



### **Hume's Relative Ideas**

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## HUME'S RELATIVE IDEAS

The fundamental principle in the analysis of propositions containing descriptions is this: Every proposition which we can understand must be composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted.

Bertrand Russell, The Problems of Philosophy

In this paper I shall show that Hume found within the "way of ideas" the basis for a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.<sup>1</sup> By examining the distinction between positive and relative ideas and Hume's discussions of relative ideas in the light of the logical writings of Antoine Arnauld and Isaac Watts, I shall argue that relative ideas are the cognitive analogues of definite descriptions. Although Hume often regarded epistemic claims based upon relative ideas with at least a modicum of scepticism, the doctrine of relative ideas provides the basis for the intelligibility of and the critical moves in his discussions of *that unintelligible chimera of... substance*.<sup>2</sup> The recognition that Hume espoused the doctrine of relative ideas also sheds light on his discussions of the missing shade of blue and his claim that one has an idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, even though one's mental image of that minute entity differs in no way from one's mental image of an entire grain of sand.<sup>3</sup>

#### I. Positive and Relative Ideas

Empiricism was the predominant intellectual force in early eighteenth century British philosophy. It was on the basis of their commitment to empiricism that such philosophers as Locke and Berkeley granted ontological status to those qualities that are directly available to the senses. As states of mind, ideas were held either to represent real qualities and objects (Locke) or to be real qualities and

objects (Berkeley). Nonetheless, as substance theorists, the ontological commitments of both Locke and Berkeley went beyond the domain of a pure ontology of qualities, and since substance is in principle imperceptible, such an ontological commitment seems to raise a problem for an empirical theory of ideas. Although it might be reasonable to assume that an idea of a quality is a mental image of that quality, such a claim is less plausible regarding one's ideas of substance.

The early empiricists responded to this apparent problem by drawing a distinction between two kinds of ideas: positive ideas and relative ideas. A positive idea represents an entity as it is in itself, and it might be reasonable to construe such ideas as mental images. On the other hand, a relative idea--what Berkeley often called a notion or a relative notion<sup>4</sup>--singles out an unperceived entity on the basis of its relations to a perceived entity, i.e., a positive idea. Both Locke and Berkeley were explicit in claiming that one has no positive idea of substance. For example, Locke wrote:

We have no such clear Idea at all, and therefore signify nothing by the word Substance, but only an uncertain supposition of we know not what; (i.e. of something whereof we have no particular distinct positive) Idea, which we take to be the substratum, or support of those Ideas we do know.<sup>5</sup>

One has only an "obscure and relative Idea of Substance in general",<sup>6</sup> indeed, "we have no Idea of what it [substance] is, but only a confused and obscure one of what it does."<sup>7</sup> On this point Berkeley was at one with Locke. Regarding one's putative ideas of material substance, he wrote the following:

Now I desire that you would explain what is meant by matter's supporting extension: say you, I have no idea of matter, and therefore

cannot explain it. I answer, though you have no positive yet if you have any meaning at all, you must have at least a relative idea of matter; though you know not what it is, yet you must be supposed to know what relation it bears to accidents, and what is meant by its supporting them.<sup>8</sup>

Notice that in the writings of both Locke and Berkeley one's idea of substance is not a positive idea: one has no idea that represents substance as it is in itself. The most one can claim to have is a relative idea of substance, that is, an idea that singles out an entity on the basis of the relations in which that entity stands to a positive idea. As Berkeley's discussions clearly indicate, if one claims to have a relative idea of an entity, the relations involved in that idea must be clearly known. It is Berkeley's contention that the relation of support cannot be elucidated in the case of material substance,<sup>9</sup> while it can be elucidated in the case of immaterial substance,<sup>10</sup> that accounts for his rejection of the doctrine of material substance and his adherence to the doctrine of immaterial substance.<sup>11</sup>

Although Hume's discussions of relative ideas are brief and few in number, they are sufficient to show that Hume also accepted the distinction between positive and relative ideas. A positive idea, of course, is nothing other than an idea that is a copy of an impression. It is in terms of positive ideas that the overwhelming majority of Hume's discussions are couched. Nonetheless, in his discussion of the limits of ideational thought in Book I, Part ii, Section 6 of the Treatise, after concluding that *'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea [i.e., a positive idea] of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions*, (T67) he went on to claim that it is possible to form a relative idea of an external object as a thing specifically different from a perception. As he wrote, *The farthest we can go towards a conception of*

