Hume, Malebranche and 'Rationalism'

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Abstract
Traditionally Hume is seen as offering an 'empiricist' critique of 'rationalism'. This view is often illustrated – or rejected – by comparing Hume's views with those of Descartes'. However the textual evidence shows that Hume's most sustained engagement with a canonical 'rationalist' is with Nicolas Malebranche. The author shows that the fundamental differences (among the many similarities) between the two on the self and causal power do indeed rest on a principled distinction between 'rationalism' and 'empiricism', and that there is some truth in the traditional story. This, however, is very far from saying that Hume's general orientation is an attack on something called 'rationalism'.

Introduction

Many undergraduate courses in the History of Philosophy pit the 'empiricist' Hume against a nominal figure known as the 'rationalist'. Recent commentary also uses this vocabulary in approaching Hume. Peter Millican, for example, believes that Hume's 'permanent philosophical importance lies overwhelmingly in his consummate defeat of rationalism',[1] that there is 'truth in the traditional perception of Hume as [Locke and Berkeley's] heir in the British Empiricist tradition' and that Hume's philosophy 'remains far more in the spirit of Locke and Berkeley than it is in the spirit of Descartes and his disciple Malebranche'.[2] Others use such vocabulary in order to repudiate the very idea that Hume offers an 'empiricist' assault on 'rationalism'. Thus Stephen Buckle argues that it is 'difficult to find any evidence that Hume had rationalist views at the forefront of his mind'.[3] Indeed, few scholars now subscribe to any neat historiographical cleavage between the 'big three' of British empiricism on

[1] Peter Millican, 'The Context, Aims and Structure of Hume's First *Enquiry*', in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding* ed. Millican (Oxford: Oxford Unversity Press, 2002), 50–51.
[2] Op.cit., 38.
[3] Stephen Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of 'An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 36.

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the one hand and the rationalist three of Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz on the other. John Cottingham, for example, writes that 'there were no...fundamental differences of method or purpose between the so-called "British empiricists" and their "rationalist" counterparts in continental Europe'.[4]

Neither Buckle nor Millican subscribe to any crude picture of 'rationalism' versus 'empiricism', but nevertheless they disagree fundamentally on the issue of whether Hume should be understood as orienting his philosophy against something called 'rationalism'. Their disagreement is not my concern. I mention them because, rather than offering a definition of 'rationalism', they support their respective contentions by contrasting Hume's views with those of Descartes'. And just as they offer no caricature of 'rationalism' and 'empiricism', neither thinks that anything worth the name 'rationalism' must be identical to Descartes' views and Descartes' views alone. A comparison of Hume with Descartes can be an entirely legitimate illustrative and pedagogical device. But as a matter of fact, Hume's texts, and especially the *Treatise*,[5] reveal that his most sustained engagement with a canonical 'rationalist' philosopher is not with Descartes, but with Nicolas Malebranche. The extensive and traceable influence of Malebranche on Hume presents us with an opportunity of tracking Hume's *actual* engagement with a 'rationalist' Malebranche at a detectable and determinable textual level. This allows us to consider the extent to which this relation can, and should be, thought of along the lines of an 'empiricist' versus a 'rationalist'. This contributes to our understanding of the fascinating and complex influence of Malebranche on Hume and helps us to determine the truth in the traditional view of Hume as targeting 'rationalism'. I say the *truth in* the traditional view, not *its truth*. For whilst I disagree with Buckle's claim that Hume had no rationalistic views at the forefront of his mind, I agree with him and others that no historiography of 'empiricists versus rationalists' fully comprehends the intellectual landscape of the early modern period.

[4] John Cottingham, *The Rationalists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 2. See also Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Philosophy and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981) and Jonathan Rée, 'Philosophy and the History of Philosophy' in *Philosophy and its Past*, ed. Rée, Ayers & Westoby. (Bristol: Harvester Press, 1978).

[5] Although Millican and Buckle concern themselves with the first *Enquiry*, I shall concentrate on the *Treatise*. The interesting differences between the Hume of the *Treatise* and the Hume of first *Enquiry* are not relevant to my concerns.

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What I intend to show here is that the fundamental differences between the two thinkers do indeed depend crucially on a rationalist/empiricist contrast, which is *not* equivalent to saying that Hume's philosophy is largely a matter of defeating rationalism.

The paper is organized as follows. I first identify two key features of 'rationalism', namely (i) a commitment to a non-sensory form of representation (the intellect), and (ii) a related epistemology of substance. I show that Hume and Malebranche differ quite clearly with respect to the intellect. Second, since many readers may not be aware of it, I outline the general extent and character of Malebranche's influence on Hume. I then discuss in detail the topics of causation and self in order to show that, despite many similarities between the two thinkers, the fundamental divergences between them rest on Hume's empiricist rejection of the rationalist faculty of intellect.

Rationalism & Empiricism

What is distinctive of 'rationalism' as opposed to 'empiricism'? I mentioned that Buckle and Millican approach matters by comparing Hume with Descartes, but both are fully aware that the philosophers falling under the traditional extension of 'rationalist' – Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche and Leibniz – differ considerably among themselves on a whole panoply of issues. These include the nature and number of substance, the metaphysics of causation, the status of modal fact, and the nature of ideas and representation. Leibniz reintroduces elements of Aristotelianism and final causation, hardly things Descartes would embrace. Spinoza disagrees with Descartes and others on the relation of attribute to substance. Leibniz argues strenuously against Descartes' voluntarism about necessary truth, a doctrine also falling under Malebranche's sights. Furthermore, the traditional extension becomes somewhat fuzzy for Millican in that he holds that for some purposes aspects of Locke's philosophy, and other British philosophers, count as 'rationalistic', underscoring his own awareness of the complexities here.

