



Essential Philosophy with Dr. David Schenk

Lesson 19: David Hume's Radical Empiricism and Argument Against Causation

Outline:

David Hume's Radical Empiricism and Argument against Causation

- Hume is a radical empiricist, an extreme version of Classical Empiricism
- **Classical empiricism:** A position in the science of knowledge called *epistemology*, stresses that knowledge of the world's content and structure is registered only through senses.
- Hume goes a step further by believing that all meaningful concepts, non-vacuous speech, come only from the senses.
 - *Example question: Is there anything as meaningful and genuine as a soul?*
- If David Hume is right, then he can answer all the stubborn philosophical questions in history.
 - *The most stubborn philosophical arguments happen not because these questions are so difficult, but because we are so confused and addled in our thinking.*
- We are confused and addled because we have too much imprecision and vagueness in what exactly we mean by these important philosophical terms.
- Solving a question means sitting down and thinking very thoroughly and precisely about just exactly what is it we mean by a certain term in the question.
- The question of whether determinism is true will depend on what the term necessity means. Determinism tells us that all human behavior is guaranteed or necessitated. The exact definition of that causal necessity will govern whether or not all human behavior fits the umbrella.

Causal necessity

- Causal necessity boils down to two things
 - Constant conjunction of like events. These are patterns of event types repeated in nature. Stimulus of #2.
 - Inference of necessity. This means our observed psychological habit of adjusting to constant conjunction when we encounter them. Response to #1



- Aristotle says that we are rational creatures but that doesn't mean that we are always smart and sensible. More accurately, we are animals with the potential of rationale, which we can unlock with the appropriate training.
- Humans are animals of habit, long before they are animals of thought. We get accustomed to these patterns of events that we observe in nature. So we expect certain events to continue in the future, simply because we have experienced them previously.

Free will and Determinism

- Hume defends liberty of free will as the ability to follow one's desires.
- This has nothing to do with the libertarian definition of free will, being the authors of our actions.
 - Having free will doesn't mean we can surpass or ignore our biological composition and the influence that our environment has on us.
- Given that X is the thing you want to do the most, you are able to do X. The fact that you want to do X the most, can be completely determined by your biological mechanisms and surrounding factors. We are also predetermined to want to do X.
- **Example:** We are familiar with Hume's definition of free will in our childhoods, when our parents made us clean our rooms. We lacked liberty while doing this chore. But when our parents said "Okay, you can play with our friends," then we have free will because no one was telling us what we can or cannot do (*forcing an environment on us that prevents us from following our desires*).

Is determinism true or false?

- Boils down to the question "Is there or is there not constant conjunction in all human behavior?" Is human behavior not habitual and pattern-like?
- There is constant conjunction in all human behavior. So we can be machines, but as long as we are happy machines, that's all free will really is to David Hume.

Minor questions

- David Hume still wrestles with issues of moral responsibility.
 - **Question:** If we are predetermined to want to rob a bank, then we shouldn't be held accountable for performing that action. Blame our biological mechanisms or blame God.
- Hume argues that **libertarian free will** destroys moral responsibility. If your actions have no correlation to your desires or thoughts or personality (which you are supposedly superior to), then there is no way to place responsibility on you.
- But if you follow Hume's concept of causal necessity, you'll find that there are set patterns and habits. There is constant conjunction that can be read in human behavior.