

Hume's Determinism

Peter Millican

University of Leeds and Hertford College, Oxford

Abstract

James Harris and Ted Morris have both recently questioned the standard view that Hume is a compatibilist and hence a “soft determinist”, by denying that he is a determinist at all. The aim of this paper is to refute their arguments by re-establishing the standard view on a solid textual basis, significantly more extensive than has been supplied by the view's previous defenders (such as Stroud, Russell, Garrett, Penelhum, and Botterill). These writers have generally been content to rely on the most overtly deterministic passages in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, where Hume speaks of what is “universally allowed”. Harris and Morris both aim to undermine this evidence by distancing Hume from the necessitarian views which he thus ascribes, but it is questionable whether Hume's idiom can justify such a reading.

In any case there is plenty of less ambiguous evidence for Hume's determinism, including passages from letters, the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* where he evinces a belief in the Causal Maxim, a belief which he apparently takes to have an empirical basis. Whether determinism can indeed be empirically founded is highly debatable, but many others have thought it to be so, and Hume himself is totally explicit about a closely related rule's being “derived from experience”. Hence there seems little ground for doubting the natural interpretation of his statements on the Causal Maxim, however philosophically dubious we might think them to be.

Getting straight on Hume's determinism throws light on his project in the *Enquiry*, where his theory of definition is used to clarify the idea of necessity, which is in turn applied within his discussion of liberty and necessity. Harris and Morris see the theory of definition as motivating a non-deterministic conclusion, but the texts suggest a complete reversal of this account, with Hume setting out precisely to establish determinism in the moral sphere, and wielding his theory of definition to undermine a potential objection.

Hume's Determinism

Peter Millican

University of Leeds and Hertford College, Oxford

1. *Morris on Hume's Doctrine of Necessity*

In a provocative paper “Another Look at Hume’s Doctrine of Necessity”, delivered to the 2004 Tokyo Hume Conference, Ted Morris vigorously attacks what he calls “the myth of Hume’s compatibilism”, denying the commonly held view that Hume is a “soft determinist”. He notes that this view has been advanced by Barry Stroud,¹ Paul Russell,² Don Garrett,³ Terence Penelhum,⁴ and George Botterill,⁵ amongst others, but contends that the quotations they use to support their attribution of determinism to Hume are insufficient for the purpose.⁶ His main line of attack, however, is not to appeal directly to Hume’s texts, but rather to what he takes to be Hume’s overall philosophical orientation, based primarily on his famous theory of definition via the Copy Principle. According to Morris (pp. 3-4), we should sharply distinguish Hume’s “doctrine of necessity”, which concerns the application of the idea which he aims to define and whose impression source is accordingly pursued in *Treatise* I iii 14 and *Enquiry* VII, from two other theses with which it is commonly confused:

¹ Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

² Paul Russell, *Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalising Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

³ Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), especially pp. 127-9.

⁴ Terence Penelhum, “The Freedom of the Will”, in Penelhum, *Themes in Hume: the Self, the Will, Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), pp. 156-76, especially pp. 165-9.

⁵ George Botterill, “Hume on Liberty and Necessity”, in Peter Millican (ed.), *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First Enquiry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), pp. 277-300, especially pp. 285-7. Morris also alludes to my introduction to this collection, p. 19, which evinces sympathy for Botterill’s deterministic interpretation of Hume.

⁶ The three quotations Morris considers are from E 82 and T 105 (both discussed by Garrett), and E 95 (discussed by Penelhum).

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”

Armed with these distinctions, Hume's arguments for his doctrine of necessity in *Treatise* II iii 1 and *Enquiry* VIII, which have been widely interpreted as arguments for soft determinism, can be read rather differently. Morris sees Hume's interest here as totally non-metaphysical, oriented instead around an attempt to pin down the “cognitive content” of our ideas, based on his theory of definition which involves a search for the corresponding impressions. According to Morris, therefore, interpreting Hume as a determinist is not only mistaken, but fundamentally misconceives the nature of his enterprise. Hume's twofold purpose is to define our ideas and to advocate empirical investigation in preference to metaphysics. Both universal causation and strict determinism are metaphysical claims that cannot legitimately be supported empirically, and neither is implied by the understanding of “necessity” to which Hume's theory of definition leads; hence, Morris concludes, to view him as any sort of determinist is quite contrary to the spirit of his philosophy.

