

## Causation Revisited

I find that it is just over thirty years since I published a paper both promoting a certain interpretation of David Hume on causation, and arguing that so understood Hume was in essence right about the topic.<sup>1</sup> Since then, although seas of argument have swirled around both those claims, and much other writing about causation has appeared, I have seen little reason to change my mind. I would, however put some things a little differently, particularly in the light of four avenues that have opened up, or of which I was not sufficiently aware. Two of these are buttresses to my position but two are objections. I shall first sketch what I did say, and then elaborate in the light of these additions.

I called the view which I offered Hume and also defended, quasi-realism about causation. I now regret the term, as having certain misleading connotations. The most important of these is that thirty years ago I thought that the term ‘realism’ was sufficiently understood to serve as a landmark that could orientate the discussion. I am no longer confident of that, largely because in the intervening years minimalism and deflationism about truth have both become far more prevalent than I took them to be at the time. When they are there to assist us it no longer takes any theoretical effort to climb what I called Ramsey’s ladder, going from, say, ‘Covid causes nasty illnesses’ to ‘it is really true, or a fact, that Covid causes nasty illnesses’. If that is realism and it can be earned so cheaply, there is no point in being pussyfooted about it. On the other hand, it being so cheap, you cannot purchase any worthwhile philosophical clarity or understanding with it. Nor is it, as it was once supposed

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Blackburn, ‘Hume and Thick Connexions’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (special half-centenary volume) 1990.

to be, a metatheory, or in other words a philosophical theory about some area of discourse. It is simply the fall out from ways of making first-order claims themselves.

My principal concern in that paper was to query the “New Hume” which interpreted him as a causal realist, and a realist who was indeed offering a metatheory – not a restatement of causal claims, but an interpretation of them. I thought of this as neglecting the real epistemological (and metaphysical) significance of Hume’s discussions, which lies in distinguishing the two aspects of the subject, aptly separated in the “two definitions” of both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. There is what the world shows us, which are the regular patterns in which events fall out, and there is what the mind makes of this. Alongside Norman Kemp-Smith I claimed that this was significantly parallel to the two different aspects of attributions of value to things or virtues to people that Hume also employs. There is what we can neutrally or empirically observe in the natural properties of things and people—and then there is the approbation or cluster of attitudes that these elicit in us. In the case of causation there is the empirical basis in the pattern of events that manifest themselves to us, and then there is what I shall call the modal overlay: the supposition that some events *had to* happen or *must* happen or are *made to* happen by surrounding events or states of affairs. The modal overlay is not a fact of which we are aware, in the way that we are aware of the empirical succession of events, but is as it were the gloss we bring to the empirical pattern: a gloss that in turn signals our confidence in selecting or manipulating means in order to predict or bring about the consequences we suppose them to cause. The modal overlay represents the inferential consequences of causal judgments, as opposed to the inertness of pure records of observation.

In this paper I shall not revisit the rebuttal of the New Hume interpretation that I tried to offer, beyond reminding us that Hume shows nothing but impatience with it:

I am, indeed, ready to allow, that there may be several qualities both in material and immaterial objects, with which we are utterly unacquainted; and if we please to call these *power* or *efficacy*, 'twill be of little consequence to the world.<sup>2</sup>

Now to the additional materials. The first important buttress to my line is a discussion by the historian Margaret Wilson.<sup>3</sup> I first discussed this in my contribution to the *Oxford Handbook to David Hume*, but I shall repeat the gist here. Talking in general of philosophers of the seventeenth century, including Galileo, Descartes, Hobbes, Boyle, and Malebranche, Wilson says:

also common to most of these writers is a tendency to vacillate, just as Locke does, over whether terms like 'color' and 'red' denominate physical structures, or the "powers" that (partly) result from the structures to cause sensations, or (as Locke seems usually to suppose) the sensations themselves. (Wilson 1992, 229)

In other words, these writers were unable or unwilling to decide between three theories:

1. Colours are microphysical structures (possibly including relationships with other surrounding physical structures).
2. Colours are the powers or dispositions that objects have, in virtue of their microphysical structures, to cause particular sensations in us.
3. Colours are sensations (*qualia*) in us.

