



Hume on Continued Existence and the Identity of Changing Things

Eric Steinberg

Hume Studies Volume VII, Number 2 (November, 1981), 105-120.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

HUME ON CONTINUED EXISTENCE AND THE IDENTITY OF CHANGING THINGS

Most discussions of Hume's rather cursory treatment of coherence as a factor in generating belief in what he calls the *continu'd existence* of objects in *Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses*,¹ have taken a common line in interpreting the nature of the problem Hume's treatment is designed to solve. For instance, perhaps the two most extensive discussions, those of Price² and Gomberg³ seem to agree that the problem is: how do we fill in the gaps among our perceptions, complete sequences or series that are incomplete, and come to believe in the existence of a world of unperceived objects. At the same time such discussions have focussed on the issue of whether the inference from the coherence of our perceptions to belief in the continued existence of objects (ICCE) is, as Hume claims, distinguishable from causal inference. Hume is read in such a way that ICCE if not causal is at least quasi-causal; that is, the only difference for Hume between the two sorts of inference has been taken to be one concerning the evidence on which each is based -- causal inferences on past constant conjunctions or uniformities, ICCE on something less.

I believe that these discussions have invariably omitted a key factor in understanding Hume's treatment of coherence, one that I want to point out and develop in this paper. Hume's discussion of coherence, like his discussion of constancy, is bound up with the concept of identity; for belief in the continued existence of an object, which coherence generates, is a belief about its identity. Hence a causal inference is distinguished from ICCE by Hume as only the latter necessarily involves belief in the identity of an object over time. Once this is recognized, we can view Hume's discussion of coherence as requiring an answer to the question: "How do we come to believe in the identity of changing things?" I want to consider two interpretations of

the exact nature of ICCE for Hume -- one suggested by examples offered in his discussion of coherence, the other suggested by remarks about the concept of identity in other sections of Part Four of Book One of the Treatise -- and to argue that neither satisfactorily answers this question. This failure raises doubts not only about ICCE but about the tenability of Hume's characterization of the "vulgar" view of perception and his view of identity.

When Hume first answers the question, "What qualities of our impressions or perceptions lead us to attribute to them a distinct and continued existence,?" by isolating the qualities of constancy and coherence, I think it is clear that the former is invoked to account for objects which are, at least in a relative sense, unchanging, which *have always appear'd to me in the same order and return upon me without the least alteration* (T194), while the latter is invoked especially, if not solely, to account for objects that undergo rather large changes over time, things which *after a little absence or interruption may become hardly knowable*. (T195) Hume's example concerns a fire in his chamber, which undergoes great change from the moment he leaves (or perhaps the moment it is lighted) to the time he returns (or perhaps the time it is a bunch of glowing embers), but which, nevertheless, compared to other fires undergoes a *like alteration ... in a like time*. (T195) Whatever more coherence can do, it is required, at least initially, to account for just those cases which cannot be subsumed under constancy, in other words, cases in which changing objects are taken to possess distinct and continued existence.

In the famous paragraph following his initial comments on coherence, Hume seemingly proceeds to explain how coherence gives rise to belief in continued existence. The account runs basically as follows. Hume hears a noise, as of a door turning; he sees a porter coming toward him. But, Hume says,

I never have observ'd, that this noise could proceed from anything but the motion of a

door; and therefore conclude, that the present phaenomenon is a contradiction to all past experience, unless the door, which I remember on t'other side the chamber, be still in being. (T196)

Similarly the appearance of the porter seems to require the existence of stairs leading to Hume's chamber. Hence, one could say in general what Hume says of the case of the noise and the door: *I have not received in this particular instance both these perceptions. These observations are contrary [to past experience], unless I suppose that the door still remains, and that it was open'd without my perceiving it. (T196-7)* Therefore, one must infer the *continu'd existence of objects, in order to connect their past and present appearances. (T197)*

