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Humes Old and New II - The two definitions and the doctrine of necessity

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Peter Millican lists four fashionable 'Humean heresies'. I shall concentrate on the fourth: the characterisation of Hume as what Millican describes as a 'causal realist', or, as it is more frequently put, a 'sceptical realist'. Hume thus interpreted is sometimes referred to as 'the New Hume'. Millican claims that Hume's argument for the 'doctrine of necessity' in Section VIII of the first *Enquiry*, 'Of Liberty and Necessity', is 'a torpedo into the core of the New Humeans' position' (Millican 2007: 193). I shall argue that in fact Hume's discussion of free will provides virtually no additional evidence, let alone decisive evidence, either for the traditional interpretation to which Millican subscribes, or for any other.

In §1, I provide a brief overview of the recent interpretative controversy surrounding Hume's views on causation. In §2, I describe how that controversy plays out in the case of Hume's famous 'two definitions' of causation – definitions that Hume explicitly appeals to in his argument, in Section VIII of the *Enquiry*, that there is but one species of necessity, which applies equally to the physical and the mental. In §3, I argue that since the kind of language Hume uses to describe his position in Section VIII is not significantly different to that used earlier in the *Enquiry*, Section VIII provides no additional *direct* textual evidence for or against any particular interpretative position. Both New Humeans and others can interpret Hume's words in just the ways they are used to having to do in other contexts. In §4, I turn to the more substantive issue of whether the structure of Hume's *argument* in Section VIII, as

opposed to the precise way in which he expresses it, provides evidence in favour of any particular interpretative position; and I shall argue that it does not.

1. Hume on causation: three interpretative positions

The **traditional interpretation** of Hume – the one that most of us remember from our undergraduate days, and the one that is associated with ‘Humeanism’ in contemporary metaphysics – casts Hume as a reductionist about causation: causation is to be defined in terms of temporal priority, contiguity, and constant conjunction. The most obvious piece of textual evidence for the traditional interpretation is, of course, Hume’s famous claim that ‘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* (E 76)¹ – though, as we shall see in §2, what exactly Hume is doing when he ‘defines’ causation is controversial question.

One issue that divides defenders of the traditional interpretation concerns Hume’s attitude towards the seeming possibility that, even though our concept of causation latches only onto regularities, there may yet be some kind of real necessity or power linking causes to effects. According to what is at least a possible version of the traditional interpretation, Hume straightforwardly denies that there is anything whatever in the world connecting causes to effects. Galen Strawson calls this the ‘Realist Regularity theory of causation’, and characterises it as the view that ‘there is, quite definitely, *absolutely nothing at all* about the nature of the world given which it is regular in its behaviour: there is *just* the regularity; that is all that causation in the world amounts to’ (Strawson 1989: 21).

A more plausible version of the traditional interpretation takes Hume to hold that it is simply incoherent to so much as suppose that there could be any kind of objective relation between causes and effects. Since any such alleged relation has been shown to be completely

¹ Throughout this paper, ‘E’ refers to Hume’s first *Enquiry* (Hume 1748) and ‘T’ to the *Treatise* (Hume 1739-40).

cut off from our experience, and since any genuine idea, and so anything that can genuinely contribute to the content of our thought, must be traceable to a source in impressions, it makes no sense whatsoever even to wonder whether an experience-transcendent relation between causes and effects might exist. Hence there is no contentful supposition available to us, either to affirm or deny, concerning the existence of any experience-transcendent relation between causes and effects.

Some more recent interpreters of Hume who belong in the ‘traditional’ camp have taken a rather more concessive view about the possibility of some kind of objective relation between causes and effects. Don Garrett, for example, claims that ‘for Hume there is no contradiction in the general supposition that there are things or qualities (nature unspecifiable) that we cannot represent. And he never denies, needs to deny, or seeks to deny, that there may be such things or qualities in causes’ (1997: 114). Garrett’s position finds textual support in the following passage:

I am, indeed, ready to allow, that there may be several qualities ... with which we are utterly unacquainted; and if we please to call these *power* or *efficacy*, ’twill be of little consequence to the world. But when, instead of meaning these unknown qualities, we make the terms of power or efficacy signify something, of which we have a clear idea, and which is incompatible with those objects, to which we apply it, obscurity and error begin to take place, and we are led astray by a false philosophy. (*T* 168)

