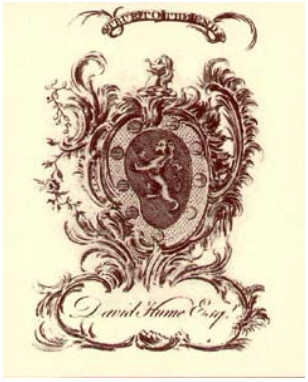

Hume's Ideas
John W. Yolton
Hume Studies Volume VI, Number 1 (April, 1980), 1-25.

HUME'S IDEAS

In the eighteenth century, there was widespread acceptance of a physiological basis for cognition. Some writers even argued for a rather detailed correlation between awareness and physiological changes, suggesting that (a) the former could be adequately explained in terms of the latter or, in some few instances, (b) that the former are the latter. David Hartley may come to mind as fitting one or the other of these alternatives, but Robert Hooke had earlier argued for ideas as brain impressions, as of course did Descartes in his early scientific treatises.[1] There was also one medical doctor in the eighteenth century, Dr. Astruc, who seems (on the basis of what Chambers reports) to have attempted a very specific correlation between specific forms of awareness and specific states and changes in physiology.[2]

There were also writers in this century who warned against the dangers of using physical-object vocabulary when talking about the mind and acts of awareness. Berkeley is one such writer; Thomas Reid at the end of the century traced, to the use of this vocabulary, what he took to be the indirect realism of the way of ideas.

Hume is writing in both these traditions: the tradition of using physical language for characterizing mental operations and the tradition of physiological explanations and correlations. The phrase used by Alexander Pope and Hume, 'the anatomy of the mind', seems to be a mixed metaphor, but it is a phrase which I take as an indication that Hume is doing what we would call 'cognitive psychology'. Another phrase used by Hume (this time in the Enquiry), 'mental geography', may capture his enterprise better: 'geography' still sounds physical, but it is modified by 'mental'. Hume is engaged in mental mapping.

I want to take a look at the use of the term 'idea' in Hume's writing (mainly in the Treatise) in order to see

whether Hume's text enables us to say anything about the nature of his ideas, to discover what role they play in his mental geography. As far as I can determine, there are three possible candidates for the nature of ideas in Hume: images, brain impressions, and cognitive contents. The first of these is, I think, the standard reading of Hume's ideas. Professor Anderson has presented strong argument and evidence to support the second.[3] I will be suggesting that the third is the best candidate, given the full range of the text of the Treatise. Of course, the correct answer may be all three of these.[4]

1

The Treatise opens by dividing all perceptions of the human mind into two kinds. Impressions and ideas differ in the degree of force and liveliness *with which they strike upon the mind.* Even though the language of 'force' and 'liveliness' may be borrowed from physical talk, it is the mind, not the brain, on which perceptions strike. The examples of impressions are sensations, passions, and emotions. Ideas are said to be the faint images of these impressions in thinking and reasoning. The term 'image' throughout the eighteenth century never receives any clear explication. Its inheritance from optical treatises always hangs about it. We should look to the examples cited by Hume, in order to see whether we can construct a meaning for that term when used in these psychological contexts. Let us look first at his very first example of 'ideas': *all the perceptions excited by the present discourse.* (T1) He explicitly excludes from these perceptions those *which arise from the sight and touch,* as well as *the immediate pleasure or uneasiness* his discourse may excite in us. The perceptions which are thus excluded are sensations and emotions, the impressions he has just distinguished. The only candidate left for ideas would seem to be what this discourse says, our thoughts about

it, my understanding of what it says.[5] The distinction is not one Hume thinks is difficult to follow: *Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking.* (T1-2) Last week I was sad, today I recall that feeling of sadness, the difference between being sad and remembering that I was sad. Hume gives a different example: the perceptions formed when I shut my eyes and think of my room. (T3) Here we are often tempted to say I image my room, the objects in it, and their position. I may well do that, although I do not think it clear what such images are. But I can also think about my room, even the objects in it, without any attempt at imaging: I know that there is a typewriter, a desk, a black and white floor, etc. My recalling each of the objects in my room, including their relative position, is what Hume would say is an *exact representation of the impressions* (T3) I have with my eyes open. 'Exact representation' need not be 'image' or 'picture'. An exact representation in thought gets it right, is the knowledge that the room is made up of these objects.

