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Comments on Allison Kuklok's paper "The Status of Mechanism in Hume's Account of Causal Power"

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There is plenty of textual evidence which suggests that Hume recognizes the existence of hidden causal powers, especially in the first *Enquiry*. The main goal of Allison Kuklok's paper is to show that causal powers are real and inescapably hidden in Hume's account. To get a deeper understanding of Hume's position, Kuklok stresses that we need to evaluate it in light of Locke's related views.

The intelligibility of bodily causation, Kuklok argues, is not discoverable in the causal interactions of macroscopic bodies that are perceivable to us. The real causally efficacious parts of bodies, like the operative parts of an intricate machine, are hidden from us. Because our sense organs are limited to perceive macroscopic physical phenomena, we have only a limited insight into the mechanism of bodies. What is available to us, Kuklok asserts, is the mechanism's *concept* of body. The mechanism's concept, not experience, ultimately renders macroscopic causal interactions intelligible to us.

The research contribution of Kuklok's paper can be summarized as follows: Hume adopts Locke's conception of hidden causal power and mechanism. This result challenges the received view in the research literature, according to which Locke anticipated Hume's regularity theory of causation. Kuklok maintains that although all we experience in causation is constant conjunction, Hume draws on Locke's conception of hidden mechanism of bodies (what Locke calls the corpuscularian hypothesis). Mere reference to experience and regularity is not enough to understand Hume's conception of causation. Rather, causation must be understood as a function of the microscopic parts of bodies. Kuklok's paper thus provides a new picture of Locke's relationship to Hume, as well as a mechanistically driven interpretation of Hume's conception of causation based on hidden causal power and mechanism.

In what follows, I shall examine critically three of Kuklok's arguments: **I)** the role of intelligibility and experience in Hume's conception of causation, **II)** Hume's position on the corpuscularian hypothesis, and **III)**

the notion of "concept" in Hume. I do not wish to state that Kuklok's arguments are incorrect; rather, I hope that the following critical remarks will facilitate discussion. Moreover, I shall not take a stand on the Locke scholarship presented in the paper.

I

According to Kuklok's (p. 3) argument (I), "it is a mistake to think that this intelligibility [of causation in bodies] finds its source in our experience of the causal interactions between actual macroscopic bodies." This argument makes two tacit assumptions: 1) causation in bodies is (if not exclusively, at least partly, see p. 5) intelligible and 2) experience of causal interactions between bodies is not enough to establish whether the bodies are causally related.

Do causal interactions reflect intelligibility? The first *Enquiry* provides some examples where Hume seems to challenge the principle of intelligibility in causation. In the last section of his work, he writes:

The existence, therefore, of any being can only be proved by arguments from its cause or its effect; and these arguments are founded entirely on experience. If we reason *à priori*, any thing may appear able to produce any thing. The falling of a pebble may, for ought we know, extinguish the sun; or the wish of a man controul the planets in their orbits. (EHU 12.29; SBN 164.)

As I understand Hume's above argument, what he wants to say is that there is nothing intelligible in causation.¹ The world could be so strange that falling of a pebble might extinguish the sun, or the motions of the planets could be affected by volitions of humans.² We could discover such causal relations. This would be unintelligible (not inconceivable), but intelligibility seems not to be a necessary requirement for causation. Rather, are not the "rules by which to judge of causes and effect" in section 15 of the first Book to the

¹ For other such interpretations, see Rosenberg (1993, 73) and Millican (2007, xxx).

² Hume criticizes the principle of intelligibility in factual reasoning explicitly in EHU 4.18 (SBN 35). Kuklok makes the specific point that there is at least something intelligible in *bodily* causation. Hume's examples in EHU 12.29 (SBN 164) do not concern bodily causation based on contiguous contact actions. However, when Hume analyzes bodily causation in the collision of billiard balls in EHU 4.10–11 (SBN 29–30), he seems to contrast reason and intelligibility to observation and experience in the same way as in EHU 12.29 (SBN 164).

Treatise—rules which stipulate constant conjunction instead of intelligibility—the necessary requirements for causation?

To continue with the quote from the first *Enquiry*, Hume argues that reason or intelligibility does not teach “us the nature and bounds of cause and effect,” or enable “us to infer the existence of one object from that of another.” Rather, this is only due to experience. It could be thus argued that Hume rejects reason and intelligibility in causation, and contrasts it to experience (or to “experiments”). In very central passages of his work, Hume claims that causation is founded on experience (T 1.3.1; SBN 69, EHU 4.14; SBN 32), and that experience is our memory and observation of two species of objects being constantly conjoined (T 1.3.6.2; SBN 87). Our experience of constant conjunctions is sufficient for us to make the positive claim that there are causal relations among objects or events.

