



## **Relative Ideas Rejected**

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## RELATIVE IDEAS REJECTED

Hume's claim that ideas copy impressions seems to provide prima facie evidence for the interpretation that he also believed that all thought is restricted to images. Clearly such a view would be fatal to Hume's epistemological framework for at least two reasons. The first reason is quite simply that images are not a necessary element for thought, since we rarely think in images or pictures. The second reason is that the imagistic interpretation prevents the possibility of universal a priori knowledge; since images only represent particulars they can never permit the inference from knowledge of particular instances to knowledge of universal cases. Yolton's paper, "Hume's Ideas",<sup>1</sup> is a valiant effort to save Hume from the crippling imagistic interpretation. Although Yolton presents a reading of the Treatise that might avoid this interpretation, he fails to provide a sufficiently detailed account of any one counter-example to the imagistic view of Hume. However, such a counter-example has been worked out in Flage's recent paper "Hume's Relative Ideas".<sup>2</sup> Although the search for non-picturable ideas in Hume's system, and subsequent destruction of the imagistic interpretation is an admirable path for investigation, I intend to show that Flage's attempt to produce a Humean theory of non-picturable "relative" ideas is entirely misguided.<sup>3</sup> I shall argue that Flage has produced a theory without application in Hume's framework, a theory actually based on a distinction between relative ideas and relations of ideas, that Hume never intends.

Flage argues that Hume has a theory of relative ideas, and that the application of this theory can produce intelligible concepts of essentially imperceptible

objects. A relative idea is obtained by an inference, of sorts, from the relations of ideas obtained from impressions; or in Flage's words, a relative idea "singles out an unperceived entity on the basis of its relations to a perceived entity, i.e. a positive [picturable] idea" (HS 56). Flage admits that "Hume often regarded epistemic claims based upon relative ideas with at least a modicum of scepticism" (HS 55). He also realizes that no such theory of relative ideas can be used to justify ontological claims of the unperceivable objects (HS 63), but that "the doctrine of relative ideas at least accounts for the intelligibility of various concepts" (HS 59). Flage applies the theory of relative ideas to three concepts that Hume discusses in an effort to demonstrate how this theory can make these concepts intelligible. The three concepts are substratum, the missing shade of blue, and the idea of a thousandth part of a grain of sand; however, Flage fails to realize that Hume successfully argues against the intelligibility of these concepts. I shall present the arguments that Hume gives to show that Flage's theory of relative ideas does not apply in the cases he argues for. Hopefully this will show that Flage has created a theory that lacks application; however, this is not Flage's only failing. "Relative" ideas are obtained from relations of ideas (HS 56), and by this description Flage has implicitly distinguished between Hume's use of "relative" and the philosophical "relations of ideas", a distinction that Hume never intends. In the latter part of this paper I shall show that Hume uses "relative" to refer to the relations of ideas, and that Flage has simply located and produced a theory on the basis of a distinction that has no real difference.

In the discussion of substance, Flage correctly points out that Hume distinguishes three definitions of substance in the fourth part of book I of the Treatise (HS 63-4).

Flage also correctly points out that at least two of these definitions are unintelligible (HS 64). The definition of substance, as an autonomous object that is distinct from dependent qualities, fails to properly distinguish substance from qualities (T 233),<sup>4</sup> and substance defined as the "subject of inhesion" fails because there is no empirical evidence to justify the claim that qualities inhere in a substance (T 234). However, Flage incorrectly argues that Hume asserts that the idea of substance as "the entity that is simple and identical through time" can be made intelligible (HS 64). This idea of substance, which Berkeley apparently called "the relation of support" (HS 57) and Locke called "substratum or support" (HS 56), Hume identifies as the entity underlying all perceivable qualities or "substratum" (HS 65, cf. T 244). Flage incorrectly claims that,

At no point in his discussion of the belief in substance did Hume deny the intelligibility of this relative idea of substance [or substratum] . . . (HS 64).

On this count Flage is mistaken. Hume explicitly argues that the idea of a simple and identical entity underlying perceivable qualities is unintelligible on the basis that such an entity must support contrary qualities. The idea of substratum is contradictory because it,

. . . must at the very same instant be modify'd into forms, which are contrary and incompatible. The round and square figures are incompatible in the same substance at the same time (T 244).

