

Hume, the Occult, and the Substance of the School

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Abstract I have not been able to locate any critique of Hume on substance by a Schoolman, at least in English, dating from Hume's period or shortly thereafter. I have, therefore, constructed my own critique as an exercise in 'post facto history'. This is what a late eighteenth-century/early nineteenth-century Scholastic could, would, and should have said in response to Hume's attack on substance should they have been minded to do so. That no one did is somewhat mysterious. My critique is precisely in the language of the period, using solely the conceptual resources available to a Schoolman at that time. The arguments, however, are as sound now as they were then, and in this sense the paper performs a dual role—contributing to the defence of substance contra Hume, and filling, albeit two hundred years or so too late, a gap in the historical record.

'And he said: Go, and thou shalt say to this people: Hearing, you will hear, but not understand; and seeing you will see, but not perceive' (Isaiah 6:9).

I would fain ask those philosophers and historians of philosophy, among whom we must number the celebrated Mr. Hume as undoubtedly the most enlightened, whether there be, in the tumult of disputatious volumes, any so voiceless as the Schoolmen.

We have it on the highest authority of the genial Scotchman that the men of the School, 'making use of undefined terms, draw out their disputes to a tedious length, without ever touching the point in question.' With what alarm do we learn that these purveyors of obscurity have even ensnared the great Mr. Locke, one of the fathers of the experimental philosophy?¹ With so great consternation do we hear it said that the Scholastics lose themselves in 'abstruse philosophy and metaphysical jargon, which, being mixed up with popular superstition, renders it in a manner impenetrable to careless reasoners, and gives it the air of science and wisdom.'² Nay, we are told in

¹D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*: 2.9 (S. Buckle (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.18, note a.).

²*Enquiry*: 1.12, Buckle (2007), p.9.

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the frankest of terms that ‘Scholastic learning and polemical divinity retarded the growth of all true knowledge’.³

Such vituperation appearing unbecoming to a man famed for his expansive culture and gentle wit, I am compelled to conclude that the threat posed by no less than a ‘torrent of scholastic religion’⁴ must be of a high enough order to have the quills acquiver of even the great and worldly men of letters. Certain it must be that where that instrument of darkness, the Index of Forbidden Books, has failed to reach, so the heresy hunters in those few regions must as we write these words be creating new and ever bolder Indexes, nay even so far as to establish an Index devoted solely to the writings of Mr. Hume himself, the titles of his works inscribed in the blackest of India ink and the thickest and most menacing of lines.

When therefore we run over libraries, persuaded of the dangers of the dogmatists, surely we will find this jewel in Scotland's crown subjected to the most merciless of their flagellation? Yet if we take in our hand what volumes we possess, it would seem that Mr. Hume was heard throughout Europe save by the School itself!⁵ Was this in virtue of mere ignorance, even wilful blindness, or a simple discourtesy unbecoming men of erudition and standing? Perhaps there be other hypotheses we might feign such as the living under penal laws for nigh on two hundred years in Britain, accompanied by the effacement of the School from the universities, and the many wars of the Continent, retarding as they surely did the growth of true knowledge in those towers of learning. Howsoever we explain the phenomenon, it is evident that Mr. Hume came unto the purveyors of mummeries, and they heard him not.

Or, some might suspect, they heard him indeed, but *had nothing to say* in return and this because the very artfulness of Mr. Hume reduced his dogmatist enemies to silence; as it were from the spouting of mummeries to not saying a mum. Suppose this to be so; we should expect to find the corpses of his bigoted Scholastic enemies prostrate at the foot of every argument brought to bear upon their ‘fruitless efforts of human vanity’.⁶ In particular, we should expect the laying waste of that so central an idea of the School, the idea of *substance*. For there is none so important, none so metaphysical a dogma of abstruse philosophy, so admirably complementing the ‘scholastic religion’, as that of the existence of substance and its correlative accidents. How could it be that without substance there should be *transubstantiation*, marked by Mr. Hume as a ‘superstitious delusion’?⁷ No more than there should be a *mechanical philosophy* without machines. Let us not say, however, that the light of Caledonia focused his piercing beam upon the idea of substance as a means to take up the sword with ‘[t]he devotees of that strange superstition.’⁸ Rather, I would have it that the dogma of substance and accident must have so offended the pious ears of this most cautious and professedly undogmatic of men that he could only marvel to see how

³ Hume, *The History of England*, vol. 6, Appendix to the Reign of James I (London: A. Millar and T. Cadell, 1767), p.136.

⁴ Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, in his *Four Dissertations* (London: A. Millar, 1757), p.71.

⁵ P. Jones (ed.), *The Reception of David Hume in Europe* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005); J. Fieser (ed.), *Early Responses to Hume's Metaphysical and Epistemological Writings*, vols. 1 and 2 (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005; 2nd edn.).

⁶ *Enquiry*: 1.11, Buckle (2007), p.8.

⁷ *Enquiry*: 10.2, Buckle (2007), p.97.

⁸ Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*: I.iii.8 (L.A. Selby-Bigge (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978, p.99).

anyone pleading soundness of mind should ever have been so deluded by it. The serried ranks of generations, nay thousands and more, of Schoolmen, reinforced on their flanks by the Aristotelians who knew naught of miraculous changes of substance presided over by the so-called popish priesthood, must then stand in awful anticipation as they await the calm and profound reflection by which Mr. Hume demolishes the keystone of their sophistical system.

Yet when we cast our eyes over that most prodigious corpus, we cannot but feel dejected at the absence of bulk devoted to such a momentous idea. In the celebrated *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, we find nothing but some remarks upon spiritual substance and personal identity, but not upon the very idea of substance itself. We fare no better in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. We are summarily informed of Mr. Hume's position in his *Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in Edinburgh*, in which he tells us that we have 'no distinct idea of substance', invoking Mr. Locke and Bishop Berkeley in support.⁹ His controversial essay *Of the Immortality of the Soul* contains a little more of substance, so to speak, since he says: 'metaphysics teach us, that the notion of substance is wholly confused and imperfect, and that we have no other idea of any substance than as an aggregate of particular qualities, inhering in an unknown something.'¹⁰ From the consideration of which, I must conclude that the full weight of Mr. Hume's onslaught is borne by his justly famous *Treatise of Human Nature*, in which the cudgels are taken up against this elemental idea, so that in destroying the frame of the School, no stone is left standing on another. We must expect nothing less than the most powerful of dialectics, accompanied by a calm and easy reasoning that takes us insensibly from the innocent questioning of this Scholastic commonplace to a thorough mystification that so many penetrating minds should ever have tangled themselves in such a net of sophistry and illusion.

In the Abstract to his *Treatise*,¹¹ Mr. Hume reminds us of his opinion but adds some detail: 'We have no idea of substance of any kind, since we have no idea but what is derived from some impression, and we have no impression of any substance either material or spiritual. We know nothing but particular qualities and perceptions. As our idea of any body, a peach, for instance, is only that of a particular taste, colour, figure, size, consistence, etc.; so our idea of any mind is only that of particular perceptions, without the notion of anything we call substance, either simple or compound.' Again, I would urge that we put aside consideration of mental or spiritual substance and devote our attention to substance as such. If there be no idea of substance, there can be no idea of spiritual substance; if there be an idea of substance, then that of spiritual substance cannot be dismissed on the more general ground. If spiritual substance be a chimera, then some of the edifice of the School will fall; if substance itself be a fantasy, then all of it collapses in a heap of ruins.

Before I turn to the *Treatise* itself, where the whole work is done by Mr. Hume in his assault upon the idea of substance, I cannot ignore the accusation that in speaking of the *idea* of substance and of substance itself as it were in a single breath, I am confusing that which Mr. Hume wishes to keep separate. For do we not learn, most

⁹ Buckle (2007), p.160.