The thought, then, is that it is perfectly conceivable that there could be *some experience-transcendent relation or other* that holds between causes and effects, of which we cannot form any more specific idea. But since our actual causal thought and talk – our deployment of words like ‘cause’, ‘necessity’, ‘power’ and ‘efficacy’ – is utterly insensible to the existence of any such relations, we cannot use those terms to *refer* to such relations. Or at any rate we cannot do so if we intend those terms to have the meaning they ordinarily have, or indeed any

specific meaning at all beyond signifying some unspecific unknown quality that may or may not exist.

The **sceptical realist interpretation**, by contrast, casts Hume as a firm believer in real causal powers, and takes Hume to think that these powers are what our ordinary causal thought and talk refer to. A central feature of the sceptical realist interpretation is the claim that Hume's primary point in his discussion of causation is an epistemological one. While our habits of expectation generate belief in real powers – when the transition in the mind from cause to effect generates belief *that* the first event causes the second, that belief really is a belief about the existence of a real power – we can never come to grasp the *nature* of that power, since our idea of it is generated not by the power itself but by the felt transition of the mind. So it makes sense to believe in real powers – indeed, belief in them is mandatory because it arises as a result of natural processes in the imagination – despite the fact that our *idea* of those powers is deficient: we cannot, as Strawson puts it, form a 'positively or descriptively contentful conception' of them (1989: 127).²

Finally, the **projectivist interpretation** casts Hume as a non-cognitivist about causal claims: our causal thought and talk *expresses* our inferential habits, rather than asserting either that the priority, contiguity and constant conjunction requirements obtain (as the traditional interpretation has it) or that causes have a real, experience-transcendent power to bring about their effects (as the sceptical realist interpretation has it).³ The projectivist interpretation agrees with the traditional interpretation that the contribution of the world is just the constant conjunction of consecutive events (which, again, need not be incompatible with the possibility that there may yet be further 'unknown qualities' relating causes and effects), but disagrees with the traditional interpretation on the matter of the semantics of our causal talk.

² Sceptical realist treatments of Hume include Wright 1983, Strawson 1989, and Buckle 2001.

³ See Blackburn 1984: 210-12, 1993: 55-7, 2000: 107-11 and my 2006, Chapter 6.

One quick (though of course not decisive) way to motivate the projectivist interpretation, against the traditional interpretation, is to consider the difficulty the traditional interpretation has in reconciling the claim that ‘*c* caused *e*’ just *means* ‘*Cs* are constantly conjoined with *Es*’ with Hume’s apparent insistence that the idea of necessary connection is an *additional* component of our idea of causation. On the projectivist interpretation, the idea of necessary connection does indeed feature as an additional component: it is the projection of the felt transition of the mind that gives causation its distinctive modal character.

2. The two definitions

In both the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise*, Hume defines causation twice over.⁴ In the *Enquiry* versions, the two definitions run as follows. We may define a cause to be:

(D1) *an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second. (E 76)*

(D2) *an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other. (E 77)*

While (D1) might superficially seem to hand us the traditional interpretation on a plate, many different interpretations of the two definitions have been suggested. Here I survey what is only intended to be a large enough sample to raise the kinds of issue that will be relevant to the discussion of liberty and necessity.

The most obvious problem with taking the two ‘definitions’ to be genuine definitions is that they are not, apparently, extensionally equivalent. A standard way to deal with this problem (see Robinson 1962) has been to hold that only (D1) provides a genuine *definition* of causation; the second merely provides an account of the way in which we do in fact (or perhaps should) come to make causal judgments. While we cannot directly find out whether

⁴ Well, three times in the *Enquiry*, if you count Hume’s ‘other words’ for the first definition: an object, followed by another, ‘*where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed*’ (E 76). I ignore Hume’s counterfactual formulation in what follows.

