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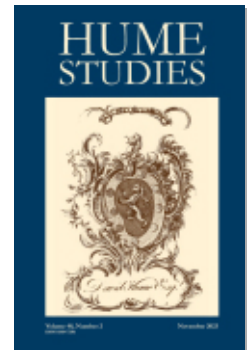
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Hume, Substance, and Causation: A Solution to a Nasty Problem

ALEXANDER P. BOZZO

Abstract: Louis Loeb has identified a “nasty problem” in connection with Hume’s theory of meaning. The problem is that Hume seemingly claims we lack ideas corresponding to key metaphysical terms, such as terms like “substance” and “necessary connection,” but he then proceeds to explain why philosophers believe in the existence of entities denoted by such terms. In short, Hume seems motivated to explain belief in the existence of certain entities, despite his claiming we have no ideas corresponding to them. In this paper, I strive to solve the problem by noting the important role of clear and distinct perception in his thought. In particular, I argue Hume only wishes to deny that we have *clear and distinct* ideas of substance and necessary connection, and not that we *altogether* lack any idea of substance and necessary connection, traditionally conceived.

1. Introduction

In the next section, I introduce a nasty problem originally articulated by Louis Loeb in connection with Hume’s discussion of substance. The problem is Hume seemingly claims we lack an idea of substance, as traditionally conceived, but then seeks to provide an explanation as to why philosophers falsely believe in its existence. But how can Hume coherently explain belief in something of which, he admits, we lack any idea?

In section 3, I attempt a solution to this problem by turning to the role of clear and distinct perception in his thought. I argue that Hume's copy principle is his chief means of rendering our ideas clear and distinct, accomplished through his tracing our ideas back to their source in impressions. Indeed, I present textual evidence to the effect that Hume conceives of his philosophical project as partly one of clearing up the obscurity and confusion within our thought. Consequently, Hume does not wish to deny we have any idea of substance (as traditionally conceived). Instead, he merely wishes to claim we lack a *clear and distinct* idea of it.

But this raises a question: How does Hume understand the nature of obscurity given his uncompromising theory of ideas? What exactly is it for someone to have an obscure idea, given that all ideas come from vivid and distinct impressions? I contend that Hume's comments on necessary connection are most helpful here. Thus, in section 4, I turn to his discussion of causation in connection with the nasty problem. Specifically, I argue Hume understands our idea of necessary connection to be obscure insofar as we pay undue attention to the words we employ. In addition, I argue he takes our idea of necessary connection to be confused insofar as it involves an incoherent projection of the felt determination of the mind onto natural objects. In this way, I hope to have solved the nasty problem, and thereby to have made better sense of Hume's empiricist project.

2. Substance

Simply stated, Hume holds the meaning of a term is its associated idea.¹ In other words, for any term "T," he claims that

1. "T" is meaningful \equiv "T" has an associated idea.

Accordingly, if a word lacks an associated idea, then that word is meaningless.

In addition, Hume asserts—via his "copy principle"—that simple ideas are copies of simple impressions (T 1.1.1.7).² Thus:

2. "T" has an associated idea only if "T"'s associated idea is copied from some impression (or the associated idea's constituent simple ideas are each copied from some impression).

The reason for the parenthetical in (2) is that, strictly speaking, the copy principle extends only to *simple* ideas. Hume admits that some complex ideas may not be directly copied from some complex impression (such as his idea of the "New Jerusalem"), and that some ideas do not perfectly resemble the complex impressions which originally produced them (such as his idea of Paris) (T 1.1.1.4). As such, it follows from (1) and (2) that

3. “T” is meaningful only if “T”’s associated idea is copied from some impression (or the associated idea’s constituent simple ideas are each copied from some impression).

Consequently, a word is meaningful for Hume only if it has an associated impression (or impressions).³ This is Hume’s “meaning-empiricism.”

Such considerations lead Hume to endorse the following well-known test for meaning: “When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?*” (EHU 2.9).⁴ In other words, if we suspect that some term is employed without any meaning, Hume calls us to consider whether or not it has an associated impression.

As an illustration of this procedure at work, consider Hume’s discussion of the word “substance.” Traditionally understood, a substance is that in which a thing’s properties inhere. Locke, for instance, conveys the notion as follows:

When we talk or think of any particular sort of corporeal Substances, as *Horse*, *Stone*, etc. though the *Idea*, we have of either of them, be but the Complication, or Collection of those several simple *Ideas* of sensible Qualities, which we use to find united in the thing called *Horse* or *Stone*, yet because we cannot conceive, how they should subsist alone, nor one in another, we suppose them existing in, and supported by some common subject; *which Support we denote by the name Substance.* (*Essay*, 2.23.4)⁵

Thus, an apple is a substance just in case it is a “common subject” or “support” with various qualities—such as its color, taste, and smell—inhering or subsisting in it. It is this “support,” properly speaking, which constitutes the apple’s substance. In contrast, Hume applies his test for meaning to the notion of substance and finds it wanting. He writes:

I would fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident . . . whether the idea of *substance* be derived from the impressions of sensation or reflection? If it be conveyed to us by our senses, I ask, which of them, and after what manner? If it be perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or sound, or a taste. (T 1.1.6.1)

Furthermore, Hume claims our idea of substance is not derived from any impression of reflection: “The idea of substance must, therefore, be derived from an impression of reflection, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflection resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possibly represent a substance”

(T 1.1.6.1). Given his copy principle, then, he concludes that we have “no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it” (T 1.1.6.1).

