

New Hume: The State of the Debate

Hume, Causal Realism, and Free Will



The State of the Debate

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Two "Definitions of Cause"

- Hume's main discussions of "the idea of necessary connexion" (*Treatise* 1.3.14 and *Enquiry* 7) both culminate with two "definitions of cause".
- 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*.

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Causation and the Mind

- Hume 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, "Of Liberty and Necessity")
- Both arguments crucially turn on the claim that there is nothing to causal necessity beyond the two definitions ...

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Anti-Realism supporting realism

- all objects, which are found to be constantly conjoin'd, are *upon that account only* to be regarded as causes and effects. ... the constant conjunction of objects constitutes *the very essence* of cause and effect ... (*T* 1.4.5.32, my emphasis)
- two particulars [are] essential to necessity, *viz.* the constant *union* and the *inference* of the mind ... wherever we discover these we must acknowledge a necessity. (*T* 2.3.1.4)

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The "New Hume"

- Hume has generally been read as denying the existence of any "power" or "necessity" in objects that goes beyond the definitions.
- This would make him a "regularity theorist", denying the existence of (capital "C") "Causation" or "thick connexions" in objects.
- The "New Hume" is the view of John Wright, Galen Strawson, Peter Kail and others that Hume is instead a "Causal realist".

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Hume's causal realism

- "Since therefore 'tis possible for all objects to become causes or effects to each other, it may be proper to fix some general rules, by which we may know when they really are so." (*T* 1.3.15.1)
- "Philosophers [observe] that, almost in every part of nature, there is contained a vast variety of springs and principles [and often a] secret operation of contrary causes." (*E* 8.13)

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Hume's References to Powers

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume makes numerous references to objects' powers:
 - "the ultimate cause of any natural operation ... that power, which produces any single effect in the universe ... the causes of these general causes ... ultimate springs and principles" (*E* 4.12); "the secret powers [of bodies] ... those powers and principles on which the influence of ... objects entirely depends" (*E* 4.16); "the power or force, which actuates the whole machine" (*E* 7.8)

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Kames and a Footnote

- Kames (1751) quoted Hume's references to powers in the *Enquiry* (at 4.16) against him, as evidence of inconsistency; they knew each other well and swapped manuscripts prior to publication.
- In 1750 Hume added a footnote to *E* 4.16:
 - "The word, Power, is here used in a loose and popular sense. The more accurate explication of it would give additional evidence to this argument. See Sect. 7."

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Causation as the Basis of Science

- Hume takes causal relations to be the foundation of all factual inference beyond our memory and senses:
 - "Tis evident, that all reasonings concerning *matter of fact* are founded on the relation of cause and effect ..." (*A* 8)
 - "All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause and Effect*." (*E* 4.4)
 - See also *T* 1.3.6.7, *E* 7.29, etc.

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Necessity as Essential to Causation

- Hume sees necessity as an essential part of our idea of causation, e.g.:
 - "According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation" (*T* 2.3.1.18)
 - "Necessity may be defined two ways, conformably to the two definitions of *cause*, of which it makes an essential part." (*E* 8.27)
- So *in some sense* Hume must be prepared to countenance the ascription of necessity to events in the objective world.

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The Onus of Proof

- Hume's references to causes and causal necessities, and his enthusiasm for causal science, imply only (lower-case) causal realism, *not* (upper-case) Causal Realism.
- So they provide no counterbalance to the clear onus of proof deriving from the overall thrust of his arguments on "the Idea of Necessary Connexion", in *Treatise* 1.3.14, *Abstract* 31-4, and *Enquiry* 7 ...

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An Argument for Anti-Realism

- Hume's entire argument is structured around the Copy Principle quest for an impression.
- The Principle is a tool for deciding questions of *meaning* (*T* 1.1.6.1, *A* 7, *E* 2.9).
- He aims to find causal terms' *meaning* or *significance* (*T* 1.3.14.14 & 27, *A* 26, *E* 7.3, 26 & 28).
- When the *subjective* impression is identified, the apparently anti-Realist implication is stated.
- The discussion culminates with two *definitions* of "cause", incorporating this anti-Realism.

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Semantics or Epistemology?

- “New Humeans” claim that Hume’s statements about “meaning”, “definition” etc. should not be interpreted *semantically*.
- Thus Peter Kail insists that we should “view Hume’s talk about ‘meaning’ as meaning ‘acquaintance with’, as opposed to ‘thinkable content’” (2001, p. 39)
- Even if possible, this provides no *positive* evidence for the New Hume. Hume’s actual text remains *prima facie* anti-Realist.

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“New Humean” Arguments

- A. “The anti-realist interpretation is a twentieth-century positivist invention”
 - Clearly false. Kames (1751), Leland (1757), and Reid (1785) all see Hume as anti-realist.
- B. “Causal anti-realism is too outrageous to have been contemplated by Hume”
 - “of all the paradoxes, which I have had, or shall hereafter have occasion to advance in the course of this treatise, the present one is the most violent ...” (T 1.3.14.24).

