

Did Hume hold a Regularity Theory of Causation?

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In *The Secret Connexion*¹ Galen Strawson argues against the traditional interpretation of Hume, according to which Hume's theory of meaning leads him to a regularity theory of causation. In actual fact, says Strawson, 'Hume believes firmly in some sort of natural necessity' (p. 277). What Hume denied was that we are *aware* of causal connections outrunning regular succession, and that we have a 'positively or descriptively contentful conception' of such powers (p. 283); he did not deny that there are such powers, or that they are what we are talking about when we talk about causation.

Strawson has four central lines of argument. His 'most direct evidence' (p. 2) against a regularity interpretation consists of (1) passages where Hume refers to hidden powers underlying the regularities of which we are aware. Strawson's broader motivations for rejecting the traditional interpretation are (2) that the regularity theory is in itself quite absurd, and (3) that it is incompatible with Hume's 'non-committal scepticism'. And the method which he uses to defend his interpretation against pressure from the theory of ideas is (4) to develop some comments of Hume's on 'relative' ideas into something like a further theory of content to supplement the theory of ideas. Strawson develops almost the strongest case I can imagine for his claims. I shall try to explain why he leaves me unconvinced.

¹ Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion—Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Page references in the text, other than to Hume, are to this book. References in the form 'T' and 'E', followed by page number, are to the following editions: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); and David Hume, *Enquiries ...*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd. edition rev. P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). The first of these volumes also contains the Abstract of the *Treatise*, cited here as 'Abs'. References to the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (cited as 'DNR', followed by page number) are to Norman Kemp Smith's edition (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947).

1. *References to hidden powers* (pp. v, 14, 279; § 18). The ‘most direct evidence’ that Strawson offers (p. 2) is a series of passages where Hume seems to refer to hidden powers. He talks for example of ‘those powers and forces, on which [the] regular course and succession of objects totally depends’, of ‘the secret connexion, which binds [events] together,’ and of how ‘the power or force, which actuates the whole machine, is entirely concealed from us’ (E55, E66, E63, quoted pp. 185, v, 188).

Strawson reads these as references to causal powers outrunning regular succession—or, as he often puts it, to Causation, with a capital C (p. 84). But there are other options. Some of the phrases may not have been meant as referring expressions at all. (We know that Hume in another context wrote ‘that idea’ and later corrected his own copy of the text to read ‘that pretended idea’. (See Hume’s Abstract pp. 648-9, and Nidditch’s note, p. 673.)) Hume’s primary point in most of the passages in question is that we are unaware of any powers outrunning regular succession; he does not need, for that purpose, to have a view on whether such powers exist, or, if he does have a view, to make clear exactly what it is. So a certain amount of indeterminacy is to be expected. More importantly, when these phrases are meant as referring expressions (as I agree they often are), it is not obvious exactly what kind of causal power Hume intends them to refer to. Strawson reads them as references to what we might call *a priori* powers—features of the cause that would licence *a priori* inference to the effect. But others will read them as references to regularity powers—features whose production of an effect is ultimately only a matter of regularities in the objects and their constituent parts. After all, ‘we have been oblig’d to ... make use of terms before we were able exactly to define them’ (T169; cp. E33n), and when the explanation comes, it seems that all that the word ‘power’ can properly refer to, according to the theory of ideas, is regularity and a ‘determination of the mind’.

If at first Hume appears to be saying more than this, this may be because he is ‘talking with the vulgar’ while ‘thinking with the learned’. When the learned are thinking of regularity powers, they can perfectly well talk of (some of) them as ‘hidden’ from us. They can also talk of them as ‘underlying’ higher-level causal processes, when a description of them captures the micro-level regularities of systems that compose a macro-system. They might even say that some regularity powers were permanently hidden from us, if they

thought that every causal process depended on causal processes of yet smaller or more 'remote' items, and so on without limit, and thought that humans could only learn of a finite number of types of regularity in a finite amount of time.

