

Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

David Hume, 1711-1776

5. Hume's Theory of Causation



Peter Millican
Hertford College, Oxford

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Last Time ...

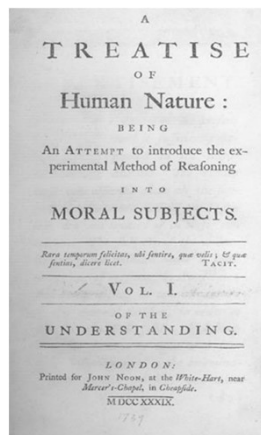
- We discussed in detail Hume's argument concerning induction, from both *Treatise* 1.3.6 and *Enquiry* 4.
 - The *Treatise* argument starts from his search for the impression of necessary connexion (since *T* 1.3.2.12).
 - Causal relations are not *a priori*, but learned through experience of *constant conjunction* (1.3.6.1-3). This, apparently, becomes the third component (with *contiguity* and *resemblance*) of the philosophical relation of causation (1.3.6.16).
 - Hume argues that induction takes for granted a principle of uniformity (UP) which cannot be "founded on" reason, but is instead due to *custom*, an operation of *the imagination*.
 - The *Enquiry* (but not the *Treatise*) presents this argument as sceptical, though Hume offers an answer (*E* 12.22-23).

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The Argument of *Treatise* 1.3.14 and *Enquiry* 7



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The *Treatise* and *Enquiry* Versions

- *Treatise* 1.3.14 and *Enquiry* 7 are both entitled "Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion", and their overall purpose is the same: to hunt down the *impression* from which the *idea* of necessary connexion is derived (see *T* 1.3.14.1, *E* 7.5).
- Hume's presentation is progressively refined:
 - The 1740 *Appendix* adds paragraph *T* 1.3.14.12, arguing that we cannot "feel an energy, or power, in our own mind" – this is later expanded to *E* 7.9-20!
 - As with induction and free will, the *Enquiry* version is significantly more polished – and no less extensive – than the *Treatise* version. Hence it makes sense to accord most authority to that later version.

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Applying the Copy Principle

- Hume's *Copy Principle* (*T* 1.1.1.7, *E* 2.5) is that all simple ideas are copied from (or "are deriv'd from" and "exactly represent") impressions.
- The principle provides "a new microscope" (*E* 7.4) for investigating the nature of ideas, by finding the corresponding impressions.
- In "Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion" (both versions) Hume repeatedly refers or alludes to this principle – see *T* 1.3.14.1, 4, 6, 10, 11, 12, 16, 20, 22; and *E* 7.4, 9, 15, 26, 28, 30.
- 1.3.14.1 summarises the argument to come ...

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"What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected together. ... as we have no idea, that is not deriv'd from an impression, we must find some impression, that gives rise to this idea of necessity, if we assert we have really such an idea. ... finding that necessity is ... always ascrib'd to causes and effects, I turn my eye to two objects suppos'd to be plac'd in that relation; ... I immediately perceive, that they are *contiguous* in time and place, and that the object we call cause *precedes* the other we call effect. In no one instance can I go any farther, nor is it possible for me to discover any third relation betwixt these objects. I therefore enlarge my view to comprehend several instances; where I find like objects always existing in like relations of contiguity and succession. At first sight this seems to serve but little to my purpose. The reflection on several instances only repeats the same objects; and therefore can never give rise to a new idea. But upon farther enquiry I find, that the repetition is not in every particular the same, but produces a new impression, and by that means the idea, which I at present examine. For after a frequent repetition, I find, that upon the appearance of one of the objects, the mind is *determin'd* by custom to consider its usual attendant, and to consider it in a stronger light upon account of its relation to the first object. 'Tis this impression, then, or *determination*, which affords me the idea of necessity."

