

What Hume Didn't Notice about Divine Causation

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1. Introduction

According to Nicholas Malebranche, causal connections are necessary connections, and ordinary alleged causes do not necessitate their effects. David Hume agrees on both points. Malebranche concludes that God is the only cause. Hume removes God from the causal story. Therefore, Hume is left with constant conjunction plus a psychological disposition to expect frequently observed effects that leads to a “subjective necessity,” which we project onto the world. In short, he proposes occasionalism without God.ⁱ Hume himself encouraged reading his contributions against the background of Malebranche (Hume 1740 and Letter xxx), and his discussion of the topic in both *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) is situated in the context of the “Cartesians,” which included Malebranche and other occasionalists. However much this framework helps us better understand his thought, it also serves a polemical move that excludes other approaches. Reading Hume against the background of English-language philosophers who endorsed or considered divine causation of ordinary events, rather than against the background of primarily continental Cartesians, will help draw out deficiencies in Hume’s arguments. By leaving out important philosophical positions in his day, Hume leads the reader to believe he has ruled out all the major options, when he has not.

In this essay, I argue that Hume’s criticisms of divine causation are insufficient because he does not respond to important philosophical positions that are defended by those whom he closely read. Hume’s arguments might work against the background of

a Cartesian definition of body, or a Malebranchian conception of causation, or some defenses of occasionalism. At least, I will not here argue that they succeed or fail against those targets. Instead, I will lay out two major deficiencies in his arguments against divine causation. I call these “deficiencies” because Hume does not adequately address live positions. This does not mean, of course, that there are not problems with these views or that Hume could not have given strong arguments against them. Rather, Hume’s arguments, which can seem comprehensive to the twenty-first century reader, are in fact not so. For the deficiencies discussed in this essay, I point to writers from Hume’s near context (many of whom we know he read carefully) who held the views not discussed, and I provide reasons why Hume seems not to have entertained these possibilities. I won’t distinguish between accidentally overlooking and actively ignoring. By drawing attention to these three deficiencies, I have two goals. The first is to demonstrate the diversity of seventeenth and early eighteenth century views on divine causation, especially among philosophers in England, Scotland, and Ireland, who are often ignored by philosophers today who, like Hume, focus on continental Cartesians while ignoring British dualists and vitalists. The second goal is to make today’s readers aware of shortcomings in Hume’s arguments to encourage productively contextual readings of Hume and his contemporaries.

After laying out Hume’s arguments against divine causation in section two, I discuss two major deficiencies in section three. First, his arguments fail to address the possibility that people could have impressions (experiences) of God. Hume argues only against people having an innate idea of God, as Descartes and some Cartesians had argued. I argue that this is because in the context of British philosophy of the early eighteenth century, such views were associated with religious and political radicalism, while Hume engages primarily with moderate Enlightenment figures like John Locke.

Second, Hume misrepresents the widespread interest in direct divine activity among British philosophers, including among people he read closely, including Isaac Newton, John Locke, Samuel Clarke, and Colin Maclaurin. In doing so, he fails to account for theories that do not define body as pure extension. This includes two sets of philosophers. Some, like Samuel Clarke, in response to Newtonian natural philosophy, defended space as pure extension, required that bodies must have additional essential properties, and argued that all motion is caused either by God or immaterial agents (angels or human souls). Others, like Margaret Cavendish and Anne Conway, defended vitalist conceptions of matter that are simply not addressed by Hume. Both groups of philosophers provide arguments for ubiquitous divine causation that are distinct from the Cartesian arguments from a bare conception of body that Hume focuses on.

An additional line of questioning that I don't pursue here is the way in which Hume's philosophy is fundamentally atomistic. If he can imagine A separate from B, then A really is separable from B. (He does not distinguish, as do many of his contemporaries, separate faculties of the imagination and intellect.) His methodological atomism is apparent in both his epistemology and metaphysics, and it might lead him to not fully appreciate the monistic philosophies of Margaret Cavendish, Anne Conway, John Toland, or Jonathan Edwards. His methodological atomism plays a key role in his argument that cause and effect must be distinct, because this distinctness is what justifies his claim that there is no necessary connection between cause and effect. There may be resources within monistic metaphysics to resist Hume's arguments, and he certainly does not address them directly, but I will not pursue this objection here.

