

Lecture Nine: Hume on Causation

1. Recap and Aims

We've been looking at how Hume's new approach to philosophy ('The Science of Man') plays out in a number of areas. The main move Hume makes is to begin his philosophical inquiry by turning attention of how we as human animals work first. We will extend our understanding by looking at how this way of looking at things deals with causation. Here we will also see the further relevance of **Hume's Fork** and the **Copy Principle**.

Today we will first lay out Hume's attack on other views of causation. What Hume's own, positive, view of causation is is a matter of much dispute. I will give you a guide to the main available interpretations.

2. Why Causation?

First let's start by asking why Hume (and we) is interested in causation at all. Two central points – causation is a philosophically interesting concept in its own right; Hume's philosophical system makes use of causation at a number of points. We begin by discussing the things causation can do for us both to pique our interest in the topic, but also if we know what causation does we will have a way of adjudicating between different interpretations of Hume.

Causation is linked to **explanation**. This has an **epistemic** side – learning the causes of an event affords us understanding of it; and a **metaphysical** side – causation is *why* events happen, it glues the world together.

Scientific explanation also looks closely related to causation – much of science is attempting to discover the causal structure of the world (e.g. biology, sociology, geology, much of physics, etc).

Causation is important to **moral responsibility** – can you be blamed for something you didn't do? **Perception** of distal objects also involves causation (objects outside the mind cause perceptions).

In Hume's philosophy causation mediates all **knowledge** of things beyond immediate impressions. **Impressions** cause resembling **ideas**. Previous philosophers, according to Hume, have talked a lot of nonsense on the topic – **occasionalists** think all causal power belongs to God; **Aristotelians** distinguish many types of cause (formal, efficient, final, material). Hume wants to sweep away this crud.

3. Causal Realism

Take an ordinary causal interaction: one billiard ball strikes another (e1), and then the second billiard ball moves off (e2). At the same time the lights in the billiard room flicker (e3). E2 and e3 both happen after e1, but intuitively e1 causes e2 and not e3 (that was just a coincidence). E1 *makes* e2 happen.

In other words, causation involves **necessary connection**: causes force their effects to happen.

Causal realism says that causal judgments (e.g. the judgement that e1 caused e2) express beliefs about necessary connections between events. At least some of the time these beliefs are true and justified (we can come to know that one thing caused another). And what makes these judgements true is that there are mind-independent necessary connections between distinct events.

This may sound like a piece of common-sense, but Hume argues it must be wrong. His attack on **causal realism** is now the background against which modern discussions of causation take place.

4. The Attack on Causal Realism

What is the Humean way to begin an investigation of causation? Look at what a human being is doing when they are making a causal judgement. When we do such a thing we are deploying our **idea of necessary connection**. If we want to understand this idea what do we do? Apply the insight of the **copy principle** – look for the source of our **impression of necessary connection**.

You might think you get an impression of necessary connection by observing a causal interaction in the world. But this cannot be where you get it:

When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. We only find, that the one does actually, in fact, follow the other. The impulse of one billiard-ball is attended with motion in the second. This is the whole that appears to the *outward* senses. The mind feels no sentiment or *inward* impression from this succession of objects: Consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection (Enquiry, p. 63).

In perception all you experience is one event after another – you don't see an additional thing, the necessary connection. If you did have such an impression you'd be able to work out what was going to happen based on observing a cause you'd never seen before.

Do you get an impression of necessary connection by observing an interaction between your mind and your body? (E.g. willing your arm to move and the arm moving). No – we don't understand how this relation works, on a number of levels.

What about by observing an interaction between elements *within* your mind (e.g. willing myself to think of a pink elephant and having an idea of pink elephant)? No – again we do not understand how the will brings this about. As with external objects, all we observe is one mental item following another.

So we don't get an impression of necessary connection in any of these ways. Does this mean, then, that our causal judgements are meaningless? No, we do get an impression of necessary connection, we just have to look beyond a single case of causation – you get an impression of necessary connection after observing *many instances* of a causal interaction:

When one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another, we make no longer any scruple of foretelling one upon the appearance of the other, and of employing that reasoning, which can alone assure us of any matter of fact of existence. We then call the one object Cause; the other, Effect." (Enquiry 74).