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*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. (T68) As Hume's discussion of the philosophical belief in the external world indicates, to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative (T241) assumes that the relation of causation (or the relations of resemblance and causation) obtains between a given perception of which one is aware and some external object.*<sup>12</sup>

Hume also alludes to relative ideas in a footnote to his discussion *Of the Necessary Connexion* in the first Enquiry. There he claimed that one has a relative idea of power as the unknown quality of an object that causes (is constantly conjoined with) a known effect. Hume wrote:

*According to these explications and definitions, the idea of power is relative as much as that of cause; and both have a reference to an effect, or some other event constantly conjoined with the former. When we consider the unknown circumstance of an object, by which the degree or quantity of its effect is fixed and determined, we call that its power: And accordingly, it is allowed by all philosophers, that the effect is the measure of the power. But if they had any idea of power, as it is in itself, why could not they Measure it in itself?<sup>13</sup>*

As in the case of one's idea of an external object as something specifically different from a perception, one's idea of power as the quality that causes a particular effect is a relative idea. One has no idea of power in itself; one can merely conceive of power as the property that causes (is constantly conjoined with) an observable effect.

These passages clearly indicate that Hume espoused the distinction between positive and relative ideas. The contexts in which he drew this distinction also provide one with significant clues to the correct model for understanding relative ideas. If relative ideas provide the foundation within the "way of ideas" for a representational theory of perception, one's relative idea of a material

object must single out exactly one entity that causes a known perception and is not itself a perception. Similarly, to claim that one has a relative idea of power as an unknown quality or type of quality that is causally related to a particular effect, one's relative idea of power must single out a particular quality or type of quality that is causally related to the particular effect or type of effect one perceives. Since Hume's paradigm cases of relative ideas appear to be cases that involve a uniqueness requirement, it is reasonable to suggest that relative ideas are the cognitive analogues of definite descriptions. Hence, one may linguistically express the intent of one's relative idea of a material object (although not describe the relative idea itself) by the definite description, "the entity that causes a and is not itself a perception," where a is a perception of which one is aware, *i.e.*,

$(\exists x) \{ (xCa \ \& \ \neg Px) \ \& \ (\forall y) \{ (yCa \ \& \ \neg Py) \supset \ x=y \} \}$ . Similarly, the intent of one's relative idea of power can be expressed by the definite description, "the property that causes (is constantly conjoined with) b," where b is an observed event, *i.e.*, where variables are quantified over properties,

$(\exists x) \{ xCb \ \& \ (\forall y) \{ yCb \supset \ x=y \} \}$ . My suggestion that Hume's relative ideas should be understood on the model of definite descriptions accounts for the uniqueness claims that are implicit both in a representational theory of perception that holds that perceptions are specifically different from objects and in Hume's discussion of the relative idea of power. The doctrine of relative ideas can therefore provide an ideational foundation for a distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description in Hume's philosophy. As we shall see later, even though Hume did not allow that one can claim to know that all putative entities singled out by relative ideas exist, the doctrine of relative ideas at least accounts for the intelligibility of various concepts.

## II. The Logical Background

Although definite descriptions seem to provide a reasonable model for understanding relative ideas, and therefore a basis for claiming that the criteria for the adequacy of definite descriptions apply to relative ideas, someone might object that this model is anachronistic. In reply to such an objection, I shall show that the logical theory of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was sufficiently sophisticated to provide such a model to Hume. I shall first consider the type of complex linguistic expression Arnauld called a "determination", since one type of determination is what we now call a definite description. I shall then turn to the criteria for the adequacy of a real definition and argue that these criteria apply, mutatis mutandis, to the question of the adequacy of relative ideas.

