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RELATIVE IDEAS REVISITED: A REPLY TO THOMAS

In "Hume's Relative Ideas" I argued that what Hume called a "relative idea" is the cognitive analogue of a definite description, that relative ideas are nonimagistic, and that recognizing the distinction between positive ideas (images) and relative ideas sheds light on various issues that remain opaque apart from that distinction.¹ Thomas has recently taken exception to my position, contending that I have "produced a theory without application in Hume's framework."² In reply I shall present the three cornerstones of my view and then turn to Thomas's criticisms.

I. On Relative Ideas

1. What relative ideas are: In claiming that a relative idea is the cognitive analogue of a definite description, I mean only that a relative idea functions in the cognitive realm (realm of ideas) in the same way that a definite description functions in the linguistic realm. Just as the statement expressing the contextual definition of a definite description specifies the truth conditions for a statement containing that description, the statement expressing the contextual definition of a definite description corresponding to a relative idea indicates the (factual) conditions that must obtain if that relative idea succeeds in singling out an entity, i.e., it specifies the "truth conditions" for a relative idea (see T 448, T 458, and T 84 for Hume's use of 'truth').³

2. The intellectual milieu: The expressions 'relative idea' and 'relative notion' seem to have at least two uses in eighteenth century philosophy. Some philosophers used such expressions to refer to an idea or a conception of a relation.⁴ Nonetheless, since no

substance theorist held that a substance is a relation, this can hardly be the sense in which Locke used the expression when he claimed that one has an "obscure and relative idea of substance in general."⁵ Further, Locke's discussion of the relationship between positive ideas (images) and the relative idea of substance clearly indicates that relative ideas provide an indirect means of allowing one to know what something is on the basis of its relation to something known directly, i.e., on the basis of its relation to a positive idea.⁶ Locke also claimed that one's idea of infinity is a relative idea,⁷ he seems to have held that the idea of power is a relative idea,⁸ and given his account of perception, it is at least reasonable to suggest that relative ideas are found in perceptual contexts. Similarly, Berkeley maintained that one has a relative notion of immaterial substance, but no relative notion of material substance, since in the former case, but not in the latter, one has a notion of the relation between a substance and its attributes.⁹ Outside the "way of ideas" one finds the distinction between direct and relative "conception" clearly spelled out in Reid's Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind. Reid wrote:

Of some things, we know what they are in themselves; our conception of such things I call direct. Of other things, we do not know what they are in themselves, but only that they have certain properties or attributes, or certain relations to other things; of these our conception is only relative. 10

Reid contended that our conceptions of mind, of body, of powers, and of secondary qualities are relative conceptions, that at least some of our conceptions of large numbers of things and of polygons are relative conceptions, and that relative conceptions are operative in memory.¹¹ Now given that there seems to have been a fairly

widely recognized doctrine of relative conception in the eighteenth century, given that the contexts in which Hume used the term 'relative idea' are contexts in which proponents of relative conception employed that term, and given that Hume stated philosophical issues in terms of the conceptual system of his time, I consider it reasonable to suggest that Hume recognized and held a doctrine of relative conception even though he did not devote so much as a paragraph to stating that doctrine.

3. The relation of images to relative ideas: A relative idea is inherently complex: it includes a positive idea (or ideas) and a relation (or relations) which together single out something of which one has no positive idea, viz., the thing that is so related to the positive idea. The relation (or relations) found in a relative idea will not obtain between two positive ideas, although one of the relata, the relatum that grounds the relation, will be a positive idea. A relative idea is nonpictorial insofar as it contains no image of the entity singled out, and it is of this thing of which one has no positive idea that one claims to have a relative idea.

II. On "Relative Ideas Rejected"

Turning to Thomas's criticisms, I shall first examine each of his specific criticisms of my position. Next I shall mention two additional contexts in which Hume seems to use relative ideas. Finally, I shall briefly consider whether the prima facie evidence provided by the copy theory of ideas that all ideas are images poses any problems for my account of relative ideas.

In "Hume's Relative Ideas" I claimed that Hume never denied the intelligibility of the relative idea of substance corresponding to the definite description,

"the entity that is simple and identical through time" (HRI 64). Disagreeing with my claim, Thomas cites a passage from Hume's discussion of Spinozism to show that Hume held that this relative idea is unintelligible (RIR 151). To show that the passage he cites does not refute my claim, I shall first state the criteria for differentiating relative ideas and then examine the passage he cites. This will show that my contention that Hume never denied the intelligibility of that relative idea remains unchallenged, since the relative idea of substance used in the discussion of Spinozism is different from that corresponding to "the entity that is simple and identical through time."

