

### Is Shepherd a Monist?

The question of this paper can be put roughly as follows. For Shepherd, how many things exist?<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, it looks like the answer is going to be: many! It is a central tent of Shepherd's philosophical system that causation is a relation whereby two or more objects combine to create a third. Since there are many instances of this causal relation, there must be many objects in the world. Add to this the distinction between internal (mental) objects and external ones, and the distinction between these and the divine essence that is the cause of all the others, and it seems like there sure are a lot of things in the universe. On the other hand, though, there are several moments throughout her writing where Shepherd indicates that the distinction between causes and effects is in some sense unreal. For example, in *ERCE* she claims that, "Cause and Effect are [...] but different words for the same *Essence*" (*ERCE* 57), and in *EPEU* that, "all things in a strictly philosophical sense, form ONE NATURE" (*EPEU* 359). In these texts, it looks like Shepherd is saying that while the world *appears* to us to consist of many distinct objects interacting causally, *really* there is just one thing and its merely nominally distinct parts. So which is it?

My suggestion is that Shepherd is an ontological pluralist, and the texts that appear to express a commitment to ontological monism are best understood as expressing ontological *holism* instead. That is, Shepherd holds that each of the many objects that exist has its own essence, but that these essences necessitate certain relational facts about them—how they combine with other objects to bring about new ones. As such, for each object to be the object that it is, implies that it

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<sup>1</sup> This paper grew out of discussions with Margaret Atherton, Martha Bolton, Deborah Boyle, Louise Daoust, Manuel Fasko, Keota Fields, and Antonia Lolordo as part of an online reading group on Shepherd in the 2022/23 academic year. I am enormously grateful for their patience, generosity, and insight.

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occupies a role in a system of causally-related objects that together form one world. That holism, rather than monism, is the sense in which “cause and effect are but different words for the same essence” and “all things form one nature”. My process here is as follows. First, I present the case for considering Shepherd an ontological pluralist. Then, I present the case for considering her an ontological monist. After considering some related texts, I conclude that Shepherd is, in fact, an ontological holist. I then reread the monism-implying texts from that perspective, and also present other texts which support the holism interpretation.

### Pluralism

The case for understanding Shepherd’s system as requiring there to be many distinct objects is relatively straightforward. That thesis appears to follow from one of her most central philosophical commitments: that causation is a relation whereby *two* (or more) objects combine to create a *third*. Here is her description of that relation as understood, “under the strict eye of philosophical scrutiny”:

Thus *the union of two distinct natures*, is the *cause, producer or creator* of another; which must instantly, and immediately, have all its peculiar qualities; but the cause has not acted, is not completed, till the *union* has taken place, and the new nature is formed with all its qualities *in*, and *about it*. *Cause producing Effect*, therefore, under the strict eye of philosophical scrutiny, is a *new object* exhibiting *new qualities*; or shortly, the formation of a new *mass of qualities*. (ERCE 50)

Causal relations begin with “two distinct natures”, which two objects combine to “produce” or “create” another. This production consists in the two natures forming a “union” to create “a new

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object”.<sup>2</sup> Shepherd so frequently uses this idiom of production, formation, and creation when describing the causal relation that her doing so cannot be understood as anything but a deliberate and carefully-considered choice of words that are intended to bear substantial philosophical weight.<sup>3</sup>

What are these objects that combine in these causal relations? That is a tricky exegetical question. On the one hand, Shepherd’s explicit definitions of objects makes it look as if she might be a bundle theorist of a kind, holding that an object just is the sum total of its causal powers.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Many other similar texts support this reading. For example, here is Shepherd’s most official definition of ‘cause’:

A Cause, therefore, is such an action of an object, as shall enable it, in conjunction with another, to form a new nature, capable of exhibiting qualities varying from those of either the objects unconjoined. This is really to be a producer of new being.—This is a generation, or creation, of qualities. (*ERCE* 63)

Causes combine to “form a new nature” and serve as producers of “new being”. “This is a generation, or creation”. The causal relation has ontological consequences, and requires multiple distinct entities.

