HUME ON CAUSATION

HIS ATTACK ON HIS PREDECESSORS

Hume begins his discussion of causality by pointing out:

(i) That there can be no *a priori demonstration* of a necessary connection between a cause and its effect, because any cause can be conceived without its effect, and vice versa.

(ii) That, contrary to what many of his predecessors had assumed, we also have no *perception* of a necessary connection between the cause and the effect.

For example, when we see two billiard balls colliding, although there are impressions of the two balls, of their motions, of their collision, and of their flying apart, there is no impression of any alleged necessity by which the cause brings about the effect.

Moreover, he objects to those who appeal to the power of God to cause things to happen on the grounds that they give us "… no insight into the nature of this power or connection." [*Treatise*]

And finally, he also rejects his predecessors' attempts to explain the link between causes and effects in terms of powers, active forces, etc. "The terms *efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connection,* and *productive quality,* are all nearly synonymous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest." [*Treatise*]

In short, for the first time, Hume manages to completely secularize the notion of causality.

AN INTERPRETATIVE PROBLEM

HUME'S TWO DEFINITIONS OF CAUSE:

In the *Inquiry* he formulates these as follows:

a. **"… 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." [p. 521]**

b. **"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." [p. 521]**

While in the *Treatise*:

He claims that "There may two definitions be given of this relation, which are only different by their presenting a different view of the same object, and making us consider it either as a philosophical or as a natural relation; either as a comparison of ideas, or as an association betwixt them."

And then he provides the following "definitions" of cause:

a. "An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are placed in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter."

b. "An object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other."

These two definitions are, however, not only not synonymous they don't even have the same extensions. How then are they related?

The best view here seems to be to construe Hume as saying that the first definition is the real one and the second one is not really a definition at all.

Rather, what he seems to be doing in the "second definition" is explaining how we come by the idea of a necessary connection between the two events when there is none in nature.

Thus, the essence of necessity "… is something that exists in the mind, not in the objects" and the supposed objective necessity that his predecessors believed existed in nature, is actually spread by the mind onto the world.

So what he is evidently trying to do is to explain why people think that the causal relation described in *a* above is one of necessity, and his answer to this is that it is because the relation is a "natural" one. But what does it mean to say that the causal relation is a "natural" one?

The causal relation is *natural* iff, if A causes B then if A and B are observed then the idea of A is associated with the idea of B (i.e., the association of the idea of B with A is psychologically unavoidable).

And how does he unpack the definition in *a*? X *causes* Y iff (1) Y occurs immediately after X (i.e., the succession condition); (2) Y occurs in the immediate geographical neighborhood of X (i.e., the contiguity condition), and (3) All particular occurrences which are like X are such that a particular occurrence like Y occurs immediately afterwards in the immediate vicinity.

"Thus in advancing we have insensibly discovered a new relation betwixt cause and effect, when we least expected it, and were entirely employed upon another subject. This relation is their constant conjunction. Contiguity and succession are not sufficient to make us pronounce any two objects to be cause and effect, unless we perceive that these two relations are preserved in several instances. We may now see the advantage of quitting the direct survey of this relation, in order to discover the nature of the necessary connection which makes so essential a part of it…. But if we go further, and ascribe a power or necessary connection to these objects, this is what we can never observe in them, but must draw the idea of it from what we feel internally in contemplating them." [*Treatise*]

SOME PROBLEMS WITH HUME'S ANALYSIS:

1. It is unverifiable.

2. Aren't there cases where we assert that X causes Y even though we have only one experience where contiguity and succession have occurred? To use Wittgenstein's example, I only need to count the letters in the word 'Bismarck' *once* to conclude, not just the universal truth, but the *necessity*, of the proposition that tokens of the word 'Bismarck' have eight letters.

3. Most modern physicists reject the contiguity condition in at least some cases.

4. And what about precedence? Why does Hume claim that the cause must be earlier than the effect?

In the *Treatise* he provides an argument for this. It proceeds roughly as follows:

Suppose that a state of affairs A causes B. Now the only time-slice of A that can cause B is the *last* one that *could* have done so; for the passage of time by itself has no causal efficacy. But if the *last possible* time-slice of A that can cause B is the one that occurs *simultaneously* with B, then *only* what is simultaneous with B can cause it. But then this applies to *A* as well; and so we reach the conclusion that if *any* causes are simultaneous with their effects then they *all* must be, and so everything would happen at once.

But it isn't clear why the passage of time has no causal efficacy.