¹⁰ Buckle (2007), p.190.

¹¹ Selby-Bigge (1978), p.658.

particularly from the first *Enquiry*, that the devotee of an Academical scepticism will not, from the demonstrated absence of an idea, thereby dare to conclude that there be nothing whatsoever corresponding to that which the idea would represent were this idea to exist?¹² For my part, I wish to avoid stepping into a bog of confused notions as to what such a supposition might amount to. In simplicity, I wonder whether, if we have no idea of something, we could ever frame to ourselves any hypothesis about what that, which we do not have, would represent if we had it. For not having it, how can it represent even, as a Schoolman would say, *in potentia*? And if it does not represent, by what right may I aver that what it would represent does exist and yet avoid falling into inconsistency? What we do not have we do not have, and to introduce the idea by means of the word by which it is supposedly signified would be no more than to cover the empty with the nonsensical. Conversely, should I but know what an idea would be an idea of were I to have it, then by all means I *do* have it; I entertain it, as we might say; it is in my mind; I can discourse of it; yet still there may be nothing in reality to which it corresponds.

Howsoever philosophers may seek to resolve such a conundrum, be it in respect of Mr. Hume's view of causality and necessary connexion,¹³ or the real powers of objects,¹⁴ I do not propose that one may dispel it with regards to substance. Mr. Hume is clear: there is no idea of substance. He does, it is true, say the idea of substance is not 'distinct'; in another place that we have no idea of it but as of an 'aggregate of particular qualities, inhering in an unknown something'. The latter appears distinct enough if devoid of some knowledge, to wit knowledge of what the 'something' is in which the qualities inhere. Were we to rest here, however, we might think Mr. Hume to be no more than a devotee of the equally illustrious Mr. Locke, who proffers for our consideration the idea of something 'we know not what' support of the qualities of things.¹⁵ Perhaps in his more moderate moments, moderate at least for him, Mr. Hume does think we have an idea of substance albeit confused, indistinct, of some or other unknown support of qualities. For the School, this is extreme enough. Yet in the only place in his many volumes where we do find an extended discussion of the subject, the position is more sceptical still. Here, Mr. Hume doubts the 'real existence' of the idea, which he glosses by claiming: 'We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it.'¹⁶ Here, there is no mention of that 'unknown something' in which the collection is supposed to inhere; it comes shortly after, in a context suggesting that we *purport* to refer qualities to an unknown something in which they are supposed to inhere, but that this is a 'fiction'.

¹² This is one of the main themes of the interpretation of Hume as 'sceptical realist'. For the most thorough exposition, see S. Buckle, *Hume's Enlightenment Tract: The Unity and Purpose of An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). For one of the earliest, see John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983). Both works make out a detailed (if controvertible) case for Hume as sceptical realist about necessary connections, but none whatsoever about substance, where the discussion in general is either thin or non-existent.

¹³ G. Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Buckle (2001).

¹⁵ Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II.xxiii and elsewhere (P.H. Nidditch (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, pp.295–317).

¹⁶ *Treatise*: I.i.6, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.16.

Is he speaking of the inhesion or of the purported referral? Both, it would seem—a studied ambiguity achieving both of Mr. Hume's ends. For the idea of inhesion is, to the mechanical philosopher, no more intelligible than that of the substance it is supposed to define; and what we purport to do by making said referral inherits the incoherence.

I say, Mr. Hume denies we have any idea of substance. But does he not describe the idea as being of an aggregate of qualities, at the least? Here, the art of logic chopping is practised better than by any Schoolman. For were I to tell the believer in God that I too believe; that the deity is an elfin figure who dwells on the isle of Mull; would the believer welcome me into his household of faith? To propose, then, that the idea of substance exists, and that it is of an aggregate of qualities, is to deny the idea of substance; and this being the idea of the School, which all know to be Mr. Hume's quarry, it would scarce serve his purpose were he to shrug and exclaim that he agrees with the School: there *is* an idea of substance after all.

I fear I have already wandered too far into the brambly thicket of Mr. Hume's shuffling use of language. Say he that we have no idea of substance; say he that we have an idea but in reality there is none; let him affirm that substance exist but we have no idea of what it could be; allow him the freedom to state that we grasp the idea but what we lay hold of is so different from what the Schoolmen say substance to be that we engage in mere wordplay to call it substance or no; for my part it is of no moment. For what the School asserts, Mr. Hume denies: that we have an idea of substance; that the reality match the idea; that what we comprehend is that which the vulgar apprehend; and that the School supplies merely the calm and profound reasoning which refines the vulgar thoughts, polishing them and deepening their hue with a burnish born of many hundreds of years of abstruse reasoning. Proudly do I say 'abstruse': for as the mathematician prides himself on the abstruse reasoning that finds perfect harmony with the mere child's counting of his beads, and as the famed Mr. Newton uncovered the secrets of light by an abstruse and profound reflection that helped mankind to fathom how an ageing philosopher might yet see through his spectacles; so, I say, the Schoolman treads with calm detachment onto a perilous field, beset by the enemies of sound reason on both sides—the sceptics and the naysayers, the knownothings, if I may speak such, assaulting him on one flank; and the extravagant iconoclasts, the wreckers who find progress in the knocking down of a gothic masterpiece and its replacement with a fishmarket, on the other—yet who, by a determined mind, reinforced by the battalions of historic and perennial wisdom, sets out to chart a complex terrain, happy in the knowledge that whatever its detail and remove from vulgar thought, it will yet, with no hindrance, allow the ordinary man to find his simple way from one landmark to another.

The School now expects a battery. It looks to be overwhelmed by a volley of accurate and just reasoning that will impel it to turn tail from substance and seek anxious refuge in cloistered prayerfulness. What does it find? Mr. Hume wants to know whether the idea of substance be derived from impressions of sensation or of reflection.¹⁷ Impressions of reflection being but passions and emotions, or so he tells us and we have no reason to question his assumptions where it proves unnecessary, no Schoolman would venture down such an absurd route any more than Mr. Hume.

¹⁷ *Treatise*: I.i.6, Selby-Bigge (1978), pp.15–16.

What of impressions of sensation? For sensation could mean different things in different mouths. We have assistance, though: impressions of sensation are conveyed by our senses. His examples here are colours, sounds, and tastes. In truth, any quality we can sense may give rise to an impression of sensation, though the impression may not resemble the quality.

Let the School stake its bare claim at once, lest uncertainty on its part bedevil proceedings at the outset. When we see the green of a tree, we see the tree (though we may not know it;¹⁸ but the idea of substance is generated by the normal, not the eccentric); when we hear a man speak, we hear the man; when we taste the sweetness of an apple, we taste the apple. If these be impressions of sensation, as Mr. Hume must allow, we sense the tree, the man, the apple.¹⁹ It is of no consequence to concede that we see the tree *by means of* seeing its colour, hear the man *by means of* hearing his voice, taste the apple *by means of* tasting its sweetness. I see by means of my eyes; does that imply I do not see? 'We have eyes, therefore we cannot see' would be almost too much for a Pyrrhonist to swallow.²⁰ To this extent, then, do we have an idea of substance derived from our impressions of particular substances.

This being but a capsule of the Scholastic thought, let us proceed. Mr. Hume wants to know, if the impression of substance be an impression of sensation, then which sense and in what manner does that sense convey the impression and its consequent

¹⁸ We may not know we are seeing a tree, that is, through mistake, ignorance, or abnormal perceptual conditions.