These fairly obvious points made above throw into relief the limitations of an illustrative focus on Descartes. Without any independent grasp of what 'rationalism' means, what can we learn other than that Hume disagrees or agrees with Descartes? When is any such difference a difference between a *rationalist* element and an *empiricist* element? Consider, for example, Millican's use of Descartes. Millican identifies 23 theses held by Descartes but

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denied by Hume.[6] These include: a) we can have a priori knowledge of minds, b) the workings of the mind are transparent to introspection, c) the mind is better known than the body, d) the self is revealed through introspection as an indivisible unity whose essence is to think, e) the mind has innate ideas and f) we can prove with certainty – i.e. demonstrate – the existence of an external world. But it is not just Hume who denies these: so does Malebranche.[7] Is Malebranche here being an 'empiricist' in objecting to Descartes? Or do these differences between Descartes and Malebranche rest on something quite different? Is Malebranche really a 'disciple'[8] of Descartes? Given that Malebranche and Descartes differ considerably, it is not immediately evident why any difference between Hume and Descartes marks a difference between an empiricist element in Hume and a rationalist element in Descartes. In the absence of any independent characterization of 'rationalism', we have only a list of differences between Hume and Descartes and nothing more.

Whatever Buckle or Millican might intend by 'rationalism', and its cognates, there are two clear and related features that serve to draw a principled distinction between the traditional 'empiricists' and the 'rationalists'. First, rationalists share a commitment to a non-sensory form of representation, the intellect, which empiricists reject. Second, the intellect affords a grasp of the nature of substance, which empiricists also reject. Ironically, it is Descartes, in his famous discussion of a piece of wax in the Second Meditation, who offers the best illustration of these related theses. In considering a piece of wax, Descartes claims to 'understand' the wax distinctly, but that which is understood includes 'none of the features arrived at by means of the senses'.[9] One reason offered for this claim is that we have a conception of something remaining unchanged throughout a change in its sensible qualities. But, more crucially, there is an element of modal knowledge that speaks in favour of a 'purely mental scrutiny' outstripping the perception of vision, touch or

[6] Op. cit, note 1, 29–30.

[7] In mitigation of his illustrative focus on Descartes, Millican writes 'Malebranche's influence on Hume was immense . . . . [u]nfortunately, however, his writings are relatively little known in the English-speaking world, so here I shall focus exclusively on his mentor Descartes' (Op. cit., note 1, 28).

[8] Op. cit., note 1, 28.

[9] References to *Meditations on First Philosophy* in *Philosophical Works* (ed. Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, Vol II. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) (CSM Vol. 2: 20).

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imagination.[10] Descartes says he can grasp that 'the wax is capable of countless changes [of modes of extension], yet I am unable to run through this immeasurable number of changes in my imagination, from which it follows that it is not the faculty of imagination that gives me my grasp of the wax'.[11] The piece of wax then 'is not perceived by the senses or the faculty of the imagination but by the intellect alone'.[12] The modal knowledge provided by the intellect provides a grasp of substance, the second mark of rationalism. For it furnishes a way of distinguishing that which is dependent – modes – from that upon which they depend, namely the essence. This knowledge involves non-sensory representations that are also inherently general, which allows for the modal knowledge required for knowledge of substance and mode. Malebranche (like Spinoza and Leibniz) is a rationalist inasmuch as he shares with Descartes a commitment to the intellect and its potential grasp of substance. Ideas of the intellect 'represent things to the mind in a way so clear that we can discover by simple perception whether such and such modifications belong to them'.[13]

If there is anything distinctive of empiricism, it is a rejection of the intellect. Locke famously holds that all representations emerge through outer and inner sensory experience, and Berkeley explicitly rejects the intellect. 'Pure intellect' he writes, 'I understand not'.[14] And Hume is clearly aware that this is a fundamental point of difference between himself and Malebranche. Thus in the *Abstract* he writes:

> *Father Malebranche* would find himself at a loss to point out any thought of the mind, which did not represent something antecedently felt by it, either internally, or by means of the external senses, and must allow, that however we may compound, and mix, and augment, and diminish our ideas, they are all derived from these sources.[15]

[10] CSM 2: 21.
[11] CSM 2: 20–21.
[12] CSM 2: 22.
[13] References to *The Search After Truth*, trans. T. Lennon and P. Olscamp, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and volume and page references to *Oeuvre Complètes de Malebranche* ed. A. Robinet (20 vols.) (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958–78). Hence *Search* 561, OCM III: 44.
[14] *Philosophical Commentaries* §810.
[15] Norton and Norton (eds.), *A Treatise of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), following the convention of book, part, section and paragraph numbers. Page references to *A Treatise of Human*

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Hume's challenge to Malebranche and the intellect rests on the 'Copy Principle', the thesis that 'all our simple ideas, in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent'.[16] All representation, for Hume, depends on sensory materials to furnish its contents. In connection with the intellect, he writes that some hold that there are ideas 'of so refin'd and spiritual a nature, that they fall not under the conception of the fancy, but must be comprehended by a pure and intellectual view, of which the superior faculties of the soul are alone capable'.[17] Malebranche himself called intellectual representations 'spiritual'.[18] Hume thinks that the Copy Principle 'destroy[s] this artifice'.[19]

I shall not comment on whether Hume's appeal to the Copy Principle really succeeds against the intellect. The point is simply that this is a key and explicit difference between the two thinkers. Before we continue, let me make two further comments on 'rationalism' and 'empiricism'. First, the controversy over innate ideas tends to be associated with the rationalist/empiricist division, and it is quite true that Descartes and Leibniz explain the intellect by appeal to innate representations. However, the existence of the intellect is logically independent from the doctrine of innate ideas. Malebranche is a case in point, for he is a stern critic of innate ideas and yet subscribes to the intellect.[20] For him, our representational capacities involve direct cognitive contact with quasi-platonic entities constituting the blueprints, as it were, for the created world.[21] So Buckle's claim that Hume's brevity over the issue of innate ideas is evidence that Hume does not really target rationalism does not touch the rationalist with whom Hume is most engaged.[22] Hume's strategy against the

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Nature ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon, 1978) (SBN). Hence *Abstract* 6; SBN 648.

