Hume on free will

This handout follows the handout on ‘Hume on causation’. You should read that handout first.

HUMAN ACTION AND CAUSAL NECESSITY

In *Enquiry* §VIII, Hume claims that the history of philosophy contains many examples of debates in which each side is using its terms with different meanings; and so the two sides misunderstand each other, neither persuades the other, and so the debate continues. The debate over whether we have free will or whether our actions and choices are determined is like this. In fact, Hume claims, all that is needed to end the debate are ‘a few intelligible definitions’ (p. 149). He aims to provide these definitions, of necessity and of liberty; to show that no one has ever disagreed that we are both free and yet our actions follow necessarily; and so end the debate. So he defends a form of compatibilism.

His account is very closely dependent on his theory of causation. He begins by reiterating his claim, defended in §§ IV, V, and VII, that our ideas of necessity and causation arise from our experience of constant conjunction and the resulting inferences we make. He says that if anyone produces an analysis of causation which differs, or does not include the idea of necessity, he will give up the whole debate (p. 159).

From constant conjunction of two objects and inference from one to the other, then, we conclude that a necessary, causal relation holds between the two. At least, we do when it comes to material objects. We seem less willing to do so in the case of voluntary human action. But, in consistency, we should not, because we experience constant conjunction and make inferences here as well. So we must accept that actions and choices are both caused and necessarily follow from motives.

Constant conjunction: the same motives always produce the same choices and actions. History shows us nothing new; in fact, the point of doing history is ‘to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature’ (p. 150). Of course, we need to make allowance for the diversity of characters, prejudices, opinions that people hold, so that the actions of different people will differ somewhat. But this is usual in the material world as well: uniformity in every particular detail isn’t found anywhere in nature. If we can’t find a uniformity of motive and action, the cases differing from one person to the next, this isn’t proof against the point. As philosophers and scientists, we recognise that there are such a variety of different possible ‘minute or remote’ causes. So it is very likely that where the effect differs, this isn’t because the relationship between cause and effect is contingent rather than necessary, but that different causes are involved. And this seems to hold true about human action: people who know someone best, who know every particular of their character and situation, can often account for the most unexpected and irregular decisions. So we should conclude that human choice and action is as regular and uniform, involves constant conjunction just as much, as any part of nature.
Furthermore, we continually draw inferences on this basis. We act and plan our actions in ways that demonstrates our expectations that others will, in their voluntary actions, act in very specific ways, e.g. in taking goods to market, I expect others to come, to want to buy, and so on. And in our plans, we don’t make any distinction between how natural causes and others predictable actions will affect us, e.g. a prisoner planning his escape reckons with the problems of jailors as much as with bricks and mortar. Finally, to the objection that, when thinking of other people’s actions, we can say ‘but he might change his mind, and in an unpredictable way’, we should note that we make analogous claims regarding natural causation as well – that something could happen that we just didn’t anticipate, e.g. an earthquake. So, human action is as subject to causation and necessity as natural events: ‘A man who at noon leaves his purse full of gold on the pavement at Charing-Cross, may as well expect that it will fly away like a feather, as that he will find it untouched an hour later’ (p. 156).

**OBJECTIONS**

Hume argues that ‘the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature’ (p. 154). This is highly controversial, and it is not entirely clear how Hume wants to handle the objection that it is false.

On the one hand, he says that we must not expect everyone in the same circumstances to act in the same manner – we must allow for differences of character, etc. This suggest that the conjunction between motives and actions only holds at a fairly high level of generality, e.g. if someone is hungry, they will seek food. But, as Hume immediately acknowledges, taken as a causal law, this is false; there are many exceptions (e.g. the person is fasting or dieting or dislikes the food available or…). Certainly, we have no sense of necessity here; hunger and seeking food are not so conjoined in our minds that we believe the one must follow the other – our expectation is not that strong. So far, the conjunction is not as regular and uniform as, say, expecting spilled water to fall towards the ground rather than up towards the sky.

