

Hume's metaphysics

Hume's metaphysics (1): causation (*EHU* section 7)

As was argued in the discussion of section 4 of *EHU* Hume rejected the rationalist conception of causation. To recall philosophers in the rationalist tradition held a range of beliefs about causation, including the following: (i) causes *contain* their effects; (ii) the relationship between causes and their effects is one of *entailment*; and (iii) there is a *necessary connection* between causes and their effects. As has been shown Hume was certainly opposed to the first two of these beliefs about causation. Against (i) he argued that the events that we label an effect are completely different from anything contained in the events that we label the cause of that effect. Against (ii) he argued that causes do not entail their effects in any logical sense of 'entail'. In other words, as we have seen previously, Hume holds that causal inferences are not demonstrative in character, but rather are inductive inferences that we are conditioned to make following our experiences of constant conjunctions between events. But what about (iii)? That's what *EHU* 7, entitled 'Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion', is about.

The idea of necessary connection

The first thing to notice is just how seductive the idea is that there is *some kind* of necessary connection (a natural necessity perhaps) between causes and their effects. Despite Hume's critique in section 4 it still seems clear that causal relations imply *some* idea of necessary connexion or power. As Hume puts it, causes produce effects with 'the greatest certainty and strongest necessity' (*EHU* 7: 27). As Hume observes, the idea of causal necessity involves the belief that, given a particular set of conditions, there is only one possible outcome. In other words, it involves the belief that, in causal sequences, there is a sense in which, given the specific set of conditions that existed, things just couldn't have turned out other than they in fact did. In yet other words, it is the belief not simply that the observed effect does occur, but that it must. It is tempting to cash out this must-ness as a necessary connection that is established by a *power* or a *force* in the cause that enables it to produce the effect.

Hume has no doubt that we have the *idea* of a necessary connection. However, he declares, in *EHU* 7:3, that the concepts of power, force, energy and necessary connection (terms which he appears to treat as pretty much equivalent) are among the most 'obscure and uncertain' in metaphysics. So he sets about tidying up the mess by trying to fix 'the precise meaning of these

terms'. But how? The basic guiding principle operative in Section 7 is a *variant* of Hume's *principle of empiricism* introduced in Section 2:

It seems a proposition, which will not admit of much dispute, that all our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, or, in other words, that it is impossible for us to *think* of any thing, which we have not antecedently *felt*, either by our external or internal senses. (EHU 7:4)

The meaning of a term is the idea to which it has been connected. Ultimately, all ideas are copied from impressions. So, for a term to have meaning, it must have its source in an impression. No impression, no meaning. Hume's task, then, is to locate the impression-source of the idea of necessary connexion.

The impression of necessary connection

So our idea of a necessary connection must derive from an impression, and Hume intends to find that impression. For Hume there are two forms of impression: outward and inward impressions. Since Hume intends to consider all sources he looks to both forms of impression in turn.

Outward impression

He starts out by looking in the obvious place, by examining the *impressions of sensation* (outward impression) that we receive when we observe causal sequences. But this move fails. Hume deploys his favourite example: billiard balls.

When we look at two billiard balls collide do we *see* one ball *cause* the other ball to move? Do we *see* one ball exert a *power* over the other? Hume is clear: 'no!'. We see first one ball move, then the two balls come into contact, then one ball move off (perhaps we also hear a noise). Here, we have impressions of at least three perhaps four events, none of which is the impression of a connection between the two balls.

When we look about us toward external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connexion. . . . 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. (EHU 7: 6)

This result, Hume thinks, holds not just for colliding billiard balls, but for all our experiences of causally related events. His conclusion is that our experience of causal sequences affords us no *sensory* (or outward) impression of a necessary connection *in nature*.

