

Hume's Skeptical Definitions of 'Cause'

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Abstract: The relation between Hume's constructive and skeptical aims has been a central concern for Hume interpreters. Hume's two definitions of 'cause' in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* apparently represent an important constructive achievement, but this paper argues that the definitions must be understood in terms of Hume's skepticism. The puzzle I address is simply that Hume gives two definitions rather than one. I use Don Garrett's interpretation as a foil to develop my alternative skeptical interpretation. Garrett claims the definitions exhibit a general susceptibility to two kinds of definition that all "sense-based concepts" share. Against Garrett, I argue that the definitions express an imperfection Hume finds only in our concept of causation. That imperfection is absent from other sense-based concepts, and prompts skeptical sentiments in Hume's conclusion to the *Treatise's* Book 1. I close by comparing my interpretation with those of Helen Beebe, Stephen Buckle, Galen Strawson and Paul Russell.

A central dispute in Hume interpretation concerns the relation between the constructive and skeptical elements of his philosophy. Perhaps the most active battleground in this dispute has been T 1.3.6 (SBN 86–93),¹ where Hume presents his famous argument concerning induction. Opposing the traditional view that T 1.3.6 defends a form of skepticism about induction, recent interpreters have argued that the section simply provides a psychological account of what makes us draw inductive inferences.² That might be so. But T 1.3.6 is part of a larger discussion of the nature of causation (introduced in T 1.3.2; SBN 73–77), which culminates with the two definitions of "cause" in T 1.3.14 (SBN 155–72). And this paper's contention is that the two definitions themselves must be understood in light of Hume's skepticism.

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The central puzzle I address is that Hume gives two definitions rather than one, after promising “an exact definition of the relation of cause and effect” (T 1.3.14.30; SBN 169). To explain this fact adequately, we need to recognize that the definitions express an imperfection Hume discerns in our concept of causation—an imperfection that drives Hume to skeptical sentiments in his conclusion to Book 1 of the *Treatise*. Even if T 1.3.6’s conclusions are not themselves skeptical, the section falls into a larger discussion whose conclusions are. That is, in keeping with Hume’s own understanding of skepticism in the *Abstract*, he intends the definitions to “give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding” (T Abs. 27, cf. T 1.4.7.14–15; SBN 657, cf. SBN 272–74).

Don Garrett’s interpretation of the two definitions will serve as a foil to develop my skeptical interpretation. In his recent book *Hume*, Garrett considers it unsurprising that there are two definitions of “cause.” The concept of causation is a “sense-based concept,” and all such concepts are in principle susceptible to two kinds of definition (*Hume* chap. 4, esp. 129–36). The two definitions are simply a consequence of the “sense-based character of the concept” (*Hume*, 133).

I agree that the concept of causation is sense-based. But against Garrett, I argue in section 1 that the two definitions of “cause” do not exhibit a general susceptibility to two kinds of definition that all sense-based concepts share. Rather, the definitions express a feature that is unique to the concept of causation. Section 2 explains and defends the skeptical explanation of why there are two definitions, attending especially to the role causation plays in T 1.4.7 (SBN 263–74). Section 3 considers and rejects Helen Beebe’s account of the definitions. Section 4 considers two other accounts in the literature, and argues that they should be supplemented with my skeptical interpretation to explain adequately why there are two definitions. I conclude in section 5 by commenting on the connection between the skeptical interpretation and the familiar puzzle that the definitions appear not to be extensionally equivalent

1. Sense-based concepts and the two definitions

Garrett's account of the two definitions of "cause" relies on his insight that the concept of causation in Hume is sense-based. Sense-based concepts are abstract ideas that arise from "primitive capacities to have specific kinds of felt mental response" (*Hume*, 119). For example, BLUE is a sense-based concept. (I follow Garrett in calling abstract ideas *concepts*, and in using small capital letters to pick out concepts. See *Hume*, Preface xxii.) The concept BLUE is formed from ideas of particular blue objects, in accordance with Hume's account of abstract ideas. Each of those ideas contains as (at least) a part the simple idea of the object's blueness, and that simple idea is copied from an *impression* of blueness.

Not all concepts (abstract ideas) are sense-based. For instance, there is no specific kind of felt mental response—such as a distinctively feline impression or sentiment—that gives rise to the concept CAT. Still, concepts of secondary qualities are not the only sense-based concepts in Hume. Others include BEAUTY and DEFORMITY, VIRTUE and VICE, and (perhaps surprisingly) CAUSATION and PROBABILITY (Garrett, *Hume*, chap. 4). The concept CAUSATION is formed from ideas of particular cause-effect pairs. Each of those ideas contains the simple idea of a *necessary connection*, which is copied from a simple impression (T 1.3.2.11–12; SBN 77).

Garrett explains in detail how the sense-based concepts function similarly to one another throughout Hume's philosophy (*Hume*, chap. 4). For my purposes, we can focus on one of the five features Garrett attributes to fully developed sense-based concepts: their in-principle susceptibility to two kinds of definition. As an example, Garrett suggests two rough definitions that Hume might accept for the secondary quality term "warmth":

W1: Warmth is "that which has a relatively high degree of motion among its very small corpuscular parts" (*Hume*, 125).

W2: Warmth is "that which produces the sensation-of-warmth in spectators" (*Hume*, 125).

The productive definition (W1) specifies the quality in the object that gives rise to the mental response, while the responsive definition (W2) specifies the mental response itself.

For most sense-based concepts (including WARMTH), Hume does not provide both a responsive and a productive definition. Garrett's claim is simply that both kinds of definition are *in principle* available to Hume for each sense-based concept. But sometimes, according to Garrett, Hume does provide both kinds. Most notably, there seem to be two definitions of "virtue" (or Personal Merit) in Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (EPM):³

V1: "Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*" (EPM 9.1; SBN 268, Hume's emphasis).

V2: "The hypothesis which we embrace is plain It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*" (EPM App 1.10, Hume's emphasis, cf. footnote to EPM 8.1; SBN 289, cf. SBN 261). (See Garrett, *Cognition*, 107; and Garrett, *Hume*, 135. The labels "V1" and "V2" are Garrett's.)

As in Garrett's WARMTH example, the productive definition V1 specifies the quality in the object (that is, in the virtuous person) that gives rise to the mental response. And V2 specifies the mental response itself, which is "the pleasing sentiment of approbation."

Now take the two definitions of "cause," which Garrett claims fit the same pattern (*Hume*, 133):

C1: We may define a CAUSE to be "An object [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to another, and [3a] 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 1.3.14.31; SBN 170, my numbers)

C2: “A CAUSE is an object [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to another, and [3b] 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; SBN 170, my numbers)⁴

(Hume summarizes condition [3a] in C1 by saying objects similar to the cause and the effect are *constantly conjoined*, for example, in T 1.3.6.3 (SBN 87–88), and I will follow him in this.)

C1 and C2 both specify that the cause is [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to its effect, but they diverge in their third condition. Garrett takes C1 to be a productive definition, as its third condition [3a] specifies the quality in the object that gives rise to the mental response. And he takes C2 to be a responsive definition, as its third condition [3b] specifies the mental response itself—that is, the determination of the mind to pass from the idea or impression of one of the causally related objects to the (more lively) idea of the other (*Hume*, 133). Garrett’s picture provides an explanation of why Hume gives two definitions of “cause” rather than one. The two definitions are simply examples of two kinds of definition that are available for *each* sense-based concept. The availability of these two kinds of definition arises naturally from the structure of sense-based concepts.

