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THE CONTINGENT REALITY OF NATURAL NECESSITY*

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NICHOLAS EVERITT's objection to my discussion of the regularity theory of causation is a common one. I think it misses the point, but the point it misses is in a way a delicate one, and hard to express, and the general worry he expresses is a natural one. For that reason it is important, and its importance is reflected in the fact that it is very difficult to find a satisfyingly substantive way of stating the difference between regularity theories of causation and non-regularity theories of causation. I have had no new ideas about how to do this since I wrote [5] and [6], but I will restate some of the ideas in [5], and in chapters 8 and 22 of [6], in order to try to answer Everitt, who considers only chapter 5.

I

My principal doubt about Everitt's type of objection is this. Is it going to have the consequence that the regularity theory of causation is an a priori truth? I assume that most philosophers would agree that the regularity theory of causation is not an a priori truth, and that any objection to an attempt to state a non-regularity theory of causation which had the consequence that the regularity theory of causation was an a priori truth would be unsatisfactory. I may be wrong in making this assumption: it may be that some defenders of the regularity theory of causation would not mind if their account of things had the consequence that the regularity theory was an a priori truth. But it would be very good to get this fact out into the open, if it is a fact.

Everitt's objection divides into two parts, which he calls (a) and (b) (p. 206). He is right that (a) is beside the point, and I will concentrate on (b), or rather on the general objection of which (b) is one particular expression. In talking of explanation he sets up the issue in terms I tried to avoid, but the basic point is nevertheless usefully summarized, again in terms of explanation, in the entry on the cosmological argument in Flew's *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, where it is observed that any attempt

to explain why things are as they are must always ultimately be made in terms of general facts that are not, and cannot be, further explained. So why should the existence of the Universe, and perhaps the fact that it has whatever fundamental regularities it does have, not be accepted as the fundamentals, requiring no further explanation? ([2], p. 74)

Going into a little more detail, I think one can state Everitt's final argument against my position as follows. (1) Either there is no ultimate explanation (or reason) for how

* This is a reply to a paper by Nicholas Everitt called 'Strawson on Laws and Regularities'. Unprefixed page references are to this paper.

things are, or there is. (2) To suppose that there is an ultimate explanation (or reason) for how things are is to suppose that some sort of ‘ontological argument’ can be used to show that what exists necessarily exists (perhaps by showing that there is something which necessarily existed in the past, whose existence necessitated, and explains, the existence of what now exists). (3) All such ontological arguments are hopeless. (4) So we have to accept that there is no ultimate explanation or reason for how things are.

But I am prepared to accept that ontological arguments are hopeless, and that there can be no ultimate explanation for how things are. So why is it thought that this undermines my objection to the regularity theory of causation?

Perhaps the idea that it does comes to this:

—You (G.S.) accuse the regularity theory of causation of being grossly implausible in claiming that the regularity of the behaviour of the universe has been, for fifteen billion years, a fluke, a matter of complete chance. And yet you are prepared to grant that there can be no ultimate explanation for anything. But to grant that there can be no ultimate explanation for anything is presumably to grant that everything is ultimately a fluke or a matter of complete chance—including, presumably, the regularity of the universe.

Most of us don’t want to say that there is a reason for everything. We don’t want to invoke the Principle of Sufficient Reason (according to which there is a reason for everything), and we know explanations come to an end. Nor do we want to employ ontological arguments to the effect that something that exists in the world necessarily exists. Most of us don’t want to say that about anything. And so we seem obliged to hold that, ultimately, there is no reason for anything, and a fortiori, no ultimate reason why the world is regular in the particular way that it is.

You propose *the nature of matter* as the reason why the world is regular in the particular way that it is ([6], pp. 90, 224–5). But those who do this face the question why the nature of matter is constant or regular in the way that it is. And if they give a reason R1 why the nature of matter is constant and regular in the way that it is, they will be asked why whatever is invoked in R1 is constant and regular in its underwriting of the constancy and regularity of the nature of matter. And if they give a reason R2 why whatever is invoked in R1 is constant and regular in its underwriting of the constancy and regularity of the nature of matter, they will be asked why whatever is invoked in R2 is constant and regular in its underwriting of the constancy and regularity of whatever is invoked in R1. The only way to stop this regress, short of an ontological argument, is to answer, at some point, “That’s just the way things are”.’

In reply: I’m happy to say ‘That’s just the way things are’ at some point. If someone asks why the nature of matter is as it is, I will say ‘That’s just the way things are’, agreeing with Hume’s spokesman Philo in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Philo asks the fundamental question: ‘How could things have been as they are, were there not an original, inherent Principle of Order somewhere ...?’ ([3], p. 216). He knows explanations come to an end, and accordingly says ‘Why not stop at the material World’ (pp. 199–200), when seeking to stop the regress of demands for explanation. For as he says, it may well be that ‘such is the Nature of material Objects ... that they are all originally possessed of a *Faculty* of Order and Proportion’ (p. 201). He suggests that ‘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’. For ‘we should clearly see, that it was absolutely impossible for them, in the smallest article, ever to admit of any other Disposition.’ (p. 216)

It may yet be asked how I can say ‘That’s just the way things are’. It may be said that to give this answer is to concede that regularity is an ultimate fact, not further explicable in terms of something which is a reason for it. And since the ‘That’s just the way things are’ answer must be given at some point, it seems regularity must be an ultimate fact, not only not further explicable in any way, but also something for which there is, objectively, no reason. But 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.

It is, however, a trivial point that all explanations come to an end. It would be very odd if it followed from this that the regularity theory of causation must be true. Ultimately we must stop giving reasons and say ‘This is just how things are’. But this does not commit us to the necessary truth of the regularity theory of causation. It does not commit us to the view that there is, objectively, *in the nature of things as they currently exist*, no reason why they are regular in the way that they are—so that their regularity of behaviour from moment to moment to moment is, in some inescapable sense, a continuous fluke. For the matter which is ‘just how things are’ is: matter with a nature given which it cannot but behave as it does; matter whose nature is such that there is, as an ultimately *contingent* matter of fact, such a thing as ‘natural necessity’.

And this, of course, is how things are. And so I am entirely happy to accept that there may be a sense in which it is, in Everitt’s terms, ‘flukish that the universe should contain precisely [the] set of basic substances’ that it does ([1], p. 208). This is meant to be his final objection to my position, but I simply accept it, in so far as I accept the story of the Big Bang, and the coherence of the (admittedly difficult) idea that the Big Bang is itself something for which there was no reason at all.

II

In the end, the whole thing comes down to the old question of whether one is prepared to accept the idea that there is or could be such a thing as natural necessity. Many empiricists and positivists cannot bear the idea of natural necessity. Even this late in the century, they are tempted to say that the idea of natural necessity is ‘unintelligible’, meaning not just that we cannot fully understand it even if it exists, but that it is incoherent in some way, so that it cannot exist. They think that we cannot genuinely suppose that something exists unless we can say what would count as observing it, or at least as having good evidence for its existence. And they think that the regularity of the world does not count as (good but, of course, logically inconclusive) evidence for the existence of natural necessity, but only as (conclusive) evidence for the existence of regularity. In fact, they turn the regularity theory of causation into an a priori truth in their own inimitable way, by endorsing a theory of meaning according to which no attempt to state a rival theory of causation, i.e. a non-regularity theory of causation, can count as properly meaningful. But I am still assuming that any account of things that turns the regularity theory of causation into an a priori truth is ipso facto vitiated.

Let me restate the point. Even if it is true that ultimately there is not only no humanly attainable *explanation* of the existence of the universe, but also no *reason* for the existence of the universe, it just does not follow that everything that happens is ultimately a matter of chance, any more than it follows that a man is a bastard if his

parents are. For what could possibly come into existence, by chance, is, precisely, some inherently non-chancy stuff—matter—something whose nature is such that cannot but be regular in its behaviour—something that is, by its nature, *constitutionally* regular in its behaviour. And that, of course, is what we've got in this universe, however it came to exist.

At the risk (worth while I think) of seeming to move confusingly close to the regularity view, one might express this position as follows. Reality is constitutionally regular. To say that reality is *constitutionally* regular is *not* to say that it *just is* regular. For it is true of an objectively utterly random (and therefore not constitutionally regular) world which is flukishly identical to our world in respect of its regularity properties that it *just is* regular. So to assert that regularity is constitutionally regular is to reject the regularity theory utterly. For it is to assert that there is something about the nature of reality in virtue of which it is regular in the way that it is: *so that the mere fact of its regularity isn't the only fact there is, so far as the question of what causation is concerned*. The point may seem fine to some but the italicized phrase denies the heart of the regularity theory.¹

III

Explanations come to an end, philosophical arguments go on for ever. I sympathize with Quine when he says

That there have been regularities, for whatever reason, is an established fact of science ... Why there have been regularities is an obscure question, for it is hard to see what would count as an answer. ([4], p. 126)²

In these terms, the present position can be expressed as follows. We may grant for the sake of argument that the universe came into existence with the Big Bang, and that the Big Bang was not merely something of which we can give no explanation, but something for which there was, objectively, no reason. Now, however, the universe is in existence, and it has (we may assume) been running in a regular way ever since it came into existence. Let's suppose that Quine is right to say that it is hard to see what could count as an answer to the question of why there have been regularities. It is nevertheless a real question. And if the right answer to it is not 'There is some reason why, *given the nature of what came into existence in the Big Bang*', then the right answer to it is 'There is no reason why, *given the nature of what came into existence in the Big Bang*'. Perhaps my adherence to the non-regularity view of causation amounts to this: I cannot accept the second answer, and so I accept the first.

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- [2] A. Flew (editor), *A Dictionary of Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
- [3] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), edited by N. Kemp Smith (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1947).
- [4] W. V. Quine, 'Natural Kinds', in his *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).
- [5] Galen Strawson, 'Realism and Causation', *Philosophical Quarterly* 37 (1987) 253–77.
- [6] Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹ Cf. [6], pp. 225–6; for some more exotic difficulties with the notion of regularity, see [6] p. 29, and p. 227 n.

² In fact one can think that 'natural necessity' is a very good answer, while respecting the positivism that finds it hard to know what such an answer amounts to.