

BOOK REVIEW

Stefanie Rocknak: *Imagined Causes: Hume's Conception of Objects*. Dordrecht: Springer (The New Synthese Historical Library Vol. 71), 2013, pp. xvi + 289. £117.00 (hb). ISBN 978-94-007-2186-9.

Hume believed that his account of the fundamental operations of the human mind was powerful enough not just to establish a new empirical science of the mind, but also to serve as the foundation for a 'complete system of the sciences' from physics and theology to politics and morals. But what exactly are the fundamental operations of the human mind as Hume describes them in the *Treatise*? And how are these operations supposed to give rise to the world of our experience, as well as to the sciences that provide us with our knowledge of this world? Answers to these questions have been remarkably slow in coming. Only in recent decades has a systematic effort gotten under way to provide a rigorous reconstruction of Hume's cognitive psychology, the most important works in this vein until now being those of Don Garrett (1997) and David Owen (1999).

Stefanie Rocknak's new book, *Imagined Causes: Hume's Conception of Objects* should be viewed as the next major piece of this ongoing project. Rocknak's strategic choice of subject matter, the simplicity and explanatory power of her main argument, together with her painstaking, detailed work on the relevant texts, make this a breakthrough work in Hume's psychology. Indeed, it deserves to be regarded as the most important book on Hume published in more than a decade.

As Rocknak correctly emphasizes, one of Hume's principal aims in Book 1 of the *Treatise* is to determine why human beings believe in the existence of mind-independent objects, which make up what 'we are pleas'd to call a *reality*' (T 1.3.9.3, SBN 108). If we can understand how we come to populate our world with objects of this kind, we will have grasped the nature of the most basic mechanism by which the real is discovered or invented by the human mind across the sciences. Rocknak immediately grants that Hume occasionally uses the term *object* when speaking of impressions (that is, sensations) or of mind-independent entities. But she argues, again correctly, that these texts do not reflect Hume's 'more comprehensive understanding of objects, which is unveiled as we proceed deeper into the book' (76). Hume recognizes that the reports of the senses are clearly insufficient to explain how the belief in objects comes about, since all the senses are able to provide is interrupted impressions of things. And we have no access to mind-independent entities other than what we get from the reports of the senses. Belief that these interrupted impressions are mind-independent

objects must therefore have its source in some additional psychological mechanism (T 1.4.2.14, SBN 193).

Rocknak's book is in two parts: The first (Rocknak's Parts 1–2) presents her reconstruction of Hume's final answer to the question of what this additional psychological mechanism is. The second (Parts 3–4) seeks to use this new understanding of the nature of object-construction in Hume's psychology to resolve other major interpretive questions in *Treatise 1*, including: (i) Hume's notoriously tangled discussion of objects as viewed by 'the vulgar' and by 'philosophers'; (ii) his account of personal identity; and (iii) his understanding of how psychology permits a distinction between beliefs that are justified and those that are not. My focus will be on the first part of Rocknak's book.

As Rocknak shows, Hume provides four different descriptions of the psychological mechanism by which what we take to be mind-independent objects are constructed. First, in Section 1.3.2, Hume argues that neither identity relations nor relations of time and space can be established as a result of impressions alone, but must 'always' be the result of some 'secret cause' that establishes these impressions as a unified thing or as separated things (T 1.3.2.2, SBN 74). Second, in Section 1.4.2, Hume suggests that when we regard objects as real, the 'opinion of their continu'd existence' is produced by 'a kind of reasoning from causation' that is nonetheless 'considerably different from' the more familiar kind of causal reasoning that is 'deriv'd from custom, and regulated by past experience' (T 1.4.2.19, SBN 195; 1.4.2.21, SBN 197). Third, a few pages later in Section 1.4.2, Hume argues that the concept of identity arises even from viewing a single impression due to a 'fiction of the imagination [that] almost universally takes place', according to which we 'imagine... a change in the time without any *variation* or *interruption* in the object' (T 1.4.2.29, SBN 201). And finally, in Section 1.4.6, Hume describes the construction of the self by the imagination, which projects 'something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts' of our experience to one another – something that provides these parts with a 'common end' and permits us to 'suppose that they bear to each other, the reciprocal relation of cause and effect in all their actions and operations' (T 1.4.6.6, SBN 254; T 1.4.6.12, SBN 257).

The guiding insight of *Imagined Causes* is that all four of these texts are talking about the same thing. They all propose that what we take to be a mind-independent object is in fact a certain kind of abstract idea: The idea of an invariable and uninterrupted object that is the cause of various disconnected impressions and ideas (148). To be sure, Hume is not as clear in saying this as he might have been. Nevertheless, Rocknak's reconstruction of these passages in their broader context is compelling. Among other things, this requires us to revise our understanding of what Hume means by an 'abstract idea', which term is now seen to apply to concrete objects like a particular orange or a particular motorcycle, no less than to more conventional abstract entities like 'the self' or 'time' (*En route* to this

conclusion, Rocknak provides a persuasive critique of Baxter [2007] on Hume's conception of time. This argument is quite important in itself and should be reviewed with care).