It is worth adding that some of the phrases are hard to take at face value on anyone's interpretation. Hume sometimes talks, in the plural, of hidden 'powers and forces' (e.g. E55), in a way that suggests that the power of nourishment in food, for example, might well be a different power from the power of limb-movement in the human mind. Such usages are fairly amenable to the decree that all they can refer to is regularity in objects and a 'determination' in the mind. On the other hand, it is obviously not so easy to take a phrase like 'the power or force, which actuates the whole machine' as a straightforward reference to a regularity power. But it is not easy to take it as a straightforward reference to anything else either. Hume (at least in later work) gave a good reason to resist the assumption that one and the same 'power or force' acts in the whole variety of causal interactions, both mental and physical. ('Did I show you the particular causes of each individual in a collection of twenty particles of matter, I should think it very unreasonable, should you afterwards ask me, what was the cause of the whole twenty. This is sufficiently explained in explaining the cause of the parts.' (DNR190-1)) Rather than being a literal reference to an all-producing natural power, 'the power ... which actuates the whole machine' seems to echo the occasionalist conception of God—a very special conception of Him, as the one true cause of all material occurrences, which Hume thought applied not to a hidden entity, but to no entity at all (E70-73).

Finally, if there remain recalcitrant passages, they could be aberrations—genuinely meant, but only because Hume has not long considered their consequences. There is seldom an intellectual revolution in which the hero with one leap is free—free of all vestiges of views he is nonetheless determined to reject. If Hume's theory of ideas is an attempt to delimit the bounds of sense, we should hardly be surprised if he occasionally transgresses them—especially if the lines have in fact been drawn in the wrong place. It may be that Hume is fundamentally a regularity theorist, without being a wholly consistent regularity theorist.

The evidence is good that Hume believed in hidden powers underlying the regularities we observe. What is unclear is that Hume meant them to be

powers ‘conceived in an essentially non-regularity-theory way’ (p. 84), rather than simply regularity powers. This is not to say that Strawson’s reading is wrong: I have not yet investigated the positive credentials of the regularity interpretation. But the evidence of these passages is inconclusive: none of them will, as Strawson thinks, ‘suffice on its own to establish the present view’ (p. 188).²

2. *Absurdity* (§§ 5, 8, 22.2). Interpretations of detail depend of course, in part, on what we expect Hume, on general grounds, to think. Strawson argues that there must in fact be more to causation than regular succession, and, in addition, this would have been ‘obvious’ to Hume (p. 222). The main argument is, roughly, that to suppose that the regularity of events had no further basis would be like supposing that a series that ran 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, and so on, in the sequence of natural numbers, was the output of a random number generator (pp. 24, 225 n. 11). This would be to suppose a ‘vast and continuous fluke’—which is ‘absurd’, though not logically impossible (p. 26). Given that ‘reality ... is highly regular’, we have ‘reason to suppose that ... there is something about reality in virtue of which it is regular in character’—namely, Causation (p. 223).

It is this argument that explains Strawson’s low estimate of the regularity theory, as hardly credible (p. 23) and ‘one of the most baroque

² Strawson also quotes some striking passages from Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, e.g. ‘And were the inmost essence of things laid open to us, ... we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition.’ (DNR174-5, quoted p. 112n) Such passages are certainly not to be dismissed, but it is unclear how they bear on the interpretation of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. First, they occur in a dialogue—a form which Hume describes as appropriate to topics that are ‘so *obscure* and *uncertain*, that human reason can reach no fixed determination with regard to [them]’ (DNR128)—; so even views that come from the character most closely identifiable with Hume may well not be ascribable to the author without reservation. Secondly, it is unclear whether Hume may not have changed his mind by the time he was writing the *Dialogues*—for example, treating the theory of ideas as less important than he had done before. Strawson himself says he will not rest his case on the *Dialogues* (p. 8n), and I shall not consider them further here.

metaphysical suggestions ever put forward' (p. 87). But whatever the merits of Strawson's argument in itself, I doubt that Hume would have found it obvious. Even if the regularity theory is 'fantastically implausible' (p. 277), it is not so implausible that no one has ever held it. (Strawson himself mentions Ayer and Thomas Brown.) We need a reason, therefore, to think that its absurdity would have been obvious to Hume. The argument Strawson offers is of little help. It depends, as Strawson points out, on a 'fundamental (not-further-justifiable) notion of what is intrinsically reasonable' without being deductively necessary (p. 224). Hume's attitude towards non-deductive reasoning, however, was at best ambivalent, as his discussion of induction shows. It is hard to believe, therefore, that he would have accepted as simply 'obvious' a piece of reasoning that depended on an irreducible but non-deductive conception of the 'reasonable'.

