

Kemp Smith on Hume on Causation



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Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (1)

"Hume freely recognises the existence of 'secret' causes. ... speaking in the Enquiry of causes in the natural world: '[The really] ultimate springs and principles [of natural operations] are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry. Elasticity, gravity, cohesion of parts, communication of motion by impulse; these are probably the ultimate causes ... we shall ever discover in nature'"

(1905, p. 152; cf. 1941, p. 88)

Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (2)

"But Hume is no supporter of what is usually meant by the 'uniformity' view of causation. As he is careful to insist, causation is more than sequence, and more also than invariable sequence. We distinguish between mere sequence and causal sequence; and what differentiates the two is that the idea of necessitation (determination or agency) enters into the latter as a quite essential element."

(1941, pp. 91-2)

"There is a NECESSARY CONNEXION"

"Shall we then rest contented with these two relations of contiguity and succession, as affording a compleat idea of causation? By no means. An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being consider'd as its cause. There is a NECESSARY CONNEXION to be taken into consideration; and that relation is of much greater importance, than any of the other two above-mentioned."

T 77 (quoted in 1941, pp. 92, 369)

"This relation is their CONSTANT CONJUNCTION"

"Thus in advancing we have insensibly discover'd a new relation betwixt cause and effect ... This relation is their CONSTANT CONJUNCTION. Contiguity and succession are not sufficient to make us pronounce any two objects to be cause and effect, unless we perceive, that these two relations are preserved in several instances. We may now see the advantage of quitting the direct survey of this relation, in order to discover the nature of that *necessary connexion* ..."

T 87

Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (3)

"What! The efficacy of causes lie in the determination of the mind! ...' [T 167] ... Hume's answer to this objection shows very clearly that he does not mean to deny the objective reality of material bodies or their mutual influence. '*... when, instead of meaning these unknown qualities, we make the terms of power and efficacy signify something, of which we have a clear idea ...*'"

(1905, p. 172; cf. 1941, p. 94)

Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (4)

"... when we transfer the determination of the thought [to] external objects ... *that being a quality, which can only belong to the mind that considers them*' [T 168] ... All that [this] says is that causal connexion denotes for us merely a feeling, the feeling of necessitated transition, and that *this, quâ feeling*, can exist only in mind. ... Hume's whole meaning, therefore is that the connexion and necessity *which ground our inferences* can only exist in us ..."

(1905, pp. 172-3)

Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (5)

"This observation of repeated sequence generates – *causally* generates – in the mind a custom or habit. This custom or habit, in turn, itself generates – again in a *causal* manner – the feeling of *necessitated* transition; and it is upon the pattern of this impression that our ideas of causal connexion have come to be modelled."

(1941, p. 373)

Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (6)

"In the final outcome, so-called causal inference is found not to be inference at all"

"Inference is declared not to be inference, but merely enlivened expectation"

"To repeat, what Hume is here endeavouring to justify is not a uniformity view of causation, but a view in which causal agency – power, efficacy, determination – is presupposed throughout. *It is the factor of inference, not that of agency, which is being denied.*"

(1941, pp. 372, 387, 393)

Kemp Smith's "New Hume" (7)

"The ... resembling instances ... through their effect *on the observer* ... produce the new impression of being determined, i.e. necessitated"

"Now, clearly 'determination' is here more or less synonymous with causation. ... What he has set himself to give is a *causal* explanation of our belief in causation as holding *between objects*, by pointing to their connexion, *their causal connexion, in the imagination*. ... the actual occurrence of causation ... is presupposed throughout."

(1941, pp. 395, 401)

The Case 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 15-16, A 648-9, E 21-2).
- He talks of establishing causal terms' *meaning* or *significance* (T 162, 168, A 657, E 74, 76).
- 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.

"Meaning" Quotations

- "Thus ... when we talk of any being ... as endow'd with a power or force ... when we speak of a necessary connexion betwixt objects, and suppose, that this connexion depends upon an efficacy or energy ... in all these expressions, *so apply'd*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. (T 162)
- "either we have no idea at all of force and energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can mean nothing but that determination of the thought, *acquir'd* by habit, to pass from the cause to its usual effect." (A 657)
- "We shall ... endeavour ... to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms" (E 62)

Synonymy and Definition

- Hume begins his quest for the impression:
“I begin with observing that the terms of *efficacy*, *agency*, *power*, *force*, *energy*, *necessity*, *connexion*, and *productive quality*, are all nearly synonymous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest. By this observation we reject at once all the vulgar definitions, which philosophers have given of power and efficacy; and instead of searching for the idea in these definitions, must look for it in the impressions, from which it is originally deriv'd. If it be a compound idea, it must arise from compound impressions. If simple, from simple impressions.” (T 157)

Two Puzzles

- Why does Hume assume that “necessity”, “power”, “force” etc. are virtual synonyms?
- Why does he assume that the idea of “necessary connexion” is *simple*, and hence cannot be explicitly defined?
- Suggested solution: Hume's interest lies in a *single common element* of the relevant ideas, what we might call the element of *consequentiality*.