¹⁹ I should enter an important caveat. One could, of course, take the idealist reading of Hume suggested by *Enquiry*: 12.1 (Buckle 2007, pp.131–6), in which case protestations in favour of our impressions being of substances as well as accidents will have less force: not *no* force, because even if all objects of perception are purely mental, Hume still has to account for impressions that appear to be of substances rather than of accidents, albeit both will be only mental entities. Still, the protestations will have less force inasmuch as the Schoolman will be in no better position than Dr Johnson vis-à-vis Berkeley. This is not so on a realist reading, since if Hume and the Schoolman both accept the existence of mind-independent material objects, there is a substantive question about what our impressions of sensation are impressions *of*—and they seem for all the world to be of substances as well as qualities. But this dialectical advantage is not my reason for choosing a realist reading. The reasons are these. First, the idealist reading purchases consistency for Hume (or at least a greater chance of consistency, as it were) at the price of wild implausibility: better methodologically to attribute to one's opponent a plausible initial position before worrying about whether it leads to an inconsistency, unless the position is inconsistent at first glance, which in Hume's case it is not. Secondly, Hume's ubiquitous use of perceptual vocabulary taking non-mental items as objects makes it difficult to describe him as merely speaking with the vulgar in all these places, though he clearly does in some instances. Moreover, the realist interpretation is in line with his overall commitment to, and desire to defend, the mechanical philosophy, albeit his idealist and other radically sceptical musings show the extreme danger into which the mechanical philosophy falls of sawing off the branch on which it sits (as Buckle 2001, p.307 points out). Thirdly, I follow Buckle (2001), pp.296–308 in holding that Hume entertains these radical doubts seriously but does not regard them as overwhelming because they are unliveable, which is a key desideratum of his philosophical methodology. His 'mitigated' or Academic scepticism, outlined in 12.3 of the *Enquiry* (Buckle 2007, pp.140–4) is, as Hume says, 'durable and useful' and one to which we should adhere, leaving the radical sceptic and his opponent to confine their disputes to the ivory tower. Fourthly, given that my discussion of Hume on substances focuses almost entirely on the *Treatise*, it is only fair to read him as he stands in that work; and there, as he famously asserts, the existence of body is something 'we must take for granted in all our reasonings' (*Treatise* Liv.2, Selby-Bigge 1978, p.187), which is precisely what he does throughout the book, notwithstanding occasional idealist musings (as in I.ii.6, Selby-Bigge 1978, pp.66–8).

²⁰ The example is from A. Olding, 'Religion as Smorgasbord', *Quadrant* 42 (5) (May, 1998), pp.73–5. It was used by the late Australian philosopher David Stove as an example of 'the worst argument in the world'.

idea? 'If it be perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or sound, or a taste.'²¹ Now by 'it' I presume the author to be speaking of substance, not the idea or impression of it, since neither ideas nor impressions are perceived by the eyes, ears, or palate.²² Justly so, for the more common ground betwixt Mr. Hume and his Scholastic opposition the better for reasoned debate. Now the *reductio ad absurdum* is well taken, for who would assert that substance is a colour, a sound, or a taste? Yet how does Mr. Hume arrive at the absurdity with which he will convict the School? By affirming that what is perceived by the eyes must be a colour, by the ears must be a sound, by the palate must be a taste. I for one find this unduly restrictive, and have no idea of where it would be found in the mechanical philosophy. Did Mr. Newton or Mr. Boyle demonstrate that by my eyes I can perceive a colour but not a shape? Does Mr. Hume think my sense of touch has only one proper object, and if so what—is it shape, size, texture, or something else? With my ears can I perceive only sound? Or do I not sense the crisp texture of the autumn leaves with both my touch and my hearing when they fall beneath my feet? To be sure, the only qualities I may perceive with my palate are tastes, but this is merely an example of mixing up what should be kept apart, lest there be an easy but deceptive transition from a commonplace about taste to a decided uncommonplace about sight, hearing or touch.

This thought is not, however, our main concern. Our question is whether Mr. Boyle or Mr. Newton or any other of the illustrious mechanical philosophers proved that the ear can perceive sounds but not what produces them, the eye colours and shapes but not *of what* they are colours and shapes. I would struggle to find this in their magnificent writings, though I dare not to deny an intimation will be located here and there, albeit hardly sufficient to convince the learned that the intimation was somehow founded on an *experiment*. For what experiment would ever demonstrate such a thought, which is metaphysical through and through and as much a puzzle to the School as the School's metaphysical dogmas are to Mr. Hume? To the contrary, the great experiments, such as those of Mr. Newton on the refraction of light or of Mr. Boyle on the transmission of sound, presupposed the existence of the very substances productive of the light and sound that those natural philosophers sought to understand.

There must be more subtlety to Mr. Hume's reasonings on this topic than we have so far uncovered. He might appeal to the fact that the mechanical investigation of sensation reveals only light striking the eyes, vibrating air striking the ears, and so on for the other senses. We may not, however, conclude that all we see is light and all we hear is air, for such would be the ravings of a madman. So what may we conclude from this mechanical investigation? That the *means* by which we see colour and hear sound involve the interacting of mechanisms within and without the body of the perceiver. I do not *use* those means as I use a knife to cut butter; I could choose to cut it with a fork but I cannot choose to use other than my eyes to see. Call the means what you will—an instrument, a medium, or a vehicle by which we see and hear and

²¹ *Treatise*: I.i.6, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.16.

²² Hume very occasionally speaks that way (e.g. *Treatise* I.ii.5, Selby-Bigge 1978, p.59) but his almost universal use of 'perceive' does not take impressions or ideas as the object. See further n.19.

taste. From the mechanical facts, I can infer nothing concerning *what* it is that I see, hear, or taste, though I must infer that there be substances which in part cause the seeing, tasting and hearing of something by the very existence of the mechanical facts themselves. These causes I would sense in my establishing of the facts, were I to be a mechanical philosopher.

Yet have I not played into the sceptic's hands? For if I can infer nothing about what I sense from the mechanical facts about sensation, then by similar reasoning must I not deny that I may infer anything about what I sense beyond the mere sensation of colours, sounds, and other qualities? It is evident that the cases are not the same. The natural philosopher who investigates the mechanics of sensation is not in the profession of establishing what it is I sense. By contrast, when I go about my daily affairs sensing colours, sounds, and other qualities, I am most certainly concerned in establishing what it is that I sense. The School and Mr. Hume are at one inasmuch as we do not devalue the conduct of daily life; we must be men as well as philosophers,²³ and as a man I want to know what I sense. It need not be emphasized that in the daily affairs of life, my instincts and habits carry me forward, to be sure; yet when caught up in the vapours of a bodily or mental disorder, if I retain some ability to reason, still I seek to discern whether, if I grasp at the image before my eyes, I will lay hold of a substance or my hand should pass insensibly through the air. I will not rely on my instinct, and custom will not avail me. I must think, and when I do so, at least in calm reflection after my disease has passed, I will conclude that sensing a colour will not always imply that I sense the substance which has it; but that in the usual case, I can be sure it does.

Yet I feel the force of Mr. Hume's scepticism pressing down upon me; for how, in the usual case, can my mind reach out to a substance when all I sense is one quality after another? I sense a colour; it belongs to a shape; the shape is filled with texture; the texture is warm or cold; it feels solid, and I hear a sound coming from the location of these perceptions. I perceive quality after quality in succession, yet where amidst it all is the substance?²⁴ The School replies: And do you think that the search for substance is like the search for a needle in a haystack? Are you like the miner of gold who thinks that if only he will sift the silt for long enough, his arduous toil will bear fruit in the discovery of a grain of precious metal? Has a Schoolman ever said so much, and if so, who? The shrewder among the School will retort: Mr. Hume, try as I might I can never find an *impression*. For when I turn my gaze within, and am not caught up in the vapours of an addled mind, I only find that I have the perception of a green leaf, of a tall mountain, or of a pool of warm water; there is no impression of *green* as such, or of *tallness* or *warmth*, at least in no sense that is relevant to your philosophy.