3. *Non-committal scepticism* (§ 9). The regularity theory denies that there is more to causation than regular succession. For Strawson, this is 'a *positive* ontological assertion about the nature of reality' which 'is violently at odds with Hume's *scepticism*—his strictly non-committal scepticism with respect to knowledge claims about what we can know to exist, *or know not to exist*, in reality.' (p. 277) Hume can hardly therefore have held the regularity theory.

Setting aside the disputed issues of whether, and on what grounds, Hume may have actually denied the existence of other items that his rivals believed existed, like 'that unintelligible chimaera of substance' (T222) or infinitely divisible matter (T I.ii), I shall make two points. First, the word 'unintelligible' may mean *beyond our understanding* (as quantum mechanics is unintelligible to most 12-year-olds) or *self-contradictory* (as round squares are). A non-committal sceptic of Hume's type should not deny the existence of things unintelligible in the first sense, but he will be quite ready to deny the existence of things unintelligible in the second. Hume indeed does so: 'We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible.' (T32) So if Hume regards the idea of 'real intelligible connexion' as literally 'incompatible with those objects, to which we apply it' (T168), then it is open to us to interpret him as denying the existence of any such power in those objects. Secondly, if Hume's theory of meaning tells him that the reference of the phrase 'causation' can only be either regular succession in objects or a 'determination of the mind', this is not in itself, as Strawson

thinks, a piece of dogmatism about what exists in reality. There may be an infinity of items beyond our ken, unconceived by us; all that is claimed is that, whatever they may be, they are not the reference of our term ‘causation’.

4. *‘Relative ideas’* (§§ 6.5, 12). Strawson’s most ambitious and innovative line of argument starts as an attempt to disarm an objection. If we have no impression of causal power outrunning regular succession, then, on Hume’s theory of ideas, it would seem that we can have no idea of it—and hence, surely, no belief in the existence of such causal power either. In reply, Strawson draws on comments Hume made about our conception of external objects. Having first declared that it is ‘impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions’, Hume seems to back-track. We can, after all, have ‘a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects’ (T68). ‘We may *suppose*, but never can *conceive* a specific difference betwixt an object and impression’ (T241, my emphasis). And just as Hume allows us to have a merely ‘relative idea’ of external objects, as the unknown causes of known effects, he can allow us, Strawson thinks, to have a relative idea of objective causal power—as ‘whatever it is in reality which is that in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is’ (p. 52, cp. p. 122).

If we ascribe to Hume a whole theory of ‘relative ideas’, is it to be seen as a departure from his theory of ideas or as merely an elaboration of it? Strawson mostly takes the first option. In addition to ‘E-intelligible ideas’, meeting ‘the strict empiricist conception of intelligibility’ embodied in the theory of ideas, Hume permits ‘R-intelligible ideas’ meeting a “realist” conception of intelligibility’ (pp. 127-8). The theory of ideas is the theory merely of ‘descriptive content, impression-derived, impression-copy content’ (p. 122), of what we can “positively-contentfully” mean, “comprehend” or *representationally encompass*’ (pp. 122, 188). Hume on the other hand, ‘in his Realist ... linguistic practice, ... acknowledges that words may have a proper use or meaning ... beyond the use or meaning granted to them by the theory of ideas.’ (p. 127)

Strawson is not the first to suggest that Hume’s theory of ideas deals only with a ‘special restricted sense of content’ (p. 53); but the view is hard to square with what Hume says of this kind of case. According to the Abstract, ‘if

no impression can be produced, [Hume] concludes that the term is altogether insignificant' (Abs 649), and this uncompromising line dominates in his discussion of our idea of necessary connexion. If we cannot find a source-impression, our conclusion must be that 'these words are absolutely without any meaning' (E74; cp. T162); if that conclusion is later avoided (as of course it is), this is only because an impression after all *is* discovered, to serve as the source of our idea. This is not to say that Hume never departed from the implications of the theory of ideas—no philosopher has ever been wholly consistent. But he never departed from it by design, let alone provided for a supplementary theory of content to permit him to do so.