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- However Hume only applies the *a priori* constraint in Part 1, when considering *single-instance* impressions.
- He does not apply it at all in Part 2, to the impression (arising from *repeated* instances) which he explicitly identifies as the genuine impression of necessity.
- This makes sense if he is assuming that any single-instance connexion must be a *priori*, an assumption that is manifest anyway in his discussion of induction.

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Defective Definitions?

- F. One of the most commonly cited passages in support of the New Hume:
 - “so imperfect are the ideas which we form ..., that it is impossible to give any just definition of cause, except what is drawn from something extraneous and foreign to it. ... we cannot remedy this inconvenience, or attain any more perfect definition, which may point out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connexion with its effect.” (E 7.29)

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Power and Necessary Connexion

- Galen Strawson acknowledges that Hume adopts a “global subjectivism” about *necessity* (1989, pp. 156-60) while insisting that he is unquestioningly realist about causal *power*.
- However Hume consistently equates *necessity* with *power* in his discussion, and alternates between the terms (indeed he uses “power” words far more often than “necessity” words).
- The original title of *Enquiry 7* is “Of the Idea of Power or Necessary Connexion”!

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Hume’s “Strict Scepticism”

- C. Strawson dubs Hume a “strict sceptic” who “does not make positive claims about what ... knowably ... does not exist” (p. 34).
 - But Hume’s anti-realism about causation is a limit on our *ideas* and what *we can mean* by “power” etc., not a limitation on reality.
 - Anyway the claim that he is a “strict sceptic” begs the question. Where are the texts?
 - Hume does deny the existence of some things, e.g. substantial forms, occult qualities.

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Imperfect Ideas, not Definitions

- Hume describes our *ideas* as “imperfect”, but the *definitions* as “just”.
- He’s discussing his definitions of *cause*, not of *necessary connexion* (which he clearly distinguishes, e.g. in the *Enquiry* index).
- “that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connexion with its effect” is very *unlikely* to mean the necessary connexion, especially given the footnote to this paragraph.

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“That Circumstance in the Cause”

- A “circumstance” is a factor that is variable between situations, to which eliminative methods can be applied to identify the true causal factor (e.g. T 1.3.13.11, E 7.30).
- The footnote to E 7.29 makes clear that the relevant “circumstance” is identifiable only by experiment, and even then can be hard to isolate (e.g. it could be the velocity, or the square of the velocity).

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Is the *Enquiry* Realist?

- D. “All the main support for the view that Hume was an outright regularity theorist derives from the *Treatise*, and vanishes in the *Enquiry*” (Strawson 2000, p. 32). But this is not true:

“When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought ...” (E 7.28)

“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” (E 8.22n)

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The “AP” Property

- E. In *Enquiry 7* Part 1, Hume repeatedly argues that perception of an object or an internal feeling cannot yield an impression of necessary connexion, because if it could, this would enable us to infer the effect *a priori*, which we cannot do.
- On this basis, New Humeans claim that “genuine” Humean necessity must, quite generally, licence *a priori* inference.

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Quantitative Forces

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume is clear that mechanics involves *forces*: theoretical entities that can be quantified and enter into equations describing objects’ behaviour. (e.g. E 4.12-13)
- “Force” is in the same family as “power” etc.
- E 7.25n and E 7.29n both suggest an attitude to such forces corresponding exactly to the anti-realist spirit of *Enquiry 7*. Forces are to be treated *instrumentally* (cf. Newton and Berkeley).
- One can clearly be “ignorant” etc. of such forces.

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Moving Onto the Offensive

- The arguments in favour of the New Hume are all rather weak – none of those we’ve considered seems sufficient to dent the onus of proof generated by the context, structure and content of Hume’s argument.
- But there are far stronger arguments to be added to the other side of the debate:
 - from the Conceivability Principle
 - from Liberty and Necessity

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The Conceivability Principle

- Causal realism is hard to square with Hume's prominent *conceivability principle* (that whatever is conceivable is possible).
- If Hume were prepared to countenance a "hidden" objective necessity connecting *A* with *B*, then the fact that we can conceive *A*'s not being followed by *B* could not imply that this is a genuine possibility. So conceivability would not imply possibility.

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Kail on Conceivability

- Kail finds "a joker in the pack" (2003b: 519, cf. 2003a: 49, 2007a: 95-6) to respond to this objection, suggesting that Hume, when most careful, allows the inference from conceivability to possibility only when ideas are *adequate*, basing this on the passage:
 - "Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects ..."

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... The plain consequence is, that whatever *appears* impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be *really* impossible and contradictory, without any farther excuse or evasion." (T 1.2.2.1)

- But Hume talks here of the inference from *apparent impossibility (inconceivability)* to *real impossibility*, equivalent to inferring from *possibility* to *conceivability*.
- In this one case he insists on a condition of adequacy, but *never* when the inference is in the opposite direction.

