

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 17

Hume: Relations, causation

TWO CLASSES OF RELATIONS. A very central part of Hume's discussion, Part 3, begins with a mighty muddle. Earlier on in T 1.1.5 Hume's has already distinguished between natural relations and philosophical relations. Natural relations are those three mentioned earlier that connect our ideas without our volitional input (this is a paraphrase of the text). Philosophical relations are those which, given several ideas, we can examine whether they stand in a particular relation. These latter relations are seven in number. But now in T 1.3.1.1 Hume also insists that they fall into two groups:

Group A Resemblance, degree of quality, proportion in number, contrariety.

Group B Identity, cause and effect, relation in space and time (including contiguity).

The exact ground of the distinction, as introduced in the paragraph, is obscure. One suggestion is that Group A includes necessary (and a priori) relations, and Group B includes contingent (and factual) relations. This is a neat suggestion, especially if 'ideas' are 'concepts'. Then the distinction will correspond to Hume's own distinction in the *Enquiry* where he talks of 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact'.

Nevertheless, this proposal might appear problematic. Should not, for example, an A-relation 'degree of quality' be contingent? What can be more contingent than the fact that this cup is colder than this plate? Thus an alternative interpretation is that the distinction reflects the way the ideas enter the mind. For example, whether an idea *I* comes before or after *J* does not matter for the resemblance between *I* and *J* when we examine them. But if *I* was experienced simultaneously with *J*, then upon examination, we conclude that the two are contiguous.

However, there *may be* something else going on, if we stick to Hume's own remarks. The relation 'degree of quality *X*' holds a priori if we examine how the quality *X* *appears* to us, and if we take the *relata* to be ideas, rather than material objects. T 1.3.1.2

Example 1. I am holding a cup and a plate. The cup feels colder to me. Then it is no use to protest that the plate is 'really' colder, and that there is something amiss in my condition. So I can establish '*I* is colder than *J*' before conducting any empirical investigation and with certainty. Is it necessary? Is it analytic?

Question 2. Examine the case of resemblance, as described in T 1.3.1.2.

But in all honesty this is not a perfect reading of the passage either, since Hume explicitly claims *relata* to be objects.

KNOWLEDGE. At all events, relations of Group A are knowable, either by intuition or demonstration. I know that sugar is sweeter than salt (degree in quality), and I do not require any justification for it. Similarly I know that one plus one is two (proportion in number). But I need a demonstration to prove Pythagoras' theorem. Still, when I go through the steps one by one, I am left in no doubt that each of them holds good. T 1.3.1.3

The two classes of truths, intuitive and demonstrative, have this in common, that they are true by virtue of relations of ideas alone. And strictly speaking, only these kinds of propositions are knowable. The rest of the relations—i.e. B-relations—are merely probable.

CAUSATION: THE PROBLEM. Hume proceeds to address the problem with causation. It is that in making causal inferences we go beyond what is available to us through senses. Earlier on Hume puts what is supposed to be the same point a little differently. As we cannot determine causal relations entirely by reason, we have to use experience. So we have to investigate how, based on experience, we can reason about 'existences and objects' that go beyond experience. T 1.3.2.3
T 1.3.1.1

Remark 3. Revisit the general discussion of relations in T 1.1.5.

IDENTITY AND SPATIOTEMPORAL RELATIONS. In fact causation is not the only problematic B-relation, the other being identity and ST-relations. But their cases are unproblematic in the following sense: they do not have the tendency to make us draw conclusions unwarranted by experience. T 1.3.2.2

Example 4. Suppose I observe two cars at a distance of each other. I will not be tempted to infer that they will always remain at a distance with each other. Conversely, if I observe two cars next to each other, I will not infer that they will remain so in the future.

Example 5. Suppose I observe a dog that looks exactly like the dog I used to have as a child. I would be mad to conclude that this is the same dog. By contrast, if I observe a book looking exactly like the book that I used to own years ago and with the same marginal notes, I would conclude that this is the same book.

As we can see from these examples, the basis of our inferences in each of them seems to be the causal relation. Thus it remains the only problematic one in the sense above.

Question 6. Suppose I observe a man that looks only slightly different from the man I saw two hours ago. Which inference is warranted in this situation? Which is unwarranted?

THE IDEA OF CAUSE. Having found out that the idea of cause is problematic, the task, as Hume sees it, is to examine its origin. This presumably should mean, given the background of his theory of ideas, that must look for the impression of a cause. We at once see that it cannot be identified with any quality of the body. Many completely different things can play the role of a cause. So, instead of a quality, there must be found some relation between objects. T 1.3.2.5

He determines there to be three such relations. First, we have *contiguity*. This means that causes and effects are close to each other in space and time. Obviously, not every cause is in the immediate vicinity of its effect. If this be so, then we T 1.3.2.6

believe there are intermediate causes. There is, in other words, no action at a distance. At the same time Hume notes that contiguity is not always present in the idea of cause. For example, feelings may exist, but be in no particular place at all. It is not clear to me whether Hume is entitled to this qualification. T 1.4.5.10

Secondly, there is *temporal priority*: causes must precede their effects. But Hume is aware of the possibility that causes might not precede the effects. He gives an argument to show that, but it is widely perceived as fallacious. Even so, it is interesting to see, I think, how Hume connects causality, succession, and the ‘annihilation of time’. T 1.3.2.7

At all events, contiguity and priority are of secondary importance. The reason is clear. Both are relations of time and space, and neither would, therefore, suggest to the mind making inferences about the unobserved. The central ingredient in the idea of cause is assigned to the relation of *necessary connection*. But this relation is peculiar in that we are unable to find any impression corresponding to it. T 1.3.2.2 T 1.3.2.11

Example 7. Suppose I observe a billiard ball striking another billiard ball. I describe the first as the cause of the motion of the second. But all I ever perceive is the relations of contiguity and succession, possibly coupled with constant conjunction—that is, the past occurrences of qualitatively similar events. T A9

One might conclude, at this point, that the failure to find the relevant impression should tell against the theory of ideas and against the claims it makes with regard to the priority of impressions. Predictably, Hume refuses to draw this conclusion. Instead he embarks upon the enquiry about the origins of two beliefs. One is the belief that every event has a cause. The other is the belief that like causes will produce like effects. T 1.3.2.12

EVERY EVENT HAS A CAUSE? Hume investigates the Causal Principle: Every event necessarily has a cause. This issue can be addressed briefly (and crudely). Hume uses the distinction between demonstrative and empirical knowledge. Effects can be separated from their causes in imagination. It is not a contradiction to believe that a particular effect did not have that particular cause. Thus, since whatever is conceivable is possible, events can occur in absence of any causes. T 1.3.3.1

However, there is a danger lurking here. We may very well imagine an event having a different cause. But we are not so much at liberty as to imagine it have *no* cause whatsoever. This, I think, we can take as an opening move in a Kantian gambit against Hume.

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