

HUME'S *TREATISE* AND THE THEORY OF IDEAS

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ABSTRACT
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Hume's *Treatise* and the Theory of Ideas
(Under the direction of Alan Nelson)

Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* has long been evaluated in terms of the skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy. According to this interpretation, there are two distinct and often diametrically opposed Humes: a skeptic concerned to eradicate dubious metaphysical views and a naturalist concerned to develop a science of human nature. The skeptical Hume applies the theory of ideas developed in Book I of the *Treatise* to the phenomena he seeks to explain and nearly obliterates them. That leaves the science of human nature weak and without phenomena to explain in Books II and III. The naturalistic Hume, in contrast, is able to develop a robust science of human nature in Books II and III of the *Treatise*, but does so at the expense of completely abandoning the theory of ideas developed in Book I. In short, the familiar skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy has it that Hume either successfully developed a science of human nature *without* the theory of ideas or else stubbornly held on to his theory of ideas at the cost of a robust science of human nature.

This is a false dichotomy. There is one Hume, not two, who both adheres to the theory of ideas throughout the *Treatise* and develops a robust science of human nature. Hume accomplished much with little in his *Treatise*. Most importantly, he demolished extravagant metaphysical theories of various types and developed a robust science of human nature. Both feats were accomplished via his oft criticized, but little understood theory of

ideas. Contrary to the prevailing opinion, the theory of ideas stands not in opposition to Hume's naturalistic project of developing a science of human nature, but rather is the foundation of that very project. I develop and defend an interpretation of Hume's theory of ideas according to which it succeeds in eradicating dubious metaphysical views, but also supports, rather than undermines his science of human nature.

For my family, the very best parents, brother, and husband I could hope to have

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INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of David Hume, especially as it presents itself in his masterwork, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, is most often understood in terms of the longstanding skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy.¹ According to the skeptical interpretation, Hume is primarily a skeptical philosopher who developed and employed a version of the Theory of Ideas to eradicate dubious metaphysical views.² This interpretation, the skeptical interpretation, has it that the Theory of Ideas leads directly and inevitably to skepticism, which undermines the project of developing a science of human nature. It claims that we cannot know much about much of anything, including all of the interesting human behaviors a science of human nature would be expected to explain. According to the naturalistic interpretation, Hume is a naturalist who set out to develop a science of human nature on the experimental model of Newton. This interpretation strongly suggests that Hume was not entirely committed to his Theory of Ideas, and perhaps even recognized himself its limitations.³

¹ All references to Hume's *Treatise* are from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Niddich, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978. Abbreviated: SBN, Book, Chapter, and Section numbers, or SBN page number. All references to Hume's *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* are from *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Abbreviated: EHU, Section, Part, or EHU page number.

² I capitalize 'Theory of Ideas' to distinguish Hume's Theory of Ideas in particular from the theory of ideas understood more generally.

³ *Treatise* 1.4.7 and Hume's *Appendix* entry regarding *Treatise* 1.4.6 are frequently cited as evidence that Hume himself recognized the limitations of his Theory of Ideas. Both *Treatise* 1.4.7 and the *Appendix* entry concerning *Treatise* 1.4.6 will be discussed in subsequent Chapters.

To summarize, the most influential ways of viewing Hume's project have it that Hume can have either the Theory of Ideas *or* a robust science of human nature, but he cannot have both because the Theory of Ideas undermines the science of human nature. That is, Hume either successfully developed a science of human nature *without* the Theory of Ideas or belligerently held on to his Theory of Ideas at the cost of a robust science of human nature. In either case, Hume's Theory of Ideas is something of an embarrassment. At best, it does nothing of value for Hume. At worst, it undermines his entire philosophical project.

The skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy is misleading in the overall assessment of Hume's Theory of Ideas it generates. The Theory of Ideas is neither useless nor undermining. Hume accomplished much with little in his *Treatise*. Most importantly, he demolished extravagant metaphysical theories of various types and developed a robust science of human nature. Both feats were accomplished via his oft criticized, but little understood Theory of Ideas. Contrary to the prevailing opinion, the Theory of Ideas stands not in opposition to Hume's naturalistic project of developing a science of human nature, but rather is the foundation of that very project. As I see it, nearly all of Hume's significant philosophical achievements, most especially his science of human nature, are grounded in his Theory of Ideas. Hume's primary aim in the *Treatise* is to develop a science of human nature by, as his subtitle indicates, "introducing the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects." I agree with the skeptical interpretation that the Theory of Ideas is of great importance to Hume's overall philosophical project. I agree with the naturalistic interpretation that one of Hume's major achievements is the development of a science of human nature. I reconcile these two interpretations by showing that Hume's Theory of Ideas

provides a much richer foundation with which to explain human experience than is commonly supposed.

In this dissertation I will develop and defend a novel interpretation of Hume's Theory of Ideas according to which it supports rather than undermines his science of human nature. In Chapter One, I examine Hume's Theory of Ideas and explore its history, focusing on why it has been believed to be so deeply troubled. I then outline what I believe to be the key to the Theory's salvation: four interpretive claims and one corollary that challenge the way we are used to thinking about the basic structure and application of the Theory. Chapters Two, Three, and Four make the case in favor of my interpretation of Hume's Theory of Ideas by applying it to resolve three lingering interpretive difficulties in the Hume studies literature, showing how these difficulties either do not arise or are easily resolved if my interpretive hypothesis is adopted. Finally, Chapter Five revisits the skepticism-naturalism dichotomy via an examination of *Treatise* 1.4.7, the conclusion of Book I of the *Treatise*, widely regarded as Hume's most explicit confrontation of the tension between skepticism and naturalism in his philosophy.

CHAPTER ONE

REINTERPRETING HUME'S THEORY OF IDEAS

Section 1.1: Some Preliminary Remarks

According to my view, the project of Hume's *Treatise* and related works is to produce a science of human nature firmly based on the Theory of Ideas. I understand the science of human nature to be the project of developing a framework for explaining and understanding human experience as we find it in all manner of contexts.⁴ Hume's Theory of Ideas, like most theories, is a theoretical apparatus designed to answer a set of questions and composed of the fewest number of definitions, principles, and postulates required for explanatory adequacy. Rarely is it treated as having such a rigorous design. Hume's Theory of Ideas can be understood minimally as consisting of the following three claims:

- 1) Experience is explicable in terms of two types of perceptions, impressions, understood roughly as sensations, and ideas, understood roughly as thoughts.
- 2) All ideas are copied from impressions (Hume's so-called "Copy Principle").
- 3) All mental activity is explicable in terms of three principles of the association of perceptions: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect.

As Hume's Theory of Ideas is almost universally regarded as a failure, it is interesting and instructive to explore how it came to be so regarded.

⁴ I am indebted to Donald Livingston's characterization of Hume's project as a framework for understanding in *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*. I differ from Livingston in that I identify the Theory of Ideas as the core of that framework.

Let us begin with some preliminary remarks on what is usually meant by the terms “skepticism” and “naturalism” in the context of Hume’s philosophy. However, these remarks will not be easily made, as Hume himself did not use the term “naturalism” and used the term “skepticism” too liberally. Humean naturalism is perhaps best understood as the doctrine according to which human beings and their mental lives are part of the natural order, making a proper explanation of why they hold the beliefs that they do part of an empirical science. According to Humean naturalism, epistemology should not be done *a priori*, but only on the model of the sciences. Hume discusses a wide variety of *skepticisms* in his *Treatise*, frequently choosing not to write in his own voice, but the *skepticism* that is best described as belonging to him (*Humean skepticism*) is simply the doctrine according to which many of our ordinary beliefs have no grounding in reason and are, therefore, without traditional justification.

Section 1.2: The Skepticism-Naturalism Dichotomy

The skepticism half of the skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy began with Thomas Reid, who was the first to prominently champion the skeptical interpretation of Hume. Reid is a convenient starting point for another reason. It was Reid who first coined the phrase “theory of ideas” and it was also Reid who first suggested that Hume adopted Locke’s theory of ideas wholesale.⁵ In the opening pages of his *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* Reid wrote, “The ingenious author of that treatise [Hume’s *Treatise*], upon the principles of Locke, who was no sceptic, hath built a system of

⁵ The theory of ideas Hume allegedly inherited is perhaps more accurately described as developed by Descartes and Berkeley, as well as Locke.

scepticism, which leaves no ground to believe any one thing rather than its contrary.”⁶ This quotation speaks to both of Reid’s allegations against Hume: first, that Hume uncritically took over Locke’s theory of ideas, and second, that Hume was a skeptical philosopher above all things. Hume’s aim, according to Reid, was nothing short of universal skepticism. In Reid’s opinion, Hume wanted to show that our common sense beliefs are without foundation in reason, that we have no justification for belief in causation, external objects, the self, and many other beliefs central to our common life. To this end, Hume adopted the theory of ideas and applied it until at last he reached the skeptical conclusions he so desired. The theory of ideas, Reid believed, committed all of its adherents to the Berkeleyan claim that nothing is perceived but ideas, that, in Reid’s words, “we do not really perceive things that are external, but only certain images and pictures of them imprinted on the mind.”⁷ Reid rightly identified Hume’s Copy Principle, the thesis that all simple ideas are derived from simple impressions correspondent to them and which they resemble (SBN 4), as the backbone of Hume’s Theory of Ideas, and argued that Hume “never offers the least proof” for the Copy Principle and yet employs it to dismantle the whole of philosophy, religion, and common sense.⁸

The naturalism half of the skepticism-naturalism dichotomy began with Norman Kemp Smith’s seminal work *The Philosophy of David Hume*. In Kemp Smith’s view, Hume was far more influenced by Francis Hutcheson’s moral philosophy and, to a lesser extent, Isaac Newton’s empirical, scientific method than by John Locke’s theory of ideas. The Reid

⁶ Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, pp. 3-4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

interpretation, according to Kemp Smith, placed too great an emphasis on Hume's metaphysics and epistemology and paid too little attention to his aspirations as a moral philosopher. Kemp Smith argued that Hume's moral philosophy set the agenda for the entire *Treatise*. According to Kemp Smith:

what is central in [Hume's] teaching is not Locke's or Berkeley's 'ideal' theory and the negative consequences, important as these are for Hume, which follow from it, but the doctrine that the determining influence in human, as in other forms of animal life, is feeling, not reason or understanding, i.e. not evidence whether *a priori* or empirical, and therefore also not ideas—at least not 'ideas' as hitherto understood.⁹

In short, *the* thesis of the *Treatise* is the priority of the sentiments and instincts over reason.¹⁰ Kemp Smith sees the Theory of Ideas as being of, at most, secondary importance to Hume's overall philosophical project.

Many commentators have attempted to augment or modify the interpretations of Reid and Kemp Smith and also to reconcile the skeptical interpretation of Reid with the naturalistic interpretation of Kemp Smith. In all of these valuable contributions to the Hume studies literature, the reputation of Hume's Theory of Ideas remains roughly the same: it is either undermining or only minimally helpful to Hume's overall philosophical project. Barry Stroud, a self-proclaimed follower of the naturalistic Kemp Smith tradition, attempts to unite that interpretation with some elements of Reid's skeptical interpretation.¹¹ Stroud describes

⁹ Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Noticing that Hutcheson's naturalism with regard to moral philosophy came into conflict with the model offered by Newtonian physics, Kemp Smith argued that Newton was less influential for Hume than was Hutcheson.

¹¹ "It will be obvious that my own interpretation owes a great deal to Kemp Smith, but I think that, partly on the basis of his work, I have been able to present a more systematic and more consistent naturalistic interpretation." Stroud, *Hume*, p. xi.

Hume's project as involving both a "positive" and "negative" phase.¹² The negative phase, Stroud argues, comes first and is primarily an anti-metaphysical project grounded loosely in Hume's Theory of Ideas.¹³ The positive phase comes second and is essentially an alternative account of how we come to have the beliefs that we do. Stroud sees Hume as pursuing a primarily naturalistic agenda, but one that makes some sense of the skeptical bits of the *Treatise*. The Theory of Ideas is certainly not, according to Stroud, at the forefront of Hume's philosophy:

One thing that works against a consistent and comprehensive naturalism in Hume's own thought is his unshakeable attachment to the theory of ideas. That theory impedes the development of his program in several directions in which he might otherwise have pursued it.¹⁴

Stroud is explicit that the Theory of Ideas is more of a liability for Hume than an asset.

Don Garrett and Louis Loeb also offer extremely influential naturalistic interpretations of Hume's philosophy. In *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, Garrett contends that Hume's primary concern is with cognitive psychology, and not with a skeptical epistemology rooted in the Theory of Ideas.¹⁵ Loeb, on the other hand, thinks Hume is primarily an epistemologist, but not a skeptical epistemologist. In *Stability and Justification In Hume's Treatise*, Loeb argues that Hume offers an account of the stability of, not simply our beliefs, but our *justified* beliefs, making Hume out to be a far more optimistic

¹² Notably, Don Garrett and William Edward Morris also make reference to Hume's "negative" and "positive phases."

¹³ I write "loosely grounded" because Stroud accuses Hume of deploying the Theory of Ideas haphazardly.

¹⁴ Stroud, *Hume*, p. 224.

¹⁵ There is a sense in which Garrett takes Hume's Theory of Ideas very seriously. What he calls Hume's "cognitive psychology" is carried out via the basic components of the Theory of Ideas: perceptions and relations between perceptions, such as Hume's Copy Principle, the principles of association, and the Separability Principle.

epistemologist than he is commonly thought to be. Loeb makes the case that there is, for one example, “abundant evidence of Hume’s epistemic endorsement of causal inference” in the *Treatise* and related works.¹⁶ Loeb, too, assigns a minor role to Hume’s Theory of Ideas.

The most influential post-Reid skeptical interpretations, in some ways, differ little from the most influential naturalistic interpretations. Robert Fogelin, one of the best known skeptical interpreters of Hume, claims that, at the end of the day, Hume’s skepticism “coheres with Hume’s naturalistic program.”¹⁷ However, Fogelin believes that the skeptical component of Hume’s philosophy bears the most weight. Naturalism is simply a reaction to the foregone conclusion that most of our beliefs lack rational justification. Fogelin believes Hume’s skepticism to be quite severe:

The skepticism I have in mind is not, of course, a moderate, Academic, probabilistic (milk and water) skepticism. An alliance between probabilism and naturalism needs no special explanation. My claim is that an unmitigated epistemological skepticism...characterizes Hume’s philosophy.¹⁸

Fogelin assigns a major role to the Theory of Ideas, but believes that role to be primarily, if not exclusively, destructive.

While Fogelin takes seriously Hume’s commitment to the Theory of Ideas, insofar as he believes Hume’s primary philosophical objective is to eradicate dubious metaphysical views via application of the Theory, the “New Humeans” are a cohort of skeptical interpreters who believe Hume was only marginally committed to his Theory of Ideas.¹⁹

¹⁶ Loeb, *Stability and Justification in Hume’s Treatise*, p. 59.

¹⁷ Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, p. 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ The “New Humeans” include Galen Strawson, John P. Wright and, according to some commentators, Janet Broughton, though I think Broughton would resist the label, regarding herself as more of a naturalist. I can see why one might categorize her as a “New Humean.” She does have skeptical realist tendencies in that she argues

According to the New Humeans, Hume is a sort of realist, and not merely in the sense that he finds some beliefs to be unavoidable despite their lack of rational justification. They argue for the stronger claim that Hume thought we could know that causal powers and external objects exist mind-independently. Kenneth Richman summarizes the “New Hume” interpretation nicely:

[D]efenders of the New Hume hold that Hume’s analysis of our everyday beliefs has as one of its conclusions that the beliefs in the existence of external, independent objects and causes objectively so-called meet at least minimal epistemic standards for assent.²⁰

In short, Hume is not a strict epistemic skeptic. Hume believes, according to the New Humeans, that we can know that some things exist mind-independently, but that we cannot know the nature of those things. That is, Hume assents to the epistemological claim that we have no intelligible idea of causation or mind-independent objects, but he does not assent to the ontological claim that there is nothing like causation or mind-independent objects. In order to make the case that Hume is any kind of realist about causation or mind-independent objects, the New Humeans must rely upon a much weaker version of the Theory of Ideas than is suggested by the text of the *Treatise*.²¹ In particular, they weaken Hume’s Copy Principle, “*all of our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*” (SBN 4),

that Hume thinks we can form a “bare thought” of there being something about objects that underlies the constant conjunction of their observable features, but that we cannot know anything about that “something.” She seems to agree with Strawson here that Hume takes for granted that there are mind-independent objects and causation.

²⁰ Richman, ‘Debating the New Hume’ in *The New Hume Debate*, p. 1.

²¹ Kenneth Winkler and Simon Blackburn offer excellent criticisms of the New Humean interpretation. See Kenneth Winkler, “The New Hume,” *Philosophical Review*; Simon Blackburn, “Hume and Thick Connexions,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.

the backbone of his Theory of Ideas. This allows them to, in turn, weaken the reverse of the Copy Principle, the central tenet of what we might describe in our contemporary parlance as Hume's "theory of meaning":

And when he [the author] suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant. (SBN 648-49)

The most obvious reading of this key text suggests that Hume is absolutely opposed to ontological commitments that begin with terms that have no roots in impressions. Causation and mind-independent objects are commonly regarded as paradigmatic examples of such commitments. In attributing these sorts of robust metaphysical commitments to Hume, the New Humeans must attribute to him a much less robust Theory of Ideas. Like the tension commonly observed between Hume's Theory of Ideas and his science of human nature, Hume cannot have *both* a robust Theory of Ideas *and* robust metaphysical commitments. The New Humeans give up on the Theory of Ideas on Hume's behalf.

Section 1.3: A Devastating Objection to the Theory

Hume's Theory of Ideas is most commonly rejected on one of two grounds: 1) it undermines the science of human nature by generating skepticism about most of the interesting phenomena a science of human nature ought to explain, or 2) it does not do any philosophical heavy lifting for Hume, it is not something Hume took terribly seriously when all is said and done. However, to fully understand the Theory's bad reputation, we must consider what is perhaps the most devastating objection ever raised against it: ideas that we and, perhaps more importantly, Hume want to countenance do not satisfy Hume's Theory of Ideas, leaving phenomena that call out for explanation unexplained.²² This objection

²² I am grateful to Geoffrey Sayre-McCord for his helpful suggestions about how to best express this objection.

typically manifests itself in one of two ways: 1) there is a putative idea that seems genuine, but which does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas²³; or 2) Hume mobilizes an idea when accounting for phenomena in the science of human nature which does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas.²⁴ A putative idea fails to satisfy the Theory when it violates the Copy Principle. The Copy Principle often serves as a criterion for the legitimacy of ideas—if a given idea is traceable to impressions, it is legitimate; if it is not, then it is illegitimate. If a putative idea is not traceable to impressions it does not satisfy Hume’s Theory, and is, by Hume’s lights, prohibited from use in explanations in the science of human nature or, depending on the circumstances, not suitable for recognition as a phenomenon the science of human nature must explain. In short, such ideas cannot be explained by the Theory nor can they play a role in explanations in the science of human nature.

If this problem is genuine, then several negative consequences follow. First, Hume’s Theory of Ideas is inadequate for the tasks to which he puts it and the foundation for his science of human nature is faulty. Secondly, “Humesproblem,” or the pervasive belief that there is an inescapable conflict between Hume’s naturalist ambitions to advance his science of human nature and the skeptical conclusions reached by way of application of his Theory of Ideas, is also a genuine problem.²⁵ The application of Hume’s Theory seems to all but obliterate the requisite resources for carrying out his science of human nature. Finally, if this problem is genuine, Hume is either disingenuous or undeserving of his place in the canon of

²³ The missing shade of blue from *Treatise* 1.1.1, which is the subject of Chapter Two, is an example of this version of the objection.

²⁴ Examples of the second version of the objection include Hume’s accounts of object identity and personal identity (*Treatise* 1.4.2 and 1.4.6, respectively). I will discuss these cases in detail in Chapters Three and Four.

²⁵ I borrow the term “Humesproblem” from Paul Russell’s excellent book, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise*. However, the problem indicated by the term has been a primary concern of Hume scholarship at least since Kemp Smith’s *The Philosophy of David Hume*.

great early modern philosophers. He would be disingenuous for *claiming* he could account for the rich phenomena that compose human experience using only his Theory of Ideas while actually employing ideas that do *not* satisfy his Theory. He would be undeserving of his place in the canon of great early modern philosophers if a handful of interesting examples and compelling one-liners exhausted his contributions to philosophy; that is, if he were not a genius who developed a tight and systematic, though perhaps surprising, science of human nature.

This dissertation is a reply to this allegedly devastating objection to the Theory of Ideas. It argues that Hume has the resources to *consistently deny* putative ideas that *do not* satisfy his Theory of Ideas and to mobilize only ideas that *do* satisfy his Theory. It does so by showing that three of the most prominent instances of the objection rest on fundamental misunderstandings of Hume's Theory. A proper understanding of the Theory, one based on the interpretive hypothesis I advance, reveals that this objection does not arise in the cases I consider. The three instances of the objection I will consider concern the missing shade of blue from *Treatise* 1.1.1, Hume's account of object identity from *Treatise* 1.4.2, and Hume's account of personal identity from *Treatise* 1.4.6. By showing that the objection commonly thought to be fatal to the Theory of Ideas is merely putative in its three most prominent instances, I hope to thereby show that the Theory of Ideas more generally is a highly respectable and widely utilized piece of machinery in Hume's overall philosophical project. Unburdened by this nagging objection, the Theory of Ideas may earn the reputation I believe it deserves.

Section 1.4: Hume's Theory of Ideas Reconsidered

I contend that the Theory of Ideas does not undermine, but rather supports Hume's science of human nature. I support this thesis by advancing a novel interpretation of the Theory of Ideas and also by showing that the single strongest objection against the Theory fails in its three most prominent instances. In this section I will outline the details of my interpretation of Hume's Theory of Ideas.

My interpretive approach is really quite simple. I assume that Hume began his project, that of developing a science of human nature, from what he took to be a solid theoretical starting point, namely the Theory of Ideas. I also assume that he largely stayed within the constraints of that Theory when employing it to explain phenomena in his science of human nature. That is, Hume did not cheat or "relax" the Theory in order to accommodate errant phenomena he wished to explain. Rather, he attempted to minimize or "explain away" apparent exceptions to the Theory. Finally, I resist the claim put forward by many commentators that Hume took on new identities as he navigated through his *Treatise*, beginning with enthusiasm for his new science of human nature, becoming skeptical as he saw where it would inevitably lead, and finally, either deciding to pursue a naturalistic project or settling on some variety of skepticism. I do not approach this project from the perspective of "Humesproblem," or the pervasive belief that Hume and his philosophy are deeply conflicted if not broken-backed. I assume that there is only one Hume, with the same set of theoretical commitments and philosophical goals, on nearly every page of the *Treatise*. The challenge we face as interpreters of Hume is not one of synthesizing the disparate elements of a conflicted man's philosophy, but rather of seeing how a great philosophical

mind navigated through disparate domains of discourse and executed a complicated, multi-faceted philosophical project.

I should call attention to one final difference in interpretive approach between myself and other commentators. Many commentators attempt to itemize and discuss separately the many “theories” they find in Hume’s philosophy. I will resist the anachronistic temptation to see Hume as offering self-contained, but inter-related theories of mind, meaning, and truth, as such.²⁶ The tendency to impose our contemporary divisions of labor on historical figures is, in my opinion, unfair and counter-productive to fruitful interpretation and subsequent understanding of these figures. Hume is often, on the basis of our contemporary division of labor, accused of conflating psychology with various branches of philosophy. A more charitable assessment is that Hume had a considerably more broad definition of philosophy and saw philosophy and psychology as more inter-related than we now do.²⁷

Let us augment and expand the basic picture of the Theory of Ideas from earlier in this Chapter. There we reviewed the most basic components of the Theory: the impression/idea distinction, the Copy Principle, and the three principles of association. Hume, I contend, conceived of his Theory of Ideas as being as close to a formal, scientific theory as he could manage. As in most scientific theories, he wanted to balance simplicity and elegance with explanatory utility. Thus, he constructed a theory composed of the fewest number of definitions and theoretical hypotheses he possibly could while providing himself with enough resources to account for and explain human experience. His own first person

²⁶ Bennett, Pears, Loeb, and others make wide use of distinctions between Hume’s theories of this or that, but I think the theoretically simple, unified interpretations of people like Garrett are truer to the text and intentions of Hume, and therefore, preferable.

²⁷ See the introduction of Garrett’s *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* for a nice explanation of why we should not accuse Hume conflating psychology and philosophy.

observations and experiences serve as Hume's context of discovery. He formulated his Copy Principle, for example, against the backdrop of his experience. Hume justified the components of his Theory by applying them successfully to account for and explain phenomena he deliberately and self-consciously sets out to explain over the course of the *Treatise*. The *Treatise* is the context of justification. In the Hume literature there seems to be a preference for the term 'principle' when describing the basic components of Hume's Theory, such as his "Copy Principle" and "Separability Principle." I will treat the terms 'principle' and 'theoretical hypothesis' as synonyms. I prefer the term 'theoretical hypothesis' to 'principle' on account of its being a more technical, less colloquial bit of vocabulary than 'principle.' 'Principle,' of course, can be used quite technically, as in physics; but with its plethora of common uses, its meaning is less clear than that of 'theoretical hypothesis.' A theoretical hypothesis is something that is assumed to be true for the purposes of constructing and utilizing a theoretical apparatus. A theoretical hypothesis is neither self-evident nor an empirical generalization based on observation; it is a fundamental assumption.

Let us explicate Hume's Theory of Ideas in full beginning with his explanandum. Hume sets out to account for and explain **human experience**. Hume never tells us precisely what he means by 'experience,' but a thorough consideration of the *Treatise* suggests that experience, in this case, ought to be understood as the phenomenology of perception, pure experience, or experience considered without reference to its underlying causes. He begins the construction of his Theory with some definitions:

Perception: "whatever can be present to the mind, whether we employ our senses, or are actuated with passion, or exercise our thought and reflection" (SBN 647).

Impression: an original, lively perception, including our “sensations, passions and emotions” (SBN 1).

Ideas: “faint images” of impressions, less lively perceptions (SBN 1).

The Theory is composed of a few important theoretical hypotheses:

The Impression/Idea Distinction: Experience is explicable in terms of two types of perceptions, impressions, understood roughly as sensations, and ideas, understood roughly as thoughts.

The Simple/Complex Distinction: All perceptions are either simple, meaning “such as admit of no distinction or separation,” or complex, meaning “contrary to these [simple perceptions], and may be distinguished into parts” (SBN 2).

The Copy Principle: “*all of our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*” (SBN 4).

The Principles of the Association of Perceptions: ideas become united with one another with the aid of “some universal principles” (SBN 10):

Resemblance: “our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that *resembles* it” (SBN 11).

Contiguity: “’Tis likewise evident, that as the senses, in changing their objects, are necessitated to change them regularly, and take them as they lie *contiguous* to each other” (SBN 11).

Cause and Effect: “there is no relation, which produces a stronger connexion in the fancy, and makes one idea more readily recall another, than the relation of cause and effect betwixt their objects” (SBN 11).

The Separability Principle: “whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by thought and by imagination” (SBN 18).

Hume ambitiously believed that human experience could be accounted for and explained using this limited framework. The Copy Principle roots all of our mental activity directly in experience. It can also be used in reverse to explain the meaningfulness (or nonsensicality) of our language and to eradicate extravagant metaphysical theories:

And when he [the author] suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant. (SBN 648-49)

Terms without roots in experience are unsuitable for use in philosophical theories. The Separability Principle explains the imagination’s ability to “transpose and change its ideas” (SBN 10) and is central to Hume’s attack on extravagant metaphysical theories, such as his denial of a simple, unified self. Finally, the Principles of Association explain how the mind combines our various perceptions when we reason, form beliefs, and engage in other mental activities.

So far, I have merely explicated Hume’s Theory of Ideas. I expect very little, if any, of my bare description of the Theory to be controversial in nature. However, as is so often the case, the devil is in the details. My interpretive hypothesis seizes on the details of the conceptualization and deployment of Hume’s Theory, and challenges the accepted way of understanding precisely how Hume conceives of and utilizes his Theory. It may be boiled down to four claims, each of which I will explain in detail:

- 1) The Copy Principle is a theoretical hypothesis in the Theory.**
- 2) Simple perceptions are theoretical posits.**

- 3) **There are no unique analyses of words or concepts.**
 - 4) **The *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas: it explicates, applies, compares, and meta-theoretically evaluates the Theory.**
- 4 Corr.) In order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.**

I will take up each of these claims, explaining its importance and how adopting it contributes to the functionality of the Theory.

The first claim is **the Copy Principle is a theoretical hypothesis in the Theory.**²⁸ The two most influential interpretations of the Copy Principle are the analytic and the empirical generalization interpretations. Anthony Flew and Jonathan Bennett are prominent representatives of the analytic interpretation. According to this view, the Copy Principle is analytic, a priori, and necessary. It is supposed to express the following analytic truth: “an idea is *by definition* a copy of an impression.”²⁹ Furthermore, Bennett believes that Hume subscribes to a one to one correspondence between words and ideas and between ideas and impressions, and that the Copy Principle is the edifice on which his views on language are built. The text seems to count strongly against the analytic interpretation.³⁰ First, Hume’s open and sincere consideration of “contradictory phænomena” suggests that he did not conceive of the Copy Principle as an analytic truth.³¹ Secondly, as Don Garrett has carefully observed, an important theoretical commitment of Hume’s stands in the way of the analytic

²⁸ I am indebted to Alan Nelson for many conversations with me about the status of Hume’s Copy Principle. I also appreciate conversations I have had with David Landy about the Copy Principle.

²⁹ Basson, *David Hume*, p. 37.

