

Hume on Free Will

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Abstract

In this essay, I discuss David Hume's reasoning on free will as he presents it in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. I proceed by showing how Hume's compatibilist solution acquires meaning in the light of his sentimentally based science of human nature, which conceives human beings as reasonable, social, and active creatures. Within Hume's empiricist, naturalistic, and sceptical approach, we deal only with perceptions and never with things themselves, and human experience is structured in a causal order which allows us to organise both the way we experience the world and our existence in relation to that of others. In such a scenario, the question of free will depends on human practices, such as the attribution of responsibility, which follow a causal order and are not affected by metaphysical doubts about the loss of responsibility if determinism were true. I argue that Hume traces responsibility back to the expression of feelings for or against particular characters; people become the object of judgements of responsibility in so far as, through their actions, they show that they possess characters of a certain kind which reflect a whole series of dispositions and traits, empirically verifiable and causally explainable, acquired over time. I conclude by highlighting how free will may represent a problem on a practical level once moral or religious issues come into play and why this is not so for Hume.

Keywords: Hume, Free will, Responsibility, Human nature, Common life.

1. Introduction

In this essay, I offer an exegesis of David Hume's notion of free will. I take the relevant sections of *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*—that is, T 2.3.1-2 and EHU 8¹—and go through the arguments there presented to exemplify Hume's position and how he defends it. Although

¹ I shall quote *A Treatise of Human Nature* in the body of the text as T, followed by the book, part, section, and paragraph numbers, and the page of the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition (SBN). I shall quote *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* in the body of the text as well as EHU, followed by the section and paragraph numbers, and the page of the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition.

my intentions are primarily reconstructive, I shall suggest, as a possible interpretation, that his assertions on free will can only be fully appreciated against the background of his ambition to elaborate a “science of MAN” (T Intro 4; SBN xv).

First, it is necessary to elucidate the science of human nature that Hume is thinking about. To judge from what Hume claims in the first book of the *Treatise* (“Of the Intellect”) and the first *Enquiry*, this science consists in an experimental, empirical, and a *posteriori* approach aimed at accounting for the powers and limits of the human mind. In doing so, Hume follows the “way of ideas” introduced by René Descartes and developed by John Locke and George Berkeley. Hume works with perceptions, which he distinguishes into impressions and ideas; they provide the material that, together with associative principles such as resemblance, contiguity, and causality, constitute the human mind. However, the science of human nature turns out to be much broader than the associationism with which Hume wants to account for the human mind. Hume, in fact, is also a naturalist, i.e., he sees human beings as creatures endowed with a body and guided by sentiments and passions, and he devotes the two successive books of the *Treatise*, “Of the Passions” and “Of Morals”, to the study of human beings thus conceived. This study continues in his subsequent works, from the *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals* to *A Dissertation on the Passions* to the numerous *Essays, Moral and Political*, and then the monumental *History of England*. What emerges from looking at Hume’s work taken as a whole is that the objects of his science, human beings, are conceived as flesh and blood creatures who live and act in a natural world. However, Hume’s appeal to the natural world must be correctly understood: his naturalism places human beings within a practical dimension, considering them as agents “in the common course of the world” where they can be observed “in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures” (T Intro 10; SBN xix). Within this practical context, human beings reveal themselves as “reasonable” beings, but also as “sociable” beings as well as “active” beings (EHU 1.6; SBN 8). Therefore, from the way Hume sets the issue, human beings are not reducible only to their minds, nor are they only bodies whose functions can be explained biologically; they are first and foremost social creatures whose conduct is appropriately illustrated by looking at the interactions they have with each other. Hume’s conclusions on free will remain unclear unless one keeps this background in mind.