The problem with Garrett’s picture is that C2 seems importantly different from all the other responsive definitions Garrett provides. Recall that sense-based concepts arise in part from impressions or sentiments of some sense. BLUE arises from impressions of shades of blue, WARMTH from sensations of warmth, and VIRTUE from the “pleasing sentiment of approbation”.⁵ As for CAUSATION, it arises from the impression of a necessary connection (T 1.3.2, 1.3.14; SBN 73–77, 155–72). Apart from C2, Garrett’s examples of responsive definitions specify the *impression* that gives rise to the relevant sense-based concept. W2 specifies the sensation of warmth, and V2 specifies the “pleasing sentiment of approbation.” Garrett also gives a rough responsive definition of “beauty”:

“whatever produces the sentiment of beauty in an observer” (*Hume*, 125). Again, the definition specifies the relevant impression.

C2 is different. Instead of the impression of necessity, it involves the determination of the mind to pass from the idea or impression of one object to the (more lively) idea of the other. The impression of necessity arises from the determination of the mind, but it is not identical with that determination.⁶ In principle, Hume has open to him a responsive definition of “cause” that patterns with Garrett’s other responsive definitions on its third condition. Roughly:

C3: A cause is an object [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to another, and [3] which produces the impression of a necessary connection in an observer.

If the two definitions of “cause” simply exhibit the general phenomenon of two kinds of definition that Garrett identifies, it is unclear why Hume does not provide C3 instead of C2.

Of course, C2 (like V2, W2, etc.) counts as a responsive definition on Garrett’s taxonomy, because it specifies a part of the mental response that gives rise to the concept CAUSATION. But I suggest that Garrett’s taxonomy obscures a notable structural difference between C2 and other responsive definitions. Here is an alternative taxonomy. An *impression-based definition* for a sense-based concept specifies the impression that gives rise to that concept. By contrast, a *source definition* specifies the quality or (some of the) qualities that produce that impression. On the alternative taxonomy V1 and W1 are source definitions, and V2 and W2 are impression-based definitions. But matters are different for CAUSATION: *both* C1 and C2 are source definitions and not impression-based definitions. The impression-based definition of “cause” would be (something like) C3.

There is thus a significant disanalogy between the definitions of “cause” and Garrett’s productive and responsive definitions for other sense-based concepts. This disanalogy casts doubt on Garrett’s view that the two definitions simply exhibit a broader phenomenon. But we can push the

attack further. CAUSATION aside, VIRTUE is the only sense-based concept for which Hume provides both kinds of definition Garrett identifies. Recall:

V1: “Personal Merit consists altogether in the possession of mental qualities, *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*” (EPM 9.1; SBN 268, Hume’s emphasis).

V2: “The hypothesis which we embrace is plain It defines virtue to be *whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator the pleasing sentiment of approbation*” (EPM App 1.10, Hume’s emphasis, cf. footnote to EPM 8.1; SBN 289, cf. SBN 261).

Garrett makes much of the supposed parallel between the definitions of “virtue” and those of “cause” (*Cognition*, 107–11; *Hume*, 133–36). But I claim that the structure of Hume’s discussion of VIRTUE (in EPM, the second *Enquiry*) supports grouping both C1 and C2 with V1, in line with the alternative taxonomy. C2’s role in Hume’s discussion is very different from V2’s, providing further evidence that something different is going on with the two definitions of “cause.”

Hume’s chief aim in EPM is to find “the true origin of morals” or “the foundation of ethics”—that is, “those universal principles from which all censure or approbation is ultimately derived” (EPM 1.10; SBN 174). To achieve this aim, he follows a “very simple method” that involves collecting specimens of virtues and ascertaining what they have in common (EPM 1.10; SBN 173–74). The specimens are selected according to “what, in common life, we call Personal Merit.” That is: “we shall consider every attribute of the mind, which renders a man an object either of esteem and affection, or of hatred and contempt” (EPM 1.10; SBN 173–74). An alternative way of putting this is that he selects his specimens in accordance with V2. This is perhaps even clearer in the following variation to EPM 1.10 (the passage under discussion):

We shall consider the matter as an object of experience. **We shall call *every quality or action of the mind, virtuous, which is attended with the general approbation of***

mankind: and we shall denominate vicious, *every quality which is the object of general blame or censure*. These qualities we shall endeavour to collect; and after examining, on both sides, the several circumstances, in which they agree, 'tis hoped we may, at last, reach the foundation of ethics, and find those universal principles, from which all moral blame or approbation is ultimately derived (Hume's italics, my boldface).⁷

The bolded passage supports the claim that Hume's method in EPM is to select his samples in accordance with V2.

Someone might object that there is an important difference between "the general approbation of mankind" in the bolded passage and "the pleasing sentiment of approbation" that appears in EPM App 1.10's statement of V2. Perhaps (the objection would run) the criterion for selecting the samples in EPM 1.10 is not V2, because (1) the former simply concerns approbation rather than a *sentiment* of approbation, and (2) the former concerns *general* approbation rather than the approbation of a representative spectator.

But these differences appear to be mere stylistic variation for Hume. For instance, in the footnote to EPM 8.1, he writes: "It is the nature and, indeed, the definition of virtue, that it is *a quality of mind agreeable to or approved by every one who considers or contemplates it*" (SBN 261, Hume's emphasis). This is clearly a statement of V2, as Garrett acknowledges (*Cognition*, 107; *Hume*, 135). But it appears simply to restate the bolded passage above. In particular, the version of V2 in the footnote to EPM 8.1 (1) includes no explicit reference to a *sentiment* of approbation or approval, and (2) replaces EPM App. 1.10's spectator with "every one who considers or contemplates [the quality of mind]"—that is, with a reference to *general* approbation.

It is unsurprising that Hume is happy to state V2 both in terms of what everyone approves and in terms of what a representative individual approves, since he thinks people will tend to agree

in the relevant assessments. He writes that the “quick sensibility” employed in identifying the specimens of virtue is “universal among mankind” and so “gives a philosopher sufficient assurance, that he can never be considerably mistaken in framing the catalogue” (EPM 1.10; SBN 174).⁸

The methodology of appealing to V2 to reach V1 is on display at various points in EPM. Take EPM 9.12–13 (SBN 276–78). Hume states the conclusion of this passage (that is, V1) when he writes: “I cannot, *at present*, be more assured of any truth, which I learn from reasoning and argument, than that personal merit consists entirely in the usefulness or agreeableness of qualities to the person himself possessed of them, or to others, who have any intercourse with him” (EPM 9.13; SBN 278, Hume’s emphasis). He appeals to V2 to draw his conclusion. For instance, he considers why justice, fidelity and other virtues are “esteemed,” and why a cheerful disposition is “a more animating and rejoicing spectacle” than a melancholy one (EPM 9.12; SBN 277). In both cases, the answer is that these qualities meet V2 (whose truth he takes for granted) *because* they meet V1. And that supports his conclusion that V1 is true.

Immediately before discussing those virtues, Hume explicitly mentions both V1 and V2:

The preceding delineation or definition of Personal Merit must still retain its evidence and authority: it must be allowed that [V1] every quality of the mind, which is *useful* or *agreeable* to the *person himself* or to *others*, [V2] communicates a pleasure to the spectator, engages his esteem, and is admitted under the honourable denomination of virtue or merit. (EPM 9.12; SBN 277, Hume’s emphasis, my labels.)

His claim is that every mental quality that meets V1 meets V2. Given that the rest of the passage seeks to defend V1 in the way described, it seems Hume is invoking V2 in EPM 9.12–13 in order to support V1.

