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Identity, Continued Existence, and the External World

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To the question whether Hume believed in mind-independent physical objects (or as he would put it, bodies), the answer is Yes and No. It is Yes when Hume writes "We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings" (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187). However, the answer is No when, after inquiring into the causes of that belief, he writes, "What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falsehood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?"(T 1.4.2.56; SBN 218).

When faced with this apparent contradiction commentators have explored the various ways to resolve it. Some say that Hume is simply and irretrievably inconsistent. For instance Passmore, though admiring of the *Treatise*, finds it shot through with substantive contradictions (Passmore 1952: 1–2, 87, 152–3). Stroud sees Hume's position as ineluctably "paradoxical" (Stroud 1977: 245–50).

Other commentators have relied on the "No" answer and concluded that Hume restricts his attention to characterizing our impressions and ideas. Some of these interpreters think of Hume as a negative dogmatic "skeptic" who believes only in perceptions and tries to destroy the ordinary belief in an external world. This view is put more moderately by Thomas Reid and more vituperatively by James Beattie (see Kemp Smith 1941: 4–5). Others see Hume not as a destructive skeptic but as a phenomenalist who takes the external world simply to be composed of our sense impressions, whether perceived or unperceived. The classic example is Price who means in his book to be presenting "Hume's own theory" despite some corrections and developments (Price 1940: 227).

Other commentators have focused on the "Yes" answer and concluded that Hume is a realist about the external world, and not in the end a skeptic. These are the naturalists. Kemp Smith is the classic source. "Certain beliefs or judgments . . . can be shown to be 'natural', 'inevitable', 'indispensible', and are thus removed beyond the reach of our sceptical doubts" (1941: 87). The naturalist

position has been highly refined by the proponents of the "New Hume" interpretation in recent years. They take the natural belief to involve a lot of extra content about the direct perception and the nature of external objects, take Hume to have rejected all of this extra content for philosophical reasons; and they take Hume to have retained and believed the bare supposition that there exists some cause for our perceptions utterly unlike them. The philosophical correction of our natural belief reduces, but does not eliminate, the natural confidence we have in its truth. This residual naturalness provides some epistemic justification for the belief (Wright 1983: 225; Read and Richman 2000: 1–15). A different development of the naturalist interpretation is found in Garrett. For Hume, skeptical doubt is the result of various conclusions of reasoning that conflict with various beliefs which are in accord with our natural inclinations. Garrett points out that Hume's doubts about the competence of our faculty of reason raise doubts about these conclusions of reasoning. Thus, Garrett claims, his skepticism about our faculty of reason restrains his skepticism about these beliefs. That they are in accord with our natural inclinations, and serve certain desires, gives them title to be believed (Garrett 1997: 232–7).

My own view is that Hume's "Yes" and "No" answers can best be accounted for by seeing him as a Pyrrhonian skeptic in the tradition of Sextus Empiricus (Mates 1996). This interpretation, while finding considerable truth in all the various positions canvassed above, is closest to those of Norton, Fogelin, and especially Popkin.

Skepticism

The ancient Pyrrhonists found themselves unable to rest content with any philosophical arguments. For any argument for any conclusion, they always found equally compelling arguments for the opposite conclusion. Thus they considered the question still to be open and they continued their inquiry after the truth of the matter in a way intentionally reminiscent of Socrates. In the meantime they suspended judgment, not endorsing one position or its opposite.

The Pyrrhonists were reproached in ancient times and ever after for following a program that would bring life to an early end. To suspend judgment across the board would be to live without belief, the critics charged. It would be to emulate the namesake of these inquirers, Pyrrho, who according to legend would have died if not for the watchfulness of his friends. Having no belief one way or the other about what was dangerous, he took no care to avoid being run over by chariots, falling off cliffs, etc.

The legend seems unlikely on the face of it, given human nature, and the Pyrrhonists certainly were not so heedless. Their answer to the reproach required distinguishing two kinds of assent: actively endorsing a view as true on the basis of reasons, on the one hand, and passively acquiescing in a view impressed on them,

on the other (see Popkin 1966; Frede 1987). Someone who had carefully gathered arguments and evidence in favor of a view about what's true, and for whom assent was solely the result of reasoning, would assent in the former way. Someone who simply went along with the ways things appeared to him to be would assent in the latter way. It would be somewhat like passively supposing. With this distinction in hand, the Pyrrhonists could grant that they lived without belief in the more demanding sense of assenting to a view. Belief, in this more demanding sense, was an ideal of their dogmatic opponents – an ideal the Pyrrhonists didn't see how anyone could live up to. However, in assenting to views in the less demanding sense, they had enough belief to live life as mindfully as anyone else.

By following in these Pyrrhonian footsteps, Hume can both assent to the existence of the external world, and not assent to it, without inconsistency. He does passively acquiesce in the natural view thrust upon him by appearance, that there is an external world. However, he does not actively endorse as true the view that there is an external world. Sometimes even his passive acquiescence wavers. When he inquires into the causes of the view he finds temporarily that it does not even appear to be true. It appears to be the result of "trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by . . . false suppositions" (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217). Carelessness and inattention rectify this temporary anomaly, however, and return him to the view it is natural for him to acquiesce in. Keeping the kind of assent carefully in mind, we can call such a view a natural belief.

