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Hume, *Enquiry* VIII
Liberty & Necessity

Over *Enquiry* VIII-XI Hume turned to apply the theory of causality and necessity worked out over *Enquiry* II-VII to a variety of specific topics: free will, miracles, and the design argument for the existence of a provident creator and of an afterlife. *Enquiry* VIII makes a special application of the position on the nature of necessity worked out over *Enquiry* VII to the dispute over free will and determinism, or “liberty” and “necessity” to use Hume’s terms. When necessity is properly understood, Hume claimed, it turns out that liberty is not opposed to necessity (determination of the will), but only to “constraint” (determination of the body to move contrary to the will). Our actions can be both free and necessitated.

The argument of *Enquiry* VIII is divided into two parts. Over the first part, Hume argued that liberty is not opposed to necessity, and that all human actions are caused in the two senses of “cause” identified at the close of *Enquiry* VII: particular sorts of actions are the regular consequences of particular sorts of motives, and when we perceive particular sorts of motives we feel impelled to expect particular sorts of actions. The second part of *Enquiry* VIII responds to the charge that the doctrine of necessity undermines morality by making it illegitimate for us to praise or blame people for their actions. On the contrary, Hume claimed, as he had explained in the doctrine of necessity is “Not only consistent with morality, but ... absolutely essential to its support.”

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What does our idea of necessity arise from?
2. What is our idea of necessity an idea of?
3. What were Hume’s reasons for saying that all people have always concluded that our voluntary actions and operations of mind are necessitated? (Find two)
4. What is the chief use of history?
5. What is the benefit of a long life employed in a variety of occupations and company?
6. What is required for us to be able to see through the tricks of con artists and others who want to deceive us?
7. What accounts for the fact that not all people behave in precisely the same manner in the same circumstances?
8. Why is the fact that there are some actions that seem to have no regular connection with any known motives not an objection to the thesis that human actions are necessitated?
9. What is the foundation of morals?
10. Why is it that even though people all believe the doctrine of necessity and rely on it in their anticipations of how others will behave, they are reluctant to acknowledge it in words and instead claim that nothing determines human actions?
11. What is meant by attributing liberty to voluntary actions?
12. What makes actions criminal?
13. Why would denying that human actions are necessitated by motives mean that a person must be as pure and untainted after committing the most horrid crime, as at the first moment of birth?
14. What opposite interests are the moral sentiments based on?



15. How did Hume respond to the objection that insofar as the doctrine of necessity makes God the ultimate cause of all human actions, it follows that no human actions can be blameworthy, because God does nothing without a good and valid reason for doing so?

Note: “Absolute decrees” (8.36). The doctrine of absolute decrees is the doctrine that some have been predestined to be damned to hell for all eternity, and that there is nothing they can do to escape this fate. It is a consequence of the doctrines of original sin and of salvation by grace alone. According to these doctrines we are all born in a state of infinite corruption and so are all born deserving to go to hell. Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was supposed to release an infinite amount of divine grace, that would reform us and redeem us from that fate, but since the sacrifice obviously has not made everyone a good person, and since God’s grace is irresistible, it follows that God has not willed that all get the grace. The sacrifice must only have been intended to release grace for some, not all. God’s reasons for dispensing grace to some and not to others are inscrutable and apparently arbitrary. Since we are all infinitely corrupt at birth, it is impossible for any of us to do a truly good deed in advance of receiving God’s grace, which alone can overcome our corruption and make us capable of goodness. None of us can do anything to merit receiving God’s grace prior to receiving it. But though we are all equally undeserving, God nonetheless gives grace to some and withholds it from others, like a rich person walking down a street full of beggars and giving a coin to one rather than another. We are supposed to be awed that he gave as much as he did, since he didn’t have to give anything at all and no one deserved anything, rather than offended that he did not distribute all he could equally. This is the doctrine of absolute decrees. It was affirmed by Augustine and those in the more extreme Jansenist and Calvinist wings of the Catholic and Protestant denominations. Augustine’s opponent, Pelagius, and the the Molinist (Jesuit) and Arminian wings of the Catholic and Protestant denominations tried to maintain that works could get one saved, though at risk of making the crucifixion ridiculous. Moderates in all Christian denominations nonetheless found absolute decrees hard to accept.

16. How did Hume respond to the objection that insofar as the doctrine of necessity makes God the ultimate cause of all human actions, it makes him responsible for their crimes?

