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Abstract: Despite his frequently critical attitude toward metaphysics, Hume could not help but take a position on many metaphysical issues, including that of the existence and the origin of "order" in nature. In the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, Philo advocates a system in which an eternal principle of order governs all natural beings in such a way that "it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition." As many have noticed, Philo's necessitarianism is in tension with Hume's empiricist critique of causal necessity in the *Treatise*. However, Hume's idealist theory of time and his implicit acceptance of a sceptical-atheist version of eternalism (available to him in the thought of certain neo-Spinozist philosophers with whom he may have come into contact while in Paris) might offer a solution to the aporia and pave the way for a better understanding of his metaphysical thought.

Keywords: Hume, David; metaphysics; eternalism; Bayle, Pierre; Berkeley, George; Spinoza, Baruch; philosophy of time; new Hume

1. State of the question

Was Hume a metaphysician? Did Hume engage, at least sporadically, in metaphysical research? The question is an old one, and it is not my intention to discuss it fully in all its aspects.¹ I will take the term "metaphysics" in one of the (loose) meanings attested in Hume's writings, as the science of how things are, or are supposed to be in their "most secret springs and principles."² However, Hume's attitude with regard to metaphysics is subject to many variations and fluctuations. In the *Treatise*, he did not "approve" the "ambition" of those who try "to penetrate into the nature of bodies" and declared that "we can never pretend to know body otherwise than by those external properties, which discover themselves to the senses" (T 1.2.5.26). In the *Dialogues*, his spokesman Philo is less drastic: he imagines that if we could

¹ For recent reappraisals, see Baxter (2022), Slavov (2022), and Peckel (2024). Kuntz (1976) considers Hume's reflections on a principle of order a sign of his endorsement of theism, a perspective that is diametrically opposed to that of this paper.

² Hume referred to secret springs and principles in connection with metaphysics in a letter to Hutcheson of 17 September 1739 (L1 13:32–3 [see the [Bibliographical Note](#) to this issue of *Hume Studies* for a key to references to Hume's works and "Title-abbreviated primary sources" at the close of this paper for a key to references to other commonly cited primary sources]): "One may consider [the mind] either as an Anatomist or as a Painter; either to discover its most secret Springs & Principles or to describe the Grace & Beauty of its Actions. I imagine it impossible to conjoin these two Views.... An Anatomist, however, can give very good Advice to a Painter or Statuary: And in like manner, I am persuaded, that a Metaphysician may be very helpful to the Moralist [emphasis added]." In this sense, the questions of the "nature of the soul" (T 1.4.5.11), of the possibility of a vacuum (T 1.2.5.22) and of the "power, force, energy" of causes are for Hume "metaphysical" questions. This meaning of the term "metaphysics" co-exists with a more polemical one, according to which the adjective "metaphysical" basically denotes "abstruse" and "obscure" reasoning.

“penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies” (or “the inmost essence of things”) we would “clearly see why it was absolutely impossible they could ever admit of any other disposition” (D 6.12, 9.10). The latter is a metaphysical stance, although uttered hypothetically. More generally, the purpose of the *Dialogues* is, at least *prima facie*, to discuss the “attributes” of God or His “essence” and “nature” (D 2.1), and these are topics that obviously pertain to metaphysics.

My aim in this paper is as follows. After a survey (Section 1) of Hume scholars’ debate about the importance of his metaphysical stance in the *Dialogues* compared to his position in the *Treatise*, I will try to show (Section 2) that Hume’s metaphysical interests precede not only the *Dialogues* but also the *Treatise*, and that the themes of “order,” “causality,” and “eternity” are at the core of his youthful reflections. In Section 3, I suggest that Hume’s conception of time in the *Treatise* entails a version of “eternalism” which rules out any “beginning of existence,” and, therefore, any causal process in the universe, reducing “time” to the mere perception of ordered series of impressions or ideas. In Section 4, I will defend this view against some recent and influential interpretations of Hume’s philosophy of time. In section 5, I will try to exclude any suspicion of anachronism by showing that a full-blooded “eternalism” had been circulating since the mid-1710s, as attested by the clandestine and public writings of a group of neo-Spinozist French philosophers in chevalier Ramsay’s inner circle. Based on these premises, I will propose in Section 6 an interpretation of Hume’s “metaphysics” in the *Dialogues* as that of a sceptical atheist who rejected any “productive” causal power (or fantastical “creation *ex nihilo*”) and maintained, at least hypothetically, the existence of a necessary and mind-independent (but *not* causal) “principle of order”, of which the ultimate constitution remains entirely hidden to human understanding.

Let us start with a question which is often discussed by Hume scholars. Hume began his public career, in the *Treatise*, by stating formally that “necessity is something, that exists in the mind, not in objects” (T 1.3.14.22), but ended up, in the *Dialogues*, with an unequivocal declaration uttered by his spokesman Philo of the “absolute necessity” and eternal order of the mind-independent universe. This declaration is to be found twice, first in Part 6 and then in Part 9 of the *Dialogues*, with some local variants (I will return later to the full text of these passages):

Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition. (D 6.12)

Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity ...? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition? (D 9.10)

Philo enunciates his necessitarian system under a double *caveat*: necessitarianism is *only* the most “plausible” system (or at least “none is more plausible”; D 6.12), and he would endorse it *only* if he were obliged to make a choice (D 6.12). However, the fact that, on both occasions, neither Cleanthes nor Demea tries to undermine Philo’s necessitarian claims could indicate that, here as almost everywhere else, he is a faithful spokesman for Hume’s own views. Hence an unavoidable question arises: can Hume’s most “plausible” hypothesis about “the universe,” to be found twice in his beloved *Dialogues*, be in tension, or in plain contradiction, with one of the pillars of the *Treatise* (the non-existence of any causal necessity outside human minds)?³

This apparent antinomy is uncomfortable for the classic interpretation, or “Standard View,” with all its variants, including the “quasi-realist” or “projectivist” one, and also for the New Hume approach. The general strategy of both has been to erase the antinomy by suppressing (or

³ See Stove (1978; especially 309) on the “inconsistency between the philosophy which Hume published in his lifetime, according to which ‘Whatever is may not be’, and the thesis, which is at least strongly suggested in Hume’s only mature work of philosophy ... that the material universe exists necessarily”. See Stahl’s (1984) reply and Stewart (2022a).

attenuating) one of the competing claims.

“Standard View” scholars generally dismiss, or rather ignore, the two “necessitarian” passages of the *Dialogues*. For the few who take them into account, Philo’s statement is merely a dialectical move, that is, an *ad hominem* argument against Cleanthes (or against Demea),⁴ if not a simple acknowledgment that necessitarianism is impossible to refute.⁵ However, as Philo affirms in Part 6, the theory of a necessary “principle of order” is one “that we must, sooner or later, have recourse to, *whatever system we embrace* [emphasis added]” (D 6.12). The latter clause, and the fact that he reiterates the same position in Part 9, almost *en passant* and out of any dialectical context (D 9.10; “I cannot forbear insisting still upon another topic”), seem to rule out the suggested *ad hominem* status of his statements. In any case, Hume’s constant insistence in all his writings on the universal validity of the laws of nature and his admiration for Newton’s physics are entirely consistent with Philo’s eulogy of natural order. It is impossible, therefore, to consider the latter simply as a short-lived conjecture and even less as a fictional stance attributable to Philo but not to Hume.⁶

The “New Humeans” obviously triumph when they read that, for Philo, an unknown necessity rules the world.⁷ When a compatibility issue arises with Hume’s early positions in the *Treatise*, they assume that the latter were only youthful errors. According to Galen Strawson, Hume started with daring statements of the sceptical (or even “Wittgensteinian”) brand, but later, as he grew older, took shelter in more mitigated positions.⁸ However, the existence of such an evolution in Hume’s thought rests basically on the conviction that he changed his mind on the issue of causal necessity. So this latter change of mind cannot be proven by an argument based on the conjecture of an evolution. John Wright (1983, 150; substantially endorsed by Kail 2007, 101–2) chooses a different strategy: for Hume, causal necessity “is entirely inconceivable to us” and Philo’s claims represent Hume’s attempts to catch a glimpse of the “necessity of which we would be aware *if* our ideas were adequate representations of reality.” Yet, the question returns: why did Hume, in the *Treatise*, simply *deny* the real existence of a “necessary cause” in the mind-independent world? And why, far from asserting that it could be an unknown quality of matter, did he formally conclude that causality is *only* a product of human imagination? This is an assertion substantially confirmed at U 7.28, which was published a few years before the first draft of the *Dialogues*.⁹

Millican (2024) has tried to bring everything back to square one, that is, to a reading of

⁴ See Winkler (2000, 81): “Philo is not defending anything or stating a preference or conviction. He is causing trouble for Cleanthes, and he is doing it with enthusiasm – enthusiasm that might, were it not for the context, be a sign of commitment”; Pyle (2006, 89–90): “Philo’s quirky addendum in Part 6 is *ad hominem* and directed against Demea Alternatively, we could interpret Philo’s apparent commitment to empiricism as *ad hominem* with regard to Cleanthes”; Holden (2026, 59): “[p]lausibly, the introduction of absolute necessity together with endogenous self-organization in these passages is merely *ad hominem*. It is not a serious endorsement of this combination of speculative metaphysical hypotheses[.]”

⁵ According to Tweyman (1986, 82–3), Philo does not endorse necessitarianism but simply says that “it is not possible to disprove it.” Tweyman further argues (1986, 83) that Philo’s theory of a necessary “principle of order” conflicts with his rejection of Demea’s *a priori* causal argument (on this point see below n57).

⁶ Compare Winkler (2000, 87n34): “it seems reckless to take a Philonian endorsement of something sounding like causal realism to be a Humean endorsement of a genuine causal realism – one intended, by Hume, to resist reduction along the lines suggested in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*”.

⁷ See Craig (1987, 109): “It is very hard to read these as anything other than sincere expressions of Hume’s mature opinion, nor, since that should not now surprise us, is there any reason to try.” See also Strawson (2008, 452): “These are not the views of a regularity theorist. They are Hume’s views, dramatically presented and too little known.”

⁸ G. Strawson (2008, 452n25): “Here Hume has abandoned his ardent-youth endorsement (on T166/112 [1.3.14.23]) of a wild, Wittgensteinian global subjectivism about necessity while retaining the idea (also to be found on T166/112 [1.3.14.23]) that natural necessity is like mathematical necessity.”

⁹ “This connexion, therefore, which we feel in the mind, this customary transition of the imagination from one object to its usual attendant, is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion. *Nothing farther is in the case* [emphasis added].”