Let us, however, who are not so shrewd, grant Mr. Hume his assumption, that we have impressions of particular qualities as such; let them be as 'loose and separate',²⁵ as he wishes, or as 'bundled' together²⁶ as suits his purpose. We may not play favourites among impressions; one impression is at a par with any other. So let us

²³ *Enquiry*: 1.6, Buckle (2007), p.6.

²⁴ If Hume had lived in the time of Ryle, he might even have called the quest after substance a category mistake!

²⁵ *Enquiry*: 7.26, Buckle (2007), p.68.

²⁶ *Treatise*: I.iv.6, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.252.

begin with the perception of colour. I see red; the red colours a square shape; that square shape has a texture by which I feel solidity; it is part of a cubic volume; the volume, I ask, of what is it a part? Nothing, it appears. But it is evident that whereas the red colour is the colour of a shape, the shape has a texture, the textured shape belongs to a cubic volume, would we not be playing favourites after all if we allowed with equanimity that the cubic volume belonged to *nothing*? Of *what*, we may ask, is the cubic volume the figure? Why, it is the volume of a *box*; the box has a cubic figure. Need we continue in our saunter from sensation to sensation? Nay, I fear we *cannot* so continue, for we have reached an end to the musings about our red box, lest we wish either to inspect more of its qualities or else venture outside the box, so to speak, to investigate its surrounds. Or must we say that the volume is but the configuration of corpuscles, and that these too have their qualities, which are configurations of yet further corpuscles, and so on ad infinitum? Something would be awry were we to venture into these depths, for our qualities would never come to an end, each a quality of some other quality which itself qualified yet another; and we could never find the *collection*, the *aggregate*, of particular qualities Mr. Hume assures us is the adoptive child we have taken to our bosom to *replace* the true son we never had. And all for a little red box! Let us not be mistaken: the School need not pronounce upon whether any substance have a finite number of qualities or no; such is a matter for delicate investigation according to the principles of Scholastic and empirical science working in mutual harmony. Such was the intent of the great Stagirite; and so we must follow his lead, profiting from those true discoveries that are the crown of natural philosophy.

I fear we have been unfair to Mr. Hume, not in our argument but in preventing him from speaking more before directing our responses to him; an ungentle treatment of such an affable gentleman. So let him if you please to continue. This collection of qualities, which Mr. Hume finds to be the only thing that could correspond to a supposed idea of substance, 'have a particular name assigned them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or others, that collection.'²⁷ It is true, I reply, that I use the name *horse* to talk about horses, to recall them to others; albeit not to myself, I should not think. I have difficulty, though, in supposing that this have much to do with anything about horses. Were Mr. Hume to believe in true substance, all he says here would equally be correct. He then, however, presents us with a dilemma for the School. For either these qualities are all 'referred to an unknown *something*, in which they are supposed to inhere'; or if this be a 'fiction', they are 'at least supposed to be closely and inseparably connected by the relations of contiguity and causation.'²⁸

Now, I do not propose for one second to enter into a lengthy disquisition (or even inquisition) concerning Mr. Hume's justly famous views on causation. I leave this to others for whom this is a special study. I do, though, wish to register a degree of disbelief that qualities should be in relations of causation and contiguity, at least in any way congenial to Mr. Hume. He gives as his example the idea of gold, with its attendant qualities of being yellow, malleable, fusible, and having a certain weight. I ask, does its yellow colour cause it to be malleable? Does its weight cause it to be fusible? And if we then discover its dissolubility in *aqua regia*, as Mr. Hume

²⁷ *Treatise*: I.i.6, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.16.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

proposes, do we consider this quality to be the cause of any of the others? And in what way are the qualities supposed to be contiguous? Do we find them close together like peas in a pod? It is not merely that I find fusibility where I do not find dissolubility in *aqua regia*, or a yellow colour where I do not find malleableness, though this be serious enough. What gives me pause is to wonder in what way these qualities of gold are themselves contiguous. The more I think upon it, the less am I able to comprehend how dissolubility in *aqua regia* be contiguous with anything, or I am not sure I can even assign it a place or time.²⁹ Mr. Hume may knowingly retort that these qualities are contiguous *in my mind*: I perceive the yellow gold melt, then dissolve, these ideas following so closely one upon the other that I cannot but unite them in my mind under a single name. I will return to the succession of ideas momentarily, but for now I will wonder whether Mr. Hume has anything to say about the qualities of the gold or only of my ideas of them? I fear his ‘aggregates’ and ‘collections’ might themselves be mere fictions if the unity I place upon them be the mere invention of my mind; hardly a stable foundation for the experimental philosophy. My task is not, however, to convict Mr. Hume of even more scepticism than he himself would allow, noble an enterprise though it may be. I wish instead to propose that the celebrated notions of causation and contiguity can perform no task assigned them by Mr. Hume if he does not presuppose the substance of the School in the first place: for the qualities of gold are everywhere and at all times contiguous with the qualities of air—and yet air is no part of gold, nor vice versa. In likewise, the lustre of gold at all times and everywhere causes a glint in the eye of its beholder—but this glint is no part of gold, nor is gold a part of this glint. Be causation regular succession or necessary connexion, my point stands firm.³⁰

Are we to suppose, then, that causation and contiguity play no part whatsoever in our understanding of gold? To think so would be churlish and unwise. For we may be required to refer some of the qualities of gold to the effects of causation by other qualities of its minute parts, such as their structure and configuration. Mr. Hume, though, would have it that gold is no more than a collection of qualities united by mutual relations of causation and contiguity, which cannot be the case. Would not a more refined and subtle idea of such relations, suited to discovery by the genius of experimental philosophy, suffice as a replacement for Mr. Hume’s coarser conception? For the reasons previously advanced, I fear not: whatever qualities the minute structure of its parts may cause at the grosser level, those qualities are themselves incomprehensible but as qualities *of a substance*: it is *gold* the experimentalists investigate, that particular substance singled out from nature for its peculiar and marvellous qualities; the structure of its parts are of *its* parts and no other, and the corpuscles belong to the substance, not to each other or to nature as a whole, let alone to the mind. Our famed experimentalists inquire not into corpuscles, or minute parts, or qualities *simpliciter*; they wish to know about the corpuscles, parts, and qualities of the distinct *substances* that nature presents for their attention. In similar vein, for all I try to make sense of contiguous qualities, I find myself always referring those qualities to a *substance*, and no contiguity can be presented to the mind, or discovered

²⁹ To be sure, a contemporary trope theorist will call the quality instances of gold ‘compresent’ or ‘colocated’, but even if sense can be made of these notions they do not amount to *contiguity*, which is a form of non-identity.

³⁰ Needless to say, given Hume’s insistence on the ‘loose and separate’ nature of qualities, he has no principled way of excluding these ‘external’ qualities while retaining the ‘internal’ (essential) ones.

by it, save in the idea that these several qualities are all contiguous in belonging to that substance *gold*.

By what right, moreover, does Mr. Hume insist that the discovery of dissolubility in *aqua regia* causes us to attach that quality to the substance—by which he intends, of course, the aggregate—as if it had been part of our idea all along? What ‘principle of union’ is it that ‘gives entrance to whatever quality afterwards occurs, and is equally comprehended by it, as are the others, which first presented themselves’?³¹ It cannot be causation or contiguity, nor can it be so promiscuous a ticket that gives entrance to whomsoever, dishevelled and uninvited, should arrive at the door. Let our fancy take flight, and suppose the experimentalists to discover that gold is, everywhere and at all times, edible with relish by a certain species of beetle; would we then give entrance to this quality as part of our very idea of gold? If so, our chemists would not have advanced much beyond the alchemists, who admitted the motions of the heavenly bodies into their ideas of sublunary nature. They might as well admit the prizing of gold by moneylenders into their chemical descriptions, or that gold is often found in rivers and always poisonous if ingested in large quantities. My point is not that we may never *learn* many things about gold such as the above; but the anxiety lest all these lessons be incorporated into our very *idea* of gold, even as much as if they had been there from the beginning along with fusibility and malleableness; as if our famed chemists did not have enough on which to toil in their comprehension of this most wonderful metal.

