

Hume: 'My sagacious Predecessor'¹

1. How Kant reads Hume (*Preface* ¶9, 4:257–8).

- (1) *Hume's Problem*: is the causal relation 'thought through reason *a priori*', and thus is independent of experience?
- (2) So, accept for the sake of argument that the causal relation *is* rational, i.e. is grounded in reasoning. For if a relation is rational, it can be thought *a priori* (independent of experience) and 'from' concepts.
- (3) The causal relation is necessary, i.e. cause and effect stand in a necessary relation: if some object is posited (the cause), so another object must be posited too (the effect).
- (4) But it is impossible to think (or know) by reason alone how the existence of one object necessitates the existence of another.
- (5) Therefore, 'it is wholly impossible for reason to think such a connection *a priori* and from concepts'.
- (6) But then, the causal relation is not rational.
- (7) So, it is impossible to see 'how the concept of such a connection could be introduced *a priori*'.
- (8) Thus, the causal relation must be grounded in some other source, such as the imagination and custom (or habit).
- (9) But imagination and custom can only generate 'subjective necessity'.
- (10) But metaphysics, *qua* science, needs objective (intersubjective) concepts.
- (11) So, metaphysics is not possible.²

Although Kant agrees with Hume's line of thought up to (6) (e.g., 'he indisputably proved'), he finds the conclusion 'premature and erroneous', and he notes being 'very far from listening to him with respect to his conclusions' (¶13, 4:260).

Kant's revolutionary insight is twofold: (a) causation is not the only concept used to understand or grasp (necessary) connections between things *a priori*: 'metaphysics consists wholly of such concepts' (¶14, 4:260); and (b) these concepts of *a priori* connections have their origin in *pure reason*, and can be deduced from it. He thinks this solves 'the Humean problem' about the *origin* of the concept of causality (*ibid.*).

2. Humean Background

2.1 *The Copy Principle*. "All our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent."³ So, if it is not possible to trace back the idea of *x* to *some* original sensory experience (i.e. impression) that corresponds to *x*, we should be at least suspicious of this idea: it might be *meaningless* and lack content. This yields a heuristic to discard

1 See *Preface* ¶14 (4:260): *mein scharfsinniger Vorgänger* in the original.

2 For a similar presentation, see Kuehn, M. (2001). *Kant: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (p. 257).

3 *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1.1.1.7; see *Enquiry* §II.5.

empty ideas: vacuum, eventless time (i.e. time without change), absolute space, self, substance, and so on: “When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.”⁴

2.2. *Hume’ Fork.*⁵ There are two kinds of reasoning. (a) Demonstrative reasoning concerns relations of ideas, and is limited but uncontroversial (e.g., $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$). Such reasoning is *a priori*, analytical (i.e. true in virtue of logical form or meaning), and necessary. To deny a demonstrative claim yields a contradiction (e.g., not: a triangle has three sides), and is inconceivable (e.g., a triangle with five sides). (b) Matter-of-fact (factual) reasoning is widely invoked but often controversial (e.g., the sun rises tomorrow). Such reasoning is *a posteriori*, synthetical (i.e. true in virtue of facts), and contingent (i.e. possible but not necessary). To deny a factual claim does not yield a contradiction and is conceivable (e.g., the sun might not rise tomorrow).

2.3 *The Problem with Induction.* Hume’s line of thought is best expressed in a series of questions.⁶

(i) *What is the foundation for factual knowledge?* (§3) The causal relation (§§4, 14).

(ii) *What grounds knowledge of cause and effect?* (§5) *Not reason* (§§6–11): for Adam (without experience but perfect rational faculties) cannot *a priori* deduce effects from causes. Even where cause and effect are observable, they are distinct. So, effects cannot be discovered ‘in’ the causes by reason. Thus, by exclusion, *experience* grounds knowledge of causation.

(iii) *What is the foundation of all conclusions from experience?* Inductive Reasoning (§16), which takes two forms: (a) from all observed *p*-facts to *all p*-facts, or (b) from known *p*-facts up to time *t* to *p*-facts *after t*.

(iv) *What is basis for inductive inferences?* A typical inductive argument has a gap, or a missing ‘middle term’ (‘connecting proposition’): we have found: *c* causes *e*, so, we predict that *c** will cause *e** (§§16–7, 21). Here are possible principles that work as gap-filling middle terms: (a) like causes have like effects (§§16, 20); (b) nature is uniform (§18); (c) the future resembles (conforms to) the past (§§19, 21).

(v) *How are these middle terms justified: by reason or by experience?* Given the fork, a dilemma arises (§§18–21): (a) The connecting principle needs to be justified in one or the other way. (b) Demonstrative reasoning fails, because denying possible principles does *not* yield a contradiction and their negation is conceivable (§18); such principles are neither necessary nor analytical truths. (c) Factual reasoning fails, because the principles are products of factual reasoning from experience and hence the very thing the argument wants to show: this begs the question (§§19, 21). (d) So, conclusions from experience are not justified by, or founded in, *any process of the understanding*, or any process of reasoning (§§15, 23).

Hume’s alternative suggestion: *custom* or habit justifies those connecting principles.⁷ The limit of reason motivates ‘mitigated’ scepticism, and epistemic humility.

4 *Enquiry* §II.9; see also Hume’s *Abstract of a Book lately published, entitled, A Treatise etc.* ¶7.

5 *Enquiry* §IV.1–2.

6 All following paragraph references are to the *Enquiry* §IV.

7 See *Enquiry* §V.5, and *Abstract* ¶¶9–22