<sup>3</sup> A quick search of *EPEU* shows that some variation of ‘formation’ occurs 33 times, ‘produce’ 39 times, ‘create’ 40. In Chapter 2 alone of *ERCE*, ‘formation’ occurs 14 times, ‘produce’ 31 times, and ‘create’ 9.

<sup>4</sup> Fantl explicitly interprets Shepherd as a bundle theorist, in large part because of texts like these. He concludes,

If the properties an object has just are the causal powers of that object, then if the object itself is individuated in terms of its properties, a change, in the object’s causal powers will

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An *object* may be defined, a *combined mass of qualities*; the result of proportional unknown circumstances in nature. (ERCE 64)

On the other hand, Shepherd also occasionally makes references to the hidden or secret essences of objects that underly and ground these causal powers.<sup>5</sup> For example,

Now it is the formation of the particles, (whatever particles may be,) which renders exterior objects such as they are, and of any certain definite constitution; and this formation we can trace in, and by the means of sensible qualities, as signs of the things that are hid. (EPEU 304)

Here Shepherd indicates that objects have intrinsic constitutions, or essences, “the formation of the particles”, that make them what they are, and that ground the qualities that they display when combined with other objects (here, in particular, the sensible qualities that they cause in the experiencing subject).

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result in a change in the identity of the object itself. It will result, that is, in a new object. The view that this is the nature of objects is called the *bundle view* (Fantl 2016: 94)

Therefore, the textual evidence leans toward the view that particular objects are individuated in terms of what masses of qualities make up those particular objects. (Fantl 2016: 96)

Landy 2020a, Landy 2020b, Boyle 2023, Rickless forthcoming also appear to attribute a bundle view to Shepherd.

<sup>5</sup> Landy forthcoming argues against a bundle-theory interpretation, and in favor of an intrinsic constitution reading instead. Bolton 2010 charts a middle path according to which Shepherd rejects an Aristotelean substance-attribute ontology, but also doesn't go as far as adopting a bundle theory. Bolton appears to take Shepherd's commitment to be exhausted by the biconditional,  $\square(\text{An object, } O, \text{ exists} \leftrightarrow \text{Some bundle of qualities, } Q_1, Q_2, \dots, Q_n \text{ exists})$ .

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In *either* case, though, whether one interprets Shepherd as a bundle theorist who holds that objects are nothing but bundles of causal powers, or as holding that objects have intrinsic constitutions in which these powers inhere, it looks like Shepherd must hold that many distinct objects exist. Bundle theory: the causal powers of snow are different from those of fire. So, both snow and fire exist, as distinct objects in the world. Alternatively, intrinsic constitutions: because snow and fire have different causal powers, they must also have different intrinsic constitutions that ground these different causal powers. In either case, what is important is that objects necessarily have the causal powers that they do, and that it follows that a great many distinct objects exist, and are constantly combining with each other to create new objects.

Since countless such combinations occur at every moment, there must be a great many objects in the world. In fact, Shepherd explicitly argues that we can know that the world contains a great deal of ontological variety.

I shall here observe, once for all, that *all sensations*, and all their varieties, must have causes or objects in nature as various as themselves which are the effects of those causes, or the qualities they occasion to the mind's perception. Contrary qualities also must have contrary causes. Thus the *cause* for motion cannot be the same as that for rest; nor for one place, (whatever place may be,) as that for a different place. (*EPEU* 61)

We are subject to a variety of sensations (which, it is worth mentioning is each its own "internal" object). Each of these sensations must have a cause, and since Shepherd holds that each is too fleeting to be the cause of another, their causes must be "external" objects. For external objects to be the cause of such a variety of internal objects, they must be as various as the internal objects that are their effects. Here, then, is a great deal of multiplicity in the world: there are a variety of distinct internal objects, which are themselves the effects on the mind of a variety of distinct external objects.

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In addition to these varieties of varieties of distinct objects, all such worldly objects are also collectively distinct from the one divine object that is their creator.

And although the original undivided essence, whose qualities were equal to such creation, must be considered as antecedent to his own work; yet the *operation* of that essence must ever have been the same from all eternity; and in that point of view, the *junction* of wisdom and benevolence, with whatever “*capacities*” of that essence were efficient to their ends, must have been accompanied with their instant synchronous Effects;—the *formation of inferior beings*.