Relative ideas are differentiated not only on the basis of the entity (or presumptive entity) they are intended to single out, but also on the basis of the properties and relations used in singling out that entity. It was on the latter basis that I differentiated three relative ideas of substance corresponding to the description: (1) "the entity that is simple and identical through time", (2) "the entity that exists by itself", and (3) "the entity in which perceptions (qualities) inhere" (HRI 64). Now if any of these relative ideas were modified, one would obtain a different relative idea. For example, if (3) were made more specific by taking the entity to be simple, one would obtain the relative idea corresponding to the description (4) "the simple entity in which perceptions (qualities) inhere". Further, if the relation in (4) were changed from inhesion to identity, one would obtain the relative idea corresponding to the description (5) "the simple entity that is identical with its modes (or perceptions or qualities)". Hence, any change in the properties or relations used to single out an entity yields a different relative idea.

Thomas says, but does not defend the claim, that

the topic of Hume's discussion of Spinozism is relative idea (1), and consequently, Hume took (1) to be unintelligible. However, an examination of the text will show that the topic is relative idea (5). Consider the paragraph from which Thomas quoted:

Thirdly, It has been objected to the system of one simple substance in the universe, that this substance being the support or substratum of every thing, 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. How then is it possible, that the same substance can at once be modify'd into that square table, and into this round one? I ask the same question concerning the impressions of these tables; and find that the answer is no more satisfactory in one case than in the other. (T 244)

Notice, first, that Hume is here concerned with a simple entity. Secondly, he is concerned with an entity at one point in time -- there is no reference made to identity through time. Thirdly, Hume is following *the scholastic way of talking, rather than thinking, that a mode, not being any distinct or separate existence, must be the very same with its substance* (T 243), i.e., a substance is taken to be identical with its modes. Finally, notice that the above considerations indicate that the relative idea of substance used here is (5), not (1), and consequently this provides no evidence for the claim that Hume took (1) to be unintelligible. If I have erred in my discussion of (1), it might have been in my suggestion that (1), as a relative idea of substance, is a relative idea of a substratum (HRI 65), although Hume seems to have taken it to be such.

Secondly, Thomas claims that my comments regarding the missing shade of blue "cannot solve the missing shade of blue counter-example" (RIR 152). Now what I said in my original paper requires granting that whether

or not the doctrine of relative ideas "solves" the counter-example depends upon how one construes Hume's claim that the idea of the missing shade of blue is simple (T 6; EHU 21). In showing this, I shall comment on Thomas's construal of the relative idea of the missing shade of blue and then indicate the sense in which the doctrine of relative ideas might solve that problem.

Thomas writes:

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. (RIR 152)

Thomas claims that a relative idea of the missing shade of blue involves the combining or mixing of colors. If this were correct, the resultant idea would be a positive idea (an image), rather than a relative idea. Further, this would not only be inconsistent with the copy principle, but since Hume suggested that one could imagine the missing shade (T 6; EHU 21), it would also be inconsistent with Hume's account of the imagination: all ideas of the imagination are complex, being arrangements of simple ideas (T 9-10). These problems are not confronted in claiming that Hume had a relative (but not a positive) idea of the missing shade of blue. Relative ideas are inherently complex. The relative idea of the missing shade of blue partially consists of positive ideas of two simple properties and two relations, and it is on this basis that it singles out, but does not "picture", a third property (cf. HRI 68). One does not know, in the sense of having an image, what

the property singled out by the relative idea is; one knows what it is only insofar as one knows how it is related to the properties that are known as images, i.e., properties of which one has positive ideas. Further, insofar as relative ideas are complex, it would seem to be consistent with Hume's account of the imagination to suggest that the imagination could construct relative ideas. However -- this is a point I did not draw out in my original paper -- an appeal to relative ideas will not solve the problem raised by the missing shade of blue, unless one would allow that Hume himself blurred the distinction between simple ideas and ideas of simples (which might or might not be simple ideas). Since it is Hume's claim that the idea of the missing shade of blue *may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions* (T 6, emphasis added; cf. EHU 21) that raises the apparent counter-example to the copy theory, it is only if one would allow that by 'simple idea' Hume meant 'idea of a simple' that the doctrine of relative ideas does away with the counter-example. Barring this, the counter-example remains.