A Third Puzzle

- If *necessary connexion* is a key component of our idea of cause, then how can anyone even *believe* that causes could be less than absolutely necessitating?
“The vulgar ... attribute the uncertainty of events to such an uncertainty in the causes as makes the latter often fail of their usual influence ...” (T 132, E 86)
- This too is explained if the key idea is not *necessity*, but rather *consequentiality* (of which probability is a species): a *force* or *agency* need not be compelling .

“Power”, or “Necessary Connexion”?

- In *Treatise* I iii 14, Hume refers to the idea of “power” or “efficacy” around three times more often than to the idea of “necessity” or “necessary connexion”!
- My suggestion makes the former more appropriate, so why emphasise the latter in the section's title, and when summing up?
- Suggested explanation: The key result is to shed light on “liberty and necessity”, the problem of free will (II iii 1-2, *Enquiry* VIII).

Refuting Locke and Malebranche

- Locke is wrong to suggest we can get the idea of power from “new productions in matter” (T 157).
- Malebranche is right to deny that “the secret force and energy of causes” can be found in bodies (T 158).
- But the Copy Principle refutes his claim that we can acquire the idea of an “active principle” from our idea of God (T 160).

No Idea from Single Instances

- Powers cannot be found among the known or perceived properties of matter (T 160-1).
- Nor among the properties of mind (added in the *Appendix* of 1740, T 632-3).
- We cannot find any *specific* impression of power in these various sources, hence they cannot possibly yield any *general* idea of power either (T 161-2; cf. the theory of “general or abstract ideas” of I i 7).

A Key Move in the *Enquiry*

- Hume seems to assume that the perception of a necessary connexion between two “objects” would imply that the “effect” must be inferable from mere observation of the “cause”, with total certainty (cf. *T* 161).
- However he only applies this test to *single-instance* candidates for the impression of necessary connexion. Any such inference must be “*a priori*”, and Hume standardly assumes that *aprioricity* implies certainty.

Repeated Instances

- The actual source of the elusive impression is revealed when we turn to *repeated* instances of observed conjunctions of “objects”. In these circumstances,
 - ... we immediately conceive a connexion betwixt them, and ... draw an inference from one to another. This multiplicity of resembling instances, therefore, constitutes *the very essence of power or connexion*, and is the source, from which the idea of it arises. (*T* 163)

An *Internal* Impression

- Repeated instances supply no new impression *from the objects*; to find the elusive impression of power we must look inside ourselves to the habitual transition of the mind (i.e. the operation of custom).
- *T* 88 anticipated this result:
 - “perhaps ... the necessary connexion depends on the inference, instead of the inference’s depending on the necessary connexion”.

Is the Impression a *Feeling*?

- “This connexion ... which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion.” (*E* 75).
- Stroud and others take the impression to be a *feeling* of compulsion that accompanies the operation of customary inference.
 - But Hume’s arguments rule out feelings as the source of the idea (*T* 632-3, *E* 64, 67n).

Is “Determination of the Mind” an *Impression*?

“This determination is the only effect of the resemblance; and therefore must be the same with power or efficacy, whose idea is deriv’d from the resemblance. ... Necessity, then, is ... nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.” (*T* 165)

- But why equate *inference* from *A* to *B* – a transition of thought from *A* to *B*, with *another*, third, “perception”?

Reflexive Awareness of Inference

- *Consequentiality* may be the key here ...
- *Inference* is genuinely consequential:
 - “that inference of the understanding, which is the only connexion, that we can have any comprehension of” (*E* 96)
- Hume should be taken literally: the source of the idea is the *reflexive awareness of making causal inference*, and not a feeling.
- But it’s very dubiously an “impression” ...

Necessity in the Mind, not in Objects

"[customary inference] is the essence of necessity. ... necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider'd as a quality in bodies. ... necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc'd union." (T 165-6)

"When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought, and give rise to this inference ..." (E 76)

Hume's Anti-Realism

- Hume is not saying that there is some kind of full-blooded necessity, but that it applies only to events in the mind. Rather ...
- We find ourselves inferring from *A* to *B*, and then naturally attribute this consequential relation to the objects themselves, because "the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion" (T 167).

An Outrageous Conclusion ...

