



**Natural Necessities and Causal Powers: A Discussion Rom  
Harre and E.H. Madden, *Causal Powers***

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## D I S C U S S I O N

Causal Powers by R. Harré and E. H. Madden.  
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## NATURAL NECESSITIES AND CAUSAL POWERS

"The authors of this book intend", in the words of their dust-jacket, "nothing less than a wholesale rejection of the Humean scheme of causality and the reconstruction of the causal relation along non-Humean lines." Readers of Hume Studies will, and others I believe should, regret that Harré and Madden chose to relate their own contribution to the original source of the tradition which they are rejecting only most distantly. This neglect is curious, since the book is full of historical titbits. I was, for instance, glad in the final chapter 'Fields of Potential' to learn something of the sixteenth century Robert Norman - "The first scientist of the modern era to develop the concept of a field in a way recognizably like our contemporary notion..." (p.164). But in this journal it is appropriate to concentrate upon the connections, and the lack of connections, with Hume.

The first chapter begins: "There can be no doubt that the Humean conception of Causality and its linear descendant, the Regularity Theory, must be wrong" (p.1). I agree. I agree, furthermore, both that there are powers - that "a particular thing" may be "endowed with the power to produce an effect in virtue of its nature" (p.16) - and that - as "A number of eminent philosophers have insisted" - "we are sometimes directly aware of the action of causal powers" (p.49). But I want to establish the first thesis by starting from Hume himself, and showing that the elements which he admits cannot by any means be

put together into an analysis carrying all the entailments carried by propositions asserting causal connections or laws of nature. And I want to see the second and third theses against the background of a lively appreciation of exactly what it was which Hume here was primarily concerned to deny.

So consider the first of the two definitions proposed in the first Inquiry: "*we may define a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second. Or in other words where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed."<sup>1</sup>*

The first of the two clauses italicized by Hume is a variation on the theme of constant conjunction; and such constant conjunctions can easily be expressed in terms of material implication - not as a matter of fact one and not the other. But the second clause, which Hume falsely states to be equivalent, is totally different; it is a contrary to fact conditional. Propositions of this second sort are not entailed by propositions of the first kind. Yet every causal proposition entails some such contrary to fact conditionals; and the same is, indeed, definitionally true of every kind of nomological proposition. If, for instance, I maintain that the cause of the trouble is a fault in the wiring, then, it follows necessarily, that had there been no fault in the wiring, and had everything else been held constant, there would have been no trouble. The upshot is that, in so far as Hume's account of causation is an account in terms of the regularities of constant conjunction, it must be, as an analysis of the established meanings of causal words, at the very least, crucially insufficient.

Nor is this situation saved by introducing some reference to associations of ideas or to the projection of

the felt force of habit: "We may ... form another definition of cause, and call it, an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other."<sup>2</sup> For, whatever may or may not happen to be true about my psychology when I give vent to some assertion about what causes what in the universe around me, that assertion itself certainly cannot be denied by offering some counter-assertion about putative ongoings in the speaker. Such psychological references cannot, therefore, be any part of the meaning of my original assertion.

At this point, if not before, someone will want to urge that Hume was not writing for the journal Analysis. So his "definitions" should not be construed - as the French would say if only they spoke English - at the foot of the letter. They are not, this objector might say, really intended to provide an epitome of the established meaning of the word 'cause'. Rather they are summaries of Hume's account of the circumstances of its employment: first, his account of what and all that is going on around me; and, second, his account of what is going on in me.<sup>3</sup> The greatest attraction of this hermeneutic suggestion is that it relieves Hume of responsibility for an implausible and false thesis. It is here salutary to reflect once again how well a Humean story can be fitted to the famous Geulinox example of the two clocks - modified perhaps by the proviso that one is to be a split second fast on the other. Yet that example was offered, and accepted, as a paradigm case of constant conjunction without direct causal connection!<sup>4</sup>

Harré and Madden maintain that "The Humean or Regularity Theory of Causality rejects the concept of natural necessity" (p.2). Speaking of "contemporary Humeans, they assert "Any notion of physical necessity goes against what they see as an eternal verity" (p.44).

