

Hume, Causation and Subject Naturalism

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Price sees in Hume a particular form of naturalism distinct from the naturalism dominant in contemporary philosophy. Price's Hume embodies the approach of a 'subject naturalist' as opposed to that of an 'object naturalist'. Object naturalism involves the ontological claim that all there is is what is studied by science and the epistemological claim that our all genuine knowledge is scientific knowledge. Naturalism in general engenders 'placement problems', roughly problems concerning how we are to understand phenomena such as meaning modality and value whose status is somehow problematic in the natural world. Object naturalism seeks to solve these placement problems in familiar and familiarly problematic ways, including reductionism, identity theories and the more recent Canberra Planning strategies. Subject naturalism takes science seriously too and includes taking seriously what science tells us *about us*. It seeks to explain our thought and behaviour. It also offers a different perspective on 'placement problems'. It does not seek to solve placement issues in the 'material mode' namely in the objects themselves. Instead it concerns linguistic behaviour, the use of certain problematic areas of discourse, and asks 'how are to understand the roles and functions of the behaviour in question in the lives of the creatures concerned?...Whence its genealogy?' (*Naturalism without Mirrors*, p.232). For Price, subject naturalism is theoretically prior to object naturalism in as much as the latter needs validation from the former. Or, to put matters differently, subject naturalism can invalidate the presuppositions of object naturalism. These presuppositions concern certain 'semantic' or 'representationalist' theses, something to the effect that discourse in the

problematic area has the function of ‘matching’ distinct classes of fact or entity. The guiding intuition is that ‘if we can explain how natural creatures in our circumstances come to speak in these ways, there is no further puzzle about the place of the topics concerned’ (p.233).

Obviously much more will be said at this workshop about Price’s development of this view. However, as someone who works primarily in the history of philosophy my interest is in Price’s understanding of Hume. Historians of philosophy are prone to trying to correct what they take to be anachronistic readings of canonical figures and complain in various ways about how the text needs to be understood in the context in which it was written and in terms of the questions they ‘they’ are asking rather than what ‘we’ are asking. You may or may not be pleased to learn that I am not going to do that. One reason is that Price has no pretensions at all at exegesis. Second, and although I appreciate (and have sometimes contributed to) that brand of what is sometimes self-consciously called ‘antiquarianism’ in the history of philosophy, I do not think it is the be all and end all of doing history of philosophy. For it encourages (or perhaps expresses) a view that there are no radically brilliant and innovative thinkers whose thought really does break from a tradition and present a new philosophical orientation. I think Hume is one of those thinkers. I think he is the first to embody the approach Price wants to encourage. So I have also found Price’s views useful as a way of understanding aspects of Hume. Although Hume is taken as a paradigm naturalist its is remarkable just how little discussion of quite what is meant by Hume’s ‘naturalism’. The association of the ideas of Hume and naturalism was forged in Norman Kemp Smith’s ground-breaking work, but for reasons I

shan't go into here a good deal of what Kemp Smith claims seem to me to be flatly wrong about a whole host of issues and the term 'naturalism' in the lexicon of Kemp Smith is an idiosyncratic one. Only Barry Stroud's 1977 *Hume* really tries to understand the nature and implications of Hume's philosophy as a form of naturalism. For most part the term 'naturalism' is used but not reflected upon. But that strikes me as odd, given that how, say, David Papineau construes naturalism in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* seems a million miles away from the pages of the *Treatise*.

Hume is the hero of many an object naturalist. As Price puts it, becomes the 'Saint Francis of modern metaphysics, the patron saint of ontological ascetics' (p.34), enshrined in the Lewis's view of the mosaic of 'local matters of particular fact, just one little thing after another' (p.34). The world comprises distinct existences that are not necessarily connected. On traditional readings of Hume causation just consists in *relata* satisfying relations of contiguity, priority and constant conjunction. If there is a placement problem for causation, Hume opts for a reductionist solution. Notoriously, of course, such an ascetic view was too austere for most. From Thomas Reid this reductionist conception of causation, the typical reaction is to note that this view seems to fail to fit the supposedly naïve extension and intension of the concept. Modern conceptions try to supplement, if that's the right word, the austere view with other notions like powers or necessitation relations. Other people are much better placed to debate the success or failures of these attempts to fly from what Price calls the 'pure faith' of the Humean. But my concern here is to show that there is more to Hume than this, and what's more, that it is congenial to Price's project.