Here, then, is how V1 and V2 relate. V2 comes first, and is the definition by which Hume picks out samples of virtues in order to discover what they have in common. The application of this

method results in V1, which captures the common feature of the V2-selected samples. Hume applies V2 to discover the universal principle he seeks, which is V1. It is V1 that provides the “foundation of ethics” that Hume is after. For the definitions of “cause” to be parallel to V1 and V2 in this respect, Hume would have to start with C2 in order to pick out samples of cause-effect pairs. He would then reach C1 as an account of the features that are shared across the resulting set of pairs. He would thereby start with the response in order to discover the quality in the objects that underlies the response.⁹

But that is not Hume’s method for causation. C1 and C2 *both* emerge in the search for whatever gives rise to the impression of a necessary connection between causes and effects. (In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, the core idea of C2—defining “cause” by reference to the mind’s determination—emerges towards the end of that search, in T 1.3.14.1 (SBN 169–70) and EHU 7.28 (SBN 75–76).) It seems that both C1 and C2 are parallel to V1. Like V1, they emerge as an outcome of Hume’s search for the qualities that give rise to the relevant impression. And like V1, each of C1 and C2 specifies such a quality. That is—in line with my alternative taxonomy—all three are source definitions.

Recall C3, my proposed impression-based definition of “cause”:

C3: A cause is an object [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to another, and [3] which produces the impression of a necessary connection in an observer.

Hume does not explicitly appeal to C3, but all three of its components occur towards the beginning of his discussion of causation. In T 1.3.2.10–16 (SBN 77–78) he says causation involves [1] precedency, [2] contiguity and [3] a necessary connection. And the central question he raises about the necessary connection concerns the source of its impression. Arguably, then, something like C3 plays a role analogous to that of the impression-based definition V2 in the discussion of virtue. Hume

begins by identifying the impression that gives rise to the sense-based concept in question, and concludes by identifying the source(s) of the impression via source definitions.

In summary, C2 is different from all the other responsive definitions Garrett identifies in that it specifies a *source* of the relevant impression instead of the impression itself. Garrett's explanation of why there are two definitions of "cause" does not explain this structural disanalogy. Moreover, the significance of the disanalogy can be seen by comparing Hume's discussion of causation with that of virtue. Both C1 and C2 emerge from the search for the source of the impression, and are source definitions. By contrast, V2 *sets up* the search for the impression, and is an impression-based definition. It is V1 that is parallel to both C1 and C2. To explain adequately why there are two definitions of "cause," we need to explain why there are two *source* definitions of "cause." Garrett's picture does not explain that.

2. The skeptical interpretation

The two definitions of "cause" do not fit a general pattern of dual definitions that are available for all sense-based concepts, as Garrett claims. I suggest that we can make better sense of Hume's definitions of "cause" by attending to his skeptical purposes. I will begin by explaining my skeptical interpretation with reference to the *Treatise*, before suggesting that the strongest support for the interpretation comes from comparing the *Treatise* with the first *Enquiry*.

Famously, Book 1 of the *Treatise* ends with the skeptical section "Conclusion of this book" (T 1.4.7; SBN 263–74). Since I will draw heavily from T 1.4.7, it will help to outline it. Hume begins by expressing his melancholy and despair at his own past errors and his isolation (T 1.4.7.1–2; SBN 263–65). He then laments the weaknesses in human understanding that his investigations have uncovered (T 1.4.7.3–5; SBN 265–67). These reflections raise the difficult question of how we are to proceed in light of Hume's discoveries (T 1.4.7.6–8; SBN 267–69). Reason is of little help in answering that question, but nature cures Hume of his "philosophical melancholy and delirium"

through distraction (T 1.4.7.9; SBN 269). Initially he is ready to abandon philosophy (T 1.4.7.10; SBN 269–70), but he soon regains his desire to philosophize (T 1.4.7.11–13; SBN 270–72). He returns to philosophy a skeptic, chastened by his skeptical discoveries yet ready to “indulge [his] inclination in the most elaborate philosophical researches” (T 1.4.7.14–15; SBN 272–74).

There are various controversies surrounding T 1.4.7’s interpretation. For this paper, I assume simply that in T 1.4.7.3–5 Hume is describing *his own* skeptical sentiments in response to his discoveries concerning the “infirmities . . . common to human nature” (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265). The skeptical sentiments themselves inevitably fade under nature’s influence – but Hume remains convinced that his discoveries reveal the “imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding” (T *Abs.* 27; SBN 657). The sentiments fade not because of any reasoning that convinces him that human understanding is not flawed after all (T 1.4.7.9; SBN 269), but because of the effects of nature (T 1.4.7.9–10; SBN 269–70) and his “curiosity and ambition” (T 1.4.7.12–15; SBN 270–74). By the end of T 1.4.7, Hume still calls himself a “sceptic” (T 1.4.7.15; SBN 274).¹⁰ I take it this assumption provides the most natural reading of T 1.4.7.5, and is shared by most Hume interpreters.¹¹

T 1.3.14, where the definitions of “cause” appear, is the only section of T 1.3 that Hume cites explicitly in T 1.4.7.5. In relation to T 1.3.14, Hume writes: “When we trace up the human understanding to its first principles, we find it to lead us into such sentiments, as seem to turn into ridicule all our past pains and industry, and to discourage us from future enquiries” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266). The source of Hume’s discouragement in T 1.4.7.5 is a “deficiency in our ideas” (T 1.4.7.6; SBN 267). We were “push[ing] on our enquiries” to find something that meets two conditions:

- (i) It is the tie between cause and effect. That is, it is “the original and ultimate principle,” “that energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266–67).
- (ii) It is in mind-external objects.¹² It is “something, which resides in the external object,” “that energy *in the cause*, by which it operates on its effect” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266–67, my emphasis). But we find nothing that meets both conditions: “how must we be

disappointed, when we learn, that this connexion, tie, or energy lies merely within ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266).

I suggest that the two definitions of “cause” in T 1.3.14 express the problem that brings about Hume’s dejection in T 1.4.7.5. If the concept CAUSATION were unproblematic, Hume would be able to provide a single definition of “cause” along the lines of C*:

C*: A cause is an object [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to another, and [3] which is necessarily connected with the other.

The necessary connection in [3] would be the source of the impression of a necessary connection, and would ideally have two features. Firstly, it would be the tie between cause and effect. And secondly, it would be in mind-external objects. That is, it would meet both conditions (i) and (ii). T 1.3.2 moves towards such a definition, but Hume’s search for the impression of a necessary connection produces a problem. The source of the impression in any particular observation of one object causing another—that is, the tie between a particular cause and its effect—turns out to be the *mind’s determination* to pass from the idea or impression of one object to the (more lively) idea of the other. This determination meets condition (i) but fails to meet condition (ii), because it is not in mind-external objects. The determination arises because of the constant conjunction of objects similar to the cause with objects similar to the effect (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155–56). But this constant conjunction is not the tie between any token cause and its effect. It meets condition (ii) but fails to meet condition (i).

There are two options. We can either meet condition (i) by identifying the necessary connection with the mind’s determination, or meet condition (ii) by identifying the necessary connection with constant conjunction. Either way, the desire Hume reports in T 1.4.7.5 is frustrated. It seems Hume takes both options: “Necessity . . . consists either in the constant conjunction of like

objects, or in the inference of the understanding from one object to another” (EHU 8.27, cf. EHU 8.5, T 2.3.2.4; SBN 97, cf. SBN 82, 409–410).¹³ Constant conjunction and the mind’s transition are the closest our ideas can get to “that unintelligible necessity that is supposed to lie in matter” (T 2.2.2.4; SBN 333). If we are to have any idea of causation, the (unintelligible) necessary connection in C*’s condition [3] must be replaced either by constant conjunction (as in C1) or by the mind’s determination (as in C2). Two definitions—specifically, the two Hume provides—must replace the one definition.

