

9.5 The Notion of Necessary Connection – What is a cause?

9.5.1 A need for a new definition of cause

- We have seen in the previous sections that:
 - We cannot prove that there is an objective causal relation between two objects or events a priori
 - We cannot prove that there is an objective causal relation between two objects or events a posteriori
 - Hence, we cannot ground our belief that similar cause-events will be followed by similar effect-event on anything objective. In other words, the basis for our expectations is not a reasoning based on objective facts.
 - Instead, the origin of our belief that similar cause-events will be followed by similar effect-event is a psychological one: our belief is a feeling that accompanies the ideas of the objects or events that we have repeatedly experienced as conjoined.
- From the analysis above, it follows that:
 1. The notions of cause, effects, and causal connection, are among the most important ones in human understanding: these notions are the basis of all reasonings about matters of facts which go beyond the evidence of immediate perception and memory.
 2. The notions of cause, effect, and causal connection, are among the less well understood by philosophers:
 - philosophers have been taking that our ideas of causes and effects reflects some features of the world which they have called power, force, energy or necessary connexion
 - we have shown however that the ideas of causes and effects do not rely of simple impressions of objective features of the world

So: we are in need of a proper definition of cause.
- The definition of cause is the opportunity to check on the method for philosophy that Hume advocates, namely, using the copy principle as a criterion of meaning.

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The point is then to find which impressions are the basis for our idea of cause and causal connections.

These impressions will exhaust the meaning of our ideas.

9.5.2 Necessary Connection: negative phase

Project: Examination of the impression that correspond to the idea of necessary connection.

Strategy: Investigation of all the sources from which such an impression can derive

We know we have two sources: sensation and reflection

1. First source: the external objects

In this case, the idea of cause would come from sensation

- we do not experience necessary connections in external objects
- all we experience is that one event follows another
- same argument as before: from the first occurrence of a given event, we cannot conjecture what will be the effect

2. Second source: our mind

- Hypothesis: we get the idea of power/force/cause from the consciousness of the power of will.

In other words: what we experience as our will is the experience of power/force/cause. From that experience, we can get the idea of power/force/cause

In this case, the idea of cause would come from reflection

- There are two kinds of thing on which we believe our mind has some power: our body and our ideas. Hume shows that we get the impression of a necessary connection in none of these.

- We have no experience of the power of mind on bodily organs per se: all we experience is the sequence: will – effect. The means by which the mind acts upon the organs are unknown to us
 - (a) we do not understand how the mind can influence matter and vice versa

- (b) we do not master the power of the mind in the same way in all organs
- (c) we know that the means by which the effect follows the will are very complicated and apparently arbitrary

Note the assumptions here: we are not entitled to say that we have experienced a connection unless:

1. we master such connections
2. we understand the intermediates

“If the power were felt, it must be known: were it known, its effects must also be known”

SO: our idea of power is not copied from our experience of the power of our minds on our body

- We have no experience of the power of mind on ideas per se: same arguments:
 - (a) We do not understand the means by which an idea follows our will to conceive it
 - (b) Our power on our ideas is limited – we do not master this
 - (c) Our power varies with factors the influence of which we do not understand either.

Note that we need the same assumptions here

SO: our idea of power is not copied from our experience of the power of our minds on our ideas

SO: Hume has shown that we cannot find any impression to which trace back our idea of causal power and necessary connection.

We have to find out where it comes from.

The assumptions were:

1. the copy principle
2. we do not experience a cause unless we master its consequences and understand the intermediates

9.5.3 Necessary connection: positive phase

There is no impression from which we can derive the notion of cause: is it meaningless? Should we stop talking about causes altogether? Hume gives his account:

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- From the repetition of the conjunction, we are determined to imagine a connection
 - custom
 - a particular feeling or sentiment
- Two definitions of cause:
 1. External: a cause is “an object, followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second”
 2. Internal: a cause is “an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other”
 3. They constitute the proper definition of cause *together*
- SO: necessary connections are only in our minds !

This is going much further than before. Before, we were told that we cannot prove the existence of a causal connection in the world. This alone does not imply that causal connections do not exist. Now, we are told that causal connection are only in our minds, the result of some natural tendency in our brains. This implies that there are no causal connection in the world !!

- Discussion: To what extend can a Humean be a scientist?

Does Hume’s argument imply that

 1. there are no connections between events in the world?
 2. there may be such connections but we do not have experience of them – such connections remains unknown to us?
 3. there are such connections but we do not have experience of them – such connections remains unknown to us?
 4. there are no necessary connections/immutable laws of nature in the world?
 5. there may be necessary connections but they remain unknown to us?
 6. there are necessary connections but they remain unknown to us?

9.6 Hume on Scepticism

9.6.1 Scepticism concerning the evidence of the senses and the existence of the external world

Scepticism 1 – Descartes

- Descartes:
 - scepticism as a *precaution* – before inquiry
 - *universal* scepticism, including faculties
 - base veracity of faculties on 1 original principle + reasoning
- Objection:
 - EITHER there is no principle more evident and convincing than what is coming from our faculties
 - OR if there were one, our only way to grasp it would be by these very faculties that we do not trust

SO: The Cartesian Doubt, were it possible (which Hume denies), would be incurable
- Note: What does Hume mean by “were it possible to be attained by any human creature”? He is implying that, in fact, it is NOT possible to doubt everything in the way that Descartes tells us to do.
- Qualification: Hume advocates a weakened version of Descartes’ method for philosophy:
 - be suspicious about prejudices and opinions
 - base knowledge on clear and evident principles
 - proceed by cautious deductive reasoning
 - check on the conclusions
 - examine all the consequences
- Important Note: of course, what counts as clear and evident for Hume is NOT what counts as clear and evident for Descartes !! For Descartes, a clear and distinct idea is grasped through the mind only, whereas for Hume, a clear and distinct idea is a direct copy of a sensation.