Although Morris's particular slant on the issue is distinctive in some respects, his central denial that Hume is a determinist echoes some ideas presented in a recently published article by James Harris, who was on the same panel at the Tokyo Conference and expressed strong agreement with Morris's position.⁷ Although I shall mainly address Morris's paper because it is more narrowly focused on this issue, my aim here is to oppose both of them, not by tackling their overall perspective on Hume's methods and aims, but by concentrating on the straightforward textual evidence for Hume's commitment to universal causation and to determinism. The overall view of Hume's interests, intentions, and claims presented by Morris (and endorsed by Harris) may have some philosophical plausibility, but it is simply falsified by

⁷ James A. Harris, “Hume's Reconciling Project and ‘The Common Distinction betwixt *Moral* and *Physical* Necessity””, *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* **11** (2003), pp. 451-71, especially pp. 464-5.

the texts. So either Hume's project is different from what Morris suggests, or else Hume's working out of it goes beyond the constraints that he prescribes. Whether Hume might be philosophically justified in going beyond these constraints is not something I shall try to decide, for even if Morris were correct in mapping out the limitations that Hume *should have* observed in pursuing his project, clear and consistent textual evidence for Hume's actual beliefs must always trump any philosophical speculation about what those beliefs should properly have been.

2. Hume's Endorsement of The Causal Maxim

Treatise I iii 3 is devoted to a discussion of the "general maxim in philosophy, that *whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence*" (T 78, 1.3.3.1), famously arguing that this Causal Maxim cannot be proved by intuition or demonstration. The section's final paragraph then points the way towards an immediate, and surprising, change of subject:

Since it is not from knowledge or any scientific reasoning, that we derive the opinion of the necessity of a cause to every new production, that opinion 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)

Hume never returns explicitly to the deferred question, so it is not surprising that some of his readers have taken him to be uncommitted to the Causal Maxim. Fortunately, however, we know Hume's reaction to this interpretation of his position, because he twice responded to published statements that he had denied the maxim, first in 1745 and then again in 1754.

In 1745, while under consideration for the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, Hume was accused of having advanced various impious principles, these being drawn together in a "Sum of the Charge" whose second point attacks the author of the *Treatise* for:

Principles leading to downright Atheism, by denying the Doctrine of Causes and Effects, p. 321, 138, 298, 300, 301, 303, 430, 434, 284. where he maintains, that the Necessity of a Cause to every Beginning of Existence is not founded on any Arguments demonstrative or intuitive.⁸

⁸ Quoted by Hume on p. 17 of his *Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, reprinted in facsimile edited by Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price (Edinburgh, 1967).

In the subsequent *Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh* (pp. 21-4), Hume answers this accusation as follows:

II. The Author is charged with Opinions leading to downright Atheism, chiefly by denying this Principle, That whatever begins to exist must have a Cause of Existence. ... Now, 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. Is this any Thing like denying the Truth of that Proposition, which indeed a Man must have lost all common Sense to doubt of? ...

Thus you may judge of the Candor of the whole Charge, when you see the assigning of one Kind of Evidence for a Proposition, instead of another, is called denying that Proposition; ...

It should be noted that Hume wrote this response without having a copy of the *Treatise* to hand; in my view this makes the document particularly valuable, in giving us a general overview, in words often quite different from those of the *Treatise* itself, of what Hume took himself to have maintained.⁹ In the present case, Hume obviously thought that he had returned to the question of the Causal Maxim's truth, and had asserted "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". So even if Hume never did actually say this explicitly in the *Treatise*, we have some ground for supposing it to have been his opinion.