Surprisingly Hume himself would not defend the Pyrrhonists by distinguishing kinds of assent. He has a crude view of Pyrrhonism and echoes the above reproach himself. However, in pursuing philosophy he proceeds as a Pyrrhonist even if he wouldn't characterize himself as doing so. He naturally holds and acts on the belief in the external world because it almost irresistibly appears true, even though careful inquiry into the causes of the belief make it appear unjustified and even inconsistent. These opposing views of the belief keep him from actively endorsing it or its negation as true. In fact he thinks if we were able actively to endorse beliefs as true, that is, if our process of belief formation enabled us to believe only what we had good reason to believe, we wouldn't endorse anything (T 1.4.1.8; SBN 183–4). Nonetheless he for the most part acquiesces in the belief because it costs him "too much pains to do otherwise" (T 1.4.7.11; SBN 270).

In this skeptical way Hume takes for granted the existence of body. His real interest is in the workings of the human mind. Just as he has the natural belief in the existence of body, so do we all. The fact that we assent in any way to such an ill-grounded view calls for an explanation. He concludes that it is part of our nature passively to assent to it. We believe it instinctively. Were we ideally rational, we would fail to have the belief. So other causes besides justifying reasons must explain the fact that we have it. The bulk of T 1.4.2 is an inquiry into those causes.

It may seem odd that a skeptic goes on to theorize about causes. However, assent to views that seem forced on one by appearances need not be restricted to our fundamental natural beliefs, such as in the existence of body. In fact such a

restriction would be unnatural and unpleasant for someone of an inquisitive turn of mind. Hume on the whole finds himself inclined to "refin'd reasoning" (phrase from T 1.4.7.7; SBN 267–8), inclined to weigh opposing arguments and to see which results strike him more forcefully. In this he follows the ancient academic skeptic Carneades. Nonetheless, in my opinion Hume remains more Pyrrhonist than academic by finding no merit in this procedure as a cause of true belief. A relentless application of reason would undermine any of its results. Fortunately such severity seems beyond him most of the time, and beyond most people all of the time (T 1.4.1.7; SBN 183). Hume summarizes his position as follows:

> Thus the skeptic continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts, that he cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187)

The Imagination

Why, then, do we naturally believe in external physical objects? To begin an answer Hume makes a distinction he will find useful between "continu'd" existence and "distinct" existence. For an object to have continued existence is for it to continue to exist unsensed by anyone. For an object to have distinct existence is for it to exist and function in a different location than that of the perceiver and independently of being perceived. Hume makes the distinction because although distinct existence is what most people think of when they think of external objects as such, the belief in continued existence is prior in the order of acquisition of beliefs.

With this distinction in mind, Hume poses his main question, "whether it be the *senses, reason,* or the *imagination*, that produces the opinion of a *continu'd* or of a *distinct* existence" (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188).

Before beginning his answer, he reminds the reader that his concern is with our belief in objects that are not "specifically different" from perceptions. His point is that he is not presently concerned with the ancient philosopher's belief in pure substance, some mysterious principle of unity and identity underlying difference and change in ordinary objects – a principle which in itself has no sensible qualities. In such a case philosophers try to imagine something "unknown and invisible," an "unintelligible something" (T 1.4.3.4; SBN 220). In Locke's famous phrase a pure substance is simply "an uncertain supposition of we know not what" (Locke 1975: 1.4.18). But no idea could be used to think of such a thing. Since all ideas are copied from perceptions, no idea can represent something "specifically different" from perceptions (T 1.2.6.8; SBN 67–8). The best one could do is to try to form a "relative idea" of the causes of our perceptions "without trying to

comprehend the related objects" (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68. See Locke 1975: 2.23.2–3). But this would be to conceive "an external object merely as a relation without a relative" (T 1.4.5.19; SBN 241). Such an idea could not be used to think of an object's external existence. The idea of an object's external existence, like the idea of its existence in general, is not different from the idea of the thing itself. If there is no idea of the thing, there is no idea of its existence, external or otherwise. Thus Hume says, "For as to for the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shown its absurdity" (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188).

Hume turns to explaining the belief in objects *not* specifically different from perceptions. His concern is with our belief in external objects that in many ways resemble our perceptions, for instance in shape, solidity, motion, color, taste, smell, sound, etc. Note that for Hume perceptions are not perceiv*ings*, but perceiv*eds*. They are not acts of mind, but mental objects on which acts of mind are directed. They differ from external objects mainly by being "perishing and internal." That is, perceptions cease to exist when not perceived, and have no location in external space. So when we distinguish external objects from perceptions we only "attribute to them different relations, connexions, and durations" (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68).

Back to the main question then. Hume says it is obvious that the senses by themselves "are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the *continu'd* existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses." They would have to continue to operate after they had ceased to operate. Nor can they produce belief in *distinct* existence. They neither display perceptions and objects separately nor fool us into thinking our perceptions are distinct from us (T 1.4.2.3–13; SBN 188–93).