Certainly our authors are right to emphasize that Hume made no provision here for any but a logical necessity. Even the proud discovery of the impression from which the ideas of causal necessity and causal connection are supposedly derived is always, it seems - and in defiance, surely, of his own stated semantic principles - seen rather as an exposure than a legitimation. Yet what Harré and Madden say, considered simply as an interpretation of Hume, is nevertheless in a subtle way misleading. For Hume does not first begin by making some distinction between logical and contingent necessity, and then proceed to rule out the latter as somehow incoherent or absurd or incompatible with the eternal verities. He does not even - as Harré and Madden at one point suggest that he does (pp.158-159) - entertain contingent as opposed to logical necessity as a theoretical possibility, but they proceed to urge that knowledge of such necessities is outside the scope of our naturally limited understanding. The truth is, rather, that no second notion of non-logical as opposed to logical necessity ever entered Hume's sights at all. (By the way: could not the same be said equally truly of Kant?)

For what Hume does is to concentrate persistently and consistently on his primary negative thesis, the denial that we can have a priori knowledge of causal relations. Descartes, for instance, had taken it as an inexpugnable manifestation of the natural light, not only that everything must have a sufficient cause, but also that that cause to be sufficient must have at least as much reality - whatever that may mean - as its effect. Hume is thus in the first place concerned to dispose of any such putative necessities. We do not and we cannot know that any thing or any sort of thing either must be or cannot be the cause of any other thing or sort of thing. This disposal achieved, the way is, as Hume sees it, wide open for the

development of an account of how the felt force of habitual association is projected as the idea or pseudo-idea of necessity. And this account is, of course, one of the main campaign trophies of that "march up directly to the Capital" announced in the Introduction to the Treatise.<sup>5</sup> For is not this discovery, together with the companion account of what we might once uninstructedly have called value characteristics, strictly comparable with the recognition in the natural sciences that secondary qualities are native to the mind rather than to the universe around us?

Chapter III of Harré and Madden is 'The Rebuttal of the Central Pillars of the Humean Theory'. Section 1 is 'An Examination of the Most Central Humean Contention: the In-Principle (or No-Contradiction) Argument' (p.44). The authors refer to "contemporary Humeans", not to Hume: "In principle, they say, there can be no element of necessity in the causal relation because the conjunction of the description of a cause with the negation of the description of the usual effect is never self-contradictory" (p.44). Certainly it is this In-Principle (or No-Contradiction) Argument to which Hume repeatedly resorts in labouring to establish his negative thesis. For instance, in the first Inquiry version Hume considers how "*The impulse of one billiard ball is attended with motion in the second*", and concludes: "*But were the power or energy of any cause discoverable by the mind, we could foresee the effect, even without experience; and might, at first, pronounce with certainty concerning it, by the mere dint of thought and reasoning.*"<sup>6</sup>

External sources of the "*idea of power or necessary connection*" thus briskly dismissed, Hume proceeds to the suggestion "*that we are every moment conscious of internal power; while we feel, that, by the simple command of our will, we can move the organs of our body, or direct the*

*faculties of our mind*".<sup>7</sup> This is again rejected, for a parallel reason: "*the influence of volition over the organs of the body ... is a fact, which, like all other natural events, can be known only by experience.*"<sup>8</sup>

Again what Hume says is perfectly true; and, as a reason for maintaining his own most cherished conclusion, quite decisive. Considered, however, as objections to the contention that we become by experience acquainted both with certain contingent necessities and with some of our own powers, such deployments of the In-Principle (or No-Contradiction) Argument are not even relevant. For the contention is that it is precisely and only by experience that we can and do become acquainted with these natural realities; whereas the proposed objection impotently insists that we do not and cannot here possess any knowledge a priori.