2. *Hume's Arguments against Divine Causation*

Hume does not have separate discussions of causation and divine causation. Hume's primary battery of arguments against divine causation are nested in a larger discussion of causation. As Hume recognizes, to write about causation in the 1730s and 1740s just is to write about divine causation. Interpreters of Hume have largely focused on the larger issue of causation rather than the more specific issue of divine causation except when discussing Hume on miracles. However, paying attention to the particular issue of divine causation, especially ubiquitous divine causation, can lead us to notice new strengths and weaknesses in Hume's arguments. (I will often say "ubiquitous divine causation" so as to include both occasionalism and the then-common view that only immaterial agents, whether divine or finite, introduce motion into the physical universe.)

While there are possibly changes in Hume's views and certainly changes in the presentations of his views over time, there is a lot of continuity between *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-1740) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) on causation, especially that we do not have any idea of power and that we perceive no necessary connection between cause and effect. It is also one of the arguments highlighted in his anonymous attempt to drum up interest in the *Treatise*, "An Abstract of a Book Lately Published" (1740). In both the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* versions of the argument against necessary connection, Hume is clear that appealing to divine causal activity does not get us any closer to his opponents' account of causation and in fact introduces new problems. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the argument as it appears in the *Treatise* before pointing out a couple unique features of the argument as presented in the *Enquiry*. The more thorough approach of the *Treatise* will allow us to better see the strengths and weaknesses of Hume's argument.

2a. The Argument from the *Treatise*

Hume argues against our having any idea of power, energy, or efficacy that could serve as part of our idea of causation. It has no basis in reason or experience (T 1.3.14.6). To show this, he argues against the “Cartesians” and those (he cites Malebranche) who would appeal to God as the explanation for our idea of power. Hume does not state clearly who the Cartesians are. Presumably, Cartesians are those who accept some basic aspects of Descartes’ philosophy. There were many such philosophers in the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. Based on what Hume says, it is clear that (1) Cartesians think body is merely extension, (2) at least some Cartesians believe we have an innate idea of God, and (3) Malebranche is a Cartesian. (For more on their views on divine causation, see the discussions of Descartes and Malebranche in their respective chapters in this volume.) Then he eliminates any account of secondary causation, in which a body has the power of acting because it has been bestowed by the divine first cause.

In more detail, Hume’s argument against us having an idea of power begins by revealing we have no impression of power. We know this by reflecting on our experiences. Should one turn to “those philosophers, who have pretended to explain the secret force and energy of causes” we will find little help (T 1.3.14.7). In reference to “those philosophers,” Hume includes a footnote that points to Malebranche’s *The Search After Truth* (6.2.3). Hume shares his contemporaries’ disdain for appeals to substantial forms or other “virtues and faculties” because “none of them have any solidity or evidence” and they are “perfectly unintelligible and inexplicable.” Thus, we should not accept any account of causal power that would rely on them for their foundation. The impression of a particular power must then have one of the following sources: the known qualities of matter, the deity, or our own will or mind.

The known qualities of matter (T 1.3.14.7-9): Philosophers are “almost unanimous” in reaching the conclusion that we cannot discover power in the known qualities of matter,

having been driven to that conclusion by the debates about substantial forms. The failure to find any idea of power in body has “oblig’d philosophers to conclude, that the ultimate force and efficacy of nature is perfectly unknown to us, and that ‘tis in vain we search for it in all the known qualities of matter” (T 1.3.14.8). According to Hume, the question that divides philosophers is not whether this claim holds, but what conclusion should follow. Some philosophers (“the *Cartesians* in particular”) take it as a principle “that we are perfectly acquainted with the essence of matter.” We know the essence of matter, which is extension. From this they draw the following conclusion: “As the essence of matter consists in extension, and as extension implies not actual motion, but only mobility; they conclude, that the energy, which produces the motion, cannot lie in the extension.” This leads them to a further “perfectly unavoidable” conclusion: matter cannot “produce, or continue, or communicate motion.” This conclusion is surprising because we observe motion by the senses, and it seems that some power must have produced them. So, these Cartesians reason, that power “must lie in the Deity, or that divine being, who contains in his nature all excellency and perfection.” God does this not just through an “original impulse, but likewise by a continu’d exertion of omnipotence, supports its existence, and successively bestows in it all those motions, and configurations, and qualities, with which it is endow’d” (T 1.3.14.9). In other words, the Cartesians have argued from the failure of substantial forms, through the principle that extension is the essence of matter, to the conclusion that the power of beginning and continuing motion lies in God, not matter.