Reason is not the cause, either. People innocent of the use of reason, such as children, nonetheless believe in continued and distinct existence. Further, even the seasoned reasoner, wise in the ways of induction, cannot observe a constant conjunction of perceptions and objects from which to conclude that the former are caused by the latter. He cannot observe any conjunction at all, for again, objects and perceptions are not presented as distinct things (T 1.2.4.14; SBN 43–4).

That leaves the imagination to be responsible for the belief in continued and distinct existence. Hume often uses "the imagination" to refer broadly to "the faculty, by which we form our fainter ideas," in contrast to the faculty of memory by which we form more vivid ideas. In this larger sense, the imagination is the mental faculty by which we associate ideas according to the principles discussed in T 1.1.4. In the present discussion, however, Hume uses "the imagination" in the "more limited sense" of excluding not only memory but also "our demonstrative and probable reasonings" (T 1.3.9.19n.; SBN 117–18n.)

As Hume notes, "all impressions are internal and perishing existences, and appear as such," yet only some provoke the imagination to yield belief in body (T 1.4.2.15; SBN 194). There must be certain qualities of these impressions that the imagination is susceptible to. Neither "involuntariness" nor "superior force and violence" will do (cf. Berkeley 1982: Pt. 1, sects. 29, 30, 33). Pains exhibit these.

More promising, according to Hume are "constancy," which is always a factor at least to some extent, and "coherence," which is often a factor. He talks as if these are qualities of external objects, but they are primarily qualities of impressions. More accurately, they are qualities of impressions in sequences. Impressions exhibiting constancy are closely resembling ones interrupted by others. Impressions exhibiting coherence are ones in a sequence with many of the elements of a familiar causal sequence. For example, repeated views of the scenery from one's window give constant impressions. Repeated glances at the logs burning in the hearth give coherent impressions.

Hume begins by discussing how coherence operates on the imagination. For some kinds of impressions – "our pains and pleasures, our passions, and affections" (T 1.4.2.16; SBN 194) – it has no notable effect. Their regular changes (see, for example, T 2.1.4.3; SBN 283) don't seem to require that they continue to exist unperceived. On the other hand, some sequences exhibiting coherence would be contrary to our experience of causal sequences unless the missing elements were assumed to have existed unperceived. For example, the sound of feet on the stair followed by the creak of the door is most naturally explained by appeal to the fuller sequence of impressions one gets when both watching and listening to a person mount the stairs and push open the door. Thus we assume more regularity than we observe. This is not mere causal reasoning, which is constrained to observed regularity. It is rather an inertia of the mind in continuing a way of thinking once begun. The mind notices a ragged regularity contrary to the neat regularity it is used to, but continues its habit of expecting the neat regularity by assuming it took place partly unperceived (T 1.4.2.20–2; SBN 195–8). Hume earlier discussed a precedent for this mental inertia when explaining how we come to the fiction of perfect equality in geometry (T 1.2.4.24; SBN 199).

Although Hume regards the effects of coherence to be important, he says, "I am afraid 'tis too weak to support alone so vast an edifice, as is that of the continu'd existence of all external bodies" (T 1.4.2.23; SBN 198–9). Constancy is needed as well. Why? Hume gives no further answer. My guess is that coherence could at best give us the belief of the continued and distinct existence of types of objects. It is types, not durable individuals, that figure into causation. Only constancy gives us belief in objects that retain their individual identity through time.

Hume gives a brief summary of the process by which constancy seduces the imagination into producing the belief in external body. We have a visual impression of for instance "the sun or ocean." After looking away we look back and get another such impression. These impressions are interrupted – others occurred in between – and so are numerically distinct, but they closely resemble; they have "like parts in a like order." The imagination is susceptible to regarding distinct, closely resembling things as the numerically same thing. This is the source of equivocation, for example (T 1.2.5.21; SBN 61–2). So we take the second impression to be numerically identical with the first. Yet the interruption makes it obvious that the impressions are numerically distinct. We are uncomfortable with the

contradiction, a discomfort from which we are eager to free ourselves. To do so we suppose that the first impression continued to exist unperceived and reappeared as the second impression. In other words one and the same impression was present to mind, then absent, then present again. In supposing so, we don't think of it as an impression, but rather as a continued existence. This supposition acquires the force and vivacity of a belief from its relation to the remembered impressions and the propensity to consider them the same. So we come to believe of distinct, closely resembling impressions that they are one and the same continued existence (T 1.4.2.24; SBN 199). It is a short step to believing of them that they are therefore a distinct existence, an external body.

His summary prepares the reader for the "considerable compass of very profound reasoning" needed to explain the role of constancy (T 1.4.2.23; SBN 199). He distinguishes four requisites for understanding and justifying his system, which need elaboration.

