Chapter 4

The Category of Causation in Locke and Hume

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we shall explain, examine and compare the category of causation in the philosophical systems of Locke and Hume. Causation is one of the fundamental concepts, which signifies a form of universal connection between phenomena. Whenever one phenomenon gives rise to another, the former is called a 'cause' and the latter, 'effect'. Causation is said to be universal and uniform in the sense that no change ever occurs without a cause, and similar causes always produce similar effects. The aim of scientific knowledge consists in unveiling these causal connections of objective reality. One of Locke's objectives being to validate scientific knowledge, he endeavours to establish the necessary causal connections of objects. Hume, on the other hand, attempts to show that as nothing is ever present to the mind but 'impressions' and 'ideas', we never know anything like objective causal connections.

We shall try to ascertain the positions of Locke and Hume in
causation in the light of their general philosophical standpoints. In the second chapter, we have observed that Locke accepts the reality of external material objects as well as their internal material structures (real essences). In Locke’s view, different configurations of the primary qualities of the insensible material particles (constituting the real essence) empower the objects to produce different effects in different objects. Thus, objects become causally related. Locke views a causal relation as the

“most comprehensive relation wherein all things that do or can exist are concerned.” ¹

While discussing Hume in the third chapter, we find him denying our beliefs in external and enduring material objects as irrational. Consequently, it is but quite natural that he does not admit of any objective power or any necessary causal connections of objects. In his words,

“Either we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes, according to their experienc’d union.” ²

As far as Locke’s views about causation are concerned, we shall take into account the influences of Aristotle, Descartes and the science of his time, on him. As an outcome of these conflicting influences his position becomes as inconsistent as we find it to be with regard to material substance. In the case of Hume, we notice

the Berkeleyan line of thought as far as the denial of objective material 'power' is concerned.

We shall divide this chapter into two sections. The first section will deal with the views of Locke. In the second section, we shall observe how Hume refutes Locke's objective account of causation and tries to interpret causal necessity in subjective terms.

4.2 Locke's Account of Causation

Locke, in order to account for our knowledge of the relations holding between external material objects, introduces the complex idea of 'relations', a prominent one of which is our idea of causal relation. According to him, we form the idea of causal relation, just like any other idea of relation, through the mental operation of comparison of two ideas - simple or complex. However, the special feature of causal relation, he points out, is that here, out of the two ideas that are being compared, one produces the other. That which produces is denoted by the term 'cause', while that which is produced is called the 'effect'. In his view, causation is a constant fact of experience. To quote him,

"we cannot but observe that several particular, both qualities and substances, begin to exist, and that they receive this their existence from the due application and operation of some other being. From this observation we get our ideas of cause and effect." 3

Hence, he makes the point that in causal relations, something begins to exist through the operation of something else. He attempts to clarify his point with an example. Whenever a certain degree of heat is applied to the substance ‘wax’, we observe that it produces fluidity in the latter, from which Locke contends, we acquire the idea of causal relation between heat and fluidity. ‘Heat’ in relation to the fluidity in wax is the cause, while ‘fluidity’ in relation to heat is the effect. By ‘cause’, therefore Locke means that

"which makes any other thing, either simple idea, substance or mode begin to be; and an effect is that, which had its beginning from some other thing."  

We have already stated that in Locke’s account of causation, we can mark the influences of Aristotle, Descartes and his contemporary scientists. We first attempt to find out how much Locke owes to Aristotle. As discussed in the first chapter of the thesis, entitled ‘Historical Background’, Aristotle endeavours to explain change through the antithesis of potentiality and actuality. We find the same thought working in Locke’s concept of active and passive power. In order to explain the necessary connection between cause and effect, Locke introduces the concept of ‘power’. By ‘power’, he means the ability of a thing to bring about change in another thing as well as the ability of the latter to receive that change. Locke says,

"whatever change is observed, the mind must collect a Power somewhere able to make that change, as well as

While he calls the former kind of power as 'active power', he designates the latter as 'passive power'. Now, as far as cause and effect are concerned, Locke implies that 'cause' is endowed with the active power of producing changes, and 'effect' with the passive power of being changed.

In Aristotle's contention, it is the potential only which becomes actualised. What he signifies by 'potentiality', Locke expresses as the active power of producing change. Locke interprets Aristotle's 'actuality' as the passive power of being changed, or the thing which is produced.