Because the principle of innate ideas is false, we are not in a position to suppose a deity “in accounting for that idea of agency, which we search for in vain” in material objects. All ideas, Hume reminds us, are founded on impressions, and we have no impression of power. (For Hume’s arguments why we have no innate ideas, see xxx.) Keep in mind, because it will matter for our discussion in the next section, that Hume

points out that only “Cartesians” identify body with extension, and he does not argue against non-Cartesian theories of body, despite pointing out that such philosophers exist.

The deity (T 1.3.14.9-10): If we accept the inactivity of matter and the evident motion of matter, the power that produces these effects “must lie in the Deity, or that divine being, who contains in his nature all excellency and perfection.” This argument could only work, says Hume, if we have an idea of God. The Cartesians claim that this idea is innate, which is to say that we are all born with this idea already in our minds. Such an idea could be the source of our idea of power, given that our idea of God is of a necessarily omnipotent being. But there are no innate ideas, Hume has argued elsewhere (T 1.1.1.12). Any idea of a deity would have to have the same origin as our other ideas: an impression of either sensation or reflection. He leaves unstated that it is found in neither.

Secondary causes (T 1.3.14.11): Hume briefly considers another possibility, that God has endowed bodies with the power to initiate motion. His strategy here is to show that this view collapses into one of the other three strategies for determining the origin of our idea of power. Those that “attribute a derivative, but a real power and energy to matter” also claim “that this energy lies not in any of the known qualities of matter.” Thus the difficulty of finding the origin of the idea of power remains. It is impossible that the idea of power be derived from an unknown quality, and it is not in the known qualities. Appealing to secondary causation does not help.

The will (or our own mind) (T 1.3.14.12): If our own will (or any operation of the mind) gave us an impression of power, then we would discover a connection between the will (or mind) and its effect. We do not perceive such connection between a will and its effect, whether that effect be bodily or mental. There is no constant conjunction of the will (or any operation of the mind) and its effect. At best, the will has some sway over the

mind. There is no internal impression that has any energy. (This section is the one most clearly indebted to Malebranche's account of causation.)

Hume now reviews his findings and connects them to his already argued claims in epistemology. Efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connection, and productive quality "are all nearly synonymous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest" (T 1.3.14.14). To claim that there exist powers in matter, God, ourselves, or elsewhere, we must have a clear and determinate idea of power (T 1.3.14.14). To have a clear and determinate idea of power, we must be able to identify a particular impression of a particular power. This is an instance of Hume employing his "copy principle." According to Hume, all ideas are copied from impressions. So if there is a disputed idea, we ought to be able to identify the impression from which the idea came. If we cannot, this tells us that we have a meaningless term that has no concomitant idea. The other previously argued aspect of his epistemology that he references is that there are no abstract or general ideas because all ideas are particular, so there is no general idea of power from which we could derive a particular idea of power (T 1.3.4.13).

2b. The Argument from the *Enquiry*

In Section VII of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume denies we have an idea of power. As in the *Treatise*, the question of causation generally and divine causation in particular are run together and Cartesian occasionalism is singled out.

Hume raises three objections to those philosophers who claim that God is the only cause. First, he provides multiple theological objections.

They rob nature, and all created beings, of every power, in order to render their dependence on the Deity still more sensible and immediate. They consider not, that, by this theory, they diminish, instead of magnifying, the

grandeur of those attributes, which they affect so much to celebrate. It argues surely more power in the Deity to delegate a certain degree of power to inferior creatures, than to produce every thing by his own immediate volition. It argues more wisdom to contrive at first the fabric of the world with such perfect foresight, that, of itself, and by its proper operation, it may serve all the purposes of providence, than if the great Creator were obliged every moment to adjust its parts, and animate by his breath all the wheels of that stupendous machine.

