Hume’s goal:

There are no ideas which occur in metaphysics more obscure and uncertain than those of “power,” “force,” “energy,” or “necessary connection,”.... We shall, therefore, endeavor in this section to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms and thereby remove some part of that obscurity which is so much complained of in this species of philosophy.

The discussion really centres on “necessary connection” and “power.”

Hume is an empiricist. He subscribes to the following principle:
It is impossible for us to think of anything which is not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses. (74)

That is, our ideas (that which we are capable of thinking) are copies of our impressions. Impressions are delivered to us either by our external sensory apparatus or by introspection.

We are allowed simple logical operations with our ideas, so that from the idea of gold and the idea of a mountain we can form the idea of a golden mountain. But ideas that go beyond this are to be discarded as meaningless, confused, obscure or even metaphysical.

• While this is an appealing doctrine, later (19th century) developments in science make it look over-simplified.
• How could a Humean empiricist account for the idea or concept of the atom, the electromagnetic field, or entropy?

But to return to Hume’s program, can we pick up the idea of, say, necessary connection from impressions we receive via our external sensory apparatus. Absolutely not, say Hume:
There is not, in any single particular instance of cause and effect, anything which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection....

In reality, there is no part of matter that does ever, by its sensible qualities, discover any power or energy, or give us ground to imagine that it could produce anything, or be followed by any other object, which we could denominate its effect. (75)

Do we perhaps obtain the idea of necessary connection by reflecting on the workings of our own minds, on, perhaps, “the influence of volition over the organs of the body”? (76) NO, because it is not something that we can know a priori (that is, independent of experience), and we cannot find a source for this idea in experience, contrary to what one might think.

1. We have no general understanding of how mind can control or activate matter.

Is there any principal in all nature more mysterious than the union of soul with body, by which as supposed spiritual substance acquires such an influence over a material
one that the most refined thought is able to actuate the grossest matter? (76-77)

2. If we understood how the will can influence the body, we would understand why we can control some of our organs but not others. But we do not understand this.

Why has the will an influence over the tongue and fingers, not over the heart or liver? This question would never embarrass us were we conscious of a power in the former case, not in the latter. (77)

3. We do not understand the specific mechanisms by which a volition moves a limb. But if we had knowledge of the power, we would know how it operated.

How indeed can we be conscious of a power to move our limbs when we have no such power, but only that to move certain animal spirits which, though they produce at last the motion of our limbs, yet operate in such a manner as is wholly beyond our comprehension (78)
**Conclusion:** “Our idea of power is not copied from any sentiment or consciousness of power within ourselves when we give rise to animal motion or apply our limbs to their proper use and office.” (78)

Perhaps the idea comes from the responsiveness of our thinking to our willing. NO: because

1. What experience informs us of is

    ...the existence of an idea consequent to a command of the will; but the manner in which this operation is performed, the power by which it is produced, is entirely beyond our comprehension. (79)

[This remark has more general application to the Cartesian idea that we have “privileged access” to the operation of our minds or consciousness. What happens, for instance, when we remember something? We cannot tell, from mere inspection of consciousness.]

2. As in (2) above, the mind has limited control over its thoughts, and still less over its sentiments and passions. These limits are revealed by experience, not through any understanding of the alleged power.
3. This power we have over our thoughts ("self-command") varies from time to time, but we learn of this only through experience, not through any understanding of the alleged power.

Part II

In our experience, as Hume famously says,

All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another, but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected*. (85)

[Looking ahead, one might observe that certain puzzling pairs of events in the "Mermin contraption" seem more than merely conjoined but also less than connected.]

**But.** There may be one more possible source of the idea of power or necessary connection. Suppose that we experience many instances of a certain kind or type of event followed by a second certain kind or type of event. We begin, when experiencing the first kind of event, to *expect* an event of the second kind. The mind develops a certain kind of *habit* of moving from an event of
one kind to that of the other. It is this habit, this trick of mind, that gives us the idea of necessary connection.

This connection, therefore, which we feel in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connection. Nothing further is in the case. (86)

This observation motivates Hume’s famous definition:

We may define a **cause** to be *an object followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second.* Or in other words, *where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed.* (87)

Note that the second definition is explicitly in terms of a counterfactual conditional whereas the first is just in terms of uniform constant conjunction. Perhaps the two are not really equivalent, though Hume clearly believes that they are.