NOTES ON THE READING

Enquiry VIII opens with the claim that people have only disputed over the freedom of the will because they have not bothered to carefully consider what necessitation and liberty involve. They have supposed that when things are necessitated, there is some force or power that makes them occur. But *Enquiry IV* has shown that we have no experience of any force or power responsible for the production of any event in nature, and *Enquiry VII* has shown that the most we have is an impulse to conceive of certain things on the occasion of perceiving other things. Hume claimed that when necessitation and liberty are properly understood, it turns out that all people have always tacitly agreed that human actions are necessitated, even though they may have claimed otherwise.

Enquiry 8.4-6. The nature of necessity. According to Hume, for human actions to be necessitated is for them to have some cause. This cause is not something that “necessitates” our actions in the sense of producing them or forcing them to occur. Instead, conformably to the two definitions of “cause” given at the close of *Enquiry VII*, a cause of an action is just something that regularly happens before that event occurs, and something that impels the mind to conceive of that event. Over the main part of *Enquiry VIII* Hume proceeded to argue that all people have always



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tacitly agreed that all human actions are caused in each of these senses. They have supposed that actions of certain sorts are regularly preceded by circumstances, motives, and character traits of certain sorts, and when they consider people particular motives and character traits to be placed in particular circumstances, they expect them to behave accordingly. Having established these two points, Hume turned to briefly explain why an incorrect understanding of the nature of necessity has led people to fail to recognize their own belief in the determination of all human action and to forge an illegitimate notion of liberty.

Enquiry 8.7-16. Why we all agree that human actions are the constant consequences of antecedent motives. Hume's principal reason for concluding that we take human actions to be necessitated in the first sense of being the regular effects of antecedent motives is that we formulate general rules concerning the behaviour of other people, and rely on these rules in our interactions with them and in our speculations concerning them. We consider certain people, particularly older people, to be good judges of character because their experiences have put them in a position to tell, from people's circumstances, expressions and actions, what passions are motivating them, and to draw correct inferences about their behaviour from their passions. Were this not the case, we would be at a loss to anticipate how people would behave next, and nothing would surprise us in their actions. Just the opposite is the case. The better we know someone, the easier it is to tell in advance what they will do. When we run into problems with other people, we seek out the advice of those who know them better or are simply older than we are because we trust that their greater experience will have revealed more to them about "what makes people tick." We study history for the same reason. It gives us more experience of how people behave and so allows us to draw generalizations about their behaviour from a broader experiential base. We even extend these inferences to peoples in past times and remote places, and expect them to behave as those we know behave. And we carry these judgments to our assessments of works of fiction and consider them flawed to the extent that the characters act in ways that are too much at variance with our experience of how people behave.

Of course, not all people behave in exactly the same way, even when placed in the same circumstances. But that just leads us to collect people into different sorts, and make generalizations about their behaviour depending on the sort we take them to belong to. We expect people to behave differently based on their age, their gender, their upbringing, and other such factors, and we ascribe different character traits to them and expect different actions from people we consider avaricious, ambitious, timid, resentful, lazy, curious, and so on.

It does happen that from time to time people do things that surprise us, and go contrary to everyone's expectations. But these occasions are rare. Moreover, they do not arise any more frequently — indeed, rather less frequently — in the case of human behaviour than in the case of natural events. We are more often surprised by the weather than by the behaviour of those around us, yet we do not think that the weather is undetermined. Hume maintained that when wise people run across untoward events in nature, they immediately assume that the anomaly must be due to the complexity of the circumstances, which conceal some cause that has not yet been noticed. Less educated people might suppose instead that causes are weak, and only able to bring about their effects most of the time rather than with perfect constancy. But even they continue to believe that most events in nature are caused and the exceptions are due to chance, or the failure of any cause to operate. Since the constancy of the conjunction between circumstances, character traits, and motives, on the one hand, and human actions, on the other, is no less than that between natural



events, we ought, by parity of example, to draw the same conclusions about human behaviour: if it is sometimes surprising and anomalous, the most likely reason is the operation of some hidden cause — or, failing that, pure chance. This is a second reason for concluding that we take human actions to be necessitated. We suppose that natural events are necessitated. But the regularities in human behaviour are no less extensive than those in the inanimate world.

