

*** ROOM CHANGE: 60 EVANS ***

Phil 104, January 30, 2007
Hume: Liberty and Necessity, Reflective Stability

II:iii:1–2: 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 feel this inference within our own minds.
- Our idea of causation, or necessary connection, arises from this feeling.
- 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?

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?

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, cou'd have been completed into the thing itself; because shou'd 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*.

(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.

III:iii:6: Morality approves of itself

- We have seen Hume's explanation *why* we make the moral judgments that we do.
- Is that how we *ought* to make moral judgments?
- Does Hume think that it makes sense to ask this question?
- Yes, in a way: We can ask whether our moral sense approves or disapproves of itself.
- And it turns out that it approves of itself:

[T]his sense must certainly acquire a new force, when reflecting on itself, it approves of those principles, from whence it is deriv'd, and finds nothing but what is great and good in its origin... According to [the system of those who account for that sense by an extensive sympathy with mankind], not only virtue must be approv'd of, but also the sense of virtue (619).

- We might call this “reflective stability” (following John Rawls). When our moral sense “reflects” on itself, it is “stable,” i.e., finds nothing in need of change.