³⁰ For a nice refutation of the analytic interpretation see Chapter 2 of Garrett’s *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*.

³¹ This consideration is most clear in the case of the missing shade of blue, which is the subject of Chapter 2.

interpretation: Hume subscribes to the Conceivability Criterion of Possibility according to which “nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible” (SBN 19-20). One might, if one agrees with Garrett, believe that the denial of the Copy Principle is obviously conceivable, and so, too, believe that the Copy Principle cannot express a necessary truth.³² In response to the analytic view, Garrett offers one of the most well-developed empirical generalization interpretations of the Principle. According to this view, that simple ideas are derived from simple impressions is a well established empirical regularity supported by the best data available at the time.³³

Strictly speaking, ‘the Copy Principle’ means whatever perceptions co-occur with it during an instance of its use, and the perceptions co-occurrent with a token use of a word or word phrase can vary greatly. This is a direct consequence of Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis, which I shall take up shortly. There are likely occasions when the ideas co-occurrent with ‘the Copy Principle’ include empirical generalizations; such as biting an orange and then thinking about biting an orange, or smelling coffee and then thinking about smelling coffee. We often offer these cases to students when explaining the impression/idea distinction and Copy Principle to them. There are also likely occasions when what one has in mind when uttering ‘the Copy Principle’ is something rather like an analytic truth, as when one is explaining what it is to be an idea. The Copy Principle is neither an analytic truth nor an empirical generalization full stop. Rather, it, like all things in the Humean framework,

³² Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, p. 43.

³³ William H. Williams offers an alternative interpretation of the Copy Principle in his discussion of the case of the missing shade. Williams claims that the Copy Principle is not necessarily intended to provide “an exact account of the origin of our ideas...[but rather to determine] whether words express clear ideas” (92). The missing shade of blue is a red herring, claims Williams, because it misunderstands what the Copy Principle is designed to do. I am skeptical of this position, as I do not see how the Copy Principle could be employed to ensure that words express clear ideas without enforcing that ideas must derive from impressions.

varies in meaning depending upon how it is conceived. Again, I will explain in more detail what I mean when I explicate Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis.

That said, I do think Hume intended the Copy Principle in a certain way when he introduced it in Book I. I contend that he intended it as a theoretical hypothesis, or maxim (a word Hume, himself, used), in the Theory. It is assumed or accepted as true for a theoretical purpose. If we think Hume thought of the Copy Principle as an empirical generalization, then the important question about it becomes, “how general is it?” or “is true that all ideas are copied from impressions?” However, if we take Hume as thinking of the Copy Principle as a theoretical hypothesis in a theory, then the important question about it becomes, “how much explaining can it do?” When contemplating the status of the Copy Principle, we must keep in mind that Hume is really engaged in three tasks with respect to it: 1) motivating the principle (i.e., providing a reasons to adopt it, often appealing to generalizations), 2) quasi-formalizing the principle (I use “quasi-formalizing” here because it is obvious that Hume’s Theory is not a truly formal theory, but, again, I maintain that it is only as close as he can manage), and 3) justifying the principle through application to cases (which will often result in empirical generalizations). This task shifting is captured in Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis, which I will discuss shortly. Empirical generalizations motivate the Copy Principle (e.g., biting an orange is prior to and more vivid than thinking about the taste of an orange), and empirical generalizations might result from the application of the Copy Principle (i.e., we can use the Copy Principle to explain patterns in human cognition), but the Copy Principle itself is not intended by Hume as an empirical generalization.

As I will show in the following Chapter, thinking of the Copy Principle as a theoretical hypothesis in Hume’s Theory allows us to explain away Hume’s mysteriously

cavalier reaction to the infamous missing shade of blue counter-example from *Treatise* 1.1.1. Briefly, Hume’s consideration of the missing shade in the first place is part of a strategy for motivating the Copy Principle, one of the three tasks he engages in with respect to it. He considers it as a reason one might not accept the Copy Principle, along with reasons in favor of accepting it. He does this, I suspect, for the sake of intellectual honesty, but he thinks it will have little sway. Why is Hume so cavalier? Not, I propose, because he is convinced of the scarcity of such cases (although he does mention this), but because he knows that down the road he will have all of the resources he needs to dissipate the intuitive pull of the case.

The second claim of my interpretive hypothesis is **simple perceptions are theoretical posits**.³⁴ Simple ideas are not entities to which Hume is ontologically committed on the basis of his experience of them. In fact, I contend that simple ideas are not directly experience-able at all. To understand this claim fully, we must contrast simple ideas with sensible minima:

Simple idea: Hume tells us that “simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation” (SBN 2).

Sensible minima: Hume tells us in *Treatise* 1.2.1 “that the imagination reaches a *minimum*, and may raise up to itself an idea, of which it cannot conceive any subdivision, and which cannot be diminished without total annihilation” (SBN 27).

To illustrate sensible minima, Hume gives us an example of an ink spot. Consider an ink spot on a piece of paper. Now, take that piece of paper back some distance from the viewer

³⁴ I am very much indebted to Nelson and Landy’s “Qualities and Simple Ideas: Hume and his Debt to Berkeley” in *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate* (forthcoming June 2011). I am also grateful to Nelson and Landy for sharing drafts of this piece with me and for their many helpful conversations with me regarding the nature and status of Humean perceptions.

until the viewer can no longer see the ink spot. Just before the ink spot disappears, it is the smallest sensible object of its kind. These sorts of cases define the limits of perception.

Simple ideas are not sensible minima. Sensible minima *do* admit of distinction. Consider the ink spot again. It admits of distinction. I can ask and answer questions like, “what is to the right of the ink spot?,” “what is above it?,” and so forth. The ink spot has a left and right side and a top and a bottom. These sides can be distinguished and mentally separated (as in abstraction). Simple ideas, by definition, admit of *no* distinction or separation. Nothing we experience is experienced as such; that is, as impervious to distinction and/or separation. Simple perceptions are never experienced *qua* simple. Hume’s simple perceptions are theoretical posits whose place in the Theory of Ideas is justified by their explanatory utility. Simple perceptions are supposed, or assumed, to exist because, for example, they account for our ability to manipulate and transpose ideas.³⁵ Sensible minima are experiential entities while simple perceptions are theoretical entities. Sensible minima are experienced directly. Simple perceptions explain experience, but are not directly and individually experienced themselves.³⁶ Thinking of simple perceptions as theoretical posits

³⁵ For a different treatment of the comparison between simple ideas and sensible meaning discussed in relation to the case of the missing shade of blue see William H. Williams’ “Is Hume’s Shade of Blue a Red Herring?” One important difference between Williams and me is that Williams thinks that simple ideas are the phenomenological product of distinctions of reason. I contend that distinctions of reason allow us to place the same object into different revival sets on the basis of different respects of resemblance. Suppose I have a green cube, a blue cube, and a blue sphere. Distinctions of reason allow me to place the blue cube into two different revival sets, the cube set and the blue set, on the basis of respects of resemblance. Distinctions of reasons do not, I contend, give me simple ideas of blue or cube. Indeed, one could never have a simple idea of a cube. Remember, of course, that the blue cube and the green cube resemble because they are associated; they are not associated because they resemble. For an excellent and more broad treatment of qualities, simple ideas, and distinctions of reason discussed in relation to the missing shade of blue see Lilly-Marlene Russow’s “Simple Ideas and Resemblance.”

³⁶ There is a sense in which we experience nothing but simple perceptions. Simple perceptions compose complex perceptions, and we do experience complex perceptions. These concerns are addressed in detail in Chapter Two.

not only sits well with the definition of simples Hume offers us, but also allows us a clever response to the infamous missing shade of blue, as I will explain in the following Chapter.

The third claim of my interpretive hypothesis is that **there are no unique analyses of words or concepts.**³⁷ This is perhaps the most difficult of my interpretive claims both to explain and to understand. It is perhaps best explicated by starting with the accepted view on meaning and conceptual analysis in Hume's *Treatise* and related works. Hume did not have a particularly well thought out and developed theory of meaning or philosophy of language. Like Locke and Berkeley before him, Hume thought words depend for their meaning upon the occurrent perceptions to which they are annexed. Words are meaningful, in large part, because of their association with ideas.³⁸ Hume discusses what we might call "conception-formation" in 1.1.7 of the *Treatise*:

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all of its particular circumstances and proportions. But as the same word is suppos'd to have been frequently applied to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, which is immediately present to the mind; the word not being able to revive the idea of all those individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allowed so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquired by surveying them. They are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power; nor we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. (SBN 20)

³⁷ I developed this interpretive claim with the assistance of many valuable conversations with Alan Nelson and also with the help of participants in the UNC Department of Philosophy's Dissertation Completion Seminar during the Spring of 2009. I am also grateful to members of the UNC Department of Philosophy who attended a talk I gave on some preliminary ideas that gave rise to this thesis during the Spring of 2009.

³⁸ Hume's view on meaning is slightly more sophisticated than this. In *Treatise* 3.2.5, "Of the obligation of promises," for example, Hume assigns an important role to the community of speakers to which one belongs in determining the meaning of words. In this section we see that in addition to their being associated with ideas, words also get meaning from their handling by a community of speakers. The Theory makes a distinction between word-ideas and "public" words.

According to Hume, having a concept consists in experiencing a kind of association of resembling perceptions upon hearing a general term. I have the concept “dog” if when I hear, speak, or inscribe ‘dog,’ I experience an idea of a particular dog which tends to be associated with other, similar ideas. For example, I have the concept “dog” if when I hear the word ‘dog,’ I experience an idea of McGruff the crime dog which has a tendency to be associated with ideas of Snoopy and Lassie. So far, I agree with the accepted view.

Where I deviate from the accepted view is in how this basic picture of Hume’s views on meaning and concept formation get deployed in the *Treatise*. The accepted view is that a term, such as ‘identity,’ either is or is not annexed to an idea with proper roots in impressions. If it is, then that term has *a* meaning. If it is not, then that term has no meaning. In the case of identity, which I will discuss in detail in Chapters Three and Four, it is frequently observed that the term has no idea or set of ideas annexed to it; that we, therefore, have no idea *of it*; and that there is no such concept as of identity. Another way of putting the accepted view is in terms of the question it asks in response to this minimal framework: “what is *the* idea of X?,” where X is a given word or concept Hume employs. It assumes that terms stably track the same idea or set of ideas. This way of looking at matters often places Hume in an unflattering light. In the case of identity, for example, Hume is accused of employing a term to which there is no correspondent idea. ‘Identity’ is not associated with an idea properly derived from impressions, it is thought, and so Hume uses the term illicitly. This is a manifestation of what I consider the single most significant objection facing Hume’s Theory of Ideas: ideas that we and, perhaps more importantly, Hume want to countenance, do not satisfy the Theory. The accepted view also asks this question, “what is *the* idea of X?,” with respect to the other manifestation of this objection. In the case of the missing

shade of blue, the accepted view asks, “can Hume deny *the* idea of the missing shade of blue?” or “can the subject in the case not possess *the* idea of the missing shade?”

The accepted view assumes that Hume is either looking for or fails to be in possession of some highly specific idea—*the* missing shade of blue idea, *the* belief in body, *the* idea of the self, and so forth. In each case, they think there is some particular Humean idea that is or is not located, and which should not be or should be located, respectively. They think there is some coherent notion of the form “the idea of the X” that Hume has when he should not and does not have when he should. I argue that the accepted view is mistaken and rests on what I call the Big Idea Error. The Big Idea Error rests on the aforementioned assumption, that words and word phrases stably track the same idea or set of ideas. For example, it assumes that ‘identity’ is supposed to stably track one unique idea in Hume’s discussion of object identity in *Treatise* 1.4.2.³⁹ Below I have outlined the step by step genesis and resulting conclusions of the general version of the Big Idea Error:

Step 1: assumption that there is or should be a single Humean idea involved in a given explanation or example.

Step 2: a search for the Humean idea assumed in step 1 that results in either a seemingly legitimate idea that defies the Hume’s Copy Principle (i.e., there is a legitimate idea where, according to the Theory, there should not be) or in failure to find a legitimate idea (i.e., there is no legitimate idea where Hume claims there is).

At this point, the Error has been committed. Negative conclusions follow.

Step 3: conclusion that the Theory of Ideas is too restrictive on one or both of the following grounds: a) the Theory denies ideas it ought to acknowledge (e.g., the

³⁹ Stroud and Bennett, prominently, commit this version of the Big Idea Error in their analyses of Hume’s account object identity, the subject of Chapter Three.

missing shade of blue), and b) the Theory cannot account for ideas integral to explanations of phenomena in the science of human nature (e.g., Hume seems to rely on an idea of the self when explaining human moral reasoning in Books II and III that his Theory does not license). In short, the Theory fails to deliver the “right” verdict on the legitimacy of a given idea.

Step 4: the Theory of Ideas comes to be regarded as inadequate for the tasks to which Hume puts it, and frequently its role in Hume’s philosophy is marginalized to avoid the undesirable conclusions outlined in Step 3.

Steps 1 and 2 express a basic version of the Error, but more remains to be said about this assumption. To fully appreciate the assumption underlying the Big Idea Error, we must expose a correspondence assumed by the accepted view before even arriving at Step 1. The assumption made goes back to the primitive theory of meaning just discussed: words get their meaning through their association with ideas. Proponents of the accepted view take Hume’s position a step further, and in so doing seriously restrict the resources available to Hume in executing his science of human nature. They assume that word phrases such as ‘the missing shade of blue’ and ‘the belief in body’ stably co-occur with just one particular idea or set of ideas. That is, they think that every utterance, inscription, or thought of, for example, ‘the missing shade of blue’ must co-occur with precisely the same idea. Call this the Correspondence Assumption.

Correspondence Assumption: there is a one to one correspondence between some terms and highly particular ideas.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ I insert the qualifier ‘some’ here because many commentators acknowledge that some terms correspond to different ideas in different contexts (e.g., most general terms: ‘dog,’ ‘car,’ ‘water,’ etc.). The tendency to assume a one to one correspondence between terms and ideas is most prevalent when the term involved contains a demonstrative or definite article. However, many commentators, perhaps unwittingly, make the

If one believes that there is a one to one correspondence between certain word phrases and highly particular ideas, then she will find Hume's Theory of Ideas too restrictive indeed, but, I argue, the Theory in no way compels us to accept the Correspondence Assumption in the cases of interpretive difficulties I consider in this dissertation. In fact, there is much in the *Treatise* to tell strongly against the Correspondence Assumption.⁴¹ It is now widely accepted that Hume believed that general terms co-occur, or are disposed to co-occur, with several ideas, commonly called "revival sets."⁴² For example, the word 'triangle' will frequently co-occur, or be disposed to co-occur, with several ideas, not one unique idea. It is not yet widely accepted that *many* words will turn out to be, or to behave like, general terms on Hume's account, or, more modestly, that nothing forces us to accept the Correspondence Assumption in most cases. There is no compelling reason to assume that such phrases as 'the missing shade of blue,' 'that pen,' 'this computer,' and so forth co-occur stably with one particular idea or set of ideas. However, there is a compelling reason to *reject* the

assumption with general terms like 'identity' and 'invariableness.' That is, they might acknowledge that 'identity' uttered by a mathematician and 'identity' uttered by layperson co-occur with very different ideas, but they will insist strongly on the Correspondence Assumption within a given domain (i.e., 'identity' co-occurs with the same ideas in all mathematical contexts).

⁴¹ *Treatise* 1.1.7, "Of Abstract Ideas," and subsequent applications of that analysis in later parts of Book I, for example, *Treatise* 1.4.2 and 1.4.6 (the subjects of Chapters Three and Four), tell against the one-one correspondence assumption. I contend that even word phrases containing demonstratives are general terms on Hume's view. 'That pen' actually co-occurs with several perceptions, not one unique perception. In addition, Hume acknowledges that many words do not ostensibly refer. Consider his discussion "Of the obligation of promises" at 3.2.5. 'I promise' does not co-occur with resembling ideas as does 'red.' Using 'I promise' correctly is not a matter of associating with the right ideas, but of using it in the right circumstances (which can also be given an analysis in terms of perceptions). Consider also Hume's observations about mathematical reasoning. Hume tells us in 1.1.7 that we cannot form adequate ideas of large numbers, yet we can use terms like 'one thousand' meaningfully (SBN 23). Using 'one thousand' correctly is applying a set of rules regarding its manipulation correctly. Finally, consider Hume's position on theoretical terms like 'inertia.' In a footnote (16), Hume explains that 'inertia,' though we have no precise idea of "it," successfully captures a set of empirical phenomena (EHU 143). There are conventional and empirical standards for proper application of the term. I am indebted to Donald Livingston's very fine book for illuminating these observations about Hume's so-called "philosophy of language" (Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, Chapter 3).

⁴² Term coined by Garrett and now, I believe, part of the Hume scholarship vernacular.

Correspondence Assumption in most cases. First, rejecting it is more consistent with the text. The Correspondence Assumption is based largely on the assumption that Hume inherited a view about language from Locke, which may not even be a correct interpretation of Locke. However, the text tells against this reading in ways I will explain in the following chapters. Secondly, rejecting the Correspondence Assumption allows Hume's Theory of Ideas more flexibility to account for and explain phenomena in the science of human nature, thus making it a more adequate theory than previously supposed.

Now that we have reviewed the accepted view, let us return directly to the third claim of my interpretive hypothesis: **there are no unique analyses of words or concepts**. This claim is essentially a denial of the accepted view. So far as the Theory of Ideas is concerned, each perception is completely unique and never repeats. Sometimes Hume writes that our impressions repeat themselves in memory or imagination as ideas, but this is Hume being careless, not Hume making an important claim about his theoretical apparatus nor about the metaphysics of perceptions.⁴³ My argument for this claim, that each perception is completely unique, is as follows:

(1) The Separability Principle: "whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by thought and the imagination"

(SBN 18).

(2) "the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences" (SBN

636).

⁴³ Sometimes Hume writes that our impressions repeat themselves in memory or imagination as ideas, as in "The faculty, by which we repeat our impressions in the first manner, is called MEMORY, and the other IMAGINATION" (SBN 8-9). Here "repeat" just means "copy." Hume is not making an important claim about the metaphysics of perceptions. The second appearance of "the impression" as an idea is a distinct existence, so far as the Theory of Ideas is concerned.

(3) Faculties can be nothing over and above perceptions. (Faculties are just manners in which perceptions occur or are disposed to occur. For example, memory just describes a manner of having ideas in which the ideas are forceful, vivacious, and relatively static. In short, Hume is a reductionist about faculties.)⁴⁴ Thus, faculties cannot play the role of different metaphorical “places” the same perception might appear under a different description.⁴⁵

(4) The “same perception” does not first appear in sensation and then move to memory. Rather, the perception of sensation and the perception of memory are two distinct perceptions. In short, each perception is, so far as the Theory of Ideas is concerned, completely unique.⁴⁶

Now, let us couple this argument with Hume’s theory of meaning. The meanings of terms are, in large part, the perceptions with which they co-occur. Since each perception is completely unique, if one is challenged to make a term, say ‘self,’ meaningful, then one must perceive something definite on the occasion of ‘self’ being uttered, thought, inscribed, etc. This is even true of every time *you* think of what *you* have always associated with ‘self,’ for each time *your* perceptions are different.

⁴⁴ See *Treatise* 1.1.3, “Of the ideas of memory and imagination”. Hume distinguishes memory from imagination by no criterion other than the manner, or way, in which perceptions appear when attributed to memory and when attributed to imagination.

⁴⁵ It seems possible for two perceptions to be judged to be the same. Indeed, this is what the subjects in Hume’s investigation into the continued and distinct existence of objects in *Treatise* 1.4.2 commonly do. The Theory can explain the judgment that two perceptions are identical, but the Theory prohibits, within the domain of pure theorizing, the identification of two perceptions.

⁴⁶ Outside of the domain of application of the Theory of Ideas to experience, one might (though Hume does not) raise questions about the ontological status of perceptions. One may conclude during this process that it is metaphysically possible for the same exact perception to recur in a subject’s experience. However, the Theory assumes that each perception is an individual existence.

Consider a less philosophical, more quotidian term. ‘The sun’ is likely never annexed to the same idea, or set of ideas, twice. In other words, there is no unique analysis of ‘the sun.’⁴⁷ Suppose I watch the sunset in Chapel Hill and say, “the sun is spectacular.” Now suppose I go on vacation and watch the sunset in Honolulu. I might say again, “the sun is spectacular.” It is easy to see in these two cases that the ideas annexed to my utterance are different. The contrast between Chapel Hill and Honolulu illustrates my point well. However, I need not contrast the two cities to make my point. Even if I stay in Chapel Hill all my life, and never observe a sunset in another city, the ideas annexed to “the sun is spectacular” will vary with each token utterance. Analyses of token utterances of given words vary greatly as a person shifts from context to context, and the degree of variation between analyses will depend upon the degree of variation between contexts. This is clear from a distinction Hume makes throughout the *Treatise* between the vulgar and the learned. Hume often suggests that the explanation of a given belief, for example in particular external objects, will depend upon whether the belief is held by the vulgar or by the learned.

To complicate matters, Hume is always quick to remind us that very few of us, if any of us, are strictly vulgar or strictly learned. Rather, we wander back and forth between vulgar contexts (e.g., taverns and backgammon) and learned contexts (e.g., philosophy and other intellectual pursuits). Consider the following sentence: ‘the coffee is ready.’ ‘The coffee is ready’ uttered by a colleague in the break room is annexed to very different ideas than is ‘the coffee is ready’ uttered by a farmer in her coffee fields than is ‘the coffee is ready’ uttered by a master-roaster in her laboratory. Of course, a master-roaster might make coffee in the break room and utter ‘the coffee is ready,’ too. That we all transition between

⁴⁷ Locke makes this same point with regard to nominal essences. See ECHU, Book III, Chap IX, “Imperfection of Words.”

such disparate contexts, or domains of discourse, as the break room and the laboratory seems an incontestable experiential fact.⁴⁸ The point is that analyses of terms like ‘coffee’ vary from context to context, and the search for “*the* idea of the X” is up a blind alley because there almost never is just one idea annexed to a given term. Hume’s objective is not to give an analysis of “*the* idea of *the* X,” but rather to demonstrate how his Theory can generate analyses of an enormous variety of phenomena in terms of perceptions. Hume is not in the business of generating unique conceptual analyses of philosophical notions like “identity.” Rather, Hume is interested in explaining with his framework of ideas our various uses and experiences of “identity.”

The fourth claim of my interpretive hypothesis is **the *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas: it explicates, applies, compares, and meta-theoretically evaluates the Theory.** This claim has a corollary: **in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.**⁴⁹ Hume’s project in the *Treatise* has at least five components: motivation for the Theory, explication of the Theory, application of the Theory, evaluation of the Theory and the result of its application, and consideration of alternative theories. This is a meta-theoretical claim about the development and application of Hume’s Theory and about Hume’s own meta-theorizing. The relationships between these component tasks generate significant exegetical and interpretive difficulties. First, Hume often shifts between the component tasks just delineated without signaling or signposting. Hume

⁴⁸ I will use the terms “contexts” and “domains of discourse” interchangeably.

⁴⁹ I am grateful to participants in the UNC Department of Philosophy Dissertation Completion Seminar held during the Spring of 2009 for their comments on early articulations of this interpretive claim and corollary. I am also grateful to Livingston’s *Philosophy of Common Life* and Kemp Simth’s *The Philosophy of David Hume* for inspiring me to take a harder look at the dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.

motivates his Theory without writing, “I am now going to consider some crudely described phenomena to motivate my Theory”; and applies the Theory to his explananda without writing, “Now let us apply the Theory to an explanandum”; and so forth.

A second exegetical difficulty concerns the closeness between two of the component tasks just delineated: motivation for and application of the Theory. It is not obvious when Hume is offering motivation for his Theory and when he is applying it to explain some phenomenon in the science of human nature. This is because Hume’s explananda and the phenomena to which he appeals when motivating his Theory can be quite similar. For example, “the workings of the mind” are appealed to both to motivate the principles of association and as explananda. Our pre-theoretical understanding of how the mind works might make the principles of association easier to accept, but how the mind works also comprises part of Hume’s explanandum. Because Hume is not careful to distinguish between these two component tasks, he is often taken to have inconsistent views. For example, Hume often crudely characterizes the workings of “the mind” as motivation for his view in a way that seems to conflict with the analysis of “the mind” his view yields.⁵⁰ The mind seemingly is not what Hume pre-theoretically describes it to be. Here, too, I think we can appreciate Hume’s challenge. He has to start somewhere. He cannot dispense with all aspects of our pre-Theoretical understanding of the world at the start of his project. As will become clear in Chapter Four, Hume has a radical way of thinking about the mind, but he must meet his readers where they are. He must start with the more conventional and work gradually toward the unconventional.

⁵⁰ I will discuss this worry in Chapter Four.

Finally, there is a third difficulty which properly belongs to interpreters of Hume and not to Hume himself. Interpreters of Hume inherit all of his exegetical difficulties plus the difficulty that is generated by doing exegesis on something that is already exegetically complex. The execution of my interpretive approach sometimes calls for meta-meta-theory, as when I am discussing Hume's meta-theoretical considerations. Another difficulty I face is that Hume rarely *explicitly* says that he is engaged in the project I attribute to him. I have three responses to this difficulty. First, I am not unique in being faced with recalcitrant texts and with texts that ought to have been included but which were not included. Every interpretation faces this obstacle. Secondly, there is much in the way of implicit textual support for my interpretive hypothesis, which I will show in the following Chapters. Finally, I think the ability to construct a consistent system on behalf of a historical figure given one's interpretive thesis is strong evidence that the figure in question subscribed to the view hypothesized on his behalf even though he may never have explicitly articulated it. This evidence is further strengthened if according to the alternatives the figure in question commits serious errors. I do adhere throughout to a principle of charity and I take the value of doing so for granted. If I do not succeed in making the case that Hume thought of his Theory of Ideas in the way I am suggesting he did, I can succeed at least in offering a view that was open to Hume. Even if the view detailed in this dissertation does not belong to Hume, it is certainly consistent with all of his theoretical commitments and philosophical goals. If I have produced a systematic view Hume might have adopted, then I am pleased with that result.

The text can be made to say many things on many occasions. The early moderns, not unlike us, were not always as clear, direct, or organized as they might have been; and this is

exacerbated by their need to work within political and theological constraints from which we are relatively free. It is unreasonable to expect any interpretation to sit perfectly with every piece of text. An additional complicating factor is that it is extremely difficult to achieve perspective on large philosophical works. It can be difficult to see how even your own dissertation, books, or articles fit with all of your philosophical commitments. It is possible that Hume often did not fully understand how all of his commitments fit together. My general strategy is to construct a flattering interpretive hypothesis *first* (although the context of discovery will involve a good deal of preliminary textual analysis), and *then* to apply it resolve lingering interpretive difficulties without creating new ones. If my interpretive hypothesis makes Hume's philosophy appear valuable and if it provides some clarity, then I am satisfied. Someone might accuse me of developing a rational reconstruction of Hume's philosophy and not interpretation. I do not recognize a clear distinction between those two enterprises. Again, if I have produced something Hume might plausibly have adopted but perhaps did not actually adopt, that is still, to my mind, a significant accomplishment.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MISSING SHADE OF BLUE

The most significant objection facing Hume's Theory of Ideas is this: ideas that we and, perhaps more importantly, Hume want to countenance do not satisfy Hume's Theory of Ideas. This Chapter considers and responds to one instance of this objection: the missing shade of blue from *Treatise* 1.1.1. In responding to this particular instance of the objection, I will rely on Claims One, Two, and Three of my interpretive hypothesis:

- 1) **The Copy Principle is a theoretical hypothesis in the Theory.**
- 2) **Simple perceptions are theoretical posits.**
- 3) **There are no unique analyses of words or concepts.**

My strategy is as follows. I first explicate several versions of the problem raised by the case of the missing shade of blue and consider some influential attempts to solve the problem. I then identify and explore an interpretive dilemma raised by the text and secondary literature. I ultimately argue that one horn of the dilemma involves a category mistake. Finally, I examine a "hard" version of the problem raised by the case of the missing shade and suggest lines of response to it.

Again, the general problem thought to be devastating to Hume's science of human nature is that ideas that we, and perhaps more importantly, Hume want to countenance do not satisfy Hume's Theory of Ideas. This problem typically manifests itself in one of two ways:

- 1) there is a putative idea that seems genuine, but which does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas;
- or 2) Hume mobilizes an idea when accounting for phenomena in the science of human

nature which does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas.⁵¹ The case of the missing shade from *Treatise* 1.1.1 is an instance of the first manifestation of the problem.

Section 2.1: The Counterexample

After articulating the Copy Principle, “*all of our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*” (SBN 4), Hume seemingly concedes a counter-example to it:

There is however one contradictory phænomenon, which may prove, that ‘tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions. I believe it will readily be allow’d, that the several distinct ideas of colours, which enter by the eyes, or those of sounds, which are convey’d by the hearing, are really different from each other, tho’ at the same time resembling. Now if this be true of different colours, it must be no less so of the different shades of the same colour, that each of them produces a distinct idea independent of the rest. For if this shou’d be deny’d, ‘tis possible, by the continual gradation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is most remote from it, and if you will not allow any of the means to be different, you cannot without absurdity deny the extremes to be the same. Suppose therefore a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it has never been his fortune to meet with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be plac’d before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; ‘tis plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other. Now I ask, whether ‘tis possible for him, from his own imaginings, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, ‘tho it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of the opinion that he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions; tho’ the instance is so particular and singular, that ‘tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim. (SBN 5-6)

To recapitulate, a man goes blind after thirty years of sight. He has experienced many colors, but not, by hypothesis, a particular shade of blue. It seems very plausible that this man could line up his blue ideas in descending order from darkest to lightest, detect a blank where the missing shade would be, and fill it in, thus, generating an idea of blue never before

⁵¹ Examples of the second version of the objection will be discussed in the following two Chapters.

experienced. This case threatens the Copy Principle, the backbone of Hume's Theory of Ideas, as it suggests that we can come to have ideas which are not copies of impressions. Hume curiously brushes the case off as being singular and rare, but Hume's company is sparse on this point.⁵² Both hostile and friendly commentators see the missing shade case as a significant problem. Jonathan Bennett, for one prominent example, thinks the missing shade of blue opens the floodgates to other sorts of exceptions to the Copy Principle. He writes:

As soon as he admits that the copy thesis is false, and that ideas can be formed in at least one other way, the game is up. The idea of eventless time (say) cannot be formed in either of the two ways so far described, but what now is the argument for holding that it cannot be formed in some third way?⁵³

Even Don Garrett, who is far more sympathetic to Hume's overall project, thinks the problem raised by the missing shade calls out for a solution, as evidenced by his offering two solutions to the problem.⁵⁴ Making reference to "the problem raised by the missing shade of blue" is misleading, as there are *many* problems of the missing shade of blue accompanied by many attempted solutions. I will discuss six such problem and solution pairs.