Maybe it would be better to try a second option, and treat the theory of 'relative ideas' as more like an elaboration of something already implicit in the theory of ideas. After all, a description like 'the heaviest man in England', formed from independently comprehensible components, is itself obviously comprehensible, even if we cannot identify the man in question. But we can hardly ascribe to Hume a parallel view of causal power: if the idea of causal power were a complex idea introduced by some such description, then he would not have needed to chase around for a simple impression from which to derive the idea of it. Causal discourse would have been transparently comprehensible and clearly legitimate. The agenda for *Treatise* I.iii.14 and *Enquiry* § vii would simply evaporate.

There is perhaps a third option: that the theory of 'relative ideas' is a theory only of *semi*-legitimacy, while the theory of ideas is Hume's one theory of full legitimacy. This is more promising, with the prospect of drawing parallels with some of Locke's comments on how our substance-terms make tacit reference to real essences, though this is using 'words without ideas', since we have no acquaintance with the essences. (v. Strawson § 12.2) But still there are problems: if the meaning of 'causal power' were (even semi-legitimately) given by a description, then Hume would not have needed to search abortively for a single simple impression to be the source of our understanding of it (since our understanding of the term would instead derive from a definite description). Neither would he have needed to come up with the impression of reflection which he eventually offers as the source of our idea. What is more, he would not (*pace* Strawson p. 189) have been able to dismiss in the way he did (E64n, T157) Locke's account of how we get our idea of power—for Locke's suggestion is very close to the descriptive idea

which Strawson is offering as Hume's own. Last of all, there are two glaring problems for any version of the view that Hume believed in the existence of Causation, though he also thought we have no idea of it. First Hume says that 'we can never have reason to believe that any object exists, of which we cannot form an idea' (T172). Secondly, he tells us that belief is a 'vivid idea', so without an idea of Causation, we surely could not believe, or even entertain the thought, of its existence.

Hume never explicitly faced the trilemma I have sketched. He never said exactly how he wanted his talk of 'relative ideas' to harmonize with the official theory of ideas. But the important point is that he didn't really need to, if, as I think, he had no plans to make much use of the notion of relative ideas. In the case of external objects, which is the main context in which he mentions 'relative' ideas, he denies that they actually figure in our everyday conceptions: 'Generally speaking we *do not* suppose [objects] specifically different' from perceptions (T68, my emphasis). What is more, Hume seems to regard this kind of idea as beneath contempt (—'a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it' (E155—a passage which I think Strawson underestimates, p. 133 n. 26, and p. 203)). In the circumstances, Hume hardly needed a theory of the meaningfulness of these 'relative' conceptions. It is a different matter on Strawson's interpretation. If Hume had rested his understanding of 'causal power' on the notion of 'relative' ideas, then he could hardly have failed to have a view on the nature and content of such ideas; and if he had done, then he would surely have seen that all the obvious ways of applying that notion to 'causal power' would have sat very uncomfortably with his other views on the meaning of 'necessary connection'.

In a footnote, added in the second edition of the *Enquiry*, Hume does say that 'our idea of *power* is relative' (E77). But he is primarily saying that the idea of *power* is relational, rather as Locke had pointed out that the ideas of *concubine*, *old* and *great* are, perhaps unobviously, relational (*Essay* II.xxv.2-3). And far from turning his back on the theory of ideas at this point, Hume says that his point is clear from the 'explications and definitions' which he has just given in the text—that is, from the two definitions, which derive, *inter alia*, from the application of that theory.

A final objection to offering Hume a conception of causal power as 'that in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is' (p. 52) is that

this would not after all succeed in legitimizing the idea. The phrase ‘in virtue of which’ itself introduces here a causal relation of some sort (even if—bearing in mind Strawson’s comments, pp. 185-6—not the standard relation of cause and effect), and Hume would have demanded an independent source for our idea of it—surely, by his own lights, without success.

The difficulty is not with the notion of relative ideas *per se*. Hume obviously does in one context use the notion, to explain a way in which we might ‘suppose’ objects to be categorically different from our perceptions, though in fact we usually do not do so. The problem is with the idea that Hume could have put any weight upon it in legitimating a conception of a causal power outrunning regular succession. To do so would be insufficient to the task, given the point of the last paragraph. It would also have forced the rest of his discussion into a very different form. Given that we know that Hume did not explicitly rest his views on this idea, we have very little reason to suppose that he implicitly did so.

