language. This is equivalent to option (1) above. By contrast, 'the necessity that connects fire and heat' might be *philosophical* nonsense [option (2)]. Philosophical nonsense is distinguished by its use of words that are perfectly in order in other contexts. We can use words that individually are significant to produce a grammatically correct phrase or sentence without seeing that we have incompatible ideas lying behind them. The obvious objection is that this is simply incoherent: to spot such nonsense, I would have to understand it well enough to see that we could have no such corresponding idea, which means that those words are not, after all, nonsensical. Hume can reply, however, that spotting philosophical nonsense requires only that one understand the constituent words in other contexts, not that one understand the whole string. Take, for example, the phrase 'the square root of Bismarck, North Dakota.' No idea can be formed of such a thing, since it involves a category mistake, just as 'the necessity that connects fire and heat' does. But I know this only because I know the meanings of 'square root' and 'Bismarck.' This does not mean that 'the square root of Bismarck' signifies an idea, even though individually, each noun does.

Wade Robison has rightly pointed out that denying meaning to a claim is not the same as denying that claim.[15] There is no comfort here, though, for the agnostic reading of Hume. A meaningless claim does not even have a truth value, one way or the other; it would be a strange trick to turn this into the very means by which that claim rises above refutation.

The Vulgar Notion of Necessary Connection

If the causal realist's claims mean anything at all, then, they mean (2): that necessity is a mind-independent feature of events. This, I have argued, is incoherent, from Hume's point of view.[16] We have already seen Hume give one diagnosis for this

[14] See Winkler (1991), 543.

[15] See Robison (1976). Robison is an early defender of the 'new Hume,' though he focuses on the external world rather than causation.

[16] Again, I am not arguing that the position is incoherent *tout court*; simply that it cannot be Hume's.

projection: the mind's tendency to 'spread itself' on the world. But later in the *Treatise*, Hume offers a very different account, both of what the causal realist's claims mean and what accounts for the human tendency to make them. It will turn out, then, that we need yet a fifth option in our list of what causal claims can mean.

Paralleling his story of the development of views on the external world, Hume isolates three stages: that of the vulgar philosophy, the false, and the true (1.4.3.9). Each stage is a natural development in one's mental life that has been recapitulated, however haphazardly, in the philosophical world.[17]

To begin, we first have to know a bit more about how Hume conceives the realist's notion of necessity. If there really were a causal connection between two events, the effect would have to be inconceivable without the cause; that is, there would have to be a logically necessary connection between them.

> Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to conceive any connexion betwixt them, or comprehend distinctly that power or efficacy by which they are united. Such a connexion wou'd amount to a demonstration, and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be conceived not to follow upon the other: Which kind of connexion has already been rejected in all cases. (1.3.14.13)

The main question about this argument is its target: who is supposed to have held that it is logically impossible for fire not to burn flesh? What kind of numbskull could believe *this*?

In fact, we all do, at least the earliest stage of our cognitive development. And this is because we find it difficult to separate the idea of say, fire, from that of heat. That is, we suppose that the two ideas are inseparable; the necessary connection here is just that of identity. If I don't see how fire and heat can be separated, at least in thought, I'll think they're necessarily connected, simply because I'll think they're identical.

Summarizing this first stage, Hume writes,

> '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. (1.4.3.9)

This is not the outcome of any sophisticated philosophical reasoning; it is simply the uncorrected brute force of custom as it were squashing distinct ideas together. It then takes mental effort to pull them apart. In this way, the vulgar naturally come to believe that there is a necessary connection between distinct existences.

Thus the nonsense-speakers and self-contradictors are not ordinary folk but philosophers. It is vital to see that the incoherent projector is not the person in the street, anymore than the defender of the doctrine of double existence is the average believer in the external world. The unreflective view does not project an internal impression of necessity on to things that cannot, by their nature, have it. Instead, the

[17] See 1.4.3.9: "[W]e may observe a gradation of three opinions, that rise above each other, as the persons, who form them, acquire new degrees of reason and knowledge."

mind, having experienced the constant conjunction of a and b, *blurs the line* between a and b and confounds these quite distinct perceptions. So we do not need to appeal either to false or to incoherent projection to account for our impulse to believe that causes and effects are really, necessarily connected, simply because most of the time we believe a cause and its effect are one and the same thing. Their seeming inseparability is a result of our not seeing their distinctness, not of our projecting an idea of necessity on to them.

