



**In Defense of Section V: A Reply to Professor Yolton**

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IN DEFENSE OF SECTION V:  
A REPLY TO PROFESSOR YOLTON

Professor Yolton's article is especially valuable for its opening paragraphs on the writing done in the eighteenth century on the physiological basis of cognition. These provide a much-needed background to Hume's own remarks on the nature of perceptions. It is both correct and helpful, I think, to understand any philosopher as a man of his own century. Professor Yolton offers this article, in part at least, to differ with my interpretation given in "The Location, Extension, Shape, and Size of Hume's Perceptions." It seems to me, however, that this opening part of his article serves instead to lend support to mine. I have not said, by the way, that Hume believes that ideas are "brain impressions," since Hume has not used that phrase himself. Instead, I have merely provided evidence that Hume believes some perceptions have location, extension, shape and size; and I have pointed out an inconsistency that arises in this connection.

Professor Yolton warns against taking Hume to intend, in saying that an idea represents its impression, that the idea is an image of the impression. I find, however, that Hume does assert that ideas are images:

*Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name impressions.... By ideas I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.... (T1)*

Again, in explaining memory:

*For what is the memory but a faculty, by which we raise up the images of past perceptions? And as an image necessarily resembles its object.... (T260)*

At the end of his Part I, Professor Yolton concludes:

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

It seems to me not at all clear that Hume distinguishes soul

or mind from the brain, for he says:

*Bodily pains and pleasures...arise originally in the soul, or in the body, whichever you please to call it....(T276)*

And Hume certainly does describe the brain and its physiological processes on T60-61 and T185, as Professor Yolton himself later recognizes explicitly on his pages 12 and 16.

An ambiguity arises regarding 'representation', Professor Yolton concludes, because Hume is writing in two languages in his account of ideas as representations:

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? (6)

I gather that Professor Yolton finds some sort of incompatibility between the "quantitative" characteristics of ideas and their "logical" ones; yet he offers no explanation why he finds them incompatible. More to the point, of course, is whether Hume himself regarded them as incompatible. I find he does not. Rather, it appears that it is the "quantitative" aspects of some ideas that permit them to be adequate representations, having the same "logical" properties as do objects. On T28 Hume has concluded that some ideas are very small:

*This however 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....*

Then on the following page he makes good use of this conclusion to argue that ideas have the same "logical" properties as the objects they represent:

*Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and*

*agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge. But our ideas are adequate representations of the most minute parts of extension; and thro' whatever divisions and subdivisions we may suppose these parts to be arriv'd at, they can never become inferior to some ideas, which we form. The plain consequence is, that whatever appear impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be really impossible and contradictory, without any farther excuse or evasion. (T29)*

Thus I perceive no weight in Professor Yolton's distinction between Hume's alleged two languages; and I perceive no ambiguity at all in Hume's account of representation.

It is Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Section V: "*Of the Immateriality of the Soul*" which provides the richest evidence that Hume holds that some perceptions have location, extension and shape. Professor Yolton dismisses this section, saying that it is:

...a clever satire on a controversy which raged throughout the eighteenth century, the controversy over the question 'could matter think'. (17)

He provides no evidence, however, that Hume intended this section as a satire, except to state that:

...this is the heart of the satire, that he will show that immaterialism, not materialism, is an atheism. (17)

This remark of Hume's, I fear, is not directly relevant to the discussion on the location, extension or shape of perceptions. It is found on T240, where Hume apparently has concluded his discussion--and his resolution--of the controversy between "materialists" and "theologians." He here embarks on a second discussion, comparing Spinoza's doctrine of substance to the "theologian's" doctrine of thinking substance, and finding the same basic fault in both. He says:

*This gives me an occasion to take a-new into consideration the question concerning the substance of the soul; and tho' I have condemn'd that question as utterly unintelligible, yet*

*I cannot forbear proposing some farther reflections concerning it. I assert, that the doctrine of the immateriality, simplicity, and indivisibility of a thinking substance is a true atheism, and will serve to justify all those sentiments, for which Spinoza is so universally infamous. (T240)*

The term atheism, in Hume's time, was rather freely used to characterize any doctrine considered to depart from orthodoxy. Thus Spinoza was called an atheist (even by Hume on T241) although Spinoza clearly believed in God. We are likely to use 'fascist' or 'communist' in a similarly loose way in our time.

In order to show that Hume's discussion on the controversy between "theologians" and "materialists" is intended as a satire, Professor Yolton should be able to point to some remark, or perhaps an altered mode of expression, in the text. But he provides none. It seems probable enough that Hume takes some pleasure, toward the end of Book I of the Treatise, in attacking a number of doctrines: the Aristotelian doctrine of substance in Section III, and Locke's doctrine of matter and qualities in Section IV. Yet these appear to be quite serious arguments, closely related to Hume's endeavor earlier in Book I. I find no clue that Section V is intended any less seriously. Rather, it is as though Hume seeks to defeat, in these three sections, doctrines current in his time and counter to his own.

It seems that Section VI, "*Of Personal Identity*," must be taken as seriously intended by Hume; otherwise we must disregard his very important treatment of the self. If we take Section VI as serious, and if Section V is satirical, then we ought to find, at the end of one or the beginning of the other, some remark or change of expression to indicate a change of his intention. I find none. Further, Section VI begins with an attack on the claim that there is an impression of the self. But Section VI begins with a similar attack. If Hume is to be taken as serious in Section VI, then it seems he ought to be taken as serious in Section V also.

If Hume were not serious in Section V, then we should expect his conclusions there about the location or non-location of ideas would have no parallel elsewhere in his writings. Yet it is clear much earlier in Book I that Hume holds that ideas have location in the brain:

*...as the mind is endow'd with a power of exciting any idea it pleases; whenever it dispatches the spirits into that region of the brain, in which the idea is plac'd....*  
(T60-61)

Moreover, the extension of some perceptions, discussed in Section V, is touched upon again much later, in Book II:

*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.* (T372)

The occurrence of such remarks at widely scattered points in the Treatise is evidence that Hume's intention on the topic of location and extension of perceptions remains the same throughout.

Finally, Hume makes an anticipatory reference, in an earlier section, to the conclusion he reaches in Section V regarding the non-extension and non-location of certain objects:

*...Sounds, and tastes, and smells, tho' commonly regarded by the mind as continu'd independent qualities, appear not to have any existence in extension, and consequently cannot appear to the senses as situated externally to the body. The reason, why we ascribe place to them, shall be considered afterwards.* (T191; Hume's footnote indicates this explanation is to be found in Section V)

The above remark is found early in Section II, "Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses." If Section V be satirical, then this passage ought to be satirical also; yet there is nothing in the context to indicate this is so. I fear Professor Yolton has provided no evidence at all that Section V was intended by Hume as a satire; and I have provided a great

deal of evidence that Hume intended Section V seriously.

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