Scepticism 2 – Montaigne

- Montaigne (for example)
 - scepticism as a *result* of inquiry
 - scepticism concerning:
 1. mental faculties
 2. Senses
 3. Maxims of common life
 4. Metaphysics and Theology
- Non convincing arguments for scepticism about the evidence of the senses: the unreliability of senses

Hume's answer: use reason to correct the senses

Is this a satisfactory answer? Why? Why not?
- Convincing argument: the problem of representation
 1. Natural instinct: the external world is objective and exists as it appears to us

The Representation Thesis:

(A) our sensations are the result of the influence of external bodies on our sense organ

(B) this influence is such that our sensations are “similar” to the external bodies
 2. Philosophy contradicts our natural instinct:
 - our sensations are only images, perceptions in the mind, representations of external bodies
 - we have no way to prove that these perceptions correspond and resemble external bodies
 3. Arguments undermining the representation thesis:

(A) dreams etc.: sensations without external objects

(B) causal influence of bodies on mind is incomprehensible

4. Attempts to save the representation thesis defeated:

- proof by experience: impossible
 - proof by veracity of God (Descartes is the target): contradiction (why do the senses deceive us?) or circle (how to prove that God exists and is not a deceiver)
- Assessment: this kind of scepticism is convincing. We find ourselves in a *dilemma*:
 - EITHER we accept the teachings of nature and then take *all there is are our sensations* (Berkeley)
 - OR we postulate that our perceptions are representations of external bodies but *we cannot prove it either by experience or reasoning*
 - Hume is, of course, going to defend the second alternative: we should follow our natural instinct and adopt the representation thesis, but accept also that we cannot prove, either a priori or a posteriori, that this thesis is true.

This view is, according to Hume, both reasonable and beneficial (see part III on the mitigated scepticism)

Scepticism 3 – Berkeley

- Berkeley:
 - everyone agrees that secondary qualities are in the mind only
 - the arguments for which we all accept that secondary qualities are in the mind only also apply to primary qualities
- Appeal to an “abstract” notion of extension?
 - such notion is unintelligible: unknown, indeterminate, inexplicable something
 - HUME ON ABSTRACT IDEAS: they don’t exist – we only have ideas about particulars – see also note 33
- SUMMARY of the convincing objections against the evidence of the senses and the existence of the external world:

1. DILEMMA for the representation thesis:
 - If we rely only on our natural instinct (take our sensations as true), then we must accept a world of sensation à la Berkeley, and reject the teachings of our reason (reject that the information that we get from our senses should be corrected by reason)
 - If we rely on our reason, then we must reject our natural instinct, and we have nothing to replace it as a basis for secured knowledge
2. All sensible qualities, both primary and secondary, are in the mind only
 - All arguments that apply to secondary qualities apply to primary qualities
 - Appeal to abstraction is no good for the sceptic

9.6.2 Against Excessive Scepticism

Excessive scepticism concerning rational knowledge

- From the outset, Hume formulates the classical objection against scepticism:

It is impossible, because self-contradictory, to prove that reasoning is fallible through reasoning

- Hume then examines some of the most well known arguments that are supposed to support scepticism concerning reasonings:
 - infinite divisibility of space – paradoxes of the infinite
 - infinite divisibility of time

Reference of interest: Zeno's paradoxes (you can find a short and clear presentation in Salmon, *Space, Time and Motion*)

In both cases, "absurd opinions" are supported by clear and valid reasonings. This makes us suspicious about the deductions of reason.

Excessive concerning empirical knowledge

- Popular excessive scepticism – no empirical knowledge is attainable for the senses are unreliable – is tenable only in the Schools, that is to say, not in everyday practice

- Philosophical scepticism – no empirical knowledge is attainable for empirical knowledge relies on causal reasoning which we cannot justify – is tenable
- Popular excessive scepticism is neither useful nor beneficial
 - does not produce any conviction (Copernic vs. Ptolemee)
 - does not involve any ethical behavior (Stoics vs. Epicureans)

9.6.3 Hume's Mitigated scepticism

Four characteristics of Hume's mitigated scepticism

1. Hume's scepticism is a means to fight dogmatism and reveal instead:

the whimsical condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them.

We humans are prompt to make our mind, to defend our ideas against everybody else and to despise or hate the ones who disagree with us.

Hume's view teaches some kind of modesty

2. Philosophy: restricted to the domain of experience

philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected.

Theology and Cosmogony are taken out of the domain of philosophy

3. Abstract sciences: restricted to the domain of quantities and numbers

Any abstract discussion of objects that are neither quantities nor numbers are vain verbal disputes (disputes that are based on disagreement regarding definitions of the words, not their meaning)

4. Empirical science: no demonstration is possible – only probable reasonings.

Through a priori reasonings, we can entertain about any system of coherent propositions. None of such systems can be proved to be false, since they are not contradictory. All such systems are equally plausible. They are all equally implausible as well!

5. burning worthless books ?

