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Hume Studies Volume XVI, Number 1 (April, 1990) 1-16.

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Hume, Strict Identity, and Time's Vacuum

Michael J. Costa

It is well known that Hume distinguishes between strict identity¹ and the identity that applies to changeable objects, such as physical objects or persons. Identity judgments that we make with respect to changeable objects are based upon a number of features that determine how likely it is for the mind to confuse the perception of such objects with the continuous perception of an unchanging object. Strict identity can apply only to the latter (T 203-18, 253-63). Even the idea of strict identity, however, is considered by Hume to be a fiction and based at bottom on a confusion.

I will concentrate here on Hume's account of the idea of strict identity, and I will try to explain the precise sense in which Hume considers this idea to be a fiction and based upon a confusion. Some very able commentators have dealt with this topic before, but none of the accounts with which I am familiar give adequate attention to the full context of Hume's account in the *Treatise*. They do not note the degree to which his account develops out of and depends upon very basic features of his system, such as his characterization of relations as complex ideas (T 13) and his theory of abstract ideas (T 17-25). Nor do the accounts note the degree to which the idea of strict identity is tied to the idea of time without change (T 64-5), and through that, to the idea of a vacuum (T 53-65).²

I shall argue that viewing Hume's account of the idea of strict identity in light of his accounts of complex and abstract ideas, his account of the idea of a vacuum, and his account of time without change makes considerable sense of it, at least as an account that it is reasonable for him to hold. I will proceed by examining each of these features in turn. Along the way I hope to make some novel and enlightening interpretative points with regard to complex ideas, abstract ideas, the idea of time, and the idea of a vacuum.

I

Hume tells us that simple perceptions (whether impressions or ideas) are those which *admit of no distinction nor separation*, whereas complex perceptions are contrary to these and *may be distinguished into parts* (T 2). The example that he immediately gives, however, at best clouds the distinction he has made. He says, *Tho' a particular*

colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple, 'tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other (T 2). This may make it seem that simple ideas are universals³ and that a mere distinction of reason (see T 24) is enough to show that a perception is not simple; but I think that Hume did not have universals in mind at all with respect to the simple/complex distinction. **Every** perception-proper for Hume is a particular, an existent (T 66-7). There is, indeed, **something** more to a universal or abstract idea for Hume than a particular idea, but this something more is a disposition and not another idea or perception. I see no evidence that Hume intended the simple/complex distinction to apply to the dispositions connected with abstract ideas. Note that in the apple example, the ideas mentioned are of different sense modalities. They can be distinguished psychologically, and not merely as distinctions of reason. One can form a distinct idea of the colour of the apple without forming **any** idea of taste or smell. The shape of the apple would not be distinct in the same way. Any idea of the shape of the apple would, for Hume, also be an idea of some colour or other.

This becomes important when we note that Hume characterizes space and time (indeed, all relations) as complex ideas (T 13). He does not mean that these ideas are logically analyzable; he means that any instance of these ideas is psychologically analyzable. Any instance is analyzable into idea parts that can be considered separately in mind from the other idea parts. An instance of space or extension is a complex perception in the sense that it consists of an array of coloured or tangible perceptions, each of which could be considered in isolation from the others. An instance of time is a complex perception in that it consists of a sequence of noticeably different perceptions, each of which could be considered in isolation from the others in the sequence. We must tell an additional story about the abstract ideas (so-called) of space and time, one that requires first some discussion of Hume's general account of abstract ideas.

According to Hume an abstract idea is nothing but a particular idea connected with a disposition or *custom* to bring to mind other particular ideas of the same type (T 20-21). So, for example, the abstract idea of triangle is always an idea of some specific triangle or other connected with a disposition to bring to mind ideas of other specific triangles if performing a cognitive task should call for it. Hume's example is having in mind an idea of an equilateral triangle in performing the cognitive task of deciding the truth of the proposition that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other. If one has an adequate abstract idea of triangle one will bring to mind the instances of *scalenum* and *isocetes* that show that the proposition is false (T 21).

The same specific idea can do service as a number of different abstract ideas depending upon its features and the various cognitive dispositions that are connected with it. A white globe can serve as both the abstract idea of white and the abstract idea of spherical since it is an instance of both and has connected to it both a disposition to think of other specific ideas of white and a disposition to think of other specific ideas of spherical things. We distinguish between the colour and shape of the particular idea of the white globe not by being able to form distinct particular ideas of them, but by the capacity to have triggered the distinct dispositions to bring to mind **other** white things, on the one hand, and **other** spherical things, on the other. This is Hume's explanation of a **distinction of reason** (T 24-5). As explained above, I think that Hume views this as different from the case of distinguishing the colour from the taste and smell of an apple. In the case of the apple, we can actually have the very same ideas distinctly in mind.⁴

