

HUME'S DYNAMISM: THE PROBLEM OF POWER

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ABSTRACT: In this essay, I investigate the dynamic foundations of Hume's philosophy which is so heavily dependent upon Newton's physics. Hume's ubiquitous phrase „force and vivacity“ is symptomatic of his dynamic, rather than voluntaristic, position that dominates his interpretation of impressions, ideas, and causality in particular. After pointing out some inconsistencies of Hume's Newtonism, I concentrate on Hume's treatment of power. It is a well-known fact that Hume rejected natural powers, in fear of their occult character, but accepted human powers giving them an actualist interpretation. I suggest that there is a dispositional treatment hidden in Hume's statements which puts Hume in line with other philosophers of power.

KEYWORDS: Force and vivacity, impressions, ideas, causality, natural powers, human powers, dispositional and actualist conception of power.

I. Hume: a voluntaristic or a dynamic philosopher?

The concept of power occupies an important position in Hume's philosophy. Explicitly he claimed, in a cavalier fashion, that the terms „*efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connection and productive quality*, are all nearly synonymous“¹ and their meaning can be revealed only empirically, through the scrutiny of our impressions. All the above, „nearly synonymous“, terms were employed by Hume in his controversial theory of causation and the rich literature related to this topic throws light, at least indirectly, also on Hume's treatment of power. It can be assumed with justification that whatever Hume said about efficacy, necessary connection, force, etc., would roughly apply to power as well and the differences here are merely of a stylistic nature. If this is the case, can one add anything new to the seemingly exhaustive treatment of this particular Humean topic?²

¹ Hume (1888).

² See e. g. the articles of J. A. Robinson, T. J. Richards and J. W. Lenz, reprinted in Chappell (1966, 129 – 186). See also Capaldi (1975, chapter 5).

Yet the concepts of power, force, etc., were also used tacitly in Hume's philosophy, concealed underneath his statements or in seemingly innocent repetitious phrases such as „force and vivacity.” In fact, it is this stratum of Hume's work which might have tempted some of his commentators to call him a *voluntaristic* philosopher.³ Of course, a better word for Hume's philosophy may be „dynamic” since forces (powers) seem to determine empirical phenomena – the basis of Hume's philosophy – in a neat Newtonian fashion. It is the aim of this essay to give support to such thesis, by employing relevant passages in Hume's philosophical works.

II. Force and vivacity as primitive terms

The frequency of Hume's use of the phrase „force and vivacity” suggests more than a stylistic convenience: it seems that these terms are employed as undefined primitive terms which may help us to reveal some of Hume's hidden „metaphysical” assumptions. Impressions and ideas – Hume's two basic categories – are distinguished by different degrees of force and vivacity; ideas are in general fainter or weaker than impressions. Memory, imagination, belief are also distinguished from each other and characterized by different degrees of force and vivacity. One may question how these forces (powers) entered such basic data of human cognition, through the variety of degrees which – Hume trusts – can be introspectively inspected by everybody. The inquiry into the hypothetical causes of these forces, which are their observable effects, is quickly cut short by Hume's skepticism.⁴ Of course, the road was later opened for Kant's *Ding an sich* or Schopenhauer's postulated will.

Suppose now that Hume *was* a Newtonian.⁵ Then he certainly accepted Newton's three laws and apparently also feared „occult” qualities and unjustified hypotheses. Although the question, „What makes impressions different (in the same person)?” would not appeal too much to the skeptical Hume, it can be treated in a Newtonian frame. If, in an agent A, an impression *i* gives way to another impression *j*, one may assume that, according to Newton's first law, the (hidden) force sustaining *i* was replaced by another (hidden) force which now keeps *j* in exist-

³ See e. g. Taylor (1972, 270 – 272; Hume as a psychological voluntarist). Hume's statements disprove this interpretation – compare Hume (1888, Appendix, 624).

⁴ Hume (1888, 13) (unknown causes), and many other references.