Mr. Hume having fancied himself to have disposed of the idea of substance in this part of his treatise, feels compelled to return to the fray somewhat later,³² in his criticism of a selection of ‘fictions of the antient philosophy,’³³ to wit, and of no surprise, substance, substantial form, accidents, and ‘occult qualities’. Of substance I have already spoken and will speak some more presently, adding minor remarks on substantial form. With accidents these form a contrast and so they cannot avoid a small discussion. First, I wish to say a little about those infamous ‘occult qualities’ which Mr. Hume subjects to some of his most bitter derision. With this most enlightened and judicious gentleman I share the belief that preoccupation with the *occult* is an unhealthy and perilous pastime unfit for men of culture and fame. Even so, we may note in the interest of clarity that ‘occult’ has various meanings. I fancy that Mr. Hume presents the term as more akin to ‘magical’ or ‘supernatural’ than to such hum-drum meanings as ‘hidden from view’, ‘undetected by the senses’, ‘beyond ordinary understanding’, ‘latent’, or even ‘mysterious’ or ‘inexplicable’, though there be in nature mysteries aplenty and activities reachable by the human mind with difficulty if at all. Were he indeed to have consulted the illustrious Doctor Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*, published when Mr. Hume was at the height of his powers, he would have discovered the *only* meanings assigned to ‘occult’ were ‘secret’, ‘hidden’, ‘unknown’, and ‘undiscoverable’; and had he consulted the quotation from Sir Roger L'Estrange included by our eminent lexicographer, he would have read: ‘These instincts we call *occult* qualities; which is all one with saying that we do not understand how they work.’³⁴

³¹ *Treatise*: I.i.6, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.16.

³² *Treatise*: I.iv secs. 3 and 4, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.219 ff.

³³ Selby-Bigge (1978), p.219.

³⁴ S. Johnson (ed.) *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: printed by W. Strahan for J. and P. Knaptor, T. and T. Longman, et al., 1755), vol. 2, entry for ‘occult’.

A simple and uncontentious observation, one might say: that there are qualities in nature such that we do not understand how they work; as true now as it was when Mr. Hume toiled on his treatise. '[U]nreasonable and capricious' is how he calls occult qualities,³⁵ 'incomprehensible fictions',³⁶ 'wholly insignificant and unintelligible',³⁷ talked about by the Peripatetics using empty terms shadowed by the mere ghost of meaning.³⁸ All of which he summarizes in this caustic remark concerning the Schoolmen: they 'need only say, that any phenomenon, which puzzles them, arises from a faculty or an occult quality, and there is an end of all dispute and enquiry upon the matter.'³⁹ Foolhardy it would be to insist that no Schoolman has ever been so cavalier with the term 'occult quality', as have some experimental philosophers with favoured terms such as 'idea' and 'perception'; confusion from misuse or lack of care with language being no preserve of the vulgar. I might venture further that the more decadent Scholasticism of latter times, to some of which Mr. Hume was no doubt exposed, preferred the comfort of laziness to the rewards of toilsome but righteous labour. Others merited but little the title Schoolman, being more infected with the Platonism of fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy (as elsewhere) than enlivened by the sound and just philosophy of Aristotle. As an example of the former, I would cite Monsieur Fernel;⁴⁰ of the latter, Cornelius Agrippa.⁴¹ We can, I believe, then agree upon the mishandling of 'occult qualities' by certain Schoolmen either genuine or pretended.⁴² What of it? As in all such cases, we must turn to the inspirations of the School so as to maintain a steady course and avoid a shipwreck among treacherous ideas. If we cast our eyes over the works of Aristotle, do we find occult qualities? Neither the name itself nor its misuse can be seen.⁴³ To be sure, the *master of those who know*⁴⁴ is well cognizant of the lack of empirical knowledge of the workings of nature, this first and greatest of experimental philosophers having spent much of his life trying to unlock her secrets; the proving of which in his works would be otiose. Shall we say otherwise of his greatest disciple and the genius of the School? To our

³⁵ Selby-Bigge (1978), p.219.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.222.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.224.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.224.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.224.

⁴⁰ Jean Fernel (1497–1558), French physician, educated in the Paris of late Scholasticism, and inclined as much to obfuscation by appeal to occult qualities as to understanding (though signs of both can be found). See further B.P. Copenhaver, 'Magic', in K. Park and L. Daston (eds) *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 3: Early Modern Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.532 ff.

⁴¹ Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1535), German alchemist, theologian, and physician: see further Copenhaver (2008), pp.519–26.

⁴² The literature on occult qualities is extensive. See, for example, the following by B.P. Copenhaver: 'Magic' (above); 'The Occultist Tradition and its Critics', in D. Garber and M. Ayers (eds) *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.454–512; 'Natural Magic, Hermeticism, and Occultism in Early Modern Science', in D.C. Lindberg and R.S. Westman (eds) *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.261–301 (and see the references at n.30, p.294). Also: K. Hutchison, 'What Happened to Occult Qualities in the Scientific Revolution?', *Isis* 73 (1982), pp.233–53 (and the references therein); J. Henry, 'Occult Qualities and the Experimental Philosophy: Active Principles in Pre-Newtonian Matter Theory', *History of Science* 24 (1986), pp.335–81.

⁴³ The term 'proprietates occultae' seems to be a Latin translation of the Greek 'idiotetes arretoi', first introduced by Galen (c.130–210 AD) to mean 'indescribable properties' (see Copenhaver 1990, p.272).

⁴⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, canto 4.131: 'il maestro di color che sanno'.

good fortune, Saint Thomas of Aquin bequeathed a small essay entitled ‘On the Occult Workings of Nature’,⁴⁵ in which he makes transparent the sense in which he uses the name *occult*. It is evident that, having passed three years at the Royal College of La Flèche, where without doubt the reverend Jesuits would have maintained in their well-provided library the *opera omnia* of the Angelic Doctor,⁴⁶ Mr. Hume would have had the opportunity to consult this limpid piece slight only in words, where he would have found such choice remarks as: ‘in some natural bodies certain natural actions appear whose principles cannot be clearly understood’⁴⁷; ‘certain *occult* operations are found in some bodies which similarly come together in all which are of the same species: for example, every magnet attracts iron. Whence, it follows that these operations arise from an intrinsic principle common to all things of the same species’⁴⁸; ‘Certain *occult* operations, however, arise from inferior bodies, which whenever they are used, themselves being passive,⁴⁹ produce the same effects, as rhubarb always purges a definite humour. And from this it is concluded that the action arises from some power residing and permanent in the body.’⁵⁰ And so forth, with no need to multiply quotations beyond necessity, the point being sufficiently made.⁵¹ The operations of nature not always being manifest to us, some perchance

⁴⁵ Full title: ‘A Letter of Thomas Aquinas to a Certain Knight Beyond the Mountains on the Occult Workings of Nature’ (‘De Operantibus Occultis Naturae ad Quemdam Militem Ultramontanum’). Latin text at: <http://www.corpusthomaticum.org/opo.html> (last accessed 28 June 2011); parallel Latin and (imperfect) English texts at: <http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/CDtexts/OperatOccult.htm> (last accessed 28 June 2011); translations are my slight improvements of the online one (by J.B. McAllister, 1939) unless otherwise specified.

