

How may one distinguish between caused events and a coincidence?

This essay will look at what, if anything, distinguishes a caused event from a coincidence. This essay will view the relation between cause and effect from Hume's perspective, paying particular attention to the idea of necessary connection in book 1, section 14 of 'Treatise of Human Nature'. Descartes' third meditation will be referenced as we explore the primal cause of an omnipotent being. References will also be made to our use of language in the way we define cause and effect, how we define a caused event will determine how that differs from a coincidence, or can coincidences be explained as a type of cause. This essay will commence as we meditate with Descartes on the existence of god, then take a meander through Hume's necessary connection theory as to whether agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connection and productive quality are the same, and if a definition may be found in impressions at a simple level or in the compound of ideas. This essay will concern itself also with the question are we a coincidence of nature, or a causal effect of an omnipotent existence – this will be a subject which will be meditated upon and from the impressions this question evokes ideas will spring forth in a spontaneous fashion giving a style of randomness to the proceedings, however, through these random ramblings philosophical debate will ensue. Engagement with the works of Hume and Descartes will be the primal influence of this process and whatever develops from this will be as an effect of their cause, which, coincidentally will introduce the cause and effect process of ideas in the imagination, and the coincidences which often strengthen our beliefs in an omnipotent being as the cause of all effects.

Descartes

The process Descartes takes in his meditations is to sit by the fire in his dressing gown and engage in the process of thinking, clearing his mind and allowing the innate primal function of his mind to step into the light of his consciousness, that he may see clearly answers to the questions he poses. In the previous meditations Descartes concludes that he must exist since he is a thinking thing, and now in the third meditation he turns his attention to thoughts on the existence of God. Of particular interest is the idea of God as the original cause to avoid the idea of an infinite regress of creation God must exist. Descartes explains that there must be something in the effect which is equal to the cause, and "since I am a thinking thing and have within me some idea of god, it must be admitted that that which caused me is itself a thinking thing and possesses the idea that all the

perfections which I attribute to God.”¹ Descartes concludes on this thought that as he does exist and holds the idea of a perfect being provides distinct evidence that indeed God does exist. Coincidentally, this leads Descartes to finish the meditation feeling elated, and concludes that ‘contemplation of the divine majesty’ would lead us to know what deep joys life could hold for us. Is this a coincidence of convenience? as thinking in this way would lead us to pleasure, and if we view this from a utilitarianists perspective, belief in God as a primal cause, to whom we return when we are done with our effectiveness, is far brighter than the darkness of the alternative. Such is the enlightened thought of the existence of God as to an opposed coincidence of our existence as some spontaneous event with no cause.

Hume

Tackling Hume’s theories is not for the faint hearted. His theories on cause and effect are complex, and unlike Descartes he does not sign off on a definite conclusion as to the original cause, but does give rise to the idea of words as causes “nothing is required but the hearing of that word to produce the correspondent idea;”² Words have such an effect upon our thoughts, that we cannot think otherwise than the relation of the word to the idea of the image it evokes, each word determines its effect in our mind, creating another word and its association in a cascading effect. “We have no other notion of cause and effect, but that of certain objects, which have been conjoined together”³ Our imaginations will always find a union between objects which conjoin in this way, we ideally always see connections in that which has an effect on our thoughts and whatever invokes that thought, however tenuous, will be its cause. Can we hold that all we witness are these connections? that we see nothing of the notion of cause and effect, just connections. In that case we might as well say all we know is coincidences, just isolated actions and ideas of a random nature.

Necessary connection for Hume is “contiguous in time and space”.⁴ Temporal spacial adjoining is the necessary connection of cause and effect. Necessary connection cannot be derived from perceiving any individual pair of events. Repeated evidence of two things conjoining leads to impressions, one cannot imagine one thing without the other. “Tis this impression, then, or, determination, which affords me the idea”.⁵ Hume goes on to look at

¹Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Translated by John Cottingham (Cambridge University Press, 1987) p34

²David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896) p54

³ Ibid p55

⁴ Ibid p86

⁵ Ibid

the terms used in philosophers' definitions of cause and effect: , agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connection and productive quality, and says they are all the same and that they should not look to definitions for the idea in these but look to the impression which originate from the idea, that a compound idea will arise from a compound impression and a simple idea will arise from simple impression. Can we find answers in the simple of what we term as a compound? Is our causal language as various as it could be? Are these words defining something quite different, or the same thing? They are different words; however, they have in their essence a common quality which we can apply to the process of cause and effect. If cause is to be defined that definition must be found not in the terms of efficacy like agency, power, force, energy and the like, but more in the convergence of these aggregates do we find something more concrete. Before we leave Hume let us look at his argument against an omnipotent being as the 'prime mover of the universe', Hume concludes that believers " have no adequate idea of power or efficacy in any object ; since neither in body nor spirit, neither in superior nor inferior natures are they able to discover one single instance of it."⁶ He uses the term single instance, again should we not look at a combination of things to define a thing, after all a sum is equal to its parts, if everything is conjoined in some way by cause and effect is it not impossible to look at a single instance without reflecting on all that conjoins that single instance. If not, then we are a coincidence of nature and not a causal effect of an omnipotent existence. Is the power of creation in our minds as something quite random or part of a chain of events? one event being the cause of another, does this fall short as this would relate to an infinite regress, however, if we allow for the idea of an omnipotent being, the butt, as they say, would stop there; all roads would lead to Rome, or in this case God. "The efficacy or energy of causes is neither placed in the causes themselves, nor in the deity, nor in the concurrence of these two principles; but belongs entirely to the soul, which considers the union of two or more objects in all past instances. Tis here that the real power of causes is placed, along with their connexion and necessity."⁷ This is as good a definition as we can get from Hume, again we see that the mind/soul is where the conjoining of events continually experienced lies, not in the causes themselves or the existence of any kind of deity.

To conclude might we say that causation is mentally imposed as we observe regularity, we assume everything must have a cause. Hume is not denying the power of cause and effect, only that we cannot assume these powers exist. Trying to define what exists on a macro level by using examples on a micro level does not lead us to any satisfactory conclusions,

⁶ Ibid p88

⁷ Ibid p91

and the debate of whether we are the result of cause and effect, God being the cause and all that we are and perceive as the effect, our continued existence, the continuity of our ideas to impressions and impressions to ideas is either proof of causes or proof of a random universe with random coincidences, however even random coincidences have some form of continuity and commonality in the fact that they continue in some time and some space, is there then order in this chaos of our existence? We are all held together by the laws of nature in a sequence of events, whether or not these events are causal or coincidence there is no defining answer to be found in the written word, if the answer does not lie in linguistics, it must lie in the energy, the power, the force, the connexion, the productive quality themselves, and the impressions they leave on us. It is in the impressions, not the words, we find effectiveness.

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