2. Uniform Perceptions

Let us see in detail how Hume proceeds. In the *Treatise*, Hume introduces his reasoning about free will as part of a broader representation of the sentiments and passions that characterise human nature. He starts from the relation of the will with direct passions. These, in Hume’s taxonomy, arise immediately from good and evil, pleasure and pain; passions such as desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear are of this type. As in the case of the passions, the will, for him, is only an impression of which we become aware the moment we express it: “[B]y the will, I mean nothing but *the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind*” (T 2.3.1.2; SBN 399). If it is permissible to speak of the will, for Hume, this is all we can say about it: we have knowledge only of perceptions, which in turn are distinguished into impressions and ideas; therefore, for the empiricist Hume the will, manifesting itself as an impression, is to all intents and purposes

nothing more than an impression, which cannot be further defined. It is from this observation that Hume proceeds to account for the problem of the relationship between freedom and necessity and, with it, the problem of free will.²

Hume sets the question through a parallel between the necessity existing among external bodies and that which exists in the mind. Notice that for him, in both cases, any consideration we can make concerns those perceptions of which the will also consists. For both matter and the human mind, we cannot go beyond the observation that we always and only deal with perceptions, never with things in themselves: “[I]n no single instance the ultimate connexion of any object is discoverable, either by our senses or reason, and [...] we can never penetrate so far into the essence and construction of bodies, as to perceive the principle, on which their mutual influence depends” (T 2.3.1.4; SBN 400). Hume is here showing the sceptical aspect of his philosophical perspective. Since the ultimate essence of things and the principles that determine the connection between things are inevitably obscure to us, Hume wonders where our idea of necessity could possibly come from. In his view, it is the result of the “constant union” we find among objects—that is, among the perceptions we have of them—that leads our mind to infer, following “an uniform and regular conjunction” (T 2.3.1.4; SBN 400), that particular effects will always necessarily follow from particular causes. Therefore, if it makes sense to speak of necessity, it is nothing more than the result of the concurrence of these two elements: a constant conjunction of perceptions and an inference of the mind. It is not a question of ascertaining the existence of a principle of connection between objects—given Hume’s *a posteriori* approach, nothing of the sort can be known—but of accounting for an operation of the mind that projects necessity onto things whenever it faces cases of constant union between our perceptions.

Hume’s point is that this type of reasoning applies to the judgements we make about both the external world and human conduct: in either case, the process of ascribing necessity is the same. For him, human conduct expresses the same regularities of external bodies, that is, human conduct, too, involves a constant union of causes (people’s motives) and effects (people’s actions): “Whether we consider mankind according to the differences of sexes, ages, governments, conditions, or methods of education; the same uniformity and regular operation of natural principles are discernible. Like causes still produce like effects; in the same manner as in the mutual action of the elements and powers of nature” (T 2.3.1.5; SBN 401). In a famous passage in the first *Enquiry*, Hume declares that human conduct—as directly observed and as witnessed in history—exhibits homogeneity, which applies as much to individuals as to society as a whole. It is worth quoting it at length:

It is universally acknowledged, that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations. The same motives always produce the same actions: The same events follow from the same causes. Ambition, avarice, self-love, vanity, friendship, generosity, public spirit; these passions, mixed in various degrees, and

² Here I confine myself to examining the will in so far as it is relevant to the question of free will. For a more specific discussion, and criticism, of the notion of the will in Hume, see Connolly 1987; Keutner 1987; Stalley 1986. For a reconstruction of the scholarly debate on Hume’s notion of free will, see Millican 2011.

distributed through society, have been, from the beginning of the world, and still are, the source of all the actions and enterprizes, which have ever been observed among mankind. Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the Greeks and Romans? Study well the temper and actions of the French and English: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations, which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by shewing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials, from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour (EHU 8.7; SBN 83).

This homogeneity enables us to explain why people acted in given ways and to make predictions about future conduct. Human actions may show inconstancy and uncertainty now and then; however, when this happens, there must necessarily be a cause unknown to us which, if we were aware of it, would account for the unusual behaviour. The mechanism that allows us to judge the actions of human beings is always the same:

When any phaenomena are constantly and invariably conjoin'd together, they acquire such a connexion in the imagination, that it passes from one to the other, without any doubt or hesitation. But below this there are many inferior degrees of evidence and probability, nor does one single contrariety of experiment entirely destroy all our reasoning. The mind ballances the contrary experiments, and deducting the inferior from the superior, proceeds with that degree of assurance or evidence, which remains (T 2.3.1.12; SBN 403).