Section 2.2: Six Versions of the Missing Shade of Blue

Recall Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis: **there are no unique analyses of words or concepts.** It follows that what is meant by 'the missing shade of blue' varies from use to use and subject to subject, as the ideas associated with token utterances, inscriptions, or thoughts of 'the missing shade of blue' will vary from use to use and person to person.

⁵² Some commentators agree with Hume's assessment of the missing shade of blue as being singular and rare, notably Garrett, Fogelin, and Russow. All three commentators conclude that the missing shade is an acceptable exception to the Copy Principle conceived of as an empirical generalization.

⁵³ Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, pp. 218-219.

⁵⁴ It is fair to say that Bennett and Garrett represent two extremes in Hume interpretation.

‘The missing shade of blue’ does not stably track one idea or set of ideas. There are at least six interpretations of what ideas are associated with ‘the missing shade of blue’ as it appears in Hume’s *Treatise* and the subsequent secondary literature:

- (1) The missing shade of blue is a blank, an absence, what “*if it could be apprehended sensorially or in image, would fill the gap.*”⁵⁵
- (2) The missing shade of blue is a complex idea built out of properly acquired simple ideas.⁵⁶
- (3) The missing shade of blue is part of an interpolated series of closely resembling ideas.⁵⁷
- (4) The missing shade of blue is a simple idea generated by “blending” two antecedently experienced shades.⁵⁸
- (5) The missing shade of blue is a relative idea.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Kemp Smith, Butler, Pears, and Livingston offer versions of this interpretation. Quotation from Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 206. Livingston suggests, and I rather like this solution, that the idea of the missing shade is parasitic upon the general success of the Copy Principle. The blank that is generated is so generated by the success of the Copy Principle in accounting for all of the adjacent shades and for our mastery of color words. Butler suggests that the missing shade of blue is not an image, but rather a “conceptual content”, what would fill the gap, or a way of speaking about/understanding the gap.

⁵⁶ The complex idea interpretation, Interpretation (2), as far as I know, receives no serious defense in the literature. Rather, it is considered by nearly all commentators who concern themselves with the case, but is quickly dismissed.

⁵⁷ Garrett, Stroud, Fogelin, and Pears suggest versions of this interpretation. Stroud invokes a passage from 1.4.2: “the imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse” (SBN 198). The missing shade of blue, Stroud suggests, could be generated by the imagination’s natural forward progression. However, in this passage Hume is explaining how it is that we come to believe such things as that our homes continue to exist after we leave for work in the morning; he is not explaining the generation of a novel idea.

⁵⁸ Garrett and William Edward Morris offer versions of this interpretation. See Morris’s Stanford Encyclopedia article and Garrett’s footnote citing Morris. I will discuss Garrett’s version of this interpretation in the main text.

⁵⁹ Flage offers this interpretation, appealing to relative ideas to explain Hume’s easy treatment of the case.

- (6) The missing shade of blue is generated by using distinctions of reason to distinguish (without separating) such features of properly acquired ideas as hue and lightness and to recombine those features in a new simple idea.⁶⁰

Four of the six can be dismissed quickly or set aside. Interpretation (1) does not so much suggest a solution to the problem as dissolve it. There is a perfectly ordinary, metaphysically innocent sense in which we perceive absences, or understand that “something is missing”; for example, when someone removes a treasured object from your desk. If an absence in the sense just described is all that is associated with ‘missing shade of blue,’ then no violence is done to Hume’s Theory. Similarly, Interpretation (2) dissolves rather than solves the problem. If the missing shade is a complex idea generated by combining two antecedently experienced shades, then no violence is done to Hume’s Theory. I will return to the complex idea solution, Interpretation (2), in the following section, but for now I want to suggest a reason to dismiss it, as well as Interpretation (1), outright. Both (1) and (2) suffer from seeming too obvious and convenient to be correct. If what Hume had in mind was a complex or a blank, then why would he have entertained the “objection”? If the missing shade of blue is a complex idea or blank, it is no “contradictory phænomenon” at all. Hume would have no cause to use such conciliatory language or to devote such attention to it. However, Hume does, and so we must, at least for now, consider the matter more seriously than this.

I will not consider Interpretations (5) and (6) in detail. Interpretation (5) has it that the missing shade of blue is a relative idea. Once we understand what Hume takes relative ideas to be, we will see that (5) collapses into (1), the missing shade of blue is what would, if

⁶⁰ Karánn Durland and Lilly-Marlene Russow offer versions of this interpretation.

it could be apprehended, fill in the blank.⁶¹ Hume rarely writes of the positive/relative idea distinction in the *Treatise*, nor does he utilize relative ideas to achieve any significant philosophical results⁶², but the two passages which address relative ideas explicitly are worth considering:

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. (SBN 68)

[‘T]is impossible our idea of a perception, and that of an object or external existence can ever represent what are specifically different from each other. Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt them, ‘tis still incomprehensible to us; and we are oblig’d either to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative, or to make it the very same with a perception or impression. (SBN 241)⁶³

These passages concern external objects, but I think we can carry Hume’s reasoning over to our discussion of the missing shade of blue. Relative ideas, as Hume conceives of them, seem best understood as *ideas of relations* but without relata. The idea of $2+2=4$ is composed in part of a relation, addition. It seems uncontroversial that I can have an idea of that relation without the relata, 2, 2, and 4. “Filling in the blank” is a relation just like addition, and I can form an idea of it without forming definite ideas of particular relata, as in $_ + _ = _$. Interpretation (5) has it that the missing shade of blue is the idea of a blank without whatever fills it, which is just another way of stating (1). We set Interpretation (1) aside because it is no “contradictory phænomenon,” and so, we must set aside (5) for the same reason.

⁶¹ Paraphrase of Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, p. 206.

⁶² Proponents of the “New Hume,” or “skeptical realist,” interpretation of Hume disagree with me on this point. Rupert Read and Kenneth Richman’s anthology, *The New Hume Debate Revised Edition*, is an excellent resource on this debate.

⁶³ Hume also explicitly considers relative ideas at footnote 33 of EHU 7.2 (EHU 52).

Interpretation (6), the missing shade of blue is generated by using distinctions of reason to distinguish (without separating) such features of properly acquired ideas as hue and lightness and to recombine those features in a new simple idea, is not a viable option for two reasons. First, it misunderstands what distinctions of reason allow us to do. Distinctions of reason do not allow us to distinguish different simple ideas from objects that can be recombined to generate new simple ideas. Rather, they allow us to place objects in different sets of associated objects on the basis of different respects of resemblance. It is impossible to *separate* the color of a marble globe from its shape, but it is possible on the basis of distinctions of reason to place a white marble globe into two different sets of associated objects, the white set and the globe set.⁶⁴ Secondly, (6) violates the Separability Principle. Garrett puts the problem nicely, “because hues cannot exist without some intensity, saturation, or brightness, and vice versa, treating any of these as simple perceptions would violate the Separability Principle and introduce real connections between simple perceptions.”⁶⁵

I will consider Interpretations (3) and (4) in detail. Interpretations (3) and (4) are well expressed in Don Garrett’s *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, and so I will focus on his articulations of the two interpretations. Let us consider both in turn.

(3) The missing shade of blue is part of an interpolated series of closely resembling ideas.

Garrett: Given the existence of natural resemblances among simple perceptions, Hume has a plausible explanation for a subject’s ability to form a simple idea of the missing shade of blue in the absence of an exactly corresponding impression: the subject has instead a very large number of simple perceptions that naturally resemble

⁶⁴ SBN 1.1.7.

⁶⁵ Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, p. 73.

the missing impression very closely and are even arranged in such an order as to positively *point*, given the nature of the resemblances, to the content of the missing impression. The operation of the mind in using an array of resembling shades to fill in the blank within an ordering of simple ideas—especially when it is an ordering of elements whose principle the mind understands (through the relevant abstract ideas)—is arguably quite similar to the operation of the mind when it interpolates missing elements into other series that do not require the formation of a new simple idea.⁶⁶

In the quotation above Garrett suggests that the natural resemblances holding between simple perceptions could explain how it is that a subject could form an idea to which there is no correspondent impression. The large number of ideas of shades of blue acquired in accordance with the Copy Principle together generate the missing shade of blue by “positively *pointing*” to it.

This interpretation is appealing in that it attempts to defend the general success of the Copy Principle; the generation of the missing shade depends on several resembling ideas acquired in the appropriate manner. However, the considerations against this solution are threefold. First, if Hume admits that the idea of the missing shade can be generated in this way, he makes himself vulnerable to Bennett’s floodgates worry; or the worry that if the missing shade of blue can be generated in this way, then nothing stands in the way of other, more problematic, ideas being generated in the same or different ways. Floodgates worries are far from universally compelling, and could not silence this interpretation alone.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, the remaining two considerations against this interpretation are more powerful than the first. The second consideration against this interpretation is that it concedes too

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁶⁷ The floodgates worry is not universally compelling because it is not obvious that a putative exception (or even two or three) will cause Hume’s Theory to completely unravel. This worry relies mostly on sensationalism and fear of exceptions without providing evidence of and argument for actual exceptions. There is no evidence of a rush of exceptions to the Copy Principle so significant as to warrant the flood metaphor. As this paper argues, it is not clear that even the missing shade of blue is an exception.

much. It is not obvious that Hume concedes anything at all, not even that a single idea without a correspondent impression is possible, nor is it obvious that his Copy Principle requires him to do so. There may be no need to offer a solution on Hume's behalf because there may be no problem posed by the case of the missing shade, a possibility that will be suggested and defended in the following sections. The final consideration against this interpretation concerns the status of the missing shade of blue. Hume's first postulate and Copy Principle entail that the missing shade of blue as it is generated in (3) is an *impression*, and not an idea. Force and vivacity alone cannot distinguish between impressions and ideas, as Hume himself notes that ideas can often reach levels of force and vivacity equal to those found in impressions.⁶⁸ Thus, additional criteria are required to maintain the distinction between impressions and ideas.⁶⁹ The text suggests two: 1) impressions must cause ideas, and 2) ideas must resemble the impressions which cause them.⁷⁰ Given these considerations, it is difficult to see how the missing shade of blue generated in the way Garrett explains could be an idea at all. Rather, it would seem to be an impression, which sits uneasily with the text and secondary literature.

Let us consider Interpretation (4), focusing again on Garrett's articulation of it.

4) The missing shade of blue is a simple idea generated by "blending" two antecedently experienced shades.

⁶⁸ EHU 2.1

⁶⁹ David Landy's "Hume's Impression/Idea Distinction" is an excellent investigation into the nature of the distinction between impression and ideas. Landy argues that force and vivacity cannot be the criterion by which Hume means to distinguish between impressions and ideas, but rather, Hume means to employ the two criteria I mention here.

⁷⁰ 'Cause' is used here in the Humean sense developed in EHU 7 and SBN 1.3.14.

Garrett's second solution to the problem raised by the missing shade of blue relies heavily on the text below from the *Treatise*:

Ideas may be compared to the extension and solidity of matter and impressions, especially reflective ones, to colours, tastes, smells, and other sensible qualities. Ideas never admit of total union, but are endowed with a kind of impenetrability by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture. On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union, and, like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression which arises from the whole. Some of the most curious phenomena of the human mind are derived from this property of the passions. (SBN 366)

In this passage Hume explains that in the case of the passions, two emotions can be "blended" to make a third that is similar to the two that were blended to create it, but which does not contain the original two as parts. Garrett thinks a similar phenomenon could occur with simple ideas of shades of colors:

Let us now imagine a similar process by which ideas of a lighter and darker shade could be imaginatively "blended" so as to produce a simple *idea* intermediate between them. This would differ from the blending of *impressions* only in the lesser force and vivacity of the perceptions on which it operated. And although Hume describes the blending process as one that applies to impressions rather than ideas, he also characterizes it as one that applies specifically to colors. Hence, one might not be surprised to find the imagination having at least a limited capacity to "blend" ideas of closely resembling colors.⁷¹

The missing shade of blue as described above is an idea generated by blending together two antecedently acquired ideas without containing those ideas as parts.

Again, this interpretation is appealing because it seeks to defend the place of the Copy Principle in Hume's Theory of Ideas. However, Garrett's choice of textual reference is unfortunate. Upon closer examination, it appears to prohibit the solution for which it was invoked. Let us take another look at the passage Garrett cites from Book III of the *Treatise*:

⁷¹ Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, p. 52.

Ideas may be compared to the extension and solidity of matter and impressions, especially reflective ones, to colours, tastes, smells, and other sensible qualities. **Ideas never admit of total union, but are endowed with a kind of impenetrability by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture.** On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union, and, like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression which arises from the whole. Some of the most curious phenomena of the human mind are derived from this property of the passions. (SBN 366)

Consider the sentence in bold text. Hume seems to be saying that ideas cannot be totally united with each other; that they, in fact, exclude each other; and that we can compound them, but we cannot fully integrate them into a mixture.⁷² Additionally, the second and third considerations against Interpretation (3) also hold against Interpretation (4). Interpretation (4) prematurely concedes an objection against Hume's Copy Principle and leaves unexplained why the missing shade of blue as described is an idea and not an impression.

Section 2.3: An Interpretive Dilemma

In the previous section I dismissed Interpretation (2), the missing shade of blue is a complex idea built out of properly acquired simple ideas, for being "too good to be true." This dismissal is bolstered by the fact that it is nearly uncontroversial in the literature that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea. The missing shade is so regarded for two reasons: 1) the context in which the case arises (i.e., during a discussion of the Copy Principle) seems to suggest that the idea in question is simple, as it would not be contradictory to the Copy Principle if it were not; and 2) because the quotation which follows seems to suggest that color ideas in general are simple ideas.

'Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou'd be distinct and separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different

⁷² I am grateful to William Edward Morris for discussing this problem with Interpretation (4) with me.

simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho' their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. 'Tis the same case with particular sounds, tastes and smells. These admit of infinite resemblances upon general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms *simple idea*. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest. 'Tis the same case with all the degrees in any quality. They are all resembling, and yet the quality, in any individual, is not distinct from the degree. (SBN 637)

On the basis of these considerations commentators representing such disparate views in Hume scholarship as Bennett and Garrett draw the same inference: the missing shade of blue is a simple idea.⁷³ Either it is right to conclude that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea or it is wrong to conclude that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea. I will pursue both possibilities. I will argue that if the putative idea in the case of the missing shade is indeed simple, then the case is ill-formed and involves a category mistake. However, I will also argue that it is wrong to conclude that the missing shade of blue is obviously a simple idea. Interpretation of the missing shade case presents a dilemma: if the missing shade is treated as a simple idea, then a category mistake is committed; if it is treated as a complex idea, then it is not a “contradictory phenomenon.” I will begin with the latter possibility.

⁷³ Garrett offers a third reason to regard the missing shade as a simple idea in relation to the suggestion that the missing shade is a complex of rationally distinguished qualities of hue, brightness, saturation, etc. Garrett argues that the Separability Principle prevents us from treating these qualities as simples that combine to create the missing shade because these qualities cannot exist independently and to treat them as though they could would be to introduce real connections between distinct existences (e.g., between two properly acquired color ideas and the missing shade of blue). These considerations push us to consider the missing shade of blue a simple with different respects of resemblance. However, these considerations only close off one way of considering the missing shade of blue a complex. They do not show that we must regard the missing shade as a simple.

The Missing Shade of Blue is Not a Simple Idea

I will offer four arguments against concluding that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea, beginning with an argument from the text. Let us re-examine the case as it appears in Hume's *Treatise*:

There is however one contradictory phænomenon, which may prove, that 'tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions. I believe it will readily be allow'd, that the several distinct ideas of colours, which enter by the eyes, or those of sounds, which are convey'd by the hearing, are really different from each other, tho' at the same time resembling. Now if this be true of different colours, it must be no less so of the different shades of the same colour, that each of them produces a distinct idea independent of the rest. For if this shou'd be deny'd, 'tis possible, by the continual gradation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is most remote from it, and if you will not allow any of the means to be different, you cannot without absurdity deny the extremes to be the same. Suppose therefore a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it has never been his fortune to meet with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be plac'd before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; 'tis plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other. Now I ask, whether 'tis possible for him, from his own imaginings, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, 'tho it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of the opinion that he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the **simple ideas** are not always derived from the correspondent impressions; tho' the instance is so particular and singular, that 'tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim. (SBN 5-6)

I have placed the only occurrence of 'simple idea(s)' in bold type. Never in Hume's characterization of this case does he say of the putative missing shade that *it* is a simple idea. He describes a particular case and says of it that it "*may*" serve as proof that the Copy Principle does not hold universally.⁷⁴ In short, the text is not decisive on the matter. That Hume thinks of the missing shade of blue as a quintessential simple idea is not at all obvious.

⁷⁴ Italics are mine.

Additionally, it is completely at odds with experience, something Hume is determined to explain, to conclude (without very detailed specifications of the case in question) that either the missing shade of blue is a simple idea or that all of our color ideas are simple ideas. On the contrary, our color ideas seem to come in all shapes and sizes. I can speak intelligibly about the orange of a leaf in fall. This perception is surely complex; fall leaves are regarded as beautiful in part because they do not have uniform colors. I can speak intelligibly about the blue of Mary's robe in El Greco's *The Assumption of the Virgin*. Again, this perception is clearly complex. The robe has folds and the light hits some portions of it and not others resulting in several shades of blue. These common experiences of color show that it cannot be that *all* of our color ideas are simple ideas. Do we have some simple ideas of color? Yes, but only in a tenuous theoretical sense, and not in a rich phenomenological sense, which I will explain when I address the second possibility.⁷⁵ Is the missing shade of blue one such instance of a simple idea of color? As I will explain, it depends on the description of the case.

Thirdly, consider a second textual argument. It is arguable that Hume deliberately distances himself from the "counter-example" when he says that the case of the missing shade "*may*" serve as proof against the Copy Principle. I made this claim in the first paragraph of this sub-section, but I did not offer textually based reasons for Hume's not bothering to explain the distancing language. I will do that now. My contention is that Hume does not pursue the matter further because of the dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.

⁷⁵ There are actually two senses in which we might have simple ideas of color. One is Hume's technical sense of simple ideas. The other sense is more colloquial and is best expressed by an example. I can have simple ideas of color in the following non-technical sense. I can say of an artist, for instance, that her palette is very simple, meaning that she uses only primary colors and black and white. Here the attribution of simplicity depends on a comparison with a color palette of greater complexity. To recapitulate, I can have a simple idea of blue or I can have an idea of a blue that is a relatively simple idea.

At this point in the *Treatise* he has not fully developed his Theory of Ideas. He has to leave us hanging in the opening section of the *Treatise* because he needs to further prepare his reader to receive his theoretical apparatus in its entirety. This task is enormously complicated and he often does it clumsily, but he does do it. If we, Hume's readers, knew at *Treatise* 1.1.1 what Hume's technical sense of simple ideas is, we would not think the subject in the case has one, and we would not think the case of the missing shade is a threat to the Theory of Ideas. Rather, we would think that either the subject has a complex idea or that the case is ill formed, which follows if we pursue the other possibility, and we will shortly.

The final argument against concluding that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea depends crucially upon Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis: **there are no unique analyses of words or concepts**. Again, so far as the Theory of Ideas is concerned, each perception is completely unique and never repeats. This conclusion follows from the Separability Principle: "whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by thought and the imagination" (SBN 18), the fact that "the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences"(SBN 636), and the reducibility of faculties to perceptions (which renders them incapable of "housing" perceptions over time).⁷⁶

What do these considerations about perceptions being completely unique have to do with the case of the missing shade? Allow me to explain. The meanings of terms are the perceptions with which they co-occur. Since each perception is completely unique, if one is challenged to make 'missing shade of blue' meaningful, one must perceive something definite on the occasion of 'missing shade of blue' being uttered, thought, inscribed, etc.

⁷⁶ See Chapter One for full argument.

This is even true of every time *you* think of what *you* have always associated with ‘missing shade of blue,’ for each time *your* perceptions are different. In short, the case of the missing shade is massively under-described. What is the upshot? A proper analysis of what is meant by ‘missing shade of blue’ must be accompanied by the perception of something definite, and that “something definite” will vary from person to person and context to context. There is no one answer to the question, “what is going on in the case of the missing shade?” We will have to ask a further question, “which case are you talking about?” or “describe the case further?” There is no one analysis of “*the* case,” and we cannot assume the details do not require filling in. Once the details are filled in, we will see that in most descriptions of the case, what is being described *is not a simple idea*.

It is often assumed that we all have the same conception of the case of the missing shade, but perhaps I imagine a sample paint strip from Sherwin Williams with an absent middle shade and you imagine smearing two dollops of paint together on a palette. In each case, the ideas which co-occur with ‘missing shade of blue’ are different (and complex, for the record), and so, too, must be the analysis of each case. The answer to “Does the subject featured Section 1.1.1 of Hume’s *Treatise* have an idea of the missing shade?” is “Depends on the description of the case.” Different ideas could count as succeeding. More often than not we will find that, at the proper level of description, the missing shade a given subject has in mind is not a simple idea, at least it is not obvious that it is or even can be.

Assume that the Missing Shade of Blue is a Simple Idea

Before exploring the consequences of assuming that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea, let us briefly consider again the argument for Claim Two of my interpretive

hypothesis: **simple perceptions are theoretical posits.** Again, to understand what Hume means by his term ‘simple idea,’ we must contrast simple ideas with sensible minima:

Simple idea: Hume tells us that “simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation.” (SBN 2)

Sensible minima: Hume tells us in *Treatise* 1.2.1 “that the imagination reaches a *minimum*, and may raise up to itself an idea, of which it cannot conceive any subdivision, and which cannot be diminished without total annihilation.” (SBN 27)

As we reviewed in Chapter One, to illustrate sensible minima, Hume gives us an example of an ink spot. Consider an ink spot on a piece of paper. Now, take that piece of paper back some distance from the viewer until the viewer can no longer see the ink spot. Just before the ink spot disappears, it is the smallest sensible object of its kind. These sorts of cases define the limits of perception.

As we observed in Chapter One, simple ideas are not sensible minima. Sensible minima *do* admit of distinction. Consider the ink spot again. It admits of distinction. I can ask and answer questions like, “what is to the right of the ink spot?,” “what is above it?,” and so forth. The ink spot has a left and right side and a top and a bottom. These sides can be distinguished and mentally separated (as in abstraction). Simple ideas, by definition, admit of *no* distinction or separation. Nothing we experience is experienced as such; that is, as impervious to distinction and separation. Simple perceptions are never experienced *qua* simple. Hume’s simple perceptions are theoretical posits whose place in the Theory of Ideas is justified by their explanatory utility. Simple perceptions are supposed, or assumed, to exist because, for example, they account for our ability to manipulate and transpose ideas. Sensible minima are experiential entities while simple perceptions are theoretical entities.

Sensible minima are experienced directly. Simple perceptions explain experience, but are not directly and individually experienced themselves.

What bearing do these considerations about the status of simple perceptions have on the missing shade of blue? If simple ideas are never experienced as simple, if they are *theoretical posits*, then the missing shade of blue is never experienced *as simple*. A person may claim that she can produce a simple idea not rooted in an experience of a simple impression, but now that we have a better view of Hume's Theory we can see that he is equipped to deliver a strong push in return. Of anyone who claims confidently that she has isolated a simple idea of a shade of blue never before experienced, Hume can ask, "what exactly are you experiencing?" The person's description is not likely to be of something that admits of no distinction or separation. Such ideas seem to be imaginatively impossible; that is, one will almost always be able to answer questions such as, "can you cut your idea in half?" "does it have a border?" and so forth. Simple ideas simply are not the kinds of things that can be experienced in the way described in the missing shade of blue passage from Hume's *Treatise*. To describe them as such is to make a category mistake. Specifically, it is to treat a theoretical entity as a phenomenological, or experiential, entity.

To better understand the role simple ideas play and the category mistake made when it is assumed that they can be experienced in the way described in the relevant passage from Hume's *Treatise* and the literature, consider two analogies. First, the relationship between simple ideas and complex ones is like the relationship between molecules and my desk. I experience my desk, and, insofar as my desk is a collection of molecules, I experience the molecules that compose it. However, it would be quite an odd thing to claim that I have experienced in some direct and indubitable sense molecule #7289. There is a sense in which

I experience nothing but molecules as I move my hand over the surface of my desk, but I do not experience them individually. I cannot know right now, for example, how many molecules my finger is touching. This analogy makes the missing shade of blue case seem less intuitive than simply bizarre. Many of us (constructive empiricists, instrumentalists, and anti-realists (at least)) just do not think one can experience molecules *like that*. To claim that one can is to misunderstand what molecules are. Similarly, I experience complex ideas, and, insofar as complex ideas are collections of simple ideas, I experience the simple ideas that compose them. I experience the simples *as composing the complexes*, and that is all.

The relationship between simple ideas and complex ones is also like the relationship between phonemes and the sound of a word or sentence.⁷⁷ I experience the sound of an utterance of ‘missing shade’ and, insofar as ‘missing shade’ is an arrangement of phonemes, I experience the phonemes that compose the utterance. Now, claiming that I have definitely experienced a very particular phoneme turns out to be quite tricky. It is easy to imagine recording an utterance of ‘missing shade’ and then playing it back, pausing after each phoneme and pointing them out in a manner similar to Hume’s in the ink spot example. However, a moment’s reflection reveals this experience to be deeply complicated. Even in the absence of expert knowledge of phonology, we can see some of the difficulty involved with such claims about experience of theoretical entities. It is commonplace in enquiries of all types to attempt understanding of a given domain through analysis into parts. This is in large part what Hume’s Theory of Ideas and phonology do; they analyze their subject matter into the smallest comprehensible units for explanatory purposes. The “smallest units,” simple ideas or phonemes for example, are part of a theoretical framework for understanding

⁷⁷ I am grateful to Ram Neta for offering this example to me.

experience. What precisely the “smallest units” in any theory are is often hotly debated. Given that phonemes are relative to a language or a dialect, and given that languages and dialects are sometimes difficult to distinguish, and given that there is debate over which phones belong to a phoneme, one can see how the claim to have experienced directly a given phone or phoneme is a bit audacious. Phonemes simply are not the kinds of things that can be experienced in the way described. Similarly, to claim to have experienced directly a given simple idea is a bit audacious. It involves a category mistake: simple ideas are not the kinds of things that can be experienced in the way described. I experience complex ideas, and, insofar as complex ideas are collections of simple ideas, I experience the simple ideas that compose them. I experience the simples *as composing the complexes*, and that is all.

One of the main objectives of this dissertation is to defend the following thesis: Hume *consistently denies* putative ideas that *do not* satisfy his Theory of Ideas and mobilizes only ideas that *do* satisfy his Theory. We are now in a position to see that in case of the missing shade, Hume *consistently denies* a putative idea that *does not* satisfy his Theory of Ideas, or at least has the resources to do so. I considered two possible, textually defensible interpretations of the case of the missing shade. According to one, the missing shade of blue is a complex idea, which poses no problems for Hume’s Theory. According to the other, it is a simple idea, which leads to a category mistake. Hume is free to affirm the first and deny the second, and I think this is a plausible interpretation of what he, in fact, does.

The “Hard” Version of the Case of the Missing Shade

One might accept everything I have claimed in the previous section and still believe that the missing shade of blue case makes serious trouble for Hume’s Copy Principle. Consider the following modified version of the case of the missing shade.

The subject imagines she is at a UNC Tar Heels basketball game. Before the team comes out of the locker room, an announcement is made over the loudspeaker: “The Tar Heels will not be wearing their traditional Carolina blue uniforms. Instead they will be debuting uniforms in a shade of blue never before experienced.” Then the subject imagines the Tar Heels bursting out of the locker room onto the floor in uniforms that are a shade of blue she has never experienced before. Now, the subject has read this dissertation and agrees with my claims, so she does not think she can experience a simple idea, as such. However, I do claim that we experience complex ideas, and that insofar as complex ideas are composed of simple ideas, we experience simple ideas. The subject reports that she is experiencing a complex idea of the Tar Heels’ uniforms that is partially composed of simple ideas of a shade of blue never before experienced. Could not the subject have a simple idea of a shade of blue never before experienced *as part of a complex* without committing a category mistake? And would this not serve as a counter-example to the Copy Principle?⁷⁸

This is a difficult version of the case. I have attempted to block counter-examples to the Copy Principle through my interpretation of simple ideas as theoretical posits. This version of the case accepts that interpretation and finds a way in which a subject can have a simple idea without a correspondent impression that would be *prima facie* acceptable to me. I will consider various responses to the case, settling on one.