(*ERCE* 97)

The divine essence that creates the world does so by conjoining its attributes to produce the world as its effect, but nonetheless exists antecedent to those effects, and is distinct from these “inferior beings” that it thereby creates. So, there exist at least three distinct kinds (of kinds) of objects, all of which are causally related to each other: internal, external, and divine. There is only one “original undivided” divine object, but there are many internal and external ones. Shepherd appears to be clearly committed to ontological pluralism.

### Monism

That appearance, however, is itself apparently belied by Shepherd’s repeated and explicit commitment to some form of ontological monism. For example, in arguing for the synchronicity of cause and effect in *ERCE*, Shepherd writes,

The objects (whose *union is necessary* to a given result,) must certainly exist, *antecedent* to such an union. But it is *in their union*, there exists those *newly formed objects*, or masses of qualities called *Effects*, which are therefore *identical* with the *similar cause*; for in *this union*, Cause and Effect are *synchronous*, and they are but different words for the same *Essence*. (*ERCE* 57)

Here Shepherd claims that ‘cause’ and ‘effect’ are but different words for the same essence. So, an effect is *identical* to its causes. They are not distinct objects after all.

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Of course, Shepherd might mean something more mundane here. Notice that the claim that cause and effect share an essence is qualified by ‘in *this union*’, and is itself an amendment to the claim that cause and effect are synchronous. So, perhaps all that Shepherd means to say here is that an effect is nothing other than the combination of its causes. Effects are not identical to those causes *in general*, but only in the *moment* of their combination. In that synchronous moment, and in that moment alone, the antecedently existing causes combine, and that combination *is*, again, in that moment, the creation of a new object, their effect. After that moment of combination, the effect continues on its own distinct existence, independent of the causes that brought it about. And perhaps more importantly, causes exist *antecedent* to their effects, and it is only *in combining* that they, collectively, become identical to the newly created effect.

That would be a plausible enough account of this passage, were it not for the fact that Shepherd appears to deny precisely this interpretation elsewhere. For example, consider this passage, in which Shepherd urges her reader to consider the apparently many causes of a given effect as “one compound object”.

Now all the exterior and uncombined objects, whose junction is necessary to an event, may be considered as one grand compound object; and may, under that idea, be termed and spoken of in the singular number: and when contemplated previously to their union may also be considered to be prior in the order of time, as the cause of a future object. (*EPEU* 124-5)

Notice that Shepherd is explicit here that even though the apparently many causes antedate the effect that they combine to form, even *in that prior time*, those causes can be considered as “one grand compound object”, or as “*the* cause of a future object”. So, when Shepherd says in the earlier passage that, “in this union [...] Cause and Effect [...] are but different words for the same essence”, she does not mean to limit the scope of the identity of cause and effect to just the moment

of their combination. The very essence of each of the objects that will later combine to form the new object that will be their effect, already binds those objects together into one grand compound object.

What Shepherd indicates here, then, is that the time during which objects appear to exist independently of each other, and the time in which those objects combine to form a new object is incidental to the numerical identity of those objects. In fact, Shepherd is explicit about a related point elsewhere.

Time is necessary to continue existence but not to the action of causation considered independently of such continuity. (*EPEU* 407)

As Shepherd understands it, the causal relation is not *per se* temporal, but only becomes *de facto* temporal when it is temporal continuants that are being combined. Spark and kindling are each temporal continuants, the necessary qualities of which include their temporal properties (such as their motions).<sup>6</sup> As such, their combination necessarily occurs at a certain moment in time, when their spatiotemporal locations overlap. In that moment, fire is created, with all of its spatiotemporal qualities, including those which overlap with the properties of the spark and kindling. This combination and formation of a new object is temporal because the objects involved are temporal objects. The combination itself, however, is not *per se* temporal, but is rather merely the relation whereby two objects combine to create a third.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Landy 2020.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth considering the context in which Shepherd makes this claim. Shepherd is reflecting on the problem of mind-body union. She has just argued that, “perception and design of *mind*,” combine to, “direct motion on matter,” and that this combined mental state must, “be considered of AS AT REST” (*EPEU* 405). She then goes on to puzzle over how something at rest can produce

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Consider that Shepherd is explicit that such a relation can exist between non-temporal objects as well, such as numbers.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Shepherd urges her reader to think of physical causation

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motion in an object, and attributes this production to “the mysterious law, or natural power which is a material property and executes the motion”(EPEU 406). She then claims this power, “is hidden from its observation”(EPEU 406), but that this lack of epistemic access to the precise mechanism by which our will operates on matter does not make the mind-body union *mysterious*.

But there appears to me no mystery in this union; nor indeed in any; all things are united, and form one whole in their mutual interactions according to their natures. Time is necessary to continue existence but not to the action of causation considered independently of such continuity. (EPEU 407)

The final sentence about time reads like a bit of a *non sequitur*, but I believe that Shepherd’s point is this. Motion and rest are essentially temporal properties, and as result the question of how something at rest could cause something else to be in motion seems mysterious. For example, as we have seen, causation is synchronous for Shepherd, and in the moment of combination, cause and effect are identical. What is it for motion to exist in a moment, though, and how can that motion be identical to something at rest? If, however, we put aside the fact that these are specifically temporal properties of their objects, then we can see that the mere idea of an effect having different properties than its causes is not mysterious at all. What doing that leaves us with, in turn, is the notion of causation as combination *simpliciter*, which is not *per se* temporal, but which becomes temporal when objects with temporal properties are involved. My sincere thanks to an anonymous referee at this journal for urging me to think about this passage more carefully.

<sup>8</sup> Shepherd specifies that it is the same causal principle that governs both physical objects and mathematics, “whether it be expressed by abstract numbers, or by mathematical diagrams”(EPEU

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on the model of the combination of numbers precisely insofar as the latter relation abstracts from the temporality of the former.

To represent the relation of cause and effect, as, *A followed by B* is a *false* view of the matter; cause and effect might be better represented rather, as  $A \times B = C$ , therefore *C* is *included* in the *mixture* of the objects called *cause*. If *C* arises once from the junction of any two bodies, *C* must, upon every like conjunction be the result; because there is no alteration in the proposition of the quantities to make a difference; *C* is really *included* in the mixture of *A* and *B*, although to our senses we are forced to note down (as it were) the sum arising from their union *after the observance of their coalescence*. (EPEU 281-2)

Consider the number 6. As Shepherd indicates here, 6 is identical to the combination of 2 and 3.

That combination does not occur at any particular moment or place because numbers do not exist in time or space. Nonetheless, 2 and 3 can combine, and their combination is identical to 6. What is more, 6, as the effect of the combination of 2 and 3 is included in their mixture. It is part of the very essence of 2 that it can combine with 3 to form 6, part of the very essence of 3 that it can combine with 2 to form 6, and part of the very essence of 6 that it is created via the combination of 2 and 3. None of these are *independent* existences, but all include in their very essence the power to so

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280). It is not just the temporally located physical quantities of mathematical diagrams that are subject to the causal principle, but also non-temporal abstracta such as numbers. Shepherd goes on to quote herself from *ERCE*, “In like manner, the result of all arithmetical combinations are included in their statement” (EPEU 282), which again emphasizes that abstracta such as numbers enter into combinatory, and therefore causal, relations.

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combine. What is less clear in the case of temporally extended objects is made slightly clearer in the case of numbers: there is no time at which 2 and 3 exist independently of 6.

What is the lesson of this digression into the non-temporality of the causal relation? Well, we had been wondering if Shepherd might limit the identity of causes and effects to the moment of their combination. Might she hold that effects are identical to the combination of their causes in the moment of their combination, but not also identical to them prior to their combination in that moment. We saw that Shepherd appears to explicitly eschew doing so, and endorses the claim that what appear to be multiple causes can be construed as a single compound object. Now that we see that the causal relation is not *per se* temporal, this makes sense. The combination of those objects occurs at a single moment in time, but only because the objects themselves are temporally extended. Considered in abstraction from their temporal qualities, that combination belongs to the very essence of those objects “all along”. So, one cannot use the spatiotemporal distinctness of objects to distinguish their causal roles.