There is a whole series of behaviours that seem to confirm the unpredictability of human conduct but which, on the contrary, are explained and justified because one cannot help but look at people's demeanour as causally determined. That is the case with spontaneous actions or those done in haste or in an unpremeditated manner. Why do we admit them, and why do we not condemn those who do them? Precisely "because a hasty temper, tho' a constant cause in the mind, operates only by intervals, and infects not the whole character" (T 2.3.2.7; SBN 412). Or, Hume continues, take the case of repentance: we accept it when it corresponds to a change in the character of the one who is repenting. A criminal is such when his conduct is moved by "criminal passions or principles in the mind" (T 2.3.2.7; SBN 412; see EHU 8.28-30; SBN 97-99). If these criminal principles are removed, our judgement of him changes. So, what matters to Hume when it comes to describing human behaviour is the uniformity of human conduct, by which we can identify, through the observation of human actions, the principles of human nature as manifested in individual characters. Consistent actions allow us to trace the motives behind them; these motives, in turn, function as an interpretative lens through which to look at actions and explain their meaning:

Hence likewise the benefit of that experience, acquired by long life and a variety of business and company, in order to instruct us in the principles of human nature, and regulate our future conduct, as well as speculation. By means of this guide, we mount up to the knowledge of men's inclinations and motives, from

their actions, expressions, and even gestures; and again, descend to the interpretation of their actions from our knowledge of their motives and inclinations. The general observations, treasured up by a course of experience, give us the clue of human nature, and teach us to unravel all its intricacies (EHU 8.9; SBN 84-5).

Human beings may well behave in ways that are not always predictable, but this is not to deny that their conduct is regulated in terms of cause and effect:

[W]e know, in general, that the characters of men are, to a certain degree, inconstant and irregular. This is, in a manner, the constant character of human nature; though it be applicable, in a more particular manner, to some persons who have no fixed rule for their conduct, but proceed in a continued course of caprice and inconstancy. The internal principles and motives may operate in a uniform manner, notwithstanding these seeming irregularities; in the same manner as the winds, rain, clouds, and other variations of the weather are supposed to be governed by steady principles; though not easily discoverable by human sagacity and enquiry (EHU 8.15; SBN 88).

We can admit exceptions in individual behaviour because we reason in terms of uniformity. These exceptions are the result of “conceal’d” causes that are “contrary” (T 2.3.1.12; SBN 404) to the normal behaviour we expect of individuals. And yet, they are still causes that produce effects which can only be explained if we admit the doctrine of necessity: “From the observation of several parallel instances, philosophers form a maxim that the connexion between all causes and effects is equally necessary, and that its seeming uncertainty in some instances proceeds from the secret opposition of contrary causes” (EHU 8.13; SBN 87).

As in the case of external bodies, for human conduct, too, the constant union of causes and effects—i.e., motives and actions—leads the human mind to infer the existence of one from the other. Again, it is the human mind that organises experience according to a causal arrangement conceived as necessary, a necessity that, for external bodies as well as for human things, has no other reason for being than the ascertainment of regularities and hence the inference that is drawn from them by the mind. It is thereby that “the force of *moral evidence*” can be affirmed, which “is nothing but a conclusion concerning the actions of men, deriv’d from the consideration of their motives, temper and situation” (T 2.3.1.15; SBN 404). A uniformly structural experience of the world enables human beings to move with confidence in it and relate to one another in the certainty that they can predict people’s actions according to repeatedly observed relationships: “A prince, who imposes a tax upon his subjects, expects their compliance. A general, who conducts an army, makes account of a certain degree of courage. A merchant looks for fidelity and skill in his factor or supercargo. A man, who gives orders for his dinner, doubts not of the obedience of his servants” (T 2.3.1.15; SBN 405). Hume’s explanation of causal necessity reveals itself most clearly in a practical context of this kind, where social creatures such as humans regulate their actions on the basis of what others do. Causal necessity makes it possible to manage how human beings interact with each other thanks to the fact that they, given their natural constitution, cannot but infer that specific actions will follow from specific behaviours because the constant experience of particular behavioural dynamics confirms this.

