

Is Hume a Skeptical Realist? On the Necessity and External Object

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Abstract

Recently, there have been various movements that attribute a new meaning to the standard interpretation concerning Hume's epistemological necessity. One is a skeptical realism that interprets the epistemology of Hume as realism. The other is a quasi-realism that is also a new interpretation based on the standard interpretation. These two readings have been paid an attention to Hume scholars for two decades. My aim in this paper is to show the interpretative arguments and the limitations of these new interpretations. In doing so, I shall compare two philosophers' positions that represent this New Hume Debate: Galen Strawson and Simon Blackburn.

I shall explicate the three different positions emerging in their recent arguments: 'positivist', 'skeptical realism', and 'quasi realism'. We shall then look at the difference between Strawson's 'relative idea' and Blackburn's 'Projectivism' concerning the idea of external object and necessary connection. Furthermore, I shall then show what is at issue when the skeptical realist and quasi-realist argue each other. Finally, I shall examine a literal meaning of the idea of the necessary connection and external object in the *Treatise* in order to see what Hume is really getting at.

1 Three different interpretations

There are three main different interpretations on Hume's epistemology. The first one is the positivism. This position is the standard interpretation of Hume's view. According to the view, Hume focuses on the theory of meaning when he analyses the concept of causation. On the standard position, the 'constant conjunction' between cause and effect is found in the regular succession of our impressions. Since the standard interpretation reaches the conclusion that we can not have the idea of the external object and causation, positivist argues that we can not help taking skeptical position of the knowledge of external object and causation. Furthermore, according to positivist, the knowledge we can only pursue is confined to the realm such as logic and mathematics. In the case of external-object or necessity, positivists argue that we could not know the reality of them epistemologically or ontologically. However, Skeptical-realists raise an objection to this standard interpretation. Although they agree with the epistemological skepticism, they disagree with onto-

logical skepticism¹ concerning external object and causation. Skeptical realists claim that Hume does not give a semantic description about causation but makes description about causation as a source of terms.

However, Skeptical Realism is criticized by Simon Blackburn who proposes Quasi-Realistic interpretation about Hume's epistemology. Blackburn presents his interpretation about Hume in terms of Hume's two famous definitions of cause. I shall discuss this problem later. Blackburn denies the idea that the idea of necessary connection is something existing in the world. If this is so, he denies a direct Realism. Instead, he regards the idea of necessary connection as a representation of a change in our mental states and practical attitudes. Although he resists a direct realism, he does not defend an entire Anti-Realism about external-object or necessity. He thinks that it is reasonable to form the idea of necessary connection by projecting our mind into the world. In other words, according to Blackburn, although we cannot have a positive idea of necessary connection or external object epistemologically, we can form the idea by projecting our mind into the world. We project the idea of necessary connection or external object onto the world, thinking of these projections as if they were objective features of the world, even though they are no such thing in reality. But by taking a quasi-realistic position, he forms a specific realism model. And he looks at a ground of his assertion in ethics.

2 Skeptical Realism & Quasi Realism

• Realistic interpretation ①—relative idea

In order to show the Realistic interpretations of Hume's epistemology which are new strands against positivism, in this section, I deal with a specific argument of new interpretation of Hume. Let us begin this with Strawson's 'relative idea'.

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd **specifically different** from our perceptions, is to form a **relative idea** of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects.²

Strawson remarks on 'specifically different' at this passage. On Strawson's reading, the existences that is beyond our perception and that is inside our perception are specifically different from each other. But it is hard to think that impression is entirely different from object which elicits it. In order to connect those two objects, that is, impression and external object, Hume introduces the 'relative idea'. According to Hume, though we don't have any idea about external object, we can refer to something to provoke some state and have conception about it. Therefore, he says that though we cannot recognize external object, we acquire some idea by perceiving impressions which object elicits, and **the idea can not help being considered with the relation of external-object**. Given

¹ Since we cannot have the impression of the external-object or necessity, their existence also can not be accepted. Ontological skepticism says this position.

² David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition revised by P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978). This will be cited as "T" followed by page number(s). T-68p

this, Strawson maintains that we can not help acknowledging the existence about external-object.

However, Blackburn points out that it is wrong to insist that we understand the unintelligible specific different object. He says that we have no ground to interpret the object meaningfully, though we speak of the term about unintelligible object. Furthermore, Blackburn argues that we should quest a doubt whether the conception like ‘necessity’ or ‘external-object’ is properly used.