In his discussion of linguistic expressions, Arnauld indicates that a determination is a complex expression in which "the extension of the idea expressed by the complex term is less than the extension of the idea expressed by the principal word."<sup>14</sup> Although any noun modified by an adjective is an example of a determination, Arnauld indicates that some determinations have only one individual in their extensions. These determinations are what we now call definite descriptions. Of these Arnauld wrote:

Some determinations are proper names: A general word may be joined with other words in such a way that the idea expressed has in its extension but a single individual. When, for example, I form the complex expression 'the present Pope,' I have determined the general word 'pope' in such a way that the complex expression applies to no other person than to Alexander VII.<sup>15</sup>

One finds the same point made even more succinctly in the writings of the eighteenth century logician Isaac Watts. Watts wrote:

Note in the third place, That any common name whatsoever is made proper by terms of particularity added to it, as the common words pope, king, horse, garden, book, knife, &c. are designed to signify a particular idea, when we say, the present pope; the king of Great Britain; the horse that won the last plate at Newmarket; the royal garden at Kensington; this book, that knife, &c.<sup>16</sup>

These passages clearly indicate that by the early eighteenth century there was an awareness of the uniqueness claim made by a denoting phrase. Since it is undeniable that Hume was acquainted with Arnauld's The Art of Thinking,<sup>17</sup> and since it is probable that he was acquainted with Watts' Logic,<sup>18</sup> it is reasonable to understand the uniqueness claim of a relative idea on the model of a definite description.

If it is proper to construe Hume's relative ideas on the model of a definite description, the criteria for the adequacy of a definite description should apply as well to a relative idea, viz., it must pick out at most and at least one thing.<sup>19</sup> There are several reasons why it is proper to allow that the standard criteria for the adequacy of a definite description apply to relative ideas. First, these are the criteria of uniqueness, and it is clear that there is a uniqueness claim implicit in a Humean relative idea. Secondly, if one can allow that a relative idea might single out a type as well as a token, thereby grounding the meaning of a general term as well as a proper name--a move that is consistent with both the standard analysis of definite descriptions and Hume's discussion of abstract ideas<sup>20</sup>--the criteria for the adequacy of a real definition can be seen as applicable to words that are meaningful only due to a relative idea. Since Arnauld clearly allowed that a real definition can be relative, i.e., a word can be defined "by identifying the cause, or the matter, or the form, or the purpose of any referent of the defined word,"<sup>21</sup> it is clear that a relative idea can provide a foundation within the "way of ideas" for a real

definition. Further, by examining the criteria for the adequacy of a real definition, we shall come to understand why the doctrine of relative ideas is consistent with empiricism and why it may seem that one has a relative idea of something, while, in fact, one does not have such an idea.

Arnauld stated three criteria for the adequacy of a real definition. He wrote:

1. A definition must be exhaustive, that is, the defined words must refer to all those things to which the defining words refer....
2. A definition must be proper, that is, the defining words must refer to only those things to which the defined word can refer....
3. A definition must be informative--that is, the defining words must express a clearer, more distinct idea than does the defined word....<sup>22</sup>

Since the first two criteria demand that the definiens refer to all and only those things in the extension of the definiendum, they comply with the criteria for the adequacy of a definite description. Just as the criteria for the adequacy of a definite description demand that the description pick out at least and at most one thing, in an analogous way if one employs a relative idea to provide the basis in the "way of ideas" for the meaning of the term "material object", it must single out exactly one type of thing. The third criterion is also instructive, for its application to relative ideas demands that one's ideas of the known relatum and the relation in which it stands to the unknown relatum be clear. Since Hume held that ideas are clear just in case they are copies of impressions (T72-73), the application of the third criterion to relative ideas can be understood as demanding that one have positive ideas of the relation and the known relatum in a relative idea. When understood in this way, the third criterion complies with Russell's principle for the adequacy of a proposition containing a definite description, viz., "Every proposition which we can understand must be

composed wholly of constituents with which we are acquainted."<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, this provides the basis for one of Hume's criticisms of the philosophical doctrine of substance.

