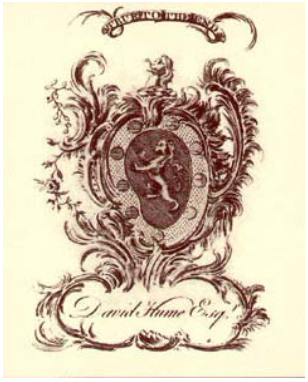

What Impressions of Necessity?
Antony Flew
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What Impressions of Necessity?

Antony Flew

My question is this: "Why and how was it that Hume failed to find a kind of impression from which to legitimate the complementary ideas of physical necessity and physical impossibility?" We can best begin from his first published discussion of causation.

1. In *Treatise* 1.3.2, the section, "Of probability; and of the idea of cause and effect," Hume asserts that, "The idea ... of causation must be deriv'd from some *relation* among objects; and that relation we must now endeavour to discover."[1] His first efforts are directed to establishing that two causally related objects must be both spatio-temporally contiguous and temporally successive, the cause object preceding the effect object. But "[h]aving thus discover'd or suppos'd" this conclusion, Hume finds that he is "stopt short, and can proceed no farther in considering any single instance of cause and effect" (T 76). We might, therefore, have expected that his next move would have been to consider series of resembling cause objects and their relations to series of resembling effect objects. But such a consideration is in fact deferred from section 2 until section 14, "Of the idea of necessary connection"; a section starting all of seventy-seven pages later. Instead, the immediately following paragraph reads:

> Shou'd any one leave this instance, and pretend to define a cause, by saying it is something productive of another, 'tis evident he wou'd say nothing. For what does he mean by *production*? Can he give any definition of it, that will not be the same with that of causation? If he can; I desire it may be produc'd. If he cannot; he here runs in a circle, and gives a synonimous term instead of a definition. (T 77)

The phrasing of that paragraph perhaps constitutes one of those infelicities in the *Treatise* which Hume was later to recognize and regret. For if and inasmuch as "causation" and "production" are synonyms, any adequate definition of either word must be equally adequate for both. Rashly assuming that his challenge to produce such a definition will not and cannot be met, Hume proceeds at once to ask and to answer his own consequential question:

> Shall we then rest contented with these two relations of contiguity and succession, as affording a compleat idea of causation? By no means. An object may be contiguous and prior to another, without being consider'd as its cause. There is a NECESSARY CONNEXION to be taken into consideration; and that relation is of much greater importance, than any of the other two above-mention'd. (T 77)

2. But now, why "necessary connexion" rather than either "causal connexion" or "connexion" without prefix or suffix? Suppose that you were the Adam of the *Abstract* "created in the full vigour of understanding," yet altogether "without experience" (T 650). And suppose that you had noticed some *A*'s both spatio-temporally contiguous to and precedent to *B*'s. Then, assuming that your understanding was not only vigorous but also equipped with all the essential concepts, you might well ask yourself, or perhaps, if she was now available, your partner, whether there was any causal connection here at all; or, more specifically, whether these *A*'s were causing these *B*'s. You might even proceed to put the question to experimental test: either by producing further *A*'s in hopes of consequentially producing further *B*'s; or, when *A's occurred spontaneously, by trying to inhibit the subsequent occurrence of B's.*

What such an Adam would surely not do—not unless he had developed proto-Humean desires: both to demonstrate the absence here of any logically necessary connections; and thus, hopefully, also to discredit the idea that any other kind of necessity might be involved—is to suggest that the third, crucial, and so far unidentified element in any adequate account of causation must be *necessary* connection; as opposed, that is, to either causal connection or just plain unqualified connection.

