

An inquiry concerning human freedom



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Hume argues in his Enquiry that necessity and liberty are compatible, and that the dispute between the two is only due to improper definitions of the terms (Hume 92). The question that he poses in his paper is whether we are responsible for our actions if all events are necessary. This paper will argue that, since all events are necessary and we are not free to choose them, we are thus not responsible for our actions. Hume begins his Enquiry with the problem of induction. Hume first defines human reasoning in two ways: “Relations of Ideas” and “Matters of Fact” (40). Relations of ideas are independently true by their own definitions, such as Geometry and Mathematics. For example, it is always true that a triangle will have three sides because by definition a triangle is a three-sided figure. Matters of facts are based on experience and are all “founded on the relation of cause and effect.” (41) Unlike relations of ideas, they are not true by definition. Since a cause does not define its effect necessarily, any number of effects from a given cause are equally logical. Hume then applies this logic to causality, which is a relation of cause and effect. Although A’s have been always followed by B’s, it is just as likely that a given A will not be followed by a B (44). Causality, therefore, is not a relation of ideas but a matter of fact, and is “discoverable not by reason, but by experience.” (42) The only experience of cause and effect is that it has been that way in the past. However, the only experience of the future being like the past is that in the past, the future has been like the past. To assume that the future will be like the past on the basis that that has happened in the past is to assume what was to be proven, which is circular reasoning and a logical fallacy. Hume concludes that there is no deductive proof that the future will be like the past. Therefore, there is no proof of a causal link, or as Hume defines “necessary

connection”, between A’s and B’s Hume suggests that rather than causes and effects being necessarily connected, they are instead constantly conjoined; rather than A’s causing B’s, A’s are followed by B’s (80). There is no necessary tie between constantly conjoined pairs; it is possible that any given A will not be followed by B (85). Our notion of causality comes from habituation: the inference of B given the impression of A (87). “ After the constant conjunction of two objects... we are determined by custom alone to expect the one from the appearance of the other.” (57) Hume states that we “ must apply the same reasoning to the actions and volitions of intelligent agents.” (97) All events in nature follow a set of laws and are necessary. Human action, if shown to be the same as nature, would also be necessary. Hume states that the idea of necessity comes from constant conjunction and inference, and is based “ entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature.” (92) He feels that the same uniformity observable in the natural world is also prevalent in human action (94). Hume states that the basic inclinations – ambition, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity and public spirit – in varying degrees, form all human sentiment (93). He also notes that throughout history, humans generally react the same way to the same stimulus. Hume concludes that, just as effects are constantly conjoined with their causes, so too are human actions constantly conjoined with their motives. Hume then argues that human interaction is dependant upon the belief “ that men... are to continue, in their operations, the same that they have ever found them.” (98-99) The purpose of human interaction is that, through interaction, one can satisfy his inclinations. A store owner offers goods at a reasonable price because he believes that he will receive more customers by doing so. If humans did not believe in the uniformity of human

action, basic human interaction would fail. If the store owner believed that offering goods at a reasonable price would not attract customers but rather would elicit a random reaction, there would be no reason for him to offer reasonable prices or to sell goods at all. Hume concludes that humans infer from past experience that human interaction will be the same in the future. Since human action, like nature, is based on the constant conjunction of a cause and its effect, as well as the inference that the future will be like the past, Hume concludes that human action and nature are one in the same: they are both necessary and uniformly follow internal principles (97). Since human action is necessary “ the connection between all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes.” (96-97) All events resulting in human action are equally necessary, including the unseen forces. An example is a man who is happy that he found money on the ground. The individual aspects – the fact that someone left money on the ground, the man being in the right place at the right time, his predisposition to become happy when he finds money – all equally contribute to set up a circumstance for which the man will be happy. Necessity can predict someone’s actions (95). Someone who is known to drink Coke would generally continue to order Coke because it is in his character to do so. Necessity can also account for character deviation. “ The most irregular and unexpected resolutions of men may frequently be accounted for by those who know every particular circumstance of their character and situation.” (97). Hume states that if we know a man’s character, and all outside circumstances, we can account for all character deviations. For example, the same man one day may order a Sprite. This may seem out of character, but upon further examination it is

found that the day before he saw an advertisement with his favourite celebrity endorsing Sprite. Hume argues that the necessity of human action is compatible with liberty. Hume defines liberty as “ a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will... if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.” (104) Hume holds that free will exists as long as the power to choose is not constrained. A man running a red light does so of his own free will; a man held at gun point who does the same is not. Hume states that the compatibility of necessity and liberty are the crux of morality (108). If a misdeed wasn't caused by a person's character, or chosen by him freely, only the action, not the person, would be to blame. Actions are reflective of a person because they are derived from his character, which is defined by his past experiences, and chosen by him freely. “ Actions render a person criminal merely as they are proofs of criminal principles in the mind.” (107) Actions are governed by character, and character is governed by past experiences. As Hume points out, men are only accountable for actions that they do consciously and free from constraint (107). Hume holds that a man who loans money to his friend is free, while a man who performs the same action under gunpoint is not. But Hume also argues that all events are equally necessary. If this is the case, the man is equally constrained whether he is at gunpoint or not. In either instance, the trigger of the event of the man parting with his money – his friend needing a loan or a criminal targeting him for armed robbery – would equal in necessity because both would have been set up by prior events. Similarly, the man's reaction to either instance would be equally predetermined and governed by the internal law of necessity, whether it is the psychological urge to avoid death or to help a friend. As a result, we

cannot be forced against our will externally, because that external force would have to transcend necessity. Therefore, there is no constraint on one's liberty, and as such liberty must be redefined. Liberty, instead, should be the ability to have done otherwise. Only when we have the actual ability to have made a different choice can we be held accountable for our actions. Take for instance a man given the choice between a green and red M&M, and he chooses green. According to Hume, he freely chooses green, unencumbered by any external forces. But could he have done otherwise? According to necessity, the only way to change one's future is to change one's past. The only way he could choose the red M&M is if he had different past experiences, ultimately leading to the predisposition for him to want to choose red over green. But this would be a different him. The only way for the man to freely choose is if, given the same past, the possibility for him to make two distinct choices is there. Consider if he was psychologically unable to form the want to choose the red M&M. Given the choice between the two, the man will quite happily choose the green M&M, and when asked he will attest that he did so freely and unencumbered. This, however, is not liberty, because there was no alternative choice. The man is not truly free in his choice because he could not have done otherwise. In sum, necessity holds that all events are determined by prior causes. If this is the case, we do not freely choose our actions because we do not have the ability to do otherwise. Since responsibility follows actions we do willingly, we are not responsible for our actions. Works Cited1. Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Upper Saddle River : Prentice-Hall, 1995.