This leads to his second approach, viz. that these many differences (between people and situations) that lead from the same motive to different actions can all be accounted for if we take into account every detail of character and circumstance. And this is exactly parallel to how we treat complex natural events, such as the weather or the operations of the human body. In our experience of these, there seems to be some variation in the effects that flow from some event, e.g. taking medicine doesn’t always lead to cure. But we don’t think that the relation between taking medicine and its effects is contingent; we assume there are other causal factors we need to take into account. The same can be said about human action.

But there is a difficulty here. If we must take every detail of character and circumstance into account, then in what sense can we say that the conjunction of motives and actions is regular and uniform? For every character and every circumstance is different; how will we gain the requisite experience of constant conjunction that supports causal inference?

Hume faces a dilemma: the level at which we can speak of constant conjunction between motive and action is a very general level, where the conjunction is not so strong that it brings with it the sense of necessity; if we try to refine our description of how motive and action are conjoined, to avoid exceptions and generate the sense of necessity, then
each situation we describe is different, and we have lost uniformity and constant conjunction.

Do we not face the same problem with causation in objects? How do we solve the problem of complex causes there? We can make two suggestions. First, there is more uniformity – we can and do replicate complex causes (as in Hume’s case of the watch, p. 153), and are able to find every cause that operates; and this supports our belief that a variety of effects is the result of the interaction of many causes. Second, even when we cannot do this (as in the weather), we judge that we are dealing with the same kind of thing, viz. natural objects and events, in these cases as we are in cases in which we can successfully identify the ‘hidden’ causes. So again, our belief that all differences in effect spring from differences in causes is supported, in this case by analogy. In all of this, we are supported by the progress of science in the explanation of natural objects and events.

We can argue that these options for dealing with complex causes are not available to us with people. Motives are not the same kind of thing as natural events; and we know far less about the operations of the mind than about some natural objects, so we can never be sure that we have identified every cause that may operate. Psychology has not had similar success in discovering the ‘hidden’ causes in human motivation, and so has no more ‘exceptionless’ laws now than in Hume’s day.

**RESISTANCE TO NECESSITY**

In presenting his account, Hume doesn’t think he has said anything controversial. So if causation, and the idea of necessity it contains, derives from just such experiences of constant conjunction and inference, why do we not immediately accept that human actions are as necessary as natural events? Hume identifies two sources of resistance.

**Misunderstanding necessity**

The first is that we mistakenly think that there is a difference in the operation of causation in natural events and in human actions. We may think that our actions are uncaused. Or we may think that there is at least no necessity in the relations between motive and action, while there is necessity between cause and effect in natural events. We think that investigation of natural events will reveal this, but we know we do not experience any such connection between their motives and their actions. So we suppose there is a distinction between natural events and human actions. It is the idea of necessity, the idea that we have no ‘freedom’ in bringing about our actions, given our motives, that feels threatening.

Can we conclude that there are two types of causation, one involving necessity, which applies to material objects, and one that does, which applies to human action? Hume thinks the whole line of reasoning starts on the wrong foot:

> as long as we will rashly suppose, that we have some farther idea of necessity and causation in the operations of external objects; at the same time, that we can find nothing farther in the voluntary actions of the mind; there is no possibility of bringing the question to any determinate issue. (p. 157)

The point is that we make causal inferences as readily about human actions as we do about natural events. There just is nothing else to our idea of causal necessity than constant conjunction and inference. The idea of necessity is a result of custom, the movement of our minds that supports causal inference. Finding an absence of necessity
between motive and action ‘from the inside’ is therefore unsurprising. But there is nothing additional in the case of objects. If we accept that material objects are subject to causal necessity, we must accept that human agency is as well. So there is no distinction to be drawn.

We have argued above that there is such a distinction to be drawn (and give another argument below). Hume is right that at a general level, we make causal inferences about human actions. But this is not supported by the kind of necessary connection at the individual or particular level that we believe present in natural events. On the individual level, our experience and investigation of natural events and human actions differs. (This reply makes no special reference to finding an absence of a necessary connection in reflection, in one’s own acting, but applies to our experience of human action in general.)

The feeling of liberty
In a footnote (p. 158), Hume develops his comment that we do not feel necessity when we are in the process of actually deciding what to do. Quite the opposite – we actually have a feeling of liberty, that our action is not fixed or determined, that it is not true that the motives we have must lead us to act in one way rather than another. As already noted, this is unsurprising if necessity is not part of the cause and effect themselves, but arises from an impression of reflection. The impression of necessity occurs when we are considering a causal relation, it is only apparent from the third-person point of view. It is not a feeling which occurs – or can occur – from the first-person point of view.

