

# Class Twelve - Hume's *Enquiry*, Sections IV

## Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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### 1 Quick Recap

- **Hume's Aim:** Hume's aim can be understood as basically twofold:
  - **Developing a Science of the Mind:** Hume wants to develop a scientific account of the basic principles that govern our understanding—for instance, how we move from idea to idea—not unlike how Newton developed a scientific account of the basic principles that govern the material bodies in the world.
  - **Against Dogmatic Metaphysics:** Hume's engaging in "abstract and abstruse" philosophy—metaphysics—in large part in order to expose a lot of existing metaphysics as simply dressing up common superstition in highfalutin vocabulary to make it seem philosophically respectable when it really isn't.
- **Impressions and Ideas:** We distinguished between *impressions*, the perceptions that are immediately given to us in sensory experience, and *ideas* which we have from recollecting these impressions and from mentally operating on them in various ways (compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing).
- **An Anti-Dogmatic Philosophical Principle:** "When we entertain [. . .] any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion," (13).

### 2 Reflections on Causation

- **Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact:** Hume starts by making the following distinction two kinds of objects of knowledge:
  - **Relations of Ideas:** Propositions that "are discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is any where existent in the universe," (15). Their contraries aren't possible. For example:
    - \* The square of the hypotheuse equals the square of the two sides.
    - \* Three times five equals half of thirty.
  - **Matters of Fact:** Propositions that can't be known through the "mere operation of thought" but, rather, that we know only through experiencing how things in the world actually are. Their contraries are possible. For example:
    - \* There are twenty-five chairs in this room.
    - \* The Sun will rise tomorrow.
- **Causation as the Principle on which (the vast majority of) or Knowledge of Matters of Fact is Founded:** We seem to know a lot of things about the world. What is the principle on which this knowledge is based? Hume tells us that it's *causation*: "By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses," (16).

- **Example One:** You believe your friend is in France. Why? Presumably, you received a postcard from him (and thus take it his use of a pen caused the ink-marks on the postcard, that putting the address on the letter caused it to be delivered to you, and so on), or perhaps you know that he had bought a ticket (and that this would cause him to actually go to the airport, get on the plane, and actually go there, and so on).
  - **Example Two:** You find a watch on a desert island and thereby believe that it is inhabited. Why? Presumably, you think that there was someone on the island who made it, causing it to come into existence.
- **Knowledge of Causation is Attained Only Through Experience:** In particular, we have knowledge of causal relations “when we find, that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other,” (17).
  - **Example One:** Fire causes wood to burn. On the basis of what do we know this? Well, whenever we put wood in fire, it burns. So there’s a *constant conjunction* of events: the event of the wood’s being put in the fire and the event of the wood’s burning. Whenever the one first event occurs, the second shortly follows. On this experiential basis, we take there to be a causal relation between the fire and the burning of the wood.
    - \* **Argument:** Suppose you’re a (very smart) caveperson who’s never seen fire before. You’re teleported to the present day and I show you a lighter, flicking it so that the flame ignites. You can observe this fire all you want, but until you start experimenting with it (for instance, putting sticks in it and seeing what happens) you’re not going to have any knowledge of its causal powers (knowing, for instance, that it burns things).
  - **Example Two:** One billiard ball moving and coming into contact with another will cause that second billiard ball to move in the same direction. On the basis of what do we know this? Once again, on the basis of the constant conjunction of the two events in our experience.
    - \* **Argument:** Suppose (though this is harder to do) that you’ve never seen billiard balls (or material bodies like them) interact. What do you think will happen when one contacts the other? No amount of scrutiny of the billiard balls and no amount of *a priori* reasoning will answer this question for you.
 

“[M]ay I not conceive that a hundred different events might as well follow from that cause? May not both of these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap from the second in any line or any direction? All of these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give preference to the one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference,” (19).

### 3 Hume’s Problem of Induction

- **The Key Inference:** Hume’s principle concern is with the rational soundness of the following inference:
 

*I’ve found that such an object has always been attended with such an effect ~→ I forsee that other objects which are, in appearance, similar, will be attended with similar effects* (22)
- **Hume’s Acknowledgement and Challenge:** Hume acknowledges that, of course, we do, as a matter of fact, make this inference. But he wants to know what *justifies* our making it.
 

“I know in fact, that it is always inferred. But if you insist, that the inference is made by chain of reasoning, I desire you to produce that reasoning,” (22).
- **Possibility One:** The reasoning is “demonstrative reasoning, or that concerning relations of ideas” (22), like the reasoning, for instance, from the claim that the number of planets is greater than seven to the claim that the number of planets is greater than five.

- **The Problem:** Inferences that are underwritten by this kind of reasoning are *necessary*, and it doesn't seem that the key inference is necessary. There's no *contradiction*, for instance, in the possibility that even though every time in the past that I've put paper into fire it's burned, the next time I put paper into fire, it will freeze. This possibility is perfectly intellegible.
- **Possibility Two:** The reasoning is "concerning matters of fact," (22).
  - **The Problem:** This goes in a circle:
 

"We have said, that all arguments concerning existence are founded on the relation of cause and effect; that our knowledge of that relation is derived entirely from experience; and that all our experimental conclusions proceed upon the supposition, that the future will be conformable to the past. To endeavour, therefore, the proof of this last supposition by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question," (23).
- **A Possible (Question-Begging) Attempt:** But in the past, *it's always been the case* that, whenever an object of a certain sort has been accompined by a certain effect a bunch of times, it's accompanied by that effect then next time.
  - **The Clear Response:** This pressuposes that when something has happened in the past in a certain kind of circumstance, a similar thing will happen in the future in a similar kind of circumstance. And that's precisely the principle that's in doubt!
- **Question:** Do you think that the Sun will rise tomorrow? What are your grounds for thinking this?