⁴⁶ Not to mention the works of John of St Thomas (Jean Poinso, 1589–1644) and Francisco Suarez (1548–1617), two of the greatest post-Reformation Scholastics, whose views of substance coincided in all important respects with those of Aquinas. See, for example, Suarez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* 32; John of St Thomas, *Cursus Philosophicus Thomisticus* l.xv ff., ‘Summa Textus Aristotelis de Praedicamentis’. (Neither are easily available but online Latin versions can be found at <http://www.telefonica.net/web2/salcascu/d32.htm> (Suarez) and <http://books.google.com/books?id=qFjab2Kn95QC&q=substantia#> (John of St Thomas) [both last accessed 29 June 2011].)

⁴⁷ ‘in quibusdam naturalibus corporibus quaedam naturales actiones apparent, quarum principia manifeste apprehendi non possunt’.

⁴⁸ ‘vero operationes *occultae* in quibusdam inveniuntur corporibus, quae similiter conveniunt omnibus quae sunt eiusdem speciei, sicut omnis magnes attrahit ferrum. Unde relinquitur huiusmodi operationes consequi aliquod intrinsecum principium quod sit commune omnibus habentibus huiusmodi speciem.’ (My emphasis.)

⁴⁹ By ‘passive’ in this context, Aquinas is making a contrast with the production of an effect by a superior agent such as when an artisan uses a saw to cut wood. Such an effect is produced by a higher action, as opposed to the case of magnetism where no such superior agent is required, only the stimulation of the power to produce the effect in question. In the usual Scholastic sense of ‘active’ and ‘passive’, though, magnetism is still an active power—the power to attract or repel another.

⁵⁰ ‘Quaedam autem actiones *occultae* sunt corporum inferiorum, quae quaecumque adhibeantur suis passivis, similes effectus producant; sicut rheubarbarum semper purgat determinatum humorem. Unde relinquitur, huiusmodi actionem provenire ab aliqua virtute indita et permanente in corpore tali.’ (My emphasis.)

⁵¹ Here is another, taken almost at random: ‘But sometimes that which is more known in reference to us is not more known absolutely, as happens in natural sciences where the essences and powers of things are hidden, because they are in matter, but are made known to us through the things which appear outwardly. Hence in these sciences the demonstrations are for the most part made through effects which are better known in reference to us but not absolutely.’ (‘Item, quandoque id quod est notius quoad nos non est notius simpliciter, sicut accidit in naturalibus, in quibus essentiae et virtutes rerum, propter hoc quod in materia sunt, sunt *occultae*, sed innotescent nobis per ea, quae exterius de ipsis apparent. Unde in talibus fiunt demonstrationes ut plurimum per effectus, qui sunt notiores quoad nos, et non simpliciter.’ [My emphasis.]) From the *Commentary on the Posterior Analytics* 1.4.16; Latin at <http://www.corpusthomaticum.org/cpa1.html> (last accessed 29 June 2011).

forever to remain hidden, we cannot pretend to know exactly by what means the things of nature produce their effects.⁵²

We are bound, moreover, to refer the powers we cannot fathom, when they be common to like substances, to some permanent principle resident in the body, not, at least in the usual case, to the immediate power of God, nor to that of a mischievous demon or magician, and in no wise to a Platonic Idea. Does the Doctor of the School bid us not to investigate further? Does he exhort us to leave well alone the magical power whereby rhubarb so wonderfully stimulates the sluggish action of the nether regions? Are we commanded to retire from seeking to grasp the marvellous magnetic quality on the ground of unintelligibility, lest straying too close we be drawn like particles of iron into a vortex of despair from which there is no escape? On pain of a want of charity the School might convict Mr. Hume himself of a faith in the truly occult, those powers and principles which are forever unknowable to us by the very scepticism at the core of his distrust of human reason,⁵³ whereas for the true follower of the School reason can and must, on pain of betrayal of man's nature and ingratitude to his Creator, seek to penetrate the secrets of the Creator's work with all due modesty, care, soundness of reasoning and fidelity to just philosophy.

I hear Mr. Hume object that by 'occult quality' he only ever intended to convict *substance* and *substantial form* of incoherence, of being 'perfectly unintelligible and inexplicable',⁵⁴ not to affirm, either in his own self or in his Scholastic enemy, disbelief in the hidden powers of nature.⁵⁵ The Peripatetics, he says, assign to each distinct species of object a distinct substantial form which is the source of all the different qualities of those objects; this being an obstacle to correct understanding, which is that it '[a]ll depends on our manner of viewing the objects. When we look along the insensible changes of bodies, we suppose all of them to be of the same substance or essence. When we consider their sensible differences, we attribute to each of them a substantial and essential difference. And in order to indulge ourselves in both these ways of considering our objects, we suppose all bodies to have at once a

⁵² Consider in addition this remark by Hutchison (1982), p.252, speaking of the postulation of 'specific qualities', as they were sometimes called by the Aristotelians, to explain manifest effects: 'To the Peripatetics this was reasonable because the *qualitates* were seen as "real" and separate from the effects they produced, and to attribute the effect of a drug, for example, to a "soporific virtue" [recall the "dormitive virtue" ridiculed by Molière in *Le Malade Imaginaire*] served the far from trivial task of locating the cause of drowsiness *in the drug itself* [my emphasis] rather than in some supernatural agency summoned by the drug.' A couple of points are worth noting. The use of *qualitas* as a term in late Scholasticism was quite broad, including both what a strict Aristotelian would call an *accident* (including powers) and sometimes also substantial form (Hutchison 1982, p.234). More importantly, one might wonder with what this position of the Peripatetics is contrasted. Hutchison says it is, for the mechanical philosopher, 'some special relationship between the mechanical properties of the drug and the frame of the human body, so that to locate it in the drug itself was mere nominalism, an acceptable way of speaking, but no causal explanation' (p.252). The term 'nominalism' here is highly misleading, given that the Peripatetics are talking about species-wide (specific) properties, but the more substantial point is that if Hutchison is right in his interpretation of the mechanists' position, the latter are wholly at cross purposes with the Aristotelians since the Aristotelians do not deny that intrinsic powers have an essentially relational component: a power is always a power to *do* or *undergo* something in response to some kind of stimulus. The power itself is still intrinsic. (Nothing can be inferred from this general Scholastic position, incidentally, about whether they considered all of the so-called 'secondary qualities' to be like this.)

⁵³ For extended defence of which, see Buckle (2001) and the other 'sceptical realist' interpreters.

⁵⁴ *Treatise*: I.iii.14, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.158.

⁵⁵ For this use of 'quality' in technical Scholastic jargon, see Hutchison (1982), p.234.

substance and a substantial form.’⁵⁶ My topic here being substance rather than substantial form, I note merely that the School does indeed, as it always has, refer the powers and properties of substances to their form, to wit that by which they have the essence they have. This does not *all depend* on any manner of viewing any object. I find terms such as ‘insensible changes’ and ‘sensible differences’ more liable to confuse than to enlighten, and will state instead, with the School, that where sufficient sameness be found across a number of substances so as to justify a certain unity of species, so we attribute a single substantial form, and thereby a unitary essence, to them; and where not, we withhold such attribution; the judgement being in many cases probable but not shielded from further evidence to the contrary. Suchlike patient and careful examination of nature for the purpose of classification is, for the Peripatetic, the source of sound and accurate reasoning concerning its workings. I would add that the stable principles of which Saint Thomas speaks are indeed, if not of the essence, so closely bound to it that by investigating them, were this possible, we would understand the essence itself. So be it; Mr. Hume having even less to say about essence than about substance, I leave it to his disciples to put flesh on bare bone, preferring not to supply the labour for which their master is found wanting.