Hume as a mere theorist of an “objective” regularity founded only on the experience of “constant conjunctions” of “objects.” However, while engaging in what he calls a “counter-revolution,” he too avoids mentioning the *Dialogues*, let alone Philo’s necessitarian stance. This is also quite a popular strategy among those who prefer the “quasi-realist,” or “projectivist” approach.¹⁰ The fact is that in Part 6 and Part 9 Philo does not at all resemble an empiricist observer of “regularity.” Far from it, he acts like a metaphysician who argues for the necessity of an eternal principle of order underlying all that the human mind can grasp in what is called “the universe.” In any case, Millican’s counter claims about the bare empirical “objectivity” of Hume’s theory of causality force him to dismiss, and even condemn, “the notoriously subjectivist passages in *Treatise* 1.3.14,” which he considers, just as Strawson had, as “hyperbolic overstatement on Hume’s part, which he later regretted and discarded” (2024, 104). Hence the paradox: two leading Old- and New-Hume scholars apparently agree in considering spurious, or at least irrelevant, the most original section of the *Treatise*, the one in which the young Hume announces to the world the result of his long and painstaking research on the origin of causality.

To find a possible solution that might allow us to preserve in full force, and without any qualification, both Hume’s revolutionary critique of causal necessity in the *Treatise* and his equally bold necessitarianism in the *Dialogues* we need to go back to the beginning.

2. Cause, order, and necessity: the early memoranda

Hume’s interest in the metaphysical topic of the world’s “order” (and its possible “cause”) largely predates not only the *Dialogues*, but also the *Treatise*. In the *Early Memoranda*, this topic is dealt with in a number of annotations, mostly taken from Bayle’s *Dictionnaire, Continuation des pensées diverses*, and *Réponse aux questions d’un provincial*:¹¹

Cicero contradicts himself in two Sentences in saying that Thales allow’d the Ordering of the World by a Mind, & in saying that Anaxagoras was the first [emphasis added]. (EM 2.11)

Strato’s Atheism the most dangerous of the Antient, holding the Origin of the World from Nature, or a Matter endu’d with Activity. Baile thinks there are none but the Cartesians can refute this Atheism [emphasis added]. (EM 2.14)

A Stratonician cou’d retort the Arguments of all the Sects of Philosophy. Of the Stoics, who maintain’d their God to be fiery & compound & of the Platonicians who asserted the Ideas to be distinct from the Deity. The same Question, *Why the Parts or Ideas of God had that particular Arrangement?* is as difficult as why the World had [emphasis added]. (EM 2.15)

The Argument a priori That no necessary existent Being can be limited is only conclusive that there is an intelligent Being who antecedently forms the Idea of infinite Perfection & resolves to work up to his Model: Which implies a Contradiction. Baile (EM 2.16)

Whether a Cause is Necessary? Whether necessary to an eternal Being? Whether necessary in every new Moment of a successive Being? Whether necessary in Motion? (EM 2.31)

Some pretend that there can be no Necessity according to the System of Atheism: Because even

¹⁰ As Strawson (2008, 423) has remarked, “[m]any still proceed as if the *Dialogues* – Hume’s most carefully composed work of philosophy, and arguably his ‘greatest work of metaphysics’ – simply does not count when it comes to understanding Hume’s views.” Blackburn (1993, 96) mentions the *Dialogues* only once, and only to talk about what is *not* to be found in them. Beebe (2006, 196–7) quotes Philo’s necessitarian claims only because they are quoted by John Wright but does not discuss them. No mention of the *Dialogues* is to be found in Coventry (2006). For a recent and valuable exception (Holden, 2026), see below, n60.

¹¹ For the dating of the *Memoranda* and a new hypothesis on their origin, see Mazza and Mori (2016). Contrary to Stewart’s (2022b) claims, based on a material dating of Hume’s manuscript, the extant *Memoranda* (or at least a large part of them, including all the philosophical fragments) are copies of preceding annotations (1727–38) and certainly pre-date the printing of the *Treatise*.

Matter cannot be determin'd without something Superior to determine it. Fenelon. (EM 2.35)

Hume's perspective, like Bayle's, is both historical and philosophical. Historically, he observed that, according to Cicero, "the ordering of the world by a mind" had first been proposed by Anaxagoras against the Epicureans. However, Cicero had attributed this doctrine also to Thales, and his inconsistency had been noted by Bayle (EM 2.11).¹² Philosophically, the question was just as contested and unresolved, and proved to be more difficult than expected, at least compared to Cudworth's assertive "'If there be φύσις [*nature*], then there must be νοῦς [*mind*]" (1678, 172).

Against Cudworth (and nearly all Christian theology), Bayle had retorted: if the order of nature is the product of a "mind," what is the cause of this "mind," which is itself an ordered being? If one admits that the order of God's "ideas" depends on His nature, the same could be asserted of the parts of Matter, which, therefore, could well be the "first cause" of everything (CPD 106–14).¹³ Alternatively, one could suppose that God is not really the first being, and that there must be another mind who created God's mind working on a preceding model. But the latter position would obviously involve a *regressus ad infinitum* with no explanatory value. Bayle concluded, "you would never find a first cause" (CPD 106).

The spectre of "Stratonism" loomed over both horns of the dilemma and suggested a materialist way out: "order" could be an intrinsic property of matter, one that matter could be endowed with from eternity, without necessarily receiving it from an antecedent "cause." This is the position contested by "Fénelon" (or rather by Father Tournemine in his *Réflexions sur l'athéisme* accompanying Fénelon's *Traité*), whose objection is annotated by Hume: "Some pretend that there can be no Necessity according to the System of Atheism: Because even Matter cannot be determin'd without something Superior to determine it" (EM 2.35).¹⁴ In other words, according to Tournemine, an eternal and necessary matter could not exist by itself but only if created by "something superior," that is by God. Tournemine's objection obviously assumes the necessity of an (adequate) cause for every existence and is, as such, unacceptable in the context of the *Early Memoranda*, where, for the first time in his intellectual biography (and in Western philosophy), Hume expressed doubt about the truth of this principle and particularly inquiries about its theological implications.¹⁵ Hence Hume's unanswered metaphysical question, to be found in one of his rare "memoranda" not taken literally from other authors: "whether [a cause is] necessary to an eternal being?" (EM 2.31) An explicit (negative) answer to this crucial question will be given only in D 9.8: "How can any thing, that exists from eternity, have a cause; since that relation implies a priority in time and a beginning of existence?"

In the *Memoranda*, Hume carefully selected all of Bayle's most relevant passages on the issue of "Stratonic" atheism. The obvious advantage of Stratonism compared to Christian theology resided, for Bayle, in the fact that the former is not committed to a moral view of God's attributes, of which Bayle had already shown the destructive implications. In Hume's paraphrase: "God must create the Soul with every new Modification" (EM 2.30), and therefore God is also the cause of every sinful deed. Like Bayle, Hume considered entirely irrelevant the various arguments proposed (since Augustine) by Christian theology to avoid this consequence. He concluded the discussion of one of these arguments with a curt verdict: "No solution" (EM

¹² The source of this passage is to be found in Bayle, *Dictionnaire* Anaxagoras D.

¹³ For more details on Bayle's "Stratonic" objection, see Mori (2021, 120–7).

¹⁴ This passage is erroneously attributed to Fénelon by Hume, who no longer had the sources of his original annotations to hand.

¹⁵ See Mori (2025b). For a similar interpretation of Hume's position on causality in terms of a critique of God's purported creative "power," see especially Anderson (2024 and 2020). As Anderson shows, Hume's critique of causality is the direct premise of Kant's anti-theological campaign in the "Transcendental Dialectic" section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and especially in the "Antinomy of Pure Reason."

2.26).

In other words, the Hume of the *Early Memoranda* was aligned with Bayle on both critical theological aspects discussed in the *Continuation des Pensées diverses*: the existence of evil in the world and the origin of the world order and seems ready to consider “Stratonic” materialist metaphysics as a viable alternative to Christian theology.

3. Time and order

In the *Treatise* the notion of “order” shapes Hume’s treatment of Space and Time. “Time” is especially important in this connection, since it is the foundation of Hume’s theories of causality and personal identity. Hume’s theory of time is not entirely original and draws on many different philosophical sources. For centuries, with rare exceptions, Christian theology had maintained that “time” (designating “duration”) is only relevant to creatures, and that, in God, eternity means timelessness, that is, absence of duration. This was the standard view of Christian theologians since Augustine and Boethius (Porro 2001). The theory of “continuous creation” was a late scholastic finding, proposed by Suarez and later adopted by Descartes (Revol 2020).¹⁶ The necessity of a renewed creative act at every instant of time implies that God’s continuous creation marks the “time” of bodies and minds, dividing it into individual moments, of which the succession is totally determined by God’s omnipotent will. This was the theory that Hume had found in Bayle, as EM 2.30 attests.¹⁷ As already noted by Kemp Smith (1941, 295), Bayle was also the direct source of Hume’s main argument for the indivisibility of the moments of time (an anti-Malebranchist feature of his thought).¹⁸

However, another important source, quoted by Hume along with Descartes, Malebranche, and Bayle, as indispensable for understanding the *Treatise* (Hume to Ramsay, 27 August 1737, in Agnesina 2019, 107–8), should be added in this connection: Bishop Berkeley. The latter had suppressed one of the terms of the human cognitive process, matter, consequently reducing time to a mere “succession” of perceptions in human minds, devoid of real existence “outside” them: “Whenever I attempt to frame a simple idea of time, abstracted from the succession of ideas in my mind, which flows uniformly, and is participated by all beings, I am lost and embrangled in inextricable difficulties. I have no notion of it at all” (*Principles* 98; compare Hestevold 1990 and Hynes 2005). However, Berkeley’s idealist theory did not imply a strict relativity of time. For Berkeley, a certain objectivity is preserved by the fact that the succession of sensible ideas in men’s minds is the effect of God’s causal power (as in the theory of continuous creation; Winkler 2011, 291–3; Lee 2018).

Berkeley’s position is clearly echoed in the *Treatise*, with an important alteration: in Hume’s godless universe there is no place for continuous creation, nor for any kind of objective “causal” power. Stripped of any theological premise, Hume’s endorsement of Berkeley’s idealist conception led him to a more complex, fully relationist or relativist, position. For Hume, the idea of “time” (or “duration,” the two terms being generally synonymous for him)¹⁹ is an “abstract idea” which does not precede human experience but originates in a “succession of perceptions.”

The idea of time, being deriv'd from the succession of our perceptions of every kind, ideas as well

¹⁶ For “continuous creation” from Descartes to Leibniz, see Anfray (2018). For some antecedents and possible sources of Suarez’s position, see Pasnau (2011).

¹⁷ “Preservation is a continual Creation, & consequently God must create the Soul with every new Modification. Id. [Bayle].”

¹⁸ For Malebranche’s position, and a comparison with Bayle’s, see Anfray (2018).