Even if that is right, though, we are nonetheless left with a puzzle. Yes, there is no *time* at which 2 and 3 are distinct from 6 because numbers do not exist in time, but are 2 and 3 not distinct from 6 nonetheless? 2 is a *different* number than 6, and so is not identical to it. And 2 is also a different number than 3, and so cannot be identical to it. So, don't there exist at least three numbers? And likewise, don't there exist many objects? Again, Shepherd appears to indicate that seeing such objects as distinct is somehow to miss the point. Here she is discussing the relation of efficient causes to final ones.

On the other hand, all things in a strictly philosophical sense, form ONE NATURE, and it is impossible to see the *operations of nature* in a clear point of view, unless the manner be clearly perceived, by which final causes become identical with those which are efficient.

(EPEU 359)

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It is impossible to see the operations of nature in a clear point of view, unless one understands that all things form one nature. Notice that this claim is an epistemic, not a metaphysical one. In order to *see* the operations of nature from *a clear point of view*, one must clearly *perceive*, etc. It is worth asking why that epistemic fact should obtain. Why must one see the operations of nature as *one*, if one is to understand them?

Presumably, the operations of nature at issue here are the processes (temporal or not) whereby causes combine to create new effects. So, how do we come to understand such processes? Well, recall that Shepherd holds that effects are contained in their causes. So, if one is to understand how an effect comes about, then one must understand how that effect arises from the objects that are its necessary causes. In order to understand, say, the creation of fire, I will have to understand how fire arises from the combination of spark and kindling. And to understand that, I will have to understand the natures of both spark and kindling, which will refer back to fire, and also to their causes and other effects. At each step of this process of understanding I will come to understand how the very essence of each object contains within it the potential to be combined with other objects to create new ones. So, one cannot understand any individual object, or the essence of any individual object, without also thereby understanding how that object interacts with all the other objects in the universe. That is, Shepherd appears to be a *holist* about causes and effects.

This holism, I suggest, is the real thesis behind what appears to be Shepherd's monism. It is not the case that only one thing exists. Rather, each of the many things that exist is the bearer of many relational properties, so the essence of each existing object comprises facts about how it would and does combine with other objects to create new ones. Because each object necessarily has the qualities that it does, and because some of these qualities are relational, each object stands in necessary causal relations to all others. The essence of every object reaches out, so to speak, to the

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essences of all others, to form a single necessary structure in which all objects stand. Thus, what appears to be Shepherd's claim of ontological monism, is actually only a claim to ontological holism.

## Holism

Let's look back at some of the texts in which Shepherd appears to express monism to test this hypothesis, that what Shepherd is really expressing is holism.

But it is *in their union*, there exists those *newly formed objects*, or masses of qualities called *Effects*, which are therefore *identical* with the *similar cause*; for in *this union*, Cause and Effect are *synchronous*, and they are but different words for the same *Essence*. (ERCE 57)

Are effects literally identical to their causes? We have seen evidence that this is not, and ought not to be, what Shepherd means. But can we understand the claim that 'fire' is just another word for 'the combination of spark and kindling' as an expression of holism? We can. That is because whatever the essence of fire is, that essence includes the relational fact that it is necessary that fire is the result of the combination of spark and kindling. Understanding fire as necessarily playing a certain causal role in a single system of causally-related objects does make sense of the claim that causes and effects share an essence insofar as each has an essence that necessarily relates it to the other.

But what about Shepherd's strong wording here? She does say that "in their union" effects are "identical with" their causes. Can holism make sense of that identity claim? Well, according to holism, the essence of fire includes its being brought about by the combination of spark and kindling, etc. So, to return to an earlier suggestion of how to read this passage, fire is identical to the *combination* of spark and kindling, etc. Fire *is* that which plays the causal role that fire plays in the system of causally-related objects that is the world. It is not that an effect is identical to each of its causes individually, but rather that it is identical to their combination, and that those causes are identical to the combination of their causes, and so on. Each of the many objects in the world has its

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own essence, but these essences include relational facts that support this stronger identity claim, properly understood.