In the *Letter from a Gentleman*, Hume was responding to damaging accusations of impiety and atheism, in the context of his application for an academic post he strongly desired, so his reply might be suspected of being disingenuous. Fortunately, however, it is strongly corroborated by his response, nine years later, to John Stewart, who in an essay "Some Remarks on the Laws of Motion" contributed to a volume issued in 1754 by the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh (of which Hume was then joint Secretary), remarked:

That something may begin to exist, or start into being without a cause, hath indeed been advanced in a very ingenious and profound system of the sceptical philosophy*;

⁹ On p. 32 of the *Letter*, Hume points out that he does not have the *Treatise* with him: "I am sorry I should be obliged to cite from my Memory, and cannot mention Page and Chapter so accurately as the Accuser. I came hither by Post, and brought no Books along with me, and cannot now provide myself in the Country with the Book referred to."

The asterisked footnote identified the *Treatise* as the work Stewart had in mind, prompting Hume to respond in a letter of February 1754 (*HL* i 186):

... 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? There are many different kinds of Certainty; and some of them as satisfactory to the Mind, tho perhaps not so regular, as the demonstrative kind.

Where a man of Sense mistakes my Meaning, I own I am angry: But it is only at myself: For having exprest my Meaning so ill as to have given Occasion to the Mistake.

The evidence of the *Letter from a Gentleman* by itself may appear to lack solidity because of its context, but here we have it forcefully backed up by a private letter to someone Hume knew personally and respected, with no apparent motive to be anything other than truthful.

3. What is “Universally Allowed”

So far, I have not considered the texts which have been most quoted by previous commentators in supporting the view that Hume is a determinist, because these passages are typically written in a way that can be interpreted as reporting, without necessarily endorsing, a general presumption of “philosophers” (as suggested by both Harris p. 464, and Morris p. 4). But now that we have seen ample evidence of Hume’s commitment to the Causal Maxim *in propria persona*, it is time to turn to these passages to see whether such dismissal of them is warranted.

The passages explicitly discussed by Morris are as follows:

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)

Another in the same spirit, which Morris does not mention, can be added from the *Treatise*:

'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)

This last passage is particularly significant, because it comes at the very beginning of Hume's first discussion of liberty and necessity, setting the scene and laying out the main question that is to be addressed, namely, whether "this be the case with the actions of the mind", a question he aims to answer in the affirmative. "This" here refers back to the same claims of necessity that he has just outlined in respect of the operations of matter, claims which are couched in totally explicit deterministic terms. So here we have a straightforward statement of Hume's aim in the following section, namely, to argue that "the actions of the mind" are "in this respect on the same footing with matter", and hence that the same deterministic claims that are "universally acknowledg'd" to apply to "external bodies" apply *also* to the mind. Here there is no hint whatever that he is distancing himself from what is "universally acknowledg'd"¹⁰ – indeed his meaning seems to require that he is fully identifying with it – nor does he give any such hint when he quotes this passage *verbatim* in the *Abstract* of the *Treatise* (A 660, para. 31), a reuse which adds still further to its authority.¹¹

Given these points, and the close parallel between the three passages quoted above, the onus of proof must surely lie with Morris in claiming that they do not represent Hume's own opinion as well as what is "universally" accepted.¹² But any attempt to back up his claim by appeal to Hume's usage of such potentially non-committal reporting is doomed to failure, as shown by the catalogue of other cases where Hume reports views in this same style:

'Tis universally allow'd, that the capacity of the mind is limited ... And tho' it were not allow'd, 'twould be sufficiently evident from the plainest observation and experience. (T 26, 1.2.1.2)

¹⁰ The very word "acknowledged" seems to imply acceptance, and is less ambiguous than "allowed" which can more plausibly be read in a non-committal manner. But Hume's own usage suggests that he treats them equivalently in this sort of context.

¹¹ Perhaps significantly, this is by far the longest direct quotation from the *Treatise* reproduced in the *Abstract*.

¹² Taken literally, of course, "universal" acceptance straightforwardly implies acceptance by the reporter (as does acceptance "on all hands", an expression Hume uses at T 463, 3.1.1.18 and E 33, 4.16 when expressing a view he clearly shares). If Hume wished to distance himself from such a reported opinion, therefore, he should have said that the opinion in question is "generally" or "commonly" accepted, rather than "universally".

