

David Hume



On Compatibility

Necessity and Freedom

- ◆ Hume confronts the problem of determinism and libertarianism by claiming the conflict results from epistemological differences
- ◆ "...all men have ever agreed in the doctrine both of necessity and of liberty, according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms; and that the whole controversy, has hitherto turned merely upon words"
-AW 565

- ◆ Libertarianism: our will is free
- ◆ Determinism: our will is not free, but determined
- ◆ Compatibilism: we are both free and determined

- ◆ Hume denies the contemporary associations of both determinism and libertarianism
- ◆ Libertarianism contains too much anarchy, randomness, and a lack of moral responsibility.
- ◆ "According to the principle, therefore, which denies necessity, and consequently causes, a man is as pure and untainted, after having committed the most horrid crime, as at the first moment of his birth, nor is his character anywise concerned in his actions, since they are not derived from it, and the wickedness of the one can never be used as a proof of the depravity of the other." -AW 572

- ◆ Additionally, Hume believes in moral responsibility for actions, which denies a strict determinist interpretation.



- ◆ Rather than an arcane sense of a prescribed fate with no freedom of action, Hume contends that free will exists, yet still exists in within a determined framework.



"You realize, of course, that these imply free will?"

Compatibilism

- ◆ Hume synthesizes Free Will and Determinism into Compatibilism.
- ◆ This interpretation relies heavily on the natural laws that Hume believes govern the universe.
- ◆ While we are free to decide, our actions are ultimately perfectly predictable given total knowledge.

- ◆ "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. A person of an obliging disposition gives a peevish answer; but he has a toothache or has not dined"
-AW 568

- ◆ "Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular"
-AW 566

- ◆ Full knowledge of all circumstances (omniscience) allows an observer to accurately predict outcomes.

“A man who at noon leaves his purse full of gold on the pavement at Charing Cross may as well expect that it will fly away like a feather as that he will find it untouched an hour later”

-AW 569

- ◆ As mentioned before, full knowledge of a situation allows one to perfectly predict the future, despite the possible interference of human free will.
- ◆ Example:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bxYCh_p2Mjs

- ◆ The laws that govern human action are as dependable as physical laws:

"I shall say that I know with certainty that he is not to put his hand into the fire and hold it there till it be consumed: and this event, I think I can foretell with the same assurance, as that, if he throw himself out at the window, and meet with no obstruction, he will not remain a moment suspended in the air. No suspicion of an unknown frenzy can give the least possibility to the former event, which is so contrary to all the known principles of human nature."

-AW 569

Compatibilism

- ◆ Freedom of action arises when one is not coerced by external restraint:
 - "By liberty, then, we can only mean a power of acting or not acting according to the determinations of the will"
 - AW 571
- ◆ This new form of liberty ascribes a sense of moral responsibility lost in Hume's interpretations of Libertarianism and Determinism, for we are responsible only for what we choose.

The Necessity of Necessity

- ◆ "Necessity may be defined two ways, conformably to the two definitions of cause, of which it makes an essential part. It consists either in the constant conjunction of like objects, or in the inference of the understanding from one object to another." -AW 572

- ◆ This “conjunction of like objects” satisfies the determinist aspect of compatibilism. While free will is inherent within the construct, it serves a determinist end when one considers the natural laws and maxims that Hume ascribes to human character.
- ◆ We have the perception of free will- just as we cannot see the invisible hand of gravity, we don’t feel the causal pressure of the past, which ultimately sways our decisions.

"A prisoner who has neither money nor interest, discovers the impossibility of his escape, as well when he considers the obstinacy of the jailer, as the walls and bars with which he is surrounded; and, in all attempts for his freedom, chooses rather to work upon the stone and iron of the one, than upon the inflexible nature of the other. The same prisoner, when conducted to the scaffold, foresees his death as certainly from the constancy and fidelity of his guards, as from the operation of the axe or wheel. His mind runs along a certain train of ideas: the refusal of the soldiers to consent to his escape; the action of the executioner; the separation of the head and body; bleeding, convulsive motions, and death. Here is a connected chain of natural causes and voluntary actions; but the mind feels no difference between them in passing from one link to another."- AW 569

- ◆ Hume recognizes that the perception of cause and effect, which forms the basis of necessity, results naturally within ourselves:

“But though this conclusion concerning human ignorance be the result of the strictest scrutiny of this subject, men still entertain a strong propensity to believe that they penetrate farther into the powers of nature, and perceive something like a necessary connexion between the cause and the effect.”

- AW 570

- ◆ However, Hume does not reject the usefulness of these natural inclinations of men, which he terms instincts.
- ◆ Instead, he claims that we should recognize the fundamental importance of these emotions when conducting philosophy.

- ◆ "The mind of man is so formed by nature that, upon the appearance of certain characters, dispositions, and actions, it immediately feels the sentiment of approbation or blame; nor are there any emotions more essential to its frame and constitution... A man who is robbed of a considerable sum; does he find his vexation for the loss anywise diminished by these sublime reflections? Why then should his moral resentment against the crime be supposed incompatible with them?"

-AW 574

Questions

- ◆ Is the debate between libertarianism and determinism really just epistemological?
- ◆ Is Hume's compatibilism just a token concession to Free Will?
- ◆ Are Hume's views on causality consistent with his belief in moral responsibility?
- ◆ Do you find his resolute belief in natural human behavior credible? Could there be infinite justifiable causes?