Ifiok: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies Vol. 5, No. 1 July, 2020
ISSN 2408-6800
http://ifiokjournal.com

DAVID HUME'S NOTION OF CAUSALITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of David Hume's causality and whether or not it has any implication for African Philosophy. It would be recalled that David Hume had earlier on objected to the notion of causality and maintained that it is our association of objects or events that gradually become habitual which, in turn, give rise to impressionable source of the idea of causality. For Hume, we erroneously conceive of causality on the basis of three modes of relationship which he identified as priority in time, contiguity and constant conjunction. Thus, David Hume rejected causality, on the grounds that it is impossible to achieve necessary connection in causal relationship. However, various studies have shown that implicit in all aspects of African philosophy is the notion of causality. As a matter of fact, African philosophy could be said to be causality while causality could be considered as African Philosophy. It thus appears that in the absence of causality, David Hume's position is capable of rendering African Philosophy meaningless. Through a balanced and critical analysis of the issues involved, this paper contends and argues that David Hume's position on causality does not and will not pose any threat or portend negative implications for African Philosophy since the issue of necessary connection is real and actually exists in African philosophy.

Keywords: David Hume, Causality, African philosophy. Knowledge, Necessary Connection.

INTRODUCTION

Causality is one fundamental issue in philosophy that predates even the Socratic era of philosophical history. It became a perennial issue that attracted the attention of philosophers down through the ages. Thus, we have philosophers like the Stoics, Plato, Aristotle, and others having some shots at the subject matter at different times.

In the thirteenth century philosophy, most Christian philosophers tried to reconcile Aristotle's philosophy with the Christian idea that God created the world out of nothing. As a consequence, Aristotle's unmoved mover was

transformed into a 'creating cause of existence' (Gilson 62). This evolution involved a radical change in the development of the concept of cause.In the seventeenth century, when causality took root, it was specifically conceived that (i) all causation refers exclusively to locomotion, (ii) that causation entails determinism, and (iii) that efficient causes were just the inactive modes in the chain of events. These changes have had a lasting influence on the evolution of our conception of cause, and indeed the entire Western outlook. Probably, the most radical change in the meaning of *cause* happened during the seventeenth century in which there emerged a strong tendency to understand causal relations as instances of deterministic laws.

In a point of fact, causality was actually brought to the front burner of philosophical discourse by Hume's objections and views on the subject matter. Hume's position had posed some challenges for some other areas of philosophy including African Philosophy. The extent of the challenges and the likely implications of Hume's objections on African philosophy is the major concern of this paper. For a clearer understanding of the issues at stake, this paper examine Hume's concept of causality and the extent to which causality could be said to be inherent in Africa Philosophy. The paper examines whether or not Hume's notion of causality has any implication on African Philosophy. It concludes with a critical summary and evaluation.

HUME'S CONCEPT OF CAUSALITY

Hume undertook the task of explaining causality in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. In part IV, he is concerned to establish a reason or explanation for our belief in the independent and continuing existence of external things or 'bodies' for upon this all causal reasoning about such things must ultimately rest. As is well known, Hume argues that such belief must either come from the senses, reason, or what he terms 'imagination', and he dismisses the first two, leaving only the last, where he attributes the belief to coherence and constancy of impressions.

Hume begins by distinguishing between *impressions* and *ideas*. *Impressions* are sensory, emotional, and other vivid mental phenomena, while *ideas* are the thoughts or memories related to these impressions. We build up all our ideas from simple impression by means of three laws of association, resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect (Hume 46).

One of those assumptions, never explicitly stated but always lurking just beneath the surface of Hume's philosophy, is that all reasoning and understanding of the external world comes from the mind working on the content of sensible impressions, be they pains, pleasures, colours, or sounds. The burden of inferring the existence of things outside of the mind then must fall upon the mind and those processes available to it, because what the sense offer not their impressions as the images of something distinct, or independent, and

external, because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of anything beyond.

Hume suggests that we cannot justify these causal inferences. There is no contradiction in denying a causal connection, so we cannot do so through relations of ideas. Also, we cannot justify future predictions from past experience without some principle that dictates that the future will always resemble the past. This principle can also be denied without contradiction, and there is no way it can be justified in experience. Therefore, we have no rational justification for believing in cause and effect. Hume suggests habit, and not reason, enforces a perception of necessary connection between events. When we see two events constantly conjoined, our imagination infers a necessary connection between them even if it has no rational grounds for doing so.

