

# Hume: Causality & Subjectivity

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David Hume challenged rationalist epistemological theory, specifically the predominance of the "Principle of Sufficient Reason," by asserting that it is impossible to truly know the causal connection between two events. In doing so he posited the empiricist position that it is only through experience, not reason, that one can obtain knowledge of the world. However, it remains a debate even today whether Hume was questioning whether or not an event causes another, or if it merely follows it in regular succession, regardless of the event's intelligibility to human consciousness. It is this difference in interpretation, between what has been labeled both positivism and skeptical realism that has emerged as a serious debate regarding Humean thought in the past twenty years.

The positivist approach is rooted in Hume's skepticism. It states that there is very little that we can understand regarding causality, outside of falling into regular patterns. Recently the skeptical realists have rejected this idea, known as the "regularity theory," replacing it with a notion of dependence between events that goes beyond regular succession. However, a closer reading of Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*<sup>1</sup> reveals the importance of subjective interpretation in his epistemology, an idea that fits in better with a third approach, that of anti-realism as it is coined by Simon Blackburn. I will review and cri-

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tique the main two approaches in the *Enquiry*, argue that Hume's empiricism is metaphysically subjective and how that fits with anti-realism, and finally, discuss the ramifications of such on epistemology.

Before embarking on a critical assessment of the two primary schools of thought on the issue, it behooves us to first closely examine what Hume said, and proceed from there. To do so I will be focusing exclusively on the *Enquiry*, as Hume himself declared it to be an improvement over his *Treatise*.<sup>2</sup> In section 7, "The Idea of Necessary Connexion," Hume dismisses the rationalist principle of sufficient reason:

"All events seem entirely loose and separate. One event follows another; but we never can 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 sense or inward sentiment. The necessary connexion *seems* to be, that we have no idea of connexion or power at all. And that these words are absolutely without meaning, when employed either in philosophical reasonings, or common life... it is impossible for us, by any sagacity or penetration, to discover, or even conjecture, without experience, what event will result from it, or to carry our foresight beyond that object, which is immediately present to the memory and senses."<sup>3</sup>

Hume goes on to argue that the connection between cause and effect is but a feeling in the mind based on the custom or habit of observing similar events occurring in the same way over and over that gives us the idea of necessary connection. That is, the idea of causality is simply that, an idea, formed in the mind from the data of past experience, and not inherent in the event itself. There are two important ramifications here. The first of course is that every event does not have a cause that can be deduced *a priori*, consistent with Hume's overall attack on rationalism. The second, and perhaps more interesting, is the as-

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sertion that it is only after an idea of connection has been formed in the mind after the repeated witnessing of the same impression do we possess the idea of causality. This is derived in part from Hume's copy principle: "Every idea is copied from some preceding impression or sentiment; and where we cannot find any impression, we may be certain there is no idea."<sup>4</sup> Let me return to this idea of causality shortly.

Hume concludes the chapter<sup>5</sup> with his famous two definitions of causality. Hume admits that they are inconvenient in that the only definitions of cause that can be formed are from something foreign to it, yet he claims a more perfect definition cannot be attained. They are:

- 1) "An object, followed by another, and 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.
- 2) An object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other."<sup>6</sup>

There is some dispute as to what Hume meant with these definitions. Hume states in the *Treatise* that the two are a 'philosophical' definition and a 'natural' definition, in that order.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Richards determined that the first really is a definition, while the second is a statement of the conditions under which one believes in causality.<sup>8</sup> J.A. Robinson is in agreement with the first part, but holds that the second is better regarded as a condition in which belief in causality in fact occurs as opposed to a more normative condition.<sup>9</sup> Edward Craig considers both views and correctly argues that both definitions are descriptions of the circumstances that lead one to believe in causality.<sup>10</sup> Craig realized that in Humean thought a definition is not the strict meaning of a term in the modern sense, as is argued by logical positivists, but rather a process of reducing ideas to the initial impressions the ideas were copied from, more description than definition. In the case of defining causality, the two definitions reflect the two ways of experiencing causality, ideas copied from