For ease of exposition, let us call this bundle conception of substance “substance_b,” and the traditional conception of substance “substance_t.” In the above passage, Hume seemingly claims we lack an idea of substance_t, and claims instead that all that we can mean by the term is “substance_b.” Accordingly, the standard reading of Hume is he departs from Locke in that he denies our having any idea of substance_t at all. According to this reading, Hume’s account of substance is deflationary: to assert that an apple is a substance, for example, is merely to associate a bundle of various qualities—such as its color, taste, and smell—and to designate it by a certain name (such as “apple”).⁶ Hence, the idea of a “support” in which such qualities are said to inhere is not really any idea at all. Consequently, Hume would regard the word “substance_t” as meaningless.

Georges Dicker provides a nice articulation of this reading of Hume. He writes that:

When Hume’s test for meaning is applied to the notion of material substance, it yields the result that the notion is meaningless and that a thing can be only a bundle of properties. Likewise, when the test is applied to the notion of mental substance, it yields the result that this notion is meaningless and that a mind can be only a bundle of conscious states. Meaning-empiricism leaves no room at all for the notion of substance as distinct from its properties, whether it be a material substance or mind.⁷

Alexander Rosenberg also endorses this reading of Hume. He writes:

According to Hume’s theory, since a term names an idea, the meaning of a term is ultimately given by a set of impressions that cause the idea that it names, and terms without such a pedigree are meaningless noises. In effect this theory of meaning constitutes a criterion of cognitive significance indistinguishable from one of the positivists’ earliest attempts to frame a principle of verifiability.⁸

But there is a problem with this interpretation. The problem is that Hume provides an *explanation* as to why philosophers believe in the existence of substance_t. But explaining why philosophers believe in the existence of substance_t seems to presuppose that we have some idea of substance_t. For instance, Hume claims that we commonly regard our complex idea of substance_b “as one thing, and as continuing the same under very considerable alterations” (T 1.4.3.2). In Hume’s terminology, we attribute a “simplicity” and “identity” to our ideas of bodies, despite the fact that they are actually composed of several distinct ideas. For instance, he explains our attribution of simplicity to this bundle of perceptions as follows.⁹

First, he claims that the act of the imagination when considering a simple and indivisible object—that is, the act of the imagination when considering a simple impression or idea—feels similar to the act of the imagination when considering a complex object “whose *co-existent* parts are connected together by a strong relation” (T 1.4.3.5). Since each of these distinct acts of the mind feel similar, we mistake a complex object for a simple one: “Hence the colour, taste, figure, solidity, and other qualities, combin’d in a peach or melon, are conceiv’d to form *one thing*; and that on account of their close relation, which makes them affect the thought in the same manner, as if perfectly uncompounded” (T 1.4.3.5). Thus, Hume claims that the mind’s attribution of simplicity to a complex object is explained in part by similar acts of the imagination.

Nonetheless, the mind is not totally misled. For when the mind “views the object in another light” (T 1.4.3.5), it recognizes that each of the object’s qualities are separable: that is, the mind realizes that the idea is a complex idea, and not a simple thing. This realization “obliges the imagination to feign an unknown something, or *original* substance or matter, as a principle of union or cohesion among these qualities, and as what may give the compound object a title to be call’d one thing, notwithstanding its diversity and composition” (T 1.4.3.5). Thus Hume’s explanation of how we come to have an idea of substance_c involves the following: (i) similar acts of the imagination lead the mind to attribute a simplicity to a complex object, (ii) the mind is uneasy about this attribution, and so (iii) the mind “feigns” an unknown something or support of these qualities.¹⁰ The problem, then, is that Hume claims we have no idea of substance_c—at most, we have an idea of substance_b—and yet he provides an explanation as to why philosophers believe in the existence of substance_c.

Such concessions, in the words of Louis Loeb, create a “nasty problem” for Hume:

Hume declares “*substratum*” meaningless. [But he then] sets out to *explain* why the ancient philosophers *believe* in the existence of material *substrata*. These sections work at cross purposes. How can Hume consistently set out to explain the psychological causes of a belief that is without meaning or content in the first place?¹¹

Similarly, Robert Fogelin echoes Loeb’s concern, asking: “What is the content of the false philosopher’s belief in substance? Hume’s answer seems to be that it is contentless, but then what does the belief amount to?”¹² The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Hume acts in precisely the same way with respect to a host of other traditional metaphysical terms—such as religious belief in invisible intelligent power, the self, external bodies, the existence of a vacuum, the idea of changeless time, and, what is particularly relevant for our purposes below, the idea of necessary connection. In light of this fact, Loeb identifies the following variant of the main problem:

All contentless concepts are the same, just as there is one null set. Yet Hume provides different psychological explanations of the beliefs in the existence of material substrata, souls, external existence and necessary connection. The different explanations could be appropriate only if the beliefs somehow differ in content, but they do not differ in content if the key concepts are meaningless.¹³

Hence Hume is saddled with a contradiction. On the one hand, he makes clear claims of meaninglessness, claims about key metaphysical concepts, such as substance, self, and necessary connection. On the other hand, he describes and explains the origin of belief in the existence of entities denoted by such concepts. In short, Hume seems motivated to explain belief in entities denoted by these traditional metaphysical concepts, despite his claiming we have no ideas of them. But, as Loeb notes, these aims work at cross purposes. Moreover, the problem is a serious one, as it is engendered by aspects fundamental to Hume's entire project.

In the next section, I try to resolve the problem by noting the important role of clear and distinct perception in Hume's thought. In particular, I argue that Hume takes impressions to be clear and distinct perceptions, whereas ideas tend to be obscure and confused. As such, Hume's copy principle—his “microscope” of the moral sciences—is his chief tool for rendering our ideas clear and distinct. Once this is established, it will become evident that Hume does not wish to deny we lack an idea of substance, *tout court*, only that we lack a clear and distinct idea of it.

3. The Copy Principle

Hume opens the Introduction to the *Treatise* lamenting “the present imperfect condition of the sciences” (T Intro. 1). “’Tis easy for one of judgment and learning,” he writes, “to perceive the weak foundation even of those systems, which have obtain’d the greatest credit, and have carry’d their pretensions highest to accurate and profound reasoning.” He continues: “Principles taken upon trust, consequences lamely deduc’d from them, want of coherence in the parts, and of evidence in the whole, these are every where to be met with in the systems of the most eminent philosophers, and seem to have drawn disgrace upon philosophy itself” (T Intro. 1). Indeed, he writes that

even the rabble without doors may judge from the noise and clamour, which they hear, that all goes not well within. There is nothing which is not the subject of debate, and in which men of learning are not of contrary opinions. The most trivial question escapes not our controversy, and in the most momentous we are not able to give any certain decision. Disputes are multiply’d, as if every thing was uncertain; and these disputes are manag’d with the greatest warmth, as if every thing was certain. (T Intro. 2)

Thus, Hume opens the *Treatise* by painting a dark picture of the state of scientific theorizing of his day. More specifically, he characterizes it as a state of widespread uncertainty and confusion. Moreover, says Hume, this depressing state of affairs has led to a common prejudice against metaphysics in particular:

From hence in my opinion arises the common prejudice against metaphysical reasonings of all kinds. . . . By metaphysical reasonings [such individuals] do not understand those on any particular branch of science, but every kind of argument, which is in any way abstruse, and requires some attention to be comprehended. . . . [N]othing but the most determin'd scepticism, along with a great degree of indolence, can justify this aversion to metaphysics. For if truth be at all within the reach of human capacity, 'tis certain it must lie very deep and abstruse, and to hope we shall arrive at it without pains, while the greatest geniuses have fail'd with the utmost pains, must certainly be esteem'd sufficiently vain and presumptuous. (T Intro. 3; cf. EHU 1.7)

Interestingly, we find this characterization of metaphysics—as both abstruse and difficult—mirrored in the first *Enquiry*. In its first section, for instance, Hume contrasts an abstruse and speculative kind of philosophy with a more shallow and down-to-earth variety. He characterizes the more abstruse kind as resting on a “turn of mind” which takes the principles of human nature as its subject matter (EHU 1.2–3). This generates a problem, however, for such inward reflection inevitably engenders obscurity:

It is remarkable concerning the operations of the mind, that, though most intimately present to us, yet, whenever they become the object of reflection, they seem involved in obscurity; nor can the eye readily find those lines and boundaries, which discriminate and distinguish them. The objects are too fine to remain long in the same aspect or situation; and must be apprehended in an instant, by a superior penetration, derived from nature, and improved by habit and reflection. It becomes, therefore, no inconsiderable part of science barely to know the different operations of the mind, to separate them from each other, to class them under their proper heads, and to correct all that seeming disorder, in which they lie involved, when made the object of reflection and enquiry. (EHU 1.13)¹⁴

Indeed, elsewhere in the *Enquiry*, Hume writes that “moral ideas are apt, without extreme care, to fall into obscurity and confusion” (EHU 7.2) and that few people “can think long without running into a confusion of ideas, and mistaking one for another” (EHU 9.5n20). Consequently, “the chief obstacle . . . to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and the ambiguity of the terms” (EHU 7.2).