'tis universally allow'd by philosophers, and is besides pretty obvious of itself, that nothing is ever present with the mind but its perceptions ... (T 67, 1.2.6.7)

Now necessity, in both these senses, has universally, tho' tacitly, in the schools, in the pulpit, and in common life, been allow'd to belong to the will of man, and no one has pretended to deny, that we can draw inferences concerning human actions ... (T 409, 2.3.2.4 repeated *verbatim* at E 97, 8.27)

If these circumstances form, in reality, the whole of that necessity, which we conceive in matter, and if these circumstances be also universally acknowledged to take place in the operations of the mind, the dispute is at an end ... (E 93, 8.22)

Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains. Here then is no subject of dispute. (E 95, 8.23)

There is not a single case in his published writings where Hume describes an opinion as being “universally allowed” or “universally acknowledged”, but where he himself clearly disagrees with that opinion or goes on to challenge it. On the contrary, in most cases where he uses this language, it is very clear indeed that he shares precisely the opinion he reports, and describes it thus to forestall any debate rather than to raise one. Hence when he describes deterministic views as being “universally” accepted, we have every reason to interpret him in the natural and straightforward manner, as endorsing those views rather than distancing himself from them.

The same conclusion can be strengthened by examining more closely Hume's own use of the terms in which he characterises the deterministic views that he takes to be “universally allowed”. These amount, as we have seen above, to claiming “that in the communication of [external bodies' motion] there are not the least traces of indifference or liberty” (T 399-400, 2.3.1.3), and “that *chance* ... means not any real power, which has, any where, a being in nature” (E 95, 8.25). Yet Hume, at least in the *Treatise*, and speaking clearly *in propria persona*, is himself equally committed to denying the reality of chance, indifference and liberty:¹³

... 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)

¹³ Hume explicitly equates *liberty* with *chance* at T 408, 2.3.2.2 (“As liberty or chance ...”), T 411, 2.3.2.6 (“... the doctrine of liberty or chance,”), T 412, 2.3.3.7 (“... the doctrine of *liberty* or *chance* ...”), and T 412, 2.3.3.8 (“... what I have advanc'd to prove that liberty and chance are synonymous;”).

... the doctrine of liberty, however absurd it may be in one sense, and unintelligible in any other.
(T 407, 2.3.2.1)

In the *Enquiry*, perhaps mindful of the bitter controversy that the strident views of the *Treatise* had provoked, Hume's terminology changes so as to enable his argument to be presented as a moderate "reconciling project" (E 95, 8.23) which clarifies the nature of, rather than rejecting, liberty. Hence he now no longer usually equates liberty with chance or indifference, and is far less overtly hostile towards these notions, softening some of his most deterministic statements by placing them within the scope of what is "universally allowed". However there are still indications elsewhere that his essential theory remains unchanged beneath the guise of his modified terminology, and that he is still just as committed as in the *Treatise* to the absence of chance or indifference (e.g. "Though there be no such thing as *Chance* in the world ..." E 56, 6.1; cf. E 94n, 8.22 n. 18). His determinism is perhaps most explicit – and his language most like that of the *Treatise* – when at the end of Section VIII he moves on to discuss the theological relevance of "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). After this forthright explication, he considers the implications of such determinism for the Problem of Evil, and the structure of his argument makes clear that he himself is committed to it. The same commitment is evident in the posthumously published essay "Of Suicide", probably written in the early 1750s, which largely takes for granted a deterministic position, and explicitly uses this as the basis for denying that killing oneself can transgress a duty to God. It seems, therefore, that Hume not only endorsed determinism throughout his philosophical career, but also took it to be sufficiently widely accepted that he could reasonably describe it as "universally allowed", and take it as a relatively uncontroversial basis for arguments on such potentially inflammatory topics as the Problem of Evil and the morality of suicide.

