

CAUSATION: DAVID HUME'S PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

H.R.N.P.K Handegama

Department of Philosophy and Psychology, Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya

Introduction

David Hume's (1711-1776) analysis of the concept of causation is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it heralded analysis as against speculative thinking. Secondly, it sets a new trend for philosophical reasoning in the contemporary English-speaking world. Hume elaborates this concept by way of clear statements, which are empirical in contrast to value-oriented statements. Empirical statements are either true or false; value oriented statements are neither true nor false. They are accepted because one likes them (Hume, 1955).

This is a fresh and revolutionary beginning.

Analysis

We will elaborate on how Hume analysis the concept of causation, which troubled previous philosophers. Secondly how it gave birth to analytic philosophy. Hume notes causation as follows: "if we define a cause to be an object precedent and contiguous to one another and where all the objects resembling the former are placed in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter; we may easily conceive that there is no absolute nor metaphysical necessity, that every beginning of existence should be attended with such an object."(1)

Though many other philosophers and

theologians did not accept Hume's conception, it gave birth to a turning point in philosophical thinking. The revolutionary reasoning involved here is the demolition of the traditional understanding of the concept of causation. It is noted as 'cause and effect' provided that 1st event, namely, 'cause' produces 2nd event, namely 'effect'. Furthermore, the relationship or connection here is popularly known as necessary. It is also referred to as 'necessary casual connection' or 'necessary causal relationship' in the history of philosophy. Examples:

- (1) 'Fire produces heat'
- (2) ' Monsoonal winds bring about monsoonal rains'

In these examples 'fire' and 'monsoonal winds' are the causes, and 'heat' and 'monsoonal rains' are the effects. Alternatively, effects are brought about by causes. The meaning here is that 'effects' are logically not possible without 'causes' or 'causes' logically produce 'effects'. It is the relation between 'cause' and 'effects', which was known as 'necessary connection' without which the concept of causation is redundant. Such concepts as power, energy, vigor, etc, are also implied with respect to the 'necessary connection' in causality-talk. This is the main reasoning among classical philosophers and theologians such as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Leibniz, Berkley, etc. However,

reasoning was a jungle of words. David Hume's attempt was to bring about a kind of analysis that clarifies the concepts involved, which play significant roles in traditional reasoning on causation.

Hume's methodology involves two exercises. The first is to penetrate the concept by enumerating the most important words in this casual reasoning as (i) cause, (ii) effect and (iii) necessary connection. The second is to notes their fullness or non-fullness. The most important step here is to work out the origin of each concept. That is to say, to decide whether sense-impressions or experiences make a concept comprehensive or non comprehensive/empty. If the concept is comprehensive then it is a full concept. This methodology is then applied to the three concepts, namely: (i) cause, (ii) effect and (iii) necessary connections. Going back to the analysis noted above, namely, the exercise relating to comprehension by sense-impressions or experience by the sense-organs, we note (i) fire (which is represented as cause and (ii) heat (which is represented as effect) and therefore both concepts are comprehensive or full. Philosophers, theologians, etc, before Hume have had reasoning leading to 'the necessary connection' (iii concept noted above) also as sense-impression-oriented or experiential. To Hume, however, though (i) and (ii) are sense-impressions oriented and are therefore comprehensive or full, (iii) the concept of 'necessary connection' lacks sense-impressions-orientation. Accordingly, it is simply – empty. This is the crux of the issue. His reasoning

is as follows; In the example given above, both fire and heat are contiguous and experiential events, yet necessary connections; is not an event experienced. Or simply, it is empty of sense- impressions or experiences. Previous philosophers thought that 'cause' and 'effect' are connected by 'necessary connection. This erroneous reasoning was responsible for empty metaphysics in past philosophies. How does Hume explain the necessity of these cause-effect connection? To him, the concept of 'necessary connection' is simply imposed by other philosophers on events, which were contiguous and regular. The contiguity and regularity of events in the external world made them think that 'cause' 'effect' and 'necessary connection' in causation, are not only of the same logical footing but are also the significant concepts in that conceptual family. The revolutionary reasoning of Hume is to separate 'necessary connection' from the conceptual family of 'cause' and 'effect.' A clear understanding of causation, then is hence evident here without the empty 'necessary connection' which is only a value added. The regularity and contiguity of certain chains of events occur in the external world. A habit in us is brought about to expect 'an effect' whenever 'a cause' in that chain of events exists or comes about. The tendency or the habit is to confer a kind of relationship between 'cause' and 'effect'. It is named 'necessary connections' but is fundamentally an additional value concept imposed which logically falls outside genuine causation (Smith, 1949). 'Causes' and 'effect' are expressed by empirical statements. They are either true or false. 'Necessary connection' is being

value-statements which are neither true nor false. This analysis of Hume as against traditional description is both revolutionary and progressive.

Conclusion and Outcome

This kind of Hume's revolutionary conclusion is results mainly from the method of analysis in David Hume's methodology. This technique of analysis is adopted in contemporary philosophy by Bertrand Russell, L. Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, A.J. Ayer, etc, in their philosophical thought. Not only it has come to be known popularly as analytic philosophy in the English-speaking world but also as a second-order discipline.

Reference;

- Hume David (1955), *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford, Ed, L. A. Selby Bigge) Bk. I. part iii
Smith, Norman Kemp (1949) *The philosophy of David Hume* (Macmillan & Co. ltd) London.