Thus, Hume regards metaphysics in particular as immersed in obscurity and ambiguity. For this reason, it is “burdensome and laborious” and “painful and fatiguing” (EHU 1.10). In addition, such obscurity is “the inevitable source of uncertainty and error” (EHU 1.11), enabling superstition to take hold and overwhelm “every unguarded avenue of the mind” with “religious fears and prejudices” (EHU 1.11). Nonetheless, Hume thinks we must soldier on:

The only method of freeing learning, at once, from these abstruse questions, is to enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show, from an exact analysis of its power and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects. We must submit to this fatigue, in order to live at ease ever after: And must cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate. . . . Accurate and just reasoning is the only catholic remedy, fitted for all persons and all dispositions; and is alone able to subvert that abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom. (EHU 1.12)

Accordingly, Hume conceives of his philosophical project as an attempt to shed light on such abstruse topics (cf. EHU 1.10). He thinks it a travesty that metaphysics should be clouded in such obscurity and uncertainty, for the straightforward reason that it lends credence to popular superstitions and flames religious fears. Thus, Hume aims to remove the obscurity and uncertainty of traditional metaphysics and cultivate a “true metaphysics.”

As one might expect, Hume’s copy principle and associated test for meaning take center-stage in this project:

Here, therefore, is a proposition [the copy principle], which not only seems, in itself, simple and intelligible; but, if a proper use were made of it, might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace upon them. All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure: The mind has but a slender hold of them: They are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas; and when we have often employed any term, though without a distinct meaning, we are apt to imagine it has a determinate idea, annexed to it. (EHU 2.9)

In this passage, Hume claims our ideas—especially abstract ones—tend to be “faint and obscure.”¹⁵ The mind has a slender hold on them as they are easily “confounded” with other resembling ideas. Indeed, we often employ terms without any “distinct” meaning, says Hume, to the extent we mistakenly think there is some “determinate” idea annexed to them.

In contrast, Hume regards our impressions as strong and distinct:

On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: The limits between them are more exactly determined: Nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them. When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light, we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality. (EHU 2.9)

Accordingly, Hume takes our impressions to be clear and distinct, whereas our ideas tend to be obscure and confused.¹⁶

But of course—consistent with Hume’s copy principle—all simple ideas are copies of simple impressions. And thus, as a means of eliminating the obscurity in our ideas, Hume calls us to retrace our ideas to their origin in experience:

When we have pushed up definitions to the most simple ideas, and find still some ambiguity and obscurity; what resource are we then possessed of? By what invention can we throw light upon these ideas, and render them altogether precise and determinate to our intellectual view? Produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied. These impressions are all strong and sensible. They admit not of ambiguity. They are not only placed in a full light themselves, but may throw light on their correspondent ideas, which lie in obscurity. And by this means, we may, perhaps, attain a new microscope or species of optics, by which, in the moral sciences, the most minute, and most simple ideas may be so enlarged as to fall readily under our apprehension, and be equally known with the grossest and most sensible ideas, that can be the object of our enquiry. (EHU 7.4)

Indeed, “since all impressions are clear and precise, the ideas, which are copy’d from them, must be of the same nature, and can never but from our fault, contain any thing so dark and intricate” (T 1.3.1.7).¹⁷ Hence Hume’s copy principle—his “microscope” of the moral sciences—is his chief tool for rendering our ideas clear and distinct.

Importantly, this understanding of Hume’s project helps us discern how he avoids the nasty problem. Hume does not wish to claim that we lack—*tout court*—an idea of substance_c. He grants we can have some idea of this “unknown something” or “*original substance or matter*” (T 1.4.3.5). On the contrary, he only wishes to deny we can have a *clear and distinct* idea of substance_c. The only clear and distinct idea we can have of substance is substance_p. As such, there is no inconsistency in Hume.

But this raises a question: What exactly is it for someone to have an obscure idea (such as of substance_c), given that all ideas come from vivid and distinct impressions?

How does Hume understand the nature of obscurity given his uncompromising theory of ideas? Here Hume's comments on our idea of necessary connection are particularly helpful, for Hume claims there "are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of *power, force, energy, or necessary connection*" (EHU 7.3). Accordingly, in the next section, I turn to the nasty problem in connection with Hume's discussion of necessary connection.

4. Causation

As hinted at above, the nasty problem also emerges in connection with Hume's discussion of causation. For instance, in Book 2 of the *Treatise*, Hume writes that "It has been observ'd already, that in no single instance the ultimate connexion of any objects is discoverable, either by our senses or reason, and that we can never penetrate so far into the essence and construction of bodies, as to perceive the principle, on which their mutual dependence depends" (T 2.3.1.4). What does Hume mean by "ultimate connexion" in this passage? His description of it as a penetration into the "essence" of bodies is most plausibly understood as a gesture toward the traditional idea of power or necessary connection.¹⁸ On this understanding, a necessary connection between cause and effect is one which sanctions an *a priori* inference from cause to effect, and vice versa. Following Simon Blackburn, let us call this traditional conception of causation "thick causation," or "causation_k" for short.¹⁹ Thus, in this passage, Hume seems to attribute to philosophers the belief—via his rejection of the view—that thick causation exists.

