

‘Humeanism’

ABSTRACT: *In metaphysics, the adjective ‘Humean’ is used to describe positions that deny the existence of any necessary connection or causal influence in concrete reality. This usage has been significantly reinforced by David Lewis’s employment of ‘Humean’ in the phrase ‘Humean supervenience’. It is, however, not at all clear that this usage is appropriate. Lewis himself raised a doubt about it.*

KEYWORDS: metaphysics, ontology, history of philosophy, Scottish philosophy, history of analytic philosophy, epistemology, skepticism

I.

Many philosophers suppose that David Hume holds a ‘regularity’ theory of causation according to which—to put it in plain English—nothing ever really causally influences anything else in any way at all. The world is highly regular in its behavior, according to this theory; occurrences of one particular kind regularly and indeed invariably follow occurrences of another particular kind. But nothing that happens ever actually influences what happens next in any way. Nothing ever actually brings anything else about.

On this view Hume’s claim about causation is not simply that we can never form any sort of empirically respectable—genuinely empirically contentful or meaningful—conception of causal power or causal influence; although he is certainly saying at least this. He’s not allowing that there might possibly be such a thing as causal influence while stressing that we can’t clearly conceive what such influence might involve. He’s saying that there is as a matter of certain metaphysical fact no real causal influence of anything on anything—ever. He’s endorsing what one might call the ‘pure’ or ‘outright ontological’ regularity view of causation.

Saul Kripke expresses this view of Hume well when he writes that ‘If Hume is right . . ., even if God were to look at [two causally related] events, he would discern nothing relating them other than that one succeeds the other’ (1982: 67). A. J. Ayer writes that on the Humean view ‘in nature one thing just happens after another’ (Ayer 1973: 183). Woolhouse says that ‘Hume’s conclusion [is] that so far as the external objects which are causes and effects are concerned there is only constant conjunction’; so far as the ‘operations of natural bodies’ are concerned, ‘regularity and constant conjunction are all that exist’ (1988: 149–50). According to O’Hear, Humeans hold that there is not ‘any more to causality than “regularity of succession”’ (1985: 60). Putnam speaks of the ‘Humean definition of *total* cause—A is the (total) cause of B if and only if an A-type event is always followed in time

References to Hume’s *Treatise* give the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch edition page reference followed by the Norton and Norton edition paragraph reference, e.g., ‘224/1.4.3.10’. References to Hume’s first *Enquiry* give the Selby-Bigge and Nidditch page reference followed by the Beauchamp paragraph reference, e.g., ‘77/7.29’.

by a *B-type* event’ (1981: 214). Jackson invites us to ‘consider . . . the possible world where every particular fact is as it is in our world, but there are no causes or effects at all. Every regular conjunction is an accidental one, not a causal one. Call it, for obvious reasons, the Hume world’ (1977: 5).

Kripke’s formulation of the once standard view of Hume is clear and accurate—wholly sufficient. I’ve added some more quotations because an anonymous reviewer for *Mind* judged my initial characterization of the once standard view of Hume to be ‘ridiculous’; ‘crude’, ‘unworthy’, ‘a parody’. These words fit the standard attribution of the pure regularity view to Hume well, but they don’t fit my description of the attribution. The view once almost universally attributed to Hume is in everyday English, in which a spade is a spade, the view that there is as a matter of certain metaphysical fact no such thing as causal influence. It’s not the thoroughly respectable (if still questionable) epistemological view that we can know nothing more of cause than regular succession. It’s not the far more plausible view that regular succession is all we can legitimately mean by the word ‘cause’ in philosophy if we endorse a certain strict empiricist theory of meaning.

Fortunately, the once standard view of Hume has lost a lot of ground in the past thirty years.¹ This is a good thing, if only because the standard view is flatly inconsistent with the fact that Hume—whatever else he is or is not—is a skeptic. He’s a committed albeit ‘moderate’ (224/1.4.3.10) skeptic who rejects all claims to certain knowledge of the ultimate or intrinsic contingent nature of reality—except in the case of his own immediate experiences, which are, as he says, ‘perfectly known’ (366/2.2.6.2). It follows that it cannot be right to think that Hume claims to know that nothing ever actually influences anything else in any way at all.

This is already enough to show that the old view is false. We don’t need to examine the details of Hume’s discussion of causation. When we do, and proceed with care, we find that Hume as a ‘moderate’ skeptic never questions the idea that there is genuine causal influence. He takes it for granted and merely insists on the sense in which we can never hope to form any empirically respectable grasp of its intrinsic nature. And yet the adjective ‘Humean’ is still widely used as a shorthand term for the pure ontological regularity view.