"But tho' this be the only reasonable account we can give of necessity ... I doubt not that my sentiments will be treated by many as extravagant and ridiculous. What! the efficacy of causes lie in the determination of the mind! As if causes did not operate entirely independent of the mind, and wou'd not continue their operation, even tho' there was no mind existent to contemplate them ... to remove [power] from all causes, and bestow it on a being, that is no ways related to the cause or effect, but by perceiving them, is a gross absurdity, and contrary to the most certain principles of human reason." (T 167-8)

... Which Hume Defends!

"I can only reply to all these arguments, that the case is here much the same, as if a blind man shou'd pretend to find a great many absurdities in the supposition, that the colour of scarlet is not the same with the sound of a trumpet, nor light the same with solidity. If we really have no idea of a power or efficacy in any object, or of any real connexion betwixt causes and effects, 'twill be to little purpose to prove, that an efficacy is necessary in all operations. We do not understand our own meaning in talking so, but ignorantly confound ideas, which are entirely distinct from each other." (T 168)

Objective Causes, in a Sense ...

"As to what may be said, that the operations of nature are independent of our thought and reasoning, I allow it; and accordingly have observ'd, that objects bear to each other the relations of contiguity and succession; that like objects may be observ'd in several instances to have like relations; and that all this is independent of, and antecedent to the operations of the understanding." (T 168)

- There is an objective and a subjective side to our idea of power or necessity; hence two definitions of "cause".

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 15-16, A 648-9, E 21-2).
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The “New Humean” Response

- “New Humeans” claim that Hume’s statements about “meaning”, “definition” etc. should not be crudely interpreted in the modern *semantic* spirit, but should instead be understood *epistemologically*.
- Even if possible, without objective support this remains a “just so story” which cannot provide *positive* evidence for the New Hume interpretation. Hume’s actual text remains *prima facie* anti-realist.

Rebutting “New Humean” Claims

- “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.
- “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 166).

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 as explained earlier – the common element is *consequentiality*.
- The original title of *Enquiry* VII is “Of the Idea of Power or Necessary Connexion”!

Hume’s “Strict Scepticism”

- 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 Hume 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.

Is the *Enquiry* Realist?

- “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). However the arguments are similar:

“When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought ...” (E 76)

“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 94n)

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 30); “the secret powers [of bodies] ... those powers and principles on which the influence of ... objects entirely depends” (E 33); “the power or force, which actuates the whole machine” (E 63-4)

Kames and a Footnote

- Kames (1751) quoted Hume's references to powers in the *Enquiry* 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* 33:
 - “* 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.”

The Confused Vulgar Idea of Power

- “as we *feel* a customary connexion ... we transfer that feeling to the objects; as nothing is more usual than to apply to external objects every internal sensation, which they occasion” (*E* 77-8n)
- In the *Treatise* (*T* 167, 238), this is compared to our propensity to objectify taste impressions: “All this absurdity proceeds from our endeavouring to bestow a place on what is utterly incapable of it”.
- Necessity involves “the same propensity” (*T* 167).
- “the sentiment of *nisus* or endeavour” also “enters very much into” the vulgar idea (*E* 67n, 77n).

The More Precise Humean Idea

- “’tis probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong apply'd*, than that they never have any meaning” (*T* 162).
- The vulgar idea broadly corresponds in its application to the more precise idea which is vindicated by Hume's analysis and definitions.
- So talk of powers in objects is harmless as long as we keep in mind – when drawing our philosophical conclusions – that the accurate idea of power is of a quite different nature.

Newtonian Forces, and Ignorance

- 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* 30, 31)
- “Force” is in the same family as “power” etc.
- *E* 73n and *E* 77n both suggest an attitude to such forces corresponding exactly to the anti-realist spirit of *Enquiry* VII. Forces are to be treated *instrumentally* (cf. Newton and Berkeley).
- One can clearly be “ignorant” etc. of such forces.

The Conceivability Principle

- Causal realism is hard to square with Hume's *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.

Liberty and Necessity

- “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* 661, cf. *T* 405-10, *E* 82, 92-6)
- Hume's solution to the problem of free will requires that his analysis of “necessity” sets a limit to what we can coherently *think*. Only a *semantic*, anti-realist interpretation will do.

"I am, indeed, ready to allow, that there may be several qualities both in material and immaterial objects, with which we are utterly unacquainted; and if we please to call these *power* or *efficacy*, 'twill be of little consequence to the world."

- Craig: "a sign of agnosticism" those who interpret "such passages as ironical expressions of [a] negative ontological thesis" are "spurred on by ... disastrous assimilation... to logical positivism".
- Wright: "qualities which correspond to ... power"
- Broughton: "we can *correctly* take ourselves to be speaking of powers in objects"
- Strawson: "this utterly unknown power"