

Hume and the Metaphysics of Agency

ABSTRACT

In the first *Enquiry* Hume presents several arguments against drawing the concept of causal power from the experience of voluntary action. These arguments can be largely divided into two kinds. The first kind, which defends the *separability* of willing and acting, is intended to prove that we lack grounds for claiming that causation is (actually) involved in human action. The second kind of argument, which defends the *incomprehensibility* of the mechanics of acting, is intended to prove that we have no reason to think, even if it were true that human action involves causation, that the experience of voluntary action acquaints us with the nature of causal power. Scholars rarely take issue with the central claim of Hume's second argument, namely, that the relation between volition and action is incomprehensible. By contrast, several scholars take issue with the central claim of Hume's first argument, namely, that volition is separable from action. Hume, in support of this claim, provides an example in which someone is said to have an experience of *willing* a paralyzed limb to move, and so to have an experience of willing that is isolated from action. It has been suggested that this example is implausible and, at best, theoretically convenient. However, this criticism is inapt. In defending the integrity of Hume's paralysis example, I draw attention to two significant (and heretofore overlooked) historical points. Hume's paralysis example (1) is designed to challenge a position advanced by one of his contemporaries, Charles Mayne; and (2) is one among other examples of its kind in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Hume, as I hope to show, offers an analysis of human agency that is more attuned to ordinary experience than it may seem.

Joshua M. Wood
Visiting Assistant Professor
Department of Philosophy
Texas A&M University
j-wood@philosophy.tamu.edu