Moreover, when we ask, "Why can't some causes be later than their effects?" Hume's only answer seems to be that this is just part of the meaning of the word 'cause'. But this hardly seems helpful, and some philosophers—e.g., Michael Dummett in "Bringing about the Past"—have argued that this is merely a reflection of the experience of agency on which the concept is modeled.

5. Finally, perhaps we should remind ourselves that Hume's analysis depends on his twofold distinction between truths of reason, which are analytic *a priori,* and matters of fact, which are synthetic *a posteriori*. If we hold, as Kant, for example, does, that there are synthetic *a priori* truths, then we may be able to maintain not only that the claim that every event has a cause falls into this category, but also that some specific causal claims do as well.

OTHER THEORIES OF CAUSATION:

There are two other features of Hume's analysis of causation which have been questioned:

1. He analyzes singular causation in terms of general causation. A specific event *a* causes a specific event *b* because events of type A, of which *a* is an instance, cause events of type B, of which b is an instance.

2. He analyzes the relation in terms of constant conjunction.

The Probabilistic Theory of Causation: **This theory, in contrast, contends that when we say that *a* causes *b* we are, contrary to Hume, only asserting a probability. So the claim that smoking causes cancer asserts only that one who smokes will probably get cancer.**

The Agency Theory of Causation: **This theory asserts instead that we come to an understanding of the concept of causality directly through the realization that we can manipulate events directly.**

HUME ON RELIGION

Toward the end of *Section VIII*, Hume raises the issue of why, if God is conceived to be the author of good, He is not also equally conceived the author of evil. He concludes by saying that "To reconcile the indifference and contingency of human actions with prescience or to defend absolute decrees and yet free the Deity from being the author of sin has been found up to now to exceed all the power of philosophy." [p. 532]

In *Section X*, he then attacks our belief in miracles:

He opens by claiming that the issue is one of matter of fact, and that in such cases "Though experience is our only guide in reasoning … it must be acknowledged that this guide is not altogether infallible, but in some cases is apt to lead us astray." Nonetheless, the wise man "proportions his belief to the evidence."

He then defines a miracle as "… a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined to be." [p. 536]

He cites, as an example, that although "It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die all of a sudden, because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other, has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle that a dead man should come to life, because that has never been observed in any age or country."

He identifies several additional reasons for doubting them:

Although those who attest to them may be men of "good sense, education, and learning," they may still be open to delusion.

He notes that our passion of surprise and wonder "gives a tendency towards the belief of those events from which it is derived."

Moreover, "… it forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors…."

Finally, they are often opposed by an infinite number of other witnesses, and the "authority" of one conflicts with that of the others.

He concludes that "Upon the whole, then, it appears that no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof, and that, even supposing it amounted to a proof, it would be opposed by another proof derived from the nature of the fact which it would endeavor to establish… we may establish it as a maxim, that no human testimony can have such force as to prove a miracle and make it a just foundation for any such system of religion." [pp. 541f.]

No wonder then that the English thought he was an atheist.

HUME ON SUBSTANCE

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST SUBSTANCE:

P1) **"We have no perfect idea of anything but a perception."**

P2) **"A substance is entirely different from a perception."**

C) **"We have … no idea of a substance." [p. 559]**

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST INHESION:

P1) **"Inhesion in something is supposed to be requisite to support the existence of our perceptions."**

P2) **"Nothing appears requisite to support the existence of a perception."**

C) **"We have … no idea of inhesion."**

Hume's Conclusion:

"What is the possibility then of answering that question *Whether perceptions inhere in a material or immaterial substance*, when we do not so much as understand the meaning of the question?"

Note: These points, together with Hume's analysis of causality, just destroy the foundations of the philosophies of Locke and Berkeley.

PROOF AN OBJECT MAY EXIST AND YET BE NOWHERE:

P1) The taste exists.

P2) If it is in the fig, then it is either in a part or in the whole.

P3) It is not in a part only because every part of the fig has the same taste.

P4) It is not in the whole.

P4.1) The whole has a figure.

P4.2) If the taste was in the whole it would have a figure too.

P4.3) The taste has no figure.

C) The taste exists nowhere.

HUME ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

HUME ON IMMATERIAL SUBSTANCE

He simply claims to have no experience of a thing that has perceptions.

"There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self, that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence, and are certain beyond the evidence of a demonstration both of its perfect identity and simplicity.... Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self after the manner it is here explained. For from what impression could this idea be derived? This question it is impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity, and yet it is a question which must necessarily be answered, if we would have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible. It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference." [p. 566]

But if the self isn't a substance what then is it?

