

EPISTEMOLOGICAL INTERROGATION OF DAVID HUME'S CRITIQUE OF CAUSATION

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Abstract:

This paper interrogates Hume's epistemic thought on causation. Of paramount importance is his denial of causation which is premised on his disagreement with the rationalists on the nature and scope of knowledge. This of course is consistent with the empiricists' tradition. Beginning with the analysis of content of the mind, he analyzed series of topics that led to his critique of causation. Causation is the relation of cause and effect, in which one event necessarily follows another. Hume argues that our idea of causation is nothing but association of habit and custom, and that the idea of necessary connection is nothing beyond a felt determination of the mind. By this, he rejects in totality the reality of *a priori* knowledge, claiming that we cannot make a causal inference purely by *a priori* means but rather by experience of constant conjunction. However the study acknowledges the indispensability of *a priori* principles in any quest that concerns knowledge. The work therefore observes that, Hume's critique of causation bereft the mind of its metaphysical power, thereby making the whole effort at establishing a profound and holistic foundation for knowledge an exercise in futility. And so the paper seeks to show the extent to which Hume failed to incorporate the totality of reality with a view to filling in the gap by arguing that there is a synthesis of Hume's positions as a result of the outcome and consequences of his denial of causation which necessitated the emergence and the foundation of philosophy of science, social and naturalized epistemology that has become a trend in modern epistemology. The contribution of this study to knowledge is that it promotes scientific methodology. This study makes use of qualitative research design. Data were sourced from books, journals and periodicals. The work adopts expository, historical and analytical methods.

Keywords: Interrogation, Causation, Necessary Connection, Constant Conjunction

Introduction

The early modern period was the heyday of the investigation of the ideas of causal influence and many other philosophically contested ideas. Every modern philosopher accepted some version of the theory of causation - the view that there is a relationship between something that happens and the reason for it happening (T 1.3.14.13). Hume holds an empiricist version of the theory, because he thinks that everything that happens is ultimately traceable to experience. Beginning with the analysis of content of the mind, Hume carefully analyzed series of topics that led to his critique of the problem of causation. For Hume, the very idea of causation is suspect; He asks what impression gives us the idea of causation. His answer is that there is no impression corresponding to this idea. How then does the idea of causation arise in the mind? According to him, the idea of causation arises in the mind when we experience certain relation between objects (EHU 1.11/12). Hume's denial of this relationship bereft the mind of its metaphysical powers thereby showing that a thorough going account of his position would expectedly end up in absurdity, thereby making the whole effort at establishing profound foundation for knowledge a huge joke. It is in the light of this that Hume's critique of causation will be interrogated.

Hume's Epistemic Thought on Causation

Hume's critique of causation is best appreciated when approached within the context. Edward Craig for instance, has argued that philosophy during Hume's time was strongly in the grip of what he calls the "Image of God doctrine" (Craig, 13-17). As one might expect, this is the view that human beings are made in the image of God. Craig observed that the image of God doctrine engendered various metaphysical and epistemological implications. For instance, proponents of this doctrine regarded God's knowledge as the best, certain and most perfect form of knowledge (Craig, 20). Consequently, God's knowledge was conceived in terms of his having *a priori* knowledge which came to be seen as the most perfect form of knowledge (23).

Accordingly, proponents of the image of God doctrine held that causes necessitate their effects, such that if one could somehow penetrate into the essence of a cause, one would see that the effect could not fail to come (30). It is precisely for this reason that proponents of this doctrine consider mathematics and logic and the certainty that each provides as most worthy of the label "knowledge" (Galen Strawson, 109). They held that since human beings are made in God's image, our cognitive capacities must mirror or approximate the cognitive capacities of God. The epistemological implication is that, man is capable of attaining *a priori* knowledge about the nature and structure of the natural world (Galen Strawson, 10).

However, the view that causal connections are real opposes Hume's own account of causation. In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume claims, for instance, that our idea of causation is a complex idea consisting of at least three elements: first; that the cause is spatiotemporally contiguous with the effect, second; that the effect succeeds the cause in time, and third that the events like the cause are constantly conjoined with effect (T 1.1.2.1/7). For Hume, "the fundamental source of our knowledge is something empirical than divine" (EHU 1.12/12).

