



Freedom and Moral Sentiment: Hume's Way of Naturalizing Responsibility

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Introduction

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Happy, if we can unite the boundaries of the different species of philosophy, by reconciling profound enquiry with clearness, and truth with novelty!

Hume, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding

The nature and conditions of human freedom and moral responsibility are matters of perennial philosophical importance and controversy. The questions raised in this sphere concern nothing less than the basis of moral life and our understanding of the place of humankind in the natural order of things. These are issues that straddle both metaphysics and morals. The positions that we take on such matters deeply shape our fundamental philosophical outlook. In this book, I am concerned with David Hume's contribution to our understanding of these matters.

In modern times, problems of freedom and responsibility have been considered with particular reference to the narrower issue of “free will”. This more specific problem may be expressed as follows: Can human freedom and moral responsibility be reconciled with causal determinism or the necessitation of all human thought and action? The philosophical literature on this subject is vast. There are, however, a few seminal works that dominate the discussion and interpretation of this problem. It is widely acknowledged that among these works Hume provides us with one of the great “classic” statements of the “compatibilist” position—the view that human freedom and moral responsibility are not threatened or undermined by determinism (and, indeed, that they require it).¹

Hume's statement of the compatibilist position is closely identified with the compatibilist positions taken up by a number of other well-known philosophers. In one direction, for example, Hume is generally thought to have been greatly

influenced by the compatibilist strategy of his predecessor Thomas Hobbes.² In the other direction, there are a host of philosophers in the empiricist tradition—including Mill, Russell, Schlick, and Ayer—all of whom are widely understood to be following Hume's basic lines of thought on free will.³ Indeed, Hume has become so closely identified with this group of thinkers that the compatibilist strategy that they are taken (collectively) to pursue has been labelled the “Hobbes-Hume-Schlick doctrine”, or “Hume-Mill-Schlick-Ayer” position, and so on.⁴ The general point is that in the relevant literature there is near universal agreement that Hume belongs to the classical compatibilist tradition of thought and that his arguments on this subject should be interpreted in this light.⁵

(p.4) The strategy of the classical compatibilist tradition is very familiar. It argues that because we confuse causation with force and compulsion we mistakenly conclude that freedom (and responsibility) requires the absence of causation and necessity. Moral freedom, therefore, is wrongly supposed to require the metaphysics of indeterminism. The compatibilist maintains, against this view, that causation and necessity are actually required for freedom and responsibility. An agent is responsible for an action only if it was his motives or desires that *caused* it. Uncaused action could never be attributed to any person and would be random and capricious. Moreover, rewards and punishments secure valuable social benefits only because they motivate people to act differently than they would do in their absence. In other words, they *cause* people to alter or change their conduct in desirable ways. This is the essence of the classical compatibilist position. This strategy is understood to be primarily concerned with the *logic* of the concepts in question (i.e. freedom, necessity, etc.).⁶ So interpreted, this strategy involves a kind of pure conceptual or philosophical analysis that is required to clarify the framework within which any independent empirical investigation into the nature of moral life must take place.⁷ It is this position which Hume is widely held to be a principal spokesman for.

The view that Hume provides one of the principal statements—if not *the* principal statement—of classical compatibilism remains current within the field of Hume scholarship. Indeed, this view of Hume has been defended and elaborated on by a number of distinguished Hume scholars over the past thirty years, right up to the present. Although their interpretations vary somewhat, these commentators are all agreed that Hume's general strategy fits squarely into the classical compatibilist tradition. (Hereafter, I will refer simply to the “classical interpretation” of Hume's strategy.) The commentators whom I primarily have in mind include influential figures, such as Flew, MacNabb, Ayer, Stroud, Mackie, and Penelhum.⁸ Moreover, I am unaware of any substantial effort to challenge this general account of Hume's compatibilist arguments or intentions.⁹ Clearly, then, the view that Hume is a principal spokesman of the

classical compatibilist strategy that runs from Hobbes to Schlick and Ayer is not only the dominant view—it has gone almost unchallenged.