Identity

The first is to "explain the *principium individuationis*, or principle of identity." Whatever Hume took this phrase to mean, his purpose is to discover some of "the essential qualities of identity" (T 1.4.2.31; SBN 202), that is, qualities that are entailed by an object's being identical and without which there cannot be the same object. Note that the sense of "identity" relevant here is that of being "individually the same" (T 1.4.2.24; SBN 199) as opposed to being resembling or to being the same sort of thing. The qualities Hume will discover will be "the invariableness and uninterruptedness of any object, thro' a suppos'd variation of time" (T 1.4.2.30; SBN 201). He later confirms that both of these are essential by saying that variation is "evidently contrary" to identity (T 1.4.3.2; SBN 219), and "'tis a false opinion that any of our objects, or perceptions, are identically the same after an interruption" [in existence as opposed to an interruption just in appearance] (T 1.4.2.43; SBN 209). Whether Hume is right about their essentiality is a controversial matter, but why he would take it for granted is easy enough to understand for both cases. Variation amounts to having, then lacking, some nonrelational quality. If what has the quality is numerically identical with what lacks it, then a contradiction is true of that thing. So they are not identical. Interruptedness amounts to a temporal separation. So if something were numerically identical after the interruption, it would be separated from itself. So they are not identical. So identity requires invariableness and uninterruptedness. The "suppos'd variation of time" is also required, as will be seen.

Hume doesn't say why discovering these essential qualities is germane to his explanation of our belief in body. My guess is that uninterruptedness is the link between identity and continued existence unperceived. Constancy causes us to attribute identity, which causes us to attribute uninterruptedness, which causes

us to attribute continued existence, which then causes us to attribute distinct existence.

Hume arrives at invariableness and uninterruptedness by means of a remarkably compressed and opaque discussion. In my opinion it is also remarkably enlightening for anyone thinking seriously about the concept of identity. A more standard view, however, is that Hume was just naively and confusedly trying to come to grips with Frege's puzzle about the truth and informativeness of statements of identity (Bennett 2001: 298).

Hume is concerned with a different problem, however, not amenable to Frege's solution. Despite his mention of a proposition and words, Hume is not directly concerned with language and its meaning. He is directly concerned with ideas and what they represent there as being. Propositions, for Hume, are composed of ideas. Ideas for Hume are not like words or sentences. Ideas are like actors in the mind that, generally, portray objects and events outside the mind (cf. T 1.4.6.4; SBN 252–3). By having certain characteristics, ideas represent there as being objects with those characteristics, just as by being stout an actor represents there as being a man – Falstaff, say – who is stout (cf. Wittgenstein 1974: 2.171). (I use the odd phrase "represent there as being" to avoid the implication that the represented object really exists.) Hume's problem concerns which facts about ideas would represent there as being two things that are identical. In particular he is concerned with how many ideas it takes to do this.

It might seem obvious that in order to represent there as being two things that are identical, one must use a single idea to represent there as being a single thing. After all, identical things are just a single thing. But there is more to the idea of identity than just being an idea of unity (singleness, oneness). Questions whether things are identical can arise, even though they are in fact identical. I may wonder whether Cicero is Tully, even though he is. Such questions do not arise for something which we think of simply as a single thing. The question whether it is identical with itself seems silly (T 1.4.2.26; SBN 200).

To differentiate the idea of identity from the idea of unity, we might be tempted to represent there as being an identity by means of two ideas. But it is immediately obvious that this suggestion won't work. Two ideas represent there as being two distinct things, not one and the same thing (T 1.4.2.27; SBN 200).

If not one, yet if not more than one, then how many? Somehow we need more than a single idea but less than multiple ideas – a requirement that is impossible to fulfill (T 1.4.2.28; SBN 200). Hume says, "To remove this difficulty, let us have recourse to the idea of time or duration." This may seem a bit of bravado. However, he does not propose to do the impossible by finding an idea that literally is "a medium betwixt unity and number." Rather he will find an idea which we treat as if it were such a medium. That will be the idea of identity. By finding out which experience is necessary for generating that idea, he will find the essential qualities of identity. That experience will require applying the previously acquired idea of time or duration (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 200–1).

It may seem odd to think that the idea of time is required for the idea of identity. Paradigm cases of identity don't seem to involve time. For instance, in saying the number 4 is identical with the number 4 there seems to be no reference to time or duration. To see why he focuses on time, however, consider the specific problem he is addressing. It is as if he were a director trying to stage a play of the following form. Scene 1: A man and a man enter the stage in a way that leaves the audience wondering whether or not they are the same man. Scene 2: It turns out that they are the same man. The problem is how many actors to use to in Scene 1. If the director uses one actor, what is there for the audience to wonder about? They are obviously the same man. Furthermore Scene 2 becomes impossible to stage. Likewise, if he uses two actors they are obviously distinct men, and again Scene 2 becomes impossible to stage. But what other choice is there? The natural answer to this question is that the director use one actor and draws attention to him at different times.

In addition to the naturalness of appealing to time, the appeal is perfect for finding an idea involving both unity and number. On Hume's theory there are two ways to take up time: (1) having duration, which entails being many things in succession, and (2) being steadfast, which entails being a single thing (as opposed to being a succession) coexisting with a succession. The idea of identity will amount to the fiction of a steadfast object with duration – something that is both one and yet many.

