

Hume the Cause, Kant the Effect

Diana Mertz Hsieh (diana@dianahsieh.com)

Kant (Phil 5010, Hanna)

14 December 2004

The Dogmatic Slumber

In the Preface to the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant famously credits his recollection of Hume's skepticism with being "the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction" (Pr 260). From Kant's perspective, Hume's skeptical arguments about causality "demonstrated irrefutably that it was entirely impossible for reason to think *a priori* and by means of concepts [the] combination [of which] involves necessity" (Pr 257). In other words, Hume's arguments showed that not even the most elaborate and complex chains of *a priori* reasoning could prove causal connection, i.e. that the existence of A must necessarily give rise to the existence of B (Pr 257). Kant clearly rejected Hume's skeptical conclusion that "reason [is] altogether deluded" about cause and effect, yet he regarded him as offering "a spark from which light might [be] obtained," provided that it catches "some inflammable substance" and "its smoldering fire [is] carefully nursed and developed" (Pr 257). Although he does not say so directly, Kant clearly views his Copernican Turn as that flammable substance and himself as the tender of the fire.

Kant's wholly original solution to Hume's skepticism about causality is found in the Second Analogy of Experience in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The basic purpose of this paper is to critically examine Kant's account of causality in the Second Analogy, to determine whether it adequately responds to Hume's skeptical challenge. Notably, Kant's attempt to ground causality comes late in the *Critique*—in the interesting sense that it logically depends upon his earlier arguments about time as an *a priori* form of sensibility in Transcendental Aesthetic, the relationship between the categories and the forms of logical judgment in the Metaphysical Deduction, the categories as necessary for the experience of objects in the Transcendental Deductions, and so on. Apart from that foundation, Kant's proposed solution to the problem of causality is not merely highly implausible, but also basically incomprehensible. So despite my strong objections to those fundamental elements of Kant's critical philosophy, this paper will focus solely upon the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments of the Second Analogy as a response to Hume.

Kant's Interpretation of Hume's Skepticism

In his commentary on Hume's arguments about causality in the *Prolegomena*, Kant chastises some of Hume's critics for wholly missing the thrust of his skeptical arguments. These philosophers of the "common sense" school erred in "taking for granted that which [Hume] doubted, and demonstrating with zeal and often with impudence that which he never thought of doubting" (Pr 258). Kant aims to set the record straight: Hume never questioned that "the concept of cause was right, useful, and even indispensable for our knowledge of nature," but instead denied that causality "could be thought of by reason *a priori*, and consequently whether it possessed an inner truth, independent of all experience, implying a more widely extended usefulness, not limited merely to objects of experience" (Pr 258-9). While Kant is certainly correct that Hume never doubted the usefulness of the principle of cause and effect, his own

summary of Hume's skepticism leaves much to be desired. As an empiricist, Hume would have been perfectly content with a well-grounded principle of causality which was "limited merely to the objects of experience" (Pr 259). His skeptical doubts were rooted in the difficulties of justifying ordinary causal claims, not any rationalist desire to extend the principle of causality beyond possible experience. In this way, Kant's interpretation of Hume is all-too-conveniently suited to Kant's own project of transcendental idealism. Nonetheless, the critical question at hand is whether the theory of causality that Kant develops in the Second Analogy of the *Critique* constitutes an adequate answer to Hume's skeptical arguments. So let us briefly survey those arguments before considering Kant's response to them.

In the discussion of causality in the *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume first divides "all the objects of human reason or inquiry... into two kinds," namely "Relations of Ideas" and "Matters of Fact" (Inquiry 40). Relations of ideas include "every affirmation which is either intuitively or demonstrably certain" and which is "discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence upon what is anywhere existent in the universe," such as the principles of mathematics (Inquiry 40). Matters of fact are empirical truths, the opposites of which "never imply a contradiction" and can be "distinctly conceived by the mind" (Inquiry 40). In Kantian terms, relations of ideas are all *a priori*, analytic, and necessary, while matters of fact are all *a posteriori*, synthetic, and contingent. Hume develops his skeptical arguments within this general framework in two basic stages: (1) causal connections are not relations of ideas because they cannot be known *a priori*, (2) all empirical claims about necessary causal connections are unjustified (Inquiry 42-57).