Enquiry 8.16-20. Why we all infer actions from motives. If we accept the theory of causal inference laid out in *Enquiry V.ii*, according to which the impression of an event of a type that has been observed in the past to be constantly conjoined with another type of event compels us to form a belief in the other event, then it immediately follows from the fact that we all notice motives to be constantly conjoined with human actions that we will infer actions from a knowledge of people's motives. But Hume further illustrated the point with a number of examples. He pointed out that we cannot engage in commerce or in any other activity involving cooperation with others if we are at a total loss to anticipate how people will act next. He noted that history, politics, morals, and criticism would become impossible since we could not rely on people to tell the truth about matters in which they have no interest, or on laws to have any influence on behaviour, or on good or bad character traits to determine people's actions, nor could we have any standard for assessing whether the actions of fictional characters were plausible or implausible. And he argued that our inferences concerning inanimate nature are of a piece with our inferences concerning human behaviour, so that the one is not considered any less law-like in its operation than the other.

Enquiry 8.21-22. Erroneous notions of necessity and free will. But if we all think that human actions are necessitated by motives, why do so many of us insist that we are free? Hume's answer was that we are led to do this by wrong notions of freedom and necessity. People think that natural causes are not just regular antecedents of consequent events, but things that contain powers that make those consequent events come about. Because people don't feel any power in the motives that precede their actions, they claim that their will is free and not determined. Indeed, they go so far as to fancy that their will could just as easily have caused an action contrary to the action it did cause.

The error of these opinions is easily demonstrated. While, from a first person point of view, we don't experience anything in our motives that makes us act as we do, we don't experience anything in any cause that makes it produce its effect. What makes us consider something to have a cause is just that it is regularly preceded by an event of a certain sort. And that is the case with our actions. Whenever we consider the actions and motives of some other person, we see regularity in the succession of the one after another. But when we consider our own actions, and don't feel any connection between our motives and our will, we think the will is not determined by its motives. We forget that all that it means for the will to be determined by its motives is for particular acts of will to be regularly preceded by particular motives. Others can see that that is the case with us. Even when we try to prove that our will is undetermined by first doing one action, such as raising an arm, and then doing the opposite and not raising it, others can say that our action is the regular consequence of a motive to prove the supposed freedom of the will.

Enquiry 8.23-25. The nature of liberty. Having established that everyone really believes that our wills are caused or necessitated in the sense of being regularly preceded by circumstances, character traits, and motives from which we feel impelled to infer actions, Hume turned to establish



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that everyone also believes that we are free agents. Even those who think that all our actions are determined also think that most of those actions are also free. There is no contradiction in doing so, as long as we properly understand what it means to be free.

Hume claimed that when we consider ourselves to be free we cannot mean that our actions are uncaused. What we mean is rather that our actions are caused by the will rather than by some factor that forces our bodies to move independently of or contrary to the will. The will itself, however, is determined by motives, character traits, and circumstances. Liberty (action through the will) is opposed to constraint (action that bypasses the will) rather than to determination. Agents are at liberty when they are able to do what their motives incline them to do and constrained when something prevents them from doing what they are motivated to do. So you are at liberty if, when you will to do something you can do it, and when you will not to do that thing you can refrain from doing it. When it is understood in these terms, everyone will agree that liberty belongs to everyone “who is not a prisoner and in chains” that is, who is able to make their bodies move as a consequence of their own volitions.

But everyone also has to agree that the will is determined — indeed, that determination of the will by motives is necessary for this notion of liberty to make any sense. Were we not determined by any motives, we couldn’t tell whether our actions are in accord with or opposed to our motives and so couldn’t say whether we are at liberty or not. The absence of all determination is not liberty of will but chance. A will that is not determined by any motive would not be a freely acting cause but no cause at all.

We think otherwise only because we have confused notions of causality. We tend to think that in addition to being the regular antecedents of subsequent events, causes are things that have a power to make those events come about. We further think that in some cases the power is so strong that the causes necessitate the events whereas in other cases it is weaker so that the causes do not always necessitate their effects. We then attach this notion to the will, which we think of as an effect that cannot be necessitated by any cause. In fact, however, the only thing that makes us consider one event to be a cause of another is that the one regularly precedes the other. What makes motives causes of the will is that they regularly precede acts of will, not that they have some power to make the will what it is. To really deny that the will is we would need to establish, not just that motives do not contain any power to determine the will, but that particular motives do not regularly precede particular acts of will. But no one could do that, first, because it is obviously false, and second because denying it would destroy any intelligible sense of freedom at the same time that it destroyed determinism. Freedom means being able to do what you are motivated to do. Action without motives is not free action, but random or chance action — which is something that no one accepts.

