

**IMMANUEL KANT AND DAVID HUME: An analysis of
contradicting theories of Causation**



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Causation: Kant vs. Hume

Introduction:

Empiricism is the theory that all human knowledge is derived from sense experience. One of the most notable empiricists is David Hume, the 18th century Scottish philosopher. Hume's radical empiricism led him to develop scientifically devastating views on causality, putting into question everything he knew. Analysis of these views was essential to the work of Hume's contemporary, German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant did not entirely agree with Hume's theories, rather he saw them as a basis for further philosophical investigation.¹ Do Kant's theories effectively solve the problems that Hume proposed? Which philosopher provides a more accurate view on causation?

Thesis:

The purpose of this essay is to compare and contrast Kant and Hume's views on the relationship between cause and effect by analyzing each philosopher's epistemological theories. The first step will be an analysis of the two philosopher's views on a priori knowledge. The second step will be an exploration of Kant's theory on the human brain's ability to connect sensations. The third step will be a comparison of Hume's skepticism and Kant's causal conjunctions. By the end of this study, it may become clear that Kant was able to bridge the gaps in Hume's theories. Thus, Kant's views provide a more accurate and comprehensive view of causation.

Argument 1:

Kant manages to disprove Hume's view that a priori knowledge is invalid. Due to Hume's radical empiricism, he theorized that all true knowledge must be derived from sense

¹ Immanuel Kant. *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, p.4. (1783).

experience.² The human brain cannot know anything but its perceptions; this includes the notion of an external reality. The objects it seems to observe are merely bundles of properties that can be observed through the senses, not the actual object itself.

Kant viewed Hume's problems with pure reason from a more general standpoint, asking how cognition from pure reason was possible at all.³ Kant came to the conclusion that there are three areas of human knowledge that can be deduced logically. One area of a priori knowledge is pure mathematics. An example Kant uses is the proposition that $7 + 5 = 12$. The human brain can grasp that the separate concepts of 5 and 7 will create a sum when added together. It is also able to intuitively and logically deduct that their sum will be another separate concept, 12.⁴ The brain is able to come to this conclusion without the use of sense experience. This simple example displays the brain's ability to form connections between individual concepts a priori, disproving Hume's theory that the brain is merely a bundle of perceptions. This notion becomes fundamental to Kant's views on causality.

Argument 2:

However, Kant was not dismissive of Hume's reliance on perceptions. Rather, he built upon Hume's theories to develop his notion of the unified mind. Hume stated there is no way of determining whether or not the connections the mind makes between its perceptions of events are accurate. He believed that he had exhausted every method of proving that these connections could be made logically and concluded that they could only be connected through probable arguments.⁵ All connections observed between events were coincidental, regardless of how often these connections were repeated, as there is no way of determining empirically that these connections would occur in every instance.

² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) p. 9.

³ Graciela De Pierris and Michael Friedman, "Kant and Hume on Causality," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) p. 21.

⁵ William Edward Morris and Charlotte R. Brown, "David Hume," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Kant's solution is his theory of the unified mind, which proves that the mind can accurately connect sensations without sense experience. He stated that experience is a "synthesis of perceptions."⁶ The human mind perceives things as objects in a space outside of itself, making connections between the various sensations it derives from said object to comprehend that it is a unified object rather than separate sensations. However, since space is not an object itself, Kant argued that it is merely a tool the mind uses to organize its sensations.⁷ Space and our perceptions only exist within our mind. Furthermore, he argues that this means the laws of geometry and science are the laws of our mental space. Since objects and events only exist within our mental space, they must follow said laws.

Similarly, this theory can be applied to the notion of time. The mind is able to recognize change in its objects over time, whilst still understanding that it perceives the same object. This means that the mind must be unified throughout time, as it is able to collect and recollect the sensations of an object over time. This also establishes the notion that all events we perceive must follow previous events. An example Kant uses is the perception of the freezing of water from a liquid state to a solid state.⁸ In order to understand that the water has frozen; the mind must recollect a time when the water was liquid. The mind must also make the connection that the event of the freezing of the water was preceded by the event of the water being liquid. This particular connection or category, in Kant's terms, is cause and effect.

Argument 3:

Through his theory of the unified mind, Kant is able to prove the reliability of causal laws, contrary to Hume's skepticism. Hume stated that the laws of causality were unreliable as there were no empirical, logical, or intuitive arguments that could prove them to be accurate. However, he acknowledges that due to human nature, the brain chooses to believe these laws are

⁶ Kant, *Pure Reason*, p. 93.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 30.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.73.

true regardless as it is necessary for human survival and overall everyday function.⁹ But is this belief not intuitive?