Thus, of the three definitions of substance in part IV, Hume argues that none of them can be made intelligible. Flage apparently failed to notice that the only intelligible idea of substance is *nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination* (T 16). Clearly this application of relative ideas fails to make the concept of substratum intelligible.

Flage's second application of the theory of relative ideas is an attempt to solve the "missing shade of blue" dilemma which threatens Hume's "maxim" that all simple ideas are derived from impressions.

Flage seems to believe that a theory of relative ideas can rescue Hume's "copy theory of simple ideas" from the famous missing shade of blue counter-example (HS 68). The missing shade of blue counter-example proposes that the mind might be able to create the simple idea of a particular color without access to a prior impression, which is missing from a linear gradation of the shades of a particular color. Flage suggests that one could produce the idea of the missing shade by combining a bit of darkness (obtained from the darker side of the scale of colors) with a bit of lightness (obtained from the lighter side of the scale of colors). However, Flage fails to realize that the mind has created a simple idea, which still provides a counter-example to the maxim that all simple ideas are derived from impressions. Obviously, the mind determines the missing shade by varying the hue of the perceived shades, but this explanation fails to explain how the mind is able to produce this simple idea without a prior impression of it, and still stands as a counter-example to the maxim that all simple ideas are immediately produced by impressions. A theory of relative ideas cannot solve the missing shade of blue counter-example anymore than it can make the concept of substratum intelligible. Flage's third application of relative ideas fares no better. In this application he attempts to explain how "one has an idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand" (HS 68-9).

Hume's discussion of the supposed differences between the idea of a grain of sand and the idea of a thousandth part of that grain of sand is located

among his arguments against the doctrine of infinite divisibility (T 27). Hume argues that the imagination must reach a point of termination in the conception of a mathematical point in order to have a clear and determinate idea of such an object. The "grain of sand" is nothing more than a paradigm of the smallest conceivable object, and if Hume had conceded Flage's argument that the mind could produce a relative idea of objects smaller than the smallest conceivable object, then Hume would have to concede his arguments against infinite divisibility as well. If relative ideas individuate particulars, as Flage claims (HS 56-7), and if a relative idea could individuate the possible idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, then Hume would have to concede that a relative idea of even smaller parts could be produced without end, which would be contrary to the arguments against infinite divisibility. The admission of any such relative idea of anything smaller than a minimal idea would lead Hume to conclude that infinite divisibility is a possibility, and the subsequent breakdown of his atomistic conception of space and time. No idea, relative or otherwise, of a part of the smallest possible idea can be made consistent with the arguments against infinite divisibility, and Hume concludes that,

*. . . the idea of a grain of sand is not distinguishable, nor separable into twenty, much less into a thousand, ten thousand, or an infinite number of different ideas (T 27).*

Nonetheless, even Hume would grant that a grain of sand is larger than the thousandth part of that same grain of sand; however, a theory of relative ideas is not needed to explain how one knows this, since this sort of knowledge is based on the ideas of mathematical relations.

The knowledge that a grain of sand is larger than any part of that grain is not obtained by the

comparison of a non-picturable relative idea with a picturable idea, as Flage might have us believe. This knowledge is obtained by the comparison of a *distinct idea of these numbers and of their different proportions* (T 27), or by those relations of ideas that provide knowledge of quantity or number irrespective of the objects being compared (T 69-70). In this case the mind has a clear idea of a grain of sand, and although the mind has no idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, the knowledge of mathematical relations applied to these possibilities demonstrates that the whole is greater than the part by one thousandth. Hence, there is knowledge of a mathematical *relation without a relative* (T 241), or in other words, knowledge of relations is possible even without a clear idea of the objects or relatives in the relation. For example, the proposition "A is greater than one half of A" is knowable, without knowing anything about the object "A". The point is that a theory of relative ideas is unnecessary for knowledge of mathematical relations. This shows that Flage has created a theory without application; his theory of relative ideas cannot make the concept of substratum intelligible, nor can it solve the dilemma created by the "missing shade of blue" counter-example, and it fails to play a role in the knowledge that a thousandth part of something is smaller than the whole. Flage claims that relative ideas are obtained, in part, from relations of ideas (HS 56-7); however, a close reading of the texts will show that Hume never intended the distinction between "relative" ideas and relations of ideas that Flage suggests.