So we need to add to our list

2b. That events or objects a and b are inseparable

I think this is Hume's most plausible account of what the unreflective person means in ordinary discourse. It is neither subjective nor psychologistic, in Stroud's senses. It avoids appeal to projection of any kind and is obviously distinct from what Hume thinks one *should* mean by causal statements. The nature of the 'should' here is straightforward: as Hume goes on to argue in 1.4.3, it takes only a little reflection to see that a and b are in fact separable in thought.

To return to our initial question: how can one seem to mean something one cannot? This is not the familiar illusion of meaning semantic externalists have in mind—it's not as if I had thought all along I was referring to H_2O when I was in fact referring to XYZ. This illusion takes place at the level of purely introspectible content. The first possibility we explored is that one's terms strictly speaking mean nothing: they correspond to no idea within the complex idea signified by a verbal proposition. Second, one might be indulging in incoherent talk without noticing it; as an example, consider time travel. Suppose it turns out that time travel is logically incoherent. It is nevertheless possible to talk *as if* one had a clear and consistent notion of traveling back in time, and to make inferences accordingly. Finally, and on Hume's view, much more commonly, one is simply supposing that the two events are inseparable. The force of habit is such that it takes some reflection to see that heat is not a necessary part or concomitant of fire. This last case, (2b), is important, because there need be no illusion of meaning: I really can mean that a and b are inseparable. And I can do this without any projecting or spreading of the mind.

Taking the Sting out of Stroud's Problem

Thus one part of Stroud's problem has been solved: we have arrived at a plausible account of the causal realist's language. We have seen both how philosophers and how persons in the street come to make the mistake they do in thinking that events are necessarily connected: the former by projecting an idea of necessity into a new context where it does not belong, the latter simply by not seeing that two events are distinct. Part of Stroud's problem remains, however. If Hume is right, how can he avoid the consequence that, when using terms like 'cause' with their proper signification, we are always in the business of making self-reports?

To answer this, we need to look at Hume's two definitions more closely.

> We may define a CAUSE to be [3] 'An object, precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in like

> relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter.' If this definition be esteem'd defective, because drawn from objects foreign to the cause, we may substitute this other definition its place, *viz.*, [4] "A CAUSE is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other." (1.3.14.31)

Let's begin with (3), Hume's first definition of cause. Now, this was not the focus of Stroud's problem, precisely because there is nothing subjective about it. If I believe that a and b stand in relations of precedency and contiguity, I believe something about the way things are. But of course (3) neglects the extra ingredient of necessity, which Hume spent much of 1.3 'beating about the neighbouring fields' looking for.

Option (4), then, is the real source of our worry. We can develop a plausible response by looking at a solution drawn from Don Garrett's contributions to a very different problem, viz., the apparent fact that (3) and (4) are not co-extensive.[18] On this view, we need not assume that a causal claim in sense (4) is a self-report. When Hume says that *the mind* is determined to form one perception on the basis of another, this phrase need not, Garrett thinks, be read as any particular mind, or the speaker's own. Instead, Hume might have been thinking of the mind of an ideally situated observer. A causal claim thus construed is obviously something one can be mistaken about and is not in any interesting sense a self-report. There is an objective fact of the matter that makes causal claims true or false. Garrett in fact thinks that both (3) and (4) admit of 'subjective' and 'objective' readings. As long as (3) and (4) are read as both subjective or both objective, the definitions come out co-extensive. More important for our purposes, the availability of the objective construal solves our latest iteration of Stroud's problem.