Inward impression

Here Hume turns to the example of the ‘will’. Hume asks two questions: (1) might we find the idea of necessary connection in the causal relation between mind (will) and body?; (2) might we find the idea of necessary connexion by looking at how we can conjure up (*cause*) images in our thoughts? Both of these questions relate to apparent *inner* causal powers: we can not only cause our bodies to move but we can cause certain images to appear in our minds. Could we find the impression of necessary connection here? Hume again insists that the answer is a clear ‘no!’. Concerning (1) Hume offers three reasons why the source of the idea of necessary connection cannot be found through a consideration of the causal influence of mind over body:

- We cannot possibly identify the idea of necessary connexion in the relation between mind and body because we (literally) have no idea how the mind *causes* the body to move. As Hume insists the connection between mind and body is the most mysterious in all nature.
- We do not in fact have full control over our bodies. Relating to the first point Hume argues that to have the idea of connection here we would have to be able to explain why we have control over some parts of our bodies and not others. This is a point emphasised in the case of someone with ‘palsy’.
- Even if we consider those parts of our bodies that we clearly can control (e.g., hands) it is clear from our knowledge of anatomy that we do not in fact directly move our (e.g.,) hands but rather we move the muscles and sinews in our hands. But the process by which we do this is utterly mysterious: we simply do not consciously move the muscles in our hands even if it’s true nevertheless that we move our hands.

Hume concludes – he hopes ‘without any temerity’ – that

our idea of power is not copied from any sentiment or consciousness of power within ourselves, when we give rise to animal motion, or apply our limbs to their proper use and office. . . . the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and inconceivable. (EHU 7:15)

Hume turns to question (2): can we identify the source of the idea of necessary connection by considering the power of the mind to conjure up images? Again Hume answers ‘no!’. Again he offers three reasons:

- Just like the minds control over the body when we cause an image to appear before our mind, we have no idea how we do it. Hume again insists that to have a clear idea here we need a clear idea of the cause, the effect, and the relation between them.

- Again just like our control over our bodies, we have limited control over the production of ideas. This is even more pronounced in the case of our sentiments and feelings. To have a clear idea here what's going on we would need a principled way to explain the differences.
- The limited power we do have to produce ideas is itself sensitive to context and situation: when we are ill or hungry we seem to have less control. Without an explanation for this we cannot say we have a clear idea of the underlying mechanism here.

In his arguments against (1) and (2) Hume seems to assume the same principle: we cannot know the connection without knowing how the connection works. Having considered both possible sources Hume goes on to conclude:

All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we can never 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 and inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion seems to be, that we have no idea of connexion or power at all, and that these words are absolutely without any meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings, or common life. (EHU 7:26)

The actual source of our idea of necessary connection

It looks then that following Hume's principle of philosophical significance because there is no legitimate impression of necessary connection (in either outward or inward impression) we have to abandon the very idea. But note that Hume thinks this conclusion only *seems* to follow. Hume declares that there is one possible source for the idea that he has not yet considered. Hume asks, how and when does the idea of necessary connection (causation) arise out of the idea of mere conjunction? Hume starts by stating that we have no idea of a causal relation between two (sorts of) events when we have experienced only *one* instance of a relation between such events; Hume calls any attempt to deny this 'unpardonable temerity'. We only start to talk of genuine causal relations when we through experience we become aware of a *constant conjunction* between the two relevant events. So Hume's task now is to consider the experience of constant conjunction - what does the experience of many similar pairs of events give us that the experience of a single pair of events does not? Here again we can consider both forms of impression. Does the outward impression of constant conjunction add anything? Hume insists not. Nothing is gained by simply adding a number of related pairs of events together - if there is no impression of necessary connection present in our experience of any single pair of events then there could not be an impression of necessary connection in our experience of many such events. What about inward impression? Here Hume appears to get a result!

