

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740), Book I, Part III.

N.B. This text is my selection from Jonathan Bennett's paraphrase of Hume's text. The full Bennett text is available at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/>. The original Treatise text is available at <http://davidhume.org/texts/thn.html>.

Note also that Hume is an *empiricist*, and is convinced that all of our concepts and knowledge – beyond those concerned with mathematics and logic – derive entirely from experience. There are no innate ideas on this view, or innate knowledge. Experience itself is of two kinds: the five senses give experiences or “impressions” of external objects like chairs and trees, and introspection gives a person experiences of inner objects, within their own mind, such as desires, pains, and beliefs. One key Humean doctrine that is heavily used in this passage is that:

All human concepts ('ideas') are mere copies of impressions

That's why, in analysing the concept of causation, Hume keeps searching for the impression from which the idea of causation is copied.

Section ii

To begin in an orderly fashion, we must consider the idea of causation and see from what origin it is derived. It is impossible to reason soundly without understanding perfectly the idea about which we reason; and it is impossible to understand an idea perfectly without tracing it back to its origin and examining the primary impression from which it arises. The examination of the impression gives clearness to the idea, and the examination of the idea gives a similar clearness to all our reasoning.

Take any pair of objects that we call *cause* and *effect*, and turn them on all sides in order to find the impression that produces this prodigiously important idea. I see straight off that I mustn't search for it in any of the particular qualities of the objects: whichever of these qualities I pick on, I find some object that doesn't have it and yet does fall under the label of 'cause' or 'effect'. And indeed everything that exists, whether externally or internally, can be considered as either a 'cause' or an 'effect', though it is plain that no one quality universally belongs to all beings and gives them a title to that label.

So the idea of causation, since it doesn't come from any quality, must be derived from some *relation* among objects; and that relation is what we must now try to discover. **The first thing** I find is that only *contiguous* pairs of objects [= 'immediate neighbours'] are considered as cause-effect related, and that nothing can operate at a time or in a place other than—even if extremely close to—the time and place that it exists in. It sometimes seems that one object acts on another that is at a distance from it, but they are commonly found on examination to be linked by a chain of causes, with each link contiguous to the next, and the end links contiguous to the distant objects; and in any particular case where we can't discover such a chain we still presume it to exist. So we can take it that contiguity is essential to causation; at least we can suppose it to be so, according to the general opinion, until we can find a better occasion—in section 5.iv—to clear up this matter by examining what objects are and what are not capable of being brought together and conjoined.

The second relation that I shall claim to be essential to causes and effects is not so universally acknowledged as contiguity, being a subject of some controversy. It is the relation of the cause's *priority in time* to the effect. Some claim that it is not absolutely necessary for a cause to precede its effect, and that any object or action can in the very first moment of its existence exert its productive quality, giving rise to another object or action that is absolutely simultaneous with it. But experience in most instances seems to contradict this opinion, and anyway we can may establish the essentialness of the relation of priority by a kind of inference or reasoning, as follows. It is an established maxim, both in physics and the human sciences, that

an object O1 that exists for some time in its complete state without producing another object O2 is not the sole cause of O2 when it does occur, but is assisted by some other factor that pushes O1 from its state of inactivity and makes it exert the energy which it secretly possessed.

Now if any cause could be absolutely simultaneous with its effect, it is certain, according to this maxim, that all causes must be simultaneous with their effects; for any one of them that holds back its operation for a single moment doesn't exert itself at the very time at which it might have operated, and so it is not the whole cause of the effect. The consequence of this would be nothing less than the destruction of the succession of causes that we observe in the world—indeed, the utter annihilation of time. For if one cause were simultaneous with its effect, and this effect with its effect, and so on, there would plainly be no such thing as succession, and all objects would be coexistent.

If you find this argument satisfactory, good! If not, I ask you to allow me the same liberty that I took in the preceding case, of supposing it to be satisfactory. You will find that the affair is of no great importance.