Kant argued that the mind unified its perceptions because it was necessary in order to understand the objects it perceived. If these unifications were necessary then the connections the mind makes between said objects are also necessary.¹⁰ According to the connection of cause and effect, every perception must be preceded by a previous perception. To prove that the law of causality is accurate, Kant uses the example of a boat on a stream.¹¹ The human mind perceives that the boat is an object that is changing position. First the boat is perceived at a higher position in the stream, and then it is perceived at a lower position. The events from which these perceptions are derived occur outside the control of the conscious mind. One cannot choose to look at the boat further down the stream and then afterwards choose to regard the same boat higher up. Causal laws determine the order of these perceptions. This is evident as there will never be a situation where the second perception will be perceived before the first and the second perception could not occur without the first.

Synthesis:

Kant was able to disprove Hume's theory that cause and effect are merely coincidental. Hume's theories relied solely on perceptions and sensations, failing to acknowledge that there must be some sort of connection between these perceptions. Although bundle theory is accurate, in the sense that objects we perceive are a product of its perceptions, Hume does not recognize that there must be a mental process that allows the mind to bundle these perceptions in the first place.

By combining both rationalist and empiricist views, Kant was able to provide evidence that a priori knowledge is valid. His exploration of intuitive reasoning demonstrates that, contrary

⁹ Maurice Cranston and Thomas Edmund Jessop, "David Hume," *Encyclopædia Britannica inc.*,

¹⁰ Kant, *Pure Reason*, p. 63.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 98.

to Hume's beliefs, the human brain is more than a bundle of its perceptions. Kant was also able to use Hume's ideas as a foundation for his theory of the unified mind, presenting a solution to Hume's issues with scientific and mathematical theories. The unified mind is crucial in his response to Hume's skepticism regarding the accuracy of the laws of causation. Through the theory of the unified mind, Kant proves that the law of causation is necessary to the mind's apprehension of knowledge. Without the laws established within the unified mind, it would be impossible for the mind to comprehend the countless perceptions it receives.

Conclusion:

Kant's views offer a more accurate and comprehensive view of causation, which make up for many of Hume's epistemological shortcomings. Although Hume's theories were accurate according to empiricist beliefs, he proposed many problems with no solution, leaving behind a trail of scientific devastation. Kant was able to effectively present solutions to the issues Hume proposed and built upon Hume's theories to create a larger, more encompassing web of theories. There are of course, many more layers to both Kant and Hume's philosophy that would be impossible to capture in this brief study. Therefore, this essay may be considered the starting point for further exploration.

Works Cited

Cranston, Maurice and Thomas Edmund Jessop. "David Hume." Encyclopædia Britannica inc.. December 17, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/David-Hume>.

Maurice Cranston was a professor of political science at the University of London who has written biographies on John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Thomas Edmund Jessop was a professor of Philosophy at the University of Hull who wrote a biography on David Hume. In this online source, Cranston and Jessop describe David Hume's early life, his work, and the impact his work had in areas such as philosophy and science. The two authors argue that Hume's work was heavily influential to successive philosophers as they attempt to disprove his theories. Cranston and Jessop appear to demonstrate a bias towards Hume, praising his impact, however they demonstrate no clear bias towards Hume's theories themselves. This source is very useful for foundational research on Hume, his work, and brief summaries of his philosophy.

De Pierris, Graciela and Michael Friedman. "Kant and Hume on Causality." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. December 21, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant-hume-causality/#KantAnswHume>.

Graciela De Pierris is an associate professor of philosophy at Stanford University. Her husband, Michael Friedman is a philosopher of science and professor of Humanities at Stanford University. This online source compares Immanuel Kant and David Hume's theories on causality. The authors argue that Kant's theories provide a solution to the problems Hume proposed in his theories of cause and effect. The authors demonstrate a bias towards Kant as they highlight the ways in which Kant builds upon Hume's work. This source is very useful when doing research on causality and when making comparisons of the two philosophers.

Hume, David. **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**. 1748.

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Morris, William Edward and Charlotte R. Brown. "David Hume." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. March 21, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume/#CauInfConPha>.

William Edward Morris is a professor of philosophy at Illinois Wesleyan University. Charlotte R. Brown is an associate professor of Philosophy. The two have authored books together regarding David Hume. This online source analyses and references some of David Hume's most notable philosophical works. The two authors argue that Hume's work was deeply influential and that it has inspired many other notable philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant. The authors demonstrate a bias towards Hume and his theories. This source is very useful when doing research on Hume as it provides a thorough analysis of his major works.

Velasquez, Manuel. "Kant." **Philosophy: A Text with Readings**. Nelson Education, 2015.

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