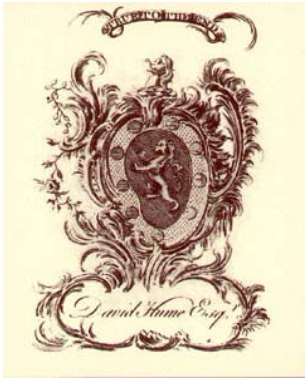

Hume and Abstract General Ideas
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HUME AND ABSTRACT GENERAL IDEAS

In his discussion of abstract ideas in the Treatise, Hume offers what "...may...be thought...a plain dilemma, that decides concerning the nature of those abstract ideas..."[1] He states the dilemma in these words:

> *The abstract idea of a man represents men of all sizes and all qualities; which 'tis concluded it cannot do, but either by representing at once all possible sizes and all possible qualities, or by representing no particular one at all. Now it having been esteemed absurd to defend the former proposition, as implying an infinite capacity in the mind, it has been commonly infer'd in favour of the latter; and our abstract ideas have been suppos'd to represent no particular degree either of quality or quantity.* (T, I,I,7, p.18)

However, with respect to this dilemma, Hume says:

> *But that this inference is erroneous, I shall endeavor to make appear, first, by proving, that 'tis utterly impossible to conceive any quantity or quality, without forming a precise notion of its degrees: And secondly by showing, that tho' the capacity of the mind be not infinite, yet we can at once form a notion of all possible degrees of quantity and quality, in such a manner at least, as, however imperfect, may serve all the purposes of reflexion and conversation.* (T, I,I,7, p. 18)

The second item Hume claims he is about to prove is aimed at the first disjunct of the above-stated dilemma; more specifically, it is aimed at the claim that

> (1) An abstract idea (e.g., of a man) represents all possible degrees of quantity and quality (in men) only if the human mind is infinite in capacity.

To show that (1) is false, Hume offers his own positive account of how ideas which are particular in nature may nevertheless be general in representation, even though the mind's capacity is finite. The first item Hume sets out to prove is aimed at the second disjunct, and conclusion, of the dilemma; it is aimed, that is, at

(2) Abstract ideas represent no particular degree of either quantity or quality.

In this paper I will be concerned solely with Hume's attack on (2); it is this attack in which Hume says I *"place my chief confidence."* (T,I,I,7, p. 24)

I

As stated, (2) is ambiguous, since it might be taken to mean that abstract ideas fail to represent altogether, or that they fail to represent any quantity or quality however construed. But, I believe, Hume means neither of these; he means, instead, that

(2a) Abstract ideas represent non-particular, indeterminate degrees of quantity or quality.

Now recall that Hume tries to refute (2a) by establishing, as he says, that

(3) It is impossible to conceive any quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees.

But how, by establishing (3), would Hume thereby refute or aid in the refutation of (2a)? And, for that matter, how does he support (3)?

Hume's case for (3) consists of three arguments, the respective conclusions of which are most pertinent here. He concludes his first argument by saying that

(4) *...the general idea of a line...has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality.* (T, I,I,7, p. 19)

The conclusion of the second argument is this:

(5) *An idea is a weaker impression; and as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the case must be the same with its copy or representative.* (T, I,I,7, p. 19)

and of the third it is this:

> (6) *Abstract ideas are therefore in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation. The image in the mind is only that of a particular object, tho' the application of it in our reasoning be the same, as if it were universal.* (T, I,I,7, p. 20)

Construed in a fully general way, these conclusions assert that

> (7) Each idea is determinate with respect to (degree of) quantity and quality.

But notice that (7) is not equivalent to, and does not obviously imply, (3). Hence, Hume's three arguments by themselves fail to establish (3), since none issues in a conclusion strong enough to warrant the use of the modal in (3).

Fortunately, Hume does not need (3); he can make do, instead, with

> (3a) No one ever conceives any quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees.

If we grant Hume the plausible assumption that

> (8) One conceives a quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees, only if one has an indeterminate idea of that quantity or quality,

then he will have established (3a) directly via inference from (7) and (8). Furthermore, establishing (3a) will help in refuting (2a). For Hume need simply argue that (2a) is true only if (3a) is false; and that (3a) is false only if (7) is false. But, since (7) is established, so Hume might reason, by means of his three arguments, we can conclude that (2a) is false. Fully laid out, Hume's argument would look like this:

> (9) Abstract ideas represent non-particular, indeterminate degrees of quantity or

quality only if people sometimes conceive a quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees.

(10) People sometimes conceive a quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees only if one has an indeterminate idea of that quantity or quality.

(11) Each idea is determinate with respect to (degree of) quantity and quality; i.e., statement (7) is true.

