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Kalu, Grace Onuma

grace.kalu@unn.edu.ng**RECEIVED** March, 2026**ACCEPTED** May, 2026**PUBLISHED** June 3rd 2026**CITATION**

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A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF DAVID HUME'S CAUSAL SKEPTICISM: THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS AND PRACTICAL LIMITATIONS

Kalu, Grace Onuma*

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Social Science, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract

David Hume's revolutionary treatment of causality represents a watershed moment in Western philosophy, challenging fundamental assumptions about human knowledge and the nature of causal relationships. This study critically evaluates Hume's notion of causality, examining both its theoretical contributions and practical limitations. Using qualitative research methodology drawing on historical, expository, analytical, and evaluative philosophical tools, the study analyses Hume's reduction of causality to constant conjunction, his skepticism toward necessary connection, and his subordination of reason to custom and habit. The evaluation reveals that while Hume's causal skepticism provides valuable epistemological insights by exposing unverified assumptions underlying causal claims and awakening philosophers from dogmatic slumber, his extreme skepticism proves theoretically inconsistent and practically inapplicable. Hume's attempt to build experimental methods of reasoning into moral subjects while simultaneously undermining reason creates logical contradictions. His denial of necessary connection between cause and effect leads to indeterminism, making reliable prediction, historical understanding, and legal attribution impossible. The study concludes that although Hume successfully challenges naive realism and hasty generalisation in causal reasoning, his thoroughgoing skepticism overreaches, undermining the very possibility of knowledge and reducing human rationality to mechanical custom. The paper recommends balanced approaches that acknowledge both empirical foundations of causal knowledge and rational capacities transcending mere sensory experience, suggesting that contemporary philosophy benefit from Hume's critical insights while rejecting his extreme skeptical conclusions that paralyse rather than advance human understanding.

Keywords: *David Hume, causality, causal skepticism, necessary connection, epistemology, empiricism, custom, problem of induction.*

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INTRODUCTION

Cause is an abstraction that indicates how the world progresses. Every event is explained in relation to cause. Owing to the nature of humans as inquisitive beings, we seek causal explanations for things. When we face problems, we try to identify the cause in order to proffer solutions; hence, the notion of cause is a significant concept in human relations and in relation to other things. Philosophers in their quest for knowledge and explanation of things in nature have predominantly questioned all aspects of existence, with causality emerging as one of the most contentious and philosophically significant concepts.

David Hume (1711–1776), the Scottish philosopher and prominent British Empiricist, provided a revolutionary account of causality that fundamentally challenged prevailing philosophical assumptions. In his major works, particularly *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), Hume subjected the concept of causality to rigorous empiricist scrutiny, concluding that our belief in causal connections rests not on rational demonstration or empirical verification but merely on psychological habit formed through repeated observation of constant conjunction. This provocative thesis sent shockwaves through philosophy, awakening Immanuel Kant from his "dogmatic slumber" and influencing subsequent thinkers from John Stuart Mill to Bertrand Russell.

Hume's importance to the causality debate stems from his radical departure from the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition that had dominated Western thought for centuries. Where Aristotle had distinguished four types of causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) understood in terms of ontological dependence and metaphysical necessity, Hume reduced causality to a strict relationship of constant conjunction between events, denying any perceivable necessary connection. This reduction represented not merely a refinement of existing causal theories but a fundamental reconceptualisation with far-reaching implications for metaphysics, epistemology, science, and practical reasoning.

This study argues that David Hume's attempt to successfully build his experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects using his extreme causal skepticism is logically inconsistent and practically inapplicable, therefore constituting a philosophical failure despite its valuable critical insights. While Hume admirably challenges naive assumptions about causality and exposes weaknesses in rationalist metaphysics, his own positive account reduces human knowledge to mere

animal custom, undermines the possibility of rational inquiry (including his own philosophical arguments), and creates practical problems for prediction, historical understanding, moral responsibility, and legal attribution.