One thing that might puzzle us about Hume's examples, given the reason for introducing coherence in the first place, is that they are not for the greater part of things that are changing like the fire, but relatively stable and unchanging like the tree, for which constancy and not coherence was said to be relevant. Still, it is no doubt tempting to read Hume's examples and the paragraph in which they occur as having straightforward application to the case of the fire. It might seem as if Hume is contending that ICCE is at least quasi-causal in nature. We have seen two kinds of objects frequently (but perhaps not constantly) conjoined. Now we perceive one but not the other. To conform the present case to the past cases (or the multitude of past cases), we supply the missing object by believing that it exists unperceived. The role of ICCE is simply to keep our experience regular or uniform by providing unperceived conjuncts. We could even suppose that the same process also provides conjuncts for past cases where one of the objects was absent.

Now of course there appears to be no limit to how extensive the list of conjoined objects or the sequence may be. We might imagine, therefore, that the same kind of

operation would be able to fill in numerous or great gaps in the case of the fire. Even if in the present case, for instance, one has only observed the starting of the fire and the dying embers, we can imagine one inferring all the intervening states, as long as we suppose that one has perceived the entire course of the fire in the past. And once we have filled in the gaps it might be said we have posited the continued existence of the fire.

The preceding is roughly the way that Price⁴ and Gomberg⁵ interpret the nature of ICCE for Hume. Although Gomberg doubts whether ICCE as so described is in fact different from causal inference and consequently whether it justifies Hume's claims, he does believe that it is adequate to account for belief in the continued existence of the fire.

I think that Gomberg is mistaken both in his causal or quasi-causal reading of ICCE for Hume and in his belief that this kind of inference can account for belief in the continued existence of the fire. To see why we must consider Hume's use of the expression "continued existence."

Although we might be inclined to suppose that the expression *continu'd existence* means for Hume just what the expression "unperceived existence" does for us, we should note that in his discussion of how we or the "vulgar" come to believe in the continued existence of objects, Hume is employing the former expression in a narrower sense than we typically employ the latter. Whether because of his conviction that belief in what is commonly called the "external world" must start from what is given in sense experience or because of his desire to faithfully capture the beliefs of the common man, the fact is that as the term "continued" implies, what Hume is concerned with is how we come to believe that the objects we perceive continue to exist after we have perceived them or have continued to exist when we are perceiving them. In other words, for the vulgar, to believe that an object *x* has continued existence is to believe that *x* is sensed and that *x* exists after it is sensed or

prior to its being sensed--in short, that x exists at a time other than the time at which it is sensed. This is the manner in which the expression is introduced in this section of the Treatise (*Why we attribute a CONTINU'D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the sense* (T188)), and it is the sense implicit in virtually every remark Hume makes about the continued existence of objects throughout this section.⁶ Moreover, it accords with the role assigned to constancy later in the section in developing belief in continued existence. For according to Hume constancy leads us to believe that the very things we sense exist when we are not sensing them. This sense of the expression also would account for the fact that Hume seems to treat the extreme or limiting case of the attribution of continued existence by the vulgar to be not that in which it is attributed to things that have never been perceived, but instead to things *which are perfectly new to us*, (T209), i.e., things which we are sensing for the first time.

If it is a condition of ascribing continued existence to any object x that x be sensed and believed to exist when unsensed, I think it follows that it is a condition of ascribing continued existence to x that x be taken to be numerically the same object when sensed and when unsensed. Put slightly differently, belief in the identity of an object is entailed by belief in its continued existence.⁷ It seems clear that in the paragraph in which he discusses his chamber door and the porter, Hume is quite aware that the belief in continued existence is tied to a belief in identity. For in referring to the objects whose continued existence is inferred, Hume says, *the door...I remember, the stairs I remember, continu'd existence of posts and ferries, according to my memory and observation*, (T196) and he ends the paragraph with a remark extremely similar to one found earlier in the Treatise concerning the role of experience and observation in judgments of identity.⁸

