



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The New Hume Debate (review)

Paul Russell

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 41, Number 1, January 2003,  
pp. 132-134 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/hph.2002.0107](https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2002.0107)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/37618>

best recent traditions of international Leibniz scholarship. But her book undoubtedly breaks new ground and remains an important contribution to an exciting field which cannot and will not be ignored. While international Leibniz scholarship may not absorb some of this book's more extreme theses, it will need to come to grips with many of its more basic innovations.

Perhaps the single most important of these is a very general one: to take seriously the German intellectual world from which Leibniz emerged. Within the general history of early modern philosophy, Leibniz is too often portrayed as a "modern" western European stranded in a central European intellectual backwater. Mercer's account is the most sustained argument to date that Leibniz was not a misplaced modern westerner: rather, the most characteristic features of his thought were deeply rooted in the German intellectual world from which he emerged. Most fundamentally, his deep desire to reconcile ancient and modern thought, philosophy and theology, and Protestantism and Catholicism ultimately derived from the need to repair the terrible disunities which had precipitated a generation of devastating war in central Europe and to substitute in their place intellectual, religious, and political peace. This fundamental set of concrete conditions helps explain, among other things, the philosophical harmony between the Lutheran philosophers in Leipzig to which Mercer usefully directs our attention and the seemingly very different Calvinist and Catholic thinkers whose importance for the young Leibniz has been emphasized by others. No sophisticated student would now hope to grasp the full significance of Hobbes or Locke without reference to the wars and revolutions of seventeenth-century England; and future Leibniz scholarship will likewise come to recognize still more clearly the extent to which his deepest philosophical impulses were conditioned by the thirty years of continuous warfare which immediately preceded his birth. On the road to this new outlook, Mercer's book constitutes an impressive and outspoken piece of research which forcefully promotes and advances in the Anglo-American world a new way of approaching the history of philosophy.

MARIA ROSA ANTOGNAZZA

*University of Aberdeen*

Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman, editors. *The New Hume Debate*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Pp. vii + 210. Cloth, \$85.00.

No one debates that Hume's views about causation are of central importance to his philosophy and that, historically speaking, what he said on this subject has been enormously influential. Nor is there much doubt that according to the "standard" interpretation Hume holds that causation must be understood in terms of the constant conjunction of objects and does not involve any "metaphysical" powers or forces in the objects themselves. On this reading Hume is a proponent of the "regularity" theory of causation, and it is this view that has done much to shape empiricist and "positivist" philosophy over the past two centuries.

Despite these points of agreement, recent work in Hume scholarship has challenged the accuracy of the standard interpretation. This work includes, most notably, John Wright's *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (1983) and Galen Strawson's *The Secret Connexion* (1989). One particular merit of *The New Hume Debate* is that it gives both Wright and Strawson an opportunity to present their case for the "causal realist" interpretation in relatively concise and brief papers that will be more accessible to a wider audience. The most important and influential response to the realist interpretation, as defended by Wright and Strawson, is Kenneth Winkler's paper "The New Hume" (1991), which is reprinted in this volume along with a new "Postscript." The other contributors to this collection, beside the editors, are Barry Stroud, Simon Blackburn, Edward Craig, Martin Bell, Daniel Flage, and Anne Jaap Jacobson. All the contributions are of interest and merit comment. However, for the purpose of this review I will focus my attention on the debate between Strawson and Winkler, which involves most of the central issues.

Strawson's paper "David Hume: Objects and Powers" presents a clear statement of the "realist" interpretation. His interpretation turns on a fundamental distinction between ontological and epistemological scepticism. Strawson maintains that the "standard" interpretation of Hume confuses the (epistemological) claim that (i) all we can ever *know* of causation as it is in objects is regular succession, with the distinct (ontological) claim (ii) all that causation is in objects is regular succession. This "catastrophic" slide from epistemic to ontological scepticism about causal powers in objects (i.e., Causation) is "propelled," Strawson claims, by taking Hume's theory of ideas to imply that all we can ever *mean* by "causation is regular succession" (33). The standard account, Strawson argues, presents Hume as making a "positive ontological assertion about the ultimate nature of reality," which is "violently at odds with Hume's scepticism" (34). According to Strawson, although Hume "does not make positive claims about what definitely (or knowably) does *not* exist" [my emphasis], he also "never really questions the idea that there is Causation, something in virtue of which reality is regular in the way that it is" (35).

In response to the objection that the realist conception of causation is unintelligible, given the constraints of Hume's theory of ideas, Strawson replies that it is possible to frame a "relative idea" of Causation, which "suffices to pick Causation out in such a way that we can go on to refer to it while having no descriptively contentful conception of its nature on the terms of the theory of ideas" (37). Causation exists, therefore, even though we have no (positive) conception of it. According to Strawson's reading, however, Hume's position is not neutral with respect to the various hypotheses that may be framed about the nature of the real causal power that underlies the regularities that we observe in nature. On the contrary, Strawson argues that while Hume accepts the (Lockean/Newtonian) view that there exist real powers in external objects, Hume also rejects as "absurd" the Occasionalist hypothesis that these regularities manifest God's immediate activity and (infinite) power (44–5; and cf. 35, 40, 42). On this interpretation, therefore, Hume's scepticism about our knowledge of Causation does not prevent him from accepting some hypotheses about its nature and rejecting others, even though there is no experimental basis for this preference. It is not entirely clear how this difference in attitude toward the principal alternative hypotheses that Hume considers can be rendered consistent with his (epistemological) sceptical commitments on this subject.