More dramatically, this new understanding of how the imagination constitutes reality means that for Hume, the relation of cause and effect does not only arise when the imagination establishes a 'necessary connexion' between types of impressions that tend to appear together, as is commonly supposed. It turns out that the imagination can also produce the sensation of such a necessary connection between a series of interrupted impressions and the invented idea of an invariable and uninterrupted object that causes them. Indeed, our minds establish exactly this kind of causal relation every time we believe in the existence of any mind-independent object. This imparts an entirely new meaning to Hume's claim that causation is 'the cement of the universe' (A 35, SBN 662), in that it is what holds real objects together. This is a radical proposal, but it is also a plausible one that contemporary cognitive science could stand to take seriously. I wonder whether Hume will not ultimately be vindicated on this point.

I think Rocknak's reading is right on these crucial issues. But her account is not without difficulties. First among these is her surprising neglect of Hume's bane, the theory of the 'double existence' of objects, according to which the object exists independently in the world and a second time, simultaneously, as a perception in the mind. Hume brings up this troubling theory at the very start of his principal discussion of the nature of objects (T 1.4.2.4, SBN 189). He then savages it as a 'monstrous' view invented by philosophers (T 1.4.2.52, SBN 215), before going on to trounce it again in his attack on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities ('Of the modern philosophy', T 1.4.4), which is what permits thinkers like Descartes and Locke to believe in the double existence of objects in the first place. For some reason, Rocknak neglects this material on double existence. As a result, she underestimates Hume's opposition to the position of the 'the philosophers' regarding the nature of objects, at times seemingly giving them credit for a theory of identity quite similar to Hume's – credit that Hume in fact explicitly denies them. Indeed, I am doubtful that Rocknak's interpretation of 'the philosophers' as being literally 'forced' into their view of objects by rejecting that of the vulgar (due to some fancy work with *modus ponens*) really holds water. Rocknak overlooks the fact that the whole 'double existence' position is, as Hume says, nothing better than a 'hypothesis' (T 1.4.2.52, SBN 215) – which means that no one was forced into it by anything. Hume actually thinks it's just fantasy.

It is also unfortunate that Rocknak, following H. H. Price, chooses to import the jargon of Kantian transcendentalism into her account of Hume's psychology, distinguishing between 'natural probable reasoning', which depends on the 'natural' causal relation; and what she calls 'transcendental probable reasoning', which Rocknak says is based on a special kind of 'transcendental causation' established by the 'transcendental imagination'

(50, 244). I understand Rocknak's point here to be that Hume, and not Kant, should be seen as having given the first major account of the preconditions of human knowledge. In this, too, she is right, and getting Hume credit for *his* Copernican revolution in philosophy is an honourable and worthy aim.

However, when applied to the *Treatise*, Kantian language is terribly misleading. When Kant speaks of the preconditions of human experience, he means that there are *logically necessary* preconditions of experience – that is, preconditions that hold good for rational beings in general without reference to the particular structure of the human mind. Hume, however, is talking about human psychology, and is seeking to discover the operations of the human mind that create the forms of specifically human experience (although animal minds may, he believes, have similar mechanisms). There is no hint that Hume's method is via some kind of 'transcendental argument' – a logical form that Hume would certainly have rejected as a fiction. Rather, Hume's method in searching for the mental operations that form our experience is Newtonian and inductive. It is of course true that the law of gravity is in a certain sense a 'precondition' of the orbital motion of the planets and the moon. But that does not mean it is a logically necessary precondition, or that there is a Kantian 'transcendental argument' that can get you there. Newton's method of arguing from phenomena to their causes is a form of induction, and exactly the same is true of Hume's method, which is an empirical exercise in seeking mental mechanisms. Kant, on the other hand, was at pains to reject both the inductive method and the resulting psychologicistic foundationalism that is Hume's entire purpose in the *Treatise*.

Moreover, I have a suspicion that Rocknak's distinction between normal 'natural causation' and Humean 'transcendental causation' (which establishes objects) may be overwrought. It is true that Hume invites this strong distinction with his talk of 'secret causes'. But in the end, the kind of causation that establishes imagined causes standing behind the impressions is not as different from the more familiar Humean causation as we may think. Remember that for Hume 'belief is a lively idea produc'd by a [causal] relation to a present impression' (T 1.3.7.6., SBN 97). This definition can be used to describe belief in standard relations of cause and effect, but it fits at least as well in describing the belief in mind-independent objects that is established by this new 'transcendental causation'. Given that this new kind of causation is every bit as 'natural' as what Rocknak calls 'natural causation', and happens every bit as automatically, there is room to wonder whether a little more work will not succeed in making these two kinds of causation into one.

In terms of style, Rocknak's book is high-octane analytic philosophy. She is relentlessly precise in her readings of texts, and occasionally you get the feeling that she is being more precise than Hume meant to be. At times, this makes *Imagined Causes* a difficult read. My own view is that all this rigour pays its bills in the form of a marvellously sharp argument, both where Rocknak is on the mark, and where she strays.

But even readers who are not grateful for this kind of workout can still appreciate Rocknak's theory of objects as imagined causes – a theory and a reading of Hume's *Treatise* that should be able to hold its own even without quite so much analytic machinery to defend it. Hume's theory of objects, as Rocknak reads it, is in fact a sweeping proposal that revises much of what we thought we knew about Book I of the *Treatise*, even as it brings a greater coherence to the text than we thought it could have. We are very fortunate to have this volume, which moves us firmly forward in understanding Hume's model of the mind and his system of the sciences, as well as the idealism that followed inexorably in the wake of these achievements.

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