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Paper 3

Intro to History of Modern Philosophy

Hume’s Philosophical View: Determinism and the Free Will of Humans

In Section VIII of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: Of Liberty and Necessity,* Hume points out that the long held controversy regarding liberty and necessity are considered by philosophers as mutually exclusive. Specifically, for philosophers who believe in necessity, assured that everything must have an ultimate cause, there is no room of human freedom (also known as “liberty”). In their view, human actions are determined by a necessary cause in accordance with laws of nature in a clock like universe. Therefore, human beings are not responsible for what they do and thus cannot praise or blame people for what they have done. On the other side, people who are knowns as Libertarians completely ditch the notion that causation is necessary. The two concepts, liberty and necessity, in this way seem to be battling against each other, one cannot exist without denying the other. However, Hume states in his essay:“from this circumstance alone that a controversy has long kept on foot and remains still undecided, we may presume that there is some ambiguity in the expression and that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Hume argues that if the terms liberty and necessity are both properly understood, they can be reconciled and still be consistent with human habitual moral practice. His argument for reconciliation between liberty and necessity is plausible in relieving the tension between them, stating people still have certain degree of liberty under some well-understood necessity. Hume’s approach to address this solution by the broad problem regarding causation in physical world made it more vulnerable to the examination by metaphysical skepticism.

Hume begins his argument by first examining the doctrine of necessity. He points out that if we “shift” the scenes observed in nature to be in a fashion where no events share similarity with each other, then people will never realize the idea that there are necessary connections among the objects. So he concludes that “Our idea, therefore, of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other.”[[2]](#footnote-2) What he means here is that we, as humans, are too prone to ascribe the reason that similar events conjoin together to necessary causations. When we always observe the same kind of consequences resulting from the same kind of events as patterns, we are by habit generalizing regularity and thus assume absolute necessity in these events. However, Hume suggests these collections of experiences can only give us insight of causal relations to make probable inferences but unable to indicate the ultimate reason behind such regularities.

Further, Hume points out how people make expectations based on the uniformity in human motives and there are rules or laws that govern behaviors, both for human beings and for physical objects. He says people are assuming that certain conducts are performed out of human motive that cannot contrast human nature. For example, if a traveler describes men as “wholly different from any with whom we have ever acquainted, men, who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge, who knew no pleasure but friendship,”[[3]](#footnote-3) this example can be understood as people will immediately judge such accounts to be false since the described way in which men act is contrary to what they assume men to be through experiences and generalizations. Even in the case of irregular and extraordinary actions that seem to have no regular connection with any known motives, we can still ascribe certain regularity if we pay enough attention. For instance, “a peasant can give no better reason for the stopping of any clock or watch than to say it does not commonly go right,”[[4]](#footnote-4) but an artist can infer that a grain of dust stops the clock’s movement. So an irregularity that cannot be accounted for does not mean it is not acting under a constant character, but rather its internal operation and government just beyond the observer’s comprehension. Hume argues that human behavior can be understood in exactly the same fashion as how the physical world works: they are both acting under rules instead of acting randomly. Even when people show unexpected behavior, such as “a person of an obliging disposition gives a peevish answer,”[[5]](#footnote-5) which is seemingly contrary to our expectation of an obliging person to be mild, he is actually governed by an underlying regularity, “he has a tooth ache,”[[6]](#footnote-6) that dominates his seemingly random behavior. So in this sense, Hume attempts to reconcile causal necessity and human will by standing on his account of regularity and leaving people free to choose their actions out of their own motive. In conclusion, Hume describes man to take measures from past experiences just “in the same manner concerning external objects,”[[7]](#footnote-7) to find general regularities in both objects and human behaviors’ operations, and expect them to continue in the same regularity as what he observed, because he believes that “as men extend their dealings and render their intercourse with others more complicated, they always comprehend in their schemes of life a greater variety of voluntary actions, which they expect, from the proper motives, to cooperate with their own.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This indicates that people act out on their own will that arises from certain motivations.

However, Hume warns that our account of regularity is nothing more than particular objects that are constantly conjoined together, and that we infer the happening of the other based on experience of one. Nothing should go into or beyond the necessity of nature. Any consideration of determinism in causation are actually sprang inside our mind. As Hume says, “It may, perhaps, be pretended that the mind can perceive in the operations of matter some further connection between the cause and effect and a connection that has no place in the voluntary actions of intelligent beings,”[[9]](#footnote-9) whether necessity really exists can only be determined upon examination of material causes. Hume tries to convince us that in order to be made compatible with liberty, “necessity” in the battle should better be understood as regularity of humans as well as objects’ behavior we have generalized, which is however, easily considered as “necessity” in people’s minds. That’s why people are mistaking such necessity by mind as real necessity, so as to hold the view of incompatibility with liberty. In this way, necessity must be properly understood.

