



## **Inconsistency within a Reconciling Project**

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## INCONSISTENCY WITHIN A RECONCILING PROJECT

*There is nothing I wou'd more willingly lay hold of, than an opportunity of confessing my errors; and shou'd esteem such a return to truth and reason to be more honourable than the most unerring judgment.* Hume's words in the first sentence of its Appendix referred to Books I and II of A Treatise of Human Nature. I quote them here with a similarly particular but less glorious reference to Chapter VIII of my Hume's Philosophy of Belief (London, and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, and Philosophical Library, 1961). The errors to be corrected are in the first instance mine. But, if I am now right, they are also and more importantly to be found in the first Inquiry itself.

Hume's purpose in Section VIII is to apply to *the long disputed question concerning liberty and necessity* what he takes to be his discovery that *Our idea ... of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter* (Selby-Bigge, EHU 81-82).

In urging what is here offered as the new and only correct interpretation of what others want to distinguish as contingent necessity and contingent impossibility, Hume is in their - and my - terms saying that there is no genuine idea of, and no such thing as, contingent necessity and contingent impossibility. There are, that is to say, no true logically contingent propositions asserting certain necessities and impossibilities whether relative or absolute. There are, on the contrary, only logical necessities and logical impossibilities; and these obtain simply as *relations of ideas*. They do not and cannot either

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characterize or determine *real existence and matter of fact* (EHU 25-26).

Now certainly, if Hume were right in maintaining either that we cannot coherently assert, or that we never have due warrant for asserting, that any causes necessitate their effects - that they make these, that is, as a matter of fact inevitable and anything else as a matter of fact impossible - then it would become a short and easy task to effect a Compatibilist resolution of *the long disputed question*. For, on this assumption, nothing more than profound regularities of human behaviour, and sometimes predictabilities, ever have been or ever could be revealed, whether in the everyday experience of the banal vulgar, or whether by the elevated investigations of the physical and the human sciences. Discoveries of this sort, however, do not and cannot prejudice the familiar realities of human action; which just requires that, in some sense, agents must always be able to do otherwise than they do. This sense - a sense which allows that both the agent who acts freely and the agent who acts under compulsion act - Hume explicates as Locke had done before him in the great chapter 'Of Power' (Essay, II (xxi) 7 ff.). Action necessarily involves a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may (EHU 95).

1. Having thus in Part I drawn Compatibilist conclusions from what is in effect his rejection of all contingent necessity and contingent impossibility, Hume proceeds in Part II to apply his findings to the theological special case: to the equally *long disputed question* of freewill and predestination, that is, rather than of free-will and determinism. After first considering that all reward and punishment must presuppose that the persons to be so treated are the causes of whatever it is for which they are to be rewarded or punished, Hume entertains what

ironically he presents as an objection to this theory, with regard to necessity and liberty ... It may be said, for instance, that, if voluntary actions be subjected to the same laws of necessity with the operations of matter, there is a continued chain of necessary causes, pre-ordained and pre-determined, reaching from the original cause of all to every single volition of every human creature (EHU 99).

In Hume's Philosophy of Belief I argued, against many if not all previous interpreters, that this "objection" is in truth not the ingenuously admitted embarrassment it pretends to be, but a mischievously contrived occasion for drawing two desired morals, both relevant to the stated purposes of the whole book. Thus, Hume continues, speaking of God, *He foresaw, he ordained, he intended all those actions of men, which we so rashly pronounce criminal. And we must therefore conclude, either that they are not criminal, or that the Deity, not man, is accountable for them* (EHU 100). The first option is ruled out on the congenial, radically secular ground that *these distinctions are founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind ... not to be controuled or altered by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever* (EHU 103). The second is taken to justify the equally congenial, equally secular moral that philosophy should confine herself to the proper province of our human understanding *without launching into so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction* (EHU 103).