the impression of necessary connection. Craig, however, struggled with the extensional equivalence of the two definitions, namely, "if one can be true when the other is not, how can they be called 'views of the same object'?"<sup>11</sup> This is an issue other modern philosophers have grappled with in interpreting Hume's thought.<sup>12</sup> Craig, despite the realization of causality as experience *prima facie*, is unsure whether the definitions are to be considered epistemologically or ontologically, in the form of "what a cause is."<sup>13</sup> I think for our purposes though, the realization that neither is a definition in the technical sense, but could perhaps be better described as descriptions, will suffice for now.

Before we depart from Hume to focus on interpretation of his work, I would like to add one final note on Hume's idea of belief. Justin Broackes has argued that Hume actually presents three kinds of conceptions of belief.<sup>14</sup> I will follow Broackes' line of reasoning in lieu of Hume's discussion of belief in section 5 of the *Enquiry* and conclude that belief is "a steady and vivid conception of an idea."<sup>15</sup> That is, it is a sentiment, dependent not on the will, more intense and steady than what the imagination alone is able to attain.<sup>16</sup> This poses a philosophical problem for Hume, in that where do beliefs come from internally in his separation of perceptions? Belief for him is not an impression, nor is it an idea, as it goes beyond that in that it is a conception of an idea with a steady and vivid feeling attached, in other words, an idea that feels like an impression. Externally he says their source is custom or habit formed from the constant conjunction of two events in a consistent causal relationship. But custom does not carry with it necessarily steadiness and vivacity; instead it would be better characterized as an inference than a belief. So what then is the shift from merely viewing such a conjunction to belief in its necessary occurrence, if all perceptions of the mind are either ideas or impressions?<sup>17</sup> Hume later argues that "this sentiment (of customary connection) is the original of that idea" (of causality), thereby stating that belief is an impression, which gives rise to our idea of causality vis-à-vis the copy principle.<sup>18</sup> But this contradicts his earlier statement that belief is a conception, more intense and steady than fictions, each of which he al-

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ludes are the product of the association of ideas.<sup>19</sup> I believe the second is erroneous, as the first fits much neater with a temporal rise in belief, and the situation of belief as a “matter of fact” that stretches beyond our memory and senses.<sup>20</sup>

There are now three concepts we are dealing with in interpreting Hume’s theory of causality: his idea of it, the two “descriptions” of it, and the nature of our belief in it. Our idea of causality stems from experiencing conjoined events, translated into two connected ideas through the copy principle. This is entirely accurate when viewing the mechanistic functioning of events. When I push the pedals of a bicycle a series of chains and gears rotate the rear wheel forward. However, Hume is not discussing the workings of a bike but rather human perception of the world, and our ability to organize and make sense of what we see. That is why Hume says that although we are not logically justified to believe in causality, without it we would go mad. Hume is more interested in explaining how we understand things to be, or believe things to be, as opposed to what reality is.

The aforementioned definitions highlight this distinction further. As was mentioned earlier they could be understood better as descriptions than definitions. Such an understanding resolves the difficulty in having two definitions of the same thing, especially if a no more perfect definition cannot be attained. So what exactly do these definitions describe? Immediately it becomes apparent that even though an observer is not mentioned, both seem to presuppose its existence. The first definition describes objects similar to one another, a distinction that requires an outside observer in order to undertake the comparison; otherwise you would merely have two different objects. It takes a third being, the subject, to experience the two objects and deem them to be similar or dissimilar. The second definition contains a thinker who associates one object with the thought of another. So although both discuss causality in lieu of a subject, the first focuses on the impression of causality while the second focuses on its idea, which is of course entirely consistent with the mind being divided into two classes of perceptions. The definitions thus reflect the two ways *our mind* can perceive causality, as an

impression or as an idea, as opposed to two ways causality occurs.