2.

This use was powerfully reinforced by a well-known passage in David Lewis’s introduction to the second volume of his *Philosophical Papers*:

Humean supervenience is named in honor of the greater denier of necessary connections. It is the doctrine that all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another. (1986: ix).

¹ Some of those who used to hold the standard view and teach it have repressed the fact that the above quotations are accurate representations of the old consensus. Kahneman notes that ‘once you adopt a new view . . ., you immediately lose much of your ability to recall what you used to believe before your mind changed’ (2011, 202).

In another place Lewis writes as follows:

Humean Supervenience . . . says that in a world like ours, the fundamental relations are exactly the spatiotemporal relations: distance relations, both spacelike and timelike, and perhaps also occupancy relations between point-sized things and spacetime points. And it says that the fundamental properties are local qualities: perfectly natural intrinsic properties of points, or of point-sized occupants of points. Therefore it says that all else supervenes on the spatiotemporal arrangement of local qualities throughout all of history, past and present and future. (Lewis 1994: 225–6)

Since quite a number of people trace their use of ‘Humean’ back to Lewis, it may be helpful to report an exchange that took place in June 1997.

Earlier that year I had sent Lewis a paper (Strawson 2000) that argues that Hume is not a pure regularity theorist and is in effect a realist about causal influence—a suitably nondogmatic ‘sceptical realist’, in John Wright’s terms (Wright 1983). After dealing with some other business, I asked Lewis whether he agreed with the thesis of the paper. Lewis replied by fax the same day (June 23; quoted by kind permission of Stephanie Lewis):

Do I believe you? No; and I don’t disbelieve you either. You make an impressive case, but I take it you and your allies have not yet convinced the entire learned world. I don’t know what can be said by way of rejoinder. So long as the experts are divided, I am not entitled to an opinion. I am not enough of an historian to judge the question for myself.

As a neutral bystander, I now have an urgent practical problem. Whether or not he is a fictitious character, the Hume of popular (mis?)understanding remains a figure of much interest to me. I take him to be right about some important things. I consider him vastly more interesting than your Hume. I want to carry on using him as a point of reference in discussing various questions.

So I need an adjective applying to things as they are according to this perhaps-fictitious Hume. Unless your view of the historical Hume gets knocked down decisively, ‘Humean’ is an unsuitable word—to say the least. What’s the replacement? “‘Humean’” with inverted commas and a footnote?

The view in question hasn’t been knocked down decisively. Don Garrett has recently suggested that it is as well supported by Hume’s text as the old ‘pure’ regularity view (Garrett 2009; for some older statements of various aspects of the skeptical realist view see Wright 1983; Broughton 1987; Craig 1987; and Strawson 1989). Many now agree that Hume’s fundamental point about causation is epistemological-cum-semantical, not ontological-metaphysical. His claim is that

we can't ever observe anything more than constant conjunction when it comes to whatever it is that is the reason why the world is regular in its operations, and so we can't form any clear and distinct or empirically legitimate or philosophically respectable concept of causation as something more than constant conjunction. The phenomenon of constant conjunction is ubiquitous. The trouble is precisely that, in Hume's words, 'we cannot penetrate into *the reason* of the conjunction' (93/1.3.6.15; my emphasis). 'The scenes of the universe are continually shifting', he says, 'and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession; but *the power or force, which actuates the whole machine*, is entirely concealed from us, and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of body' (63-4/7.8; my emphasis).

The terminological conclusion seems plain. Those who wish to use terms accurately should stop using the word 'Humean' in the old unqualified way. Will this happen? Many people hate changing their ways. They hate it even more when they're told that they should. They usually say that it doesn't matter that a name is not appropriate or accurate.

Lewis, for one, disagrees. Those who wish to follow Lewis should stop using 'Humean' in the old way. The point holds independently of the fact that many now think that Hume is at bottom a realist about causal influence in a nondogmatic way that is entirely compatible with his moderate skepticism (for a good recent statement see, e.g., Kail 2007 and also Wright 2009). The point holds even if you agree with Lewis (as I hope you do not) that 'the Hume of popular (mis?)understanding' is 'vastly more interesting' than the skeptical realist Hume.