In two of the places where Hume uses "relative" he is pointing out the difficulties of making the distinction between perceptions and objects (T 68 and T 241). The fundamental problem of obtaining knowledge of

objects, which is present in any empirical epistemology that encompasses a theory of perception, is to determine how perceptions might be distinguished from the objects of perception. This familiar problem arises from the initial premise that the mind has direct access only to perceptions, and is only mediately aware of objects by means of perceptions. In making this distinction, Hume points out that for the most part we do not believe that objects and perceptions are "specifically different", i.e. objects have the colors, shapes, and sizes that are represented in perceptions. However, if objects are specifically different from perceptions, i.e. objects are not in any way like perceptions, then we could never have the slightest idea of what objects might be like, because the mind is wholly dependent on perceptions for the formation of ideas. Thus, on the one hand, if we assume that objects and perceptions are alike, then the distinction between the two is impossible to make on the basis of apparent differences. On the other hand, if we assume that objects are nothing like perceptions, then we are again unable to distinguish between the two, since we have no idea of what objects might be like. Nonetheless, Hume argues that even though the distinction cannot be made on the basis of apparent differences, it can be made on the basis of *different relations, connexions, and durations* (T 68). For example, regardless of the possible specific differences between objects and perceptions, I assume that the two differ in terms of causal relations, i.e. the cause of my perception is different from the cause of the object, and in terms of durations, i.e. the perception does not last as long as the object. In other words, irrespective of apparent differences, objects and perceptions can be distinguished on the basis of differing relations. Hume argues that if we suppose that objects are "specifically different" from perceptions, then *the farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects*

. . . *is to form a relative idea* [an idea of the relations] *without pretending to comprehend the related objects* (T 68). If objects are not like perceptions, then we are left with an idea of their differing relations, and no idea of the objects. Hume provides another way of explaining the distinction between perceptions and objects. If objects are like perceptions then we have an idea of the object and some idea of the differing relations; but, if objects are not like perceptions, then the only idea we have of an object is as a differing relation, or *merely as a relation without a relative* (T 241). Hume simply means that we can form the idea of something unknown (objects) in terms of the different relations with something known (perceptions). There is no evidence in either of these passages to suggest that Hume has a theory of relative ideas that can be used to individuate particular objects.

In the third place where Hume uses "relative" he is clearly referring to relations again (E<sub>1</sub> 77n). Hume argues that the idea of power is no different than the idea of causal relations, since both infer an effect or constant conjunction between events. Hume says that,

*. . . 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*  
(E<sub>1</sub> 77n).

There is no evidence to suggest that Hume means "relative" to be anything other than "relational".

Flage's theory of relative ideas has no application in practical terms for the Humean system; it cannot make the concept of substratum intelligible, nor can it solve the problems he professes to solve with it. The theory is based on rather scanty textual evidence, and is grounded in an implicit distinction between Hume's use

of "relative" and the relations of ideas--a distinction Hume never makes. Clearly, Flage's distinction between "relative" ideas and relations of ideas is without any real difference insofar as Hume is concerned.<sup>5</sup>

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1. John Yolton, "Hume's Ideas", Hume Studies VI (1980), 1-25.
2. Daniel Flage, "Hume's Relative Ideas", Hume Studies VII (1981), 55-73. Hereafter cited as HS.
3. Laird hints at a similar theory of relative ideas that might be used to individuate "extra-mental objects"; he says, "a relative idea of such an object was admitted (by Hume) to be possible". (See John Laird's "Hume's Account of Sensitive Belief", Mind 48 (1939), pp. 427-8.) Although Laird does not provide a full-blown theory of relative ideas, as Flage does, he does suggest that Hume admits the possibility of a distinct category of "relative" ideas.
4. Page references to Hume's works are from the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch editions. A Treatise of Human Nature (Oxford 1978) is designated as T, and An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (Oxford 1975) is designated as E<sub>1</sub>.
5. Flage provides an excellent discussion of similar theories held by Hume's precursors Arnauld and Watts (HS 60-63). Although this survey has definite historical appeal, it fails to support the interpretation that Hume holds a similar view in the guise of a theory of relative ideas.