From Locke's application of the concept of 'power', we discern that 'power' relates to the three Aristotelian categories, namely, substance, quality and activity. First, that which produces or receives change must be an enduring thing. Hence, power must always belong to substance. Second, Locke defines 'quality' as

“the power to produce an idea in our mind.”

Power, therefore stands for the quality of a substance. Third, it is the execution of 'power' that is called action. Locke makes the relation of 'power' to substance and action evident through the following passage:

“Power being the Source from whence all Action proceeds, the substances wherein these powers are, when they exert this power into Act, are called Causes; and

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the substances which thereupon are produced, or the simple ideas which are introduced into any subject by the exerting of that Power, are called Effects.”  

From the above passage, it also follows that Locke distinguishes different kinds of causal activity. When a new substance is produced out of pre-existing material, Locke calls it 'generation', such as a man or a tree is generated. When a new simple idea (i.e., a quality) is produced in an already existing thing, Locke names it an 'alteration'. For example, a new colour may be applied to a statue. Apart from these two, Locke also refers to 'making' and 'creation' as other forms of causal activity. When the association or dissociation of discernible parts gives rise to something new, Locke calls the causal process as 'making', as in the case of all artefacts. In all the above three cases, the effect is produced out of already existing materials. But in the case of 'creation', Locke holds that something entirely new is produced without there being any pre-existent material. If our idea of causal relation is derived from the comparison of two ideas ultimately received through experience, it is difficult to understand how can 'creation', in Locke's sense of the term, be included under causal relation. In this case, we have no idea of that out of which the new thing is produced. In all the above-mentioned forms of causal action, we notice that Locke refers to something really producing something, not to the mere comparison of ideas. This is an inconsistency on the part of Locke. While on the one hand, he claims causal relation to be a complex idea only i.e., a mental construction formed through the

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mental act of comparison, on the other, he recognizes objective ‘power’ as the basis of necessary causal connection. As we have already discussed in the second chapter, inconsistencies are there throughout Locke’s philosophy, and these are due to two conflicting influences working on him simultaneously - one of Descartes and the other of Aristotle and the sciences of his day. As Locke accepts the Cartesian assumption that what the mind directly knows are only the ideas, not material objects, he claims that it is not possible for the mind to go beyond the ideas and to know anything about the nature of material objects or the manner of their operation. In his words,

“How any thought should produce a motion in body is as remote from the nature of our ‘ideas’, as how any body should produce any thought in the mind.”

The above passage shows Locke’s acceptance of the Cartesian dualism, i.e., that there cannot be any causal connection between the mind and the body (or matter). Hence, in his view, our ‘ideas’ do not reveal to us the causal connections of material bodies. We simply have the ideas of ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, but not of the actual causal action or the execution of the ‘power’. He holds that though things have a

“constant and regular connexion in the ordinary course of things: yet, that connexion being not discoverable in the ideas themselves, which appearing to have no necessary dependence one on another, we can attribute their

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connexion to nothing else but the arbitrary determination of that all-wise Agent ..."  

Locke’s point is that what we receive through experience are ideas of cause and effect, not any ideas of their connection. Consequently, Locke is of the view that our knowledge of causal connection is completely dependent on experience. In his words,

"though Causes work steadily, and Effects constantly flow from them, yet their Connections and Dependencies being not discoverable in our ideas, we can have but an experimental knowledge of them."  

Hume picks up this point of Locke and contends that since experience reveals to us only the constant conjunction between cause and effect, we cannot claim any necessary connection between them. We observe that even though Locke claims that experience does not acquaint us with any idea of connection, yet he tries to account for our knowledge of causal connection through the concept of ‘power’. According to Locke, the idea of ‘power’ is a simple idea just like any other simple idea, and it is received through both sensation and reflection. As in Locke’s contention our simple ideas are the

"natural and regular productions of things without us really operating upon us ...",  

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he attempts to justify the reality of ‘power’ by presenting it as a simple idea. Here, we mark Locke’s self-contradiction. On the one hand, he denies any knowledge of the causal actions of material objects, on the other hand, he holds that all our simple ideas are produced by actions of material objects on our senses.

Locke maintains that in our daily life, we constantly observe the impacts of bodies upon one another, which furnish us with the idea of ‘power’. However, in his view,

"Bodies, by our senses, do not afford us so clear and distinct an Idea of active power, as we have from reflection on the operations of our Minds."