Hume is here employing a rhetorical tactic that he mobilizes very effectively in his later *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*: he uses internecine theological debates to undermine one or more of the positions in that debate. We need not read Hume as endorsing the view that occasionalism is actually less magnificent than secondary causation for this move to be effective. If he captures even part of his audience with this claim that a causally active God would be less magnificent, it is sufficient. A second objection (“I cannot perceive any force in the arguments, on which this theory is founded”) is given a more detailed explanation in the *Treatise*, which we have already discussed. Hume’s third objection to occasional causes is unique to the *Enquiry*. “...This theory of the universal energy and operation of the Supreme Being, is too bold ever to carry conviction with it to a man, sufficiently apprized of the weakness of human reason, and the narrow limits, to which it is confined in all its operations” (E 7.24). One of Hume’s interests in the *Enquiry* is which philosophical theories and arguments actually produce belief in the reasoner. He even cites, in a footnote to this paragraph, the Section XII discussion of reasoning producing belief. It is interesting that in this case Hume does not claim that the theory can never carry conviction with it. Instead, he offers the more carefully circumscribed claim that it can carry no conviction with anyone sufficiently

aware of the weakness and limits of human reason. He does not give reason here to doubt that philosophers might truly believe in occasionalism; however, philosophers with appropriate awareness of reason's limits and weakness could not believe it.

A final distinctive aspect of the *Enquiry* discussion of divine causation is that he obliquely references British responses to occasionalism in a footnote (E 7.25n), which is discussed in Section 3b below.

3. *Possible Responses*

Are the arguments as thoroughly devastating to prior theories of causation as they have seemed to many current readers? There are three ways to challenge the efficacy of Hume's arguments. First, we could find an error in his arguments, either a false premise or an incorrectly drawn conclusion. For instance, perhaps we do have an innate idea of God (as Descartes claimed), or we do perceive power in our sensory experience of a person walking (as Hume's friend Henry Home, Lord Kames, insisted in *Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion* 2.4). Second, we could decline finding a specific flaw in Hume's arguments yet nevertheless conclude that Hume's overall project fails. If Hume's discussion of alternative theories is exhaustive and Hume's own positive account of causation is deemed too deeply flawed (for instance, for the reasons given by Thomas Reid in *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* 4.9), then we might be justified in rejecting Hume's conclusion even if we are unsure where his arguments went wrong. These two approaches would have us relitigate Hume's theory of causation. As these have been the focus of many essays and books, I will not pursue these lines of objection.

A third line of objection has not been as frequently pursued. By attending to gaps in Hume's stated arguments, we can notice options that Hume does not address. This is the approach I take here. What philosophical positions (and here I limit myself to

positions that were publicly endorsed in the century leading up to Hume's writing) provide the basis for endorsing ubiquitous divine causation? I discuss three. First, we might have a direct experience of God (an impression, in Hume's terminology). Second, Hume misrepresents the British philosophical tradition so as to make it appear that philosophers who were invested in direct divine causal activity were not so. Newtonians, other British dualists, and vitalists deny that body is mere extension, so his arguments against the "Cartesians" do not rule out their views. Finally, Hume's metaphysical and epistemological atomism leads him not to notice the monistic arguments for divine causation. These three objections are the subjects of the next two sections.

3a. What Hume Didn't Notice: Impression of God

In discussing why the source of our idea of power could not be God (T 1.3.14, E 7), Hume focuses on the view, attributed to the "Cartesians," that we have an innate idea of God. However, many theists have claimed to know God not because of an innate idea but through an experience, described by some in sensory terms and by others as an internal awareness. A truly thorough accounting of the possible sources of an idea of God should have included an impression of God that is not innate but experienced. Whether humans actually have an experience of God depends on a lot of factors, the most obvious of which is whether God exists. Further features include whether an impression of something infinite is possible and whether an impression of God is possible only after death, as some theists have claimed. Hume cannot assume at this point in the argument that God does not exist, because according to Hume the claim that God exists is identical to having an idea of God (T 1.2.6.4), and he is here considering whether we have an idea of God. Hume does not seem to be in a position to rule out, without argument, that (at least some) humans have an impression of God.

