

# Hume's Determinism



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## Three Doctrines (Morris):

- *Hume's Doctrine of Necessity*
  - “We apply our idea of necessity equally to objects in the physical world and to the actions of humans in predicting and explaining both”
- Universal Causation
  - “every event, including human actions, has a prior cause”
- Strict Determinism
  - “every event is fully determined by exceptionless causal laws”

- “Peter Millican has also noticed the close and intentional connection between the two sections, but sees the argument of Section VII as stage-setting ‘motivated very largely, perhaps even predominantly, by his need to prepare the ground for his resolution of the free will issue in Section VIII’. This reading gets the relation between the two sections exactly backwards.” (Morris, n.2)
- “Peter Millican [has] a perspective that completely overlooks Hume’s theory of definition and its methodological centrality. This neglect is all-too obvious throughout *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*.” (Morris, n. 7)

## The Sinking of the Causal Maxim

- “‘Tis a general maxim in philosophy, that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*” (T 78, 1.3.3.1)
- “Since it is not from knowledge or any scientific reasoning, that we derive [this] opinion ..., [it] **must necessarily arise from observation and experience**. ...

... The next question, then, shou’d naturally be, *how experience gives rise to such a principle? But as I find it will be more convenient to sink this question in the following, Why we conclude, that such particular causes must necessarily have such particular effects, and why we form an inference from one to another? we shall make that the subject of our future enquiry. ’Twill, perhaps, be found in the end, that the same answer will serve for both questions.*” (T 82, 1.3.3.9)

## Determinism in Hume’s Texts

- a) Hume very explicitly endorses the Causal Maxim in two letters.

### Letter from a Gentleman (1745)

- “it being the Author’s Purpose, in the Pages cited in the Specimen, to examine the Grounds of that Proposition; he used the Freedom of disputing the common Opinion, that it was founded on demonstrative or intuitive Certainty; **but asserts, that it is supported by moral Evidence**, and is followed by a Conviction of the same Kind with these Truths, That all Men must die, and that the Sun will rise To-morrow.” (LFG, pp. 21-2)

### Letter to John Stewart (1754)

- “... But allow me to tell you, that I never asserted so absurd a Proposition as that any thing might arise without a Cause: **I only maintain’d, that our Certainty of the Falshood of that Proposition proceeded neither from Intuition nor Demonstration; but from another Source**. That Caesar existed, that there is such an Island as Sicily; for these Propositions, I affirm, we have no demonstrative nor intuitive Proof. Woud you infer that I deny their Truth, or even their Certainty?” (HL i 186)

### Determinism in Hume’s Texts

- a) Hume very explicitly endorses the Causal Maxim in two letters.
- b) Hume repeatedly expresses deterministic principles as being “universally allowed”, and the textual evidence strongly suggests that he agrees with this “universal” acceptance.

- “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. ...” (E 82, 8.4)
- “It is universally allowed, that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that *chance*, when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power, which has, any where, a being in nature.” (E 95, 8.25)

- “’Tis universally acknowledg’d, that **the operations of external bodies are necessary**, and that in the communication of their motion, in their attraction, and mutual cohesion, **there are not the least traces of indifference or liberty**. Every object is determin’d by an absolute fate to a certain degree and direction of its motion, and can no more depart from that precise line, in which it moves, than it can convert itself into an angel ...

... The actions, therefore, of matter are to be regarded as instances of necessary actions; and whatever is in this respect on the same footing with matter, must be acknowledg’d to be necessary. **That we may know whether this be the case with the actions of the mind**, we shall begin with examining matter, and considering on what the idea of a necessity in its operations are founded ...” (T 399-400, 2.3.1.3)

- “‘Tis universally allow’d ... [and] sufficiently evident from the plainest observation and experience.” (T 26, 1.2.1.2)
- “‘tis universally allow’d by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself ...” (T 67, 1.2.6.7)
- “if these circumstances be universally acknowledged ... the dispute is at an end” (E 93, 8.22)
- “Now this ... is universally allowed ... Here then is no subject of dispute.” (E 95, 8.23)

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- b) Hume repeatedly expresses deterministic principles as being “universally allowed”, and the textual evidence strongly suggests that he agrees with this “universal” acceptance.
- c) Hume repeatedly denies the reality of “chance”, “indifference” etc.