Given this relation between belief in continued existence and belief in identity for Hume, I think it should already be apparent that ICCE is not for Hume simply a causal or quasi-causal inference as Price and Gomberg suppose. For filling in gaps or missing conjuncts is neither positing the continued existence of an object nor tantamount to a judgment or belief about the identity of what results once the process has been completed. This can be illustrated by the sorts of examples Hume, himself, offers in the aforementioned paragraph. By providing a missing conjunct, a door or a flight of stairs, we are merely inferring an x that is unsensed. We are by no means doing what Hume describes, that is, inferring the existence of something taken to have been previously sensed. Even in the case of the fire, it would seem that inferring continued existence is more than filling in gaps in our perception. For as we have noted, to believe that the fire has continued existence is to believe that the same object has existed throughout a period of time, during some but not all of which it has been perceived. Filling in gaps in this case may give us a series of different perceptions, but not necessarily a belief about the identity of the object constituted by the series. Yet without the latter belief we do not have a belief in the continued existence of the fire at all.

However, even if we can say for Hume that belief in continued existence involves a belief about identity, a question about the precise nature of ICCE for him remains. On the basis of his discussion of the door and porter examples and the concept of continued existence, the following seems a plausible reconstruction of his account of ICCE. All of us are in the habit of making causal inferences when we find two kinds of objects frequently (if not constantly) conjoined. In the case of the noise, for example, it is natural for us each time we hear such a noise to infer the existence of an impression, i.e., a door, of the kind we have perceived accompanying the noise. However, there is a

principle of the imagination, which when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse. (T198) As Hume expresses the same point when first discussing the principle in the context of the concept of equality, the principle proceed(s) ...with any action, even after the reason has ceas'd, which first determin'd it to begin. (T48) In short, the principle keeps an action going on beyond the point for which it was originally required. Given what Hume says in the passage about his chamber door, in the case of ICCE, the only action that already seems to be taking place is the causal inference noted above which is required to conform the present to the past; in the case of the door, this would mean that the original action is the inference of an impression or door from the noise, an impression or door that likely is taken to exist for a time prior to the time at which the noise is heard, since past experience has likely been of doors that have been observed to exist prior to their being opened. Thus, two facts are present to the mind, first, that the door of Hume's chamber has been perceived and existed at some time in the past, let us say at time t_1 and, second, hearing a noise at time t_n , that a qualitatively similar impression or door must exist at t_n and for a period of time immediately prior to t_n , say from t_{n-1} to t_n . Still at this point a belief in the continued existence of Hume's chamber door has not been generated. But then the principle of the imagination referred to by Hume is activated and extends the same action, the positing of a qualitatively similar impression for a period of time, by providing an impression of a door from time t_{n-1} to time t_{n-2} and so forth, until it has provided the same impression for all times back to t_1 . In this way it comes to posit the continued existence of Hume's chamber door. For if the imagination has provided a belief that a qualitatively similar impression has persisted from t_1 to t_n , it has ipso facto provided a belief in the continued existence of the door,

since as Hume notes the concept of identity is just the concept of an invariable and uninterrupted perception or object. (T201)

If the preceding account is correct then Hume's problem is not as often claimed that he failed to distinguish an ICCE from a causal or quasi-causal inference, but rather that his account of the difference, as in the example of the door, fails to explain the belief in the continued existence of changing things such as the fire. As described above ICCE seems to result from the imagination filling in or connecting by repetition of exactly resembling impressions. Yet this operation seems irrelevant as far as belief in, for example, the continued existence of the fire is concerned, given that belief in its continued existence is presumably a belief in the identity of an object none of whose states persists. Far from giving rise to a belief in the fire's continued existence, repetition would undermine it. In fact the belief in the continued existence of the fire seems paradoxical. How can one believe in a changing thing that has continued existence and thus an identity, when the very concept of identity implies invariableness or lack of change?

