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Hume's Philosophy of Action
(Not a Final Draft)

The central thesis in Hume's philosophy of action is that determinism, or the doctrine of necessity, is compatible with freedom, or the doctrine of liberty. Hume expounds this view by also including that the doctrine of necessity is not only consistent with morality, but "absolutely essential to it." (Hume 64)

In this paper, I will provide a close examination of this thesis and its implications. I will first explain Hume's argument "That all men have ever agreed in the doctrine both of necessity and liberty according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms." (Hume 54) Secondly, I will show that if one agrees with Hume's doctrines of necessity and liberty, then one must give up the reality of their own, first person, experience of agency. Lastly I will argue that if Hume's view is correctly pressed, it seems that his doctrine of necessity is, at the same time, essential to and incompatible with morality. However, I will allow Hume the notion that praise and blame is permissible only in the causal sense. By causal sense I mean, when praise and blame is applied to characters with certain motives, it might cause those motives and the motives of others to turn towards the good, and therefore benefit society. Nevertheless, Hume is still not able to adequately answer the question: How a person can be genuinely praised or blamed if they are not the true author of their actions?

Hume begins by stating that mankind has always acted according to his doctrines of necessity and liberty, even though, to them, it may have appeared otherwise. His explanation

of the doctrine of necessity begins with the notion that the material world seems to operate with what he calls a necessary force. "Every natural effect is so precisely determined by the energy of its cause, that no other effect...could possibly have resulted from it." (Hume 54) An example of this necessary force would be to say that a billiard ball's trajectory is completely determined by the amount of force it is hit with, the english used, condition of the felt, and etc. However we can never assert a necessary connection between cause and effect, because it stretches beyond our rational and empirical powers. We can never have any knowledge of this property because there is no way for us to observe it, or rationally deduce it. The best thing we can do is to use the constant conjunction of certain causes and effects to infer that there must be a necessary force acting upon an event that makes one follow another. From seeing event A lead to event B enough times, our mind will begin to infer that there must be some underlying force that results in this constant conjunction of events A and B. Using the inference derived from observing a countless number of these constant conjunctions, we can see underlying uniformities that surround us in the material world. It's these underlying uniformities that allow us to practice our physical sciences and live our daily lives in the way that we do; without them¹, we could never hold on to any knowledge, and every new day would be a blank slate.

Hume goes on to argue that we have used this same type of inference to frame mankind with this idea of underlying uniformity. He says that "it is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity in the actions of men, in all nations and ages." (Hume 55) Certain motives that humans possess always produce the same actions. One way Hume argues this is by using

¹ Even though these inferences arise from inductive logic, and therefore can never be valid. Hume would argue that it would be absurd to live our lives as if these inferences simply didn't exist. It would be impossible to accomplish anything worthwhile without being able to take these inferences from the world.

an analogy of a traveler that has just come back from an undiscovered nation: if he were to say that the people of this nation were wholly different from any he has met in the past: that they weren't selfish, greedy or spoiled and only displayed happiness, joy and generosity. We would immediately know that this person is a liar, and it would be as if he would have told us that he just travelled faster than the speed of light. This is because we see the uniformity in mankind with such veracity that any deviation from it would be akin to seeing the laws of physics being broken. If there were no underlying unity, then it would be impossible for us to form any general observation concerning mankind. Since we can make these general observations, Hume concludes that there must be uniformity among mankind.

Hume acknowledges that there are abnormalities that look like strong objections to the doctrine of necessity, such as rash changes in the temperament of individuals, and the unpredictability of the weather. He accounts for these objections by saying that they appear abnormal only due to ignorance of hidden causes. The doctrine of necessity implies that if we were to know every single cause that acts upon an object or contributes to an event; it would be perfectly predictable. However, since we can never know these causes and our inference of them is limited by what we can physically experience, it should be of no surprise to us when we see something that wasn't expected. From this we see that Hume also makes the strong claim that if the doctrine of necessity is to be accepted, then necessity is the sole acting force in the universe. In the Humean world², there is no such thing as chance because, if there is a necessary force acting upon everything, then everything must have a consistent cause and effect. Since randomness presupposes inconsistency, then it cannot exist.

² I use 'Humean world' because with the paradigm shift of quantum mechanics, randomness is known to be a present factor in our world. A common example of this is radioactive decay.

Hume's doctrine of liberty is explained much more simply. Hume strictly defines liberty as the "power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will." (Hume 63) This definition amounts to liberty being the freedom from any outside restraint. When I woke up this morning, I got out of bed because I willed it, or more simply, because I wanted to. This was an exercise of my liberty because there were no constraints that prevented me from fulfilling this will. If, on the other hand, I woke up this morning, handcuffed to my bed, and still willed to get out of bed, then I could not exercise my liberty to do so because of the physical restraint that would prevent me from acting according to my will. I would have no liberty under this second circumstance because I could not act according to the determination of my will.