According to him, the idea of power that we receive from the bodies is an obscure one. All that we observe with regard to bodies, he contends, is simply the transfer of motion by impulse, not actual production of motion. He tries to clarify his point with the example of a billiard ball in the following way. When a billiard ball starts moving after being hit by a billiard stick, it only continues the motion imparted to it, but does not produce it itself. Locke is of the opinion that it is by reflecting on the operations of our mind that we can acquire the idea of active power; because the mind, has the power of starting or ending several mental actions by its mere will power, and it can also move different parts of our body by its thinking or willing. The idea of active power i.e., ‘the Idea of the beginning of motion’, he says,

"we have only from reflection on what passes in ourselves

... we find in ourselves a power to begin or forbear, con-

continue or end several actions of our minds, and motions of our bodies, barely by a thought or preference of the mind ordering ... "  

It is with the intention of establishing the objectivity of 'power' that Locke attempts to present it as a simple idea of sensations. In his view, the facts that neither can we create the ideas of sensation at our will, nor can we refuse, alter or wipe them out when they are offered to us, all these indicate the presence of 'power' in external things, which cause these ideas in us. He tries to affirm his point with the following example:

"if I turn my eyes at noon towards the sun, I cannot avoid the ideas which the light or sun then produces in me."  

We observe that Berkeley picks up this idea of power from Locke. It is impossible to think of a cause, Berkeley holds, without the idea of power. However, while the ideas of sensation, for Locke, refer to the power of material things, Berkeley uses them to prove the power of Infinite Spirit or God. He argues that matter, being inert, lacks the power of producing anything; finite minds, on the other hand, do not have much control over their ideas of sensations. He uses almost the same example of Locke in order to show the power behind the ideas of sensation. He says,

"when in broad daylight I open my eyes it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determi-
ine what particular objects shall present themselves to
my view . . . . "  

This lack of power of the finite minds over the ideas of sensation,
in Berkeley's view, goes to prove the presence of an Infinite Mind
who excites these ideas in the finite minds through His Will Power.
Moreover, Berkeley claims that the order, arrangement and coher­
ence of the ideas of sensation also point towards an All-Powerful
Author of Nature (i.e., God) as their cause.

Thus, we notice that using the same example, Locke attempts to
prove the objective basis of 'power', while Berkeley buries all ob­
jectivity under the layer of mysticism. It is out of this observation
that A. A. Luce comments,

"The two thinkers have performed the same simple ex­
periment in vision, and there is a world of difference in
their results."

Due to Locke's close acquaintance with the scientific circle,
we find him upholding a mechanical theory about the origin of
our ideas. According to the science of mechanics, the interaction
between the insensible particles of matter possessing the primary
qualities of bulk, figure, motion, etc is held to be the source of all
movements or changes. In this context, we may refer to scientist
Robert Boyle, who says,

"almost all sorts of qualities, ... may be produced mech­
anically; I mean by such corporeal agents, as do not ap­

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15}}Ayers, M. R. George Berkeley: Philosophical Works. (London: Everyman), 1975,
p.100.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{16}}Luce, A. A. Berkeley's Immaterialism. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd.), 1945,
pear either to work otherwise than by virtue of the motion, size, figure, and contrivance of their own parts.”

Isaac Newton, too upholds the same mechanical theory of causation. He also explains phenomena of nature as arising from the interaction between the material particles and holds that it must be by virtue of certain powers they possess that they act on each other. To quote him,

“Have not the small particles of bodies certain powers, virtues or forces by which they act at a distance, not only on the rays of light ... but also upon one another for producing a great part of the phenomena of nature?"

Clarifying Newton’s point, A. R. Hall and M. B. Hall maintain that Newton’s theory of matter

“consisted of the view that phenomena result from the motions of material particles and that these motions are the result of the interplay of forces between the particles.”

From the preceding accounts of the scientific theories of Boyle and Newton, it becomes evident that Locke gets the concept of

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‘power’ directly from Newton. It is under the influence of their thoughts that Locke attempts to explain the origin of ideas in terms of the mechanical interaction of material particles possessing the primary qualities.

According to Locke, due to the operation of insensible particles on our senses, motion is produced. This motion is transmitted through our nerves to the brain, thereby producing ideas in our mind. To quote him,

"some motion must be thence continued by our Nerves, or animal spirits, by some parts of our Bodies, to the Brains or the seat of Sensation, there to produce in our Minds the particular Ideas that we have of them."  