Hume holds that "time, in a strict sense, implies succession" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 200). In other words, the idea of time or duration is a general idea of the manner in which temporal successions are arrayed. It is just the idea of temporal successiveness. When Hume uses the word "time" he is not speaking of a dimension in which objects are located. That is why he uses "time" and "duration" interchangeably. He just means to refer to what temporal successions have in common.

A succession is a number of distinct things, one after the other. In contrast are what Hume calls "stedfast" and "unchangeable" objects. These are single objects that coexist with successions but which are not successions themselves. Thus they lack duration despite coexisting with successions that, as such, have duration. A mantelpiece would be an example of a steadfast object coexisting with the flickering succession of flames below. It would coexist likewise with the less predictable succession of thoughts in the mind of the homeowner relaxing alongside (T 1.2.3.6–11; SBN 34–7).

Even though steadfast objects really lack duration, we tend falsely to attribute it to them and to ignore their steadfastness. When we do so "'tis only by a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos'd to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects, and in particular of that of our perceptions" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 200–1). A non-succession lacks successiveness, but we attribute it anyway. We can't help it. Because we rarely give sustained attention to anything, so distracted are we by our tumbling thoughts and impressions, we treat everything as having the successiveness we continually experience. There are other

reasons as well that make treating everything as a succession an almost irresistible habit of mind (T 1.2.5.29; SBN 65).

Think of the fiction this way: we confuse (1) coexisting with all members of a succession with (2) successively coexisting with each member and not the others. The former is how a steadfast object coexists with a succession. The latter is how several things in succession coexist with another succession: the first member of one succession coexists with just the first member of the other, then the second coexists with just the second, then the third coexists with just the third, etc. If you are having trouble keeping these two ways of coexisting straight, then you can understand why ordinarily we don't bother to.

One day after the habit of treating everything as a succession is firmly established we attend closely to a steadfast object, such as a cup, accompanied by some succession, such as the ticks of a clock. We discover no variation or interruption in the object. It is patently a single thing as we contemplate it. However, in retrospect we can't resist the habit of considering it to have duration and therefore of being many things in succession. We find, therefore, that we represent the object as being a single thing or as being more than one thing, depending on the view we take. When we consider the moments of the ticks one after the other, we think of the steadfast object as unitary. Its invariableness and uninterruptedness are what are salient. However when we consider different moments of different ticks simultaneously, we think of the object as a multiplicity. We distinguish in our mind the object insofar as it coexists with the earlier tick (and not the later one), from the object insofar as it coexists with the later tick (and not the earlier one). The object's successively existing at different moments is what is salient. That it does so is just our habitual fiction; really it coexists with all the ticks, and not successively with each to the exclusion of the others. But we are well past such nicety by this point.

The result is the idea of identity. "Here then is an idea, which is a medium betwixt unity and number; or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201). The idea of the steadfast object with duration is an idea of something that is one thing when looked at one way and many things when looked at another.

Now, again, Hume has not done the impossible. He has not given us an idea of something that is more than one but less than many. In fact the idea he has given us involves the inconsistency of lacking duration yet having it. However, the switching of views masks the inconsistency and the mongrel idea comes to play an important role in our mental economy, especially the sector concerned with the external world.

Hume now has an idea he can use to address the problem he began with. When we say that an object is identical with itself, what we mean is that the object existent at one time is identical with itself existent at another. That way we make there be a difference (a difference in time) between the idea meant by the word "object" and the idea meant by the word "itself" (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201). We don't simply represent there as being more than one thing, however, because we can always

switch views and represent them as being one. Nor do we simply represent there as being one thing, because we can always switch views again. Nonetheless, being one thing is the stronger view since it is directly copied from experience.

It is essential to getting the idea of the oneness of the object that it be invariable and uninterrupted through a change in time that we suppose applies to it. Thus Hume concludes that the essential qualities of identity are "*invariableness* and *uninterruptedness*" (T 1.4.2.30; SBN 201). He now has in hand the link between constancy and continued existence unperceived.

Continued Existence

The next step, "the *second* part of my system," is to explain how their constancy, i.e., invariableness, causes us to ascribe numerical identity to interrupted perceptions. They have only one of the essential qualities of identity, but we somehow end up ascribing both. So the question concerns "the source of the error and deception with regard to identity, when we attribute it to our resembling perceptions, notwithstanding their interruption" (T 1.4.2.32; SBN 201–2). Note the falseness of the attribution. Another layer of fiction is being added.

Hume's explanation for the fiction appeals to a two-part "general maxim" in his science of human nature (T 1.4.2.33; SBN 203). The first sub-maxim is, "wherever there is a close relation betwixt two ideas, the mind is very apt to mistake them, and in all its discourses and reasonings to use the one for the other" (T 1.2.5.19; SBN 60). The second is, "wherever the actions of the mind in forming any two ideas are the same or resembling, we are very apt to confound these ideas, and take the one for the other" (T 1.2.5.21; SBN 61). In proposing the second sub-maxim, Hume takes for granted that we know what he means by "action of the mind." He later calls it "that certain *je-ne-sçai-quoi*, of which 'tis impossible to give any definition or description, but which every one sufficiently understands" (T 1.3.8.16; SBN 106)! My guess is that he is at least asking the reader to recognize that it can feel different to the mind to think of different things. For example it takes more effort to think of something complicated or painful than it does to think of something easy or pleasant. In any event, a consequence of these two maxims is that we have an almost irresistible tendency to confuse closely resembling ideas. Not only are the ideas closely related, but the actions of the mind in conceiving each of them are almost the same (T 1.2.5.19, 21; SBN 60, 61; T 1.4.2.32; SBN 202–3). As a result we fail to distinguish the resembling perceptions in a series exhibiting constancy.