The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse . . . of two billiard balls, he could not pronounce that the one event was *connected*; but only that it was *conjoined* with the other. *After he has observed*

several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them to be connected. What alteration has happened to give rise to this new idea of *connexion*? Nothing but that he now *feels* these events to be *connected* in his imagination, and can readily foretel the existence of one from the appearance of the other. [This connexion, therefore, which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion] (EHU 7:28)

Hume thus finally identifies an impression that secures the legitimacy of the idea of necessary connection. However this is not an outward impression, i.e., an impression of a power *intrinsic* to the relevant events, rather is an inward impression, i.e., an impression sourced in *introspection*. Hence, it seems – rather counter intuitively - that the impression of necessary connection is sourced *in us* not *in the world*. Hume's point then is that through an operation of the imagination (based in custom and habit) we project an inner feeling of expectation onto the world and thereby come *mistakenly* to think that certain events are necessarily connected.

we feel a customary connexion between ideas, *we transfer that feeling to the objects*; as nothing is more usual than to apply to external bodies every internal sensation, which they occasion. (EHU 7, 29n)

The only relation we identify between events is conjunction. If that conjunction is seen to be constant we begin to form habitual expectations - we come to expect event B after event A, if As have always been followed by Bs. Because of these expectations we come to think that there is a necessary link between these sorts of event but in fact the necessity is internal to us. Note here that there is a strong link between Sections Five and Seven - in Section Five, the psychological explanation of inductive inference referred to operations of imagination involving feelings of expectation that become entrenched in custom and habit; in Section Seven, Hume goes on to identify the impression-source of the very idea of necessary connexion with this feeling of expectation.

The idea of causation: two definitions

In spite of how things look, perhaps there is a way of understanding Hume that doesn't commit him to the terribly counter-intuitive position on causal necessity that we have just sketched. Perhaps what Hume means is not the *metaphysical* claim that there is no causality or necessity in nature, but rather the *epistemological* claim that while there may well be causality and necessity in nature, *all that we have epistemic access to* in causal sequences is regular succession. We then form the idea of a necessary connection due to the operation of custom and the feeling that subsequently accompanies our causal inferences.

This kind of interpretative difficulty is also raised by the infamous two definitions of cause that Hume gives at EHU 7:29. Here's the first:

Similar objects are always conjoined with similar. Of this we have experience. Suitably to this experience, therefore, 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 had never existed.

Here's the second:

The appearance of a cause always conveys the mind, by a customary transition, to the idea of the effect. Of this also we have experience. We may, therefore, suitably to this experience, form another definition of cause, and call it, *an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other*.

Hume backs this up with an example:

We say, for instance, that the vibration of this string is the cause of this particular sound. But what do we mean by that affirmation? We either mean, *that this vibration is followed by this sound, and that all similar vibrations have been followed by similar sounds*: Or, *that this vibration is followed by this sound, and that, upon the appearance of the one the mind anticipates the senses, and forms immediately an idea of the other*. We may consider the relation of cause and effect in either of these two lights; but beyond these, we have no idea of it.

Hume's definitions are obviously not equivalent. The first appears give us a *regularity theory of causation*. It looks like the metaphysical claim that causation in the world is just regular succession, with all the counter-intuitive overtones that that idea carries. But maybe that worry can be diffused somewhat if we interpret the first definition in an epistemological spirit, and say that it gives us a definition of cause 'as experienced by the outward senses' (Beauchamp, p.37). The second definition provides an account of why minds like ours take things in the world to be causally connected in a necessary way. It doesn't actually mention necessity, but the phrase 'always conveys the thought' is surely meant to signal the feeling of inevitability that is at the heart of Hume's account of how we get the idea of necessary connection. What is clear enough is this. For Hume, anything that fulfils the conditions of the first definition of cause will, given minds like ours, fulfil the conditions of the second. Perhaps, then, the two definitions are supposed to provide complementary views on the same phenomenon, both of which are required by Hume's theory.

Finally, two concerns: first, it seems that Hume's theory of causation may prevent us from talking meaningfully about the existence of a single causal sequence, i.e., a case of a genuine cause and its effect that happens only once. On the metaphysical reading of Hume's first definition, there simply are no such things. On the epistemological reading, such things might exist, but we could not form beliefs about them. Secondly, it is unclear that Hume gives us the machinery to tell (1) genuine causal sequences apart from (2) accidents of regular succession on a cosmic scale, i.e., genuine cases of regular succession, where the instances of the two types of event are never related causally.