Hume proceeds to show that a number of complex ideas in philosophy, such as the idea of an immaterial self as the core of personal identity, fail to meet his empiricist criterion (*Treatise,* Book I, Part IV, Sec. VI). But the most famous subject of his criticism is relation of cause and effect. Western philosophers and scientists traditionally believe that to know something fully one must know the cause upon which it necessarily depends. Hume argues that such knowledge is impossible. He notes that the causal relationship provides the basis for all reasoning concerning matters of fact; however, unlike the relations of ideas explored by mathematics, no judgment that concerns matters of fact are necessarily true. This is because we can always imagine, without contradiction, the contrary of every matter of fact (e.g. 'the sun will not rise tomorrow' neither is nor implies a contradiction). Hume adds that the causal relationship between any two objects is based on experience, and is not known a priori (e.g. if Adam was created with perfect rational faculties, prior to experience he still could not tell from the properties of water that it would suffocate him). Yet all that experience establishes concerning causal relationships is that the cause is prior in time to and contiguous with effect. Experience cannot establish a necessary connection between cause and effect, because we can imagine without contradiction a case where the cause does not produce its usual effect.

For purposes of clarification, it is necessary that we understand Hume's own definition of cause and how the ontological and the epistemological approaches are reflected in Hume's two definitions of cause in the *Treatise* Hume stated that "We may define a *cause* to be "An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are placed in like relations of precedence and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter" (170). He further maintained that "A cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and is so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impressions of the one to form a more lively idea of the other (170).According to Hume, the notion of cause and effect is a complex idea that is made up of four more foundational ideas. These include priority in time, proximity in space or contiguity, constant conjunction and necessary connection. Concerning priority

in time, if it is the case or we assume that event A causes event B, what is meant here is that A occurs prior to B. If B were to occur before A, then it would be absurd to say that A was the cause of B. This is to say that A which is the cause, always precedes B, which is the effect. Concerning the idea of proximity or contiguity, what is meant is that if we say that A cause B, then it is the case that B is in proximity to, or close to A, or has a contiguous relationship with A. For instance, if we shoot a gun in Calabar (Southern Nigeria), and at that moment someone's death is recorded in Kaduna (Northern Nigeria), it would be wrong to conclude, by virtue of the idea of contiguity, that our gunshot is the cause of the death recorded. The gunshot and the death must be in proximity with each other for us to establish the case for causality. There is also the idea of constant conjunction by which we mean joint occurrence. In other words, for us to establish or make a case for A as accompanied by B, they must always occur together.

Priority, proximity and constant conjunction alone, however, do not make up our entire notion of causality going by Hume's position. For instance, if each time I close the door the dog barks, it would be wrong to conclude that the closing of the door was the cause of the dog's barking, even though the conditions of priority, proximity and constant conjunction were fulfilled. Going by Hume's position, apart from fulfilling the three conditions above, there ought to be a necessary connection between cause A and effect B. Based on this observation, Hume argues against the very concept of causation, or cause and effect. We often assume that one thing causes another, but it is just as possible that one thing does not cause the other. Hume claims that causation is a habit of association, a belief that is unfounded and meaningless. Still, he notes that when we repeatedly observe one event following another, our assumption that we are witnessing cause and effect seems logical to us.

CAUSALITY IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

The African view of causality can best be captured and appreciated through our understanding of the holistic world view of the African or the general outlook on life by Africans. In speaking of an African worldview and African Traditional Religions (ATR) we are speaking of two concepts that are so intertwined; that are inseparable. The African worldview is a religious worldview based upon ATR. Ambrose Moyo is quoted in Richmond and Gestrin that "religion permeates all aspects of African traditional societies. It is a way of life itself. Even anti-religious persons still have to be involved in the lives of their religious communities"(30). Richmond and Gestrin (31) go on to state the relationship between religion and worldview in the following words: 'Africans are very spiritual people. Life is short and difficult, and Africans, like people everywhere, need beliefs to explain and give meaning to the world they live in. The above position was best captured by Thorpe (6) when he wrote that "African Traditional Religion is the context from which philosophy,

anthropology, and ethics have sprung. In fact, the entire African world view, which is often expressed in forms of art and dance, is rooted and grounded in an African religious approach to life." The African worldview based on African Tradition Religion is equated with philosophy by Parrinder when he stated that "the African world view is life-affirming; a philosophy of vitalism or dynamism lies behind many attitudes and actions" (233). The traditional African though does not limit causation to the empirical world but freely blends and relates empirical causation. It was on the basis of the above that Keita describes African worldview as follows:

> The thought system of the ancient Egyptians represents the literate expression of the African in ancient history. These thought systems were based on the essential African view of the world as being both subject to empirical and metaphysical interpretations. For the African, the pursuit of metaphysics is an attempt to grapple with the gnosis to explain the life and motion that energizes the material world (Wright, *African Philosophy* 65)

The thrust of the argument here is that on the issue of the origin and nature of the universe, it has to be stated that African ontology is a religious cosmology so that African ontology and cosmology are closely aligned. Concerning the conception of the universe in Africa, Mbiti Stated:

> It is generally believed all over Africa that the universe was created. The creator of the universe is God. There is no agreement, however on how the creation of the universe took place. But it seems impossible that the universe could simply have come into existence on its own. God is, therefore, the explanation of the origin of the universe, which consists of both visible and invisible realities (32)

The African believes that the whole universe, that is, the visible and the invisible world are charged with life-force and that this life-force is in constant interaction with each other. This view was equally held by Akpan when he observed "That the world is viewed by Africans as a unitary sphere though composed of multifarious individual beings. He further stated that it is a world where everything interpenetrates, where the physical and the spiritual coalesce. It is simply a world of amazing unity and interaction among all thing" (14).

Apart from presenting and explaining a form of dynamism between the spirit world and the physico-material world, the above views clearly brought to the fore the Cosmo-ontological background for African causal explanation. From the position of the African worldview, there is no way we can conceive of any action or activity without a cause; every event is said to have a cause in the form of an agent or agents working through some forces. The nature of African philosophy can be found in its basic assumptions about reality and the theoretical schemes or explanatory models, which are epistemological, metaphysical and religious in nature. Within this framework, spirit, life-force or vital force is the primary axiom. Here, the material has meaning and purpose only through the lenses of the spiritual. In the words of Azenabor (4), the nature

of reality is charged with life forces, that is, everything is alive. Even nothing becomes "something", especially when we utilize the right spiritual apparatus. The foregoing analyses show that the phenomenon of causality is one that permeates and penetrates the whole gamut of African philosophy. In other words, we cannot conceive of African philosophy without causality.

Within the broad context of African worldview, African epistemology is understood to be an all-embracing and multi-dimensional approach to knowledge. In other words, African epistemology is not faced with the challenge involved in the denial of societal influence in one's knowledge and interpretation of things. This was what Itibari (37) meant when he stated that the participation and efforts of Individuals in society also contribute to the derivation of knowledge in its social dimension as well. He further observed that indigenous African knowledge is not based or derivative from individual alone but it is a communal or collective understanding and rationalization of community (38). Such collective understanding emphasizes the dialectics, cooperation and togetherness involved in knowledge acquisition as against the individualistic or rather self-glorifying means that ignores the social element in acquiring knowledge.

Tempels (40) contends that in African epistemology, there is an intimate ontological bond and relationship between every being. He posits that the African view of a world of forces (being) is like 'a spider's web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network (41). Hence, African-oriented knowledge is derivate from chain of relationships. Like a spider's web, the knowledge of one aspect of reality is intertwined with the knowledge of other aspects in a causal manner.

From the axiological angle, it can be contended that tradition and custom in African society define the various aspect of human behaviour and social activities that were approved and those aspects that were prohibited and forbidden. All the codes of morality were nearly in the form of prohibitions which were sanctioned by the deities and ancestral spirits. The account for why many scholars hold the view that African ethics and morality is derived from traditional religion. Ilogu (23) observes that Omenala (custom) is derived from the goddess Ala (earth divinity) and sanctioned by the ancestors; it is religious in nature, although it fulfils social, moral and cultural functions. Its hold on the community derived from the power of the goddess and the ancestors. Hence, this forms the unquestioned obedience which the community gives to it.

Ilogu's opinion about the source of Igbo ethic and morality is also true for other African communities. The belief in divine moral code and the ability of the gods to punish any deviation from or violations of the divine law was the most powerful mechanism of societal control. Shorter agrees with this view when he observes that, "In African Traditional Society, morality is seen to be in intimate relationship with the ontological order of the universe in a causal pattern. The order is "given" if not explicitly "God given", and it is expressed in the system

of symbolic classification current in society. Any infraction of this order is contraction in life and brings about a physical disorder which reveals the fault" (62).