Another way to avoid the too easy but unclear notion that ideas are images of impressions is to ask whether sensations, passions, and emotions are picturable or imageable. What is the image of pride or love? Hume also uses 'corresponds' and 'resemble' for this relation. He remarks that some complex ideas never have corresponding impressions. As examples of ideas never fully copied from impressions, he offers the idea of the New Jerusalem or of the Paris I have seen. In this latter case, I cannot form an idea that will *perfectly represent all its streets and houses*, I can't think of all the streets and how they are related. (T3) Every simple idea, he thinks does have a corresponding simple impression which 'resembles it', but again, we should be cautious in reading 'resemble' in any picture sense.[6] The example he offers here is the idea of red which we form in the dark: it differs from *that impression, which strikes our eyes in sun-shine* only in degree. Can we say more about

the impression of red, the visual sensation? Is it picturable? What is the idea which we form of red when we are in the dark, when we think of it after we have seen it? Hume gives the example of teaching a child the idea of scarlet or orange, sweet or bitter. (T5) To do so, we present him with the relevant objects, we *convey to him these impressions*. To have an idea of sweet would seem to be to know that taste, to be able to recognize it. The notion of imaging the taste hardly seems to make sense. He speaks of perceiving a color and of feeling a sensation, contrasting these perceivings and feelings with thinking about them.

Impressions are divided into those of sensation and those of reflection. The former are said to arise in the soul (not in the brain) from unknown causes. The latter are derived from ideas. He speaks of impressions striking the senses, making us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger. (T7) The mind then takes a copy of that impression. The copy remains when the impression ceases. It is an idea. We must ask again what is the copy of a sensation of hunger, heat, or pleasure?[7] When I think of the pleasure or pain I experienced before, am I not just recalling the fact of my feeling? Hume wants to say also that, when these ideas return again upon the soul, a new impression is formed: of desire and aversion, hope and fear. These are the impressions of reflection. Likeall perceptions, they are present to the mind. (T8) A little later, Hume contrasts the mental with the natural world. (T12)

Hume uses the traditional classification of relations, modes, and substances, characterizing the idea of substance as *that of a collection of particular qualities*. The idea of gold is given a particularly Lockean rendering. (T16) Examples of modes are the idea of a dance, the idea of beauty. (T17) When talking of abstract ideas, he speaks of conceiving a quantity or quality, and of forming a notion of degrees of these. He also cites the ideas of the length of a line, or the idea of a precise degree of any quantity

or quality. (T18-19) Ideas are said to be joined in the conception. These ideas have their appearance in the mind. (T19) Another example of the copying of impressions by ideas is given: what is absurd in fact and reality is absurd in idea also. Throughout these pages, both ideas and impressions are said to be present to the mind. (e.g., T20) The way to avoid talking nonsense is to look for repugnancies among our ideas, another stress on the close link between ideas and meaning.

A number of points emerge from this survey of Part 1 of the Treatise.

(1) Hume never mentions the brain and the physiological processes. It is the mind or the soul which considers, conceives, imagines, remembers, thinks. It is also the mind or soul to which ideas and impressions are present.

(2) The ultimate causes of the workings of the mind - *of our mental actions* (T22) - cannot be explained or known, unless by anatomists.

(3) There is a mental and a natural world.

11

Hume starts Part II with a consideration of the mind's ability to conceive of infinity. This discussion is meant to be introductory to the account of our ideas of space and time. There were debates over the question of whether space and time have parts, and whether these parts can be infinitely divided. Locke refers to one of the standard definitions of extension as partes extra partes. Mathematicians were involved in some of these debates. In the background there was, as well, a view of matter as corpuscular, as made up of insensible particles. Hume's discussion in Part II is dense and difficult. It is not easy for us to discern in what he says all of the issues and debates around which he wrote. Someone needs to fit this part of the Treatise into the eighteenth-century mathematical

disputes. All I am trying to do here is to listen to Hume talking about *how* the mind operates, so that we can make some assertions about the nature of Hume's ideas.

There are a number of mathematical concepts dealt with in this part: number, infinite divisibility, space, extension, time. Two features stand out in Hume's discussion of how the mind conceives of or forms ideas of these concepts: the various acts of the mind involved in forming these ideas, and the contrast he draws between the appearances and their causes. The difficulties of interpretation arise from Hume's application of quantitative terms to ideas - size, parts, divisibility. We have to balance this quantitative language of ideas by Hume's ascription of logical properties to ideas - truth, contradiction, possibility. When he speaks of ideas 'representing' things, to which language does 'representation' belong: to the quantitative or to the logical language?

Hume opens the discussion in this part by a consideration of one dominant view about the mind's ability to conceive of infinity. A *full and adequate conception of infinity* would require, this view says, an infinite capacity of the mind. (T26,27) Such a capacity would enable us to divide the idea of some quality infinitely. Any idea, no matter how complex, can *by proper distinctions and separations* be divided into simple ideas which are no further divisible. Thus, Hume disagrees with those who claim the possibility of and the need for infinite divisibility. He gives several examples to establish his claim that we end with simples. His first example is from the faculty of the imagination: *the imagination reaches a minimum, and may raise up to itself an idea, of which it cannot conceive any sub-division, and which cannot be diminished without a total annihilation.* (T27) Seemingly distinguishing between ideas and images, Hume says that he has a distinct idea of large numbers and of the relations between them (e.g., *the thousandth and ten-thousandth part of a grain of sand*), but the

images which represent these numbers *are nothing different from each other, nor inferior to that image, by which I represent the grain of sand itself, which is suppos'd so vastly to exceed them.* 'Having an idea of' may mean 'understand'. The use of 'image' in this passage is not made clear, but Hume's conclusion is firm: *But whatever we may imagine of the thing, the idea of a grain of sand is not distinguishable, nor separable into twenty, much less into a thousand, ten thousand, or an infinite number of different ideas.*

