

Hume's 'Reconciling Project': A Reply to Flew

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In his note 'Paul Russell on Hume's "Reconciling Project"' (*Mind*, 1984, pp. 587-8) Professor Flew makes two criticisms of my note 'On the Naturalism of Hume's "Reconciling Project"' (*Mind*, 1983, pp. 593-600). They are: (1) that 'nowhere does Russell take note of the fact that Hume left us two treatments "Of Liberty and Necessity", two treatments which are at least in emphases and tone of presentation very different'; and (2) that I must be 'prepared to offer and to defend some alternative reading' of the first three paragraphs of the first *Enquiry* discussion 'Of Liberty and Necessity' where Hume suggests that 'the whole controversy has *hitherto* turned merely upon words' (*EHU*, p. 81—my emphasis: this and later page references are to the Selby-Bigge editions). As regards the first criticism, I refer the reader to my second footnote where I do in fact, quite explicitly, note that Hume left us two treatments 'Of Liberty and Necessity'. In this footnote I point out that my description of Hume's arguments as *compatibilist arguments* 'accords somewhat more with the "reconciling" spirit of the *Enquiry* than with that of the *Treatise* where Hume tends to identify liberty with liberty of indifference' (p. 593). Obviously in any discussion note there is limited space, and therefore I could not discuss *at length* complexities which were not of immediate relevance to my alternative interpretation. However, contrary to what Flew claims, I do mention that there are two treatments and that they differ in emphases and tone.

Flew interprets Hume's remarks in the opening passages of the *Enquiry* discussion 'Of Liberty and Necessity' as expressing 'a most misguided and misleading view of the nature and importance of philosophical analysis' (p. 588; see also Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, London, 1961, pp. 156-8). Here again I believe that Flew's interpretation is seriously mistaken. Let me, therefore, provide an alternative interpretation of Hume's remarks in this context. The terminological aspect of the free will dispute is repeatedly and strongly emphasized by Hume throughout his discussion in the *Enquiry*. However, while the 'verbal' aspect of the dispute is not emphasized in the *Treatise* as explicitly as it is in the *Enquiry* Hume does make it clear in both the *Treatise* and the *Abstract* what he takes the 'verbal' aspects of the dispute to be. At the end of II, iii, 1 he states:

I dare be positive no one will ever endeavour to refute these reasonings otherwise than by altering my definitions . . . If any one alters the definitions, I cannot pretend to argue with him, 'till I know the meaning he assigns to these terms [viz. cause, and effect, and necessity, and liberty, and chance] (*THN*, p. 407).

Hume's subsequent remarks make it very clear that it is the meaning of the term 'necessity' which he believes has been the major stumbling block.

The only particular which any one can differ from me, is either, that perhaps he will refuse to call this [sc constant conjunction and inference of the mind] necessity. But *as long as the meaning is understood, I hope the word can do no harm* Or that he will maintain there is something else *in the operations of matter* (*THN*, pp. 409-10—my emphasis).

Again, in the *Abstract* Hume claims to have put the whole free will controversy 'in a new light by giving a new definition of necessity' (*A*, p. 31; page references are to the Keynes and Sraffa edition). He continues:

... the most zealous advocates for free will must allow this union and inference with regard to human actions. They will only deny that this makes the whole of necessity. But then they must show that we have an idea of something else *in the actions of matter*, which according to the foregoing reasoning is impossible.

In the *Enquiry* the point is made even more clearly.

Necessity, according to the sense in which it is here taken, has never yet been rejected, nor can ever, I think, be rejected by any philosopher. It may only, perhaps, be pretended that the mind can perceive, *in the operations of matter*, some farther connexion between the cause and effect . . . as long as we will rashly suppose, that we have some farther idea of necessity and causation *in the operations of external objects*; at the same time, that we can find nothing farther in the voluntary actions of the mind; *there is no possibility of bringing this question to any determinate issue, while we proceed upon so erroneous a supposition* (*EHU*, pp. 92–3—my emphases; see also *EHU*, p. 97).

It would appear, then, that Hume believes that the crucial first step in resolving this dispute is to become clear about the nature of necessity as it exists in the 'actions of matter'. This is hardly surprising given that the first step of his own discussion, in both the *Treatise* (*THN*, pp. 399–400) and the *Enquiry* (*EHU*, p. 82), is a clarification of our idea of necessity *as it exists in the operations of matter*.

The following remarks from the *Treatise* may also help us to understand why Hume came to suggest (in the *Enquiry*) that the liberty and necessity controversy should be regarded as 'merely verbal'.

I may be mistaken in asserting, that we have no idea of any other connexion *in the actions of body* . . . But sure I am, I ascribe nothing to the actions of the mind, but what must readily be allow'd of. Let no one, therefore, put an invidious construction on my words, by saying simply, that I assert the necessity of human actions, and place them on the same footing with the operations of senseless matter. *I do not ascribe to the will that unintelligible necessity, which is suppos'd to lie in matter*. But I ascribe to matter, that intelligible quality, *call it necessity or not*, which the most rigorous orthodoxy does or must allow to belong to the will *I change, therefore, nothing in the receiv'd systems, with regard to the will, but only with regard to material objects* (*THN*, p. 410—my emphases; see also *EHU*, p. 97)

Hume's point would seem to be this; it is only his views concerning material objects which may be deemed 'unorthodox'. No one, he claims, can reasonably dispute that our willings and actions are subject to necessity *as he understands this term* (i.e. constant conjunction and inference). To deny, on the one hand, that our willings and actions are 'necessary' but, on the other hand, accept in practice, if not explicitly, that we discover regularity and make inferences in the moral realm is to reduce this issue to one of whether or not 'union and inference' should be termed 'necessity'. A disagreement of this nature, Hume argues, while it may be a substantial issue within the context of 'natural philosophy and metaphysics' (because it suggests that we have no further idea of necessity in the operations of matter), is merely 'verbal' in the context of the free will controversy. In this way, Hume is demanding that his 'free will' opponents recognize that it is his amended conception of causation and necessity in the material world that is contentious or unorthodox rather than the substance of what he has to say about the will and our actions.

