

Chapter 18

David Hume: Theory of Knowledge

Key Words

Empiricism, skepticism, personal identity, necessary connection, causal connection, induction, impressions, ideas.

DAVID HUME (1711-76) is one of the most important among philosophers, because he developed to its logical conclusion the empirical philosophy of Locke and Berkeley, and by making it self-consistent made it incredible. He represents, in a certain sense, a dead end: in his direction, it is impossible to go further. [Russell; A History of Western Philosophy, p. 659]

One of the fundamental assumptions of empiricist school is the belief that knowledge is linked with the ideas the mind has. We have seen how Locke had developed his ideation theory of knowledge based on this assumption. He thought that there exists a world outside our mind from where we get ideas through sensations. Berkeley was critical about this position and has pointed out that we are certain only about our ideas and not about their external sources. He thus asserted the essential psychic nature of the world, as according to him, everything in the world depends upon their being perceived by a mind. He thus rejects the thesis that asserts the independent existence of the material world and has demonstrated how erroneous are Locke's conceptions of the material substance and his distinction between the primary and secondary qualities.

David Hume, the third among the great British empiricist philosophers, also began his philosophical contemplations with these fundamental empiricist insights. He accepts the empirical theory of the origin of knowledge proposed by Locke and also Berkeley's doctrine of *esse est percipi*. He deduces from these basic assumptions a radical form of empiricism that makes room for skepticism and even nihilism.

Hume contends that all sciences have a relation to human nature and hence it is important to study human nature with a science of man or moral philosophy. He affirms that only with this science we can provide solid foundation to other sciences. This science, like the Newtonian natural sciences, should employ the experimental method of reasoning and must be based on experience and observation. Hume argues that human nature is the capital or centre of the sciences and the science of

man should venture to understand it. It should enquire into the nature of the human understanding and analyze the powers and capacities of the human understanding. Most importantly, it enquires the origin and nature of knowledge.

As mentioned above, the science of man should follow the experimental method of the new sciences in order to study human nature. It should observe man's psychological processes and of his moral behavior and should try to find out their principles and causes. Like the natural sciences, this science should also start with the empirical data and employ the method of induction. It should collect data gained from introspection and observation of human life and conduct.

The Origin of Knowledge

Hume's project envisages examining the contents of the mind or perceptions, which are derived from experience. He decides to delve deep into the empiricist foundations of knowledge and argues that perceptions, which constitute the basis of experiential knowledge can be further divided into impressions and ideas. The impressions and ideas are the real building blocks of all our knowledge. Impressions include the sensations and feelings that are strong and vivid and they constitute either the impressions of sensation, which are derived from our senses, or the impressions of reflection derived from our experience of our mind. On the other hand, ideas are related to thinking and include concepts, beliefs, memories, mental images, etc. they are derived from and are copies of impressions and hence are relatively faint and unclear. Hume considers colours and smells as ideas of sensation and the idea of an emotion is treated as an idea of reflection.

The difference between impressions and ideas is a difference of forcefulness and vivacity. Unlike impressions, ideas are less forcible and less lively and they are unclear copies of impressions. For example, according to Hume, when we listen to music, we have impressions and when we remember the music we have listened, we have ideas. In other words, impressions are our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. We have impressions when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will. All our thoughts and ideas are the copies of these lively impressions.

The notion of impression is thus at the center of Hume's conception of knowledge. He argues that all knowledge is built up by compounding, transposing,

augmenting, or diminishing impressions and since ideas are copies of impressions, where there is no impression, there is no idea. For example, a blind man has no notion of colour.

The process can be explained in the following manner. The entire human system of knowledge begins with impressions. There are impressions of sensations, which arise from unknown sources and impressions of reflection, which are derived from the ideas which we have. The impression of any sensation like cold may be accompanied by a pain, the copy of which is retained by the mind as an idea. This may produce a new impression of aversion, which is an impression of reflection, which will in turn get copied by the memory and imagination and become ideas. The process goes on to make the human system of knowledge.

Hume now talks about a process called the association of ideas, whereby simple ideas are combined in order to produce complex ideas. This is the process that takes us from impressions to knowledge. Hume maintains that to each impression there is a corresponding idea and in the association of ideas these simple ideas are combined. In this sense he says that complex ideas are made up of the materials provided by the impressions. But the process of association consists not just in **combining** simple ideas. Rather, ideas are associated with one another in terms of the principles of **resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect**. Therefore, in the formation of complex ideas, our ideas or thoughts exhibit a regularity, as they introduce one another not abruptly, but in an orderly fashion. For instance, a wound calls up the idea of pain suggesting a causal relationship. Hume thus argues that complex ideas are formed by the association of ideas according to the above mentioned principles.

The association of ideas thus functions as a uniting principle among ideas. It stands for some associating quality by which one idea naturally introduces another. It is described as a gentle force that introduces connections and order. It is an innate force or impulse in man that makes human beings combine together certain types of ideas.

When we further examine Hume's concept of knowledge, the idea of relations needs a deeper analysis. Hume says that all our reasoning deal with the relations between things and such relations are the objects of human reason or enquiry. Hume basically talks about two types of relations: the relations of ideas and matters of fact.

In the sciences of geometry, algebra and arithmetic we deal with relations of ideas. The truth the propositions that constitute these sciences are independent of questions about existence and what is the case in the world. They are thus absolutely certain as the relations they assert are necessary. In such sciences every affirmation made is either intuitively or demonstratively certain as the truth of these propositions depends on the relations between ideas or on the meanings of certain symbols. In other words, the truth of the propositions of these sciences depends on the meanings of the terms and they can neither be confirmed nor be refuted by experience. They are formal in nature. For example, Pythagorean Theorem says that on a triangle, the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. Here its truth is not a matter of experience.