There are exactly parallel to three candidates for virtues in Hume: I here pick only three out of many illustrative remarks:

1. They are useful or agreeable qualities in persons.

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<sup>2</sup> Hume *Treatise*, book 1 part III, Section 14, SBN p. 163

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, M. 1992 'History of Philosophy in Philosophy Today; and the Case of the Sensible Qualities', *Philosophical Review* v. 101, 191–243.

*Temperance, sobriety, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, considerateness, secrecy, order, insinuation, address, presence of mind, quickness of conception, facility of expression,* these, and a thousand more of the same kind, no man will ever deny to be excellencies and perfections. <sup>4</sup>

2. They are the powers that persons have, through possessing such qualities, to excite pleasure, love, and admiration, or their opposites, in those who contemplate them.

Now since every quality in ourselves or others, which gives pleasure, always causes pride or love; as every one, that produces uneasiness, excites humility or hatred: It follows, that these two particulars are to be considered as equivalent, with regard to our mental qualities, virtue and the power of producing love or pride, vice and the power of producing humility or hatred<sup>5</sup>

3. They are these passions themselves, of pleasure themselves, lying in the mind of the person contemplating them.

EUCLID has fully explained every quality of the circle, but has not, in any proposition, said a word of its beauty. The reason is evident. Beauty is not a quality of the circle. It lies not in any part of the line *whose* parts are all equally distant from a common center. It is only the effect, which that figure produces upon a mind, whose particular fabric or structure renders it susceptible of such sentiments. In vain would you look for it in the circle, or seek it, either by your senses, or by mathematical reasonings, in all the properties of that figure.<sup>6</sup>

It may seem unpardonable, by modern analytic standards, to sit quiet about such an apparently momentous choice. But Hume and his seventeenth and eighteenth century cohort had a compelling excuse. The vacillation is over a ‘metaphysical’ question: ‘what colours are’ or ‘what virtues are’ and eventually ‘what causes are, or what causation is’. But this is not the kind of question Hume was trying to answer. We only have to remember the titles of both his major works to see that Hume is the philosopher of human nature. His

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<sup>4</sup> Hume *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section 6 part 1 §21 SBN p. 126

<sup>5</sup> *T* III, 3, 1, §3 SBN p. 575

<sup>6</sup> (*ESY* ‘The Sceptic’, I. 18.16 p. 165)

enquiries are entirely concerned with what underlies our *experience* of virtue or colours or causation, or our *thoughts* or *talk* about. As far as that goes he need not be troubled about any alleged vacillation, nor any work left to do. From his perspective the tripartite story is quite enough in the way of metaphysics. In the case of ethics on the one hand we have the qualities of character. Some of these have the power to excite our admiration and esteem. And those feelings gain expression in our moral approval. Were any of the three stages missing, we would not be valuing qualities of character as we do. And exactly the same tripartite structure underlies Hume's philosophy of causation:

1. Causes are temporarily prior elements isolated from regular patterns of contiguous events
2. They are the powers such patterns have to prompt inferential and practical dispositions in the mind.<sup>7</sup>
3. They are the inferential dispositions themselves.

In each case, then, there is on the one hand the contribution of the world, insofar as we can understand it, and on the other hand the functional change in the mind that is aware of that contribution. And Hume is just as forthright about the third element:

The necessity of any action, whether of matter or of the mind, is not properly a quality in the agent, but in any thinking or intelligent being, who may consider the action, and consists in the determination of his thought to infer its existence from some preceding objects.<sup>8</sup>

His satisfaction with the tripartite story also explains the somewhat weary way Hume introduces the "two definitions" in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, writing as if he is

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<sup>7</sup> I return to the importance of practical dispositions later. If any reader is troubled that this second premise talks of 'prompting', itself a causal term, they may rest assured that whatever we end up saying about causation in general will apply, without troubling circularity, to this instance as well. It is not as if Hume or I are using a causal premise to support the conclusion that there are no causes, but only to clarify what is meant by saying that there are.

<sup>8</sup> *T*, II, 3, §2, SBN p. 408.

impatient with the demand for definition. For when we have both what the world manifests to us and the adjustments in the mind that this engenders, there is no need of a ‘reductive analysis’, going on to say exactly what we mean. Hume has a strong sense of the autonomy of our reactions, and the sui generis nature of the assertions that voice them:

I begin with observing that the terms of *efficacy*, *agency*, *power*, *force*, *energy*, *necessity*, *connexion* and *productive quality* are all nearly synonymous, and therefore it is an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest.<sup>9</sup>

It is the origin on the ideas in our minds that we must find, and we will not do that by finding synonyms.