First a note about Lewis's ontology and Hume's own views. To put things somewhat crudely, it worth recalling that Hume himself deliberately restricted his claims to relations discoverable amongst experiences and signally clearly his attention not to stray beyond that narrow compass. He thinks we should be content with 'knowing perfectly the manner in which objects affect [the] senses, and their connexions with each other, as far as experience informs [us] of them. This suffices for the conduct of life; and this also suffices *for my philosophy, which pretends only to explain the nature and causes of our perceptions, or impressions and ideas.*' (T 1.2.5.25; SBN 63, my emphasis)¹ Hume appears to allow for a certain form of modesty where conceptual investigation is not guaranteed to carve ontological joints. If this is correct, which I believe it is, Hume's naturalism is not a metaphysical claim but more epistemic, restricting the realm and knowledge and belief to the realm of experience. So if we take 'nature' in Hume to refer to an experience-transcendent reality then it is debatable that he is an 'object naturalist'. He at least allows that it is a live possibility that our cognitive capacities are not up to the job of limning reality.

Let us leave the aside, and return to causation. Recently I have been trying to fathom how Hume's austere view might have emerged at the end of what was a long rich and very subtle history of the metaphysics of causation, coming things not from the flight from pure humeanism but how it emerged in the first place. I agreed to do what Berkeley described as the disagreeable thing of writing on the same topic twice (more than twice in

¹ References by book, part, section, and paragraph number to Hume (2007), and by page number to Hume (1978) (SBN). All italics original unless otherwise noted.

my case). The editor is a good guy, the press is prestigious and the company of authors a good one (I was the only person I had never heard of), and the submission date seemed a lifetime away. Time came when I had to begin writing it my mind was elsewhere, namely thinking about the nature and status of Nietzsche's 'genealogical' approach to morality. So it was with a slightly heavy heart when I began writing. When I did, a number of things that had struck me before struck me with again but with more force and vivacity this time around. The first is just how *radical* a break Hume's views are from previous metaphysically rich accounts of the causal relation, such as influxus, trope transfer, pre-established harmony, occasionalist and other accounts. The second is just how radically revisionary the view I have described above appears to be, allowing Reid his gleeful attempt at assault of intuitive counter-example. A third thing remained in my mind, namely a general dissatisfaction with the standard account of what motivates Hume's austerity, namely that Hume is interested in giving an empiricist analysis of key terms and arguing that key terms like 'force' or 'power' are not experientially grounded and so are meaningless. All that we can legitimately mean by 'cause' is exhausted by regularity and the rest is nonsensical.

I won't rehearse my worries with that story. But a fourth thing struck me, and its sudden salience might owe itself to the fact that I was engaged in thinking about genealogy and had also talked to Price when I was writing. Hume calls the method he uses to arrive at his account of causation as 'seemingly preposterous'. He calls it as such because he says that we have been 'examining our inference from the [causal] relation before we had explain'd the relation itself' (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 169). He then, somewhat gnomically excuses himself by saying his approach is taken because the 'nature of the [causal] relation depends so

much on that of the inference.’ (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 169) Now to put matters somewhat bluntly, Hume arrives at the concept of cause not through analysis but an account of how it figures in our cognitive lives. What that explanatory account further reveals is that role of our concept in our lives (or rather key aspects of that concept) does not function representationally. The terms ‘power’ or ‘force’ express a certain psychological function that can be misinterpreted as expressing a claim about a stronger causal modality than regularity. This strikes me at least as very much a subject naturalist’s invalidation of object naturalism and their placement strategies. It also explains why Hume can be so radical in a way that seems richer than the argument that talk of powers is ‘nonsensical’.

Hume does not present his interest in causation as a self-standing interest in its metaphysics. His interest flows from his account of the inferential faculties. Causation is the only relation that ‘can be trac’d beyond our senses, and informs us of existences which we do not see or feel’ and so to understand that inference we must ‘endeavour to explain fully [the causal relation] before we leave the subject of the understanding.’ (T 1.3.2.3; SBN 74) Essentially the same point is made in the *Enquiry*, where Hume tells us that all ‘reasonings concerning matter of fact are found on the relation of *Cause and effect*’ (EHU 4.4; SBN 26), and so in order to satisfy ourselves ‘concerning the nature of that evidence, which assures us of matter of fact, we must enquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect.’ (EHU 4.5; SBN 27)² But one might have thought he would offer a prior definition of the relation in order to understand the inference, but, as I have said, he does

² References by section and paragraph number to Hume (2006) and page numbers to Hume (1975) (SBN).