II

Strawson’s case against the regularity interpretation seems inconclusive. But is there anything positively to be said in favour of the regularity interpretation? Strawson does of course discuss some of the evidence. There are places where Hume seems to affirm a regularity theory. For example: ‘Tis the constant conjunction of objects, along with the determination of the mind, which constitutes a physical necessity’ (T171). Strawson mostly tries to explain away such passages—either as asserting a regularity theory only with respect to ‘idealist objects’ rather than objects in general (§§ 6.3, 6.9), or else as a misleading expression of a purely epistemological point that causation is regular succession ‘*so far as we have any notion or conception*’ of it (p. 151; see §§ 15.1, 15.4, 15.5). Both gambits seem to me dubious. There is no evidence that Hume in his discussion of causation had the distinction between idealist and realist objects (let alone the fine distinctions developed in §§ 6 and 22) clearly enough in mind to have got as far as embracing one view of causation for one category of object and another view for the others. And the second gambit fails to reckon with the fact that Hume was at least under pressure to think that we have no notion of causation whatever, other than

our notion of causation ‘so far as we have any notion of it’—and with no notion of a richer kind of causation, we can have no belief in it. So Hume’s expressions of a regularity view cannot be set aside.

More important than mere expressions of a regularity view, though, are the arguments in Hume that seem to support it. Strawson notices these lines of argument: they derive from the theory of ideas (v. § 10). But because he sees that theory as only a part of Hume’s overall view of content, he is ready to allow these arguments to be overridden in the light of Hume’s broader “realist” conception of intelligibility’ (p. 127; v. § 12). My misgivings about the latter idea explain my misgivings about Strawson’s reading of these arguments. Whatever realist conceptions Hume himself employed, it was not with an awareness of the shortcomings of his theory of ideas. Where his theory of ideas forced a conclusion on him, I do not think that Hume envisaged that anything else could release him from it. (If he had done, he would have shown more modesty in his views on the existence of substance and infinitely divisible matter.) In the absence, therefore, of a good reason for down-grading their significance, the positive arguments for a regularity theory from the theory of ideas—the initial force of which Strawson is ready to acknowledge (v. § 10)—remain firmly in place.

It is perhaps strange that Strawson admits at one point that Hume ‘clearly and explicitly takes a very strong *subjectivist* line about necessity, according to which *all* necessity lies only in the mind.’ (p. 157) One might at first think that this would open the door to giving Hume a subjectivist view also of causal power, and would make difficulties for Strawson’s idea that he believed firmly in objective causal powers. But Strawson will have none of that. In so far as Hume seems to say this, it is because he treats ‘necessity’ and ‘causal power’ as ‘nearly synonymous’ (T157); but this is only a ‘casual definitional equation’ (p. 160) that can be excised. In short, Hume was a subjectivist about necessity, and an objectivist about causal power. I am not convinced. The equation of causal power and necessity is no passing aberration: ‘necessary connexion’ is just one of Hume’s many terms for causal power, and the same argument as leads him to say that necessity is ‘in the mind’ would lead just as directly to the conclusion that causal power is ‘in the mind’ too. The fundamental argument is simply that since the source of the idea is only the ‘determination of the mind’, that also must properly be its reference; and in the argument’s main occurrence (in T162-5) I find it

impossible to disentangle the topics of necessity and of causal power. Strawson's admission that Hume is a subjectivist about necessity cannot but weaken the case that he is an objectivist about causal power.

All in all, therefore, I think there remain positive reasons for attributing to Hume the view that causation consists only of regular succession in the objects, with an accompanying 'determination of the mind'. But this is not to say that there is nothing in Hume to support Strawson's interpretation. The strongest support, to my mind, comes from those places where Hume seems to think that our idea of causation falls short of the reality—which it could hardly do if causation simply consisted in regular succession. Our ideas of cause are described as 'imperfect' (E76); we have 'no adequate idea of power or efficacy in any object' (T160); the two definitions are 'drawn from circumstances foreign to the cause' (E77) and seem to be portrayed as suffering from an irremediable imperfection. The real trouble is with the single-mindedness of Strawson's interpretation. Deliberately rejecting the option of interpreting Hume as 'not completely consistent' (p. 153), Strawson undertakes to defend the view that 'Hume is entirely consistent in his expression of his belief in the existence of Causation, and ... the standard view is completely wrong in its overall view' (p. 153). 'Hume did not hold *anything like* the strong, Realist Regularity theory of causation in the *Treatise*.' (p. 169, my emphasis)