"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception." [p. 567]

It is "… nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity and are in a perpetual flux and movement." [p. 567]

"The mind is a kind of theatre where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time nor *identity* in different, whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity." [p. 567]

Why then do we attribute an identity to it? Hume claims that we do this because we confuse the idea of identity with that of a succession of related objects.

"We have a distinct idea of an object that remains invariable and uninterrupted through a supposed variation of time and this idea we call that of *identity* or *sameness*. We have also a distinct idea of several different objects existing in succession and connected together by a close relation among the objects. But though these two ideas of identity and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct and even contrary, yet it is certain that, in our common way of thinking, they are generally confounded with each other…. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake and makes us substitute the notion of identity instead of that of related objects…. In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle that connects the objects together and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continued existence of the perceptions of our senses to remove the interruption, and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance* to disguise the variation." [pp. 567f.]

Having identified the mistake we make Hume now goes on to identify at least some of the circumstances in which we make it:

1. **We make it when a relatively small part in relation to the whole is added or subtracted.**
2. **We make it when the change is gradual.**
3. **We make it when the parts have a mutual dependence on one another.**
4. **We make it when the parts resemble one another.**
5. **We make it when the objects in question are by their nature changeable.**

He then claims that these same points can be applied to the problem of personal identity. And here he suggests that the culprits are resemblance and causation.

1. **Because the memory of a past event resembles that event, we judge that it is the same person.**
2. **Because the impressions we have produce other impressions, we judge that it is the same person.**

In both of these cases memory is the primary culprit.

"Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects which constitute our self or person…. In this view, therefore, memory does not so much produce as discover personal identity by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions." [p. 571]

This is immediately followed by a jab at Locke who, remember, tried to define sameness of person in terms of memory.

"It will be incumbent on those who affirm that memory produces entirely our personal identity to give a reason why we can thus extend our identity beyond our memory." [p. 571]

Hume now summarizes:

"The whole of this doctrine leads us to a conclusion which is of great importance in the present affair, namely that all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties…." Since "… as the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity. All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal." [p. 571]

Note here that Hume is providing a sort of reductive analysis of the problem of personal identity. It is just a species of the general problem of how we identify objects through time.

As Prof. Ahmed points out in his lecture notes however,

"Unfortunately Hume himself changed his mind. This is evident from the Appendix, where he says that I.iv.6 is "very defective". The trouble starts when we think about Hume's view of causation itself. He had said quite reasonably (I.iii.14) that causation is, so to speak, "in the head". All that really happens is that clouds are always followed by rain. When we say that the clouds "cause" the rain, all we are adding to this is our own feeling of expectation of rain after seeing clouds. But this means that causal relations cannot obtain between elements of the bundle unless there is a suitable observer around to *notice* the constant conjunctions amongst them. But this observer himself has to believe in the unity of the observations in question: the causal relation cannot arise from a pattern distributed across a number of consciousnesses or bundles. So it seems that in order to explain the belief in the unity of the self, we have to presuppose the idea of causation; but the latter depends on somebody being aware that *he* has experienced such and such regularities in experience. (NB the Appendix is one of the hardest passages in all of Western philosophy and there is no agreement as to what H is about. This is my own interpretation of the passage: a similar one is attacked, and an alternative one is defended, in the excellent discussion at pp. 118-40 of B. Stroud, *Hume*.)"

HUME ON OUR KNOWLEDGE OF THE EXTERNAL WORLD

HUME'S CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATIONAL REALISM:

His attack here is directed against what he perhaps mistakenly takes to be Locke's view that we are not directly aware of external objects, but are aware that our perceptions represent such objects.

In response, he simply argues that no argument can establish the existence of external objects resembling our perceptions.

In the *Treatise* he claims that "The only conclusion we can draw from the existence of one thing to that of another, is by means of the relation of cause and effect…. The idea of this relation is derived from past experience, by which we find, that two beings are constantly conjoined together, and are always present at once to the mind. But as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions; it follows that we may observe a conjunction or relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence or any qualities of the former, we can ever form any conclusion concerning the latter, or ever satisfy our reason in this particular."

But how then does this mistaken theory arise? Hume claims that "The imagination tells us, that our resembling perceptions have a continued and uninterrupted existence, and are not annihilated by their absence. Reflection tells us, that even our resembling perceptions are interrupted in their existence, and different from each other. The contradiction betwixt these opinions we elude by a new fiction which is conformable to the hypotheses both of reflection and fancy, by ascribing these contrary qualities to different existences, the interruption to perceptions, and the continuance to objects." [*Treatise*]

Assuming that Hume is right about this, how might we respond?

1. We might adopt a naïve realist position and maintain that we directly perceive the world as it is. This is the approach that J.L. Austin adopts in *Sense and Sensibility* (1963).

