



Perceptions, Objects and the Nature of the Mind

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PERCEPTIONS, OBJECTS AND THE NATURE OF MIND

In this paper I consider the relation between perceptions and objects for Hume and the bearing which this has on his conception of the mind as composed of perceptions. But first it is necessary to distinguish at least two senses in which he uses the term 'object'. In the first, "perceptions of the human mind" -- both impressions and ideas -- are referred to **as** "our objects" (T 1,2). Objects in this sense are intentional objects. Hume almost consistently **uses** the noun 'perception', rarely the verb 'to perceive'. This serves to emphasize that for him perception is an object, not the perceiving of an object -- a departure from the tradition of Locke and Berkeley for whom perceptions are cognitive acts having objects. That perception is not conceived by Hume as a cognitive act or form of awareness but purely as an object of awareness is evident when he says,

For since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear. Everything that enters the mind, being in reality a perception, 'tis impossible anything shou'd to feeling appear different. This were to suppose, that even when we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken (T 190), 1

Or again, "The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness, command our strongest assent..." (T 212).

In its other sense the term 'object' is used to denote bodies, or that to which we attribute a continued existence "distinct from the mind and perception", or, borrowing Locke's expression "external

objects". It is just because we attribute a continued and independent existence to bodies that we distinguish them from perceptions, for "all impressions are internal and perishing existences, and appear as such" (T 194). But while we make this distinction in our everyday role of common man, the difference between a perception and an (external) object is really only a difference between two types of perceptions, on the one hand those that are characterized in their occurrence by constancy and coherence, and on the other those, for example the passions, which exhibit a different type of "regularity" in their occurrence (T 195). The constancy and coherence which some perceptions exhibit, together with a natural tendency of the mind "to bestow on the objects a greater regularity than what is observ'd in our mere perceptions" (T 197) causes us to attribute to these perceptions an uninterrupted and independent existence, an existence which is, of course, fictitious, because all perceptions are really internal and perishing.

'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence (T 206).

This is not to say, however, that "what any common man means by a hat, or shoe, or stone" (T 202) he **also** believes to be a perception. What he does believe is **that** the hat or the shoe is immediately present to the mind, or directly appears to his consciousness. It is **Hume**, the philosopher, who is here interposing the philosophical doctrine that "no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions" (T 212). This is, of course, not an **empirical** generalization. It is the definition of a perception as "whatever can be present

to the mind" (Abstract 647). It is this definition which gives sense to the statement "their perceptions are their only objects", the term "objects" here referring to "external objects". And the common man would, no doubt, be surprised to learn that these hats, shoes, etc., which directly appear to his consciousness, are by that circumstance really only his own perceptions which he has imagined, falsely, to have a continued and independent existence. Only a few experiments, however, are needed for the philosopher to realize that perceptions, i.e., what is present to the mind, do not have a continued and independent existence. Unable to give up his vulgar belief that what immediately presents itself **as** a hat or shoe has a continued and independent existence, the philosopher seeks to satisfy the rival claims of imagination and reflection by inventing a distinction between perceptions and objects, attributing the interruptedness to the former and the uninterruptedness to the latter. Both the vulgar and the philosopher distinguish between perceptions and (external) objects and do so unwittingly by a fiction. The vulgar fiction is that some of their perceptions are external objects. The philosophical fiction is that there are external objects which resemble and cause the perceptions. In both cases the existence of external objects is epistemologically unjustifiable, but wholly unavoidable, the vulgar fiction unavoidable as being the work of nature, the philosopher's fiction unavoidable if, confronted as he is by contradictory principles, he is to put his mind at rest (T 215). Hume is compelled by nature to believe in the existence of bodies. Only a few experiments, however, are needed *to* show that in its vulgar form the belief is false. The philosopher's "double existence of perceptions and objects" is a palliative for **"the struggle and opposition in the**

case" (T 215). **As** a philosopher and at the same time **as** a member of mankind, Hume himself has no choice but to accept the palliative. And **so** he does. The double existence is taken for granted throughout the Treatise, for it is as a philosopher that Hume is the author of that work.

In the period between Descartes and Hume some philosophers followed Descartes in giving minds and bodies parallel ontological structures. For example, with **Descartes** both minds and bodies are substances, each characterized by an unchanging attribute and changeable modes. Prominent among the dualists, with their ontological parallelism, were Spinoza, Malebranche and Locke, and with these, and possibly also with Descartes, the ontology of mind is modelled on that of body. Others denied this parallelism, for example Hobbes or Berkeley or Leibniz. Insofar as he accepts the double existence of perceptions and objects Hume, **as** philosopher, not only borrows the ontological structure of the psychical from the physical, but very explicitly argues that we must do **so**, and that on the grounds that what is true of objects as such is precisely mirrored in what is true of perceptions, as such.

When at the beginning of the Treatise Hume distinguishes ideas and impressions as the two species of perceptions, ideas are said to be "images of" or "exactly [to] represent" the impressions. This clearly suggests that it is impressions that are the objects of ideas. But when Hume begins his account of the soul or mind in the section "Of the Immateriality of the Soul" **he** makes what turns out to be a very important distinction between "our idea of a perception, and that of an object or external existence" (T 241). Perception and object are in this section taken to be numerically distinct, but because all our ideas are

derived from some preceding perceptions (i.e., impression) there can, so the argument goes, be no specific difference between the impression and the object. "We have no idea of any quality in an object, which does not agree to, and may not represent a quality in an impression; and that because all our ideas are deriv'd from our impressions" (T 243). This has far-reaching consequences and is used as a methodological principle for determining the nature of perceptions.

I say then, that since we may suppose, but never can conceive a specific difference betwixt an object and impression; any conclusion we form concerning the connexion **and** repugnance of impressions, will not be known certainly to be applicable to objects; but that on the other hand, whatever conclusions of this kind we form concerning objects, will most certainly be applicable to impressions. The reason is not difficult. **As** an object is suppos'd to be different from an impression, we cannot be sure, that the circumstance, upon which we found our reasoning, is common to both, supposing we form the reasoning upon the impression. 'Tis still possible, that the object may differ from it in that particular. But when we first form our reasoning concerning the object, 'tis beyond doubt, that the same reasoning must extend to the impression: And that because the quality of the object, upon which the argument is founded, must at least be conceiv'd by the mind; and cou'd not be conceiv'd, unless it were common to an impression; since we have no idea but what is deriv'd from that origin. Thus we may establish it as a certain maxim, that we can never, by any principle, but by an irregular kind² of reasoning from experience, discover a connexion or repugnance betwixt objects, which extends not to impressions; tho' the inverse proposition may not be equally true, that all the discoverable relations of

impressions are common to objects (T 241-2. my emphasis).

This "certain maxim" is reiterated in the Appendix: "All ideas are borrow'd from preceding perceptions. Our ideas of objects, therefore, *are* deriv'd from that source. Consequently no proposition can be intelligible or consistent with regard to objects, which is not so with regard to perceptions" (T 634). It is, then, external objects which provide the clue to the nature of perceptions.

It would appear to have sometimes been Hume's intention to assert a parallelism between minds and bodies. There are two indications of this. Shortly after the passage from the Appendix just quoted Hume says,

Philosophers begin to be reconcil'd to the principle, that we have no idea of external substance, distinct from the ideas of particular qualities. This must pave the way for a like principle with regard to the mind, that we have no notion of it, distinct from the particular perceptions (T 635).