It is, of course, obvious that Hume himself is eager to get on first to denying logically necessary connections, and then to the further business which he relates to this denial. For it is in the immediately following section 3, "Why a cause is always necessary," that he presents his argument for the conclusion that, whereas, "Every effect must have a cause" is, "Every event must have a cause" is not a logically necessary truth. The development of the fully comprehensive empiricist contention that it is from experience alone that we can learn what particular things or sorts of things are or are not the causes of other particular things or sorts of things is deferred till section 14. Even there the formulation of this conclusion is less incisive and decisive than in the *Abstract*:

> The mind can always *conceive* any effect to follow from any cause, and indeed any event to follow upon another: whatever we *conceive* is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense: but wherever a demonstration takes place, the contrary is impossible, and implies a contradiction. There is no demonstration, therefore, for any conjunction of cause and effect. (T 650-51)

3. Way back in the antediluvian days of my own first readings of the *Treatise*, I was eager, like Hume, to hasten on to those famously exciting empiricist denials, and to Hume's positive account of causal efficacy as a sort of secondary quality. Since John Davis is a close contemporary I suspect that his background was similar, and that he, too, made no attempt during his first readings to meet Hume's challenge to produce, not a mere synonym or synonyms, but a properly explicative definition. If so, we were together, as we shall see, in abundant company; a company surely increased by the hazing effect of infelicities of the peremptory paragraph putting the challenge.

But those days are long past. So why not now, for a start, say that causing is making something happen? In order to overcome the objection that this by itself is merely providing a synonym, we need to develop and apply a distinction elsewhere seminally suggested by Hume himself. In the essay, "Of National Characters," he wrote: "By *moral* causes, I mean all circumstances, which are fitted to work on the mind as motives or reasons. ... By *physical* causes I mean those qualities of the air and climate, which are supposed to work insensibly on the temper, by altering the tone and habit of the body."[2]

The former can operate only upon agents and, in so doing—to borrow a famous phrase from Leibniz—they incline but do not necessitate. By conveying some splendid news to someone I provide them with good cause to celebrate. But I do not thereby compel them to celebrate, willy-nilly. Such moral causing is sometimes described as agent causation. This is, however, misleading, since it suggests: not, what is true, that it is only agents who can be moved by moral causes; but instead, what is false, that it is only agents who are able to cause in this way.[3]

Physical causes, on the other hand, do necessitate. A physical cause causes or produces its effects by making their occurrence physically necessary and their non-occurrence physically impossible. This notion of making things happen, and the associated ideas of physical necessity and physical impossibility, are the essentials missing from any and every Humean analysis of causation. It is because physical causes produce or bring about their effects that there is no room in logical space for any conception of backwards causation: if the

putative past "effect" has already happened, then its supposed later "cause" must be redundant and hence ineffective; whereas, if it has not previously happened, then its postulated future "cause" will need to make to have happened something which has not happened.[4] It is only and precisely because propositions asserting physical causation, like propositions asserting laws of nature, contain the two associated ideas of physical necessity and physical impossibility that they can license inferences to contrary-to-fact conditionals.[5]

It is also only and precisely because Hume refuses to admit either the notion of making things happen or the associated ideas of physical necessity and physical impossibility that his "reconciling project," attempted in the first *Enquiry*, can at least seem to go through at the trot (E 95). For "this reasoning," as he had explained in the *Abstract*, "puts the whole controversy in a new light, by giving a new definition of necessity" (T 661). New it certainly is, although it constitutes a dissolution rather than a definition. For what is thus presented as "a new definition of necessity" is in truth an account of nothing but a sort of regular sequence, which deliberately precludes any kind of necessity.[6]

4. In the present context, Locke's great chapter, "Of Power,"[7] must be the most appropriate starting point of a search for the sorts of impressions from which the essential ideas omitted from Hume's account of causation could be derived, and by reference to which they may be legitimated. For it is to this chapter and its author that Hume makes reference in his treatments, "Of the idea of necessary connexion" in both the *Treatise* (T 157) and the first *Enquiry* (E 64). In order to reap the maximum profit we will approach the sorts of impressions sought indirectly; by way of the idea, or rather the ideas, of power.