Cs and Es are universally constantly conjoined, those situations in which our thought is ‘conveyed’ from *c* to *e* are just those situations in which we have had experience of *past* constant conjunctions, and those are the situations in which we do (or perhaps should) make causal judgments. This conception of the two definitions, of course, is consistent only with the traditional interpretation, since it takes (D1) to specify fully and uniquely the *content* of causal judgments.

Strawson, by contrast, points out that, before introducing the two definitions, Hume notes that ‘so imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning it, that it is impossible to give any just definition of cause, except what is drawn from something extraneous and foreign to it’ (*E* 76). ‘Which is to say,’ Strawson says, ‘that there is (of course) something about the (individual) cause-event in virtue of which it is causally connected with its effect ... but, simply, we do not and cannot know its nature, or what it actually is’ (1989: 209). For Strawson’s Hume, then, we ‘can’t give a perfect definition of causation because of our ignorance of its nature. All we can encompass in our definitions is its observable manifestations – the observable regular-succession manifestations in the objects, and the observable feelings of necessity or determination (or habits of inference) in the mind to which they give rise. That is, all we can do is to say what it is to us, so far as we have any positively contentful grasp or experience of it’ (1989: 209-10). So the definitions define what causation is ‘to us’, but not what it is in itself.

A third interpretative position denies that the ‘definitions’ are really *definitions*, as contemporary analytic philosophers understand the term, at all. Instead, as Edward Craig puts it, the definitions merely characterize the ‘circumstances under which belief in a causal connection arises, one concentrating on the outward situation, the other on the state of the believer’s mind that those outward facts induce’ (1987: 108). This interpretation is consistent

with all three broad interpretative options, since it simply leaves the issue of the *content* of ‘belief in a causal connection’ unanswered.

Finally, my own view is that none of the suggestions described above do justice to Hume’s claim in the *Treatise* that the two 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* 170). Hume defines ‘philosophical’ and ‘natural’ relations in mental terms: the difference between them lies in the mental processes involved in ‘placing’ objects in relations – relations of quantity, resemblance, contiguity, causation, and so on. A philosophical relation is ‘that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them’. For example, if I conjure up the idea of a cat and the idea of a mat, I can consider the cat as *on* the mat, or *beside* it, or *under* it, and so on. A natural relation, by contrast, is ‘that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and the one naturally introduces another’ (*T* 170). For example, a ‘picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original’ (*E* 24), because on looking at a picture of the Eiffel Tower, say, I *automatically* think of the Eiffel Tower itself, since the picture *resembles* the object portrayed. Hume takes the natural relations to be resemblance, contiguity, and causation.

For Hume, causation (like contiguity and resemblance) is *both* a natural and a philosophical relation. In other words, there are two different sorts of mental mechanism by which I can come to form a causal judgment: *either*, thanks to the transition of the mind, my impression of one event will automatically lead me to expect another, and I will thereby come to ‘call the one object, *Cause*; the other, *Effect*’ (*E* 75); *or*, in the absence of the circumstances that will deliver this natural transition, I can consider two events and consider whether to place them in the relation of causation. This might happen if, say, I am conducting

a highly controlled one-off scientific experiment. In that case, I won't have the appropriate experience of past constant conjunction to trigger the transition of the mind from the impression of the first event to the expectation of the second; but I am nonetheless entitled to judge that events of the first kind are constantly conjoined with events of the second kind, and hence that the first did indeed cause the second.

On this view, then, the two definitions are not two different ways of describing the *circumstances* under which we come to make causal judgments; rather they are descriptions of the two different *ways* in which we come to make them. Like the former interpretation, however, the latter leaves the *content* of causal claims unspecified; it is thus an interpretation that leaves all the broad interpretative positions in play.

I shall not attempt to adjudicate between the different proposed interpretations of the two definitions here.⁵ For the purposes of this paper, the important question is whether what Hume says in his argument for the doctrine of necessity provides any *additional* evidence for or against any of the broader interpretative options. One way in which it might, in principle, do that is by ruling out one or more of the above interpretations of the two definitions. What we cannot do, given the question just described, is take a stand on which interpretation of the two definitions is the correct one, read that interpretation into Hume's argument for the doctrine of necessity, and draw conclusions about the viability of the different broad interpretative options on that basis. It would hardly be surprising, for example, to find that if we read the traditional interpretation of the two definitions into Hume's argument, we will find him claiming that regularity is all there is to causal necessity. This would not give us any additional reason to believe that Hume really is a regularity theorist, since this is something that we will have taken for granted at the outset.