not. Instead he introduces two elements that we typically judge to true of causally related objects. He makes an empirical generalization early on that what are ‘commonly denominated causes and effects’ (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 170) exhibit contiguity and temporal priority, but it is not clear that at this stage at any rate he views them as necessary conditions on causes. Instead these are taken as what is typical of causal relations. So although he offers an *a priori* argument for the priority of cause and effect, it is perhaps more interesting to notice his utter insouciance to its success or failure. He writes that if ‘this argument appear satisfactory, ’tis well. If not, I beg the reader to allow me the same liberty, which I have us’d in the preceding case [i.e. contiguity], of supposing as such. For he shall find, that the affair is of no great importance.’ (T 1.3.2.8; SBN 76) Such insouciance is warranted by the fact that he is interested at this stage in identifying what elements enter into the explanation of causal inference. Constant conjunction is also introduced in this way. Later in the *Treatise* in a section entitled ‘The inference from the impression to the idea’, Hume notes that ‘[c]ontiguity and succession are not sufficient to make us pronounce any two objects to be cause and effect, unless we perceive, that these two relations are preserv’d in several instances.’ (T 1.3.6.3; SBN 87) It is in virtue of the fact that memory of constant conjunction is required to facilitate causal inference that constant conjunction is then added to the definition of ‘cause’. Hence we have ‘insensibly discover’d’ the relation of constant conjunction while discussing ‘another subject.’ (T 1.3.6.2; SBN 87)

These three elements come together in the conception of a cause as regularity. But they emerge from an examination of what ‘makes us pronounce any two objects to be cause

and effect'. The concept then is extracted from the role it plays in inference. But it might seem still too prone to Reid's gleeful retort in that it simply fails to accord with our intuitions. But what Reid ignores, and what I have not yet mentioned, is that Hume famously gives us a *second* definition of cause. What we have so far considered is causation considered as a 'philosophical relation', very roughly causation as it can be considered as the object of conscious consideration. Hume also considers causation to be a natural relation. Observation of objects standing in the relation described in the first definition (though not observation *that* they stand in the relation) affect the inferential character of the mind. So he tells us that the source of idea of causal modality – of necessary connection – is the 'determination of the mind' brought about by repeated experience of objects satisfying the first definition. He foreshadows this conclusion much earlier in the *Treatise* when he writes that "twill appear in the end, that the necessary connexion will depend on the inference, instead of the inference's depending on the necessary connexion' (T 1.3.6.3; SBN 88) Notice that this is an implied target here, namely those who think that causal inference might depend on a grasp of a necessitation relation between cause and effect. There is a long story to tell about that, but the main point is revealed in what Hume considers what a perception of a necessary connection would involve. It would involve the capacity simply to read off just what effect such and such a cause must have and furthermore render it impossible for us to conceive effect without its cause. But Hume thinks we can never be in such a cognitive position. Nevertheless he offers an account of why we think in these terms in his much maligned account of the determination of the mind. For the effect of repeated experience mimics psychologically the cognitive

consequences of what a supposedly genuine experience of power would entail. Subjects acquire by long habit 'such a turn of mind, that, upon the appearance of the cause, they *immediately* expect with assurance its usual attendant, and *hardly conceive it possible that any other event could result from it.*' (EHU 7.21; SBN 69, my emphasis) Because 'custom has render'd it difficult to separate the ideas, [people are commonly] apt to fancy such a separation to be in itself impossible and absurd'. (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223) The immediacy of the inference mimics the 'reading off' of an effect from cause, and the psychological difficulty of thinking of the effect without a cause mimics the genuine inconceivability or inseparability, both of which a true grasp of necessity would entail.

Now this account seems to me to be very much in the spirit of the subject naturalist's undercutting of the object naturalists pretensions and their strategy for dealing with placement problems. The early modern period accounts of causation approach the topic of causation from the perspective of object naturalism though in a way complicated by the fact that non-naturalistic solutions are more readily available. But very crudely - *very crudely* - there is the problem of placing active force in the newly characterized natural world of the mechanical. It was a problem motivated by physics that lead to very different metaphysical solutions about how 'active force' could be placed in the natural world. Hume undercuts this dispute by giving a functional account of the concept of causation. Metaphysics seeks to find a metaphysical correlate for powers when actually those words express the functional change Hume tries to explain. However, I want to end with noting one difference between Hume's attitude and Huw's. Hume saw his position to be very surprising and 'new and extraordinary' in the sense of something that is oddly

counterintuitive, which I think Huw doesn't think. Is simply owing to the sheer novelty of Hume's approach and a lesson for philosophers? Or does he think it radically alters our self image?

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