The causal nature of African logic is clearly brought to the fore when we consider the fact that regardless of how hard the problem, Ancient Africans realized there is always an undiscovered logical coherence among the hidden parts of a problem and its basic logical structure that are always in conformity with Africans ontological experience. They started the search of the unknown or the incomprehensible by assessing the underlying base of the problem searching for Principles. For logic to retain its significance within the context of African word-view, it is expected to display dynamic and relational inherent essential of being because it is a logic that considers being in its fullness and comprehensiveness. This explains why Asouzu maintained that the complementary methodology presupposes the acquisition of an inclusive comprehensive logical mindset (34). Out of this process arose African Critical philosophy - a rigorous logical method using, argument and logical analysis to clarify and critique existing beliefs - as all should do – on the way to discovering the truth.

Given this fact and the position of David Hume on causality, what readily comes to mind is that African philosophy has to grapple or contend with some challenges posed by Hume's position. What therefore does Hume's position portend for African philosophy? Put in another way, what are the implications of Hume's view of causality on African philosophy?

HUME, CAUSALITY, AND AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

In the foregoing, attempts were made to show that African philosophy is fundamentally rooted on causality. In other words, causality tends to permeate every facet of African philosophy from the metaphysical, down through the epistemological, axiological, to the logical foundations of African philosophy. Going by the subjective Western analysis of African philosophy, Hume is assumed to have dealt a heavy blow on the issue of causality. His position suggests that since in almost all cases of cause and effect, it is impossible to establish the necessary connection between cause A and effect B, it becomes completely misleading to talk of causation. Thus, without this necessity in connection, what we simply have are relations of priority in time, of contiguity, and of constant conjunction that are themselves founded on habits. This, in the opinion of Hume cannot be taken to mean causality or causation. Ordinarily, the obvious implication of Hume's concept of causality on African philosophy would have been to render African philosophy meaningless since causality is an integral aspect of African philosophy. However, further investigation shows that such negative implication borne out of Hume's concept of causality cannot be said to hold sway for African philosophy since it can be argued that necessary connection necessarily exists in African causality, and by implication, in African philosophy. Going through the different aspects of African

Philosophy (African metaphysics, African epistemology, African axiology, and African logic), it can be argued that they are characterized by necessary connection in their various shades of causality. The question now is: on what ground(s) is it possible to establish necessary connection in African causality? Put in another way; is it possible to talk of necessary causal connection in African philosophy?

First, it must be contended that Hume's concept of causality was not founded on the African ontology and, as such, is quite alien to African setting. It is a position that cannot be substantiated outside the context of Western philosophy. Second, Hume's notion of causality is fraught with a fallacy. The position is fallacious because his knowledge and analysis of Western culture and philosophy alone does not offer sufficient grounds for the general dismissal of causality. Contrary to Hume's view, what seems to be the case in African metaphysics is not a reflection of habitual association and conjunction of events with some supernatural beings. Thus, it would be wrong to infer from Hume's causality that what is referred to as causality or causal connection in African metaphysics is, nothing more than event happening within the context of priority in time, contiguous relations, and some forms of constant conjunction. Rather, association of events with supernatural beings can be shown to be founded on some forms of necessary connection. For instance, African ontology is a probe into things as they are in nature while the universe is causal as a cyclical order or an ordered sequence in harmonious and causal connection. This necessary causal connection is what Ijiomah (75) refers to when he avers that Igbos believe in this perception since they do not make rigid or superior-inferior demarcations between the phenomenal and the noumenal, and between the cause and effect. What this seems to suggest is that African metaphysical reality is holistic, cyclical, interrelated and harmonious, and informs the need for ontological balance in causal pattern. Agreeing with this necessary causal connection, Oladipo explains that:

> Nature, for the Yoruba, is an integrated whole in which all forces and powers in the human and non- human, physical and quasi-physical interact in a mutually reinforcing manner. There is thus, in Yoruba world-view, like that of many other African people, a sense of order and continuity of experience, it is this sense which underpins the peoples belief that everything is ultimately explicable in both the animate and inanimate realms (157)

In the epistemological foundation of African philosophy, we have also showed that causality pervades some forms of knowing and knowledge in African philosophy. From our study of the religious, spiritual and mythical knowledge (which may also be referred to as extra-sensory knowledge) and their modes of acquisition, the issue of causation is obviously present. Some forms of knowledge, within the context of African philosophy, are ultimately traceable to a supernatural being who is expected to be the author and