A similar conclusion is drawn about the impressions of the senses. Fixing my gaze on a spot of ink on this paper, then backing off until I lose sight of the spot, *'tis plain, that the moment before it vanish'd the image or impression was perfectly indivisible.* (T27) Hume is careful in this case to remark that this is a report about appearances, not a function of a lack of light rays *striking on our eyes.* He is giving a phenomenological report, just as in the image case of the imagination he is giving an introspective report. Having argued from such reports that neither the image of the imagination nor the phenomenal impressions of sense can be infinitely divided, Hume goes on to argue against the notion that the mind is limited by these facts. Our ideas of small objects are <u>adequate</u> to those objects, without those ideas mirroring the size of such objects. In an extravagant passage, Hume supports this claim by saying that it is certain that *we can form ideas, which shall be no greater than the smallest atom of the animal spirits of an insect a thousand times less than a mite.* (T28) We should be cautious in seizing upon the 'size' terms in this remark. If the image which represents the ten thousandth part of a grain of sand is 'not inferior to' the image by which I represent the grain itself, presumably the same would be true of the idea by which I represent an atom of an animal spirit and that spirit itself; that is, the

latter is not inferior to the one which represents the smaller object. Can we say that Hume is saying that the images in these two instances are the same size? Or is his point that size is not the means by which we represent objects to ourselves?

In the mite example, Hume goes on to say that what is important is whether we can enlarge our conceptions *so much as to form a just notion of a mite.* (T28) A just notion requires a *distinct idea representing every part of them,* of the object. Such a representation is not possible if there is infinite divisibility, nor is it very easy according to the notion of *indivisible parts or atoms* because of *the vast number and multiplicity of these parts.* 'Representation' seems to be the important word in these passages. If representation is not a matching of the size of ideas with the size of objects, how does representation occur? One form of representation (though it may not be the only form) resides in the logical properties of our ideas. Asserting that *our ideas are adequate representations of the most minute parts of extension,* it is the logical relations which are said to do the representing: *the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects.* (T29)[8] Hume uses this representation of ideas as a way of showing the impossibility of infinite divisibility. The reasoning to this reductio is not important for my purposes, other than to remind us that a consideration of ideas of extension is used as a way of concluding that no *finite extension is infinitely divisible.* (T30) The reductio form of argument is used throughout the rest of this section, to reach the conclusion that time *must be compos'd of indivisible moments* (T31) and that it is impossible for there to be mathematical points (T33). Thus, at least in this section, to say ideas adequately represent objects is to say that by considering our ideas and their relations we can determine whether certain claims about space and time are possible or impossible.

Section III tells us how we acquire the idea of extension: open our eyes, turn towards the surrounding objects, perceive many visible bodies, shut our eyes and consider *the distance betwixt these bodies*. (T33) It is by the process of considering what I have seen that I acquire the idea of extension. The mental act of considering plays an important role in the formation of all abstract ideas. The example used in this passage is the move from the optical array of colored points disposed in a certain manner on our eyes to the idea of extension as colored points in a specific order. (T34) From that idea we go on to realize that the color of the points is not important; it is the ordering which is important. We take some specific idea of extension and generalize it by considering it in a certain light.

Just as it is *from the disposition of visible and tangible objects* that *we receive the idea of space*, by considering the appearances to sense in a certain way, so the idea of time is tied down to specific impressions. Time alone, disconnected from appearing objects, cannot give rise to the idea of time. We form the idea of time from the succession of ideas and impressions. (T35) In this example, Hume writes indifferently of ideas, perceptions, and thoughts.[9] It is some perceivable succession on which our idea of time depends; at least the first appearance of time to the mind so depends upon a succession of objects.[10] Perhaps we are able to conceive of time *without our conceiving any succession of objects?* Time cannot, however, be even conceived without succession, since it is an idea which is a function of the manner, the order, of appearances. In this case, conception cannot go beyond experience, just as we cannot conceive of extension without color or touch sensations. (T36,38)

The idea of extension must preserve the color and tangible qualities of the sensory experience. What form does that preservation take? Is the color of the sensed

point actually transferred (formally, as Descartes would say) to the idea? Or does the idea preserve the color objectively? The actual color is necessary for the sensory simples to be discovered by the senses. The preservation in idea is necessary for the comprehension of those simples by the imagination. Sensory discovery is not the same as imaginative conception, i.e., understanding. We must consider the simples as colored or tangible, otherwise they *can convey to us no idea.* (T39) So far, Hume seems to me to be keeping quite distinct the real, actual colored points affecting our senses and our ideas of such colored points. In order for me to form an idea of extension (an adequate idea) I must think of the sensory points as being colored. But this reading is clouded over when Hume goes on to speak of our idea of extension having parts, and then tells us that the idea of extension must also *be consider'd as color'd or tangible.* It looks as if he means for us to think of our idea itself being colored, at least its parts are colored. Still, if considering is a non-sensory process (as it seems clearly to be), then even considering our ideas to be colored would not mean they are in fact colored.

