

# Class Fourteen - Hume's *Enquiry*, Section VII

Philosophical Perspectives II - Ryan Simonelli

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## 1 Quick Recap

- **Investigation into Our Beliefs in Matters of Facts:** We've been investigating our belief into matters of fact, and in particular, on the way in which our beliefs in matters of fact are based on our taking the relation of *causation* between various things or events.
- **Skeptical Doubts and a Skeptical Solution:** It turned out, when we tried to justify the basing of our beliefs on causal inferences, we came up short since we couldn't justify the principle of *induction*, the inference from the fact that things have happened a way in a certain way in the past to the claim that they'll continue to happen that way in the future. We then considered the principle of our making these causal inferences *was*, if not reason, and we arrived at the conclusion that it was *habit* or *custom* which is a product of a natural instinct.
- **From an Epistemological to a Conceptual Question:** In the last sections were thinking about the *epistemological* question of how we can be *justified* in inferring from things happening in the past to the claim that they'll happen that way in the future, as we do when we take something to have some causal power. We now are turning to the *conceptual* question of what it even is in which our grasp of a causal power consists.
- **Hume's Anti-Dogmatist 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 Searching for the Source of the Concept of Necessary Connection

- **A Family of Related Concepts:** The title of the Section is "Of the Idea of Necessary Connection," but Hume talks more often in this section about the notion of *causal power* than he does about the notion of a *necessary connection*. These concepts belong together as close relatives in a family of concepts.
  - **Causal Power:** Something that an object possesses in virtue of which it necessarily brings about a certain effect in certain conditions.
    - \* **Capacity or Ability:** A causal power of an agent to enact effect by way of the will.
  - **Necessary Connection:** The relation between a causal power and the effect the causal power is in act, producing the effect.
- **Recall the Result of Section IV:** When we think of empirical objects outside of us—things like fire burning paper and billiard balls banging into each other—the only notion of causation that we're able to come to on the basis of experience is that of *constant conjunction*—that one type of event always *does* follow another. This is distinct of the notion of *causal power*: the power of objects in virtue of which one event *must* follow another. So it seems like we must look somewhere else to discover the origin of this idea.

- **First Attempt – Our Own Agency Over Our Body:** It certainly seems that we as agents have causal power over our body. We can, for instance, move our arms and legs at will. So perhaps our basic concept of a causal power, and, accordingly, a necessary connection, derives from our understanding our own capacity to move our body.
  - **Problem One:** We have no idea how the connection between the mind and the body works at all! To try to explain the notion of a causal connection in general by way of *this* most mysterious causal connection is absurd.
  - **Problem Two:** There are some parts of our body that we are able to move (such as our arms, fingers, tongue, and so on), and some that we are not (such as our heart and liver). Why do we have the power of some of these parts of the body and not others? If we were “fully acquainted with the power or force, by which [our mind] operates, we should also know why its influence reaches precisely to such boundaries and no farther,” (43). We can answer this question, of course, but only *empirically*—by doing anatomy—but the whole point of this attempt to answer the question is that our grip on our own causal power is *not empirical* but known by reflection.
- **Second Attempt – Our Own Agency Over Our Mind:** O.K. perhaps our grip on the mind’s causal power over the body is tenuous, but consider the power we have over our own mental states, for instance, to imagine things at will. Imagine a purple giraffe on the moon. It seems that this idea is a product of one’s mind. Perhaps *that* is the ultimate source of our idea of a causal power.
  - **Problem One:** If we try to think that we have a real causal power to produce this idea, what kind of causation would this be? It seems that this would be a creation *ex nihilo* “a production of something out of nothing” (45), and that idea of a causal power we generally attribute only to God. A more plausible way of thinking what is going on is that “We only feel the event, namely, the existence of an idea, consequent to a command of the will” (45) without any direct apprehension of any sort of power itself.
  - **Problem Two:** Just as with the agency we have over the body, we only have mental agency over *some* mental states. We can imagine things at will, but we cannot be angry with someone at will. Once again, it seems that we only know the scope of our mental power over the mind by way of *experience*, but, once again, the point of this kind of answer to the question is that our grip on this causal power we have is supposed to be non-empirical.
- **Third Attempt – The Agency of a Supreme Being:** Return again to the fact that certain objects of experience are constantly conjoined. Perhaps the explanation of this constant conjunction is that things are operating in accordance with the will of God, and it is really God’s agency that is the basic causal power in play here, and it’s this notion of a divine causal power that is our primary notion.
  - **Problem One:** There’s a general problem with theological explanations of this sort. Whenever we reason about such things as Supreme Beings, we should be wary of the conclusions we draw, for we are stretching our reason far beyond its natural domain:
 

“We are got into fairy land, long ere we have reached the last steps of our theory; and *there* we have no reason to trust our common methods of argument, or to think that our usual analogies and probabilities have any authority,” (48).
  - **Problem Two:** This doesn’t solve the problem at all, in any case—it merely pushes it back a step, for we can raise the very same concerns with respect to the “force by which a mind, even a supreme mind operates either on itself or on a body,” (48).

### 3 A (New Kind of) Skeptical Conclusion

- **We Really Have No Idea of a Power or Necessary Connection:** “Contemplate the subject.” We *feel* that events are connected in this special way that causes and effects are supposedly

connected, but we really don't have a grip on this "connection" that we feel must obtain between causes and effects.

- **Two Kinds of Skepticism:** The topic of this section is the same as the topic of Section IV, but a different kind of skepticism is developed here.
  - **The Epistemological Skepticism of Section IV:** In Section IV, we reached a skeptical conclusion concerning our *justification* for making causal inferences. We could never *know* through experience that the thing possesses the sort of power as to actually bring about its effect. This is a kind of *epistemological* skepticism
  - **The Conceptual Skepticism of Section VII:** Now, Section VII, we've reached a skeptical conclusion concerning the *very idea* of a causal power. It's not just that *we can't know* that anything possesses the causal power to necessarily bring about its effects, it's that *we don't even have a grip on what it would be to know* such a thing. This is a kind of *conceptual* rather than *epistemological* skepticism.
- **The Only Things of which We Really Have Concepts:** What *do* we have concepts of?
  - **Constant Conjunction:** We have concepts of various things that always happen together, with one following the other time after time.
  - **Mental Association:** In a case where things are constantly conjoined in experience, whenever we have an idea of the first, the mind naturally transitions to the idea of the second.
  - **Anticipation and Inference:** We also *anticipate* the second upon an experience of the first, and *believe* that the second will happen if the first has happened, and we have concepts of this anticipation and this inference.

Whatever concept of causality we actually has, these are the ingredient concepts, for it is only these of which we actually have any impressions. We have no impression of causal powers or necessary connections themselves.

- **Question:** Are Hume's arguments convincing? It certain *seems* that we have the concept of a causal power. Are we really mistaken in thinking that we do?
- **Question:** What would the practical upshots of accepting Hume's arguments be? What about standard and seemingly important distinctions we make such as that between causation and correlation?