In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume is of the opinion that the very idea of causation is suspect, and he approaches the problem by asking the question, 'what is the origin of the idea of causation? Since ideas are copies of impression, Hume asks what impression gives us the idea of causation. His answer is that there is no impression corresponding to this idea (EHU 1.12/12). How then does the idea of causation arise in the mind? Hume said that "the idea of causation arises in the mind when we experience certain relation between objects. We mean to say that A causes B. but what kind of a relation does this show" (EHU 1.12/12). According to him, experience furnishes us with two relations: "first, there is the relation of contiguity, for A and B are always close together; second, there is priority in time, for A, the cause always precedes B, the effect" (EHU 2.4/18). But there is still another relation that the idea of causation suggests to common sense, namely, that between A and B there is a necessary connection between objects (EHU 1.11/12).

Consequently, In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume insists that our imagination is in fact "confirmed within very limits" (T 1.1.2.1/7). For Hume, our idea of causation is nothing beyond constant conjunction, and that our idea of necessary connection is nothing beyond a felt determination of the mind. He argues that we cannot make a causal inference by purely *a priori* means. Rather, he claims, it is by experience, and specifically experience of constant conjunction (EHU 1.11/12).

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume opined that there is no object that implies the existence of another when we consider objects individually. He maintained that “no amount of observation of oxygen can ever tell us that when mixed with hydrogen it will necessarily give us water” (T 1.3.14.13). We know this only after we have seen the two together. “It is therefore by experience only that we can infer the existence of one object from another” (T 1.1.1.2). He observed that while we do have impression of contiguity, priority, and constant conjunction, we do not have any impression of necessary connection. Thus, the problem of causation is not a quality in the object we observe but is rather a habit of association in the mind produced by the repetition of instances (T 1.1.7.5).

In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume insists that the necessary connection between a cause and its effect is solely a feature of our minds, and not objects (T 1.3.14.13). It is an impression of reflection—a determination or disposition of the mind to believe that the effect will occur, given the cause. There is nothing intrinsic to the cause that necessitates its effect. Consequently, our idea of necessary connection is copied from an impression. The causal relation links our past and present experience to our expectations about the future (T 1.3.14.13).

Thus, Hume concludes that we lack an idea of necessary connection. Accordingly, we deceive ourselves, when we imagine that we possess any idea of this kind, after the manner we commonly understand it. “All ideas are gotten from, and represent impressions (T 1.3.14.11). Hume is of the opinion that “we will be disappointed, when we learn that this connection, tie, or energy lies merely in ourselves” (EHU 1.12/12). Such a discovery not only cuts off all hopes of ever attaining satisfaction, but even prevents our very wishes; since it appears, that when we say we desire to know the ultimate principle, as something, which resides in the external object, we either contradict ourselves, or talk without a meaning (T 1.4.7.5).

A Critique of Hume's denial of Causation

Hume's critique of causation purports to show that our opinions regarding what we have not observed have no justification. The obstacle is irremediable; no matter how many further observations we might make, we would still not be entitled to any opinions regarding what we have not observed. His conclusion is more radical than we are not entitled to any degree of confidence whatever, no matter how slight, in any predictions regarding what we have not observed. This conclusion “leaves not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition that goes beyond our present observations and memory (T, 2.6.7). Some scholars have deliberated on Hume's critique of causation with a view to contributing to knowledge justification and the validity of causation or it otherwise.

Salmon Wesley in his book, *The Nature of Causality* expounds Hume's critique of causation. Salmon opined that Hume's denial of causation undermines *a priori principle* (48). In this work, Salmon raises some serious objections against Hume's rejection of causation. According to him, if, for Hume, causation is not the sole source for justification of epistemic claims, is Hume arguing only for empirical source of knowledge? (50). If so, is Hume not guilty of skepticism? It would appear that Salmon does not fully appreciate Hume's position. He could not understand why Hume would deliberately deny the principle of causation. As far as he (Salmon) is concerned a rethink

of Hume's epistemic critique of causal inferences is necessary in order to meet the present challenges in epistemology.

In his work, *What did Hume Really Show about causation*, Okasha Samir offers a common reading of Hume's critique of causation to equate demonstrative with “deductively valid claims with *a priori* premises” (30). This may be closer to the mark, if one thinks, as Hume seems to have done, that causal inference which can be known *a priori* cannot be false, and hence necessary element of knowledge. If causal inference is deductively valid, then the conclusion of the inference from *a priori* premises must also be necessary. Okasha's interpretation here is that Hume's rejection of cause and effect then rules out the possibility of a deductively valid argument with *a priori* premises (46). However, recent commentators have argued that in the historical context that Hume was situated in, the distinction he draws between demonstrative and probable arguments has little to do with whether or not the argument has a deductive form. Therefore, Okasha needs more consultation and clarification from the original sources from Hume's works in order to have a clearly view on Hume's position on causation.