⁵ I do that in my 2006, §4.5 and 4.6.

3. The argument for the doctrine of necessity: Hume's words

Hume deploys his two definitions in Part One of Section VIII of the *Enquiry*, 'Of liberty and necessity', in order to demonstrate that, as he puts it, 'all men have ever agreed in the doctrine both of necessity and of liberty, according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms; and that the whole controversy has hitherto turned merely upon words' (*E* 81). It is in Hume's argument that 'all men have ever agreed' to the 'doctrine of necessity' that the two definitions do their work. Putting it very roughly, the doctrine of necessity is the claim that human actions are necessarily connected to the operations of the mind in just the same sense in which purely material events are necessarily connected to one another: what goes for billiard balls goes equally for human behaviour. The argument itself is simple: according to the two definitions, regularity and predictability 'form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter' (*E* 82). But we can all agree that human behaviour is just as regular as the behaviour of material objects, and indeed our ability to form stable social relationships depends crucially on our ability to predict others' behaviour and to draw inferences from behaviour to character and motives. Hence, at least implicitly, we all agree that the doctrine of necessity applies equally to human action and to the operations of nature.

The first two paragraphs of the argument deploy the kind of talk that has played centre stage in the dispute between sceptical realist interpreters and their opponents in the context of the *Enquiry*: Hume manages, to the untrained ear at least, to sound like a realist in the first paragraph, and a regularity theorist in the second. The very first thing Hume says is:

It is universally allowed that matter, in all its operations, is actuated by a necessary force, and that every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause that no other effect, in such particular circumstances, could possibly have resulted from it. The degree and direction of every motion is, by the laws of nature, prescribed by such exactness that a living creature may as soon arise from the shock of two bodies, as motion, in any other degree or direction than what is actually produced by it. (*E* 82)

This passage has a distinctly realist-sounding tone to it, and echoes many previous claims in the *Enquiry*, where Hume apparently admits that there are ‘ultimate springs and principles’ (*E* 30), ‘powers and principles on which the influence of ... objects entirely depends’ (*E* 33), and so on.

Those who spurn the sceptical realist interpretation are adept at hearing such claims in a different way, however.⁶ A standard approach is simply to reinterpret them in the light of Hume’s two definitions; after all, Hume tells us that the origin of the idea of necessity is the felt transition of the mind (so that’s ‘necessary force’ dealt with), and he believes in determinism (‘precisely determined’; ‘prescribed by such exactness’). As Simon Blackburn puts it:

[I]t is simply no good citing one more time the places where Hume shows sympathy with unknown causes, hidden springs and principles, the propriety of thinking of matter as containing within itself the power to initiate motion, and so on ... This is like staring at passages where he says, for instance, that ingratitude is horrid, and claiming him for moral realism. (2000: 110-11)

There is no additional evidence here, then, to add grist to the sceptical realist’s mill; there is nothing in the above paragraph that we haven’t seen before, and if non-sceptical realist interpretations succeed in dealing with Hume’s other realist-sounding pronouncements, they succeed here too.

Indeed, Hume immediately proceeds to say: ‘Would we, therefore, form a just and precise idea of *necessity*, we must consider whence that idea arises when we apply it to the operations of bodies’ (*E* 82). In effect, then, he seems to be telling us that the preceding passage is in essence merely a commitment to a deterministic world of necessary connections, and he is about to remind us what that commitment amounts to:

⁶ See for example Blackburn 2000, Jacobson 2000, and Winkler 2000. For a discussion of the non-sceptical realist interpretative options in the face of such claims, see my 2006: §7.2.