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(*T* 1.3.14.1)

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The Structure of the Argument

1. Causes are *contiguous* to their effects, and *prior* – but *necessary connexion* is also essential (T 1.3.2.11).
2. We accordingly aim to understand this idea of *power*, *force*, or *necessary connexion* (T 1.3.14.4, E 7.3).
3. To do so, we need to find the *impression* from which that idea is copied (T 1.3.14.6, E 7.5).
4. We cannot acquire an impression of power by observing the interaction of bodies (T 1.3.14.7-11, E 7.6-8).
5. Nor do we get an internal impression of the power of our own minds, e.g. our will (T 1.3.14.12, E 7.9-20).
6. Nor can we acquire a *general idea* of power without first having an idea of a *particular power* (T 1.3.14.13).

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7. Some philosophers find the answer in *occasionalism* – according to which everything that happens is caused directly by God's power (E 7.21, cf. T 1.3.14.9-10).
 - But this takes us "into fairy land ... and *there* we [cannot] trust our common methods of argument (E 7.24).
 - Besides, it is just as difficult to understand how we can acquire an idea of the power of God (E 7.25).
8. All negative results so far, but there are grounds for having another look (T 1.3.14.14, E 7.26).
9. The impression does not come from *one* instance, but from *repeated* instances (T 1.3.14.15-16, E 7.27).
10. Repetition generates a new impression, *not in the observed objects, but in the observing mind* – namely, the "determination of the mind" (T 1.3.14.20) or "customary transition of the imagination" (E 7.28) when we find ourselves making an inductive inference.

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Stage 2: A Family of Terms

"I begin with observing that the terms of *efficacy*, *agency*, *power*, *force*, *energy*, *necessity*, *connexion*, and *productive quality*, are all nearly synonymous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest." (T 1.3.14.4)

"There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of *power*, *force*, *energy*, or *necessary connexion*, of which it is every moment necessary for us to treat in all our disquisitions. We shall ... endeavour in this section, to fix ... the precise meaning of these terms" (E 7.3)

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Two Puzzles

- Why does Hume treat "efficacy", "power", "force", "energy", "necessity" etc. as virtual synonyms?
- Why, in his subsequent procedure of seeking for a single source impression, does he apparently assume that the idea of "necessary connexion" is *simple*, and hence cannot be explicitly defined? (This is made explicit at E 7.8 n. 12, which implies that the quest is for "a new, original, simple idea".)
- **Suggested solution:** Hume's interest lies in a *single common element* of the relevant ideas, what we might call the element of *consequentiality* – see my "Against the New Hume" (2007), §2.2.

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Stage 3: Seeking the Impression

"as we have no idea, that is not deriv'd from an impression, we must find some impression, that gives rise to this idea of necessity, if we assert we have really such an idea" (T 1.3.14.1)

"the idea of efficacy ... must be deriv'd from ... some particular instances ... which make their passage into the mind by ... sensation or reflection. Ideas always represent their ... impressions; ..." (T 1.3.14.6)

"To be fully acquainted ... with the idea of power or necessary connexion, let us examine its impression; and in order to find the impression with greater certainty, let us search for it in all the sources, from which it may possibly be derived" (E 7.5)

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Stage 4: No Such Impression from Observing Causation in Bodies

To explain causation, philosophers have resorted to all sorts of "principles of substantial forms, and accidents, and faculties", which "are not in reality any of the known properties of bodies, but are perfectly unintelligible and inexplicable. ... we may conclude, that 'tis impossible in any one instance to shew the principle, in which the force and agency of a cause is plac'd" (T 1.3.14.7)

Cartesians have concluded that "Matter ... is in itself entirely unactive, and depriv'd of any power, by which it may ... communicate motion". Hence "the power, that [does so] must lie in the DEITY ... who ... bestows on [matter] all those motions" (T 1.3.14.9 – see Stage 7)

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"When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the *outward* senses. The mind feels no sentiment or *inward* impression from this succession of objects: Consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connexion." (E 7.5)

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Hume's "Key Move" in the *Enquiry*

- At E 7.7, Hume introduces a form of argument that he will be repeating: let's call this his "Key Move":

"From the first appearance of an object, we never can conjecture what effect will result from it. But were the power or energy of any cause discoverable by the mind, we could foresee the effect, even without experience; and might, at first, pronounce with certainty concerning it, by the mere dint of thought and reasoning." (E 7.7)

- There is a hint of this move in the 1739 *Treatise*, but only once – at T 1.3.14.13. Another is at T 1.3.14.12, added in the 1740 *Appendix*.