First, Hume effectively demolishes the notion that our ideas of causal connection are relations of ideas on the grounds that particular causal connections are only known by experience. He observes that "Adam, though his rational faculties be supposed, at the very first, entirely perfect, could not have inferred from the fluidity and transparency of water that it would suffocate him, or from the light and warmth of fire that it would consume him" (Inquiry 42). Effects are not conceptually contained in their associated causes in the way that "unmarried" and "male" are contained in the idea of "bachelor." In fact, "the effect is totally different from the cause, and consequently can never be discovered in it" (Inquiry 43). Without the benefit of experience, we could coherently conceive of "a hundred different events" that could result from one billiard ball moving rapidly toward another (Inquiry 44). As far as reason alone is concerned, the billiards might repel or attract like magnets, disintegrate into a fine powder, or transmogrify into Plato and Aristotle. So although we are "apt to imagine that we could discover [causal] effects by the mere operation of our reason without experience," such is clearly impossible upon further reflection (Inquiry 43). Thus our ideas of causal connection cannot be *a priori* relations of ideas.

Second, Hume rules out the possibility of developing any necessary and universal causal laws from experience given that the senses only provide a "continual succession of objects, and one event following another," not the "the particular powers...by which all natural operations are performed" (Inquiry 56). So upon observing one event follow another, claiming a causal connection would be hasty because "their conjunction may be arbitrary and casual" (Inquiry 56). Even the observation of events "constantly conjoined together" offers us no insight into the "secret power by which one [event] produces the other" (Inquiry 56). So although we regard gravity as the cause of a rock falling to the ground, perception only tells us that such bodies fall, not why they do so. Perhaps invisible, speedy, and overweight fairies who like to sit upon floating objects are the "secret power" at work. Even experiments carefully crafted to reveal "a

connection between the sensible qualities and the secret powers” of some entity cannot justify universal causal claims because such inferences presume “that the future will resemble the past, and that similar powers will be conjoined with similar sensible qualities” (Inquiry 50-1). So even if we regularly experience necessary causal sequences of events, any claim to empirical knowledge of them will be unjustified.

Ultimately, Hume explains our propensity to make causal connections between events as the product of the force of custom or habit, which just means that for some unknown reason the “repetition of [the act of drawing causal connections] produces a propensity to renew the same act... without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding” (Inquiry 56-7). Before turning to Kant’s alternative account of causation, we ought to note that Kant wrongly frames the skeptical worries raised by Hume in terms of the concept of causality itself. He writes that “Hume’s problem... was a question concerning the *origin* of the concept [of cause]” which, if answered, would have “determined as a matter of course” the “conditions of its use and the sphere of its valid application” (Pr 259). But as we have seen, Hume’s skeptical doubts did not concern the origin of the concept of causality at all, but rather the possibility of justified claims of causal connection.

The Determination of Temporal Order

In his introductory comments on the three analogies of experience in the *Critique*, Kant sketches the basic challenge posed by the current stage of his not-yet-complete critical philosophy to be overcome by the analogies. Like in the Transcendental Deduction, the threat of a chaotic sensory manifold must be defused by appealing to some necessary order imposed by the mind. Yet in this case, the particular focus is not on the unification of the sensory manifold in a single subject by pure apperception, but rather the necessary temporal connections between perceptions generated by the pure regulative concepts of subsistence, causality, and community. Significantly, those three analogies are not independent principles but rather connected elements in Kant’s attempt to render temporal relations between perceptions objective.

Kant rather cryptically describes the general problem to be solved by the analogies as follows: “In experience, ...perceptions come together only contingently, so that no necessity of their connection is or can become evident in the perceptions themselves, since apprehension is only a juxtaposition of the manifold of empirical intuition, but no representation of the necessity of the combined existence of the appearances that it juxtaposes in space and time is to be encountered in it” (CPR A176/B219). Let us unpack that basic problem. Given the structure of the mind so far developed in the *Critique*, perceptions are merely jumbled together in time, not temporally connected to one another in determinate way. The manifold of empirical intuitions cannot provide any necessary temporal order because “time itself cannot be perceived” (CPR B219). More simply put, the particular events in our flow of experience are not stamped with some particular number from an Intrinsic and Universal Time Scale. Instead, we are mired in a subjective temporal order of experience, one which routinely fails to correspond to the objective temporal order of the world. The subjective temporal order of our experiences depends upon us, as in the progression of individual parking meters seen in the course of walking down a street. In contrast, the objective temporal order depends upon the objects of our experience, such as the spray of water which erupts from a fire hydrant upon being struck by a car. The challenge that we face lies in distinguishing between objective and subjective temporal order—given that perception offers us no means to do so.

Sebastian Gardner notes the importance of this task in writing that “if we are to think of objects as distinct from our representations, then we need to be able to think of them as existing in time, as a matter over and above the inner flow of our representations.”¹ For Kant, such a task is necessary for any empirical knowledge at all, since such involves perceived objects not merely “juxtaposed in time” but rather “objectively in time” (CPR B219). Ultimately, the mere possibility of experience presupposes that we somehow differentiate between the idea of an “objective time-order, in which objects exist with determinate temporal locations” and that of our “subjective time-order in which our representations succeed one another.”² Since perception offers us no distinguishing features from which to work, that differentiation “can only come about through [the] combination [of objects] in time in general,” which in turn requires the three analogies of experience as “*a priori* connecting concepts” (CPR B219). The analogies (i.e. subsistence, causality, community) are regulative “rules of general time-determination” under which “all empirical time-determinations must stand” corresponding to the three modes of time (i.e. persistence, succession, and simultaneity) (CPR A177/B219-20). The basic principle common to all the analogies is the one stated by Kant at the outset: “Experience is possible only through the representation of a necessary connection of perceptions” (CPR A176/B218).

