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

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Every idea, according to Hume, can be traced back to the impression from which it is derived. Hence, the knowledge of causation, which Hume famously called "the cement of the universe" (A 35, SBN 661-2), "arises entirely from experience" (E 4.6, SBN 27). How, then, are we to explain Hume's assertion that we cannot have any experience of causation and necessary connection, "a crucial component" of the idea of causation (Beebee, 2016, p. 1)? In order to explain the idea of cause and effect, Hume provides "an empiricist explanation of the derivation of this idea from experience" (Beauchamp and Rosenberg, 1981, p. 1). Rejecting external impressions as a source of the idea of necessary connection and "completely changing the course of the causation debate" (Morris and Brown, 2019), Hume ingeniously introduces a new sentiment, to wit, a "customary connexion" (E 7.30, SBN 78-9), thus finding the sought-for original impression correspondent to the idea of causation. This essay will argue that whereas Hume held that we cannot have any experience of causation due to the lack of a related impression of sensation, the source of the idea of causation can be found in an impression of reflection. In order to trace Hume's search for the sentiment which is "the original of that idea" (E 7.30, SBN 78-9), this essay will examine Hume's account of perceptions. Then, after outlining the argument against the *a priori* justification of causal claims, this essay will analyse Hume's account of derivation of the idea of causation from experience.

Hume's influential contributions to the causation debate are found in two of his works: "A Treatise of Human Nature", which Hume in the "Advertisement"[1] called a "juvenile work", and "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding", which is generally regarded as a revision of *Treatise*. In both works, Hume distinguishes between two kinds of perceptions, different in their degree of "force and vivacity" (E 2.4, SBN 18), to wit, impressions and ideas, the latter being "the faint images" (T 1.1.1.1, SBN 1-2) or "copies" (E 2.5, SBN 19) of the former. Hume's empirical thesis that all our ideas are copies of impressions is usually called the Copy Principle. After expounding the Copy Principle, Hume examines impressions and divides them into "those of Sensation and those of Reflexion" (T 1.1.2.1, SBN 7-8), replacing them with *original* and *secondary* impressions, respectively, in *Treatise* 2.1.1. The later version is considered a more accurate distinction (Owen, 2009, p. 85). While impressions of sensation arise in us from unknown causes, impressions of reflection are derived from our ideas, or "from a reflection on previous experience" (Owen, 2009, p. 85), which is why Hume calls them secondary. The concept of secondary impression is instrumental to Hume's constant conjunction theory of causation.

Hume begins his enquiry into "how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect" (E 4.5, SBN 27) with the proposition that the knowledge of causal relations cannot be discoverable *a priori*, i.e. independently of experience. Indeed, if an entirely unfamiliar object were presented to us, we would not be able, "by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects" (E 4.6, SBN 27), since the effect is a distinct event from the cause. Thus, unassisted by experience, our reason cannot make any causal inferences. Therefore, the mere sight of one billiard ball moving towards another cannot suggest us the one particular event which would follow from that cause (E 4.10, SBN 29-30).

Knowledge of causal relations, however, can be derived from our experience, though experience too cannot show us any necessary connection between the cause and the effect, since contraries of matters of fact are always possible and do not imply contradictions (Morris and Brown, 2019). When we observe external objects, we are unable to discover any tie between them, we can only find that one event continually follows the other. In his "Abstract of A Treatise of Human Nature", Hume identified three

[1] "Advertisement" prefacing the 1777 edition of the "Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects"

“requisite circumstances to the operation of all causes”, to wit, contiguity in time and place, priority in time, and constant conjunction (A 9, SBN 649-50). However, these empirical relations are insufficient to justify causal inferences. The events which we label as cause and effect seem “conjoined, but never connected” (E 7.26, SBN 73-4). Nevertheless, after having seen “several instances of resembling conjunctions” (T 1.3.14.20, SBN 164-5), we infer “a connexion between the sensible qualities and the secret powers” (E 4.21, SBN 36-8) and begin to project our experience to other objects in the future in virtue of the Principle of Uniformity of Nature, the belief that the future will be conformable to the past. According to Hume, our propensity to “project past regularities into the future” is determined by custom (Henderson, 2018).

Before revealing the source of our idea of necessary connection, Hume comes to the apparently paradoxical conclusion that this idea seems meaningless, yet he immediately refutes this view by applying his theory of perception: “*When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only, that they have acquired a connexion in our thought*” (E 7.28, SBN 75-6). Our perception of reoccurring instances of resembling conjunctions thus generates a new impression in our mind giving rise to the idea of necessary connection, which cannot be derived from single instances of conjunction. Hume gives this new impression the title in his *Enquiry*: “*We then feel a new sentiment or impression, to wit, a* ***customary connexion*** *in the thought or imagination between one object and its usual attendant; and this sentiment is the original of that idea which we seek for*” (E 7.30, SBN 78-9).

As can be seen from the above, Hume, applying his copy principle, traces the idea of necessary connection to an impression of reflection. This “genetic account of the acquisition of causal beliefs” (Beauchamp and Rosenberg, 1981, p. 10) reveals the lack of the empirical evidence that would legitimise a cause-effect connection and thus dispels our misconceptions that causal relations hold between the objects themselves. The source of our delusion is a “psychological projection of compulsion from the internal to the external”, which forces us to use causal terms improperly to “refer to the external region” (Beauchamp and Rosenberg, 1981, p. 10). It is not, therefore, the causal inference itself but its alleged explanation that is meaningless. The source of the idea of necessary connection is erroneously found in the impression of sensation, and Hume's “sceptical doubts” concern this common misapprehension.

Having located the source of the idea of necessary connection, Hume provides two famous definitions of cause:

> (Df_1) We may define a cause to be “*an object, followed by another, and where all the 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*.”
> (Df_2) [We may define a cause to be] “*an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other*” (E 7.29, SBN 76-7).

While the first definition, sometimes referred to as the “constant conjunction definition”, focuses on the relevant external impressions, the second definition reveals the genesis of the idea of causation and is psychological in character. Although (Df_2) does not incorporate explicitly the idea of necessary connection, which is essential to causality, its second part captures the “customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant” (E 7.28, SBN 75-6), from which the idea of necessary connection is derived.

Hume's sceptical view concerning causation thus implies that our knowledge of necessary connection between the cause and the effect cannot arise from original impressions. Instead, our idea of necessity is based on causal inferences, which are “to be ascribed to imagination and custom” (Mackie, 1980, p. 3). Although our causal claims cannot be justified *a posteriori*, our knowledge of causation arises from experience, and experience only shows regular conjunction of similar objects without, however, “giving any grounds for believing that it follows necessarily” (Peterson, 1898, p. 43). And it is Hume's distinction

between original and secondary impressions that appears to be the key to understanding his thesis that, while we cannot have any experience of causation, our knowledge of causal relations "arises entirely from experience" (E 4.6, SBN 27).

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