As to our original subject, namely substance, I proceed with Mr. Hume’s observations. He pretends to find in *identity* and *diversity* the key to the imagination’s feigning for itself the seeming idea of substance.⁵⁷ When we trace a succession of qualities, moving gradually and insensibly from one to the next, we consider that we are following a single, unchangeable object. When, instead, we consider remote points in the series, comparing them, we find the contrast so great that we think the identity destroyed. This ‘contrariety’ leads to contradiction and confusion, or so Mr. Hume would have us think; whereas the want of clarity in his own remarks is the real source of confusion. Is he speaking of similar qualities in the one case and diverse ones in the other? Or are the qualities of no consequence and all that matters is whether we trace a gradual succession of changes, or instead consider extreme points in the series with nothing to connect them? I slowly burn a log to ashes; I watch this happen from beginning to end, never diverting my attention. I can now see the log has been substantially transformed into a pile of ash. Does Mr. Hume allow this gradual succession to consist with my thinking the identity destroyed, as evidently I do so think? I watch my neighbouring innkeeper place wooden benches in his tavern; being somewhat bored of the spectacle, I retire to a different hostelry for a wee dram; returning some days later, I find wooden benches of an identical appearance, in the same places; the innkeeper tells me that in my absence he decided to set up stone benches of an altogether different appearance, then, the result not being to his liking, he returned to the original wooden seats. I recall the original benches, and I see the new ones, remote points along a series, and yet exactly the same in quality. Do I fancy the identity of the benches preserved? It is evident I do, despite the lack of contiguity supplemented by the knowledge of significant change in between. So also would I judge identity to be maintained when considering the chick and the cockerel, the tadpole and the frog, or the pristine block carved from Carrara marble and the weather-worn selfsame thing in the wall of a manor house. Where in the series I

⁵⁶ *Treatise*: I.iv.3, Selby-Bigge (1978), pp.221–2.

⁵⁷ Selby-Bigge (1978), pp.219–20.

consider the qualities, or whether I trace a succession of ideas at all, is of no consequence, it being the qualities themselves that guide our judgement. If Mr. Hume would have us think that our considerations upon identity and diversity are led by observation of the similarities and differences betwixt qualities of objects, then none but the simple minded would disagree. If he demands a certain *continuity* in judgments of identity, then save in unusual cases, only those lacking basic philosophic understanding, however elementary, would object. If he means something else, I struggle to discover what it is.

Let us, nonetheless, consider that settled. We make judgments of identity and diversity; if changes be radical, we consider identity destroyed; if similarity be maintained, so we conclude identity be preserved. Rough and unpolished though this be, and subject to exceptions, it is fit for our purpose. And what of it? Mr. Hume tells us that ‘the imagination is apt to feign something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls a *substance, or original and first matter*.’⁵⁸ Here, we return to that ‘unknown something’ in which qualities inhere and which also performs the useful service of preserving identity amidst variation. Happy fortune that such a something exists! But why does Mr. Hume call it equivalently ‘original and first matter’? He must mean the *primary matter* of the School; if so, well and good that he is aware of it; but it is not substance nor was ever thought so. It does, indeed, underlie all substantial transformation, as when our log burns to ashes; for the alternative, repugnant both to the School and, one would expect, Mr. Hume himself, is a constant succession of creations and annihilations. By whom—God Himself? Neither Mr. Hume nor the School will wish to truck with Father Malebranche and the occasion-*alists*. So primary matter it is with which Mr. Hume must learn to live, but it is, I repeat, not substance nor need it be invoked in every case of alteration. For when a substance undergoes an accidental change, as our block of marble from shiny and smooth to dull and pitted, it surely is the block which survives the change, and there is an end to it. Prime matter there be, but it need not play a role in explaining this innocent variation. And if the burning of our log to ashes preserved minute corpuscles of wood throughout, so we would have the substance of these corpuscles of which to avail ourselves as the subject of the alteration. But if no such corpuscles remain, then primary matter it is that we must invoke, as Aristotle saw and his followers have ever maintained.⁵⁹

It is at this point that we approach the heart of our idea of substance, that of the being in which qualities inhere. A ‘spectre in the dark’, Mr. Hume calls this supposed fiction,⁶⁰ asking the School what it *means* by ‘substance’ and ‘inhesion’, after which serious dispute might become possible.⁶¹ I hope to clarify this to the satisfaction of

⁵⁸ Selby-Bigge (1978), p.220.

⁵⁹ In fact, I am making a greater concession here to corpuscularianism than orthodox hylemorphism permits. The hylemorphic position is that *no* substance survives a substantial transformation, for no substance is composed of other substances—such as substantial particles—that exist throughout the change. Each substance has substantial *parts* (assuming the substance to be mereologically complex), but these parts are not ontologically independent substances in their own right. Hence hylemorphism posits prime matter as the substratum of *all* cases of substantial change.

⁶⁰ *Treatise*: I.iv.4, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.226.

⁶¹ *Treatise*: I.iv.5, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.232.

any who doubt the good sense of these ideas, having already remarked sufficiently on the matter of invisibility and unknowability; but if allowed some recapitulation, I would remind Mr. Hume that substances are not invisible unless they be ghosts. Here is a cow; there a tree; there a man; and there a lump of fine ivory. These, insist the Schoolmen, are substances; for what else could they be? I would count it miracle enough to convince even a disbeliever of the likes of Mr. Hume that they were floating aggregates of qualities, bound together by something I know not what, magically located in space and time, occupying successive places with a graceful simplicity and ease of control such as to make mere mortals marvel at the hidden powers of these qualities. Yet such occult powers, if I may borrow a phrase, are themselves yet more qualities—so in what special way, I ask, do they assist the others in maintaining that wonderful stability we find in our farmyard beasts? Such a close and intimate relation these qualities all bear to each other, admitting only what has a prior title to entrance and barring the door to what is in advance an intruder, so that no cow grow a beard and wings, no lump of ivory metamorphose into antimony, that I would faint at the sight of this veritable ballet of dancing qualities should I come to believe that such really existed.

And in what way are our substances unknowable? There come to mind a number of ways, none of them congenial to the critical mind of Mr. Hume, all of them well known to the School. At its most primitive, we note that no one knows, or may ever know, all the substances there are, whether on Earth or in immense celestial expanse; and this as individuals or as species. Further, we may not know, now or ever, to what species a particular substance belongs; and if we do, we may not have certainty but must rest content with probability, where opinions may alter in the light of experiment. Moreover, even after having assigned a substance to a species with certainty, we may never know all there is to know about its membership of the species; what completely unites the species; our knowledge may be indeterminate, approximate, or partial.⁶² Oftentimes, we only know the species of a substance indirectly, via the powers and other properties of the substance, as when we learn of the species of gold by examination of its fusibility and malleableness. I could continue with such observations but I take the point sufficiently to be made. Substance is unknowable in many respects, all of which point to the finiteness of the human mind and the limitations upon our art and contrivance. The greatest experimental philosophers will show enough grace and modesty to admit that the book of nature contains many pages of indecipherable text, but try to read we must and improve the power of our spectacles.

What of this substance and inhesion for which Mr. Hume seeks a meaning he is unable to find? I cannot but be disappointed at the meagre pickings to be found throughout his corpus when searching for reference to Aristotle,⁶³ but only a want of good will would cause me to deny him any familiarity with the *Categories*.⁶⁴ In this justly admired work, the Philosopher sets out with famous clarity and conciseness the

⁶² For more on fallibilism about essence, see D.S. Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (London: Routledge, 2007), ch.3.

⁶³ These amount to little more than twenty unique references as an approximation, including the non-philosophical writings. (Search performed 29 June 2011 at *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*, <http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/>.)