The Origin of the Concept of Causation

The first analogy concerns the persistence of substance underlying change, in that “all change (succession) of appearances is only alteration” of a single substance (CPR B233). Building upon that foundation, the second analogy focuses on the necessary connections between that succession of appearances. In the course of perceiving successive appearances, we are aware that A exists, followed by non-A (CPR B233). For the general reasons already indicated, Kant claims that such awareness is “not the work of mere sense and intuition, but is here rather the product of a synthetic faculty of the imagination” (CPR B233). However, the mere temporal connection of two appearances, A and B, contains no necessity; A might follow B or B might follow A (CPR B233). So while we are aware of a temporal order of appearances, that order is merely subjective, not objective. As Kant writes, “I am therefore only conscious that my imagination places one state before and the other after, not that the one precedes the other in the object”—meaning that “through the mere perception, the objective relation of the appearances that are succeeding one another remains undetermined” (CPR B233-4). An objective, necessary temporal ordering of A and B would require that “the relation between the two states... be thought in such a way that it is thereby necessarily determined which of them must be placed before and which after rather than vice versa” (CPR B234). So an objective temporal order would require A to always precede B or B to always precede A. No empirical concept of causality can perform that task; only the pure concept of causality “carries a necessity of synthetic unity with it” capable of imposing objective temporal order upon the subjective flow of events, such that “[the cause] determines [the effect] in time” (CPR B234).

After sketching this basic theory of causality, Kant helpfully compares the perception of a house in parts with the perception of a boat moving downstream in order to “show what sort of combination in time pertains to the manifold in the appearances itself even though the presentation of it in apprehension is always successive” (CPR A190/B235). In other words, what renders a certain temporal order objective within the subjective flow of our experience? What makes some alterations (in which “a state comes to be that previous was not”) necessary? (CPR

¹ Sebastian Gardner, *Kant and the Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 172.

² Ibid.

A192/B237). The differences between the house example and the boat example promise to answer those questions.

In the case of sequential perceptions of a house, “the apprehension of the manifold in the appearance of a house that stands before me is successive” but “no one will concede” that “the house itself is also successive” (CPR A190/B235). In other words, the progression of the perceived parts of the house is not due to those parts coming to be and then passing away, but rather to the movement of the eyes. So Kant is not here appealing to mere common sense, but rather to fact that the subject can alter the order of his perceptions by his own actions. As he notes, “my perceptions could have begun at its rooftop and ended at the ground, but could also have begun below and ended above; likewise I could have apprehended the manifold of empirical intuition from the right or from the left” (CPR A192/B237-8). More generally, “in the series of these perceptions there was... no determinate order that made it necessary when I had to begin in the apprehension in order to combine the manifold empirically” (CPR A192-3/B238). By such considerations, we may justly declare that the temporal connections between the perception of various parts of the house are merely subjective, not objective and necessary.

In contrast, such reversals of order are not possible in the case of the boat moving downstream with the current. In that case, “my perception of its position downstream follows the perception of its position upstream” such that “it is impossible that in the apprehension of this appearance that the ship should first be perceived downstream and afterwards upstream” (CPR A192/B237). As with all such causation or objective temporal order, the “determine order” of appearances “makes the order of perceptions that follow one another (in the apprehension of this appearance) necessary” (CPR A192-3/B238). According to Kant, such is the basic distinction by which we may “derive the subjective sequence of appearances from the objective sequence of appearances” (CPR A193/B238). Only when a person “cannot arrange the apprehension otherwise than in exactly this sequence” is he “justified in saying of the appearance itself, and not merely of [his] apprehension, that a sequence is to be encountered in it” (CPR A193/B238). In that case, the sequence of change in appearance is subject to an objective temporal order—meaning that it involves a necessary causal connection between two events. So as Gardner notes, the concept of causation is just “the concept of a necessary and irreversible succession.”³

Such is the origin of the second analogy, i.e. the rule that “all alterations occur in accordance with the law of the connection of cause and effect” (CPR B232). Without such a rule imposed upon perception, Kant argues, our mental life would be reduced to “a play of representations that would not be related to any object at all” (CPR A194/B239). Hume also regarded our ideas of causal connection as critical to “all reasonings concerning matter of fact” but merely on the grounds that they are required in order to “go beyond the evidence of our memory and senses”—a seemingly modest claim in comparison (Inquiry 41). Kant’s essential arguments in the Second Analogy, are thus well-summarized by Gardner as follows: “The experience of objective change, i.e. of the world as changing, as opposed to merely oneself or one’s representations changing, is necessary for experience of an objective time-order, and that the distinction between change occurring in our representations, and change occurring in an objective world, can be made only by employing the concept of causality.”⁴

The Application of the Concept Causation

³ Ibid., 176.