Why did he ignore this possibility? The answer to this question is biographical and contextual. Although he wrote the *Treatise* while living in France at the Jesuit college at La Flèche, and although he read widely, and although he clearly aimed for international fame, Hume's most immediate intellectual context is the English, Scottish, and Irish philosophers from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Nearly all of Hume's rare contemporary references in Part 1 of the *Treatise* (the section on metaphysics and epistemology) and in the *Enquiry Concerning to Human Understanding* are to British philosophers, including Thomas Hobbes, Ralph Cudworth, John Locke, Isaac Newton, Samuel Clarke, and George Berkeley. In the Abstract, a brief summary of the *Treatise* that he published anonymously in 1740, the context is more complex and international. There he emphasizes is those who have contempt for hypotheses in moral philosophy, whom he lists as Locke, Shaftesbury, Mandeville, Hutcheson, and Butler. After a brief reference to Leibniz, he provides a second context of the logic of probabilities. Those who emphasize demonstrations and are too concise on probabilities include the authors of "the *Essay on human understanding* [Locke], *Le Recherche de la verité* [Malebranche], and *L'Art de penser* [Pascal]." Even with the more international framing, Hume's preference, which we are of course welcome to ignore but can be useful for recognizing how Hume framed his own accomplishments, is that he belongs in the British tradition of those applying the "experimental" approach to human nature, which includes probabilistic rather than demonstrative reasoning to conclusions. As he turns to particulars in the Abstract, he explicitly sides with Locke against Malebranche. (Malebranche should probably be included in Hume's category of "Cartesians" for most purposes, but on the particular issue of an innate idea of God, Malebranche does not quite fit Hume's story because for Malebranche our intellect does not access innate ideas in us but rather ideas as they are in God's mind.)

None of these philosophers mentioned, from Hobbes and Cudworth through Hutcheson and Butler, thought that we have an impression (in Hume's sense) of God. Debates about the existence of God among these philosophers focused on arguing from the evidence. That some people might have a direct impression of God is simply not on the table for the philosophers with whom Hume engages. Why is this? In the British Isles, and in some parts of continental Europe, claims that one directly experienced God were labeled "enthusiasm," a derisive term used almost exclusively by people like Locke who were opposed to religious nonconformists, such as the Quakers. Let us turn to Locke's discussion of faith and reason in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which is both representative and influential. Reason is "the discovery of the certainty or probability of such propositions or truths which the mind arrives at by deduction made from such ideas, which it has got by the use of its natural faculties," and faith is "the assent to any proposition, not thus made out by the deductions of reason, but upon the credit of the proposer, as coming from God, in some extraordinary way of communication" (that is, revelation). Faith for Locke is not awareness of God, but a recognition of the information that God communicates through scriptures. Both reason and faith have their role to play, for Locke. His primary concern in this section is to show that reason and faith cannot contradict each other, with the clear emphasis on delimiting the role for faith. If we do not keep faith and reason "distinct by these boundaries," then there will be no place to condemn "the several religions of the world" that deserve condemnation and we would debase religion "which should most distinguish us from beasts, and ought most peculiarly to elevate us, as rational creatures" (*Essay* 4.18.11).

Locke is concerned both with preserving a role in religion for proper condemnation of false religious beliefs or upholding human dignity and with larger social and political issues. After spending about 3,350 words demarking faith and reason

in Chapter 18 of Book 4, Locke spends about 4,150 arguing against enthusiasm in Chapter 19. (Chapter 19 was added in the fourth edition of 1700.) His objections to enthusiasm focus on failures of reason that are due to being flattered (in one's "Laziness, Ignorance, and Vanity") that one has special knowledge from God (*Essay* 4.19.7). Enthusiasts do not take the arguments of others seriously because their alleged word from God will always outweigh them (*Essay* 4.19.2). Enthusiasm substitutes "ungrounded fancies of a man's own brain" for both faith and reason (*Essay* 4.19.3). Enthusiasts might be sincere, but they are giving into their own laziness and weakness of thinking (*Essay* 4.19.5-7). Locke concludes this section with an extended discussion of how to tell true revelation from false enthusiasm. Concerns about enthusiasm are not just about preserving what Locke takes to be worthwhile in religion. Locke is also concerned about what counts as knowledge and what separates sane, strong reasoners from the mad. As Kathryn Tabb (2018) has convincingly argued, Locke is concerned with diagnosing madness. As he tells Damaris Masham, "in religion men accustomed to the thoughts of revelation make a greater allowance to it, though indeed it be a more dangerous madness, but men are apt to think that in religion they may and ought to quit their reason" (quoted in Tabb 2018). Religious madness, and here he has enthusiasm in mind, is worse than other kinds of madness because it is dangerous not just to the individual but to society. Those whom Locke is most concerned with were the Quakers. In fact, the reference to the "enthusiasts" from Chapter 20 (originally Chapter 19) of Book 4 was a reference to the "Quakers" in Draft A (Anstey 2019). The Quakers represented social destruction: they failed to recognize rank, they preached loudly in the streets, and women held positions of authority. One need only read the transcription of the trial of Margaret Fell and George Fox (see Booy 2004) to see the ways in which Quakers were perceived, in the conviction

of their own rightness and divine inspiration, as a threat to authority and organized society.