That explains why there are two (source) definitions of “cause.” Our concept of causation involves the supposition that there is something that meets both conditions (i) and (ii). But that supposition is false, producing in Hume skeptical sentiments in relation to the concept. The best we can do is to provide two definitions instead of one, each of which captures one of the conditions. In providing two definitions, Hume reveals the imperfection in our concept of causation. That is not to say that Hume is dissatisfied with the definitions themselves. He describes them as “exact” and “precise” (T 1.3.14.30; SBN 169), and says we cannot “attain any more perfect definition” (EHU 7.29; SBN 77). The definitions are as perfect as they can be, given the imperfection of the concept defined.¹⁴

On my interpretation of T 1.4.7.5, the problem that bothers Hume arises for CAUSATION alone. That explains why he does not express parallel skeptical sentiments for the other sense-based concepts, and why there are two source definitions only in the case of CAUSATION. But it should be acknowledged that the structural feature identified in T 1.4.7.5 is *partly* shared by other sense-based concepts. In mistakenly supposing there is something that meets both conditions (i) and (ii), we exhibit the mind’s “propensity to spread itself on external objects” (T 1.3.14.25; SBN 167). Sense-based concepts tend to involve some kind of spreading or projection of mind onto world, as we falsely suppose that certain features of our impressions are to be found in the external objects that give rise to them.

However, CAUSATION involves a unique kind of projection. Consider the concept BLUE. Under the “modern philosophy,” there is some feature in each blue object (such as the arrangement of its corpuscles) that produces the impression of blue in a particular case of perceiving that object.¹⁵ We wrongly project the *phenomenal* quality of blueness onto the object, which contains no such thing. But the arrangement of corpuscles both (i’) is the (non-phenomenal) blueness of the object, and (ii’) is in mind-external objects. Contrast the case of perceiving a particular blue object with that of perceiving a particular cause-effect pair. In the latter case, it is not simply that there is nothing in the particular objects that *resembles* the impression, as there is no phenomenal blueness in blue objects. Rather, there is nothing in the particular objects that even *produces* the impression of a necessary connection. It is the mind’s determination that (in the particular case) produces the impression. That determination is (i) the tie between cause and effect, but is *not* (ii) in mind-external objects. In this way, CAUSATION involves a unique kind of projection that distinguishes it from other sense-based concepts.

The skeptical interpretation holds that the two definitions of “cause” in T 1.3.14.31 (SBN 169-70) are closely connected with Hume’s skeptical sentiments concerning causation in T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266-7). Two definitions instead of one are required because of Hume’s failure to find something that meets both conditions (i) and (ii). This failure is due to an imperfection in our concept of causation, and grounds Hume’s skeptical sentiments. These claims should seem plausible from the *Treatise* passages alone, but the most compelling evidence for the skeptical interpretation is found in the first *Enquiry*. The *Enquiry*’s two definitions of “cause” appear in EHU 7.29. But EHU 7.29 (SBN 76-7) strikes a tone that is more obviously skeptical than in T 1.3.14.31 (SBN 169-70). On closer examination, it appears that EHU 7.29 (SBN 76-7) *combines* T 1.3.14.31 (SBN 169-70) with T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266-7). The connections I have claimed are present in the *Treatise* appear explicitly in the *Enquiry*.

T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266-7) has four components. Firstly, Hume expresses skeptical sentiments concerning causation. Secondly, he emphasizes the importance for our enquiries of understanding causation. Thirdly, he reports the grounds of his skeptical sentiments—that our desire in investigating causation is frustrated, because there is nothing that meets both conditions (i) and (ii). And fourthly, he claims that the desire itself is somehow confused. It seems we cannot express that desire meaningfully and without contradiction.

All four components are on display in EHU 7.29 (SBN 76-7), where the *Enquiry*'s two definitions reside. Firstly, Hume makes his skeptical purposes evident by opening the paragraph: “And what stronger instance can be produced of the surprising ignorance and weakness of the understanding, than the present?” (EHU 7.29; SBN 76). Similarly skeptical remarks occur throughout EHU 7.29. Secondly, he emphasizes the importance for our enquiries of understanding causation: “For surely, if there be any relation among objects, which it imports to us to know perfectly, it is that of cause and effect” (EHU 7.29; SBN 76). The reasons given for why it is important to understand causation differ between the two works, but the point is the same.

Thirdly, Hume provides the grounds for his skeptical sentiments. EHU 7.29 introduces the definitions by remarking how “imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning [the causal relation]” (SBN 76). Echoing comments in T 1.3.14.31, Hume laments that both definitions are “drawn from circumstances foreign to the cause” (EHU 7.29; SBN 77): C1 is drawn from external objects other than the particular cause and effect, and C2 from a connection in the mind. The “inconvenience” in the definitions’ being drawn from foreign circumstances is that neither “point[s] out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connexion with its effect” (EHU 7.29; SBN 77). In other words, neither definition contains something that meets both of T 1.4.7.5’s conditions:

- (i) It is the tie between cause and effect.
- (ii) It is in mind-external objects.

And fourthly, Hume again remarks that the desire to find something that meets both conditions (i) and (ii) is somehow confused. “We [even] have no . . . distinct notion of what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it” (EHU 7.29; SBN 77). The *Enquiry* drops the *Treatise*’s claim that our expressions of the desire are either contradictory or meaningless, but the point is similar.¹⁶

All four components of T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266-7) are present in EHU 7.29 (SBN 76-7), and the latter passage explicitly connects the definitions with Hume’s skeptical aims. Moreover, EHU 7.29 bears out my explanation of why there are two definitions instead of one. I claimed that if the concept CAUSATION were unproblematic, Hume would be able to provide a single definition of “cause” along the lines of C*:

C*: A cause is an object [1] precedent and [2] contiguous to another, and [3] which is necessarily connected with the other.

The necessary connection in [3] would meet both conditions (i) and (ii). When Hume restates in EHU 7.29 the grounds for his skepticism about causation, he writes: “we cannot . . . attain any more perfect definition, which may point out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connexion with its effect” (SBN 77). The “more perfect definition” would surely be something like C*. We have to give C1 and C2 instead of C* because we cannot discover anything that meets both conditions (i) and (ii).

I have claimed that each of C1 and C2 meets exactly one of the two conditions Hume provides in T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266-7). But someone might object for each definition that it meets *neither* condition. For C2, the objection would be that the mind’s determination does not qualify as a genuine tie between cause and effect and so does not meet condition (i). However, Hume says the tie *is* the mind’s determination:

And how must we be disappointed, when we learn that this connexion, tie or energy lies merely in ourselves, and *is nothing but that determination of the mind*, which is acquir'd by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to the lively idea of the other? (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266, my emphasis)

Admittedly, Hume sometimes uses “determination” loosely to refer to the *impression* of the mind’s determination rather than to the determination itself (T 1.3.14.1, 1.3.16.8; SBN 156, 178)—following a more general practice inherited from Locke (see Garrett, *Hume*, 125–26). But “determination” in the passage just quoted clearly refers to the determination itself. It is the mind’s determination—rather than the impression of the determination—that is acquired by custom, and that causes us to move from the idea or impression of one object to the (more lively) idea of the other (T 1.3.14.31, 1.3.16.8; SBN 169–70, 178). When we interpret condition (i) as T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266–7) demands, the mind’s determination in C2 qualifies as the tie between cause and effect. Of course, the determination still does not provide everything we might want from the tie, because it does not meet condition (ii).