Ok, what about the passage that seemed to undermine taking causes and effects to be identical only in their combination?

Now all the exterior and uncombined objects, whose junction is necessary to an event, may be considered as one grand compound object; and may, under that idea, be termed and spoken of in the singular number: and when contemplated previously to their union may also be considered to be prior in the order of time, as the cause of a future object. (*EPEU* 124-5)

Again, we can consider the uncombined causes as one grand compound object, not because they literally form a single object, but rather because they are all conjointly specified as the potential cause of their effect in its essence. It is because the essence of an effect includes relational properties that its causes “share an essence”. What Shepherd is pointing out here is not that an effect is identical to its individual causes, even before they combine, but rather that because the essence of an effect is, or includes, its causal role, an object just *is* the combination of its causes (and likewise its potential effects when combined with other objects, etc.). There is an implicit counterfactual in this passage that reflects the latent powers of each object, and its necessary, but not actual, connections to all other objects, and it is those connections that support the identity claim. The identity of each object includes the necessary relations that it stands in to other objects.

One more passage:

cause and effect might be better represented rather, as  $A \times B = C$ , therefore *C* is *included* in the *mixture* of the objects called *cause*. [...] *C* is really *included* in the mixture of *A* and *B*, although to our senses we are forced to note down (as it were) the sum arising from their union *after the observance of their coalescence*. (*EPEU* 281-2)

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Is C included in the mixture of A and B because all three objects are literally identical? No. It is included in that mixture because all of A, B, and C include as part of their essence the properties whereby they are related to each other. Again, holism can easily make sense of this passage where ontological monism could not.

Furthermore, that Shepherd is an ontological holist is a thesis that enjoys an abundance of independent textual support. Consider Shepherd's account of the use of the word 'fire'.

Therefore fire, in order to have a right to the sign of the word fire, for an expression of its attributes, in order to be a "*like cause*," must of necessity burn as much as it must be red, otherwise the red object were not fire; and *could not have been produced by those causes that elicit that element*. ERCE 54

An object is correctly denoted by 'fire' only insofar as the object has *all* the causal powers implicitly attributed to that kind of object. For example, an object is a fire only if it is caused by the combination of, say, a spark and some kindling, and is in its turn the cause of burning, and sensations of heat and certain colors. Again,

It becomes therefore part of the definition of fire to burn certain bodies, to melt others; of bread to nourish the human body; of snow to be cold, and white; and these qualities they must have, in order to compose that entire *enumeration of qualities*, for which appropriate names have been formed, and to the exhibition of which similar and efficient causes have been in action. ERCE 55

Part of what it is to *be* fire is to burn wood, melt wax, etc. Similarly, what it is to be bread is to come from wheat and nourish the body; what it is to be snow is to produce feelings of cold and sensations of white and to fall from the sky, etc. Of course, if the essence of fire is to be that which arises from the combination of a spark and some kindling, then likewise spark and kindling must have as part of their essences being those objects that combine to create fire. And, of course, fire can be used to

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cook bread or to melt snow, and so the necessary causal powers of all these objects are inter-related. Notice that Shepherd makes clear that she takes the scope of these essences to be quite broad.

Thus we trace the *sensible qualities* of bread to the SECRET CONSTITUTIONS which have partly been put in action, by the sower and reaper or corn, the operations of the miller and the baker; and beyond these to the influence of the air, the sun, and the juices of the earth; which objects as they originally seem to have “come forth from the Father of man” for his use, so have they ever continued too true to their destination, not to be considered as dependant on that “God of seasons,” who has ordained the nourishment of his children to arise from “*bread, earned by the sweat of their brow.*” ERCE 119-20

What it is to be bread includes not just the proximate causes of bread, say the oven and the flour, but also all the many distal causes as well: the sower, the reaper, the miller, the baker, the air, the sun, etc. all the way back to God’s intention for us to be nourished by the fruits of our labor. That is holism, and I think represents the solution to the exegetical puzzle with which this paper began. For Shepherd, there exist many objects, but each of these objects’ being what it is, entails that it combines with other objects to form one, holistic system of nature.

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