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Is the "Key Move" Plausible?

- Recall Hume's "Adam" thought-experiment (A 11, E 4.6), where he convincingly claims that without prior experience, Adam could have no idea what events (e.g. impact of one billiard ball on another) would have what effects (e.g. communication of motion).
- This supposedly proves that Adam has no impression of power or necessity from observing the motion of the first billiard ball. For if he had such an impression (Hume now says), then Adam would be able to predict, in advance of the collision, what the effect would be.
 - But it seems an implausibly strong requirement on an impression of power, that it should yield something like *a priori* knowledge of cause and effect!

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Stage 5: An Internal Impression?

"Some have asserted, that we feel an energy, or power, in our own mind; ... The motions of our body, and the thoughts and sentiments of our mind, (say they) obey the will; nor do we seek any farther to acquire a just notion of force or power." (T 1.3.14.12 – 1740)

"Since, therefore, external objects as they appear to the senses, give us no idea of power ... by their operation in particular instances, let us see, whether this idea be derived from reflection on the operations of our own minds, and be copied from any internal impression", which "arises from reflecting on ... the command which is exercised by [our] will, both over the organs of the body and the faculties of the soul." (E 7.9)

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Repeating the Key Move (*Enquiry*)

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume applies his Key Move six times to rule out various potential internal sources of the impression of necessary connexion.
- First he considers "the influence of volition over the organs of the body" (E 7.10).
- Then he moves on to consider the mind's power over its own ideas (E 7.16).
- In each case he gives three arguments to show that we have no such impression.

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5.1: Our Power over our Body

- First, Hume points out that we have no understanding of "the union of soul with body" (E 7.11).
- Secondly, we cannot understand why we have voluntary control over some parts of the body, but not over others (E 7.12-13).
- Thirdly, our voluntary control operates not directly on our limbs (etc.), but on muscles and nerves (etc.) of which we are usually entirely ignorant (E 7.14).

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5.2: Our Power over our Mind

- First, we do not understand “the nature of the human soul”, “the nature of an idea”, or how one can produce the other (*E* 7.17).
- Secondly, we can only discover through experience the limits of our command over our thoughts and passions (*E* 7.18).
- Thirdly, this self-command varies over time, in ways that we cannot explain and learn only through experience (*E* 7.19).

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Stage 6: No Abstract Idea (*Treatise*)

- At *T* 1.3.14.13, Hume gives an argument to deny that we can acquire a *general* (or *abstract*) idea of power without first acquiring a *specific* idea of power.
- This refers back to his account of such ideas in *T* 1.1.7 (but absent from the *Enquiry*), which implies:

“that general or abstract ideas are nothing but individual ones taken in a certain light, ... If we be possest, therefore, of any idea of power in general, we must also be able to conceive some particular species of it; and as power cannot subsist alone, ... we must be able to place this power in some particular being, and conceive that being as endow'd with a real force and energy, by which such a particular effect necessarily results from its operation. ...”