Owen David, in his book, *Hume's notion of causation*, discusses Hume's notion on causation in relation to the class of inferences that establish conclusions whose negation is a contradiction (23). This may include not just causal valid epistemic inferences from *a priori* premises, but any inferences that can be drawn using *a priori* reasoning (99). According to Owen, it looks as though Hume does intend his refutation of causal claims to rule out any *a priori* reasoning, since he says that Hume claim that our idea of causation is nothing but association of custom and habit, and that our idea of necessary connection is nothing beyond a felt determination of the mind. If that is the case, Hume could advancing a thesis in cognitive psychology rather than making a normative claim about epistemic justification of knowledge (202). According to Owen, the main upshot of Hume's argument regarding causation is that there can be no reasoning process that establishes cause and effect. For Owen, the message is that the causal inference is not drawn through a chain of ideas connected by mediating links, as would be characteristic of the faculty of reason.

Beauchamp Tom in his book, *Hume and the Problem of Causation* opined that Hume's causal analysis is “an attempt to refute the rationalist belief that at least some causal arguments are demonstrative” (18). He observed that the role of imagination in Hume's causal analysis has been responsible for undermining the causal inference. He argued that Hume is merely trying to exclude a specific kind of justification of causation, based on a conception of reason predominant among the rationalists of his time, rather than a justification of knowledge claims in general. Under this interpretation, Hume's position on causation should be modified to read something like: “If there is no chain of reasoning based on demonstrative arguments from the premises to the conclusion of inference, then causal inference is not justified” (23). However, it has been observed that such interpretations do however struggle with the fact that Hume's argument is explicitly a two-pronged attack, which concerns not just demonstrative arguments, but also probable arguments. The question of how expansive normative conclusion attributed to Hume is a complex one. It depends in part on the interpretation of Hume's own solution to the problem he observed causation creates in epistemology. As rightly observed, Hume attributes the basis of causal inference to principles of the imagination in the *Treatise*, and in the *Enquiry* to “custom and habit”, (E. 5.2.22)..

Karl Popper in his book, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* regarded Hume's problem with the theory of induction as insurmountable. But he argued that science is not in fact based on inductive inferences. He therefore proposed "falsifiability" as the demarcation of science from pseudoscience as way to mitigate the force of Hume's causal skepticism and to restrict its scope (Popper, 6). In this way Popper, rather presented a deductivist view of science, according to which it proceeds by making bold conjectures, and then attempting to falsify those conjectures (34). Thus, Popper claimed that science was not based on the extrapolative inferences considered by Hume. The consequence then is that it is not so important, at least for science if those causal inferences would lack a rational foundation. Popper's account appears to be incomplete in an important way because there are always many hypotheses which have not yet been refuted by the evidence, and these may contradict one another.scientific method.

In actual fact, Hume's critique of causation is premised on his disagreement with the rationalists. This of course is consistent with his epistemic thought. However, in the attempt to refute causation he punctured his argument. Granted that his argument is based on his refutation of causation, he missed the mark when he argued that our knowledge of causation stems from habit and custom. What this suggests is that our belief in the reality of cause and effects does not result from rigour but from habit or belief and if this is all he set out to achieve, it means that from the onset he never really meant to posit for us a thorough going account of knowledge; thereby making the whole effort at establishing a profound foundation for knowledge a huge joke

Hume's skepticism of causal inference can also pass for all acts concerning prayer and incantation. To understand Hume's critique of causation, one need to first grasp his usage of skepticism. Contrary to Descartes, Hume belief his skepticism of causal influence is meant to assist us in being critical of issues. He saw this refutation mainly as a tool of critical analysis which is why he invented the *pruning fork*, an idea he derived from William Ockham's razor otherwise known as the law of parsimony (EHU 1.11/12). Furthermore, in an attempt to reject the reality of causation, he was stuck in the rationalist quagmire, making him a "phenomenistic idealist" who merely seeks to describe the psychological processes of the mind using the vocabulary of empiricism.

Again, this total denial of causation has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that it makes his argument more consistent than that of others and makes evident once and for all the danger of extreme subjectivism to which any consistent empiricist is exposed. But the disadvantage is that it bereft the mind of its metaphysical powers thereby showing that a thorough going account of causation would expectedly end up in absurdity.

