

## Hume's Treatment of Causation in the *Treatise* and First *Enquiry*:

### Some Questions for Eric Schliesser

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A casual survey of the literature on Hume suggests that many philosophers see no substantive differences between the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* but agree with Hume that “the philosophical principles are the same in both,” that the *Enquiry* (merely) shortens and simplifies the questions, and that any differences lie “more [in] the manner than the matter.”<sup>1</sup> Eric challenges this assumption by examining Hume’s treatment of causation and arguing that the science of man that appears in the *Treatise* differs substantially from that of the *Enquiry*.<sup>2</sup> Much of Eric’s discussion focuses closely on the two texts, but he also identifies a problem with Hume’s associationism and calls attention to a shift in the reception of Newton’s ideas, which Eric suggests provides further support for his position. The scope and complexity of the issues that Eric explores make his project particularly ambitious, and I cannot do justice to it here. In what follows, I settle for identifying a few points where his proposals might be pressed.

I begin with a question that lacks serious implications for Eric’s larger undertaking, one that involves his “Speculative Interlude.” Eric proposes that by the time Hume produced the *Enquiry*, he recognized a problem with treating association as a species of mental cause. As Eric explains it, identifying three natural relations (i.e., resemblance, contiguity, and causation) forces Hume to admit that a single antecedent can be connected to three or more consequences. Since Hume cannot identify a cause with such an antecedent, he must give up his claim that his associative principles are causal. My question is whether Hume faces a serious problem.

Two strategies for avoiding one seem to be available. Elsewhere Hume tells us that when a cause is not accompanied by its usual effect, we may suspect the secret operation of contrary causes (THN I.iii.11, p. 132; EHU, VIII.1, p. 67). This suggests he could say that when we discover that a particular perception is associated with more than one consequence, we should suspect such causes. He might maintain that closer scrutiny of the mind could reveal them in some cases, though he might also say that positing unperceived

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<sup>1</sup> Hume’s remarks about the sameness of the principles and the shortening of the questions appear in his well-known letter to Gilbert Elliot: “The philosophical Essays contain everything of Consequence relating to the Understanding, which you would meet with in the *Treatise*; & I give you my Advice against reading the latter. By shortening & simplifying the Questions, I really render them much more complete. *Addo dum minuo*. The Philosophical Principles are the same in both: But I was carry’d away by the Heat of Youth & Invention to publish too precipitately. So vast an Undertaking, plan’d before I was one and twenty, & compos’d before twenty five, must necessarily be very defective. I have repented my Haste a hundred & a hundred times” (March or possibly later 1751, in Grieg, p. 158). The claim about matter and manner come from his autobiography: “I had always entertained a notion, that my want of success in publishing the *Treatise* of Hume Nature, had proceeded more from the manner than the matter” (*My Own Life*, xxxv, in Miller [1987]).

<sup>2</sup> Eric is not alone in identifying substantial differences between the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, or in maintaining that they involve the science of man. Nelson (1972) urges that Hume attempts to psychologize all the sciences in the *Treatise* but retreats to the idea that the sciences “depend in some measure on the science of man” in the *Enquiry*. Flage (1987) argues that in the *Treatise*, Hume attempts to provide a theory of mind but that in the *Enquiry*, he settles for mere lawful descriptions of the mind’s operations. More recently (as Eric notes), Millican (2002) identifies changes in Hume’s attitudes toward associationism and skepticism.

causal mechanisms could be warranted. Alternatively, Hume could argue that careful inspection of the kinds of cases Eric describes might reveal that contrary to initial appearances, a single antecedent is not associated with different consequents. If we look attentively, Hume might tell us, we will find subtly but importantly differing perceptions, each of which is associated with a separate consequent. Whether either tactic provides an accurate account of the mind's operations is, of course, a separate matter. But both strategies offer ways for Hume to agree with Eric that identifying the principles of contiguity, resemblance, and causation as causal mechanisms in the way that he does in the *Treatise* is somewhat misleading, and yet still maintain that causal principles do ultimately account for the association of our ideas. (Perhaps this is why Hume describes the principles discussed in the *Treatise* as "gentle forces.") If this is right, then Eric's suggestion that Hume recognized a serious flaw with his associationism seems doubtful.<sup>3</sup> In any case, since Eric doesn't use this point to argue that the *Treatise* differs significantly from the *Enquiry*, but only to explain why Hume may have changed his position, it does not pose a serious threat to his overarching project.<sup>4</sup>