⁵ As it is emphatically stated in Capaldi (1975). I find Capaldi's arguments persuasive.

ence. Evidently, the „force and vivacity“ of *i* and *j*, as it appears to the agent A, should be proportional to the forces operating behind *i* and *j* respectively, as the idea of the passivity of an impression suggests. Of course, it is the qualitative variety of impressions (sensations) that is here at stake, not the mere quantity of force and vivacity in them which may be about equal (as against reflections, ideas, memories, etc.). Apart from the qualitative differences between impressions, the (hidden) force producing them might be the same, while the (hidden) force producing our ideas would be different, for ideas are characterized by a fainter degree of force and vivacity. Hence, the obvious fact of the variety of impressions either cannot be explained mechanistically (by applying Newton’s three laws), or the explanation would be extremely complex, requiring the knowledge of a tremendous variety of (hidden) forces which are responsible for the qualitative differences among impressions (ideas, etc.). Evidently, Hume viewed such variety of impressions (ideas, etc.) as strictly given, without too much willingness to transcend impressions and search for the original forces which cause them. Nevertheless, the application of a Newtonian framework clearly points toward such original forces, even if they do nothing but maintain a higher degree of force and vivacity of impressions (sensations) as against ideas and other data of human cognition.

At any rate, different degrees of force and vivacity do account, in Hume’s view, for the differences between his basic categories; he found thus a common basis for their comparison. Yet he could not propose any objective measuring device and so resorted to the method of subjective introspection that is assumed to produce similar results in different persons. No wonder that some Hume scholars⁶ put so much weight on the strength of *feelings* as the basic criterion for the evaluation of human cognition in Hume’s philosophy.

III. Necessary connection: force and vivacity

Sections of Hume’s works which deal with the idea of necessary connection⁷ have been very extensively discussed by many Hume scholars. Indeed, these sections are of crucial importance for our analysis as well. According to a standard reading of Hume, necessary connection (effica-

⁶ Notably Kemp Smith (1960), especially chapters ii, vi and ix.

⁷ Hume (1888, Book I, Part III, Sec. XIV); Hume (1962, Sec. VII); Hume (1955, 193).

cy, power) does not exist between external objects themselves and can be found only in our mind where the idea of it must be ultimately reduced to corresponding impressions (the fundamental building blocks of everything). But since we cannot perceive any tie by which objects entering into a causal relation are united – Hume claimed – the idea of power represents „not any thing, that does or can belong to the objects, which are constantly conjoined.”⁸ In other words, Hume contended that there was no objective correlate to our idea of power as operating between causally related objects. Nevertheless, while observing single instances of causally related objects (where causality is based on contiguity, succession and constant conjunction), „the several instances of resembling conjunctions lead us into the notion of power and necessity,” and that notion is nothing but „an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another.”⁹ Hence, even if there is no impression or sensation corresponding to the assumed necessary connection between objects, there is some internal impression or impression of reflection out of which the idea of power arises. So Hume saved his basic principle (every idea must be derived from some impressions) and the idea of power (necessary connection) as well!

This well-known argumentation of Hume seems to support the presumed voluntaristic interpretation of Hume's philosophy. If the idea of power amounts to our „determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another,” this determination is an act of will which gives an assent to a (rational) causal inference, to a transition from one object – the cause, to the other – the effect. However, such interpretation is faulty, for the above-mentioned determination is grounded on habit or custom which, in turn, operates with a force acquired through the accumulation of empirical observations. Thus a more adequate interpretation will be based on this *dynamic* foundation of Hume's doctrine which incorporates the force (strength, power) of our impressions, ideas, etc. as its essential ingredient. Now Hume's omnipresent „force and vivacity” comes again into the fore, producing all the difference in his empiricist world.

Of course, the very force of an idea cannot in itself determine which is the other idea required for an adequate representation of the causal relation in question. But it appears that, by habit, the complementary

⁸ Hume (1888, 164).

⁹ Hume (1888, 165).

idea that is endowed with a sufficient strength has a „magnetic“ attractive force and is thus singled out from the collection of other close candidates. Obviously, this is only a metaphorical talk, but so is also the phrase „the cement of the universe“, frequently used in this connection.