16 T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4.

17 T 1.2.1.7; SBN 72.

18 *Search* 16, OCM I: 66.

19 T 1.2.1.7; SBN 72.

20 See e.g. *Search* Book 3, part 2, chapter 4.

21 For discussion, see Nicholas Jolley *The Light of the Soul* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

22 Op. cit., note 3, 38. Buckle adduces other reasons why rationalism is not Hume's target. First, he voices a general (and well-placed) scepticism about the historiography of 'warring schools' of Empiricism vs. Rationalism (35–36). Second, the *Enquiry* targets those who give a 'shelter to superstition' and according to Buckle rationalism does not fit

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intellect need not be an attack on innate ideas but a matter of establishing empirically an alternative enshrined in the Copy Principle.

Second, a different feature is often said to mark an empiricist/rationalist distinction. Rationalists, supposedly unlike empiricists, subscribe to the thesis that the world is, in principle, 'intelligible'. This is sometimes expressed as the idea that there is a reason for each and every state of affairs (the principle of sufficient reason). I have elected not to include this, and not merely because the meanings of 'intelligible' and 'sufficient reason' are difficult to determine. Rather, it is a matter of controversy as to whether Berkeley, Locke or even Hume rejected the 'in principle intelligibility' of the world. Berkeley's view of natural events as sign and signifier, constituting the language of God spoken in a providential world, seems to be a candidate for an intelligible world.[23] Michael Ayers argues that Locke is an 'ontological rationalist' who holds that the world does have an intelligible structure, but not intelligible *to us* because we lack the intellectual faculty necessary to grasp it.[24] Following John P. Wright,[25] he also holds that the same is true for Hume, though this realist dimension to Hume is accompanied by a more thoroughgoing epistemological scepticism than Locke's. Rather than taking a stand on this issue, then, I shall bracket the issue of the 'intelligibility' of the world as a distinguishing mark of the rationalism/empiricism divide.

Setting the Scene: Malebranche's Influence on Hume

We begin with a summary of the extent and nature of Malebranche's influence on Hume. As this influence is documented elsewhere, I shall confine myself to a few brief remarks.[26]

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here (36–37). Third, the fact that editions of the *Meditations* were difficult to get hold of in Scotland in the 1740s suggests absence of interest in Cartesianism. This he sees as part of a more general chauvinism in favour of Newton over Descartes (65). I have elected not to discuss these points.

[23] See my 'Berkeley, the Ends of Language and the Principles of Human Knowledge', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **107** (2007), 265–278.

[24] See Michael Ayers, *Locke: Ontology* (London: Routledge 1991), 154ff.

[25] John Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1983.)

[26] The most recent discussions include my 'On Hume's Appropriate of Malebranche: Causation and Self' *European Journal of Philosophy* in press

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In his 1916 study, C. W. Doxee claimed the influence to be singularly striking because '[r]arely do we discover an empiricist and a rationalist that teach identical doctrines, particularly when the doctrines in question are almost equally fundamental in the thinking of both'.[27] That Hume and Malebranche teach 'identical doctrines' is rather an exaggeration, but Doxee identified extensive similarities between (i) their treatment of causal relations (ii) the unknowability of any substantial self and (iii) Malebranche's theory of natural judgment and what Kemp Smith called Hume's 'natural beliefs'. Later work finessed and added to Doxee's study. In addition to those Doxee noted, the other discernible lines of influence include the following: Hume's view of truth as relations of ideas,[28] the basic mechanics of sympathy,[29] and Hume's treatment of the passions.[30] Hume's view of secondary qualities and his projective metaphor of 'spreading the mind' come from Malebranche.[31] Hume's treatment of the associative relation of resemblance and its relation to error in

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and sections of my *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007). See also Charles McCracken, *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), the relevant sections of Peter Jones *Hume's Sentiments: Their Ciceronian and French Context* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982) and John Wright, op. cit., note 24 and 'Hume's Criticism of Malebranche's Theory of Causation: a Lesson in the Historiography of Philosophy' in Brown (ed.) *Malebranche and his Critics* (Assen/Maarstrict: Van Gorcum, 1991). Earlier studies include Ralph Church, 'Hume and Malebranche', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, **1** (1938) 143–161 and C. W. Doxee, 'Hume's Relation to Malebranche', *The Philosophical Review*, **25** (1916), 692–710. Other discussions include J Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature* (London: Methuen, 1932), 100ff; Stephen Nadler, 'Malebranche on Causation' in Nadler (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 133ff; Church, *Hume's Theory of the Understanding* (London: Allen and Unwin 1935), 92ff; Charles *Hendel Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), 57 and Buckle, op.cit., note 3.

[27] Op. cit, note 25, 692.

[28] See McCracken, op. cit., note 25.

[29] Wright, op. cit, note 24, 232, McCracken, op. cit., note 25, 287 and Susan James, 'Sympathy and Comparison: Two Principles of Human Nature' in Frasca-Spada and Kail (eds.) *Impressions of Hume* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2005).