4. The Causal Maxim as "Derived from Experience"

We have seen that, whether rightly or wrongly, and for good reasons or bad, Hume apparently did indeed endorse the Causal Maxim, and also a strict determinism ("every object is determin'd by an absolute fate to a certain degree and direction of its motion" etc.). But this naturally raises the question of why he did so, and on what basis, especially given Morris's suggestion that a commitment to determinism would be contrary to Humean principles. In §2 above we have seen

evidence from Hume's letters that he took the Causal Maxim to be empirically founded, and we shall now substantiate this from the text of the *Treatise*, before going to in §5 to consider in more detail how he takes the Maxim to be so founded.

Although in the *Treatise* Hume never explicitly returns to discuss the Causal Maxim after having "sunk" it in the question of our inductive inferences, we can conjecture with reasonable confidence some of what he had intended to say about it. First, at the point where the "sinking" occurs, we have seen that he anticipates his intended conclusion:

that opinion [i.e. the Causal Maxim] 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)

In other cases where he anticipates in just this way, the expectation is indeed fulfilled:

Perhaps 'twill appear in the end, that the necessary connexion depends on the inference, instead of the inference's depending on the necessary connexion. (*T* 88, 1.3.6.3)

This will not, perhaps, in the end, be found foreign to our present purpose. (*T* 218, 1.4.2.57)

So this would lead us to expect that Hume's attitude to the Causal Maxim will be closely related to his account of induction, perhaps taking the view that, like the Principle of Uniformity which underlies our inductive inferences,¹⁴ it is something that we cannot support by argument, but nevertheless cannot help believing or at least manifesting through our inferential behaviour. Certainly Hume does take "the nature of our understanding", employed inductively, as the basis for some "general rules" which are somewhat related to the Causal Maxim, and "by which", he says, "we ought to regulate" such inferences (*T* 149, 1.3.13.11). These "Rules by which to judge of causes and effects", which are spelled out in *Treatise* I iii 15, include:

3. There must be a constant union betwixt the cause and effect. 'Tis chiefly this quality, that constitutes the relation.

¹⁴ See my "Hume's Sceptical Doubts Concerning Induction" (in Millican ed., *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 2002, pp.107-73), pp.153-4 and note 67, for some nuances of interpretation between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* on the question to what extent Hume takes a Uniformity Principle to be essentially involved in our inductive inferences.

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.

Interpreted strictly Hume's fourth rule is simply false, because given that "the same effect" is to cover event types rather than tokens (as it must do if the rule is to be non-trivial and potentially amenable to support "from experience"), it is clearly possible for the same effect (e.g. a fire, or the movement of a ball) to arise from different causes on different occasions. Interpreted more charitably, the rule can be taken as enjoining us to look for underlying uniformity in differing causes of similar effects (e.g. sources of heat as causes of fire, application of forces as causes of movement), but even thus interpreted, it is still far from clear that this rule is "derivable from experience", though Hume clearly supposed it to be so.

The interpretation and basis of this fourth rule are also potentially dependent on whether Hume accepts the Causal Maxim, because the rule's scope could be limited if he is prepared to countenance events that are neither causes nor effects (cf. Garrett p. 129, Morris p. 5). But given that he does endorse the Maxim, it seems to follow from his statement of the rule that he takes any event whatever to be the product of uniform causal processes, and moreover takes this very conclusion to be "derived from experience" – which tallies exactly with his earlier insistence (*T* 82, 1.3.3.9) that the Causal Maxim itself would turn out to be so derived. The alternative interpretation of the rule, as applying only to those things that are causes or effects (and therefore not implying the Causal Maxim if some things happen causelessly), would have even more serious problems accounting for the rule's supposed empirical basis, because thus (charitably) interpreted it might become a mere logical consequence of the third rule and the related definition of causation, which already imply that causal relations where they exist must be constant. The fourth rule becomes empirically empty if it implies no constraint whatever on what happens, but only clarifies the conditions under which we can legitimately call something a "cause" or an "effect".

