

Lecture 25

Hume on Causation

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Ideas and impressions

Hume's terminology

- **Ideas:** Concepts.
- **Impressions:** Perceptions; they are of two kinds.
 - **Sensations:** Perceptions of the external world.
 - **Impressions of reflection:** Perceptions of our own thoughts, feelings, emotions.

All simple ideas are copies of impressions

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 anything, which we have not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses . . . Complex ideas, may, perhaps, be well known by definition, which is nothing but an enumeration of those parts or simple ideas, that compose them. (VII.1)

How to make ideas clear

- Philosophical ideas are often ambiguous or obscure.
- A complex idea can be clarified by giving a definition of it.
- *But when we have pushed up definitions to the most simple ideas, and find still more ambiguity and obscurity; what resource are we then possessed of? By what invention can we throw light upon these ideas, and render them altogether precise and determinate to our intellectual view? Produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied. These impressions are all strong and sensible. They admit not of ambiguity. They are not only placed in a full light themselves, but may throw light on their correspondent ideas, which lie in obscurity. (VII.1)*

Idea of necessary connection

- *Usual belief:* If C causes E and C happens, E **must** happen.
- Hume's terminology:
 - There is a **necessary connection** between cause and effect.
 - A cause has a **power** to produce its effect.
- *There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of power . . . or necessary connection. (VII.1)*
- *To be fully acquainted, therefore, with the idea of power or necessary connection, let us examine its impression; and in order to find the impression . . . let us search for it in all the sources, from which it may possibly be derived. (VII.1)*

No impression in one instance

- *When we look about us towards external objects, and consider the operation of causes, we are never able, in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality, which binds the effect to the cause, and renders the one an infallible consequence of the other. 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. The mind feels no sentiment or inward impression from this succession of objects: consequently, there is not, in any single, particular instance of cause and effect, any thing which can suggest the idea of power or necessary connection. (VII.1)*
- Hume argued that the same is true when the cause is our own will, e.g., the decision to raise my arm is followed by my arm rising.

We infer connection from repetition

After one instance or experiment where we have observed a particular event to follow upon another, we are not entitled to form a general rule, or foretell what will happen in like cases . . . But when one particular species of event has always, in all instances, been conjoined with another . . . we then call the one object, Cause; the other, Effect. We suppose that there is some connection between them; some power in the one, by which it infallibly produces the other, and operates with the greatest certainty and strongest necessity. (VII.2)

Impression comes from repetition

It appears, then, that this idea of a necessary connection among events arises from a number of similar instances which occur of the constant conjunction of these events . . . But there is nothing in a number of instances, different from every single instance, which is supposed to be exactly similar; except only, that after a repetition of similar instances, 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 connection. (VII.2)

Thus the impression that gives rise to the idea of necessary connection is the impression of our mind, when it sees one event, expecting the other event that usually accompanies it. This is an impression of reflection.

Necessary connection isn't between cause and effect

- Since we have no impression of a connection between cause and effect, we have no idea of such a connection.
- *When we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a connection in our thought, and give rise to this inference, by which they become proofs of each other's existence: A conclusion which is somewhat extraordinary, but which seems founded on sufficient evidence. (VII.2)*
- *We have no idea of this connection [between cause and effect], nor even any distant notion what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it. (VII.2)*

- 1 Hume's investigation of the concept of causation involves looking for where we could get an impression of necessary connection. (a) Why is necessary connection relevant to causation? (b) Why does Hume think we must have an impression of it? (c) What does he hope to achieve by finding that impression?
- 2 What is the impression that gives rise to the idea of necessary connection, according to Hume?
- 3 Did Hume think it is true that if C causes E then there is a necessary connection between C and E ? Explain.



David Hume.

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.

1748.

[Online edition.](#)

Quotations are from this book; numbers in parentheses are section and part numbers.