¹⁹ See T 1.2.3.8: “time or duration consists of different parts [emphasis added]”; T 1.2.5.29: “[f]rom these three relations we are apt to confound our ideas, and imagine we can form the idea of a time and duration, without any change or succession [emphasis added]”; T 1.4.2.29: “let us have recourse to the idea of time or duration [emphasis added].”

as impressions, and impressions of reflection as well as of sensation, will afford us an instance of an abstract idea, which comprehends a still greater variety than that of space, and yet is represented in the fancy by some particular individual idea of a determinate quantity and quality. (T 1.2.3.6)

Hume applied here his customary method or Copy Principle: to talk meaningfully of something we must have an idea of it; if we have such an “idea,” we must have had, before that, an impression from which the idea originated. However, we do not have a “primary” and “distinct” impression of time (T 1.2.3.10). Instead of that, we have perceptions of the successive states of changing “objects.”²⁰ It is as if human minds took successive photos, so to speak, of an object at a variable rate (of which the “bounds” are “fix’d by the original nature and constitution of the mind” [T 1.2.3.7]). While the single frames, that is, the single perceptions, are indivisible and, therefore, durationless (Jennifer Wright 2016, 61–4, 104–5; Slavov 2021), the perception of their succession can give the mind the notion of a certain duration (as in Hume’s much debated example of “five notes play’d on a flute”; T 1.2.3.10). Finally, the analogies between our recurrent perceptions of ordered series of “objects” give us the abstract idea of “time.” Hume insisted on the point that, even if there were a succession of states in the “objects,” there would still be no “time” for the thinking subject unless the latter had distinct *perceptions* of these different states (“[w]herever we have no successive perceptions, we have no notion of time, even tho’ there be a real succession in the objects.” [T 1.2.3.7])

Hume’s theory has been criticized from a “Kantian” point of view and qualified as “circular” in so far as it defines the idea of time by means of the notion of “succession,” which apparently means “existence at successive times” (Allison 2008, 54–5; similar objections are surveyed by Baxter 2008, 20). However, this criticism is unfounded since, for Hume, “succession” and “time” are linked but independent concepts.²¹ Hume’s “succession” denotes, as such, only the “manner in which impressions appear to the mind” (T 1.2.3.10), or rather a certain serial “order” (T 1.2.4.2) between different “objects” (i.e. perceptions of objects). It is not the succession *as such* that constitutes “time,” but the fact that it is *perceived* or “perceivable” by the mind (see T 1.2.3.7: “time cannot make its appearance to the mind, either alone, or attended with a steady unchangeable object, but is always discover’d by some *perceivable* succession of changeable objects [my emphasis]”).

For Hume, “time” (or “duration”) is the human way of conceiving an ordered series of perceptions that cannot co-exist (as it happens in “space,” or “extension”). More generally, time and space are the two modes in which, respectively, a successive or simultaneous “order” can be conceived by human minds. As he put it, “[t]he ideas of space and time are therefore no separate or distinct ideas, but merely those of the manner or order, in which objects exist [that is, in which the objects are perceived as co-existent or existing successively in a series]” (T 1.2.4.2).

However, the relation between “succession,” “order,” and “duration” is a crucial point that Hume scholars have long debated and deserves further discussion.

4. Time, succession, and “steadfast objects”

Donald Baxter has provided an influential interpretation of Hume’s philosophy of time relying

²⁰ T 1.2.3.8: “[the idea of time] must be deriv’d from a succession of changeable objects, and time in its first appearance can never be sever’d from such a succession.”

²¹ In Book 2, while discussing the effects of “distance” on passions from a non-metaphysical standpoint, Hume apparently equated “time” and “succession” as synonyms. “Without having recourse to metaphysics, any one may easily observe, that *Time*, or *succession*, tho’ it consists likewise of parts, never presents to us more than one at once [emphasis added]” (T 2.3.7.5). However, as we shall see in the next section, this purported synonymy is only a local concession to common sense realism. For a different reading of this passage, see McRae (1980, 122); Miller, (2008).

heavily on the supposedly intrinsic “temporality” of any “succession of objects,” independently of whether a succession is perceived by the mind or not. In his words:

Another direct consequence of Hume’s account is that *all* successions have duration. (2008, 21)

[I]t does no harm to take the idea to apply also to imperceivable successions. It is likely Hume intended us to do that, since he also says ‘that time is nothing but the manner, in which some real objects exist’ without insisting that the manner be perceivable. (2008, 21; referencing T 1.2.5.28).

However, the fact that Hume did not always “insist” on this point is not sufficient to prove that he considered it to be inessential: the *positive* assertion that the “perceivability” of a succession is necessary for the idea of time to arise cannot be challenged by a general statement in which this necessary “perceivability” is not denied but only omitted (or rather simply implied by the term “real objects,” which, for Hume, is often synonymous with “perceived objects” or rather, and even more simply, “perceptions”).²² On the other hand, it could be argued that, even if the perceivability of succession were a necessary condition for the *idea* of time to arise, it does not follow that perception of the succession is a necessary condition for temporal duration *in itself* (that is, for time as it is supposed to exist independently of any human perception).²³ Hence a “metaphysical,” or “ontological” question arises from Hume’s standpoint: what kind of existence does “time” have in itself? Can “time” exist (in some sense of the word) without being perceived by a human mind?

Hume’s relativist, or relationist, conception of “duration” obviously implies that he rejected Newton’s “absolute time” and possibly also targeted Locke’s version of the latter.²⁴ For equally obvious reasons, since Hume denied (in the *Treatise*) the existence of a “real” causal “power” in any being, including God (T 1.3.14.23), he must have rejected the existence of a “creatural” time as well (that is, the existence of time as a by-product of God’s continuous creation of successive finite beings).²⁵ This seems at least to leave open the possibility that time, from Hume’s perspective, has only a perceived reality, related to the “nature” of human minds. The well-known example of our experience of “steadfast objects”, a popular topic among recent Hume scholars (Baxter 2008, 30–47; Ainslie 2015, 83–91, 93–4, 102; Ryan and Hakkarainen 2023; Boehm and Cruz 2023; Falkenstein 2024, 130–44; Baxter 2024), could help us shed some light on this issue.

A “steadfast object” is for Hume an object that does not show successive “changes” to an observer, from which it follows, he argued, that it cannot be said to “endure,” or to cause the impression or the idea of time to appear in the mind. No changes, no succession, no time:

I know there are some who pretend, that the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects, which are perfectly unchangeable; and this I take to be the common opinion of philosophers as well as of the vulgar. But to be convinc’d of its falshood we need but reflect on the foregoing conclusion, that the idea of duration is always deriv’d from a succession of changeable objects, and can never be convey’d to the mind by any thing stedfast and unchangeable. For it inevitably follows from thence, that since the idea of duration cannot be deriv’d from such an object, it can never in any propriety or exactness be apply’d to it, nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration (T 1.2.3.11)

²² See especially Rocknak (2012), and Falkenstein (2024, 132) about “Hume’s usual tendency to use ‘object’ in contexts where he ought to be restricting himself to terms that have a phenomenologically more basic extension, such as ‘sensation’, ‘impression’, ‘idea’, or ‘perception’.”

²³ I thank a Reviewer of this paper for proposing this objection.

²⁴ See Boehm and Cruz (2023). According to Thomas (2018, 125–49), Locke implicitly held a relationist theory of time.

²⁵ From this point of view, Hume cannot be considered “a successor of Descartes” for his conception of time, contrary to what has been argued by Baxter (2024).



I will comment later on Hume's explicit rejection of the "vulgar" and "philosophical" conception of time (a decisive point, as we shall see). The main issue at stake here is as follows: how could Hume suppose that a "steadfast object" cannot be said to endure, basing himself on the simple absence of changes in its perceivable features? As Falkenstein has suggested, a "steadfast object" could easily be conceived as presenting to the mind a "monotonous" succession of identical perceptions, each for every moment of "time." If this were the case, *pace* Hume, we could derive the idea of time (i.e. "duration") from a succession of identical perceptions which occupy different moments of our internal timeline.²⁶

However, while Falkenstein is possibly right in challenging Baxter's reading on this point,²⁷ he has no reason to accuse Hume of mistakenly conflating an absence of "change" and an absence of temporal "successiveness" (and of inferring the latter from the former).²⁸ To say that a "steadfast" object could well occupy a series of temporal instants is certainly reasonable, but it depends as a necessary premise on the (gratuitous) supposition that Hume endorses a realist conception of time. In other words, Falkenstein seems to share Baxter's claim that Hume's successions (even if they are only mental states, with no "substantial" existence outside the mind) are temporal as such.²⁹ Basing themselves on this premise, they reach different, but equally questionable, conclusions. For Baxter, Hume must suppose that different mental timelines can exist in parallel (that of "steadfast objects" and that of changeable objects), but this contradicts not only Hume's dogma that two different parts of time cannot co-exist but also his reiterated assertion of the equivalence between time and duration.³⁰ For Falkenstein (2024, 12) given that Baxter's solution is untenable, one must conclude that "Hume had no good reason for rejecting the endurance of unchanging objects."

However, both Baxter and Falkenstein take us a long way from Hume's text. Hume was simply saying that a "steadfast" object, being unchanging, cannot generate in the mind the idea of time and he must be taken at his word on this point. For Hume, time, or "duration," is neither an intrinsic propriety of "objects" nor an internal feature of our succession of perceptions as such. Time is a "second level" mental entity: it arises from the "contemplation" of the succession of perceptions that constitute a stream of consciousness.³¹ From this point of view, a perceived

²⁶ "There is no absurdity in the thesis that a successor might be qualitatively identical to its predecessor and so no logical impossibility in the experience of a monotonous succession (think of the blast of a foghorn). If we cannot have such an experience, or we can, but cannot 'abstract successiveness' from it, we need to be told why not." (Falkenstein 2024, 123).

²⁷ For other compelling arguments against Baxter's analysis of "steadfast objects," see Ryan and Hakkarainen (2023, 11–12): "it would appear that Baxter's reading of steadfast unchanging objects—ingenious as it is—is difficult to reconcile with several of Hume's basic metaphysical commitments and so must be abandoned."

²⁸ See Falkenstein (2024, 123–4): "being without change, notably qualitative change, is not the same thing as being without succession. It needs to be proven that what is unchanging cannot occupy a succession of moments"; 129: "[the rejection of the 'monotonous' argument] is not justified by the considerations Hume offered in its support, which are either irrelevant, contentious, derived from the undue restriction of principles to just some of the cases to which they apply, or based on bluster and rhetorical questions. It has no other foundation than Hume's say-so."

²⁹ Falkenstein (2024, 125): "For any one conscious being, time consists of a single succession of momentary total perceptions, constituting 'simultaneity planes' that are tacked on top of one another like a deck of cards to constitute the life experiences of that individual. Except the deck is a virtual deck. The emergence of a card from the virtual deck entails the destruction of the existent card. The cards are not dealt out over time. The emergence of a card defines a moment of time. On this account, time is a perpetually perishing 'dimension.' But this does not entail that it must be substantial or absolute (that it would exist even if there were no perceptions to be disposed on simultaneity planes, or that it extends beyond an individual consciousness to correlate the simultaneity planes of other individuals)."

