

Causality as a Necessary Relationship

In my blog [Humean Causality and Presuppositionalism](#), I found that Hume's view of causality entails the following points:

1. Causality is a relationship between "events"
2. There is no inherent necessity connecting one event to another (they "seem entirely loose and separate" and "we can never observe any tie between them")
3. A single instance is never sufficient to inform a general principle
4. Exhaustive knowledge of all instances is needed to form a general principle (repetition)
5. The "necessity" of cause and effect relationships is ultimately grounded in the imagination

In addition to these findings, I noted that I could find in Hume's analysis no defense of the premise that causality is properly understood as a relationship between "events" or of the claims that "all events seem entirely loose and separate" and that "we can never observe any tie between them." I also noted that these premises are crucial to Hume's skeptical conclusion about induction. Hume seems to take them for granted as if they were self-evident and unquestionable in spite of the problems which plague them.

Fortunately we do not have to live with Hume's mess. The Objectivist conception of causality, which differs significantly from the Humean view, offers serious thinkers a promising alternative.

In contrast to the Humean view which characterizes causality as a relationship between "events," the Objectivist view is that causality is grounded in the nature of entities. This is only reasonable since it is entities which perform actions in the first place. On this view, causality is essentially the identity of action, which is directly consistent with the Objectivist axiom of identity: to exist is to be something, to have identity. Since action exists, it has identity, just as do the entities which exist. Ayn Rand explicated the principle as follows:

The law of causality is the law of identity applied to action. All actions are caused by entities. The nature of an action is caused and determined by the nature of the entities that act; a thing cannot act in contradiction to its nature The law of identity does not permit you to have your cake and eat it, too. The law of causality does not permit you to eat your cake *before* you have it. (*Atlas Shrugged*, [Galt's Speech](#)).

Notice several points here. To say that "the law of causality is the law of identity applied to action," is essentially to say that action has identity, just as an entity does, and for the same reason: it exists. Also, since "the nature of an action is caused and determined by the nature of the entities that act," the actions which an entity performs *depends* on the nature of the entity which performs it. Moreover, the law of causality is *objective*: contrary to Hume's notion that causal connection ultimately depends on the input of human imagination, causality, as a relationship between an entity and its own actions, exists independent of consciousness and cannot be abrogated.

On Rand's view, causality is absolute: it does not conform to our imagination, feelings, ignorance, wishes, commands, etc. (This is true even in the case of man's volition, which is a type of causation.) Since for Rand causality is the identity of action (and therefore also of motion and change), if you see an entity acting, you see causality. This flies directly in the face of Hume's view that all we can see are "events" in succession, but not the connection which ties them together, and demolishes his skeptical argument from its very foundations. (We will see in an upcoming blog how one attempt to challenge this point results in blithering absurdity.)

H. Acston offers a succinct summary of the contrasts between the Humean view of causality and the objective theory of causality:

Causality, at least since Hume, has been conceived of as a chain of events, each antecedent event causing the other. This conception has led to confusion. While it is true that antecedent factors play a role, a proper

conception of causality would have to incorporate a wider context. In Aristotle's view, cause and effect is rooted in the identity of acting things. What a thing is, says Aristotle, will determine what it does. An acorn can become an oak tree, and not a catfish, because that is its nature. The actions an entity can take are determined by what that entity is. On this view, when one billiard ball strikes another it sends it rolling because of the nature of the balls and their surroundings, not just antecedent events. ([An Aristotelian Foundation for Objectivity](#))

For Hume, as we saw in [my previous blog](#), the upshot is that causality, being conceived of as a relationship between events, entails a *necessary* connection *only so long as one's imagination is involved*. Thus it should not surprise us when theists insist that we accept Hume's overall position, since they too share Hume's primacy of the imagination in both metaphysics and cognition.

The Aristotelian alternative to Hume's position, is refreshingly sober by contrast. It is founded on the recognition that causality pertains primarily to *action*, that the action which an entity performs depends on the nature of the entity which performs it. As the above statement indicates, this is a broader understanding of causality than Hume's vague notion of a succession of events, for it subsumes not only actions resulting from antecedent factors, but also includes those actions which are self-generated and goal-oriented, such as those which biological organisms perform in the effort to exist. The standard Humean view is unable to account for this latter type of action, while failing to provide an objective account of the type of action it seeks to represent (since it bases causal connectivity ultimately in the imagination of the perceiving subject).