Here, we notice how closely Locke follows the Cartesian theory of the origin of our sense-ideas through the nerves, animal spirit and brain. While discussing Descartes in the first chapter, we have found that he regards a part of the brain, which he calls the Pineal Gland, as the centre of transaction between mind and body. However, as Descartes’ dualism does not admit of causal connection between mind and body, he separates these ideas (produced by the action of bodies on the mind) as ‘confused ideas’. At this point the empiricist Locke sharply differs from Descartes. In Locke’s view, all our simple ideas of sensation, whether of heat and cold, or motion and rest

"are equally clear and positive ideas in the mind."  

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In conformity with the scientific theory of mechanics, we observe that Locke holds our ideas of secondary qualities to be nothing but ‘powers’ in the objects to produce those ideas in our minds either directly or indirectly. In the first case, different configurations of the primary qualities of the minute particles directly acting on our senses give rise to these ideas, such as our ideas of ‘colour’, ‘weight’, etc. of ‘gold’. In the second case, the primary qualities of one object interacting with the primary qualities of another object brings about changes in the primary qualities of the latter object. These, in turn produce changed ideas in us. With reference to his favourite example of ‘gold’, when gold comes into contact with aqua regia, it gets dissolved due to the action of aqua regia on it, and we receive the idea of gold’s solubility in aqua regia. Through this explanation, Locke attempts to emphasise that ‘powers’ actually signify the causal relation of an object with other objects. Hence, the yellow colour, heavy weight, malleability, fusibility, and all the like qualities or powers of ‘gold’ indicate how gold acts, or gets acted upon by other material objects. Thus, Locke attempts to make the point that

“powers make a great part of our complex ideas of substances, since their secondary qualities ... commonly make a considerable part of the complex idea of the several sorts of them.” 22

With regard to Locke’s interpretation of the secondary qualities of an object as ‘powers’ of the insensible particles of that object, Michael Ayers observes,

“it is entirely natural that, when he is assuming the atomic hypothesis, Locke should sometimes identify the power with the actual primary qualities supposed to be responsible for the effect.” 23

As an evidence of his view, M. Ayers refers to a passage from the Essay:

“what is sweet, blue or warm in idea is but the certain bulk, figure, and motion of the insensible parts in the bodies themselves, which we may call so.” 24

Ayer points towards Locke’s acceptance of the atomic hypothesis of Newton. While discussing his atomic theory, Newton maintains that the changes of corporeal things are to be placed only in the various separations, new associations and motions of the permanent particles. As the scientific theory means that primary qualities of the internal material structure cause all the changes in objects, by ‘power’ Locke sometimes signifies the primary qualities themselves.

Hence, through an analysis of Locke’s position, it becomes evident that though he starts with the claim that causal relation is only a complex idea formed through mental operations out of simple ideas, all through his epistemology and ontology, he attempts to account for its objectivity. His doctrine of primary and secondary qualities, the internal material structure i.e., real essence and his causal theory of perception - all point towards a real connection between cause and effect.

Now, we shall discuss Hume's refutation of Locke's concepts of 'power' and 'necessary connection' as well as Hume's own formulation of causality.

4.3 Hume's Account of Causation

Hume's position in causation is a logical corollary of his position with regard to material substance. As we find from our analysis and examination of his epistemology and ontology in the third chapter, he denies the reality of abiding, mind-independent material substance and advocates it as a bundle of discrete impressions. In such a case, it is evident that there cannot be any objective causal connections, which require endurance of objects. As Suman Gupta explains the point,

\[ \text{when there is nothing in the world except fleeting, discrete impressions, it logically follows that there cannot be a necessary causal connection between different phenomena.}\] \(^{25}\)

Hume refutes Locke's concept of 'power' or 'necessary connection'. His argument rests upon one of the fundamental principles of his philosophy; viz.

\[ \text{“All our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.”}\] \(^{26}\)


Since Hume contends that in our perceptions of causal connections, we never receive an impression of necessary connection, he denies that a simple idea of necessary connection is involved in our idea of causal connection. All that we perceive, he insists, is one event following another, not any power of a thing bringing about changes in another thing. He tries to clarify his point with the example of a billiard ball. When a billiard stick hits a billiard ball, what we observe is that the striking of the ball is followed by the motion of the ball, and nothing else - no power or connection between the two. Hence, he rejects Locke’s claim that sense-experience furnishes us with the idea of ‘power’ as the basis of necessary causal connections between objects. In Hume’s view, the terms efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion and productive quality - are all nearly synonymous. In Hume’s words,

“When we look about us towards external objects and consider the operation of causes, we are never able in a single instance, to discover any power or necessary connection; any quality which binds the effect to the cause.”