Attributing identity to them is the result of an additional application of the second sub-maxim. The disposition of the mind when thinking of a constant though interrupted sequence of perceptions is very, very similar to the mind's disposition when thinking of a steadfast object, or as Hume says, an object "which preserves a perfect identity" (T 1.4.2.33; SBN 203). (He uses this phrase presum-

ably because a steadfast object displays both invariableness and uninterruptedness through a supposed change in time, the essential qualities of identity.[1]) When thinking of a steadfast object the mind merely continues the action of having an idea of the object instead of forming new ideas. No special effort distinguishes one moment from the next. Thinking of a succession of related objects is almost as easy. The relation facilitates the transition from one idea to the next. When the relation is close resemblance, the sequence of actions of the mind is "so smooth and easy, that it produces little alteration on the mind, and seems like the continuation of the same action" (T 1.4.2.34; SBN 204). As a result of this similarity in the actions of the mind, the mind regards the succession of related objects as "only one object." In the case at hand the mind is thinking of impressions exhibiting constancy. So in addition to failing to distinguish them from one another it explicitly regards them as identical.

Hume says that later in the *Treatise* he will mention many other instances of the tendency to regard distinct, closely related things as the same thing (T 1.4.2.35; SBN 204). These instances come under the discussions of the ancient philosophy and of personal identity (T 1.4.3 and T 1.4.6). Right now, though, the concern is with the impressions, the images, in a succession exhibiting constancy. He says, "'tis to these interrupted images we ascribe a perfect identity" (T 1.4.2.36; SBN 205).

Hume is on his way to explaining how we come mistakenly to think that perceptions exhibiting constancy are continued and distinct objects. It is the perceptions themselves that we come to regard this way. In coming to believe in body, we do not distinguish external bodies from internal perceptions. Here "we" refers to "the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind (that is, all of us, at one time or other)" (T 1.4.2.36; SBN 205), which Hume also calls "the vulgar." The vulgar ordinarily have no reason to distinguish perceptions from the objects they represent. "Those very sensations, which enter by the eye or ear, are with them the true objects, nor can they readily conceive that this pen or paper, which is immediately perceiv'd, represents another, which is different from, but resembling it" (T 1.4.2.31; SBN 202). It is only after someone arrives at a firm belief in external body, that he can then go on and make the philosophical distinction between internal perception and external objects. Prior to that, "the vulgar *suppose* their perceptions to be their only objects" (T 1.4.2.43; SBN 209). It is not that they explicitly suppose this. They simply take it for granted without a thought.

So far in the narrative we have attributed identity to distinct, interrupted perceptions. At this point a tension arises. The interruption of the perceptions naturally causes us to regard them as numerically distinct, in opposition to the strong tendency to regard them as numerically identical. This contradiction makes the mind uneasy, and it seeks relief by giving up one of the opposing views. The resolution of the tension is the "third part of that hypothesis I propos'd to explain" (T 1.4.2.36; SBN 205).

The tendency to attribute identity is too strong, so the opposite view must be given up. Thus we "suppose that our perceptions are no longer interrupted, but

preserve a continu'd as well as an invariable existence, and are by that means entirely the same." However, this resolution of the tension would seem immediately to raise another one. After all, the interruptions are too "long and frequent" to overlook. It couldn't be plainer that one of the essential qualities of identity is not present. So in order to suppose that there is really one invariable, uninterrupted perception, we have to suppose that it is often not present to mind. But how can a perception exist without being present to mind (T 1.4.2.37; SBN 205–6)?

This question is out of order, however. It would occur only to a philosopher who had long ago acquired the idea of body, and had gone on to distinguish internal perceptions from external body. The vulgar make no assumption that the very things they see and feel are mind-dependent. The only problem, then, is to explain to philosophers how we can ordinarily overlook the absurdity of supposing that mind-dependent perceptions be separated from the mind.

Hume's answer is to deny the philosopher's assumption that perceptions are dependent on the mind. Perceptions are distinct from the mind. Distinct things are separable. So perceptions are separable from the mind. There really is no contradiction in thinking perceptions take their leave of the mind, nor in thinking that they later come to be reunited with it. In his discussion of these points Hume anticipates his bundle theory of the self to be presented in T 1.4.6; SBN 251–63. In any event, there is no obstacle to his account of the mind's resolution of the first tension:

> When the exact resemblance of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them an identity, we may remove the seeming interruption by feigning a continu'd being, which may fill those intervals, and preserve a perfect and entire identity to our perceptions. (T 1.4.2.40; SBN 208).