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The Earliest Key Move (*Treatise*)

“... We must distinctly and particularly conceive the connexion betwixt the cause and effect, and be able to pronounce, from a simple view of the one, that it must be follow'd or preceded by the other. This is the true manner of conceiving a particular power in a particular body: and a general idea being impossible without an individual; where the latter is impossible, 'tis certain the former can never exist. Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to ... comprehend distinctly that power or efficacy, by which they are united. Such a connexion wou'd amount to a demonstration, and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the one object not to follow, or to be conceiv'd not to follow upon the other: Which kind of connexion has already been rejected in all cases.” (*T* 1.3.6.14)

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Stage 7: Rejecting Occasionalism

- In the *Treatise*, we saw Hume criticising “Cartesian” (Malebranche's) *occasionalism* at *T* 1.3.14.9-10.
- The *Enquiry* critique is more extensive, ultimately rejecting occasionalism on the grounds that:
 - It is too bold and bizarre to be credible: “We are got into fairy land, long ere we have reached the last steps of our theory, and *there* we have no reason to trust our common methods of argument” (*E* 7.24).
 - Malebranche can't explain the origin of our idea of necessity as coming from God, since “we are ... ignorant of the manner ... by which a mind, even the supreme mind, operates ...” (*E* 7.25)

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Stage 8: Having Another Look

Treatise

“Thus ... when we speak of a necessary connexion betwixt objects, and suppose ... an efficacy or energy, with which any of these objects are endow'd; in all these expressions, *so apply'd*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. But as 'tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong apply'd*, than that they never have any meaning; 'twill be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject, to see if possibly we can discover the nature and origin of those ideas, we annex to them.” (*T* 1.3.14.14)

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Enquiry

“It appears, that, in single instances of the operation of bodies, we never can ... comprehend any force or power ... The same difficulty occurs in contemplating the operations of mind on body ... [and the] authority of the will over its own faculties and ideas ... So ... there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion, which is conceivable by us. ... And as we can have no idea of any thing, which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion *seems* to be, that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, ... either in philosophical reasonings, or common life.

But there still remains one method of avoiding this conclusion, and one source which we have not yet examined.” (*E* 7.26-27)

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Stage 9: Repeated Instances

Treatise

"Tis not, therefore, from any one instance, that we arrive at the idea of cause and effect, of a necessary connexion of power, of force, of energy, and of efficacy.

But ... suppose we observe several instances, in which the same objects are always conjoin'd together, we immediately conceive a connexion betwixt them, and begin to draw an inference from one to another. This multiplicity of resembling instances, therefore, constitutes the very essence of power or connexion, and is the source, from which the idea of it arises."

(T 1.3.14.15-16)

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Enquiry

"When any natural object or event is presented, it is impossible for us ... to discover, or even conjecture, without experience, what event will result from it ... Even after one instance ..., we are not entitled to form a general rule, or foretel what will happen in like cases ... But when one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning, which can alone assure us of any matter of fact or existence. We then call the one object, *Cause*; the other, *Effect*. We suppose, that there is some connexion between them; some power ...

It appears, then, that this idea of a necessary connexion among events arises from a number of similar instances which occur, of the constant conjunction of these events"

(E 7.26-27)

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Stage 10: Identifying the Impression

Treatise

"after we have observ'd the resemblance in a sufficient number of instances, we immediately feel a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and to conceive it in a stronger light upon account of that relation. This determination is the only effect of the resemblance; and therefore must be the same with power or efficacy, whose idea is deriv'd from the resemblance. ... Necessity, then, is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another."

(T 1.3.14.20)

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Enquiry

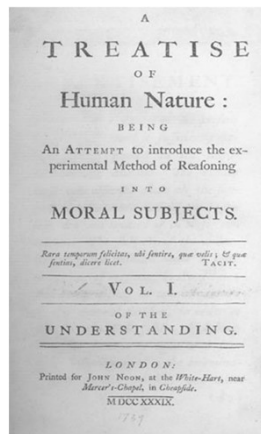
"there is nothing in a number of instances, different from every single instance, which is supposed to be exactly similar; except only, that after a repetition of similar instances, the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe, that it will exist. This connexion, 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 connexion. ... When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other's existence: A conclusion, which is somewhat extraordinary; but which seems founded on sufficient evidence." (E 7.28)

