

Causality: The Ideas of Hume and Kant on an Essential Question



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Introduction:

When contemplating the nature of human knowledge acquisition and experience, the fields of epistemology and metaphysics are essential. In regard to these fields, causality – how or if events are linked – is an important concept. Two eighteenth-century philosophers, David Hume and Immanuel Kant, explored the idea of causality and sought to define it within the frameworks of their respective philosophies, empiricism and transcendental idealism. Though the two philosophers published their views within decades of one another, their ideas are substantially different. With Kant's writings serving as a response to those of Hume, the question can be asked, whose ideas better represent reality?

Thesis:

This brief comparison of the views of the Hume and Kant is meant to ascertain which philosopher's views better corresponds to reality and will involve the analysis of their ideas on causality from several perspectives. The first perspective will provide an understanding of their ideas on the nature of causality. The second will analyze their ideas as they relate to scientific theory. The third will explore how the processing of external knowledge fits within their causal paradigms. Upon completing this comparison, it may become apparent that Kant creates a more accurate version of causality by expanding on Hume's skeptical views, creating a more unified picture of reality.

Argument 1:

In order to effectively compare causality according to Hume and Kant, their considerable different definitions of causality must first be understood. For Hume, causality was

a property of the objects being observed themselves, similar to a force which exists in nature that should be perceptible. An object or cause must possess a property whereby it is able to bring about its effect.¹ According to Hume, since no such force is perceptible, the human notion of cause and effect must have a separate basis. He posits that the principle of cause and effect is simply a “custom or habit” arising from “the constant conjunction of two objects – heat and flame for instance.”² True to his empirical philosophy, Hume suggests that any idea of causality is simply the repeated observation of two events in succession. Even though the events are not linked in any way, after the repeated observation of event A followed by event B, it becomes a habit to assume that any time in the future event A occurs, event B will as well. This implies that causality does not in fact exist, but constant conjunction gives the appearance that it does.

Kant, on the other hand, embraces the fact that causality cannot be directly inferred from human experience. In his view, causality does not need to be observed because it is in fact part of the framework through which the world is viewed. He uses causality as “analogy of experience” through which the world is understood, allotting it a regulative property that is not grounded in sense intuition.³ For Kant, these analogies, such as causality, are not a “universal condition for the possibility of existence” but rather they are specific rules that allow for “the coordination of events in experience.”⁴ Kant’s treatment of causality is a more logical approach than Hume’s because it rejects the need for a perceptible property of causality. It is impossible to ascertain whether human experience and perception is objectively true, so using it as a criterion

¹ Bernard McBreen, “Realism and Empiricism in Hume's Account of Causality,” *Philosophy* 82, no. 321 (Jul., 2007): 422.

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 31

³ Dennis A. Rohatyn, “Kant, Hume and Causality,” *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 6, no. 1 (1975): 34

⁴ *Ibid*, 35

for the existence of a concept is inherently flawed. As such, Kant's causality allows for a more universal representation of the human experience.

Argument 2:

Hume's rigid use of human experience as the basis for his theories throws his version of causality further into question. In an attempt to refute the concept of causality, he suggests that in order for it to exist, the conjunction of two events would have to be "surveyed in all possible lights and positions."⁵ However, as he later goes on to state, this is rendered further impossible by the fact that every time an event occurs, it is different from the previous instances. This supposition tries to prove that the human understanding of causality is flawed in that it is based on the observation of ever-changing objects and factors. If this were true, Hume's causality provides no continuity of objects throughout time. This is clearly refuted by the modern scientific paradigm with its knowledge of objects at the atomic level which prove that observed objects are not constantly changing but rather a constant collection of the same atoms. According to the same scientific paradigm, different objects in different situations can maintain the same effect due to their molecular properties which remain constant as well.

Hume's discrepancy with modern scientific theory goes further with his choice of using a billiard ball as an example to prove his opinion. He states that watching a white ball hitting a red ball provides him with no observable cause and effect forces. The events of the motion of the two balls, according to Hume, are two unrelated events.⁶ However, when human action is involved in part of the event, the lack of an observable causal force can be remedied. For example, the pushing of a cart clearly involves a cause and effect relationship between the

⁵ Hume, 52

⁶ McBreen, 431

force applied by human motion and the motion of the cart. The bodily sensation of pushing, even by Hume's definition, can provide an origin of a cause.

Contrastingly, Kant's ideas lead to less conflict with scientific principles. Kant does not seek to prove or disprove the existence of causal properties of objects, allowing his theories to be more coherent with the modern understanding of physics which explains the example of two billiard balls hitting each other with the law of conservation of energy whereby the kinetic energy from one ball is transferred to the other. Kant's version of causality, unlike Hume's, is not at odds with physics. Kant simply argues that causality is established a priori and a property of the human mind, rather than a property of the objects or events themselves.⁷ With regards to science, Kant's causality is much less contradictory than that of Hume making it a more believable version of the concept.