Having thus discovered or supposed the two relations of *contiguity* and *succession* to be essential to causes and effects, I find myself stopped short: this is as far as I can go if I attend only to single instances of cause and effect. When bodies collide, we think that the motion in one causes motion in the other; but when we consider these objects with the utmost attention, we find only that one body comes up to the other, and that the former's motion precedes the latter's, though without any interval that we can perceive. It does no good for us to rack ourselves with further thought and reflection on this individual case: we have said all we can about it.

You might want to stop looking at particular cases and define 'cause' as 'something that is productive of something else'; but this doesn't say anything. For what would you mean by 'production'? Could you define it except in terms of causation? If you can, please produce the definition. If you can't, you are here going in a circle, producing merely one *synonymous term* instead of a *definition*.

Shall we then rest contented with contiguity and succession as providing a complete idea of causation? By no means! One object can be contiguous and prior to another without being thought to be its cause. There is also a ***necessary connection*** to be taken into account, and that relation is much more important than either of the others.

So I return to the particular case—for example, the collision—and look at it from all angles trying to discover the nature of this necessary connection by finding the impression(s) from which the idea of it could be derived. When I cast my eye on the known qualities of objects, I immediately find that the relation of cause and effect doesn't depend in the least on them. When I consider the relations between them I can find only contiguity and succession, which I have already regarded as imperfect and unsatisfactory. Should I despair of success, and accept that what I have here is an idea that is not preceded by any similar impression? That would be strong evidence of light-mindedness and instability, given that the contrary principle has already been so firmly established as to admit of no further doubt—at least until we have more fully examined the present difficulty.

So we must proceed like someone who, having searched for something and not found it where he expected, beats about all the neighbouring fields with no definite view or plan, hoping that sheer good luck will eventually guide him to what he is looking for. ...

Section xiv

As we confront a particular cause-effect pair, we can't just by considering either or both of those objects perceive the tie that unites them, or say for sure that there is a connection between them. So it is not from any one instance that we arrive at the idea of cause and effect, of a necessary connection, of power, of force, of energy, of efficacy. If all we ever saw were particular conjunctions of objects, each conjoined pair being entirely

different from each of the others, we could never form any such ideas.

But when we observe numerous instances in which the same kinds of objects are conjoined, we immediately conceive a connection between them, and begin to draw an inference from one to another. So this multiplicity of resembling instances constitutes the essence of power or connection, and is the source from which the idea of it arises. To understand the idea of power, then, we must consider this multiplicity—and that is all I require for a solution of the difficulty we have been wrestling with. I reason thus: The repetition of perfectly similar instances can't *on its own* give rise to an original idea different from what is to be found in any particular instance; I have pointed this out already, and it obviously follows from my basic principle that *all ideas are copied from impressions*. But the idea of power is a new original idea that isn't to be found in any one instance, and yet it arises from the repetition of numerous instances; so it follows that the repetition doesn't have that effect on its own, but must either (1) reveal or (2) produce something new that is the source of that idea. . . . (1) But the repetition of similar objects in similar relations of succession and contiguity obviously doesn't reveal anything new in any one of them, since we can't draw any inference from it or make it a subject of either demonstrative or probable reasonings (as I proved in section 6). Indeed, even if we could draw an inference, it wouldn't make any difference in the present case. That is because no kind of reasoning can give rise to a new idea such as the idea of power is; when we reason we must already have clear ideas to serve as the objects of our reasoning. The conception always precedes the understanding; and where one

is obscure the other is uncertain, where one fails the other must fail also.

(2) It is certain that this repetition of similar objects in similar situations produces nothing new in these objects or in any external body. For you will readily agree that the different instances we have of the conjunction of resembling causes and effects are in themselves entirely independent of one another, and that the passing on of motion that I see result from the present collision of two billiard balls is totally distinct from what I saw result from such a collision a year ago. These collisions have no influence on each other: they are entirely separated by time and place, and one of them could have existed and communicated motion even if the other had never occurred. So:

Nothing new is either revealed or produced in any objects by their constant conjunction, and by the uninterrupted resemblance of their relations of succession and contiguity. Yet it is from this resemblance that the ideas of necessity, of power, and of efficacy are derived. So these ideas don't represent anything that does or can belong to the objects that are constantly conjoined.