On the other hand, Hume convinces us that liberty can be properly understood as well. He gives a definition that “by liberty, then we can only mean a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will – that is, if we choose to remain the rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.”[[10]](#footnote-10) In his view, liberty is not absolute freedom of what men can do, it is defined in a smaller range, within which men choose to act according to one’s motive. For example, a man has will to make money, he can choose to buy more stock but at the same time take more risks since he observed a lot of cases of making money successfully in this way. Even though whether or not buying stock makes money can be under debate is subject to a deterministic ultimate cause that he cannot control, he chooses his behavior out of his own will.

So in this way, Hume manages to make “liberty” and “necessity” compatible by giving a better account of how these two terms can be properly understood.

In part II, Hume further argues “the doctrines both of necessity and liberty, are not only consistent with morality, but are absolutely essential to its support.”[[11]](#footnote-11) He rules out the incompatibility between necessity and liberty by contradiction on the grounds of moral practice. Assuming necessity and liberty are incompatible, one of them must be ruled out when the other is true. However, Hume’s reasoning shows that whether we rule out necessity or we rule out liberty, it will result in a state that is against our usual morality. Specifically, if we rule out necessity, since actions are temporary and perishing, we may blame the evil actions themselves when someone conducted them, but we cannot blame the person that did such evil behavior because they “proceed from nothing in him that is durable and constant and leave nothing of that nature behind them.”[[12]](#footnote-12) This is against morality because man might remain pure even after conducting horrible crimes when necessity is denied. On the other hand, if we abandon liberty in order to argue for necessity, contradictions will also appear. When an action is announced criminal, the conductor is either innocent or guilty. However, according to Hume, the conductor’s innocence arrives in absurdness. As for the case of the conductor being not innocent, there must be a Creator, who foresaw, ordained, and planned out all these actions for which he has to be accountable for regarding his evil behavior. However, this reasoning also arrives in contradiction to the perfect characteristic of the Creator. So Hume concludes that compatibility must be the solution to the liberty and necessity problem.

Hume’s argument towards such compatibility is successful in the way that he suggests an account for our observations of relations of events as regularity, which gets rid of determinism. This view helps us to be prepared for when unexplainable things happen, instead of taking account of what must be the causation of something and sheds light to inductive reasoning when we are trying to make assumptions of future things to happen. However, Hume is overly relying on the existence of uniformity among objects to give account of regularity that people must generalize through their experience. Spinoza or Leibniz might argue that Hume is in fact assuming the necessity of such uniformity’s existence for people to observe, which is also created by the ultimate cause in this way. They can also argue against Hume that the Creator is intentionally making similar events to behave as if they are governed by laws, but still with seemingly unaccountable exceptions that warrants further scrutinization, and allows Hume to realize this seemingly hidden characteristic and to uncover it at this certain time. Hume might think his account for necessity is ahead of other philosophers, but the Creator might be a bigger deceiver. When Hume explains that the characters of men are, to a certain degree, unconstant and irregular, he relies on “the constant character of human nature,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and “the internal principles and motives may operate in a uniform manner, notwithstanding these seeming irregularities – in the same manner as the winds, rain, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by steady principles, though not easily discoverable by human sagacity and inquiry.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Spinoza and Leibniz can also dispute Hume’s account that we cannot defend necessity since we have not seen any necessity or connection beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, by stating that “such determinism, which causes all of your work to make you believe that no necessary causation exists, is also beyond your comprehension that it is not easily discoverable by human inquiry, and it is just its constant deceptive nature.” Moreover, when Hume arrives at the absurdness when people with evil behaviors are regarded as not criminal under the necessity assumption, he does not make it clear that it is absurd by what standard. If there exists an ultimate Creator, such judgement of innocence is not absurd in the view of the Creator, since the conductor did exactly what he was designed to do. Most importantly, Hume attempts to use the big picture of the causality problem in the actual world to address the problem of human freedom. This leaves his arguments in a dangerous position. Hume argues against determinism, stating that it is not right to presuppose the ultimate cause in the world. However, as he argues in favor of laws and uniformity that are observed by human beings and that govern peoples’ behaviors, Hume uses most of his analysis to link such observed uniformity from experience, such operation on the understanding, to morality and will. For instance, Hume questions “What would become of history had we not a dependence on the veracity of the historian, according to the experience which we have had of mankind? How could politics be a science, if laws and forms of government had not a uniform influence upon society?”[[15]](#footnote-15) It seems plausible that his account of inference from motives to uniform voluntary actions, and from characters to uniform conduct positively engages in science or action by men; however, he does not argue how grounded and necessary such uniformity is very well, nor where it comes from.

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