The chief reason why Hume failed to recognize any of those described in this chapter as being suitable is that his constant and overriding objective was to banish logical necessities. It was always these which he was targeting. Thus in the better, later treatment, he speaks for Locke: "It may be said, 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" (E 64). The nub of Hume's objection to this is put in the single sentence:

> This influence, we may observe, is a fact, which, like all other natural events, can be known only by experience, and can never be foreseen from any apparent energy or power in the cause, which connects it with the effect, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. (E 64-65)

Perfectly true, we may in our turn observe; and altogether irrelevant. To Hume, all this appears germane only because seemingly it never enters his head to assess Locke's suggestion as a suggestion: first about the origin of concepts incorporating another notion of necessity; and then about the sort of warrant we may have for believing propositions involving such concepts. Thus it is, though quite correct, entirely beside the point to insist that we can learn only through experience, and not from any insight into logical necessities, what is and is not subject to our wills. The facts, too, about what, if any, physical (or contingent) necessities obtain, and where, are of course contingent facts, not logically necessary truths. Nor is there any question but that, if we are to know any facts of this kind, our knowledge has to be grounded in experience. But once we allow ourselves to admit, besides the logical, another idea of necessary connection, everything here will be seen to be exactly as it should be, and as constituting no threat whatsoever to Hume's master insight: "If we reason *a priori*, anything may appear able to produce anything. The falling of a pebble may, for aught we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of man control the planets in their orbits" (E 164).

Although neither Locke nor Hume explicitly distinguished two senses of "power," Locke was in fact concerned with power solely in the sense in which it can be predicated only of people—or of such putative, quasi-personal beings as the theist God, the Olympian gods, archangels, angels, devils, and other assorted disembodied or ever-bodiless spirits. Let us, therefore, attach to power in the first sense the label "power (personal)." It was, presumably, power of this personal sort which Hume was darkly denying when he repudiated "[t]he distinction, which we often make betwixt *power* and the *exercise* of it" (T 171).

In the other sense, which is the only sense in which the word can be applied to inanimate objects and to most of animate nature, a power simply is a disposition to behave in such and such a way, given that such and such preconditions are satisfied. Thus we might say that the "nuclear device" dropped at Nagasaki possessed an explosive power equivalent to that of so many tons of TNT, or that full-weight nylon climbing rope has a breaking strain (of a power to hold up to) 4,500 pounds. Let us label this second sort of power "power (physical)." A power (personal) is an ability at will either to do or to abstain from doing whatever it may be. Thus we might say that in his heyday J. V. Stalin had the power of life and death over all subjects of the Soviet Empire.

5. In three characteristically vivid passages Locke not only explains both what we have distinguished as the idea of power

(personal) and the contrasting concepts of physical necessity and physical impossibility, but also demonstrates that there can be no question at all but that all these ideas have abundant application. It is to be regretted that in the third Locke mistakes it that he is explaining what is meant: not, generally, by "an agent"; but rather, particularly, by "a free agent." The first reads:

> This at least I think evident, that we find in ourselves a Power to begin or forbear, continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our Bodies ... This Power ... thus to order the consideration of any idea, or the forbearing to consider it; or to prefer the motion of any part of the body to its rest, and *vice versa* in any particular instance, is that which we call the Will. (Locke, 236)

The second reads:

> Everyone, I think, finds in himself a Power to begin or forbear, continue to put an end to several Actions in himself ... actions of the Man, which everyone finds in himself, arise the Ideas of Liberty and Necessity. (Locke, 237)

And the third passage, in which the Latin translates as St. Vitus' dance, reads:

> We have instances enough, and often more than enough, in our own bodies. A Man's Heart beats, the Blood circulates, which t'is not in his Power ... to stop; and therefore in respect of these Motions, where rest depends not on his choice ... he is not a free agent. Convulsive Motions agitate his legs, so that though he will it never so much, he cannot ... stop their motion (as in that odd disease called *chorea Sancti Viti*), but he is perpetually dancing: He is ... under as much Necessity of moving as a Stone that falls or a Tennis-ball struck with a Racket. (Locke, 239)

With the reminders of these three passages before us we become equipped to develop ostensive definitions of two kinds of bodily movements. Going deliberately with, rather than against the grain of modern English usage, let those which can be either initiated or quashed at will be labelled "movings," and those which cannot "motions." Certainly it is obvious that there are plenty of marginal cases. Nevertheless, so long as there are—as there are—far, far more which fall unequivocally upon one side or the other, we must resolutely

and stubbornly refuse to be prevented from labouring this absolutely fundamental and decisive distinction by any such diversionary appeals to the existence of marginal cases.