As for C1, the constant conjunction is in mind-external objects and so meets condition (ii) (with the caveat in endnote 12, concerning causation between the mind’s perceptions). But someone might object that condition (ii) is not what Hume intends in T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266–7). Instead, perhaps he intends:

(ii*) It is in the *particular pair* of mind-external objects that are causally related.

Meeting (ii) is necessary but not sufficient for meeting the stricter condition (ii*). And T 1.4.7.5 suggests the stricter condition by speaking of an “energy in the cause”, and perhaps also by reporting our desire to know the operating principle “as something, which resides in the external object” (T

1.4.7.5; SBN 266–67). C1’s constant conjunction does not meet T 1.4.7.5’s second condition if that condition is (ii*).

Nevertheless, I think (ii*) is stricter than the condition Hume intends, and that (ii) provides the correct interpretation. The first reason to favor (ii) over (ii*) is that it fits better with the picture of T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266–7) outlined above. C2’s determination meets condition (i) alone, and the comparison with EHU 7.29 (SBN 76–7) justifies drawing a close connection between the two conditions and the two definitions. It is therefore natural to think C1’s conjunction should meet the second condition. Interpreting the second condition as (ii) achieves that result.

But secondly, it is worth asking why Hume would want the tie between cause and effect to meet the second condition. The answer, I suggest, is found in T 1.3.14.26–28 (SBN 167–69). Hume has just stated his conclusion that the tie is in the mind rather than in the objects, and then gives voice to an objection: “What! the efficacy of causes lie in the determination of the mind! As if causes did not operate entirely independent of the mind, and wou’d not continue their operation, even tho’ there was no mind existent to contemplate them, or reason concerning them” (T 1.3.14.26; SBN 167). He goes on to express agreement with the objector’s central claim: “As to what may be said, that the operations of nature are independent of our thought and reasoning, I allow it” (T 1.3.14.28; SBN 168).

The problem Hume sees with locating the tie in the mind rather than in the objects is that this seems to make nature’s operations depend on the mind. And that is plausibly why Hume had hoped that the tie would meet the second condition in T 1.4.7.5 (SBN 266–7). But if that is so, it does not matter whether the tie is in the cause and effect themselves or simply in the external world as a whole—as long as the tie is not in our minds. The motivation T 1.3.14.26–28 provides for the second condition requires only that the tie meet condition (ii), not that it also meet condition (ii*). Indeed, part of Hume’s response to the objection in T 1.3.14.26–28 is that the constant conjunction (which figures in C1) is independent of the mind (T 1.3.14.28; SBN 168–69). The constant conjunction meets the objector’s demand, but what does *not* meet the demand is any “power or necessary connection”

the idea of which is drawn “from what we feel internally in contemplating [the objects]” (T 1.3.14.28; SBN 169). It seems likely that the objector’s demand, to which Hume is sympathetic, lies behind the second condition Hume states in T 1.4.7.5. If that is so, the second condition should be understood as (ii) rather than (ii*), since C1’s constant conjunction meets only the former.¹⁷

With these points in mind, it is not hard to see why T 1.4.7.5 appears to suggest the stricter condition (ii*). In that passage, Hume expresses a desire for something that meets condition (i): something that is the tie between cause and effect. But if something is the tie between cause and effect *and* is in mind-external objects, it is natural to think it will be in (or between) the cause and effect themselves. Something that meets conditions (i) and (ii) would presumably also meet condition (ii*)—so since Hume states the conditions (i) and (ii) together, it is unsurprising if his language suggests (ii*). Still, there is good reason to think that the second condition taken alone simply requires that the tie be in mind-external objects.

The two definitions of “cause” do not simply exhibit a more general feature of sense-based concepts, as Garrett claims. Rather, they are required because of an imperfection Hume identifies that is uniquely present in our concept CAUSATION. We falsely suppose that there is something in mind-external objects that is the tie between cause and effect, but there is no such thing. We can define “cause” by appeal to something in mind-external objects (C1) or to the tie between cause and effect (C2). But there is no single “more perfect” definition that achieves both desiderata at once. The skeptical interpretation thus explains why there are two definitions of “cause.”

3. Beebee’s account

Helen Beebee gives an alternative explanation of why there are two definitions. Beebee takes her cue from Hume’s claim in T 1.3.14.31 that the definitions make us “consider [causation] either as a *philosophical* or as a *natural* relation” (SBN 170, Hume’s emphasis). On Beebee’s view, the distinction between philosophical and natural relations amounts to “a distinction between two kinds

of mental activity”: a natural relation is one under which the mind moves instinctively from one idea to another, and a philosophical relation is one under which the mind compares two arbitrarily selected ideas (Beebee, *Hume on Causation*, 100). Accordingly (on her view), the definitions simply describe two ways in which we might reasonably come to make causal judgments. C2, which defines causation as a natural relation, describes a less sophisticated form of thinking in which we instinctively conclude that two objects are causally related through a habitual determination of the mind. C1, which defines causation as a philosophical relation, describes a more sophisticated form of thinking in which we conclude that two objects are causally related on the basis of their constant conjunction (Beebee, *Hume on Causation*, 100–107).

Beebee’s account permits a simple explanation of why there are two definitions of “cause”: there are two definitions because there are two reasonable ways to make causal judgments, corresponding to Hume’s distinction between philosophical and natural relations. Central to her account is the claim that in giving “definitions,” Hume is simply describing different routes to causal judgment rather than saying what causation is or what “cause” means (Beebee, *Hume on Causation*, 102, 107). I will argue that this claim is false, so Beebee’s explanation of why there are two definitions fails. My argument will also tell against Edward Craig’s view that a definition of “cause” for Hume is “a statement of the conditions under which belief in a cause-effect relationship does in fact come about” (Craig, *The Mind of God*, 104; Craig, “The Idea,” 224)—but I focus on Beebee because of her better worked out explanation of why there are two definitions.

Beebee’s (and Craig’s) claims about the definitions of “cause” fit poorly with how Hume understands definitions. For Hume, definitions (1) specify the *meaning* of our terms, (2) explain the *ideas* associated with the words, and (3) explain the *objects* to which the words and ideas refer. Moreover, it seems he *equates* tasks (1), (2), and (3). In EHU 8.1, Hume presents definition as the solution to the “ambiguity in the expression” that plagues the debate on liberty and necessity. He remarks: “it were impossible, if men affix the same ideas to their terms, that they could so long form

different opinions of the same subject” (EHU 8.1; SBN 80). To explain what a term means (task (1)), we must explain the idea to which the term is affixed (task (2)). In EHU 5.12 (SBN 48–50), Hume seems to equate defining the sentiment of belief (task (3)) with explaining the meaning of the term “belief” (task (1)). (Cf. T 1.2.4.18–21; SBN 45–47.)