The British generation before Hume was deeply concerned with enthusiasm, which is why Locke and others calling Malebranche an enthusiast for his vision of all things in God, as was their charge of Malebranchianism against Berkeley for similar reasons, was so powerful. John Norris, the foremost British proponent of Malebranche's metaphysics and epistemology, and Mary Astell, who seems to have at least entertained the views of Norris and Malebranche even if she did not forthrightly endorse them, apparently did not figure in Hume's intellectual concerns. Neither did Anne Conway, the foremost Quaker philosopher of the seventeenth century, who converted late in her life, and whose philosophical treatise had a major impact on a small group that included Henry More and Leibniz but did not seem to have been widely read by Hume's day. Hume seems to have entirely missed or ignored the philosophical proponents of direct awareness of God when he wrote the *Treatise*. With the exception noted at the end of this paragraph, his only references to enthusiasm in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* are to "poetical enthusiasm," which suggests he is more concerned with the ancient question of divine inspiration for artists and poets, which was the primary preoccupation of eighteenth-century French philosophers, not British. With the exception of his *History of England* and his essay "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm," Hume mostly neglects enthusiasm, focusing instead on superstition, which includes a variety of errors of reasoning and belief. In fact, he goes so far in the first *Enquiry* as to claim that "There is no enthusiasm among philosophers..." despite the dangers of superstition for philosophy (E 11.7).

Having an impression of God would seem to Hume and his immediate predecessors as a kind of religious enthusiasm. (Remember, enthusiasts claim to experience God directly, which is different from those like John Locke or Samuel Clarke

or Joseph Butler who believed we could come to knowledge of God through scripture, reason, or nature.) Hume believes that philosophers are not inclined toward enthusiasm, even though they are susceptible to superstition. This may be because they have different sources. “Weakness, fear, melancholy, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of Superstition. ... Hope, pride, presumption, a warm imagination, together with ignorance, are, therefore, the true sources of Enthusiasm” (“Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” 1-2). While superstition can hide in apparently solid reasoning, the cure for enthusiasm is “sound reason and philosophy” (“Of Superstition and Enthusiasm” 3). Like we saw in Locke, Hume’s focus in his one extended discussion of enthusiasm is the Quakers, although he also mentions Independents, Presbyterians, Anabaptists, Camisards, Levellers, and Covenanters. (The one good thing about enthusiasm, according to Hume? It is, unlike superstition, “a friend” of civil liberty.) After the *Treatise*, Hume does devote half of a short essay to enthusiasm, and it plays an explanatory role in his *History of England*, but (perhaps because he thought sound reasoning was a sufficient antidote) it plays almost no role in the *Treatise* and its limited role in the first *Enquiry* is well after the discussion of causation.

That we could have an impression of God, who in virtue of being omnipotent would thereby give us an idea of causal power, is not something that Hume addresses in his discussions of our alleged idea of causal power. This is best explained by situating Hume in his immediate British context. The philosophers with whom Hume saw himself discoursing all ignored or ridiculed those who claimed to have a direct experience of God. People who made such claims were derisively called enthusiasts, and they were seen as socially dangerous. Hume claimed that philosophers were not prone to enthusiasm. Even if he thought that proper philosophy could not sustain enthusiasm, and even if he thought that people not writing in the form of treatises, dialogues, essays, and other

recognized philosophical genres could be safely ignored, and even if he never read the Quaker convert and philosopher Anne Conway, Hume could be rightly chastised for failing to see that Malebranche and Berkeley, whom he cites positively (and Norris and Astell, whom he does not cite), were frequently engaged with this question.

To be clear, saying that Hume failed to engage with this question sufficiently in his published writings on causation does not mean that he could not object to these positions. To raise just two possible objections, few people suggest that young children have a direct experience of God before they come to have knowledge of causation, and finite minds might not be capable of getting adequate ideas of an infinite being through experience. However, his printed argument leaves this possibility unanswered.