Turning to the discussion of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, one should acknowledge that Hume's conceivability criterion of possibility is restricted to clear ideas (T 32), and that he seems to have held that an idea can be clear only if it is a copy of an impression (T 72-73), i.e., a positive idea. Further, it was with respect to positive ideas that Hume stated his criteria of distinguishability and separability, and it is almost certainly with respect to a positive idea of a grain of sand that Hume wrote, *it is not distinguishable, nor separable into twenty, much less into a thousand, ten thousand, or an infinite number of different ideas* (T 27). Given this, I concede that I might have erred in claiming "that it is possible that anything of which one

can have an adequate relative idea could exist" (HRI 63). If I did so err, however, it can only strengthen the plausibility of my contention that Hume could have a relative idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, since having a relative idea of that minute entity would then clearly be consistent with his discussions of infinite divisibility. It is clear that Hume had some idea of the thousandth part of a grain of sand, since he allowed that one can understand what is meant in talking of the thousandth part of a grain of sand because one has a *distinct idea of these numbers and of their different proportions* (T 27). It is through an understanding of these proportions that one understands the locution (has an idea of) "the thousandth part of a grain of sand", even though one certainly has no positive idea of that minute entity. I shall also grant Thomas's claim that "knowledge of relations is possible without a clear idea of the objects or relatives in the relation" (RIR154); indeed, it is only if this is granted that my own contentions regarding relative ideas are at all plausible. Since Hume held *that when we mention any great number, such as a thousand, the mind has generally no adequate idea of it, but only a power of producing such an idea, by its adequate idea of the decimals, under which the number is comprehended* (T 22-23), he seems to suggest that the only way in which a numeral or a word referring to a large number can have any meaning is on the basis of a relative idea. If an adequate idea of a thousand is a positive idea of a thousand things -- and it seems Hume did so take it -- it seems that the idea that provides the meaning for the term 'one thousand' could well be the relative idea corresponding to the description "the collection of ten times ten times ten things", or some other description involving fairly small numbers (of which one can easily have clear and

adequate positive ideas) and mathematical relations. Notice also that if I am correct regarding the doctrine of relative ideas, one does not have a relative idea of a mathematical relation (cf RIR154); rather, one has a relative idea of a number, part of which is at least one mathematical relation and at least one positive idea of a collection of a certain number of things.

Turning to my discussion of the role of relative ideas in the philosophical theory of perception (representationalism), Thomas contends that neither of the passages I cite (HRI 57-58) provide evidence "to suggest that Hume has a theory of relative ideas that can be used to individuate particular objects" (RIR 156). Within the context of a theory of perception, however, such a claim does not seem justified. Any theory of perception holds that the object of perception, whether perceived mediately or immediately, is an individual. In claiming that a relative idea in the context of perception will single out the one and only one nonmental thing that is the cause of a present impression, I meant no more than that it will pick out an individual object rather than several, analogous to the uniqueness claim in the contextual definition of a definite description. I did not mean that it will allow one to reidentify the object at some other time. Relative ideas are grounded upon positive ideas or impressions, and since Hume seems to have taken the latter to be momentary (T 194), relative ideas are not sufficient for the reidentification of objects at different times. Nor did I mean that a relative idea would allow one to know anything about the object other than that it is related to a particular positive perception.¹² Further, since it is always possible that a relative idea will fail to single out an existent (a case in which nothing answers to the corresponding definite

description), i.e., it is possible for a relative idea to be false (cf. T 448, T 458), to suggest that relative ideas are found in the philosophical theory of perception is quite consistent with Hume's scepticism regarding that hypothesis.

Thomas's final specific contention is that "the idea of power is no different than the idea of causal relations, since both infer an effect or constant conjunction between events" (RIR 156). This is inconsistent with Hume's claims. While causation is defined in terms of a constant conjunction between objects (T 170, T 172, EHU 76-77), in his footnote on one's relative idea of power, Hume clearly indicated that the notion of power is more specific than that of a cause: it pertains to the specific "circumstance" (property) of an object that causes a known effect. As he wrote, *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* (EHU 77n, Hume's emphasis). While one might have a positive idea of an object or type of object that is constantly conjoined with a particular type of effect (i.e., a positive idea of a cause), Hume was less confident that one can have a positive idea of the power (property) of an object that makes the cause efficacious.

Thomas concludes that my "theory of relative ideas has no application in practical terms for the Humean system" (RIR 156). Now even if one ignores all the cases that have been considered up to this point, there is evidence that Hume used relative ideas in two other contexts. First, the idea of God that is central to the Dialogues is a relative idea. While Hume suggested in the first Enquiry that one has a positive idea of God based upon an augmented idea of one's own mind (EHU 19), this is not the idea of God he used throughout the Dialogues. There the idea of God

is that of the unknown cause of the universe. As Philo says, *Nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call GOD* (D 142, emphasis added). This relative idea of God is retained throughout the Dialogues, and one of the main issues considered is whether one can know that the cause of the universe is represented by the positive idea described in the first Enquiry or any other positive idea.¹³

Secondly, since it is fairly clear that Hume proposed a representational theory of memory (T 8-9, T 84-86),¹⁴ it is reasonable to suggest that relative ideas are involved there in the same way they are involved in the philosophical theory of perception. If I remember the Fourth of July 1968, my memory consists of the relative idea that singles out the one and only one impression (or series of impressions) that occurred on 4 July 1968, that caused the positive idea (or series of ideas) of which I am now aware, and that resembles the positive idea (or series of ideas) of which I am now aware.