But what I failed to see then, and what Hume too seems not to have seen, is that this pretended objection in fact construes causation in a sense much stronger than that for which Hume makes provision. The passage quoted at the end of the last paragraph but one immediately continues: *No contingency anywhere in the universe; no indifference; no liberty. While we act, we are, at the same time, acted upon. The ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world, who first bestowed motion on this*

*immense machine, and placed all beings in that particular position, whence every subsequent event, by an inevitable necessity, must result* (EHU 99-100). This talk of an *inevitable necessity* we cannot read in the official, denatured sense. For that is compatible with what Hume calls liberty. But here the Divine causality specifically leaves no room whatsoever for alternatives, *no liberty*. So what is supposed to be the particular application in Part II of the reconciling ideas of Part I is in fact inconsistent with them.

2. Granting that this is true of what Hume actually wrote, is there not some way in which he could have side-stepped trouble while still offering an "objection" adequate to warrant the desired morals? I do not believe that there is. His first difficulty will be to make room within *the religious hypothesis* for what he calls liberty - the possibility, essential to our agency, of doing other than we do (EHU 139). This surely can be met by stipulating that the Creator brings about conditions of our action such that, while He and others can know what we will in fact do, nevertheless, in the sense indicated by Locke, we always could have done otherwise. If there is indeed no incoherence here, then these arrangements must leave the Deity, if not the exclusively responsible ultimate agent of all our misdeeds, then at least the permanent and universal accessory before and during their doing<sup>1</sup>.

But, even allowing that it is thus easy to dispose of this first difficulty, there remains a more fundamental and intractable second. Does not the notion of any agency, whether human or Divine, itself contain and imply much more than the brute fact of constant conjunction which is all that Hume can permit in causation as a philosophical relation? For doing is a kind of causing. But to say that these cause those entails, what to say that these are as a matter of fact always accompanied by those does not entail, subjunctive conditionals. So any analysis of causation in terms of mere constant conjunction must be, to say the

least, importantly incomplete<sup>2</sup>. If this is right, then a Humean account of Divine causation, or of human, will be one in which nothing at all is actually done. Nothing happens, that is to say, such that something else would not have happened if that had not; and nothing is ever made either necessary or inevitable, whether by God or man. Yet there just are universal regularities in the occurrence of events in themselves entirely loose and separate and unconnected.

Hume, therefore, is not entitled to help himself to that congenial moral against *launching into so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction*. The troubles of the theologians are a direct consequence of their own insistence upon postulating a Creator as the ultimate agent. If they accepted Hume's reductive reinterpretation of the necessity of causes, then they could spare their God the charge of being at least the accessory to and perhaps even the ultimate author of sin; albeit only at the altogether unacceptable price of maintaining that no one, whether God or man, actually brings about anything at all!

3. I must not end without confessing two further relevant faults of Hume's Philosophy of Belief. The first of these is in the treatment of his exploration in Part I of Section VII of possible sources '*Of the Idea of Necessary Connection*'<sup>3</sup>. I concentrated on the true point that Hume was primarily concerned to establish his most characteristic and fertile negative thesis, the thesis that we cannot know a priori that anything or sort of thing either must be or cannot be the cause of any other thing or sort of thing. So I failed to bring out Hume's own refusal to recognize as such the sources and warrants for the notions of agency, of contingent necessity, and of contingent impossibility. This first failure was then compounded by corresponding inadequacies in my reconstructive criticism of Hume's positive contribution<sup>4</sup>.

The second of these further and relevant faults is

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in the treatment of his *reconciling project* in Part I of Section VIII (EHU 95). Having previously in that criticism failed to make sufficient room for contingent necessity and contingent impossibility, I was then far too generous in my assessment of the success of this project. For if these are indeed legitimate ideas, corresponding to realities with which we cannot but be utterly familiar, then it is just not true to say that *Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent inference from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connection* (EHU 82). Yet this, and this alone, is Hume's reason for thinking that his *reconciling project* can go through at the trot. If once that reason is refused to him, then we are, as far as he is concerned, back at square one<sup>5</sup>.

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1. Compare 'The Freewill Defence' in my The Presumption of Atheism (London, and New York: Pemberton-Elek, and Barnes and Noble, 1976).
2. Compare, for instance, Hume's Philosophy of Belief, pp. 127 ff.
3. Ibid., pp. 108 ff.
4. Ibid., pp. 117-139.
5. I have tried to do better on all these several matters in my A Rational Animal (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), especially Chapters II-IX.