



Research Paper

A Critical Examination of David Hume's Susceptibility to the Science of His Time in His Turn toward a Critical Conception of the Principle of Causation

Farideh Lazemi^{*1} , Muhammad Asghari² 

¹ Postdoctoral Researcher in Philosophy, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. Email: F.lazemi@tabrizu.ac.ir

² Professor of Philosophy, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages, University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran. Email: m-asghari@tabrizu.ac.ir

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Abstract

David Hume's significance in the intellectual transformations of the Enlightenment is undeniable. On the one hand, he maintained a deep commitment to the scientific outlook and the achievements of modern science; on the other, he adopted one of the most critical perspectives on religion and the idea of God. Hume extensively drew upon the scientific knowledge of his age to reinforce his skeptical arguments against traditional theology. One of the most prominent domains of this engagement was his critique of the principle of causality—a principle that held a central place in classical arguments for the existence of God. By employing the scientific and philosophical advances of his time, Hume argued that causality is not an objective necessity inherent in the world but rather a mental and psychological habit formed through the repetition of experience. Consequently, reliance on the principle of causality as a foundation for proving God's existence and explaining the relationship between the world and a transcendent origin loses its philosophical validity. This article critically examines how Hume's encounter with contemporary science shaped his skeptical stance on causality and explores the implications of this critique for religious rationality.

***Corresponding Author:** Farideh Lazemi

Address: University of Tabriz, Tabriz, Iran.

Email: F.lazemi@tabrizu.ac.ir

Tel: 09335609582



Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The principle of causation has long occupied a central place in traditional proofs for the existence of God. Among those proofs, the cosmological argument stands out as an a priori inference that presumes every phenomenon in the world has a cause and that the chain of causes ultimately terminates in a transcendent first cause. In classical rational theology, the principle of causation was treated as a self-evident and unquestionable rule and served as the principal means of connecting the sensible world to an infinite divine source. However, the intellectual developments of the Enlightenment posed serious challenges to this longstanding foundation. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century advances—especially in Newtonian physics, the rise of empirical methods associated with Francis Bacon and John Locke, and broader epistemological shifts—created a new horizon for evaluating the principle of causation. It was in this context that David Hume, as one of the leading critical philosophers of the Enlightenment, undertook a foundational reappraisal of causation. Hume argued that causation is not an objective necessity residing in the nature of things but rather a psychological habit produced by repeated experience and mental association. Consequently, relying on the principle of causation to prove God's existence or to explain the relation between the world and a transcendent source loses its philosophical authority.

2. Research Aim

The central question of this article is: How did Hume, by drawing on the scientific and epistemic resources of his age, reduce the theological-metaphysical status of the principle of causation to a psychological

habit? More specifically, the study aims to (1) reconstruct the role of the principle of causation within traditional rational theology and cosmological argumentation; (2) identify and analyze the scientific and philosophical currents that shaped Hume's skepticism; (3) read Hume's principal texts—*A Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*—in light of those influences; and (4) evaluate the implications of Hume's critique for religious rationality and possible reconstructions of theology.

3. Methodology

This research employs a historical-critical methodology. Primary texts by Hume—most notably the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*—are examined in detail to trace the form and basis of his critique of causation. Concomitantly, the study surveys the scientific and philosophical background of the period—especially Newtonian mechanics and Baconian/Lockean empiricism—to situate Hume's arguments within their intellectual milieu. Secondary literature in the philosophy of religion and the history of ideas is used to assess the consequences of Hume's critique for contemporary debates about rationality and theology.

4. Findings

The investigation yields the following principal results. First, in classical rational theology the principle of causation was treated as an unquestionable premiss and constituted a cornerstone of cosmological arguments that move from the observed contingency of the world to a transcendent cause. Second, the scientific and philosophical transformations of Hume's time Newtonian physics' mechanistic account of nature and the empiricist emphasis on sensory experience—created a context in which claims about necessary relations in



nature could be reinterpreted as regularities discoverable by observation rather than metaphysical necessities. Third, Hume's textual analysis shows that he did not merely reject causation on purely speculative grounds; rather, he argued that what we call causal necessity is a psychological expectation formed by habit when similar events repeatedly follow one another. Fourth, by recasting causation as psychological habit rather than metaphysical necessity, Hume undercut the epistemic foundation of cosmological and other traditional theistic proofs; as a result, those proofs lose the sort of empirical or rational support they once claimed.

5. Discussion and Synthesis

Hume's criticism of causation is best understood as arising from an intimate engagement with the scientific and epistemic climate of the Enlightenment, not as an isolated rhetorical maneuver. His commitment to an inductive, experience-based account of human understanding led him to locate causal reasoning in human psychology rather than in the external order of things. This reframing invites

a reorientation of philosophy of religion away from purely metaphysical demonstration toward approaches that take experience, psychology, and human practices as central to religious understanding.

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that Hume's critique of the principle of causation represents a decisive turning point in the history of religious rationality. By demonstrating that causal necessity is a product of mental habit rather than a metaphysical feature of the world, Hume deprived classical cosmological proofs of their longstanding philosophical authority. This shift opened intellectual space for later developments in philosophy of religion—such as non-demonstrative or fideistic accounts of faith, and approaches that ground religion in existential experience rather than deductive argumentation. Thus, Hume's legacy remains pivotal for contemporary debates about the relation between science and religion and for ongoing efforts to reconceive the rational foundations of religious belief.



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