



Discussion: Causal Powers

R. Harré and E. H. Madden

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HUME AND NONLOGICAL NECESSITY

Flew substantially agrees with our main themes in Causal Powers, though he thinks our discussion should begin closer to the work of Hume himself. What to reply? Needless to say, we find no fault in his agreement with us and are happy for his support. The answer to the second part of his response is far more complicated and requires a bit of background from Causal Powers.

While contemporary Humeans differ in important details, they share certain commitments which constitute what we call the Humean tradition. This tradition and contemporary refinements of it are the targets of our criticisms and provide the crucial foil for presenting our own positive theory of natural necessity. Two important strands of the tradition, as we characterized it, are the In-principle (No-contradiction) argument and the argument against the possibility of a priori knowledge of matters of fact. (i) Since nature may change its course, 'C and not E' is not self-inconsistent. To the Humean the phrase "change in the course of nature" seems intuitively clear; to us it seems utterly opaque and itself in great need of analysis. We show that there are two possible interpretations of the phrase, one of which is self-inconsistent while the other, though coherent, does not establish the Humean conclusion that there is no necessary connection between matters of fact. (ii) The Humean assumes that 'p is contingent' and 'p is a posteriori,' and 'p is necessary' and 'p is a priori,' are materially equivalent, and then argues easily that since all causal propositions are a posteriori none of them can be a priori and so necessary. We offer numerous arguments to break up the assumed equivalencies and thus defeat the conclusion

of the Humean argument. We show that while all scientific propositions are indeed known a posteriori it does not follow that there are no justifiable propositions about natural kinds. Philosophers in other traditions have made a similar point in showing that "metaphysical necessity" does not entail "epistemic necessity." Indeed, in contrast to many contemporary Humeans, we are complete fallibilists and even reject the notion that there is a self-contained given which is incorrigible.

In portraying various strands of "the Humean tradition" in Causal Powers, we were, of course, imputing these views to Hume himself. How could it be otherwise? In referring to the Humean tradition instead of to Hume we meant only to indicate (as do contemporary Humeans) that we were concerned only with what we take to be still very much alive in Hume's work. Hence it is puzzling to read Flew's remark that we relate our own contributions to Hume "only most distantly." That we and contemporary Humeans are always correct in what we ascribe to Hume and in what we take to be still philosophically alive in his work may be open to question, but since Flew does not challenge any specific ascription there is no alleged misinterpretation to defend ourselves against.

Flew suggests that we should show Hume to be wrong at the outset -- convict him, so to speak, on the grounds of the inconsistencies in his own texts. He refers to the famous definition of 'cause' in the Inquiry, where Hume gives a factual rendition of 'cause' and then innocently equates it with a counterfactual counterpart. C. J. Ducasse, for many years an ardent critic of Hume texts, made this point nicely in 1924 in his splendid book Causation and the Types of Necessity. After quoting Hume's definition in the Inquiry Ducasse remarked:

This statement, incidentally, is immediately followed by: "Or in other words where, if the first object had not been, the second never had

existed." But this, far from being only a different way of saying precisely the same thing, is on the contrary a precise way of saying a very different thing. For Hume very definitely maintains elsewhere that there is never any "if-ness" objectively observable at all, but only a "that-ness" constantly repeated in experience. So that only the first statement is consistent with his empiricism, and even in that first statement the words "are followed" should in strictness be replaced by "have in experience been followed."¹

Indeed we must add that Hume in the Treatise makes matters worse by explicitly rejecting the notion that there is any difference between constant conjunction statements, on the one hand, and power, ability, or potentiality statements, on the other. Having given his definition of 'cause' in the Treatise, he proceeds to draw several corollaries from it. Part of the second corollary is that *"the distinction, which we often make betwixt power and the exercise of it, is equally without foundation."*² It is not difficult to find other inconsistencies in Hume; indeed Ducasse writes that "any attempt to extract from Hume's writings a consistent set of conclusions is, I am convinced, bound to fail." "The most disconcerting vices in Hume's exposition of his views, especially in the Treatise, are his frequent disregard at one place of the conclusions that he has reached at an earlier place, and his continuing to use in their ordinary sense terms that he has already redefined or even criticized away."³

