Hume's Analysis of "Cause" and the 'Two-Definitions' Dispute

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Notes and Discussions

HUME'S ANALYSIS OF "CAUSE" AND THE 'TWO-DEFINITIONS' DISPUTE.[1]

ON OCCASION, HUME SEES HIS ANALYSIS of causation as an inquiry into the meaning of the words "cause" or "necessary connexion." This is the case, for example, in this passage from Section VII of the *Enquiry*, "Of the idea of Necessary Connexion":

> The chief obstacle, therefore, to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and ambiguity of the terms . . . we shall, therefore, endeavor in this section to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms . . .[2]

We should be careful however not to over-state Hume's interest in language, and his affinities with contemporary methods of linguistic analysis. His method is in general psychological rather than linguistic,[3] and his analysis of causation is paradigmatic of this: we explain the nature of causal inference, the origin of our beliefs about causal connexions, our knowledge of causes, and even the meaning of the word "cause", by giving a psychogenetic account of the mind's determination, under the influence of custom, to pass from the idea of the first object to the idea of the second. In short, Hume attempts to fix the meaning of important terms in the language without examining the ways in which these words are employed. I shall argue in this paper that this distinctive approach has not been fully appreciated by Hume's commentators, and that the recent dispute concerning Hume's "two definitions" has arisen as a result of this neglect.

Hume provides the following definitions of "cause" in the *Treatise:*

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[1] I am indebted to A. G. N. Flew, Raymond Martin, and S. L. Varnedoe for their criticisms of an earlier version of this paper.

[2] *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (2nd Edition, 1962), pp. 61-62. Subsequent references to the *Enquiry* and *Treatise of Human Nature*, (ed. Selby-Bigge) will be in the body of the paper.

[3] On those occasions when Hume does examine language, he shows little interest in its details. In distinguishing between virtues and talents, defects and vices, Hume claims that: "A moral, philosophical discourse needs not enter into all these caprices of language, which are always so variable in different dialects, and in different ages of the same dialect." (E, p. 314)

D_1: An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all objects resembling the former are placed in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter. (T, p. 170)

D_2: An object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it that, the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other. (*ibid.*)

These two definitions are said to be "only different by their presenting a different view of the same object, and making us consider it either as a philosophical or natural relation . . ." (*ibid.*) But, as J. A. Robinson was the first to argue, how can one relation, the causal relation, be defined in two ways, if the definitions are neither intensionally nor extensionally equivalent?[4] That D_1 and D_2 differ in meaning is obvious from the consideration of ideas and the determination of the mind in D_2 and the absence of any such notions in D_1. That they pick out different events as causes is shown by Hume's admission of "secret causes" which satisfy the conditions of temporal precedence, contiguity, and constant conjunction of D_1 but, as they are unobserved, fail to be conditions of psychological association for any observer as required in D_2.[5] Further, cases of "mistaken expectations" occur where the psychological association of D_2 obtains but is not conjoined with the constant conjunction condition of D_1. Here again, an event would satisfy one definition of "cause" but not the other. How are we to explain two non-equivalent accounts of the same notion?

There are several alternatives. Drawing upon Hume's distinction between philosophical and natural relations, Robinson argues that D_1 is really Hume's only definition of "cause" (i. e. a definition of the philosophical relation "cause"); D_2, in spite of the term "definition," is really only a statement that "the (already defined) cause-effect relation is a natural relation" (i.e. that observation of the cause induces an association in the mind with the idea of the effect.) On this view, the Humean view of causation (i.e. of the meaning of the word "cause") is merely of priority, contiguity, and constant conjunction. If we attempt to make causes necessary, or view necessity as part of the meaning of the word "cause,"[6] then

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[4] "Hume's Two Definitions of 'cause'," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, XII (1962), reprinted in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell (New York: Anchor Press, 1966), pp. 129-147.

[5] Hume speaks of "unknown causes" "ultimate inexplicable causes" (T, p. 84), and "as to the causes of these general causes . . . [they] are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry." (E, p. 30) The extensional non-equivalence of D_1 and D_2 has been questioned by Donald Gotterbarn ("Hume's Two Lights on Cause," *The Philosophical Quarterly* (April, 1971), pp. 168-171) on the grounds that D_1 implicitly involves a mental determination. Hume's remark however that "all objects . . . are placed in like relations" does not unambiguously indicate that they are so placed by an observing mind, and the *Enquiry* version is quite impersonal, e.g., "if the first object had not been, the second never had existed." (E, p. 76) Even if D_1 did involve *some* mental determination, this would still be insufficient grounds for concluding that "both D_1 and D_2 require the same mental determination" (p. 171), since what is essential to D_2 is the mind's propensity to pass from the idea of the first object to the idea of the second.

[6] This is the view held by Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941), pp. 91-92 (quoted in Robinson, p. 141.)

we have confused this analysis of the concept with his explanation of how the (mistaken) belief that causes are necessary for their effects has arisen.

