Hume, Causal Realism, and Causal Science

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Sceptical Realist, or Non-Sceptical Anti-Realist?
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The “New Hume”
- Hume has generally been read as denying the existence of any causal “power” or “necessity” going beyond his two definitions (i.e. any upper-case Causation or “thick connexions”).
- The “New Hume” is the view of John Wright, Edward Craig, Galen Strawson, Peter Kail and others that Hume is instead a “Causal Realist”.
- Their most persuasive argument: Hume’s texts show him to be taking causation, causal power and causal necessity very seriously …

“Sceptical Realism”
- John Wright coined the term “Sceptical Realism” for this point of view:
  - Realism: Causation in things is mind-independent, and goes beyond functional relations of regular succession.
  - Sceptical: In so far as Causation goes beyond what is captured by Hume’s two definitions (regular succession + inference), it cannot be known or even conceived.

Hume’s Advocacy of Causal Science
- Hume seems in general to have a very positive attitude towards causal science:
  a) He says that causation is the basis of all empirical inference;
  b) He proposes “rules by which to judge of causes and effects”;
  c) He talks of “secret powers”;
  d) He advocates a search for hidden causes underlying inconstant phenomena.

(a) The Basis of Empirical Inference
- “The only connexion or relation of objects, which can lead us beyond the immediate impressions of our memory and senses, is that of cause and effect …” (T 1.3.6.7)
- “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, cf. E 7.29)

(b) The Rules of Treatise 1.3.15
- “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)
- “[Phenomena] in nature [are] compounded and modified by so many different circumstances, that … we must carefully separate whatever is superfluous, and enquire by new experiments, if every particular circumstance of the first experiment was essential to it” (T 1.3.15.11)

(c) Hume’s Talk of “Secret Powers”
- Most prominent in Enquiry 4-5:
  - “the ultimate cause of any natural operation … that power, which produces any … 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);
  - “those powers and forces, on which this regular course and succession of objects totally depends” (E 5.22);

(d) The Search for Hidden Causes
- “philosophers, observing, that, almost in every part of nature, there is contained a vast variety of phenomena, … the causes of these general causes, or at least the possibility of the contrariety of effects may … proceed … from the secret operation of contrary causes. … they remark, that, upon an exact scrutiny, a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes, and proceeds from their mutual opposition.” (E 8.13, copied from T 1.3.12.5)

Practical Limits on the Search
- “The utmost effort of human reason is, to reduce the principles, productive of natural phenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation. But as to the causes of these general causes, we should in vain attempt their discovery … and we may esteem ourselves sufficiently happy, if, by accurate enquiry and reasoning, we can trace up the particular phenomena to, or near to, … general principles.” (E 4.12)

Necessity as Essential to Causation
- “Power” is a term from the same family – derived from the same impression – as “necessity”, which Hume sees as an essential part of our idea of causation:
  - “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)

Causal Science and Causal Realism
- We have seen that Hume indeed takes causal science very seriously: All science must be causal; causal relations can be established by rules; explanation involves reference to secret powers; and we should search for hidden causes.
- But the presumption that this implies Causal Realism that goes beyond the two definitions can be challenged …

Hume’s Anti-Realism: an Initial Case
1. Berkeley’s example proves that a positive attitude to science need not imply Causal Realism.
2. Hume’s argument concerning the origin of the idea of necessary connexion, in Treatise 1.3.14 and Enquiry 7, has standardly been read as implying that he is a Causal Anti-Realist.
3. An important footnote connects the power references in Enquiry 4-5 with the apparently anti-Realist argument of Enquiry 7, in such a way as to undermine their apparent force.
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1. Berkeley’s Instrumentalism
   - ... the difference there is betwixt natural philosophers and other men, with regard to their knowledge of the phenomena. ... consists not in an exacter knowledge of the efficient cause that produces them, for that can be no other than the will of a spirit, but only in a greater largeness of comprehension, whereby analogies, harmonies, and agreements are discovered in the works of Nature, and the particular effects explained, that is, reduced to general rules ... which rules grounded on the analogy, and uniformness observed in the production of natural effects (Principles i 105).

2. An Argument for Anti-Realism
   - Hume’s entire argument is structured around the Copy Principle quest for an impression.
   - He aims to find causal terms’ meaning or significance (T 1.3.14.14a 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.

3. 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.’’

Semantics or Epistemology?
   - ‘‘New Humeans’’ claim that Hume’s statements about ‘meaning’, ‘definition’ etc. should not be interpreted semantically but epistemologically.
   - Thus Peter Rail 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 gives no positive evidence for the New Hume. The texts of T 1.3.14 and E 7 remain prima facie strongly anti-Realist.