It seems to me much more likely that Hume did not have a completely settled view. (In one remarkable passage, he first denies that we can even formulate a *wish* for knowledge of causation beyond regular succession, and then immediately complains that we are 'ignorant of the ultimate principle which binds [cause and effect] together' (T266-7).) If this is right, then it is necessary not just to identify the tensions, but to place them in a pattern. Where did Hume feel his arguments were leading him? Where he had rival views, how far was he aware of the conflict? What kind of support did he think the views had? Where exactly did Hume feel he really had *something to say*? It is with these issues of balance and perspective that I find Strawson's interpretation most unsettling: it places the emphasis on what Hume may at times have presupposed but never made the topic of an enquiry in its own right. To defend that presupposition, it constructs a theory of relative ideas out of comments Hume made, in a related area, on some notions that he anyway wanted to dismiss. It down-grades Hume's theory of ideas, and

transposes into a merely epistemological key his actual affirmations of regularity views—ignoring Hume’s own dramatic estimate, that in examining the source of his idea, he had ‘examin’d one of the most sublime questions in philosophy, viz. *that concerning the power and efficacy of causes*’ (T156).

To the extent that Hume believed in the existence of causal powers outrunning regular succession, it was, I think, something he had little to say about. The foreground of his interest lay in the conclusions he could draw, via the theory of ideas, from our ignorance of any such powers. He was happy to say there were hidden powers; but it was more comfortable to leave it indeterminate whether they might be just regularity powers hidden from us. He says we are unaware of the essence of matter (Txvii, cp. T64). But he gives us no clear description of what kind of thing this ‘essence’ is: probably again he had no clear views on it. More importantly, his theory of meaning, as he applied it, was always liable to make the topic collapse into that of regularities and the associated determination of the mind. ‘*Something* outruns regular succession’ passes the test for significance set by the theory of ideas, and I am sure that Hume believed it. (Under pressure however, it might collapse into the unambitious claim ‘There exist some relations other than regular succession’.) On the other hand, ‘*causal powers in objects* outrun regular succession’, in Hume’s estimate, was always liable to be classified as a contradiction in terms. Strawson offers Hume the mechanism of relative ideas—or definite descriptions—to ease the way. But even when he does use descriptive phrases like ‘the ultimate and operating principle ... in the external object’, Hume (however unfortunately) tended to suspect that he was contradicting himself or talking without a meaning (v. T267). The threat of self-contradiction was meant quite literally: the phrase ‘power in external objects’ would have to apply to something both inside the mind and outside it. So even if Hume had considered the possibility of using some such descriptive phrase to fix the meaning of ‘causal power’, he might well have seen little promise in it. The problem lies not in a narrow modern interpretation of the theory of ideas, but in Hume’s own application of that theory. In a very ordinary sense, Hume had little to say about causal powers outrunning regular succession. But this is true in a stronger sense too: it was only by failing to put that label on them that he managed to think of them at all.

Hume never gave instructions for coping with the kind of interpretative battle his works have given rise to. But Malebranche anticipated similar problems, and did. Though he famously rejected ‘the efficacy of secondary causes’, he also at times talked, as other people do, of the powers of material objects. Was this a sign that he really never meant his denial of efficacy in material objects? Or were his views boldly inconsistent? Malebranche insists not. ‘We have only to observe when [an] author speaks according to his lights, and when he speaks according to common opinion. When a man speaks as do others, that does not always signify that he is of their opinion. But when he positively says the opposite of what is customarily said, though he might say it only once, we have reason to judge that it is his view—provided that we know that he is speaking seriously, and after having given careful thought.’³ Hume would benefit from the application of Malebranche’s principle. His affirmations of a regularity theory are certainly contrary to the common opinion; he was speaking seriously, and the arguments he had to support it make clear that he had given the matter careful thought. The passages, on the other hand, where Strawson finds Hume referring to Causation are ones where he is ‘speak[ing] as do others’. The former view is supported by a central line of argument in the *Treatise* and repeated in the *Enquiry*. The latter comments on the other hand are ambiguous: to some extent Hume would believe them literally compatible with a regularity theory; to some extent he would pass them off as loose talk to be interpreted as Malebranche decreed. There are, as I have said, residual elements that can probably only be taken as conflicting with a regularity view. To recognize these, however, is not to give them a status above that of *obiter dicta* or (perhaps valuable) aberrations; and it does nothing to undermine the view that the regularity theory is, and was meant to be, central in Hume’s philosophy of causation.