The study employs qualitative research methodology, sourcing data from documented materials including primary texts by Hume and other philosophers, secondary scholarly literature, and philosophical commentaries. Data analysis utilises historical, expository, analytical, and evaluative philosophical tools. The historical tool situates Hume's contributions within the broader development of causal theories from ancient Greek philosophy through medieval scholasticism to modern empiricism. The expository approach lays bare Hume's arguments regarding constant conjunction, necessary connection, and custom. The analytical tool explicates key concepts and logical relationships within Hume's causal theory. The evaluative tool assesses the strengths and weaknesses of Hume's position, examining both its philosophical merits and its theoretical and practical limitations.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: PRE-HUMEAN CAUSAL THEORIES

Understanding David Hume's revolutionary approach to causality requires situating his work within the historical development of causal theories in Western philosophy. The cosmological speculations of early Milesian thinkers represented the first shift away from mythological explanations toward natural philosophy. These pre-Socratic philosophers sought to understand the ultimate cause of all things through logic and reason rather than divine caprice. Thales proposed water as the fundamental element; Anaximander held evolutionary views of living things, positing that life began in water and gradually evolved. These early thinkers established the philosophical project of seeking rational causal explanations for natural phenomena.

Plato (427–347 BCE) developed a more sophisticated causal theory centred on transcendent Forms. In the *Phaedo*, Plato finds no adequate causal relations at the purely physical level, arguing that ultimate solutions to causation require reality transcending the physical world. He argues that the cause of beauty in any object is not its physical properties but its participation in the transcendent Form of Beauty itself. Aristotle (384–322 BCE) systematised causal theory through his doctrine of four causes: material cause (the matter from which something is made), formal cause (the form or pattern), efficient cause (the agent producing change), and final cause (the purpose or end). This Aristotelian framework, emphasising both efficient and final causation

understood in terms of real metaphysical powers and necessities, became foundational for medieval philosophy.

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) Christianised Aristotelian causality, most famously in his Five Ways arguing for God's existence. His arguments from motion, efficient causality, contingency, gradation, and design all rely on causal reasoning. Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980–1037) developed a sophisticated metaphysical system centring on God as the necessary being and first cause, emphasising the ontological dependence of contingent beings on the necessary being and understanding causation primarily in terms of this vertical metaphysical dependence. René Descartes (1596–1650) articulated the Causal Adequacy Principle, stating that causes must contain at least as much reality as their effects, employing causal reasoning both to establish God's existence and to ground the possibility of knowledge.

This historical review reveals a dominant tradition understanding causality in terms of real metaphysical connections, necessary relations, and ontological dependence. David Hume's contribution accelerated the progressive elimination of material, formal, and final causes by reducing even efficient causality to mere constant conjunction, eliminating necessary connection entirely and grounding causal belief in psychological custom rather than rational insight or empirical verification of real powers. This represented a revolutionary break from the entire preceding tradition.

EXPOSITION OF HUME'S NOTION OF CAUSALITY

Hume's Epistemological Framework

David Hume's treatment of causality emerges from his broader epistemological framework developed in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume's central epistemological doctrine distinguishes impressions and ideas. All perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into these two distinct kinds. Impressions are those perceptions that enter the human mind with most force and violence, comprehending all sensations, passions, and emotions as they make their first appearance. Ideas, by contrast, are faint images of impressions in thinking and reasoning, being less forceful and lively copies of impressions.

The Copy Principle establishes that every simple idea derives from a corresponding simple impression; purported ideas lacking such experiential provenance are meaningless. This becomes Hume's weapon against traditional metaphysics: abstract concepts like

"substance," "essence," "necessary connection," or "God" must either be shown to derive from impressions or be dismissed as empty verbiage lacking cognitive content. Hume also distinguishes two kinds of objects of human reason: Relations of Ideas (propositions intuitively or demonstratively certain, known a priori, including mathematics and logic) and Matters of Fact (contingent truths about existing things known a posteriori through experience). This distinction cuts deeply — causal relationships, being matters of fact, can never be known with demonstrative certainty. We cannot deduce effects from causes a priori, as effects are distinct existences whose occurrence involves no logical contradiction.

Hume's Analysis of Causation

Having established his epistemological framework, Hume turns to causation, declaring that "if there be any relation among objects which it imports us to know perfectly, it is that of cause and effect. On this are founded all our reasonings concerning matter of fact or existence." Hume's analysis begins by observing what we actually perceive when we observe causal sequences. When we see one billiard ball strike another and the second ball moves, we perceive spatial contiguity, temporal priority, and constant conjunction — but do we perceive necessary connection? Hume argues we do not. We observe that the second ball does move, but not that it must move.

