

PHIL 3923H: Honors Colloquium on Free Will
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Hume, “Of Liberty and Necessity”

Part I.

- In the opening paragraph Hume claims that some disputes, such as that over free will in particular, may be simply verbal disputes.

From this circumstance alone, that a controversy has been long kept on foot, and remains still undecided, we may presume, that the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed in the controversy.

- Hume claims that if we were simply clear about the meaning of the terms in the free will debate — ‘necessity’ and ‘liberty’ — then we would recognize that we do not disagree.

I hope, therefore, to make it appear, that all men have ever agreed in the doctrine both of necessity and liberty, according to any reasonable sense, which can be put on these terms; and that the whole controversy has hitherto turned merely upon words.

- Hume begins by clarifying the meaning of ‘necessity’. This follows his section V. discussion:

Beyond the constant *conjunction* of similar objects, and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity, or connexion.

- But, Hume claims, it is obvious that much human behavior is necessary in this sense. If such behavior is both necessary and free, then we have shown that freedom (liberty) is compatible with necessity.

- Hume proceeds to give many examples of necessity in human behavior: the same human motives have been present throughout human history and across geographical distance, economic behavior, the prisoner, and the visiting friend.

- Hume thinks that we all *know* that the doctrine of necessity holds for human behavior.

○ The necessity in human (moral) affairs is at least as strong as physical necessity.

○ When there seem to be exceptions to the principle of necessity, these are best explained by our ignorance of all the relevant factors:

But philosophers, observing, that, almost in every part of nature, there is contained a vast variety of springs and principles, which are hid, by reason of their minuteness or remoteness, find, that it is at least possible the contrariety of events may not proceed from any contingency in the cause, but from the secret operation of contrary causes.

● Now, what is meant by ‘liberty’?

By liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may.

○ Surely, we have much liberty in this sense (i.e., the power to do what we want to do, or to do otherwise if we so choose). And note how this is compatible with necessity.

Part II.

● Hume on respecting the norm of truth:

When any opinion leads to absurdities, it is certainly false; but it is not certain that an opinion is false, because it is of dangerous consequence. Such topics, therefore, ought entirely to be forborne; as serving nothing to the discovery of truth, but only to make the person of an antagonist odious.

○ That being said, Hume still thinks that his conclusions about necessity and liberty, far from damaging morality, are essential to morality.

○ Reward and punishment, for example, are motives for ethical and/or legal behavior that assume some necessity in human behavior (e.g., that people desire certain rewards and fear certain punishments).

○ If actions aren’t determined by a person’s character, then it is not appropriate to hold a person responsible for her actions. Similarly, liberty is also

required for moral responsibility because actions that result from our own liberty reflect our character.

○ Q: But if necessity (determinism) is true, then aren't all our actions pre-determined by factors completely beyond our control (e.g., God's will, or an infinite succession of physical causes, etc.)? And doesn't this take away our liberty?

Hume responds, in part:

Or why should not the acknowledgement of a real distinction between vice and virtue be reconcilable to all speculative systems of philosophy, as well as that of a real distinction between personal beauty and deformity? Both these distinctions are founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind: And these sentiments are not to be controlled or altered by any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever.