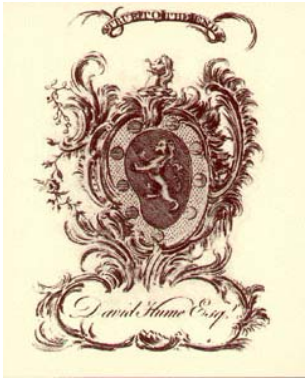

Impressions or Experiences: Public or Private?
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IMPRESSIONS AND EXPERIENCES: PUBLIC OR PRIVATE?

In his 'Perceptions and Persons' William Davie aims "to determine what perceptions are for Hume."[1] He challenges what I trust that he is right in labelling "The Standard View." His statement of this view is quoted from my Hume's Philosophy of Belief:

> ...Impressions are defined as constituting with ideas the class of 'perceptions of the mind.' While wine must be (logically) public, the impression of wine like the idea of wine must be (logically) private. Whereas the presence of wine tautologically guarantees the presence of wine, the occurrence of an impression of wine is by no means a sufficient condition of the presence of wine -- because an impression of wine, but not of course real wine, may be hallucinatory. Impressions belong to the category of experiences: wine$_2$ is cellared in that of physical things.[2]

My own purpose now is to defend, against attacks recently launched not only by Davie but also by Donald Livingston, this standard view. Davie contrasts it with "my own view, which is that perceptions are the things that we know, both private and public" (p. 130). He shows no signs of recognizing either how revolutionary his present suggestion is, or how revolutionary Hume himself would have been were any such suggested interpretation correct. For this particular "Standard View" is not one first introduced by me a couple of decades ago, and later misguiding even such usually sound scholars as Terence Penelhum. Instead it seems to have been accepted by almost if not absolutely all earlier writers discussing this part of Hume's philosophy. For instance: if Davie is right, then Thomas Reid must have devoted most of his professional life to the dismembering of a straw man. "Reid," as Livingston remarked in his Introduction to Hume: A Re-

evaluation, "took Hume's work to be a reduction to absurdity of a philosophical hypothesis which began in modern times with Descartes.... 'The hypothesis I mean is, that nothing is perceived but what is in the mind which perceives it....'"[3]

Again: if Davie is right, then Hume is here breaking from all his immediate predecessors in a revolutionary way, and in a direction which ought to have made the revolution welcome to Reid. Yet Hume himself gives no hint of this radical new beginning. Instead he goes out of his way to note a merely verbal innovation: by his introduction of a new use for the term 'impression' the word 'idea' is restored "to its original sense, from which Mr. Locke had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions" (T2 fn.).

The class of Lockean ideas, the class which Hume is thus studiously subdividing into the subclasses of Humean ideas and Humean impressions, contains, surely, nothing but what is logically private? Certainly no other interpretation of Locke's words would seem to be possible. He scarcely could have put the point more clearly or more emphatically than he does in the introductory first chapter of An Essay concerning Human Understanding. He says there that he is going to investigate "those Ideas, Notions, or whatever else you please to call them, which a Man observes, and is conscious to himself he has in his Mind...." Locke also apologizes for his frequent employment of "the Word Idea," excusing it as necessary "to express whatever is meant by Phantasm, Notion, Species, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ'd about in thinking...."[4] Only and precisely in this understanding of the nature of ideas was it possible for Berkeley to open The Principles of Human Knowledge with a single sentence asserting everything which Reid was so correctly concerned to deny:

> It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways.[5]

I

In face of all this, how is it possible to maintain that, for Hume, "perceptions are the things that we know, both private and public?" Well, it helps a lot to begin by ignoring what Hume himself says about the relations and lack of relations between his vocabulary and that of his predecessors. This Davie does. But Livingston does not. In Hume's Philosophy of Common Life he starts by allowing "that Hume inherited Locke's 'new way of ideas'...." But he then contends that a "radically different and distinctively Humean" usage of "the term 'perception'" is to be found "virtually buried some 200 pages later in what are notoriously the most difficult sections."[6]

What is not merely helpful but quite essential is to ignore, as both Davie and Livingston do, Hume's altogether categorical and totally decisive statement in Part I of Section XII of the first Enquiry. Livingston's sin of omission becomes the less venial when judged by his own characteristic contention that, "Since Hume's concept of a perception is presented narratively, our grasp of what he means by perceptions at the beginning of the Treatise depends almost entirely on what discoveries are made later on...."[7] If Part IV is thus to trump Part I then, surely, anything in Book I has to be reviewed in the light of

Hume's latest and preferred restatement in the first Enquiry. "The slightest philosophy," the mature Hume still insists,

> teaches us, that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which these images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and the object. The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: but the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: it was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences, which we consider, when we say, this house and that tree, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. (EHU 152)

II

So much for the ignoring of objections to any alternative Davie/Livingston interpretation. Is there anything positive to be said in favour? The true answer, though harsh, appears to be: 'Precious little.'

(a) Surprisingly, Davie approaches the question of the essential privacy or otherwise of Hume's "perceptions of the mind" by way of his account 'Of personal identity.' This is indeed surprising. For, if we confine ourselves to Book I, that penultimate Section 6 offers perhaps the very best base for assailing the thesis that Humean "perceptions" are not necessarily private. (Certainly it was my own first resort while reading Livingston's book.)

Davie asserts, truly, that, if we hold to "The Standard View," then we must agree that "Hume has effectively legislated that person is a mental

concept." Davie comments next, with equal truth, that this is an odd "bit of legislation for a philosopher to make, since we ordinarily think of ourselves as flesh and blood creatures."[8] What is far more remarkable, although rather rarely remarked, is that the particular philosopher who is not so much promulgating as most meekly accepting this particular piece of legislation was, unlike the actual legislators, a lifelong mortalist.[9] When, much later, his essay arguing for personal mortality appeared, then this took the form of a challenge 'On the Immortality of the Soul.' The soul is there still conventionally conceived as the essential person; and, as such, as the in-principle disembodiable subject of experiences. Davie mentions "our Cartesian heritage" in passing, but sees no morals to be drawn.[10] Yet there can be few, if any, instances which show more strikingly the enormously strong grip in which most of the successors of Descartes have been held by what aficionados of The Structure of Scientific Revolutions would call 'the Cartesian paradigm.'

For Hume's starting point was, surely, that reached by Descartes in the first two paragraphs of Part IV of his Discourse on the Method. Here we find: not only "perceptions of the mind" being construed in a strictly private sense; but also "person" being "effectively legislated" to become "a mental concept." Descartes meditates:

> ...considering that all the same thoughts that we have when we are awake can also come to us when we are asleep, without any one of them then being true, I resolved to pretend that nothing which had ever entered my mind was any more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterwards I became aware that, while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something....

> Then, examining attentively what I was, and seeing that I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world or place that I was in, but that I could not, for all that, pretend that I did not exist ... I concluded that I was a substance of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, and which, in order to exist, needs no place and depends on no material thing; so that this 'I,' that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, and even that it is easier to know than the body, and moreover, that even if the body were not, it would not cease to be all that it is.

It is not made clear whether Davie believes that the oddness, on "the Standard View," of Hume's proceedings constitutes any kind of reason for rejecting either that view itself or the consequent interpretation of those proceedings. What is certain is that he offers no other reason. Nor does he attempt the impossible task of making some sense of the section 'Of personal identity' on the alternative assumption that Hume here was thinking of people as specimens of a special sort of creatures of flesh and blood.

If this were the truth then we could not even begin to understand why he did not essay an account of personal identity as the identity of just such specimens, or how he could be so sure that he had never been "intimately conscious" (T251) of his own existence and continuance in existence. (Had Hume never either looked at himself in a mirror or had any bodily sensations?) Again, if those of our Humean impressions which are sensory really include not only sense-data but also objects actually perceived, then that "bundle or collection of different perceptions" (T252) which Hume maintains that each of us is would have to embrace all those features of the Cartesian external world

which happen from moment to moment to come within our perceptual sights.