It is of some contemporary importance that Hume continues to be interpreted in this manner. The reason for this is that there is an increasing consensus among philosophers in the field that the classical compatibilist strategy has now been effectively discredited or surpassed by more recent developments in compatibilist thinking. Insofar as Hume continues to be read as holding to the classical compatibilist position, his views will inevitably be judged as of less immediate contemporary interest and significance.¹⁰ In other words, if the classical reading of Hume's compatibilism is indeed correct and it is also true that compatibilist thinking has now advanced well beyond the confines of this general strategy, then we must conclude that Hume's thinking on this subject is now somewhat dated and passé.¹¹ The crucial question, therefore, is whether or not Hume has been properly interpreted by his commentators.

In this book I argue that Hume's views on this subject—although they have been very widely discussed and hugely influential—have nevertheless been seriously misrepresented. More specifically, I argue that commentators and scholars have distorted Hume's views on this matter because they have overlooked a key element in **(p.5)** Hume's analysis of the nature and conditions of moral responsibility. This element is moral sentiment. One of the key objectives of Hume's science of man was to discover under what circumstances people are *felt* to be responsible. To hold a person responsible is to regard that person as an object of a moral sentiment, which is a calm, indirect passion. Hume believed that “in the production and conduct of the passions, there is a certain regular mechanism, which is susceptible of as accurate a disquisition, as laws of motion, optics, hydrostatics or any part of natural philosophy” (DP, 166). Hume is concerned to *describe* the “regular mechanism” which generates the moral sentiments. This feature of Hume's discussion, I maintain, shapes his general account of the nature and conditions of moral responsibility.

Hume's discussion of the subject of free will must be interpreted within the framework of this *naturalistic* account of responsibility. In particular, it is not possible to understand the general structure and significance of Hume's effort to “reconcile” liberty and necessity until we properly appreciate how these arguments depend on Hume's description of the causal mechanism that produces our moral sentiments. Part I of this book is especially concerned with these points. I show that Hume introduces “the experimental method of reasoning” *into* the free will controversy in order to put an end to this “long disputed question” (EU, 81). His general strategy, therefore, is in important respects very different from that of other (classical) compatibilist thinkers, such as Hobbes and Schlick.

There are, I argue, striking parallels and affinities between Hume's general strategy and the views that have been advanced more recently by P. F. Strawson in his influential paper "Freedom and Resentment". What Hume and Strawson are fundamentally agreed about is that questions of moral responsibility, and how they relate to traditional problems of free will, can be properly understood and analysed only within the framework of moral sentiment. Moral sentiment, they hold, must be considered as a "given" of our human nature. As such, it constitutes the very fabric within which issues of freedom and responsibility arise. Any effort to justify or describe responsibility outside this framework is bound to mislead and perplex us. In this way, the naturalistic avenue of interpretation and criticism, far from draining Hume's discussion of its contemporary interest and significance, makes plain what precisely that interest and significance consists in.

Part II of this book builds on the naturalistic theme raised in Part I. Hume's theory of responsibility draws from—and depends on—several different aspects of his moral theory and his philosophy of mind. The nature of these commitments, and their relations with one another, are the particular concern of Part II. In this regard, I discuss a range of issues, such as Hume's views about the nature and content of moral sentiment; the relevance of character to ascriptions of responsibility; the role of intention, will, and feeling in arousing moral sentiment; the extent to which we have control over our (moral) character; and, finally, the question of the justification of punishment. Beyond this, Hume's views on the subject of responsibility are considered in relation to his wider and deeper philosophical concern with problems of religion. I will show that the naturalistic theory of responsibility is an especially important aspect of Hume's more basic anti-Christian philosophical objectives and concerns. In the final chapter, I draw some general conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of Hume's naturalistic theory. In this context, I am especially concerned **(p.6)** to emphasize the significance of Hume's account of the relationship between issues of freedom and issues of responsibility.

On the classical account, Hume understands the problem of responsibility simply in terms of the conditions of free action. Hume's account of the relationship between responsibility and freedom, I explain, is more complex than this. For Hume, the issue of responsibility is not reducible to the problem of free will. The scope of moral evaluation extends well beyond the sphere of intentional action. A person may be held responsible for aspects of character that are manifest neither in their will nor through their intentions. In general, it is Hume's view that we must not exaggerate the importance of voluntariness and control for moral responsibility. Hume's (complex) account of the relationship between freedom and responsibility, I maintain, constitutes a particularly important and illuminating aspect of his wider naturalistic strategy.