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Liberty and Necessity

- Hume's argument that the same necessity is applicable to the moral and physical realms depends on taking our understanding of necessary connexion to be completely exhausted by the two factors of constant conjunction and customary inference.
- These two factors can be shown to apply in the moral realm, and he insists that we can't even *ascribe* any further necessity to matter:

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"the ... advocates for [libertarian] 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." (A 34, cf. T 2.3.1.3-18, T 2.3.2.4, E 8.4-22, E 8.27)

- This requires a *semantic* interpretation of the two definitions, limiting what we can *think*.

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Kail's Defence (a)

- Such objections "crucially miss the fact that Hume refigures the dispute at the level of *common life* rather than as an issue in the metaphysics of causation". (2007b: 264)
 - But this, based on E 8.1 alone, looks extremely tenuous; moreover E 8.16, 8.23 and 8.27 all seem to tell strongly against it.
 - Besides, the corresponding discussions in the *Treatise* and *Abstract* give the same argument, but no passage corresponding to E 8.1...

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- Kail recognises the latter objection in a footnote, giving an explicit reply:

– "Response: all this means is that the *Enquiry* affords a better case for realism. Realist readers ... view the *Enquiry* as superior to the *Treatise* with respect to the discussion of causation in this respect not least because the references to secret powers are more prominent, so such a move is not *ad hoc*. Those who prefer the first *Enquiry* to the *Treatise* thus have reason to take this as authoritative. (2007b: 268 n. 26)

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Kail's Defence (b)

- "Even in the midst of the discussion ... , Hume's language, when treating of powers, sounds more naturally epistemic and sceptical than semantically restrictive and reductive:

... our faculties can never carry us farther in our *knowledge* of this relation than [constant conjunction] ... But though this conclusion concerning human *ignorance* ... we *know* nothing farther of causation of any kind." (2007b: 266)

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- But this passage from E 8.21, is not "in the midst of the discussion": it follows the main argument and is giving an error-theory as to why people naturally oppose his position.

- Moreover the next paragraph goes straight back to the semantic theme that has dominated most of the discussion:

"Better ... to ... try whether they can there form any idea of causation and necessity ... the whole of that necessity, which we conceive in matter ... as long as we will rashly suppose, that we have some farther idea ..."

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Kail's Defence (c)

- "in the midst of the discussion Hume is prepared to grant, for the sake of argument, power in matter, but that it makes no difference to the reconciliation. But if the reconciliation turned on the claim that no further thought is possible with regard to causation, even this small concession would violate this alleged central move. ... Here is an opportunity for him to reassert his alleged conclusion that no such ... thought is possible ... But he does not take this opportunity ..." (2007b: 266)

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- Again, the intended passage (E 8.27), is not "in the midst of the discussion"; it comes later, with the distinctive purpose of arguing that the doctrine of necessity is "innocent".

"[some] maintain it possible to discover something farther in the operations of matter. But this, it must be acknowledged, can be of no consequence to morality or religion, whatever it may be to natural philosophy or metaphysics. We may here be mistaken in asserting, that there is no idea of any other necessity or connexion in the actions of body: But ..."

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Beebee's Defence (a)

- Beebee argues (and Kail hints) that Hume cannot intend his definitions to yield the meaning of "cause" because they are not intensionally or extensionally equivalent.
- Beebee goes on to develop an alternative story of what Hume is doing, based on the thought that ascription of Causal powers is a *natural belief*, which we have reason to ascribe equally to mind and to matter.

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Definitions and Meaning

- However Hume's account of meaning and understanding is genetic, based on *ideas copied from impressions*, not on analytic necessary and sufficient conditions.
- His definitions seem designed to capture our complete grasp of causal notions in terms of their origin: the experiences that lead us to make causal inferences and thus acquire the idea of causal power.

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- We may consider Hume's genetic account of meaning based on his Copy Principle to be hopeless, but that's no good reason for reinterpreting the well-known texts expounding it, which are so explicit.

- Instead, we should acknowledge that someone who advances such an account is likely to see definitions in a very different light from ourselves, as doing something quite different from specifying necessary and sufficient conditions.

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Beebee's Defence (b)

- Beebee's account based on a natural belief in Causation is also problematic because for Hume, belief is an enlivened idea, and his argument in *T* 1.3.14 and *E* 7 insists that we have no such idea.
- More fundamentally, there is no local evidence in Hume's text that natural belief plays any such role in the argument. It very clearly turns on limits to thinkability.

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Conclusion

- The New Hume has little to recommend it.
- A la carte selection of texts, principles, and pretexts for flexible interpretation can be used to support any number of Humean readings, but only those that can make sense of the detailed flow of his arguments are worth taking seriously.
- On causation, his arguments seem to be quite unambiguously anti-Realist.

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