It seems evident that, if all the scenes of nature were continually shifted in such a manner that no two events bore any resemblance to each other ... we should never, in that case, have attained the least idea of necessity, or of a connexion among these objects ... Our idea, therefore, of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature ... and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connexion. (E 82)

Here we have Hume rehearsing his two definitions, and sounding at his *least* realist: necessity, he seems to be saying, just *is* a matter of constant conjunction and the felt transition of the mind. But of course sceptical realists are similarly adept at hearing all this in a different way. As we have already seen, Strawson, for example, holds that the two definitions merely define causation (or necessity) *as it is for us*. The necessity *we ascribe* to matter – that of which we have a fully contentful idea – is indeed a matter of constant conjunction and inference. But that in no way precludes Hume from holding that what we *refer* to in our causal talk – that of which we cannot have a fully contentful idea – is something over and above the ‘necessity, which we ascribe to matter’. So again we have no new direct textual evidence here that Hume is no sceptical realist.

Indeed, Hume later reverts to more sceptical-realist-sounding, epistemological talk, when explaining why people have been so reluctant to ‘acknowledge ... in words’ the commitment to the ‘doctrine of necessity’ that is implicit ‘in their whole practice and reasoning’ (E 92). He says:

[A]ll our faculties can never carry us farther in our knowledge of this relation than barely to observe that particular objects are *constantly conjoined* together, and that the mind is carried, by a *customary transition*, from the appearance of one to the belief of the other ... being once convinced that we know nothing farther of causation of any kind than merely the *constant*

conjunction of objects, and the consequent *inference* of the mind from one to another ... we may be more easily led to own the same necessity common to all causes. (E 92)

Here Hume appears to be stressing, as he does when he presents the two definitions earlier in the *Enquiry*, that we have no *knowledge* of causation beyond constant conjunction and the transition of the mind. Again, though, there is nothing new here; if non-sceptical realist interpretations of Hume's remarks surrounding the two definitions succeed, they will succeed here too.⁷

As far as brute appeal to Hume's words is concerned, then, Hume's argument for the doctrine of necessity leaves everything where it was. His talk is just as frustratingly open to wildly different interpretations here as it is earlier in the *Enquiry*, moving freely between suggesting that all there *is* to necessity is constant conjunction and the transition of the mind, and suggesting that those criteria simply exhaust what we can *know* about causation. So far – as far as my overall thesis is concerned – so good. More interesting, of course, is the question of whether Hume's *argument* provides additional support to one or other of the broad interpretative options. It is to that topic that I now turn.

4. Hume's argument for the doctrine of necessity

Recall that Hume deploys his two definitions in order to show that 'all men have ever agreed' to the doctrine of necessity, that is, to the claim that human behaviour is necessarily connected to character, motives and so on in just the same way as the movement of a cue ball is necessarily connected to the angle and speed and so on with which it is struck by the cue. In this section, I shall argue that this argument will work equally well whichever of the four interpretative spins we put on the two definitions – and so, *pace* Millican, it will work equally

⁷ See my 2006, §7.2 again. There is of course an issue – and this is Millican's torpedo into the core of the sceptical realist interpretations – surrounding whether Hume can legitimately claim that the *same* necessity is common to the mental and the physical, if all his 'definitions' achieve are conceptions of what necessity is *for us*. I return to this issue later.

well whichever broader interpretative position we adopt with regard to Hume's theory of causation. I then consider and counter two possible objections to this claim.

The standard interpretative position concerning the two definitions is to take them (or perhaps just the first definition) at face value: causation, and hence necessity, just *is* a matter of constant conjunction and/or the felt determination of the mind. Clearly this would give Hume what he needs to establish the doctrine of necessity in the realm of human action: if necessity is just constant conjunction and/or the felt determination of the mind, then, given that those two features are present in the realm of human action as well as in the realm of non-human events, the doctrine of necessity is established.