But many of Hume's remarks are inconsistent with what Robinson would have him say. It has been noted[7] that the use of the term "definition" for D_2 is not an isolated instance, and thus not likely to be an unnoticed slip on Hume's part. And it is clearly a mistake to claim that, for Hume, necessity is not part of the concept of a cause. In the *Treatise*, Hume said, "According to my definitions, necessity makes an essential part of causation ..." (T, p. 407), and "I define necessity two ways, conformable to the definitions of *cause*, of which it is an essential part" (T, p. 409). In the *Enquiry* he is equally explicit:

> Let anyone define a cause without comprehending as a part of the definition a necessary connexion with its effect, and let him show distinctly the origin of the idea, expressed by the definition, and I shall readily give up the whole controversy. But if the foregoing explication of the matter be received, this must be absolutely impracticable.... (E, pp. 95-96)

Hume clearly understood D_1 and D_2 to be full-fledged definitions, and in both necessity is said to be an essential part. We cannot then resolve the difficulties by appealing solely to the distinction between philosophical and natural relations, because a cause is said in these passages to be *both* of these.[8] The problem remains: if these relations are satisfied under different sets of conditions, how can there be one thing which is the cause?

We have justified Kemp Smith's claim that necessity is part of the concept of cause, but his alternative account of the two definitions passage is ironically a mirror image of Robinson's 'one definition' view, and mistaken for similar reasons. Although Kemp Smith does not explicity discuss D_1 and D_2, his remarks suggest that he takes D_2 to be Hume's real definition, and D_1 merely an explanation of how we came to believe in causal connexions:

> ... *two* distinct factors are involved in the idea of necessary connexion, one as *conditioning* it, and one as *constituting* it. Constancy of conjunction is requisite as that through which alone a custom or habit can be acquired ... it also generates a *feeling* of necessitated transition. It is this feeling, thus completely conditioned, which constitutes our impression, and therefore our idea, of causation....[9]

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[7] Thomas J. Richards, "Hume's Two Definitions of 'cause'," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, XV (1965) (reprinted in Chappell), p. 151 ff. Richards notes three occasions in the *Treatise* (p. 172), and the use of "definition" continues in the *Enquiry* account.

[8] A similar account has been defended by W. H. Baumer ("Hume, Causes, and Relations" read at the Western Division Meeting May, 1970, of the American Philosophical Association): "What the causal relation can properly be said to represent is on Hume's view simply this regular succession and nothing more. . . ." This view, like Robinson's, is simply at odds with Hume's own remarks. Baumer takes D_2 to be an analysis of "the causal relation as it holds between ideas," but Hume's way of speaking of the cause is that of an *object* whose idea is associated with another idea. He is not then taking the ideas themselves as the causes and effects.

[9] Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 373.

Thus, while Robinson supports a one definition view of cause as D_1, Kemp Smith supports a one definition view of cause as D_2. And neither account can claim to be adequate to Hume's repeated insistence that there are two definitions of "cause". In fact, the non-equivalence of D_1 and D_2 ought to put an end to speaking simply of "Hume's concept of cause" or "Humean causation."

II

What has to be given up if we are to make sense of Hume's remarks is the assumption common to both camps that Hume is analyzing *the* meaning of "cause" and hence that we must either find a way of restoring the equivalence of D_1 and D_2 or give up one of them as a genuine definition. There is another way out, and we have very good evidence that this is in fact Hume's own position: there are two non-equivalent definitions of "cause" because the word has more than one meaning.[10] To see that this is his view, we must consider the conditions under which words possess meaning on Hume's account, and how he sets out to elicit this meaning.

From the outset of the *Treatise*, Hume explains in psychological terms how words acquire whatever meaning they have: when through custom a word or sound is connected with a particular idea, the hearing of that word excites or revives the idea in us.[11] Given this view, and his basic principle that all ideas are derived from antecedent impressions, it follows that a necessary condition for a word having meaning, is that there be some original impression from which the idea may be acquired. Hume concludes from this that if we are in doubt about the meaning of a word, or whether it has any meaning, we need only "produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied" (E, p. 62).

In its application however, this principle acquires a new interpretation: not only does a consideration of the relevant impression aid in rendering the idea "precise and determinate," but beyond what can be explicated through a description of his original experience, the word has no meaning at all.[12] In short, Hume

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[10] The failure to question this assumption may be attributable to imprecision in the statement of the issue. Robinson, for example, moves from speaking of D_1 and D_2 as "definitions of the same term" (p. 133) to D_1 and D_2 as "definitions of the same notion." (p. 165) It may not be possible to have two non-equivalent definitions of the same *notion*, but this should not lead us to conclude that there cannot be two such definitions for the same *term*. Richards' account moves in the right direction by taking D_2 as an explication of "what we mean by a natural cause" (p. 160), thus having D_1 and D_2 defining different *terms*, but this is not Hume's way of speaking.