Hume examines whether reason can establish necessary causal connections a priori, arguing decisively no. Since causes and effects are distinct existences, and since anything we can clearly conceive is possible, we can always coherently conceive the cause occurring without the effect. There is no logical contradiction in imagining fire that does not burn or bread that does not nourish. Turning to experience, Hume asks whether observation can reveal necessary connections — again, his answer is negative. Experience shows us only that events have been conjoined, not that they must be conjoined. We observe succession but not necessitation; the occult quality of real causal power remains entirely hidden.

This leads to Hume's famous problem of induction. If causal knowledge depends on experience, and experience reveals only that events have been conjoined in the past, what justifies inferring they will be conjoined in the future? Such inference assumes the Uniformity Principle that the future will resemble the past. But this principle cannot be justified by demonstration (its contrary involves no contradiction) nor by experience (this would be circular reasoning). Hume concludes that through repeated observation of constant conjunction,

our minds form habits through psychological association — custom becomes the source of the Uniformity Principle and all causal inference.

Hume's Definitions of Causation

Having dissolved traditional notions of necessary connection and grounded causal belief in custom, Hume offers two famous definitions of causation:

First Definition (Philosophical): "We may define a CAUSE to be an object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are placed in like relations of precedency and contiguity to those objects that resemble the latter."

Second Definition (Natural): "A CAUSE is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other."

The first definition analyses causation purely in terms of observable regularities — spatial contiguity, temporal priority, and constant conjunction — eliminating all reference to necessary connection. The second definition references the psychological dimension, where the impression of necessity we feel is not a perception of objective power but a subjective feeling of determination produced by habit. These definitions represent Hume's attempt to construct an empiricist account of causation faithful to actual experience while explaining causal belief without positing unobservable necessary connections.

Reason as Slave to Passion

Hume's treatment of causation connects to his broader subordination of reason to passion. In a famous passage, Hume declares: "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them." Reason's role is merely instrumental — discovering means to ends — while passions set the ends themselves. This reverses the traditional hierarchy placing reason above passion as the properly human faculty capable of perceiving truth and directing action.

For Hume, beliefs including causal beliefs are formed not by rational deliberation but by natural psychological mechanisms. Custom generates expectations; passions motivate actions; reason merely calculates. This thoroughgoing naturalism treats human cognition as continuous with animal cognition, both operating through associative mechanisms rather than rational insight. This subordination of reason has radical implications: if causal beliefs rest on custom rather than rational

justification, then philosophy itself becomes problematic. How can Hume trust his own philosophical arguments if reason lacks authority? This tension between Hume's skeptical conclusions and his continued philosophical activity generates accusations of self-refutation that persist to this day.

CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO HUME

Immanuel Kant's Critical Response

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) famously reported that reading Hume awakened him from his "dogmatic slumber," spurring the critical philosophy developed in his Critique of Pure Reason (1781/1787). Kant agreed with Hume that causal knowledge cannot derive purely from experience, as experience presents only succession, not necessity. However, Kant argued that the causal principle "every event has a cause" is a synthetic a priori truth necessary for the possibility of experience itself. Without causality as a category organising perceptions, experience would be impossible — we could not distinguish objective temporal succession from subjective associations.

Through his theory of synthesis, Kant argued that the mind actively structures experience through a priori categories including causality. The very possibility of combining perceptions into experience of objects presupposes causal connections. While we cannot know things-in-themselves, causality validly applies to phenomena because causality structures appearance itself. Kant thus preserved causal knowledge against Humean skepticism while acknowledging empiricist insights about the limits of pure reason, demonstrating that causality might be grounded in cognitive structures rather than either rational intuition of real connections or mere psychological habit.

John Stuart Mill's Regularity View

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) defended a sophisticated regularity view of causation in his System of Logic (1843). Mill agreed with Hume's rejection of mysterious necessary connections while attempting to develop a more rigorous empiricist account. Mill defined causes as invariable unconditional antecedents — "the sum total of the conditions positive and negative taken together... which being realized, the consequent invariably follows." Mill also developed inductive methods for discovering causes including the Method of Agreement and the Method of Difference, which encapsulate controlled experimental reasoning. However, Mill shared Hume's ultimate dependence on observed regularities, leaving the problem of induction unresolved: his appeal to the uniformity of nature as a well-confirmed inductive

generalisation still rests on induction, maintaining Hume's circularity problem.