Whether it is the growth of plants, nourishment of the body by food, or explosion of gunpowder, Hume argues that in all these instances, it is only the succession of events that we perceive - not any power, say in the food, which connects it causally with the nourishment of the body. As against Locke’s claim, he holds that we do not receive any impression of ‘power’ through reflection on the operations of our mind. According to Hume, through repeated

experience, we come to know about the influence of the mind on both its faculties and the organs of the body, but not about the 'power' of the mind. With regard to the operation of the mind, Hume holds,

"the manner, in which this operation is performed, the power by which it is produced, is entirely beyond our comprehension." 28

However, even though Hume intends to deny the causal power of the mind over the body, or its own faculties, his own account implies the cognizance of this power. When he says,

"the influence of volition over the organs of the body ... we may observe, is a fact, which, like all other natural events, can only be known by experience ... " 29

or when he says,

"The command of the mind over itself is limited", 30

he recognizes that the mind has some sort of power, whether he calls it 'influence', or 'command'. He cannot interpret the fact of connection between volition and bodily movements (or mental acts) as simply a fact of one event following another. All the detailed arguments that he provides, instead of proving that we have no idea of power, proves just the opposite. For example, he contends that had we any idea of the 'power' of the mind, we

would have known why the mind can influence certain organs of the body, not all or, why the command of will is not as strong on sentiments and passions as it is on thoughts.

Hume criticises not only Locke’s concept of power, but also the doctrines of ‘power’ advocated by Descartes and Berkeley. For Descartes, the essence of matter consists in extension, which implies mobility, but not actual motion. Hence, in Descartes’s view, it is God, who not only imparts the ‘original impulse’ to matter, but also continuously sustains the amount of matter and motion. Hume’s objection against this view is that the Cartesian idea of God is an innate idea, and

“the principle of innate ideas being allowed to be false, it follows, that the supposition of a deity can serve us in no stead, in accounting for that idea of agency.”

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In Hume’s contention, if there is an idea of God, it must be derived from some impression, and as

“no impression, either of sensation or reflection, implies any force and efficacy”,

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it is not possible to ascribe this principle of force to the idea of God.

Now, what is Berkeley’s view of causation, which Hume opposes, even though he agrees with Berkeley as far as the rejection of Locke’s concept of material substance is concerned? According to Berkeley, all our sense-ideas are produced by the will of God:

therefore, all of them are effects of which the Supreme Spirit (i.e., God) is the cause. Berkeley calls the set rules, in accordance with which God excites the ideas in finite minds, as the Laws of Nature. In his view, we come to know these laws through experience, which amounts to knowing which ideas are attended with which. In his words,

"That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us ... all this we know, not by discovering any necessary connection between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled Laws of Nature." 33

Hume opposes Berkeley's views, which he considers as

"extraordinary and so remote from common life and experience." 34

Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, holds,

"our ideas reach no further than our experience: we have no experience of divine attributes and operations"; 35

from which, it naturally follows that we have no idea of divine causality. To further emphasise his point, he holds,

"We have no idea of the Supreme Being but what we learn from reflection on our own faculties." 36

Hume argues that if our knowledge of the Supreme Being comes only by reflecting on our own faculties, i.e., if we attribute to God, the highest degrees of those qualities only which we find in ourselves, then it is not possible to ascribe the quality of ‘power’ to Him. Hume’s reason is the following one –

“We have no sentiment or consciousness of this power in ourselves …” 37

Thus, Hume criticises both Descartes and Berkeley for resorting to God as the origin of power. He charges them in the following terms,

“They rob nature, and all created beings, of every power.” 38

The question that comes to our mind is: Is the charge not applicable to Hume also? What we find on ultimate analysis of Hume’s causal theory is that he reduces necessary causal connection of objects to a mere determination of the mind produced by custom, and thus banishes the traces of objectivity from causal connections.