The remaining issues that I want to raise point to more serious challenges. When discussing Hume's conception of definitions (difference #5), Eric proposes that the Hume of the *Treatise* generally uses 'definition' to fix the meanings of words before using them and wants to capture what "we" mean by 'cause'. The Hume of the *Enquiry*, in contrast, views definitions as "microscopes" that consist in "nothing but an enumeration of those parts or simple ideas, that compose [complex ideas]" (EHU 7.1.4). I agree with Eric that Hume often employs the word 'definition' to different ends in his two books, but I am not convinced that this is significant. The closeness with which the account of definitions provided in the *Enquiry* aligns with what might be called a "reverse use" of the Copy Principle, the presence of that principle in the *Treatise*, and Hume's reversed deployment of it there to show that we lack (or seriously misunderstand) a number of ideas

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<sup>3</sup> A case might be made for thinking that after writing the *Treatise*, Hume came to appreciate that his account of the mind's operations was not as complete as he had hoped, and that dissatisfaction with his explanations led him to abandon his claim to be the Newton of the mind. But even if this is right, it does not by itself indicate that the *Enquiry* differs substantially from the *Treatise*. Hume could agree that he failed to explain the understanding as fully as a true Newton would without abandoning the idea that causal mechanisms ultimately account for the association of ideas, or giving up the particular principles that he earlier endorsed. He need only admit that his explanations fall short of his Newtonian ideal. Recognizing their inadequacy could lead him to make less bold claims for the significance of his work when writing the *Enquiry*, but it need not mark a significant change in the substance of the work itself. To establish that the two books differ significantly, more would need to be said.

<sup>4</sup> I think that questions can also be raised about Eric's suggestion that Hume was motivated to reexamine his account of the principles of association as a result of crucial discoveries (regarding the shape of the earth and the return of Halley's Comet) between the publication of the *Treatise* and the creation of the *Enquiry*, experiments which gave Newton's ideas the status of "settled fact." While this is obviously not the place for a careful discussion of the reception of Newton's thought – and in forthcoming work and elsewhere, Eric does discuss the issues involved at greater length – I think that what is said here falls short of being persuasive. The significance the learned community attributed to the "critical" experiments is questionable, for many individuals saw the results as imprecise or ambiguous. (For further discussion, see Schaffer [1996].) In addition, although Newtonianism eventually did come to dominate in learned circles, the significance of this is not univocal. Newton's name bestowed such considerable authority that a wide variety of doctrines – ranging from different views about the nature of light, to political positions, to mesmerism – came to be called 'Newtonian'. (See Shaffer [1980, 1996] and Heilbron [1980].) This makes attributing a shift in Hume's position to the widespread acceptance of Newton's ideas without further discussion of what this means unconvincing. Newton's ideas and Newtonianism need to be carefully distinguished, and Hume's familiarity with each explored.

suggest that he is committed in that text to the same model of what might be called a “proper” definition.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the definitions of ‘cause’ that he offers in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* seem designed to capture all that we can legitimately maintain that causes are. For these reasons, more needs to be said to show that the features that Eric identifies are not (mere) variations in manner.

Similar concerns can be raised about Eric’s claim that “the official purpose” of introducing the definitions in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* changes (difference #6). Eric proposes that in the earlier work, Hume employs his definitions to fix the mental objects to which our terms refer, but that they later serve to reveal the understanding’s ignorance and weakness, as well as to help set the limits of inquiry.<sup>6</sup> The Hume of the *Enquiry* clearly does want to expose the understanding’s fragility and to curb our inquiries, but the idea that the primacy of these aims can be established by looking at his treatment of causation alone – that his discussion of causation reveals that these are his official concerns – is problematic. At the beginning of Section VII, he identifies the “chief obstacle” to advancement in the sciences as “the obscurity of the ideas, and the ambiguity of the terms,” the murkiest of which include ‘power’ and ‘necessary connection’. His project, he then tells us, rests with “fix[ing], if possible, the precise meaning of these terms, and thereby remov[ing] some part of that obscurity” (VII.i. pp. 61-2). This seems to be his official aim. The enterprise can’t help but reveal the poverty of our understanding, and in a later section of the *Enquiry*, Hume does use his discoveries about our condition to help to indicate how inquiry should be limited. But the fact that he employs his findings in this way does not by itself show that his real objective when discussing causation lies here. A plausible case for the view that these are his real aims can be made, but it requires considering the *Enquiry* as a whole, and not just his handling of causation. Further, even if Eric is right about why Hume introduces his definitions in the *Enquiry*, more needs to be said to show that this marks a substantive departure from the *Treatise*, for the earlier work also emphasizes the weakness of the understanding, and it uses the discussion of causation to do so (e.g., THN I.iv.7).

The same sort of need for further information attaches to Eric’s claim that inquiry in the two texts differs (difference #7). Eric maintains that in the *Treatise*, Hume offers his definitions as “part of a potentially *open-ended* and *collaborative* process of inquiry” but that inquiry in the *Enquiry* possesses neither feature.