What is interesting in the definitions is the unrestrained individual ability to determine what constitutes similarity, and what can be associated with an idea. The source of each is the same, the experience we have interacting within the world. Hume is correct in that knowledge cannot be deduced *a priori* through reason alone, but what must be acknowledged, however, is the uniqueness of every individual's experience. At every moment our consciousness is bombarded not just with one experience, but *many* experiences simultaneously, as each of our senses detects multiple stimulations of various degrees. For example, as I type this I audibly detect not only the music I am playing, but the clacking of the keyboard reacting to my fingers, the sound of a TV playing in the background, the rumble of my stomach, and the whistling of the wind outside my window. Each of these adds an element by overall experience, a cumulative activity that grows with each passing moment. As a result, my cumulative experience is uniquely my own, so much so that if another person were to engage in the exact same activity as I am, say watching a sunset, it would be comprehended in two entirely different ways, as each of us would be bringing a different memory of perception to the sunset experience. A religious person may think immediately of the awesome power of God, and connect the sunset with other religious experiences, while a scientist would connect it to other ideas associated with planetary rotation and a painter would begin mentally reconstructing the sunset in his mind so as to be able to reproduce it on canvas. So whereas we are sharing in the common experience of the sunset, and can relate that experience to one another through the common vehicle of language, our experiences are uniquely our own, a fact that would become apparent to us through utilizing language in describing our unique interpretation of a common experience.

So too are our beliefs, which, as conceptions of ideas, are our ways of making sense of the world, as "matters of fact" beyond the present. Being derived from the relation of cause and

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effect, they are products of the two ways our mind perceives causality, and subjected to the same uniqueness of experience that constitutes each individual, in the way each sorts and orders acquired ideas. This explains how similarly constituted people in a similar situation can have radically different beliefs, their experience, unique to them, reveals stark differences in approach to a similar event. For example, a husband and wife could each witness a different shooting death, one a senseless crime and the other an act of self defense, and could come away from their respective experience with a different belief in guns, gun control, and public safety. It is the human interpretation of the act, not the act itself, associated with other ideas (of gruesomeness, justice, etc) with the steady and vivid feeling attached of revulsion, relief, etc that forms our beliefs of the way the world is. Again, I think it is important to consider that in a discussion on belief and knowledge of causality, we are considering a human element, not a mechanistic ordering of the universe more apt to be included in a defense of rationalism. Kant's later explanation of the difference between noumena and phenomena makes this distinction clearer.

When I say "I" it must be acknowledged that it is a term of convenience. In actuality, the self is at best a belief, created from our experiences to give us a basis of understanding the world. Such a concept of self confirms our impression on uniqueness, in that my experience is mine alone, in its cumulative totality completely different from anyone else's. Gilles Deleuze asserts the world as well is a term of convenience, a fiction of the imagination.<sup>21</sup> Hume regarded the self to be not as a separate and distinct substance, ala Cartesianism, but rather a collection of impressions and their corresponding associated ideas, known as a "bundle theory" of self.<sup>22</sup> I bring this up to anticipate any objection to the idea of subjectivity through Hume's disjointed notion of identity. In fact, it is the lack of essence to the self and the world that leaves individual subjectivity as the only method of making sense of anything, as a world that supplies knowledge without encroaching on my idea of myself as Self. "The impressions of sensation only form the mind, giv-

ing it merely an origin, whereas the impressions of reflection (the principles of association of ideas) constitute the subject in the mind, diversely qualifying the mind as subject."<sup>23</sup> Without individual interpretation it would be impossible for the mind to ever organize its impressions to form a system that we believe to be the self. In other words, even though the self does not exist as a separate and distinct substance, we believe in the idea of such, and such a belief is derived from the collection of impressions and ideas organized into a system I call "me." For example, I believe I exist, and that I am an intelligent, open-minded, humanist. Whether or not this is true is irrelevant, what is relevant is that I believe it, and that this belief stems from the bundle of ideas I have about myself that I have chosen to represent me, regardless of how I actually react to the world.