Therefore,

(12) No one ever conceives any quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees; i.e., statement (3a) is true. (10, 11)

Therefore,

(13) No abstract idea represents non-particular, indeterminate degrees of quantity or quality; i.e., statement (2a) is false. (9, 12)

When reconstructed in this way, the role of (3a) is made clear; and Hume's three arguments against abstract general ideas, and for statement (7), are shown to help support (3a) and, thereby, the refutation of (2a).

As remarked earlier, premise (10) is plausible (it is just a restatement of (8)); and, though (9) is subject to considerable debate depending on different meanings attached to 'represent', let us grant (9) for present purposes. The crucial premise is (11), which is our earlier-stated (7). This is the claim that Hume explicitly argues for; and it is, he clearly feels, the conclusion that secures his contention that there are no abstract general ideas. We turn next to these arguments, and to the contention just alluded to.

II

Hume's first argument on behalf of (7) relies

heavily on a principle relating entities that are different, distinguishable and separable. He states these matters as follows:

> *...We have observ'd, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And...these propositions are equally true in the inverse, and...whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and...whatever objects are distinguishable are also different.*
> (T, I,I,7, p. 18)

These general claims are then put to use concerning abstract ideas:

> *In order therefore to know, whether abstraction implies a separation, we need only consider it in this view, and examine, whether all the circumstances, which we abstract from in our general ideas, be such as are distinguishable and different from those, which we retain as essential parts of them. But 'tis evident at first sight, that the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself; nor the precise degree of any quality from the quality.*
> *These ideas, therefore, admit no more of separation than they do of distinction and difference. They are consequently conjoined with each other in the conception; and the general idea of a line, notwithstanding all our abstractions and refinements, has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality; however it may be made to represent others, which have different degrees of both.* (T, I,I,7, pp. 18-19)

Stated very broadly, Hume's argument here is that entities which are not different, distinguishable or separable in reality, are likewise not different, distinguishable or separable in idea or in thought. But, abstract general ideas would have to allow at least for separability in idea; hence, there are no abstract general (non-particular and indeterminate) ideas.

To fully state and evaluate this interesting argument, we need to be clear about the relevant technical

terms. Hume helps a little, since concerning his notion of difference he says that

> *Difference is of two kinds as oppos'd either to identity or resemblance. The first is called a difference of number; the other of kind.* (T, I,I,5, p. 15)

But Hume supplies virtually no clarification on his use of the terms 'distinguishable' and 'separable', except that he sometimes marks a difference between distinguishability and separability in thought and in reality. Still, I believe we can reconstruct what Hume intended. We will say that

> Two entities, x and y, are separable-in-re just in case:[2]
> either, (a) it is logically possible that x exists and y
> or, (b) it is logically possible that y exists and x does not exist

where the term 'entities' in this definition and in those to follow is taken very broadly. Next, we say that

> Two entities, x and y, are separable-in-idea just in case;[3]
> either, (a) it is logically possible that one have the idea of x and fail to have the idea of y;
> or, (b) it is logically possible that one have the idea of y and fail to have the idea of x.

We can explicate distinguishability along the following lines:

> Two entities, a and b, are distinguishable$_1$ just in case:
> There are non-equivalent consistent predicates, F and G, such that Fa is true and Gb is true, and such that:

either, (i) it is false that Fa logically implies Gb;

or, (ii) it is false that Gb logically implies Fa.

Notice that as defined, distinguishability$_1$ implies nothing with respect to whether a person can distinguish, or discriminate a from b. Yet Hume does seem to have the latter notion in mind, for instance when he asks, rhetorically,

> *...how is it possible we can separate what is not distinguishable, or distinguish what is not different?* (T, I,I,7, p. 18)

A person can separate two entities, I take it, just in case those entities are separable-in-idea, as defined above. But what is it for a person to be able to distinguish two entities? Roughly, it is that the person can identify the one entity, a, as being F without thereby identifying b or implying anything regarding b, or conversely. We may define this notion as follows:

Two entities, a and b, are distinguishable$_2$ just in case:

either, (i) a person's identification of a as F, or as having F, is logically independent of his identification of b as G, or as having G, for any consistent property G that is not equivalent to F;

or, (ii) a person's identification of b as G, or as having G, is logically independent of his identification of a as F or as having F, for any consistent property F that is not equivalent to G.

Given Hume's two claims that "*...whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination,...*" and that "*...whatever objects are separable are*

also distinguishable and...whatever objects are distinguishable are also different." (T, I,I,7, p. 18), it is clear that utilization of the above definitions in stating these claims will yield twelve different bi-conditional statements as interpretations of Hume's meaning. Fortunately, we will not need to investigate all of these, since Hume certainly does not use all or even most of them.

