The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 18

Hume: Causation (negative)

Separability of causes. Once he has shown that the Causal Principle ('every event has a cause') cannot be established by reason, Hume moves on to the question whether it could be established by experience. The question is taken up in T 1.3.6. It begins with a striking observation that no object, considered in isolation should give a reason to believe in the existence of any other object, also considered in isolation. Once again, this initial contention turns on 'separability'. As I can separate the existence of two objects in my imagination, it follows that one object can, under some circumstance, exist without the other. T 1.3.3.9 T 1.3.6.1

This short argument depends on the already familiar to us epistemic principle that conceivability is a guide to possibility:

Conceivability Principle. Necessarily, for every x, if x is conceivable, then x is possible.

Is this an acceptable principle? Some have protested. I can conceive the Goldbach's Conjecture ('every even number is a sum of two primes') to be proved and I can also conceive to be disproved. But if it is true, then it is true necessarily. And if it is false, it is false necessarily. So either way I have conceived something that is impossible. And so conceivability is not a guide to possibility.

However, this reasoning fails to convince. What exactly am I conceiving in my conceiving the GC to be proved? Perhaps a newspaper report, perhaps a happy face of the mathematician who proved it, perhaps a printout of some kind showing what I stipulate to be its proof. But neither of these should qualify as conceiving the proof. I have to imagine the actual proof, which is obviously impossible for me to do.

One might say that I need not conceive GC proved—but only that it is true. Truth and proof can come apart, at least if I adopt the stance of mathematical realism. But again, what do I conceive when I conceive its truth? A long sequence of even numbers written down that satisfy the Conjecture? This is compatible with the falsehood of GC. Or perhaps I imagine the Conjecture written down with the label 'true' next to it?

Even more precarious is the demand to conceive the falsity of GC. In that case I will have to conceive either an actual even not being a sum of two primes (which would constitute a constructive proof of GC), or else a non-constructive proof, likely describing the negation of GC as a coherent possibility. Both projects are quite beyond my reach or anyone else's. And more importantly, we can see here that conceiving the falsity of GC is incompatible with the truth of GC, a fact that should confirm the Conceivability Principle.

Question 1. Explain the last claim.

Question 2. Moritz Schlick argued that there is life after death on the grounds that I can conceive my own funeral. How could an argument of this kind proceed? Is it successful?

Constant conjunction. Now, since we can separate causes and events, it follows that any event can be a cause (or effect) of any other event. Having ascertained that, Hume claims that causal inferences are based entirely on experience. What Hume believes he has established is that beliefs in causal connection are based on experience and our exposure to constant conjunction of the two types of events (cause-types and effect-types). T 1.3.6.2 T A11 T 1.3.6.4

Induction. Thereupon follows the discussion of induction. There are roughly two possible interpretations of what Hume is saying in the remainder of section 6 (§4ff). According to one reading, he is an unabashed sceptic. There is no rational justification from inferring future occurrences based on past occurrences. The totality of observed facts lends no evidential or otherwise rational support to the claims about unobserved phenomena. On a rival interpretation, Hume is a moderate sceptic. His scepticism extends no further than the *deductive* justification of inductive arguments. I am inclined to think that the latter reading goes against much of the tone of the *Treatise*, in particular in the current section and in the Abstract.

Observe that the inductive inference, according to Hume, should be based upon the premiss of the uniformity of nature ('instances of which we have had no experience. . . '). In short we can put it thus: T 1.3.6.4

Uniformity principle. The future should resemble the past.

This principle evidently allows no deductive justification. On the other hand, any attempt at inductive justification will be circular. T 1.3.6.7

The power argument. Hume turns to address an argument that may be found in Locke (though Locke is not mentioned), and which can appear plausible to realists about causation: T 1.3.6.8

> The mind being every day informed, by the senses, of the alteration of those simple ideas it observes in things without; and taking notice how one comes to an end, and ceases to be, and another begins to exist which was not before; reflecting also on what passes within itself, and observing a constant change of its ideas, sometimes by the impression of outward objects on the senses, and sometimes by the determination of its own choice; and concluding from what it has so constantly observed to have been, that the like changes will for the future be made in the same things, by like agents, and by the like ways; considers in one thing the possibility of having any of its simple ideas changed, and in another the possibility of making that change; and so comes by that idea which we call power. Thus we say, fire has a power to melt gold, i.e. to destroy the consistency of its insensible parts, and consequently its hardness, and make it fluid; and gold has a power to be melted; that the sun has a power to blanch wax, and wax a power to be blanched by the sun, whereby the yellowness is destroyed, and whiteness made to exist in its room. In which, and the like cases, the power we consider is in reference to the change of perceivable ideas. For we cannot observe any alteration to be made in, or operation upon anything, but by the observable change of its sensible ideas; nor conceive any alteration to be made, but by conceiving a change of some of its ideas. (*Essay* II.xxi.1)

To paraphrase this argument: If we have regularities in the world—and we do, as the evidence suggests—then there is some further *ground* of these regularities. Such ground can be attributed to 'powers'. In fact we can say this: we cannot help but believe in some such ground. Bare regularities are not believable.

Refutation. Hume offers no less than four objections against the power argument. (1) 'Production' is a causal term. To say that X produces Y is to say that, perhaps among other things, X causes Y to be. (2) No existence of any object entails logically the existence of power. This is plausible especially if we attend to the earlier refutation of the Causal Principle. (3) The idea of power offers no explanation, as it is a confused idea, akin to the idea of substratum. (4) Finally, supposing that its idea is a coherent one, power does not reside in sensible qualities. That is an assumption: it resides in the bodies themselves. Suppose further that we believe its presence to be accompanied by a certain idea on the occasion O_1. Then on what ground do we conclude that its presence will be accompanied by a similar idea on another occasion O_2? Clearly on the ground of the Uniformity Principle, and thus any such defence involves a circularity. In other words: the concept of power, even if acceptable in its own right, does not give a non-circular reason for prediction.

T 1.3.14.5f
T 1.3.7.10

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