One line of response that is obviously open to us is Hume’s. We could simply concede this case, emphasizing how isolated and rare it is. One might even think this solution is easier to swallow once the case is described at this level of specificity and is

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Katie Elliot and Cathay Liu for challenging me with this case.

constructed after taking all of the relevant theoretical concerns and constraints into consideration. Constructing a case like the one under consideration requires a deep understanding of Hume's theoretical apparatus, one that few subjects would have. It is not as though, as the original formulation suggests, just anyone could go around constructing counter-examples to the Copy Principle. It would take some hard work and would happen rarely, respecting the empirical adequacy of the Principle.⁷⁹

Another line of response is to deny the alleged counter-example on the grounds that it is susceptible to a private-language type argument. One could argue that there are no public criteria for judging whether the uniforms resolve themselves, at least partially, into simple ideas of a shade of blue with no antecedent in impressions; therefore, we cannot verify that the exception to the Copy Principle is genuine. This response would prohibit the construction of counter-examples on the basis of a single person's experience, which some might find unacceptable.

A third response might be to deny the alleged counter-example on the grounds that it is the Theory of Ideas that divides complexes into simples, not the subject of the experience; and the Theory claims that there are no simple ideas without antecedents in impressions.⁸⁰ Though the subject *claims* that her experience is composed of simple ideas without correspondent impressions, the Theory denies that this is possible. There are at least two potential problems with this response. First, it seems to miss the point. The problem just is that the Theory does not allow us to countenance ideas that we want to countenance. Secondly, going this route might render the Theory unfalsifiable. If all potential counter-

⁷⁹ This line of response requires its defenders to conceive of the Copy Principle as an empirical generalization.

⁸⁰ Katie Elliot suggested this line of response to me.

examples are denied on the grounds that the Theory does not recognize the objection, then nothing can count against the Theory. However, this is not quite true. The way to refute Hume's Theory of Ideas is to offer an alternative theoretical framework for understanding experience which better accommodates the phenomena.

A fourth response might be to deny the alleged counter-example on the grounds that it simply pushes the category mistake discussed in the previous section to a different location. The subject in the example claims to understand the role of simple ideas in Hume's Theory. However, she does not; as she thinks she can know with certainty that the uniforms decompose into simple ideas of a shade of blue never before experienced. When engaged in discussion at the theoretical level of discourse we might claim that, for example, the sweater I am wearing decomposes into color simples, tactile simples, olfactory simples, and so forth. It would be strange, however, to claim that the sweater decomposes into the following simples: yellow #4567, laundry detergent smell #2149, and tactile simple #56990. We do not have this specific of an acquaintance with the simples that compose our experience. We assume that they are there because they have such valuable explanatory utility, but we do not "know them by name." This sort of claim is especially strange to say of something imagined which lacks the force and vivacity of uniform shirt held in my hands at this moment. In short, the subject does not really understand the role of simple ideas in Hume's Theory.

Finally, and I think this is the best response, one could agree that the subject in the example could experience a complex idea composed of simple ideas without a correlate in impressions and deny that this experience is a counter-example to the Copy Principle. The Copy Principle states, "*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them and which they exactly represent*" (SBN 4).

Much depends upon what is meant by “exactly.” We have good reason to think that an idea need not be absolutely perfect in every respect in order to “exactly represent” an impression, for Hume tells us himself that ideas more often than not fail to represent perfectly at least one aspect of their correspondent impressions: force and vivacity. Ideas are “faint images” of impressions, often lacking the vividness of their correspondent impressions.⁸¹ Consider the following definitions of “exactly” from the Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd Edition, all of which would have been in use at the time Hume was writing the *Treatise*:

1. In a perfect manner, perfectly; to a perfect degree, to perfection; completely.
2. In an exact or accurate manner; with careful attention to detail; with strict conformity to rule; punctually; with propriety.
3. Precisely, as opposed to *vaguely*; in express terms.
4. Of knowledge or statement: Accurately, with strict correctness.
5. **a.** Of resemblance, agreement, adaptation, correlation: Precisely; without any discrepancy. **b.** Qualifying a predication of identity, a specified quantitative relation, position, manner, time, etc.: Precisely, ‘just’, as opposed to *approximately*.

At the very least, these definitions should persuade us that it is not obvious just what is meant by “exactly.” Taking into consideration the phenomenological distinction between impressions and ideas, though the distinction is not decisive in distinguishing the two types of perceptions, the last four are likely candidates. With respect to copies, these definitions allow for a little deviation from the original, perhaps enough deviation to convince a subject that she has acquired an altogether new idea. It would not take much, as many of our perceptions are *very* closely resembling and yet distinct. Even in cases where most people are happy to agree the Copy Principle succeeds, the impression and the idea in question are distinguishable from one another. If it were possible to place an idea next to its correspondent impression, as on a split screen television, there seems to be no trouble in

⁸¹ SBN 1.

claiming that we could detect the difference between the two sides. Of course, we cannot do this, nor do we have the ability to “check” any of our ideas against their correspondent impressions; as once an impression is experienced, it has passed, never to be experienced again. We sometimes talk as though we can have the “same impression” again, but all perceptions are completely unique and what we are actually having is a very similar perception. Directing our attention back to the split screen television, if we can agree that if we could place both the impression and the idea of a given pair next to each other, we could detect the difference; then what could be the matter with regarding the missing shade as a comparatively imperfect copy of an impression? A copy that corresponds a little less to the original than another copy is still a copy. Furthermore, correspondence between originals and copies varies within acceptable degrees depending upon the judge. Experts can rate the comparative quality of replicas of famous works of art in ways that non-experts never could. Consider two copies of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*. A non-expert might judge that the two copies are perfect copies of the original. However, an expert with a magnifying glass might judge that one copy is a perfect copy while the other copy contains three brush strokes on a part of the canvas where Wood uses five and, thus, is an imperfect copy; and yet both are copies of the original. It seems bizarre to assume that all of our ideas copy their correspondent impressions with the same degree of accuracy. On the contrary, some features of a given experience I remember more vividly than others. For example, my idea of a person’s eye color might be more vivid than my idea of her hair color even though both ideas are copied from an unadulterated head shot of the person viewed in perfectly good lighting while I was reasonably alert and attentive to detail. Some ideas retain the vivacity of their impressions better than others, which Hume is happy to grant. Put differently, some copies

are more representative than others. The “exact representation” expressed in the Copy Principle is scalar within narrow parameters. This “wobble room” creates the space for somewhat imperfect copies of ideas, like the missing shade of blue.⁸²

One might object: but the case of the missing shade is set up such that there is no impression correspondent to the idea *by hypothesis*; how is your suggestion a solution and not a flat denial of the case? Well, my interlocutor is not completely off base here. My suggestion essentially is a denial of the case, but a thoughtfully considered denial. The reason the case of the missing shade is so worrisome and gripping is because it seems to describe a phenomenon we might very plausibly encounter in experience. However, the more we examine Hume’s Theory of Ideas and apply it to actual experience, the less the case seems like a reasonable hypothesis and the more it seems like a belligerent stipulation based on misunderstanding of the Theory and what it is intended to do. The Theory is intended to explain and account for human experience as we find or can coherently imagine it to be. Hume has not promised us a way to identify and track individual perceptions, but rather a way to understand our experience through the framework of perceptions. The game of identifying a given simple idea and determining whether it is undoubtedly free from impressions is not for Hume.

Section 2.4: The Status of the Copy Principle

The case of the missing shade raises interesting questions about the status of the Copy Principle and what counts as a proper challenge to it. Our examination of the case supplies a compelling reason to accept Claim One of my interpretive thesis: **the Copy Principle is a**

⁸² I am grateful to a number of audiences who helped me think through this case with their questions and comments, including participants in the 2010 Midsouth Philosophy Conference, the 2010 North Carolina and South Carolina Philosophical Society Conference, and the American Philosophical Association’s 2010 Eastern Division Meeting.

theoretical hypothesis in the Theory. It is assumed or accepted as true for a theoretical purpose. The theoretical hypothesis-in-the-Theory interpretation of the Copy Principle can account for Hume's cavalier response to the missing shade of blue. If you take the Copy Principle to be an empirical generalization, then you may argue that the scarcity of cases like the missing shade of blue renders them harmless to the generality of the Principle. However, if the Copy Principle is regarded as a theoretical hypothesis in the Theory, then there is no mystery as to why Hume would consider and dismiss so cavalierly the missing shade. Hume's consideration of the missing shade in the first place it is part of a strategy for motivating the Copy Principle, one of the three tasks he engages in with respect to it. He considers it as a reason one might not accept the Copy Principle, along with reasons in favor of accepting it. He does this, I suspect, for the sake of intellectual honesty, but he thinks it will have little sway. Why is Hume so cavalier? Not, I propose, because he is convinced of the scarcity of such cases (although he does mention this), but because he knows that down the road he will have all of the resources he needs to dissipate the intuitive pull of the case. Once his Theory of Ideas is seen in the full light of the *Treatise*, it becomes apparent that the missing shade of blue is either perfectly well accommodated by the Theory of Ideas or else it is an incoherent putative experience the Theory of Ideas is under no obligation to explain.

CHAPTER THREE

BELIEF IN BODY

In the previous Chapter we considered one famous instance of the most devastating objection facing Hume's Theory of Ideas: the missing shade of blue. The general objection is, again, ideas that we and, perhaps more importantly, Hume want to countenance do not satisfy Hume's Theory of Ideas. Again, the objection typically manifests itself in one of two ways: 1) there is a putative idea that seems genuine, but which does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas; or 2) Hume mobilizes an idea when accounting for phenomena in the science of human nature which does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas. The missing shade of blue is an instance of the first manifestation of the objection. The missing shade of blue seems to be a genuine idea, one a reasonable person would want to countenance, but it does not, by hypothesis, derive from impressions. In this Chapter we will consider an instance of the general objection to Hume's Theory of Ideas that manifests itself in the second way: the idea of identity as Hume seems to employ it in his account of the identity of objects in *Treatise* 1.4.2. Hume seems to mobilize an idea of identity in his explanation of belief in body that does not derive from impressions, and which, therefore, violates the Copy Principle and fails to satisfy his Theory of Ideas. We will also examine one way in which the variety of tasks Hume takes up with respect to the Theory of Ideas and failure to distinguish between them leads to serious interpretive difficulties. In particular, we will consider an interpretive error developed around Hume's alleged inability to distinguish between and account for both the

vulgar and the philosophical beliefs in body. I will argue that this allegation does not arise if my interpretive hypothesis is adopted.

Section 3.1: A Preliminary Sketch of Treatise 1.4.2

Treatise 1.4.2 is an enquiry “concerning the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body”, or as to “why we attribute a CONTINU’D existence to objects...and...suppose them to have an existence DISTINCT from the mind and perception” (SBN 187-188). This section of the *Treatise* is notoriously confusing and commonly thought to be devastating to both Hume’s theoretical commitments and his naturalist project. *Treatise* 1.4.2, perhaps more so than any other section of the *Treatise*, lays bare the potentially mutually undermining nature of the two “dominant strands” of Hume’s philosophy, skepticism and naturalism. Hume’s Theory of Ideas seems unable to rise to challenge of accounting for an ordinary, pervasive human belief, the belief in body, without being supplemented by explanatory resources that are prohibited by its own lights. Hume is stuck between a rock and a hard place. The rock is giving up on his Theory in order to be able to account for our belief in body. The hard place is admitting that belief in body is a human phenomenon beyond our explanatory powers, something about which we are forced to be skeptical.

The difficulty of Hume’s task in *Treatise* 1.4.2 and the apparent tensions in his account derive from the following constraints:

- (1) Hume’s commitment to naturalism requires that he explain the vulgar belief in body, as such an explanation seems integral to his science of human nature.⁸³

⁸³ Hume also needs to account for or explain the philosophical belief in body, best expressed in the doctrine of double-existence. I consider this task to be considerably less difficult, as Hume has the option to declare the doctrine incoherent. Hume has to account for our common beliefs with greater care, so I will focus primarily on his account of the vulgar, as opposed to the philosophical, belief in body. Hume must accept and explain

(2) Hume's commitment to the Theory of Ideas places a considerable limitation on the resources available to him in accounting for that belief.

(3) Conceptual skepticism must be avoided.⁸⁴

Constraints (2) and (3) are closely related, but importantly different. Constraint (2) expresses a potential worry that Hume's explanation of the vulgar belief in body will be too reductive to adequately capture the richness commonly thought to characterize that belief. If Hume is successful by the close of *Treatise* 1.4.2, we ought to feel satisfied that he has indeed accounted for the vulgar belief in body fully and without sacrificing its phenomenological character. Hume is engaged in what some might call a "reductive" project, but in "reducing" the putative beliefs examined in the *Treatise* to beliefs consistent with his empiricism and Theory of Ideas, Hume must achieve explanatory sufficiency.⁸⁵ Constraint (3) expresses the worry that a pernicious conceptual skepticism will dismiss the belief Hume endeavors to

ordinary human experience as he finds it. Belief in body is a pervasive feature of our experience as Hume finds it.

⁸⁴ I borrow a distinction from Robert Fogelin here. In his book *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature*, Fogelin distinguishes several varieties of skepticism, including epistemological vs. conceptual skepticism. An epistemological skeptic is one who accepts a belief or set of beliefs as intelligible, but who questions the warrant for the belief(s). Whereas a conceptual skeptic is one who, like Berkeley on the subject of material substance, rejects a belief or set of beliefs as incoherent and unintelligible (See Chapter 1, "Aspects of Hume's Skepticism", pp. 5-12).

⁸⁵ I think it is perhaps more accurate to describe Hume's project as one of *analysis* than as one of "reduction". I understand what other commentators are trying to capture when they characterize Hume's strategy as one of reduction. They are trying to characterize the following oft employed maneuver: Hume starts with a putative idea or belief, say of necessary connection, then, rather than dismissing it as incoherent in the fashion of Berkeley (or cartoon Berkeley, as the case may be), he goes on to explain that the idea or belief in question is not what we might have initially thought it was. In the case of necessary connection, he reduces a metaphysically dubious idea of an unobservable power to an idea that is grounded in impressions and Copy Principle-approved ideas. The characterization of Hume's strategy I have just summarized is misleading. What Hume is doing is perhaps better characterized as follows: Hume starts with a belief, and then offers a Theory of Ideas-approved analysis of that belief. His strategy must be characterized thusly on pain of acknowledging as ideas things that are prohibited from being regarded as such by Hume's Theory. If we adhere to my interpretive hypothesis, Hume cannot "start with a merely putative idea or belief," as such things might turn out to nonsense on his view. Hume does better to "start fresh," and offer his own analysis of a given belief, rather than to move forward from a starting point that makes no sense on his view and offer a "reduction" or "replacement" of that starting point.

explain as unintelligible, incoherent, or otherwise unfit for explanation. *Prima facie*, Hume's commitment to the Theory of Ideas and the skepticism that is thought to be an inevitable result of that commitment seem to prevent him from being able to even take seriously the belief he attempts to account for in *Treatise* 1.4.2. Like Berkeley before him, Hume seems doomed to dismiss the belief as incoherent at the outset. However, according to Constraint (1), Hume's naturalism demands that he account for the vulgar belief in body.

Hume's task in *Treatise* 1.4.2 is indeed difficult given his theoretical starting points, but not, I will argue, insurmountably difficult. In this Chapter I will offer an interpretation of *Treatise* 1.4.2 according to which Hume adequately accounts for the vulgar belief in body, using only the resources available to him in the Theory of Ideas, and in such a way that undermining varieties of skepticism are held at bay. I will rely primarily on Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis: **there are no unique analyses of words or concepts**. I will also utilize Claim Four and its corollary: **the *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas: it explicates, applies, compares, and meta-theoretically evaluates the Theory; and in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise***. My strategy is as follows. First, I explicate the basic structure of Hume's account of belief in body from *Treatise* 1.4.2. *Treatise* 1.4.2 is one of the most dense and complicated passages in the entire book, so my explication will involve taking a variety of interpretive stances, which I will pause and elucidate. For instance, I will digress from my explication to defend Hume against the claim that he does not and cannot distinguish between the vulgar and the philosophical belief in body, a failure commonly thought to undermine Hume's account. Then, I consider one of the most significant objections facing Hume's account of belief in body: in order to

explain the ordinary human belief in body, Hume must rely upon an idea of identity that does not derive from impressions. Finally, I defend Hume against this objection.

Section 3.2: What is the Object of Hume's Explanation in Treatise 1.4.2?

Hume begins *Treatise* 1.4.2 by re-emphasizing the nature of the task he undertakes. He is not investigating whether or not body exists, as Descartes did when developing his proof of the existence of material things, or as Berkeley did when he famously denied that there exists such a thing. Hume thought it “vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?*,” for we take this belief “for granted in all our reasonings” (SBN 187). It is important not to be misled about what is meant by “body” in this quotation. If read in isolation, one might think this passage indicates that Hume subscribes to conceptions of body put forward by his predecessors, such as the view that bodies are mind-independent, extended objects. However, Hume has already explained that we cannot hope to have any understanding of such things as what philosophers call mind-independent objects.⁸⁶ The question Hume takes up in *Treatise* 1.4.2 is why we *believe* in body, not whether body exists. What Hume is looking for in *Treatise* 1.4.2 is what corresponds to our *saying* that (or acting as though) body exists, or, more likely, that a particular body exists, in a variety of contexts. Hume sets out to explain, in terms of perceptions, such utterances as “I am going to return home at 5pm,” “the stapler is in my top desk drawer,” and “the Great Pyramids are quite different than my idea of them.” Each of these examples assumes at least one enduring object: a house, a stapler, the Great Pyramids. Hume is also interested in explaining non-verbal behaviors that indicate belief in body, such as going to the pantry when one desires a snack. As we have established, words do not have *unique* meanings, as meaning is, in large part, determined by

⁸⁶ See *Treatise* 1.2.6. Here Hume explains that experience and perceptions are the only objects of his science of human nature.

the perceptions associated with a token use of a word, which vary widely. The meanings of terms such as ‘home,’ ‘stapler,’ ‘desk drawer,’ and ‘Great Pyramids’ are, in large part, the occurrent perceptions with which token utterances or inscriptions are associated. At this point Hume has not yet given an analysis or set of analyses of *what* it is we believe when we believe in “body,” but we should assume from his taking the effort to explain this belief that it is something his Theory gives him the resources to explain, and that “something” could not be non-perceptual objects, as his Theory of Ideas does not countenance such things.⁸⁷

The vulgar belief in body, Hume observes, seems to derive from two “intimately connected” attributions, that of continued existence and that of distinct existence. Thus, in order to explain the vulgar belief in body, we must explain these two attributions.

We ought to examine apart those two questions, which are commonly confounded together, *viz.* Why we attribute a CONTINU’D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses; and why we suppose them to have an existence DISTINCT from the mind and perception. (SBN 188)

Hume tells us that these attributions are “intimately connected” for the obvious reason that if an object exists independently of any perceiver, then it will clearly continue to exist when not perceived; and if an object continues to exist when not perceived, then it exists independently of any perceiver. It is important to avoid any confusion as to the subject of these attributions.

Hume writes that we attribute continued and distinct existence to “objects” in the quotation

⁸⁷ I tend to prefer the language of “non-perceptual objects” over “mind-independent objects” because I think it helps us avoid a potential confusion. One might claim, that from the perspective of the Theory, our “belief in body” could not be “in” mind-independent objects, but “mind-independence,” understood from the perspective of Theory, is rather peculiar. According to Hume, all that we mean when we refer to “the mind” is some collection of perceptions or other, not a perceiving ego or the like. According to the Separability Principle, all perceptions are really distinct and can be considered independently of each other, so, in a technical sense, there is nothing peculiar or alarming about claiming that a perception exists independently of the mind. This claim reduces to the more uncontroversial claim that perceptions can exist independently from other perceptions. That said, I may from time to time lapse into the “mind-independence” language. Hume, no doubt, frequently employs the terms ‘mind’ and ‘mind-independence’ in a non-technical sense. Hume’s view of “the mind” is the subject of Chapter Four.

above, which we must understand to mean nothing other than perceptions not only for the reasons I have already given, but also because in this particular quotation Hume considers only what *we perceive* when we say of something that it “continues to exist” or that it “exists distinct from the mind.” Hume is not considering the ontological status of anything that might be said to underlie our experience. In 1.2.6 of the *Treatise* Hume explains that the subject of any enquiry into human nature must ultimately be perceptions. He writes:

Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to mind; it follows that 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions. (SBN 67)

Hume reiterates this opinion several times in *Treatise* 1.4.2:

For as to the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shewn its absurdity. (SBN 187)

There are no principles either of the understanding or fancy, which lead us directly to embrace this opinion of the double existence of perceptions and objects, nor can we arrive at it but by passing through the common hypothesis of the identity and continuance of our interrupted perceptions. Were we not first persuaded that *our perceptions are our only objects*, and continue to exist even when they no longer make their appearance to the senses, we should never be led to think that our perceptions and objects are different, and that our objects alone preserve a continued existence. (SBN 211, my italics)

The only existences of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness, command our strongest assent, and are the first foundation of all our conclusions (SBN 212)

Our perceptions are our only objects. (SBN 213)

We can now easily see why the attributions of continued and distinct existence Hume endeavors to explain in *Treatise* 1.4.2 must apply to *perceptions*, and not to non-perceptual objects. We can also better understand why Hume must develop his account within Constraints (2) and (3). Constraint (2) requires that Hume employ only impressions and

ideas in explaining the vulgar belief in body. The worry posed by Constraint (3), that conceptual skepticism will suffocate the project before it begins, reinforces the importance of starting the enquiry with an intelligible subject matter (i.e., perceptions).

Concepts and Conceptual Skepticism

Before moving forward, I would like to digress for a moment and focus some attention on this worry about conceptual skepticism and on why I think Hume can easily avoid it. According to Robert Fogelin, who first clearly distinguished this variety of skeptical worry from others in Hume's philosophy, "a conceptual skeptic challenges the very intelligibility of a system of beliefs."⁸⁸ What concepts are taken to be varies from philosopher to philosopher, and certainly the debate about concepts figures much more prominently in our contemporary philosophical discourse than in Hume's, which makes explaining what Hume was trying to avoid when he avoided "*conceptual skepticism*" a bit challenging. I have already argued that Hume starts his enquiry into the vulgar belief in body with an intelligible subject matter, which subdues any challenge to the intelligibility of the system of beliefs he wishes to explain. However, more remains to be said about what is meant by "intelligible subject matter."

For Hume, intelligible subject matter is comprised exclusively of impressions, ideas, and sets of associated perceptions. Hume can avoid conceptual skepticism simply by staying within the constraints of his Theory; that is, by limiting himself to explanations that involve only impressions, ideas, and sets of associated perceptions. I have yet to mention "concepts" in this Chapter, so one might think that I have failed to adequately respond to the threat of "*conceptual skepticism*" on Hume's behalf. However, once one recalls what "concepts" are

⁸⁸ Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism in the Treatise on Human Nature*, p. 6.

for Hume, one will see that there is really no distinction between concepts and ideas over and above a technical manipulation. It is perfectly fine to say, on Hume's view, that, for one example, I have the concept "dog," but we must keep in mind the Theory-approved analysis of what it means for me to say of myself or of another that I or she has the concept "dog." 'Dog' is a term that we apply to several resembling perceptions. After applying 'dog' to enough resembling perceptions (i.e. after developing a custom of applying 'dog' to a variety of resembling perceptions), the word 'dog,' whenever uttered, heard, read, or inscribed, will be associated with one or usually more ideas (a revival set) to which we have applied or would apply the term 'dog.'⁸⁹ Keep in mind that because terms do not have fixed meanings (or unique analyses), the perceptions associated with utterances or inscriptions of 'dog' will vary from case to case and person to person.

Hume's account of concept formation is best expressed in the following *Treatise* text we examined in Chapter One:

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all of its particular circumstances and proportions. But as the same word is supposed to have been frequently applied to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, which is immediately present to the mind; the word not being able to revive the idea of all those individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allowed so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquired by surveying them. They are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power; nor we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. (SBN 20)

⁸⁹ I should note that I am not increasing Hume's ontological commitments with the addition of words. Words are ideas, too, and so can be used in Theory-approved explanations of experience.

According to Hume, having a concept consists in experiencing a kind of association of resembling perceptions upon hearing a general term. We now have the resources to state clearly and finally how Hume avoids “conceptual skepticism.” So long as Hume’s Theory can identify impressions and ideas associated with a token utterance or inscription of a given general term, he can avoid conceptual skepticism about the subject characterized by those perceptions and terms. Since Hume engages in an explanation of the vulgar belief in body, we must assume that he thinks his Theory has the resources to identify the impressions and ideas associated with the terms involved in expressing attributions of continued and distinct existence to objects. Again, Hume avoids conceptual skepticism simply by staying within the constraints of the Theory. To conclude that more than this is required is to import a non-Humean notion of concepts.

With that digression behind us, let us consider one additional piece of evidence for the claim that the subject of the attributions of continued and distinct existence is and can only be perceptions. Consider Hume’s definition of belief found in *Treatise* 1.3.7:

[B]elief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive an object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity. An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin’d, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION. (SBN 96)

A belief *just is* an enlivened idea associated with a present impression. Put another way, beliefs are nothing but perceptions. Hence, if it is a *belief* Hume endeavors explain in 1.4.2, then by definition he is simply explaining an enlivened idea and associated impression. The vulgar belief in body, if it is legitimate candidate for a Humean explanation, is simply an enlivened idea associated with a present impression, where the idea in question is consistent with the standards of the Theory of Ideas. Allow me to elaborate. The idea component of the vulgar belief in body cannot be of the nonsensical, incoherent variety as is, for example,

what some philosophers mean by “essence.” Rather, it must be derived from and traceable to experience (i.e. impressions) in the way prescribed by the Copy Principle, or it is not fit to be the subject of a Humean explanation.⁹⁰

It is well worth emphasizing Hume’s definition of belief at this juncture, for it is frequently seen as divorced from his Theory of Ideas, as opposed to supportive of it. Many commentators, notably Edward Craig in his influential book *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*, mistakenly think “that [Hume’s] theory of belief is more important to him than his theory of ideas.”⁹¹ Craig elaborates during a discussion of Hume’s strategy in *Treatise* 1.4.2:

what we see here [1.4.2] is not really a serious attempt to use the theory of ideas and impressions at all; Hume is not genuinely looking for the origin of an idea, in the strict terms of that theory—he is inquiring into the origin of a *belief*.⁹²

Craig writes of ideas and beliefs as though Hume can explain the origin of one and not the other, but such a supposition is impossible given Hume’s definition of belief. He cannot account for the origin of the vulgar belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects without utilizing his framework of ideas, for the belief is nothing but an idea and an associated impression. Thus, the tension in *Treatise* 1.4.2 cannot be resolved by making light of Hume’s commitment to the Theory of Ideas.

Section 3.3: What Faculty is Responsible for the Attributions?

Before delving further into Hume’s strategy for explaining our attributions of continued and distinct existence, let us remove another potential confusion regarding the object of Hume’s explanation. It is perhaps natural to think that what Hume is explaining in

⁹⁰ There is much to be said about occurrent versus dispositional beliefs, and there is a huge literature on Humean belief. This dissertation does not take up the subject of the nature of Humean belief in detail.

⁹¹ Craig, *The Mind of God and Works of Man*, p. 91.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp. 119-120.

Treatise 1.4.2 is why we attribute continued and distinct existence to certain of our perceptions. After all, I have gone to some trouble to emphasize that the fundamental components of Hume's explanation and its object must be perceptions, as perceptions exhaust Hume's resources. However, this way of putting his project misleadingly characterizes the vulgar belief Hume is trying to explain, particularly from the vulgar perspective. The vulgar certainly do not think their perceptions have continued and distinct existence. That would be a very odd characterization of the belief Hume is attempting to explain. There is a better way to understand the vulgar belief in body Hume is attempting to explain, and it involves making the organization of *Treatise* 1.4.2 more explicit. As suggested in the introductory paragraphs of this Chapter, what Hume is really up to is taking inventory of what Theory-approved perceptions are involved when we utter vulgar statements like 'the stapler is in my top desk drawer.' This suggestion extends to more theoretical statements like 'the Great Pyramids in person are quite different from my idea of them,' and also to highly theoretical statements like 'external objects are perceived mediately through ideas.' What perceptions are associated with such utterances and how they combine to explain experience is at the core of Hume's explanation of belief in body in *Treatise* 1.4.2.

Once Hume has made the object of his explanation clear, he proceeds to consider what mental faculty might be responsible for our attributions of continued and distinct existence, or for the association of perceptions in cases where such attributions are made. Recall from the argument in Chapter One establishing the uniqueness of each perception from the perspective of the Theory that, for Hume, faculties are nothing over and above perceptions. Faculties are just manners in which perceptions occur. Interestingly, Hume takes up the same candidates Descartes considered when accounting for the seeming

externality of the cause of sensation in the *Meditations*: sensation, reason, and the imagination. Descartes and Hume also have it in common that they are, in some fashion or another, reductionists about faculties.⁹³ Let us, like Hume, consider each in turn, asking of each faculty whether it is responsible for associating whatever perceptions are connected with our claims about the continued and distinct existence of objects.

Sensation

Hume first considers whether sensation is responsible for our attribution of continued and distinct existence, but almost immediately, he dismisses it. It is apparent to Hume that the senses cannot be responsible for associating whatever perceptions are connected with our attribution of continued existence, for if this were the case, then we would be forced to assume that “the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceas’d all manner of operation” (SBN 188), which would be absurd. Showing that the senses are not responsible for the association of whatever perceptions are connected with our attributions of distinct existence requires a bit more effort. Hume thinks it is obvious that the senses do not *directly convey* impressions as “of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*...because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond” (SBN 189). That is, the senses give us impressions and that is all. The vulgar belief in body and the more sophisticated philosophical doctrine of double existence require an inference provided by some faculty other than the senses, as sensation does not draw inferences. If the senses somehow manage to convey impressions as distinct existences, then, Hume thinks, they would have to do so by way of illusion.