Argument 3:

In addition to a discordance between Humean causality and science, his idea of the self is puzzling when combined with his idea of causality as well. According to Hume, external sensory experiences are constantly being received and form a "bundle of perceptions" which constitute the self.⁸ His opinions on causality fall into the same vein involving the constant conjunction of these sensory experiences. However, neither his idea of the self nor, as a result, his idea of causality provide a concrete explanation as to the feeling of self-unity over time.⁹ He gives no explanation as to how the self brings about a concept of itself that persists throughout time and does not explain how any perceptions are processed or understood, leaving the human

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, 33

⁸ Rohatyn, 38

⁹ Ibid

experience in essence chaotic. For example, when an apple is looked at over the course of a few seconds, the mind understands it as being the same apple rather than new apples every single time a new perception is obtained. This example questions Hume's "bundle of perception" theory and his view on causality because they rely on the precept that every time an object or event is perceived, it is different because of ever changing perceptions and as such no prediction that the same causal relationship will occur again can exist. When the commonly held idea that objects and the self do exist independent of time and perceptions is applied, his ideas are weakened.

On the other hand, Kant is able to escape this criticism because his ideas disregard any necessity to relate phenomena, the human experience, to noumena, objective reality. He states that even though he has "no notion of such a connection of things in themselves" his concepts "contain nothing that lies in the appearances, but only what the understanding alone must think."¹⁰ Once again, Kant uses causality as an a priori category for the processing of experience rather than any property of objects themselves. For him, causality is a property of the mind. This idea also gives Kant a more believable stance when it comes to the processing of information. Where Hume is unable to explain how any information is understood, Kant provides a model wherein the self exists throughout time and provides categories through which all experience is understood.¹¹ It does not matter in this case whether or not causality corresponds, for example, to an objective kinematic theory in Kant's model because any human understanding of kinematics would have ultimately arisen from the a priori categories of the mind. Hume's argument struggles greatly with providing a unified picture of the human mind and causality. In this

¹⁰ Kant, 33

¹¹ Rohatyn, 35

respect, Kant's views are more consistent and provide an explanation for the details of causality and how it fits into a larger framework.

Synthesis:

Therefore, since Hume's ideas of causality rely on an inherently flawed human experience to describe an objective reality while Kant embraces the differences between phenomena and noumena, Kant's choice to use causality as a category to describe phenomena makes more logical sense. While Hume's causality disagrees in several respects with modern science, Kant's ideas do not as they are detached from the inherent properties of the objects and events that are described. In addition to the first two perspectives, Hume's rigidity in his usage of human experience as the base of all knowledge leads to a struggle in relating the self and causality. In comparison, Kant is able to create a unified picture of human experience which includes his view of causality without contradiction.

Conclusion:

Kantian causality is able to isolate itself from the inherently questionable abilities of human experience in describing objective reality by concerning itself only with human understanding of external events rather than the events themselves. As such, Kant's ideas provide a more logical and understandable notion of causality as it relates to the humans. Though it may not perfectly describe objective reality, it adequately describes human reality. Accepting Kant's causality is essential to uphold the modern scientific method which is founded on the principle of cause and necessary effect. Due to the limitations of this comparison, not all variables and perspectives have been addressed. It may be used as the basis for a further more in-depth study.

Primary Sources:

Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. 1784.

Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*. 1783.

Secondary Sources:

Rohatyn, Dennis A.. "Kant, Hume and Causality," *Zeitschrift für allgemeine Wissenschaftstheorie* 6, no. 1 (1975): 34

Dennis Rohatyn is professor of philosophy at the University of San Diego where he has taught since 1977. He has published books such as *Two Dogmas of Philosophy* and *The Reluctant Naturalist* and has written regularly in journals. This article is a resource that provides an outline as to how Immanuel Kant's ideas on causality in *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* responds to the earlier ideas of David Hume. The paper goes through descriptions of both philosophers, with a focus on Kant, and how their ideas of causality relate to their general philosophy. There is a bias towards Kant's view of causality.

McBreen, Bernard. "Realism and Empiricism in Hume's Account of Causality," *Philosophy* 82, no. 321 (Jul., 2007): 422.

Bernard McBreen studied philosophy at the University of Oxford and is a frequent contributor to the journal *Philosophy* which is published by the Royal Institute of Philosophy. The article provides an overview as to the different perspectives from which Hume's causality can be considered. It is an in-depth exploration of how his ideas relate to both realism and empiricism and provides a look at Hume's thought process and logic. The article focuses on Hume, however, it does not show a bias towards his ideas as it points out certain contradictions he makes.