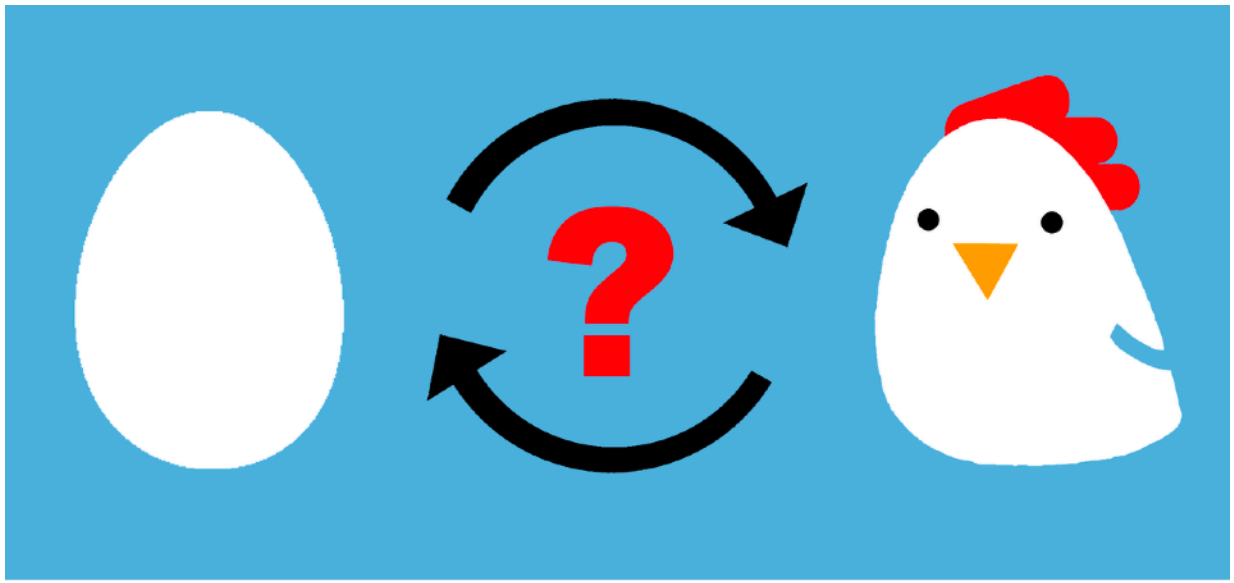


Hume's Account of Causality: A Critique



And is there a way out of this Humean Skepticism?

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Critically evaluating Hume's conception of Causality

Every major philosopher prior to David Hume believed in the law of cause and effect. However, Hume had a very dim view of metaphysics and he set out to demolish the whole notion of causality through his empiricism and skepticism¹. Hume starts off by saying that all we have access to are our ideas and impressions and so, we cannot grasp anything outside the bounds of experience. Impressions come through our senses and emotions whereas ideas are just 'copies' of those impressions.

Hume argues against the very conception of causality and contemplates whether there really is a cause-effect relationship in the world. Hume says that when we observe two events taking place one after the other, we end up associating them by habit as they are '**constantly conjoined**'. We simply form an assumption that one causes the other.

Hume goes on to say that just because we always observe one event following another does not necessarily imply that the former is the cause of the latter. We assume that event A causes event B simply because B always follows A. But it is just as possible that A does not cause B and instead causes an event C. Event C following event A is perfectly and logically perceivable and comprehensible, and is therefore not a contradiction. For instance, the fact that fire emits heat and light is something we observe in our daily lives. Hume says that because we observe this sequence of events regularly, we end up assuming that fire is the cause of that heat and light. But what if the laws of nature were to change tomorrow, and fire were to become as cold as ice. It is completely and logically possible that such **continuity may cease**.

Hume's main argument is that just because something has always occurred in the past does not necessarily imply that it would continue to do so in the future, unless there was a law that stated that the future would always resemble the past. But precisely because no such law exists, there is no rational support for believing in causality. Even though heating water is always followed by its boiling, one cannot say that heating necessitated the boiling. There is no law

¹ David Hume, An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding <<https://davidhume.org/texts/e/4>>

linking them both, it's just an association that we make up due to past experiences.

Thomas Reid has an interesting view point on Hume's conception of causality². Reid says that according to Hume, we only form the notion of causality after observing a certain sequence of events repeatedly. So if those events were to occur for the very first time, that would imply that they were not related. He gives an example of an earthquake destroying a city, saying that if the earthquake had occurred for the first time, Hume would say that the earthquake was not the cause of the destruction, which would be an 'absurd implication'.

I find this criticism untenable as Hume would never outright say that the earthquake was not the cause of the destruction. It may very well be, but the point that Hume is trying to make is that **we do not have access to causality in itself**; we only observe two events happening one after the other. We do see the second billiard ball moving after the first one hits it, but we cannot see the first one assuring the movement of the second one. He uses the notion of constant conjunction just to add to the certainty in our belief that one event would be the cause of the other. But we could never know whether they actually are causally related.

Moreover, even if there had been a constant conjunction in the past, Hume would still continue to doubt whether the earthquake really was the cause of the destruction, because **the past does not necessarily imply the future**. But he wouldn't rule out the possibility of it being the cause.

Reid's other objection to Hume's notion of causality seems to bear more merit. Reid says that according to Hume's definition of a cause, night would be the cause of day because these two events have always constantly followed each other since the beginning of the world. So Hume must deny that the two of them are actually conjoined, which would be absurd!