We are now in a position to state Hume's first argument for (7). We will state it as he does in terms of an example of a line of a specific length; but we will also assume that the argument can be readily generalized across all other examples. Hume asks whether "abstraction implies a separation", and offers his argument as a response to this query. I take him to be saying that

(14) There is an abstract general idea of the precise length of a line (i.e., an idea that is indeterminate with respect to length) only if the precise length of a line is separable-in-idea from the line.

(15) But, the actual precise length of a line is neither different nor distinguishable from the line.

(16) Two entities, x and y, are separable-in-re only if x is distinguishable from y.

(17) Hence, the actual precise length of a line is not separable-in-re from the line.

(18) If two entities, x and y, are not separable-in-re, then x and y are not separable-in-idea.

(19) Therefore, if (17), then the actual precise length of a line is not separable-in-idea from the line.

(20) Thus, it is false that the actual precise length of a line is separable-in-idea from the line.

Therefore,

(21) There is no abstract general idea of the precise length of a line.

Even if generalized, of course, (21) will apply only to quantity, and ideas thereof. But let us assume that a similar argument is available for qualities, as Hume clearly assumes, so that the overall conclusion is

(22) There is no abstract general idea of any quantity or quality, i.e., there is no idea that is indeterminate with respect to quantity or quality; i.e., (7), and premise (11) are true.

Premise (16) is just one part of a general principle Hume makes considerable use of.[4] It is most plausible, I believe, if the use of 'distinguishable' in it is reckoned as meaning 'distinguishable$_1$'. Thus, (15) has to be similarly understood so that, (having dropped reference to difference, which does not function in the argument as such), it becomes,

(15.1) The actual precise length of a line is not distinguishable$_1$ from the line.

But (15.1) is problematic.

To see why, notice that we may think of length in (at least) three distinct ways: (a) as a determinable which takes as instances various degrees of lengths; (b) as a determinate, specified as to degree, say six meters; (c) or, as a concrete instance of a determinate, say to specific six meter length measured on a straight line from my living room chair to the dining room wall.[5] Now (15.1) is surely true if (c) is utilized; and we may certainly suppose that Hume is not talking of lengths as determinables. However, while (15.1) is true on this reading, (14) is dubious. For, possession of an abstract idea of a length of a line would imply the separability-in-idea of some determinate from another, but not necessarily some concrete instance from another. On

the other hand, if (15.1) is interpreted along the lines of (b), then (15.1) seems plainly false. For,

(23) The line connecting point x on my living room chair and point y on the dining room wall is a straight line

does not imply

(24) The line connecting point x on my living room chair and point y on the dining room wall is six meters in length

where 'six meters in length' and 'straight line' designate determinates. Those two determinates, then, are distinguishable$_1$.

Imagine, though, that this objection to (15.1) could be overcome, and that both (14) and (15.1) are construed along the lines of (b), viz., as dealing with determinates rather than with concrete instances of determinates. In that case, even if the argument succeeded in establishing (7), there would be a problem. For so taken, (7) amounts to the claim that

(7.1) Each idea is determinate in the sense of (b), above, with respect to degree of quantity and quality

and partisans of abstract general ideas could embrace (7.1) with equanimity. For ideas determinate in the sense of (b) might well also be general, i.e., universal. Indeed, that is exactly how they would be best construed. Hume would thus have shown at best that no idea is a mere determinable; or, that we have no ideas of mere determinables, a contention that a proponent of abstract general ideas might well find acceptable. Hume's first argument, then, proves unsatisfactory either because it has a dubious premise, or because its conclusion is not strong enough to cause serious concern to his opponents. Perhaps, though, one or both of the remaining arguments will fare better.

The essential parts of the second argument are contained in the following:

> *...'tis confest, that no object can appear to the senses; or in other words, that no impression can become present to the mind, without being determin'd in its degrees both of quantity and quality.....Now since all ideas are deriv'd from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them, whatever is true of the one must be acknowledg'd concerning the other.... An idea is a weaker impression; and as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the case must be the same with its copy or representative.* (T, I,I,7, p. 19)

The argument can be stated simply, as:

(23) Each impression is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality.

(24) Each idea is an exact copy of some impression.

(25) Hence, each idea is determinate with respect to degree or quantity and quality, (= (7)).

However, this argument clearly will not do since, as Hume himself noted (T, I,I,1, p. 3), (24) is dubious. He endorses the much less contentious claim that

(24.1) Each simple idea is an exact copy of some impression

which, together with (23), yields at most,

(25.1) Each simple idea is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality.

And, though establishing (25.1) is a strong step in the right direction for one attacking abstract general ideas, it is certainly not sufficient, since it is not even strong enough to yield (7).