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The "Impression of Necessary Connexion"



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Notorious "Subjectivism" about Necessity

- "Necessity, then, ... is nothing but an internal impression of the mind" (T 1.3.14.20);
- "necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects" (T 1.3.14.22);
- "the necessity or power ... lies in the determination of the mind ... The efficacy or energy of causes is [not] plac'd in the causes themselves ...; but belongs entirely to the soul ... 'Tis here that the real power of causes is plac'd, along with their connexion and necessity. (T 1.3.14.23);
- "power and necessity ... are ... qualities of perceptions, not of objects, and are internally felt by the soul, and not perceiv'd externally in bodies" (T 1.3.14.24);
- See also T 1.4.7.5, 2.3.1.4, 2.3.1.6.

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Misunderstanding and Bias

- Hume is not saying that we perceive some kind of objective necessity within the operations of the mind, but not body (see T 1.3.14.29). Rather ...
- We find ourselves inferring from A to B, and this relation “in the mind” is *all we can understand* by “necessity” (whether in body or mind). *We can’t even make sense* of anything more.
- There is a natural bias against this view: “the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion” (T 1.3.14.25).
 - *Hume is criticising this propensity, not endorsing it!*

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The Confused Vulgar Idea of Power

- Another common instance of “the same propensity” is our natural tendency to assign spatial location to our impressions of sounds and smells.
 - T 1.3.14.25 includes a footnote to 1.4.5.14, which says: “All this absurdity proceeds from our endeavouring to bestow a place on what is utterly incapable of it”.
- In the *Enquiry*, Hume alludes to a similar projective tendency “to apply to external objects every internal sensation, which they occasion” (E 7.29 n. 17).
 - The same note also mentions “the sentiment of a *nisus* or endeavour” which “enters very much into” the vulgar idea of physical power (E 7.29 n. 17, cf. 7.15 n. 13).

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Is the Impression a *Feeling*?

“we ... feel a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant” (T 3.1.14.20, cf. 29)

“This connexion ... 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 connexion.” (E 7.28)

- Stroud (1977, pp. 85-6) takes the impression to be a “*feeling* of determination” that happens to accompany the operation of customary inference. But the *Enquiry* talks of “transition” in this context (as on the next slide), never “determination”.
- Besides, it’s not obvious that *there is* any characteristic *feeling* of inference (cf. T 1.3.8.2, 13; 1.3.12.7). And even if there were, “No internal impression has an apparent energy, more than external objects” (T 1.3.14.12, cf. E 7.15 n. 13).

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Is the Impression a “Determination” or “Transition” of Thought?

“’Tis this impression, then, or *determination*, which affords me the idea of necessity.” (T 1.3.14.1)

“Necessity, then, ... is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.” (T 1.3.14.20)

“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 connexion” (E 7.28)

“We ... *feel* a new sentiment or impression, to wit, a customary connexion in the thought ... and this ... is the original of that idea which we seek for ... this customary connexion or transition of the imagination” (E 7.30)

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Reflective Awareness of Inference?

- If Hume had in mind Lockean “reflection” – internal *monitoring* of mental activity (as hinted by E 1.13-14, 7.9), rather than literal *feeling* – then his “impression” could be our *awareness* of making causal inferences.
- This would fit with the idea that mental *inference* is the only form of genuine *consequentiality* of which we can be intimately aware: “that inference of the understanding, which is the only connexion, that we can have any comprehension of” (E 8.25)
- This ingeniously finds the source of our consequential thinking about *causation* in our own *inferential* behaviour. When Hume calls his impression a “feeling”, he is probably being misled by his pervasive assumption that all “impressions of reflection” are feelings.

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What Happened to the Key Move?