In other words we take the perceptions in the constant but interrupted series to be a steadfast perception, invariable and uninterrupted, which is alternately present and absent to mind

> But as we here not only *feign* but *believe* this continu'd existence, the question is, *From whence arises such a belief?* and this question leads us to the *fourth* member of this system. (T 1.4.2.41; SBN 208)

Hume has earlier argued that belief consists in the vivacity, force, liveliness of an idea and that a belief in general is "A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96). The mind is excited by a lively impression, the impression attracts to mind a related idea. The relation between the perceptions gives the mind a propensity to form the idea and also smooths the way for the idea's appearance to mind. The excitement from the impressions lingers through the easy transition to the idea and is thus conveyed to the idea (T 1.4.2.41; SBN 208).

The case at hand is not exactly an instance of the general case, but the belief arises in much the same way. The relevant impressions are "impressions of the memory" (so-called because ideas of memory are "equivalent to impressions" [T 1.3.4.1; SBN 82]). It is the resemblance between actions of the mind that directly gives the mind a propensity to regard the interrupted perceptions as numerically the same. But the propensity and easy transition have the same effect of conveying the mind's excitement from the memory impressions to the idea of their identity. So the propensity "bestows a vivacity on that fiction; or in other words, makes us believe the continu'd existence of body" (T 1.4.2.42; SBN 209).

As noted at the beginning, "continu'd existence" for Hume is shorthand for "continued existence unperceived." So it is an immediate and obvious inference that a continued existence exists "independent of and distinct from the perception," i.e. is a body, an external object (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188). This completes Hume's account of how constancy causes us to believe in objects that retain their identity through time.

Hume gives a very similar, though compressed, account of the causes of our belief in external objects that retain their identity not only through change of time, but other changes as well. The close relations between successive qualities in an altering object can cause us to believe the fiction that there is an identical, altering object (T 1.4.3.3; SBN 220). Ultimately we will attribute identity to sequences of perceptions displaying neither invariableness nor uninterruptedness. Sometimes the attribution is not even hindered by sudden great changes, if they are common enough (T 1.4.6.14; SBN 258). We end up very far afield from the steadfast object that precipitated the idea of identity.

The Philosophical System

Hume called our collection of beliefs in body a "vast . . . edifice." The weakness of its foundation of falsehoods and fictions is apparent on the least reflection. A few simple experiments suffice to undermine it. For example, gently push one eye to separate the focal points of the eyes to get double vision. Instantly, all the objects one directly sees are doubled. Since changing our perceptual apparatus is what caused the second member of each pair to appear, and since both members of any pair are exactly the same sort of thing, it follows that both depend for their existence on being perceived. They are clearly perceptions, not existences distinct from the mind (T 1.4.2.45; SBN 210–11).

If we reasoned justly, such results would lead us to abandon our belief in continued and distinct existence. Instead, philosophers respond by distinguishing internal perceptions, which are not continued and distinct, from external objects, which are. He calls this "*philosophical hypothesis*" the doctrine of "double existence." The doctrine, Hume argues, "*has no primary recommendation either to reason or to the imagination*" (T 1.4.2.46–7; SBN 211–12).

Not to reason. "The only existences of which we are certain, are perceptions" because they are "immediately present to us by consciousness." The only way to conclude by reason that anything else exists is by appeal to what must exist to cause our impressions of sense or memory (T 1.3.4). However, knowledge of causal connections requires past observation of constant conjunction between things of one sort and things of another. Such a constant conjunction can never be observed between external objects and internal perceptions, because all we directly perceive are the internal perceptions. So causal reasoning to the existence of external objects as their causes is not possible (T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212).

Not to the imagination either. Starting from the supposition that "our perceptions are broken, and interrupted, and however like, are still different from each other" there seems to be no way to explain how we would arrive at the conclusion that there are additional entities, much like perceptions, yet "continu'd, and uninterrupted, and identical" and not immediately perceived. Furthermore, any such argument would be unnaturally subtle and complex. What is more natural, as witnessed by the fact that it is so much more common, is the supposition that "our perceptions are our only objects, and continue to exist even when they are not perceiv'd." False, Hume says, but much more natural (T 1.4.2.48; SBN 213).

Thus, "*the philosophical system acquires all its influence on the imagination from the vulgar one*." Clearly the doctrine of double existence has some authority, since it is common among those who consider the simple experiments against the vulgar system. However, it must derive its authority, having "no original authority of its own." It does so as a compromise between two unshakeable beliefs. We unphilosophically come to believe that our constant perceptions are a continued and distinct existence immediately perceived. This belief is so natural and stubborn, that nothing can cause us to give it up for long. A little philosophical reflection easily makes us see the dependence on our perception of what we immediately perceive. We find ourselves obliged to reject our unphilosophical opinion. However it "has taken such deep root in the imagination, that 'tis impossible ever to eradicate it." To relieve ourselves from the struggle between the stubborn unphilosophical opinion and its obvious falsehood, "we contrive a new hypothesis" which seems to satisfy both reason and the imagination: "the double existence of perceptions and objects." We take perceptions to have the obvious interruption and lack of continuity and identity between them. We take objects to be continued and uninterrupted and identical though time. "This philosophical system, therefore, is the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both embrac'd by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other." The doctrine of double existence is a pretext under which we in fact are alternately believing of our immediate perceptions, that they are continued and distinct and yet interrupted and dependent (T 1.4.2.49–53; SBN 213–16).