³⁰ Baxter's conclusion that "there are two ways to take up time: by being a succession or by being steadfast" (2024, 144) is highly questionable, since Hume takes "time" and "duration" as synonymous terms, and for him "steadfast objects" cannot be said to "endure."

³¹ T 1.4.6.4: human minds "are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.... The mind is a kind of theatre, where

series of perceptions is the occasion for “a new original impression” to arise,³² in the same sense as a customary conjunction of two objects is the occasion, if perceived by the mind, for “the new impression” of “necessary connexion” to arise.³³ These “new” impressions are said to be “original” in so far as they do not “resemble” their (mental) objects and are only *our way* to represent those (mental) objects. In other words, for Hume, a “succession” is nothing but a series of different states of an object, which is non-temporal as such but is the necessary condition for the “new” impression of “time” (or “duration”) to arise in the mind.³⁴ Upon this premise, Hume’s conclusion about “steadfast objects” flows naturally, if not tautologically: being devoid of any perceivable succession of different states, a “steadfast object” cannot be said to “endure.”

Thus, the impression of “time” (or “duration”) is the result of a “contemplation” by the mind of its own successive (i.e. changing but not temporal as such) perception of objects. The impression of “space” has similar features: it is the result of an internal reflection of the mind on its own perception of co-existent and indivisible (but non-extended) coloured points (Frasca-Spada 1998, 29–33). Space and time are, therefore, mental frameworks by which the mind organizes its perceptions and superadds a system of spatial localization and temporal duration to the objects of its mental activity. It follows that in the mind-independent world the properties of “objects” neither have a real “location” nor “endure”: they emerge gradually (and are interpreted in terms of “co-existence” in a three-dimensional space or “duration”) in as much as they are perceived by our minds and later disappear according to the interplay of relations that are supposed to subsist between human cognitive faculties and the unknown being that surrounds them.

The general conclusion that space (or “extension”) and time (or “duration”) have only a

several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”

³² T 1.2.3.10: “Five notes play’d on a flute give us the impression and idea of time; tho’ time be not a sixth impression, which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses. Nor is it a sixth impression, which the mind by reflection finds in itself. These five sounds making their appearance in this particular manner, excite no emotion in the mind, nor produce an affection of any kind, which being observ’d by it can give rise to a new idea. For *that* is necessary to produce a new idea of reflection, nor can the mind, by revolving over a thousand times all its ideas of sensation, ever extract from them any new original idea, unless nature has so fram’d its faculties, that *it feels some new original impression arise from such a contemplation* [my emphasis]. But here it only takes notice of the *manner*, in which the different sounds make their appearance; and that it may afterwards consider without considering these particular sounds, but may conjoin it with any other objects.”

³³ Hume’s analysis of the origin of the “impression of time” (see the preceding note) parallels his analysis of the origin of the idea of “necessary connexion”: “*The reflection on several instances only repeats the same objects; and therefore can never give rise to a new idea.* But upon farther enquiry I find, that the repetition is not in every particular the same, *but produces a new impression*, and by that means the idea, which I at present examine [the idea of necessary connexion; my emphasis]” (T 1.3.14.1). See also T 1.3.14.20: “Tho’ the several resembling instances, which give rise to the idea of power, have no influence on each other, and can never produce any new quality in the object, which can be the model of that idea, yet the observation of this resemblance produces a new impression in the mind, which is its real model.”

³⁴ “’tis impossible to conceive ... a time, when there was *no succession or change* in any real existence [my emphasis]” (T 1.2.4.2); “[f]rom these three relations we are apt to confound our ideas, and imagine we can form the idea of a time and duration, without any *change or succession* [my emphasis]” (T 1.2.5.29). In T 1.2.3.9, Hume clearly distinguished “time” from “succession”, which confirms that the latter is only a necessary condition of the former: “time in its first appearance to the mind is always *conjoin’d with a succession of changeable objects* [my emphasis].” In two passages of Book 2 of the *Treatise*, “succession” is synonymous with “time”: see T 2.3.7.5 (quoted *supra*, [note 21](#)), and T 2.3.8.10: “space or extension appears united to our senses, while *time or succession* is always broken and divided [my emphasis].” See also 1.2.3.17, which is possibly the only passage of the *Treatise* in which Hume apparently declared that a succession has “duration” before being perceived by a mind: “the indivisible moments of time must be fill’d with some real object or existence, *whose succession forms the duration*, and makes it be conceivable by the mind [my emphasis].” However, Hume’s position here is the same as that dubbed as “non-metaphysical” in T 2.3.7.5 (quoted *supra*, [note 21](#)). These passages finally amount either to a loose way of speaking or to a momentary endorsement of the vulgar and non-metaphysical position.

mental existence can also be reached through another line of reasoning, which relies on Hume's constant endorsement of a great "discovery" of modern philosophy: that of the purely mental status of "secondary qualities" such as "colours" or "smells". According to modern philosophers, the latter are "nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv'd from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects" (T 1.4.4.3).³⁵ Hume added that this reduction of colours, sounds and smells to mere "impressions" without an "external model or archetype" (T 1.4.4.4) may be demonstrated based on the variability of our perceptions. "Upon examination, I find only one of the reasons commonly produc'd for this opinion to be satisfactory, viz. that deriv'd from the variations of those impressions, even while the external object, to all appearance, continues the same" (T 1.4.4.3).

This criterion is first applied to "extension," which is "compos'd of parts, endow'd with colour or solidity" (T 1.4.4.8). However, colours are subjective and solidity is likewise changing and appears differently "every moment", although it must be considered as being always the same in itself. "[T]ho' solidity continues always invariably the same, the impressions of touch change every moment upon us; which is a clear proof that the latter are not representations of the former" (T 1.4.4.14).

Now, everything suggests that the same sceptical conclusion must be reached concerning "time" (or "duration"), the latter being represented in the mind by equally variable and unstable perceptions. "A man in a sound sleep, or strongly occupy'd with one thought, is insensible of time; and according as his perceptions succeed each other with greater or less rapidity, *the same duration appears longer or shorter to his imagination* [my emphasis]" (T 1.2.3.7).

For Hume, "duration," like "extension," "solidity" and "colour," has only an "internal [existence]" and "arise[s] from causes, which no ways resemble [it]" (T 1.4.4.4). The "external world" is not red or blue, and things are neither solid nor do they have a "duration" as such (either as external objects or as members of an internal series of perceptions).³⁶ Hume concluded his discussion of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities by writing: "[i]f colours, sounds, tastes, and smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive is possest of a real, continu'd, and independent existence, not even motion, extension and solidity, which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on" (T 1.4.4.6).

If Hume did not mention "time" in this connection, it is because he had already done so, albeit obliquely, while discussing "steadfast objects". Introducing the latter issue, Hume explicitly distinguished his position from the "vulgar" and the "philosophical" and qualified both as false (T 1.2.3.11). The key to this otherwise obscure allusion is given only in Part 4 of the *Treatise*, where Hume asserted that both the "vulgar" and the "philosophical" opinion converge on a realist position about the existence of "primary qualities" in the mind-independent world.³⁷ Since Hume denounced as "false" the "vulgar" and "philosophical" view about the duration of "perfectly unchangeable" objects, he necessarily subscribed to an idealist conception based on the rejection of the "real existence" of time.

It follows from this set of theories that "time" (or "duration") is not a property of what exists in

³⁵ See also T 3.1.1.26: "Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar'd to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind: And *this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences*; tho', like that too, it has little or no influence on practice [my stress]."

³⁶ There is obviously a difference between colors and time (or "duration"): while a "color" is a primary impression, which is not derived from other perceptions, the impression of time, as we have seen, is a second-level perception (T 1.2.3.10) derived from the "contemplation" of a series of perceptions.

³⁷ T 1.4.2.12: "[T]here are three different kinds of impressions convey'd by the senses. The first are those of the figure, bulk, motion and solidity of bodies. The second those of colours, tastes, smells, sounds, heat and cold. The third are the pains and pleasures, that arise from the application of objects to our bodies, as by the cutting of our flesh with steel, and such like. Both philosophers and the vulgar suppose the first of these to have a distinct continu'd existence. The vulgar only regard the second as on the same footing. Both philosophers and the vulgar, again, esteem the third to be merely perceptions; and consequently interrupted and dependent beings."

the mind-independent world, and that the latter, which is supposed to be the ultimate source of the single static perceptions that compound our subjective temporal experience, can be imagined as a timeless multiplicity of floating states of things (as in David Lewis's "Humean mosaic").³⁸ In Hume's "universe" there can be ordered series of emerging properties which happen to constitute a "regularity" (such as, for instance, the series of natural numbers, in which "3" comes necessarily after "2") but without any sort of "duration" or "passage of time". As it has recently been argued, "Humeanism requires eternalism" (Friebe 2018, 82–6), that is, a theory of time in which past, present, and future are ontologically equivalent, although things maintain an intrinsic but not temporal order. Hume's universe is a "block universe" in which nothing "begins" to exist, and nothing can be the "cause" of anything else, unless by the words, "cause" and "effect," one means simply the imaginative and abstract representation of a customary "order" of perceptions.

5. Hume's eternalism and its sources

Attributing to Hume such a "fashionable" eternalist view might seem anachronistic. Hume, it could be said, was neither Einstein nor McTaggart, although he has been compared to both in recent times (Slavov 2021 and 2016). According to Falkenstein (2024, 59, 64n49), "we cannot underestimate the prevalence and the force of presentist commitments among all early modern European thinkers [...]; eternalism could not be coherently articulated prior to the conceptual advances that led to the notion that time might only be an order of before and after."³⁹

Yet, this is not the case, historically speaking. As we have already suggested, eternalism was from the Middle-Ages the very foundation of the main theological conceptions of time. Whereas humans are immersed in finite "duration," "real" being, that is, God, is timeless, eternal, and sees present, past and future in a single vision.⁴⁰ In God's view there is a timeless series of the world's different states, from creation to redemption, which God knows simultaneously but in an irreversible order. This ancient theological position is to be found, closer to Hume and among his favourite sources, in Berkeley,⁴¹ in Clarke,⁴² and in Fénelon's *Traité*, edited by Chevalier Ramsay in 1718 and annotated in Hume's *Early Memoranda* (EM 2.36–7). "In God [...] nothing lasts, because nothing passes away; everything is fixed, everything is at once, everything is motionless. In God nothing has been, nothing will be, but everything is" (*Traité* 482–3).