That there is some looseness in Hume's discussion is suggested by two features of this passage. First, consider the sentence, *We have therefore no idea of space or extension, but when we regard it as an object either of our sight or feeling.* (T39) The 'it' looks as if it should refer to 'idea', yet I find it hard to believe Hume means to say ideas are objects of sight or touch. One would find such expressions in Berkeley but not, I think, in Hume. It is space or extension which for Hume is an object of sight or touch. Secondly, the very next paragraph in this section applies a similar line of thought to time as he has just used for space, yet he does not say our ideas of time are in time. Of course they are, the succession of our ideas or perceptions is an equal partner which successively appearing objects in forming the idea of time. One would think that

in drawing a parallel reasoning on the idea of time, Hume would have made this point: the idea of time is itself composed of successive parts, and the idea of space is itself composed of colored parts. The parallel reasoning Hume cites for time is not for the idea of time: *The same reasoning will prove, that the indivisible moments of time must be fill'd with some real object or existence, whose succession forms the duration, and makes it be conceivable by the mind.* (T39).

Hume's stress is on what we need in order to have the thought of, to conceive of space and time. *The ideas of space and time are therefore no separate or distinct ideas, but merely those of the manner or order, in which objects exist.* (T39-40) We cannot conceive of a vacuum or of extension without something being ordered in a certain way. Similarly, time requires change and succession. Time consists of non-coexisting parts, space consists of co-existing parts. These facts about space and time (or about our sensory impressions underlying our experience of space and time) must be preserved in our ideas, our conceptions, our understanding of space and time. Hume is not saying, I am suggesting, that our thoughts of space are themselves colored, but that we must think of space as consisting of colored points in a certain order. Thinking of time as successive parts may be easier, since succession is a literal property of our thoughts. Time is more pervasive than space, as Kant was later to emphasize.

In these sections, as in the rest of this part, Hume goes into great detail to show how ideas are formed on the basis of, or concomitantly with specific appearances and sensory impressions. Just as belief is always built upon a present impression and the manner of appearances to us, so the ideas Hume considers in Part II of the Treatise involve the same combination of sensory appearances and specific sorts of mental acts made on the basis of those appearances. Some of the more radical aspects of this part

are, I suspect, Hume's careful account of how geometrical concepts are also intimately based upon sensory appearances: concepts of equality, line, surface, right angle all are functions of appearances. Just as mathematical points are non-entities, so the claim for some standard of equality or of right angularity which escapes sensory experience is erroneous. These concepts or ideas have a physiological causal foundation (see the dissection of the brain example, T60-61) and a psychological component. The psychological component is marked by the various mental acts which the mind engages in, in forming certain ideas. The act of considering is but one such act cited in several passages. There are others. Hume speaks of the mind revolving over all its ideas of sensation, such 'revolving over' is said to be a contemplation. Taking notice is another mental operation, as well as arriving at a conception, or regarding. In speaking of the ability the mind has of determining whether one body is greater, less, or equal to another, he speaks of our judgments, of reviewing and reflecting upon that judgment. (T47) Here, as in other cases, the mind works from the appearances to the eye. The mind also discovers and reasons, sometimes mistaking one idea for another. (T60)

III

With its stress upon the psychological components in the formation of the abstract ideas of geometry, which in turn continues the Part I use of these same mental acts, it should come as no surprise to discover that the Part III discussion of knowledge and belief is pervaded by the role of mental acts. The seven philosophical relations, around which this part is constructed, depend *entirely on the ideas, which we compare together*, such comparing of ideas in knowledge being again firmly in the Lockean tradition. (T69) As for Locke also, all certainty arises from the comparison of ideas. (T79) Besides comparing, Hume speaks of abstract

reasoning and of reflection. (T69) He also cites considering as a way of thinking about ideas. (T71) Comparison, in the case of the non-demonstrative probable relations (identity, time and place, causation), works with objects, or, as I presume he must mean, with the appearances of objects. *All kinds of reasoning consist in nothing but a comparison, and a discovery of those relations, either constant or inconstant, which two or more objects bear to each other.* (T73) We can make such a comparison when both objects are present to the senses, or when neither is present, or when only one is present. When both are present, this is perception. In this case, there is no *exercise of the thought*, only a *mere passive admission of the impressions thro' the organs of sensation.*