Enquiry 8.26-31. Why determinism is required for morality. It is commonly charged that if determinism is true then morality is impossible. This is because morals prescribe how people ought to behave. But if all actions are necessitated, then it makes no sense to lay down prescriptions concerning behaviour. One might as well try to prescribe how the planets ought to move as try to prescribe how people should behave. The motions of the latter are no less the necessitated than the former, and no more open to change in accord with our prescriptions. We may discover the natural laws in accord with which human beings *do* move, just as we may discover the natural laws in accord with which the planets move. But to attempt to lay down any prescriptions about how either *ought* to move, contrary to how they are necessitated by natural laws to move, would be in vain.



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Neither does it make any sense to blame people for failing to follow moral prescriptions. We do not hold people morally responsible for doing what they were forced to do, and if all actions are determined then whatever we do we were forced to do.

Hume turned to address these charges in *Enquiry* VIII.ii, where he argued that determinism is so far from making morality impossible that the opposite is the case. Determinism is necessary for the possibility of morality. To make his case, Hume observed that actions, considered in themselves, are morally indifferent. Even the most unfortunate actions, resulting in the agonizing death of thousands of people, are in themselves morally indifferent. To be immoral, an action must not only be evil, it must have been done with evil intent. Someone who causes some evil because they could not avoid it (tripping and falling to knock over a lamp that causes a fire in which hundreds are burned to death) or because they did it inadvertently (unknowingly carrying a disease that infects thousands and causes them to die a slow, agonizing death), is not blamed or considered morally responsible for their action. Similarly, those who do evil things through negligence or lack of caution are not blamed as much as those who do them deliberately or as a consequence of premeditation. But to allow that what makes an action evil is not just that it has evil consequences, but that it was done with evil intent is to allow that the motive that people have for acting makes all the difference to whether we consider their actions moral or immoral. But that in turn presupposes that motives are causes of action. If my motives did not cause my actions, I couldn't be considered to have done an evil act from an evil motive and so could not be blamed.

This argument stands on its own, but it is further illuminated by some of the details of the moral theory that Hume alluded to in *Enquiry* VIII and presented more fully in other works. According to that theory, people's different character traits naturally or instinctively lead us to feel sentiments of approbation or disapproval, depending on whether those character traits are intrinsically pleasing or displeasing, or are good or bad for the person themselves or for those around them. When we disapprove of people's actions, it is only to the extent that we take those actions to follow from and so be signs of disagreeable character traits of the person. Inadvertent or negligent actions are not as offensive to us as premeditated ones because they are not good signs of the disagreeable character traits that are really what arouse our moral sentiments.

Hume also had an answer to the charge that determinism would make it useless to attempt to prescribe moral rules. The answer is not one that comes out clearly in the text but that follows from his background theory of ethics and the passions. According to that theory, people instinctively approve of certain character traits and disapprove of others. These instincts can be artificially molded. One way they can be artificially molded is by public statements of moral rules governing behaviour — the sort of behaviour motivated by good character traits. As long as the rules are broadly accepted and followed by others, who evidently treat those who follow the rules with esteem and those who break them with disapprobation, the rules can have a profound effect on people's behaviour and even a formative effect on their characters. Since people's sense of pride and shame is largely determined by what others think of them, they experience unpleasant feelings of shame at the disapproval of others and pleasant feelings of pride at their approval. Even if they have bad characters, and don't want to do the things that are prescribed by moral rules, the fact that these things have been so publicly prescribed and are so widely observed makes people want to behave accordingly in order to at least pretend to have good characters (by acting as if they do), and perhaps acquire those characters by practice. This will earn the esteem of others, which is one of the things we prize the most.



In short, Hume's answer to the objection was that even if all our actions are determined, prescribing moral rules can affect how they are determined. We can't change the motion of the planets by telling the planets how they ought to behave. But we can change their motions by moving a massively gravitating body into the vicinity of the solar system. Prescribing moral rules is like that. It alters the way people perceive one another, and our altered sense of how others perceive us in turn alters how we are disposed to behave. We end up behaving morally not because it is the right thing to do, but we (or at least some of us) have been determined to want to do so, in part because of the institution of the laws.