Fénelon was certainly an important source for Hume. Many of Demea's theses in the *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* are directly inspired by Fénelon's "mystical rationalism," with possible literal borrowings.⁴³ Fénelon's influence is particularly apparent for his theory of

³⁸ T 3.1.1.22: "All beings in the universe, consider'd in themselves, appear entirely loose and independent of each other." For more details about Lewis's "Humeanism" and its versions, see Kocsis, Demeter, and Toader (2021).

³⁹ Falkenstein takes for granted that Hume is a "presentist", but the *Treatise* passages he quotes (T 2.3.7.5, T 1.2.2.4, T 1.2.3.8) do not appear to prove that. In these passages Hume dealt with "human" time, or duration, that is, our way of conceiving an orderly succession of perceptions. Hume's eternalism is not a theory about the human mind but a metaphysical hypothesis about the mind-independent world.

⁴⁰ According to Pasnau (2011, 289), Wyclif was the first to argue that theological eternalism "entails the reality of the past and future." Pasnau's whole chapter on "successive beings" (374–400) is also valuable.

⁴¹ "All things, past and to come, are actually present to the mind of God, and [...] there is in Him no change, variation, or succession" (Berkeley 2013, 318–19); quoted by Hestevold (1990, 179).

⁴² "[A]ll Things present and future [are] equally entirely in [God's] Power and Direction; as if there was really no Succession in all, but all Things were actually present at once" (1705, 83–4).

⁴³ Compare Hume, *Dialogues* D 4.2 where Demea says, "[b]y the same act, say they, he sees past, present, and future, [my stress]" with Fénelon, *Traité* 496: "vous voyez ces choses [le passé, le présent, l'avenir] hors de vous ... vous embrassez tout par votre infini indivisible"; D 4.2 "his mercy and his justice, are one individual operation," with *Traité* 463: "ce qui punit est le même qui pardonne ... en un mot en lui tout est un d'une suprême unité"; D 4.2 "He is entire in every point of space; and complete in every instant of duration", compare *Traité* 506: "comme en chaque

time. The section on God's "immutability" in Fénelon's *Traité* is entirely based on the opposition between God's timeless "permanence" and men's perpetual "succession" of mental states, which is the result of the "incompatibility" (*incompatibilité*) between the parts of their temporal existence. "[L]'une exclut l'autre, et il faut que l'une finisse afin que l'autre commence" (*Traité* 480), compare T 2.3.7.5: "the incompatibility of the parts of time in their real existence separates them in the imagination." In God, there is no past and no future, but everything is present because God is the real being, he is "timeless in all the times of creation," he is "*celui qui est*" (a dangerous Malebranchian formula to which Fénelon subscribed with enthusiasm [*Traité* 438–9, 490]).

Thus, Fénelon's Christian eternalism was well known to Hume. However, this was only the official *façade* of a far more radical, albeit clandestine, reappraisal of Augustine's and Boethius's classical positions.⁴⁴ In his *Réflexions sur l'athéisme* added in 1718 to Fénelon's *Traité* (and annotated by Hume), Father Tournemine announced the advent of a new sect of atheist enemies of theology. Tournemine was almost certainly alluding to Camille Falconet and Nicolas Fréret, who belonged to Chevalier Ramsay's inner circle at the time Hume arrived in Paris. Falconet was Ramsay's "friend,"⁴⁵ possibly a longtime acquaintance since both were *protégés* of the Dukes of Bouillon and moreover companions in conversations and philosophical discussions (despite Falconet's reputation as a Spinozist).⁴⁶ Fréret had been involved in the first edition of Ramsay's *Travels of Cyrus* (1728), to which he contributed a letter "concerning the chronology of this work." It is thus highly probable that Falconet and Fréret met Hume in summer 1734 when he was hosted by Ramsay in Paris. Be that as it may, it is a fact that Falconet's and Fréret's necessitarianism is based on an eternalist view of time, linked (especially in Fréret's works) with a reductionist theory of causality which bears many points in common with Hume's (Mori 2025a). However, as we will see, the philosophical proximity between Hume and the two French *académiciens* stretches beyond the critique of causality and concerns, at a deeper level, the metaphysical foundation of their thought.

In the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques* (ca. 1714), a lengthy philosophical manuscript attributable to Camille Falconet,⁴⁷ eternalism and necessitarianism are clearly stated. Falconet was a post-Cartesian (or post-Malebranchian) immaterialist, or neutral monist, philosopher. For him, as for Hume, all we have are perceptions and there is no possible distinction between primary and secondary qualities of so-called "external" objects.⁴⁸ Falconet, contextually speaking, was an atheist, although he rhetorically admitted a "God" and sometimes addressed

*tems on doit toujours dire de Dieu 'il est' ... de même en chaque lieu on doit dire 'il est' sans le restreindre en disant 'il est ici!'; D 4.2 "[w]hat he is implies not in it any shadow of distinction or diversity"; compare *Traité* 469: "je distingue ses perfections non pour me représenter qu'elles ont quelque ombre de distinctions entre elles mais pour les considérer par rapport à cette multitude des choses créées que l'unité souveraine surpasse infiniment." These Fénelonian traits may well be explained by the fact that Chevalier Ramsay served as Hume's historical model for the character of Demea (Mori, forthcoming).*

⁴⁴ As Scribano (2023) has shown, Fénelon himself may be suspected of having been a kind of crypto-Spinozist.

⁴⁵ See Ramsay [to John Stevenson], 24 August 1742, in Baldi (2001, 465): "Yow are in the right about the *Medical Essays*. My friend, Dr. Falconet, has got them translated here." The catalogue of Falconet's huge library includes indeed a French version of the *Medical essays and observations, revised and published by a Society in Edinburgh*, 1733 (see *Catalogue de la bibliothèque de M. Falconet* [1763, 2:18779]).

⁴⁶ See Kervella (2008, 333): "His attending physician was Camille Falconet.... Although he was an admirer of Spinoza, Ramsay sought out his conversation." (Unfortunately, Kervella does not mention his sources here).

⁴⁷ See Falconet 2023. For further compelling arguments that confirm the attribution of the *Réflexions* to Falconet, see McKenna and Mori (2026).

⁴⁸ "We have said that it is the mind that feels, sees and hears. This being so, all visible and sensible objects are in the mind.... Here we are again thrown into an abyss of darkness, for I conclude from all this that there is no movement in nature; that there is no straight or curved line; the curved or straight stick, the river, the shore, the earth, the stars, the heavens, the whole visible world being only the soul variously modified, we cannot suppose any local movement, nor any figures, since it is impossible to conceive of such movement and figures in a pure mind." (Falconet 2023, 285)

his questions directly to Him (in Fénelon's style).⁴⁹ Falconet's "God," like Spinoza's, is devoid of all the attributes that are essential to any form of early modern theism: freedom, intelligence, providence, design.⁵⁰ "God," for Falconet, is the eternal and necessary being: He has no causal "power" at all but deploys necessarily His omnipotence in a single, timeless "act." Therefore, there are neither real changes nor "beginnings of existence" (nor "time," "motion," or other events) in the universe as "seen" from God's point of view. "Successive" time is only a prerogative of finite human minds that pass from one "sensation" to another, while God sees all the possible states of the universe "all at once":

It cannot be said that you ["God"] have acted or that you will act: these human ways of speaking presuppose a real beginning and a real future. There is no such thing for you: there is not even time, movement or season; these varieties come from a succession of different views. You have, my God, only one universal, unchanging, infinite view; we only see a certain number of sensations in succession, and you see them all at once. The face of the universe never changes in your presence. It always appears to you in the full extent of its perfections and properties: its apparent revolution is only for us. So you can do nothing, my God. (2023, 406)⁵¹

The interest of this new brand of atheism resided, from Hume's point of view, in the fact that it gave him the opportunity to conceive a non-theological (that is, monist, necessitarian and non-creationist) eternalism, where "being" is originally organized by an internal ordered necessity and nothing new "happens," since everything "exists" from eternity in its accomplished state:

all our thoughts, our past and future actions, finally all the modifications of pain and pleasure and the properties of which we are capable really subsist in your [God's] presence, and all kinds of creatures, worlds, universes, in whatever way we imagine them possible, and even infinitely beyond our imagination, have an existence as real as that of this visible world. (Falconet 2023, 416)

If he met Fréret and Falconet while in Paris, Hume would have heard about this new atheist eternalism. In any case, he certainly perused the volume of the French *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* in which was to be found Fréret's dissertation on the Chinese language, first presented to the Academy in 1718 (first French edition: 1729; first Dutch reprint: 1731).⁵² A refined necessitarian and eternalist system is described in the last pages of this text, which clearly echoes Falconet's position in the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*. Fréret attributed his system to certain "Chinese philosophers" and referred to the famous account by Father Longobardi (1701, 60–82; in which, however, no such theory can be found, and Chinese philosophy is merely considered as a sort of materialism):

In the Chinese system, everything is eternal, nothing begins and nothing ceases to exist. What we call generation and destruction are, for these philosophers, nothing more than changes of modifications and relationships, or rather they are nothing more than the manifestation and

⁴⁹ Falconet's ambiguity on God may be determined by the fact that he wanted to publish his work in Holland. Following Huet's example, he had contacted the bookseller Reinier Leers in Rotterdam under the pseudonym 'Delaube'. See McKenna and Mori (2026).

⁵⁰ Falconet (2023, 393): "It follows that force, intelligence, justice, goodness, prudence, temperance, power, and wisdom, all mean nothing in God but imaginary qualities."

⁵¹ Fénelon is an important source and polemical target of the *Réflexions*. See (2023, 90–101).

⁵² Hume certainly perused the Dutch (pirated) 1731 reprint of this work, since he referenced it in a footnote to his *History of England* (H 3: 145nF: 492) concerning "a tapestry, preserved in the ducal palace of Rouen" (this is the only quotation of the *Mémoires de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* in Hume's entire production). The Dutch 1731 reprint of the *Mémoires* is mentioned by Thomas Johnson in his letter to Charles Mackie dated 12 August 1732 and was probably available in Edinburgh some time later (Agnesina, McKenna, and Mori 2026). The Dutch reprint of the *Mémoires* was also available in Edinburgh at the Advocates Library, but not at the Library of the College of La Flèche, where Hume stayed from 1735 to 1737.

development of certain properties of being that are discovered by us or cease to be known to us. When these properties become perceptible to us, we say that they are produced, that they begin to exist. When we can no longer perceive them, we say that they are destroyed; however, according to Chinese philosophy, no other change occurs in them on these occasions than that which happens to an object when we turn our eyes to it and consider it. Thus, among an infinite number of properties equally contained in the bosom of a being, we are sometimes affected by its extension, its mobility, its solidity, its colour and its shape. Then we only call it body or matter; sometimes we put a motive force into it, and this is what we call a living being that gives itself its own movements; sometimes, finally, we believe we see feeling, will, thought and perception in it, and so we give it a soul and a spirit. In this system these various properties, although distinguished from one another by the idea we have of them and by the impression they cause in us, are in no way distinguished as to the reality of their being, since they necessarily exist with an infinity of others and all participate equally in one and the same infinite and unalterable existence. Once this principle has been established, it is easy to see that Chinese philosophy admits neither creation nor providence, and consequently does not recognise any God, i.e. any being distinct from the universe, who has produced or created the world and who governs or preserves it in accordance with the laws he has established. (Fréret 1731, 362–6; for a possible source of [some features of] Fréret's Chinese system, see Bayle, *Dictionnaire*, Japan D.)