### III. Applications

If my interpretation of Hume's position on relative ideas is correct, it provides the basis for understanding Hume's critical discussions of the doctrine of substance, it explains why he seemed to hold that the missing shade of blue posed no serious problem for the copy theory of ideas, and it explains how it is possible to think about very large and very small numbers, even though one has no clear and adequate (positive) ideas of them. We shall also discover that, unlike some contemporary proponents of the distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description, Hume did not allow that all putative things singled out on the basis of a relative idea complying with the three criteria are existents, although he did allow that it is possible that anything of which one can have an adequate relative idea could exist. To allow a claim of knowledge by description, Hume required that it be possible to have a positive idea of an entity of at least the same generic sort as that singled out by the relative idea in question. It is for this reason that he could take the relative idea of a material object as a paradigm, while still claiming that the actual existence of material objects as entities specifically different from perceptions is subject to doubt, since *The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, and no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions.*<sup>24</sup> (T212)

Although Hume never explicitly couched his discussions of the philosophical doctrine of substance in terms of relative ideas, his characterizations of that doctrine presuppose that relative ideas provide the cognitive basis for thought about substance. His characterizations of substance may be expressed by the following three definite

descriptions: (1) "the entity that is simple and identical through time";<sup>25</sup> (2) "the entity that exists by itself";<sup>26</sup> and (3) "the entity in which perceptions (or qualities) inhere".<sup>27</sup> As we shall see, he never denied the propriety of the first of these relative ideas, rather he claimed that there is no evidence that it singles out anything. In the remaining two cases, however, he provided grounds for denying the propriety of one's assumed relative ideas.

Hume's discussions of the philosophical doctrine of substance occurs in Part IV of Book I of the Treatise.<sup>28</sup> Throughout his discussions, his most common characterization of substance is that of "the entity that is simple and perfectly identical through time." For example, one finds this in his discussion of substance in *Of the Antient Philosophy*. There he wrote:

*'Tis confest by the most judicious philosophers, that our ideas of bodies are nothing but collections form'd by the mind of the ideas of the several distinct sensible qualities, of which objects are compos'd, and which we find to have a constant union with each other. But however these qualities may in themselves be entirely distinct, 'tis certain we commonly regard the compound, which they form, as ONE thing, and as continuing the SAME under very considerable alterations. The acknowledg'd composition is evidently contrary to this suppos'd simplicity, and the variation to the identity. (T219)*

At no point in his discussion of the belief in substance did Hume deny the intelligibility of this relative idea of substance, although he consistently claimed that there is no evidence that anything complies with the idea, i.e., one has no positive ideas of things of this type. Indeed, as the passage above indicates, all the positive evidence suggests that nothing complies with the relative idea of material substance as the entity that is simple and perfectly identical through time. Nonetheless, in his discussion of the substantiality (the "perfect identity and simplicity") of the self in *Of Personal Identity*, (T251), Hume went so

far as to (ironically) allow that even though he had no (positive) idea of himself as a simple and perfectly identical entity, others might have such a positive idea of themselves. (T252) Furthermore, since one might well take this relative idea of the self as an intelligible idea of a substratum, one can understand why Hume could quite justifiably make the following claim in his Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh.

*The Author has not anywhere that I remember denied the Immateriality of the Soul in the common Sense of the Word. He only says, That that Question did not admit of any distinct Meaning; because we had no distinct Idea of Substance. This Opinion may be found everywhere in Mr. Lock, as well as in Bishop Berkley.<sup>29</sup>*

By a *distinct Idea of Substance* Hume certainly meant what I have called a positive idea.

Hume found the second candidate for a relative idea of substance, *the entity which may exist by itself*, (T233) unintelligible. His examination of the Cartesian definition of substance was intended to show that that definition of substance (and the relative idea one supposedly possesses) fails to single out an entity that is categorically distinct from perceptions. Assuming a distinction between an immaterial substance and perceptions as its modes, and arguing from the distinguishability and separability of perceptions, Hume concluded that since one can conceive of a perception existing apart from all other things, it is possible for a perception so to exist. *They [perceptions] are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance.* (T233)<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, given his operative assumption that *A substance is entirely different from a perception*, (T234) it follows that the definition and its corresponding relative idea fail to single out an entity that is categorically distinct from a perception. Hence, due to the failure of this relative idea of a substance to single out a unique type of entity, it cannot be an adequate idea of substance.