An objection that is often brought up to this deterministic view is that we have this feeling that our actions are subject to our own will, and in turn, our will is subject to nothing. An example of this phenomenon is given in the following dialogue: After listening to Hume give a lecture about the doctrines of necessity and liberty, a student objects by raising his arm and saying: "Look, I just raised my arm, on my own accord, and nothing that had happened a minute, hour, day or fortnight ago could have caused this spontaneous action."

Hume would reply, "Sir, from my perspective, I can see how many events could have caused you to perform such spontaneous actions. From the questions raised by my lecture mere minutes ago, to your willingness to attend this college after it accepted you, to the curiosity instilled by your father's frivolous attempts to predict the harvest. All these and many more events determined you to raise your hand in a protest to determinism."

In this example, while raising his arm, the student was experiencing the feeling of liberty, or acting according to his will to raise his arm. Just because at that specific time he was

not aware of any prior events that were affecting his decision, something that we often experience as well, does not mean that there were no prior events that affected his decision; with due reflection the student would see, just as Hume did, that there were many events that caused him to raise his arm. If one partakes in Hume's doctrine of necessity, then this first person feeling of non-determinacy is merely an illusion. The reality of this feeling would be contradictory to the doctrine of necessity, so it must be false.

Lastly Hume shifts his focus on the implications his views have on morality. Hume believes that not only is necessity compatible with morality, but it is essential to it. Hume argues this claim by focusing on the persistence of motives that are present in a person's character and how these motives cause a person to perform certain actions. If a person's actions were not dictated by certain motives present in them, then you could not genuinely praise or punish them according to their actions. Hume goes on to argue that all actions are genuinely praised and blamed, but since actions are fleeting, instantaneous, no persistence over time, you cannot punish a person on behalf of them. If a person commits a murder at T_1 and is genuinely punished at T_2 it must be the case that there is a persistent motive that caused that person to murder, and only if that motive is still there, can a genuine punishment be delivered. The doctrine of necessity allows us to infer uniformity in human action, and by that, infer the causal relationships between certain motives and subsequent actions. So a person, who commits a deliberated crime, should receive a stronger punishment because the motives of such crimes are usually much more sinister than out-of-the-ordinary, fleeting, human action. Without the doctrine of necessity, we could never see any underlying uniformity in human action, and therefore we could never be aware of any such motives.

I will give Hume a charitable reading on this issue of morality because praise and blame is essential to a society's sustenance. I can imagine a society that operates on the concept of not punishing their criminals and not praising their upstanding citizens and this concept would result in the very opposite effect of morality. It would punish their upstanding citizens by surrounding them with criminals, and it would reward their criminals by providing them a venue for their art. Although this image is farfetched, it would cause me to allow punishment even though it could never be genuine in a Humean conception of the world.

Genuine punishment requires that the agent be the author of his own actions, rather than the actions being an effect of some external cause. If we take up the doctrine of necessity, and the causal chain were to be traced back to the beginning, it seems that only the author of the first cause, and subsequently all the resulting causes, effects and actions that follow, is genuinely praised or blamed. If we treat matter with the same systems that we do mankind, it would seem that we come to an absurd conclusion, that matter has the same moral responsibilities as mankind.

Imagine a set of dominoes that is set up to knock a vase off a table. It would appear that this system of dominoes has a motive to destroy the vase, a deplorable moral act. If certain causal conditions are met, then the dominoes will destroy the vase, and if more causal conditions are met, they will do it again. This analogy is present in Hume's view of morality. If a person is to perform an immoral act under certain causal conditions, then he is no different than a system of dominoes. If a person has no true decision in the way his motives are set up, then he has no true moral responsibility for their subsequent action. Hume's view presupposes a true free agent, someone who set the metaphorical dominoes in to place. This agent then has

the weight of the moral responsibility solely on his shoulders. However, if Hume says that the dominoes should be held morally responsible, then that would be an absurd consequence.

Hume answers this paradox himself: "An absurd consequence, if necessary, proves the original doctrine to be absurd." (Hume 67)

There is some evidence that shows that with questions raised by morality, mankind is right in questioning determinism. In this paper I have tried to show that the doctrine of necessity is not as solid as Hume would claim.

Works Cited

Hume, David, and Eric Steinberg. An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding : With Hume's Abstract of a Treatise of Human Nature and a Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh. Boston: Hackett Company, Incorporated, 1993. 53-69.