I do have to tip my hat to Reid, he does a wonderful analysis of Hume and puts forth his objections in an eloquent manner. Alas, although his second objection seems to be very convincing, he misses out on something significant. According

² Nichols, Ryan and Yaffe, Gideon, "Thomas Reid", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/reid/>>

to Reid's conception of Hume, if two events in this world are constantly conjoined, one must be the cause of the other. However, from what I comprehend, **Hume never says that all constant conjunctions must necessarily imply causality.** Rather, he only says that all our ideas of causality are based on constant conjunctions. We do not look at every sequence of events in the world and deduce them to a cause-effect relationship.

C.J. Ducasse³ also agrees with Reid, saying that "some instances of regularity of sequence are not instances of the cause-effect relation". Otherwise, the "growth of hair in babies would be the cause of their growth of teeth". Yes, its true that there are some regularities that do not mandatorily imply a cause-effect relationship. However, Hume never said that they would! It was the other way around.

Michael Lacewing analyses Hume's definition of the word 'cause' saying that Hume provides two definitions, one that refers to the relation between the objects and one that relates the object to the mind⁴. These two definitions are certainly not equivalent. Hume's ambiguity regarding the definition of 'cause' has been a major objection by many philosophers.

However, Hume never says that something would be a cause if it satisfies both the conditions. He is just giving us two views of causation and to be able to fully comprehend this, we must take into account both, what goes on in the world (between the objects) and our experience (relating the object to the mind).

So is there a way out of Humean Skepticism? Is there a tenable rebuttal to Hume's notion of causality? Hume says that we associate two events because they are constantly conjoined. **But what is the reason for this 'constancy'?** Why do we always associate things in the same constant manner? Hume's argument presupposes this constancy and this is precisely what Immanuel Kant was able to pick up and elucidate further.

³ Ducasse, C. J. "Critique of Hume's Conception of Causality." *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 63, no. 6, 1966, pp. 141–148. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2024169.

⁴ Michael Lacewing, "Hume on Causation" <http://cw.routledge.com/textbooks/alevelphilosophy/data/A2/Hume/HumeCausation.pdf>

Kant famously said that it was Hume's skepticism that awoke him from his 'dogmatic slumber'⁵. Kant brought about two very important distinctions in his critique - about apriori and aposteriori (prior to experience) knowledge, and analytic and synthetic judgements. Analytic judgements are definitional whereas synthetic ones are also informative, because we learn them from experience. One would generally associate apriori with analytic judgements and aposteriori with synthetic judgements. That was Hume's fork, which put knowledge into these two categories. But Hume overlooked a third type of knowledge, a 'third prong on the fork', as it were.⁶ Kant associated 'synthetic' with 'apriori', stating that certain principles are **synthetic apriori knowledge** - necessary truths known apriori that tell us something about the world. He states that whatever we conceive to be reality is shaped by the mind. The mind does not just receive impressions and ideas, it also shapes it and makes sense of the information that it receives.

Kant agrees with Hume that the constant conjunction isn't proof of any necessary causal relation. However, he says that this idea of causality is derived not from constant impressions, but is an apriori mental condition of all possible experiences. Kant says that we intuitively make such inferences because **the very idea of causality is apriori**. The judgement that one causes the other is grounded in an apriori source of knowledge. Kant calls this '**transcendental**' because it is not realisable in experience. It is an apriori condition that must be fulfilled in order for empirical knowledge to be possible.

Kant argues saying that even to be able to associate smoke with fire, we need certain apriori structures of thought, namely temporality. According to Hume, it is simply a habit or convention that we associate smoke with fire. But why should this association we make be constant and not arbitrary? We could always associate things differently. One could simply associate fire with ice. **This constancy is presupposed and not explained in the empiricist frame.** In explaining this constancy through habit, we are actually presupposing that constancy. There would be no habit formation without there being a constancy of experience; and this constancy of experience cannot be

⁵ Rohlf, Michael, "Immanuel Kant", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/kant/>>

⁶ <https://askaphilosopher.org/2014/12/22/how-hume-woke-kant-from-his-dogmatic-slumber/>

explained through experience. Then **why is there a constancy of experience** that allows us to form that habit and say that they're causally related? That is Kant's question.

That constancy can't lie in nature in itself, simply because we don't have access to nature in itself. Kant says that to have these meaningful empirical observations, we need certain apriori structures of thought, which condition all experiences. He does not deny empirical observations, but we have certain 'transcendental' ideal structures that make these experiences possible.

Hume works from the world to mind, staying true to empiricist nature, but Kant works from the mind to the world⁷. How we experience the world according to Kant is conditioned by the mind and not the world itself. We do not forcefully project a causal necessity on to a constant conjunction. **Causal necessity is rather an apriori condition that the mind applies to every judgement.** This is famously known as Kant's Copernican revolution, because now objects conform to the knowledge and not the other way around.

Kant is able to successfully fight off Hume's skepticism and defend metaphysics through his transcendental philosophy, synthesising both the rationalist and empiricist traditions in his thought. Hume puts forth his notion of causality very persuasively, but Kant, having awoken from his 'dogmatic slumber' is successful in finding a way out of this skepticism.

⁷ Stuart Greenstreet, Kant versus Hume

https://philosophynow.org/issues/49/Kant_versus_Hume_on_the_Necessary_Connection