When explaining the objective conception of causality to presuppositionalists, it never fails to provoke their ire. They apparently have ample resentment for anyone who dares to check Hume's premises. A case in point is a recent exchange I had with one presuppositionalist who, incidentally, hesitates to state for the record whether or not he thinks Hume's argument for inductive skepticism is sound. In [a comment of mine](#), I stated the following:

Causation is the law of identity applied to action. Specifically, it is the recognition that the relationship between an entity and its own actions is a necessary relationship. The cause of action is the entity which does the acting. The idea of "causeless action" essentially affirms action without something which performs the action, which is self-contradictory. As Kelley puts it, "you can't have a dance without a dancer."

In [the same comments section](#), presuppositionalist Chris Bolt responded to my statement with a question:

How do you know that the relationship between an entity and its own actions is a necessary relationship?

Because, as I had quoted Kelley, "you can't have a dance without a dancer." There can be no action without an entity to perform it. The existence of something which acts is a *necessary precondition* for any action. Also, action is the action *of* the entity which performs it. As such, action is an attribute of something that exists, which means: it is part of its nature. Since a thing is itself, and what a thing is includes all of its attributes (not just some arbitrary selection of those which belong to it), the actions which a thing performs are part of its nature. This can only mean that an entity acts *in accordance to* its nature. Why? It must first exist before it can act, and if an entity exists, it must be something specific, it must have a nature, it must be finite. An "infinite range" of actions is not possible for something which is finite in nature (and there is no such thing as an entity that is infinite in nature).

Stated another way: without something which performs an action, there can be no action to begin with. Action is not an entity, but the activity *of* an entity. Action is something that an entity *does*. In order for action to exist, an entity must *first* exist in order to perform the action. In this sense, existence comes *before* action. Since there cannot be any action without an entity which performs the action, an entity is necessary for action to take place. This recognition is axiomatic: it is implicit in any perception of entities performing actions, and the axiom of causality makes this recognition explicit.

As Kelley notes:

If actions depend on entities, then an action must depend on the *nature* of the entity that acts. A thing is its nature. If we try to imagine an action that depends on an entity but not on its nature, we have to imagine the entity as distinct from its nature. We have to drive a kind of metaphysical wedge between a thing and what it is. But a thing is what it is. There's no such gap. So now we know that an action must depend on the nature of an entity. ([Universals and Induction](#))

The law of identity is the recognition of the fact that to exist is to be something, to have a nature. Since action exists, action has identity. Why would the law of identity not apply to action if action exists? Blank out. But consider: if action did not have identity, how could we formulate concepts which identify actions? Think of all the verbs in the English language. Verbs like 'to walk', 'to swim', 'to think', 'to exercise', etc. All these verbs name actions. How could actions be named if they did not have identity?

But Bolt seems to think that the law of identity does not apply to action. In the same comment, he continued:

If the law of identity functioned as you assume it does (applied to action) then I am not sure that there can be change.

Notice the uncertainty here. Notice also that Bolt does not explain why he's not sure that there can be change if the law of identity applies to action as well as to entities. Yet Bolt himself uses verbs all the time to specify actions, just as he does in the above statement. How could he do this if the law of identity did not apply to action?

Also, if change is the identity of action, then when we observe change, we are observing the identity of action. Thus to deny the identity of action is to deny change as such. But since we perceive action directly - such as when we perceive an entity moving, then we are perceiving change. And if we perceive change, then we are perceiving action which possesses identity.

On [a later occasion](#), Bolt expressed himself more confidently:

Trying to apply identity to the problem leads to the conclusion that there is no change.

Again, no argument here. Just more bald assertion. Also, no explanation of how we could identify actions if the law of identity did not apply to them. To say that the law of identity does not apply to action, is to affirm that action has no identity. Thus, using verbs to denote actions while affirming such a view, commits the fallacy of the stolen concept. If Bolt is going to be consistent with his position, he will have to stop using concepts which denote actions. But I wager that he will not be consistent with his own position and continue to trade in stolen concepts.

In a [recent blog](#), Chris Bolt openly confesses that Christianity does not hold to the objective understanding of causality:

The Christian is not committed to this Objectivist idea that natural law is essentially identity applied to action. Such an idea is inconsistent with the Christian worldview since there are actions God has taken which may be identified but have nothing to do with anything natural (e.g. the exchange of love between the Persons of the Trinity).