In the metaphysical view of Fréret's Chinese *literati* there are no causal events, since everything already possesses its necessary disposition and cannot be different from what it is, and there is no God "distinct" from the "block universe" of properties that human minds can grasp in the great ocean of being. All we have are "ideas" or "impressions" of these properties, and what we call a "beginning of existence" is only a change in our relation to these properties: "When these properties become perceptible to us, we say that they are produced, that they begin to exist. When we can no longer perceive them, we say that they are destroyed." (This is exactly the experience Hume described in Part 4 of the *Treatise* Book 1, concerning the difficulty of thinking the "continual" existence of bodies.)⁵³

In Falconet's and Fréret's atheist eternalism, as in Hume's *Treatise*, "time" and "duration" are *only* mental phenomena depending on our internal "successions" of perceptions, since men's minds cannot see "everything at once" (Falconet) and must be content to perceive successively limited segments of the infinite "properties" of the world (Fréret). However, the world certainly shows orderly phenomena, and "the permanent and admirable order that reigns in this universe and in all its parts cannot be the effect of chance, nor of an inferior and blind being" (Fréret 1731, 388). Order, for Falconet, is an intrinsic character of the eternal being, which cannot "choose" between different worlds and is completely necessitated by its nature:

So, my God, you are incapable of determination, because you are incapable of doubt, ignorance or any change, and because all the decisions of your destiny are eternal and irrevocable. When you act, it is always very perfectly, and you know neither how to do things less well nor better. *You, therefore, act necessarily.* (Falconet 2023, 417–18)

6. "A principle of order"

The *Dialogues* are the only work by Hume to be entirely devoted to a metaphysical question, that of the attributes of God. This is, as such, an important change in perspective, compared to Hume's early empiricist commitments. However, the latter were neither forgotten nor abandoned but suspended. When seen from the perspective of the *Treatise*, the *Dialogues* depend indeed on a *dato non concesso*: the "unquestionable" truth of the existence of God, based, in turn, on the principle of causality. Both Cleanthes's design argument and Demea's "a priori" proof rest on the necessity of a cause for a given effect. Very unexpectedly, Philo does not make any objection on this point: he endorses the principle of causality in its full force and considers it to

⁵³ T 1.4.2.24: "[T]his interruption of their existence is contrary to their perfect identity, and makes us regard the first impression as annihilated, and the second as newly created[.]"

make the existence of God a “self-evident” truth that would expose those who might deny it to the “greatest ridicule” (a possible example of Hume’s auto-irony):

The former truth, as you well observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call GOD; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection. Whoever scruples this fundamental truth, deserves every punishment, which can be inflicted among philosophers, to wit, the greatest ridicule, contempt and disapprobation (D 2.3) ⁵⁴

It is not difficult to explain why this condition is required: if Hume had Philo expound the *Treatise*’s reductionist theory of causal necessity, the *Dialogues* could not even have begun (since the denial of an objective causal power necessarily implies the non-existence of God, and, therefore, the futility of discussing his perfections [Mori 2025b]). This explains why the *Dialogues* are saturated in a “causal” lexicon.⁵⁵ The underlying *dato non concesso* is plainly declared by Philo, in Part 4:

If Reason (I mean abstract reason, derived from enquiries a priori) be not alike mute with regard to all questions concerning cause and effect; this sentence at least it will venture to pronounce, That a mental world, or universe of ideas, requires a cause as much, as does a material world, or universe of objects; and if similar in its arrangement must require a similar cause [my emphasis]. (D 4.7)

In other words: “reason” may not be the source of our ideas of cause and effect, but *assuming it is*, then the causal inference should be applied to all cases, included in the question of the origin of natural order.

To say, that *the different ideas, which compose the reason of the Supreme Being, fall into order, of themselves, and by their own nature*, is really to talk without any precise meaning. If it has a meaning, I would fain know, why it is not as good sense to say, that *the parts of the material world fall into order, of themselves, and by their own nature*. Can the one opinion be intelligible, while the other is not so [my emphasis]? (D 4.10)

This is an almost literal quotation of Bayle’s “Stratonic” objection annotated in the *Early Memoranda*. “The same Question, Why the Parts or Ideas of God had that particular Arrangement? is as difficult as why the World had” (EM 2.15) And the Baylean short circuit reappears. When one asks for the cause of an “order,” it is of no use to imagine an “intelligent mind” as its source, since the existence of this “intelligent mind” must in turn be explained causally, *ad infinitum*, in an everlasting quest for a transcendent “first author.” Philo’s conclusion amounts to an apparent endorsement of Stratonic materialism, simply on epistemological grounds:

⁵⁴ See also D 11.17 where Philo mentions the “modal” version of the principle of causality: “so long as there is any vice at all in the universe, it will very much puzzle you Anthropomorphites, how to account for it. You must assign a cause for it, without having recourse to the first cause. But as every effect must have a cause, and that cause another; you must either carry on the progression *in infinitum*, or rest on that original principle, who is the ultimate cause of all things[.]”

⁵⁵ See D 2.5: Cleanthes: “[s]nce therefore the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble”; D 2.8: Philo: “[i]f we see a house, Cleanthes, we conclude, with the greatest certainty, that it had an architect or builder; because this is precisely that species of effect, which we have experienced to proceed from that species of cause”; D 2.18: Philo: “[t]hought, design, intelligence, is an active cause, by which some particular parts of nature, we find, produce alterations on other parts”; D 5.3: Philo: “[t]he farther we push our researches of this kind, we are still led to infer the universal cause of all to be vastly different from mankind, or from any object of human experience and observation”; D 7.1: Philo: “[i]f the universe bears a greater likeness to animal bodies and to vegetables, than to the works of human art, it is more probable, that its cause resembles the cause of the former than that of the latter”; D 9.9: Philo: “[i]n such a chain too, or succession of objects, each part is caused by that which preceded it, and causes that which succeeds it,” and so on.

Why then should we think, that order is more essential to one than the other? And if it requires a cause in both, what do we gain by your system, in tracing the universe of objects into a similar universe of ideas? The first step, which we make, leads us on for ever. *It were, therefore, wise in us, to limit all our enquiries to the present world, without looking farther* [my emphasis]. (D 4.11)

Thus, Philo's provisional conclusion is that atheist materialism, in which "order" is embedded in matter, is better founded than theism (Mori 2021, 244–7; Williford 2023). However, this is also a conditional statement, which depends on the *dato non concessio* already mentioned: *if* there is causal necessity in the world, *then* we must suppose that the world's order certainly has a cause, and, in this case, the supposition of a mental order as being this cause is of no use, if not meaningless. Materialism, in this connection, is certainly the best bet, for strictly epistemological reasons: it does not offer a positive solution to the issue, but at least it does not postulate any fantastic entity, whose existence should then, in turn, be demonstrated or imputed to a precedent cause, *ad infinitum*:

If I am still to remain in utter ignorance of causes, and can absolutely give an explication of nothing, I shall never esteem it any advantage to shove off for a moment a difficulty, which, you acknowledge, must immediately, in its full force, recur upon me [my emphasis]. (D 4.14)

Is this Philo's last word on the question of the origin of order? Must we always remain "in utter ignorance of causes?" A possible answer is given by the two controversial passages with which our research began, in which Philo apparently takes a different route. Far from lamenting our complete ignorance as to the origins of the universe and its intrinsic features, he claims that a metaphysical "system" concerning "the inmost essence of things" could "[solve] all difficulties" (D 6.12). This system posits the existence of an eternal "principle of order" which is the source of the "inviolable laws" of nature and necessarily determines the "disposition" of every finite being. Here is the full text of the two passages, which are substantially equivalent (the last lines are literally the same, with few variants):

[W]ere I obliged to defend any particular system of this nature (which I never willingly should do) I esteem none more plausible, than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world; though attended with great and continual revolutions and alterations. This at once solves all difficulties; and if the solution, by being so general, is not entirely complete and satisfactory, it is, at least, a theory, that we must, sooner or later, have recourse to, whatever system we embrace. How could things have been as they are, were there not an original, inherent principle of order somewhere, in thought or in matter? And it is very indifferent to which of these we give the preference. Chance has no place, on any hypothesis, sceptical or religious. Every thing is surely governed by steady, inviolable laws. And were the inmost essence of things laid open to us, we should then discover a scene, of which, at present, we can have no idea. Instead of admiring the order of natural beings, we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other disposition. (D 6.12)

I cannot forbear insisting still upon another topic. 'Tis observed by arithmeticians, that the products of 9 compose always either 9 or some lesser product of 9; if you add together all the characters, of which any of the former products is composed. Thus, of 18, 27, 36, which are products of 9, you make 9 by adding 1 to 8, 2 to 7, 3 to 6. Thus 369 is a product also of 9; and if you add 3, 6, and 9, you make 18, a lesser product of 9. To a superficial observer, so wonderful a regularity may be admired as the effect either of chance or design; but a skilful algebraist immediately concludes it to be the work of necessity, and demonstrates, that it must for ever result from the nature of these numbers. Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole œconomy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity, though no human algebra can furnish a key, which solves the difficulty? And instead of admiring the order of natural beings, may it not happen, that, could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition? (D 9.10)

A striking character of *both* passages is the fact that the terms "cause," "power," "force,"

“energy,” “production,” “efficacy,” “agency,” “action,” “operation,” “creation,” “beginning of existence,” do not appear anywhere in them (although they surreptitiously surface in some old- and new-Humean readings of them⁵⁶). The term “effect” occurs once but only negatively, when Philo explains what “order” does *not* depend on (chance, or design).