At this point we need to make a distinction between what we learn about things and what we learn about people. In one of his greatest chapters<sup>9</sup>, a chapter which Hume must surely have had in mind if not open on his desk when he wrote 'Of the Idea of Necessary Connection', Locke argued that the idea 'Of Power' is acquired from our experience of being able to do or to abstain from doing this or that at will. But power in this sense cannot properly be attributed to any inanimate nor to most animate things. When we feel the pressure of the steam under the lid of the kettle what we are acquainted with is a dispositional power, not a power to choose.

Failing to appreciate this distinction, and failing to recognize that we are aware of both kinds of power is, I think, one aspect of what Harré and Madden "would like to call the 'inferential predicament'"; and "getting involved in it forces one inevitably into pan-psychism and animism, an unmitigated disaster in the eyes of the great majority of contemporary philosophers" (p.58). No doubt

one reason why "contemporary Humeans" have been reluctant to admit any notions of causal efficacy or of contingent necessity is a fear that this must involve some sort of animistic projection of the distinctly human out onto the inanimate.

Another reason is by Harré and Madden attributed to the historic Hume: "Since he takes punctiform and atomistic sensations as epistemically basic, it would be impossible for any single impression to be the original or any relational concept, let alone the original of 'the action of causal power'" (p.55). This apothegm again refers, I think, to aspects of the deep assumptions which led one "contemporary Humean" fifteen years ago to write: "Hume in considering causality, in effect, and with obvious qualifications, first insists that all the evidence we have or could have for causal propositions consists in statements of constant conjunctions ... Presumably evidence must ultimately be either observational or experimental. Applying an appropriately fastidious standard or purity in observation it is scarcely possible to deny that all we could ever simply observe would be more or less constant conjunctions. Even experimental evidence, which he unfortunately fails to emphasize, is from a pure logician's point of view itself reducible to observational. In doing and reporting the experiment all we observe or could observe will be that one thing follows another, or not".<sup>10</sup> The expression "an appropriately fastidious standard or purity in" seems to have been an euphemism for "extensional blinkers to".

Causal Powers contains too many deplorable sentences, such as "The idea that modern field theory is some kind of return to Aristotelianism as suggested by Miller and Caws in two recent reviews, is to betray not only a failure to understand the metaphysical revolution

implicit in the shift from all genuine substance theories to dynamical or power theories of matter but also a lamentable ignorance of the history of science" (p.166); and "But we claim that what we have thus identified is a conceptual relation which is a reflection of a real relation of necessitation between a particular thing endowed with the power to produce an effect in virtue of its nature, in the absence of constraint and when properly stimulated" (p.16). Both sentences are here repeated complete, and exactly as given.

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1. Selby-Bigge p.76: Hendel, p.87.
2. Ibid. pp.77 and 87.
3. Compare my parallel suggestion at pp.67-69 of W. D. Hudson (ed.) The Is/Ought Question (London, and New York: Macmillan, and St. Martin's Press, 1969) about another famous conclusion: "So that when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it."
4. I suggested this first at p.131 of my Hume's Philosophy of Belief (London, and New York:, Routledge and Kegan Paul, and the Philosophical Library, 1961); and made more of the suggestion at pp.336-338 of An Introduction to Western Philosophy (Indianapolis, and London: Bobbs-Merrill, and Thames and Hudson, 1971).
5. Selby-Bigge, p.xx.
6. Selby-Bigge, p.63: Hendel, pp.74-75.
7. Ibid., p.64 : pp.75 and 76.
8. Ibid., p.64 : p.76.
9. Essay II (xxi).

10. I have to confess that I was the man; at p.133 of HPB. The passage is the better evidence of the strength of these deep assumptions in that back in 1954 in 'Could an Effect Precede its Cause?' (P.A.S. Supp. Vol XXVIII) I had already faulted Hume for failing to do justice to causal efficacy, while in the same chapter of HPB I went on to try to take proper account of contingent necessity.