The problem—yet again—is that Hume seems to deny we have any idea of causation_k:

The several instances of resembling conjunctions lead us into the notion of power and necessity. These instances are in themselves totally distinct from each other, and have no union but in the mind, which observes them, and collects their ideas. Necessity, then, is the effect of this observation, and is nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another. Without considering it in this view, we can never arrive at the most distant notion of it. (T 1.3.14.20)

Here Hume claims we have no idea of necessary connection beyond the idea of a felt determination of the mind. On this view, our idea of causation involves nothing more than the constant conjunction of cause and effect and a felt determination of the mind (T 1.3.14.35). Let us refer to this conception as "thin causation," or "causation_n" for short.

Consequently, the nasty problem reemerges in connection with Hume's discussion of causation insofar as his repeated denials seem to presuppose that we have

some idea of causation_k. But, as we have just seen, Hume denies we can have an idea of causation_k. Asher Jiang nicely summarizes the problem as follows:

Hume frequently states that we are ignorant of genuine power. There is a well-known internal difficulty concerning this claim concerning ignorance. According to Hume, we do not have an impression-based idea of genuine power; on the other hand, every noun needs a corresponding idea to be meaningful. Is his claim concerning ignorance, which makes use of the noun “power,” meaningless in light of *his own* criterion of meaningfulness?²⁰

And, as stated by P. J. E. Kail, the problem is this:

[I]t appears Hume’s account of the derivation of the idea of necessity implies that no thought at all can be formed concerning genuine necessity and that the “true meaning” of necessity is merely that it is a feature of our psychology. Either way, the very possibility of the barest thought concerning genuine necessity is undercut, and with that any possibility of realism. No content can be given to putative thoughts with respect to objective causal necessity and hence no question concerning its existence can be intelligibly raised. For even to raise the question of whether there is genuine causal power requires content for such thoughts. The only thought we can form with regard to the objective component to causal relations is, roughly, that they fall under a pattern of regular succession, and that, therefore, is in what causation consists.²¹

However, the conclusions of the preceding section should make it clear on how to respond. Hume does not wish to deny that we have an idea of causation_k. On the contrary, he concedes we have an obscure and confused idea of causation_k. He only wishes to deny that we have a clear and distinct idea of causation_k. The question for our purposes, however, is how he understands the nature of this obscure and confused perception. In the next subsection, I argue that Hume understands the obscurity of our ideas largely as a product of the ambiguity of the terms. In short, we use words without employing any attendant ideas (that is, the only relevant idea we have is of the word itself). Then, in the next subsection, I argue Hume understands our confused idea of causation_k in terms of an incoherent projection.

4.1 Meaningless Terms

To see this, it is helpful to begin with Descartes’s discussion of obscure and confused perception. In the Second Meditation, for instance, Descartes has us consider what the first-person pronoun “I” means. His initial response is that “I” denotes a man, but he soon claims this answer is too obscure (CSM II 17; AT VII 25–26).²² Similarly,

he explores the same question in *The Search for Truth*, having Eudoxus ask Polyander what he is, with Polyander replying that he is a man. In response, Eudoxus claims:

You are not paying attention to my question, and the reply you give me, however simple it may seem to you, would plunge you into very difficult and complicated problems, were I to press you even a little. If, for example, I were to ask even Epistemon himself what a man is, and he gave the stock reply of the scholastics, that a man is a “rational animal,” and if, in order to explain these two terms (which are just as obscure as the former), he were to take us further, through all the levels which are called “metaphysical,” we should be dragged into a maze from which it would be impossible to escape. (CSM II 410; AT X 515–16, emphasis mine)

Thus, to say that “I” denotes a man, or to provide the answer of “rational animal,” is to give the “stock reply of the scholastics.” Moreover, here we have an example of that pejorative sense of “metaphysical” which Hume had lamented above. Such replies plunge us into “very difficult and complicated problems,” “a maze from which it would be impossible to escape.” The italicized portion of the quotation—in addition to Eudoxus’s contention that the answer of “rational animal” is “as obscure as the former”—signals that Descartes regards such responses as garnering obscurity and confusion. This is evident when one takes his official definition of clarity and distinctness into account:

A clear perception I call that which is present and open *to the attending mind*; just as we say that those things are clearly seen by us which, being present to the regarding eye, move it sufficiently strongly and openly. But that perception is distinct which is not only clear but is so precise and separated from all others that it plainly contains in itself nothing other than what is clear. (CSM I 207; AT VIIIA 21, emphasis mine)

As this makes clear, an attentive mind is one which fails to give the conditioned response, and instead considers and attends to the content of one’s ideas. As James Humber notes, Polyander is inattentive because he is attending solely to the *words or terms* employed, and not the meanings or ideas associated with them. His response is thus superficial, for “when Polyander says that he is a man he is not thinking about what he is saying, i.e., he is not paying attention to content. Rather, he is merely hearing words and responding as he had been trained from youth to reply.”²³ As Descartes puts it,

Because of the use of language, we tie all our concepts to the words used to express them; and when we store the concepts in our memory we always simultaneously store the corresponding words. Later on we find the words easier to recall than the things; and because of this it is very seldom that our concept of a thing is so distinct

that we can separate it totally from our concept of the words involved. The thoughts of almost all people are more concerned with words than with things; and as a result people very often give their assent to words they do not understand, thinking they once understood them, or that they got them from others who did understand them correctly. . . . What has been said appears to be sufficiently intelligible to help us distinguish those of our concepts which are clear and distinct from those which are obscure and confused. (CSM I 221; AT VIIIA 38)