Of course, Hume’s understanding of definitions in T 1.3.14 (SBN 155–72) and EHU 7 might differ from that in these passages. But this is not so. The opening passage of EHU 7 compares the “mathematical” and “moral” sciences. Hume writes: “If any term be defined in geometry, the mind readily, of itself, substitutes, on all occasions, the definition for the term defined: Or even when no definition is employed, the object itself may be presented to the senses, and by that means be steadily and clearly apprehended” (EHU 7.1; SBN 60). We can draw two points from this passage. Firstly, it seems the point of definitions is that the object defined be “steadily and clearly apprehended” (task (3)). Secondly, we may define *terms* (task (1)), and in so doing allow the definition to be substituted in place of the term defined, presumably without changing the truth value of the sentence. EHU 7.4 makes it clear that definitions are resources for “throw[ing] light upon . . . *ideas*, and render[ing] them altogether precise and definite to our intellectual view” (SBN 62, my emphasis). That is, they fulfil task (2). There is no suggestion that definitions of “cause” are accounts of how we come to make judgments about causation.

There is equally strong evidence in T 1.3.14 for this account of definitions. To understand T 1.3.14, it will help to explain T 1.3’s structure up to 1.3.14. Hume introduces the major project of T 1.3 in T 1.3.2 (SBN 73–78). He seeks to explain the relation of causation, because of its importance for our reasoning (T 1.3.2.2–3; SBN 73–74). After he identifies contiguity (T 1.3.2.6; SBN 75) and priority in time (T 1.3.2.7; SBN 76) as essential to causation, he identifies a *necessary connection* as the third essential component. However, he cannot explain the idea of necessary connection in terms of a corresponding impression (T 1.3.2.10–12; SBN 77), and so must consider two tangential questions (T 1.3.2.13–15; SBN 78). The second question—roughly how and why we reason from

causes to effects—occupies the bulk of his attention in T 1.3 (T 1.3.6–13; SBN 86–155). Finally, in T 1.3.14, Hume returns to his original question of explaining what causation, or our idea of it,¹⁸ is. Given T 1.3.2, this primarily requires explaining what the necessary connection is (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155–56). Hume addresses other philosophers’ accounts of causation (and our idea of it) in T 1.3.14.4–12 (SBN 157–61, 632–33). Then after discussing the necessary connection, Hume introduces the definitions as the product of joining together “all the different parts of this reasoning” (T 1.3.14.30; SBN 169). He claims in T 1.3.14.30 that the discussion of the inference (the second tangential question) allows us to understand the nature of the causal relation itself (the original question posed in T 1.3.2).

This sketch suggests a number of points. Firstly, it does not make sense of the *position* of the definitions to understand them as describing how we come to make causal judgments. Hume gives such a description in his long discussion of the second tangential question in T 1.3.6–13 (see especially T 1.3.6). Secondly, in providing the definitions Hume is turning back from the second tangential question to address the original problem of T 1.3.2: the problem of explaining what the causal relation *is*. He proceeds in this order because “the nature of the relation depends so much on that of the inference” (T 1.3.14.30; SBN 169). And as with the *Enquiry*, there is evidence that explaining what the object *is* and defining the word “cause” is the same task for Hume. For example, Hume brings together tasks (3) and (1) when he says that in postponing explanation of nature of the relation, “we have been oblig’d to . . . make use of *terms* before we were able exactly to define them, or *fix their meaning*” (T 1.3.14.30; SBN 169, my emphasis). I conclude that Hume does not intend the definitions of “cause” as descriptions of how we make causal judgments, so Beebee’s explanation of why there are two definitions is unsuccessful.

One feature of T 1.3.14.31 that I (unlike Beebee) have not emphasized is Hume’s comment at the start of the paragraph that the definitions “are only different, by their presenting a different view of the same object, and making us consider it either as a *philosophical* or as a *natural* relation, either

as a comparison of two ideas, or as an association betwixt them” (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 170, Hume’s emphasis). C1 makes us consider causation as a philosophical relation. It does so by highlighting a respect in which we can compare the idea of a cause and that of its effect (and the cause and effect themselves) independently of the mind’s association of those ideas. C2 makes us consider causation as a natural relation. It does so by highlighting the fact that the idea of a cause and that of its effect tend to be associated in the mind, and that the impression of one produces a belief in the other (cf. Hume’s explanation of the distinction in T 1.1.4–5; SBN 10–15). This much is uncontroversial (cf. Beebe, *Hume on Causation*, 101–107; Garrett, *Hume*, 134), and is consistent with my skeptical interpretation.

However, the skeptical interpretation does not make use of the distinction between philosophical and natural relations to *explain why* there are two definitions—and in light of the emphasis Hume places on the distinction at the start of T 1.3.14.31, that might be thought a problem. In response, it is first worth noting that accounts of the definitions other than Beebe’s do no better than mine in this respect (for relevant discussion, see Beebe, *Hume on Causation*, 99–101).¹⁹ And I have already argued that Beebe’s interpretation is incorrect.

But secondly, I believe the philosophical-natural relation distinction should *not* figure centrally in our explanation of why there are two definitions. That distinction is present in the *Treatise*, but disappears altogether in the first *Enquiry*. If the distinction is central to understanding the two definitions, it is puzzling that there is no mention of it when Hume presents the definitions in his later work. Instead, he opens EHU 7.29 by emphasizing the *skeptical* import of his discoveries: “And what stronger instance can be produced of the surprising ignorance and weakness of the understanding, than the present?” (SBN 76). And we have a good explanation of why there are two definitions that centers on their skeptical import.

Hume famously said that the *Enquiry* corrects “some negligences in [the *Treatise*’s] reasoning and more in the expression” (T *Advertisement*, SBN 2). It is unclear to me whether T

1.3.14.31's first sentence suggests the distinction between philosophical and natural relations is central to understanding the definitions. But if it does, I think it displays negligence in expression. C1 *does* make us consider causation as a philosophical relation and C2 as a natural relation (in the way I explained above), but that distinction does not explain why there are two definitions.

4. Other accounts of the definitions

I will close by considering some less detailed accounts of the definitions than Garrett's or Beebee's—the first from Stephen Buckle and Galen Strawson, and the second from Paul Russell. My approach to these accounts is conciliatory. The skeptical interpretation is consistent with both accounts, although it is not committed to either. By supplementing their accounts with the skeptical interpretation, these authors can make better sense of why there are two definitions of “cause.”

Consider Buckle and Strawson first. Both claim that Hume is a causal realist—that is, that he believes there are mind-independent causal powers that are not a matter of mere regularity. On their view, the definitions fall short because both fail to pick out these causal powers. The best we can do is to define “cause” using either constant conjunction or the mind's determination, both of which give rise to the idea of necessity, but are “extraneous and foreign” (EHU 7.29; SBN 76) to the causal powers (Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract*, 207–210; Strawson, *The Secret Connexion*, 190–94; Strawson, “David Hume: Objects and Power,” 46–48). (John P. Wright approvingly cites Strawson on the definitions in “Hume's causal realism,” 90–92.)

Unlike Buckle and Strawson, I am not committed to the claim that Hume is a causal realist. The idea of causation is imperfect (on my view) because it involves the false supposition that there is something that (i) is the tie between cause and effect, and (ii) is in mind-external objects. Hume need not be a causal realist to think the idea of causation involves this false supposition. However, my interpretation can be combined with Buckle and Strawson's. They can agree that if the idea of causation were unproblematic, Hume would be able to provide a single definition of “cause”

involving something that meets both conditions—on their view, that thing would be mind-independent causal power. But in fact, the tie between cause and effect (which is the source of the impression of necessity) is “nothing but [the] determination of the mind” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266). And the only source of the impression in mind-external objects is their constant conjunction. Hume gives C1 and C2 (on this combined view) because there is no “more perfect” definition that employs mind-independent powers that meet conditions (i) and (ii).