One more point should be considered. Someone might contend that the copy theory of ideas provides strong prima facie evidence that all ideas are images (cf. T 1, RIR 149). Thus, even though Hume's theory of ideas would have been strengthened if he had countenanced relative ideas, the fact that a relative idea is nonpictorial indicates that it cannot count as an idea. In reply I would point out that there is also contrary prima facie evidence. Hume claimed that there are abstract ideas, and that an abstract idea consists of a particular (positive) idea and the ability to recall other particular ideas as the context demands (T 21-22). So, if an abstract idea is an idea, it is not purely pictorial. Similarly, pictorial

elements (positive ideas) do not exhaust a relative idea, since that which is singled out on the basis of a relative idea is not directly known on the basis of experience. Since the very term 'relative idea' suggests relative ideas are ideas, and since they are at least as pictorial as abstract ideas, this (and everything else I have said) would seem to provide good grounds for allowing that a relative idea was held by Hume to be an idea.

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1. Daniel E. Flage, "Hume's Relative Ideas," Hume Studies 7 (1981): 55-73. Further references to this paper will be made parenthetically with the title abbreviated HRI.
2. Max M. Thomas, "Relative Ideas Refuted," Hume Studies 8 (1982): pp.149-157. Further references to this paper will be made parenthetically with the title abbreviated RIR.
3. References will be made to the Selby-Bigge editions of the Treatise and the Enquiries, and to the Kemp Smith edition of the Dialogues. I wish to thank Professors Doublas Lewis and Jeffrey Olin for pointing out my earlier confusion between a definite description and the statement expressing the contextual definition of a definite description.
4. See Isaac Watts, Logic, or the Right Use of Reason, in the Inquiry After Truth, 3rd American Edition (Boston: Ranlett and Norris, 1806), p. 30; Francis Hutcheson, Illustrations on the Moral Sense, ed. Bernard Peach (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 141; and Henry More, An Antidote against Atheism, in The Philosophical Writings of Henry More, ed. Flora Isabel MacKinnon (New York: AMS Press, 1969), p. 16.
5. John Locke, An Essay concerning Human Understanding, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.23.3, p. 296.

6. See John Locke, A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward, Bishop of Worcester, in The Works of John Locke, 10 vols. (1823; reprint edition Darmstadt, West Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1963), 4:21-22.
7. Locke, Essay, 2.29.16, p. 371; cf. Essay, 2.17.13-15, pp. 216-219.
8. Locke, Essay, 2.21.3, p. 234.
9. See George Berkeley, Of the Principles of Human Knowledge, sections 16, 17, 27, 68, 80, 89, 140, 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), 2:47-48, 52-53, 70-71, 75, 79-80, 105, and 106; and George Berkeley, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in Works, 2:197-199 and 223.
10. Thomas Reid, Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind, ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), p. 7, Reid's emphasis.
11. Reid, Active Powers, pp. 7-10; cf. Thomas Reid, Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man, ed. Baruch Brody (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1969), pp. 252-256, 273, 277, 381, and 473.
12. Nor is it a complaint against my account of relative ideas to claim that if my account is correct, "then we could never have the slightest idea of what objects might be like" (RIR 155). Since Hume almost certainly took Locke's perceptual theory to be a paradigm of representationalism, it is worthy of notice that Locke himself maintained that one does not have anything like detailed knowledge of the nature of the cause of a sensible idea (see Essay, 4.3.11, pp. 544-545). Certainly Hume's account is no worse in this regard.
13. The alternative analogies Philo offers in Parts V-VII of the Dialogues - analogies to a ship and its intellectually dull builder, to a city and its committee of planners, to an animal body, and to a vegetable - seem to be intended to show that insofar as the argument from design is an analogical argument from effect to cause, even if there is a better reason to accept one analogy than another, in the end there is no more reason to accept one positive idea of the cause of the universe than another.

14. Sydney Shoemaker, "Memory," in The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ed. Paul Edwards, 8 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 5:267. This also seems to have been Biro's intent in arguing for "the intentionality of memory" in Hume. (See J. I. Biro, "Hume on Self-Identity and Memory," The Review of Metaphysics 30 [1976]: 19-38; and J. I. Biro, "Hume's Difficulties with the Self," Hume Studies 5 [1979]: 45-54.) If memory is intentional, various questions arise regarding the status of intentional objects in Hume's ontology, but an examination of these issues goes beyond the scope of the present paper.