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## COULD AN IMPRESSION BE A PROCESS?

Processes are of two main kinds, depending on whether the process has or lacks culmination. I am concerned with non-culminating processes, e.g., with a burning fuse sans explosion. This is reported as secondary by any good dictionary, derived from the head, or culminating, sense of 'process'.

An ontological criterion for 'process' is as follows: something is absolutely unchanging, if it is unchanging in every sense of the word. Those who hold that, e.g., a monotonous sound is absolutely unchanging hold that in an absolutely unchanging universe there is no reason why there should not be such a sound. Like any absolutely unchanging existent, a sound is caught, so to speak, in an instantaneous freeze on all change. Those who opt for process hold that change is, so to speak, of its essence. Hence, in an absolutely unchanging world, there could not be a process.

The question I wish to raise is not whether there are processes, and certainly not whether Hume opts for processes. It is doubtful that Hume entertained the question of process. Indeed, that is the point. One of Hume's main commentators, R. W. Church, holds that Hume's perceptual atoms, defined by his dictum that distinguishability mutually entails separability, as well as their philosophical relations, are incompatible with the thesis that "experiences exist not in succession but in process."<sup>1</sup> Church goes on to say that it is "difficult to see how . . . 'process' can have meaning for Hume. He plainly holds perceptions and their contents to be successive merely."<sup>2</sup>

I begin by considering Church's reason why Hume must reject processes, and then consider an additional reason drawn from Hume's account of time. Specifically,

divisibility of time terminates in unchanging atoms. The essence of process is change. Hence, no temporal atom is a process. Neither reason, I argue, suffices for holding that impressions and processes are mutually exclusive.

Hume holds that distinguishability mutually entails separability. Church holds that this dictum defines Hume's perceptual atomism. To highlight the atomism it is supposed to define, he rewords it, as follows: "Whatever is distinguishable is intrinsically self-identical and therefore self-contained."<sup>3</sup> What does this rewording mean? According to Church, Hume, in the body of the Treatise, holds that resemblance is qualitative identity distributed, numerically, over many complexes. "On Hume's theory of abstract ideas, 'resemblance' is a verbal term referring (in virtue of habits of association) to any case of a qualitative identity numerically distributed."<sup>4</sup> Further, the qualitative identity in question is not relative to any difference from another quality, Bradley to the contrary notwithstanding.<sup>5</sup> Difference, for Hume, is incompatible with relation and it is itself not a relation.<sup>6</sup> It follows, according to Church, that Hume's absolute self-identity mutually entails self-containment.

So much for Church's version of Hume's perceptual atomism. Is it incompatible with process, as Church claims? A trombone's slide illustrates non-culminating process with succession. Let us use it as a basis for an account.

A trombone's slide is unbroken not only qua sound but qua pitch. Nevertheless, it incorporates pitch multiplicity. By "successive merely" does Church mean that the transition from pitch to pitch must be broken, contrary to what is heard, and, for this reason, Hume cannot account for the slide qua process? If so, he is mistaken.

Distinguishability mutually entails separability for Hume, but this does not mean that the transition from pitch to pitch cannot be experienced as a slide. In fact, it is easy to show that a trombone's slide conforms to Hume's dictum, by reason of the just noticeable difference and Hume's philosophical relation of contiguity in time.

We are dealing with three notions: first, distinction, and, in particular, how pitches in the slide are distinguished. Second, separability, and, in particular, how separation corresponding to distinction is guaranteed by the fact of process. Third, slide, and, in particular how Hume's philosophical relation of temporal contiguity, coupled with the just noticeable difference, guarantees phenomenal slide. I take up these three notions in the order mentioned.

The distinction between two pitches in the trombone's slide is effected by the just noticeable difference. But, it will be objected, the just noticeable difference is a sense-organ-induced distinction. A sense organ provides the basis for distinguishing what is really without distinction or difference.

Hume rejects this characterization of the distinction of pitches. It opposes distinction to slide, and, then, to resolve their apparent contradiction, it allocates distinction to a sense organ, and slide to a "real" world. Hume insists over and over that reality and perception cannot stand in such a mis-match relation (e.g., T 190). Slide, distinction and succession are as they are perceived. Hence, there cannot be logical opposition between 'distinct' and 'slide'. The matter must be recharacterized as follows: a just noticeable difference is a real difference. Yet, pitches really, i.e. perceptually, slide one into another.

This characterization, it will be objected, does nothing to ease the logical tension between 'distinct' and

'slide'. Let us grant the objection, for the moment. For right now I am concerned to make explicit Hume's use of the word 'distinct'. It is a use compatible with 'slide'.