3. A Feeling of Freedom

It is worth insisting that when Hume speaks of necessity, he is not expressing a judgement about things *per se*, since it is here that the key to understanding what Hume means by free will lies. To the extent that it is correct to claim that Hume is a determinist,³ one must keep in mind that his determinism must be seen in the light of the mental mechanisms whereby human beings order experience according to causal necessity. Humean determinism is not a statement regarding discernible relations between things in themselves: “[T]he *necessary connexion* is not discover’d by a conclusion of the understanding, but is merely a perception of the mind” (T 2.3.1.16; SBN 405-406). Hume reiterates this in the first *Enquiry*, as well, when he defines the notion of necessity by comparing it to that of cause. Hume recalls that the latter can be defined in two ways, either by referring to the constant conjunction between objects or to the inference that “the mind” or “the thought” establishes between one object and another (see T 1.3.14.31; SBN 170; EHU 7.29; SBN 76-77). Necessity, too, can be understood in these two senses, either by conceiving two objects as constantly conjoined together or by looking at “the inference of the understanding from one object to another”, and Hume specifies that these two senses, “indeed, are at bottom the same” (EHU 8.27; SBN 97). That is why he confidently concludes that natural evidence and moral evidence are the same in nature: “And, indeed, when we consider how aptly *natural* and *moral* evidence cement together, and form only one chain of argument betwixt them, we shall make no scruple to allow, that they are of the same nature, and deriv’d from the same principles” (T 2.3.1.17; SBN 406). In both cases, these are ways of structuring human experience from a content that is always the same: perceptions. And in both cases, it is not a question of grasping the ultimate structure of the world but of accounting for how sentiment-driven creatures such as human beings bring coherence to their experience, give meaning to their existence in common, and thus survive.⁴

That being so, Hume embraces a *compatibilist* solution, i.e., he believes that human beings can be said to be free even if determinism is true.⁵ At first glance, it may seem that reconciling human freedom and determinism is a contradiction in terms; indeed, much of the debate on free will revolves around this very theoretical juncture, with “incompatibilists” arguing that the truth of determinism *ipso facto* denies that human beings can be said to be free. However, if the specific way in which Hume understands necessity applies, this is not the case. In fact, “[t]he necessity of any action, whether of matter or of the mind, is not properly a quality in the agent, but in any thinking or intelligent being, who may consider the action, and consists in the determination of his thought to infer its existence from some preceding objects” (T 2.3.2.2; SBN 408). Hume is thinking of a necessity thus defined, which allows us to account for people’s actions by tracing them back to their characters. If we could not do this, we would not evaluate

³ “It is universally allowed that nothing exists without a cause of its existence, and that chance, when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power which has anywhere a being in nature” (EHU 8.23; SBN 95).

⁴ In this regard, his determinism differs from that of Thomas Hobbes, who instead conceives determinism as concerning things in themselves. See Chappell 1999.

⁵ For a debate on Hume’s compatibilism, compare Beebe & Mele 2002; Harris 2005: Chpt. 3; 2012; Millican 2010; Penelhum 2000; Pitson 2016; Russell 2021a.

anyone's actions since we can only identify individuals as distinguished by their specific characters. If necessity fails, it is no longer possible to understand what it means for human beings to be free; if necessity is absent, so are causes, and human action without causes corresponds to chance. But this, Hume observes, goes against our experience of human action, which is always causally explicable. So, to be free does not consist in acting according to what Hume calls "liberty of *indifference*"—a liberty that is defined regardless of any causal determination—but in acting without being forced or prevented; that is, in Hume's terminology, in acting according to "liberty of *spontaneity*" (T 2.3.2.1; SBN 407; the typo is in the Humean text).