3b. What Hume Didn't Notice: British Occasionalism and Vitalism

A second curious omission in Hume's discussion of causation is that nearly all British philosophers whom Hume cites reject the "Cartesian" definition of body that Hume relies on in his argument. In addition to the vitalists who reject mechanism and argue that bodies are active, British dualists overwhelmingly reject the identification of body with extension. In this section, I unpack Hume's oblique reference to British philosophers who defend ubiquitous divine activity in the world to show how he elides or downplays important positions defended by English and Scottish philosophers who Hume

In Section 2, we saw that Hume explicitly situates his own theory within larger debates about causation by laying out the arguments of the "Cartesians" as going partway to his own view. Another place where he situates his contribution historically is the footnote to *Enquiry* 7.25, where he offers a revealing reading of Newtonian and Cartesian thinking about divine causation. According to Hume, Newton had no interest

in occasionalism, but he “had recourse” to ether to explain the phenomena of attraction, suggesting that in Hume’s view ether was something Newton endorsed reluctantly. Hume is aware that some of Newton’s followers (whom he does not name) have tried “to rob second causes of all force or energy” on the basis of Newton’s work, but this was not Newton’s intention. He draws a parallel to Descartes: Newton considers occasionalism “without insisting upon it,” while “Malebranche and other Cartesians made it the foundation of all their philosophy” (Ibid.).

This reading of Newton was not widely agreed upon in his day or in ours; indeed many have argued that Newton was something like an occasionalist. What is most surprising about this footnote is the final three sentences. Occasionalism “had, however, no authority in England. Locke, Clarke, and Cudworth, never so much as take notice of it, but suppose all along, that matter has a real, though subordinate and derived power. By what means has it become so prevalent among our modern metaphysicians?” (E 7.25n). Given that Ralph Cudworth’s “plastic nature” is a noncorporeal causal agent, his inclusion in this list is questionable. John Locke clearly opposed occasionalism, but thought the best strategy was to ignore it so it would go away. (Two essays he wrote and decided against publishing were included in his posthumous works of 1706, to which Hume would have had access.) Most surprising is Samuel Clarke’s inclusion here. He argued influentially that motion could not be essential to matter (*A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, in *Works* 2.530-536), and he argues this in a passage that Hume cites in the *Treatise* discussion of causation (T 1.3.3). While Clarke does discuss “the Powers of all Things” in the *Demonstration*, it is also clear in context that the powers of self-motion are only possessed by spiritual substances, both divine and human (*Works* 2.569ff). This is reaffirmed in *A Discourse Concerning the Unchangeable Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, where he is clear

that angels and humans are given the power of starting and continuing motion: “All things done in the world, are done either immediately by God himself, or by created intelligent beings: matter being evidently not at all capable of any laws or powers whatsoever” (*Works* 2.697ff). So while Clarke was not an occasionalist, he was clearly and consistently committed to the view that material objects have no power. There is no agreed-upon term for this view, which I will call “semi-occasionalism.”

This semi-occasionalist view became very popular by the time Hume wrote, and it was likely those influenced by Clarke, such as Andrew Baxter, who were Hume’s intended target with the reference to “our modern metaphysicians” (Winkler 1989). Indeed the contrast between “England” and “our” suggests that he has in mind Scottish philosophers such as Baxter. If Baxter, as one of “our modern metaphysicians,” is an occasionalist, then so is Clarke, whose views he repeatedly echoes and expands. Furthermore, Hume’s professor of mathematics at the University of Edinburgh was Colin Maclaurin. Maclaurin would later become a critic of occasionalist readings of Newton (see Connolly 2013 and Yenter forthcoming), but his master’s thesis of 1713 claims that “the descent of heavy bodies can result from no bodily impulse” and must be from “a will capable of some incorporeal and intelligent cause,” which would be God (Maclaurin 1713: 17). It is quite possible that Maclaurin held this view while Hume was his student in the 1720s. However the details get worked out, Hume seems to be downplaying, even in 1748, when the *Enquiry* was first published, the extent to which Scottish philosophers were engaged in the questions of occasionalism and semi-occasionalism that would occupy them throughout the eighteenth century.

