

# David Hume's critiques on Causation and paṭiccasamuppāda in the Theravāda Buddhism

Ven. Kadawalawewe Kalyana<sup>1</sup>, Ven. Marthuwela Vijithasiri<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

“Causality” is one fundamental natural principle that is inevitable in our day to day interpretation, explanation and prediction of phenomena, whether in religion, science, politics, social interaction, philosophy and so many other fields of human endeavor. The notion of causality is quite a complex one. The concept of paṭiccasamuppāda is one of the most important discourses in Buddhist philosophy. Fundamentally, the Buddha's theory of paṭiccasamuppāda is known as the “Theory of Dependent Origination”. David Hume (1711-1776) is one of the British Empiricists of the Early Modern period of western philosophy. Hume had criticized the theory of causation and he pointed out that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect.

## Research Objective

There are manifold Philosophical interpretations of causation theory since the history of philosophy. The objective of this research is to examine the Buddhist paṭiccasamuppāda and David Hume's empirical criticism of causation. And it is examined how Hume's critique affects to the Buddhist theory of paṭiccasamuppāda.

## Research Methodology

Data was collected referring library and E-library. The data from the primary and secondary sources related to the field-collected through the libraries and discussed with scholars in the field. The data analysis method of the research is descriptive method. And in this research, I wanted to point out some critiques of Hume regarding the causation and Buddhist theory of paṭiccasamuppāda using the descriptive and comparative methods.

## Research Problem

The major problem of this study is to examine whether Hume's critique of the causality effects on the interpretation of Buddhist paṭiccasamuppāda.

---

<sup>1</sup>. Assistant Lecturer, Department of philosophy, University of Kelaniya. *kadawalawewe1989@gmail.com*

<sup>2</sup>. Junior fellow, Department of Sanskrit & Eastern studies, University of Kelaniya.  
*marthuwelavijithasiri@gmail.com*

## Findings and Research discussion

Hume's most important contributions to the philosophy of causation are found in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, and *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, the latter generally viewed as a partial recasting of the former. Both works start with Hume's central empirical axiom known as the Copy Principle. Loosely, it states that all constituents of our thoughts come from experience. Hume observes that while we may perceive two events that seem to occur in conjunction, there is no way for us to know the nature of their connection. 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. Hume holds that we have an instinctive belief in causality, rooted in our own biological habits and that we can neither prove nor discount this belief. However, if we accept our limitations, we can still function without abandoning our assumptions about cause and effect. Religion suggests that the world operates on cause and effect and that there must, therefore, be a First Cause, namely God. In Hume's worldview, causation is assumed but ultimately unknowable. We do not know there is a First Cause or a place for God.

The traditional answer prevalent in Theravāda Buddhism is that *paṭiccasamuppāda* does not simply mean *uppāda* (*uppādamattam*) or accidental origination (*adhiccasamuppāda*) but dependent origination, where 'dependent' means 'dependent' upon causal conditions. Coming to Hume's criticism of the causal interpretation of *pratītyasamutpāda* we can ask whether rejection of causal necessity would be consistent with the spirit of the Buddha's conception of *pratītyasamutpāda*. It is true that the Buddha's formula of *paṭiccasamuppāda* viz. 'imasmin sati idaṃ hoti, imasmin asati idaṃ na hoti' taken literally, is a formula of regular relation of co-occurrence or sequential occurrence and is similar to David Hume's idea of constant conjunction. But can we infer from this that the Buddha, like David Hume, was not inclined to accept the law of causation? David Hume's skepticism about the law of cause-effect relation implies that the so-called cause-effect relation cannot be proved to be a necessary relation. Suppose what we call cause refers to an event C and what we call effect refers to an event E, then Hume's contention is that we cannot guarantee that since C has occurred, E must necessarily occur or that since E has occurred, C must have occurred prior to it. Now let us consider the Buddha's application of

paṭiccasamuppāda to the problem of suffering. The Buddha was saying that suffering occurs depending directly or indirectly upon craving. Now can we imagine the Buddha saying something like this in the same breath: “It is true that when craving occurs suffering also occurs and when craving does not occur, suffering also does not occur? But there is no necessary connection between the two. Craving may be there, but it does not necessarily follow that suffering must occur as a result of it. Similarly, if craving is not there, it does not necessarily follow that suffering will not take place”. Such a view will be contrary to the true spirit of Buddhism.

### **Research Conclusion**

According to Hume, our knowledge is based on impressions and concepts. Here concepts are copies of impressions. These empirical concepts create our knowledge and there are three connections among these concepts such as resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. But according to Hume’s empirical interpretation, there is no necessary connection between cause and effect. The manufacturing of such a necessary connection is an inference of our mind because contiguity and order of cause and effect or two facts. That’s why Hume refute causation. According to Prof. S.S. Barlingay the Buddha’s formula of pratīyasamutpāda refers to the relation of regular sequence and not to causality. Secondly, the idea of causality is also inconsistent with the doctrine of momentariness. So it can conclude that paṭiccasamuppāda is not causation at all according to Hume’s interpretation.

**Keywords:** Causation, paṭiccasamuppāda, Theravāda Buddhism, Empiricism, impression

### **References**

- Barlingay, S.S. (1998). “The significance of pratīyasmutpāda, sāmānyalakṣaṇa, and apoha in Buddhism”, **Re-understanding Indian Philosophy**. New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd.
- Hume, David (2007). **A Treatise of Human Nature**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, U.K. David Fate Norton & Mary J. Norton (ed.).
- Hume, David (2000). **An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding**. Oxford: Clarendon Press. U.K. Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.).
- Mackie, P. (1995). “**Causality**”. The Oxford Companion to Philosophy. Ted Hunderich (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pande, G.C. (1997). “**Causality in Buddhist Thought**”. A Companion to World Philosophies. Eds: Eliot Deutsch and Ron Bontekoe U.S.A Blackwell.