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<sup>5</sup> This use of the principle in the *Treatise* fits with what Eric calls a “genetic method” for ensuring that our ideas are clear. The Abstract makes plain the relationship Hume sees in the *Treatise* between terms, (proper) meanings or definitions, and ideas and impressions. He writes, “wherever any idea is ambiguous, he has always recourse to the impression, which must render it clear and precise. And when he suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant” (THN, Abstract, p. 649). This interest in (proper) definitions appears his discussion of necessary connection, where he remarks that “when we speak of a necessary connexion betwixt objects and suppose that this connexion depends upon an efficacy or energy, with which any of these objects are endowed; in all these expressions *so apply’d*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. But as ‘tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong apply’d*, than that they never have any meaning; ‘twill be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject, to see if possibly we can discover the nature and origin of those ideas, we annex to them” (THN I.III.xi, p. 162).

<sup>6</sup> Eric’s point, I take it, is that although Hume wants to fix the mental referents of our terms in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, he is content with this in the earlier work, while later on, his real or primary concern lies with displaying the frailty of our understanding and establishing the boundaries of what we can study.

Hume's definitions reach the end, and he invites no assistance in formulating or correcting them. To support these points, Eric calls attention to two passages:

*Treatise*: "Should this definition also be rejected ... I know no other remedy, than that the persons who express this delicacy, should substitute a juster definition in its place. But for my part I must own my incapacity for such an undertaking" (THN III.iii.14, p. 170).

*Enquiry*: "[T]hough both these definitions be drawn from circumstances foreign to the cause, we cannot remedy this inconvenience, or attain any more perfect definition" (EHU VII, p. 77).

These extracts strike me as too slender a thread on which to hang so substantial a difference. Hume's fondness for irony makes a literal interpretation of the first passage suspect, for the remarks are just the sort to possess such a tone. The seriousness with which he takes his Copy Principle, the carefulness of his immediately preceding discussion, and his frustration with the frailty of the understanding at the end of Book I fit the kind of inquiry that Eric sees in the *Enquiry*. More needs to be said to show that the two works differ significantly; the passages Eric offers to support his claim are compatible with (mere) variations in expression.<sup>7</sup>

The final concern that I want to raise involves differences that Eric sees in normativity. Eric notes that the *Enquiry* neither restricts genuine judgments about causation to natural relations nor contains Hume's rules of reasoning. To support the significance of the first change, Eric argues that the *Enquiry* drops the distinction between natural and philosophical relations and takes the two definitions of 'cause' to apply to the *same* relation (differences #4 and #3). He grounds the definitions' attachment to one relation in Hume's remark that "Our thoughts and enquiries are, therefore, every moment, employed about this relation: Yet so imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning it, that it is impossible to give any just definition of cause" (underlining added, EHU VII.ii p. 76). But these facts fall short of revealing a serious change in Hume's thought. In the *Treatise*, Hume also tells us that his definitions apply to one relation: "'Tis now time to collect all the different parts of this reasoning, and by joining them together form an exact definition of the relation of cause and effect .... There may two definitions be given of this relation, which are only different, by their presenting a different view of the same object, and making us consider it either as a *philosophical* or as a *natural* relation" (underlining added, THN I.iii.14 pp. 170-71). Moreover, Hume treats the relation that he identifies in the *Enquiry* in ways that align with the *Treatise*'s distinction between natural and philosophical relations (i.e., both as a principle of association and as a comparison of ideas). The differences Eric notes thus fit a "shortening and simplifying" that involves only a change in manner.

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<sup>7</sup> Some support for the view that inquiry in the *Treatise* is in a sense collaborative and open-ended might be found in Hume's commitment to accept principles only when they are supported by observation and experience, where observation and experience need not be limited to his own. But he appears to retain this commitment in the *Enquiry*, and in any case, discussing the issue will require going well beyond his treatment of causation. There is another sense in which the inquiry in the *Treatise* seems to be a deeply first-person one and not collaborative at all, for it is written in the first person and narrates a series of discoveries made while meditating on a variety of topics. (See Janet Broughton's article [2004] for further discussion.) How far this differs from the procedure Hume adopts in the *Enquiry*, however, requires further discussion.

In conclusion, although I have reservations about the significance of some of the differences that Eric identifies, his paper has convinced me that the relationship between the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* deserves careful attention, and I am sympathetic to the idea that substantive differences between the texts exist. Most of my concerns lie not with particular claims Eric makes, but with what his support for them. Given that the issues that Eric addresses are wide-ranging and complex, and that he had only a small amount of space to engage them, such requests for further information are only to be expected. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

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