The other indication is contained in the sequence of sections following "Of scepticism with Regard to the Senses". First in Section 3 Hume considers the notion of bodies or objects as so-called 'substances', in which the fiction of a substratum is introduced. This fiction performs two functions, one that of giving a spurious identity to the body undergoing a succession of changing qualities, and the other that of being the no less spurious subject of a set of co-existing qualities. Then in turning to a consideration of mind in Sections 5 and 6 Hume is concerned to show that here too substance as the common subject of inherence and as that which is the same or identical through change is just as fictional as it is in the case of body. But if this was his general intention, namely to assert an

ontological parallelism between minds and bodies, this is not what he in fact does. His 'maxim' is not that what may be asserted of the ontological character of bodies may equally be asserted of that of minds, but rather that what may be asserted ontologically of bodies, i.e., objects, may equally be asserted ontologically of perceptions. It is a perception, not a mind, which is the analogue of a body. To show how his 'maxim' applies Hume considers the hideous hypothesis of Spinoza.

To apply this to the present case; there are two different systems of beings presented, to which I suppose myself under a necessity of assigning some substance, or ground of inhesion. I observe first the universe of objects or of body: The sun, moon and stars; the earth, seas, plants, animals, men, ships, houses, and other productions either of art or nature. Here Spinoza appears, and tells me, that these are only modifications; and that the subject, in which they inhere, is simple, uncompounded, and indivisible. After this I consider the other system of beings, viz. the universe of thought, or my impressions and ideas. There I observe another sun, moon and stars; an earth, and seas, cover'd and inhabited by plants and animals; towns, houses, mountains, rivers; and in short every thing I can discover or conceive in the first system. Upon my enquiring concerning these, Theologians present themselves, and tell me, that these also are modifications, and modifications of one simple, uncompounded, and indivisible substance. Immediately upon which I am deafen'd with the noise of a hundred voices, that treat the first hypothesis with detestation and scorn, and the second with applause and veneration. I turn my attention to these hypotheses to see what may be the reason of so great a partiality; and find ... that as far as we can understand them, they **are** so much alike, that 'tis impossible to discover

any absurdity in one, which is not common to both of them (T 242-3).

In the Appendix this argument is put in briefer form:

But this table, which is present to me, and that chimney, may and do exist separately. This is the doctrine of the vulgar, and implies no contradiction. There is no contradiction, therefore, in extending the same doctrine to all the perceptions (T 634).

It can be seen, then, that for Hume the analogy is between mind and the whole of nature, not between mind and body, and between an individual perception in the mind and an individual object in nature.

What is at issue for Hume in the use of the analogy between perceptions and objects is the question how perceptions are to be categorized. What kind of being do they have? Are they substantival self-subsistent entities? Or are they adjectivally related to, or predicated of, some such entity; or, third, are they acts or actions? To decide this question Hume looks at objects -- seas, plants, ships, etc. They are, of course, substantival or separately existing entities. This table and that chimney "may and do exist separately". Tables and chimneys are quite obviously not qualities of anything; rather, they are that to which qualities are attributed. And finally objects are not actions. Invoking now Hume's 'maxim', **it** follows that perceptions too are substantival *or* separately existing entities; they are not qualities, **but** like objects have qualities -- "we have no idea of any quality in an object, which does not agree to ... a quality in an impression" (T 243); and finally Perceptions are not actions (T 244-6).

That perceptions are not mental acts deserves particular comment, for Hume makes extensive use of mental acts in his psychology. These acts or actions

of the mind are intentional acts and as such have objects. It is perceptions which are the objects of those acts. Thus in considering the scholastic division of the "acts of the understanding" with conception, judgment and reasoning he argues that all those acts are reducible to the first, *i.e.*, they are "nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects". In this context belief is an act of the mind. Belief is a particular manner of conceiving an idea. The idea is the object of this act of conceiving (T 97n, 107, 116). Another important action of the mind is that in which it surveys a succession of resembling objects or perceptions, an act which has a striking resemblance to the act by which it surveys an identical object (T 205). Consequently there is a "transition" of the mind from one object to another, where, because of the relation of the objects, it is as smooth as if it "contemplated one continu'd object" (T 254). Hume's employment of mental acts plainly raises difficulties. If, as he says, the mind is "nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions" (T 207), then how do we render intelligible the notion of the mind as conceiving these objects in a certain manner, as surveying them, or contemplating them, in short, as transcending the objects of which it is merely the heap or collection? Or again, if, as John Wright has properly emphasized, Hume's mental actions are neuro-physiological **phenomena**,³ how can they have objects, or be intentional in nature?

Let us now turn to consider the consequences for Hume's conception of the mind of the analogy that the ontology of perceptions bears to that of physical objects. The fiction of identity which is attributed to any succession of changing parts is produced by their being related by resemblance, contiguity, or causation, *i.e.*, by the principles of **association**. In

the case of self, soul, or mind it is chiefly causation which does the work, i.e., allows the mind to move smoothly along the succession of perceptions. He **says**,

...we may observe, that the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other (T 261).

It is to be noted that Hume's theory of causation involves the very distinction between objects (or bodies) and perceptions that we have been considering. This can be seen in his two definitions of cause. The first definition is in terms of the constant conjunction of objects, Here cause and effect are, as he points out, defined as a philosophical relation. The second definition views causation as a natural relation, i.e., in terms, not of objects, but of perceptions, and is stated **as** follows:

A cause is an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other (T 170).

In this second definition we move from **a** relation between two objects to a relation between the idea of the one object and the idea of the other object, or between the impression of the one object and the idea of the other, in short, to a relation between Perceptions. If what goes for billiard balls and other objects goes also for perceptions, **as** their ontological analogues, it should be possible to view the causal relation between perceptions either as a philosophical relation (a constant conjunction of perceptions), or as **a** natural relation or determination of the mind in its transition from one perception to another. The

parallelism between billiard balls as objects and perceptions requires that for the natural relation in the case of the latter there must be perceptions of the perceptions. Hume discusses this in T 105-6 and T 635-6.

It is important to keep the two definitions of cause in the forefront in considering Hume's treatment of the mind, for it is in terms of the first definition that he tells us what the mind is: it is in terms of the second definition that he explains why we attribute to the mind an identity and a unity both of which are fictitious.

(1) what the mind is: "the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it **as** a system of different perceptions or different existences, which **are** link'd together by the relation of cause and effect" (T 261). Hume gives two examples of this type of system, organisms (animal or vegetable) and republics or commonwealths. There is nothing fictitious here. This is "the true idea of the human mind"; and the relation of cause and effect which it invoked would be the philosophical relation of constant conjunction belonging to the first definition.

(2) The identity of the mind: this is a fiction produced by causes considered as a natural relation and in terms of the second definition. This fiction of identity is the same for souls and bodies, namely substance or substratum, something unknown, unintelligible and mysterious, which is supposed to continue the same through all changes (T 220, 254). Hume's first account of this unintelligible principle is that of substance on substratum for changing and diverse qualities of bodies, such as extension, solidity, figure, bulk, motion and gravity, i.e., if we confine ourselves to 'primary qualities' (T 192, 227). When he comes to souls, however, Hume **is concerned, not with**

something Unintelligible which remains the same through **a** change of qualities, but through change of parts and which connects them together in one **whole**.⁴ All Hume's examples of identity through change in the Section, "Of personal Identity", concern the relations of parts to whole, nor is there any great difficulty in observing in these examples what it is that remains the same, however much the parts are changed. There is the example of the ship where the parts have a reference to each other and combine to a common end or purpose. Though the ship undergoes many repairs with a consequent change of materials, nevertheless "the common end, in which the parts conspire, is the same under all their variations...." (T 257). Hume thus actually names **a** perfectly observable factor which remains the same throughout the changes and which gives the ship its identity. What then is puzzling is that in continuing the sentence he says that this "affords an easy transition of the imagination from one situation of the body to another", and thus explains how we can mistakenly suppose that there is some unintelligible substratum connecting the parts of this whole together. It is essential to Hume's theory of perceptions, as we have seen, that they are entities or objects, not qualities or acts, and it is as entities or objects that they are the mind's parts. If these Perceptions are quite evidently causally inter-related **in a** collective whole why should Hume have thought that **any** one would mistakenly suppose the mind's identity to **lie** in some unintelligible substratum holding these objects together, any more than they might be expected to suppose a republic's identity to lie in some **unintelligible** substratum?

