The next interesting philosophical idea we will consider is David Hume's idea concerning causality. Hume's idea has been a major source of interest for philosophers and other intellectuals for the past 250 years. . . However, it is not easily stated. We will attempt a formulation, but the reader should be cautioned that the formulation will contain misleading elements. The idea should become more clear as we get into making sense out of it in terms of our own everyday experience.

According to Hume, our common ideas concerning causality are due to intellectual habits. That is, we do not perceive causes and effects in the world around us. We perceive different events taking place and we intellectually relate some of these events to each other by thinking of certain events as being causes or effects of other events. Our thinking in terms of causes and effects is due simply to the way in which our minds function, rather than our perception of causes and effects in our environment.

Causality, of course, is extremely fundamental to the entire Western scientific way of making sense out of our environment. It is so fundamental, in fact, that it seems quite apparent to many people that we are simply "aware" of it taking place in the world around us. Hume's idea seems to suggest that the causality arises out of our own minds rather than actually being there independent of our minds. . . .

We would like to approach Hume's idea by inviting the reader to attempt to become vividly aware of the difference between what we actually see or hear and what we intellectually supply as we make sense out of what we see or hear. . . . Imagine there has been a fire in a nearby residence. The fire has been put out, after it has caused considerable damage, and an investigation is being conducted to determine its cause. Soon it is determined that the fire was caused by children playing with matches in the garage. After a bit of questioning, little Bobby Jones confesses his guilt amid a flood of tears. Let us, for the sake of our imaginary example, pretend that the investigation has correctly determined the cause of the fire. If we had been able to see everything that happened immediately prior to the fire, we would agree that the fire was caused by Bobby Jones and Jimmy Smith playing with matches in the garage. The fire fighters write up their report, putting down "children playing with matches" as the cause of the fire, and return to the station.

Now let us take a closer look at the circumstances surrounding the beginning of the fire and see if we can think of any other ways to describe the fire's cause. We could perhaps say the fire was caused by a match being placed very close to some old newspaper, which was, in turn, next to some cardboard boxes. Possibly, a physicist would have included mention of these factors in a description of the fire's cause. But these details were not of great concern to the fire fighters. Their determination of the fire's cause would have

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David Hume (1711–1776) and his views on causation form a central focus for this selection. This well-known philosopher from Scotland wrote his major philosophic works before he was fifty, thereafter concentrating on writing in history, economics, and politics. One of the most famous of empiricist philosophers he wrote widely on philosophical topics.

The Selection: Two different points about causal explanations are explained. First it is noted that any particular event can be regarded as having a number of causes. What is counted as a cause depends on the interests of those concerned about the event. Second, David Hume's views on causes are explained. Hume argued that when we describe one event as causing another we are correlating the events and not claiming there is an entity in the world connecting the events. That is, Hume argues that the word cause (unlike the word red) is not used to refer to something in the world. Thus when we explain events in terms of causes, we are merely calling attention to correlations we have noticed. The constant association of events in the world makes us feel there is a necessary connection between them, even though there is no such necessary connection.

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gone beyond the lighted match coming into contact with some newspapers, even if they already knew that this had happened. What they consider to be the cause depends upon their determination of why the match came into contact with the newspaper. The match coming into contact with newspaper could have been part of several different causes of the fire from their point of view, including several varieties of arson, a sloppy attempt to light a hot water heater, or a drunken game being played by adults.

Of course, what the fire fighters consider to be the cause is not in conflict with what the physicist might consider to be the cause. The fire fighters are just interested in other details that may not be of interest to the physicist. If a psychologist or a social worker were interested in our fire, they would probably consider yet other details to be relevant to their determination of the fire's cause. The psychologist might point out that Bobby's father used to entertain him with match tricks, but Bobby's mother slapped Bobby's hand whenever he touched a book of matches. The social worker might mention that Jimmy Smith's mother had left Jimmy at Bobby's house so Bobby's father could baby sit while Jimmy's mother went to a lecture. Bobby's father subsequently became interested in a television program and ignored the children. Moreover, the social worker might point out that Bobby's parents were very poor housekeepers, leaving matchbooks lying around and piles of old newspaper and boxes in the garage.

A person campaigning against smoking might plausibly contend that the real cause of the fire was the fact that Bobby's mother and father are smokers, since if they were not smokers there would be no matches lying around for Bobby to play with. That person might even produce statistics indicating that this type of fire occurs twice as often in households where one of the parents smokes than in households where neither parent smokes. (As far as we know such "statistics" are as imaginary as the rest of our example...). Of course, that person would not deny that the children playing with matches more directly caused the fire, any more than the fire fighters would deny that the fire's cause could be described as a lighted match coming into contact with newspaper. But just as the fire fighters might contend that in order for a fire to be produced by a match coming into contact with newspaper, other conditions must be present, and it is these other conditions that are of interest to them, similarly our antismoking campaigner could contend that in order for children to start a fire by playing with matches, other conditions must be present. If the children had no access to matches, they couldn't play with them.

At this time, it is apparent that we could also refer to a large number of other events or conditions as causes of the fire. We could say that the fire was caused by Bobby's father and mother fornicating six years earlier, since if that had not happened Bobby would not have been born, and if Bobby had not been born the fire would not have occurred. (A fundamentalist preacher might attempt to make such a case.) Or, we could say the fire was caused by the invention of matches or the fact that Bobby's tricycle was broken, since we could make a good case for saying that if either of these events had not occurred, the fire would not have occurred.