For Descartes, then, an attentive mind is one which attends to its ideas and not merely the words it employs.²⁴

In the same way, Hume contends our idea of causal power is obscure insofar as it frequently involves the employment of meaningless or insignificant terms. He writes:

Thus upon the whole we may infer, that when we talk of any being, whether of a superior or inferior nature, as endow'd with a power or force, proportion'd to any effect; when we speak of a necessary connexion betwixt objects, and suppose, that this connexion depends upon an efficacy or energy, with which any of these objects are endow'd; in all these expressions, *so apply'd*, we have really no *distinct* meaning [emphasis mine], and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. (T 1.3.14.14)

In this much-discussed passage, Hume claims when we talk about an object as endowed with a power or force we (i) really have “no distinct meaning,” (ii) “make use only of common words,” and (iii) do so without “any clear and determinate ideas.” We saw above how Descartes characterized a clear and distinct perception as one which is perceived by the attentive mind, and that an attentive mind is one which attends to its ideas rather than to the words it employs. Hume is making a similar claim in this passage. He is claiming when people attribute some power to an object, they often are merely making use of “common words”—that is, words without any associated ideas.

In fact, Hume provides several examples in which we think an idea is associated with a word, but in which we are merely substituting synonymous terms:

I begin with observing that the terms *efficacy*, *agency*, *power*, *force*, *energy*, *necessity*, *connexion*, and *productive quality*, are all nearly synonymous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest. By this observation we reject at once all the vulgar definitions, which philosophers have given of power and efficacy; and instead of searching for an idea in these definitions, must look for it in impressions, from which it is originally deriv'd. (T 1.3.14.4)²⁵

And consider his remarks that “if a cause be defined, *that which produces any thing*; it is easy to observe, that *producing* is synonymous to *causing*. In like manner, if a cause be defined, *that by which any thing exists*; this is liable to the same objection. For what is meant by these words, *by which*?” (EHU 8.25n19). And also,

Should any one . . . pretend to define a cause, by saying it is something productive of another, 'tis evident he wou'd say nothing. For what does he mean by *production*? Can he give any definition of it, that will not be the same with that of causation? If he can; I desire it may be produc'd. If he cannot; he here runs in a circle, and gives a synonymous term instead of a definition. (T 1.3.2.10)

Thus, Hume claims that when philosophers speak of a cause endowed with a “thick” causal power, they are really saying something without any content. That is, they are merely repeating words without knowing they lack associated ideas.²⁶ In Descartes's terms, they are speaking inattentively.²⁷

4.2 Incoherent Projections

Having noted this, however, Hume quickly moves on to what he thinks is the more common problem: “But as 'tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong apply'd*, than that they never have any meaning; 'twill be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject, to see if possibly we can discover the nature and origin of those ideas, we annex to them” (T 1.3.14.14). Here Hume admits we do sometimes mean something by “causation_k” other than the word itself, but this meaning is “wrongly applied.” And, here again there is a parallel with Descartes. When providing an example of a clear but confused idea, for example, Descartes notes that:

When someone feels an intense pain, the perception he has of it is indeed very clear, but is not always distinct. For people commonly confuse this perception with an obscure judgment they make concerning the nature of something which they think exists in the painful spot and which they suppose to resemble the sensation of pain; but in fact it is the sensation alone which they perceive clearly. Hence a perception can be clear without being distinct, but not distinct without being clear. (CSM I 208; AT VIIIA 22)

In this case the mind's perception of pain is clear, but the judgment—namely, that the pain exists somewhere in the body—is confused. The reason of course is that pain, a pure mental state for Descartes, does not reside in the body.

Similarly, Hume's projective account of causation—in which we “gild and stain” natural objects with “the colours borrowed from internal sentiment”

(EPM App. 1.19)²⁸—is very similar to the kind of account Descartes offers in this passage. Descartes claims we clearly perceive the nature of pain, but perceive it in a confused way when we apply or attribute it to body. Similarly, Hume claims we clearly perceive the nature of power—as the internal impression or determination of the mind—but perceive it in a confused way when we apply it to objects. This, says Hume, is a confused idea of thick causal power. Indeed, the extent of the error is brought out forcefully in the following passage:

The case is here much the same, as if a blind man shou'd pretend to find a great many absurdities in the supposition, that the colour of scarlet is not the same with the sound of a trumpet, nor light the same with solidity. If we have really no idea of power or efficacy in any object, or of any real connexions betwixt causes and effects, 'twill be to little purpose to prove, that an efficacy is necessary in all operations. We do not understand our meaning in talking so, but ignorantly confound ideas, which are entirely distinct from each other. . . . When, instead of meaning these unknown qualities, we make the terms power and efficacy signify something, of which we have a clear idea, and which is incompatible with those objects, to which we apply it, obscurity and error begin then to take place, and we are led astray by a false philosophy. This is the case, when we transfer the determination of the thought to external objects, and suppose a real intelligible connexion betwixt them; that being a quality, which can only belong to the mind that considers them. (T 1.3.14.27)

Thus, Hume claims the idea we associate with thick causation is a confused perception: it is a clear idea of an internal impression wrongly applied to objects. Hume applies his microscope to this confused idea—which enlarges the simple ideas—and discovers that our clear and distinct idea of necessity exists only in the mind.