We do not intend to belittle Flew's reiteration of Ducasse's point, far from it; this inconsistency needs to be stressed. However, contemporary Humeans are quite aware of the difficulties of justifying on Humean grounds the counterfactual inferences that causal statements allow, and they have offered numerous solutions to this difficulty. It is necessary to show both that the offered solutions

fail and, more important, why all such solutions are in principle bound to fail. We attempt both tasks in Chapter 2 of Causal Powers. It is difficult to see how pointing out Hume's unawareness of the difficulty is any answer to Humeans who see the problem and try to solve it. We may cut off Hume in this fashion but we by no means thereby cut off the Humean tradition.

It is also difficult to see what use there is in criticizing Hume for incorporating psychological references as part of the meaning of original assertions. We deliberately avoided this sort of criticism. The psychological dimension in Hume plays no role in the thinking of contemporary Humeans, though they construct logical surrogates for Hume's psychological gambits. It is necessary to demolish the surrogates, not what they have replaced. The Humean tradition has Hume in it, but not all Hume is part of the tradition.

Flew makes two points (which he takes to be intimately related) that are interesting and, we think, important, though it is not easy to assess them: (a) "...no second notion of non-logical as opposed to logical necessity ever entered Hume's sights at all" and (b) "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." We did not discuss these matters in Causal Powers (our book is in no way an historical account of Hume) but are happy to respond to them here in an attenuated way.

(a) We share Flew's view that Hume is deploying a univocal concept of necessity but are puzzled by the way he states the point. In the Treatise Book I, Part III, Section XIV, Hume considers the possibility of there being

kinds or degrees of necessity by virtue of the strength or weakness of the connection between objects. However, he rejects the idea on the grounds that physical necessity is just constant conjunction and a determination of the mind, and these conditions either obtain or they do not. In the absence of either there is chance. Neither can admit of degrees; therefore, "*'tis impossible to admit of any medium betwixt chance and an absolute necessity.*"⁴ In these passages Hume speaks in the clearest terms of physical necessity, argues about whether it has degrees, and contrasts it with chance. Of course he goes on to analyse it in his characteristic way, a way which prevents us seeing it as a form of necessity at all. Even more important, it is impossible to make sense of Hume's whole enterprise unless one has a feeling for his reluctance to lose the ordinary and scientific notion of natural necessity. If the ball is genuinely a ball -- has mass, etc. --, is genuinely unsupported and nothing intervenes to support it, then the ball must fall to the ground. Hume twice repeats in the Treatise and the Inquiry that the definition of cause which he gives is "*drawn from circumstances foreign to the cause*"; "*from something extraneous and foreign to it,*"⁵ and that it is only the best of which the feeble powers of man permit -- a distinction which would not make sense unless he admitted a possible meaning to 'natural necessity' and a distinction which again acknowledges the importance of the ordinary notion of natural necessity even though this notion cannot be caught in his epistemic net and thus justified.

Recall again that we agree with Flew that Hume has a univocal concept of necessity. However this view is compatible with drawing the opposite conclusion from Flew's. The text can be made to support an ironic reversal of

Flew's comment "that no second notion of non-logical as opposed to logical necessity ever entered Hume's sights at all." In giving his account of the necessity that obtains in the relations between ideas, Hume gives just the same analysis, namely, constant conjunction and a determination of the mind. This is particularly striking in the famous argument to distinguish a pure mathematics of ideas within algebra and arithmetic from a mathematics contaminated with the empirical as in the case of geometry. The issue seems to us an interesting one since it raises, in addition to a problem in Humean exegetics, the question of how logical necessity was conceived in the era of those philosophies Hume is at much pains to refute.