Does this repeated exposure reveal anything new in the external objects themselves? No – how they look the 5000th time is the same as the way they look the first time.

Perhaps causal claims are established by *a priori* reasoning? No – *a priori* reasoning (**demonstration**) establishes propositions only about **relations of ideas** (as discussed last week).

Does repeated exposure to causal interactions enable us to establish causal claims using **probabilistic reasoning**? No – to do so we would have to rely on the supposition "that instances of which we have had no experience must resemble those of which we have had experience and that the course of nature remains uniformly the same". We know from last week the problems of resting on such an assumption (the **problem of induction**).

So how does repeated exposure give us an impression of necessary connection?

The reflection of several instances only repeats the same objects; and therefore can never give rise to a new idea. But upon father enquiry I find, that the repetition is not in every particular the same, but produces a new impression, and by that means the idea, which I at present examine. For after a frequent repetition, I find, that upon the appearance of one of the objects, the mind is *determin'd* by custom to consider its usual attendant, and to consider it in a stronger light upon account of its relation to the first object. 'Tis this impression, then, or *determination*, which affords me the idea of necessity. (T1.3.14.1).

The impression of necessary connection is an impression of reflection that arises thus: when we experience constant conjunction of two types of events they 'acquire a union in the imagination': we become disposed, in virtue of 'custom' or 'habit' to infer an idea of an effect from the impression of the relevant cause. This 'customary transition of the mind' is accompanied by a *feeling of irresistibility* or *compulsion*: given an impression of one billiard ball hitting another we feel compelled to form the idea of the second ball moving off.

This feeling of compulsion is the impression which is copied into an idea of necessary connection. We've used the copy principle to discover the real source of our idea of necessary connection.

5. The Mind Spreading Itself

So our idea of necessary connection is rooted in an inner impression we feel after observing repeated causal interactions. What does this mean for **causal realism**? What *are* we doing when we make a causal judgement?

The **causal realist** says that causal judgements are beliefs that are often justified about relations of necessary connection in the natural world. Hume seems to be saying that actually the source of necessary connection is something to do with our mental activity.

This is apt to appear 'violently paradox[ical]' to us. This is because of our tendency to *project* aspects of our feeling on to the world:

[T]he mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects, and to conjoin with them any internal impressions, which they occasion, and which always make their appearance at the same time that these objects discover themselves to the senses. Thus as certain sounds and smells are always found to attend certain visible objects, we naturally imagine a conjunction, even in place, betwixt the objects and qualities, tho' the qualities be of such a nature as to admit of no such conjunction, and really exist nowhere. ... [T]he same propensity is the reason, why we suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them; notwithstanding it is not possible for us to form the most distant idea of that quality, when it is not taken for the determination of the mind, to pass from the idea of an object to that of its usual attendant (T1.3.14.25).

This is much like our tendency to project our tastes on to the world – we say the object is beautiful, rather than that we find it pleasing; the ice cream is tasty, rather than we like it. We even sometimes project emotions on to natural objects – the clouds look angry.

We now understand Hume's attack on **causal realism**. Our job now is to understand Hume's positive view – how do we best make sense of this talk of the mind spreading itself on to the world? Many of the interpretations here bear a striking resemblance to positions in **meta-ethics**. One way of understanding them is to make an analogy to your understanding of the matching ethical position.

6. Error Theory

This is the simplest interpretation, and also a) traditional and b) almost certainly wrong. According to the error theorist reading, causal judgments express beliefs about necessary connections between objects in nature.

Unfortunately, these beliefs are systematically wrong – there just are no such relations in the world.

Sometimes the error theorist supplements the error theory by offering a *revisionary regularity theory of causation* – according to the regularity theory causation just is events of one type being followed by another. Our everyday concept of causation is empty – there are no necessary connections. But we can get by with this new, surrogate notion.

The trouble with error theory is that it's absurd – how could causation do all the things for us that it does if there is no such thing? Besides which, Hume's own philosophy makes many causal claims.

Furthermore, this interpretation says our concept of causation involves necessary connections between objects. But this is nothing like the impression of causation Hume claims to find – we've abandoned the **copy principle**.