[30] James op. cit., note 28.

[31] See my 'Projection and Necessity in Hume', *European Journal of Philosophy* **9** (2001), 24–54.

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the *Treatise* leans heavily on Malebranche's account of *liaison naturelle* (which Hume calls 'natural relations'), as does his general account of association.[32]

This last example provides a good illustration of the kind of evidence we have for the influence. In accounting for association by resemblance, Malebranche appeals to 'animal spirits', writing that they

> . . .produce certain traces in the brain that often produce others that truly resemble them in some things, but are not quite the traces of the same objects, nor those the soul desired to be represented, because the animal spirits . . . crowd into the deep traces of the ideas that are more familiar to us.[33]

Now, compare the wording of this passage with one from the *Treatise* where Hume attempts to explain the source of the associative relation of resemblance:

> . . .whenever [the imagination] dispatches the spirits into that region of the brain, in which the idea is plac'd; these spirits always excite the idea, when they run precisely into the proper traces, and rummage that cell, which belongs to the idea. But the motion is seldom direct, and naturally turns a little to the one side of the other; for this reason the animal spirits, falling into the contiguous traces, present other related ideas.[34]

The similarity of wording here is unmistakable,[35] and indeed aside from the number of explicit references to Malebranche in Hume's works, the *Treatise* contains a significant number of passages that

[32] See Wright op. cit, note 24, 64ff for discussion.
[33] *Search* 134–5, OCM I: 275.
[34] T 1.2.5.20; SBN 60–61.
[35] This is, for both thinkers, the basis of our disposition to anthropomorphize, a phenomenon they illustrate with similar examples. Malebranche talks of seeing a 'face in the moon' and 'chariots, men, lions or other animals in the clouds' (*Search* 135, OCM I: 276), and Hume in the *Natural History of Religion* says we 'find human faces in the moon, armies in the clouds' (in Gaskin (ed.) *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993: 141)). See my 'On Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche' for discussion.

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are near word-for-word translations of passages from the *Search*. Thus Malebranche:

> There are philosophers who maintain that second causes act by . . . their substantial form. Many by Accident or Qualities, some by Matter and Form; others by Form and Accidents, others still by certain virtues and faculties distinct from all this.[36]

And Hume

> There are some, who maintain, that bodies operate by their substantial form; others, by their accidents or qualities; several, by their matter and form; some by their form and accidents; others by certain virtues and faculties distinct from all this.[37]

One can find many such passages[38] (and nothing comparable from the work of Descartes as far as I can determine), showing that a direct line of influence of Malebranche on Hume is highly probable.[39]

It is not surprising, then, that the *Search* tops a list of works Hume advised his friend Michael Ramsey to read in preparation for the *Treatise*. Quite obviously, it would be absurd to say that Malebranche is Hume's sole or most significant influence. Nor should 'influence' be taken to mean mere slavish copying. As Charles Hendel wrote, Hume did not follow Malebranche 'as a disciple'.[40] Hume appropriates material drawn from Malebranche and uses it for his own ends. And clearly Hume differs from Malebranche in many fundamental ways. In what follows I show that these differences depend on a rationalist/empiricist distinction.

Causation

Malebranche's influence is at its most pronounced in Hume's treatment of causal power. At a superficial level, it is evidenced in T.1.3.14 'Of the idea of necessary connexion', where there are near word-for-word translations of passages from the *Search*. Furthermore, many examples Hume employs, in both the *Treatise*

[36] *Search* Elucidation 15, 658, OCM III: 205.
[37] T 1.3.14.7; SBN 158.
[38] For others, see McCracken, op. cit., note 25, 257 and Jones, op. cit., note 25 19ff.
[39] Edinburgh University library has Hume's copy of the 1684 edition of *Recherche de la Vérité*.
[40] Op.cit, note 25, 57.

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and the first *Enquiry*, can be traced to Malebranche. The famous example of the billiard balls from §7 of the first *Enquiry* is in Elucidation 15 of the *Search*. Both thinkers, in rejecting the thesis that we can observe efficacy in the operations of the will, centre their discussions on the example of a paralyzed man attempting to move his arm (*Search* Elucidation 15; *Enquiry* §7). Both reject the claim that causal power is observable, but nevertheless offer an explanation of the mistaken belief that it is. Hume says that the vulgar 'imagine that they perceive a connexion betwixt such objects as they have constantly found united together',[41] and 'suppose . . . they perceive the very force or energy of the causes'.[42] The source of this mistake for Hume is the mind's 'great propensity to spread itself on external objects',[43] whereby we project an inner sentiment onto the world. This explanation again has its source in the *Search*. 'When I see one ball strike another', Malebranche writes, 'my eyes tell me, or seem to tell me, that the one is truly the cause of the motion it impresses on the other'.[44] But my 'senses seduce me':[45] my experience of causal transactions is akin to misleading secondary property experience, owing itself to the fact that the soul 'spreads itself (*répandre*)'[46] onto external objects.[47]

For both thinkers, this vulgar error in the epistemology of causation contributes to a dialectic between a 'true' and a 'false' philosophy

[41] T 1.2.3.9; SBN 223.

[42] Beauchamp (ed.) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), following the convention of book, part, section and paragraph numbers. Page references to *Hume's Enquiries* ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (rev. ed., Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) (SBN). Hence EHU 7.1.21; SBN 69.

[43] T 1.3.14.25; SBN 167.

[44] *Search* Elucidation 15, 660, OCM III: 208.

[45] *Search* Elucidation 15, 660, OCM III: 209.

[46] *Search* 58, OCM I: 138. See also *Search* 657, OCM III: 203 and elsewhere. The metaphor is quite common in the *Search*.

