

PREFACE

On matters concerning causality in general, the theory deriving from David Hume exercised perhaps more influence on philosophers in the ensuing two centuries than the work of any other thinker. Arguably, the rise of logical positivism in the early twentieth century can be traced to the increasing influence of Hume's doctrines; so too can the attendant decline in respect for the study of the metaphysics of causation among philosophers. While many philosophers have retreated from the more distasteful implications of logical positivism, Hume's general approach to causal questions is still highly regarded in most quarters.

On the other hand, there has been no shortage of thinkers who, in varying degrees and for a variety of reasons, have expounded viewpoints that reject one or more of the defining tenets of the Humean-Empiricist (Humean) tradition. It is my contention that the loose assemblage of positions offered by the authors considered contain key realist insights on a sufficiently wide variety of issues within the theory of causation that these insights deserve to be brought together "under one roof." The cumulative effect of these critiques, and of the alternative theories these thinkers offer, is to render the Humean theory of causation highly suspect—enough so to make the possibility of articulating a systematic alternative an exciting prospect.

This thesis is a defense of the plausibility and coherence of a realist theory of causality—one that rejects the Humean standpoint on each of the four issues that are, in my view, foundational for the theory of causality. They are: (a) whether causality can be detected in experience, (b) whether causal relations presuppose causal laws, (c) whether the concepts of "natures" and causal "powers" are valid, and (d) whether there is any sense that can be made of the notion of causal necessity in nature.

I argue that on each of these basic issues, a realist position is available that is at least as plausible (if not more so) as any Humean (anti-realist) alternative. If my conclusions are valid, it means that causal realism warrants serious

consideration as a framework for the exploration of philosophical issues in the theory of causality. My hope is, of course, that the arguments offered for the positions I adopt are relevant, and at least to some degree compelling.

In this thesis, I adopt a rather hard-line stance towards Hume and the Humean tradition, and take a favorable view of what, despite the vagueness of the term, might best be called the “Aristotelian” approach. I argue that Hume’s theory of causality, and the problems which followed in its wake, are ultimately traceable to lapses in cogency of thought. By such lapses, I have in mind specifically the arguments that Hume used to sustain a philosophy of mind and a theory of knowledge based on sensationalism and phenomenalism. These assumptions play essential roles in Hume’s anti-realist causal theory, and if these assumptions are rejected, nothing of much interest survives of the constant conjunction or regularity theories of causality. (That does not mean, of course, that regularities are irrelevant to the study of causation. Empirical regularities will remain important as possible sources of evidence for the existence of causal relations, and remain as possible grounds for the justification of causal laws. The point is that empirical regularities emerge from the observed repetition of instances of phenomena that are independently causal and often known, antecedently, to be causal. I affirm the doctrine of “the primacy of singular causes,” as it is often called.)

To some, it might appear that I am content to remain in my own sort of dogmatic slumber, unwilling to acknowledge the superior credentials of empiricism. On the contrary, there is nothing inherently anti-empiricist about causal realism, if by empiricism we have in mind a doctrine that has been disentangled from several philosophical assumptions to which it need not be attached: the sharp distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact, the hostility toward abstract ideas, the identification of the necessary with the *a priori*, and as already mentioned, sensationalism and phenomenalism.

My Aristotelian sentiments tend to distance me from the Kantian tradition as well. Since my rejection of the relevant (*i.e.*, to causality) details of Hume’s

approach is clean and complete, and since Kant and Hume share considerable common ground, I am led to take a dim view of attempts to “answer” Hume. Instead of answering Hume’s challenge, the unmitigated realist rejects the premises in terms of which the challenge itself acquires its urgency and stature.

Once the Humean assumptions have been jettisoned, my negative theses can go through without much difficulty. In terms of Hume’s criterion of cognitive significance, “natures,” “powers,” and “natural necessity,” are theoretical rejects. Yet, the criterion itself—reducibility of the ideas to corresponding impressions—can only be justified in terms of Hume’s basic, and untenable, assumptions. If a sensationalist model of awareness is adopted, then impressions are events, and causation is a relation between events—this restricts the universe of possibilities of what could play the role of the “cement” to make molecules of these sensory atoms. Indeed, it restricts it so much that causality itself cannot be detected. Again, if sensationalism is false, the aspiring anti-realist is disarmed of one of the most effective weapons.

Contemporary post-positivism empiricists (whether their sympathies run more toward Hume, Kant, or elsewhere), still harbour considerable suspicions concerning the epistemological legitimacy of “metaphysical” reasoning. “Metaphysics” itself still possesses a lingering pejorative connotation in many quarters. Ideally, it is something we should prefer to do without, and other theoretical compromises may well be worth the price if it can be avoided. A bias against “metaphysics” thus comes to function as a high-level constraint on theorizing. I intend that the present work exemplifies a reasonable form of empiricism, one that emphasizes testing and measurement, and keeps theoretical claims grounded in reality.

The Humean approach to causation has been the standard one in philosophy for decades. Piecemeal assaults from various directions have scarcely scratched the empiricist’s armor. If a reorientation in philosophers’ attitudes towards the metaphysics of causation is forthcoming, it will not follow just a refutation of Hume. Unless and until a systematic alternative has been offered, there stands *no* chance of upsetting the orthodoxy.