There is another dimension to this whole question which seems especially important to us. A good case can be made, we think, for saying that Hume confuses a strong sense of necessity (logical) with a weaker sense of necessity (contingent necessity) and unwittingly thinks that because he has shown that empirical propositions cannot be necessary in the first sense he has shown that they cannot be necessary in the second sense -- a non sequitur. This point seems to us to go to the heart of Hume's univocal view of necessity, and we discussed it in detail in Causal Powers.

(b) We agree with Flew that Hume concentrates persistently on his primary negative thesis, namely, the denial that we can have a priori knowledge of causal relations. Indeed, in Causal Powers we emphasize that Hume concentrates on showing that all causal propositions are a posteriori and none of them a priori. Assuming that 'p is a posteriori' and 'p is contingent,' and 'p is a priori' and 'p is necessary,' are materially equivalent, he easily slides to the conclusion that causal propositions are not necessary. Since, of course, we emphatically agree with Hume's negative thesis, we avoid

his conclusion that causal propositions are never necessary by breaking up the assumed material equivalencies. Certainly it is important to focus on Hume's negative thesis; however, it is crucial to see the ultimate point of it. It is the crucial link in his effort to show that there is no "causal efficacy," or that if there is, we can never know it. Which of the two alternatives was he trying to establish? Happily we do not need to decide between skeptical and positivistic interpretations of Hume (or show that they both confusedly co-exist in the texts), but we can point out that it is difficult to make sense of the distinction itself or of the skeptical interpretation if one believes that Hume had no nonlogical sense of necessity in mind. That he confused it with logical necessity is another claim and one that we argue for.

Finally, Hume's confusion between nonlogical and logical necessity is reflected in the way he blurs and lumps together the significantly different concepts of power, agency, efficacy, and necessary connection. In the Treatise he lumps together efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connection, and productive quality; in the Inquiry, power, force, energy, or necessary connection.⁶ Although he never spelled it out, Hume seems to have followed this path: if 'necessity between facts' is to make any sense at all, it must be because 'power' links or connects C to E. That is to say, E must follow C because there is a power in C which necessitates E's coming into being. Put another way, power is conceived to be some kind of "ontological tie that binds" C to E, and this tie allegedly explains why the effect necessarily occurs. This path is quite in contrast to the one followed by Locke, who conceived power statements as requiring, not providing, explanation. For Hume, however, 'power' conceptually implies 'necessary connection,' and hence he lumps the two notions together

when he looks for the original of "causal necessity" in external and internal impressions, He does not find the original of this concept, of course, and so his inevitable conclusion follows. It is necessary to go behind Hume to Locke, who happily kept the concepts of power and natural necessity distinct.

Not taking Locke seriously in his opening move seems to us a distinct loss. It is our contention that his view (though admittedly ambiguous in places) contains within itself the potential for development in a direction which, had it been persistently pursued, would have vitiated Hume's analysis in advance. We believe that Locke's keeping distinct the concepts of power and natural necessity, his analysis of power statements as promissory notes requiring explanations in terms of the natures of the various particulars involved, and his ontological interpretation of 'power' as referring to forceful particulars that make things happen, are all ingredients in what can be developed into an adequate concept of non-logical necessity.

E. H. Madden
State University of New York
at Buffalo.
R. Harré
Linacre College, Oxford.

1. Causation and the Types of Necessity, pp.9-10.
Ducasse left out Hume's italics in the counterfactual rendition.
2. Selby-Bigge, p. 171.
3. Causation and the Types of Necessity, p.7.
4. Selby-Bigge, p. 171.
5. Selby-Bigge, p. 170; Hendel, Scribner's, pp. 157-58.
6. Selby-Bigge, p. 157; Hendel, Scribner's, p. 146.

7. Cf. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Fraser edition, II, vii, 8; II, xxi, 73 (cf. II, viii, 10); II, xxiii, 18; II, xxvi, 2; IV, iii, 11; IV, iii, 12 (cf. IV, iii, 14). There are times when Locke intimates that the minute particles forming a thing's primary qualities are not the explanation for that object's powers, but constitute the powers themselves (cf. II, viii, 8). Apparently Hume interprets Locke this way, but in light of the overwhelming textual evidence to the contrary we reject any such interpretation.