⁶⁴ *Categories* ch.2, 1a20ff. (J.L. Ackrill (ed.), *Aristotle: Categories and De Interpretatione* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p.4).

definition of primary substance (that which so exercises Mr. Hume, though secondary substances, or species and genera, are little less a source of perplexity for him). A substance is neither *said of* nor *is in* another thing. In sum, that is it. To place more flesh upon the bone: the *species horse* is said *of* Bucephalus, since Bucephalus is a horse; but the species is not *in* the particular horse in the sense that it *inheres* in it, by which Aristotle means that it is not a separate being dependent upon it and adding to its description; for we do not say, ‘There you have Bucephalus, and his horseness’, since Bucephalus is by essence a horse; he is no ‘unknown something’, some bare ‘support’ in which horseness inheres. By contrast, an *individual accident*, such as the particular mode of Bucephalus's blackness, is *in* but not said *of* the horse itself; this particular blackness⁶⁵ is dependent for its whole being upon Bucephalus; but as a distinct being from Bucephalus, we can accurately say, ‘Here is Bucephalus and there is his particular blackness as well’; but we do not justly say that Bucephalus is this particular blackness, only that he is black (which description we can further expand by describing the shade of black this is, etc.). On the third count, the various *universal accidents* are both said of and are also in their possessors: we say of Bucephalus that he is black, but blackness is a separate being from any of its possessors and is dependent upon them for its whole being; as such, it *inheres* in those things which are black. Finally, *substances* are neither said of nor are in anything: for Bucephalus is not predicated of anything (not even Bucephalus himself, except we might allow in a decadent sense), nor does this magnificent horse inhere in anything, and as such is metaphysically dependent upon nothing for its whole being, though of course it depends upon air, water, food, and suchlike.

Were Mr. Hume before me now, I would ask him whether he wished for the supply of more meaning to *substance* and *inhesion*. There is room for uncertainty as to whether he does not fully understand the Scholastic conception, or whether he does so but fully *disagrees* with it. For he insists that ‘[e]very quality being a distinct thing from another, may be conceived to exist apart, and may exist apart, not only from every other quality, but from that unintelligible chimera of a substance.’⁶⁶ I confess to missing the junction betwixt distinctness and the possibility of separate existence; any Schoolman would have informed him that real distinctions of being do not imply real separability of existence, as for example the form and matter of material things; to which I would add the circumference of a circle and its radius, if Mr. Hume would permit me a mathematical example. Moreover, the very idea of floating qualities I find scarcely more credible in the individual case than were they to seek comfort in numbers like nervous kittens without their mother, as indicated above. If he means the mundane observation that where, say, redness and roundness are found together in one place and time they may yet be found separately at others, all of mankind would agree. If he means that although Bucephalus is black, blackness may also be found where Bucephalus is not, who would cavil? And if he wishes to draw our attention to the fact that where Bucephalus is black, Incitatus is white, or that a horse born gray may age to white, only a fool would object. I fear, however, that Mr. Hume means

⁶⁵ Not the particular shade, but the particular quality itself—the trope, not its character. (These are different, as proven by the fact that we can ascribe to an individual a particular colour whilst withholding any characterization of it.)

⁶⁶ *Treatise*: I.iv.3, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.222.

something more potent than all of these, and more noxious, entering into fancies both metaphysical and dogmatic yet contrary to all reason.

If I may take this a little further, I would invite consideration of Mr. Hume's discussion of the immateriality of the soul,⁶⁷ wherein he alights briefly albeit loosely on the School's definition of substance, saying that it is 'something which may exist by itself', only then to dismiss the notion as either without meaning or applicable to everything. Anything, he affirms, may be conceived to exist 'separately' from every other thing, and so nothing needs any other thing as the support of its existence. Thus we may even contend that a perception is a substance, all perceptions being separable, a *reductio ad absurdum* in his eyes of the very idea of substance, since 'a substance is entirely different from a perception'.⁶⁸ Nothing appears necessary to support the existence of a perception, *therefore* (Mr. Hume's conclusion) we have no idea of substance and no idea of inhesion. Quite by what means the *ergo* emerges from what precedes it is something of a mystery greater than the idea of substance is to the Scotchman, it being more natural to suppose, if Mr. Hume be correct, that we have an idea of substance and of inhesion yet deny their application to any object.

That to one side, the Schoolman can only contemplate with perplexity the very idea of a perception without a perceiver any more than that of a smile without a face, a lap without a sitter, or a scratch on Mr. Hume's tankard without the tankard. If they be conceivable at all this merely shows the weakness of our power of conception insofar as a correspondence with what is truly possible concerns us; I for one, with every Schoolman, would deny them to be conceivable, not even by a babbling lunatic. If there be substances, neither Mr. Hume's perceptions, nor any other, are worthy candidates; being accidents or modifications of something else, we do best to find our target in what they modify to gain a clear and easy understanding, taking *existence by itself* as but a pleasing and innocent abbreviation of a more demanding idea.

Of Mr. Hume on substance, there is little more to be said, for there is little more that he does say. Where do they stand, the School and its scourge? The latter would have the former to be devout exponents of a false philosophy more remote from the vulgar than the true philosophy Mr. Hume commends to us.⁶⁹ I, for one, would find in his own philosophy that superstitious dogmatism of which he convicts his opponents, to wit a dogmatically feigned ignorance of metaphysical principles and adhesion to the impotence of human reason to penetrate, within its admittedly finite compass, to the reality of things. Like the brutes we are but helpless to our passions and instincts, wondering, if we are capable, why we were ever born with the faculty of reason in the first instance. Let this baseness not, though, prevent excitable but idle forays of the imagination into dancing qualities, miraculous concurrences, and truly *occult* powers unfathomable by the experimental philosophers who give rise to them, sawing off the very branch on which they sit.⁷⁰ If this be closer to the opinions of the vulgar than the sound Peripatetic philosophy, which seeks to build upon rather than destroy, to refine

⁶⁷ *Treatise*: I.iv.5, Selby-Bigge (1978), pp.233–4.

⁶⁸ Selby-Bigge (1978), p.234.

⁶⁹ *Treatise*: I.iv.3, Selby-Bigge (1978), p.222–3.

⁷⁰ On this latter point, see for example Buckle (2001), p.301 ff.

and detail rather than corrode, those opinions of the majority of mankind from its origin, then we would have the most wondrous of all marvels to behold.

Yet I feel the urge to end on a peaceable note. Should Mr. Hume have been in search of decadent Scholasticism, he would have found it with ease. Had he wished to dispute with corrupters of the School, many an interlocutor would have been at his disposal. Fictions and fancies there are aplenty both within the School and without, and for these I am no apologist any more than Mr. Hume. Unsound philosophy is for the combating wherever found, and Mr. Hume's target was no pure creation of his imagination. Yet had he, in more charitable spirits, betaken himself to the *source* of the School's wisdom, to wit the thought of its Athenian founder and the Doctor of Aquin his most powerful exponent, along with their sincere and capable followers, he might have taken the body for more vigorous and healthy than he considered it, despite, or rather in virtue of, its many centuries of age. For myself, I look for the day, long after my philosophical thoughts have found their permanent rest and my mind has turned to matters both more fearsome and more sublime, that men of substance will be found who in good faith will carry on the work of their ancestors, deepening and clarifying, sifting and refining the perennial body of wisdom, subjecting it to the trying fire of whatever new experimental knowledge should be discovered by the genius of our race.⁷¹

*Finis.*⁷²

⁷¹ For the excellent work done in recent years on the Aristotelian concept of substance, see: E.J. Lowe, *The Possibility of Metaphysics: Substance, Identity, and Time* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999): ch.6; J. Hoffman and G.S. Rosenkrantz, *Substance Among Other Categories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) and their *Substance: Its Nature and Existence* (London: Routledge, 1997); for a nice introduction to Aristotelian substances, see M.J. Loux, *Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2006; 3rd edn.), pp.107–17; for work on ontological dependence generally, see Lowe as well as K. Fine, 'Ontological Dependence', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 95 (1995), pp.269–90 and R. Chisholm, 'Ontologically Dependent Entities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54 (1994), pp.499–507.

⁷² I am grateful to Michael Gorman for extensive, and very helpful, comments on an earlier draft of this paper.