Perhaps we could use lowercase 'humean' rather than 'Humean'—a proposal made by Gideon Rosen (in correspondence). That would be a start, so long as the first use of 'humean' in any piece of work was accompanied by an explanatory footnote of the kind proposed by Lewis. But I don't think that Lewis would think it enough, if his view were consistently and grossly misrepresented, to have the capital letter 'L' of his surname replaced by lowercase 'l'; a point put to me by Edward Craig. How would you feel if it happened to you? You don't have to be overly self-concerned to think that it would be a pity.

Perhaps it's time to try something else. In the case of the supervenience thesis, we can replace 'Humean' by 'Lewisian.' The doctrine that 'all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact' takes on a deeply different and far more interesting shine when coupled with a 'four-dimensionalist' or 'block universe' conception of reality. But this conception of reality, although part and parcel of Lewisian supervenience, is no part of anything Humean.²

Might we more generally replace 'Humean' everywhere by 'Brownian', in recognition of Thomas Brown? Brown does have a claim to be the first true regularity theorist (see, e.g., Kemp Smith 1941: 91n; Strawson 1989: 7; Wright 2005; Dixon 2010: 11-16; Psillos 2011), but it's not clear that the claim is correct. Brown does write that

² On the question of what a nonregularity conception of cause might look like given a four-dimensionalist view, see Strawson (2014: 5-6).

the invariableness of antecedence and consequence, which is represented as only the *sign* of causation, is itself the *only essential circumstance* of causation

and that

cause . . . simply and truly is only another name for the immediate invariable antecedent of an event'. (1818: xii–xiii, 196–7)

At crucial points, however, he qualifies such claims with remarks to the effect that this is all causation can be to us—allowing that there may be something more. He's concerned with the notion of 'a cause, in the fullest definition which it philosophically admits' (1818: 17), and his awareness in 1818 of the limitations of definitions, when it comes to attempts to capture the nature of concretely existing phenomena, is the same as Hume's in 1739 and 1748. His criterion of philosophical admissibility is also the same as Hume's where concretely existing phenomena are concerned. It's a matter of clarity and distinctness of content of the sort that can in his view be conferred only by proper empirical grounding in experience. There's no reason to suppose that Brown thinks that reality doesn't and can't extend further than properly empirically grounded human conception. There's no more reason to think this of Brown than of Hume, who remarked in 1740, in a clarificatory addition to Book 1 of the *Treatise*, that

as long as we confine our speculations to *the appearances* of objects to our senses, without entering into disquisitions concerning their real nature and operations, we are safe from all difficulties, and can never be embarrass'd by any question. If we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the senses, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty. (638–9/1.2.5.26)

3.

It's not hard to see how the mistaken view of Hume arose. At one point in the *Treatise* Hume writes that

we may define a CAUSE to be 'An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in like relations of precedence and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter'. (170/1.3.14.31)

In the *Enquiry* he initially rephrases this as follows:

We may define a cause to be *an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second.* (76/7.29)

Surely, to offer a definition of something is to say what it is?

In fact, not—this is not so in the eighteenth century: not when it is a matter of defining a concretely existing phenomenon like causation, rather than squareness, say, or triangularity. As Edmund Burke notes, writing nine years after the publication of the first *Enquiry*,

A definition may be very exact and yet go but a very little way towards informing us of the nature of the thing defined. . . . When we define, we seem in danger of circumscribing nature within the bounds of our own notions, which we often . . . form out of a limited and partial consideration of the object before us, instead of extending our ideas to take in all that nature comprehends, according to her manner of combining. (1757: 12)

Priestley concurs twenty years later:

a *definition* of any particular thing . . . cannot be anything more than an enumeration of its known properties. (1778: 34)

This is what Hume was doing when he gave a definition of causation. It explains why he thinks his definitions are ‘exact’ and ‘precise’ (169/1.3.14.30) and ‘just’ (76/7.29)—they exactly capture our best human take on causation—even as he judges them to be irremediably ‘imperfect’ (76/7.29). A ‘more perfect definition’ would be one that ‘point[ed] out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connexion with its effect’ (77/7.29), but we can’t do this. All we can detect is constant conjunction; ‘we cannot penetrate into the *reason* of the conjunction’ (93/1.3.6.15; my emphasis).

This understanding of definition isn’t restricted to the eighteenth century. In 1927 Russell uses ‘define’ in the same sense as Hume, Burke, and Priestley when characterizing matter: ‘all that we ought to assume is series of groups of events, connected by discoverable laws. These series we may *define* as ‘matter’. Whether there is matter in any other sense, no one can tell’ (1927: 93). Russell makes it clear that to give a definition is not to make an ontological declaration.

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