Bertrand Russell's Scientific Perspective

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) initially took a dismissive stance toward causation in his 1912 article "On the Notion of Cause," declaring the law of causality "a relic of a bygone age." Russell argued that modern physics replaces the philosopher's concept of causation with functional relationships between quantities expressed in differential equations. However, Russell's later work *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948) adopted a more positive stance, emphasising certain postulates of causation fundamental to scientific inference, including the Postulate of Quasi-Permanence and the Postulate of Separable Causal Lines. Russell's trajectory illustrates ongoing tensions in understanding causation — his initial dismissal reflected empiricism's discomfort with metaphysically robust causation, while his later acknowledgment recognised that scientific inference requires assumptions beyond mere observation of regularities.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

Positive Contributions

Hume's causal theory, despite its problems, makes significant positive contributions that justify its enduring influence. Most importantly, Hume's analysis provides a valuable critique of naive realism regarding causation. We do not perceive necessary connections, only constant conjunctions. Correlation does not logically entail causation. Inductive inferences cannot be rationally justified without circular reasoning. These insights remain valuable correctives to hasty generalisation and unverified causal claims.

Second, Hume's skepticism raises crucial questions about epistemological justification that have driven subsequent philosophy. His challenge to justify induction remains central to philosophy of science. His demand that ideas trace to impressions influenced logical positivism's verification principle. His psychological account of belief formation anticipated cognitive science. Third, Hume's emphasis on custom and habit offers valuable psychological insights — much human cognition does operate through associative mechanisms rather than explicit reasoning, prefiguring evolutionary psychology and cognitive science.

Fourth, Hume's work productively provoked reactions that advanced philosophy. Kant's critical philosophy, Mill's inductive methods, and contemporary debates about laws of nature all developed partly in response to

Humean challenges. Fifth, Hume's skepticism has practical value in promoting intellectual humility. His observation that there is no guarantee beyond reasonable doubt that the future will resemble the past encourages recognition that circumstances change and well-established patterns may not continue, supporting flexibility in responding to unexpected developments.

Negative Implications and Criticisms

Despite these contributions, Hume's causal theory suffers from severe theoretical and practical problems that render it ultimately unacceptable as a comprehensive account of causation and causal knowledge.

Logical Inconsistency: Hume's position exhibits internal contradictions. He criticises reason's insufficiency to prove and verify causal claims, yet presents philosophical arguments claiming knowledge of human nature. If reason is as limited as Hume suggests, how can he trust his own reasoning about its limits? Hume's thesis itself rests on evidence and argument; if causal reasoning is merely custom lacking rational justification, this applies equally to Hume's philosophical claims. The position is self-refuting.

Undermining of Human Rationality: Hume's denial of reason's authority reduces humans to dependence on passion and instinct. While passions do influence us, humans also demonstrate capacity for critical reflection, abstract reasoning, and overcoming habitual associations through deliberate thought. Reducing all belief formation to psychological mechanisms eliminates the normative distinction between justified and unjustified beliefs, rational and irrational inferences. If all belief formation is merely mechanical habit, then distinguishing true from false beliefs becomes impossible.

Practical Implications of Indeterminism: If events are not causally connected but merely constantly conjoined through coincidence, this leads to radical indeterminism. Why work hard if success is not causally connected to effort? If medical treatments' efficacy is mere coincidental conjunction rather than causal necessity, why trust medicine? The practical implications of Humean skepticism paralyse action by removing rational basis for expecting actions to achieve intended effects.

Undermining of Historical Knowledge: Hume's denial of reliable causal connection undermines historical understanding. History involves causal explanation of past events and their consequences. If causal connections are illusory, we cannot give reliable historical accounts or understand how past events shaped present circumstances. Yet humans are

fundamentally historical beings whose identities depend on narrative understanding of causal development.

Legal and Moral Problems: Hume's causal skepticism creates insurmountable problems for legal responsibility and moral accountability. Law depends on establishing causal connections between actions and harms. If causal connections are merely perceived regularities lacking real necessity, attributing responsibility becomes arbitrary. Moreover, if reason is slave to passion and actions flow from passions rather than rational choice, moral responsibility disappears — every crime could be excused as passionate impulse beyond rational control.