2. Following Bertrand Russell in *Problems of Philosophy* (1912), for example, we might argue that we infer the existence of the external world from our perceptions.

HUME'S PYRRHONIAN SKEPTICISM

I. Two Types of Pyrrhonianism:

A. *The Popular Type:* It contains arguments about the fallaciousness or contradictoriness of sense information. But, according to Hume, this form is weak because it only shows that the senses alone can't be depended on.

"I need not insist upon the more trite topics employed by the skeptics in all ages against the evidence of sense such as those which are derived from the imperfection and fallaciousness of our organs on numberless occasions: the crooked appearance of an oar in water, the various aspects of objects according to their different distances…. These skeptical topics, indeed, are only sufficient to prove that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on, but that we must correct their evidence by reason and by considerations derived from the nature of the medium … in order to render them, within their sphere, the proper criteria of truth and falsehood." [p. 551]

B. *The Philosophical Type:* It contends that there is no rational or certain basis for either our factual and moral judgments, or the rational (mathematical) judgments we make.

1. In the case of factual judgments, they are all based on the relation of cause and effect, or constant conjunction. But there is no rational basis for believing that objects which have been constantly conjoined in the past will continue to be so in the future.

2. In the case of moral judgments:

a. Reason can't be the source because:

i. Moral ideas influence our passions while rational ones don't.

ii. Reason compares ideas seeking truth in terms of their agreement whereas moral ideas don't seek truth but what is laudable and blamable.

b. Matters of fact can't, since moral distinctions are based entirely on sentiment.

3. With respect to rational judgments concerning reason (mathematics), In the *Treatise*, Hume also adopted a skeptical view for two reasons:

a. Although he did not deny that there might be true judgments of the form "P is a legitimate proof," he doubted that we could ever have adequate evidence for a judgment of the form, "I know that P is a legitimate proof." (Not included in your selection from the *Treatise*)

P1) The possibility of committing an error when carrying out any chain of reasoning is greater than 0.

P2) The possibility of committing an error when evaluating the possibility of committing an error when carrying out a chain of reasoning is also greater than 0.

P3) When combining these the resultant possibility of error is still greater than the possibility of error noted in P1.

P4) But this process can be carried out ad infinitum.

C) The probability that we could ever recognize that a particular piece of reasoning was correct approaches 0.

i. According to Hume, we don't notice this because the mind cannot stretch itself into the uncomfortable position from which to make judgments about its judgments.

ii. My Response: Applying Hume's own line of reasoning against itself here we get the conclusion that he was almost certainly wrong!

iii. Hume seems to have abandoned this view in the *Inquiry*. There mathematical judgments are considered to be analytic.

b. Our instinctive beliefs about the existence of external objects is at variance with our reasonings about it.

"This is a topic, therefore, in which the profounder and more philosophical skeptics will always triumph when they endeavor to introduce a universal doubt into all subjects of human knowledge and inquiry. Do you follow the instincts and propensities of nature, may they say, in assenting to the veracity of sense? But these lead you to believe that the very perception or sensible image is the external object. Do you disclaim this principle in order to embrace a more rational opinion that the perceptions are only representations of something external? You here depart from your natural propensities and more obvious sentiments and yet are not able to satisfy your reason, which can never find any convincing argument from experience to prove that the perceptions are connected with any external objects." [p. 552]

c. Another problem Hume found concerned personal identity. His work suggested that all the self consisted in was a bundle of perceptions. But this doesn't provide the self with any unity, and we all assume that the self remains the same over time. (Compare my hearing "bob" followed with "white" with my hearing "bob" followed by your hearing "white.")

d. Hume also found some of the mathematical proofs paradoxical. Thus, the angle between the circumference of a circle and its tangent was proved to be smaller than any acute angle.

II. Yet, as Popkin expresses it, "… the skeptical view that we ought not and do not hold any opinions is false. We must hold opinions since nature forces us to. It is not really a question of what we should do, but rather a question of what we have to do."

A. We have to judge about factual matters because our belief in them is not due to rational evidence but is the result of custom or habit.

B. And we have to make moral judgments because the moral sense we have leads us to have certain feelings with regard to certain objects and events.

C. And, finally, the skeptical arguments showing that we can't acquire certain demonstrative knowledge also conflicts with what nature compels us to believe. Indeed it compels us to believe in the existence of body, mind, and God.

III. The Pyrrhonian skeptic however, cannot even consistently hold his skeptical view, for, as Hume recognized, to do so would result in the destruction of the believer. So he cannot even be dogmatic in his skepticism.