The second position described in §2 – Strawson's claim that the two definitions say what necessity 'is to us, so far as we have any positively contentful grasp or experience of it' – is less obviously reconcilable with Hume's aim of establishing the doctrine of necessity, for it raises the worry that Hume's opponent might be able to make just the kind of move that concerns Millican. Millican quotes Hume's summary, in the *Abstract* of the *Treatise*, of the final stages of the argument for the doctrine of necessity:

[T]he most zealous advocates for free-will must allow this union and inference with regard to human actions. They will only deny, that this makes the whole of necessity. But then they must shew, that we have an idea of something else in the actions of matter; which, according to the foregoing reasoning, is impossible. (*T* 661)

Millican says, '[n]ote that here Hume is explicitly appealing to the limits of coherent thought, as revealed by his search for the impression of necessary connexion' (2007: 192). Thus Hume's 'libertarian opponent, in supposing that "the actions of matter" involve some objective necessity that outruns the Humean definitions, is trying to think the unthinkable' (2007: 193). He continues:

This simple argument is – it seems to me – a torpedo into the core of the New Humeans' position, for Hume is here denying exactly what they assert, namely, that we can coherently

ascribe to things some kind of ‘upper-case’ Causation or ‘thick’ necessity that goes beyond his two definitions. If we could indeed do this, then the libertarian would be able to ascribe that thick necessity to matter but not to minds, and thus undermine Hume’s claim of equivalence between the necessity of the two domains, which is the entire point of his argument. (*ibid.*)

In order to counter Millican’s charge, the sceptical realist needs to deny that the coherent ascription of ‘thick’ necessity that goes beyond Hume’s two definitions would allow the libertarian to ‘ascribe that thick necessity to matter but not to minds’. *Prima facie*, it’s not clear how this trick can be turned. One way in which one might try to proceed would be to claim that Hume is merely making an epistemic point: since our *grounds* for believing in thick necessity in both the human and non-human cases are the same, the libertarian has no right to claim that thick necessity is present in the first case and absent in the second. But this, just by itself, is not good enough: Hume’s argument is not that (as far as our best evidence tells us) necessity is *in fact* present in both cases; it is that *everyone agrees* (on reflection, and once they have accepted the two definitions) that this is so. Otherwise the disagreement between Hume and his libertarian opponents would not turn ‘merely upon words’ at all, as Hume says it does. The libertarian would be making a substantive, coherent claim that Hume denies, and so would be in no position to agree with Hume that necessity is present in both cases, even having accepted his two definitions, conceived, as Strawson conceives them, as definitions of what causation is *to us*.

The sceptical realist interpreter thus needs to square the claim that the two definitions do not exhaust the nature of necessity with Hume’s claim that, once we accept the two definitions, we will all *in fact* agree on the doctrine of necessity – and not merely with the claim that there will be no empirical *grounds* for disagreement. I shall argue that this can be done.

We need to remember that Hume's epistemology, as far as causation is concerned, has both naturalistic and normative aspects. On the naturalistic side, belief in a world of causes and effects is mandatory: given the way the mind works and the impressions it produces, we have no choice but to consider those events such that we infer one event from the impression of another as standing in the relation of causation. Hume thinks that, while we often fail to have the impression of necessary connection in the first-personal case – when people 'turn their reflections towards the operations of their own minds', they '*feel* no ... connexion of the motive and the action' (*E* 92) – there is frequently no such failure when we observe the behaviour of others. When I predict with certainty that someone who accidentally touches a hot iron will immediately withdraw her hand, I automatically regard the relationship between the two as a causal one, just as I come to make causal judgments when watching a game of snooker. And the belief that I thereby come to have will have exactly the same content, as far as causation is concerned, in each case. According to the sceptical realist interpretation, the belief in question amounts to a belief in what Millican calls 'thick necessity'. This is not something we have a choice about; according to New Humeans, belief in thick necessity just *is* what is forced upon us when we find ourselves with the impression of necessary connection.

On the normative side, however, we should not merely restrict our belief in causation to those cases where the imagination happens to deliver the impression of necessary connection: Hume clearly tells us, in his 'rules by which to judge of causes and effects' (*T* 173-6), that we *ought* to seek out hidden causes, for example. One of the aims of Hume's discussion of the doctrine of necessity is to show that we do, in fact, subscribe to Hume's rules in the human case every bit as much as in the non-human case; for example, 'from observing the variety of conduct in different men, we are enabled to form a greater variety of maxims, which still suppose a degree of uniformity and regularity' (*E* 85). In other words,

when faced with apparently irregular behaviour in apparently similar individuals, we assume that there are, and seek out, hidden differences in circumstance, character or motives that explain the differences in behaviour. All this is part and parcel of Hume's argument that we do *in fact* subscribe to the doctrine of necessity. As Hume says in the *Abstract* to the *Treatise*, 'there are two particulars, which we are to regard as essential to *necessity*, viz. the constant *union* and the *inference* of the mind, and wherever we discover these we must acknowledge a necessity' (T 661).