Hume strives to show that just like our beliefs in external material substances and unitary selves, our belief in necessary causal connections is also without any rational foundation. Neither through a priori reasoning, nor through experience, Hume claims, can we know such necessary connections. We find that Locke, in order to establish the certainty of the causal maxim - “Everything that has a beginning must have a cause” tries to show it as a piece

of demonstrative knowledge. In a letter to Stillingfleet, Locke endeavours to establish his point in the following way:

"by contemplating our ideas, and perceiving that the beginning to be, is necessarily connected with the idea of some operation, and the idea of operation with the idea of something operating, which we call a cause, and so the beginning to be, is perceived to agree with the idea of a cause, as is expressed in the proposition." 39

Thus, Locke attempts to demonstrate the agreement between the ideas of 'beginning to be' and 'cause' through the intervention of other ideas. Here, we may note that according to Locke, our knowledge is certain when, and only when we perceive the connection between ideas intuitively or demonstratively. Hence, by showing the causal maxim as a piece of demonstrative knowledge, he wants to ensure its certainty.

As opposed to Locke, Hume contends that it is not possible to demonstrate that what begins to be, i.e., the 'effect' is necessarily connected with the 'cause' because its denial does not involve any self-contradiction. Cause and effect being two distinct events, are distinguishable and separable in thought. As we can conceive them as existing separately, Hume argues that it is possible for them to exist separately. The ground of his argument is the following principle,

“whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence.” 40

He further argues that from the mere idea of a thing, we can never know it a priori, i.e., independently of experience, that it is causally connected with something else. To quote him,

“There is no object which implies the existence of any other if we consider these objects in themselves, and never look beyond the ideas which we form of them.” 41

The mere scrutiny of an object does not give us any clue as to whether it is the cause or the effect of anything.

Hence, Hume maintains that it is not through reasoning, but only through repeated experience that we come to discover that two things are causally related. After observing in a number of instances, that ignition of gun powder is always followed by an explosion, we come to relate these two events as cause and effect. However, Hume claims that what repeated experience reveals to us is only the constant conjunction of two events, and not any necessary connection of them. In his words,

“We only learn by experience the frequent conjunction of objects, without being ever able to comprehend anything like connection between them.” 42

His point is that we only learn the regular succession of two events, say, bread-eating and body nourishment; but we do not discover

any ‘power’ in bread by virtue of which it gets necessarily connected with body-nourishment.

Therefore, it is on the basis of this constant conjunction of two events in the past that we believe that in the future also, they will be so connected.

In order to deny necessary connection of objects, Hume attacks the very ground of our reliance on past experience (on the basis of which we make the transition to the future) namely, the assumption that ‘Future will resemble the past.’ In Hume’s view, this assumption cannot be proved either by demonstrative argument, or by probable argument, by which he means inductive argument. Demonstrative argument, he says is the way of proving something by showing that its denial involves contradiction. Now, in Hume’s contention, it is quite possible to think that the course of nature will change, that in future, a cause will not be followed by its usual effect or that it will be followed by a completely different effect. He cites different examples to establish his point, such as, that we can conceive that in future, snow will taste like salt or feel like fire: or that when a billiard ball will hit another ball, both the balls will stand still. As all these are conceivable, he emphasises that they are possible also because he takes it for granted, as we have already mentioned before, that whatever is conceivable is possible. Hence, Hume thinks that there is no contradiction in thinking that the future will not resemble the past, which implies that the assumption cannot be demonstratively proved. In Hume’s view, nor can it be inductively established, because that will be begging the question. Inductive arguments themselves are based on the supposition of the uniformity of nature.
Thus, having claimed to prove that the very ground of our belief in necessary causal connection is unwarranted, Hume proceeds to exhibit that it is actually a product of custom or habit. According to Hume, neither reason, nor simple experience, but experience of constant conjunction forming a mental habit gives rise to our notion of necessary causal connection. In his words,

"after the constant conjunction of two objects - heat and flame, for instance, weight and solidity - we are determined by custom alone to expect the one from the appearance of the other." 43

What he means is that due to repeated experience of the conjunction between, say heat and flame (i.e., whenever we experience flame, it is followed by the experience of heat), the mind gets accustomed to expect heat from the very appearance of flame, and thus connects them as cause and effect. W. W. Carlile objects against Hume's reduction of causal connection to invariable conjunction. He argues that the very fact that scientific investigation uses the invariable conjunction of events in order to prove their causal connection implies that they are not identical and causal connection is something more than the other. To quote him,

