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Forces vs. Power

## The Strength of Power in Newton, Berkeley and Hume

Berkeley’s notion of power, Newton’s concepts of power and force, and Hume’s rejection of the view that the will is the cause of our movements are all well-known.[[1]](#footnote-2) But the semantic shift undergone by the word “power”—from its Newtonian sense to its use in Hume’s philosophy, the latter a consequence of Berkeley’s decisive influence—still deserves further attention.

The debate between Newton and Leibniz[[2]](#footnote-3) supports Clarke’s claim that Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason is often nothing more than the will of God. Anything else “would tend to take away all power of causing, and […] introduce fatality.” Leibniz responds to Clarke: “A mere will without any motive, is a fiction, not only contrary to God's Perfection, but also chimerical and contradictory; inconsistent with the definition of the will”.

The Newtonian divine will (referred to by him as power) as an additional factor above the laws of motion (referred to by him as force) leads Berkeley to rule out that cause is either will nor will. Berkeley must then reject both Leibniz’s restriction of the power of God and the claim that matter is the cause of motion. It also follows that an idea cannot be the cause of another idea.

Berkeley’s theory of causation harmonizes the concept of will with Newton’s concept of power, but places it in opposition to Newton’s concept of force.

I will show how Hume finds himself stuck in the midst of a number of factors: powers and forces, his attempt to transfer Newton’s three laws into the realm of the mental and emotional, and the huge influence of Berkeley’s notion of power on his theory. I will show that Hume’s force is a mental cause of sorts, in the very thin narrow of the term. Hume’s position that impressions are the causes of ideas is a response both to Berkeley’s notion of power and Newton’s notion of forces.

Hume’s solution to this problem is to introduce the vivacity and liveliness of the impressions and the ideas of memory. As narrow as the notion of power of the terms vivacity and liveliness is, it cannot solve power’s need for causes and only provides a description of the relations between the objects of the world or the mind.

1. In the appendix of *A Treatise of Human Nature* “'tis allow'd that no effect is more inexplicable from the powers and essence of thought and matter. Nor is the empire of the will over our mind more intelligible.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. As it appears in the Leibniz–Clarke correspondence, 2nd and the 3rd letters, [↑](#footnote-ref-3)