- “... this fantastical system of liberty ...” (T 404, 2.3.1.15)
- “According to my definitions ... liberty ... is the very same thing with chance. As chance is commonly thought to imply a contradiction, and is at least directly contrary to experience, there are always the same arguments against liberty or free-will.” (T 407, 2.3.1.18)
- “... the doctrine of liberty, however absurd it may be in one sense, and unintelligible in any other.” (T 407, 2.3.2.1)

- “Though there be no such thing as *Chance* in the world ...” (E 56, 6.1)
- “this theory, with regard to necessity and liberty ... [with its] ... continued chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of all, to every single volition of every human creature. No contingency any where in the universe; no indifference; no liberty.” (E 99, 8.32)

## The Basis of the Causal Maxim

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### Rules by which to judge of causes and effects (*Treatise* 1.3.15)

- “3. There must be a constant union betwixt the cause and effect. 'Tis chiefly this quality, that constitutes the relation.
- 4. The same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause. **This principle we derive from experience**, and is the source of most of our philosophical reasonings.” (*T* 173, 1.3.15)

### The Basis of the Causal Maxim

- a) Hume suggests in the two letters, and in the “sink” passage, that the Causal Maxim is “supported by moral Evidence”.
- b) He also explicitly states that a closely related rule (from *Treatise* 1.3.15) “we derive from experience”.
- c) According to Hume, the empirical basis for the Causal Maxim seems to be our success in searching for, and finding, hidden causes that explain phenomena.

- “philosophers ... find, that it is at least possible the contrariety of events may not proceed from any contingency in the cause, but from the secret operation of contrary causes. **This possibility is converted into certainty** by farther observation; when they remark, that, upon an exact scrutiny, a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes, and proceeds from their mutual opposition.” (*T* 132, 1.3.12.5; *E* 87, 8.13)

- “... the philosopher and physician ... know, that ... irregular events ... can be no proof, that the laws of nature are not observed with the greatest regularity ...”
- “The philosopher, if he be consistent, must apply the same reasoning to the actions and volitions of intelligent agents. ...”
- “Thus it appears ... that the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature; ...” (*E* 87-8, 8.14-16)

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- a) "Deterministic claims outrun the empirical evidence, so Hume could not have made such claims"  
*Historically implausible, given the range of thinkers who have been persuaded.*
- b) "The Copy Principle account of the idea of necessity doesn't require determinism"  
*Maybe, but there's scant evidence of any non-deterministic interpretation in Hume.*

- "... there is but one kind of *necessity* ... and ... the common distinction between *moral* and *physical* necessity is without any foundation in nature. ... 'Tis the constant conjunction of objects, along with the determination of the mind, which constitutes a physical necessity: And the removal of these is the same thing with *chance*. As objects must either be conjoin'd or not, and as the mind must either be determin'd or not to pass from one object to another, 'tis impossible to admit of any medium betwixt chance and an absolute necessity. In weakening this conjunction and determination you do not change the nature of the necessity ..." (T 171, 1.3.14.33)

## Harris's Gloss on Hume

- "Hume is in effect saying that, for all we can tell, all necessity is of the moral kind."
- "All that we have reason to mean when we attribute necessity to the operations of matter is that we have experience of the regularity of the behaviour of material things, and that we find ourselves as a result disposed to make predictions about the future behaviour of those things. ... Hume does not intend or need to establish that there are exceptionless laws ..."

## Why Hume Denies Any Distinction Between Moral and Physical Necessity

- "the ... advocates for free-will ... must shew, that we have an idea of something else in the actions of matter; which, according to the foregoing reasoning, is impossible" (A 661).
- "Let them first discuss ... the operations of body ... and try whether they can there form any idea of causation and necessity, except that of a constant conjunction of objects, and subsequent inference of the mind ... If [not] ... the dispute is at an end." (E93)

## Wiblican's Modus Tollens

Hume's project is centred on his theory of definition



Hume is not a determinist

Hume's project is NOT centred on his theory of definition



Hume IS a determinist

## Why Does Hume Care?

- In the *Enquiry*, the Copy Principle is used just once, in Section VII, to derive the two definitions of causation.
- The definitions of causation are used just once, in Section VIII, to establish that necessity in human behaviour can only be the same as necessity in objects.
- Necessity in human behaviour vindicates the project of inductive moral science, and hence is central to Hume's purposes.

## Conclusion

- The argument of Section VII of Hume's *Enquiry* is motivated very largely, perhaps even predominantly, by his need to prepare the ground for his resolution of the free will issue in Section VIII.
- Hence Morris's reading "gets the relation between the two sections exactly backwards." (Morris, n.2)