In Kant's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, he addresses Hume's devastating critique of the possibility of causation presented in Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* which centers on undermining the knowability of causation. Kant attempts to provide a philosophical alternative to the implications inherent in the extremely restrictive nature of Hume's epistemology, as well as to provide an explanation as to the reason the human mind attempts to answer questions which lie fundamentally out of its grasp. It is to be observed that he lays out an entirely new system of knowledge in order to provide an answer to the question whether such a thing as causation is possible at all, through which he wishes to save the possibility of

both metaphysics as well as science from the scathing skepticism of Hume (Kant, A51/B75).

It seems that Hume's assault on the principle of causation undermined the chief component of reason, a *a priori* cause and effect, or necessary connection to be possible. Kant goes so far as to defend Hume against several detractors who had attempted to refute Hume. It is in this vein that Kant dismisses their critiques by stating that they had utterly misunderstood the nature of Hume's critique of causation and therefore had failed to realize the gravity of the situation in which metaphysics found itself.

Kant realized that if causation is to be possible, and he seemed to believe that it must be possible, it must be placed on more firm ground than that on which it had previously rested, given the strength of Hume's critique. Kant suggests that the solution to the problem presented by Hume lay within the nature of reason itself, and that if there was to be any hope of sufficiently answering the challenge, a fundamental rethinking of reason would be necessary. To satisfy the conditions of the problem, the opponents of Hume should have penetrated very deeply into the nature of reasons itself as it is concerned with pure thinking (Kant, A51/B75). In doing this, Kant begins by clarifying the nature of the problem of causation presented by Hume: that the problem posed is not whether the concept of causation was right, useful and even indispensable for our knowledge of nature but whether that concept could be thought by reason *a priori* (Kant, A51/B75).

To address Hume's problem of causation, Kant argued in his famous work *Critique of Pure Reason* that synthetic *a priori* knowledge is possible. He reversed the empiricist programme espoused by Hume's rejection of causation and argued that experience only comes about through the *a priori* categories of understanding, including the concept of causation (A51/B75). Causation becomes, in Kant's view, a *a priori* concept and therefore universally necessary, thus sidestepping Hume's skepticism. However, if the act of causation cannot be derived through reason, Kant's direct assertion of causation as an *a priori* category may seem more brutal.

Furthermore, whereas Hume tried to understand how the concept of a cause or necessary connection could be based on experience, Kant argued instead that experience only comes about through the concepts or categories of understanding (Kant, A51/B75). Consequently, for Kant, one cannot experience the reality of cause and effect without having a conceptual structure to provide for the representational properties of such experience. In Kant's terms, the intuitions received by the sensibility cannot be isolated from the conceptualization carried out by the understanding. As he states, "Intuitions without concepts are blind, concepts without intuitions are empty". (Kant, A51/B75).

Kant therefore lays out an entirely new system of knowledge in order to provide an answer to the question whether such a thing as cause and effect be possible, through which he wishes to save science from scathing skepticism of Hume's rejection of causation. Having noted this, we warn that Hume's critique of causation is not entirely useless. It remains a formidable tool for any project that involves serious rigour. Hume has given us an argument which cannot be neglected in a hurry. His critique of

causation had a profound and lasting impact on philosophy and science by promoting scientific methodology.

Conclusion

The problem of causation has not gained its notoriety merely from Hume's boldness in denying its epistemic credentials. The problem of causation derives its power from the strength of Hume's argument that it is impossible to justify even a modest degree of confidence in any of our predictions beyond observation. Again, it would be relatively unimpressive to argue that since a variety of past attempts to justify causal inference have failed, there is presumably no way to justify it.

Many philosophers have tried to find a way around Hume's argument, in order to show that science and common-sense are justified in making predictions inductively. Despite these massive efforts, no response to date has received widespread acceptance. The problem of causation remains “the glory of Science” and “the scandal of Philosophy”. Some philosophers have instead embraced Hume's conclusion but tried to characterize science so that it does not involve our placing various degrees of confidence in various predictions.

Hume's critique of causation had a profound and lasting impact on philosophy and science by promoting scientific methodology. It spurred further investigation into the nature, scope and limit of human understanding. His work influenced philosophers like Kant, who sought to reconcile empiricism and rationalism. The problem of causation has been a subject of ongoing debate and discussion, and it continues to be debated and discussed till today with philosophers trying to address the problem and defend the validity and reality of causation.

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