[47] Buckle's concentration on Descartes rather than Malebranche here misleads him. Hume's concern with the observability of causation argues for Buckle that Hume is joining Descartes in targeting the ancient philosophical view of 'cognitive impressions' (Op. cit., note 3, 41). Whilst it is quite true that Hume sides with Descartes, or more properly Malebranche, that causal power is not perceivable, the target is also the ordinary commitment to the perceivability of power and not a distinct philosophical doctrine. See my review of Buckle's book in *European Journal of Philosophy* **11** (2003), 439–443.

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of causal power. The misleading impression of power becomes yoked to a philosophy of substantial form. Malebranche holds that 'pagan philosophy and . . . the impressions of the senses' lead to a false and 'detestable philosophy',[48] whereby objects have genuine causal powers *qua* substantial forms. Hume thinks that ancient philosophy is a 'false philosophy',[49] an 'invention of the words, *faculty* and *occult quality*'[50] in the face of causal transactions that we cannot understand. For despite vulgar appearances, we have 'no idea of power or agency, separate from the mind, and belonging to causes'.[51] Malebranche agrees: '[w]hatever effort I make to understand it, I cannot find in me any idea representing to me what might be the force or power they attribute to created objects'.[52] Hence our attribution of power is 'a fiction of the mind of which we have naturally no idea, [and] it is the fancy that leads everyone to imagine it'.[53] It is clear then that Hume was deeply engaged with Malebranche. It is equally clear, however, that they arrive at radically different conclusions regarding causal power. We shall see that their respective argumentative strategies are again strikingly similar, but the differences fall out of the empiricist/rationalist divide on the intellect.

What though are their respective conclusions? Malebranche argues for *occasionalism*, the thesis that all power resides in God's volitional activity. Occasionalism entails the rejection of 'second causes'. To believe in second causes is to believe that causal transactions involve the exercise of powers possessed by the particular objects involved. Occasionalism, by contrast, holds that causal relations among objects consist in those objects standing in regularities, underwritten by God's will, that are identical to laws of nature. The truth of 'A causes B' depends not on A's power to bring about B, but in there being a God-sustained regularity whereby B follows A. Hume, on the other hand, is famously sceptical about power, holding that all that we can understand of the causal relation is captured in his 'two definitions'. No objective power is manifest in any instance of a relation between objects that we deem causal. Our idea of necessary connection is not derived from any observation or impression of genuine power but instead from a feeling of compulsion, acquired through

[48] *Search* 448, OCM II: 312.
[49] T 1.4.3.9; SBN 222.
[50] T 1.4.3.10; SBN 224.
[51] T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223.
[52] *Search* 658, OCM III: 205.
[53] *Search* 659, OCM III: 207.

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repeated observation of effect following cause. Beyond all this we cannot conceive or understand any more to the causal relation.

These then are very different conclusions. But these differences in conclusion do not by themselves mark any rationalist/empiricist contrast. It is true that Hume explicitly criticizes Malebranche's theory of causation, but then so does Leibniz. Berkeley, on the other hand, accepted a similar, though by no means identical, view of the causal relations in the natural world to that of Malebranche. It is not so much the differences in conclusions that are important for our concerns but *how* they are reached. We can approach this matter from what is the central point of contact between Hume and Malebranche. Both conceive of powers as *necessary connections*.[54] Both hold that any instance of a power must relate A and B with absolute necessity, such that in any world where A exists, B exists. This metaphysical relation is understood to imply a certain modal epistemology. Any such power, when grasped, is supposed to render it impossible for the thinker to *conceive* cause A without effect B. It is sometimes said that because Malebranche and Hume view causal powers in this way, they are guilty of conflating 'natural' with 'logical' necessity,[55] or of setting too high a standard for the causal relation. But, somewhat briefly and dogmatically, this is not so. First, the relevant modal relations hold between *objects* or *events*, whereas logical necessity (whatever else it might be) relates *conceptual* or *semantic* items. So although this metaphysical relation is *reflected* in a conceptual relation grounding the impossibility of conceiving A independently of B, the relevant modality is a metaphysical one. It is not *constituted* by relations of necessitation between the concepts that pick out the relevant *relata*. The impossibility of finding anything else conceivable expresses a *grasp* of the metaphysical impossibility of A without B: it does not constitute it.

Second, the identification of causal necessitation with metaphysical necessitation is not an arbitrarily high standard for power. To see why we need to distinguish sharply what our *concept* of A causing B might be from what might be the *metaphysical* grounds for any power, anything more than regular succession. Our concept of 'cause' commits us to more than a simple relation of regular succession holding between types A and B. We might, for example, believe A and B

[54] For a discussion of the important and centrality of this notion, see Simon Blackburn, 'Hume and Thick Connexions' in Richman and Read (eds.) *The New Hume Debate* (London: Routledge, 2000) and more extensively my *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy*.

[55] See e.g. Nadler, op. cit., note 25.

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are causally related just in case we believe (implicitly) that B is counterfactually dependent on A. So, *pace* Hume and Malebranche, we have no need of metaphysical necessity to distinguish genuine causal relations from mere regularities, for the conceptual difference can be marked by mere counterfactual dependence. But even if we grant that our ordinary concept of causal necessity implies only counterfactual dependence and not absolute necessity, this still leaves open a metaphysical question. Is there anything more *metaphysically* speaking to such relations other than regular succession? At the metaphysical level we are offered a stark choice: either such relations hold contingently, which means that ultimately speaking causal relations are a matter of brute regularities – contrary to our supposition that there is more to causation than regularities - or they must be grounded in absolute necessity. For at the metaphysical level there are two and only two modalities: contingency and necessity. Thus David Lewis's counterfactual analysis of the *concept* of causation is made against a metaphysic of contingent regularities, some of which are dignified with the term 'law of nature'.[56] If you maintain that there is metaphysically speaking more to the world than mere regularities, then there is no other modality other than absolute necessity. Hume and Malebranche do not therefore set some arbitrarily high standard for the existence of causal powers but know quite rightly that if there is anything more to the relation than regularity it has to be absolute necessity.