So how does this fit within the prevailing theories of Hume's philosophy? As I mentioned earlier, the primary approach to Hume until only recently was to consider him a positivist. This viewpoint held that there is very little we can ever understand regarding the causal connection between events, other than the observation that events have a regular pattern to them. This opinion, known as stated earlier as the "regularity theory" took its cue from the first definition of causality: 'An object, followed by another, and where all objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second;' and Hume's earlier dismissal of necessary connection:

"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; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other."<sup>24</sup>

Richards and Robinson were of the positivist view, evident by their reliance on strict truth in their view of the accuracy of the first definition of causality and agnosticism towards the second. Among more recent philosophers Barry Stroud stands out as one as well.<sup>25</sup> This was the dominant view until recently,



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power, or 'natural necessity', or 'Causation',"<sup>26</sup> regardless of our awareness of the "secret power"<sup>27</sup> of connection. This view, coined "skeptical realism" by Wright,<sup>28</sup> holds that there is "some thick notion of dependence between events that goes beyond regular succession...even if it will be one about whose nature and extent we are doomed to ignorance."<sup>29</sup> They take seriously the numerous passages that allude to the existence of such a power.<sup>30</sup> Strawson argues that Hume's skepticism would not allow him to make a dubious ontological statement like "all that causation actually is, in the objects, is regular succession" which for Strawson "is enough to refute the standard view" (positivism).<sup>31</sup> He goes on to correctly point out the impossibility of obtaining a perfect definition of causality "because of our ignorance of its nature", for if causation were just regular succession there would be no imperfection.<sup>32</sup> Smith perhaps phrases it better:

"He (Hume) is not committed to a denial of the possibility or even actuality of real connexion, but only to the contention that as such it is beyond our powers of comprehension."<sup>33</sup>

Thus, the skeptical realists have refuted the positivist claim of regular succession. But is this itself an accurate interpretation of Humean thought? Blackburn argues it is not. According to him, skeptical realists would have to characterize Hume's position on what he refers to as either the nexus or the strait jacket.<sup>34</sup> The nexus is the idea that if  $\alpha\lambda\phi\alpha$  were to occur,  $\beta\epsilon\tau\alpha$  would necessarily follow, in a dependent, causal relationship. But if this were so, then it must be part of the natural order, immune from Hume's critique of the uniformity of nature. Blackburn calls this desire a straitjacket on the possible course of nature, and a 'time-proof connexion', thereby rigidly governing how things could ever fall out.<sup>35</sup> The demands of such limitations make it impossible to consider a realist approach in light of the importance of Hume's skepticism.

Blackburn's solution is to introduce a third interpretation,

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that Hume's philosophy is a form of anti-realism, an underused concept that essentially means that there is no universal reality, only individual truths. Unlike the skeptical realists, who claim there is such reality, in the form of necessary connection that remains unknown to us (the skeptical side of the term), Blackburn maintains that not only can we not know causality, but the experience of such is individualized, which fits well with the argument of Hume's epistemology being subjective. Blackburn defends this viewpoint by saying that:

"upon experience of such a regular succession the mind changes... functionally: it becomes organized so that the impression of the antecedent event gives rise to the idea of a subsequent event. No new aspect of the world is revealed by this change: it is strictly non-representative, just like the onset of a passion, with which Hume frequently compares it. But once it takes place we think of the events as thickly connected; we become confident of the association, we talk of causation, and of course we act and plan in the light of that confidence."<sup>36</sup>

Such a shift in the organization of ideas can only be done on an individual basis, as I have already argued that experience, the source of the mind's ideas, is always individually unique. He goes on to apply this idea to the two definitions, arguing that the first describes the contribution of the world in so far as we can apprehend it (our impression of causality), and the second describes the functional difference in the mind that apprehends the regularity (our idea of causality), acknowledging that each represent different aspects of our awareness of causality and not to be viewed as strict definitions in the positivist sense.<sup>37</sup>