(b) Livingston's commitment to a public cum private view of Hume's (sensory) "perceptions of the mind" springs from his concern to show that Hume rather than Burke should be accepted as the intellectual founding father of modern conservatism.[11] The great value of Livingston's book, I believe, is to have made this out. I also agree that there is a close analogy between what Hume has to say about reason and tradition in politics and what he says about our knowledge, or lack of knowledge, of the universe around us. But to maintain this does not require us to say that Hume found, or even thought that he had found, any rationally valid way to refute 'the Cartesian paradigm.' Instead he wants us simply to welcome the irresistible Panzerwaffe of natural belief as it punches through the flimsy philosophical fancies of the veil of appearance.

On Livingston's own correct account the essence of conservatism in politics is resistance to all inappropriate intrusions of "speculative and abstract principles." Just as Burke saw such an intrusion in the French but not in the American Revolution, so Hume saw one in the Puritan Great Rebellion but not in that of our American colonists: "I am an American in my principles and wish we woud let them alone to govern or misgovern themselves as they think proper."

This political resistance does not, however, necessarily require refutations of the intrusive "speculative and abstract principles" in their own terms. It is sufficient to show the unnatural and wholly deplorable consequences of attempts to adopt and to enforce such principles. That, surely, is the line which Hume also takes about the unnatural sceptical principles which challenge our natural beliefs about

what Cartesians call the external world. Certainly, and most regrettably, he never says that, in having genuine sensory impressions, we are -- as indeed we are -- directly aware of mind-independent realities; and that this constitutes -- what in truth it does -- a primary kind of knowledge of that world and not merely natural belief about it. On the contrary: in the fifth paragraph after the one from which our previous quotations from the first Enquiry were drawn, he sums up his own utterly different final conclusions:

> This is a topic, therefore, in which the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph, when they endeavour to introduce an universal doubt into all subject of human knowledge and enquiry (EHU 153).

Equally contrary conclusions are emphasized in the final section of Book I of the Treatise, 'Conclusion of this book.' But, although in his Chapter 1 Livingston says that it is here and in Sections 2-4 that "Hume's view on the status of perceptions and their relation to the public world is most thoroughly worked out,"[12] he later pays no more attention to this section than to its immediate predecessor, 'Of personal identity.' But here, after restating his contentions about argument from experience, Hume goes on to tell us how the two principles of experience and habit conspire "to operate upon the imagination," making him "form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner." Only upon "The Standard View" are the two subsequent sentences intelligible:

> Without this quality, by which the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others (which seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason) we cou'd never assent to any argument, nor carry our view beyond those few objects, which are present to our senses. Nay, even to these objects we cou'd never

> attribute any existence, but what was dependent on the senses; and must comprehend them entirely in that succession of perceptions, which constitutes our self or person (T265).

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1. Hume Studies X, 2 (November 1984), p. 125.

2. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), 1961), p. 41: quoted at pp. 127-8.

3. (New York: Fordham UP, 1976), p. 2: the Reid quote within this quote comes from William Hamilton (Ed.), The Works of Thomas Reid (Edinburgh, 1863), p. 96.

4. Edited by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), pp. 44 and 47: 3 and 8 of I(i).

5. This is the very first sentence of the first section: "the bottom," as Austin used to say, "of the garden path."

6. (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984), p. 10. The sections in question are 2, 4 and 7 Part IV of Book I: there are two misprints and one omission in the three lines in which this reference is given.

7. Ibid., p. 48.

8. Loc. cit., p. 128.

9. Perhaps, in the comparative privacy of a terminal note, I may be permitted to refer to my 'The Logic of Mortality.' It is forthcoming in a collection to be published by Macmillans of London and edited by Paul Badham. This paper sums up, and provides references to, much of the work I have done in this area in the thirty-four years since I first began to raise what Butler called "strange perplexities" about the question of a future life.

10. Davie, op. cit., p. 130.

11. Livingston, op. cit., Chapter 12, passim, especially p. 310.

12. Ibid., p. 10.