

Sceptical conclusion
of *Enquiry IV*

Our inferences from experience

(our causal inferences)

are not justified by reasoning or any operation of the understanding.

To draw causal inferences we need to know what things are causes of what other things.

We can only discover that by noting what things have been constantly conjoined in the past.

But nothing justifies the inference from constant conjunction to cause

Why we should not be opposed to scepticism

It doesn't cater to any interest except curiosity or the love of truth,

which is the only interest that can never be bad

It cannot be taken so far as to undermine the inferences we draw in common life.

This is because human nature is stronger than reason, and will force us to draw those conclusions that are necessary for common life

even if reason cannot justify those conclusions or tells us they are unjustified

Since reason does not lead us to draw causal inferences,
what does?

Custom and habit

Explanation of the answer

We are, by instinct, creatures of habit

performing any action over and over produces a disposition to continue to do so

But there are habits of thought as well as of action

When two thoughts have customarily occurred one after the other in the past, we develop a habit to think of the one after the other.

So when we have witnessed a constant conjunction in the past

we develop a habit to think of the one thing in connection with the other, even though we see no causal link

A wrinkle

Though we associate ideas in virtue of a constant conjunction in past experience

we only draw causal inferences from the one to the other when one of the two is presented in present experience or memory

not when both are merely imagined

(The reasons why we act this way will be investigated later, but that we do so is obvious and undeniable.)

Conclusions

Belief concerning matters of fact is the unavoidable consequence of placing the mind in certain circumstances

When you have witnessed a constant conjunction between objects in the past,

and now see or remember one of those objects

you cannot resist believing in its partner

nor can any reasoning resist this natural belief

We can't say why we are made like this.

We can only know that we are.

Arguments for the answer

1. Inference to the best explanation.

No other theory can account for why we draw a conclusion from the repetition of a number of instances, even though we will not draw it from just one instance.

2. Analogy with other cases.

Animals learn from experience.

(otherwise they could not be trained)

But they can't be inferring effects from causes by reasoning

So they must learn from habit.

But we are like animals.

So we probably also learn from habit as well.

Notes

The vulgar distinction between inferences drawn by reasoning and inferences drawn by instinct is not legitimate.

In all cases where someone appeals to a rule or principle to reason to a conclusion about what will happen next,

that rule or principle is ultimately based just on past experience of a constant conjunction between sorts of events

and it is only instinct that leads us to go from past experience of a constant conjunction to belief in a causal connection

Notes, cont.'d

In animals, instincts are often responsible for specific behaviours such as building webs, nests, or hives.

But there are also general instincts

that is, instincts to behave in a certain *sort* of way in a certain *sort* of circumstance

The instinct to form habits is one of these general instincts

Whatever it might be that you do repeatedly, that thing will be what you continue doing

Compare being right-handed (specific instinct)

with hitting the 'f' on the keyboard with the left index finger (specific product of a general habit)

To form habits is instinctive

What habit exactly gets formed is due to what is customarily experienced

This makes the products of the general instinct to form habits various in different people depending on their experience and makes it look like each of them is engaged in some spontaneous act of reasoning

But it is the same instinct to form habits that is operative in all cases.

Notes, cont.'d

Though belief in matters of fact is the necessary consequence of placing the mind in certain circumstances,

not all minds will get the same beliefs because not all minds are alike in their sensitivity to those circumstances.

Factors affecting sensitivity to circumstances
(and accounting for differences in abilities to draw causal inferences)

- how much experience one has had
 - this in turn is affected by how good your memory, attention, and powers of observation are
- what general rules the experience has put the person in a position to infer
 - this in turn is affected by how clever you are
 - where inferences are drawn in virtue of the rule that what has once been observed to precede or follow an event will always do so, everything depends on which of the antecedent or consequent events you happen to pick on
- how many different factors you can grasp at once (important where causes are complex)
- how long an argument can get before you can't hold it in mind

- how good you are at drawing distinctions between subtly different things
- how good you are at separating the truly efficacious feature of an antecedent event from the accidental circumstances that accompany it
- haste or narrowness of mind in formulating general rules
- the degree to which biases and prejudices affect a person
- our degree of confidence in the testimony of others

General rules

These can be higher order causal inferences about causal inference.

Two important examples:

- whenever a supposed cause is observed to fail to be followed by its effect, a closer scrutiny of the case will reveal some previously unnoticed factor that is responsible, by its presence or absence, for the variation, and that is therefore the true cause

(formulation of this rule leads to belief in through-going causal determinism)

- when one event has just once been observed to precede or follow another, the two may be considered to be causally connected, provided that we have designed the experiment in such a way as to be sure that it is the only thing different between cases where the effect occurs and cases where it does not

General rules can also be rules governing generic types of events, rather than specific events

Not all general rules are good ones

e.g., prejudices, the *post hoc* rule