

Kant's Theory of Causality and his Criticism of Hume **Chiaki ENDO**

Introduction

How do we understand causality, that is, the relation between the cause and the effect? According to Kant, we form the understanding of causality by applying the category of causality to a succession of perceptions. Kant is said to consider that our 'understanding' orders the world by imposing causality on it, while Hume regards causality as 'an optional extra' for our understanding¹. We must here pay attention to the meaning of 'imposition' of causality. What sort of causality is imposed? How is the succession of perceptions, on which causality is imposed, epistemologically defined? In this presentation I consider these problems and show the characteristics of Kant's theory of causality.

In the following sections, first, I give an outline of the structure of Kant's theory of causality by comparing it with Hume's. Then, I examine Kant's argument in 'Second Analogy of Experience' of *Critique of Pure Reason* and show the epistemological status of 'the subjective succession' of perceptions.

Hume's Theory of Causality --- Experience of 'the Constant Conjunction'

According to Hume, when we find causality in events, there must be the following three points²: First, the cause and the effect appear contiguously in terms of time and space. Second, the effect appears in succession to the cause. Finally, Hume refers to 'the necessary connection' of the cause and the effect. It means that when the cause appears the effect always accompanies it. Hume makes much of this third condition the most as the basis of our understanding of causality. However, according to Hume, this 'necessary connection' cannot be found in characteristics of the cause and the effect themselves. We are also not permitted to find this necessary connection in any relation between the cause and the effect.

Thus, Hume questions the maxim "Whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence"³. Hume insists that we can distinguish the ideas of the cause and the effect from each other and can grasp each of them independently. It means that we have no sufficient ground for regarding the connection between the cause and the effect as necessary.

Then, from what do we gain our understanding of causality? Hume finds that it comes from 'experience'. When we repeatedly notice two events appearing contiguously and successively in space and time, namely, when we experience 'the constant conjunction'⁴ of two events, we are lead to infer causality between those two

events.

This is the basis for Hume's insistence that our understanding of causality originates from our experience.

Kant's Criticism of Hume -- Contingency of the Contents of Events and Necessity of the Laws

However, Hume does not regard the concept of causality as nonsense. The aim of Hume's argument is not to doubt the role of the concept of causality which we ordinarily understand. We behave on the basis of understanding of various causal relations not only in scientific thinking but in daily life. For example, we know the following facts: we can make boiled eggs by boiling eggs, and fried eggs by frying eggs. However we do not expect that we can make fried eggs by boiling eggs. In this case, boiling eggs (the cause) is connected with boiled eggs (the effect). Hume admits this kind of the concept of causality to be valid. He simply tries to explain the origin and the range of validity of the concept of causality.

Hume argues that causality is not necessarily valid beyond the realm of experienced events, for it is gained from the experience of 'the constant conjunction' between two events. Causality has necessity only in experienced events (cf.A765/B793). On the contrary, according to Kant, causality is one of the 'a priori' principles and is regarded as a framework of our experience. Kant criticizes Hume's theory by saying:

"Hume was... in error in inferring from the contingency of our determination *in accordance with the law* the contingency of the *law* itself." (A766/B794)

What does this argument mean? I think that 'our determination in accordance with the law' means the contingency of the contents of each concrete (experienced) event. Our understanding of each cause and effect is determined by our experience of each concrete event. Thus, we can say that Kant, like Hume, admits the contents of each concrete event to be experiential and contingent.

However, it does not mean that the 'a priori' law (the framework of our experience), which we use by determining each experiential contingent event, is also experiential and contingent. Kant criticizes Hume's theory of causality from this point of view. According to Kant, Hume wrongly insists on the contingency of the causal law (the framework of our experience) on the basis of the contingency of the contents of each concrete event in a causal relation.

Hume makes much of the following point: While causality, which is inferred from the experience of the constant conjunction, does have certain validity in the realm of 'experienced events', it is not necessarily valid in the realm of 'non-experienced events'. It can be said that Hume's argument is based on the dichotomy of 'experienced events' and 'non-experienced events'.

Against Hume, Kant argues that causality is valid not only in the realm of ‘experienced events’. According to Kant, the causal law is what “we are... able, in relation to...possible experience, to know” (A766/B794). He thinks that we should pay attention to the general law to which our possible experience must be subject, rather than to the difference between ‘experienced events’ and ‘non-experienced events’. And, based on this turn from ‘the contents of each concrete events’ to ‘the structures of our experience’, Kant gains the following point of view: Causality is an ‘a priori’ law which is valid in ‘possible experience’ (the realm which includes both ‘experienced events’ and ‘non-experienced events’).

However, is it not thinkable that Hume regards Kant’s ‘a priori’ causal law also as what originates from the experience of ‘the constant conjunction’ of events? Or, is it impossible for us to construe the succession of perceptions without the framework of causality? These questions are related to the epistemological position of ‘the subjective succession’ of perceptions. In the next section I consider this problem by examining Kant’s argument in ‘Second Analogy of Experience’.