The third candidate for a relative idea of substance, that represented by the descriptive phrase, "the entity in which perceptions (or qualities) inhere", is inadequate due to the absence of a clear idea of the relation of inhesion. His argument to show this is built upon his previous conclusion that it is possible for perceptions to exist independently. As Hume wrote:

*Inhesion in something is suppos'd to be requisite to support the existence of perceptions. Nothing appears requisite to support the existence of a perception. We have, therefore, no idea of inhesion. What possibility then to answering that question, Whether perceptions inhere in a material or immaterial substance, when we do not so much as understand the meaning of the question?*  
(T234)

One should notice that Hume's focus here is on the putative relation of inhesion. If one has a relative idea of substance as an entity in which perceptions (qualities) inhere, one must have a clear, positive idea of the relation of inhesion. Hume's argument is intended to show that one has no idea of that relation. Since the criteria for the adequacy of a real definition apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to one's relative ideas, a relative idea in which the relation is no more clear than the thing the relative idea is intended to single out violates the third criterion for adequacy, which is sufficient to demonstrate that inhesion can play no role in a relative idea of substance.

These considerations regarding one's alleged relative ideas of substance are instructive insofar as they show how Hume could allow that there seem to be things of which one thinks, even though there is neither a positive nor a relative idea that represents the object of one's thought. The first relative idea of substance, that of the thing that is simple and perfectly identical through time, is intelligible, since one has ideas of simplicity and the relation of identity.<sup>31</sup> The other two supposed relative ideas of substance fail to be significant, because in one case the class

of entities singled out by the idea includes entities that are not conventionally considered in the extension of the term "substance", while in the other case there is no positive idea of a relation that corresponds to the relational term "inheres". If it seems that the meaning of the term "substance" can be grounded on the basis of either of these latter two descriptions, it is simply because the conventional usage of the words in philosophical contexts seduces one into believing that the words in these descriptions are meaningful. Now since Hume held that words are meaningful just in case they denote ideas, (EHU22) and since his discussion of abstract ideas explains why words have conventional connotations, (T17-25) if the class of entities singled out by a relative idea does not comply with the conventional connotation of the word whose meaning it is intended to ground, one cannot claim that the word is meaningful. It is for this reason that the relative idea of substance as the thing that can exist independently cannot ground the meaning of the word "substance". In the case of one's relative idea of substance as the entity in which perceptions (qualities) inhere, the problem is merely that one has no positive idea of the relation of inherence, and the word "inherence" is therefore meaningless. So long as the relational term in a definite description that corresponds to a relative idea denotes a genuine relation, and the entity or class of entities that is singled out by the relative idea complies with one's linguistic conventions, one can quite properly claim to have a relative idea of a thing or type of thing.

As we saw earlier, it is clear that Hume held that some relative ideas single out things or types of things, for example, one's relative idea of power singles out the property that causes a particular effect. We have also recognized that if a relative idea is to single out a thing or type of thing, one must have a clear idea of the relevant relation in the relative idea. Since Hume claimed

that all genuine relations fall under seven general headings (T13-15) it is clear that the relation in a genuine relative idea must fall under one of these headings. Recognizing this, we can see how Hume's considerations of the missing shade of blue and the thousandth part of a grain of sand can be subsumed under the doctrine of relative ideas.<sup>33</sup>

In his notorious discussion of the missing shade of blue, Hume suggests the possibility that one can form an idea of a particular simple shade of blue, even if one has never had an impression of that color. Assuming that a man of thirty had been acquainted with all shades of blue save one, and all the shades of blue with which he had been acquainted were placed before him in a progression from lightest to darkest, the man would notice that there is a greater qualitative difference between two shades of blue than there is between any others. Hume then suggested that it would be possible for the man to imagine (form an idea of) this simple missing shade of blue, even though he had never had an impression of it. (EHU21; T5-6) Now Hume allowed that we possess ideas of relations of quality, and he explicitly included ideas of differences in shades of color among these ideas of qualitative relations. (T15) This indicates that one can single out the missing shade of blue on the basis of the relative idea corresponding to the definite description, "the shade of blue that is darker than x and lighter than y," where x and y are the shades of blue flanking the missing shade. If one can allow that one might have a relative, rather than a positive, idea of the missing shade of blue, this will account for why Hume seemed unconcerned about what would otherwise be a telling counterexample to his copy theory of simple ideas.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly, since Hume allowed that *All those objects, which admit of quantity, or number, may be compar'd in that particular* (T14-15), one can understand how he could claim that one has an idea of the thousandth part of a grain of

sand, even though one's mental image of it differs in no way from that of the grain of sand itself. In his words:

*When you tell me of the thousandth and ten thousandth part of a grain of sand, I have a distinct idea of these numbers and of their different proportions; but the images, which I form in my mind to represent the things themselves, 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. (T27)*

Since one can understand proportions, even though one had a distinct (positive) idea of nothing other than "numbers", i.e., numerals, representing large numbers,<sup>35</sup> it is reasonable to assume that one's understanding of the thousandth part of something consists of a relative idea of the singular part of a collection of ten times ten times ten things, where one has a clear positive idea of ten things. It is due to Hume's explicit claims that one has an idea of relations of quantity and number that it is reasonable to understand his discussion of the thousandth part of a grain of sand as the result of the operation of a relative idea on the mental image of a grain of sand.

#### IV. Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that Hume drew a distinction between positive ideas (images) and relative ideas. I began by showing that this distinction is found in the writings of Locke and Berkeley, as well as in those of Hume. I elucidated the notion of a relative idea in terms of a definite description that contains a term of a relation by appealing to the logical writings of Arnauld and Watts. Finally, I argued that the notion of a relative idea explains why it seems that one can think of substance, why Hume seemed to find the case of the missing shade of blue unproblematic, and how it is possible to have an idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, even though the mental image involved in that idea does not differ from that of the grain of sand itself.<sup>36</sup>

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1. On this distinction, see Bertrand Russell, The Problems of Philosophy (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1912), pp. 46-59.
2. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.222.
3. Treatise p. 27; cf. Treatise pp. 22-23. Since John Yolton has shown that these Humean ideas cannot be construed as images, my discussion of relative ideas will also elucidate the sense in which Hume could claim to have such ideas. See John Yolton, "Hume's Ideas," Hume Studies 6 (1980): 1-25.
4. George Berkeley, A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, sections 27, 89, and 142, in The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957), 2:52-53, 78-79, and 106; and George Berkeley, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in Works, 2:197-198 and 223.
5. John Locke, An Essay concerning Human Understanding, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book 1, Chapter 4, Section 18, p. 95, Locke's emphasis.
6. Locke, Essay, 2.23.3, p. 296.
7. Locke, Essay, 2.13.19, p. 175; cf. Essay 3.23.1-2, pp. 295-296 and 2.31.6, p. 378. See also Locke's first letter to Stillingfleet, in The Works of John Locke, 10 vols. (1823; reprint ed. Darmstadt, West Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1963), 4:7-8.
8. Berkeley, Principles, section 16, p. 47; on immaterial substance, cf. section 142, p. 106.
9. See Berkeley, Principles, sections 8-18, pp. 44-48.
10. Berkeley, Principles, section 138, p. 104.
11. This type of distinction was not limited to proponents of the "way of ideas". A distinction analogous to the positive/relative ideas distinction was also drawn by Thomas Reid. See Thomas Reid, Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind, ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1969), pp. 7-10.
12. See Treatise pp. 216-217. I have stated two ways of construing the relative idea of a material object as something specifically different from a perception, since the notion of "specific difference" is open to at least two interpretations. First, "specific

difference" might refer to a difference in quality or sort, where this has no ontological overtones. Since Hume divided the world into sorts on the basis of resemblance, two things would be specifically different in this sense if they did not resemble exactly. Given this sense of "specific difference", the colors red and blue are specifically different, different shades of blue are specifically different, and, in accordance with Locke's version of the primary/secondary qualities distinction, a secondary quality in an idea is specifically different from (does not resemble) the corresponding secondary quality in the material object that causes the idea (e.g., the power of the object to produce an idea of redness), while a primary quality in an idea is specifically identical with (does resemble) a primary quality in the corresponding object. If this is the sense in which Hume used "specifically different", one's relative idea of a material object as an entity that is specifically different from a perception cannot contain the relation of resemblance. (If one understood material objects in terms of Locke's corpuscular hypothesis, there would be little resemblance between a perception and the corresponding material object, i.e., they would be specifically different in this sense. This might be the model Hume had in mind.) Second, "specific difference" might refer to a difference between ontological kinds, i.e., a categorical difference. Such an interpretation seems consistent with Butchvarov's ontological interpretation of Hume. (See Panayot Butchvarov, "The Self and Perceptions: A Study in Humean Philosophy," Philosophical Quarterly 9 [1959]: 106.) If the specific difference between an idea and an object is a difference in ontological kind, it might be possible for an object to both cause and resemble an idea, in which case one's relative idea would include both the relations of causation and resemblance. Nonetheless, since Hume seems generally to have employed "specific difference" in the first sense (cf. Treatise p. 188 and p. 241), and even if he intended to employ "specific difference" in the second sense the relation of resemblance can be only secondary, I shall describe the relative idea in terms of causation alone.