⁹³ Descartes reduces faculties to thinking substance, while Hume reduces faculties to ideas.

Illusions involve the manner in which impressions appear, and not the nature of the impressions themselves. If some impressions are “external” to “ourselves,” we must keep in mind that frequently what is denoted by “ourselves” is comprised of impressions, too, and so must also be apparent to the senses.⁹⁴ The difficulty in accounting for the peculiarity of the feeling of externality of some impressions revolves, Hume thinks, around the way in which “we” are objects for our senses. Hume has run up against one of the most intractable problems in philosophy: personal identity. Even the best available metaphysics cannot answer questions of personal identity, Hume observes, and so “’tis absurd, therefore, to imagine the senses can ever distinguish betwixt ourselves and external objects” (SBN 190). We think we perceive our bodies in some peculiar manner, what we would now call “proprioception,” and this leads us to draw a distinction between internal (body) and external (other things), but our bodies are just collections of impressions like any other thing, so far as the senses are concerned. It is a mysterious product of metaphysics, and not sensation, that we ascribe a corporeal nature to *any* of our impressions. All impressions *qua* impressions are experienced as on a par. If there be any relevant difference between types of perceptions, for example, that some have continued and distinct existence, these differences are not revealed by the senses.

Reason

Hume next considers whether reason is responsible for the association of whatever perceptions are connected to our attributions of continued and distinct existence. Though Hume’s treatment of reason is brief, and reason is ultimately ruled out, it is worth taking the

⁹⁴ This assumes that whatever is perceived when we say “self” is delivered directly by the senses. This is arguably not always the case. Frequently the imagination constructs ideas of the self, in which case what is perceived when we say “self” is not delivered *directly* by the senses.

time to carefully consider his thoughts on this matter. The primary passage in which Hume considers reason cuts right to the heart of one of the most difficult issues in Hume scholarship: the rapid and frequent vacillation between domains of discourse. This difficulty is captured in Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and its corollary: **the *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas: it explicates, applies, compares, and meta-theoretically evaluates the Theory; and in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.** Consider the first few sentences of this important text from *Treatise* 1.4.2:

[W]e can attribute a distinct and continu'd existence to objects without ever consulting any REASON, or weighing our opinions by any philosophical principles. And indeed, whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief in objects independent of this mind, 'tis obvious these arguments are known but to a very few, and 'tis not by them, that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induced to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others. (SBN 193)

To paraphrase, Hume observes that ordinary folks and philosophers alike attribute continued and distinct existence to some objects, yet ordinary folks do not have recourse to the arguments available to the skilled philosopher, so it cannot be that reason convinces us of the continued and distinct existence of objects.⁹⁵ Both philosophers and the vulgar draw a

⁹⁵ The distinction between the vulgar and the philosophical belief in this case is difficult to characterize. A few lines down in the same paragraph Hume writes: “the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see.” Sometimes Hume writes as though the vulgar and the philosophers have, at core, the same belief with regard to the continu'd and distinct existence of objects, but in other places he writes as though there is an important difference between the two beliefs, as in the sentence just quoted. Some commentators, notably, Fogelin, argue that Hume must be able to account for both beliefs, as they are both “natural.” That is, Hume must also account for the philosophical belief in body. I think the difference ought to be characterized as follows. The philosophers either introduce mind-independent objects as theoretical posits intended to explain the vulgar belief, or reason from the vulgar beliefs to the metaphysical conclusion that body exists mind-independently. Once the philosophers have reached the metaphysical conclusion, their beliefs are no longer the “natural” sort of which Hume is obliged to give an explanation. To say that the philosophers introduce an ontological commitment that is ultimately either incoherent or beyond the scope of what we can hope to understand is to have adequately explained the belief.

distinction between something like perceptions that correspond to non-perceptual objects and perceptions that do not. In the text above, Hume is not nearly as explicit as he might have been about what philosophers and the vulgar have and do not have in common. Hume cannot mean that the vulgar think just what he has expressed, for what he has expressed above is theoretical, not vulgar, which Hume recognizes a few lines later: “the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct and continu’d existence to the very things they feel or see” (SBN 193). Hume notices the differences and the tensions between the domains of discourse relevant in this quotation, but he does not make the differences terribly clear for his readers. In fact, it is commonly held that Hume does not have a consistent view on the vulgar and the philosophical beliefs and the relationship between the two. Thus, I will suggest an alternative way of understanding Hume’s perspective on the set of beliefs he takes himself to be analyzing with regard to the continued and distinct existence of objects.⁹⁶

The Vulgar and the Philosophical Belief in Body

Let us begin with the vulgar belief, or set of beliefs, in the continued and distinct existence of objects. Hume’s analysis of the vulgar belief cannot have been made on the basis of verbal reports that are in some direct, yet ordinary way “about” external objects, for if that were the case, Hume would not have had to resort to theoretical language in order to characterize a vulgar belief. He could have simply given a sample report of a belief expressed by the vulgar and argued that the sample report is a primitive version of the philosophical belief in the doctrine of double-existence, or, more likely, that whatever the

⁹⁶ I should give credit to David Pears, who also notices the tension that is created in this passage by Hume’s attempt to discuss the pre-theoretical and theoretical beliefs at the same level of discourse, though Pears comes to a different conclusion about what Hume means to attribute to the vulgar.

vulgar believe is what philosophers are trying to capture or explain with the doctrine of double-existence. However, Hume did not do this, so a likely hypothesis is that Hume reached this conclusion on the basis of behaviors, especially linguistic behaviors, he observed. Hume probably noticed that the vulgar engage in, for one example, what I will call “retrieval behavior” with regard to some perceptions and not others.⁹⁷ For example, he might have noticed that when humans want to play billiards, they “know where to retrieve the billiard balls,” but when they want to see a solar eclipse, they do not take this “object” to be a steadfast one that is always available for viewing. Similarly, and here I will run into Hume’s difficulty, the vulgar are aware that there is a category mistake involved in treating emotions or pains and pleasures as they treat billiard balls. Of course, the vulgar do not cry “category mistake!,” but they do know that a sharp pain in one’s left temple cannot be “retrieved,” at least not in the same manner, as a beverage can be retrieved from one’s refrigerator.⁹⁸ Now, I have complicated matters, for we often say things like, “*the pain* has returned in my foot.” Pain is a notoriously puzzling subject. One factor that contributes to the elusive character of pain is the diversity of our pain language. I think Hume is actually well equipped to offer analyses of our uses of pain language. Hume’s Theory can provide him with an analysis of both the “*the pain* has returned in my foot” case and of cases in which one refers to an individual, fleeting pain that is taken to have come and gone, as in “when I accidentally touched the hot stove, I felt a pain like no other.” To conclude, what

⁹⁷ In addition to “retrieval behavior,” I am sure there are many other varieties of behavior characterized by reference to some object, or set of objects, presumed to remain “the same” over time.

⁹⁸ Participants in the UNC Department of Philosophy Dissertation Completion Seminar (Spring 2009) raised the worry that what one is doing in the pain case is, in fact, retrieving. They offered the example of retrieving a pain by repeatedly pricking oneself in the fingertip with a needle. Perhaps a more informative contrast case to the beverage case would be something like “the relief I felt the moment I found out that I got into graduate school.” Presumably, my relief is not retrievable as a beverage is retrievable.

Hume is calling the “vulgar belief” is acquired for analysis indirectly by way of simple observation of behaviors exhibited by folks in ordinary circumstances. The vulgar do not say things like, “my idea of my house is perishing and depends on me, but my actual house is real and continues to exist when I don’t perceive it.” One could certainly contrive a circumstance in which someone she considers vulgar makes some kind of distinction between mental representations and the things they represent, but when this distinction is being made the threshold from vulgar talk to amateur theorizing has been crossed.

Hume’s project requires frequent and complicated task shifting. Hume is not simply considering a variety of domains of discourse and giving analyses of what sorts of things are said in those domains from one perspective, that of his Theory of Ideas. Rather, he is often considering a variety of domains of discourse (e.g., the vulgar) from a variety of perspectives (e.g., that of his Theory of Ideas, that of other philosophical theories, the pre-theoretical, etc.). For example, he might consider and analyze vulgar behaviors from the perspective of theories not his own. He might also place himself in the vulgar perspective and reflect on the philosophical perspective. Hume does not tell us when he is making these shifts, but if we assume that he does make them, we can make sense of some puzzling pieces of texts. In what follows I will examine a few such texts and explain how viewing Hume as shifting tasks and as occupying a variety of perspectives, reconciles many apparent inconsistencies in his project.

Hume’s most significant expository problem, the problem reflected in Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and its corollary, is best understood through textual analysis. Consider the now familiar text that follows:

[W]e can attribute a distinct and continu’d existence to objects without ever consulting any REASON, or weighing our opinions by any philosophical principles.

And indeed, whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief in objects independent of this mind, 'tis obvious these arguments are known but to a very few, and 'tis not by them, that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induced to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others. Accordingly we find, that all the conclusions, which the vulgar form on this head, are directly contrary to those which are confirmed by philosophy. For philosophy informs us that every thing, which appears to the mind is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind; whereas the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see. This sentiment, then, as it is entirely unreasonable, must proceed from some other faculty than the understanding. (SBN 193)

Now, let us dissect this quotation, displaying the places where tasks and perspectives shift:

- (A) [W]e can attribute a distinct and continu'd existence to objects without ever consulting any REASON, or weighing our opinions by any philosophical principles.
- (B) And indeed, whatever convincing arguments philosophers may fancy they can produce to establish the belief in objects independent of this mind, 'tis obvious these arguments are known but to a very few, and 'tis not by them, that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind are induced to attribute objects to some impressions, and deny them to others.
- (C) Accordingly we find, that all the conclusions, which the vulgar form on this head, are directly contrary to those which are confirmed by philosophy. For philosophy informs us that every thing, which appears to the mind is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind
- (D) whereas the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see.
- (E) This sentiment, then, as it is entirely unreasonable, must proceed from some other faculty than the understanding.

In the portion of text I have labeled (A), Hume counts himself as within the perspective of the vulgar. He is attempting to characterize the phenomenon he wishes to explain. Notice the use of the pronoun “we.” In the portion of text I have labeled (B), Hume shifts into the non-vulgar, but theory-neutral perspective and evaluates the effect of *other* philosophies on the vulgar opinion of the continued and distinct existence of objects. He is providing some context for his reader and attempting to place his Theory with respect to its competitors. In (B) Hume is arguing that whatever arguments for the existence of non-perceptual “objects” *other* philosophers might give, the vulgar do not have access to them, and so it cannot be by way of philosophical argument that the vulgar form the opinion of the continued and distinct existence of some objects. In the portion of text I have labeled (C), Hume shifts from the theory-neutral perspective to the perspective of his Theory of Ideas. When he writes that “*philosophy* informs us that every thing, which appears to the mind is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind,” he could not be writing of the philosophies of his opponents, for they think that philosophical reasoning demonstrates that perceptions are *not* the only things that appear to the mind. Thus, I conclude that Hume must mean to refer to his own Theory when he writes of “philosophy” in this portion of the text. In the portion of text I have labeled (D), given what we know about Hume’s Theory and about “other philosophers,” we must assume that another shift has taken place. Hume cannot mean from the perspective of his own Theory that the vulgar confound perceptions and objects and ascribe a continued and distinct existence to the former, for on his view, the only objects are perceptions, so there is nothing to confound. Furthermore, Hume cannot mean from the perspective of his own Theory that the vulgar attribute a continued and distinct existence to the “very things they see and feel,” for Hume’s Theory is explicit that the “very

things they see and feel” are fleeting and mind-dependent. In (D) Hume is shifting back to the theory-neutral perspective. He is evaluating how well the vulgar belief lines up with the philosophical one, where the philosophical belief is what is articulated by other theories, not his own. Hume is arguing from a theory-neutral perspective that the other philosophers’ theories fail to capture the vulgar belief as well as they had hoped, without putting forward any positive claims of his own. Finally, in the portion of text I have labeled (E), Hume is shifting back into the perspective of his own Theory, and concluding from that perspective that reason cannot be responsible for associating the perceptions involved when the vulgar make attributions of continued and distinct existence.

At the beginning of this sub-section, I drew attention to the passage just analyzed and stressed the difficulty of capturing just what sort of distinction Hume wants to draw between the vulgar and the philosophical beliefs regarding the continued and distinct existence of objects. I argued that Hume does not make clear what he takes the vulgar and the philosophical views to have (and not to have) in common. Hume begins by indicating that the vulgar and the philosophical share the same opinion with regard to the continued and distinct existence of objects. He seems to be arguing that they arrive at the same attributions of continued and distinct existence, but by different means. The philosophers engage in deductive reasoning and arrive at ontological conclusions. The vulgar, on the other hand, make the same attributions without such reasoning. Hume then goes on to make a distinction between the vulgar and the philosophical, arguing that the vulgar do not draw the distinction that the philosophers draw between perceptions and objects. Rather, the vulgar, he says, attribute continued and distinct existence to the “very things they see and feel.” So now it

seems that the vulgar belief and the philosophical belief are actually quite different, according to Hume.

This confusion is amplified by other passages in *Treatise* 1.4.2, such as Hume's declaration "*that the philosophical system acquires all of its influence on the imagination from the vulgar one*" (SBN 213). Here Hume seems to be saying that the philosophical view is parasitic upon the vulgar view. The elusive character of the relationship between the vulgar and philosophical views as Hume sees them is responsible for generating some interpretive difficulties. Barry Stroud, most notably, thinks Hume finds himself in a sort of dilemma with regard to his stance on the vulgar and philosophical views. Stroud, offering an interpretation that, following Kemp Smith, emphasizes the naturalistic strand of Hume's philosophy, thinks Hume's main conclusion regarding the vulgar belief in body, and indeed most all beliefs, is that nature strongly inclines us (*qua* vulgar) to believe in the continued and distinct existence of objects, though it be contrary to reason. Had philosophers not gone on to theorize about our belief, Hume would not have had the burden of explaining what they believe and its relationship to the vulgar belief. Unfortunately for Hume, the philosophers did go on to philosophize about this matter, and in trying to account for both the philosophizing and the vulgar belief at which the philosophizing was directed, Hume, Stroud thinks, ran into trouble. Stroud writes:

Although the philosophical view as it were lives off the vulgar, Hume also thinks that, paradoxically, it contradicts that vulgar position. If the philosophical theory is correct, he says, then the vulgar are simply mistaken. They have false beliefs about what they perceive. Now there is no doubt that the philosophical system contradicts the thesis that perceptions continue to exist independently of their being perceived. That is what 'a little reflection and philosophy' about the familiar facts of perceptions is supposed to show. But does that prove the vulgar position to be mistaken? It would do so if the vulgar are in a position of actually believing that what they perceive are perceptions in the philosophical sense, and that those very things continue to exist unperceived. That is what the philosophical system contradicts.

And so again it seems as if Hume must be attributing to the vulgar that sophisticated philosophical thesis about perception that is said to be obvious to ‘the plainest experience’ after ‘a very little reflection and philosophy’. And yet he also insists on the other hand that if the vulgar were in that position they would never have arrived at the belief in continued and distinct existence.⁹⁹

Hume’s dilemma according to Stroud is that, on the one hand, Hume thinks that the philosophical system is parasitic on, but contradictory to the vulgar system in such a way that if the philosophical system were correct, then the vulgar would simply be mistaken about their beliefs, as they would believe that perceptions continue to exist unperceived. On the other hand, if the vulgar believe that their perceptions (a philosophical notion according to Stroud) continue to exist unperceived, then they do not entertain a vulgar belief at all, but rather a philosophical one. What does Hume believe to be the case? Do the philosophers build a system that is based on, but contradicts the vulgar one? Are the vulgar really vulgar, or do they also subscribe to some philosophical thesis about the object of their beliefs? Hume, Stroud thinks, does not and cannot give straightforward, consistent answers to such questions.

I think Hume can and does give consistent, though perhaps not straightforward answers to questions about the nature of and relationship between the vulgar and philosophical belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects. My interpretive hypothesis reveals that consistency. Stroud’s way of looking *Treatise* 1.4.2 obscures that consistency. It follows from Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and its corollary that membership in the vulgar and the philosophical groups is fluid and graduated. All human subjects, Hume included, shift between learned and vulgar domains of discourse. Stroud sees membership in these groups as fixed and sharply separated. He thinks there are two perfectly

⁹⁹ Stroud, *Hume*, p. 113.

distinct beliefs or sets of beliefs Hume must keep separate and analyze individually. For the sake of expository convenience and brevity, Hume sometimes has to speak as though there are two such sharply distinguished groups. However, most human subjects actually shift between domains of discourse with great frequency. One does not remain either vulgar or philosophical over the course of one's entire existence (perhaps not even over the course of one conversation). Rather, sometimes one is vulgar, sometimes philosophical, and frequently one occupies one of the many viewpoints in between the vulgar and the philosophical. When it starts to sound as though Hume is mistakenly attributing a philosophical view to the vulgar or finding himself in some sort of contradiction with regard to his descriptions of the vulgar and the philosophical views, perhaps he is simply attempting to capture the amateur theorizing that certainly occurs just outside the vulgar domain of discourse or the bogus philosophizing that occurs just outside of the philosophical domain of discourse.

There is not a sharp, easily tracked division between vulgar and philosophical beliefs. It is not the case that Hume could not, as Stroud maintains, adequately explain the relationship between the vulgar and the philosophical beliefs in the continued and distinct existence of objects on account of poverty of resources or slipshod mistakes. Rather, I claim, Hume's problem is exegetical or expository in nature, a far less serious offense. Hume was not trying to characterize the relationship between two sharply distinguished views, but rather the relationships between a plethora of vaguely distinguished views. The exegetical feat of explaining the relationships between the various types of vulgar and philosophical views as well as all of the views that lie in between is overwhelming, and it should come as no surprise that Hume's efforts to this end leave us somewhat unsatisfied. However, while Hume left a lot of work for his interpreters, I believe that all of the resources necessary to

complete that work are found in the *Treatise*. We can solve this interpretive problem simply by taking a fresh look at Hume's Theory of Ideas and how it gets deployed.

Imagination and How It Produces Belief in Body

With that digression behind us, let us proceed to the next candidate and, as it turns out, the faculty responsible for the association of whatever perceptions are connected to our attributions of continued and distinct existence. Hume concludes that the imagination, the very faculty Descartes rejected when he considered the same topic, is the faculty responsible for the vulgar belief in body. Much of what remains of *Treatise* 1.4.2 is devoted to explaining how the imagination “produces the opinion of a *continu'd* or of a *distinct* existence” (SBN 188). Let us turn our attention to that explanation. Hume has already noted that some impressions are regarded by both the vulgar and the philosophical as having continued and distinct existence while others are not. He begins his explanation of how the imagination produces the opinion of a continued and distinct existence by inquiring into the nature, or apparent nature, of the two sorts of impressions.¹⁰⁰ He concludes that it is the constancy and coherency of some impressions that leads us to attribute to them, and not to impressions that lack constancy and coherency, a continued and distinct existence. The objects that appear roughly “the same” to us over time, like Caldwell Hall, and the objects that alter in such a way that various time-slices “of them” seem to cohere, like bonfires, are the sorts of impressions to which we attribute continued and distinct existence. Hume will go on to explain in greater detail just how constancy and coherency give rise to the opinion of

¹⁰⁰ To be clear, there is no ontological difference in nature between any two perceptions *so far as the Theory of Ideas is concerned*. Perceptions get categorized by the principles of association of the mind. The mind does not place two perceptions in the same “revival set” *because* they resemble each other in some quality or property. Rather, they are regarded as resembling because they have been placed in the same “revival set” by the principles of association.

continued and distinct existence, but before we delve into that explanation let us take a closer look at what Hume writes about constancy, coherency, and the impressions to which constancy and coherency are attributed.

Let us focus our attention on two important paragraphs:

Since all impressions are internal and perishing existences, and all appear as such, the notion of their distinct and continu'd existence must arise from a concurrence of some of their qualities with the qualities of the imagination; and since such a notion does not extend to all of them, it must arise from certain qualities peculiar to some impressions. 'Twill therefore be easy for us to discover these qualities by a comparison of the impressions, to which we attribute a distinct and continu'd existence, with those, which we regard as internal and perishing. (SBN 194)

After a little examination, we shall find, that all those objects, to which we attribute a continu'd and distinct existence, have a peculiar *constancy*, which distinguishes them from the impressions, whose existence depends upon our perception. These mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear'd to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them to return upon me without the least alteration. My bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner, and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them. This is the case with all the impressions, whose objects are suppos'd to have an external existence; and is the case with no other impressions, whether gentle or violent, voluntary or involuntary. (SBN 194-195)

These passages are complicated. At first glance, one might think that Hume endeavors to discover some feature or quality that is common to all individual impressions to which a continued and distinct existence is attributed. However, this cannot be the case, for reasons I will now explain.

It is imperative that we pause for a moment and consider what, if we adopt my interpretive hypothesis and treat Hume's Theory of Ideas as being as rigorous as I believe we ought to, these passages express. This will help clear up a potential confusion and also prime us for uncovering an interpretive error we will see in alternative interpretations of Hume's explanation of belief in body. In the second passage above, Hume refers to "*these*

mountains, houses, and trees” and “*my bed and table, my books and papers.*”¹⁰¹ Phrases like “*these mountains,*” “*this pen,*” and “*my parents’ house*” are often treated by Hume commentators as though they have a unique analysis.¹⁰² However, according to Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis, words and concepts do not have unique analyses. Even phrases containing demonstratives do not have unique analyses. ‘*This pen*’ does not pick out one perception even if the conversation is maintained only for a few moments. Every time we blink, change our focus slightly, or otherwise modify our vision, we get a new perception “of the pen,” we would say, but, strictly speaking, ‘the pen’ is associated with several resembling perceptions. This story gets more complicated when we consider that as we are looking at “the pen,” our other sense modalities are giving us tactile, auditory, and perhaps olfactory impressions; and when we consider that your resembling ideas of “the pen” are not the same as mine. “The pen” at time t_1 and “the pen” and time t_2 are two different complex impressions given Hume’s Separability Principle and thesis that there are no real connections between distinct existences. To be more precise, at time t_2 , what we are calling ‘the pen’ at time t_1 is now an idea, and not impression at all. Hume does not have recourse to a non-perceptual object that our collections of impressions and ideas are “of,” the sort of thing that would allow him to give ‘the pen’ a unique analysis, so we must assume that phrases containing demonstratives operate in a manner similar to general terms. ‘The pen’ is associated with a “revival set” of resembling ideas, just as ‘dog’ is associated with a revival set of resembling ideas.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Italics are mine.

¹⁰² Fogelin and Stroud make this mistake with respect to *Treatise* 1.4.2 most explicitly.

¹⁰³ The present inquiry does not require a position on the following, but I do think it is interesting to consider that perhaps Hume believed that *all* terms, even proper names, are general. The only difference between ‘pen’

Now that we have considered the second passage quoted above, let us consider the first passage in some detail. In it Hume refers to “certain qualities peculiar to some impressions.” In fact, every reference to perceptions is in the plural. This creates an ambiguity: Hume could be read as referring to several *individual* impressions all of which possess the same qualities, which, when they interact with the qualities of the imagination, give rise to the attribution of constancy and coherency to those impressions individually; or he could be read as referring to a *collection* of impressions, which possess certain qualities as an association of ideas, which, when they interact with the qualities of the imagination, give rise to the attribution of constancy and coherency to those collections. Hume clearly means to express the latter, for he has already explained that impressions, considered individually, appear before the mind in the same manner, “as internal and perishing.” This suggests that constancy and coherency are qualities that single perceptions could not possess. Constancy and coherency must be attributed to several resembling perceptions linked together by associative mechanisms.

Hume realizes that reasoning based on the attributions of constancy and coherency is indispensable in common life, just as causal reasoning is indispensable, though without the foundation we might have thought it to have.¹⁰⁴ What we call “external objects” are perceptions united by the imagination to explain “the regularity of their operation” (SBN 196). In this case, ‘their’ refers to various perceptions, and not *one* mountain or *one* pen, etc.

and ‘the pen’ is that the revival set called up by ‘pen’ is larger and contains less closely resembling ideas than the set called up by ‘the pen.’ If true, this would be a significant discovery.

¹⁰⁴ One might raise a question here as to whether Hume meant to suggest that we reason with respect to “objects” on the basis of the attributions of constancy and coherency, or that the attributions depend on causal associations of ideas. I actually think Hume meant to suggest both. It seems that certain associations would have to occur in order for there to be cause for the attributions of constancy and coherency. It also seems that certain associations occur because the attributions have been made.

The vulgar attribution of continu'd and distinct existence of objects might superficially seem to mirror our reasoning concerning cause and effect, but the former case is considerably more complicated.

Let us consider, as Hume did, the difference between our tendency to attribute continued and distinct existence to objects and our tendency to form the expectation that certain types of events will follow certain other types of events starting with the latter. In the case of reasoning from cause to effect, we form habits on the basis of the regularity of our experience. Habits depend on repeated observation of resembling perceptions. This is the first step in all of our causal reasoning: we observe the constant conjunction of temporally prior A events and B events. This leads us, by force of habit, to anticipate B events upon experiencing A events. We anticipate regularity on the basis of observed regularity. In the case of our tendency to attribute continued and distinct existence to some objects, there is no observed regularity that produces a habit or determination of the mind. In fact, we *assume* greater regularity than we ever encounter in experience. Habits are not formed under these conditions, and so, some other force must provide the liveliness required for belief. Imagination does the job by filling in the gaps left blank by experience:

[T]he imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse. (SBN 198)

The imagination does in the case of belief in continued and distinct existences what the force of habit does in causal reasoning: it moves our mental activity forward regardless of what is actually given in experience.¹⁰⁵ Our experience is, to different degrees, broken and

¹⁰⁵ Notice that we experience the anticipation of B events upon experiencing A events with rare exception. That is, when we drop a glass, for example, we *expect* it to break even if it does not, in fact, break.

interrupted. The imagination leads us to attribute continued and distinct existence to some objects in order to remedy that brokenness and interrupted-ness. The imagination allows us to operate as though 'the pen' refers to the same object at time t_1 and time t_2 , though this be false, because uniformity makes the course of our ordinary lives run more smoothly.

Hume summarizes his explanation of how the imagination works to produce our belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects:

When we have been accustom'd to observe a constancy in certain impressions, and have found that the perception of the sun or the ocean, for instance, returns upon us after an absence or annihilations with like parts and in a like order, as at its first appearance, we are not apt to regard these interrupted perceptions as different, (which they really are) but on the contrary consider them as individually the same upon account of their resemblance. But as this interruption of their existence is contrary to their perfect identity, and makes us regard the first impression as annihilated, and the second as newly created, we find ourselves somewhat at a loss, and are involv'd in a kind of contradiction. In order to free ourselves from this difficulty, we disguise, as much as possible, the interruption, or rather remove it entirely, by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible. This supposition, or idea of continu'd existence, acquires a force and vivacity from the memory of these broken impressions, and from that propensity, which they give us, to suppose them the same; and according to the precedent reasoning, the very essence of belief consists in the force and vivacity of the conception. (SBN 199)

One might think Hume has said it all by now. Our perceptions are broken, but conveniently similar. The interruption of similar perceptions would be very distracting were nature to allow us to regard them as such, and so nature intervenes by disguising the interruptions. The interruptions are disguised by supposing that our perceptions are not interrupted, but rather continued and distinct. Memory of the broken perceptions we suppose to be united by a continued existence give force and vivacity to our ideas. End of story. However, Hume now needs to justify the system he has put forward. Before we delve into Hume's justification, let us take a step back and re-evaluate Hume's task in *Treatise* 1.4.2.

By now we have hopefully gained a better perspective on what Hume is attempting to explain *Treatise* 1.4.2. Hume has characterized his question, or at least one of his questions, as one about the vulgar belief in body, or about why the vulgar attribute a continued and distinct existence to some objects, but there is another way of looking at what Hume is trying to explain. Hume's story in *Treatise* 1.4.2 is one about what we are doing when we apply the same name to various perceptions. 'Look at the sun,' 'Please pass the salt,' 'Meet me at my house,' and the like seem to be meaningful, easily understood, everyday utterances that make reference to what the vulgar would regard as continued and distinct existences. If they are meaningful, then, according to Hume's Theory, the words in these utterances are associated with ideas with proper roots in impressions.

There are two ways the Theory could be applied in these cases, cases in which we apply the same name to multiple perceptions: Hume might employ it to determine what complex idea is picked out by 'the sun,' or he might employ it to explain what we are doing when we apply 'the sun' to multiple ideas. I think Hume is engaged in the latter application of the Theory. However, there is a strong tendency in the literature to interpret Hume as engaged in the former application of the Theory. Hume is frequently seen as attempting to explain *the* belief or idea in *the* X, the Big Idea Error from Chapter One, but here is no unique analysis for 'the sun.' 'The sun' picks out several ideas; as we have several ideas that we say are "of the sun," but know, because we have read Hume, to be really distinct from one another. The interesting project that Hume perhaps did not have the perspective to see sufficiently clearly is to articulate the difference between the psychological process involved when we use general terms like 'apple' and the psychological process involved when we use

terms like ‘this apple’ or ‘the apple.’ Hume has the resources to articulate such a difference if one views his Theory of Ideas in the ways I suggest.