"The fact of the one being used to prove the other is, however, sufficient evidence that they are not the same ... We may take it as perfectly certain ... that cause does mean for us something more than constant con-

In this context, N. K. Smith holds that by causal relation, Hume does not simply mean a relation of one event regularly following another. To quote N. K. Smith,

"Hume is no supporter of what is usually meant by the 'uniformity view of causation'. As he is careful to insist, causation is more than invariable sequence." 45

Smith signifies that Hume cognizes the importance of necessary connection as an essential feature of causality over and above the features of contiguity and priority of cause. To confirm the point, he refers to Hume:

"There is a necessary connection to be taken into consideration and that relation is of much greater importance than any of the other two." 46

Here, we may note that the 'necessary connection' to which N. K. Smith refers as being acknowledged by Hume is only a mental or subjective 'necessity', not the necessary connection of objects. In what follows, we shall expound this point. We shall find that by tracing the idea of necessary connection to a purely subjective impression (a feeling of expectation), Hume undermines his initial claim that in causation, there is something more than invariable sequence.


Hume poses the following question: if two events are completely distinct from each other, how does the mere repetition of instances produce the quality of necessary connection between them? Hume replies in terms of his principle of association. Reflecting on the past perceptions of constant conjunctions, the mind detects the resemblances amongst them. Perception of resembling instances drives the imagination to associate the relevant ideas in such a way that the idea of one brings in the idea of the other, or the impressions of one, the lively idea of the other. Hence, the impression, which according to Hume, gives rise to the idea of necessary connection, is an impression of reflection. This is nothing but a determination of the mind to pass from one event to the other, which is produced as a result of the reflection on constant conjunctions. W. L. Robinson clarifies Hume's point by holding that the connection which this determination produces is not an objective connection, but a subjective one. In Robinson's words,

"What it connects, however, is not a cause with its effect, but a perception of a cause with a conception of or belief in the occurrence of its effect." 47

In Hume's view, the mind projects the mental determination onto the external objects and thinks that objects are necessarily connected. Hence, Hume claims that necessity of causal connection signifies only a necessity of the mind, not of objects. To quote him,

"when we say, therefore, that one object is connected with another, we mean only that they have acquired a

connection in our thought.” 48

J. H. Randall tries to explain Hume's ultimate standpoint in causation in the following terms:

“The justified belief in causation as constant conjunction comes from our observation of the experienced union of objects; the unjustified addition of necessary connection comes from confusing a habit of the mind with the relations between objects.” 49

According to J. H. Randall, our belief in causation, in Hume's view, is justified when we regard it as a relation of constant conjunction, which we discover through our experience. But when we consider causation as a necessary connection of objects, Hume considers this belief to be unjustified, because here we mistake our habit of expecting one object on the appearance of the other, for a connection between the objects.

Different philosophers, we observe, react differently to Hume's theory of causal connection. Alexander Rosenberg, for example, interprets it as a subjective account of necessary connection. He expresses his opinion in the following terms,

“Hume relegated the necessity widely attributed to the causal connection to the mind, as an impression of reflection that we mistakenly attribute to the relation among the objects of causation … Thus, Hume explains our common-sense distinction between accidental sequences

and causal sequences by an appeal to a subjective sort of necessary connection, a feeling produced in the mind."  

In the above passage, Rosenberg states that Hume reduces necessary causal connection of objects to a mere subjective feeling in the mind. To confirm his point, Rosenberg cites a passage from the Treatise:

"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..."  

Rosenberg points out that by such an analysis of causal necessity, Hume implies that the basis of our distinction between accidental sequence and causal sequence is only a feeling of the mind. In Hume's view, in case of a causal sequence, the constant conjunction of two events produces a feeling of determination that the former event must be followed by the latter in all cases, but in the case of an accidental sequence, the conjunction not being regular, the mind feels no such determination. Rosenberg seems to entail that in our common sense view, a causal sequence is distinguished from an accidental sequence, because of the necessary connection between its objects, as a result of which one object necessarily implies the other, which is absent in the case of an accidental sequence.