In reasoning, remembering is another important mental act. Historical reasoning also requires that we understand evidence, such evidence being *certain characters and letters present either to our memory or senses; which characters we likewise remember to have been us'd as the signs of certain ideas.* (T83) The interpretation of signs, understanding the meaning of words (even in those cases where I disbelieve what is said) is an important cognitive process. (T95) In discussing causal inferences generally, Hume appeals to the logical properties of ideas again, in this case their coherence: *We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses.* (T84) Again, 'representation' is linked with logical relations. Assenting to ideas is another cognitive operation, one characterizing belief. (T94ff) The language of the standard eighteenth century logics also appears, when Hume speaks of the *simple conception of any thing.* (T94) Such simple conception contrasts with the mingling, uniting, separating, and confounding of our ideas cited later. (T96) That my interpretation of the very first example of 'idea' in the Treatise is correct is supported

by a reference in this part to reading a book. This passage is offered as an illustration of how understanding the meaning of words is not tied to our believing what is said.

> *If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; nor does the incredulity of the one, and the belief of the other hinder them from putting the very same sense upon their author. His words produce the same ideas in both; tho' his testimony has not the same influence on them.* (T97,98)

What the words as characters and signs produce in their readers are not brain impressions; the shapes of the letters may do that.[11] Just as words produce ideas, so pictures of persons 'convey our thoughts' to the person pictured. (T99) Hume also speaks of thinking on an object and of contemplating by *an intellectual view*. (T100) We are also said to think on our past thoughts. (T106)

There are other later passages where 'thought' appears instead of 'idea'. We are said to have *a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another* (T165), necessity is said to be a *determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes*. (T166) He refers also to the act of the understanding which is considering or comparing. (T166, for 'considering', see also T156) The mind conceives and comprehends (T161,162); conception or having ideas precedes understanding. (T164,168) All these various operations are what Hume calls *the actions of the mind*. (T177) Detailing these actions, showing how they function in thinking, constitutes Hume's psychology or his epistemic logic. Such actions are a function of the *intellectual faculties of the mind* (T138), although of course the physiological functions play a role too. Together, the faculties and the actions make up the subject matter of what Hume called in the Enquiry, mental geography. (T13) In that work, Hume praised the results of *an accurate scrutiny into the powers and*.

faculties of human nature, but he remarks as well upon the difficulties of such a study.

> *It is remarkable concerning the operations of the mind, that, though most intimately present to us, yet, whenever they become the object of reflexion, they seem involved in obscurity; nor can the eye readily find those lines and boundaries, which discriminate and distinguish them. The objects are too fine to remain long in the same aspect or situation; and must be apprehended in an instant, by a superior penetration, derived from nature, and improved by habit and reflexion.* (E13)[12]

The program for such a science of human nature is to *know the different operations of the mind, to separate them from each other, to class them under their proper heads, and to correct all that seeming disorder, in which they lie involved, when made the object of reflexion and enquiry.* Hume's contribution to such mental geography was massive, not so much in a direct cataloguing and classifying of the powers, faculties, and acts of the mind (although there is considerable contribution there), as in his careful account of how the mind comes to have certain ideas, how it forms its beliefs, what principles and faculties are at work in particular areas of concern. In pursuing this analysis, Hume was also very careful to distinguish what can be discovered by diligent reflection and attention from the speculations about the causes of the phenomenological facts so discovered. He was, in the Enquiry, guarded in his hopes for the discovery of *the secret springs and principles, by which the human mind is actuated in its operations* (E14). The Treatise cautioned that any such explanation must be based upon experience.

What our brief look at Part III of the Treatise discloses is that, as Hume moved into analysis of specific questions, the role and nature of ideas became much less important in forming ideas than the operations of the mind. The very nature of those acts of the mind, being cognitive and mental, should be indication enough that Hume's ideas

are not brain impressions. While Hume accepted the current notion that the mind can influence the physiology by affecting the animal spirits, what the mind associated, compared, compounded, divided, reflected upon, etc., are mental contents, thoughts. This conclusion, as well as the claim that it is the acts of the mind which became more important in the body of the Treatise than the way of ideas, is further supported by an examination of Part IV. This part also contains one puzzling, seeming counter-example to my claim that ideas are mental contents.

IV

Section I of Part IV is concerned with reason and reasoning. 'Faculty' talk and talk of acts of the mind loom large. Demonstrative reasoning is distinguished from the reasoning in common life. (T180) Reflection is cited, considering appears, and assent also. (T180-83) Judging is characterized as natural: nature, *by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity* determines us *to judge as well as to breathe and feel*. (T183) Nature implants the faculty of judging in our minds, just as nature has given us the faculty of seeing bodies. Reasoning and believing are said to be *some sensation or peculiar manner of conception*. (T184) Hume also speaks of a question being proposed to him and of his then *revolving over the impressions of my memory and senses*, and of his carrying his thoughts from those impressions to the objects. The product of these mental acts is a strong conception which forms his decision on the question. We find throughout this section a wide variety of mental activities, of acts of the mind: decisions, principles of judgment, balancing of opposite causes, imagination, thought, conception of ideas, feeling a sensation, common judgments, comprehending, an effort of thought, the operation of our sentiments. The animal spirits of his physiology also appear here. (T185-86) All these remarks presuppose a rather

complex account of the workings of the mind. Hume also speaks in these pages of the regular flow of the passions and sentiments and of the straining of the imagination.