Metaphysical Inadequacy: Hume's reduction of causation to constant conjunction fails to capture what causation is. Constant conjunction is neither necessary nor sufficient for causation. It is not necessary because single-case causation exists — we understand that one unprecedented event can cause another without observed regularity. It is not sufficient because accidental correlations are common: night regularly follows day, but day does not cause night; both result from Earth's rotation. Constant conjunction at best provides evidence for causation without constituting it.

Failure to Account for Modal Distinctions: Hume's account cannot distinguish between merely accidental regularities and genuine laws of nature. Why do some regularities support counterfactuals (had the match been struck, it would have lit) while others do not? Intuitively, laws support counterfactuals because they express real necessities, while accidents do not. Hume's regularity view cannot explain this distinction, treating all regularities alike.

Eliminative Implications: Taken to its logical conclusion, Hume's empiricism eliminates not only causation but much else we take as real. If only impressions and their faint copies exist, what about material objects, other minds, personal identity, moral values? Hume himself recognised that thoroughgoing empiricism leads to solipsism, acknowledging that "I must plead the privilege of a skeptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding." Yet Hume offers no principled stopping point between his causal skepticism and complete skepticism dissolving the world into disconnected impressions.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has critically evaluated David Hume's notion of causality, examining both its theoretical contributions and practical limitations. The evaluation reveals a complex picture: Hume's causal skepticism makes valuable philosophical contributions while

simultaneously proving theoretically inconsistent and practically unworkable.

On the positive side, Hume's analysis successfully challenges naive realism about causation, exposing unverified assumptions underlying ordinary causal reasoning. His demonstration that we do not perceive necessary connections, that constant conjunction does not logically entail causation, and that inductive inference lacks demonstrative justification remains philosophically significant. Hume's work awakened philosophy from dogmatic slumber, forcing rigorous examination of epistemological foundations. His psychological insights about habit and custom anticipated cognitive science. His skepticism promotes intellectual humility and guards against hasty generalisation.

However, Hume's extreme skepticism overreaches, creating severe theoretical and practical problems. His position is logically inconsistent, employing reason to undermine reason's authority. His reduction of human rationality to mechanical custom eliminates normative distinctions between justified and unjustified beliefs. His denial of causal necessity leads to indeterminism paralyzing action, undermines historical understanding, makes legal responsibility impossible, contradicts scientific practice, and fails philosophically to capture what causation is.

The study concludes that while Hume successfully demonstrates that empiricist epistemology alone cannot justify causal knowledge, his own positive account reducing causation to constant conjunction and custom proves inadequate. A satisfactory theory of causation must acknowledge both empirical foundations and rational capacities. The path forward lies between Humean skepticism and rationalist dogmatism.

Recommendations

For Philosophy: Contemporary philosophy should learn from Hume's critical insights while rejecting his extreme skeptical conclusions. Moderate positions acknowledging causal realism — that causation is objective and not merely psychological — while respecting epistemological limits prove more defensible than either Humean skepticism or rationalist dogmatism.

For Scientific Practice: Science should continue seeking causal explanations and laws while recognising Humean challenges to inductive inference. Scientists should distinguish causal connections from mere correlations, employ controlled experiments to establish causation, and maintain appropriate epistemic humility about causal claims while pursuing objective knowledge. The practical success of science provides pragmatic

vindication of inductive methods despite lacking logical demonstration of their validity.

For Practical Reasoning: In everyday life, we rightly trust causal reasoning and inductive inference despite Hume's skeptical arguments. Complete skepticism is practically unlivable; even Hume acknowledged continuing to make causal inferences in ordinary life. However, Hume's warnings against hasty generalisation and overconfident predictions retain value. We should maintain reasonable confidence in well-established causal relationships while remaining open to evidence that patterns may change.

For Legal and Moral Contexts: Law and morality require causal attribution and rational agency that Hume's skepticism undermines. Rather than accepting Hume's reductionism, we should recognise that humans possess capacities for rational choice and moral responsibility not fully captured by mechanistic psychology. Legal systems rightly require establishing causal connections between actions and harms while recognising the normative dimension of responsibility transcending mere causal sequence.

For Future Research: Further philosophical work should explore moderate positions on causation that learn from both Humean critique and its shortcomings. Promising directions include causal realism grounding causation in real powers or dispositions in nature, pragmatist approaches justifying induction through practical success rather than demonstrative certainty, and critical realism distinguishing experienced regularities from underlying causal mechanisms.

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