• **Realistic interpretation ②—Distinction between hypothesis and recognition**

Strawson says that Hume discriminates the conception between ‘hypothesis’ and ‘recognition’ from physical object and perception. Through this distinction, he insists that the following controversial passages in Hume’s *Treatise* can be solved.

For we **may well suppose** in general, but ’tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions.³

According to Strawson’s interpretation, we can not ‘recognize’ necessity or external-object. This is because, in order to recognize them, the impression and idea corresponding them should be found, but we cannot. Hence, in so far as we consider this point, we can regard Hume as a skeptic. This is the negative phase. But he does not stop here. Now the positive phase is: that there are external objects is fully intelligible, and hence meaningful by the “supposition” and “natural belief”. According to him, we can ‘suppose’ real-object ever so many and also can form ‘natural belief’ corresponding them. Thus nobody was ever genuinely a skeptic, for nature provides a remedy. “Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy”.⁴ By appealing to the concept of ‘supposition’ and ‘natural belief’, Strawson suggests that we should read Hume as a realist in speaking of the necessary connection idea and forming the conception.

Concerning Strawson’s interpretation, Blackburn indicates that it is hard to emphasize such assertion, as the references concerning discrimination of hypothesis and recognition were rarely described in the *Treatise*. Moreover, according to Blackburn, such discrimination is meaningless. For Hume says that perception and external-object are different specifically. Hume also denies the hypothesis concerning external-object or necessity in the next passage,

Generally speaking we **do not suppose them specifically different; but only attribute to them different relations, connexions and durations.**⁵

But Strawson argues against Blackburn’s above assertion in terms of another passage of *Treatise*.

I intend to examine some general systems both ancient and modern, which have been **propos’d of both (external and internal world)**, before I proceed to a more particular

3 T-218p

4 T-218p

5 T-68p

enquiry concerning our impressions.....⁶

If we look at the above passage, however, it is difficult to think that Hume truly acknowledges about external existence. In the text, he just exposed his thought about a tendency that pursuit of philosophy is separated from common life. He then refers to common people. Although the readers reading this article agree with Hume's skepticism, they may not be able to keep taking such skeptical attitude in everyday life. If this is true, it is misgiving to regard above passage as Hume's core thought.

Strawson unfolds several assertions of the position of skeptical realism. But he exposes the insufficiency of the ground about his assertion except some meaningful statements. He continually says that Hume is in the realistic position of necessity or external-object, but in fact, Hume shows much more skeptical position in his *Treatise*. Strawson must clarify the relation between skeptical and realistic position in Hume's *Treatise* convincingly.

• Projectivism of Blackburn

In what follow, I shall look at Blackburn's quasi-realism in more detail. Basically, he is in the skeptical position standing aside from positivism and skeptical realism. But he does not abandon realism and so is in the position of a weak realism. He attempts to explain to form an idea of necessity through 'Thick Connection' conception. In order to do this, he uses 'Two definition of cause'⁷ which is one of the most famous debates on Hume. In the first place, Blackburn interprets first definition of cause as the necessary element to form an idea of Thick Connection. Clear connection relations among particular cases produce the desire of 'Nexus'. However, it is only blind and accidental expectation. Hence, it is a naturally required general desire which can guarantee identification in the future. Blackburn calls this desire "Straight Jacket."⁸ This concept is derived from the second definition of cause. "Straight Jacket" can not be formed without presupposition of "Nexus" and Nexus inspires the desire of Straight Jacket. Blackburn interprets that Hume has the two positions about cause. He believes such interpretation will be able to elucidate epistemic difficulty. But it needs to be looked into more whether Hume actually does such discrimination in the *Treatise*.

Blackburn shows the Projective position on the base of two thoughts about this necessary connection. He asserts that a constant conjunction among objects changes mind functionally and such changed mind projects the relation of objects as if there were thick connection between them. The necessary connection idea which is formed by such a projection justifies not-so-skeptical connection idea among objects.

⁶ T-218p

⁷ **First definition of cause;** "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." (T-170p)

Second definition of cause; "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-170p)

⁸ A straitjacket is a special jacket used to tie the arms of a violent person tightly around their body. Blackburn named Hume's second definition of cause like this to show very strong connection among objects.

3 The Idea of Necessary Connection

(1) Forming Necessary Connection idea

So far I have dealt with two other views on Hume's ontological position. However, to understand Hume's position properly, there are limitations to adopt the Humean interpretations. This is because we may misunderstand Hume's intention in terms of some readers' suggestive interpretations. Hence, it is necessary to understand the idea of necessary connection and its meaning in the *Treatise* in literal sense.