Section 3.4: Justifying the System

Hume tells us that “four things are requisite” to justify his system, i.e., his explanation of belief in body (SBN 199). Let us review the four points of Hume’s justification starting with the first point. Once that task is completed, we will engage in a more critical discussion of the first, most important, and most controversial element in Hume’s justification: his explanation of the principle of identity. Hume puts forward what he calls a “principle of individuation,” or identity. Since he thinks there is such a thing, by his own lights, identity must be a collection of *bona fide* ideas with roots in impressions. The idea(s) of identity cannot be conveyed by a single object, for a “single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity” (SBN 200). In the case of a single object, the proposition “*an object is the same with itself*” is not informative. Hume thinks there needs to be some relevant difference between what is meant by “object” and what is meant by “itself” in order for a perception to convey the idea of identity, but that propositions about single objects do not express this difference. Multiple objects, however, cannot convey the idea of identity either. The mind sees each object as “entirely distinct and independent” (SBN 200). Since neither single objects nor multiple objects can convey the idea of identity, Hume turns to the idea of time or duration to help articulate the principle. He has already explained in *Treatise* 1.2.3 that our idea of time is formed “from the succession of ideas and impressions” (SBN 35). Now Hume asks us to *suppose* that time has transpired, which requires the succession of perceptions, while one object remains fixed. Put another way, we are asked to imagine the ordinary succession of some ideas while supposing at the “same time” that one perception

endures over the course of that succession. The object we suppose to remain fixed appears to possess an “*invariableness* and *uninterruptedness*” (SBN 201). This imaginative exercise gives us Hume’s principle of individuation:

The *invariableness* and *uninterruptedness* of any object, thro’ a suppos’d variation of time, by which the mind can trace it in the different periods of its existence, without any break of the view, and without being oblig’d to form the idea of multiplicity or number. (SBN 201)

Identity is, as applied to an object, the invariableness and uninterruptedness of that object through a supposed variation in time.¹⁰⁶

There are some difficulties involved in understanding what Hume means by “time,” “suppos’d variation in time,” “invariable,” and “uninterrupted” here. Matters are further complicated by the fact that “an object” in the non-Humean sense is actually quite a lot of objects in the Humean sense. The surface grammar of “the identity of an object” is misleading. However, if we evaluate what Hume says here in accordance with my interpretive hypothesis, we get something very much like the imaginative exercise Hume has put forward for our consideration. In fact, I would venture to say that the imaginative exercise is an attempt at a general analysis of utterances like ‘that’s the same cat we saw yesterday,’ ‘wear that dress you wore to Joe’s graduation,’ and ‘fetch me my flask.’ Of course, here Hume focuses on a slightly different kind of case than the kind I have just described. I have offered utterances from cases in which one views or otherwise interacts with “an object,” disengages with “it” for a time, and then re-engages with “it.” Hume’s principle applies more directly to cases of sustained engagement, as, for example, when I say, “I am typing on the same computer as I was typing on a second ago,” but Hume’s principle

¹⁰⁶ For a full treatment of Hume’s principle of individuation see Stroud 1977, Fogelin 1985, Garrett 1997, or Baxter 2008. All are excellent resources.

could be extended to accommodate the first type of case I described. What is happening in cases of both types is that we are experiencing a manifold of complex ideas, some of which are in flux, giving us the further ideas of time and multiplicity, some of which we mistakenly presume to remain constant.

Hume's exercise is inadequate as a strict analysis of identity ascriptions for at least two reasons. First, it is too general to be informative. Hume tries to give his audience a catchall principle of individuation, perhaps because he already had a quite large book on his hands, perhaps because he could not figure out how to accomplish the expository feat of giving an analysis of identity attributions in all cases; but doing so came at the cost of precision and explanatory sufficiency. The second problem with Hume's principle as it has been laid out in *Treatise* 1.4.2 is that it encourages commission of the Big Idea Error. In the preceding sub-section I argued that questions of the form "what is *the* idea that corresponds to 'X'?" are bad questions. They are bad questions because they indicate that each word will have (or perhaps fail to have) one unique analysis in terms of perceptions. However, there is no unique analysis of any word type. The perceptions associated with a given word vary from token instance to token instance, as the meaning of a word, or what a word signifies, just is the occurrent perceptions with which it is associated. When Hume writes such things as, "The *invariableness* and *uninterruptedness*" or "the idea of multiplicity or number" he encourages a wild goose chase after "*the* idea of *the* X," but no such thing is available for the taking.

The next step in justifying Hume's system is to "shew why the constancy of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect numerical identity, tho' there be very long intervals betwixt their appearance, and they have only one of the essential qualities of

identity, *viz. invariableness*” (SBN 202). Our identity ascriptions, which manifest themselves in a variety of ways (i.e. identity ascriptions are not always verbal, but often non-verbal, as when we engage in “retrieval behavior,” or some combination of verbal and non-verbal behaviors), involve a mistake. We ascribe identity to our “*resembling perceptions, notwithstanding their interruption*” (SBN 202, my italics). More plainly, we think, say, or behave as though two or more resembling perceptions are not merely resembling, but actually the same. This is our “mistake.” Why, Hume wants to know, do we make it? He observes that we are very likely to mistake one idea for another when there is any relation between them facilitated through the associative mechanisms of the mind. Resemblance is the most powerful associative mechanism in this regard, for it calls up and associates not only resembling ideas, but also dispositions.¹⁰⁷ Hume takes it as a general rule “that whatever ideas place the mind in the same disposition or in similar ones, are very apt to be confounded” (SBN 203). In addition to identical objects, what objects (perceptions) place us in the same (or very similar) dispositions? Successions of ideas related by the associative principle of resemblance place us in very similar dispositions, and so we are apt to, and, in fact, often do, confound them. To illustrate his point Hume offers an example:

I survey the furniture of my chamber; I shut my eyes, and afterwards open them; and find the new perceptions to resemble perfectly those, which formerly struck my senses. This resemblance is observ'd in a thousand instances, and naturally connects together our ideas of these interrupted perceptions by the strongest relation, and conveys the mind with an easy transition from one to another. (SBN 204)

Situations like the one described above are so like the imaginative exercise we considered when attempting to understand Hume’s principle of identity that we actually mistake these

¹⁰⁷ There is a huge literature on how Hume might have conceived of dispositions. This dissertation does not take a sophisticated position on Humean dispositions, though I think the interpretive hypothesis I have advanced may have interesting perspectives to add to this ongoing debate.

ordinary cases for the one we imagined. We mistakenly think our resembling perceptions, which are really broken and interrupted, are identical, as was the imagined perception in our exercise. In each case, the disposition of the mind is very similar.

The second step in Hume's justification described how we come to ascribe identity to resembling, but actually distinct perceptions. The third step resolves a tension created by this false ascription. On the one hand, we can easily see that our perceptions are broken and interrupted. On the other, we have the propensity just described to mistakenly ascribe identity to closely resembling perceptions. This creates a sort of contradiction. Our perceptions seem simultaneously identical and distinct (or, perhaps more likely, they seem to vacillate between seeming identical and seeming distinct). When the mind finds itself in this sort of tension, as between two principles, "it must look for relief by sacrificing one to the other" (SBN 206). Our thought moves so smoothly and stealthily through our resembling perceptions when it ascribes identity to them that we cannot overcome nature and give up this principle. We have only one other option: give up the opinion that perceptions are interrupted and broken. To that end, we posit continued and distinct existences. We "feign", or pretend, that "continu'd being" fills the intervals between our broken perceptions. All objects that are taken to have continued and distinct existence are also taken "neither to be annihilated by our absence, nor to be brought into existence by our presence" (SBN 207). *Prima facie*, this proposition may seem wholly incoherent by Hume's own lights, as perceptions are mind-dependent, and cannot be assumed to be absent from the mind without also being annihilated or to exist without being perceived. However, what we call "the mind" is a bundle of perceptions united by relations, and Hume has already said of each of those perceptions that it is separable, distinct, and may be considered independently of the

relations it bears to other perceptions; so, given what “the mind” means, and given what perceptions are, there is no absurdity in considering one apart from the mind.¹⁰⁸ “Consideration apart from the mind” is exactly what happens when we regard certain “objects” as continued and distinct existences, but remember what ‘mind’ is associated with in such cases. What Hume calls “the ‘mind,’” from the perspective of the Theory, is simply a collection of perceptions, which vary from case to case (i.e., the perceptions associated with ‘Emily’s mind’ at time t_1 will be different from the perceptions associated with ‘Bill’s mind’ at time t_1 and also from the perceptions associated with ‘Emily’s mind’ at time t_2). *Qua* perception, the mind is on par with any other perception. Question such as, “how can a perception be considered independently from the mind?,” are bad questions from the perspective of the Theory. According to the Theory, the mind is not a non-perceptual perceiver of perceptions. The mind is simply another perception or way of talking about perceptions. Thus, one can consider her mind apart from her home just as she can consider her home apart from her car. There is absurdity involved in considering perceptions apart from the mind only when the mind is conceived of in a non-Theory approved way.

One phenomenon Hume is attempting to capture in his justification is the vacillation between the theoretical domain of discourse and the vulgar, or everyday, domain of discourse.¹⁰⁹ When we occupy the theoretical domain of discourse, we see that our perceptions are broken and interrupted (we need not subscribe to the Theory of Ideas in particular in order to raise questions about whether the keyboard on which I type this sentence is the same keyboard on which I typed the previous sentence). In everyday

¹⁰⁸ Chapter Four will discuss in detail what is meant by “the mind.”

¹⁰⁹ I use a lower case ‘t’ here to indicate a more general theoretical domain than the domain of Hume’s Theory of Ideas, which I indicate with a capital ‘T.’

circumstances, however, we take for granted that our perceptions of, for example, our laptops are “of the same thing.” The tension between these two domains arises on account of our occupation of a third domain of discourse, perhaps best described as the meta-domain, the domain from which we are able to view our thoughts and behaviors while in other domains. It is from this third domain that we can ask questions about how our principles across domains fit together and attempt to reach some sort of reflective equilibrium. An educated person without expert knowledge of chemistry might think to herself as she sips a dry martini, “isn’t it peculiar that from one perspective this martini is nothing over and above a collection of atoms, yet from another perspective nothing seems harder to believe than that this martini is nothing but a collection of atoms?” This person has located herself outside two domains with competing views about the “true nature” of her martini. To resolve this tension, she must, for the time being, pick a side (i.e., choose a domain). It is easier for the purposes of making one’s way through life to have the vulgar, or ordinary, domain as one’s default domain of discourse. However, since according to the Theory, perceptions have the same nature in every domain (i.e., broken and interrupted), an explanation of how we come to believe otherwise in the vulgar domain is warranted. The explanation is that imagination fills in, or glazes over, the gaps between our perceptions, using, of course, only Theory-approved materials.

The final step in Hume’s justification is to explain how “we here not only *feign* but *believe* this continu’d existence” (SBN 208). Our idea of continued existence gets elevated to the level of belief by deriving force and vivacity from memory. Memory supplies us with a multitude of very closely resembling perceptions at various times (i.e. after short interruptions, after long interruptions, etc). Resemblance gives us the propensity to

mistakenly treat these distinct perceptions as identical. This contradiction leads the imagination to assume continued existences in order to make the course of our ordinary lives run smoothly. By “assume continued existences” I mean merely that I assume without experiencing, for example, that my stapler is in my top desk drawer, and that if you ask me if you may borrow it, I may say something like “Sure, the stapler is in my top drawer. Help yourself.” Memory, which Hume has already explained produces lively impressions, “bestows a vivacity on that fiction” (SBN 209). What fiction is that again? The fiction that one thing is being uniquely picked out by ‘the stapler.’ The fiction that various resembling perceptions I have are actually one enduring perception I call ‘the stapler.’

An Enduring Objection

Now that Hume’s explanation of belief in body has been fully explicated, let us consider what is perhaps the strongest objection against it. One of the most enduring and universal criticisms of *Treatise* 1.4.2 is that when Hume goes searching for an idea of identity, he ultimately comes up empty-handed, and, worse yet, proceeds through the rest of the section invoking an idea that is unintelligible by his own lights in his explanation of the vulgar belief in continued and distinct existence.¹¹⁰ This is an instance of the second manifestation of the most significant objection facing Hume’s Theory of Ideas: ideas that we and, perhaps more importantly, Hume want to countenance violate the Copy Principle and do not satisfy the Theory. This criticism rests upon the Big Idea Error. It assumes that Hume’s explanation of belief in body crucially involves locating *the* idea that answers to the term ‘identity.’ However, Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis has it that there are no unique analyses of words or concepts.

¹¹⁰ Stroud and Fogelin, most prominently, offer this criticism.

We have already devoted much time to understanding the Big Idea Error. Let us examine how it arises in the interpretation of this particular case. Hume often criticizes his predecessors in one of two ways: 1) by arguing that a word they used, ‘essence’ to name one, does not stably pick out an idea, and is therefore unintelligible, or 2) by arguing that a word is intelligible, but incorrectly analyzed. In *Treatise* 1.4.2, when Hume claims that the vulgar make a “mistaken” identity judgment, what does he mean? Arguably, he means to claim that the vulgar are taking a word that makes perfect sense (i.e., corresponds to a *bona fide* idea or set of ideas), and analyzing it incorrectly, at least from the perspective of the Theoretical domain of discourse. As one might wonder how frequently ‘identical’ is employed in vulgar contexts (indeed, it is probably used quite infrequently), a more accurate assessment of Hume’s claim would be that the vulgar make a “mistaken” identity judgment when they incorrectly (from the Theoretical perspective) analyze other sorts of words (i.e., mis-apply terms to ideas), or when they engage in certain behaviors (e.g., retrieval behavior). I assume Hume employs the second of the two strategies I have laid out here, as he devotes several pages to the discussion of a belief he takes quite seriously, and if he did not think ‘identity’ was intelligible, he would not have discussed or employed the term as he did.

The perspective from which Hume most frequently explains the vulgar belief is the Theoretical perspective, and from that perspective, what the vulgar might call ‘identical’ do not belong in one’s Theoretical revival set for ‘identity.’ As noted in the previous paragraph, the vulgar are not likely to make the exact mistake of incorrectly analyzing ‘identity,’ as the vulgar are more likely to use other terms or to engage in non-verbal behavior that suggests a mistaken judgment. ‘Incorrectly’ may be a misleading word in this case, as there is no sense of absolute, or extra-Theoretical, correctness or incorrectness. There is only correctness or

incorrectness relative to a domain of discourse. The ideas that might be associated when a theoretician hears or reads ‘identity’ are not what the vulgar regard as identical. What would it even mean for the vulgar to use ‘identity’ correctly? To use it as Leibniz did? To use it as Hume does when discussing distinctions of reason? To use ‘identity’ as Leibniz or Hume did would surely be to exit the vulgar domain of discourse. From their own perspective, vulgar identity judgments might be good and proper, though they do not hold up to the scrutiny of the Theory. One might think there is at least one instance of “perfect identity” or of “using ‘identity’ correctly,” and that is when we judge individual perceptions to be self-identical, e.g., *this* token of C sharp is self-identical, *this* flash of lightening is self-identical, *this* taste of lemon is self-identical, etc. However, even these judgments are more complicated than they might initially seem, even from the theoretician’s perspective. Not to mention that such judgments are exceedingly rare even in philosophical discourse. Individual impressions come into and go out of existence so quickly that by the time we are making judgments about “their” self-identity, we are no longer talking about “them” at all. Rather, we are discussing ideas derived from them or resembling impressions and ideas. The distinction between self-identity judgments and other sorts of identity judgments is not at all sharp. Analyses of token instances of ‘identity’ are relative to revival sets, and revival sets are relative to domains of discourse and individual subjects. However, I should emphasize again that while a theoretician’s revival set for ‘identity’ will be different from a vulgar person’s revival set (if a vulgar person even has such set, as ‘identity’ is used rarely in vulgar contexts), there is no fact of the matter as to whose revival set is “correct.” There is no one answer to the question “What is identity according to Hume?” Hume’s science of human nature is not designed to tell us what identity is, but rather to uncover what we mean when we utter ‘identity,’ its

synonyms, or engage in certain non-verbal behaviors (e.g., retrieval behavior) in various contexts.

Hume is accused of committing two major errors with respect to his account of object identity in *Treatise* 1.4.2. First, he is accused of failing to distinguish properly between and to explain adequately both the vulgar belief and the philosophical belief in body. Secondly, he is accused of employing an idea of identity which violates the Copy Principle and, therefore, does not satisfy the Theory of Ideas. This is a prominent instance of the most significant objection facing Hume's Theory of Ideas. Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and its corollary (the *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas, and, in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise*) provide a strong defense against the first accusation. Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis (there are no unique analyses of words or concepts) provides a strong defense against the second.

CHAPTER FOUR

PERSONAL IDENTITY

In this Chapter we will explore a variety of errors commonly associated with Hume's account of personal identity developed in *Treatise* 1.4.6. Hume's account of personal identity has been the subject of copious negative assessment due in large part to Hume's own apparent dissatisfaction with it, which he expressed in a now infamous *Appendix* entry (SBN 633-636). Hume's initial articulation of the problem with his account seems to indicate second thoughts about, or perhaps even a recantation of, claims from Book I: "But upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involved in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (SBN 633). "Former opinions" is almost universally taken to refer to philosophical opinions concerning Hume's theoretical apparatus, the Theory of Ideas. However, Hume's problem with his account of personal identity might be, well, more personal than that. "Former opinions" can also be interpreted as referring to Hume's pre-Theoretical opinions, those he formed before undertaking the *Treatise* best understood as Hume's intuitions before philosophizing, many of which we would tend to share. In fact, I argue that "former opinions" is *best* interpreted in this way. In order to support this claim, I will utilize Claim Three and Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and the corollary to Claim Four: **there are no unique analyses of words or concepts; the *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas; and, in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical**

structure of the *Treatise*. According to the alternative I develop, Hume’s so-called *bundle theory* is no metaphysical theory of the self at all and his second thoughts concerning his account of personal identity express something more like existential dissatisfaction with what his Theory’s analyses of personal identity reveal than a philosophical reconsideration of his Theory or the results of its application.¹¹¹

My strategy is as follows. First, I briefly explicate Hume’s account of personal identity, pausing to advance interpretive claims. I also explain why the account is believed to be troubled, identifying six hypotheses, five which capture a variety of well-established views on the subject and one of my own design, that aim to explain Hume’s dissatisfaction with it. Then I explain why five of the six hypotheses examined cannot be correct and I diagnose their errors. Finally, I offer a text-based argument in favor of the best candidate-hypothesis from the preceding sections, the hypothesis I develop according to which Hume’s *Appendix* entry is not a recantation of “former opinions” from Book I.

Section 4.1: The Apparent Trouble with Hume’s Account

Hume’s treatment of personal identity spans little more than ten pages, yet it is extremely complicated. However, I think it can be justly summarized as follows. Hume begins *Treatise* 1.4.6 by rejecting the dominant Cartesian theory of mind, according to which “we are every moment conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity” (SBN 251). Against this view Hume argues:

It must be one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression

¹¹¹ I mean to use “existential” in a colloquial, non-technical sense, meaning “having to do with the nature and significance of human existence and/or the human condition.”

must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea. (SBN 251-2)

Hume's strategy here is, by now, quite familiar. Crudely, he employs the Copy Principle (*"that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple perceptions, which are correspondent to them and which they exactly represent"* (SBN 4)) to show that some putative idea either cannot be traced through the appropriate route to impressions or does not trace back to the impressions other philosophers believe it does (in this case, the philosophers in question believe the idea should trace back to an impression of something simple and individual).¹¹² Again, a quick survey of the secondary literature would have one believe that Hume's strategy for eradicating dubious metaphysical ideas is as follows: he takes up a putative idea for consideration, he attempts to trace the idea down to impressions in accordance with the Copy Principle, he finds *no* impression or set of impressions to which that putative idea corresponds, he consequently rejects the supposed idea. However, as we have previously observed, this picture is too coarse-grained, and a more nuanced understanding is required.

Hume is not in the business of dismissing dubious metaphysical ideas full stop. Rather, he is in the business of replacing dubious assessments of words and concepts we undeniably employ in all manners of discourse with more empirically accurate analyses in

¹¹² I should pause to resolve an apparent tension between the text and my elaboration of it. The quoted text (SBN 4) indicates a one to one correspondence between ideas and the impressions which cause them. In the sentence following the quotation I suggest that a single idea may be caused by several impressions, not one. Any tension lurking between the quoted text and my sentence is resolved once the simple/complex distinction is fully explicated. The simple/complex distinction coupled with the Copy Principle allows Hume to analyze complex ideas into simple ideas and then into simple impressions. My suggestion that an idea can be theoretically traced to impressions, plural, is shorthand for the above.

terms of perceptions. Hume does not, as we soon shall see, deny that we have ideas of the self. After all, he devotes the next few pages of *Treatise* 1.4.6 to a detailed discussion of the self. Rather, in just the way I have described, Hume offers more empirically accurate analyses of the self through the application of his Theory of Ideas. Hume contends that rather than one invariable, simple, and constant idea of the self of which we are immediately aware, we have only particular perceptions:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception...I may venture to affirm to the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions...The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different; whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is compos'd. (SBN 252-3)

The passage above is the basis for the traditional bundle theory interpretation of Hume's account of personal identity, but the bundle theory does not capture Hume's meaning on this matter.

According to the bundle theory, Hume defends a robust metaphysical theory of the self, or mind, according to which it is a single, discrete collection of perceptions. This is misleading. Hume tells us in no uncertain terms that *what we call* "the mind," or "the self," is nothing but a succession of sensory and reflective perceptions associated by the relations of resemblance and causation; not that the mind is (ontologically is) a collection of perceptions. Additionally, Hume finds that "the self" is associated with "*some particular*

perception or other,” not a fixed, discrete set of perceptions. Hume does not, and this is important to understand, set out to explain how a bundle of perceptions at time t_1 and a bundle of perceptions at time t_2 become themselves bundled in the same “self” (i.e., he does not intend to explain how thoughts about what to buy at the grocery store at 10am on Monday and thoughts about what workout to do at the gym at 6pm on Tuesday are subsets of a larger fixed, discrete set). Nor does he set out to explain how particular bundles of perceptions are allocated to each “self” (i.e., he does not intend to explain which bundles truly belong to Pat and which bundles truly belong to Chris). The question of concern to Hume is not “how do bundles of perceptions observed at various times get bundled into “the self”?”, as the traditional bundle theory would have it. Rather, the question of concern to Hume is “what is happening at the level of perceptions when we make verbal or non-verbal references to “the self”?” Put differently, the question is not, “how do temporal bundles of perceptions compose the self?”, but rather, “what analysis does the Theory of Ideas give in terms of perceptions of experiences of self-directed phenomena (e.g., self-reference, self-awareness, introspection, etc.)?”

Once Hume has refuted the Cartesian view of the self and replaced it with his own view, he sets himself to the task of explaining how we find ourselves committed to the Cartesian view despite its falsity. However, the details of Hume’s explanation are no matter of contention here, so I will continue past them. To recapitulate, the major difference between my interpretation of Hume’s alternative to the Cartesian view and the traditional bundle theory are as follows. My interpretation has it that Hume’s account of personal identity is an application of the Theory of Ideas where the Theory is used as a framework for understanding self-directed phenomena and where those phenomena are taken as given. The

traditional bundle theory has it that Hume's account of personal identity is a metaphysical theory of personal identity in addition to the Theory of Ideas.

Hume's Confession

It is well known that Hume was dissatisfied with some aspect of this account. As we have already observed, in the *Appendix* to the *Treatise* he writes, "But upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involved in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (SBN 633). He elaborates on his dissatisfaction:

In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences*, and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*. Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in the case. (SBN 636)

The two principles Hume mentions explicitly in the quotation above are quite obviously consistent, in fact, they are complementary. What, then, is the problem? Many clever and innovative hypotheses have been developed in response to this question. However, I will restrict myself to the discussion of five general hypotheses that seem to capture the principle strategies of many commentators and one interpretive hypothesis of my own design, six in total. All of the hypotheses share a general strategy. Because the two principles to which Hume makes explicit reference in the *Appendix* are consistent, and because Hume indicates that an inconsistency is lurking somewhere, commentators tend to search for a missing or implicit *third* claim that is inconsistent with the two principles explicitly referenced. In five of the six hypotheses discussed in what follows, Hume's commitments and opinions from elsewhere in the *Treatise* are introduced to make sense of the mysterious inconsistency

referred to in the *Appendix*. The hypothesis I defend does not follow this pattern, as I argue that “former opinions” is best interpreted as referring to pre-Theoretical opinions, and not to those expressed in Book I.

Some Hypotheses

According to the five hypotheses against which I will argue, Hume’s “former opinions” are philosophical opinions concerning his Theory of Ideas. Call this family of hypotheses the **Theory-Centric Hypotheses (TCH)**, as they locate Hume’s second thoughts in some aspect, component, or application of his Theory of Ideas. The taxonomy that follows represents my attempt to organize and render manageable the immense and complicated literature on Hume’s account of personal identity. The divisions between the Theory-Centric Hypotheses are not intended to be ultra-precise or ultra-rigid nor do they fully capture every view ever expressed on this topic. Let us discuss each hypothesis in turn beginning with the first TCH, call it **TCH1**. Recall that each hypothesis is intended to explain Hume’s second thoughts about his account of personal identity, and will be phrased accordingly.

TCH1: Hume’s second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that he relies upon something very much like a Cartesian ego in order to make important claims in Books II and III. For example, in his discussion of pride and humility in *Treatise* 2.1.2, he seems to require a self-aware ego. However, his Theory of Ideas denies the coherence of such a thing and his bundles of perceptions seem unable to experience phenomena of self-awareness. TCH1 locates Hume’s second

thoughts in the realization that he often employs an idea of the self which violates the Copy Principle, and therefore does not satisfy his Theory.¹¹³

TCH2: Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that what the mind turns out to be according to his Theory of Ideas is incapable of the activities that we, and perhaps more importantly, he attributes to it. For example, it is unclear how a bundle of perceptions could associate ideas, perceive, think, or do any of the things a mind is generally thought to do. TCH2 locates Hume's second thoughts in the realization that his Theory's analysis of the mind cannot accommodate the activities he attributes to the mind.¹¹⁴

TCH3: Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that he has not given a satisfactory explanation as to how our mind bundles are individuated. Individuation has to be accomplished by causal closure, but Hume

¹¹³ Kemp Smith was perhaps the first to articulate this hypothesis in *The Philosophy of David Hume*. Nelson Pike's "Hume's Bundle Theory of Self: A Limited Defense" (1967) is also an excellent resource on what I am calling TCH1.

¹¹⁴ John Passmore, Wade Robison, Daniel Dennett, Wayne Waxman, Jane McIntyre, David Pears, Robert Fogelin, and Vijay Mascarenhas all consider and/or defend versions what I am calling TCH2. Passmore argues that Hume's second thoughts are rooted in his realization that if the mind is a succession of perceptions to which we attribute a fictional simplicity and identity, then the mind cannot do the attributing. Something must mischaracterize the succession of perceptions that composes the mind, and something must discover the fiction created to disguise it, and that something cannot be the succession itself. Robison's hypothesis is similar to Passmore's. Robison argues that Hume has second thoughts because he cannot explain how bundles of perceptions execute the actions of the mind, such as associating perceptions. Dennett points out that because of what the mind turns out to be according to Hume's account, Hume must attribute the activities of the mind to the perceptions themselves. Waxman argues that Hume cannot explain consciousness of a succession of perceptions itself, a presupposition crucial to his account of personal identity. McIntyre argues that Hume's second thoughts derive from the realization that the kind of self Hume needs in order to explain belief in the external world and necessary connection is "a self that is *affected by experience* and therefore must *persist through experience*," but such a self is ruled out by Hume's Theory of Ideas (McIntyre, "Is Hume's Self Consistent?," p. 82). Pears suggests that Hume could not accommodate the phenomenological "fact that a person is a single unified being persisting through time" (Pears, *Hume's System*, p. 215). Fogelin argues that Hume's second thoughts might derive from his inability to explain "how perceptions themselves can be united in a single consciousness...[and are] felt to be united" (Fogelin, *Philosophical Interpretations*, p. 91; this suggestion reappears in *Hume's Skeptical Crisis*). Vijay Mascarenhas argues that Hume's second thoughts derive from the realization that "impressions, ideas, and the association of ideas alone can never explain the unity of consciousness...necessary for the association of ideas in the first place" (Mascarenhas, "Hume's Recantation Revisited," p. 296).

cannot account for causal closure. Hume claims that our mind bundles are held together by resemblance and causation. However, he fails to explain, for example, how it is that Joe's mind-bundle and Moe's mind-bundle are closed systems with their own unique contents. There is no explanation in *Treatise* 1.4.6 of why Joe's perceptions are his and not Moe's, and vice versa. In addition, there is no non-circular explanation as to why a perception of smoke in Joe's mind does not lead to a perception of fire in Moe's mind. TCH3 locates Hume's second thoughts in the realization that his Theory is explanatorily inadequate with respect to the subject of personal identity.¹¹⁵

TCH4: Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that the relations of resemblance and causation alone cannot bind the contents of our mind-bundles. Our minds are filled with all manner of things, many of which seem related neither by resemblance nor by cause and effect. For example, when I inspect the current "contents of my mind" I find several books on Hume's philosophy but also a collection of kitschy souvenirs. The books neither resemble the kitschy souvenirs nor cause them, and vice versa, and yet they seem to be members of the same mind-bundle. TCH4 locates Hume's second thoughts in the realization that the resources he gives himself cannot explain all the relevant phenomena.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Stroud discusses a version of TCH3 at length in his fine book, *Hume*. David Pears raises a closely related worry. Pears argues that Hume's second thoughts are grounded in the realization that ownership of a given bundle of perceptions is merely contingent, and not necessary.

