



**On McRae's Hume**

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## ON McRAE'S HUME

Professor McRae's interesting paper<sup>1</sup> may be rather naturally divided into two parts. In the first part he explains what he takes Hume's account of time to be; in the second he advances the bold thesis that Hume's account of time, or perhaps of duration, provides a basis or foundation for his more widely discussed remarks on identity, substance, the self, the necessary connections. In what follows I first reconstruct Professor McRae's paper, and then I raise some problems, perhaps puzzles, about Hume's view on duration, time and fictions.

According to McRae, some philosophers (Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz) distinguish between time and duration, both of which are taken to be perfectly legitimate notions. Hume, by contrast, takes time and duration to be the same, viz., a succession of moments. What philosophers and the vulgar call 'duration' is something quite different, namely a single unbroken stretch of time which is not composed of successive parts. Of duration taken in this latter way, McRae says, Hume has four things to say, all of them negative: (1) we have no idea of duration; (2) no object has duration; (3) there is no such thing as duration; and (4) duration is a fiction. Properly understood as a succession of moments, however, time certainly exists and is thus not a fiction. Moreover, we have the or at least an idea of time, despite the fact that it is obtained without derivation from a precedent impression. And, while no object can be said to have time, Hume will nonetheless allow that objects exist at certain times and perhaps across a time span.

In the second part of his paper, Professor McRae distinguishes two types of Humean fictions. The first arises when one idea is confused with another and mis-applied to some object. The second arises when the imagination creates an "idea" in the attempt to resolve a

contradiction which comes up when the first fiction is applied to an object. What I have called McRae's "bold thesis" in the second part of his paper can now be stated. Duration, or the putative idea thereof, is a fiction of the first type, one that is attributed to what Hume calls "steadfast objects." However, such an object can be considered in two ways. One might consider the object at two stages of this duration and, McRae says, "...this will give us the idea of number" (p.126); or, one might consider in turn a series of objects, each of them supposedly "steadfast," all along supposing that though time is changing, the objects are not, and "...in this way we get the idea of unity" (*Ibid.*). But no object is both a unity and a multiplicity. So, to reconcile these conflicting considerations, the "idea" or fiction of identity is invented. As McRae says: "The idea of identity is a pure product of the imagination invented to mediate between unity and number" (*Ibid.*).

This invented "idea" is then mis-applied (a fiction of type one) to interrupted appearances of an object. To reconcile the supposed identity of an object with successive appearances of it, the fiction of substance is invented. Quoting both McRae and Hume, *In order to reconcile the contradiction between identity and diversity, the imagination is apt 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...*<sup>2</sup> (p.128). Related needs to resolve contradictions, on McRae's account, lead to the fictions of the self (p.128) and of necessary connections (p.130), though the latter fiction is of type one.

Hence, McRae's "bold thesis" amounts to this: Duration is a fiction. In the attempt to apply this fiction, one is led to, logically led to, most, if not all, of the other famous Humean fictions. And, if we allow that there are mental acts, for Hume, as well as impressions and ideas, "...then a fictitious duration will be attributed to

objects and by a progressive compounding of fictitious mental actions will give the world the ontological structure which it has for the vulgar belief we all share. It is a structure which has its entire foundation in duration" (p.132).

There are a number of problems, or perhaps puzzles, facing this account of Hume. I will briefly consider three that are of general interest. Perhaps what I have to say about them will help to push forward the discussion of Hume on time and of McRae's bold thesis.

Hume thinks that we do have an idea of time but that we lack an idea of duration (taken in the sense common to philosophers and the vulgar). Why does Hume think we lack the latter idea? He cites a familiar reason: such an idea is not derivable from any impression of sensation or of reflection (T65). What now of the idea of time? It is not derived from any such impressions either. In the flute example cited by McRae, the idea of time is rather to be derived from the mind's "...notice of the manner in which the different sounds make their appearance," namely their succession (McRae, p.121). But, as Hume points out, successiveness is not itself a new impression. Thus to be consistent Hume would have to conclude either that there is no idea of time after all, or that the reason supplied for the lack of an idea of duration would have to be withdrawn.

We can be more general on this matter. It is sometimes thought that what Hume says about the famous missing shade of blue example is the only point in Hume's writings where he is committed to any exception to the thesis that each idea is in some manner derivable from precedent impressions. The derivation of the idea of time, however, is radically different from any other derivation of an idea from an impression. Indeed, it is so different that it constitutes an additional counterexample to the thesis just alluded to. For in the case of time the relevant idea is invented or created; it is in no sense matched partially

or wholly to any impressions. In this way, the idea of time is perfectly analogous to the idea of the missing shade of blue. The role of the imagination in inventing ideas is somewhat more prominent in Hume than one might otherwise have initially expected.

Another problem or puzzle also concerns duration, as well as MacRae's bold thesis. Suppose there is no idea of duration; then, how could the "idea" of duration be a fiction of type one? Recall that such a fiction arises when one idea is confused with another and mis-applied. This requires that there be two ideas to be confused one with another. Ex hypothesi, however, there is just one idea (that of time, I surmise), so that the "idea" of duration is not of McRae's first type. Since it is not of the second type, according to McRae, the logical sequence of fictions needed to make out his bold thesis would seem to have no starting point.

Actually, I think Hume would regard duration as a fiction of McRae's second type. For, when Hume explains that *...which make(s) us fancy we have that idea...* (T65), he says *From these three relations (earlier discussed) we are apt to confound our ideas, and imagine we can form the idea of a time and duration, without any change or succession (Ibid.)*. My third and final problem or puzzle arises here. What is a fiction of this sort? Not an idea or impression, surely. It is not an impression, for they are not invented. And it is not an idea for Hume says there is no idea of duration. Nor, it would seem, can we say it is a mental act or disposition. There is nothing left that Hume will or can countenance in his ontology, however. In that case the imagination invents nothing with which we can plausibly identify the fiction of duration so that, unless some other account of Humean fictions is in the offing, McRae's bold thesis does not get started even if McRae is basically correct about Hume's intended arguments on this score.<sup>3</sup>

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1. R. McRae, "The Import of Hume's Theory of Time," Hume Studies, VI, (November, 1980). Page references in the text are to this paper.
2. D. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, L. Selby-Bigge, ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 1978, p. 220. Hereafter I refer to this work as T.
3. An earlier version of this paper was presented, as a commentary on McRae's paper, at the meetings of the Hume Society, Queen's University, Fall, 1980.