In other words, according to Bolt (Christianity's spokesman of the moment), Christianity holds that the law of identity does *not* apply to actions. This can only mean that on the Christian worldview, *action has no identity*, for the law of identity does not apply when it comes to action. And yet, Bolt still thinks that actions "may be identified," even though on his view they have no identity which can be identified. What is it that he is identifying when he pretends to be identifying action when what he pretends to be identifying is said not to have any identity? Blank out.

Again, we find that stolen concepts are unavoidable for the Christian, as I've pointed out on numerous occasions before. Bolt insists, for reasons which remain unexplained, that the law of identity does not apply to actions, and yet he performatively undermines this position every time he uses concepts to denote any action. How do you identify something that is exempt from the law of identity? How can you integrate units which have no identity into a concept? Bolt has no explanation for these questions, and seems not even to have anticipated them.

But I have seen the type of objection raised by Bolt before, and can only suspect that it is informed by an understanding of identity which Objectivism does not share. According to Objectivism, the identity of an entity is not restricted to what that entity is at a given instant in time, as if it were freeze-dried and placed on a microscope slide. Such a view would arbitrarily divorce an entity from any actions it performs or could perform. If this does not characterize the Christian understanding of identity, what is its understanding of identity, and where would one go to find it? Many Christians point to Exodus 3:14 as the source for their knowledge of the law of identity (or its several immediate applications), but I've already pointed out several problems with this before (see [here](#)). So the question remains: Where does one go to find a distinctively *Christian* understanding of the law of identity, hopefully for Bolt's

sake one which supports him in his denial of the application of the law of identity to action?

Now the theist could, in contradiction to Bolt, acknowledge that action does have identity (i.e., that the law of identity does, contrary to Bolt's protests, apply to action), and yet affirm that the action which an entity performs does not depend on the nature of the entity performing it. On this view, a billiard ball's rolling across a pool table has nothing to do with its spherical shape; a bird's flight has nothing to do with its wings' movements; a skier's descent on a snowy mountain slope has nothing to do with the skis attached to his feet, etc. But what would justify such a position? I've seen no attempt to address such quandaries, and yet they result directly from a denial of the Objectivist conception of the law of causality.

Neither alternative - whether it be denying that action has identity, or denying that an entity's actions depends on its nature - bodes well for intelligibility whatsoever. Either denial reduces to a belligerently absurd conception of the universe.

By recognizing that causality is the law of identity applied to action, Objectivism is noting several facts which are perceptually self-evident, which include (but are not necessarily limited to the following):

1. Action exists
2. Because action exists, it has identity
3. Action is action *of* something which acts
4. The actions of an entity depend on the nature of the entity which performs it

Etc.

The first of these is perceptually self-evident: we perceive the action which entities perform directly. When we see a squirrel darting across the street to avoid an oncoming car, we see it acting (though for the Christian this action apparently has nothing to do with the fact that it possesses legs).

The second point is also perceptually self-evident: when we see a squirrel running, we see it *running* (as opposed to baking a cake, drilling a hole, operating heavy machinery, etc.). In other words, its action has identity, which means: the law of identity applies to the squirrel's actions as well as to it as an entity distinct from others. Indeed, if the law of identity did not apply to the squirrel's actions, how could we speak about its actions? How could we identify those actions? How could we make sense of them? Not surprisingly, there is no answer to these questions from the anti-Objectivists.

The third point is the recognition that action does not exist on its own, that action is the action of something which performs the action, that action only occurs if there is some entity or substance which acts. We do not say "I saw running" while intending to mean that there was nothing which did the running. We would naturally ask the question "What did you see running?" (for it could have been a squirrel, a mouse, a cat, a businessman, etc.), because - as the third point recognizes - action is action *of* something which acts. If in response to the question, "What did you see running?" your respondent answered, "Oh, nothing was running, I just saw running by itself," would this be sensible? To be consistent in denying the Objectivist conception of the law of causality, one would indeed have to affirm this, and thus openly announce his worldview's enshrinement of the absurd.

