

Handout 24: The Idea of Necessary Connection

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy
Professor Geoff Pynn
Northern Illinois University

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I SECTION VII OF HUME'S *ENQUIRY*

1. The focus of the section: the idea of "*power, force, energy, or necessary connection.*" We'll regard these ideas as various aspects of the idea of *causation*.
2. Hume's goal:

"We shall, therefore, endeavor in this section to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms and thereby remove some part of that obscurity which is so much complained of."
3. Hume wants to know what we mean when we say that one thing *causes* another.
4. But remember the Copy Principle! The idea must be reducible to simple ideas copied from impressions: "Produce the impressions or original sentiments!" Otherwise these words are mere "jargon".
5. Since the idea of a cause is central to empirical science (which Hume does not wish to undermine), the stakes are high.

2 ON THE HUNT FOR THE IMPRESSION

1. Does it come from outward perception?
 - (a) When we see A cause B, all we see is A, followed by B.
 - (b) We do not see the causal power, or the force, or the energy involved.
 - (c) While the idea of *A being followed by B* can come from perception, the idea of *A causing B* cannot.
2. Does it come from our inner awareness?
 - (a) This was a common empiricist view; see, e.g., Locke:

"[O]bserving in ourselves that we can at pleasure move several parts of our bodies which were at rest [...] [we] get the idea of power" (Locke's *Essay*, 2.7.8).

(b) Hume says no.

- i. Inner awareness is just like outward perception: we are aware of willing something (e.g., to lift your arm), and then its happening right away, but we are never aware of the connection between the two.
- ii. The connection is completely incomprehensible to us: “Were we empowered, by a secret wish, to remove mountains, or control the planets in their orbit; this extensive authority would not be more extraordinary, nor more beyond our comprehension.”

3. So maybe there is no idea?

“[A]s we can have no idea of anything which never appeared to our outward sense or inward sentiment, the necessary conclusion seems to be that we have no idea of connection or power at all and that these words are absolutely without any meaning when employed in either philosophical reasonings or common life.”

3 EUREKA!

1. The “constant conjunction” of A-like impressions with B-like impressions leads the mind “carried by habit, upon the appearance of [the A-like event], to expect [the B-like event] and to believe that it will exist.”
2. The key impression is something like the feeling of anticipation. When you have an A-impression, you anticipate that a B-impression is soon to follow:

“The 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.”

3. We only acquire this feeling of anticipation after repeated exposures to A’s-followed-by-B’s.

4 FROM THE IMPRESSION TO THE MEANING OF CAUSE

1. First try:

CONSTANT CONJUNCTION

A cause =_{df} “an object followed by another and where all objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second.”

Counterexample: Every morning, Iggy walks past the church bell tower just before it rings.

2. Second try:

COUNTERFACTUAL

A cause =_{df} “an object followed by another [...] where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed.”

This is a much more promising suggestion. Possible counterexample: Firing squad case.

3. Third try:

SUBJECTIVE

A cause =_{df} “an object followed by another and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other.”

Counterexample: Iggy again, only this time I see him every morning and always think to myself, “Ah, the bell is about to ring!”.

4. Hume’s *Treatise* account:

A cause =_{df} “an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, 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” (*A Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 170).

5. Hume’s confession:

“Yet so imperfect are the ideas which we form concerning it, that it is impossible to give any just definition of cause, except what is drawn from something extraneous and foreign to it.”