Look at this argument from any angle you like—you will find it to be perfectly unanswerable. Similar instances are the first source of our idea of power or necessity; but their similarity doesn't give them any influence on each other or on any external object. We must therefore look in some other direction to find the origin of that idea.

Though the numerous resembling instances that give rise to the idea of power have no influence on each other, and can never produce *in the object* any new quality that could be the model for that idea, our *observation* of this resemblance produces a new impression *in our mind*, and that is the idea's real model. For after we have observed the resemblance in a sufficient number of instances, we immediately feel a determination of the mind to pass from one object to its usual attendant, and to conceive the latter in a stronger light on account of that determination. This determination is the only effect of the resemblance, and so it must be the power or efficacy the idea of which is derived from the resemblance. The numerous instances of resembling conjunctions lead us into the notion of power and necessity. These instances are in themselves totally distinct from each other and have no union except in our mind, which observes them and collects their ideas. So necessity is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind—a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another. If we don't view it in this way we can never arrive at the most distant notion of it, or be able to attribute it either to external or internal objects, to spirit or body, to causes or effects.

The necessary connection between causes and effects is the basis of our inference from one to the other. The basis of our inference is the transition in our minds arising from the accustomed union. These, therefore, are the same: the necessary connection between causes and effects is the move our mind makes from an impression of the cause to a lively idea of the effect, or perhaps it is not the move itself but rather our being made or determined to make the move.

The idea of necessity arises from some impression. No impression conveyed by our outer senses can give rise to it. So it must be derived from some internal impression, some impression of reflection. The only internal impression that has anything to do with the present business is the impression of the propensity that custom produces in us to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant. This, therefore, is the essence of necessity. The bottom line is this: necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects, and we can't ever form the remotest idea of it considered as a quality in bodies. Either we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but the determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects (and vice versa) according to their experienced union. ...

I am aware that this is the most violent of all the paradoxes that I have advanced or will advance in the course of this *Treatise*, and that only through solid proof and reasoning can I hope to get it accepted and to overcome the ingrained prejudices of mankind. ...

Any extraordinary claim is usually met with astonishment, which immediately changes into the highest degree of admiration or contempt, depending on whether we approve or disapprove of what is said. I am much afraid that although the above reasoning seems to me the shortest and most decisive imaginable, the bias of the mind will persist in the general run of readers, giving them a prejudice against the present doctrine.

This bias against it is easily accounted for. It is widely recognized that the mind has a great propensity to spread itself on external objects: when some objects cause internal impressions that always occur at the same time that the objects appear to the

senses, the mind conjoins these impressions with the objects. For example, as certain sounds and smells are always found to accompany certain visible objects, we naturally imagine that the sounds and smells are in the objects, even being in the same place, though in fact the qualities are the wrong sorts of thing to be conjoined with objects, and really don't exist in any place. ... All I need say here is that this propensity that the mind has for spreading itself on external objects is what makes us suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind that considers them. . . .

It is now time to gather up all the parts of this reasoning, and assemble them into an exact definition of the relation of cause and effect, which is our present topic. ...

There are two definitions we can give for this relation, which differ only in that they present different views of the same object; one makes us consider cause-effect as a *philosophical* relation (a mere comparison of two ideas), the other makes us consider it as a *natural* relation (an association between two ideas). We can define a 'cause' to be:

An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are similarly precedent and contiguous to objects that resemble the latter.

If you find this to be defective because in addition to the cause and the effect it brings in something extraneous (namely, other objects that resemble them), we can substitute this other definition in its place:

A cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and united with it in such a way that the idea of one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of one to form a livelier idea of the other.

If you reject this too for the same reason—because in addition to the cause and the effect it brings something extraneous (namely our impressions and ideas of them)—I can only ask you to replace it by a better definition. I have to admit that I can't do that. [Hume then goes on to repeat his theory and his reasons for it, concluding:] However extraordinary my views about cause-effect may appear, I think it is useless to trouble myself with any further enquiry or reasoning on the subject, and shall now rely on them as on established maxims.