(3) The mind's unity or simplicity: Hume **distinguishes** between identity and unity. Identity **has** **reference** to a succession of changing parts; unity or

simplicity to a relation of coexistent parts (T 221, 463). In the case of identity, it is the causal relation which closely binds the parts and affords the easy transition of the mind. With unity or simplicity Hume refers merely to the "close relation" of the parts (T 221, 263). He does not as with identity name any of the three natural relations. In the case of identity the notion of unity, if not of simplicity, appears to be involved in the very reference of parts to wholes. Nevertheless, however much Hume may have viewed the mind as organic or to be a "system" of parts he never considered it as other than a bundle, a heap, or a collection of parts. His conception of the nature of a collective unity is given in his treatment of space and time:

...twenty men may be consider'd as an unite. The whole globe of the earth, may the whole universe may be consider'd as an unite. The term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination, which the mind may apply to any quantity of objects it collects together; nor can such an unity any more exist alone than number can, as being in reality a true number. But the unity, which can exist alone, and whose existence is necessary to that of all number, is of another kind, and must be perfectly indivisible, and incapable of being resolved into any lesser unity (T 30-1).

The true unit is the indivisible or simple; and the unity which we, as vulgar, attribute to the mind is not that which we attribute to a collection or whole, it is rather the 'perfectly indivisible' or "simple". Thus Hume says,

An object, whose different co-existent parts are bound together by a close relation, operates upon the imagination after much the same manner as one perfectly simple and indivisible, and requires not a much greater stretch of thought in order to its conception.

From this similarity of operation we attribute a simplicity to it, and feign a principle of union as the support of this simplicity.... (T 263).

Turning now to the Appendix we find Hume saying,

But upon a more strict review of the section concerning personal identity, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent (T 633).

His analysis of his difficulties has two parts. In the first he repeats the argument for asserting that the mind is not simple but composite. "'Tis the composition of these [perceptions], therefore, which forms the self" (T 634). The argument rests on his maxim that

...no proposition can be intelligible or consistent with regard to objects, which is not so with regard to perceptions. But 'tis intelligible and consistent to say, that objects [such as this table and that chimney] exist distinct and independent, without any common simple substance or subject of inhesion. This proposition, therefore, can never be absurd with regard to perceptions (ibid.)

Hume does not restate in the Appendix what kind of composite being the mind is, namely a teleological system like organisms or republics, but he continued to make use of the idea of it as organic in the Dialogues on Natural Religion Part IV.⁵

In the second part of his analysis Hume says where his dissatisfaction lies.

But having thus loosen'd all our particular perceptions, when I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective.... (T 635).

This, and the remainder of the paragraph, reveal a surprising change. Hume now speaks of "a real simplicity and identity", when previously he had taken these to be fictions. He reviews what he had earlier said about the felt connexion or determination of thought to pass from one object to another, and the same felt connexion when thought reflects on the train of perceptions that compose the mind. It is in this felt connection that identity is found. He then goes on

However extraordinary this conclusion may seem, it need not surprize us. Most philosophers seem inclin'd to think, that personal identity arises from consciousness; and consciousness is nothing but a reflected thought or perception. The present philosophy, therefore, has so far a promising aspect (Ibid.).

Hume is satisfied, then, that he has shown what constitutes the mind's real identity. "But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness".

Hume has, by his own account, two problems. First, how to render his former opinions consistent, and secondly how to explain the unity of our perceptions in consciousness. The inconsistency resides in maintaining both that the mind is composite and that it is simple (unity and simplicity being equivalent terms for Hume) even if its unity and simplicity cannot be explained. There would be no contradiction if, as earlier in the Treatise, the unity and simplicity were something we "feign" (T 263). There is a contradiction only if the compositeness and simplicity are both taken to be real.