My discussion, as the summary account above indicates, is structured around a few basic themes. These are themes which are fundamental for a proper understanding of Hume's intentions in this sphere, but which are, nevertheless, neglected or overlooked by the classical reading.

The first theme is Hume's *naturalism*. This refers to Hume's objective to describe and explain, in empirical and scientific terms, the workings of the human passions (i.e. moral sentiments) in accounting for the nature and conditions of moral responsibility.

The second theme that I emphasize is Hume's *rejection of voluntarism*. What I mean by this is that (contrary to the classical interpretation) Hume rejects the view that responsibility is simply a matter of acting freely. Hume's position is that the relationship between freedom and responsibility is more complex than this. In particular, according to Hume it is not the case that we are responsible only for that which we control or do voluntarily.

Finally, I am also concerned to place appropriate emphasis on Hume's *secularism*, considered in relation to his views on freedom and responsibility. What Hume has to say on these matters is deeply motivated by his more fundamental philosophical objective to discredit Christian metaphysics and morals and to develop in its place a secular, scientific account of moral and political life.

A proper understanding of these features of Hume's philosophical system, I argue, is essential for any adequate appreciation and critical assessment of Hume's moral philosophy and, indeed, his philosophy as a whole. I argue that in both matters of detail and matters of general strategy the significance and interest of what Hume says on this subject is obscured by the classical interpretation. This is in no way to deny that Hume's views have serious shortcomings or difficulties. On the contrary, I am equally concerned to identify and expose (significant) shortcomings and difficulties in Hume's system. Nevertheless, whatever shortcomings may remain with Hume's position, there is a great deal more to be learned from it than is suggested by the classical reading.

Recently there has been a great deal of debate—much of it very interesting—about the nature of the history of philosophy and how it relates to the history of ideas. I take the historian of philosophy, unlike the historian of ideas, to be particularly concerned with the *critical* study of the work at hand. The history of philosophy must *begin* as a disciplined historical study, but this is not its final objective. Its final objective **(p.7)** must be to shed light on contemporary philosophical problems.¹² In this way, unlike the history of ideas, the history of philosophy finishes firmly on a philosophical note—on a note which focusses on present philosophical concerns. Consistent with this, my primary objective in

this study is not simply to clarify our understanding of Hume's thinking on freedom and responsibility. Rather, it is to clarify our own (contemporary) understanding on the issues of freedom and responsibility *by means* of a careful consideration of Hume's work.

The classical interpretation of Hume's position on the subject of freedom and responsibility presents his general strategy as simple and straightforward. I will show that this is not the case. Hume's arguments relating to these problems are both subtle and complex. In order to secure benefit from the study of Hume's work, we require a careful and detailed analysis of his philosophical principles. This requires some patience and stamina, as we follow Hume into the *labyrinth* of his system. Nevertheless, as I will show, the journey repays the philosophical effort.

However, for those readers who require only a general overview of Hume's strategy, the following shortcut may suffice: chapter 1, sections 1, 2, 4; chapter 2, section 4; chapter 3, section 1; chapter 4; and chapter 12. Readers with more time may also look at chapters 5, 9, and 10.

I will discuss and refer to secondary literature only when it is necessary for explaining the significance of the interpretive or critical issues at hand. By and large, I try to confine all such references to the notes—leaving the text free so far as possible for discussion of Hume's writings. In the body of the text, I am concerned with historical references only insofar as they shed direct light on the interpretation or criticism that I am advancing. References in the notes, along with the bibliography, should provide the reader with a fairly detailed account of the essential contemporary secondary literature.

Hume's attitude to the fate of his philosophy is of a piece with his wider attitude to life and the role of philosophy within human life. It is his view that the philosopher, no matter how subtle his reflections, will always be “lost in the man” (ESY, 179n [Sceptic]). There is no serene “temple of wisdom” where we can seat ourselves above the “rolling thunder” (ESY, 150 [Stoic]). Hume, clearly, wrote his philosophy, and accepted the reaction to it, in this general spirit. It is not unreasonable, therefore, that this study of Hume's philosophy should be written in much the same spirit.¹³

Notes:

(1.) Penelhum, for example, says that Hume's “philosophical system contains the best-known classical statement of what is now known as compatibilism” (“Hume's Moral Psychology”, 129).

