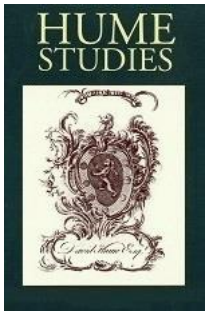


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*Character and Causation: Hume's Philosophy of Action* by Constantine Sandis (review)

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# *Book Reviews*

Constantine Sandis. *Character and Causation: Hume's Philosophy of Action*. New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2019. Pp. 148. Cloth ISBN 9781138283787, $140.

In *Character and Causation: Hume's Philosophy of Action*, Constantine Sandis takes Hume's empiricist tenet that all meaningful ideas copy impressions as the key to understanding his general philosophy. Sandis then applies "the Copy Principle" to Hume's view of persons and their actions. Portraying Hume's approach (at least in the *Treatise*) as one of conceptual revision, the result, Sandis says, is that our ideas of persons, reasons, causality, agency, free will, and other related concepts have ordinary meanings (not the abstruse philosophical ones) without ontological implications. The author describes his book as a series of connected essays. The chapters work together to present an anti-metaphysical, naturalistic, and non-skeptical picture of Hume's action theory. Each chapter is readable and trim, but the book covers a great deal of territory in a short space. At times, I craved more detailed arguments and help understanding the views in Sandis's original portrait of Hume. However, both Hume scholars and action theorists will surely find this book thought-provoking and worth grappling with. A brief epilogue discusses how Hume's "soft revisionism" bears on contemporary discussions of agency and action.

Sandis takes Hume's project to be one of establishing what we ordinarily mean in using the terms that stand for problematic concepts like necessity and self. It is not a project of determining what we can properly mean, since expressions just *have* meanings; they are neither correct nor incorrect. (There are echoes of Wittgenstein throughout the book, and Sandis invokes him explicitly in Hume's

defense in chapter 3, "Necessity, Power, and Freedom.") Furthermore, Hume's is not a project of investigating the ontology of causation, agency, and so on.

Consequently, Sandis suggests, debates, such as the "new Hume" debate, which revolve around questions like whether Hume was a realist, anti-realist, quasi-realist, or skeptical realist, are misguided. Causation involves the idea of necessary connection, of which we have no impression. So, Sandis argues, since we cannot meaningfully say anything about necessary connection, we have no idea to project onto the world and nothing to affirm or to deny. "Hume's *conceptual revisionism* about necessity thus tempers both skepticism and metaphysical realism in a move made routinely [by Hume] in relation to every major philosophical controversy of his day" (47). In much of the book, Sandis applies this revisionist interpretation of Hume to topics of free will, substance, self, identity, and motivation and morality.

At the heart of Sandis's reading of Hume's action theory is the notion of agency, which is rarely emphasized in analyses of Hume. Sandis develops this conception of agency, first, via discussion of necessity and freedom. Necessitation of action and liberty are easily compatible because of the way Hume defines each within his practice of conceptual reform. He describes cause in terms of constant conjunction of experiences, and necessity in terms of human expectation. Liberty, in his terms, is the ability to do as we will (desire), not the capacity to do anything regardless of the will. Thus, I am free when my motives are regularly conjoined with actions such that observers can predict certain behaviors on my part. Second, agency is tied to the self (mind) and personal identity. In the case of self (and substance), we have no idea of it apart from the ideas of varying qualities; the notion of an uninterrupted self or substance over time is a fiction. However, Sandis argues, Hume offers revised ideas of the self, of substance, and of identity, which follow from Hume's own "theory of meaning" (69). I cannot trace all the twists Hume's discussion of personal identity takes, but in the end, Sandis thinks it "allows us to talk of 'self' and 'identity' in a way that requires nothing beyond the sort of casual observations that he allows for across all his works" (69)—simply as qualities we suppose are tightly connected by relations of contiguity and causation. Sandis suggests that Hume might have added that, while reason cannot verify this idea of the self, it is good that nature produces it, since we could never explain and predict human and animal action without it.

On Sandis's interpretation of Hume's theory of action, an act of the will, or volition, is "the way through which the entire person chooses to do one thing rather than another" (89). At the same time, character traits also cause actions. The stability of character (which can allow some gradual change) is both necessary and sufficient for attributions of moral responsibility. Thus, people are causally responsible for all willed choices but morally responsible for those actions motivated by character. Sandis notes that his picture attributes double-causation of action to Hume—by volition and by character—and thinks Hume should have held instead

that character traits do not produce action without the assistance of the will. Sandis further argues that Hume's theory of motivation is not the Humean theory of motivation, whereby a desire and belief are each necessary to cause action. Rather, characters are more than beliefs and desires, and moral beliefs, as sentiments, can motivate action on their own and function as the reasons we act upon.

Now I raise a few challenges. First, on Sandis's Humean revisionism, we have no ideas but those that have origins in impressions. So, when someone says, for instance, "poison oak causes blisters," she can only mean and *does* mean (*not* ought to mean) that the two have been conjoined constantly and that she expects to experience one with the other. In other words, she does not mean that one necessarily produces the other. But this seems to me to be just what people ordinarily do mean. Hume writes about fictions, such as that of continued existence or unity in a subject, which we conjure from the imagination, but which do not have origins in simple impressions: "we feign the continu'd existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation" (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 255). So, what is the status of fictions, given that, on Sandis's account, Hume denies that we have confused ideas of fictions, holding that we have none at all?

Second, the notion of agency at work in this interpretation of Hume seems overly strong. I have a hard time finding support in Hume's text for the claim that, with the will, we choose one action over another. Hume's compatibilism allows us liberty of spontaneity, the freedom to do as we "will," but as Sandis notes, Hume defines the will as the impression we experience when "we give rise to" a bodily motion or a mental perception. We have passions (which constitute character), some of which are motives and cause action. Not every motivating passion brings about action because we simply cannot act on all of them at the same time. Rather, some are motivationally (causally) stronger than others, and our actions are the outcome of the strongest at any given time. Liberty of spontaneity is exercised when there are no obstacles to our doing the action that produces the end for which we have the strongest motive. There is no need for, and no space for, the will to choose what action to bring about. Hence, both the double-causation story and the suggested reform, that the will works with our motives to bring about action, seem unwarranted.

Third, I have elsewhere disagreed with the "non-Humean" interpretation of Hume's theory of motivation, which says that beliefs can bring about action without a desire (*Hume, Passion, and Action* [Oxford University Press, 2018], 39–50). That debate is more involved than I can explain here. However, I will say that Hume's claim that "any thing may produce any thing" does not, I think, entail that he cannot be a Humean about motivation, as Sandis suggests it does (56). It does not follow from this claim that anything *does* cause anything. If it did, we would never be able to do science, including the very psychology that Hume is engaged in. I

do agree that characters, of which actions are a product, are more than beliefs and desires. They include all sorts of natural dispositions and non-motivating passions. But they also include motivating passions, which for Hume, I argue, are typically defined in terms of desire (*Hume, Passion, and Action*, 24–28).

Despite our differences, I was excited to see Hume's theory of action in a new light and learned a great deal from this book. As Constantine Sandis writes in his "Preface and Acknowledgments" about philosophical colleagues with whom he disagrees, "While our arguments and conclusions may differ radically, we remain a tribe united in that exhilarating practice of trying to make sense of the same texts, with all the highs and lows that such investigative work entails" (x–xi).

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