As we have seen, the *Dialogues* are generally saturated in a causal lexicon: Demea, Cleanthes and Philo disagree on everything except on the reality and efficacy of causes and on the existence of a “first cause.” Why, in the two necessitarian passages of Part 6 and Part 9, does Philo stop talking causally? Why does he use a static lexicon (“disposition,” “state,” “scene,” “inherent principle,” “order,” “essence,” “nature,” “oeconomy,” “steady, inviolable laws”) instead of the dynamic wording of causal reasonings? True, Philo mentions in Part 9 the “work of necessity” but he does not mean by that a particular productive “power” in nature; he only suggests that different properties can progressively emerge in the members of a numerical series (a timeless order, as such). And while he mentions the world’s “revolutions,” this does not necessarily imply an inherent causal power, or a Heraclitean internal principle of becoming, since he immediately remarks that the eternal order of being which determines these “revolutions” cannot be altered or modified.⁵⁷

There is a possible answer to this question: the “necessity” mentioned by Philo in both passages need not be causal necessity, founded on a “constant union and conjunction of like objects” in the mind (T 2.3.2.4). It could be an “absolute” or “metaphysical” necessity like that instantiated by Philo’s example of the series of natural numbers with its inherent set of internal relations and properties. In any case, Hume was not conflating metaphysical and “natural” necessity, if “natural” necessity means “causal” necessity (contrast Strawson 2008, 452n25). As he clearly stated in the *Treatise*, he was only confirming that the latter “exists in the mind, not in objects” (T 1.3.14.22). From Hume’s point of view, the idea of “causal necessity” is a product of human imagination and it is either derived from the perception of a constant conjunction of “objects” (i.e. ideas of objects) or based on a customary inference from one “idea” to another.⁵⁸ In both cases, “there is no absolute nor metaphysical necessity, that every beginning of existence [i.e. every ‘event’] shou’d be attended with such an object [i.e. a ‘cause’]” (T 1.3.14.35).

Thus, when Cleanthes remarks against Demea that, “[w]hatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent,” and that, “[t]here is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction” (D 9.5), he clearly echoes Hume’s refutation of necessary

⁵⁶ Concerning Philo’s speech in Part 6 Strawson (2008, 411) writes: “to say this is to say that the regularity *theory of causation* must be true. And we reach this conclusion from our armchairs. So the *regularity theory of causation* is after all an a priori truth [my emphasis].” See also John P. Wright (1983, 150), commenting Philo’s necessitarian claims: “This gives us some notion of the necessary connection which [Hume], like his rationalist predecessors, identifies with the power or force of the cause. Hume suggests that *this necessity is inherent in nature itself*. Yet, according to him, the necessity is entirely inconceivable to us [my emphasis].” Among the “Old Humeans,” see Winkler (2000, 87n34) quoted at [note 6](#) above. But see also Tweyman’s second point (1986 83), quoted at [note 5](#) above, on the potential conflict between Philo’s necessitarian argument and his rejection of Demea’s *a priori* demonstration of *God as a necessary cause*. According to Dohn (2010) “[t]he context of this passage [D 9.10] makes clear that the necessary disposition involves causal powers [my emphasis].” But he does not explain where these “causal powers” are to be found in the passage which is entirely based on a non-causal instance of necessity such as the mathematical properties of the “products of 9.”

⁵⁷ Falconet also mentions the “revolutions” of the world, which are such “only for us” (2023, 406, 513).

⁵⁸ See T 2.3.2.4: “I define necessity two ways, conformable to the two definitions of *cause*, of which it makes an essential part. I place it either in the constant union and conjunction of like objects, or in the inference of the mind from the one to the other.” This definition apparently entails an “objectivist” approach; however, since it depends explicitly on the two definitions of “cause” given in Book 1, Part 3 of the *Treatise*, it must be understood according to Hume’s conclusion in that part, where he had been crystal clear on this point: we can consider a causal relation “either as a comparison of two ideas [causality as “philosophical relation” between constantly conjoined objects], or as an association betwixt them [causality as “natural relation”, based on custom, between the idea of the effect and that of the cause]” (T 1.3.14.31).

causality in the *Treatise*: “twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment, and existent the next, without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle”; and consequently “the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity” (T 1.3.3.3). Cleanthes’s remark paves the way for Philo’s necessitarian declaration in which there is no room anymore for any kind of “causal” production. It would be indeed quite paradoxical, if not plainly incongruous, to see Philo immediately resuscitate the dogma of causal necessity just destroyed by Cleanthes’s Humean refutation while at the same time approving the latter. (“Though the reasonings, which you have urged, Cleanthes, may well excuse me, said Philo, from starting any farther difficulties; yet I cannot forbear insisting still upon *another* topic [my emphasis]” [D 9.10].)

Hume’s twofold strategy on the issue of “necessity” appears very neatly at this crucial moment of the *Dialogues*: he used Cleanthes’s empiricist objections (that is, his own objections in the *Treatise*) to dismantle Demea’s (and Clarke’s [Khamara 1992]) *a priori* proof based on *causal* necessity, only to propose, with Philo, an alternative view based not on “that unintelligible [causal] necessity which is suppos’d to lie in matter” (T 2.3.2.4), but on the “absolute” and metaphysical necessity of an eternal being.⁵⁹ His “principle of order” is the timeless and non-causal essential principle of the universe, of which the existence is compatible with that of different “dispositions,” “states,” “natures,” “essences,” since every segment of this eternal order may have its own characteristics although “it was absolutely impossible” they could ever “admit of any other disposition” (D 6.12, D 9.10).

“Order” implies plurality, complexity, differentiation, regularity, and variety. And these are exactly the traits of the infinite and timeless being described by Falconet in the *Réflexions morales et métaphysiques*, and by Fréret in his public dissertation on Chinese writing and in his clandestine *Lettre de Thrasybule à Leucippe*. Fréret’s Thrasybule, who also thinks that, relatively speaking, materialism is comparatively stronger than theism (Mori 2025a, 82–3), endorses a neutral monist system that is clearly echoed by Philo’s most “plausible” explanation of the order of the world. In both systems, being is eternal (i.e. timeless), and absolutely

⁵⁹ In the *Treatise*, Hume took the expression “absolute necessity” to have at least three different meanings: 1) a modal property of propositions of which the negation is contradictory or inconceivable (as in T 1.3.7.3: “in *reasonings from causation*, and concerning matters of fact, this *absolute necessity* cannot take place [my emphasis]” (since we can “conceive” a different state of things); 2) an intrinsic property of a being devoid of any kind of free will and determined to act by its own essence (as in his discussion of Spinoza at T 1.4.5.28: “plants, animals, men, &c. are nothing but particular actions of *one simple universal substance*, which exerts itself from a blind and *absolute necessity* [my emphasis]”); 3) a strong psychological constraint (as in T 2.3.7.7: “[n]othing but an *absolute necessity* can oblige an historian to break the order of time [my emphasis]”). The kind of “necessity” mentioned by Philo in D 9.10 is clearly a Spinozist necessity, as in T 1.4.5.28, that is, an objective property of being, not an imaginative construction as causal necessity, which “belongs entirely to the soul” (T 1.3.14.23). For a different interpretation, see Holden (2014), who argues for a “mind-dependent” status of *all* modal expressions in Hume, but he does so without taking into account T 1.4.5.28 and Philo’s “necessitarian” declarations (D 6.12 and D 9.10), which clearly concern the mind-independent world. In his (2026) contribution to the debate, Holden extensively discusses the two relevant passages by Philo, stressing their incompatibility with Hume’s “conceivability principle”, which rules out any kind of “necessary existence.” He then concludes (55–6, 59) that “Philo ... is not in fact serious” in supporting a necessitarian stance. However, Hume’s conceivability principle *only* concerns *causal* necessity. Philo’s necessitarian stance is grounded instead in a *non-causal* eternalist theory of being, in which a different arrangement of things is simply inconceivable. In an uncaused eternal universe where past, present and future are ontologically equivalent and there are no real “beginnings of existence,” the absolute necessity of being is a mere consequence of the principle of identity A=A: anything cannot be different from what it is. For a possible source or influence, see Bayle’s survey of Diodorus and Parmenides’s position in *Dictionnaire*, Chrysippus S and Xenophanes B. True, Bayle rejects Diodorus’s (and Spinoza’s) necessitarianism, asserting that a different state of things would not be contradictory. He questions: “[w]hat contradiction would it be if Spinoza had not died in Leiden?” (*Dictionnaire* Xenophanes B). However, if Bayle can follow this line of reasoning, it is only because he regards the principle of causality as an unquestionable metaphysical principle and the existence of “events” as an undeniable empirical conclusion. For a thinker who considers “causation” a human construct and denies any real “beginning of existence,” the necessitarian stance is entirely plausible and would certainly “solve all difficulties” (D 6.12).

necessary in as much as nothing “begins to exist” in it. An “event” is reduced to a simple relation between two different “states” of being that the human mind can grasp successively. Both systems are ontologically neutral, since the principle of order is antecedent to the mind/matter distinction, which is only a human way of distinguishing between different kinds of emergent properties and relations. Both systems are the result of the dismantling of the causal myth and of the “design” hypothesis and share the same “idealist” conception of time (or “duration”). Both systems, finally, are indemonstrable but are the best bet for a metaphysician who needs to explain the existence of an eternal order independent of any “cause.” Hume’s Philo and Fréret’s Thrasybule agree on the basic tenets of this “system” and express their position with similar words, as shown on Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Hume’s Philo and Fréret’s Thrasybule.

HUME	FRÉRET
[W]ere I obliged to defend	If I were obliged to embrace ⁶⁰
Any particular system of this nature	an Opinion on this subject ⁶¹
	[If I wanted to make a system ⁶²]
(which I never willingly should do)	on which, however, I shall always prefer ⁶³
[Nothing is more suitable to that philosophy suitable to that philosophy, than ... a fair confession of ignorance in subjects, that exceed all human capacity. (T 1.2.5.26n12)]	a sincere admission of our invincible ignorance ⁶⁴
I esteem none more plausible, than that which ascribes an eternal, inherent principle of order to the world (D 6.12)	I would prefer to say that ⁶⁵
Is it not probable, I ask, that the whole œconomy of the universe is conducted by a like necessity? ... And could we penetrate into the intimate nature of bodies, we should clearly see why it was absolutely impossible, they could ever admit of any other disposition? (D 9.10)	everything that exists, exists necessarily ⁶⁶ has always existed and will always exist, and that it cannot fail to exist; ⁶⁷

⁶⁰ [S]i j’étais obligé d’embrasser

⁶¹ une opinion sur cette matière

⁶² [S]i je voulais faire un système

⁶³ dans laquelle, cependant, je préférerai toujours

⁶⁴ un aveu sincère de notre ignorance invincible

⁶⁵ j’aimerais encore mieux dire que

⁶⁶ tout ce qui existe, existe nécessairement

⁶⁷ a toujours existé et existera toujours, et qu’il ne peut pas ne point exister

all the changes and corruptions, of which we have ever had experience, are but	that its various apparent changes are such ⁶⁸ only in relation to us ⁶⁹
passages from one state of order to another;	I only see in it a vicissitude and a continual passage from one state to another ⁷⁰
nor can matter ever rest in total deformity and confusion. (D 6.12)	in relation to particular beings which successively take on various new forms. ⁷¹
	(Fréret 2010, 144, 179)