Strawson's "realist" interpretation of Hume on causation follows John Wright's general account of Hume's "sceptical realism," which Strawson also endorses (39). There are two components to this interpretation. The first is that Hume is "a sceptic who denies the possibility of attaining knowledge about the ultimate nature of reality." The second is that Hume is not a Pyrrhonian, as he endorses certain "natural beliefs," most notably "that external objects exist, and that causation exists" (34–5, 39). What the sceptical realist interpretation shows, as applied to Hume's views on causation, is that Hume did not adhere to "the theory of ideas, strictly and literally interpreted" (48). Hume has no doubt that causation is not simply a matter of regular succession in objects, even though we can never acquire any genuine knowledge of what (real) Causation may be (35, 40, 42, 44–5).

The arguments presented for the realist interpretation and against the standard view are carefully examined by Kenneth Winkler in his influential paper "The New Hume." Winkler's discussion covers a wide range of topics including "hidden causes," relative ideas, Hume's "two definitions of 'cause,'" projectionism, natural belief and so on. One key point that Winkler makes at the beginning of his paper is that defenders of the New Hume "ease their task by supposing that according to the standard view, Hume positively denies the existence of secret powers or connections" (53). This portrayal of Hume would, Winkler grants, be "implausibly dogmatic" (67). However, Winkler goes on to argue that it never occurs to Strawson and other defenders of the New Hume to consider that it is also at odds with Hume's scepticism to *affirm* dogmatically the existence of causal powers (Wright's remarks at 88). Hume's scepticism, Winkler says, involves a refusal to affirm or deny the existence of something of which we have so imperfect an understanding that (in Hume's words) "no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against" (63, 67–8).

These remarks only scratch the surface of this interesting debate and the valuable contributions that are included in this volume. The editors have done an excellent job of choosing and presenting some of the more important papers on this subject. The volume contains a useful bibliography and a citation index. (The bibliography is fairly comprehensive, although there are a few gaps, such as Robert F. Anderson's *Hume's First Principles* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966], a study that anticipates some important aspects of the "new Hume" doctrine.) There is also a helpful introduction, written by Richman, which provides a synopsis of the individual papers in this volume. A few important contributions are not included in the collection itself: papers by Justin Broackes, Janet Broughton, and Michael Costa would be high on my list. Nevertheless, all the papers that are included are well worthwhile and serve the editors' stated aim in their Preface, which is to offer "insights not only into the most difficult issues of the interpretation of some of Western philosophy's most vital texts, but also into an absolutely central example of the relevance of the philosophical history of philosophy to contemporary philosophy, in . . . accessible form."

PAUL RUSSELL

*University of British Columbia*

Allen Speight. *Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Pp. xii + 154. Cloth, \$54.95. Paper, \$18.95.

Hegel's notorious use of literary references in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* has been a source of numerous interpretive difficulties, sparking disagreements not only about the actual referents of Hegel's literary allusions, but also—and more importantly—about the meaning and purpose of such allusions. In this insightful, highly readable new book, Allen Speight challenges the stale orthodoxies that have pitted the *Phenomenology's* systematic/philosophical readers against its literary/historical ones, and offers an innovative interpretation that takes seriously the work's literary structure and allusions, while also giving due consideration to its systematic philosophical aims. Combining the rich sensibility of a literary mind with the careful rigor of a philosophical mind, Speight deftly shows how Hegel's *Phenomenology* is a work whose very aim, in part, is to transcend the traditional, but often limiting, dichotomy between philosophy and literature.

As Speight explains it, the general purpose of this book is to make "a contribution to understanding the philosophical project of the *Phenomenology* and why that project requires Hegel's appropriation of literary works and forms as it does" (9–10). The book's philosophical point of departure is the critical mass of recent scholarship that sees Hegel's epistemological task in the *Phenomenology* as essentially Sellarsian in its critique of the "Myth of the Given." For Speight, the Hegelian critique of the myth of the given implies that all knowledge claims are essentially corrigible and socially mediated, and this implies—in turn—that any attempt to draw rigid lines of demarcation between a purely "systematic" and a purely "historical" or "anthropological" approach to philosophy and its problems must ultimately fail. From this interpretive vantage point, Speight holds, a strong case can be made for the essentially *literary* character of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and the essentially *philosophical* purpose of his literary allusions. As Speight is careful to acknowledge, his own distinctive approach to the *Phenomenology* is not meant to rule out other, divergent emphases or interpretations, but only to provide "a way of better understanding the role that literature plays within the philosophical enterprise of the work as a whole" (18).

Speight begins to deliver the details of his promised "better way" by investigating what he calls the "literary turn" or the seemingly sudden "eruption of the literary" that starts to motivate the *Phenomenology's* transition from the section on "Reason" to the section on "Spirit." For Speight, the shapes of Active Reason that are crucial in this transition begin to raise a new set of problems concerning human agency. Furthermore, it is not at all a coincidence that Hegel's heightened concern with agency at this juncture of the *Phenomenology*