13. See David Hume, Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), p. 77n, Hume's emphasis.
14. Antoine Arnauld, The Art of Thinking: Port-Royal Logic, trans. James Dickoff and Patricia James (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, Library of Liberal Arts, 1964), p. 60.
15. Arnauld, The Art of Thinking, p. 60.

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16. Isaac Watts, Logic, or the Right Use of Reason, in the Inquiry after Truth, 3rd American edition (Boston: Ranlett and Norris, 1806), p. 50.
17. Hume cited The Art of Thinking at Treatise p. 43n.
18. Although the mere fact that Watts' Logic went through many editions in the early part of the eighteenth century suggests that Hume was quite probably familiar with Watts' Logic, Hume never cited Watts, and I have been unable to find any hard evidence that Hume was familiar with Watts' logical writings. Nonetheless, the fact that both Watts and Arnauld discussed a rudimentary theory of definite descriptions, indicates that such a theory was fairly well-known among knowledgeable people in the early eighteenth century, and this strongly suggests that Hume was aware of the theory even if he did not read Watts.
19. Bertrand Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," in Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901-1950, ed. Robert C. Marsh (New York: Capricorn Books, 1956), p.249.
20. See Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," p. 243, and Treatise pp. 17-25.
21. Arnauld, p. 165.
22. Ibid. pp. 165-166; cf. Watts, Logic, pp. 85-88.
23. Russell, The Problems of Philosophy, p. 58.
24. Nonetheless, it is clear that Hume held that relative ideas can provide the basis for the intelligibility of representationalism. As I indicated above (note 12), Locke seemed to include the corpuscular hypothesis in his representational theory, and at one point Hume alluded to that hypothesis as *the most probable, at least the most intelligible philosophy* (David Hume, The Natural History of Religion, ed. H. E. Root [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956], p. 29). Hence, even if an adequate relative idea is not in all cases sufficient to justify an existence claim, it is sufficient to provide for the intelligibility of concepts of things that are not available to experience.
25. Cf. Treatise, p. 219, and p. 251.
26. Cf. Treatise, p. 233.
27. Cf. Treatise, p. 234.
28. Although he employs the word "substance" at various places in the first Enquiry (e.g., pp. 65-66), his

clear allusion to the notion of material substance on page 155 can leave little doubt that he retained the same position he had championed in the Treatise. There he wrote:

*Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable something, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth his while to contend against it.*

29. David Hume, A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh, ed. Ernest C. Mossner and John V. Price (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 1967), pp. 29-30. Cf. The Letters of David Hume, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 1:94.
30. Cf. Treatise, pp. 207-208.
31. On identity, see Treatise p. 14, and pp. 200-201. A paradigm of simplicity is spatial simplicity, an idea of which Hume held one possesses (T27-28). Whether this is sufficient to account for the ontological simplicity required by a relative idea of substance is open to doubt. Nonetheless, given that one has some idea of simplicity, this seems to be sufficient to fulfill the formal requirements for a relative idea.
32. Cf. Treatise, pp. 17-25.
33. It may also shed some light on the serious intent of Hume's employment of Bayle's arguments against Spinoza (see Treatise pp. 240-246). In these arguments, Hume construed the relation of inhesion as the relation of identity, which is the only one of the seven types of relations that is a plausible candidate for that relation.
34. Robert Cummins has argued for basically this way of understanding the missing shade of blue in the course of arguing that ideas involve recognitional capacities. See Robert Cummins, "The Missing Shade of Blue," Philosophical Review 87 (1978): 548-565.
35. Cf. Treatise, pp. 22-23.
36. This paper was read at the Ninth Hume Conference in October 1980.