I was pleased to encounter Margaret Wilson’s paper describing the early modern consensus lying behind the Hume of my interpretation. It is good news that Hume is not alone in these tripartite analyses, but shares a great deal with other writers in the early modern period.

A second buttress already existed before my own involvement in these things, but I was unfortunately not fully aware of it. This was the way in which pragmatist writers such as Frank Ramsey and Wilfrid Sellars had approached the issue of causation. Huw Price reminds us of this, quoting a salient passage demonstrating Sellars’s affinity with quasi-realism:

It is my purpose to argue that the core truth of Hume’s philosophy of causation is not only compatible with, but absurd without, ungrudging recognition of those features of causal discourse as a mode of rational discourse on which the ‘metaphysical rationalists’ laid such stress but also mis-assimilated to describing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> T I. 3, §14 SBN p. 157

<sup>10</sup> Price, H. 2015. ‘From Quasi-Realism to Global Expressivism—and Back Again?’ in Johnson R. and Smith M. (eds), *Passions and Projections: Themes from the Philosophy of Simon Blackburn*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 134—152. The Sellars quotation is from Sellars W. 1958 ‘Counterfactuals, Dispositions, Causal Modalities’ in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, v. 2, eds. Feigl, Scriven & Maxwell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 285.

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In the case of causal modalities, although Sellars starts by following Hume and Ryle, he also imagines a diachronic process, whereby causal and counterfactual inferences become cemented into descriptive content that, confined to registering uniformities, would originally have been innocent of them. A later passage in the same paper expands this point. Talking of ramifications of causal vocabulary and ideas he says that

It is therefore important to realize that the presence in the object language of the causal modalities (and of the logical modalities and of the deontic modalities) serves not only to express existing commitments, but also to provide the framework for the thinking by which we reason our way (in a manner appropriate to the specific subject matter) into the making of new commitments and the abandonment of old...<sup>11</sup>

Like Ramsey he gives as examples the kinds of sentence that rationalists and realists like to showcase, such as ‘There are causal connections which have not yet been discovered’. In the same vein we might suppose that ‘There are obligations which have not yet been recognized’, such, for instance, obligations to animals or to future generations. Sellars argued that these quantifications do not describe hidden abstract objects, and should not excite metaphysical or ‘realist’ imaginings. They too are to be treated as expressive. They give voice to our being open—or endorsing us all being open—to the possibilities of inquiry and consequent improvement in their respective areas. In a similar vein someone thinking of the half-lives of undiscovered radioactive isotopes will think that there are probabilities that are yet unknown. All this is grist to the quasi-realist mill, of course. So when I finished my earlier paper asking whether the bare Humean account of the mind makes his subject a bit like you and me, the question could have received additional rhetorical import had I known of the sophistications Ramsey and Sellars bring to it. The sophistication of course makes it harder to draw any clear line between ‘realism’ and anti-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 303. For Ramsey see the essay referred to in footnote 12, *passim*.

realism, since once again we find the anti-realist starting point bringing us, without in any way betraying it, to realist-sounding conclusions. The advantage is that the realist-sounding conclusions invite no metaphysical worries. There is no head-wringing about what these causal necessities are, what constitutes them, whether they derive from essences or precede them, and so on. Nor is there any evident philosophical point in puzzling over the question of which is the ‘real’ cause when we meet variations of magnitude of aspects of things affected by complex fields of causal factors. That would often be a question for tort lawyers, bent on extracting damages, rather than one for metaphysicians.

Is Hume’s theory open to a charge of “subjectivism”? It certainly does not imply that there is no right or wrong about causal interpretations of events. There are some who maintain their denial that the Covid virus causes nasty illnesses even as they die of it. But Covid deniers are simply wrong, and so are people who think it permissible to stamp on babies for fun. These things ought to be clear to anyone of sound mind, competent to be properly aware of them. Other claims are not so clear, and when the behaviour of a system is the result of many interlocking variables their influence may be subject to dispute. One investigator may be more cautious or more imaginative in embracing more possibilities and fewer certainties than another. These are doubtless virtues, but I think Hume would avoid classifying them as rational virtues, in the strong sense that avoiding contradiction or doing mathematics correctly are rational virtues. As the vicissitudes of confirmation theory showed, it is difficult to defend just one value of Carnap’s C-function—meaning, just one propensity to derive a degree of confidence in generalizations and theories from partial



evidence.<sup>12</sup> Caution and imagination are properly matters of temperament, not traits illustrating either superior or inferior rationality, even if on occasion someone can be exasperatingly cautious and failing to draw conclusions, or dangerously rash and leaping to them.