When faced with a contradiction, the imagination makes a distinction with nothing to recommend it but the fact that it eases our minds. Two other consid-

erations show that "feigning a double existence" (T 1.4.2.52; SBN 215) is merely imaginary makeshift. First, philosophers tend to suppose that external objects resemble internal perceptions. Having no way to compare them, we have no evidence for this. It is merely a result of the fact that the imagination "*borrows all its ideas from some precedent perceptions.*" So everything it conceives in any detail must resemble them. Second, philosophers tend to suppose that a particular object resembles the perception it causes. The imagination is prone, when ideas are united by some relation "to compleat every union" by adding further relation. In this case, to causation we add further resemblance. The philosopher's doctrine of double existence is shot through with fictions of the imagination (T 1.4.2.54–5; SBN 216–17).

This ends Hume's explanation of the causes both of the common, "popular" belief in continued and distinct existence, as well as of the "philosophical" doctrine of double existence. As he considers the explanations he not only finds no reason actively to assent to these beliefs, but for the moment feels moved passively to acquiesce in the view that they are absurd. "I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system." The popular belief in continued and distinct existence is based on the coherence and constancy of our perceptions, which in themselves give no reason to believe in body. Constancy has the greatest influence but by means of false supposition. "'Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same, and 'tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions are uninterrupted, and are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses." The philosophical system retains these difficulties and adds further "absurdity" by additionally denying that our perceptions are numerically the same, then inventing a distinction between perceptions and objects to escape the contradiction. "What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?" The confusion and absurdity of both the popular and philosophical views, when displayed so clearly, moves Hume at this point to withhold any sort of belief in them. (At T 1.4.5.1; SBN 232 he speaks of "such contradictions and difficulties in every system concerning external objects.") He finds himself "more inclin'd to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination" (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217). Thus Hume finds himself with irrefutable "skeptical doubt," a malady naturally caused by "profound and intense reflection on those subjects."

Active endorsement of the view that body exists is forever precluded. The arguments against body "*admit of no answer.*" (EHU 12.15 n. 1; SBN 155) The malady "can never be radically cur'd." However, passive acquiescence in the existence of body returns once we have been distracted. "Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy." For those who work through Hume's arguments then, after taking an hour off, continue to read Hume's book, the remedy amounts to returning to the doctrine of double existence (T 1.4.2.57; SBN 218). Outside

the study when dining or playing backgammon, the remedy is more effective and one returns to the vulgar belief in body alone. One passively acquiesces in appearances. "Nature has not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations" (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187). As Hume puts it in the *Abstract*, "Philosophy would render us entirely Pyrrhonian, were not nature too strong for it" (A 27; SBN 657). As I've argued, in acquiescing to nature's insistence without epistemic warrant, we are Pyrrhonian as well.

Value of Hume's Account

It remains to inquire about the value of Hume's just-so story about the genesis of the belief in the external world. There is little evidence that our belief is acquired in the particular way Hume describes. Very young infants expect objects gradually hidden by a screen still to be there (Baillargeon 1987). It may perhaps be that we have a built-in ability to respond to perceived objects as capable of existing unperceived (Spelke 1985). Even if we acquire this response in the course of experience, it seems to occur at a low level, certainly below consciousness (see Pylyshyn 2001). Conscious conflict in attributing both identity and distinctness to certain impressions, resolved by positing their continued and distinct existence, is not part of the story of contemporary psychology.

Nonetheless, the question Hume raised about how we move from various scattered inputs to representing there as being a unified object remains important and unresolved. His question survives in part in the "binding problem" in cognitive science: the problem of how features separately detected by the brain come to be experienced as united in a single object. Likewise survives his general solution of appealing to something added by the mind to the data (Hardcastle 1998). Attempts to address Hume's question are also found in studies of the "tunnel effect," a case of "amodal completion" in which, if the motion and timing are right, observers perceive there to be a single moving object even when part of the trajectory is hidden by a barrier (Cary and Xu 2001: 186). It has also been argued that connectionist models of the acquisition of the concept of object permanence bear important similarities to Hume's account (Collier 1999).

Furthermore, there are philosophical fruits of Hume's own proposal. Regardless of the actual causes of the belief in continued existence unperceived, Hume seems right that the interrupted evidence we receive from the world does not warrant it. There is nothing in the patterns of irradiation of the retinas of Baillargeon's infants that decides in favor of a continued existence that will reappear when the screen is removed. (cf. Quine 1960: 22). Such lack of warrant should make us wary about our judgments concerning external objects. Hume's way of being a skeptic, his manner of combining wariness about what's really true with assent to what appears plausible, gives us a model for coping with our perplexities. His

lessons about why and how to be a skeptic about the external world are among the most valuable and instructive we have.

Note

1 "Imperfect identity," in contrast, is not a species of identity but rather is identity naturally but falsely attributed to something that lacks one or both the essential qualities of identity (T 1.4.6.9; SBN 256).

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