

**Phil 104, October 1, 2010**  
**Hume, *Treatise*, II:iii:1–2**

**Themes from Hume:**

*Student of human nature, “Newton of the mind”*: Hume aims to find universal laws that govern our perceptions, beliefs, feelings, actions, just as Newton found universal laws that govern the motion of inanimate objects (e.g., apples, planets).

*Skepticism*: We lack adequate grounds for many of our beliefs and other attitudes. For example, we lack any justification for our beliefs about causation, external objects, and even ourselves.

*Naturalism*: Nevertheless, human nature is such that we cannot help but have these beliefs and attitudes in our everyday lives, i.e., when we are not reflecting philosophically, and this is not regrettable.

*Notable exception*: Religious beliefs and concerns (e.g., the “monkish virtue” of humility) are undermined by philosophical reflection. When we leave the study and return to the real world, other kinds of skepticism may evaporate, but skepticism about religion lingers.

**Liberty and Necessity:**

We accept that brute, physical events are subject to “necessity.” What happens has some cause, and this cause “determines” or “necessitates” the effect.

*Where does our idea of causation, or “necessary connexion,” come from?*

- No matter how closely we examine events, we cannot find any necessary connection, or relation of causation, between them.
- All we find is one event, followed by another.
- How, then, do we ever come to think of one event causing another—which is something over and above one event following another?

*Roughly:*

- We experience constant conjunction: events of type A followed by events of type B.
- This disposes us, when we think of, or experience, an event of type A, to infer, or expect, the occurrence of an event of type B.
- We somehow “feel” our own minds making this inference.
- Our idea of causation, or necessary connection, arises from this feeling. We somehow project what is in our minds out onto events in the world.
- This is *all there is* to causation.

*So the question:*

Are *choices* caused just as physical events are caused?

*Is the question:*

Do we observe constant conjunctions of characters and choices, just as we observe constant conjunctions of physical causes and physical effects (and do we make, and feel

ourselves making, the inference from characters to choices, just as we make and feel ourselves making, the inference from physical causes to physical effects)?

*And the answer seems yes:*

- Don't we observe constant conjunctions of characters and choices, just as we observe constant conjunctions of physical causes and physical effects?
- Don't we make causal inferences from characters to choices?
- Don't we make causal inferences involving characters and physical causes, choices and physical effects?

*Objection:* Aren't we sometimes uncertain about what people will choose? Don't they sometimes surprise us?

*Reply:* Yes, but only because *we are ignorant* of their characters—not because they *do not in fact* necessitate their choices.

*Question:* Why then do people believe in the “liberty of indifference”: that our choices are sometimes *not* caused, but freely made? Liberty of indifference is choosing *without* our choice being caused by *anything*, even our *own motives*.

*First*, we confuse it with the “liberty of spontaneity.” We have the liberty of spontaneity when:

- we are not *prevented from acting* as we choose?
- we are not *coerced to choose* as we do?

*Second*, we have a false experience of our *own* choices being free of causes (although not of others' choices).

A particularly obscure passage:

“We feel that our actions are subject to our will on most occasions, and imagine we feel that the will itself is subject to nothing; because when by a denial of it we are provok'd to try, we feel that it moves easily every way, and produces an image of itself even on that side, on which it did not settle. This image or faint motion, we persuade ourselves, could have been completed into the thing itself; because should that be deny'd, we find, upon a second trial, that it can.”

We think that we could have chosen something other than what chose, because if someone challenges our freedom now, we will choose the other thing now. But this does not show that we could have chosen something other than what we chose. Nor does it show that we can choose other than what we choose now. It shows only that our desire to “prove” our freedom causes certain choices!

*Third*, we worry that if we lack the liberty of indifference, then we cannot fairly be rewarded or punished, praised or blamed.

But, in fact, Hume claims, the *opposite* is true.

- (1) It makes sense to praise and blame someone for her actions only if her actions reflect *something about her character*.

- (i) We don't blame people for ignorant, unintentional, or accidental actions.
  - (ii) We blame people less for crimes of passion than for premeditated crimes.
  - (iii) We stop blaming people when they apologize and change their ways.
- (2) Her actions *reflect* her character only if they are *caused* by her character.
- (3) If she had the liberty of indifference, then her actions would not be caused by *anything*. It would be as though her actions were one long series of random, accidental occurrences.
- (4) Therefore, if she had the liberty of indifference, then her actions would not be caused by her character.
- (5) Therefore, if she had the liberty of indifference, then it would not make sense to praise or blame her for her actions. Indeed, they wouldn't really be *her* actions at all.

**Review Questions:**

1. "Necessity is regular and certain. Human conduct is irregular and uncertain. The one, therefore, proceeds not from the other" (403). Why is this an objection to Hume's view? How does Hume reply?
2. "A prisoner, who has neither money... and death" (406, second-to-last paragraph of section i). What point is Hume making with this example?