On the other hand, the relations of matters of fact are not known a priori and hence need to be known through sense experience. They are neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain and hence are not discoverable by thought alone. Propositions expressing matters of fact are therefore contingent. Their truth depends on what is the case. All those propositions that articulate causal relationship are examples for such judgements of matters of fact. For example, fire causes warmth. This judgement is based on the belief that there is a connection between cause and effect, i.e., fire and warmth. Hume challenges this supposition and asks from what impression or impressions the idea of causation is derived. He argues that the idea of causation is derived from some relation among objects and not from any inherent quality of those things which we call causes. No such common quality is discoverable in the so-called causes of things. Hence our own experience is the basis of the belief in causal relationship.

Hume considers three elements of the causal relationship; contiguity, temporal priority and necessary connection. Objects that are understood as cause and effect are immediately or mediately contiguous. On the basis of this we assume that they are causally connected. Again two things are causally connected when they appear one after the other and the one which appears first is understood as the cause and the one which follows is the effect. Cause must be temporally prior to the effect. Another important element in this relationship is the necessary connection between cause and effect. Hume says that contiguity or temporal priority do not establish necessary causal relation, as just because two events are contiguous or one

follows the other we cannot affirm that they are causally connected. Hence, the only factor that seems to support causality is necessary connection.

Here too Hume raises objection as he wonders from what impression or impressions is the idea of necessary connection derived. How do we justify that things that come into being have causes? On what basis do we necessarily connect a particular cause with a particular effect? Hume says that the contention that everything has a cause is neither intuitively certain nor is it demonstrable. What we see is that an object or event, which was nonexistent, suddenly comes into being. We notice that another thing or event precedes its appearance on all occasions of its appearance. We then conclude that there is some necessary connection between the antecedent and the consequent. Our belief in causation therefore, arises from experience and observation.

There are two important factors that affirm causal relationship. Firstly, if anything began to exist without a cause, it would cause itself, which is impossible and secondly, a thing, which came into being without a cause, would be caused by nothing and nothing cannot be the cause of anything. Hume criticizes these arguments saying that they beg the question. They presuppose the validity of the very principle they are supposed to demonstrate, namely, that anything which begins to exist must have a cause.

Hume thus affirms that causal relationship is not a matter of logical necessity. Nor is it the result of intuition. Hume wants us to focus only on the impressions and ideas we have and to assume the existence of anything beyond them is to venture into meaningless metaphysics. He establishes that there is no necessary connection between objects and no object implies the existence of any other object. Each idea is independent and is not connected with any other idea and we have access only to them.

As mentioned above, the basis of causation is our experience. We infer the existence of one object from another by experience, as we see a frequent conjunction of two objects. For instance, we see flame and the sensation heat. The objects we believe are causally connected exhibit regularity in their appearance. They appear in a regular recurrent order of contiguity and succession. We thus relate them as cause and effect and infer the existence of the one from that of the other. Hume asserts that, there are no impressions about the idea of necessary connection. Neither constant

conjunction nor the observation of regular sequences or causal connections suggests a causal relationship with certainty. We perceive no necessary relationship. In other words, ideas of matters of facts do not provide any necessary knowledge. Hume even says that it is not necessary that the sun will rise tomorrow. Necessity is the effect of observation of several instances of constant conjunction and it is the mind with attributes this to the world. It is only an internal impression of the mind. Necessity in the world of matters of fact is the result of the human mind's propensity to attribute regularity and order out of custom and habits. It is caused by custom or association, to pass from an observed thing to another that is constantly conjoined to it. Hume thus explains causality purely in psychological terms. Causal relationship is the psychological effect of observation of instances of constant conjunction. It is attributed to the tendency of the mind to pass naturally from one idea to another or from an impression to an idea. In this process owing to the custom, the mind passes beyond experience and expect that every event will have some cause. We believe that there are no uncaused events.

In his critique of the mind's ability to gain knowledge, Hume rejects the validity of inductive inference. He says that induction is the process of drawing inferences from past experiences of constant conjunction of two objects to present or future events. The principle of induction cannot be logically deduced from experience, as it involves a leap from the observed cases to the unobserved, which is uncertain. Hence inductive inferences are not logically necessary. We shall see more of these issues in the next chapter. In short Hume advocates skepticism of the world, the self and personal identity. He refutes the principle of causality and calls into question the validity of inductive reasoning, which is inevitable in scientific theorizing.

Quiz

1. According to Hume, ideas are:
(a) Caused by objects (b) Copies of impressions (c) Produced by qualities of objects (d) Caused by God.
2. According to Hume, what is the subject matter of the science of man?
(a) Origin of human passions and sentiments (b) Origin of human customs
(c) Origin and nature of knowledge (d) Rational psychology.
3. How does the association of ideas functions?

- (a) Uniting principle among ideas (b) Introducing new ideas (c) Inferring one idea from another (d) Separating one idea from another.
4. The truth of the propositions of the sciences of geometry, algebra and arithmetic is not?
(a) Depend on the meanings of the terms (b) Can neither be confirmed nor be refuted by experience (c) Derived through induction (d) Formal in nature.
5. Which is not an element of the causal relationship?
(a) Occasional association (b) Contiguity (c) Temporal priority (d) Necessary connection.

Answer Key

1. (b)
2. (c)
3. (a)
4. (c)
5. (a)

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Web Resources

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