It might seem as if Hume's answer to this question and the true account of ICCE has to be extracted from other places in the Treatise; in particular, Sections 3 and 6 of Part Four of Book One contain an account of how identity is attributed to changing things, which account might be at the bottom of ICCE for Hume. Instead of interpreting Hume, as we have thus far on the basis of his door and stairs examples, to be claiming that coherence and the propensity of the imagination produce the belief in the identity of an object, perhaps we should understand the relation between ICCE and identity for Hume as one in which an initial observation of the complete sequence of, for example, a fire provides us with the idea of the fire's identity. This idea would then be available while we subsequently fill in gaps in our perceptions, and along with that process would result in belief

in the identity and hence continued existence of a given fire. On this reading, observation gives us the idea of an object's identity, a kind of causal reasoning gives us parts of an object, and the combination of the two gives us the continued existence of a particular object.⁹ On this reading Gomberg's and Price's contention that the function of ICCE for Hume is to fill in gaps would turn out to be at least partially correct.

In accordance with his position in Section 6, for example, Hume might hold that in the case of a fire, there are specific relations between the distinct and different impressions that constitute it, and because of this the difference is disguised. Observation of the entire series initially has an effect on the imagination that resembles the perception of an unchanging object and so gives rise to the false belief in its identity. Once derived, this belief could then be the bridge from the coherence of our perceptions to belief in the continued existence of objects.

If we look at Section 6 and note the kinds of factors that are supposed to contribute to our misattribution of identity to changing things, the above reading appears promising. Although it is obvious that some of the noted factors have no relevance to the case of the fire--the existence of a common end or sympathy of parts, for instance--a number do seem applicable, namely, the minuteness of change, the size of the change in proportion to the whole, and perhaps most importantly the gradualness of change. Perhaps what Hume means to say about the case of the fire is that when we observe the fire at time t_1 and then a second later at t_2 , the resemblance is so great (because the change is so slight) that we take the fire at t_1 to be identical with the fire at t_2 ; the same is true for the relation between the fire at t_2 and the fire at t_3 . Since the fire at t_1 is taken to be identical with the fire at t_2 and the fire at t_2 to be identical with the fire at t_3 , the upshot is that the fire at t_1 is taken to be identical with the fire at t_3 , and so on until the entire

fire is taken to be an identical object. Since we never have the complete sequence to observe at one time and since the contiguous states of the fire are so greatly resembling, we fail to realize how much the fire has changed. We then have an idea of "fire-identity" to be utilized in future observation of and inferences about other fires.

However plausible this reading may be, unfortunately it cannot, any more than could the door analogy, make belief in the continued existence of changing things like the fire intelligible. For even if we grant that observation can give us the idea of an object that is in fact changing, the very nature of an inference from coherence is sufficient to overthrow this belief. The whole point of requiring a coherence inference for Hume is to account for recognized change, not to disguise or overlook it, and ironically just because of this it does have some affinity with causal reasoning. In short, the question is this: doesn't the fact that coherence inferences are intended for cases where great gaps exist between perceptions, where, as Hume puts it, objects are "hardly knowable" have some effect on our belief in an object's identity? There can be little question that Hume himself would answer in the affirmative. In the Treatise he says,

When we gradually follow an object in its successive changes, the smooth progress of the thought makes us ascribe an identity to the succession...When we compare its situation after a considerable change the progress of the thought is broke; and consequently we are presented with the idea of diversity. (T220)

Likewise in discussing the well-known case of the missing shade of blue, Hume notes that even though we might be tempted to claim that the most closely resembling shades of the same color are not different, that 'tis possible, by the continual gradation of shades, to run a color insensibly into what is most remote from it; and if you will not allow any of the means to be different, you cannot without absurdity deny the extremes to be the same. (T6) The clear implication is that

all of us when presented with the extremes would note the difference.