To sum up this discussion, Morris may possibly be right to question whether the Causal Maxim can legitimately be "derived from experience" (an issue we shall move onto shortly), but even if so he is unwarranted in giving this as a reason to deny that Hume could be committed to such a claim. For it is at least equally dubious to assert that Hume's fourth rule can be so derived, and yet this is a claim that he explicitly makes. Hence we have so far seen no good reason to doubt the most straightforward interpretation of Hume's texts on the Causal Maxim: namely, that he did indeed accept it as true, and took it moreover to be founded on experience.

5. *Philosophers and Hidden Causes*

Fortunately, Hume is fairly specific about what he takes to be the main empirical basis of the Causal Maxim, namely, the experience of “philosophers” in searching for, and finding, hidden causes that successfully account for the superficial contrariety of events:

The vulgar ... attribute the uncertainty of events to such an uncertainty in the causes as makes the latter often fail of their usual influence ... But philosophers, observing, that, almost in every part of nature, there is contained a vast variety of springs and principles, which are hid, by reason of their minuteness or remoteness, 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. ... From the observation of several parallel instances, philosophers form a maxim, that the connexion between all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes. (*T* 132, 1.3.12.5; *E* 87, 8.13)

This paragraph is repeated *verbatim* in the *Enquiry*, though its context is changed significantly. Within the *Treatise*, it forms part of a discussion of “the probability of causes”, whose main function appears to be psychological explanation of our inferential behaviour. In the *Enquiry*, it is moved into the discussion of liberty and necessity, where it follows a more obviously normative theme which is developed further over the following three paragraphs:

... the philosopher and physician ... know, that ... the irregular events, which outwardly discover themselves, can be no proof, that the laws of nature are not observed with greatest regularity in its internal operations and government.

The philosopher, if he be consistent, must apply the same reasoning to the actions and volitions of intelligent agents. ... The internal principles and motives may operate in a uniform manner, notwithstanding these seeming irregularities; ...

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)

Here it is very clear that Hume is identifying his own position as that of the “philosopher”. The rational and consistent scientist, faced with apparent irregularities in the phenomena, should not attribute these to unreliable or chancy causation, but should instead search for hidden factors that enable the phenomena to be explained as the consistent effects of absolutely necessary causes. Given the track record of scientists in achieving this, we can reasonably conclude that nature is indeed ultimately deterministic, and that all apparent chance is in fact to be explained away as due to hidden causes. Hume seems to be firmly committed to this overall account, for echoes of

it feature strongly not only in the *Enquiry*, but also in three different sections of the *Treatise*, and even in one of his *Essays*:

'tis commonly allow'd by philosophers, that what the vulgar call chance is nothing but a secret and conceal'd cause. (*T* 130, 1.3.12.1)

supposing that the usual contrariety proceeds from the operation of contrary and conceal'd causes, we conclude, that the chance or indifference lies only in our judgment on account of our imperfect knowledge, not in the things themselves, which are in every case equally necessary, tho' to appearance not equally constant or certain. (*T* 403-4, 2.3.1.12)

a spectator ... concludes in general, that ... he might [infer our actions] 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, ... (*T* 408-9, 2.3.2.2)

What depends upon a few persons is, in a great measure, to be ascribed to chance, or secret and unknown causes ... Chance, therefore, or secret and unknown causes ... ("Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences", paras 2 & 7)

Whether this account of the supposed empirical basis of determinism is adequate to the job is very debatable, but I have already suggested that whatever our contemporary verdict may be on this philosophical issue, there is clear evidence that Hume himself was sufficiently persuaded. Morris may understandably find this regrettable, but in historical perspective it is not in the least surprising, for Hume is in good company. Indeed it is striking just how many thinkers have been convinced by the progress of science that the world is deterministic, which is why the indeterminism of quantum mechanics was widely considered so shocking, even to such a revolutionary thinker as Albert Einstein (hence his notorious insistence that "God does not play dice"). We are now used to the idea of such indeterminism, but comparable blindspots may still remain. Amongst contemporary philosophers of mind, for example, it is a commonplace that physicalism is securely founded on the causal closure of the physical realm,¹⁵ and yet it is very unclear whether the modern evidence for such closure is any stronger than the evidence was for physical determinism at the dawn of the twentieth century (prior to quantum mechanics).¹⁶ We philosophers seem to be strongly drawn towards assessments of the potential

