

# Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion

## Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion:

Of What is it the Idea?



Peter Millican  
Hertford College, Oxford

### 1. Hume's Impression-Quest, and its Purpose

- Presented in *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, summarised in *Abstract*. Based on the Copy Principle in all three, with the aim of clarifying our ideas, hence the meanings of our terms and the nature of causation.
- Second paragraph of *Treatise* 1.14:
  - 'I think it proper to give warning, that I have just now examin'd one of the most sublime questions in philosophy, viz. that concerning the power and efficacy of causes ...'

2

# Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion

## Liberty and Necessity

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

7

'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 34, cf. T 2.3.1.3-18, T 2.3.2.4, E 8.4-22, E 8.27)

- This requires a *semantic* interpretation of the two definitions, limiting what we can think.

8

## 'Meaning' Quotations

- 'when we talk of ... power or force ... [or] ... necessary connexion ... 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 1.3.14.14)
- 'either we have no idea at all of force and energy, and these words are altogether insignificant, or they can mean nothing but ...' (A 26)
- 'There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of power, force, energy, or necessary connexion ... We shall ... endeavour ... to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms, ...' (E 7.3)

3

## An Argument for Anti-Realism

- Hume's entire argument is structured around the Copy Principle quest for an impression.
- The Principle is explicitly introduced as a tool for deciding questions of *meaning*.
- He talks of finding causal terms' *meaning* or *significance* (T 1.3.14.14 & 27, A 26, E 7.26 & 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.

4

## 3a. The Issue of Synonymy

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 1.3.14.4)

9

## The Synonymy Puzzle

(S) Why does Hume feel entitled to presume so nonchalantly, and without any detailed consideration, that 'efficacy', 'agency', 'power', 'force', 'energy', 'necessity', 'connexion', and 'productive quality' are virtual synonyms?

10

## 2. Semantics, or Epistemology?

- '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*.
- Thus Peter Kail claims that we should 'view Hume's talk about "meaning" as meaning "acquaintance with", as opposed to "thinkable content"' (2001, p. 39)

5

## An Epistemological Copy Principle?

- On Kail's interpretation, the Copy Principle looks entirely trivial: any idea of something with which we're acquainted has to have been derived from sensory acquaintance.
- Likewise, his use of the Copy Principle to reject metaphysical terms whose corresponding ideas are not derived from impressions seems hopeless: his opponent already agrees that the terms in question aren't derived from acquaintance!

6

## 3b. Simplicity and Complexity

- ... when we have pushed up definitions to the most simple ideas, and find still some ambiguity and obscurity; what resource are we then possessed of? ... Produce the impressions ... from which the ideas are copied. ... To be fully acquainted, therefore, with the idea of power or necessary connexion, let us examine its impression ... (E 7.4)
- Mr. Locke ... says, that ... we arrive .. by this reasoning at the idea of power. But no reasoning can ever give us a new, original simple idea; as this philosopher himself confesses. This, therefore, can never be the origin of that idea. (E 7.8 n 12)

11

## The Complexity Puzzle

(C) Why does Hume so completely ignore the obvious possibility, highlighted by his own preamble, that the idea of necessary connexion might be a complex idea and hence prove amenable to definition?

12

# Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion

## Deeper Puzzles about Causation

- Hume makes similar comments about the impossibility of defining *cause* (T 1.3.2.10, E 8.25 n 19), although he himself emphasises that this is a *complex* idea.
- Since synonymy is transitive, it follows from Hume's claims about synonymy that *cause* is at least 'nearly synonymous' with *necessity*. But *necessity* is supposed to be just one component of the idea of *cause*, and he gives separate definitions.

13

## 4. A Combined Solution

- Hume does not consider 'efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion, and productive quality' (etc.) to be literally synonymous. Rather, he considers any differences in meaning between them to be *irrelevant* to his concerns here.
- His interest lies exclusively in a *single common element* of all the problematic ideas, an element which he apparently believes to be *simple*, so that the only way of clarifying or characterising it precisely is by identifying the impression from which it is copied.

14

## What's the Best Term?

- Three criteria:
  - Hume's argument crucially depends on a deliberate conflation between *causal* and *inferential* connexions.
  - A necessary connexion or power from *A* to *B* does not imply a connexion or power from *B* to *A*: the relation is *not symmetrical*.
  - The terms 'necessity', 'necessary connexion' etc. imply *inexorability*, but none of Hume's other 'synonymous' terms obviously does so.

15

	<i>covers both causal and inferential links</i>	<i>standardly asymmetrical</i>	<i>avoids connotation of inexorability</i>
power	✗	✓	✓
force	✗	✓	✓
energy	✗	✓	✓
connexion	✓	✗	✓
necessary connexion	✓	✓	✗
consequentiality	✓	✓	✓

16

## 'Consequentiality'

- 'Consequentiality', as understood here, is intended to capture the very general notion of *one thing's having another thing as a consequence of some sort*.
- This covers both causal and inferential consequences: the simple notion of 'having a consequence' which is (at least as Hume sees it) common to both.