¹¹⁶ What I am calling TCH4 was perhaps first developed by S.C. Patten in "Hume's Bundles, Self-Consciousness, and Kant." A.H. Basson, Kenneth Winkler, Tom Beauchamp, Galen Strawson, and John Haugeland also consider and/or defend versions of TCH4. Basson argues that Hume's second thoughts are rooted in the realization that causation and resemblance alone do not provide him with a way to distinguish between the perceptions that compose one and the perceptions that compose another mind. Winkler argues that Hume's second thoughts concern "the relations among perceptions that cause this union in the imagination" (Winkler, "'All Revolution Is in Us': Personal Identity in Shaftesbury and Hume," p. 19). Beauchamp argues

TCH5: Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that his Theory cannot explain how it is that we can bundle the perceptions that compose the mind and simultaneously bundle other perceptions into ordinary objects considered distinct from the mind. For example, it is unclear how one can simultaneously identify one's car both as a single object which persists through time *and* as a part of one's mind. TCH5, like TCH3 and TCH4, locates Hume's second thoughts in the realization that his Theory is explanatorily inadequate with respect to the subject of personal identity.¹¹⁷

TCH1-TCH5 all express deep pessimism about the ability of Hume's Theory of Ideas to execute the tasks to which it is put, placing the Theory in most unfavorable light. However, as I will go on to argue in the following section, TCH1-TCH5 fundamentally misunderstand Hume's Theory of Ideas and his overall project. Properly understood, Hume's Theory can be employed to generate a philosophically consistent account of personal identity. If I am correct about this, then none of TCH1-TCH5 succeed in explaining which of Hume's "former opinions" are inconsistent with his account of personal identity. Consider as an alternative the **Pre-Theoretical Hypothesis (PTH)**:

that Hume cannot explain how causation and resemblance alone produce our tendency to attribute identity to bundles of perceptions. Strawson argues that Hume cannot explain the principle of connection uniting the constituents of a bundle or how it could be perceived. There is a real connection between the perceptions of the mind and, Strawson argues, Hume cannot account for it. Finally, Haugeland argues that Hume's "account of causation...is incompatible with the account of personal identity in terms of (mental causation)." He goes on: "In a nutshell, the question of personal identity is how we can allocate all the conceivably free floating perceptions into various personal bundles, given that the prerequisite pattern of constant conjunctions constitutive of mental causation presupposes a *prior* bundling" (Haugeland, "Hume on Personal Identity," p. 68).

¹¹⁷ Donald Ainslie defends a version of what I am calling TCH5. Ainslie argues that Hume cannot explain why, in philosophical contexts, we believe that the perceptions which allow us to observe our minds when philosophizing about them (our minds) are part of our minds. In short, Hume cannot explain how it is that we can observe our minds *with* our minds or with part of our minds. Abraham Roth discusses a version of TCH5 in some detail in "What Was Hume's Problem with Personal Identity?"

PTH: Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by reflection on his pre-Theoretical opinions formed before undertaking the *Treatise*. Once Hume completes his work, he unsuccessfully attempts to achieve something like reflective equilibrium. He reflects on the claims of his Theory with respect to personal identity as compared to his pre-Theoretical opinions on the same subject. He expresses existential, spiritual, psychological, or perhaps emotional dissatisfaction with what the analyses of his Theory reveal about personal identity. He does not conclude that he must have committed some grave error in constructing or applying his Theory. Rather, he concludes that his Theoretical and pre-Theoretical understanding of personal identity are not entirely consistent. Neither his Theory nor any other theory applied to the same subject can entirely accommodate all of Hume's pre-Theoretical notions concerning personal identity.¹¹⁸

In order to see why PTH is a better explanation of Hume's *Appendix* confession than any of TCH1-TCH5, we must first understand Hume's Theory of Ideas and his overall project in the *Treatise*. The following section will lay bare the extent to which TCH1-TCH5 misunderstand Hume's Theory and his project. It will also explain how *Treatise* 1.4.6 is best understood, laying the foundation for the text-based argument for PTH in Section 4.3.

Section 4.2: The Five Theory-Centric Hypotheses

Before we examine how best to understand Hume's Theory of Ideas, let us first examine how each of TCH1-TCH5 misunderstand Hume's Theory and overall project, starting with TCH1. TCH1 has it that Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought

¹¹⁸ Hume declares, "I cannot discover any theory; which gives me satisfaction on this head" (SBN 636). Corliss Swain also makes heavy weather of quotations like this, arguing that Hume finds no trouble with his own account of personal identity in particular, but rather that he finds trouble with metaphysical accounts of personal identity in general.

on by the realization that Hume often requires a self-aware Cartesian ego, but that his Theory denies the coherence of such a thing and his alternative to the ego seems unable to experience phenomena of self-awareness. If Hume were to countenance an idea which does not satisfy his Theory in order to account for pervasive empirical phenomena, this would be a clear sign of his Theory's inadequacy to the task of supporting a science of human nature. TCH1 does identify a problem that, if it were genuine, would warrant Hume's claim that his account is "very defective" (SBN 635). However, TCH1 depends upon two significant and incorrect assumptions: 1) Hume's discussions of phenomena of self-awareness require a Cartesian ego, and 2) Hume came to believe that they did. Of course Hume was under obligation to explain phenomena of self-awareness (they are pervasive, obvious, and demand explanation in the science of human nature), but he does not and need not countenance an idea which does not satisfy his Theory of Ideas, such as a Cartesian ego, in order to do so. Consider what phenomena of self-awareness are in the science of human nature. An informal empirical investigation reveals phenomena that involve verbal and non-verbal self-reference. Examples include taking the person at the birthday party to be the same person who received an invitation to the party weeks before, taking a particular car to belong to one, saying to others what your all-things-considered opinion on a given matter is, and so forth. Hume requires nothing more than perceptions to analyze, for example, a given subject's feelings of pride upon completing her Ph.D. It is proponents of TCH1 who sneak the Cartesian ego into Hume's explanations of phenomena of self-awareness, not Hume. We must also guard against being confused into thinking that Hume has a view on what, ontologically, must be the case in order for feelings of pride to be possible. His project is to explain feelings of pride as we find them with his framework of ideas. It would be an odd thing indeed for

Hume to consider when reflecting on *Treatise* 1.4.6 that he actually required that empirically suspect notion he had so artfully refuted there, the Cartesian ego, or that his model for understanding phenomena of self-awareness could not itself experience the phenomena it was invoked to explain, which is what TCH1 maintains he does.

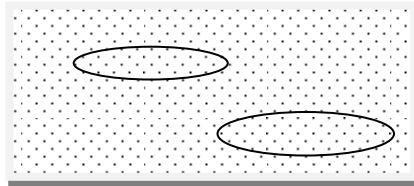
Let us proceed to TCH2. TCH2 locates Hume's second thoughts in the realization that his Theory's analysis of the mind cannot accommodate the activities he attributes to it. Indeed, the worry detected by TCH2 arises in almost any discussion of early modern empiricism. The greatest flaw of early modern empiricism is arguably its austerity, and so it is natural to locate Hume's second thoughts in his Theory's inability to fully capture the phenomena it was developed to explain. However, TCH2 rests on the same sort of confusions about Hume's explanatory task in 1.4.6 as did TCH1. Hume is responsible, as a scientist of human nature, for explaining *in terms of* bundles of perceptions what we call "activities of the mind," such as thinking or associating. Hume is not responsible for, and does not attempt, an explanation of the activities *of* bundles of perceptions. Hume is perfectly capable of explaining what we call "activities of the mind"; it is as simple as identifying what perceptions are present when a subject purports to be thinking, associating, etc. Garrett offers the following on Hume's behalf:

Hume can thus reduce any given kind of "action" of the mind simply to the occurrence of particular kinds of perceptions (as he does with will and judgment) or, failing that, to propensities of perceptions to occur in particular patterns... The fact of what propensities there are—like the fact of what causal laws there are—is for Hume a function of what past, present, and future non-dispositional events actually occur.¹¹⁹

Mental activity, as Garrett so elegantly explained, is completely explicable in terms of the occurrence of perceptions; just as all explananda in the science of human nature are.

¹¹⁹ Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, p. 170.

Let us now consider TCH3, which maintains that Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that he has not given a satisfactory explanation as to how our mind bundles are individuated. TCH3 derives from the reasonable suspicion that Hume has made oversimplifying assumptions when it comes to persons. Consider two empirical objects: a cup of coffee and an end table. According to the Theory, the cup of coffee and the end table are composed of different sets of perceptions, just as are Joe's mind and Moe's mind, but the sets of perceptions composing the cup of coffee and the end table are not mutually causally inert. The hot cup of coffee can raise the temperature of the end table on which it rests, and yet when Joe and Moe sit next to one another, their minds have no direct effect on one another. One might wonder what the principled difference is between the coffee and the table and Joe's mind and Moe's mind, or why Joe's and Moe's minds do not behave like other objects. However, Hume is not in the business of explaining how it is that, *all perceptions considered*, Joe's mind is composed of some perceptions and Moe's mind is composed of certain other perceptions with the two sets of perceptions being mutually causally inert, as TCH3 would have us believe. In the representation below the dots represent perceptions and the ovals represent two minds, say Joe's and Moe's. This image, I think, represents an important aspect of how defenders of TCH3 are thinking about Hume's task. The thought is something like this: of all the perceptions in the ideal universe, how can Hume account for the fact that some belong to Moe and some belong to Joe? How were the ovals drawn? Why is it that a modification in Joe's oval does not lead to a modification in Moe's oval? Why are the contents of Joe's mind bound by causation, but not the contents of Joe's and Moe's mind?



I do not think Hume takes himself to be answering these questions. Rather, I think Hume is primarily in the business of giving analyses of cases, where the cases are considered in relative isolation. Allow me to elaborate. Hume is not interested in considering *at once* how all of the perceptions in the ideal universe are carved up into “all of the minds,” as though Hume and his Theory take there to be a unique notion of “the mind,” a certain number of minds in the universe, and a clear notion of determining precisely what perceptions compose them. Hume and his Theory remain neutral on these metaphysical matters. Hume can give an analysis, I think, of something like the following ordinary statement: ‘Joe’s mind and Moe’s mind work very differently.’ If I were to utter something like this, I might be trying to express that Joe has a very analytic approach to problems whereas Moe’s is more artistic and creative, and I might have in mind instances where I have seen both Joe and Moe take the approaches I have just described. This sort of ordinary belief is one Hume has the resources to explain. Hume’s task is not to carve nature at the joints nor to explain why experiences appear as they do; but rather to provide a framework for understanding experience *as we find it*. The explanatory demands TCH3 places on Hume are a bit unfair. An analogy from elementary chemistry is helpful in illustrating the unfairness of which I write.

Chemistry Analogy 1: Joe’s mind and Moe’s mind, as represented in the diagram, are both explicable in terms of perceptions, just as two chemical samples in laboratory beakers, say Sample A and Sample B, are explicable in terms of atoms. Suppose Joe’s mind contains a perception of smoke, call it P_s , and Moe’s mind

contains a perception of fire, call it P_F . Suppose also that Sample A contains an atom, X_A , and Sample B contains an atom, Y_B .

Asking Hume how it is that P_S in Joe's mind is not causally related to P_F in Moe's mind is like asking a chemist why atom X_A is not causally related to atom Y_B . The chemist might try to answer such a question as follows: "Well, atom X_A and atom Y_B have it in common that they are both atoms (perhaps both of mercury)--they are related in that sense--but they have little else to do with one another because atom X_A is in Sample A which is in one beaker while atom Y_B is in Sample B which is in a different beaker. Atoms in one beaker do not typically causally affect atoms in another beaker." Similarly, Hume might respond to the parallel question: "Well, P_S and P_F have it in common that they are both perceptions (perhaps similar perceptions)--they are related in that sense--but they have little else to do with one another because P_S is in Joe's mind and P_F is in Moe's mind. Perceptions in one mind do not typically causally affect perceptions in another mind."

Suppose Hume's interlocutor presses on: "Yes, but why is P_S in Joe's mind and P_F in Moe's mind? Why isn't the reverse case true? Why aren't they both in Moe's mind?" The chemistry analog is, "Yes, but why is atom X_A in Sample A in one beaker and atom Y_B in Sample B in another beaker? Why isn't the reverse case true? Why aren't they both in sample B?" At this point, Hume and the chemist have every right to respond, "Look, I gave you a theory with helpful posits to explain certain kinds of phenomena. My theory explains the phenomena as they appear well. You cannot expect me or my theory to explain why the phenomena appear as they do and not in some other way." At some point the phenomena the theories are developed to explain are simply taken as given.

This analogy shows that TCH3 is unfair to Hume with respect to the level and type of explanation his Theory can be reasonably expected to provide. Notice that the problem detected by this hypothesis relies on a renegade conception of causation. The person who objects, “but how can Joe have a perception of smoke without causing a perception of fire in Moe if this whole ideal universe held together in part by causation?,” is bringing in a non-Humean view of causation. Humean causation is constant conjunction plus the determination of the mind to form an idea of the second member of the conjunction upon experience of the first. It is a description of what ideas we have when claim that one thing causes another. This objection assumes that smoke and fire are *really*, or necessarily, connected. Hume thinks “fire causes smoke” is analyzable into [fire idea constantly conjoined with smoke idea] and [mind determined to think fire when it experiences smoke]. But what is behind this objection? An experience of fire causing smoke? No, it is stipulated that a perception of smoke is in one subject’s mind and that a perception of fire is in another subject’s mind and then assumed that a real causal connection must hold between the two, but this causal connection is not a Humean causal connection.¹²⁰ Consider a second analogy, again intended to show that TCH3 places unfair explanatory burdens on Hume.

¹²⁰ I am taking a position on Humean causation according to which Hume’s two definitions of cause apply to a given, individual subject. The first definition defines “cause” as constant conjunction. The second defines “cause” as a determination of the mind to think of the second member of a constant conjunction upon experiencing the first member of the same constant conjunction. I take “constant conjunction” in the first definition to apply to the actual experience of a given individual and “the mind” in the second definition to refer to the same given subject’s mind. This is consistent with my view that Hume’s Theory of Ideas is a theoretical framework for understanding experience not to be employed to draw metaphysical conclusions. One might interpret “constant conjunction” as being independent of the experience of a subject, which might reflect better upon TCH3, but this strikes me as sitting very uncomfortably with Hume’s empiricism. Garrett’s *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* contains an excellent discussion of Hume’s two definitions of cause in which he considers both interpretive alternatives.

Chemistry Analogy 2: Joe’s mind and Moe’s mind, as represented in the diagram, are both explicable in terms of perceptions, just as two hydrogen clouds, call them Hydrogen Cloud 1 and Hydrogen Cloud 2, are both explicable in terms of atoms.

Asking Hume how the boundaries between Joe’s mind and Moe’s mind got drawn, or where the boundaries “really are,” is like asking a chemist how the boundaries between Hydrogen Cloud 1 and Hydrogen Cloud 2 got drawn, or where they “really are.” The answer, and whether an answer is possible, depends, for one thing, on the level of abstraction. At fairly high levels of abstraction, the boundaries around minds and hydrogen clouds are easily drawn, as in models. However, if one asked, “What exactly are the boundaries between *my* mind and *your* mind?” or “What exactly are the boundaries between *this* hydrogen cloud and *that* hydrogen cloud?” (where the two hydrogen clouds are actual clouds outside the Milky Way or some such place), it becomes less clear that Hume and the chemist can give, or are required to give, an answer. This is how the level of abstraction obscures the legitimate demands on a theory. It is not in the job descriptions of Hume and the scientist nor is it the interest of their enterprises to answer such questions.

One’s position on realism and the nature of theories might also obscure the legitimate demands on a theory. One might think one’s theory, say atomic theory, does an excellent job of explaining hydrogen cloud phenomena *because hydrogen clouds are really composed of atoms*. Alternatively, one might think that the posits in her theory are useful fictions that are helpful in the enterprise of predicting and explaining. Alternatively, one might be neutral or agnostic with respect to the relationship between her theory’s posits and the phenomena they help to explain (e.g., perhaps hydrogen clouds really are composed of atoms, perhaps atoms are merely useful in predicting and explaining hydrogen cloud behavior; I don’t know and

don't care). We should be careful to attribute only the most metaphysically modest of these positions (the third position) to Hume in the absence of compelling evidence to the contrary. When we do this, we see that asking Hume something like, "Where are the boundaries *really?*," "How can you be sure your theory carves the ideal universe up *correctly?*," or "Are you getting it right?" is unreasonable. He never set out to answer these questions, and so his dissatisfaction cannot consist in failure to do so.

I am not suggesting that the boundaries are vague and decided by convention in the case of minds, as they are in the case of hydrogen clouds; this is not what the analogy is supposed to reveal. The analogy is as follows. The scientist's theoretical apparatus explains interesting hydrogen cloud phenomena; it does not map the precise location of every atom in the universe and identify with accuracy the structures of which they are definitely a part. Similarly, Hume's Theory of Ideas explains interesting phenomena of self-reference; it does not map the precise location of every perception and identify with accuracy the structures of which they are definitely a part. This analogy reveals some of the underlying assumptions (e.g. that Hume needs to explain why the phenomena appear as they do or that Hume believes his Theory aims at giving a true, accurate portrait of how the world "really is") one would have to make in order to think Hume's Theory is explanatorily inadequate in the way suggested by TCH3, but there is no compelling reason to make these assumptions. In fact, doing so makes Hume's undertaking less successful and, as charitable interpreters, I should think we would want to avoid this.

Let us proceed to TCH4, which has it that Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that the relations of resemblance and causation alone cannot bind the contents of our mind-bundles. TCH4 seems to make good sense of the text. Hume

claims that his second thoughts about his account of personal identity arise when he “proceed[s] to explain the principle of connexion, which binds [our particular perceptions] together” (SBN 635), and TCH4 maintains that Hume’s second thoughts concern principles of connection. However, TCH4 assumes incorrectly that Hume is tasked with drawing the boundaries between minds and “getting it right”, as though there are fixed bundles of perceptions that *are*, in a robust metaphysical sense, my mind and your mind and so forth. Hume is not tasked with this project. Hume’s project is to develop a theory capable of generating analyses of empirical phenomena, such as self-reference. Such phenomena are explicable *in terms of* bundles of perceptions. Bundles of perceptions, considered as fixed, unique, and person-constituting, are not themselves phenomena *of* which Hume must deliver an explanation. Bundles *explain* what we call “persons”; persons are not bundles. Whether the relations of causation and resemblance are up to the explanatory task of accounting for verbal and non-verbal self-references is an empirical question to be answered through examination of cases. Proponents of TCH4 conclude that causation and resemblance are inadequate to the task almost *a priori* on account of a lingering attachment to the Cartesian ego. They maintain that the mind contains perceptions related neither by causation nor by resemblance. Why would they think this? It is very likely that they think this because *they* are coming to the project with Cartesian baggage, not Hume. They think there is “more to it,” but their “more to it” is empirically suspect in Hume’s view. The relations of causation and resemblance can be fairly dismissed as jointly inadequate only after finding a sufficient number of actual cases of verbal and non-verbal self-references for which the relations are unable to account. The jury, it would seem, is still out on that.

Finally, let us consider TCH5. TCH5 had it that Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by the realization that his Theory could not explain how it is that we can bundle the perceptions that compose the mind and simultaneously bundle other perceptions into ordinary objects considered distinct from the mind. For example, it is unclear how one can simultaneously identify one's car both as a single object which persists through time *and* as a part of one's mind. TCH5 identifies a problem that arises at a greater level of complexity than the previous hypotheses. TCH1-TCH4 have Hume's Theory failing at a rather superficial level (i.e., they maintain that Hume's Theory is poorly constructed and straightforwardly fails to accommodate the phenomena it was developed to explain); which should raise our suspicions, as it is unlikely that as talented a philosopher as Hume would have committed errors at such a low level of sophistication. TCH5, to its credit, has Hume's Theory failing only after attempted application to very complicated phenomena. However, lurking behind TCH5 is a set of questions about boundary drawing similar to those lurking behind TCH3, and the response to TCH3 can, with superficial modifications, be applied to TCH5. TCH5 assumes that Hume's success depends upon his ability to carve nature at the joints. However, Hume is not interested in this ontological enterprise. That we distinguish between our ideas of objects as we see them composing "our minds" and the objects themselves is given in experience. Hume's Theory of Ideas is a framework for understanding that experience and not an explanation of why that experience presents itself as it does.

Section 4.3: Treatise 1.4.6 Reconsidered

Now that we have considered many of the interpretive errors that occur with respect to *Treatise* 1.4.6, let us develop an interpretation which avoids such misunderstandings.

Consider again some important passages from the *Treatise*. Hume writes, “when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other”; and also, “I may venture to affirm to the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (SBN 252). Hume is *not*, it seems to me, claiming that each one of us is composed of a particular discrete bundle of perceptions, as the crude characterization of the bundle theory might be taken reasonably to indicate. On the contrary, he seems to be claiming that in his own case and very likely in the case of others, the perceptions that compose what we call the “self” change, sometimes dramatically. The perceptions which co-occur with Hume’s own self-references change; he encounters “one perception or another,” not the same bundle or set of bundles each time. The perceptions of which others are composed are in “perpetual flux” and “succeed each other” as well. In short, *there is no unique analysis of verbal or non-verbal self-reference in one’s own case or in the case of others*. This is an application of Claim Three of my interpretive hypothesis. To believe that Hume thinks this is possible is to misunderstand an important feature of the Theory of Ideas. Again, according to Hume’s Theory, words mean, in large part, the ideas with which they are associated. ‘Self’ does not co-occur with the same idea, or set of ideas, every time it is uttered, inscribed, read, or thought. This is opposed to the view that has it that the word ‘self’ tightly corresponds, or is supposed to tightly correspond, to a fixed idea or set of ideas. By “fixed idea or set of ideas” I mean to capture the notion that Moe, for instance, is essentially one set of highly specific perceptions, nothing more and nothing less. There is not, on Hume’s view, a fixed idea or set of ideas correspondent to ‘self.’ Rather, there is whatever perceptions are present any time I or you make reference to our selves.

Consider a few examples of self reference: “My opinion on the matter is...,” “I felt myself becoming nervous and...,” “So much of my identity has to do with being...,” and so forth. In each case, the ideas co-occurring with the near synonyms ‘my,’ ‘myself,’ and ‘my identity’ are very different.

I have claimed that Hume’s account of personal identity in *Treatise* 1.4.6 does not assign to each “self” a particular, fixed, discrete bundle of perceptions, and that, in fact, it maintains that a different bundle is associated with nearly every verbal or non-verbal self-reference. Hume does not offer a metaphysical theory of personal identity. Rather, he offers an explanation in terms of perceptions of what is happening when we take ourselves and others to be “the same” over time. As evidence in support of this hypothesis, I point to what Hume does soon after introducing his alternative. Hume proceeds to consider cases in order to show that identity attributions are associated with sets of related perceptions; not the same perception or set of perceptions.¹²¹ Almost no one draws attention to this part of *Treatise* 1.4.6, even though Hume devotes *nine* paragraphs to it (SBN 255-9). I take this to be strong evidence in favor of the claim that Hume does not intend to explain or locate “*the* idea of the self,” but rather to give an analysis in terms of perceptions of different cases of verbal or non-verbal self-reference. It is a common mistake in the Hume literature to assume that Hume needs or intends to stably track an idea or set of ideas when he employs a given term, ‘self’ for example; but there is a more plausible interpretation according to which Hume is not on a wild goose chase after a single idea or set of ideas which seem unable to satisfy his Theory. Again, Hume’s Theory delivers analyses in terms of perceptions of *cases* of self-reference; it

¹²¹ Terrence Penelhum is among very few commentators who devote attention to any of the cases Hume examines, and Penelhum considers only two: the noise and the church. Mascarenhas assigns the cases an important role in Hume’s “mistake” with respect to personal identity, but does not discuss the cases in detail.

does not attempt to explain what this *one thing*, the self, could possibly be. There is no such thing for which the Theory must account. To maintain that there is, is to commit the Big Idea Error.

Hume considers at least seven cases of identity attribution. Interestingly, the cases he considers are not cases of *personal* identity attribution. Hume asserts that “the same method of reasoning must be cont’d, which has so successfully explain’d the identity of plants, and animals, and ships, and houses, and of all the compounded and changeable productions either of art or of nature” (SBN 259). This is interesting, but perhaps not surprising. Hume’s brand of empiricism commits him to seeing humans as part of the natural order, in no need of special explanation.¹²² Hume considers “any mass of matter,” a planet, a ship, an oak tree, a repetitious noise, a brick church rebuilt in stone, and a flowing river. Slightly different lessons may be gleaned from each, but all seven make the same point. Hume’s point is that we never really pick out just *one* thing with our identity attributions, that the “objects” to which we attribute identity are always changing, yet we call them “identical.” Our identity attributions to humans, Hume claims, work in precisely the same ways as our identity attributions to all other things, which is consistent with Hume’s naturalism (i.e., there is nothing ontologically or explanatorily special about human beings) and his brand of empiricism (i.e., generalizations are not nearly as informative as considering each case individually). The point of considering all of these cases, I contend, is show that ‘identity’ and ‘self’ do not stably co-occur with any particular perceptions or sets of perceptions.¹²³ Furthermore, Hume does not intend them to.

¹²² Hume likely found 2.27 of Locke’s *Essay*, “Of Identity and Diversity,” very suggestive on this topic.

¹²³ More likely, they stably signify a revival set, as Garrett has it.

Hume observes that we observe nothing that *really* unites the perceptions to which we attribute identity. Rather, our attributions derive solely from the associative principles of resemblance and causation. I will not consider Hume's discussion of those two principles here, though I think there are many deep questions raised by that discussion. I would like to forge ahead a few paragraphs:

[A]ll the nice and subtile questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties. Identity depends on the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion. But as the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity. (SBN 262)

This passage might lead us to think that the bundle theory is no theory, and certainly no alternative to the Cartesian view, at all. Indeed, in light of the preceding paragraphs and this quotation, it seems that Hume is not trying to elucidate a certain view of personal identity, but rather to dispense with the search for a philosophical view on personal identity that assumes 'self' is strictly associated with something unique and fixed all-together. The term "bundle theory" is misleading, for it implies that Hume has a *theory* of personal identity, and we are now and in a position to see that he does not. Instead he has a theory that explains our identity attributions; namely, the Theory of Ideas. This is why, I strongly suspect, Hume dedicates so much time to the discussion of various cases of identity attribution and to the associative mechanisms that explain those attributions. Hume's story is not one about the nature of the self, but rather about the nature of our verbal and non-verbal references to what we call "the self." Hume does not provide us with necessary and sufficient conditions for self-identity. On the contrary, "we have no just standard" of identity, so the best we can hope for is what Hume gives us: a theoretical apparatus capable of explaining various cases of

identity attribution.¹²⁴ There is no metaphysical theory of the self in *Treatise* 1.4.6, but only an application of the Theory of Ideas to the subject of personal identity.

An Alternative Explanation

According to the account of *Treatise* 1.4.6 I have just presented, Hume commits no grave errors and leaves no fundamental explananda unexplained, so now the question falls to me: what was Hume's problem with personal identity? In response, I offer PTH:

Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* are brought on by reflection on his pre-Theoretical opinions, those he formed before undertaking the *Treatise*. Once Hume completes his work, he attempts to achieve something like reflective equilibrium. He reflects on the claims of his Theory with respect to personal identity as compared to his pre-Theoretical opinions on the same subject. He expresses existential, spiritual, psychological, or perhaps emotional dissatisfaction with what the analyses of his Theory reveal about personal identity. He does not conclude that he must have committed some grave error in constructing or applying his Theory. Rather, he concludes that his Theoretical and pre-Theoretical understanding of personal identity are not entirely consistent. Neither his Theory nor any other theory applied to the same subject can entirely accommodate or explain away all of Hume's pre-Theoretical notions of personal identity.

¹²⁴ The *Oxford English Dictionary* has two relevant entries for "just" as it is used by Hume. Hume might have meant "well-founded, supported by reason" or "in accordance with truth or fact; Right; Correct." I think the latter definition is most appropriate here. Hume's discussion of cases, I have argued, is intended to show that we attribute identity in disparate contexts. Put differently, we apply no common standard of identity in all cases of identity attribution. Thus, I think it is reasonable to conclude that Hume here means that we are not in possession of a true or correct standard of identity since we never seem to employ one; not that we hope or strive for one, but fail to find justification for it. William Edward Morris' "Belief, Probability, Normativity" brought these definitions to my attention.

My assessment of the *Appendix* confession relies crucially upon Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and its corollary: **the *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas (it explicates, applies, compares, and meta-theoretically evaluates the Theory) and in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.** The relationships between these components generate significant exegetical and interpretive difficulties. The question we ought to be asking ourselves with respect to the *Appendix* confession is, “which of the tasks just delineated is Hume up to?” Our answer should place Hume in the best possible light, the light in which his project is the most philosophically consistent. To that end, let us revisit an important passage:

I find myself involved in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent. If this be not a good *general* reason for skepticism, ‘tis at least a sufficient one (if I were not already abundantly supplied) for me to entertain a diffidence and modesty in all my decisions. (SBN 633)

Hume refers to his “former opinions.” He seems exasperated that he cannot “render them consistent.” Finally, he is humbled by his predicament and claims to have good reason to “entertain a diffidence and modesty in all” his decisions. Three questions naturally present themselves. First, the question with which we started, *which* former opinions? Second, with *what* can Hume not render those former opinions consistent? Finally, what sort of inconsistency would compel Hume to entertain modesty in *all* his decisions?

Before entertaining answers to the questions just raised, allow me to briefly review the remaining two and half pages of this infamous appendix entry. Approximately one and a half of those pages are simply review of what has already been claimed in *Treatise* 1.4.6.

The final two paragraphs of the entry, however, introduce some new and puzzling lines of thought. Two passages from those paragraphs are important:

[T]he thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind, the ideas of them are felt to be connected together, and naturally induce each other. However extraordinary this conclusion may seem, it need not surprize us. Most philosophers seem inclin'd to think, that personal identity arises from consciousness; and consciousness is nothing but a reflected thought or perception. The present philosophy, therefore, has so far a promising aspect. But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness. I cannot discover any theory, which gives me satisfaction on this head. (SBN 635-6)

In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences*, and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*. Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there would be no difficulty in the case. For my part, I must plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding. (SBN 636)

The second passage is supposed to illuminate just what Hume cannot render consistent. However, as we have already observed, there is no inconsistency expressed here. This brings us back to the second question raised in the previous paragraph: just what is Hume having trouble rendering consistent? An answer to the first question, “*which* former opinions?,” will help us to answer the second.