Hume and Malebranche agree on this point and the associated epistemology of conceivability, but differ over whether one can determine any relation of necessary connection. For Malebranche there is one, and only one, relation of necessary connection, and hence only one genuine power, namely that between God's will and its objects:

> When one thinks of about the idea of God, i.e. of an infinitely perfect and consequently all-powerful being, one knows there is a such a connection between His will and the motion of all bodies, that it is *impossible to conceive that He wills a body to be moved and that this body not be moved*.[57]

Clearly here Malebranche is arriving at his occasionalist conclusion by appeal to the notion of power as absolute necessity, and the related epistemology of conceivability. Hume, on the other hand,

[56] See David Lewis, 'Causation', *Journal of Philosophy* **70** (1973), 556–567.

[57] *Search*, 448, my emphasis, OCM II: 313.

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uses conceivability to reject the claim that any necessary connexion can be found among the supposed *relata* of causation. He writes

> Now nothing is more evident, than that the human mind cannot form such an idea of two objects, as to conceive any connexion bewixt them, or comprehend distinctly that power or efficacy, by which they are united. Such a connexion wou'd amount to a demonstration, and wou'd imply the absolute impossibility for the object not to follow, or *to be conceiv'd not to follow upon the other*.[58]

The fundamental difference between the two then is that Malebranche finds God's acts of will and their effects inconceivable from one another, whereas Hume simply denies any such relation. But there has to be more to matters than this, otherwise we have not much more than a relatively uninteresting standoff between the two, a matter of Hume simply denying what Malebranche claims. The difference lies in the account of conceivability. Now, as we shall explore in connection with the self, both thinkers connect conceivability with 'separability'. To conceive A apart from B is to 'separate' A from B. So what further difference is there between them? Notice Hume holds that we have no idea of necessary connection because a grasp of such a connection would 'imply the absolute impossibility for the object not to follow, or to be conceiv'd not to follow upon the other'. To support this claim he states 'as all distinct ideas are separable, 'tis evident there can be no impossibility of that kind'.[59] So because 'distinct' ideas are 'separable' we can never therefore grasp necessity: for to find B inconceivable apart from A is to find them inseparable, but given that the ideas are 'distinct', we can always separate A from B, and so find them independently conceivable. So the following seems to be on the cards. Hume holds that God's volition and its effect are distinct, and so, *contra* Malebranche, they are independently conceivable, and hence not necessarily connected.

By itself, however, this gets us little further than a simple standoff. For unless we are given some independent conception of what 'distinct' means here, Malebranche is not forced to accept this conclusion – he could simply deny that God's will and its objects are 'distinct' in the relevant sense. The key, and principled, difference rests in the theory of conceptual representation with which each operates. Recall that Hume's Copy Principle holds that *ideas* – concepts - are exact copies of sensory impressions, such that the *only* difference between sensory

[58] T 1.3.14.13; SBN 161 my emphasis.
[59] T 1.3.6.1; SBN 87 T 1.3.6.1; SBN 87.

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experiences, on the one hand, and ideas or concepts one the other, lies in their relative degree of vivacity. So any 'distinctness' in ideas must be inherited from the character of the sensory impressions from which such ideas are derived. Now, the only kind of 'distinctness' that sensory experience can yield is *phenomenal* distinctness: it cannot itself be conceptual (on pain of turning Hume into Kant). Hence given that ideas are exact copies of sensory impressions, and sensory impressions are essentially phenomenal items, the distinctness of ideas must be phenomenal.

This is a direct result of the thesis that all ideas are derived from, and exactly resemble, sensory impressions. Any *conceptual* difference is grounded in the *phenomenal* distinctness of sensory experience. Any cause and effect are separately conceivable because they are phenomenally distinct. But Malebranche holds that our concepts are of a different nature, for he holds that ideas are concepts that can represent independently of sensory experience, and so conceptual distinctness is not constrained by phenomenal distinctness. So his conception of conceptual distinctness need not imply that the idea of God's will and its effect are separable, and independently conceivable. For him, we cannot conceive God's volition failing to have its effect, presumably on the grounds that omnipotence conceptually implies necessity, and conceptual implication is not determined by phenomenal character. Hence the difference between the two thinkers has to be down to the rationalist/empiricist divide. Hume ultimately disagrees with Malebranche because his account of conceptual distinctness is governed by the thesis that all concepts are determined by their sensory origins, and so distinctness must have a phenomenal character. Hume's theory of mind is a matter of separating images, and so that shows that there is no necessary connection knowable among distinct ideas. It is because Malebranche does not subscribe to this thesis about concepts that Hume and Malebranche part company. This is why Hume thinks we have no idea of necessary connection.

I said Hume explicitly criticizes Malebranche, and indeed he does.[60] But his key criticism presupposes the more fundamental

[60] Hume offers two other objections. The first is a parity objection to occasionalism: the arguments that supposedly deprive created objects of genuine powers apply equally to God's will (EHU 7.1.25; SBN 72–73), and so he takes this as a *reductio*. The second objection to occasionalism is this: the thesis of occasionalism extends beyond common or everyday experience, and analogies drawn from common experience (op. cit.). This objection is empiricist in holding that any thesis that extends beyond the bounds of everyday experience is epistemically dubious.