Other ‘‘New Humean’’ Arguments
   - A. ‘‘The anti-realistic 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 which one of them I do not exist’’ (T 1.3.14.24).
   - 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?
     - Further, Hume does deny the existence of some things, e.g. substantial forms, occult qualities.

Hume’s ‘‘Strict Scepticism’’
   - 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). 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).

Other Arguments
   - 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.

- 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).

- G. 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).
   - ‘‘thatis, 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”

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The 1.4.5 Dilemma

- Hume starts paragraph 1.4.5.31 with a dilemma, before arguing for its second horn in the remainder of the paragraph:
  - "There seems only this dilemma left us... either to assert, that nothing can be the cause of another, but where the mind can perceive the connexion in its idea of the objects: Or to maintain, that all objects, which we find constantly conjion'd, are upon that account to be regarded as causes or effects." (T 1.4.5.31)

Liberty and Necessity

- Hume's argument that the same necessity is applicable to the moral and physical realms depends on 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.

“A New Definition of Necessity”

- Even more explicitly than with "Of the Immateriality of the Soul", Hume portrays his argument here as turning on his new understanding of necessity:
  - "Our author pretends, that this reasoning puts the whole controversy in a new light, by giving a new definition of necessity." (A 34)
- Again, the New Humean interpretation fails to make any sense of this portrayal.

Anti-Realism supporting realism

- all objects, which are found to be constantly conjion’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)

A Doubly Ironic Modus Tollens

- Kail (2007: 255) observes that "Realism construed as anti-reductionism regarding meaning and content is not only compatible with scepticism but appears to require it: a great irony for those who might object to realist readings of Hume by a blunt appeal to his scepticism.
- Indeed, and it is the non-sceptical, pro-scientific approach of Hume's discussions in "Of the Immateriality of the Soul" and "Of Liberty and Necessity" that give the most solid refutation of the claim that he holds such Causal Realism!

Reconstructing Hume's Vision

- The "chief argument" of the Treatise is almost entirely devoted to causation etc. – Treatise 1.3 is the central part of the work.
- Applying the Copy Principle to the idea of necessary connexion reveals the nature of causal necessity, settling fundamental issues about causation in the moral sphere, and eliminating aprioristic causal metaphysics.
- The "New Hume" provides no such overall coherent vision behind Hume's Treatise.

The Cosmological Argument

- Hume told Boswell that he "never had entertainted any belief in Religion since he began to read Locke and Clarke.
- Both Locke and Clarke advocated the Cosmological Argument, and insisted that matter cannot give rise to thought.
- Treatise 1.3.3 – which disputes the basis of the Causal Maxim – identifies both Locke and Clarke by name (in footnotes).

The Origin of Ideas

- Locke's empiricism naturally raises the issue of the origin of the idea of causal necessity, central to the Cosmological Argument.
- Locke's "Of Power" (Essay II xxi) gives an inadequate account: Hume sees this, and attempts to remedy the omission.
- Locke's chapter focuses also on Free Will. Hume sees his account as supporting Collins against Clarke (a debate very familiar to him through Dudgeon, Baxter, Desmaizeaux).

Conclusions on the New Hume

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

An Integrated Vision

- Hume's causal anti-Realism refutes:
  - The Cosmological Argument;
  - Anti-materialist arguments;
  - The Free Will Theodicy (cf. Hume's early memoranda, from the late 1730s);
  - Aprioristic causal metaphysics in general.
- At the same time it supports:
  - Empirical, causal science: the only way to establish anything about "matters of fact";
  - Extension of causal science into moral realm.
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Additional Slides

The remaining 5 slides were not provided on the handout, but used in discussing Bob Fogelin’s response to the paper ...

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.
- This, rather than Causal Realism, explains the *Enquiry’s* prominent “power” language.
- 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).

“What’s going on? I think it is important to note that in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* these definitions of necessity occur in a discussion of freedom and necessity. The view of causation challenged in book 1, is that causation involves necessary connectedness, or power in the sense of oomph. Treating necessity in a parallel regularist way serves Hume’s purposes in discussion freedom and necessity. I find this a bit shifty. I am interested to hear what Peter thinks.” (Bob Fogelin)

“... I dare be positive no one will ever endeavour to refute these reasonings otherwise than by altering my definitions, and assigning a different meaning to the terms of cause, and effect, and necessity, and liberty, and chance. According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation … If any one alters the definitions, I cannot pretend to argue with him, till I know the meaning he assigns to these terms.” (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)