What is important for current purposes is that Hume's 'doctrine of necessity' is exactly that: the doctrine of *necessity* – or, to use more familiar parlance, the doctrine of *causal* determinism. The thesis Hume takes to be implicit in our everyday inferential practices is not the thesis that human actions are *merely* constantly conjoined with motives, features of one's character, and so on; it is the thesis that human actions are *causally* determined or *necessitated*.⁸ This is what we 'must acknowledge' when we seek out hidden causes, draw inferences from actions to motives, and so on. In other words we do not, *in fact*, think that human actions fail to stand in some relation that physical causes and effects stand in. Insofar as libertarians claim that that they *do* think this, their claim is contradicted by their own inferential practices. While the impression of necessary connection is perhaps less frequently present in the case of human actions, particularly in the first-personal case, our inferential practices show that we do nonetheless have causal beliefs in the case of human action – and those causal beliefs will have just the same semantics as causal beliefs in the non-human case. On the sceptical realist interpretation, belief in thick necessity is what is delivered by constant conjunction and the felt determination of the mind. But it is also what is sought when we look for the regularities that are masked by the irregular behaviour of

⁸ This is supposed to be an interpretatively neutral claim. According to the traditional interpretation there is of course little or no daylight between the two theses, but Hume is still committed to the latter as well as the former.

apparently similar individuals, and it is what is delivered when we find those underlying regularities.

On Strawson's conception of the two definitions, then, the definitions tell us what necessity is *to us*. They fail to 'carry us farther in our knowledge of this relation' (E 92), in the sense that they do not adequately characterise causation as it is in itself, but *that the relation exists* is nonetheless something that we are compelled to accept in the case of human actions just as much as in the case of non-human events.

It is worth noting that there are various different kinds of libertarian opponent that Hume might have in mind. One kind of libertarian holds that human actions, or perhaps decisions, are not caused at all. A second holds that human actions or decisions are caused without being necessitated, and a third holds that human actions are necessitated, but by a different species of necessity than that which holds in the non-human realm. James Harris (2003) argues that Hume's opponent is in fact the libertarian of the third kind, as exemplified by, for example, Samuel Clarke: 'The *necessity* ... by which the *power of acting* follows the *judgment of the understanding*, is only a *moral necessity*, that is, *no necessity at all* in the sense wherein the opposers of liberty understand *necessity*' (Clarke 1738: 565). A reasonable and moral person, Clarke claims, 'judges it unreasonable for him to hurt or destroy himself; ... he *cannot possibly* act contrary to this judgment, not because he wants a *natural* or *physical power* to do so, but because 'tis absurd and mischievous, and *morally impossible*, for him to choose to do it' (*ibid.*). In other words, according to Clarke, while such a person is not *physically* necessitated to refrain from harming himself, he is nonetheless *morally* necessitated.

Harris argues that, given Hume's intended opponent, he cannot be a sceptical realist of the Strawsonian kind. The reason is that, thus interpreted, Hume's argument fails to provide libertarians like Clarke with a conception of necessity that they would be prepared to

accept. Hume says, after all, that his argument is designed to show that ‘all men have ever agreed in the doctrine ... of necessity’ (*E* 81). But if the kind of ‘necessity’ that we are all supposed to agree to exist is the kind that sceptical realist interpreters say it is – if it amounts to what in §2 I called ‘real powers’ – then, says Harris, Hume’s libertarians will simply *not* agree to the doctrine of necessity, thus construed, since the existence this kind of necessity in the realm of human actions is precisely what libertarians like Clarke deny.⁹