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Barry Stroud also objects to Hume's interpretation of causal necessity as simply a necessity of the mind, without the objects having any necessary connection. He says,

“If we can have no idea of necessity as something residing in objects, and our only idea of it is as something that occurs or exists in the mind, then we cannot even have the false belief that necessity is something that is objectively true of the connections between objects or events in our experience ... The trouble stems from Hume's tendency to conflate the question of what our idea of necessity is an idea of, and the quite different question of how that idea ever gets into the mind.”

What Barry Stroud intends to point out is that if the idea of necessity would have meant only the determination of the mind, then it would be impossible for us to have any idea of what necessary connection of objects, means. Instead of discussing what the idea of necessary connections of objects stands for, i.e., how the happening of one object or event necessitates the happening of another object or event, Hume discusses a completely different question, namely, how the mind comes to ascribe this necessity to objects. Stroud implies that Hume confounds an objective issue with a subjective one. It seems to us that it is only because objects are causally connected with each other that in all the instances, they follow a regular order of succession. Hence, the mental determination which is produced on observing the regular succession is only a consequence of objective causal connections.

While discussing Hume's general position in philosophy in the preceding chapter, we have found that Galen Strawson interprets Hume as a realist. Consequently, with regard to Hume's views about causation, Strawson refutes the charge that Hume denies objective necessity. Referring to Hume, Strawson says,

"His claim is only that causation, so far as we know about it in the objects is nothing but regular succession; not that all there is to causation is regular succession. He takes it for granted that if there is real regularity in the objects as there is, then there must be something about the objects in virtue of which they are regular ... something which is therefore not itself just the fact of regularity." 53

Strawson's point is that even though Hume holds that all that we know about causation is regular succession, yet Hume implies that this regular succession must be due to the presence of something in the objects - 'something' which makes them succeed regularly. If by this 'something', Strawson indicates the 'power' of objects, then we may reply that Hume clearly denies the presence of 'power' or agency in causes. To quote him,

"since we can never distinctly conceive how any particular power can possibly reside in any particular object, we deceive ourselves in imagining we can form any such general idea." 54

Hence, it cannot be held that Hume implies some objective 'power' from which follows the regular succession.

J. P. Wright, whose realistic interpretation of Hume's 'impressions and ideas' has been discussed in the previous chapter, holds a similar strain of thought with Galen Strawson regarding Hume's version of causation. Wright makes the following comment about Hume:

"He is saying that we have no idea of the necessity, power, or agency of causes, not that there is no necessity, power, or agency in the objects themselves." 55

According to Wright, when Hume maintains that we are

"ignorant of the ultimate principle" 56

which binds cause and effect together, Hume thereby implies the existence of 'power' in objects. Wright's reason is that one can express one's ignorance about something only when he thinks that it exists. Hence, in Wright's contention, Hume assumes the existence of a real power of which we have no knowledge.

In reply to both Wright and Strawson, we may point out that Hume's ontological position leaves no room for objective causal connections. When reality for Hume consists of discrete, unconnected perceptions only, it logically follows that there cannot be any objective causal connections. In Hume's view,

"every distinct perception is a distinct existence, and is different, and distinguishable, and separable from every

other perception either contemporary, or successive." 57

Hence, for Hume, cause and effect are entirely distinct from each other, having no necessary connection between them. He not only says that we have no idea of objective power, but also does not commit to the existence of any such power:

“If we have really no idea of a power or efficiency in any object, or of any real connexion betwixt causes and effects, ‘twill be to little purpose to prove, that an efficiency is necessary in all operations.” 58

From an overall study of Hume’s views about causation, it seems to us that his position in causation actually follows from his starting-point, namely, that nothing is ever present to the mind but its ‘impressions and ideas’. This very starting point implies his acceptance of the priority of mind over matter. All throughout, he attempts to show that mental phenomena constitute the basis of all sciences, and explanations of mental events do not presuppose any knowledge of the external world or of the body. This explains why he converts material substance to a construction of imagination through the laws of association and memory, as well as objective causal connection to a propensity of the mind formed through habit. Thus, he denies the very basis of knowledge in objective reality and presents knowledge as a subjective phenomenon. In the words of George Novack,

“By making causation into a purely subjective notion whereby the connections of things depended exclusively upon our habits of expectation and the associative powers of the mind, Hume shifted the whole weight of knowledge onto the subjective side ... Actually, if Hume’s contentions were true, the entire structure of human knowledge would collapse for lack of support in objective reality.”

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