- Awareness of *inference*, rather than a *feeling*, helps to explain why Hume’s own candidate “impression” is not rejected for failing to satisfy his “Key Move” (i.e. yielding demonstrative causal knowledge *a priori*).
- The Key Move occurs only in the first part of Hume’s argument, *before* he has considered *repetition* (and thus identified his own “impression” of necessity).
 - Hume’s use of the criterion makes sense there given his standard assumption (e.g. T 1.3.6.1, A 11, E 4.18) that any legitimate inference *prior to experience* (e.g. from observing a single A) must yield demonstrative certainty.
 - Once repetition is observed, the causal inference from A to B is made through custom, and is no longer *a priori*.

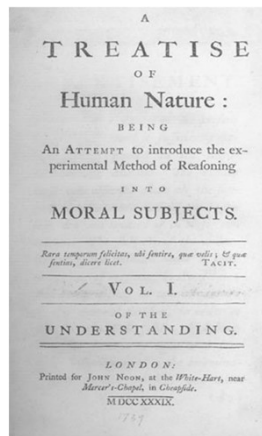
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The Two Definitions of Cause and of Necessity



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Two “Definitions of Cause”

- Hume’s discussions of “the idea of necessary connexion” both famously culminate with his paired definitions (at *T* 1.3.14.31 and *E* 7.29) .
 - The first definition is based on *regular succession* of the “cause” *A* followed by “effect” *B* (plus contiguity in the *Treatise*).
 - The second definition is based on the mind’s tendency to *infer B* from *A*.
- Note that “a cause” here is a *specific* “object” (e.g. an instance of *A*), but that its being a cause depends on the *regular sequence* of *A*’s and *B*’s (hence on objects “foreign to the cause”).

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“There may two definitions be given of this relation, which are only different, by their presenting a different view of the same object ... We may define a CAUSE to be ‘An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac’d in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects, which resemble the latter.’ If this definition be esteem’d defective, because drawn from objects foreign to the cause, we may substitute this other definition in its place, viz. ‘A CAUSE is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.’ Shou’d this definition also be rejected for the same reason, I know no other remedy, than that the persons, who express this delicacy, should substitute a juster definition in its place. But for my part I must own my incapacity for such an undertaking.”

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(*T* 1.3.14.31)

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“Similar objects are always conjoined with similar. Of this we have experience. Suitably to this experience, therefore, 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*. The appearance of a cause always conveys the mind, by a customary transition, to the idea of the effect. Of this also we have experience. We may, therefore, suitably to this experience, form another definition of cause; and call it, *an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other.*”

(*E* 7.29)

- (Note that the green highlighted “in other words” gloss seems to be a mistake – it is *not* saying the same thing!)

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“But the Definitions Aren’t Coextensive!”

- Hume is clearly aware that our inferences don’t always correspond with genuine constant conjunctions. So it seems rather unlikely that he intends both definitions to specify necessary and sufficient conditions.
 - His “genetic” conception of *meaning* suggests a different view. The meaning of causal necessity can only be understood through the “impression” from which its idea is derived (perhaps most charitably interpreted as *reflective awareness of our own inferential behaviour* in response to observed constant conjunctions).
 - The second definition, accordingly, can be seen as specifying a paradigm case in which we experience this “impression” and thus can acquire the idea.

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- *Having once acquired the idea*, we need not restrict its application only to the manifest sorts of constant conjunctions that naturally generate it.
- Hume clearly thinks that we can – and should – go beyond these natural cases by *systematising* our application of the idea. For he immediately goes on to propose “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects” (*T* 1.3.15), and he has already advocated:
 - Searching for hidden causes (*T* 1.3.12.5);
 - Working out high-level general rules (*T* 1.3.13.11-12).
- Accordingly the two definitions can be seen as *complementary* rather than conflicting. The second definition identifies the relevant idea; the first *summarises* the criteria for applying it.