What are the implications of such a shift in opinion in regards to Hume's epistemology? His skepticism of universal truths combined with an individualized theory of knowledge aims at the heart of rationalism, and only in this form can it ultimately be successful in addressing in a systematic way how one can know anything, as opposed to how everyone can know one

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thing. Of course, such freedom from limitation and openness to interpretation frightened some later philosophers, and prompted Kant's defense of metaphysics and attempt at reconciling individual existence with universal truth. Hume's philosophy stretches beyond Kant's efforts, however, as it predates a post-modernism it may very well have found a home in. The similarities between the two in regards to their dismissal of meta-narratives and openings for a pluralist theory of truth is a topic that is begging to be explored further, in another work. For our purposes it suffices to conclude by saying that Hume successfully introduced the subject into modern epistemology, an omission curious when asking "what do *we* know," and did so systematically.

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### Notes

1. Beauchamp, Tom ed. *David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1999), hereafter abbreviated as *Enquiry* in the text and E with the appropriate section and paragraph in notes.
2. "Henceforth, the author desires, that the following pieces may alone be regarded as containing his philosophical sentiments and principles." E, Advertisement
3. E7, 26-27
4. E7, 30
5. He ends the similar section in the *Treatise* with essentially the same two cryptic definitions, interesting not only in their placement within the discussion but also in their obscurity. Hume, David, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I, iii, 14
6. E7, 29
7. *Treatise*, I, iii, 14

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8. Richards, T. J., *Hume's Two Definitions of "Cause"*, in *Hume*, ed. V.C. Chappell, (London: Macmillan, 1968), pgs. 148-161
  9. Robinson, J. A., *Hume's Two Definitions of "Cause" Reconsidered*, in *Hume*, ed. V.C. Chappell, (London: Macmillan, 1968), pgs. 162-168
  10. Craig, Edward, *The Idea of Necessary Connexion*, from *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987) in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, (New York: Oxford Press, 2002), pg. 224
  11. Ibid, pg. 224
  12. Don Garrett, for one, wrestles at length with the validity of different ways of approaching conflict between the two definitions. Garrett, Don, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1997), pgs. 96-117
  13. Craig, pg. 227
  14. Broackes, Justin, *Hume, Belief, and Personal Identity*, in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, (New York: Oxford Press, 2002), pg. 188
  15. Ibid, pg. 188
  16. E5, 11-13
  17. E2, 3
  18. E7, 30
  19. E5, 13-14
  20. "All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause* and *Effect*. By means of that relation alone we can go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses." E4, 4
  21. Deleuze, Gilles, *Empiricism and Subjectivity: An Essay on Hume's Theory of Human Nature*, (New York: Columbia Press, 1991), pg. 18
  22. *Treatise*, I, iv, 6
  23. Deleuze, pg. 97
  24. E7, 6; see also E7, 26 quoted earlier in this paper.
  25. "All that ever happens in the world independently of mind is that one thing succeeds another and resembles other instances that followed similar antecedents." Stroud, Barry, *The Quest for Reality*, (New York: Oxford Press, 2000), pg. 11
  26. Strawson, Galen, *David Hume: Objects and Power*, from *The Secret Connexion*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, (New York: Oxford Press, 2002), pg. 231
  27. Hume's term for the unknown connection between events, E4, 16

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28. Wright, John, *The Skeptical Realism of David Hume*, (Manchester: Manchester Press, 1983)
  29. Blackburn, Simon, *Hume and Thick Connexions*, from *Essays in Quasi-Realism*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1993) in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, (New York: Oxford Press, 2002), pg. 260
  30. such as: "the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe, that it will exist. This connection, 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." E7, 28; Quoted by Craig, pg. 220
  31. Strawson, pg. 235-6
  32. Ibid, pg. 254-5
  33. Smith, N. Kemp, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, (London: Macmillan, 1941), pg. 398
  34. Blackburn, pg. 266
  35. Ibid, pg. 264
  36. Ibid, pg. 269
  37. Ibid, pg. 270
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