How **does** Hume arrive at this impasse? We noted at the beginning that he uses the term 'object' in two

senses. In one it is an intentional object and as such the word object is elliptical for it is always the object of consciousness, or thought, or the mind. It is in this sense that for Hume our perceptions are "our objects". The other sense of object is that of thing or individually existing entity. Bodies are such objects; and, in accordance with his important 'maxim', perceptions must be viewed in the same way also. When objects are taken in the first sense, perceptions are necessarily referred, by virtue of the meaning of 'object', to the unity of consciousness; when objects are taken in the second sense they are referred to a collection of which they form the parts. There is no inconsistency in taking perceptions to be both intentional objects and individual entities, but there is an inconsistency in not taking them univocally as one or the other when deciding the issue of whether the mind is composite or simple.

To sum up: Hume's conception of the soul **as** composed of perceptions presupposes (1) the double existence of perceptions and objects, and (2) the 'maxim' that what is true of objects is true of perceptions, though not necessarily reciprocally. It follows that perceptions, like objects, must be substantive entities, not qualities, nor acts. Accordingly, just as the universe is composed of individual objects, the mind will be composed of individual perceptions. In the Appendix to the Treatise Hume confesses his inability to render this view of the mind consistent with the unity of Perceptions in consciousness. His difficulty arises from his treatment of 'objects' in two different ways.

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1. It can be observed that 'feeling' here is not a passion as it is in Book II, i.e., it is not a perception, as passions are, but is equivalent to consciousness, or that to which perceptions as objects make their appearance. Both Malebranche and Leibniz use the expression 'internal feeling' as an alternative for 'consciousness'.
2. The example of such an irregular kind of reasoning is that inference from the coherence of certain perceptions to the continued and independent existence of objects, for this involves bestowing on the objects a greater degree of regularity than is actually to be found in the mere perceptions (T 197).
3. John P. Wright. The Sceptical Realism of David Hume, Minneapolis, 1983. For example, see T 60-1.
4. By no stretch of the imagination could extension, solidity, etc., be regarded as parts of bodies though their ideas might be regarded as parts of the idea of body.
5. Hume gives sufficient clues as to how he came by the notion of the soul or self as being like an organism. It was from Shaftesbury.
 If the reader is desirous to see how a great genius may be influenc'd by these seemingly trivial principles of the imagination, **as** well as the mere vulgar, let him read my Lord Shaftesbury's reasonings concerning the uniting principle of the universe, and the identity of plants and animals. See his Moralists: or, Philosophical rhapsody (T 254n.).

Notwithstanding the genius of Shaftesbury's being a victim of the same principles of the imagination as the vulgar, Hume accepts in its entirety Shaftesbury's analogy of the self with plants and animals, adopting from him the very language of the "conspiring" of their parts to "**a** common end". In the Dialogues, Part VI, he also adopts from Shaftesbury the notion of the universe, like the mind, as being organic. "Now if we survey the universe", says Hume, "so far as it falls under our knowledge, it bears a great resemblance to an animal or organized body, and seems actuated with a like principle of life and motion" (Dialogues, Kemp Smith, 170). **As** we have seen he had already

in the ~~Treatise~~ remarked the similarity of the universe and the mind: "...there are two different systems of beings presented ... I observe first the universe of objects.... After this I consider the other system of beings, viz. the universe of thought, or my impressions and ideas" (T 242). It is ironical that Hume should use the hideous hypothesis of Spinoza as he found it in Bayle's Dictionary to establish the absurdity of regarding the soul as simple not composite, for if he had gone to the Ethics itself he would have read that "The soul is not simple but composite" (II, 15), that it is composed of ideas, that these together possess an organic unity which persists through change **and** that they have a common end -- in Spinoza's case this being the preservation of the individual and probably being so also for Hume. For the similarities of Hume and Spinoza on the mind see my "The Mind, Simple or Composite: Leibniz versus Spinoza", The Southern Journal of Philosophy vol. XXI, Supplement **pp.** 111-120. This contains also a survey of the issue of the mind **as** simple or composite from Plato to Kant.