

The Empiricist View on the Causal Principle:

The Causal Principle - the proposition that "every event must have a cause" and that the same cause must necessarily produce the same effect - is one of the most fundamental assumptions of human thought and science. The central philosophical debate regarding this principle is about its origin and justification.

Empiricism, denies any innate ideas. Its core thesis is that all our knowledge comes from sensory experience. For empiricists, the causal principle is not discovered by pure reason but is derived from experience, habit, and psychological association. While early empiricists contributed to this discussion, the most radical, systematic, and definitive empiricist account of causality was provided by David Hume, and it is his view that represents the true empiricist position.

Hume asks a deceptively simple question: When we say "A causes B", what do we actually see in experience? Suppose we observe one billiard ball striking another. What is given in our sensory impression? We see only three things:

1. The two events are close to each other in space and time. The movement of the first ball and the movement of the second ball occur in succession at the same place.
2. The cause always precedes the effect. The first ball moves before the second ball moves. We never see the effect coming before the cause.
3. In the past, we have always observed events of type A followed by events of type B. We have seen fire followed by heat, again and again.

That is all. We see one event, then another event. We do NOT see a third thing called "power," "force," or "necessary connection" that binds them together. We do not perceive any invisible thread that compels B to follow A. The senses are silent about necessity.

Rationalists claimed that there is a logical necessity in causality - that given the cause, the effect must follow. Hume denies this. He argues that we can easily conceive of a cause without its usual effect without any logical contradiction. We can imagine fire without heat, or a billiard ball stopping dead after a collision

without moving the second ball. Since we can conceive it without contradiction, it is not logically impossible. Therefore, the necessity is not logical.

So, if necessity is not observed in the objects, where does the idea of necessity come from?

The Psychological Origin of Necessary Connection: Habit and Custom. This is Hume's most brilliant psychological discovery.

Although we do not see necessity in a single instance of cause and effect, when we experience _repeated_ instances of constant conjunction, something happens in the mind. After observing that A has always been followed by B in the past, the mind develops a habit or custom. When we see A again, the mind is automatically and naturally carried by habit to expect B. This expectation is not a product of reasoning; it is an instinctive, non-rational mechanism of human nature. The feeling of being compelled to expect B when we see A - this internal feeling of determination - is what we mistake for an external necessary connection between the objects themselves. We project our internal mental compulsion onto the external world. In Hume's own words: "Necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects."

To conclude, the empiricist view on the causal principle is a shift from objectivity to subjectivity, from reason to experience, from logical necessity to psychological habit. For empiricism, especially in its Humean form, the causal principle is not a self-evident truth of pure reason written in the mind by God. It is a product of experience. We observe constant conjunctions, the mind forms a habit of expectation, and we call that habit "necessary connection." It has no logical compulsion, only psychological force. It does not guarantee the future, it only makes us expect it.

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