Hume's position on this subject may be summarized as follows. First, he considers it of vital importance, if we are to resolve this dispute, that we recognize that there 'are two particulars which we are to consider as essential to necessity, viz. the constant union and inference of the mind' (*THN*, p. 400). (Whether or not we choose to use the term 'necessity' is, however, immaterial.) Second, no one in actual practice doubts that there is constant conjunction and inference in the moral realm (i.e. the realm of our thought and action). Third, there is, however, a widespread *and natural* reluctance to accept that this is all that there is to our idea of necessity. Fourth, this reluctance to accept that necessity is simply constant conjunction and inference of the mind is a consequence of the fact that 'men still entertain a strong propensity to believe that they penetrate farther into the powers of nature' (i.e. the operations of *matter*; cf. *EHU*, p. 92). This 'supposition' is *the major obstacle* in resolving this dispute.¹

While it was clearly verbal confusion regarding the term 'necessity' which Hume thought was particularly threatening to his 'reconciling project' he did, notoriously, get himself enmeshed in some 'verbal' difficulties as regards what he meant by the term 'liberty' in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*. In the *Treatise* Hume claims to have proved 'that liberty and chance are synonymous' (*THN*, p. 412; see also pp. 407-8). Accordingly, in that work he is not so much concerned to 'reconcile' liberty and necessity as to deny the existence of the former. That is to say, in the *Treatise* Hume tends to identify liberty with 'liberty of indifference': an idea of liberty 'which means a negation of necessity and causes' (*THN*, p. 407). By contrast, in the *Enquiry* Hume identifies liberty with 'liberty of spontaneity': a liberty 'which is oppos'd to [external] violence' (*THN*, p. 407; see also *EHU*, p. 95 and p. 99). As a result of this change in his terminology Hume's discussion in the *Enquiry* is presented as a 'reconciling project' rather than as a refutation of the 'doctrine of liberty or chance'. However, this difference between the two discussions can be exaggerated (and Flew is certainly guilty of this). Hume makes it clear in the *Treatise* that liberty of spontaneity is 'the most common sense of the word' and that it is 'only that species of liberty, *which it concerns us to preserve . . .*' (*THN*, pp. 407-8). Clearly, therefore, contrary to what Flew suggests, there is also a 'reconciling project' implicit in the discussion of the *Treatise*. Thus, Hume's change of terminology does not affect the substance of his position. In short, in so far as Hume believes that there are verbal obstacles to resolving the free will controversy it is not, as many commentators assume, the term 'liberty' which he takes to be the most troublesome obstacle.² Further, it is obvious that Hume does not regard the 'verbal' obstacle posed by the term 'necessity' as a superficial or 'spurious' difficulty. Rather, he believes that we can escape from the clutches of the free will controversy only if

¹ For an account of why Hume believes that we have a 'strong propensity' to suppose that there is 'something else' to our idea of necessity in the material world beyond mere 'union and inference' see my 'Hume's "Two Definitions" of Cause and the Ontology of "Double Existence"', *Hume Studies*, 1984, pp. 1-25 (See also corrections to this paper in the following issue)

² It should be noted that it is hard to believe that Hume thought that Hobbes's strategy (a strategy which Hume knew has scholastic origins, cf. *THN*, p. 407) of distinguishing between two kinds of liberty was the key to ending this dispute, given that in the years after Hobbes published his views this dispute persisted at, if anything, an even more vigorous tempo. Obviously Hume thought that Hobbes's strategy had failed because it did not touch upon the fundamental difficulties associated with our idea of necessity. It is for this reason that Hume was certain that his 'new definition of necessity' would put an end to the dispute.

we are willing to first pass through the philosophical labyrinth concerning the problem of causation and necessity.

I have, I believe, fully met Professor Flew's challenge 'to offer and to defend some alternative reading' of Hume's remarks in the opening paragraphs of Section VIII of the first *Enquiry*. The interpretation which I have put forward brings out the full complexity of Hume's views on this subject and suggests that Flew's interpretation (viz. that Hume was concerned with 'the nature and importance of philosophical analysis') is well wide of the mark. Further, my interpretation of this passage is entirely consistent with my naturalistic interpretation of Hume's 'reconciling project' (and, indeed, further strengthens it by pointing to the significance of what I have referred to in my previous note as Hume's 'necessity argument'). Flew's doubts about my naturalistic interpretation, it should be noted, are based entirely upon passages in the first *Enquiry*. He has, therefore, not put forward *any* grounds for rejecting my alternative interpretation of Hume's views in the *Treatise*. As I have now removed what appears to have been the only obstacle to Professor Flew accepting my interpretation of Hume's position in the first *Enquiry* it would seem that my interpretation holds good for the *Enquiry* as well as the *Treatise*. It should also be noted that Flew does not defend the orthodox interpretation against my claim that it renders Hume's project (in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*) incoherent. Thus, even if one rejects my naturalistic interpretation the orthodox interpretation remains in need of some defence. In short, until such time as Flew (1) addresses himself to the charge that the orthodox interpretation renders Hume's position incoherent and (2) shows some further reason for rejecting my naturalistic interpretation, we have strong grounds for rejecting the orthodox interpretation in favour of the one which I have put forward.

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