Hume can hence offer a definition of "liberty" as "*a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we chuse to remain at rest, we may; if we chuse to move, we also may" (EHU 8.23; SBN 95).⁶ Although Hume speaks of a "power" on our part to act as we please, this power must nonetheless be comprehended in line with a freedom understood as spontaneity. It so happens that human beings, when they perform any action, do not feel that it is the result of any necessity but experience it as depending on nothing, that is, "there is a *false sensation or experience* even of liberty of indifference; which is regarded as an argument for its real existence" (T 2.3.2.2; SBN 408). The point, Hume continues, is that we feel that our actions, unless explicitly guided by some external force, are the fruit of our will. Consequently, we also feel that our will is not compelled by anything. Nevertheless, given the universe of perceptions with which human beings deal, the will itself—i.e., for Hume, the feeling we have of it—is nothing more than a perception. Although this is the sensation we experience in the first person, yet, from a third-person point of view, our actions can always be explained by tracing them back to previous motives or circumstances: "We may imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves; but a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, were he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the most secret springs of our complexion and disposition" (T 2.3.2.2; SBN 408-9; see EHU 8.22 fn 1; SBN 94). If, then, we can be said to be free because we have the power to act or not to act, this power, for Hume, corresponds to our subjective feeling of possessing a will that does not depend on anything. Free will is nothing more than our sensation of being free; yet, this subjective "posture of the mind"—to refer to the title of a book by a renowned Humean, Annette Baier (Baier 1985)—can be explained, and always is, in terms of an observable cause—a motive of ours—which has given rise to our action. To affirm the existence of a will devoid of any causal determination goes beyond what we can claim about ourselves and the external world; as we have seen, for Hume, the essence of things is precluded from us, so it is simply nonsensical to claim both that the will is es-

⁶ The paragraph continues as follows: "Now this hypothetical liberty is universally allowed to belong to every one, who is not a prisoner and in chains. Here then is no subject of dispute". Despite Hume's speaking here of a "hypothetical liberty" and not of liberty as spontaneity, as he did in the *Treatise*, his project of defending a notion of freedom understood as spontaneity, fully reconcilable with necessity, remains unchanged in the two works. See Bricke 1996: 235-36; 2008: 207-209; Garrett 1997: 119-21; 2015: 198; Penelhum 2000: 161; Pitson 2006: 223; 2016: 381-82; Russell 1995: 12-13; 2015: 231-32; Stroud 1977: 145; Wright 2009: 170.

entially free and that it is essentially determinate, if by “determinate” we mean a sense of necessity beyond our perceptions.

The concern of those who claim that, if everything is determined, then we can never be said to be truly free, does not hold true for Hume. That is because, for him, the level of analysis from which such an assertion is made proves misplaced. That kind of reasoning has a semblance of meaning only within a philosophical context in which causal necessity is understood as something that concerns the essence of things. But for the philosopher, like Hume, who has embraced “true philosophy” (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 222) and understood that “philosophical decisions are nothing but reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” (EHU 12.25; SBN 162), conceiving of causal necessity in this way is meaningless:

To reconcile the indifference and contingency of human actions with prescience; or to defend absolute decrees, and yet free the Deity from being the author of sin, has been found hitherto to exceed all the power of philosophy. Happy, if she be thence sensible of her temerity, when she pries into these sublime mysteries; and leaving a scene so full of obscurities and perplexities, return, with suitable modesty, to her true and proper province, the examination of common life; where she will find difficulties enough to employ her enquiries, without launching into so boundless an ocean of doubt, uncertainty, and contradiction! (EHU 8.36; SBN 103).

The true scientists of human nature, those who are able to correctly illustrate how human nature works, are for Hume not the metaphysicians but the political and moral philosophers, that is, those who carefully observe human beings in action in order to derive the general principles of their conduct: “These records of wars, intrigues, factions, and revolutions, are so many collections of experiments, by which the politician or moral philosopher fixes the principles of his science; in the same manner as the physician or natural philosopher becomes acquainted with the nature of plants, minerals, and other external objects, by the experiments, which he forms concerning them” (EHU 8.7; SBN 83-84). It is only within areas such as “history [...] politics [...] morals [and] criticism” (EHU 8.18; SBN 90) that the dialectics between free will and necessity can be correctly understood.