The combined interpretation provides Buckle and Strawson with a better explanation of why there are two definitions. The claim that we cannot give a definition that captures mind-independent causal powers does not entail that the best we can do is give *two* definitions (rather than, say, one or three), let alone the two Hume gives. On the combined interpretation, Hume gives two definitions because there are two conditions ((i) and (ii)) that a definition would respect if the idea of causation were unproblematic. Each definition respects one of those conditions. And the claim that Hume sought something that meets both conditions is well supported by the connection between T 1.3.14.31 and by the combination of those passages in EHU 7.29. Therefore, the Buckle-Strawson view can be improved by combining it with the skeptical interpretation.

I turn finally to Paul Russell’s account of the definitions. According to Russell, the definitions reflect Hume’s acceptance of the “philosophical” view that acknowledges the double existence of our perceptions and external objects (see T 1.4.2; SBN 187–218). C1 describes causation “as it exists in bodies or the material world,” and C2 “as it exists in our thought or perceptions” (Russell, *Freedom*, 35). I agree that the double existence view is evident in the two definitions and the surrounding discussion. C2’s determination is a relation between the *ideas* of the causally related objects (our perceptions), whereas C1’s constant conjunction relates the objects themselves (in T 1.3.14.28–31; SBN 168–70, Hume seems primarily concerned with causation among mind-external objects).

However, the double existence view does not give the whole story concerning why there are two definitions. If it did, we should expect with Garrett that there will be two structurally parallel definitions available of “warmth,” “blue,” and so on. After all, on the double existence view there are external objects that are warm or blue, as well as impressions of warmth and blueness among our perceptions (cf. Russell, *Freedom*, 35). But as I argued against Garrett, “cause” is uniquely susceptible to two *source definitions*, which specify qualities that give rise to the relevant idea. The double existence view alone does not predict the unique structural feature of CAUSATION that is reflected in the two definitions.

The same point applies to a suggestion from an anonymous reviewer. I take the suggestion to be that there are two definitions of “cause” because Hume identifies two impression sources—a mind-internal source (the mind’s determination) and a mind-external source (constant conjunction). I agree. But we need to *explain why* Hume identifies both of these impression-sources, in a way that recognizes that there are not usually both internal and external sources to identify for the same impression. Again, it is helpful to consider the impressions that give rise to concepts like WARMTH and BLUE.

As with the Buckle-Strawson interpretation, there is an easy fix. We can agree with Russell that the definitions reflect the dual ontology of perceptions and external objects, and with the reviewer that the definitions reflect Hume’s identification of both an internal and an external impression-source. We can then supplement these claims with the skeptical interpretation. Hume needs *both* a definition that appeals to an impression-source in our perceptions (C2) *and* one that appeals to an impression-source in mind-external objects (C1). That is because there is no single impression-source that meets both conditions (i) and (ii). Instead, there is a source in our perceptions that meets only condition (i), and a source in mind-external objects that meets only condition (ii). Furthermore, with the skeptical interpretation in hand, we are in a better position to explain the skeptical remarks in T

1.4.7.5 and EHU 7.29. As with Buckle and Strawson, Russell (and the reviewer) can make better sense of the definitions by adopting the skeptical interpretation.

5. Conclusion

My concern in this paper has been why there are two definitions of “cause” rather than one. A puzzle that has received more extensive treatment in the literature is that the definitions appear not to be extensionally equivalent (see Robinson, “Hume’s Two Definitions,” 163–64). In response, some interpreters of Hume deny that Hume endorses both definitions. Others claim that definitions, for Hume, can be consistent even if not extensionally equivalent.²⁰ And others argue that properly understood, the definitions are extensionally equivalent (Garrett, *Cognition*, 108–109; see also *Hume*, 134–35). Here I note simply that on the skeptical interpretation I have advanced, it does not undermine Hume’s purposes in T 1.3.14.31 and EHU 7.29 if the definitions *are* inconsistent because not extensionally equivalent. If they are inconsistent, that simply underlines the imperfection in our idea of causation.

That said, the skeptical interpretation does not *require* that the definitions be inconsistent or not extensionally equivalent. For instance, perhaps we should read the definitions as extensionally equivalent to make sense of Hume’s discussions of liberty and necessity (Garrett, *Cognition*, 109). The skeptical interpretation is compatible with that claim.

Someone might think it a problem for the skeptical interpretation that Hume goes on to discuss causation in more constructive contexts, such as the discussion of liberty and necessity. Skeptical conclusions in T 1.3.14 and EHU 7, she might say, should lead Hume to *abandon* the concept CAUSATION. But this misunderstands Hume’s response to his own skepticism (e.g. T 1.4.7.9–15, EHU 12; SBN 269–74, 149–65). Hume thinks causation essential to our thought: “Our thoughts and enquiries are . . . every moment, employed about this relation” (EHU 7.29; SBN 76). Even if our concept of causation is highly imperfect, it is unlikely that we could stop thinking in terms of causes.

Hume therefore continues to invoke the concept in more constructive contexts. And given that we cannot “attain any more perfect definition” than C1 and C2 (EHU 7.29; SBN 77), it is appropriate for Hume to apply the definitions in these contexts.

Hume takes his discussion of causation to reveal a worrying imperfection in our concept of causation. The concept rests on the false supposition that there is something that is *both* in mind-external objects *and* that ties causally related objects together. Two definitions of “cause” are required rather than one, because no one thing meets both these conditions. Each definition captures one of the conditions but there is no single definition that captures both. To understand the definitions fully, we must appreciate their skeptical purpose.

NOTES

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¹ 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.

² For a helpful discussion of this debate concerning T 1.3.6 (SBN 86–93), see Roth, “Causation.”

³ References to the second *Enquiry* are to Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Beauchamp, hereafter cited in the text as “EPM” followed by section and paragraph numbers, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, hereafter cited in the text as “SBN” followed by page number.

⁴ I take the labels “C1” and “C2” from Garrett, *Cognition*, 97. The versions of C1 and C2 in the *Enquiry* (EHU 7.29) differ slightly from those in the *Treatise*, but the differences will not matter for my purposes.

⁵ All these are clearly impressions for Hume—for example, see T 2.1.1 (SBN 275–76).

⁶ See Beebee, *Hume on Causation*, 84–87. The impression of a necessary connection is an impression of *reflection* because it is “deriv’d . . . from our ideas” (T 1.1.2; SBN 7–8, cf. T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165–66).

⁷ For a helpful list of editions containing EPM and other works by Hume, see Hume, David, *Essays, Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Green and Grose, 85–86. The variation quoted is present in editions G to N.

⁸ A challenge to my interpretation of these EPM passages is that in the same variation to EPM 1.10, Hume says we cannot begin with “exact definitions” of virtue and vice. But the comparison with the footnote to EPM 8.1 strongly suggests that he *does* begin with the definition V2. We might resolve the tension by claiming (1) that V2 is a definition but not an “exact” one, or (2) that Hume removed the mention of “exact definitions” because he noticed the tension with his later statement of V2 in the footnote to EPM 8.1. But we should also consider the apparent ambiguity, context sensitivity or plain looseness in Hume’s use of the word “definition.” In particular, Hume sometimes (but not always) seems reluctant to call responsive definitions “definitions” (e.g., T 2.1.7.2; SBN 295). A similar reluctance might be at work in the variation to EPM 1.10. In any case, an explanation of the variation’s “exact definitions” needs to acknowledge the difficulties in unifying Hume’s talk of “definitions.”