The fourth point continues the sequence of perceptually self-evident recognitions, noting specifically that, since action exists (point 1), action has identity (point 2) and action is the action *of* something (point 3), the identity of action rests on the identity of the entity performing it. A billiard ball has the ability to roll because it is spherical, is heavier than air, is not fixed in place, etc. A bird can fly because of the movements of its wings. A squirrel can run because it has legs. Etc. To deny these facts is to say that the nature of an entity is irrelevant to the kinds of actions it can and does perform, which is simply to declare an open assault on the data we perceive in the world. Again, what justifies such a move? For some, belief in invisible magic beings apparently does. On a view which denies the objective understanding of the law of causality, the fact that a man's legs have been amputated has no causal relationship to the fact that he can no longer walk. Given the absurdity of such a position, don't be surprised when theists fail to be consistent with it. Don't be surprised when you see these same people acting in accordance with their own natures. For instance, if they want to get to another part of town, don't be surprised to find them either

walking, driving a car, taking a bus, etc., as opposed to being magically transported there.

So while many thinkers will kick and scream against the *objective* understanding of causality, it should be of no surprise when their preferred *subjective* alternative leads to absurdity and is typically abandoned before it is even attempted.

Bolt [asked some additional questions](#), and apparently believes his questions constitute problems for my position:

You have a much bigger problem though. How do you know what actions an entity is capable of?

Luckily, my worldview allows for the fact that the human mind is capable of *learning* about the world. I know what actions an entity is capable of by the same process that I use in knowing anything else: by means of *conceptual integration*. This process is explained in Rand's *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*, which outlines the objective theory of concepts. What method does Bolt propose as an alternative to the objective theory of concepts? The last time I checked, Christianity has no theory of concepts. And when asked to indicate where he would turn to find a reliable theory of concepts, Bolt can only [respond with snarky sarcasm](#). Does he suggest that praying to his god is a viable alternative to conceptual integration? Or, waiting for transmissions from the "sensus divinitatus"? Since Bolt rejects the objective worldview, let's put whatever method he proposes as an alternative side by side with the objective position, and see which is more reliable in producing genuine knowledge about the world. We could take [this discussion](#) as a point of departure.

Bolt then asks:

How do you know that the entity of water is not in a necessary relationship with the action of producing merlot all by its lonesome?

Of course, we know this by means of induction. Specifically, I know this by integrating the law of causality (as it is understood *objectively*) to concepts of existents. As a rational animal - i.e., as a biological organism possessing a consciousness which has achieved the conceptual level of cognition, I am capable of inductive reasoning, which makes use of a broad spectrum of specific information that I have gathered from reality and validated according to an objective process, and subsequently integrated with yet further information which has similarly been developed through the same objective process, to produce knowledge on a general level. After all, that is what induction does: it empowers a mind to move from knowledge about particular units to knowledge about the general class of units to which those particulars belong. This is a conceptual process, but it will never be understood fully without a good understanding of concepts.

I expect that Bolt & co. will charge my answer here of begging the question. But this would be a category mistake, and suggests that charging opponents with such fallacies is an acquired habit which has not been critically examined. When one is asked to identify the process by which he arrives at a judgment about the behavior of a *specific* class of entities or substances, how could induction not be part of the process? Asking "How do you know that the entity of water is not in a necessary relationship with the action of producing merlot all by its lonesome?" is not asking one to *justify* induction (as if it needed justification), but to *apply* it.

It is fascinating, however, that a Christian would ask the question which Bolt poses above. It suggests that his real concern is not to defend Christianity, but to denigrate human cognition as such (it's true: in the end these two activities share the same goal). Suppose for a moment that I were to respond to Bolt's question by saying, "I see no reason why the entity of water should not be in a necessary relationship with the action of producing merlot *all by its lonesome*," I would well be in the position of supposing that Bolt's god was not necessary for the water in the water pots at the marriage of Cana to turn into wine (cf. John 2:1-11). The skepticism which Bolt is in effect endorsing here would effectively bring his god's role in causing miracles into serious question. The miracle story in the gospel of John assumes that something other than the water itself brought about its transformation into wine, namely the conscious activity of an omnipotent savior-deity. Similarly, what if one affirms that there is no reason to suppose that a human corpse cannot rise from the dead on its own, thus dismissing Christianity's supernatural explanation of the resurrection of Jesus? By going with the alternative view which Bolt raises in his line of questioning, how is Christianity served? How is he giving glory to his god? If Bolt's god is glorified by his denial of the fact that action has identity, that the actions which an entity performs depend on the nature of the entity performing it, that the relationship between an entity and its own actions is therefore a necessary relationship, this tells us not only about Bolt's overall worldview, but also the god which he worships.

by Dawson Bethrick

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