In the next section, 'faculty' talk persists: he is concerned to trace our idea of body to one particular faculty. We find him talking of inferring and of supposing, also of suggesting. (T189) He speaks of the actions and sensations of the mind: these are known to us by consciousness. (T190) As he moves into the details of this complex section, inferring, regarding, and supposing reappear. (e.g., T197) Conception is seen to be important, since the belief in continued existence *consists in the force and vivacity of the conception*. (T199) We also find 'idea' linked with 'meaning': the idea expressed by the word 'object' must have a meaning different from 'ourselves'. (T200) The mind is here said to pronounce and to consider. Comprehension, opinion, belief, perceiving, assent, conceiving, notion, representation - the whole apparatus of his cognitive psychology runs throughout this section.

We then come to the apparent counter-example. This example is contained in that curious section on the immateriality of the soul. Part IV of the Treatise as a whole, and the immateriality section in particular, has a dialectical structure: opposing views on some claim are discussed, a possible resolution is suggested. This section has another trait which makes its interpretation difficult: it is a clever satire on a controversy which raged throughout the eighteenth century, the controversy over the question 'could matter think'. A lesser claim was that matter and motion were the sole causes of thought. Hume's discussion of these issues is redolent with the echoes of many writers and doctrines in that debate. He announces, and this is the heart of the satire, that he will show that immaterialism, not materialism, is an atheism. One of the arguments used by the opponents of materialism was that thought and extension differ fundamentally, belong to different kinds of

substances, and that therefore they are incompatible properties, they cannot belong to the same substance. In the background of much of this debate was a principle (with an acceptance wider than the context of this debate) which said that 'no thing can be or act where it is not'. Hume makes the proper point that the conjunction of properties need not be local or spatial conjunction: coexistence does not entail spatial coexistence. That point entails that the being or existence of anything (where 'thing' must be taken to include substances as well as qualities) does not always require spatial location. Another way of making this point is to say that extension is not a property of all that exists.

In referring to the idea or notion of space or extension (Hume, as other writers, tended to think of both body and space as extended), Hume repeats what he had said in Part II: that idea is derived from sight and feeling. (T235) What is extended must have some shape. Shape does no not 'agree with' such properties as desire, a statement seemingly meaning that shape is incompatible with desire, that a desire cannot be shaped. Hume adds that shape does not agree with *any impression or idea, except* those of the senses of sight and feeling, apparently meaning that shape is compatible with those impressions. Similarly, his denial of the dictum, that no thing can be where it is not, carries an excepting clause: the claim that something can exist and be no where is true, he says, for *all our perceptions and objects, except those of the sight and feeling.* (T236) Hume's main concern in these sentences is to press the point that most perceptions are not located or extended, apparently leaving open the possibility that some are located or extended. The crucial passage which explicitly makes this assertion is found on pp.239-40 of the Treatise. There, he returns to the 'agreement' talk of p.235. He begins by saying no external object can be known to the mind immediately. An image or perception interposes between us and such objects.

The table that appears to me is only a perception. The qualities of that table are, then, qualities of a perception. That perception has parts. The parts of that perception give us the notion of distance and extension. The idea of extension is copied from an impression and perfectly agrees with that impression. Therefore, to say the idea of extension agrees with anything is to say the idea is itself extended.

Anderson (in "Hume's Perceptions", op. cit.) links this passage with a later one where Hume uses some optical language.

> *When an object augments or diminishes to the eye or imagination from a comparison with others, the image and idea of the object are still the same, and are equally extended in the retina, and in the brain or organ of perception. The eyes refract the rays of light, and the optic nerves convey the images to the brain in the very same manner, whether a great or small object has preceded....* (T372)[13]

Anderson's conclusion is as follows:

> The extension of our perceptions of extended objects, then, appears to result from the physics of light and the physiology of visual perception.... The impression or idea of the extended object apparently is quite literally an image of that object, and hence, resembles it in that sense. (p.166)

Anderson is assuming that Hume does accept a world of objects, even though our only access to that world is by way of our perceptions. But Anderson thinks our perceptions, our impressions, copy objects, where 'copy' is taken in the literal sense. Just as bodies are extended and located in space, so some of our ideas of bodies are extended and located in space, i.e., in the brain. Without the assumption that my visual and tactual impressions do literally copy the shape of objects, the ascription of shape to my idea of extension is not so straightforwardly materialist. If the table that I see just is a perception, then the sense in which that perception is extended is just that it takes up

space in my visual or tactual field. The perception-table is a phenomenological table. Hence, to ascribe space or shape to it is not to ascribe a shape in the same way that a brain impression (which is not a phenomenological event) has a shape and a location. In other words, if we interpret Hume's perception-table in a Berkelian sense, then we cannot read his talk of extension as being the materialist's extension, which Berkeley said was an incoherent notion. On a phenomenological reading, the way the world appears to me just is that some of my perceptions are extended and located, others are not; but since space and extension are also phenomenological, Hume has not ascribed to visual and tactual perceptions a location in the brain.