4. Being Responsible

So, how does Hume harmonise determinism with free will in such a context? On the one hand, he accepts the definition of liberty of spontaneity and rejects that of liberty of indifference. On the other hand, the determinism that Hume admits never goes back as far as grasping the necessary links between things in themselves. Hume’s determinism stops at the level of perceptions and involves how humans react to constant events; the metaphysical arguments about the reconcilability of free will with the truth of determinism, which occupy so much of the debate on the subject, do not apply to him because they are formulated on a level on which he does not, and does not wish to, place himself. Hume is interested in accounting for the ways in which human beings make sense of both their experience of the world and the way they relate to each other, and human beings happen to function by virtue of causally organised reasoning as much in the physical world as in the moral world. Given all this, freedom of the will—defined in the terms admitted by an understanding of liberty of spontaneity—is

therefore admissible. Indeed, Hume's real problem turns out to be not so much that of reconciling determinism and free will as that of accounting for how human beings can exercise liberty of spontaneity given the passions and emotions that characterise human nature and given certain human practices that depend on this sentimentally marked nature of theirs. In other words, Hume reverses the order in which we generally proceed when addressing the question of free will: he takes as established certain human practices which are confirmed by our experience of human conduct and only then does he turn back to address the issues of human liberty, free will, and determinism.

These practices provide the normative criteria for understanding in what sense human beings can be said to be free. Of course, if human nature were different—that is, if it revealed different sentimental regularities from those we experience and manifested itself through different practices—then perhaps things would also be different with regard to what we can say about free will. But, given how we have experienced human nature so far, this is not the case, and we are just as ready to regard as a liar one who, after a long journey, tells us that he has met human beings with passions totally different from ours, as we are to discard the account of a historian who ascribes to past peoples a human nature irreconcilable with that known to us:

Should a traveller, returning from a far country, bring us an account of men, wholly different from any, with whom we were ever acquainted; men, who were entirely divested of avarice, ambition, or revenge; who knew no pleasure but friendship, generosity, and public spirit; we should immediately, from these circumstances, detect the falsehood, and prove him a liar, with the same certainty as if he had stuffed his narration with stories of centaurs and dragons, miracles and prodigies. And if we would explode any forgery in history, we cannot make use of a more convincing argument, than to prove, that the actions, ascribed to any person, are directly contrary to the course of nature, and that no human motives, in such circumstances, could ever induce him to such a conduct (EHU 8.8; SBN 84).

At the same time, human conduct and, with it, the question of free will, can only be fully made sense of by looking at people's actions as interrelated: "The mutual dependence of men is so great in all societies that scarce any human action is entirely complete in itself, or is performed without some reference to the actions of others, which are requisite to make it answer fully the intention of the agent" (EHU 8.17; SBN 89). This theoretical framework is reminiscent of what would be argued two centuries later by Peter Strawson, who based the discussion of the relationship between determinism and free will on the observation that people relate to each other by virtue of certain "reactive attitudes", such as resentment and attribution of responsibility, which are embedded in human nature, defining its perimeter of meaning. These reactive attitudes are not affected by the truth of a causal necessity that makes all human actions determined (Strawson 1962).⁷ Hume's discussion of free will also pivots on the notion of responsibility. Hume observes that the real problem of causal necessity, when applied to human affairs, turns out to be fundamentally both moral and religious

⁷ Paul Russell systematically juxtaposes Hume and Peter Strawson on free will. See Russell 1995, 2017, 2021a, 2021b.

in nature. If the doctrine of necessity were true, it is often complained, then human responsibility would disappear, and, with it, one of the pillars of ethics and religion; consequently, the doctrine of necessity must necessarily be false. This reasoning takes for granted what has yet to be proved—that we enjoy a freedom to act otherwise that does not depend on any external causal necessity—and does so because of a worry which, although understandable, does not by itself shed any light on how things actually are: “When any opinion leads us into absurdities, ’tis certainly false; but ’tis not certain any opinion is false, because ’tis of dangerous consequence” (T 2.3.2.3; SBN 409). On the contrary, Hume argues that only the presence of a causal necessity between our motives and actions explains what we actually mean when we say that someone is responsible for something, thus providing the strongest guarantee for morality and religion. The very notions of merit and demerit require the principle of necessity to apply; how is it possible to assess whether the actions that someone performs are to their credit or detriment if we cannot trace them back to their character?