The Status of ‘the Subjective Succession’ of Perceptions

The point Kant makes in ‘Second Analogy of Experience’ is the following: Our understanding of ‘a happening’--- “that something, or some state which did not previously exist, comes to be” (cf. A189, A191/B236)--- can be formed only by premising the cause of the ‘happening’ (the effect). In other words: “All alterations take place in conformity with the law of the connection of cause and effect” (B232). Namely, Kant insists that our understanding of ‘happenings’ of events is always formed within the framework of causality⁵.

Kant explains the structure of ‘happenings’ by comparing our grasping of ‘a house’ with that of ‘a ship moving downstream’. What we regard as ‘a happening’ is the latter. When we look at a house, we may observe the roof first, then gradually look down to the bottom of the house. However, we may do that in reverse order, or look at it from left to right. Thus, it is clear that no law is imposed on us which determines the order of our perceptions when we look at a house. On the contrary, when we look at a ship moving down stream, the perception of its lower position follows upon the perception of its higher position, but we cannot reverse the order. In short, when we grasp ‘happenings’ of ‘a ship moving downstream’, we have always two perceptions in a fixed order⁶.

What are the contents of our understanding of ‘happenings’? Kant points out the following: 1) We cannot reverse the order of two states (the preceding state and the succeeding state) in our understanding of ‘happenings’; and 2) when the preceding state exists, the ‘happening’

necessarily takes place. As Kant claims in 1), in the understanding of ‘happenings’, the order of the preceding state and the succeeding state is always fixed. Here, we never take the following procedure: After the preceding state and the succeeding state are separately grasped, they are settled in a causal relation afterwards. On this point Kant says:

“...it (=the succeeding state) can acquire this determinate position in this relation of time (=the time-relation in the ‘happening’) only in so far as something is presupposed in the preceding state upon which it (=the succeeding state) follows... in accordance with a rule.” (A198/B243)

Namely, as the succeeding state premises the preceding state, the preceding state exists only in connection with the succeeding state. If we separate the preceding state of ‘happenings’ from the succeeding state, the preceding state is never regarded as ‘the preceding state’ of ‘happenings’. I think it is this inseparability of two states that Kant mentions in 2) as the necessity of ‘happenings’.

Let us further examine Kant’s argument about the necessity of ‘happenings’. What is important here is that, as mentioned above, we never take the following procedure to grasp ‘happenings’: First we gain ‘the subjective succession’ of perceptions (perceptions without the causal law) (cf. A193/B238), then we impose causality on it afterwards. Kant argues:

“...recognition of the rule (=causality), as a condition of the synthetic unity of appearances in time, has been the ground of experience itself, and has therefore preceded it *a priori*.” (A196/B241)

“...we find that it (=relation to an object) results only in subjecting the representations to a rule, and so in necessitating us to connect them in some one specific manner; and conversely, that only in so far as our representations are necessitated in a certain order as regards their time-relations do they acquire objective meaning.” (A197/B242f.)

These comments can be read as follows: Each state, which composes ‘the subjective succession’ of perceptions, is found only by being abstracted from ‘the objective succession’ (the objective meaning of our representations) (cf. A193/B238). ‘The subjective succession’ of perceptions is a mere epistemological component. ‘The subjective succession’ of perceptions is originally dependent on ‘the objective succession’, and cannot be a substantial cognition by itself.

Thus, according to Kant, our understanding of ‘happenings’, from which we start examining the concept of causality, has originally the conditions such as the time-relation of the preceding and the succeeding state or the necessity of the connection. On the contrary, Hume starts his consideration from ‘the subjective succession’ of perceptions, then tries to find out how our understanding of

causality is formed. From Kant's point of view, however, Hume's method has a flaw at its origin. Hume's starting point, 'the subjective succession' of perceptions, is actually abstracted from 'the objective succession' by removing causality from the latter. After that, he looks anew for causality within 'the subjective succession'. Kant regards this as an attempt which is impossible by its very nature.

It is concluded that Kant regards causality as an 'a priori' framework of our experience, by establishing the realm of 'possible experience'. With regard to that, he finds that 'the subjective succession' of perceptions is dependent on 'the objective succession'. It can be said that these are the main points of Kant's theory of causality and his criticism of Hume.

References to *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, I.: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1998) are to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions, respectively.

¹ Cf. Bennett, J.: *Kant's Analytic*, Cambridge University Press, 1966, pp.153-159.

² Hume, D.: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Dent, London, 1964, pp.76-81.

³ *Ibid.*, p.81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.90.

⁵ Cf. Allison, H.E.: *Kant's Transcendental Idealism*, Yale University Press, 2004, p.258.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p.255f.