The difference between the kind of case for which Hume's explanation of the misattribution of identity has some plausibility and the case of coherence can be brought out further by considering the manner in which the imagination operates in each. If the case of the fire were simply a case of overlooking change and mistakenly believing that we are dealing with an unchanging object, we would have a case of believed constancy, and we should fill in the gaps accordingly, with a single impression as in the case of the door. It would be similar to the case of an individual whom I have known for five years and have seen nearly every day during that period. Suppose that though the person has changed during that time, my daily contact with the person has made me overlook the change and take the person to be unchanging in appearance. I think it is clear that when asked to think of or imagine how the person looked five years ago (or four years ago, etc.), I shall simply think of how the person looks today. I shall hardly replicate the entire process of change as I do in a coherence inference. On the other hand, if I remember something that indicates that the person has indeed changed, then where I mean by 'identical,' "unchanging," I will withdraw my ascription of identity. In short constancy or something approaching it may give us belief in identity; but it cannot be reconciled with recognized change. Coherence may give us recognized change; but except in cases like the door it cannot give us identity. Yet for Hume ICCE requires both coherence and identity. Neither Hume's explanation in the case of the door, in which a similar impression existed for a period of time is posited, nor an explanation which involves causal or quasi-causal reasoning-cum-misattribution of identity, shows how ICCE is possible in the case of changing things.

In this respect the situations in Hume's discussions of coherence and constancy are quite dissimilar. For in Hume's discussion of constancy he is at pains to show that a

paradox between belief in the identity of an object and its failure to meet one of the conditions for identity is only apparent and can be resolved. Although we realize that there are gaps or interruptions among the occurrence of perfectly resembling perceptions, we still want to take these perceptions to be an identical object. Hume's resolution is to say that we tend to disguise the interruptedness by believing in the continued existence of the perceptions, that is, by believing that they (or it) exist even when not being sensed. (T206) Yet in the case of coherence I believe it should be clear that the paradox is not amenable to a similar resolution. For according to Hume, the view under scrutiny in both discussions, the view of the vulgar, is represented as holding that (a) what is perceived is the object--*the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence*, (T206) and (b) this object possesses continued existence. Where x is an object and where p is the property of being uninterrupted, there seems to be no inconsistency in claiming that x is p, though given what I've seen of x, it is not p, for even accepting (a), there may be more to x than I have at this time perceived.¹⁰ At the very least we can say that the problem of the interruptedness of one's perceptions need not push one into embracing the chief competitor of the vulgar theory--the representative theory. For what I am seeing may be the object even if I am not seeing all of it there is to see. The case is quite different with coherence and belief in the identity of changing things. For where p is the property of being invariable, it is inconsistent with (a) and (b) to hold that x is p, though given what I've seen of x, it is not p--since on the vulgar theory if any portion or part of x is not invariable, then x is not invariable. To put the same point slightly differently, the only thing that can disguise the change is to suppose that what one is perceiving is not the object, that is, to give up (a).

The preceding point is I believe virtually conceded by Hume in a number of places in the Treatise. In his

discussion of personal identity, for instance, he makes the following statement,

...We often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continu'd existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a soul, and self, and substance, to disguise the variation. (T254)

A similar remark is found immediately following the passage quoted on page thirteen, where Hume says that the only way to reconcile belief in identity and the recognition of diversity is for the imagination to feign something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls a substance, or original and first matter. (T220) The striking thing about these statements is the implied asymmetry in dealing with failure to meet each of the conditions for identity. In the case of the interruption of our perceptions, we retain our view with qualifications, in the case of the variableness of our perceptions, we give it up and become "philosophical." Yet if this is true, the vulgar view seems empty.

I suspect that Hume is not unaware of the tension between the vulgar view and the belief in the continued existence of changing things. Like the discussion of personal identity, the discussion of belief in the continued existence of changing things is nowhere to be found in the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding.¹¹ When Hume does discuss perception and our belief in an external world in Section XII of that work, he refers to the belief in the independence, externality and uniformity of perceptions. The first two terms would seem to capture what Hume in the Treatise lumps under the heading *distinct existence* and from the discussion in the Enquiry, it would appear that the third term, far from being equivalent to *continu'd existence* expresses the claim that an object *suffers no alteration*.¹²

In short, beliefs about changing things are no longer under discussion.

