

Hume, “On Liberty and Necessity” (*Enquiry*, Section VIII)

The dispute about liberty and necessity is a merely verbal dispute. (365)

If we are careful to define our terms appropriately, everyone has always agreed *both* that our actions are “necessitated” by their causes *and* that we do them freely.

Note: Hume is a *compatibilist* (i.e., he thinks that freedom and determinism are compatible.)

The true doctrine of “necessity”

Everything has a cause that “necessitates” it.

But necessity is only the constant conjunction of a cause and its effect, together with a determination of the mind to infer one from the other. (366)

So understood, no one has ever disagreed with the doctrine of necessity.

The uniformity of human nature, and the predictability of human beings. (366ff)

There are, to be sure, actions that have no regular connection to any *known* causes. But exactly the same is true of matter. The conclusion *philosophers* draw in such cases is that exceptional events have a regular connection to *unknown* causal factors. (369-70, 373)

But people get confused about this, and imagine that the human will is not necessitated by anything. Why is this?

1. Because they imagine that there is some further necessary connection between cause and effect in virtue of which the cause *makes* the effect happen. Then, when they introspect, they fail to discover any such connection between motives and volitions. (373-4)
2. There is also a “false sensation or seeming experience ... of liberty of indifference, in many of our actions.” (374, fn 15) This false appearance arises in the following manner. When performing an act, I am not aware of all the motives that determine me to action. It seems to me that, *just as things were at the time*, I could have chosen otherwise – that my will could as easily have gone the other way. This is (apparently) confirmed when, on a “second trial” my will does go the other way. (E.g., “I just moved my finger to the left. I could just as easily have moved it to the right. Watch me do so now.”)

But this little experiment does not prove that – exactly as things were at the time – my will could have gone the other way, since the new situation is not the same as the earlier one. A new motive has entered the picture. “[T]he fantastical desire of shewing liberty, is here the motive of our actions.” (374-5, fn 15)

Hume also points out that “however we may imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves, a *spectator* can commonly infer our action from our motives and character.” (375, fn 15, my italics)

A conditional analysis of “liberty”

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 at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may. Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to everyone who is not a prisoner in chains. (376)

Liberty in this “hypothetical” sense is inconsistent with compulsion and constraint (with being forced to do what you prefer not to do, or with being prevented from doing what you want to do). But it is perfectly compatible with the doctrine of necessity (as previously explained).

Dangerous consequences for morality?

If all my choices and actions are necessary then no one is *morally responsible* for his/her actions.

Hume replies:

- This is completely irrelevant. (Truth is truth, however bad the consequences.)
- But it is also not true.

Why not true?

Moral responsibility requires a strong connection to the person's character. To the extent that a person might just as easily have chosen something different, his choice does not reflect on *him*, and *he* is not responsible for it.

To the degree that we are morally responsible for our choices and our actions, they must flow from our character in a perfectly regular way.

On this understanding of moral responsibility, we can explain the following familiar facts about our practice of assigning blame:

- We are not blamed for what we do in ignorance.
- We are less blamed for actions we perform hastily and without preparation.
- Repentance wipes of every crime, if attended with a reformation of life and manners."

A new objection (Is the Creator responsible for moral turpitude?)

Given the doctrine of necessity, it follows that "the ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world" is responsible for everything his creatures do. (Compare: It doesn't matter how long the fuse is – the person who lights it is responsible for the subsequent explosion.) (380)

So we face the following dilemma. Either we never perform any morally wrong action (since a *good* Creator would not cause morally wrong action), or else we do sometimes perform wrong actions and the Creator is not perfectly good and just, since he makes us do those wrong acts.

Hume seems to accept (in a half-hearted way) the following "solution." All the bad stuff in the world (including "moral turpitude?") is necessary for the goodness of the *whole* of creation. (381) Unfortunately, Hume doesn't make it entirely clear how it is supposed to solve the problem. Perhaps the idea is that a perfectly good deity can cause acts that are immoral because he has a greater good in view. But if that is what Hume means, it isn't clear why he writes the last paragraph on p. 382, where he is still worrying about the possibility that the Creator is "the author of sin and moral turpitude," and concludes that "these are mysteries, which mere natural and unassisted reason is very unfit to handle."

Critical question

Why is Hume so sure that the doctrine of necessity is true? Surely it is a question of *fact* that (according to Hume) must be settled on the basis of observation and experience. Hume treats exceptions to the "laws" governing human behavior as an invitation to keep looking until we discover deeper laws that really are without exception. But is it a well-attested generalization that we can *always* find causes for human behavior that are *sufficient* to produce that behavior?

Part of Hume's reason for believing the doctrine of necessity might be that he supposes (a) that the "uniformity of nature" is presupposed by inductive reasoning; and (b) that the "uniformity of

nature” entails universal causal determinism (Hume’s “doctrine of necessity”). Unfortunately, depending on what’s meant by the “uniformity of nature,” either (a) or (b) is mistaken. We don’t need to deny that there are *any* merely chance occurrences in order to make probable judgments about the future.