

Why did Hume think that we cannot have any experience of causation?

By Jennie Hiles

“Here I stand, I can do no other”.¹ When it comes to Hume and his thoughts on causation, perhaps these words could apply to the stance he took on the subject. This essay will look at how Hume’s early views on the state of philosophical debate and his subsequent adoption of a very strict empiricist approach led him inevitably to the conclusion that we cannot have any experience of causation.

At first Hume’s argument is difficult to appreciate: why would he suggest we cannot have any experience of causation when we see cause and effect in action every single day of our lives? Flick the light switch (cause), the light comes on (effect). Bash your little brother (cause), he bashes you back (effect). The relationship between cause and effect seems clear – one obviously is resulting from the other – so of course we must be experiencing causation. Hume’s early studies led him to consider such pronouncements, based on nothing more than hypothesis and imagination, were exactly the sort of thing holding philosophy back. He could not understand why philosophers continued to generate theory based on metaphysical speculation rather than taking the approach of those scientists in physical sciences that were, in his eyes, making much greater advancements through observation and experiment.² Thinking this way, Hume rejected the scope of *a priori* knowledge that a rationalist might accept – such as that based on intuition, deduction from intuition, innate knowledge – limiting it instead to relations of ideas that can be discovered by thought alone.³ Known as Hume’s fork, he separated these relations of ideas (*a priori* truths of mathematics, necessity and analytic propositions in logic) from matters of fact that must be derived from observation and sense experience (contingent and *a posteriori* knowledge).

So sensory experience had to be Hume’s starting point when considering cause and effect. He looked at each object, the cause and the effect, and saw them as completely distinct and therefore separate entities.⁴ In the experience of cause there is nothing in the cause itself that in any way suggests the effect. For example: looking at a candle flame there is nothing in that perception that will allow a person to deduce – or have any expectation – that the effect on a piece of paper held in the flame is that it will burn, or indeed that a steel fork will not. Likewise, the ashes of the paper alone give no indication of the cause of those ashes becoming so. Even when seen one after the other, the cause and effect are distinct and completely different events, neither of which can be deduced from the other.⁵ Not only that, it takes more than one experience of these objects occurring together to form an impression that there is a regularity of one object following the other. Multiple experiences of paper

1 Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms 1521.

2 Morris & Brown (2017) Section 3: Philosophical Project.

3 A rationalist would argue it is possible to gain knowledge independently of sense experience whereas an empiricist would not.

4 Confusingly for a novice reader, in this context Hume uses the word ‘object’ to refer to the set of circumstances giving the ‘cause’, and also to the resulting circumstances of the ‘effect’, i.e. not in the sense of a physical object.

5 D. Hume “Selection from Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” cited in Crane, Farkas (2011, 384).

burning in a flame give rise to the idea that the flame is causing the effect of the paper burning and it is only through these multiple experiences that an impression of necessity in the mind is formed.

A rationalist might go on to consider that this impression of necessity in the mind was reflecting a real, natural necessity in the world that could be deduced through intuition, but Hume certainly did not see any justification in that leap, as he pointed out the idea of a causal link is developed in the mind through inductive, not deductive, reasoning. Therefore any link between cause and effect could only ever be a contingent proposition, a probability but not a certainty. Hume argued that if a different effect could be conceived (e.g. the paper not burning in the flame) - and a different effect must be conceivable if it is only a contingent proposition - then a belief of a necessary link between cause and effect could not be warranted.

Hume's insistence on conceivability being sufficient to discount necessity is itself hard to accept. If I jump off a roof today I expect to fall to earth, but for Hume it is good enough that it is conceivable that I might 'fall' to the moon instead irrespective of whether it is, with good reason to rationalists, not genuinely possible. The point is that to maintain the integrity of his position, irrespective of what Hume actually believed, he could not come to any other conclusion than he did. Deduction from intuition belonged to the realm of the rationalists that Hume was on a mission to reform in favour of fact and observation. For him, as all matters of fact were contingent not necessary truths, it followed that 'the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible'.⁶ Additionally, if a belief of necessity is solely based on an idea created in the mind, it can never be directly experienced and, as Hume believed all knowledge must be a justified true belief based on sense experience, we cannot therefore have experience and knowledge of causation.

In the absence of any evidence of necessity, Hume proposed instead that experience established there was a constant conjunction, a regularity, between two objects with only the idea of a causal relation between the two. Hume saw simply similar objects being followed by similar objects, thus giving him his definition of cause:

'a cause is an object, followed by another, where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second. Or, in other words, where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed'.⁷

There is no third element of causation for us to experience directly in Hume's explanation. Any perceived necessity is merely an illusion created by the mind.

Despite Hume's wish to bring clarity to the philosophical discussion, his arguments do have their own problems. His idea of constant conjunction fails to address coincidental conjunctions that don't give rise to an idea of causation (e.g. the co-op is always out of milk when I visit), so modern discussions will often include reference to the cause being "something that makes the difference".⁸ Philosophers - such as Kripke⁹ - also challenge his view of the contingent nature of all *a posteriori* propositions by arguing for the possibility of

6 *ibid* p382.

7 *ibid* p388.

8 For example, D. Lewis (1973) cited in Crane, Farkas (2011, 391).

9 Crane, Farkas (2011, 305) Introduction to Necessity.

necessary *a posteriori* truths: i.e. necessary truths that have been established *after* empirical investigation (e.g. the fact of the evening star and the morning star being the same object had to be proved through empirical investigation but was no less necessarily true before it was proved, than afterwards).¹⁰ So if, for example, investigation establishes that a particular type of paper will always – in all possible worlds – combust at a particular temperature, then accepting this as a necessary *a posteriori* truth would make Hume’s ‘the contrary of every matter of fact is still possible’ stance incorrect. Despite his admiration for the sciences, no doubt Hume would still argue that this was not deduced *a priori*, and relied on the ‘secret structure’ of objects that could not be observed.¹¹ Any idea of causation remains an idea in our mind and we still do not have any *experience* of causation.

So Hume believed we experience cause and we experience effect as distinct entities but any third element – a causal relation between the two – is an idea in our mind that is only arrived at through inductive reasoning. Given that scenario, no empirical investigation would give us direct sensory experience of causation and Hume, being the ultimate empiricist, could not in good conscience justify any belief that it ever could. There he stood, he could do no other.

1,391 words

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10 This is one of the common examples discussed by Vaidya (2017).

11 D. Hume “Selection from Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding” cited in Crane, Farkas (2011, 384).

