

Hume's Critique of the Idea of a Causal Relation

Phase 1: Negative Critique

- (i) Assume all judgments are justified either *a priori* (as per *relations of ideas* judgments) or *a posteriori* (as per *matters of fact* judgments).

Ask: how is the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) justified? Since the latter is just a generalization from the truth of particular causal judgments, this is just to ask: what justifies particular causal claims of the form "A causes B"?

- (ii) Given (i), all particular causal claims are either *a priori* claims (*relations of ideas*) or *a posteriori* claims (*matters of fact*).
- (iii) PSR is justified only if "A causes B" is justified *a priori* or *a posteriori*

If "A causes B" is a

"Relations of Ideas" Claim

"Matters of Fact" Claim

then

B is logically dependent on A

There is an original impression of sensation corresponding to the *causal power* of A to produce B or the *necessary relation* between A and B

Force of Counterexamples:

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Alternative outcomes thinkable
(=causal necessity is *not logical*)

No perception of necessary relation
No perception of causal power
(=causal necessity is *not perceived*)

Interim conclusion 1: The part of the complex concept of a causal relation corresponding to an idea of necessity (logical or empirical) fails the correspondence principle test, and therefore is not *meaningful* when applied to objects of perception.

Interim conclusion 2: "A is B" is not justified either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, therefore PSR is not justified.

Problem pursuant to conclusion 1: DH's theory of ideas, on which this negative critique depends, promises that all ideas we actually have can have their origins explained by appeal either to relations among ideas we already have, or because they can be traced back to original impressions of sensation, reflection, or emotion. Since we *have* the complex idea of a causal

relation, including this idea of a necessary relation between cause and effect, the CP requires that we account for its origins, ultimately, in original impressions of sensation, reflection or emotion.

Phase Two: the Positive Critique

Hume's response to the problem arising from Phase One is his *positive* account of a causal relation, *including* the origins of the idea of the necessity of that relation in *impressions of reflection* corresponding to the "easy transitions in thought" arising due to our habit-driven association of events of type A and events of type B. This account distinguishes and accounts for the origins of each of the four properties of a causal relationship (as the human mind conceives it) by pointing to each of the four features that cause the passive imagination to associate ideas and incoming impressions:

Parts of Idea of Causal Relation	Features of Incoming Impressions
Temporal contiguity	Impression A precedes Impression B in Time
Spatial contiguity	Impression A appears close to B in Space
Resemblance	Impression A resembles B in some respect
Necessary connection	Impressions A and B are constantly conjoined

Each part of the complex concept of a particular causal relation is traceable to associative links created by the passive imagination as incoming impressions are stored/copied in memory, with the generality of our idea of particular causal relations produced by abstraction from particular impressions to produce the 1) idea of events of types A and B, and 2) the idea of their complex relation. The concept of causal relation is an abstraction from particular episodes of this process, reiterated over time and (perceptual) experience.

Main Conclusion: the empirical concept of a causal relation among objects of perception (and hence, the PSR) fails to apply to the domain of perception because a key part (the idea of a necessary relation between cause and effect) cannot be traced back to impressions of sensation, but only to impressions of reflection (easy transitions in thought...how we *respond psychologically* to repeated, temporally and spatially contiguous and resembling perceptions drawn from experience).

Skeptical result: metaphysically real causal relations *may exist*, but we cannot *know about them*. Consequences: moderate external world skepticism.