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difference regarding the intellect we have just discussed. Against Malebranche, Hume argues that since the Copy Principle is true, and the doctrine of innate ideas is false, any idea we have, including that of power or necessary connection, as well as the idea of God, must be constructed from sensory materials. But we have no sensory-derived idea of power, and without an idea of power we cannot ascribe power to the deity.[61] The premises of this argument though presuppose the more fundamental rejection of the intellect we have just been discussing. The sensory nature of Humean ideas makes all ideas 'loose and separable', allowing us to conceive the independent existence of all constituent ideas. Grasping a necessary connection, on the other hand, would supposedly render it impossible to conceive A apart from B. Such a grasp is thereby impossible because of the loose and separable nature of sensory impressions.[62]

Self and Substance

We now turn to Hume and Malebranche on self-knowledge. Both deny that we have an idea of a substantial self, maintaining that introspection reveals only particular perceptions rather than any substance upon which those perceptions depend. Although Hume rejects the existence of a substantial self, and Malebranche endorses it, commentators have been very struck by the similarity of the two thinkers on the self.[63] Thus Andrew Pyle remarks that Malebranche 'arrives . . . at a position, as regards our knowledge of our own souls, not far

[61] T 1.3.14.10; SBN 160.

[62] For a fuller discussion, see my *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy*, chapter six.

[63] This commonality was one of the main themes of Doxee's 1916 paper, and later Ralph Church argued that Malebranche 'anticipates Hume's sceptical analysis of personal identity' (*A Study in the Philosophy of Malebranche*, (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931) 49–50). John Laird (op. cit., note 25) concurred, tracing Hume's claim that perceptions pass with 'inconceivable rapidity' to Malebranche's view of perception's *vitesse inconcevable* (*Search* 221, OCM I: 420). Some commentators are more sceptical of any influence. Reacting against Church's claim that Hume merely pushes Malebranche's ignorance claim to its logical conclusion, Charles McCracken argues that the two thinkers are very different inasmuch as the reasons each offers for rejecting an idea of the self are 'entirely different' (op.cit., note 25, 271). McCracken, though allowing a 'certain affinity' between Hume and Malebranche, believes that the differences outweigh the similarities. But as I show in the body of this paper, Hume's

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removed from the scepticism of Hume'.[64] I shall show that the kind of reasoning Hume exploits in rejecting the existence of a substantial self is, like the case of necessary connection, very similar to that employed by Malebranche to establish a different thesis, namely that there *is* an unknowable self. Again the difference in conclusions here, though fostered by similar kinds of considerations, depends crucially on the rejection of the intellect. Briefly, Malebranche's argument that the soul is an unknown substance depends on (i) an intellectual grasp of the nature of material substance as extension and (ii) an argument about conceivability and independent existence. Hume rejects (i) and exploits (ii) to show that the self is *not* a substance.

We begin by examining Malebranche's reasons for thinking that there is a substantial self, of which we have no idea, and why it is that we have no such idea. The claim that we have no idea of a substantial self relates to an asymmetry between our epistemic position with respect to the self and with respect to the body. Recall that intellectual representations yield a certain kind of *a priori* modal knowledge. They 'represent things to the mind in a way so clear that we can discover by simple perception whether such and such modifications belong to them'.[65] We possess a grasp of body as pure extension provided by the intellect. This consists in a grasp of extension as essence, allowing us to determine *a priori* all the modes of which matter is capable. This knowledge is expressed in the science of geometry, which offers an exhaustive account of the properties of matter. Now, this kind of understanding is simply not available with respect to the mind, and it is in this sense that we have no idea of it. We have 'no idea of our mind which is such that, by consulting it, we can discover the modifications of which the mind is capable'.[66] Any knowledge we have is of particular modes or sensations and is *a posteriori*: we only come to know those modes by experience. The soul 'knows itself capable of a given sensation not through the perception it has of itself in consulting its ideas but only through experience, whereas it knows that extension is capable of an infinite number of figures through the idea it has of extension'.[67] Any knowledge of self is limited to an

argumentative strategy is very similar to Malebranche's. To this extent he and others have missed the real line of influence of Malebranche on Hume.

[64] Andrew Pyle, *Malebranche* (London: Routledge, 2000), 208.

[65] *Search* 561, OCM III: 44.

[66] *Search* 634, OCM III: 164.

[67] *Search* 238, OCM I: 452.

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'inner sensation' or *sentiment intérieur* which (somehow) intimates *that* there is a self, but not *what* that self is.[68]

One sense in which knowledge of the soul is not *a priori* is that we cannot understand its modes unless that mode is actualized: we cannot, that is, read off the taste of a pineapple from a prior grasp of the essence of the soul. A different sense in which our knowledge is not *a priori* is that one cannot tell by introspection whether any particular mode is a mode of the soul or a mode of body. One cannot tell whether pain is a mode of body or soul, or whether perceived colour is a mode of external bodies or merely an aspect of subjective experience. This feature of our knowledge of the mind figures in Malebranche's attempt to establish that there *is* some (*a priori* unknowable) substantial self. The argument goes like this. Anything is either a mode or a substance. We can determine what is a mode of extension by considering 'what is inseparable [*inséparable*] from it', and what we 'we conceive of as inseparable'[69] is extension or 'relations of distance'. Since colours, pains etc., are evidently not substances, and not modes of extension, they are thereby modes of a non-extended, immaterial substance. Thus Malebranche's spokesman in the first of the *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion* says 'my own substance, is not [therefore] a body, since my perceptions, which surely belong to me, are something entirely different from relations of distance'.[70]