If this interpretation is right, we need an explanation of why Strawson, in company with a number of other recent interpreters, should have been attracted to a contrary view. There are three places where we might look: the character of Hume’s philosophy, with its unstable blend of reductionism and

³ Nicholas Malebranche, transl. T.M. Lennon & Paul J. Olscamp, *The Search after Truth* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1980), 15th Elucidation, pp. 672-3. (Malebranche, *Œuvres*, ed. G. Rodis-Lewis (Gallimard, 1979), I, 994-5.)

quietism; the character of the history of philosophy today, distancing itself from the old textbook readings and knockabout rebuttals; and the character of philosophy itself today, with a more widespread sympathy for non-regularity conceptions of causal power than has been found for decades. All of these factors have played a part. But the factor that has had most effect involves both philosophy and its history: the contemporary standing of Logical Positivism. It is not just a resistance to the philosophy of the Vienna Circle and its associates; there is a distrust of recent interpretations of past philosophers that claim them to be sympathetic forerunners of Positivism, and a very special outrage at the attempts made by Logical Positivists in the past to appropriate Hume as an early positivist.

There are dangers in these impulses. There are major differences between the logical positivists and Hume, and some of their attempts to claim him as an ally can only be explained by their being too impatient with earlier philosophy to read much of it. But I think there is one principle that they share with him. In terms which neither party used, the principle is this: that the theory of meaning can tell us about our basic categories, that the structure of our world (—the possessive adjective is deliberate, but signifies no separation from the world *tout court*—) can be studied in our language. The application of this principle to causation is something with which Strawson has almost no sympathy. ‘It is to turn ontology and metaphysics into a ghostly, automatic by-blow of epistemology—and human epistemology at that.’ ‘It is to limit what there can be, in the universe ... to what our concepts can contentfully “comprehend”’ (p. 118). I have the most severe doubts about these characterizations of the effects of the principle, but this is not the time for them. What is important is that Strawson is here (as he comes close to admitting, p. 277) on a collision course with Hume himself. For Hume is not averse to making inferences (under certain conditions) from the nature of our ideas to the nature of things, notably in his discussion of Space and Time (T I.ii); and he does so also in the case of power. To repeat his own assessment: in investigating the source of the *idea* of necessity, ‘I have just now examin’d one of the most sublime questions in philosophy, *viz. that concerning the power and efficacy of causes*’ (T156). Hume’s description may perhaps not square with the project as it turned out—though I am not inclined to say so. But at the very least it displays Hume’s support for an approach towards which Strawson feels definite antipathy.

The interpretation of Hume is a delicate matter, and a short discussion like this can only advertize the need for something better. But the disagreement among interpreters is not without a pattern: it is provoked by the multitude of directions in Hume's thought, and enflamed by swings of philosophical sympathy in interpreters. The real prize would be a reading of Hume which not only recognized and balanced the different strands in his thought, but recognized and balanced the equally tangled strands in competing readings of him. I suspect from the nature of the case that the prize will not show as much impatience with the regularity view as Strawson, nor as little sympathy for the principle mentioned in the last paragraph. What Strawson has given us is a most thorough testing of a range of machinery that might be used to support a belief in causation outrunning regular succession. As I have said, I am not sure how well the machinery works; more to the point, I am not sure that what it is supporting was ever meant by Hume to be a major structural item. Strawson's basic case, though others have allied themselves with it before, has never been defended so thoroughly. But what we need now is an assault on the prize, an attempt to escape the swings of sympathy. This would not be to bring an end to the interpretation of Hume. But it would be—to echo John McDowell in another context—to give it peace.⁴

⁴ For comments on an earlier paper on this topic, I would like to thank John Campbell, Quassim Cassam, David Charles, Bill Child, Nicholas Jolley, Mike Martin, Peter Millican, Ruth Millikan, Helen Steward, Galen Strawson and Tim Williamson.