Contemplation of these and similar passages in Locke should be sufficient to remind us that we all have the most direct, and the most inexpugnably certain experience: not only both of physical (as opposed to logical) necessity and of physical (as opposed to logical) impossibility; but also both, on some occasions, of being able to do other than we do do and, on other occasions, of being unable to behave in any other way than that in which we are behaving.

So it is in terms of our fundamental distinction between movings and motions that we can go on to establish and explicate the even more fundamental concept of action. An agent is a creature who, precisely and only in so far as he or she is an agent, can and cannot but make choices: choices between alternative courses of action both or all of which are open; real choices, notwithstanding both that sometimes by choosing one or even any of these open alternatives the agent will incur formidable costs. If, for instance, as in *The Godfather*, instructions were given that you were to be one of those who was to receive "an offer which he cannot refuse," you could nevertheless refuse; but only at the presumably unacceptable cost of it being your brains rather than your signature on the document signing away your property to the Mafia.

Agents, too, qua agents—it is the price of privilege—inescapably must choose, and can in no way avoid choosing, one of the two or more options which on particular occasions are open and available. The nerve of the distinction between the movements involved in an action, and those which constitute no more than items or partial components of necessitated behaviour, just is that such behaviour is necessitated, whereas the senses of actions not merely are not, but necessarily cannot be.

Once we are seized of these insights, we should be ready to recognize that there is no way in which creatures neither enjoying nor suffering experiences of both these two contrasting kinds could either acquire for themselves, or explicate to others, any of the crucial and indispensable notions: the notions, that is to say, of physical necessity and of physical impossibility, of making something happen and of being able or not able to do other than we do, and so on. The experiences in question, to repeat, are: on the one hand those of confronting physical necessities and physical impossibilities wholly beyond our control; and, on the other hand, those of agents able and having to choose between acting in one way or another and not being necessitated to act in this way rather than that.

Those who are still, in spite of everything, reluctant to accept these contentions face a challenge, the challenge to excogitate their own

alternative accounts of how all these key notions, including the not so far mentioned notion of counterfactual conditionality, might be acquired, explained, and understood by creatures who were (are) not agents and who did (do) not have such experiences. Maybe this challenge can, after all, be met; maybe. But, until and unless it is met, and met convincingly, the prudent philosopher is bound to adopt the archetypical attitude of the man from Missouri. Notoriously, if his reluctance to believe is to be overcome, he has to be shown.

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1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1987), 75 (hereafter cited as "T").
2. David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985), 198.
3. For further discussion of this notion compare Antony Flew and Godfrey Vesey, *Agency and Necessity* (Oxford, 1987), passim.
4. Significantly, in introducing the symposium on "Can an Effect Precede its Cause?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp. vol. 28 (1954), Michael Dummett took as his premise the claim: "On the ordinary Humean view of cause, a cause is simply a sufficient condition: it is merely that we have observed that whenever A happens B follows ... however we elaborate on the notions of sufficient and necessary conditions, the relation can hold as well between a later event and an earlier as between an earlier and a later." But this confident claim fails to distinguish: logically necessary and sufficient conditions; necessary and sufficient conditions defined extensionally in terms of material implication; and causally necessary and sufficient conditions. The latter must, it should go without saying, either precede or be simultaneous with whatever they condition.
5. It is noteworthy, and it is nowadays commonly noted, that Hume in the first *Enquiry* makes just such an unlicensed inference, and makes it with panache: "Suitably to this experience, therefore, 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*." David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 76 (hereafter cited as "E").

6. Compare the statement of a Neo-Humean Compatibilism first published in book form in the same antediluvian year as the materials mentioned in note 4, above. In A. J. Ayer, "Freedom and Necessity," in *Philosophical Essays* (London, 1954), we read: "But, I repeat, the fact is simply that when an event of one type occurs, an event of another type occurs also, in a certain temporal or spatio-temporal relation to the first. The rest is only metaphor" (p. 283).
7. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), bk. 2, chap. 21; all subsequent citations are to this edition.