

## Why did Hume think that we cannot have any experience of causation?

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While Hume said, “there appears not, throughout all nature, any one instance of connexion, which is conceivable by us” (E 7.26, SBN 73-74), he also referred to causation as “the cement of the universe” (A 35, SBN 662). This apparent paradox can be explained by reference to Hume’s theory of ideas and, in particular, his notion of ‘inward’ senses or sentiment. Hume maintained that perceptions consist of impressions and, their paler copies, ideas. Impressions are inward or outward sensations (E 2.9, SBN 21-22) and “it is impossible for us to *think* of any thing, which we have not antecedently *felt*, either by our external or internal senses” (E 7.4, SBN 62). This essay will analyse Hume’s arguments regarding our experience of causation in the light of his distinction between outward and inward impressions and his two-fold definition of cause, arguing that, while Hume thought that we cannot have any experience of causation deriving from our ‘outward’ senses, our idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect arises from our inward senses or sentiment.

The notion of ‘inward senses’ (apart from our five ordinary ‘outward’ senses), although seemingly odd nowadays, was not unorthodox in Hume’s time. Burton’s ‘*The Anatomy of Melancholy*’, a well known work at the time and a favourite of Hume’s contemporary Samuel Johnson (Boswell, Loc. 2967), lists three inward senses: common sense, imagination and memory (Burton, Loc. 2758). Hume’s notion of inward senses or sentiment is not identical to this concept. Hume uses the terms “inward sentiment [or] senses” in the First Enquiry in a manner which is similar to the notion of ‘impressions of reflection’ in the Treatise (T 1.1.2.1, SBN 7-8). Inward senses or sentiment are feelings “derived from a reflection on previous experience” (Owen, p.67).

Hume’s first definition of cause is “*an object, followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second*” (E 7.29, SBN 76-77). This reflects Hume’s proposition that knowledge of causal relations is not derived from analytic *a priori* reasoning but *a posteriori* from our experience of the constant conjunction of one event, the effect, following another, the cause. He supports this proposition with the following arguments:

1. The causes which produce, or the effects which ensue from, an object cannot be discovered in that object itself no matter how carefully its qualities are examined. If we were to imagine ourselves newly arrived in the world, we would be unable to infer the movement of a red billiard ball on being struck by a white billiard ball simply by examining the white ball or its movement. Any attempt to do so by thought *a priori* would be to imagine or invent the effect (E 4.9, SBN 29).

2. Hume then considers our idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect; why we think that the effect necessarily follows the cause. Hume concludes that any knowledge of necessary connection must likewise be derived from experience since any claim of *a priori* knowledge of a particular effect which ensues from a cause cannot but be arbitrary invention, considering the other alternative possible effects which could ensue from the same cause; for instance, the white ball may bounce off the red ball or simply stop right next to it (E 4.10, SBN 29-30).

3. After surveying several types of individual cause–effect sequences, Hume concludes that we do not experience necessary connection in any single cause–effect instance. The events may be conjoined but we never observe any actual connection between them (E 7.26, SBN 73-74).

4. However, when we experience regular succession, namely succession of one object by another object coupled with their constant conjunction, we suppose that there is a connection between them such that the qualities of the cause necessarily produce the effect (E 7.27, SBN 74-75).

Our idea of causation, then, cannot be based on an impression of necessary connection derived from outward sensory experience. Neither can it originate from single cause–effect instances since ideas arise from impressions, namely outward sense or inward sentiment, and both are lacking in single cause–effect instances (E 7.26, SBN 73-74). The only possible source of the idea is an impression which originates from our experience of regular succession (Allison, p.183).

Hume’s second definition of cause is “*an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other*” (E 7.29, SBN 76-77). This definition is similar to the first with the addition of a psychological element. Hume acknowledges that our ordinary idea of causation includes necessary connection as

one of its constituent elements (Mackie, p. 19). Since we have no impression of necessity or power in the object and there is no outward difference between single cause–effect instances and a regular succession of such instances, the impression must consist of an inward sentiment arising from a feeling in the mind. Hume significantly states: “This connexion, 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” (E 7.28, SBN 75-76).

It is not reason but constant conjunction, through custom or habit, which compels the mind to make an association of ideas out of which we infer causes and effects (Bell, pp. 154-156, Allison, p. 189). For Hume, custom is “the great guide of human life” (E 5.6, SBN 44-45). This description of custom bears some similarity to the notion of ‘common sense’ which Burton characterizes as an “inward sense” which is “the judge or moderator of the rest” (Loc. 2796); a notion derived from Aristotle’s *sensus communis* which endured long after the rejection of the medieval Aristotelian philosophical tradition (Gregoric 2007, pp. 10-12).

Hume’s analysis of causation thus questions the epistemic justification which underpins our knowledge of matters of fact which are beyond sensory experience and memory. According to Hume, our knowledge of these matters of fact is based entirely on causal inferences (E 4.4, SBN 26-27). These causal inferences, however, are not the result of any necessary connection which we can observe in the objects themselves. On the contrary, it is the causal inferences which give rise to our idea of necessary connection (Mackie, pp. 3–6) and create, in our mind, an experience of causation as “the cement of the universe”.

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