Enquiry 8.32-35. The objection that the doctrine of necessity makes all human actions good, as consequences of divine will. Admittedly, not all of us can be determined to behave correctly by these means. Some people have vicious character traits that are just too resistant. This renews the question of whether these people can be justly blamed for their actions. If we don't blame people for doing things that were beyond their control, why should we blame them for actions that they did deliberately, if the character traits that motivated them to act that way in those circumstances were beyond their control?

Hume set this question in a religious context by noting that the doctrine of determinism entails that ultimate responsibility for people's behaviour must be ascribed to God, who made the world and everyone in it the way they are. If we suppose that God does everything for the best, then it would follow that people are blameless even for deliberately committing the most horrid crimes, because God made them so as to do it, and God must have had excellent reasons for making them that way.

Hume's answer to both the secular and the religious version of this problem turns on his view that moral judgments are not the consequences of reasoning but expressions of sentiment. It is a feature of our sentiments that they decay over distances, be those distances temporal, spatial, or logical. Resentment felt over injuries fades over time. Someone on a 3 year excursion on the opposite side of the world is less concerned over the news that their house back home was burned down than the same person would be at the news that a window had been broken were they living at home. Logical separation has the same effect. When we need to transfer a passion from its immediate cause to the cause of that cause to the cause of that cause and so on for a great number of steps until we reach some ultimate cause the passion dissipates. We naturally feel resentment for the person who immediately did a wicked deed, as long as we think the deed was done deliberately and so take it as a sign of a bad character. While we might take a more remote view of things and think that that the person's character was determined by their circumstances, and so feel some resentment for the parents or the politicians who played a role in creating those circumstances, the passion does not remain as strong when it is moved to a more remote object. And while we might think that the ultimate cause planned it all and designed it for the best, the contradiction between that remote thought and our proximate resentment is not felt because we simply cannot transfer the sentiment back to the remote object.

In the end, Hume's answer to the secular version of the problem is that we blame people and disapprove of them because we can't help doing so. Because of the way we are constituted we are naturally impelled to feel these passions when we contemplate bad characters. The fact that people did not make their characters what they are and so are not responsible for them does not move us to refrain from condemning them any more than the thought that we perceive no necessary connection



between constantly conjoined objects moves us to refrain from judging them to be connected as cause and effect.

Enquiry 8.36. The objection that the doctrine of necessity makes God responsible for human moral evil. Though this answer would seem to explain why we do not blame God for human wickedness, Hume could not resist the temptation to play up this particular aspect of the problem. If all human acts are determined, why shouldn't we blame God for making humans deliberately do wicked things? Granted, we might not be able to carry our sense of resentment that far back. But we could at least logically recognize God as being ultimately responsible for the wicked act.

Hume was quite happy to declare this to be a "mystery, which mere natural and unassisted reason is very unfit to handle." In other words, he was happy to suggest that there is a real problem here. The problem is, of course, the problem of why God permits evil.

This is just one of the problems for religious belief that Hume proceeded to raise over the penultimate sections of the *Enquiry*.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Hume claimed that "the conjunction between motives and voluntary actions is as regular and uniform, as that between the cause and effect in any part of nature." He claimed, further, that "this regular conjunction has been universally acknowledged ... and has never been the subject of dispute, either in philosophy or common life." Identify his reasons for making this claim and assess their strength.
2. Hume claimed that the notion of liberty only makes sense if it is understood as the ability to act or not act according to how one is motivated. Is it true that there is no other way to make sense of the term?
3. Hume claimed that, considered in themselves, actions are morally indifferent and are only made good or bad by a consideration of the reasons people have for performing them. Was he right about this? Supposing he was, was he right to draw the conclusion that this means that actions cannot be morally good or bad unless they are determined by motives? Would he have an adequate response to someone who said that what makes actions good or bad is not that they are determined by good or bad motives, but that the person who performs them always has some motives to act one way and other motives to act the opposite way and freely chooses to act on the one sort of motive rather than the other?
4. Hume claimed that we are forced by our nature to feel sentiments of moral approbation and disapproval when we contemplate characters, dispositions, and actions, that are useful or harmful to selves or society, and that we will feel these sentiments whether or not we think the people involved were determined to have the characters and dispositions they have. But we also think that it is illegitimate to blame people for things they were forced to do and could not avoid, even if we are psychologically compelled to do so. Is any *legitimate* praise or blame of people still possible if Hume is right? Are praise and blame, or rewards and punishments, still legitimate?
5. Compare the views of Hobbes, Locke, and Hume on the freedom of the will.