(2.) See, e.g., Stroud, *Hume*, 153, who claims that “the general strategy of [Hume's] ‘reconciling project’ is not new. It is found in all essential respects in Hobbes”. Hendel (*Philosophy of Hume*, 289) notes that Hume's title for the sections discussing the free will problem—“Of Liberty and Necessity”—seems to

have been taken from Hobbes's essay of the same title as it appeared in Hobbes's *Tripos* (Hobbes, *English Works*, vol. 4).

(3.) The remarks of Glover are representative of this view. Glover says that “the philosophers of the empiricist tradition, with remarkable uniformity, have argued that the belief that determinism is incompatible with responsibility is confused and false” (*Responsibility*, 50). In a footnote attached to this passage, he claims that “almost identical versions of this doctrine [compatibilism] are to be found in Hobbes, Hume, Mill, Russell, Schlick and Ayer”.

(4.) The “Hobbes-Hume-Schlick” label appears in Berlin, *Four Essays*, xv; the “Hume-Mill-Schlick-Ayer” label appears in Hospers, “What Means This Freedom?” 140.

(5.) For an especially clear and recent statement of this well-established picture of Hume's “compatibilist commitments”, as presented in the more general literature on free will, see Honderich, *Consequences of Determinism*, 88–106, and *How Free Are You?*, 95–101. Honderich says, “Hume, although he is sometimes cited as the founder of the tradition of Compatibilism, of freedom as voluntariness, does not advance greatly beyond Hobbes in fundamental conceptions” (*Consequences of Determinism*, 90–92).

(6.) In the context of explaining Hume's compatibilism, Penelhum says, “Compatibilism is the thesis that there is no inconsistency in holding that human actions are caused and yet are free. This is a logical thesis, normally combined with the substantive claim that our actions always *are* caused, and that they are sometimes free as well” (“Hume's Moral Psychology”, 129).

(7.) See, e.g., Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 156–58, and Stroud, *Hume*, 153–54. Both Flew and Stroud, in their particularly influential discussions of Hume on this subject, emphasize the “verbal” or “conceptual” nature of Hume's concerns, as distinct from his empirical project of a “science of man”.

(8.) Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, chp. 7; MacNabb, *David Hume*, 199–203; Ayer, *Hume*, 75–78; Stroud, *Hume*, chp. 7; Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 245; Penelhum, *Hume*, 117–22, and “Hume's Moral Psychology,” 129–32.

(9.) The only exception to this is my “On the Naturalism of Hume's ‘Reconciling Project’ ”. (See also Flew's reply to my paper and my own rejoinder to Flew.) It is worth noting that, not only has there been no book-length study of Hume's influential views on freedom and responsibility, there is also surprisingly little in the way of substantial journal literature devoted to these matters. Most of the basic literature on this subject has taken the form of book chapters or passages in larger studies of Hume's philosophy.

(10.) For recent references to Hume's views on freedom and responsibility that present him in this light, see, e.g., Wolf, *Freedom within Reason*, 26–35, and Double, *The Non-Reality of Free Will*, 27–31. (The newer form of compatibilism which Wolf and Double have principally in mind is the “hierarchical account” advanced by such philosophers as Frankfurt and Watson.)

(11.) Of course, there may still be considerable interest and value in studying the principles and development of the classical compatibilist tradition so that we may properly grasp how the contemporary debate has evolved. Accordingly, even if (as I will argue) the classical reading is mistaken, we still need a proper understanding of Hume's arguments *so interpreted*. The ongoing importance of Hume's writings on the subject of free will in this respect can hardly be denied. The extent of Hume's influence in this area can easily be gauged simply by noting the frequency with which selections of Hume on “liberty and necessity” continue to appear in introductory text books. These selections have served as the general basis on which several generations of philosophy students have been taught the fundamental principles of classical compatibilism. However, suffice it to say at this point that one of the reasons why Hume's views on this subject have been seriously misrepresented is precisely because what he has to say on the subject of “liberty and necessity” has generally been read in isolation from the other parts of his philosophical system in which it belongs.

(12.) For a succinct and clear statement of this account of the relationship between the history of ideas and the history of philosophy, see Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, 9.

(13.) For a further statement of Hume's wider attitude to life and the place of philosophy within human life, see the last paragraph of his essay “The Sceptic” (ESY, 180).

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