Certainly, Spinoza is an unavoidable reference when it comes to Philo's necessitarianism (Williford 2023, 347–8), and it cannot be ruled out that Hume knew Spinoza's works and was influenced by them.⁷² However, contrary to Spinoza's rationalist eternalism, the necessitarian "systems" of Falconet, Fréret, and Hume have a strong inclination towards scepticism⁷³. For Hume's Philo, the necessity of being is epistemologically founded on probability ("[i]s it not *probable*, I ask, that the whole economy of the universe is conducted by a like *necessity* ?"); for Fréret's Thrasybule, it is based on preference ("*I would prefer* to say that...") and marked by uncertainty (I have "no sufficient reason to decide with certainty") or "invincible ignorance." While Spinoza installs himself in the plenitude of rational light, Hume's necessitarianism (like that of Falconet and Fréret) rests more modestly on an exclusion argument. For all three, "chance," "design," and "necessity" are the only possible explanations of the world's order.⁷⁴ Chance is easily ruled out (see D 6.12: "[c]hance has no place, on any hypothesis, sceptical or religious"). As to the design argument, Hume had learned from Bayle (since the *Early Memoranda*) how to reduce it to a necessitarian stance (and a similar move, also on the basis of Bayle's Stratic argument, is to be found in Fréret's *Lettre de Thrasybule*).⁷⁵ Moreover, no "design," and no "production" of the world's order can reasonably be imagined without assigning a "causal power" to the first being (or to any other being). "Chance" and "design" being contradictory or meaningless; the third option, "necessity," becomes, by exclusion, the only conceivable explanation of the world's order, and, therefore, the most "plausible." This necessitarian stance, born of the rejection of the anthropomorphic myths of a productive "causality" and of an absolute "duration" of things, unavoidably engenders an eternalist

⁶⁸ que ses divers changements apparents ne sont tels

⁶⁹ que par rapport à nous

⁷⁰ j'y aperçois seulement une vicissitude et un passage continu d'un état à l'autre

⁷¹ par rapport aux êtres particuliers qui prennent successivement diverses formes nouvelles

⁷² The question of Hume's reading of Spinoza is still open. Scribano (2012) offers a fascinating parallel between Hume's explanation of causal belief and Spinoza's theory of imaginative knowledge.

⁷³ This also marks an important difference between the necessitarian positions associated with Hume and Fréret, on the one hand, and Dudgeon's Spinozistic immaterialism, on the other (on Dudgeon's works and fortune, see Russell (2008, 42–45, 230–32). Dudgeon's system rests on the thesis that God is the only substance, and he identifies space and time with properties of God—more precisely, with God's individual immensity and duration. Most importantly, unlike Hume and Fréret, Dudgeon does not question the mind-independent reality of causal power or necessary connection, but regards God as the immediate cause of all things.

⁷⁴ See especially D 9.10: "so wonderful a regularity may be admired as the effect *either of chance or design*; but a skilful algebraist immediately concludes it to be the work of *necessity* [my emphasis]". Compare Hume's position with Falconet's rejection of both chance and design (2023, 388–9, 417–18), and with Fréret's reduction of chance and design to mere necessity (2010 133, 145–6, 173).

⁷⁵ See Fréret 2010, 146: "[i]f this God is not free, if he is determined to act in consequence of certain laws which he cannot change, He is a force similar to Destiny, to Fate, to Fortune."

conclusion: the existence of an eternal and necessary (but ordered) ocean of static properties is the metaphysical substitute for the ancient myth of causality.

Scepticism is another feature Hume's Philo has in common with Fréret's *Thrasybule* and with Falconet. Given that we only know the apparent properties of things, it is completely "indifferent" whether this necessity is placed "in thought or in matter": the upshot is the same (D 6.12). The basic ignorance of men concerning the ultimate essence of things rules out any strictly materialist option and prevents Philo (or Hume) from becoming an Enlightenment materialist like d'Holbach. This is possibly the reason why Hume, since the *Early Memoranda*, added a further species of atheism to the four listed by Cudworth (epicureanism, hylopathianism, hylozoism, stoicism). Hume added "metaphysical" atheism (ascribed to Spinoza) and "sceptical, or Pyrrhonian" atheism, with no explicit reference to any known philosopher.⁷⁶ The *Dialogues* finally give a character and a system of thought to the latter brand of atheism: Philo is obviously its champion, together with Falconet and Fréret. For the sceptical atheists, the first being is, by definition, unknowable,⁷⁷ and human knowledge is essentially limited to the world of perceptions. In a post-Cartesian world without God, the essence of matter and thought is no longer accessible to men, and only "hypotheses" can be proposed about the arrangement of the mind-independent universe.

Conclusion

In the *Dialogues*, Hume did not relinquish his most revolutionary position: the assertion that causal necessity exists only "in the mind," and that there is no causal "power" or "production" in either the mind-independent universe or in God. He opened a new horizon, which goes beyond (but not against) the empiricism of the *Treatise*. He proposed his own metaphysics in his own way, that is, obliquely, if not clandestinely. And he did so through Philo's repeated insistence on the existence of a necessary and eternal "principle of order." Here lies the heart of the *Dialogues*, and this is the real conclusion of the work, to be found among the various overlapping endings and smokescreens spread by Hume (Mazza and Mori 2023). This is what clearly appears from a late (1776) *addendum* to Part 12, in which Philo proposed a sort of final settlement between atheists and theists:

The Theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The Atheist allows, that *the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it*. Will you quarrel, Gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination? [my emphasis] (D 12.7)

There is an obvious link to the necessitarian passages of Parts 6 and 9, but also to the Baylean critique of the teleological argument in Part 4.⁷⁸ The question is again that of the existence of a

⁷⁶ "Four kinds of Atheists according to Cudworth, the Democritic or Atomical, the Anaximandrian or Hylopathian, the Stratonian or Hylozoic, the Stoic or Cosmo-plastic. To which he might have added the Pyrrhonian or Sceptic. And the Spinozist or Metaphysical. One might perhaps add the [Chymical crossed out] Anaxagorian or Chymical." (EM 2.40)

⁷⁷ On this point, a paradoxical alliance can be noticed between sceptical atheists and "mystics." In Cleanthes's words: "[o]r how do you MYSTICS, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the Deity, differ from Sceptics or Atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible?" (D 4.1).

⁷⁸ See especially D 4.9; "[b]y supposing [*the material word*] to contain the principle of its order within itself, we really assert it to be God; and the sooner we arrive at that divine Being so much the better [my emphasis]"; D 4.12: "[i]n like manner, when it is asked, *what cause produces order in the ideas of the Supreme Being*, can any other reason be assigned by you, Anthropomorphites, than that it is a rational faculty, and that such is the nature of the Deity? But why a similar answer will not be equally satisfactory in accounting for the order of the world, without having recourse to any such intelligent creator, as you insist on, may be difficult to determine. It is only to say, *that such is the nature of material objects, and that they are all originally possessed of a faculty of order and proportion*. [my emphasis overriding Hume's]" In both passages, the "principle of order" is not the effect of a causal activity, but an original property included in the "nature" of being.

“principle of order” devoid of any anthropomorphic attributes except a “remote analogy” with the operations of the human mind (such as that found “in the rotting of a turnip” [D 12.7]). The existence of such a “principle of order” should be admitted, according to Philo, by both atheists and theists. (This reminds us of Philo’s affirmation in D 6.12 that the existence of a “principle of order” is “a theory, that we must, sooner or later, have recourse to, *whatever system we embrace*”). However, Philo again avoids evoking the “principle of order” as a “cause,” even less as a “first cause.” The common assumption of all systems, and especially of theism and atheism, is neither the existence of a powerful “producer” or “creator,” nor that of some kind of hidden “force” embedded in matter. Philo speaks instead of an internal harmony among the different parts of this universe, attested by their “coherence,” “apparent sympathy,” “analogy,” “structure,” “œconomy” (some processes are obviously mentioned, but the dynamic wording is reduced to a *minimum* or neutralised by the context).⁷⁹

Philo’s reiterated insistence on this point in Parts 4, 6, 9, and 12, definitively shows that the “principle of order” theory is not an *ad hominem* argument, but the acknowledgment that a metaphysical foundation of nature’s regularity is unavoidable. “Being is ordered.” This is possibly the only line, and the whole content, of Hume’s metaphysics, since only the existence of a timeless order can “explain” the fact that our experience is populated by “constant conjunctions” of objects and “inviolable laws” which attest a “regularity” in nature. The fact that Hume could not help but reaffirm this position in what has been called “his dying testament to posterity” (Stewart 2022b, 252), that is, his last addition to the manuscript of the *Dialogues*, written with a feeble hand a few days before his death in the summer of 1776,⁸⁰ attests how important this issue was for him.

It follows that nothing needs to be modified, rectified, or qualified in the *Treatise* to make it compatible with Hume’s later (but also earlier) metaphysical reflections. From this point of view, it appears that both the “Standard View” and the “New Hume” interpretation have grasped only one aspect of Hume’s philosophical revolution: the former rightly maintains that, for Hume, “necessary connection” is a mental construction that depends solely on our experience of regular successions of perceptions, but the latter also touches a real point when it argues that such regularity must ultimately depend on a deeper metaphysical order that human reason can only glimpse, without being able to fully comprehend. Conversely, both interpretations have something unsatisfactory about them: while the “Standard View” fails to acknowledge Hume’s persistent interest in metaphysics (from the *Early Memoranda* to the *Dialogues*), the New Hume approach dismisses, for no apparent reason, the revolutionary theses of the *Treatise* about the origin of the idea of a “necessary connection,” and sees causality where it cannot be found, that is, in the timeless principle of order. A more holistic perspective could perhaps allow a better comprehension of Hume’s philosophical approach. And the key to it all could lie in considering Hume’s deep involvement in the philosophical culture of his time, and especially his ability to look at the English-speaking philosophical tradition (Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley) through the eyes of a 1730s Parisian freethinker, such as those he probably met between 1734 and 1737. Like them, Hume had become a philosopher by reading Bayle and Malebranche, and like them he was sympathetic to an atheism so radical as to attack the primary source and original sin of Western metaphysics, that is, the anthropomorphic idea of a powerful God who rules the world with his causal energy. Spinozism, monism, immaterialism, necessitarianism, eternalism, call it what you will, Hume’s sceptical atheist metaphysics is the foundation of his most “plausible”

⁷⁹ See especially D 12.7: “the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought [are] energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other.” Even here, natural “energy” is compared to the “structure” of the human mind, without any mention of a “productive” power.

⁸⁰ See Stewart (2022b, 252). Kemp Smith and Stewart do not address this question, but Philo’s passage on the “mathematical” necessity of being in Part 9 (D 9.10), marked “AA” in Hume’s manuscript, could also be a 1776 addition or, rather, a 1757 (or 1761) addition that Hume had first crossed out, and then restored in 1776, with a marginal annotation on p. 60 of the manuscript of the *Dialogues* (“print this passage”).

hypothesis about the mind-independent universe, which remains as such essentially unknowable to human minds. Such a metaphysical stance cannot be overlooked without betraying Hume's most genuine engagement in philosophical matters.

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