

Hume on Causation

Some background

Hume was an empiricist philosopher. He took empiricism to its logical conclusions: ‘When we run over libraries, persuaded of these [empiricist] principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume, of divinity or school metaphysics for instance, let us ask: *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.’ (Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sec. XII, Part III, p.165).

Hume’s theory of mind

Hume divided the contents of the mind into impressions and ideas. For Hume, all our ideas have at their source an impression. For each idea there is an impression that the idea resembles. Ideas follow impressions, i.e. the impression comes first.

Reading: we will be going through a close reading of extracts from Hume’s *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section VII, ‘Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion’.

1. Hume wants to enquire into the meaning of terms, ‘power’, ‘force’, ‘energy’, ‘necessary connexion’. These are all terms we use to describe what we think is the relation between causes and effects; they are supposed to be what brings effects into existence. He writes, ‘There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of *power, force... or necessary connexion*’ (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part I, p.62).

2. It follows from what he has said about ideas, that the idea of necessary connection or of power that we talk about in relation to causation should have an impression at its source. He seeks to find that impression. For Hume, we need to clarify the idea of power, etc, by finding the original impression from which it is derived (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part I, p.63; p.439 in Cottingham).

3. However, upon reflection, we do not have an impression of necessary connection but only of a conjunction. Events *seem* conjoined but *not necessarily* connected. '[T]here appears not... any one instance of connection which is conceivable by us... One event follows another; but we never can observe any tie between them. They seem *conjoined*, but never *connected*. And as we can have no idea of any thing which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion *seems* to be that we have no idea of connection or power at all, and that these words are... without any meaning' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part II, p.74; p.441 in Cottingham).

4. *Hume's constant conjunction theory of causation:*

When one type of event has always followed another, we call the one event 'cause' and the other 'effect'. We suppose there to be some connection or power between them. 'It appears, then, that this idea of necessary connexion among events arises from a number of similar instances which occur of the constant conjunction of these events' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part II, p.75; p.442 in Cottingham).

The experience of constant conjunction between two or more kinds of events conveys to our mind the idea of a necessity connection between these events, and leads us to label the initial events as causes

and the attendant events as effects. For Hume, our idea of causation is derived from constant conjunction.

Hume claims that when we say that things of a certain kind cause things of another kind what we are saying is:

(a) Things of the first kind are spatially contiguous with things of the second (i.e., what we call their effects). (*Treatise*, Bk. 1, Part III, Sec. 2.)

(b) Things of the first kind are temporally prior to things of the second. (*Treatise*, Bk. 1, Part III, Sec. 2.).

→The term ‘constant conjunction’ summarises (a) and (b).

(c) When presented with things of the first kind, we have a habit to expect things of the second. (*Treatise*, Bk. 1, Part III, Sec. 14.)

Some problems:

- If Hume is right about (a), then there cannot be causation at a distance. But there are examples of causation at a distance.
- In respect of (b), we could reply that some causes might be simultaneous with their effects.
- B. Russell points out that constant conjunction is not sufficient to give us causes. For example, the fact that night is constantly followed by day does not show that night causes day (Russell, 1986).
- Constant conjunction might be found where there is coincidence.

5. Two 'imperfect' definitions of cause:

- 'an object, followed by another, where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part II, p.76; p.443 in Cottingham).
- 'an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part II, p.77; p.443 in Cottingham).

He thinks these definitions are imperfect because 'we cannot... attain any more perfect definition which may point out that circumstance in the cause, which gives it a connexion with its effect. We have no idea of this connexion, nor even any distinct notion what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part II, p.77; p.443 in Cottingham).

'As to the frequent use of the words, Force, Power... etc...that is no proof, that we are acquainted, in any instance, with the connecting principle between cause and effect' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part II, p.77, footnote).

6. Interpreting Hume:

Hume *seems* to be committed to the view that when we talk about, say, fire causing smoke, what we're really talking about is ourselves, or *our belief* that there is some kind of necessary connection. And, when we take into account what Hume has said about power (i.e., that we have no proof of this power), it seems that Hume is suggesting that, although we have a kind of natural tendency to form the belief that there are powers underlying the regularities in the world, this belief is unjustified.

However, many scholars believe that Hume's arguments don't go against the ontological claim that there is some sort of power underlying regularities in the world. Rather, his arguments go against the epistemological view *that we can know something* about the nature of this power. For these scholars, Hume was a realist about genuine causation, but a sceptic about our ability to have justified beliefs about it. Evidence for this position may be found in the *Enquiry*. Hume says, 'The scenes of the universe are continually shifting, and one object follows another in an uninterrupted succession; but the power or force, which actuates the whole machine, is entirely concealed from us, and never discovers itself in any of the sensible qualities of body' (*Enquiry*, Sec. VII, Part I, pp.63-64; p.439 in Cottingham).

References

- David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748], Section VII, in Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selbby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P.H. Nidditch, third edn. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).
- Hume, 'The Relation between Cause and Effect: David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*' (extracts from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748]), in *Western Philosophy: an anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
- Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*.
- B. Russell, 'On the Notion of Cause', in his *Mysticism and Logic* (London: Unwin, 1986).

Reading for students:

Essential reading:

- David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* [1748], Section VII.

For the purposes of the lecture, you will be given hard copies of the paper in Cottingham, 2008, op. cit.

Further reading:

- John W. Carroll and Ned Markosian, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), ch.2, 'Causation'.

- E. J. Lowe, *A Survey of Metaphysics* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), pp.154-62 of the chapter 'Causes and Conditions'.

- Simon Blackburn, *How to Read Hume* (London: Granta, 2008), ch.3, 'Causation'.

- Russell, 1986, op. cit.