Of course finding and displaying evidence for both causal and evaluative judgements are naturally called exercises of reason, and Hume is a relaxed enough writer to talk quite freely of reason when he is not engaged in hard-core anatomy of the mind. Although he never talks of rationality he allows himself considerable use of the judgement that some reactions to events are reasonable and others not, even when what is at issue are moral and emotional reactions. People can be unreasonably angry or unreasonably selfish as well as unreasonably dogmatic or unreasonably cautious. But neither when he is so relaxed nor when he is doing hard-core anatomy of the mind is any significant asymmetry between causal and evaluative reasonings on show.

The important upshot, for Hume is twofold. There is the avoidance (or if we like, the destruction) of any a priori element in our judgments of causation. And there is the avoidance, or again, the destruction, of reliance on any non-empirical, supernatural source of the empirical world. As the *Dialogues* shows, there is no analogy between that and legitimate scientific theorising: we can ascend to ever more general views about what causes what, but must also be aware that “the most perfect philosophy of the natural kind only staves off our ignorance a little longer”.

## II

Now for the two objections. The first is that some writers have taken it to be a decisive objection to Hume that we do in fact observe, or even ‘directly observe’ causation in

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolph Carnap, *The Continuum of Inductive Methods*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1952.

action.<sup>13</sup> We see and sometimes feel things bumping, pushing, cutting, breaking, other things. I am not concerned to show that there is anything wrong about saying this. Rather than confront such claims directly, I think we must simply remember Hume's concern with the inferential consequences of the causal interpretation of sequences of happenings. A causal interpretation can be expressed in conditionals and especially counterfactuals: there is little difference between thinking that an event A causes an event B, that when A happened B had to happen (the modal overlay), and that if A were to happen or had happened B would have to happen or would have had to happen. And no writers known to me suppose that we observe or still less directly observe the truth of counterfactuals.<sup>14</sup> Certainly when we observe bumpings, pushings and the rest, the counterfactuals indeed spring to mind. But as Michotte's famous experiments show, additional interpretations also spring to mind when we are observing sequences in which the antecedent even has no causal responsibility for the subsequent event at all (similarly we see big spheres as chasing little ones, or little ones as pestering big ones when we see them as circles on screen on which movements and juxtapositions are all that is displayed).<sup>15</sup>

The second obstacle to my interpretation that I shall discuss is a significant competitor that is now firmly on the scene. This is not indeed a competitor to my claim

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<sup>13</sup> Anscombe, G. E. M. ([1971] 1993). *Causality and Determination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; repr. in E. Sosa and M. Tooley (eds.), *Causation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993; Armstrong, D. M. (1962). *Bodily Sensations*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Ducasse, C. J. (1965). 'Causation: Perceivable? Or Only Inferred?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26: 173–9.

<sup>14</sup> The observational claims are well discussed in Helen Beebe, 'Causation and Observation' *The Oxford Handbook of Causation*

<sup>15</sup> Michotte, A. ([1946] 1963). *La Perception de la causalité*. Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie. English trans., *The Perception of Causality*, trans. T. R. Miles and E. Miles. Aylesbury: Hazell Watson & Viney, 1963.

about the correct interpretation of Hume, but rather an objection to Hume himself, and thereby to anyone such as myself who thinks Hume was substantially correct. The objection is that Hume gives us only a spectator's acquaintance with causation, and neglects the central role of our own agency in our understanding of causal thought and language. By that neglect he fails to appreciate a central aspect of the matter. As Peter Menzies and Huw Price put it in their seminal defence of this view, 'the central thesis of an agency account of causation is something like this: an event A is a cause of a distinct event B just in case bringing about the occurrence of A would be an effective means by which a free agent could bring about the occurrence of B'.<sup>16</sup>

As Price and Menzies know one reaction to this formula would be that while it is no doubt true that when A causes B, causing A is an effective means to causing B, the occurrence of 'agency' is in a sense gratuitous. Many philosophers will say that the proposition couched in terms of agency is only true because of an underlying natural causal relation that is independent of agency. I can bring it about that I do not get life-threatening Covid by bringing about my vaccination, but that is only because of the protection vaccines give: a causal power they have to stop serious Covid, and this causal power and the protection it brings about is quite independent of agency. One supposes that primitive people living close to nature realized that some snakes are poisonous without first intervening to encourage them to bite themselves or those around them. The realization certainly gave them a means for poisoning each other, but this was just an accidental bonus.