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Applying the Definitions

- Hume goes on to draw some important “corollaries” from his definitions, and then his “rules” of *T* 1.3.15.
- In later sections, he is especially keen to establish causality and necessity in respect of the mind:
 - In principle, matter could be the cause of thought (*T* 1.4.5, “*Of the Immateriality of the Soul*”)
 - The “doctrine of necessity” applies as much to the mental world as to the physical world (*T* 2.3.1-2 and *E* 8 “*Of Liberty and Necessity*”)
- Both turn on the claim that there is nothing to causal necessity beyond the two definitions (thus refuting the once-fashionable “New Hume” interpretation).

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Corollaries of the Definitions

- “All causes are of the same kind ... For the same reason we must reject the distinction betwixt *cause* and *occasion* ... If constant conjunction be imply'd in what we call occasion, 'tis a real cause. If not, 'tis no relation at all ...” (*T* 1.3.14.32) So what Nicolas Malebranche thought of as mere occasional causes are real causes.
- “there is but one kind of necessity ... and ... the common distinction betwixt *moral* and *physical* necessity is without any foundation in nature.” (*T* 1.3.14.33) So Samuel Clarke is refuted with regard to liberty and necessity.
- It is now easy to see why the Causal Maxim of *T* 1.3.3 is not intuitively or demonstratively certain. (*T* 1.3.14.35)
- “we can never have reason to believe that any object exists, of which we cannot form an idea.” (*T* 1.3.14.36)

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The Two Definitions of Necessity

- In his discussions “Of Liberty and Necessity”, in both the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, Hume gives two definitions of necessity, parallel to the earlier definitions of cause:

“Necessity may be defined two ways, conformably to the two definitions of *cause*, of which it makes an essential part. It consists either in the constant conjunction of like objects, or in the inference of the understanding from one object to another.” (*E* 8.27; *T* 2.3.2.4 is very similar)
- In Hume’s index to *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (which includes the two *Enquiries*) “CAUSE and EFFECT ... Its Definition” refers to *E* 7.29 and 8.25 n. 19; “NECESSITY, its definition” refers to *E* 8.5 and 8.27.

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Where is the Notorious Subjectivism?

- Hume’s first definition of cause and his first definition of necessity define both of these in terms of constant conjunction – an *objective* matter which is not merely “in the mind”. But what about all those famous subjectivist passages from *T* 1.3.14.19-28?
- Hume seems to have decided (correctly) that they were a serious mistake! For the *Enquiry* contains only two passages seeming to suggest that causal necessity is subjective, and neither really does so.
 - These are shown on the next two slides, with the apparently subjectivist parts highlighted. The underlined parts explain why the subjectivism is *merely* apparent.

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- a) *E* 8.22 n. 18 is in a footnote largely copied verbatim from *T* 2.3.2.2, which aims to explain “the prevalence of the doctrine of liberty”. And it clearly describes necessity in terms of *potential* (not *actual*) inference:

“... The necessity of any action, whether of matter or of mind, is not, properly speaking, a quality in the agent, but in any thinking or intelligent being, who may consider the action; and it consists chiefly in the determination of his thoughts to infer the existence of that action from some preceding objects; ... however we may imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves, a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition. Now this is the very essence of necessity, according to the foregoing doctrine.”

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- b) *E* 7.28 seems subjectivist, but it occurs in the paragraph immediately before the two definitions of cause. As soon as the definitions have been presented, an alternative objectivist understanding becomes available:

- “When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference, ...” (*E* 7.28)

<*E* 7.29: Two definitions of cause>

- We say, for instance, that the vibration of this string is the cause of this particular sound. But what do we mean by that affirmation? We either mean, that this vibration is followed by this sound, and that all similar vibrations have been followed by similar sounds: Or, that this vibration is followed by this sound, and that upon the appearance of one, the mind anticipates the senses, and forms immediately an idea of the other. We may consider the relation of cause and effect in either of these two lights; but beyond these, we have no idea of it. (*E* 7.29)

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