

Class Six - Hume's Critique of Causation

Appearance and Reality - Ryan Simonelli

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1 Quick Recap

- **The Abhidharma Conception of Ultimate Reality:** There are particular moments of sensory consciousness that give rise to other such moments.
- **Two Questions:** Here are two questions we might ask concerning the notion of causality that figures in this conception of ultimate reality:
 - **An Epistemological One:** Are we ever justified in thinking that one thing will follow from another?
 - **A Conceptual One:** Do we even have a grip on the notion of a causal relation through which one thing is supposed to follow from another?
- **Hume's 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 thirty-two 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 foresee 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 intelligible.
- **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 accompanied by a certain effect a bunch of times, it's accompanied by that effect then next time.
 - **The Clear Response:** This presupposes 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!

4 From an Epistemological Question to a Conceptual One

- **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, in Section VII, Hume is concerned to reach 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.
- **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).
- **Conclusion: We Really Have No Idea of a Power or Necessary Connection:** 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.
- **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:

“Contemplate the subject on all sides; you will never find any other origin of that idea,” 50

We have no impression of causal powers or necessary connections themselves.