Error theorists who claim Hume was also offering a replacement regularity theory need to grapple with the fact that Hume never grapples with obvious problems with the regularity theory (see Beebe, 2006).

7. Subjectivism

What error theory gets wrong is neglecting the subjective feeling of determination which Hume says is central to his account. The **subjectivist** says that a causal judgement that e1 causes e2 expresses a belief that events of type e1 are followed by events of e2 *and* that the idea of a type e1 event leads irresistibly to an idea of a type e2 event.

“Necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, considered as a quality in bodies. Either we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experience union.” (T1.3.14.22)

So, when I make a causal claim I am making a claim that is partly about my own mental activity. This strikes us as implausible – **phenomenologically**, causal judgements seem like they are about events in the world: this is why Hume begins his search for an impression of causation with external objects.

In addition, could causation do all the explanatory work we and Hume think it does if it is constituted by something to do with our mental activity?

8. Projectivism

Subjectivism and error-theory agree that causal judgements express beliefs. The projectivist says that causal judgements express **non-cognitive** desire-like mental states.

When I say that e1 causes e2 I'm not *reporting* that I find my mind moved from one idea to another, instead I'm *expressing* that feeling of determination. Or to put it another way, when I say e1 causes e2 I'm expressing my *confidence* in events of type e1 being followed by events of type e2.

[According to Hume], the causal connection between events is something of which we have no impression, hence no idea, so a Humean theory of causation instead sees us as projecting onto events our own tendency to infer one from another. ... [For Hume] the causal order is a projection of our own confidences in the way they follow from one another (Blackburn 1994: 180, 306).

How does this do as an interpretation of Hume? Projectivism is certainly incompatible with **causal realism**. But it fits poorly with some of Hume's other aims – projectivism denies that we have an idea of necessary connection at all: instead we just project our feelings of determination on to objects. But doesn't Hume think he has found an impression of necessary connection which will serve as a basis for our idea of necessary connection? The **copy principle** has been neglected again.

A **sophisticated projectivist** could complicate their claim:

It is the *transition of mind* that is projected, and not the impression of necessary connection: the impression of necessary connection just *is* the modification of visual experience that we undergo when the transition takes place. (Beebe, 2006: 146).

It's not that we have no impression of necessary connection; it's just not what is projected. Again, however, our idea of necessary connection (the thing we project) is not rooted in the relevant impression – the **copy principle** has been neglected again.

9. Sceptical Realism (aka the New Hume)

Error theory, projectivism and subjectivism agree that there are no such things as relations of necessary connection in the world. They react to this finding in different ways, but they agree that Hume thinks there are no such relations in the world.

The **sceptical realist** reading of Hume (aka the New Hume) disputes this. The claim here is that Hume is saying not that there are no such relations; instead, he is saying we cannot ever **know** that such relations obtain. There are parts of Hume that support such a reading:

[E]xperience only teaches us, how one event constantly follows another; without instructing us in the secret connexion, which binds them together, and renders them inseparable (Enquiry: 66).

[N]ature has kept us at a great distance from all her secrets, and has afforded us only the knowledge of a few superficial qualities of objects; while she conceals from us those powers and principles on which the influence of those objects entirely depends (Enquiry: 32-3).

How well does this reading fair? Well, unlike error theoretic and subjectivist readings it is not an obvious non-starter – causation could still be an explanatory notion for us, even if we can never know that relations of necessary connection obtain.

However, there is a problem here, and it comes back again to the copy principle. Remember it's an internal impression of determination that fixes the content of the idea in question. So, it looks like we cannot sensibly even talk about mind-independent causal powers in the world – the meaning of causation is ultimately grounded in something in us.

In addition, why did we go down this rabbit hole of looking towards sceptical realism – in part because of the quotes from Hume where he seems to endorse necessities in nature. However, these passages are chiefly concerned with describing the vulgar view of necessity; we don't know from them that he endorses this view.

10. Summary

How we settle the dispute over the correct interpretation of Hume's positive view is a hard and contested question.

What is of real value in Hume's work here is the **attack on causal realism**. This informs all modern discussions of the nature of causation. Furthermore, it's this attack that allows Hume to undermine the convoluted positions of the **Aristotelians** and **occasionalists**.