I am not entirely happy with this phenomenological, Berkelian reading of Hume's perception-table, because I think the 'scepticism with regard to the senses' section tried to avoid Berkeley's strict identification of ideas with objects. Moreover, if Hume is, in the immateriality section, going to be effective in arguing for and against materialism, it would seem that he must mean by 'extension' what the materialists mean. On the other hand, Hume does resolve the libertarian-necessitarian dispute by applying his account of 'necessity' and 'cause' to that controversy: there is the same sort of uniformity between motives and actions as there is between events in nature; therefore, actions are just as much caused or determined as are natural events. (E88) So it may be that in the materialist-immaterialist controversy, Hume seeks a resolution in terms of his analysis of our knowledge of the external world.[14] That analysis, somewhere between a direct realism and a Berkelian notion, does make appeal to the appearances, to our experiences. Taste sensations are not experienced as being extended. If we find ourselves thinking of the taste being in the object, a little reflection convinces us that this is an absurdity and an impossible notion. (T238) There is no absurdity in conceiving of our shape perceptions being

extended and located; that is how they are experienced, and no absurdity results. They are visually and tactually extended in our perceptual field.

Hume's appeal to absurdity and impossibility in the taste-located example is, I think, revealing. We saw earlier how, in Part II, 'represent' and 'preserve' were cashed out in logical terms. While Anderson cites this Part II use of the logical properties of ideas as a basis for concluding about objects, he does not pause to ask how such logical properties lead to his reading of 'copy' as 'literal resemblance'. (pp.159,163) Hume uses the same logical language about ideas in the immateriality section, shortly after the paragraph with the apparent counter-example. Pointing out that we are led to the view that the table before us is a perception because of our inability to conceive of an object specifically different from our perceptions (T241), he then discusses the inferences we can make around the *connexion and repugnance* of our impressions. In this passage, he argues that we cannot know for certain that these relations of ideas apply to objects, but we can know that *whatever conclusions of this kind we form concerning objects, will most certainly be applicable to impressions.* (T241) Hume's reason for running the logical move in this way is bound up with the satire he is constructing. The details of that reason and of that satire need not detain us. What we need to note is that *connexion and repugnance* was and would be recognized as being, in the eighteenth century, a Lockean use of logical relations: 'repugnance' meant 'contradiction'. The relations between objects and impressions, on the basis of which we can make inferences from one to the other, are logical. In the very voice in which Hume says, *We have no idea of any quality in an object, which does not agree to, and may not represent a quality in an impression,* he goes on to speak of finding, or failing to find, any repugnancies: *Every idea of a quality in an object passes thro' an impression; and therefore every perceivable relation, whether of*

connexion or repugnance, must be common both to objects and impressions. (T243) Once again, 'agree with' and 'represent' are closely linked with those logical properties.

The logical reading of 'representation' and 'agree with' may not be the only way Hume intended those terms, but the frequent use of logical relations between ideas in his discussion of specific problems reminds us again that Hume's Treatise is a logic in the eighteenth-century sense, of an account of the workings of the mind. One of the activities of the understanding is to draw inferences around logical relations. Such inferences are just one of many mental acts Hume details. Whatever we make of the Part IV talk of perceptions being located and extended, we cannot ignore the pervasive use of psychological language, both with respect to acts of the mind and with reference to ideas, to the contents of the mind.[15]

John W. Yolton
Rutgers College
Rutgers University

1. David Hartley, Observations on Man, 1749; Robert Hooke, "Lectures on Light", (1689), in The Posthumous Works of Robert Hooke, 1705; Descartes, Traité de la lumière, 1664, and Traité de l'homme, 1664.