¹⁵ See for example David Papineau, "The Rise of Physicalism", in B. Loewer (ed.), *Physicalism and its Discontents*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

¹⁶ In a system as complicated as the brain there is huge scope for hidden processes of all sorts, and it is hard to see how the existence of non-physical causes could be ruled out in principle by any amount of causal systematisation short of a complete account of the brain's operation, an aspiration wildly beyond the scope of current science. Yet

for scientific explanation whose optimism outruns the evidence, and the more we are inclined towards science and against what Hume called “superstition” (e.g. “spooky” as opposed to physicalist accounts of consciousness), the more optimistic we become. Given Hume’s own inclinations in this regard, it is therefore not at all surprising if his optimism also outran what Morris believes his principles would justify.

6. “The common distinction between moral and physical necessity”

Morris’s case against Hume’s determinism is fundamentally based on his interpretation of Hume’s project rather than on the texts: although, as we have seen, he forcefully attacks the natural deterministic reading of various passages, he does not quote any at all that clearly point in the non-deterministic direction he favours. Harris’s paper, by contrast, emphasises and takes its title from a passage in the *Treatise* which may provide the most explicit textual evidence for a non-determinist interpretation of Hume:

[we can conclude that] ... there is but one kind of *necessity*, as there is but one kind of cause, and that the common distinction between *moral* and *physical* necessity is without any foundation in nature. This clearly appears from the precedent explication of necessity. ’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; since even in the operation of bodies, these have different degrees of constancy and force, without producing different species of that relation. (*T* 171, 1.3.14.33)

most contemporary philosophers of mind are as strongly wedded to physicalism as nineteenth century scientists were to physical determinism, presumably because they are attracted by its perceived theoretical virtues (notably, perhaps, the avoidance of “spooks”) rather than just by the current record of physical explanation. The main evidence Morris adduces (p. 6) for supposing that Hume in particular could not likewise have been tempted to infer a broader deterministic conclusion than the progress of science strictly warrants is Hume’s emphatic denial in his argument concerning induction that his so-called Uniformity Principle can be founded on experience. But this Uniformity Principle seems to have been viewed by Hume, arguably correctly, as quite distinct from the claim of universal causal uniformity (cf. my “Hume’s Sceptical Doubts Concerning Induction”, p. 154 n. 68). Amongst the evidence for this is a passage from the *Treatise* which Morris discusses: “[W]e have many millions [of experiments] to convince us of this principle; *that like objects, plac’d in like circumstances, will always produce like effects* ...” (*T* 105). Morris (p. 5) denies the apparent significance of this passage, but in my view unpersuasively.

Harris comments: “when Hume says that ‘there is but one kind of necessity ... and that the common distinction betwixt *moral* and *physical* necessity is without any foundation in nature’, he is in effect saying that, for all we can tell, all necessity is of the moral kind.” (p. 464). The suggestion seems to be that as long as a conjunction of objects achieves sufficient constancy to generate a “determination of the mind” – so that we naturally find ourselves inferring from one to the other – then that is enough to ascribe “an absolute necessity” between them, even if the “degree of constancy” in question falls short of a perfect association. Accordingly, on Hume’s view as Harris interprets it:

“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. And ... the libertarian denies neither of these things. ... Hume does not intend or need to establish that there are exceptionless laws which govern human behaviour. Rather, his concern is merely to show that we generally regard human behaviour as no less reliable and predictable than, for example, the weather cycle ...” (p. 465).