To understand Hume's necessity, we have to look at the relation between impression and idea. Generally, when one idea which is provoked by an object regularly accompanies the other idea, we believe that those two ideas are connected. This relation is causation among objects and this idea is the idea of causation. In order that objects are connoted under causation, some conditions have to be satisfied in advance. One object has to be contiguous the other object (Contiguity) and the idea of one object has to be prior to the idea of the other object in succession. (Succession) But these two elements do not warrant causal relation between two objects. Because, two objects have contiguity and succession but objects having those features are not always causality. Therefore, another element is required. It is the 'necessary connection' among objects. But we can not find the impression that corresponds this necessary connection. Hence, we should observe thousands of individual cases between objects producing same effect. When we do so, we can find constant conjunction between two objects. This strong connection among objects raises a habitual transition to the mind. Hume calls it the "uniformity of nature." This operation of mind is a sort of tendency that inclines to judge about genesis or work of existence which is not observing yet. This tendency is supposition based on an analogy that regular cases produce regular effects.

(2) Ontological property of Necessary connection idea

So far, I have looked at how the necessary connection idea is formed in the *Treatise*. In what follows, let us ascertain more specifically how we interpret the idea of necessity ontologically through Hume's *Treatise*. First, Hume prescribes the use of term for necessity as follows;

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 wrong apply'd, than that they never have any meaning⁹

In the above passage, although Hume uses the term of necessity he does not take the position of realism. His use of this term distorts genuine meaning of the idea of necessity. Such use of the term usually does not support the assertion that the corresponding idea for such term is a real existence. And Hume also asserts that forming the necessary connection idea is nothing except the repetitions of similar cases.

9 T-162p

This multiplicity of resembling instances, therefore, constitute the very essence of power or connexion, and is the source, from which the idea of it arises.¹⁰

But 'tis from this resemblance, that the ideas of necessity, of power, and of efficacy, are deriv'd. These ideas, therefore, represent not anything, that does or can belong to the objects, which are constantly conjoin'd.¹¹

Hume says that this connective idea is not formed from something else but formed from the analogous repetition. This analogy generates the idea of power or necessity. In other words, the analogy of cases is a direct cause of necessity idea. Then, what is Hume's position about the origin of analogy? He argues in the *Treatise*, as follows:

For after we have observed the resemblance in a sufficient number of instances, **we immediately feel a determination of the mind** to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and to conceive it in a stronger light upon account of that relation. **This determination is the only effect of the resemblance;** and therefore **must be the same with power or efficacy,** whose idea is deriv'd from the resemblance.....(abbreviation).....**Necessity,** then, is the effect of this observation, and **is nothing but an internal impression of the mind,** or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.¹²

What Hume is really getting at is that he does not mean an active expression of the mind. He just says frequently that the mind is only determined. Through those passages, we can see that Hume regards our own body as objective object and our self-consciousness feels such natural appearance. (That causal idea comes to mind) This is a very thorough naturalism. Because since we are passive beings about perception, we only receive data which are entered by sense organ. Also, the internal impression seems to mean the impression of reflection. Through regular relation of external objects, a subject comes into having an idea about each case and the similar ideas produce an analogous new impression. Hence it can be said that if the impression of reflection is produced by the analogy, the idea of necessary connection is created. In the *Treatise* section 1 of part I, according to Hume's distinction between the impression of sensation and reflection, he classifies the idea of necessary connection into the impression of reflection. Given this, we can see more clearly that Hume does not take a realistic view about the idea of necessity.

It (necessary connexion idea) must, therefore, be deriv'd from some internal impression, of impression of reflexion. There is no internal impression, which has any relation to the present business, but that propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant. This, therefore, is the essence of necessity. Upon

10 T-163p

11 T-164p

12 T-165p

the whole, **necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects.....**¹³

The above passage shows that the idea of necessity that Hume mentions is found completely in our mind. As a matter of convenience, the idea can be used as the assumption or terms but it cannot be used as supporting realist interpretation. Hume says that we can not know how the idea of necessary connection is generating because we cannot have the impression of it. It is only due to the intrinsic nature of human being that has a natural tendency. The natural tendency can not work without immediately given sense-data. Hence, we cannot acquire the idea of necessary connection and the external object beyond our perception in terms of the realistic attitude.

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