The constant and universal object of hatred or anger is a person or creature endow’d with thought and consciousness; and when any criminal or injurious actions excite that passion, ’tis only by their relation to the person or connexion with him. But according to the doctrine of liberty or chance, this connexion is reduc’d to nothing, nor are men more accountable for those actions, which are design’d and premeditated, than for such as are the most casual and accidental (T 2.3.2.6; SBN 411).

Therefore, for us to understand merit and demerit, we must necessarily observe human conduct as structured according to a causal dynamic. To deny this would be to adopt an interpretative lens that would eventually lose sight of its object: people as they are in “common life” and, with them, their characters and conduct. For this reason, according to Hume, even those who deny necessity cannot help but resort to it, whether they like it or not: “But so inconsistent are men with themselves, that tho’ they often assert, that necessity utterly destroys all merit and demerit either towards mankind or superior powers, yet they continue still to reason upon these very principles of necessity in all their judgments concerning this matter” (T 2.3.2.7; SBN 411-12). In this sense, on closer inspection the question of free will turns out to be a problem of terminology only (see EHU 8.1; SBN 80-81).

Note how the doctrine of necessity also plays into Hume’s hands in order to criticise religious conceptions of morality. If, in fact, one wants to establish a link between morality and religion and conceives the divinity as the supreme legislator, its laws will be ineffective, and no obedience will be due to them without a necessary connection between cause and effect in human actions. Yet, if we grant that everything is determined according to a continuous chain of causes and effects and we place the divinity at the origin according to the doctrine whereby “[t]he ultimate Author of all our volitions is the Creator of the world” (EHU 8.32; SBN 99), then we must also admit that the divinity is responsible for everything human beings do. If this is the case, then “[h]uman actions [...] either can have no moral turpitude at all, as proceeding from so good a cause; or if they have any turpitude, they must involve our Creator in the same guilt, while he is acknowledged to be their ultimate cause and author” (EHU

8.32; SBN 100). That, of course, creates serious problems for religious moralists and divines:

[I]f human actions can be traced up, by a necessary chain, to the Deity, they can never be criminal; on account of the infinite perfection of that Being from whom they are derived, and who can intend nothing but what is altogether good and laudable. Or [...] if they be criminal, we must retract the attribute of perfection, which we ascribe to the Deity, and must acknowledge him to be the ultimate author of guilt and moral turpitude in all his creatures (EHU 8.33; SBN 100-101).

This dead-end does not affect Hume, who believes in necessity but not in the divine origin of the world.⁸ His way of interpreting necessity in human affairs is sufficient to support the convictions that moral beauty and ugliness “are founded in the natural sentiments of the human mind” (EHU 8.35; SBN 103) and that these can be explained within the context of “common life” in which the abstract reasoning of both metaphysical and religious thinkers—but more generally “any philosophical theory or speculation whatsoever” (EHU 8.35; SBN 103)—fail to catch on:

These enlarged views may, for a moment, please the imagination of a speculative man, who is placed in ease and security; but neither can they dwell with constancy on his mind, even though undisturbed by the emotions of pain or passion; much less can they maintain their ground, when attacked by such powerful antagonists. The affections take a narrower and more natural survey of their object; and by an economy, more suitable to the infirmity of human minds, regard alone the beings around us, and are actuated by such events as appear good or ill to the private system (EHU 8.34; SBN 101-2).

5. Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have discussed Hume’s reasoning on free will as he presents it in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. I have argued that his reflections cannot be understood without taking into account his project of elaborating a science of human nature. Hume’s compatibilist solution acquires meaning in the light of a sentimentally understood human nature that fully reveals itself within the perspective of “common life”, in which human beings are conceived as reasonable, social, and active creatures. I have observed that, for Hume, basing the discourse on free will on metaphysical considerations about the truth or falsity of determinism is misplaced. Within Hume’s empiricist, naturalistic, and sceptical approach, we deal only with perceptions and never with things themselves. Given the way human nature works, experience is structured in a causal order which allows us to organise both the way we experience the world and our existence in relation to that of others; in turn, the question of free will depends on human practices, such as the attribution of responsibility, which follow a causal order and are not affected by the philosophers’ metaphysical doubts about the loss of responsibility if determinism were true. On his part, Hume traces respon-

⁸ According to Russell, the insurmountable problems Hume finds for religion in his discussion of free will are further evidence of the underlying irreligiousness of Hume’s overall philosophical project. See Russell 2021a, 2021b: essays 11-13. Hume’s irreligion is discussed at length in Russell 2008.

sibility back to the expression of certain feelings for or against particular characters; people become the object of judgements of responsibility in so far as, through their actions, they show that they possess characters of a certain kind. Characters reflect a whole series of dispositions and traits, empirically verifiable and causally explainable, acquired in the course of time, whereby people can be identified. In such a context, free will may represent a problem mainly on a practical level once moral or religious issues come into play.

And indeed, free will becomes a problem only for those who fear that the truth of determinism deprives human beings of such a morally fundamental practice as the attribution of responsibility—a concern voiced by the so-called “libertarians”. According to them, compatibilist solutions such as Hume’s—but also Peter Strawson’s appeal to “reactive attitudes”—fail to guarantee what really matters, namely, that people’s actions truly derive from their will and not external factors. However, we have seen that, for Hume, such a concern reveals a fundamental confusion. Our feeling free does not justify the belief that our will is not subject to any causal dependence. From what we can observe, it would seem instead that our will consists precisely of those contingent attributes and qualities which many libertarians reject as not expressing our deepest practical identity as autonomous agents (see Campbell 1951). On closer inspection, their worry corresponds to the need to think of ourselves as “self-made selves” (Russell 1995, 130),⁹ i.e., as individuals who are the sole authors of their own choices, expressing “self-determination” (Strawson 1994), or “agent causation” (O’Connor 1995). This worry, for Hume, finds expression only from within our moral practices and does not bring into play any metaphysical reflection on the status of free will. The only legitimate expression of free will is in terms of freedom as spontaneity, not freedom as self-determination and even less freedom as chance.

The libertarian stance reveals a definite moral conviction according to which the perimeter of what is ethically relevant stops where voluntary agency ends. Here again, Hume’s position is more nuanced: what is ethically relevant goes beyond intentional action, referring to a “constitutive luck” (Williams 1981; see Russell 1995: Chpt. 9) that occupies a primary role in determining both what we are and what we can be held responsible for. Although one may continue to insist that the sphere of ethics must enjoy a status of its own that is prior to moral luck and impervious to it (see Nagel 1979), for Hume, this is not enough to make it so. On the contrary, it seems that what can be the object of praise or blame—and, with it, of other fundamental ethical concepts, among which that of responsibility—is recognisable only *a posteriori* and therefore is irremediably exposed to the influence of chance. (Think, in this sense, of the lack of a precise boundary between virtues and talents, on the one hand, and vices and defects, on the other, which Hume speaks of in T 3.3.4-5 and *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, App 4.) By linking ethics to voluntariness, libertarians end up conceiving of responsibility in all-or-nothing terms: either we are fully responsible for what we committed, i.e., for what we freely wanted to do, or we cannot say that we caused a given outcome for which we can be either praised or blamed. However, if one takes moral luck seriously, it no longer seems possible to describe responsibility as a phenomenon that either exists or does not exist but as something that involves degrees, whereby one can be more

⁹ In turn, Russell takes this expression from Dennett 1984, Chpt. 4.

or less responsible depending on the circumstances. An approach like Hume's acknowledges this since it understands responsibility as springing from the character of the agents, offering an explanation that does not need to refer to metaphysical or religious presuppositions. Also, this approach does justice to the fact that ethics represents an aspect of human nature, and that human nature can unfold in many ways depending on many different factors, not all necessarily under our control. People are regarded as more or less responsible on the basis of the development of their character, which in turn is subject to other influences, such as circumstances and upbringing.¹⁰

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