Other writers have also wished to give a more central place to the phenomena of trying or endeavouring to do things in their accounts of causation. C. D. Broad was an example:

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Menzies & Huw Price, 'Causation as a Secondary Property' *B. J. Phil. Sci.* 44 (1993) p. 187.

If you want to make a person think about perception, you must get him to think about such perfectly familiar processes as hearing, feeling, etc.; and, if you want to make him think about causation you must not start with out-of-the-way and highly abstract notions as the law of gravitation, but must get him to think about such processes as lifting, chopping, pushing, and so on.<sup>17</sup>

Price and Menzies also quote Ramsey whose extensive discussion of the relation between hypotheticals and causal interpretations of events also gives a central place to agency, culminating in the dark saying that ‘in a sense my present action is an ultimate and the only ultimate contingency’<sup>18</sup>. I do not suppose for a moment that Ramsey was making a metaphysical remark, which would have been entirely foreign to the whole tenor of his discussion, but instead was highlighting the way in which, in our reflections about causation, our own unforced decisions are thought of as free and therefore paradigm cases in which we can imagine the beginning of unfolding causal processes. A consequence of this orientation, rightly emphasized by Menzies and Price, is that it gives us an immediate and natural way of thinking about the difference between causation and coincidence. Were we just passive, stationary receivers of sense experience, our concern to make a fundamental distinction between those conjunctions that are causal and those that are not, would be entirely inexplicable. But because we are agents it matters a great deal: trying to achieve an end by manipulating as means events which are only coincidentally or indirectly associated with it is a waste of time

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<sup>17</sup> C. D. Broad ‘Notes on Causation’ originally given as a lecture in Oslo in 1955, to be reprinted in Joel Walmsley, ed. *C.D. Broad: Key Unpublished Writings*, Routledge, forthcoming.

<sup>18</sup> F. P. Ramsey, ‘General propositions and Causality’, in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. D. H. Mellor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 158. This is a late note of Ramsey’s, dated to 1929, and he did not live to expand upon it.

So far so good, but other peoples' agency does not have the same aura, and is more easily thought of as the natural upshot of preceding events. And then we are forced to realize that one of our own free interventions might have a confounding history of its own.<sup>19</sup> So for example I might set about testing whether nicotine-stained fingers cause cancer by bringing about nicotine stains and logging the results. If, however, I am the victim of an unconscious bias meaning that I only do this test on subjects I subliminally think of as cancerous, and if this perception is reliable, I will get a false result.

Nevertheless Broad and other theorists emphasizing agency, intervention, and the manipulation of events certainly have a point to make. The point might be that our own agency plays a formative role in the genealogy or origin of the modal overlay. With that I agree. But this seems to be an augmentation, a new element in a (speculative) genealogy of causal thinking and causal interpretations of the world. By itself it is not a competitor to the Humean story.

The emphasis on agency is perhaps more important in the area of experimental design, when we need active experimentation and manipulation of the value of variables in a system in order to begin to give its state equations, telling us how the system will change as these variables change. What we then observe are the changes, as Hume supposed, and it is the careful production and observation of these changes that fuel our empirical sciences. There is no a priori element returning, and no mysterious knowledge that is intrinsically connected

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<sup>19</sup> The following example is from James F. Woodward, 'Agency and Interventionist Theories' in *The Oxford Handbook of Causation*, edited by Helen Beebe, Christopher Hitchcock, and Peter Menzies

to new and future cases, as occurs in the intrusive anthropocentrism that misled Malebranche and Berkeley. This is important to Hume.