Hume is therefore led to dismiss the lack of a feeling of necessity in agency as unimportant. It is a ‘false sensation’, since a spectator can successfully infer what we will do from knowing our motives. But we can take the argument in a different direction.

There are experiences people can have of being causally forced to do something – but in such cases, they feel that they are not agents, but objects subject to external forces. There is no experience of agency which involves the impression of causal necessity. There is the thought ‘Knowing me, I will do this’, which is neither clearly first or third personal. At first sight, though, this is an acceptance of constant conjunction and even inference, but it still lacks the idea of necessity.

With natural events, we can have only a third-personal point of view. Given Hume’s doctrine of the origin of ideas, and account of our experience of natural events, understanding causation between natural events as necessary is entirely appropriate. However, with events involving motives, we have both third-personal and first-personal points of view. From a first-personal point of view, agency does not involve necessity. So we have a different experience, for we experience the causal relation from a first-person perspective as well, and from this perspective, there is no necessity. It would not be unjustified to form an idea of agency – causation involving a mind – which lacks the idea of necessity.

The idea is this: the experience of constant conjunction is sufficient to create the transition of the mind from cause to effect and impression of necessity in the case of natural events. However, it is not sufficient in the case of agency, because against it we place the absence of an impression of necessity in our experience of agency. It is not that something more is needed to account for necessity in causation between natural events. It is rather that this effect of constant conjunction upon the mind is defeated in the case of agency.
This account is highly speculative. Nevertheless, it is not completely implausible.

**LIBERTY AND CHOICE**

Hume’s discussion of the definition of liberty is much more brief. He remarks that, given the evidence from constant conjunction and inference, liberty clearly doesn’t mean ‘unconnected to motives with uniformity’. It must therefore mean just ‘a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will’ (p. 159). So I act as I do because I choose to act that way. If I had chosen not to act that way, I would not have done so. This allows, in fact, it requires says Hume, that my actions are caused by my motives. According to this definition, then, liberty is compatible with our actions being caused.

But it is also possible that we mean something else by liberty: that liberty is not a power of acting, but a power of choosing. If I can do what I want, but I can’t choose what I want, then perhaps I am not free. This is a stronger sense of freedom. It is not enough to say that I would have acted differently if I had chosen to do so. We also need to say that I could have chosen to act differently.

The modern debate regarding free will has centred around this question: I must want to want what I want, or just doing what I want isn’t enough for freedom. A common example is that of an addiction which I want to give up, e.g. smoking. I may want a cigarette, but I don’t want to want a cigarette – and this is why addictions leave us unfree. For Hume, to want a cigarette and smoke is to be free, even if you want not to want a cigarette. But if our desires and choices are like addictions, we are not free. Hume’s definition of liberty would say that we are. Liberty must therefore be more complex than he allows.

Hume considers the idea that if our actions are subject to causal necessity, then there is a chain of causes reaching back to the beginning of everything: our actions are caused by our motives, our motives by – say, our experience and our genetic inheritance, each of these has preceding causes too, and so on. That would mean that our actions are ‘pre-ordained and ‘pre-determined’ (p. 162). This doesn’t sound like free will, and is the basis of an objection to compatibilism. Hume doesn’t answer the objection in this form, though he concludes that reason overreaches itself in attempting to consider these issues.

**THE ARGUMENT FROM MORAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The debate about free will and necessity has not been just about the metaphysical question of causation. It has always involved a moral dimension, viz. what is required for us to be morally responsible for our actions? Hume argues that we must accept both that actions are caused and that they are free, in the sense defined, in order to attribute moral responsibility.

If our actions were not caused, and caused by the motives of the person, in what way could we hold that person morally responsible? An action is only someone’s if it is caused by their motives; i.e. the cause is ‘within’ them, part of them, rather than external to them. And if the act is not caused at all, then the person can’t be held responsible. We are only morally concerned with actions insofar as they indicate someone’s character and motives. They therefore can’t arouse praise or blame in us unless they derive from these.