As for separability, the essence of process is change, as specified in the ontological criterion for 'process'. What kind of change are we dealing with? It cannot be qualitative. A monotonous process is qualitatively one. Yet, qua process, there is change. The only plausible alternative is existential change. It is the sort of changeable existence best described as becoming. If one pitch becomes ("turns into") another, as 'slide' requires, then the two pitches cannot co-exist. The surviving pitch is separated, in respect to existence, from its predecessor. The requirement of separation is satisfied. It will be objected that not only 'distinction' but now 'separation' are claimed to be compatible with 'slide' -- compatible with one pitch becoming ("turning into") another. This claim, so the objection goes, is counterintuitive. Is it? Let us turn to the third notion, the relation of temporal contiguity, for an answer.

The trombone's slide illustrates qualitative distinction, specifically, among pitches. Otherwise the pitch count within the slide would not be many. Nevertheless, no break is experienced. Ruling out a sound break itself, what would a qualitative break be like? Two sorts are possible. First, a third quality, necessarily a pitch because the sound is unbroken, lies between two pitches and serves to distinguish ("break") them. But this contradicts the hypothesis of temporal contiguity. Second, two pitches are temporally contiguous, but a break lies between them because they are not next to each other in the order of pitches. But this contradicts the hypothesis that the two pitches are just noticeably different. However, there is no need to

emphasize just noticeable, provided that their distinction is granted. Among philosophical relations, Hume lists degrees of a quality. (T 15) Specifically different pitches are degrees. Nextness of degrees will do as well as just noticeable in preserving the experienced slide from pitch to pitch.

In summary, two pitches are distinct. Otherwise they could not be two. They are successive. Otherwise they could not be separable. And one slides into the other. Otherwise they could not be qualitatively and temporally contiguous.

It might be objected that Hume's account of becoming is metaphysically inadequate. But it is clear that Hume is not trying to give a metaphysical account of becoming. He does not raise the question of process. Rather, temporal contiguity and nextness in degrees of a quality suffice to account for non-monotonous processes.

I have confined discussion to non-monotonous sounds incorporating succession without breaks. But 'slides' stands to such sounds as, say, 'fades' stands to colors. Sometimes only the generic 'turns into', or an equivalent, is available.

Temporal contiguity requires qualitatively distinct terms. Qualitatively distinct terms do not require temporal contiguity. However, if distinct qualities are temporally contiguous, next in their order, and successive, one must turn into the other. One turning into the other is process and entirely consistent with Hume's perceptual atomism.

Although Church goes to considerable length to establish absolute self-identity and self-containment of Hume's perceptual atoms, his view that Hume's atomism excludes processes rests on neither one of these notions. It rests on an unexamined assumption about succession. For Church, 'succession' entails changeable existence, as it does for Hume. In addition, it entails for

Church, but not for Hume, a sort of qualitative break incompatible with nextness of degrees of a quality and/or temporal contiguity. This is why he pits Hume's perceptual atomism against process.

I turn now to non-culminating process of the non-successive variety. It is illustrated by a monotonous sound and associated with the second reason, drawn from Hume's account of time, against construing an impression as a process. Thus, five notes sounded by a flute is used by Hume to illustrate a proper succession. (T 36) Each note is unchanging. By 'unchanging' I mean that it is not itself a succession. Hume, himself, uses the word 'part' to describe the non-successive elements in a succession. The succession sounded by the flute has five temporal parts. 'Parts' is not opposed to 'whole', except as the parts of a succession are summed. However, a temporal part of a sum is often dealt with fictitiously, as if it were itself a sum consisting of temporal parts. For example, we may switch on a light simultaneously with the occurrence of a monotonous sound and divide the sound by the blinking light. It endures, say, five blinks. The blinks confer five parts on the monotonous sound. It literally lacks parts, and, thus, it is not literally a sum. It acquires parts, and thereby becomes a sum, by comparison with something literally possessing parts -- in this case successive light blinks. Referring a succession -- a sum -- to what is not literally a succession is a fiction, according to Hume. (T 37) He proceeds to explain how comparison generates the fiction: *The first and second appearances of the object, being compar'd with the succession of our perceptions, seem equally remov'd as if the object had really chang'd.* (T 65)

The point requiring emphasis is that the monotonous sound literally lacks temporal parts. For this reason, it is changeless. Is it absolutely changeless?