originator of all forms of knowledge. As earlier pointed out, every event and occurrence has a cause. To unravel the complexities surrounding an event, or to find solution to some negative and mysterious occurrence, the knower, in African context, is expected to make recourse to a supernatural being from where, real knowledge is acquired. Thus, in prescribing solution or mitigating measure for an unfortunate circumstance that defy empirical solution, it is expected that a metaphysical being must definitely be brought into the picture. From this perspective, knowledge is simply a religious and mystical thing as man on his own, cannot boast of some knowledge except it is caused by a supernatural being. For instance, it is believed that superior knowledge is bequeathed to some individuals. It is in this light that ancestor is considered to provide a link between the dead and the knowledge of living beings. As mentioned earlier, in African epistemology, divine beings are actively engaged in the epistemic experience of humans as they directly or indirectly reveal things to human beings in their experiences. This is where the notion of causality is again brought to the fore. This notion of causality as presented in African philosophy is again assumed to be meaningless when examined or assessed through the subjective lens of Hume's view of causality. In a point of fact, the assumed linkage and association between human knowledge and divine beings are not simply issues of spurious conclusion. The thrust of the argument here is that while it is possible to interpret and explain the link between human knowledge and divine being in relation of priority in time, contiguity, and constant conjunction, it is also true that such knowledge can be explained within the context of necessary connection.

In our discourse on the reality of the existence of causality in African axiology, it was pointed out that the basic idea that reflects the notion of causality in African philosophy is to be found in African axiology. From the African axiological perspective, morality is seen to be an intimate relationship with the ontological order of the universe. This order, as earlier explained is divine or God-given and it is expressed in the system of symbolic classification current in the society. This was corroborated by Shorter (62) where he contends that any infraction of this order is a contraction in life and brings about a physical disorder which reveals his fault. What this position simply tends to infer is that the causal linkage and association of human morality and that of the divine or supernatural being is assumed to be a travesty or a mockery of causal relations given the subjective view of Hume on causality. The argument here therefore is that since these assumed causal relations can only be defended on grounds of priority in time, contiguity, and on ground of constant conjunction, to the virtual exclusion of necessary connection, then it makes no sense to talk of causality within the context of Hume's view of causality. This again is an erroneous conclusion on the part of Hume because individual morality or ethical behavior, for instance, are usually fashioned against the backdrop of societal conventions which ultimately enhances social cohesion. This implies therefore that individual conduct in the society could be said to be caused by

the conventions in place. This obviously brings out the necessity in connection between human conduct in the society on the one hand and between human conduct and the ontological order on the other. The ultimate implication of this is that so long as causality in African axiology cannot be eroded on the condition of necessary connection, it shows that the axiological foundation of African philosophy is not in any way threatened by Hume's notion of causality. Thus, since the basis (that is causality) on which African axiology is rooted has not been faulted, it follows that by relevant extension, African philosophy is not faulted.

In discussing the reality of causality in African logic, we have earlier observed that the causal nature of African logic is usually very obvious because of the fact that problems whether complex or simple, are usually associated with undiscovered logical coherence among the hidden parts of the problem and the basic logical structure. The issue here is that even while we may not be able to explain the specific function and processes involved in the logical structure and conclusions, the fact remains that it is a complex process that requires the interconnectedness and interplay of various parts that are necessarily connected to one another. It is therefore erroneous for one to undermine such a necessary connection in African logic. Even when some logical processes are shown to be causally connected to supernatural processes, this is done with the ultimate aim of establishing logical structure and reasoning in connection with the ontological order. Thus, since necessary connections are shown to exist in the reasoning and logical processes, it simply stands to reason that the logical foundation of African causality is not in any way threatened by Hume's notion of causality.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The discussions showed that Hume's philosophy of empiricism and his view of causality, where emphasis is on necessary connection, portend little or no negative implications for African philosophy. The point, therefore, is that as long as we analyze, discuss, and examine African philosophy through the subjective lens of Hume's notion of causality, African philosophy cannot but be assumed to be threatened because the foundation on which it is founded may be threatened.

Given the fact that the purpose of philosophy is to understand reality, it would be right to argue that people's interpretation of reality determines their notion of causality and their sum-total approach to life. Thus, Africans whose philosophical interpretation of reality is spiritual or supernatural definitely see the world and events therein as the interplay of spiritual and supernatural forces. However, this way of conceiving reality has a grave disadvantage if it is taken too far in the sense that it beclouds the mental vision of the African from searching for physical causes which is the basis of systematic science. Again, the search for spiritual causes or the interpretation of reality from other-worldly

standpoint may lead to the belief that problems are best investigated, interpreted and comprehended metaphysically which depicts omniscience and omnipotence of metaphysical beings and man as capable of surmounting the vicissitudes of life that confront him. It must also be contended that Hume's philosophy brings to the fore that bankruptcy of subjective analysis of the issue of causality and African philosophy and by extension, the bankruptcy of African philosophy.

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