There is much that is appealing in this Garrett-inspired answer. Unfortunately, I think Garrett is wrong. In fact, I suspect that it's vital to Hume's project that (3) and (4) *not* turn out to be co-extensive. But this isn't the place to mount such an argument. In addition to the rather strained reading Garrett must give to Hume's use of 'the mind,' we have the further problem that it seems only to push Stroud's worry up a level. If one is not happy asserting something partly about her own mental states when she says 'fire causes heat,' she should be no happier to be told that the real content of her claim concerns the counterfactual responses of an idealized mind. The gap between asserting something about the mind and asserting something about the things in question remains. I think there's a better answer in the offing.

So far, we have been assuming that Hume holds a theory of meaning recognizably similar to the default view held by most contemporary philosophers. To take the sting out of Stroud's problem, we first have to see that this is not the case. For Hume, declarative utterances do not assert propositions, nor do categorematic words refer to (classes of) things.[19]

According to Hume, a belief is nothing but a lively idea (see 1.3.7, esp. the note at 1.3.7.5). Thus the closest Humean analogue to what we call an assertion is a string of

[18] See Garrett (1997), chapter five.

[19] For more on Hume's views on language, see my (2006).

sounds that collectively signifies a single idea. But what does it mean for words to signify ideas?

As a first clue, we should observe that Hume holds that a passion of another person which produces sympathy in an observer "is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it" (2.1.11.3). More clearly: "when a person openly abuses me, or slyly intimates his contempt, in neither case do I immediately perceive his sentiment or opinion; and 'tis only by its signs, that is by its effects, I become sensible of it" (1.3.13.14). Putting these passages together, we find the claim that facial expressions, for example, can serve as signs of mental attitudes because they are typically caused by a given mental state such as contempt. It seems clear that 'sign' is intended in these passages in Locke's sense: as a symptom or grounds for inference from the sign itself to something unobserved. A blush can serve as a sign of embarrassment, that is, as a reliable indicator of that mental state. And if we read Hume as using 'sign' univocally, we must interpret linguistic signification as reliable indication. There are other arguments for this reading, but I think it would be more profitable in this context to apply it to the problem at hand.

Recall Stroud's criticism: if Hume is right, then when we speak correctly, we are in part asserting something about our own minds. But if signification is indication, then every statement we make, whatever its content, is in a sense an assertion about our own minds. We are indicating an idea in our own minds and simultaneously helping to cause that idea to form in others'. So there is nothing special about causal language per se. 'The mind' in (4) can really just be, as it seems to be, the speaker's mind, and not that of an imaginary observer. This might make a shambles of our linguistic practices, as Stroud suggests, but it is Hume's shambles.

A different way to put this point would be to say that our worry about the cognitive content of causal assertions has no real place in Hume's framework. It has to be translated, and in the process substantially altered, to affect him. A rough version of the question might be this: what idea is being signified by someone who says that watching Charlie Rose put him to sleep? In other words, what is the speaker indicating? The answer must be, an idea of these two events plus an indication that the speaker's mind is now determined to move from one to the other. Both question and answer are considerably different from their contemporary counterparts.

To say that a causes b on (4), then, is not to *assert* something about one's own mind but to *indicate* how one associates the perceptions of a and b. This says nothing at all about *why* one associates them in this way. Now, it turns out that there's nothing more to *be* said by way of justification. But this isn't part of what a causal claim à la (4) indicates. Just as one who says 'the recreational torture of infants is wrong' is indicating an attitude toward the practice without thereby taking any meta-ethical stance at all, so one who says 'fire causes heat' is indicating an attitude toward those two objects or events without offering anything further. This can be the case even when that attitude exhausts the things one could sensefully indicate one thinks about those events.

To close, let's see how all of this applies to the second, counterfactual example with which we began. A popular contemporary family of realist views offered by Fred Dretske, David Armstrong, and Michael Tooley points to these conditionals as

counterexamples to the Humean view. Mere regularities do not support counterfactuals. But given Hume's (4), we can at least give content to and explain, if not 'support,' counterfactuals. When, as a good Humean, I say that 'had I not turned on PBS, I wouldn't have fallen asleep so early,' I am indicating the strong degree to which I find myself determined to associate the two perceptions. I am not indicating any particular basis for this association. This is not what realists are after, but neither is it an unworkable account of the meaning of causal claims.

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