17

## 5a. The Vulgar and Philosophers

- 'The vulgar, who take things according to their first appearance, attribute the uncertainty of events to such an uncertainty in the causes as makes the latter often fail of their usual influence; though they meet with no impediment in their operation.'
- 'Philosophers' find that 'upon an exact scrutiny, a contrariety of effects always betrays a contrariety of causes' and accordingly they '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' (E 8.13, cf. T 1.3.12.5)

18

# Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion

## The Vulgar Puzzle

- (V) If necessity – genuine full-blooded *necessity* – is an ineliminable part of our very idea of causation, then how can the question of whether some causal connexions are 'uncertain', or whether all are 'equally necessary', even arise?

19

## 5b. Hume's Explanation of Probability

- In *Treatise* 1.3, probability is hardly mentioned until 1.3.6 (within the argument concerning induction). Hume just seems to take for granted that in discussing causation he's treating of probability.
- Hume consistently regards probability as a development of inductive, causal inference, when the experience underlying such inference is variable rather than uniform.

20

## The Probability Puzzle

- If the idea of 'necessary connexion' is a simple idea which has inexorability as part of its very nature, then how can an idea of mere probability possibly be derived from it?
- A simple idea can apparently only give rise to another idea by being part of a complex, and any complex that contains *necessity* will also inherit that implication of inexorability, and therefore cannot represent mere probability.

21

## Solving the Vulgar Puzzle

- The distinctive component of our idea of causation is not really strict *necessity*, but the general notion of *consequentiality* – of which *necessity* is one species.
  - The vulgar idea of causation involves a force or agency that can be less than absolute;
  - Philosophers (including Hume, a determinist) refine this to yield a more tightly defined idea of causation which implies strict necessity.
  - Both the vulgar and the philosopher have the same sort of generic idea, with consequentiality as the common central element.

22

## Solving the Probability Puzzle

- *Probability* is another species of consequentiality, and so can plausibly be ascribed the same ultimate impression-source as the idea of necessary connexion (i.e. customary inference).
- So we can make good sense of Hume's treatment of probability as a natural development from his treatment of causal inference.

23

## 6. 'Power' and 'Necessity' in Hume's Texts

- If I'm right, that the idea whose impression Hume seeks is an idea of consequentiality in general rather than strict *necessity*, then why does Hume entitle his discussions 'Of the idea of necessary connexion', and put so much emphasis on '*necessity*'?
- This seems to be a significant contrast with Locke, Malebranche, Kames, Reid etc., who focus on our idea of '*power*'.

24

# Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion

## Not So Much of a Problem!

- The original title of *Enquiry 7* was 'Of the idea of POWER or necessary CONNEXION'.
- In all three texts, Hume describes a whole family of terms as 'nearly synonymous', and treats them as completely equivalent for the purposes of his argument.
- He has two understandable motives for emphasising necessity. First, this is needed for 'Of liberty and necessity' ...

25

## Hume's Usage in the *Treatise*

- Refers to the idea of 'power' or 'efficacy' roughly three times more often than to the idea of 'necessity' or 'necessary connexion'.
- 'Necessity' terms are preferred only in the title, the first paragraph, and in a short passage of less than 250 words between 1.3.14.20 (last 2 sentences) and 1.3.14.22.
- Shortly before this passage he twice talks of 'power or connexion' (1.3.14.16)

26

## Hume's Usage in the *Enquiry*

- Refers numerous times to the idea of 'power or necessary connexion', mainly where he is introducing (7.5, 7.9) or reviewing (7.26, 7.30) his argument, and in the original title of the section.
- Within the body of the argument, he almost always prefers either 'power' or combinations of 'power', 'force' and 'energy', except only that ...
- ... the first half of 7.28 refers to 'necessary connexion' and 'power or necessary connexion'.
- 'Idea of connexion' also appears only in the vicinity of 7.28.

27

## So What's The Common Theme?

- *Treatise* 1.3.14.21:  
'The necessary connexion betwixt causes and effects is the foundation of our inference from one to the other. The foundation of our inference is the transition arising from the accustom'd union. These are, therefore, the same.'
- *Enquiry* 7.28:  
'This connexion, therefore, which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition ... is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion.'

28

## Conflating Cause and Inference

- Hume emphasises 'necessary connexion' within his argument, in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, precisely when he needs to conflate *causal* consequentiality and *inferential* consequentiality.
- (Only) when he's needing this conflation, moreover, he talks of simple 'connexion', *without* any hint of inexorability.
- This confirms that it's the conflation, rather than inexorability, motivating Hume here.

29

## Conclusion

- Hume himself sees causation as involving genuine necessity (e.g. he is a determinist).
- But the idea whose source he seeks is less specific: it is the very general and simple idea of a connexion or consequential relation between one thing and another.
- This is comprehensive enough to embrace the deterministic necessity of philosophers, the 'uncertain' causation of the vulgar, and even the philosophical notion of probability.

30