2. In his Cyclopaedia: Or, An Universal Dictionary (1728), Chambers refers to Astruc in a number of articles. Under the entry for 'Brain' he writes: "From the Texture, Disposition, and tone of the Fibres of the Brain, Philosophers ordinarily account for the Phaenomena of Sensation and Imagination; which see. Dr. Astruc goes further, and from the Analogy between the Fibres of the Brain, and those of Musical Instruments, solves the Phaenomena of Judgment and Reasoning, and the Defects and Perfections of both. He lays it down as an Axiom, that every simple idea is produc'd by the Oscillation of one determinate Fibre; and every compound idea from contemporary Vibrations of several Fibres; That the greater or less degree of Evidence follows the greater or less Force wherewith the Fibre oscillates. He hence proceeds to show, that the Affirmation or Negation of any Proposition, consists in the equal or unequal Number

of Vibrations, which the Moving Fibres, representing the two Parts of the Proposition, viz. the Subject, make in the same Time:..." Chambers does not identify the work of Astruc to which he refers. Jean Astruc published a dissertation entitled Quaestio medica de naturali et praeternaturali judicii exercitio (Montpellier, 1720): I have not seen it, but the title suggests that this is the work to which Chambers referred. My source - MM. Bayle and Tillaye, Biographie Médicale, 1885, Vol. 2, pp. 215-219 - suggests that Astruc "avait dans la tête une espèce de physique des sens, qu'il voulait donner au public et qu'il intitulait De animistica." Apparently the work was never executed. Bayle and Tillaye also refer to two dissertations, De sensatione (1719) and De judicii exercitio (1723). Astruc was most famed for his work on venereal disease, De morbis venereis, first published in 1736. I am indebted to John Wright for these references to Astruc.

3. Robert F. Anderson, Hume's First Principles, 1966, and "The Location, Extension, Shape, and Size of Hume's Perception", in Hume, A Re-Evaluation, ed. by Livingston and King, 1976.

4. The following is only a partial survey of the uses of the term 'idea' in Hume's writings. I move through the parts of Book I of the Treatise in order. The Enquiry concerning Human Understanding and the Abstract need a similar analysis. The texts used are the Selby-Bigge editions.

5. That ideas are linked with meanings is indicated in the Enquiry: *When we entertain...any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea...* (E22)

6. In the Enquiry, the principle about ideas copying impressions is expressed as follows: *It is impossible for us to think of any thing, which we have not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses.* (E62)

7. Hume remarks that *the examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral.* (T8) Does this remark enable us to say sensations are physiological? I think not; only that the account of how they arise in the soul is a task for anatomy or the natural philosopher. Consider Locke's corpuscular account of perception or of any of the many physiological accounts then current.

8. With a clear echo of Locke's definition of knowledge,

Hume adds that, in these relations, contradictions and agreements, are *the foundation of all human knowledge.* Earlier, he ran the relation between ideas and objects backwards: if something *be absurd in* <u>*fact and reality*</u>, *it must also be absurd* <u>*in idea*</u>. (T19)

9. *A man in a sound sleep, or strongly occupy'd with one thought, is insensible of time; and according as his perceptions succeed each other with greater or less rapidity, the same duration appears longer or shorter to his imagination.* (T35)

10. Once again, Hume uses phenomenological examples. *If you wheel about a burning coal with rapidity, it will present to the senses an image of a circle of fire; nor will there seem to be any interval of time betwixt its revolutions...* (T35)

11. Hume is always aware of the background physiology to our conscious perceptions, even to our interpretation of signs. (See, <u>e.g.</u>, the physiological example on pp. 98-99.) Many other examples of physiology have been presented by Anderson in his book. Meaning also appears in Hume's discussion of necessary connexion, when he remarks that when we attempt to use terms like 'energy' or 'efficacy', *we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas.* (T162)

12. Cf. <u>Treatise</u> 105: *I must not conclude this subject without observing, that 'tis very difficult to talk of the operations of the mind with perfect propriety and exactness; because common language has seldom made any very nice distinctions among them, but has generally call'd by the same term all such as nearly resemble each other.*

13. It is difficult not to think of the early treatises of Descartes where he too used 'idea' as 'brain impression'.

14. In the immateriality section, Hume resolves the question about matter causing thought by invoking his uniformity account of cause: *we find by the comparing their ideas, that thought and motion are different from each other, and by experience, that they are constantly united; which being all the circumstances, that enter into the idea of cause and effect, when apply'd to the operations of matter, we may certainly conclude, that motion may be, and actually is, the cause of thought and perception.* (T248)

15. I briefly remarked above on the dialectical and satirical nature of the immateriality section. Thomas Reid

makes an interesting suggestion about Hume's talk of extended perception which fits into the spirit of that section. Early in that section, Hume had argued against the idea of substance, saying that it was a meaningless idea. Either it is without meaning, or, on the standard definition of substance, everything is a substance. (T233) Reid read Hume as saying there are no substances, including mind substance. In an obvious reference to the immateriality section, Reid says that "the author of the Treatise of Human Nature" tries to prove "That the mind either is no substance, or that it is an extended and divisible substance: because the ideas of extension cannot be in a subject which is indivisible and unextended." A few sentences later, he puts the point again: "He takes it for granted that there are ideas of extension in the mind; and thence infers, that if it is at all a substance, it must be an extended and divisible substance." (Inquiry into the Human Mind, ed. by Duggan, p. 170).