Accordingly, Hume claims our idea of causation_k is unintelligible insofar as it is either meaningless or incoherent.²⁹ Indeed, in this connection, consider this passage from Hobbes:

All other Names, are but insignificant sounds; and those of two sorts. One, when they are new, and yet their meaning not explained by Definition; whereof there have been abundance coyned by Schoolemen, and pusled Philosophers. . . . Another, when men make a name of two Names, whose significations are contradictory and inconsistent; as this name, an *incorporeall body*, or (which is all one) an *incorporeall substance*, and a great number more. From whensoever any affirmation is false, the two names of which it is composed, put together and made one, signifie nothing at all. For example, if it be a false affirmation to say a *quadrangle is round*, the word *round quadrangle* signifies nothing; but is a meere sound. (*Leviathan*, 1.4.20)

Here we have precisely the two sorts of unintelligibility I have been at pains to highlight in Hume. On the one hand, “causation_k” is meaningless because it is empty. On the other hand, it is incoherent because it is confused. The felt determination of the mind can no more be predicated of objects than roundness can be predicated of a quadrangle.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, then, Hume does not wish to claim that key metaphysical terms like “substance_t” and “causation_k” are strictly meaningless. Rather, he merely wishes to claim they are not *distinctly* meaningful. As such, Hume’s proposed explanations are attempts at *clarifying* the nature of our ideas: the only clear and distinct idea of substance and causation we can have is of substance_b and causation_n, respectively.

Once more, this makes a good deal of sense once we reflect on the nature of philosophical practice. A good portion of what philosophers do is conceptual analysis. Suppose, for instance, we are interested in the nature of “civil disobedience.” An assumption of the philosopher’s approach is that we have some implicit and rudimentary sense of the meaning of the term. We can pick out numerous paradigmatic cases of civil disobedience and numerous paradigmatic cases of the absence of civil disobedience. The aim is to clarify the concept by rendering it more precise. We put forward various conditions—the violation of a law, a publicly communicable act, and so forth—which must be satisfied for a given case to be a case of civil disobedience. In this way we come to more clearly and distinctly ascertain the nature of the relevant idea. Similarly, Hume contends we have a rudimentary sense of “substance_t” and “causation_k.” His aim is to render these ideas more precise.

Given the foregoing, then, we can see Hume has an important place for clear and distinct perception in his philosophy. His “microscope of the moral sciences” is his attempt to render our ideas clear and distinct by tracing them back to their source in impressions. In this way, we can solve Loeb’s nasty problem, and make better sense of Hume’s project.

NOTES

1 Given his account of general terms, this is a simplification. With general terms, Hume holds that an associated *custom*, as well as a determinate idea, constitutes the meaning of a term. This much may be assumed in what follows.

2 References to the *Treatise* (abbreviated “T”) are to Book, part, section, and paragraph, and are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). References to the Introduction to the *Treatise* (abbreviated “T Intro.”) are to the paragraph.

3 Hume does not use the expression “associated impression.” I merely intend that impression which—given its connection to a corresponding idea—is associated with the meaning of a term.

4 References are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), followed by section and paragraph (abbreviated “EHU”).

5 This passage considers material substance. Locke provides the same analysis for mental substance (*Essay*, 2.23.5). References are to John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), followed by Book, chapter, and section number.

6 A collection of qualities constitutes a “bundle” for Hume just in case these qualities are frequently found together and are taken to be linked by a causal relation (T 1.1.6.1).

7 Georges Dicker, *Hume’s Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 21. Dicker also writes that “Hume is famous . . . for arguing that meaningful words must have an empirical reference, so that ‘substance underlying all of a thing’s perceivable qualities’ and ‘immaterial soul’ lack meaning.” Dicker, *Hume’s Epistemology and Metaphysics*, ix.

8 Alexander Rosenberg, “Hume and the Philosophy of Science,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 1st edition, ed. David Fate Norton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 66.

9 Since Hume’s explanation of the attribution of identity mirrors his account of simplicity, I will simply focus on the latter.

10 A “fiction” for Hume is a complex idea that is arranged by the imagination and such that it was never copied from any complex impression. For instance, Hume would count his idea of the New Jerusalem as a fiction (T 1.1.1.4). In addition, a “fiction” can also denote a simple idea which lacks a corresponding impression, and so is a product of the imagination, such as with Hume’s missing shade of blue (T 1.1.1.10). This is not to suggest that all fictions are somehow illicit on Hume’s view.

11 Louis Loeb, “Hume’s Explanations of Meaningless Beliefs,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 51, no. 203 (2001): 145–64, 147.

12 Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism in the “Treatise of Human Nature”* (New York: Routledge, 1985), 11–12.

