

The Rationalist View on the Causal Principle :

The Causal Principle - "Every event must have a cause, and every cause must necessarily produce its effect" - is the foundation of all rational thought and science. The central question is: What is the source of our knowledge of this principle?

Empiricists like Hume argued that it comes from habit and repeated observation. Rationalists take the exact opposite stand. For them, the causal principle is not derived from experience at all; it is an a priori, innate, self-evident, and necessary principle of reason. Experience may illustrate it, but cannot prove or generate it.

For all classical rationalists, necessity is not something we see, it is something we understand. Hume's complaint that we do not see necessity with our eyes is irrelevant, because necessity is a rational category, not a sensory impression.

The most powerful modern defence of the rationalist view of causality came from the British idealist philosopher *Alfred Cyril Ewing (1899-1973)* in his works *Kant's Treatment of Causality* (1924) and *The Fundamental Questions of Philosophy* (1951).

Ewing was a Kantian rationalist. He accepted Kant's idea that causality is a synthetic a priori condition of thought, but he defended it against Hume's empiricist attack with new arguments. His main arguments are:

a) The Causal Principle is Synthetic A Priori:

Ewing argues that the proposition "Every event has a cause" is not analytic. The concept of "event" does not analytically contain the concept of "cause" within it. You can think of an event without thinking of its cause, so it is synthetic - it adds new knowledge.

But it cannot be a posteriori or empirical either. Experience can only tell us that some events we have observed have had causes. It can never tell us that every event must have a cause. The universality - "every" - and the necessity - "must" - can never come from experience, which is always particular and contingent. Therefore, it must be a priori - known independently of experience, yet applicable to experience.

b) Causality as a Necessary Presupposition of Thought:

This is Ewing's most important contribution. Ewing reverses Hume's order. Hume thought: First we have experiences, then we notice constant conjunctions, then we form the idea of causality.

Ewing says, The opposite is true. We must already presuppose causality to have any coherent experience at all.

Thus, causality is not a result of induction; it is the presupposition that makes induction possible. It is the framework within which we interpret experience. As Ewing puts it, "Causality

is a necessary presupposition of all empirical thought." Without it, experience would be a chaotic flux of disconnected impressions.

Ewing points out a fatal flaw in Hume's theory that necessity comes from habit or custom. Habit can explain expectation, but it cannot explain the feeling of necessity. Habit says: "A has been followed by B in the past, so I expect B in the future. But the causal principle says more: "A must be followed by B; B is compelled to occur." The feeling of "must" or "compulsion" is much stronger than mere expectation. No amount of repetition can logically generate the idea of logical necessity. Repetition can produce a psychological tendency, but not a rational necessity. Furthermore, Ewing argues, we apply the causal principle even to single, unique events. If we see a strange light in the sky that we have never seen before, we still instantly ask "What caused it?" We do not need repeated instances to apply causality. This shows the principle is already in the mind before experience.

For Ewing and the rationalists, the causal principle has four characteristics: It is not derived from experience, but is presupposed by it. It gives us real knowledge about the world, not just a definition. It holds for all events, at all times, and its negation is unthinkable for reason, not just unusual. It does not merely describe the world; it constitutes the rational intelligibility of the world. The world is rational, and causality is the expression of that rationality.

Ewing's defence shows why rationalism remains a powerful alternative to Humean empiricism. If Hume were right and causality were mere habit, science would lose all its rational foundation and become a mere collection of observed regularities with no guarantee for the future. The rationalist, with Ewing, argues that science works precisely because the world is rationally ordered and our reason is capable of grasping that necessary order. The causal principle is not a psychological illusion produced by custom; it is the fundamental rational law of being itself, without which neither thought nor reality is possible.

.....