These questions are best answered by first determining, in accordance with Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis, which of the tasks delineated in the paragraph above (motivation, explication, application, evaluation, or comparison) Hume takes up in the *Appendix*. The first question was, “*which* former opinions?” A pervasive assumption in the secondary literature is that the opinions are opinions concerning Hume’s theoretical apparatus, as in TCH1-TCH5. This leads to a mystery, as it does not seem that Hume’s Theory of Ideas is inconsistent on the matter of personal identity. Consider another

alternative: the opinions Hume speaks of in this case are his *pre-Theoretical* opinions, as PTH has it. Hume is engaged in a meta-theoretical task in the *Appendix*, the task of evaluating his Theory and its competitors from a perspective external to pure theorizing. Hume is grappling with the reconciliation between his pre-Theoretical opinions and the analyses of personal identity generated by his Theory.

Now we have an answer to the second question in hand. What Hume cannot render consistent is his pre-Theoretical understanding of the self with his Theory's analyses of the self. Hume tells us that he "cannot discover *any* theory" that gives him "satisfaction on this head" (SBN 635, my italics). I liken Hume's position to that of a chemist engaged in somewhat existential reflection on the relationship between her work and her pre-theoretical beliefs. The chemist might think, "My theory says that I am just a collection of atoms, but there's got to be more to me than *that*." Like Hume, she may consider alternative theories that might better fit with both her principles as a scientist and her pre-theoretical notions of herself, but she may find "no satisfaction on this head." Does this mean that the chemist finds fault with her theory *qua* theory? I think not. She will probably retain her theory because, though it does not satisfy all of her spiritual and emotional needs, it is a good theory. She might do precisely what Hume does in response to the crisis brought on by the analyses of one's theory, and that is to humble oneself in the face of human reasoning. Now, Hume is different from the chemist in an important respect: feelings are not completely outside of the realm of theorizing for Hume; they play an integral role in Hume's explanation of human belief. Hume's Theory actually predicts his crisis. His feelings of dissatisfaction do lower his degree of belief in his theory, but this does not amount to a retraction of the Theory or the development of serious concern with it. Feelings might lower his *all-things-*

considered degree of confidence in his Theory, but unless there are alternative theories in which he has a higher degree of confidence, there is no cause for retraction or allegations of *theoretical* inconsistency.¹²⁵

Hume's explicit mention of inconsistent *principles*, might, understandably, lead one to think Hume's second thoughts simply *must be* theoretical in nature. I agree that they are *in part* theoretical, but they are not, I claim, *purely* theoretical. They take as *one* of their objects Hume's pre-Theoretical beliefs. In the Appendix passage, Hume stands outside of and attempts to reconcile two sides of himself: Hume the theoretician, who is deeply committed to the principles of his Theory, and Hume the ordinary person, who remains in the grips of the deeply entrenched belief that human beings are special creatures whose nature cannot be captured with the same posits and connecting principles as everything else in the empirical world. Hume the theoretician is committed to the following two principles: "*that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*" (SBN 636). Hume the ordinary person believes that his problem would disappear if the following circumstances obtained: "Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them" (SBN 636). This sentence may be plausibly interpreted as suggesting that Hume's second thoughts would vanish if there were some way to distinguish the self from all other empirical objects, but his theoretical principles will not allow it. This is why the meta-Theoretical Hume, the Hume who stands outside Hume the theoretician and Hume the ordinary person writes, "For my part, I must plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding" (SBN 636). This Hume cannot

¹²⁵ I am grateful to Robert Adams for discussing the role of feelings in Hume's theorizing with me.

see how to reconcile or render consistent the two other Humes (Hume the theoretician and Hume the ordinary person), both of whom are deeply important to him.¹²⁶

Finally, we now have an answer to the third question, “what would compel Hume to adopt modesty toward *all* of his decisions?” Well, not, I think, a few theoretical wrinkles in his account of personal identity. Why would one “entertain modesty” in *all* of one’s decisions because of that? Why not just those decisions having to do with matters of personal identity? These questions, of course, are rhetorical. I think Hume’s problem in the *Appendix* is more existential, more personal, than theoretical in nature. He humbles himself and feels compelled toward modesty because the account of personal identity his science of human nature yields embarrasses his pre-Theoretical understanding of himself. Hume, the gregarious life-lover, must reckon with the verdict of his science of human nature, which leaves him with a “is that all there is?” feeling. Hume’s Theory has it that all ascriptions of personal identity are completely explicable in terms of perceptions and relations between perceptions; just as all other phenomena in the science of human nature are. Thus, my claims that my mother is an excellent mother who has supported me through thick and thin, or that citizen X is a committed public servant who has worked selflessly to better the lives of others, or that I always try my very best, or that mass murderer Y is a sinister and heartless monster; are completely explicable in terms of and reducible to perceptions and relations between perceptions. Murderers and torturers, as well as philanthropists and humanitarians, are explicable in terms of precisely the same machinery as are tables and chairs. Though that verdict is hard to accept for reasons of personal, spiritual, social, or existential significance,

¹²⁶ I am grateful to Simon Blackburn for discussing the text of the *Appendix* in detail with me. Our discussion helped illuminate how I was thinking about Hume’s curious treatment of the two principles he identifies in the *Appendix*.

its theoretical standing cannot be diminished except by superior theories. Hume's pre-Theoretical opinions might lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with his Theory, but so long as he reasons that his Theory is the best available, then there is no serious philosophical problem with it. We do not reject biology because it tells us that we are primates with particularly large frontal lobes, though we might be disappointed by that verdict. Only competing biological theories, not existential or emotional responses, are capable of significantly shaking our confidence in the leading theory.

The dissatisfaction Hume expresses in the *Appendix*, like the dissatisfaction he expresses in *Treatise* 1.4.7, the conclusion of Book I, concerns *not* his Theory of Ideas or the results of its application; but rather his *pre*-Theoretical self-conception as compared to his Theory's analyses of "the self."¹²⁷ Hume does not offer a metaphysical theory of the self which he later regrets. Rather, he applies the theoretical apparatus he carefully developed in the preceding sections, the Theory of Ideas, and with it succeeds in both refuting the Cartesian view and in providing the means to explain in terms of perceptions what is meant by "the self" and all other verbal and non-verbal self-references. Hume's second thoughts in the *Appendix* do not concern his Theory qua theory; they concern his pre-Theoretical self-conception as compared to the results of the application of his Theory, which is a personal matter. Perhaps Hume (and I strongly suspect he is not alone in this) has deep and lingering anti-naturalist intuitions. He set out to explain all empirical phenomena using a single theoretical apparatus and succeeded only to find that some part of him, a very personal part, did not want everything to be explicable in terms of that apparatus. At one level of discourse, he is pleased that such personal-identity invoking notions as being a good parent

¹²⁷ *Treatise* 1.4.7 is the subject of Chapter Five.

or citizen, or a bad parent or citizen, are completely explicable in terms of the Theory. At another level of discourse, Hume is surrounded by pre-Theoretical, anti-naturalist baggage; and is disappointed to find out that we are on a par with everything else in the empirical universe and that “the cat is on the mat” is explicable in terms of the same posits and connecting principles as “Suzie is a selfless and dedicated humanitarian.” Hume’s dissatisfaction with his Theory’s analysis of personal identity is personal dissatisfaction; his labyrinth is a labyrinth of levels of discourse.

CHAPTER FIVE

HUME'S CONCLUSION

In the preceding Chapters an interpretive hypothesis was developed and, through application, defended. My interpretive hypothesis offered a radical new way to understand Hume's Theory of Ideas according to which it supports, rather than undermines, his science of human nature. I considered three lingering interpretive difficulties in the Hume studies literature: the missing shade of blue, issues related to Hume's account of object identity, and issues related to Hume's account of personal identity and its apparent retraction. All three subjects are thought to display the inadequacy of Hume's Theory of Ideas. However, if my interpretive hypothesis is adopted, the difficulties associated with these subjects, commonly thought to lead to the dismissal of Hume's Theory of Ideas, are easily handled or do not arise. This investigation into Hume's Theory of Ideas began with consideration of the influential skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy. Let us return once more to that dichotomy, which has it that Hume can have either his Theory of Ideas *or* a robust science of human nature, but he cannot have both because his Theory of Ideas undermines his science of human nature. *Treatise* 1.4.7, *Conclusion of this book*, is perhaps the clearest expression of the tension that fuels the long-standing skepticism-naturalism interpretive dichotomy. In this section, Hume himself seems to express serious doubts about the claims he advanced in the preceding sections and about his justification for the development of the two books that

follow.¹²⁸ It is widely accepted that *Hume* seems worried that perhaps his Theory of Ideas has destroyed any hopes of developing a science of human nature by the close of Book I. However, I think there is an alternative explanation of Hume's apparent exasperation in *Treatise* 1.4.7. If one adopts my interpretive hypothesis, then one may argue that Hume does not call into question the viability of his science of human nature given his restrictive theoretical commitments. In this Chapter I will argue that this quintessential example of the mutually undermining relationship between Hume's Theory of Ideas and science of human nature rests on a misunderstanding. First, I will explicate the basic structure of *Treatise* 1.4.7. Then, I will suggest an alternative to the traditional "skeptical crisis" interpretation of *Treatise* 1.4.7 that depends crucially upon Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis and its corollary: **The *Treatise* executes several tasks with respect to the Theory of Ideas: it explicates, applies, compares, and meta-theoretically evaluates the Theory; and in order to interpret the Theory properly, careful attention must be paid to each of these tasks and the overall dialectical structure of the *Treatise*.**

I, following closely Garrett, maintain that *Treatise* 1.4.7 has a roughly tripartite structure: Hume begins by considering sources of skepticism in the preceding sections, he then offers a set of descriptions of the psychological states that result from his previous considerations, and he closes with a discussion of the all things considered place of skepticism in philosophy. Hume has offered a theory in Book I, the Theory of Ideas, and employed it in pursuit of many theoretical ends, but before he delves into the more practical concerns of Books II and III, he pauses to reflect. The precise object of his reflection remains to be shown. His

¹²⁸ For nice, in-depth treatments of 1.4.7, see Chapter 10 of Garrett's *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, Garrett's 'Hume's Conclusions in "Conclusion of This Book",' Morris's "Hume's Conclusion," Baier's *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Treatise*, and Allison's "Hume's Philosophical Insouciance: A Reading of *Treatise* 1.4.7."

reflection leads him to (apparently) consider himself reckless for venturing forth into Books II and III “in the same leaky weather-beaten vessel” (SBN 263). He laments “the wretched condition, weakness, and disorder of the faculties, [he] must employ in [his] enquiries” (SBN 264). Our reason, Hume observes, is not up to the tasks we thought it was, and “the memory, senses, and understanding are, therefore, all of them founded on the imagination, or the vivacity of our ideas” (SBN 265). He continues:

No wonder a principle so inconstant and fallacious shou’d lead us into errors, when implicitly follow’d (as it must be) in all its variations. ‘Tis this principle, which makes us reason from causes to effects; and ‘tis this same principle, which convinces us of the continu’d and distinct existence of external objects, when absent from the senses. (SBN 265-266)

In short, Hume expresses disappointment that the imagination, commonly thought to be unreliable and fanciful, is the backbone of our intricate web of beliefs, while reason has “little or no influence upon us” (SBN 268). Reason ought to convince us that many of our beliefs are without foundation, for example it should teach us that the connection between cause and effect “lies merely in ourselves” and, more relevant to our present inquiry, that it is contradictory or meaningless to think of properties as “residing in the external object” (SBN 266-267), but it has no power over us in these matters. The imagination, in contrast, is quite powerful with respect to such things. That is why it is vain to ask whether body exists or not; the imagination will not allow us to believe that it does not, regardless of what reason has to say on the matter. If it is not by way of reason that we, for example, arrive at our belief in the continued and distinct existence of objects, should we proceed with business as usual, or should we adopt a different attitude toward our beliefs in the continued and distinct existence of objects? Should we simply yield to nature, as we are evidently inclined to do, or resist it?

Hume finds himself in a self-described “dangerous dilemma” where he has “no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all” (SBN 268). If he accepts all that is suggested to him by the fancy, the unreliable part of the imagination, then he is susceptible to incompatible, absurd, or ridiculous beliefs. He will not be able to do science or philosophy because he will have no solid foundation from which to engage in systematic thought. On the other hand, if he accepts only what is suggested to him by the understanding, the part of the imagination that seems to reason well, he is in no better position.¹²⁹ The understanding alone “leaves us not the lowest degree of evidence in any proposition, either in philosophy or in common life” (SBN 267-268). If we reject the fancy, we reject the part of the imagination that saves reason from self-subversion. Even our most certain conclusions are merely probable. If we subject a given judgment to further judgment, that further judgment, too, is merely probable. The combined probability of our judgments diminishes the more we subject our judgments to judgment. If we subjected our judgments to judgment *ad infinitum*, we would lose confidence in all of our beliefs. Fortunately, the trivial feature of the imagination forces the mind back to its original judgments and allows us to continue on in the ordinary course of our lives.¹³⁰ Hume does not know how to solve the dilemma, he knows only “what is commonly done” (SBN 268), and that is simply to forget about, or ignore, it. Such considerations as these seldom occur to anyone, and when they do, they are quickly forgotten.

The second part of the tripartite structure is Hume’s description of the psychological states brought on by his previous considerations. He first finds himself in a state of

¹²⁹ When Hume speaks of “parts” of the imagination, I will take him to be referring to nothing over and above the having of ideas.

¹³⁰ See *Treatise* 1.4.1.

“melancholy” and “delirium” at “these manifold contradictions and imperfections in human reason” so intense that he is “ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another” (SBN 268-269). His antidote for this state is to “dine...play a game of backgammon...converse...[be] merry with friends” and then after “three or four hours amusement” the considerations that worked him into his melancholy and delirium “appear so cold, and strain’d, and ridiculous” that he cannot “enter into them any farther” (SBN 269). Upon exiting the state of melancholy and delirium, Hume finds himself “absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life” (SBN 269). He wants to be free and easy, indolent, and pleasure seeking, not worrying about the troubles that accompany philosophical inquiry. He appears skeptical, as he can see no good reason for taking philosophy up again. However, with the help of what Garrett has dubbed the “Title Principle”, Hume finds his way back to philosophy: “Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it can have no title to operate on us” (SBN 270). Hume begins to feel the sort of lively inclination or propensity just described in the Title Principle. That is, he begins to have a “curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern” him (SBN 270-271). He believes religion and superstition to be more dubious than philosophy insofar as they are employed to discover such principles, and so he decides to pursue philosophy once more.

The status of the Title Principle is somewhat abstruse. It is unclear where it fits in Hume’s Theory. I am inclined to think it fits somewhere outside the Theory, a meta-Theoretical principle of sorts. Just as a chemist or physicist might take up a perspective

outside atomic theory in order to consider why we ought to endorse it, Hume takes up a perspective outside the Theory of Ideas in order to consider why we ought to endorse it. The chemist or physicist might conclude that there are problems with atomic theory, but that we cannot abandon it because it is the best option we have, and doing so would mean the end of many important scientific inquiries. Similarly, Hume might observe from outside the perspective of the Theory of Ideas that there are problems with it, but that we cannot abandon it because it is the best option we have, and doing so would mean giving up the “curiosity to be acquainted with the principles of moral good and evil, the nature and foundation of government, and the cause of those several passions and inclinations, which actuate and govern” us along with all of the pursuits of Book I (SBN 270-271). The chemist or the physicist can do a great deal with her theory despite its problems at the meta or extra theoretical level, so, too, can Hume.

Hume’s Title Principle is not unlike Descartes’ Truth Rule. Descartes instructs us in the *First Meditation* to “hold back [our] assent from opinions which are not completely certain and indubitable just as carefully as [we] do from those which are patently false.”¹³¹ Both are phenomenological criteria governing assent either to a mental operation or the product of a mental operation. Descartes’ Truth Rule tells us to refrain from judgment when we can possibly resist it. Hume’s Title Principle assures us that it is acceptable to move forward with a line of inquiry or a judgment when we experience a liveliness and propensity, but that without a liveliness and propensity, reason has no authority over our assent. Both Descartes and Hume are responding to the effects of the great human skeptical crisis. How can we go on with our lives as before knowing that most of our beliefs lack rational support?

¹³¹ CSM II 17

Descartes takes himself to have recovered some of that rational support, and the Truth Rule is one of his tools for doing so. Hume may have given up on ever recovering rational support, but perhaps he gives us a practical tool for navigating through our mental lives anyway.

The nature of Hume's Title Principle is unclear. It is not obviously practical, or descriptive, or normative. The first half of the Title Principle seems to offer a practical or epistemic norm. If it is practical, then it governs something like life in general, and can be seen as a sort of hypothetical imperative: if we want to be able to act, and not be paralyzed by the lack of justification we have in all of our reasoning, then it is practical or prudential to assent to reason when it is lively and strong. If it is epistemic, then it says something a bit stronger, such as: there is epistemic merit or value in assenting to reason when it is lively and accompanied by a propensity, and something like epistemic fault in assenting to reason when it is not. The second half of the Title Principle seems to be more descriptive in nature: as a matter of fact, without a certain amount of liveliness and a propensity, reason does not motivate us to assent. Reason alone, from a purely descriptive perspective, either does not operate on us, or, from a more normative perspective, should not operate on us when it is not enlivened. Now we are in a position to see the Title Principle in a different light. Perhaps it lies within the Theory after all. The Title Principle may simply state that only certain ways of having ideas are accompanied by assent. The assent itself is simply a way of having an idea. This is really just more of the same. Hume has already explained that there is a great difference between merely thinking about, for example, a boulder rolling down a cliff in your direction, and actually believing that a boulder is headed straight for you.

With that digression behind us, let us proceed to the third element in the tripartite structure of 1.4.7: Hume's consideration of the role of skepticism in philosophy. Evidently

skepticism should not figure so prominently in philosophy that Hume could not go on to write Books II and III, as he did, we know, go on to write them. In explaining the role and place of skepticism in Hume's philosophy, Garrett makes a helpful distinction between the rational justification of beliefs and the epistemic merit of beliefs, claiming that rational justification is not always a necessary pre-condition of epistemic merit. Garrett also claims:

[that] the Title Principle provides a consistent principle of epistemic merit that can be accepted and permanently endorsed by philosophers, including Hume himself, who could not proceed to investigate the passions and morals of Books 2 and 3 of the *Treatise* without it.¹³²

Garrett reads the Title Principle strongly, and thinks Hume takes it to be an epistemic principle, not merely a practical one. He claims that to “continue to pursue [philosophy] in accordance with the Title Principle depends on premises that must themselves be accepted as true or as likely to be true, and not merely as pleasurable.”¹³³ A large part of our taking pleasure in doing philosophy is, Garrett thinks, the discovery of philosophical truths. Garrett claims that the reactions contained in 1.4.7 are all of them Hume's, and that Hume genuinely reaches a kind of peace with doing philosophy on the basis of the principle of epistemic merit provided him in the Title Principle. At the end of the day, Garrett thinks, Hume is a mitigated epistemic skeptic who can pursue, though not dogmatically, a naturalist project.

I agree with most other commentators that the apprehensions expressed in the first part of *Treatise* 1.4.7 belong to Hume. I would like to take a closer look, however, at the nature of those apprehensions and Hume's reactions to them. What is the status of the problems Hume discovers in *Treatise* 1.4.7? Are they undermining, philosophical problems,

¹³² Garrett, “Hume's Conclusions in *Conclusion of this Book*,” p. 170.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

or are do they also have, as William Edward Morris suggests, a “spiritual and psychological” dimension?¹³⁴ Did Hume really mean to call into question arguments he made in the preceding sections, such as his account of causation (which he then rather curiously chose to emphasize in the *Abstract*), or were the problems he sensed so palpably more existential in nature? I suggest that they were largely spiritual, psychological, and existential in nature. Hume was writing in his own voice, but from a meta-theoretical perspective, one in which we might entertain thoughts of a more spiritual bent. Consider Kim the Chemist who *qua* chemist believes that she is really a collection of atoms. Now suppose Kim takes up a perspective outside chemistry from which she considers what implications her beliefs *qua* chemist have on existential questions. Kim may be disappointed that she “is *only* a collection of atoms”; she may have trouble accepting that “*that’s* all there is to Kim.” Similarly, Hume has put forward a theory that uncovers, explains, and predicts human nature. *Qua* practitioner of the Theory of Ideas, Hume believes that the imagination is of primary importance to our mental lives, that reason is, at best, secondary, and that our mental faculties are less impressive than we supposed. Once Hume steps outside of that Theory, he is forced to reconcile his self-conception and his conception of others with the results of his Theory. Hume, perhaps uncharacteristically, feels disappointment at something very much like the realization that we are not divine chips off the old block, that we are not special, and that we are on a par with everything else in the empirical universe. He is expressing very personal feelings of disappointment that humans are much less impressive than he had believed before pursuing philosophy.

¹³⁴ Morris, “Hume’s Conclusion,” p. 89.

I would also like to take a closer look at the character of Hume's re-entry into philosophical inquiry. Why does he decide to take up philosophy again? Is it because he has found some sort of justification on the basis of epistemic merit, as Garrett suggests? For now I would like to avoid considerations of epistemic merit and questions of justification. Consider Phil the physicist. Phil is a physicist likely because he thinks it is interesting and fulfilling and because he is curious about physical phenomena. Phil occasionally steps outside of his particular theory of choice, with an eye to doing physics, and considers the alternatives. Phil's "stepping outside" never includes serious reflection on how much physics can achieve in the grand scheme of life or on how justified he should feel doing physics all things considered. Phil is happy to come up with some reasonable measures of success within the domain of physics and to see whether his theory measures up. Hume, once he has dispensed with his delirium and melancholy, is in the position of Phil the physicist. He has shifted out of one type of extra-theoretical domain of discourse, one similar to the domain in which we find Kim the chemist, and into a different sort of extra-theoretical domain of discourse, one more like the domain in which we find Phil the physicist. Like Phil, Hume pursues philosophy because he likes it (i.e. he feels very inclined to engage in it, and he thinks he will find pleasure in doing it), he has a creditable (though perhaps not perfect) theory for doing it, and he thinks himself capable of some modest success defined within certain parameters:

While a warm imagination is allow'd to enter into philosophy, and hypotheses embrac'd merely for being specious and agreeable, we can never have any steady principles, nor any sentiments, which will suit with common practice and experience. But were these hypotheses once remov'd, we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hoped for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might, stand the test of the most critical examination. Nor shou'd we despair of attaining this end because of the many chimerical systems, which have successively arisen and decay'd away among men,

wou'd we consider the shortness of that period, wherein these questions have been the subjects of enquiry and reasoning. Two thousand years with such long interruptions, and under such mighty discouragements are a small space of time to give any tolerable perfection to the sciences; and perhaps we are still on too early an age of the world to discover any principles, which will bear the examination of the latest posterity. For my part, my only hope is, that I may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge, by giving in some particulars a different turn to the speculations of philosophers, and pointing out to them more distinctly those subjects, where alone they can expect assurance and conviction. Human nature is the only science of man; and yet has been hitherto neglected. 'Twill be sufficient for me, if I can bring it a little more into fashion; and the hope of this serves to compose my temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence, which sometimes prevails upon me. (SBN 272-273)

In this quotation Hume tells us that the principles he has employed in Book I and intends to employ in Books II and III are “if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hoped for),” then “might at least be satisfactory to the human mind and might, stand the test of the most critical examination.” He has already ruled out truth as a necessary condition for withstanding the most critical examination, so he must mean here that his Theory is quite sturdy under scrutiny. Hume also tells us that his goals are sensible. He knows his Theory might not stand the test of time, but nevertheless, he hopes he “may contribute a little to the advancement of knowledge” and bring human nature as a science “a little more into fashion.” Returning to question of why and whether Hume feels justified in continuing to do philosophy, I think he offers us a hypothetical imperative:

If the reader finds himself in the same easy disposition, let him follow me in my future speculations. If not, let him follow his inclination, and wait the returns of application and good humour. (SBN 273)

If you are like Phil the physicist or Hume, and you want to achieve some modest goals within a fairly circumscribed domain using tools that you know to be respectable though imperfect, then join in the fun. If not, then remain melancholy or purposively ignorant. Perhaps Hume does not need justification or proof of epistemic merit to continue on to Books II and III. He

has been transparent about his goals and methods, and he has not forced anyone to join his ranks. If one thinks he should not, in some strong sense, continue forward with Books II and III, then the onus is on that person to give an argument to that effect. If Hume does require justification or proof of epistemic merit in order to proceed with Books II and III, let his justification be no more burdensome than what is required of all other scientists. Let it be that he wants to explain and predict a certain set of phenomena to as great an extent as he can manage, that he has put forward a respectable theory for achieving that end, and that he is reasonable and modest in his goals.

I have yet to discuss the passage in *Treatise* 1.4.7 that might be taken to be *the* statement of Hume's skepticism:

The conduct of a man, who studies philosophy in this careless manner, is more truly sceptical than that of one, who feeling in himself an inclination to it, is yet so overwhelm'd with doubts and scruples, as to totally reject it. A true sceptic will be diffident of his philosophical doubts, as well as of his philosophical conviction; and will never refuse any innocent satisfaction, which offers itself, upon account of either of them. (SBN 273)

Here Hume, still in the meta-theoretical domain of discourse from which he considers how (not whether) to proceed, he considers what makes a "true sceptic." He contrasts two sorts of people: those who are paralyzed by skeptical doubts and those who do not allow them to stand in the way of philosophical pleasure. Hume calls the person who philosophizes in the face of skeptical doubts "more truly sceptical" than the person who is paralyzed by skeptical doubts. Little attention has been paid to this precise contrast. Why does Hume think he, and I do take him to be making a self-reference, is the "true sceptic"? Hume thinks, in my estimation, that he is the "true sceptic," because he moves forward with his inquiry as though he truly has nothing to lose. Whereas, the person who is paralyzed by skeptical doubts still has the fear of being wrong in some deep way. If there is no "right," or if we can never know

what “right” is, then who cares if you are not right? The “true sceptic” is in a position to try something useful, even if it can never be accepted as true. The other “sceptic” refuses to attempt understanding of the world because he is afraid of playing the fool. In other words, he is not really a skeptic, but actually comes down on one side.

Treatise 1.4.7 is not a retraction, or a skeptical manifesto, but rather an extra-theoretical consideration of the Theory of Ideas and its all things considered place in human life in general. The disappointment Hume expresses is not with his Theory, but with himself and all other sentient human beings. He is stunned not by how weak his Theory has turned out to be, but by how weak our faculties have turned out to be. One might be disappointed to find out that many celestial phenomena are common, inevitable, and easily explained, as opposed to magical and mysterious. It makes astronomy no less impressive, but it does put a check on our conception of the universe. The “leaky weather-beaten vessel” Hume speaks of is not his Theory, but humankind, with all of our limitations and shortcomings. Hume’s Theory remains ready for modest employment, if one considers a science of human nature a modest endeavor, and, actually, as Hume has construed his ends, I think it is.

What Treatise 1.4.7 Has to Do with Treatise 1.4.6

Treatise 1.4.7 is importantly related to another section of the *Treatise* we considered in the previous Chapter: the *Appendix* entry concerning *Treatise* 1.4.6. It is seldom noticed that the tone of *Treatise* 1.4.7 is very similar to the tone of the Hume’s *Appendix* “confession” of dissatisfaction with his account of personal identity. When Hume comes to the paragraphs concerning personal identity, he departs significantly from the expressed purpose of the *Appendix*, which he writes is to “[remedy this defect] that some of my expressions have not been so well chosen, as to guard against the all mistakes in the readers”

(SBN 623). Hume is not, in the case of personal identity, clarifying his thoughts for his readers. Far from preventing his readers from entering a labyrinth, he confesses that *he* finds *himself* in a labyrinth. One might agree with me (in accordance with Claim Four of my interpretive hypothesis) that Hume shifts tasks in the *Appendix*, but still maintain that *Treatise* 1.4.7 is only very tenuously connected to the *Appendix* confession given the chronological order of the texts: the *Appendix* comes *after* 1.4.7, and so cannot be a contributing factor to the existential crisis Hume may or may not be having there. However, there is textual evidence in *Treatise* 1.4.7 which suggests that Hume was having existential second thoughts about his account of personal identity before the *Appendix* was written. Given the location of the texts, it is fair to assume they would have been part of the same task or, at least, influenced by the same lines of thought. This is an important textual discovery. In both cases, Hume seems to express doubt and dissatisfaction at something we know not what. Both cases present interpreters with a mystery: what exactly does Hume find so dissatisfying? I suggest that Hume is dissatisfied for the same reasons in each case. In both the *Appendix* and in *Treatise* 1.4.7 Hume evaluates his Theory from *outside* the perspective of pure philosophical theorizing. He attempts to achieve something like reflective equilibrium between his pre-Theoretical opinions and the results of his theorizing.

Final Thoughts

I have attempted to show, in contrast to the two most influential ways of viewing Hume's overall philosophical project in his *Treatise* and related works, that Hume's Theory of Ideas is not only adequate to the tasks to which it is put, but is also the foundation on which all of Hume's significant philosophical achievements are built. Far from undermining Hume's science of human nature, the Theory of Ideas is the foundation of that very project.

The *Treatise* is an immense philosophical work, and there are many instances in which Hume's Theory of Ideas seems to crumble beneath him, too many to discuss them all in this dissertation. Though I have not completely redeemed the Theory of Ideas here, I hope I have resuscitated it and placed its reputation firmly on the road to recovery.

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