Here is my primary concern for Kuklok’s argument **I**: *Even if* Hume accepts the existence of hidden causal powers, it is not clear why experience alone *does not* form the basis of his causal philosophy. Hence I am not sure whether Kuklok is able to show that experience is insufficient for causation in Hume, and why would Hume necessarily *need* to refer to hidden causal power to provide an explanation for his concept of causation.

Kuklok also objects to the view that by experience we could identify causes. She (p. 16) refers to “Locke’s explanation for why experience fails to afford experience of causal power is that experience fails to acquaint us with *causes*.” However, if Locke’s explanation is applied to Hume, then the reading of the Introduction to the *Treatise* (Intro 8; SBN xvii) becomes problematic. Hume claims that we should explain “all effects from the simplest and fewest causes,” without going “beyond experience.” The Introduction to the *Treatise* also fits poorly with another Locke quote from Kuklok’s paper, according to which Locke’s concept of mechanism is “thought to go farthest in an intelligible Explication of the Qualities of Bodies.” But Hume explicitly says that it is impossible to “form any notion of its [external body, or the human mind] powers and qualities otherwise than from careful and exact experiments” (T Intro 8; SBN xvii).

On the other hand, Kuklok’s paper does not make any references to the *Treatise*. To support her interpretation, Kuklok quotes from the *Natural History of Religion* to support the claim that causes are based on the

“particular fabric and structure of the minute parts of” bodies. This passage supports her reading very well (as many passages that could be picked out from the first *Enquiry*, too). It is thus possible that Hume changed his mind about the basis of causation, when proceeding to write the *Enquiries* and his works on religion. However, I feel that the paper should make such explications of its textual sources.

II

A central claim of Kuklok’s paper (argument **II**) is that Hume accepts Locke’s appeal to the mechanical philosophy, “what Locke refers to as the corpuscularian hypothesis” (p. 1). However, in his *History* (542), where Hume explicitly addresses mechanical philosophy, he seems to argue that we do not have reasons to accept corpuscularianism. First Hume reveres Boyle’s chemistry and hydrostatics but then he goes on to claim that

Boyle was a great partizan of the mechanical philosophy; a theory, which, by discovering some of the secrets of nature, and allowing us to imagine the rest, is so agreeable to the natural vanity and curiosity of men.

Although Hume appreciates Boyle’s experimental work that he carried out with the air pump, Hume does not seem to accept Boyle’s mechanistic speculation about the hidden microstructure and configuration of bodies, his corpuscularianism. Hume considers this to be imaginary. If Hume criticizes Boyle on the matter of mechanism and corpuscularianism, why would he then espouse Locke’s related views, as Kuklok’s argument **II** suggests?

III

As “the operative, or causally active, parts of Lockean natural substances are inescapably hidden from us,” Kuklok (p. 3–4) argues that “the limited insight we do have into bodily causation finds its source rather in mechanism’s *concept* of body.” In Locke’s case, as Kuklok (p. 14) shows, this mechanism’s concept is a hypothesis “about the nature of a body’s hidden internal constitution.” Such hypotheses can be supported by

an analogy drawn from the functioning of artifactual machinery. As a locksmith can predict which one of the keys can open a lock, so we can also predict what happens when macroscopic bodies collide. Neither the locksmith nor we have a direct empirical access to the machinery of locks or bodies, but in both cases the observable effects ensue from the internal micro constitutions of the lock and of the bodies. Kuklok maintains that Hume adopts Locke's view of mechanism's concept, respectively (argument **III**).

The critical question of connecting Locke and Hume in the above-mentioned way can be formulated as follows: what is meant by the notion of "concept"? Hume usually speaks about ideas. Does he apply the notion of "concept" by himself? And if, in what way?

The mind can come to the complex idea of mechanism by associating simple ideas. This could be done by understanding how artifactual machines work, which Kuklok discusses in chapter 3.1 of her paper. However, the mind can also come to the complex idea of a centaur and a golden mountain, but these ideas are imaginary. In order to ensure that any complex idea is cognitive and meaningful, one would have to separate the complex idea into its constitutive simple ideas, and look for the correspondence of these simple ideas to their simple impressions which originally caused them.³ (EHU 2; SBN 17–22.) Can we apply this critical method in case of mechanism's concept?

Kuklok's paper does not provide any interpretation of Hume's copy principle. However, it seems to me that this would be requisite to show that hidden mechanism and causal power are not imaginary but the real basis of causation in bodies in Hume's account. Otherwise the argument **III** is left unsubstantiated.

References

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³ Excluding the missing shade of blue, of course.

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