I acknowledge that the *Treatise* passage above, taken in isolation, does lend itself to such an interpretation, but this makes little impression against the overwhelming weight of evidence examined in this paper, not to mention plenty else that could be adduced (for example all those passages from *Treatise* Book I Part iii – notably on “unphilosophical probability” and “rules by which to judge of causes and effects” – where Hume warns against hasty judgement about the real causes of things). Accordingly my own view is that in so far as the quoted passage from *Treatise* I iii 14 seems to lower the threshold for correct ascription of necessity from absolute constancy to a mere “disposition to make predictions”, it is very misleadingly written, probably because Hume’s intention in the passage is to make a different point altogether. In denying a distinction between *physical* and *moral* necessity, he is not thinking of any supposed difference in their relative *strength*, but rather, is denying the commonly but erroneously supposed difference in their *nature*. This is the same point that he would later emphasise pithily in both the *Abstract* and the *Enquiry*:

“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 a more simple question, namely, 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)

Hume's intention here, in denying a distinction between *moral* and *physical* necessity, is to undermine the claim that the operations of matter involve a different *kind* of necessity from the operations of mind, a physical necessitation (paradigmatically supposed to be exemplified by such things as the collision of billiard balls) that can be seen to be incompatible with genuine human agency. This denial, indeed, is perhaps the most important upshot of his entire discussion of causation, because it forms the heart of his argument concerning liberty and necessity, and the crucial link between *Enquiry* VII and *Enquiry* VIII. It is therefore significant that when he repeated this central argument in Book II of the *Treatise*, the *Abstract*, and the *Enquiry*, he did so without any hint of the acceptance of inconstant "necessities" that Harris finds in the anomalous passage from *Treatise* I iii 14.

7. Conclusion

Morris starts from a particular interpretation of Hume's project, centred on the theory of definition implied by the Copy Principle, and uses this to argue against the familiar claim that Hume is a determinist. However his examination of the textual evidence is extremely cursory, confined to particular passages that have been taken as exemplary of Hume's determinism by previous commentators such as Garrett and Penelhum. In this paper I have shown that these passages can be backed up with plenty of others in which Hume is clearly expressing his own views, views that on Morris's interpretation should be clearly incompatible with Hume's central principles and project. My ultimate conclusion, therefore, is a *modus tollens* to Morris's *modus ponens*. In so far as Morris's arguments have force, this force tells against his interpretation of Hume's project, rather than in favour of his desired conclusion that Hume is not a determinist.

Morris sees Hume's fundamental purposes as deriving from his Copy Principle and his theory of definition, as expressed most explicitly in *Enquiry* Section II. This theory bears fruit in Section VII, in the two definitions of "cause" which are then employed in Section VIII. On Morris's view, therefore, the establishment of the definitions in Section VII is the primary goal of Hume's discussion, with Section VIII merely illustrating a significant corollary. But to quote Morris's own forthright criticism of my own position,¹⁷ "this reading gets the relation between

¹⁷ In note 2 on p. 9, Morris comments that "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 largely, perhaps even predominantly, by his need to prepare the ground for his resolution of the free will issue in Section VIII' (Millican,

the two sections exactly backwards”. As has been argued very effectively by Tatsuya Sakamoto in a paper “Hume as a Social Scientist” delivered to the 2003 Las Vegas Hume Conference, Section VIII of the *Enquiry* performs a crucial role within Hume’s later philosophy, clearing the way for moral science (as exemplified in his *Essays*) by establishing that systematic causal explanations are possible in the human sphere just as they are in the natural world. *This* is the ultimate payoff that Hume seeks, and we have seen above how central to it is his denial of the distinction between *moral* and *physical* necessity. The upshot of this denial is not, as Harris claims, to reduce all necessity to the weakness of mere moral associations, but on the contrary, to remove a potential obstacle to the claim that absolute necessity – of the very same kind that underlies deterministic physical science – is equally applicable to the moral realm. When Hume argues in favour of “the doctrine of necessity”, therefore, he means the same by those words as Hobbes meant, and the same as Priestley and Reid would later mean: the doctrine of universal determinism.¹⁸

ed. *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002, pg. 59). ... This reading gets the relation between the two sections exactly backwards.”

¹⁸ See for example Thomas Hobbes, *The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*, in Vere Chappell (ed.), *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 90; Joseph Priestley, *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated*, section II: “Of the Argument in Favour of the Doctrine of Necessity from the Consideration of Cause and Effect”; Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of Man*, chapters vi and ix.