A reignited dispute would break out in 1754 in the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh, prompted by Henry Home, Lord Kames, with a reply by John Stewart (who advocated a Clarke-like view), and an angry response from Hume. Thomas Reid, while

more cautious in print, would lecture on Newton's *Principia* and defend a Baxter-like view in his teaching and private correspondence. James Beattie, one of Hume's most vociferous Scottish critics, would later endorse a Clarkeian view in his *Essay on Truth* (1770: 1.2.3). (For more on metaphysical debates in Scottish Newtonianism, see Yenter [forthcoming].) Hume oversaw multiple reprints of the *Enquiry* and *Treatise*, but made almost no changes across editions, including any that might reflect his misrepresentation of English-language writing about divine causation or the continued interest in the question during the middle of the century. Hume downplays the Scottish interest in occasionalism and semi-occasionalism, which would become even more common after Hume publishes the first edition of the *Enquiry* in 1748. His representation of English authors on occasionalist and semi-occasionalist views is even more surprising, given Hume's interest in arguing against Clarke (Hume 1745; Russell 2008).

Clarke and Baxter are openly committed to a Newtonian conception of the natural world, which included extended space occupied by bodies in a vacuum. Henry More, Newton, Clarke, Baxter, and other British dualists recognize that both space and body are extended, so body must have some properties that distinguish it from space. (More, and possibly the others as well, also believed that there are extended spirits, which complicates the question further.) So body is not merely extension. Again, this was the dominant view in England and Scotland in the fifty years before Hume wrote. Thus, Hume's argument, which only considers the Cartesian view that body is mere extension, cannot adequately address the views of the most prominent British dualists.

In addition to the widespread belief among British dualists that body must be more than mere extension and who openly considered ubiquitous divine causation to explain this, two English authors openly defended or entertained occasionalism yet are completely ignored in Hume's story. The discussions in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*

completely ignore the work of John Norris, an English defender of Malebranchian occasionalism, and Mary Astell, who (until a final letter) seems in her correspondence with Norris (published as *Letters Concerning the Love of God* in 1695) and then again in *A Christian Religion* (1705; 1717) to be open to occasionalism. These were not minor figures at the time, and Hume would certainly have been familiar with them.

In the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, only the “Cartesian” arguments for ubiquitous divine activity are discussed, and his objections do not apply to the causal theories in the Newton-Clarke tradition. For instance, his anti-Cartesian arguments move immediately from occasionalism to an innate idea of God, which makes some sense for continental Cartesians and Norris, but is irrelevant to the arguments of Clarke, Baxter, and others. Cartesians, according to Hume, claim to know that the essence of body is extension, but Clarke denies that we know the essence of body. We know, thinks Clarke and other philosophers in the wake of Newton, that bodies must have some essential properties other than extension, because only space is pure extension. Bodies are not identical to the spaces they occupy. Space is metaphysically prior to the objects within it, and there are gaps between bodies (that is, a vacuum). Clarke and Baxter think we can rule out matter’s having any power of self-motion because this would violate the principle of sufficient reason. (Body would have a power of self-motion in every direction at once, thereby canceling out all power to move in any direction.) In these and other ways, Hume’s focus on (continental) Cartesians and misrepresentation of the British interest in divine activity leads him to pass over important positions without argument. He then misrepresents the British tradition in a footnote to his discussion of causation in the 1748 *Enquiry*, and he does not correct the record after the debate re-ignited in 1754.

4. *Conclusion*

I have discussed two gaps in Hume's argument. He ignores, without discussion, the possibility that human beings might have an impression of God. Such an impression could give us an idea of power. Hume also presents the British interest in divine causation so as to downplay how many philosophers in London, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dublin, and Aberdeen believed that widespread divine activity explained regular phenomena. I present these gaps in Hume's arguments to help the modern reader recognize the weaknesses in his stated arguments, which one is not likely to notice without a great deal of familiarity with early modern metaphysics.

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ⁱ A different sort of occasionalism without God was proposed by Margaret Cavendish. Her theory of occasional causes does not require God as an intermediary. In fact, she often suggests there is a strong divide between God and the natural world. Her vitalist, monistic metaphysics is briefly addressed later in this essay. For more on Cavendish's theory of causation and the role of God in the world, see O'Neill 2001, Detlefsen 2009, and Cunning 2017.