In recent years a good deal of attention has been paid to the view that Hume in his discussion of personal identity may have been introducing a different concept of identity from the so-called "perfect" identity that involves invariableness.¹³ It has been noted that in some of his discussion of personal identity Hume, rather than criticizing our ascription of identity to changing things, seems to be condoning it. If what has been argued for in this paper is correct, it would seem that Hume must go even further. He must not only introduce a concept of identity consistent with change, he must take it to be the vulgar concept of identity as well. For otherwise it would seem that the vulgar belief that changing things have continued existence is not simply false or muddled but impossible.

Eric Steinberg
Brooklyn College of C.U.N.Y.

1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, Second Edition (Oxford, 1978), pp.187-218. Further references to this work are in parentheses.
2. H. H. Price, Hume's Theory of the External World (Oxford, 1940).
3. Paul Gomberg, "Coherence and Causal Inference in Hume's Treatise," Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 6, pp. 693-704, December, 1976.
4. Op. Cit. pp. 50-1.
5. Op. Cit. pp. 700 and 704.
6. For instance, *Were we not first persuaded, that our perceptions are our only object, and continue to exist even when they no longer make their appearance to the senses...* (T211) and *My memory, indeed, informs me of the existence of many objects; but then this information extends not beyond their past existence, nor do either my senses or memory give any testimony to the continuance of their being.* (T196). The one possible exception to this use of the expression *continu'd existence* is in Hume's discussion of the *philosophical system* (T211; 213-6) according to which objects but not perceptions are taken to have continued existence.

7. Given the preceding account of *continu'd existence* Hume's claim (T188) concerning the equivalence of *continu'd existence* and *distinct existence* must be doubted. For we can imagine cases in which the existence of an object neither depends on an individual (or an individual's perception) nor is incapable of being perceived by others and yet exists only while it is being perceived. Despite Hume's claim, his discussion of coherence and constancy requires only that continued existence implies distinct existence (T199; 210-1; 213-4).
8. [I] suppose the *continu'd existence* of objects, in order to connect their past and present appearances, and give them such an union with each other, as I have found by experience to be suitable to their particular natures and circumstances. (T197). Cf. Op. Cit., p. 74.
9. The last reference in the previous footnote, which occurs early on in the Treatise (74) might appear to support this reading. For in the section in which that passage occurs, Hume appears to be claiming that our ascriptions of identity, although not the origin of the concept, are dependent upon the relation of cause and effect.
10. It might appear as if this is false for Hume. For if the vulgar identify objects and perceptions, then whatever is true of one must be true of the other. But to accept (b) is to deny this, since, for instance, the object exists at a time when the perception does not. Such an interpretation is suggested in the Treatise on p. 215. In the Appendix, however, Hume says that the vulgar view, i.e., the combination of (a) and (b), implies no contradiction. (T634).
11. Perhaps this omission is not independent of the omission of the discussion of personal identity. For when expressing his dissatisfaction with his account of personal identity in the Appendix to the Treatise, Hume says of his perceptions that he is aware that when I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective. (T635). As set forth in the section on personal identity, the principle of connexion seems to be a combination of causality and resemblance among different perceptions. In the case of the fire it would seem that the very same relations must be the principle of connexion responsible for the ascription of identity. That is, we have a series of perceptions that resemble other perceptions especially those on which they have a direct dependence.
12. David Hume, An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,

120.

edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, Third Edition (Oxford, 1975), pp. 151-2.

13. The view is found in Lawrence Ashley and Michael Stack, "Hume's Theory of the Self and its Identity," Dialogue, 13, pp. 239-254, June 1974. A recent critique of the view is found in Wade L. Robison, "In Defense of Hume's Appendix," in McGill Hume Studies, edited by David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi and Wade L. Robison (San Diego, 1979), pp. 89-99.