Otherwise, it may be of interest to note a Hegelian or Bradleyan streak in Hume's thinking when he said that, outside of experience, „any thing may produce any thing“;¹⁰ of course this holds only in a logical universe of discourse where the objects have not yet been sifted by virtue of empirical rules.

IV. Pragmatic basis of Hume's philosophy

It is true that William James regarded Hume as one of the forerunners of pragmatism,¹¹ but here I am concerned with logical pragmatics, developed in the 20th century by C. Morris, R. Carnap, R. M. Martin, R. Montague, and others. Hume's degrees of force and vivacity again provide the requisite point of contact. If the concepts of force and vivacity are interpreted strictly psychologically, there is a natural tendency to slip into an all-embracing emotivism (especially in moral theory): everything ultimately depends on the strength of feeling or sentiments. Yet there is also an opportunity to render Hume's philosophy with a logical twist, for instance, by correlating degrees of force and vivacity with the pragmatic degrees of acceptance, ranging from certainty (or almost certainty) to complete uncertainty. Of course, relevant portions of Hume's philosophy would have to be translated from the language of impressions, ideas, etc. into the language of statements, for we accept (believe, assert, etc.) statements, and not mere terms. Undoubtedly, these pragmatic studies could help elucidate Hume's doctrines of truth, probability, causation, belief and necessity. It could be shown why observational statements have a high degree of acceptance (corresponding to the high degree of force and vivacity of impressions, i.e. sensations) and perhaps also why Hume regarded the very notion of vivacity as being vague.¹² Yet all of this must remain at this stage only a programmatic statement.

¹⁰ Hume (1888, 173). A. N. Whitehead seemed to have misconceived Hume's position in Whitehead (1966, 4).

¹¹ James (1978, 30, 47). Hume's references to taste and sentiment in philosophy closely resemble James's terminology; e. g. Hume (1888, 103).

¹² Hume (1888, 105 – 106, 629).

V. Natural powers and human powers

Let us now return to the main subject of this essay: the problem of power. We have already remarked that Hume rejected *powers in nature*, in external objects, largely on skeptical grounds. As a Newtonian who feared occult qualities and unjustified hypotheses, Hume criticized the Cartesians, Malebranche, Locke, and others, for their introduction of secret powers since „the ultimate force and efficacy of nature is perfectly unknown to us.”¹³ Perhaps the best summary of Hume's position can be found in his characterization of power and necessity as „qualities of perception, not of objects ... internally felt by the soul, and not perceived externally in bodies ...”¹⁴ Could a philosopher who would be in Hume's position assume hypothetically, very cautiously, the existence of powers in nature? As a thorough Newtonian, Hume could have accepted power (force or energy) behind the impressions themselves. Or at least he should have been willing to put powers *in* the secondary causes, following thus Sir Isaac,¹⁵ even if not in the causal relation itself. Of course, then the effects would mysteriously possess their own powers which – who knows – might be affected by the powers dwelling in the secondary causes, and Hume would be back in the Aristotelian tradition with which he so mercilessly tried to break (by rejecting the notion of substance, the scholastic concept of potency, and by obliterating causation to the uniformity of efficient cause).

On the other hand, Hume accepted the notion of *human powers*, even though his skeptical tendencies put limitations on human cognition, especially reason, which is viewed by him as „a wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our soul ...”¹⁶ The awareness of the influence of the will (volition) over our bodily or mental operations fails to reveal the idea of power or energy to us – Hume argued¹⁷ – for the same reasons he considered in the case of natural powers and causation as such. Now, if

¹³ Hume (1888, 159) (see B. I., P. III, the entire section XIV); also Hume (1962, 73); Hume (1955, 189). Good discussion of these points can be found in Capaldi (1975, 102f).

¹⁴ Hume (1888, 166).

¹⁵ Hume (1962, 73); Hume (1888, 161).

¹⁶ Hume (1888, 179). See, however, N. Kemp Smith's distinction between analytic and „synthetic” reason.