This is a significant question, because a monotonous sound could be changeless in the sense of not being a succession. Yet, it does change in the sense of change characteristic of process. In raising this question, of course, I do not mean to suggest that Hume raises it. I do wish to suggest that Hume adheres to beliefs of common life, the correction and systematization of which constitute true philosophy. Common beliefs include belief in objects that do not change as well as belief in successions by which absolutely changeless objects and monotonous processes acquire temporal parts. Why should Hume accept common beliefs in absolutely changeless objects and in successions, but reject monotonous processes?

But, it will be objected, he must reject them, if not for his perceptual atomism, then for his temporal atomism. Specifically, temporal atoms lack parts. They cannot themselves change because they lack parts. Yet, the essence of process is change. Hence, a temporal atom cannot be a process.

This objection appears plausible by trading on two senses of 'change'. A temporal atom cannot consist of parts. It does not follow, however, that it is absolutely unchanging. It could undergo that sort of change characteristic of process.

I have shown elsewhere that Hume's argument peculiar to time establishes that his perceptual atomism and his temporal atomism are coextensive.<sup>7</sup> Recently, McRae makes the same point.<sup>8</sup> This being so, if a perceptual atom could be a process, as shown above, then so could a temporal atom be a process.

Hume offers several arguments for his temporal atomism, among them the argument peculiar to time, as follows:

*If each moment, as it succeeds another, were not perfectly single and indivisible, there would be an infinite number of coexistent moments, or parts of time; which I believe will be allow'd to be an arrant contradiction. (T 31)*

Only successions consist of temporal parts. Hence, only successions are literally divided. Further, a non-successive element in a succession is indivisible. For comparison of a succession with a non-succession, in the way just noticed, literally divides no such element. Every non-successive element in a succession, then, is undivided and indivisible. It is a temporal atom. It follows that a temporal atom is a perceptual atom and vice versa, and, because the one could be a process, so could the other.

This reading of Hume's temporal atomism sounds odd because 'atom' connotes an extension so small, or a duration so short, that it is barely, if at all, perceived, or, even, it is confused with others. This, in fact, is Hume's teaching in respect to extension, but, as McRae points out, it is not his teaching in respect to time.<sup>9</sup> Hume writes,

*Time or succession, tho' it consists likewise (i.e. like extension) of parts, never presents to us more than one at once . . . The parts of extension (because coexistent) being susceptible of an union to the senses . . . and . . . the appearance of one part excludes not another . . . On the other hand, (because of) the incompatibility of the parts of time in their real existence . . . Every part must appear single and alone. (T 429)*

This passage provides that an endless series of parts generated by 'shorter than' is impossible. Otherwise some parts in the series would be so short as to lie beyond perception, and, like points comprising extension, become confused. But Hume rejects this possibility in respect to temporal atoms. Each part of time, he says,

must appear single and alone.

It might be said that monotonous processes -- change without qualitatively distinct parts (or, again, change without succession) -- must be, following, e.g., Bergson, intuited. And, surely, Hume would reject knowledge of this kind. Hence, he must reject monotonous processes. But is his epistemology, in particular his theory of perception, so rigid as to exclude perception of processes? Hume repeatedly concedes exceptions to his epistemological principles. For example, all perceptions supposed resolve themselves into impressions and ideas. (T 1) Yet, Hume concedes that successions, although perceived, are orders of impressions, not themselves impressions. (T 36-37) There is precedent, then, for treating processes as non-impressions. Because a succession is perceived, but it is not an impression, one might construe it as a pseudo-impression. Similarly, a monotonous process might be construed as a pseudo-succession. For it has its change from itself, but its parts must be borrowed from a proper succession through the medium of comparison. But I do not wish to rule out the possibility that a monotonous process could be brought within the scope of Hume's scheme of impressions. Indeed, let me emphasize that I am not urging that Hume be read as acknowledging processes. Rather, I am urging that he not be read as rejecting them.

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1. R. W. Church, Hume's Theory of the Understanding (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N. Y.) p. 220.
2. Ibid., pp. 220-221.
3. Ibid., p. 219.

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4. Ibid., p. 12.
5. Ibid., p. 222.
6. Ibid., pp. 223-224. Church's reference here is to Treatise, p. 15.
7. In my "Durationless Moments in Hume's Treatise", David Hume, ed. G. P. Morice (University of Edinburgh Press, 1977) pp. 181-185.
8. Robert McRae, "The Import of Hume's Theory of Time," Hume Studies, Vol. VI, No. 2, Nov., 1980.
9. Ibid., p. 124. (Notice, however, that in another place (T 35) Hume emphasizes perceivable successions, the implication being that there could be unperceivable ones.)