For when Hume did discuss agency, particularly in Part I of Section 7 of the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* his primary aim is to dispute the role it take in Malebranche and Berkeley. In their view causal thinking starts, but also finishes in the operation of the will. In Malebranche, as in some previous Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali, an event or state of affairs may provide the context in which another occurs, but only by because it is an occasion on which God intervenes to actually make the consequence occur. The will gives us what I earlier called the modal overlay, an example of the force or power or necessity that we mistakenly believe characterizes the empirical world. Hume opposes this root and branch. It is not only the theological aspect that annoyed him, but more importantly the supposition that such acquaintance as we have with agency or the will gives us a better basis for understanding causal necessity than our acquaintance with empirical regularity:

We may, therefore, conclude from the whole, I hope, without any temerity, though with assurance; that our idea of power is not copied from any sentiment or consciousness of power within ourselves, when we give rise to animal motion, or apply our limbs to their proper use and office. That their motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events: But the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and inconceivable.<sup>20</sup>

He expands on this in a footnote, adding that:

It may be pretended, that the resistance which we meet with in bodies, obliging us frequently to exert our force, and call up all our power, this gives us the idea of force and power. It is this *nisus* or strong endeavour, of which we are conscious, that is the original impression from which this idea is copied. But, first, we attribute power to a vast number of objects, where we never can suppose this resistance or exertion of force to take place; to the Supreme Being, who never meets with any resistance; to the mind in its command over its ideas and limbs, in common thinking and motion, where the effect follows immediately upon the will, without any exertion or summoning

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<sup>20</sup> *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Section 7, Part I, para 52, SBN p. 67

up of force; to inanimate matter, which is not capable of this sentiment. *Secondly*, This sentiment of an endeavour to overcome resistance has no known connexion with any event: What follows it, we know by experience; but could not know it *à priori*. It must, however, be confessed, that the animal *misus*, which we experience, though it can afford no accurate precise idea of power, enters very much into that vulgar, inaccurate idea, which is formed of it.

To appreciate this properly, we can return to the title claim of Price and Menzies's paper: that causation, because of its connection with real or imagined agency, is a secondary quality. It is indeed not clear what this means for it is not clear what the primary-secondary distinction is. But the most impressive interpretation of it distinguishes primary qualities as those fitted to enter into sciences of the natural world. This claim is that of a magisterial paper on the subject:

Distinguishing primary from secondary qualities was part of the search for the requisite concepts to employ in such a genuinely explanatory science: the requisite concepts are those of primary qualities. The crucial point here is that the attribution of sensory qualities to objects has this piecemeal character: we attribute them just on the basis of a single kind of behavior-how they appear to us.<sup>21</sup>

The interpreters of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, from Descartes through Galileo to Hume and Kant would surely be aghast that the idea of causation, so fundamental to the new science, should surrender its place there. Indeed, it is unclear what remains of our understanding of the natural world without it, for the things with which we are acquainted come largely constituted by their panoply of causal powers.<sup>22</sup> To be fair, Price and Menzies devote much of their paper to rowing back on the worry that the introduction of agency into the discussion really implies an untoward anthropocentric character to causation, putting in in the same category as other secondary sensory qualities such as colour, taste, smell and sound. It is much easier to accept that with no visual systems

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<sup>21</sup> A. D. Smith 'Of Primary and Secondary Qualities' *The Philosophical Review*, Apr., 1990, Vol. 99, pp. 221-254

<sup>22</sup> Simon Blackburn 'Filling in Space', *Analysis*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Mar., 1990), pp. 62-65

there would be no colours, or with no olfactory detectors there would be no odours than it is to accept that with no inferential dispositions there would be no causes. Although it should also be said that Price at least associates the proposal with a more wide-ranging idealism, in which the entire distinction between past, present, and future is seen as itself a kind of creation of our own agency.

Even if Ramsey, Broad, Price and Menzies, and Beebee are right about the importance of agency in the genesis of the modal overlay, and are right as well to say that it explains our commitment to separating causation from regular succession, I do not accept that it makes a serious difference to the Humean picture. All we know about our own agency is that we can do some things, but not others, at will, but there is no reason to doubt that it takes the abundant trials and empirical observations made in the first years of life to tell us which things these are. And in experimental science, interventions and manipulations changing the values of the variables would be entirely useless without meticulous observation of the differences in the system that follow on, and that pattern of changes could, in principle, have occurred, be witnessed, and be interpreted causally, without our own agency having been involved at all.