¹⁷ Hume (1962, 64f., 69). This is another reason for questioning Hume's alleged voluntarism.

power (force, energy, etc.) is exhibited neither in our muscular efforts, nor in the exertion of our will which attempts to control our mental and physical operations, where is it? Apparently it is in our mind, being transformed into an idea which is founded on the feeling (sentiment, internal impression) that accompanies the „customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant ...”¹⁸ This observation turns our inquiry into an already familiar territory.

Hume’s talk about various human powers¹⁹ can thus be brought down to a common denominator: force and vivacity of mental states, processes and relations between them. A certain degree of force is an internal characteristic of an impression, idea, image, etc., and this characteristic also affects complexes and relations into which the impression, idea, image, etc. enters. In this way, relations – distinguished by Hume – such as resemblance, contiguity and especially causality, would also be characterized by their pertinent degrees of force and vivacity. One may be really tempted to regard Hume’s philosophy, if it is interpreted in this way, as an elementary lesson in „Newtonism”: everything is an interplay of forces that operate in accordance with Newton’s three laws. Of course, here the forces do not produce changes in physical bodies which can be objectively measured, but rather changes in introspectible mental entities which can be applied to other persons only by analogy.

Besides the problem of communication (mutual information about the respective degrees of force and vivacity), there seem to be other difficulties contained in this interpretation of Hume’s philosophy. One of them is the apparent collapse of the distinction between truth and falsehood if truth and falsehood are understood in a non-pragmatic sense.²⁰ Habits (customs) and general rules „determine” transitions, e. g., from certain ideas to other ideas, so that linguistic statements which express such transitions will be deemed as true (false) by the agent who possesses those ideas on the basis of their force. Evidently, a petrified habit might safeguard a requisite force, even if, for instance, a particular causal relation is misplaced, that is if the corresponding causal statement is false (in our accepted sense of the term „false”). However, the familiar

¹⁸ Hume (1962, 75).

¹⁹ See scattered remarks in *Treatise*, e. g. Hume (1888, 12, 95, 123, especially 312f). Also Hume (1962, 12, 18, 47, 67f., etc.).

²⁰ See section IV of this essay. Of course, one has to consider the difference between Hume’s relations of ideas and matters-of-fact.

stories of the problems of induction and uniformity of nature suggest that Hume would not have been at all surprised if challenged by this line of argumentation.

VI. Non-dispositional nature of Hume's „power“

Reading Hume, one has to distinguish carefully his different uses of the terms „power,“ „force,“ and their near synonyms. In some contexts these terms (their meaning) are criticized as unacceptable (Locke, Malebranche, etc.). In other contexts, Hume used them in their common-sense meaning – in the parlance of the Vulgar. And so one has to determine when is Hume using them in his own refined sense. Sometimes even the context is ambiguous and so one has to play a guessing game. There are, however, some statements in which Hume made his point very clearly. There is no doubt, for instance, that he advocated a non-dispositional concept of power, as witnessed by the following statement:

The distinction which we often make betwixt *power* and the exercise of it, is without foundation.²¹

This position is known as the *actualist* conception of power. This extreme requirement of the actual manifestation of power is however mitigated by the anticipation of a probability, i.e. a „realistic“ possibility of the power-exercise. Yet it is excluded that a person has a certain power but never exercises it (then the person *does not* have that power at all). Obviously, when the probability or possibility of the power-exercise is brought into the game, the dispositional concept of power has been introduced in a very subtle way. And, sure enough, in the same context where power was identified with its exercise, Hume offered a clear-cut characterization of power which might be embraced by any contemporary student of power who accepts its dispositional nature. To quote Hume, „power consists in the possibility or probability of any action, as discovered by experience and the practice of the world.“²²

²¹ Hume (1888, 171); repeated on pp. 311 – 313: „... *power* has always a reference to its *exercise*, either actual or probable“ (p. 313).

²² Hume (1888, 313).

If – following Max Weber and his tradition²³ – one relevantly adds to this definition a phrase, „in spite of the resistance of others,“ one finds himself/herself in the mainstream of the current discussions on political power. Thus, many sides of Hume’s philosophy are reflected also in the specific problem of power and dynamism.

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²³ Weber (1947, 152). C. Wright Mills, R. Dahl, A. Goldman, and others, belong into this tradition.