[11] *Treatise*, pp. 20-22. This does not as such show that Hume's theory is merely a psychological one. That Hume often traces out the psychological links in our learning the meaning of the word is consistent with his also demanding a variety of other conditions which must be satisfied before a word can be said to have any meaning.

[12] This becomes clear in his accounts of substance and necessity: "we have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it." (T, p. 16) Our idea of necessity has arisen from an experience of nature's uniformity and our own determination to pass from one idea to another, and therefore, "Beyond the constant *conjunction* and the consequent *inference* from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity of connexion." (E, p. 82)

sees the description of the original experience as a sufficient explication of the meaning of the word, and this has surprising results.

In the discussion of "necessity," Hume recognizes two *senses* (E, p. 97) of the term because there are two separate conditions which give rise to the idea, and since he is quite aware that neither constant conjunction nor mental determination is what is ordinarily meant by the term, he says that "as long as the meaning is understood, I hope the word can do no harm." (E, p. 97.) The implications for "cause" are now obvious. Since "necessity can be defined two ways, conformably to the two definitions of *cause*, of which it makes an essential part" (E, p. 97), it is not at all surprising that there should be two definitions of "cause," one capturing the constant conjunction sense, and the other the mind's determination to pass from one idea to the other.

This becomes even clearer in the *Enquiry* version of the "two definitions" passage which has been overlooked in recent accounts.[13] Apart from some surprising changes in the definitions themselves,[14] the main addition to the *Treatise* account is this:

> Similar objects are always conjoined with similar. Of this we have experience. Suitably to this experience, therefore we may define a cause to be (D_1E). The appearance of a cause always conveys the mind, by a customary transition, to the idea of the effect. Of this also we have experience. We may, therefore, suitably to this experience, form another definition of cause and call it (D_2E.) (pp. 76-77)

In light of Hume's practice elsewhere, the sense of "defining suitably to an experience" is obvious: different experiences give rise to our ideas of cause.[15] Since there are distinct experiences, there are distinct impressions, and hence distinct ideas of cause, or like "necessity," distinct senses of "cause." Hume's definition of "cause" then is a natural application of his operative principle that the meaning of a word can be fully explicated through a description of the conditions in which our idea first arose. The fact that Hume says nothing further in explanation of the two definitions is evidence that he regarded his procedure as obvious for anyone who had

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[13] The importance of these passages was noted by Selby-Bigge (E, Introduction, p. xvii.) Further, Flew points out in *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (London, 1961), whose publication antedates the "two definitions" dispute, that "any criticism mistaking this to be an essay in conservative logical analysis, which pretends only to epitomize accepted educated use and usage, must take pause at the facts." (pp. 120-121)

[14] D_1 (E): "An object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first one are followed by objects similar to the second. Or in other words, where if the first object had not been the second never had existed." (p. 76)

D_2 (E): "An object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other." (p. 77)

D_1 (E) contains a remarkable conflation of causes as sufficient conditions with causes as necessary conditions, since it treats one as "in other words" the same as the other. This ambivalence does not effect the present issue.

[15] They are distinct, but related. The immediate origin of our idea of necessary connexion is the internal impression of the mind's propensity, but "similar instances are still the first source of our idea of power or necessity. . . ." (T, 164)

been aware since Book I of the *Treatise* how the meaning of philosophical terms was to be explicated.

Hume's commentators have been understandably puzzled by his simply asserting that "cause" may be defined in two ways, without attempting to substantiate this claim by citing specific uses of "cause" in which one but not the other sense is obviously present, or by offering distinct paraphrases of ambiguous utterances. But, as is clear by now, this is not Hume's method of analysis. Thus, attention to Hume's method not only enables us to make sense of what Hume does say about "cause," it also helps explain why he did not say more.

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Russell, Searle, and Hamlet

In his autobiography,[1] Bertrand Russell cites the quatrain[2] addressed to him by Ronald Searle:

> All earthly knowledge finally explored,
> Man feels himself from doubt and dogma free.
> There are more things in Heaven, though, my lord,
> Than are dreamed of in your philosophy.

Russell's answer is so witty and engaging that the reader may overlook its illogic. Russell says that he dreamt of "ω," the class of all the classes not members of themselves, and that "ω" was not at the time in heaven and earth.

It seems to me that Russell discovered "ω" rather than created it, and that "ω" was in heaven and earth all along. In any case, however, Russell's statement does not refute Searle's. Russell says that he dreamt of one thing not in heaven and earth. Searle says that there are more things in heaven than Russell dreamt of.

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[1] *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1944-1969* (London and New York, 1969), illustration facing page 97 English edition, 181 American edition; a hand written retort by Bertrand Russell.

[2] *Punch*, March 1957, pp. 414-415.