But the mere fact that we can regard many different events as the cause of the fire does not mean that it makes no difference which of these events the fire fighters choose as the fire's cause. The fire fighters have specific purposes for attempting to establish the fire's cause. These purposes play a part in determining which event they will establish as that cause. For example, at least one of their purposes is prevention of future fires. Consequently, they will look for some factor that is frequently associated with fires and that can possibly be curtailed or avoided as a step in avoiding future fires. Bobby's birth, or the invention of matches, will be completely useless for this purpose. People are not going to stop having children or using matches simply in order to avoid fires. But they may attempt to keep their children from playing with matches.

Now what happens when we think of an event such as Bobby's birth as the cause of a fire that occurs five years later? Do we suddenly notice something about the birth that we had never noticed before? Of course not. The birth event is just the same whether or not we think of it as the cause of a later fire. Thinking of Bobby's birth as the cause of a later fire could not be the result of any difference that our senses reveal between Bobby's birth and anyone else's. Or, to put it in a different way, we are not aware of any way of distinguishing, at the time of birth, between those babies who will turn out to cause fires and those who will not. Our thinking of the birth event as a cause of the fire is not based upon anything that our senses reveal to us. It is based simply on our intellectually relating this event to another event as part of the manner in which we are making sense out of the other event. And in this respect our thinking of the birth event as a cause is not different from our thinking of the playing-with-matches event as a cause. Not every case of playing with matches, nor even every case of a lighted match coming into contact with newspaper, results in a fire. The difference between those which do and those which do not is not that one event somehow contains a "causality" element and the other doesn't. Or, at least if it does, the causality element is not detectable through our senses.

At this point, it will be worthwhile to remind ourselves exactly what interesting philosophic idea we are attempting to make sense out of. Hume's idea is just that our senses do not reveal causes or effects to us. Rather, our senses reveal events that we think of as causes or effects of other events. The example Hume used to demonstrate what he meant was what we would ordinarily describe as
one billiard ball hitting a second billiard ball and thus causing the second billiard ball to begin moving. Hume pointed out that all we actually see in a case like this is one billiard ball moving up to a second, and then the second moving away. We can further observe that when we see one billiard ball moving toward a second, we expect the second to begin moving—so that if it did not begin moving immediately after the first reached it, we would be surprised. This expectation, in Hume’s opinion, is very important to our ordinary ideas concerning causality. Because we have such an expectation, we think that the one observed event (the first billiard ball moving up to the second) is somehow “necessarily connected” to the second observed event (the second billiard ball moving away). The expectation, or idea of a necessary connection, arises, in Hume’s opinion, because whenever we observed an event of the first type in the past, it was always—or almost always—followed by an event of the second type. Because of this past experience, our minds have related the first type of event to the second type, and we express the relationship that our minds have formed by saying that the first event causes the second. Hume does not say we are wrong in expressing the relationship in this way, or that it is somehow not the case that the one event causes the other. He is simply pointing out what he believes he has observed concerning our idea of causality. In his opinion, our idea of causality does not simply arise from anything we observe in the world around us. Rather, it arises out of the way we have become accustomed to make sense out of what we observe.

From our point of view, the important thing once again is simply to become aware that when we consider the world in a certain way, we can make sense out of what Hume is talking about—which, of course, is not the same as deciding whether or not what Hume says about causality is true. We can roughly describe this way of considering the world as one in which we concentrate on the difference between what we perceive and what we intellectually supply as we make sense out of what we perceive.

Many people assume that if what Hume says about causality is correct, we are somehow wrong or unjustified in talking about the causes of anything. Hume clearly did not believe this was the case. He thought we were virtually forced to assume that every event has a cause in order to make any sense at all of the world. He discusses at some length the factors that shape our causal judgments and suggests rules to aid us in these judgments. He views himself as seeking to understand what we mean by causality and thinks that he has discovered that one part of what we have traditionally considered causality to be (necessary connection) is supplied by the way the mind operates rather than by what we observe.

Provoked to a large extent by Hume, philosophers have continued to explore the nature of causality for the past 200 years. Some have proceeded a bit further along the path that Hume ent-tered by considering causality to be only one among several possible intellectual tools that we may use to establish connections between features of the world. Looking at causality from this point of view emphasizes the possibility that it may not be the best intellectual tool for understanding certain different aspects of the world which we have traditionally attempted to understand with this tool. Whether or not this is really the case we don’t know. There are still many more aspects and possibilities of this subject to be explored. But it can be interesting to realize that once one begins looking at things from a certain point of view, such possibilities begin to make good sense...

Reading Questions

1. What was the real cause of the fire?
2. What does Hume think we see when we regard one event as causing another, and what does he think we supply?
3. If causes, in some sense, are in our minds, should we stop speaking of them?

Questions for Reflection and Research

1. Sociologists, psychologists, linguists, and brain physiologists might all be able to contribute different answers to the question: What caused X (some person) to say “I refuse!”? Would their explanations conflict with each other, or are they to be added together? That is, are the sciences in competition? (For a related topic see selection #34 on reduction by Hempel.)
2. Since every cause itself seems to have a cause, can we ever really find the cause of an event? (See selection #36 by Hsper for some relevant remarks.)
3. Do scientists seek causal explanations? If so, what other kinds of explanations are there that are not involved in science?
4. Is Hume right about causes? Why should we want to find out?