⁹ At the start of EPM, Hume postpones to an appendix the question of “whether [Morals] be derived from Reason, or from Sentiment; whether we attain knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense” (EPM 1.3, 1.10; SBN 170–71, 173–74). It might be thought that V2 answers this question in favor of sentiment—and if that is so, it seems that on my interpretation he assumes from the outset an answer to a question he claims to have postponed. In response, it is first worth noting that V2 appears before the appendix on *any* plausible interpretation (in the footnote to EPM 8.1). But secondly, and more substantively, V2 *does not* answer the postponed question. V2 picks out which things are virtues, and perhaps tells us part of what it is to be a virtue: a virtue is whatever produces the pleasing sentiment of approbation. But the postponed question is one in descriptive psychology concerning how (and with which faculties) we discern the virtues. Hume’s opponents concerning that question claimed that we discern virtues entirely by reason. It might be that once we have discerned virtues in this way, we also have a “pleasing sentiment of approbation” towards them—indeed, Hume’s opponents “talk much of the beauty of

virtue” (EPM 1.4; SBN 170)—but that sentiment need not be what enables us to recognize the virtues in the first place. EPM’s Appendix 1 defends the further thesis that we make our moral judgments partly by sentiment and not by reason alone. EPM App 1.10 (from “The hypothesis...”) might suggest to some readers that Hume intends V2 as an answer to the postponed question, so here is how I think that passage should be read. Hume first states his answer to the postponed question, namely that “morality is determined by sentiment.” He then explains how the rest of EPM supports that conclusion, as he said it would (EPM 1.10, App. 1.1–2; SBN 173–75, 285–86): it uses V2 to collect specimens of virtue, and then “extract[s] some general observations” from these specimens. Those observations are captured by V1, which describes the “foundation of ethics” (EPM 1.10; SBN 174). Finally, Appendix 1 applies V1 to address the postponed question (EPM App 1.1–1.5; SBN 285–87). Hume’s reasoning is “plain,” unlike his opponent’s “abstruse” reasoning (EPM App. 1.10; SBN 289). This reading explains how V2 could occur earlier in EPM without answering the postponed question prematurely.

¹⁰ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point. For one way of understanding Hume’s continued commitment to his negative conclusions concerning human understanding, see Broughton, “The Inquiry in Hume’s *Treatise*,” esp. 549–53.

¹¹ Authors who share my assumption (despite their differences with each other on other points) include Henry E. Allison (*Custom and Reason in Hume*, 318–19, 328–29), Robert J. Fogelin (*Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, 125–38), Don Garrett (*Cognition*, 205–41), Janet Broughton (“The Inquiry in Hume’s *Treatise*”), Stephen M. Campbell (“The Surprise Twist in Hume’s *Treatise*”), and Donald C. Ainslie (*Hume’s True Scepticism*, 222–24, 234–46). William Edward Morris rejects my assumption in “Hume’s Conclusion.” Morris argues that in T 1.4.7.3–5 Hume gives voice to the skeptical sentiments a *traditional metaphysician* might have on encountering Hume’s conclusions. According to Morris, there is no good reason to think Hume himself expresses dissatisfaction in response to his discoveries (Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” 106–107). I lack the space here to discuss Morris’s arguments, but I am convinced by Campbell’s response to Morris (and to similar views proposed by Annette Baier and Barbara Winters). (See Campbell, “The Surprise Twist,” esp. 112–14.) Ainslie provides some helpful discussion of the Morris-Baier view in *Hume’s True Scepticism* (234–

37). Ainslie adopts Baier's claim that T 1.4.7.5 enacts a transition from false philosophy to true philosophy, but I take it he agrees with my assumption. In T 1.4.7.3–5 (on Ainslie's reading), Hume laments problems he has uncovered with human understanding (*Hume's True Scepticism*, 222–24). Those problems affect philosophy and make some of its aspirations unrealizable, rather than putting our everyday thinking in jeopardy. The true skeptical philosophy recognizes these limits of the human mind (*Hume's True Scepticism*, 239–42). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on these issues.

¹² Hume recognizes that causation occurs within the mind (between perceptions), so condition (ii) will need refinement: perhaps it should require (roughly) that the tie be somehow external to the *ideas* of the cause and of the effect. But Hume explicitly sets aside the case of causation within the mind in T 1.3.2.16 (SBN 78), and conforms to that practice in the passage under discussion (T 1.4.7.5) in his talk of the “external object.” My exposition follows Hume in this.

¹³ Hume often uses “necessity” and “necessary connexion” synonymously. See, for example, T 1.3.14.1 (SBN 155–56).

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

¹⁵ When Hume compares the concepts of secondary qualities with other sense-based concepts, he seems to think of the former in terms of the “modern philosophy's” account of them (e.g. T 3.1.1.26; SBN 468–69).

¹⁶ “[I]t appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate and operating principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning” (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 267).

¹⁷ A comment on what Hume shares with the objector in T 1.3.14.24–28. The objector's concern has the same root as the skeptical sentiments expressed in T 1.4.7.5—we suppose that the tie between cause and effect is in mind-external objects (that is, that something meets conditions (i) and (ii)). The objector in T 1.3.14.24–28 concludes from that supposition that Hume's account of causation is false, whereas Hume in T 1.4.7.5 accepts his account and reports disappointment at the fact that the mind-riveted supposition turns out to be mistaken. We should expect the supposition to have a grip on Hume, since it is “riveted in the mind” (T 1.3.14.26; SBN 167) because of the “mind's propensity to spread itself on external objects” (T 1.3.14.25, cf. T

1.3.14.26). Moreover, “we” must rehearse Hume’s arguments to ourselves repeatedly before we are “reconcil’d to [Hume’s] doctrine” (T 1.3.14.24; SBN 166–67), the paradoxical feature of which is that it denies that the tie is in mind-external objects (T 1.3.14.24–26; SBN 166–68). All of this suggests that the supposition that something meets conditions (i) and (ii) is deeply rooted in human psychology (surely including Hume’s), rather than simply being an artefact of a false philosophical view. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting these observations.

¹⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to T 1.3.14.4–12. The reviewer suggests that passage is in tension with the claim that Hume is discussing our concept of causation—the concept possessed by ordinary people, other philosophers, and Hume—throughout T 1.3.14, rather than just a concept possessed by other philosophers. My view is that the other philosophers Hume discusses are concerned with the (our) concept of causation. That concept is in view throughout the passages, even where he is discussing other philosophers’ *false accounts* of the concept. T 1.3.14 returns to the question posed in T 1.3.2, which is: “*What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected together?*” (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155, Hume’s italics; cf. EHU 7.9, 7.15; SBN 64, 67). That question does not concern other philosophers’ conceptions (T 1.3.2.3–6, T 1.3.2.13; SBN 74–75, 78). If the philosophers Hume discusses in T 1.3.14.4–12 are giving an account of another concept entirely, Hume would be changing the subject by addressing their views. We can add that the definitions concern our shared concept, as the reviewer seems to agree. If the other philosophers’ views did not purport to do that, it is unclear why Hume thinks the definitions provide an alternative to these philosophers’ views.

¹⁹ I think Beebe overstates her case when she says Garrett’s account of the definitions is “flatly incompatible” with Hume’s remarks about natural and philosophical relations (Beebe, *Hume on Causation*, 99). Still, Garrett’s account at least has the same potential drawback as mine: it is hard to see the connection between philosophical and natural relations on one hand, and Garrett’s story about sense-based concepts on the other.

²⁰ One way of supporting that claim is to say with Craig and Beebe that the definitions of “cause” are simply accounts of how beliefs in causal relations come about. I discuss that approach in section 3.

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