What of the third argument? Hume states it as follows:

> *...to form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simply is the same thing;.... Now as 'tis impossible to form an idea of an object, that is possest of quantity and quality, and yet is possest of no precise degree of either; it follows, that there*

> *is an equal impossibility of forming an idea, that is not limited and confin'd in both these particulars.* T, I,I,7, p. 20)

But why should we accept Hume's view that it is impossible to form the sort of idea described in this passage? Hume's best reply to this query, as well as what is likely his actual one, is to fall back on (23) and (24) as support. Unfortunately, as we have lately noticed, (24) is not available, since as stated it is both false and rejected by Hume. Moreover, since (24.1) is not adaptable within the third argument, the third argument is even less plausible overall than the second.

There is, though, a way of stating Hume's second argument so that it is considerably more plausible than we have so far made it seem. Recall that in stating that argument, he said that *"...all ideas are deriv'd from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them,..."* (T, I,I,7, p. 19). In what sense are all ideas, simple and complex, derived from impressions?

It is likely, I think, that Hume means many different things in different contexts by this claim, depending on distinct senses of 'deriv'd'. But what he probably means in this context can be spelled out in the following reconstruction of his second argument:

(23) Each impression is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality.

(24.1) Each simple idea is an exact copy of some simple impression.

(25.1) Hence, each simple idea is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality.

(26) Each idea is either simple or complex.

(27) Each complex idea is wholly composed of simple ideas.

(28) If (25.1) and (27) are true, then each complex idea is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality.

(29) Thus, each complex idea is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality.

(30) Therefore, each idea is determinate with respect to degree of quantity and quality, (= (7)).

As construed in this argument, all ideas are derived from impressions in the sense that each idea is either an exact copy of an impression or is composed of entities each of which is an exact copy of an impression. Moreover, this construal of the second argument helps with regard to the third argument. For, the foregoing sense of the claim that ideas are derived from impressions supports the view *"...'tis impossible to form an idea of an object, that is possest of quantity and quality, and yet is possest of no precise degree of either;..."* fairly straightforwardly.

While it seems we now have Hume's second argument, and by implication his third argument, in its strongest form, there are still some lingering problems. One problem is that Hume's defense of (24.1) is notoriously weak; indeed, his own example of a person supplying the simple idea of a specific color shade without the antecedent simple impression of the shade is a clear counter-example to (24.1).[6] Furthermore, this weak case is all the more important since proponents of abstract general ideas might well maintain in addition that some simple abstract general ideas are innate, or that some are abstracted from impressions in such a way that the result is a simple idea that is not an exact copy of any impression. Left unsupported, (24.1) amounts to nothing more than a flat denial of doctrines that are apt to be central to various positions countenancing abstract general ideas. But something more than mere opposition is necessary if

Hume's argument is to succeed. Hume's second argument, then, though very appealing and intuitively convincing, ultimately proves to be unsatisfactory. And, since the third argument relies crucially on the second, as we noted earlier, it, too, will be unacceptable.

III

We have found that none of Hume's three arguments on behalf of (7) succeeds, so that in the end Hume's arguments for (13) and against (2a) fail. Moreover, we have also noted that even if (7) were established, Hume would not have shown thereby that there are no abstract general ideas. So Hume erred in placing his *"chief confidence"* in these three negative arguments, since none succeeds in putting the matter of the nature of abstract general ideas, in Hume's words, *"...beyond all doubt and controversy."* (T, I,I,7, p. 17) His chief confidence, I believe, is best placed on his own positive account of how particular ideas construed in a certain manner can do all of the work for which abstract general ideas were originally posited. In that case, there is no need to resort to such entities; and that, it seems to me, is excellent reason for thinking that there are none.[7]

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, (Oxford & London: Oxford University Press, 1888), Book I, Part I, section vii, p.24. Hereafter, all references to the Treatise that are incorporated in the text will cite that book as 'T', followed by the appropriate numerals indicating the relevant Book, Part and section.

2. Hume may sometimes intend something weaker than, or at least other than, logical possibility (e.g., empirical possibility), but I would argue that typically his various uses of the separability-distinguishability-difference principles requires the logical notion.

3. There may be other notions of separability-in-idea that Hume makes use of in some other contexts that are best explicated in terms of empirical or even psychological impossibility and possibility.

4. See, e.g., his discussion of causality in Treatise, I, III, 3, pp. 78 ff.

5. The determinable/determinate distinction derives from W. E. Johnson, Logic (New York: Dover Books, 1964).

6. See, on this, Treatise, I, I, 1, pp. 5-7.

7. I am indebted to Alan Hausman for helpful comments and criticism.