13 Loeb, “Hume’s Explanations of Meaningless Beliefs,” 148.

14 Donald Ainslie has done important work in elucidating the significance of this “reflective interference” for Hume. See Donald Ainslie, *Hume’s True Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

15 Locke had suggested something similar regarding the obscurity and confusion of abstract ideas (*Essay*, 2.9.6). Don Garrett has a plausible account of why Hume might regard abstract ideas as liable to confusion. See Don Garrett, *Hume* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 55.

16 For reasons of space, I cannot provide a full defense of the claim that Hume regards impressions as clear and distinct, and ideas as obscure and confused. But see my “Clear and Distinct Perception in Hume,” in preparation. I should note as well I often characterize this position as “impressions are clear and distinct, whereas our ideas *tend to be* obscure and confused.” This is deliberate, as it makes little sense for Hume to think that ideas *cannot* be clear and distinct, since I understand his project as attempting to *render* them clear and distinct.

17 Garrett echoes this in characterizing the copy principle as *clarificatory* as well as *confirmatory* (Garrett, *Hume*, 44–45).

18 P. J. E. Kail explicitly connects the traditional idea of necessary connection to essences in *Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 90–92. Hume frequently refers to “secret powers” and “hidden connexions” in this way (EHU 5.2.22, 4.1.12, 7.1.25, and T 2.3.1.4, among others).

19 Simon Blackburn, “Hume and Thick Connexions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, supplement (1990): 237–50, 237. Blackburn does not explicitly mention *a priori* inference in his characterization. However, he likely intends as much; and, in any case, it is frequently explicit in the writings of others. For example, Galen Strawson characterizes causal realism in terms of the “AP property” in *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2014), 109. And Kail describes the “Bare Thought” of causal realism as that feature which, “were we acquainted with it, would yield *a priori* inference and render it inconceivable that the cause not be followed by its effect.” Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy*, 84.

20 Asher Jiang, “Hume on the Meaning of ‘Power,’” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (2015): 229–48, 229.

21 Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy*, 81. See also Galen Strawson, “David Hume: Objects and Power,” in *The New Hume Debate*, revised edition, ed. Rupert Read and Kenneth Richman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 33–34.

22 References are to René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and are to volume and page number (abbreviated “CSM”), as well as to René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris: Vrin, 1996), by volume and page number (abbreviated “AT”).

23 James Humber, “Recognizing Clear and Distinct Perceptions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 41, no. 4 (1981): 487–507, 488.

24 Similarly, Hobbes is frequently preoccupied with the abuse of words (*Leviathan*, 1.4, 1.5.5–20, 1.8.26) and connects the obscurity of our ideas to “decaying sense” (*Leviathan*, 1.2.5.). References are to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and are to book, chapter, and paragraph. See also George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), Intro. 25, for a caution about the snare of words.

25 Hume charges Locke with this mistake at T 1.3.14.5.

26 The analysis in this subsection spells trouble for several prominent causal realist accounts. For example, Strawson characterizes our idea of thick causation in terms of the relative idea, “that in reality in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is.” Strawson, “David Hume: Objects and Power,” 37. The problem is that Hume would very likely regard the “in virtue of” relation as meaningless and empty. Kenneth P. Winkler makes this criticism of Strawson in “The New Hume,” *The New Hume Debate*, revised edition, ed. Rupert Read and Kenneth Richman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 62–64. Similar concerns face Kail’s Bare Thought, which he describes as the thought—as opposed to a positive or relative idea—of “that feature that, were we acquainted with it, would yield *a priori* inference and render it inconceivable that the cause not be followed by its effect.” Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy*, 84. The problem, again, is that Hume would very likely regard the expression “yield” in this formulation as empty and meaningless—what idea (or thought) do we have of such features *yielding* *a priori* inferences, for instance? It seems most likely that Hume would take this as either empty, or an incoherent projection of the felt determination of the mind on such features. However, I do not have the space to consider causal realism further.

27 This discussion also helps to see why Hume considers the debate over liberty and necessity to be “merely verbal.” Hume’s point is that proponents of necessity and proponents of liberty employ the very same ideas relative to their respective terms. In short, the only idea of necessity and liberty that both camps can *clearly and distinctly* conceive—and which both camps recognize in their “practice and reasoning” (EHU 8.21)—is one which resolves the dispute between those who affirm and those who deny freedom. Thus, they “dissent to [this] in words only, not in their real sentiment,” and consequently merely show “a reluctance to acknowledge it in words” (EHU 8.21). Cf. Peter Millican, “Against the ‘New Hume,’” in *The Hume Debate*, revised edition, ed. Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman (New York: Routledge, 2007), 211–52, and Peter Millican, “Hume, Causal Realism, and Causal Science,” *Mind* 118, no. 471 (2009): 647–712.

28 References are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), and are to appendix and paragraph (abbreviated “EPM App”).

29 P. Kyle Stanford highlights this fork in Hume and labels it “The Choice.” See P. Kyle Stanford, “The Manifest Connection: Causation, Meaning, and David Hume,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40, no. 3 (2002): 339–60, 343–44.

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