Turning now to Hume's account, the most evident difference between the two thinkers consists in the fact that Hume rejects any substantial self, famously holding that the self is nothing but a bundle of perceptions. According to Ralph Church,[71] Hume reaches this conclusion by pushing Malebranche's epistemological claim – that we have no introspective knowledge of a substantial self- to the ontological conclusion that there is no substantial self. This leads Church to say that Malebranche a 'better empiricist than Hume'[72] just because Malebranche is agnostic where Hume calls for rejection. But this misconstrues both Hume's argument and its relation to Malebranche's views. We should note first that Malebranche holds that we grasp one substance – namely extension –

[68] E.g. *Search* 480, OCM II 369–70.
[69] *Search* 243, OCM I: 459.
[70] *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, ed. Jolley and Scott. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 6, OCM XII: 34.
[71] Op. cit., note 25.
[72] Op. cit., note 25, 148.

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whereas Hume does not. To have an idea of substance requires an impression, but we have no such impression. Thus in T 1.4.5 'Of the immateriality of the soul',[73] Hume writes that as every idea 'is deriv'd from a precedent impression, had we any idea of... substance..., we must have an impression of it'.[74] We have no idea of substance, material or immaterial, because we have no impression of it. This is clearly an application of the distinctly empiricist thesis that all ideas must relate suitably to sensory experience. Perhaps this is what motivates Church's claim that Hume pushes Malebranche's ignorance claim to Hume's rejection. But this misses Hume's more fundamental argument, which exploits conceivability and separability considerations similar to those Malebranche uses.

Consider the definition of substance as 'that which may exist by itself'. To determine what satisfies that definition we should, with Malebranche, identify that which can be *conceived* as having independent existence through the separability of the relevant item from others. Hume applies this principle to perceptions. All perceptions are distinct, and can be separately conceived: they 'may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance'.[75] Since perceptions are supposed not themselves to be substances, but modes of the soul, the traditional route to determining substancehood delivers quite the wrong result. Thus either we have no idea of substance at all or, *per impossible*, perceptions are substances:

> ... by neither considering the first origins of ideas, nor by means of a definition are we able to arrive at any satisfactory notion of substance; which seems to me a sufficient reason for abandoning utterly that dispute concerning the materiality or immateriality of the soul, and makes me absolutely condemn even the question itself.[76]

These considerations do the real work in Hume's rejection of a substantial self in T.1.4.6 'Of personal identity'. Hume does not reject a substantial self simply on the grounds that such a self is not the object of introspection. It is true that he says that introspection

[73] Andrew Pyle remarks that 'Hume's discussion 'Of the immateriality of the soul'... shows traces of Malebranche's influence on almost every page' (op. cit., note 63 275n43).

[74] T 1.4.4.3; SBN 232.

[75] T 1.4.5.5; SBN 233.

[76] T 1.4.4.6; SBN 234.

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reveals only a 'bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement',[77] and I 'never can catch *myself*'.[78] But the real argument rests on conceivability and separability. Thus he writes:

> But farther, what must become of all our particular perceptions upon this hypothesis [of self as substance]? All these are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately consider'd, and may exist separately; and have no need of any thing to support their existence.[79]

Hume therefore uses modal considerations to reject a substantial self, an appeal to separability that Malebranche used to establish that the self is an immaterial substance. It is quite wrong then to think with McCracken that Hume's use of separability and distinction is among the 'fundamental empiricist principles' operative in the rejection of the self.[80] Instead rationalists like Malebranche and Descartes embrace the connection between distinctness, separability and conceivability in the epistemology of substance. The difference between them and Hume rest on the rejection of the intellect, and hence a grasp of substancehood. For Hume, either we have no idea of substance (since we have no impression of it) or the use of separability to determine substancehood delivers the result that perceptions are substances, and hence cannot be related to some substance that is identical to the self.

Conclusion

I have shown that the fundamentally differences between Hume and Malebranche are correctly understood as a matter of an empiricist *versus* a rationalist in terms of Hume's rejection of the intellect. Hume employs much that is borrowed from Malebranche, including the wording of passages and examples, but, more crucially, argumentative strategies regarding necessary connection and the self. Hume uses very similar arguments to Malebranche but arrives at very different conclusions. As we have seen, he is able to do so because he rejects the supposition that ideas or representations can be non-sensory. That assumption was essential for Malebranche in his arguments

[77] T 1.4.6.4; SBN 252.
[78] T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252.
[79] T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252.
[80] Op. cit., note 25, 271. McCracken traces this to Berkeley.

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for occasionalism and the substantial self and its rejection fuels Hume's very different conclusions. This however is not to say the empiricist versus rationalist element is the only interesting and central aspect of the relation between the two. Elsewhere I show how the religious differences are of equal or perhaps more importance in understanding the two.[81] Nevertheless the fundamental differences between the two authors do rest on a recognisable rationalist/empiricist distinction.[82]

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[81] See my 'On Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche'.

[82] The substance of this paper was written whilst on AHRC research leave, for which I am very grateful. During that time I was fortunate enough to be a scholar in residence in the helpful, friendly and stimulating environment of the Newberry Library in Chicago. I owe this wonderful time to Sara Austin, Mike Green, Jim Grossman, Dan and Mary-Ann Hamilton, Louis Nelson, Frank Valadez and Betsy Wright. Peter Millican offered his views on an earlier version of this paper, and I took on board all of his genuinely useful remarks. John P. Wright was as ever very helpful. Thanks also to John Mayer, Leo Fender, P. F. B. Edmund and S. M. S. Pearsall.

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