⁴ Ibid., 175.

As already noted, Kant viewed the fundamental question about causality to be that of the “the origin of the concept,” in that the answer to that question would allow us to determine “the conditions of its use and the sphere of its valid application... as a matter of course” (Pr 259). Kant’s account of the origin of our ideas about cause and effect is consistent with the substance and method of the rest of his critical philosophy, so the few unique objections may be raised against it within that context are hardly noteworthy. Instead, since Hume was concerned with the justified application of the concept of causality to experience, let us consider whether Kant’s general theory of causation may be plausibly applied to the determination of particular causal relationships between particular events.

After presenting his argument for causality as an *a priori* rule necessary for the experience of objects, Kant seeks to demonstrate the validity of our particular claims of causal connection between events. He writes:

It is... important show by an example that even in experience we never ascribe sequence (of an occurrence, in which something happens that previously did not exist) to the object, and distinguish it from the subjective sequence of our apprehension, except when a rule is the ground that necessitates us to observe this order of perceptions rather than another, indeed that it is really this necessitation that first makes possible the representation of a succession in the object (CPR A196-7/B241-2).

Kant’s purpose here is ambitious, to say the least. He aims to demonstrate that any and all ascriptions of objective temporal order (i.e. necessary causal connection between events) are valid instances of such order on the grounds that those types of claims are only possible in virtue of the causal rule of the second analogy. He attempts to prove this claim though the general question of how “we come to posit an object for [our mere] representations,” i.e. how we ascribe “some sort of objective reality” to the mere “subjective reality” of our representations (CPR A197/B242). Kant’s answer is simple: the only “characteristic... given to our representations by [their] relation to an object” is that of “making the combination of representations necessary in a certain way, and subjecting them to a rule” (CPR A197/B242). In other words, the only feature which distinguishes objective representations from subjective representations is that the former are subject to an *a priori* rule, while the latter are not. Consequently, Kant claims:

As soon as I perceive or anticipate that there is in this sequence a relation to the preceding state, from which the representation follows in accordance with a rule, I represent something as an occurrence, or as something that happens, i.e. I cognize an object that I must place in time in a determinate position which, after the preceding state, cannot be otherwise assigned to it” (CPR A198/B243).

So because causality is an *a priori* rule which makes possible connections between perceptions, even the slightest whiff of its relevance implies that it is already in full force. The mere thought that some temporal sequence from A to B might be in the object makes it so, since the thought would not be possible if the temporal sequence was merely subjective. So on this transcendental model of causality, rational beings must be infallible in the attributions of causal relationships.

Given this infallibility implication of Kant’s theory of causation, a person need not be a committed skeptic like Hume to reject his theory as not just implausible but also obviously false. After all, people err in their claims of causal connection on a regular basis. Some claims of causation from A to B are largely arbitrary, such as those made by people who regard the course of their lives as subject to the influence of the stars, angels, and so on. Other claims of causation from A to B are reasonable, but nonetheless mistaken, such as when a woman yells at her barking dog, thinking him to be aroused by the slam of a door in the wind, when he is actually warning of a prowler outside. Generally, such mistaken claims of causal connection are based upon the experience of coincidences, i.e. two events closely connected in time which seem causally related but are not. Any decent theory of causation must distinguish between genuine instances of causation from A to B and the mere coincidence of A then B. But on Kant’s view,

all coincidences are treated as genuine causes, since we could not even think “Ah, maybe A caused B” unless A actually caused B. Notably, Kant cannot overcome Hume’s skepticism about causation with a weaker but more plausible account of the determination of particular causal relationships. After all, if we are capable of erring in the designation of A as the cause of B, then we immediately subject ourselves to the very sorts of skeptical worries raised by Hume.

Concluding Thoughts

Although Kant’s theory of causation generally fits well into his overall critical philosophy, it fails in its basic task of answering the skeptical challenge posed by Hume. The fact that it cannot adequately account for the existence of coincidences is not merely a small problem to be solved by some minor modifications. Rather, it indicates that Kant lacks the necessary means to distinguish between real and apparent causal relationships, despite all of his concern for the difference between objective and subjective temporal orders. For such reasons, a solution to Hume’s skepticism about causation must be sought elsewhere.