

Steff Rocknak Précis: *Imagined Causes: Hume's Conception of Objects*

(taken from pp. xiii-xv of book)

By Hume's own account, his most ambitious project, the *Treatise on Human Nature*, was a notoriously immature undertaking, choked with immutable difficulties (Norton (1993, p. 349)). Perhaps as a result of this immaturity, and perhaps because, as Kant suggests above, Hume is perpetually misread, his view on objects remains obscured. What are they? Are they ideas? Impressions? Mind-independent objects? All three? None of the above? To date, scholars have not provided a unified, much less exhaustive, answer to these questions. Rather, four somewhat fragmented interpretations have been circulating in the literature. We may characterize them (in partial response to Grene (1994)) as follows: 1.) The phenomenalist reading, where objects *are* impressions (e.g. Grene (1994), Bennett (1971), Steinberg (1981) and Dicker (2007)). 2.) The intentional reading, where objects are the objects of thought (e.g. Salmon (1983)). 3.) The realist reading, where objects are mind-independent things (e.g. Wilson (1989), Flage (1990), Costa (1989), G. Strawson (2007), Wright (2007)). 4.) The imagined, but non-causal reading, where objects, to varying degrees (depending on the scholar at hand) are imagined, but are not imagined as causes (e.g. Price (1940), Kemp Smith (1941) Wilbanks (1968) and Waxman (1994)).

This book presents a new interpretation of Humean objects, where I focus on just Book I of the *Treatise*. In the course of doing so, I show that although in places, Hume surely does suggest that objects are impressions, or are intentional, or are imagined but are not imagined as causes, these intermittent uses of the word 'object' do not reflect Hume's more comprehensive position. Nor does Hume think that objects are mind independent things; he is not a realist.

Rather, throughout Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume struggled with two positions on the nature of objects. On the one hand, Hume believed that despite what we, in our common, i.e. "vulgar" state of mind, or alternatively, in our more sophisticated "philosophical" state of mind, *think* that objects are, what we actually and *always* do, is imagine that objects are the causes of our various and interrupted perceptions. Objects are nothing more than complex, imagined *ideas*, as such, they are perceptions. Moreover, objects are necessarily imagined (as causes) because they constitute certain conditions of possibility for experience, making them functions of what we may refer to as a "transcendental" faculty of the imagination: "we *always* imagine that there is some cause that

separates or unites [objects]” (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74; emphasis added). In this very general respect, Hume anticipates the Kantian transcendental turn.

But Hume also seemed to think that we *only* imagine causes (although unwittingly) when we reach a certain “philosophical” level of thought. Thus, when we imagine a cause of a set of interrupted and varying perceptions—where we believe that this cause is a real mind-independent thing—we are “philosophers,” as they are described at the end of 1.4.2 (“Of skepticism with regard to the senses”). However, such philosophers are *not* aware that they are imagining causes. Instead, they mistakenly think that they are using *reason* to conclude that objects are real, mind-independent things. As a result, on this second reading, imagining causes is a natural, although unacknowledged, *culmination* of human thought, as opposed to being something that all of us, *always*—although unknowingly—do.

The tension between these two positions on objects manifests itself in Hume’s much discussed account of personal identity, presented in 1.4.6 of the *Treatise*. In fact, Hume openly acknowledges this tension in the Appendix to the *Treatise*. Here, he suggests that the philosophical account of perfect identity is *mistaken*, while his account of transcendently conceived of perfect identity is correct—at least in regard to the “self.” However, this is not a definitive solution to the conflict. In fact, this conflict is never resolved in the *Treatise* (nor anywhere else in Hume’s work).

Regardless of this rift in his thought, it may be shown that Hume thought that *some* objects are imagined to be causes in a manner that is more “justified” than others. Generally speaking, this justification turns on how empirically grounded the given imagined cause is in sense impressions. This “grounding” occurs much in the same way that Hume thinks we come up with an idea of an abstract, general idea. A *particular* object is imagined as the cause of a set of resembling impressions and/or ideas that exactly represent impressions. This imagined cause indirectly represents one of those impressions, making it “real”—in a manner to be explained in great detail in this book. Accordingly, Hume writes off the “antient” (T 1.4.3) and “modern” (T 1.4.4) conceptions of objects, as well as notions of “immaterial souls” (T 1.4.5) as *unjustified*. *These* philosophical “objects” are perverted cases of imagining causes; their “objects” do not represent (indirectly or not) any impression and/or any idea that exactly represents an impression, and thus, they are completely incomprehensible. Meanwhile, the “philosophical” position presented at the end of 1.4.2 may be interpreted as the generic, *justified* version of imagining causes.

In the course of showing that some ideas of particular objects are justified, we see that some causal inferences are justified. This justification is a function of the constancy and coherence that obtains of our impressions, and ideas that exactly represent our impressions. As such, justified causal relations reflect “reality” much in the same way that justified ideas of particular objects reflect reality. Relatedly, we see that Hume must be interpreted as an “agnostic” in regard to the mind-independent existence of objects and causality, contrary to the recent tendency to interpret Hume as a “skeptical realist.”

In the course of this analysis, we review seven kinds of belief at work in the *Treatise*, five kinds of reason, three kinds of causation, Hume’s two systems of reality, and two fundamental kinds of objects, i.e. those that may be identified with impressions and ideas that exactly represent impressions, and those that admit of what Hume refers to as a “perfect identity.”