The problem with Harris’s argument is that it presupposes that Hume, *qua* sceptical realist, allows that one can coherently consider the possibility that there is a kind of necessity – moral necessity – that is distinctively different to physical necessity. The sceptical realist interpreter, it seems to me, can deny this. After all, sceptical realist interpreters claim that belief in real powers is a natural belief – it is one that is forced on us by the operations of the imagination. And, if the argument above concerning the normative aspect of Hume’s epistemology of causation is correct, Hume holds that that belief is one that we are *in fact*, whether we like it or not, committed to in cases where, for example, we believe that apparent irregularities in human behaviour are explained by hidden differences in character or motives. So, while the libertarian might *try* to claim that the kind of necessity we are committed to in such cases is mere moral necessity, Hume’s argument shows that the libertarian is simply deluding herself: the necessity she is in fact committed to in the human realm just *is* the same as the necessity she is committed to in the non-human realm.

What about the final two interpretations of the two definitions sketched in §2? Recall that, according to the third interpretation, the definitions merely specify the conditions under which we do, in fact, come to make causal judgments, and according to the fourth interpretation, they specify the mental mechanisms by which we come to form causal judgments. As I said, both interpretations are neutral with respect to the broader interpretative

⁹ See Harris 2003, §§III and IV. Harris takes Hume to be agnostic about evidence-transcendent necessity, in the sense that Hume believes there is such a thing but has no view about its nature, or indeed about whether there might be more than one kind of such necessity.

issue of Hume's theory of causation. And both, it seems to me, are consistent with Hume's aims in his discussion of the doctrine of necessity.

To say that the two definitions do not specify the meaning of 'cause', and hence that the two definitions are silent with respect to the broader interpretative controversy described in §1, is not to say that Hume offers us an additional, independent account of the meaning of 'cause'. Insofar as Hume does offer us an account, it is his claim that there is but one impression-source of the idea of necessary connection, viz, the impression that we *feel* when we infer one event (the effect) from another (its cause). That account, just by itself, does not yield a unique interpretative position; textual support for the different interpretative positions has to come from broader considerations concerning the nature of Hume's overall project, his comments about applying to external bodies the sensations to which they give rise, his claim that the definitions display our ignorance concerning the nature of reality, and so on. The account does, however, establish two things. First, whatever Hume thinks we mean by 'cause', that meaning must be the same in all contexts: when we deploy causal talk, our meaning is fixed by the impression-source of the idea of necessary connection. If we try to mean something different by 'cause', for example when describing the relation between human motives and actions, we will fail. Moreover, the same goes for any synonym for 'cause': 'necessity', 'power', 'efficacy', and so on. Second, the circumstances under which causal talk is appropriate are likewise fixed: where there is constant conjunction (or where we have good grounds to believe that there is), and where we find ourselves inferring one event from another, we should judge the events in question to stand in a causal relation to one another.

Hume's definitions encapsulate these two constraints, by reminding us of the source of causal judgment, in both the first sense just described (the closing-off of the conceptual space within which we might attempt to articulate different kinds of causation or necessity)

and the second (the conditions under which causal judgments are appropriate). And the two constraints together do precisely the job Hume needs to be done in order to establish the doctrine of necessity. The first constraint dooms any attempt to articulate a difference between physical and moral necessity, and the second constraint dooms any attempt to claim that human behaviour is predictable and yet not necessitated in any sense.

§4 Conclusion

I have argued that Hume's argument for the doctrine of necessity in Section VIII of the *Enquiry* provides no new evidence against the sceptical realist interpretation. Hume's argument is consistent with the available alternative readings of the two definitions sketched in §2, and is correspondingly consistent with all the interpretative positions concerning Hume's theory of causation sketched in §1.

This is not to deny that the *easiest* way to read Section VIII is to take Hume's two definitions at face value, as genuine definitions, and this might be thought to provide at least some evidence for the traditional interpretation. But in fact, as I mentioned in §2, thinking of *both* definitions as genuine definitions is not an option even for the traditional interpreter, given that they are manifestly not extensionally equivalent. So we already have reasons not to take them, collectively, at face value.

I myself cannot decide whether the Hume of the *Enquiry* is a projectivist or a sceptical realist, and it would be nice if his discussion of the doctrine of necessity decided the issue. Sadly, however, it does not.

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