I think it is clear that Hume intends this account of abstract ideas to apply to the ideas of space and time (T 34-5).⁵ A particular idea of space, a particular arrangement of contemporaneously experienced ideas of colour or touch, does service as an abstract idea of space only insofar as it is connected to a disposition to bring to mind other particular ideas of space. There is no idea of space that is not an idea of some particular extended array of coloured or tangible points (T 34). Likewise in the case of the abstract idea of time (T 34-5). A particular idea of time is a particular sequence of discernibly different ideas. This is why time is a complex idea for Hume. Its complexity is not logical or spatial, it is temporal. Having an idea of time is **simply** experiencing a sequence of ideas. It literally takes time to have an idea of time. This is why Hume can be so confident in asserting that the idea of time is ever-present in us. The idea of time is nothing more than a succession of perceptions, and that is taking place whenever we are conscious (T 65). It is true that Hume sometimes talks as if a sequence of perceptions is merely the basis from which we **form** an idea of time (T 35), seeming to imply that the idea of time is something separate from the sequence; but, as is well known, he speaks specifically against this interpretation (with the five notes played on the flute example, T 36-7), and another interpretation of his intent is possible. What we **form** from the experience of particular sequences is the disposition that allows any particular sequence to serve as an **abstract** idea of time. Given the account of abstract ideas, we can speak loosely of coming to form the abstract idea or concept of time on the basis of having experienced temporal sequences, but all that is really being formed is a disposition or custom to bring forth ideas of other particular sequences should the cognitive occasion arise.

This interpretation resolves some things that others have found puzzling about Hume's account of space and time. Norman Kemp Smith finds it problematic for Hume to speak of coloured or tangible perceptions as literally **parts** of space or time. This is because Kemp Smith interprets Hume to say that the ideas of space and time are ideas of **manners** of appearance, and manners do not have (tangible) parts.⁶ On my interpretation, any idea of space is a complex idea of visible/tangible points related in a certain manner to each other. The idea is an idea of the manner only insofar as it is an idea that consists of points related in that manner. There is nothing problematic about thinking of the points as literally parts of the idea. The same comments apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the idea of time. To think that we could have an idea of just the manner would clearly do violence to Hume's nominalism and his account of abstract ideas. *Pace* Kemp Smith, Hume does have a "sensational" account of space and time. We actually experience impressions of space and time,⁷ albeit not in **simple** impressions. The ideas of space and time are not violations of Hume's first principle.⁸ Every idea of space and time for Hume consists totally of parts each of which is a copy of some impression. The manner in which they appear is not another part of the idea nor is it anything of which we could have a separate idea.⁹

II

Given his account of the idea of space, Hume recognizes that the idea of a vacuum presents a considerable problem. The idea of a vacuum is purportedly the idea of a space with no content; but Hume's account of the idea of space says that any instance of space is just an arrangement of content, and that the abstract idea of space is just a particular idea of arranged content connected to a disposition to think of other arrangements of other visible or tangible content. There seem to be no resources here for explaining how we can have an idea of a space without content. Nevertheless, Hume recognizes that he cannot afford to dismiss cavalierly the idea of a vacuum. Whether or not a vacuum exists has been debated by intelligent persons for ages. It is unreasonable to think that they literally had no idea what they were talking about. Moreover, we can describe a thought experiment that seems to show that a vacuum is at least possible, and it is arguable that motion is impossible without a vacuum (T 54-5). Perhaps most importantly, Hume, himself, is inclined to hold the opinion that some bodies in the external world are actually situated so *as to receive bodies betwixt them, without impulsion or penetration*, and he recognizes that this seems tantamount to asserting that a vacuum exists (T 639).

It is a genuine tribute to Hume's ingenuity and subtlety that he is able to find a way, however shaky, between the horns of this dilemma.

We do not have a genuine idea of empty space, but we do have an idea of an invisible and intangible *distance* (T 62). This has the appearance, however, of a mere verbal manoeuvre, as Hume himself recognizes (T 64). What advantage is gained by using the word “distance” rather than the word “extension”? How is the idea of invisible and intangible distance any easier to explain than the idea of empty space, that is, a vacuum? Moreover, it seems clear that Hume commits himself to the existence of an idea of invisible distance. His physiological explanation of our tendency to confuse invisible distance with real extension in terms of the animal spirits falling into the wrong traces in the brain (T 60-61), seems to make sense only if there really are two separate ideas to confuse; but an idea of invisible and intangible distance seems to be a non-entity on Hume’s views about ideas. How can a non-entity leave a distinctive trace in the brain?

If we follow the development of Hume’s account while keeping in mind his accounts of complex and abstract ideas, however, things begin to fall into place nicely. Hume does give some examples of particular complex ideas of invisible and intangible distance. One example is an idea of points of light separated by total darkness (T 56).¹⁰ Hume is quite clear in his claim that this complex idea does not contain an idea of invisible extension. For if there were an idea of invisible extension in it, this could be distinguished and separately considered by the imagination. When the imagination tries to do this, however, it discovers that it has only an idea of darkness; that is, it does not have an idea at all (T 57). But this does not prevent the original complex idea from being a genuine idea. Moreover, it does not prevent the original complex idea from serving as a genuine abstract idea. All that is required is that it become connected to a disposition to think of other similar complex ideas. Hume may feel it appropriate to call such ideas ideas of distance. Thus far, I think, there is no need to treat such an idea as fictitious in any sense.

The fiction comes in for Hume when **other** dispositions arise in mind. The problem is that particular complex ideas of invisible distance become connected to dispositions to bring to mind complex ideas of extension, and that particular complex ideas of **extension** get connected to dispositions to bring to mind complex ideas of **invisible distance**. Two dispositions that should be separate because the instances to which they are connected fall under no single kind, get conflated together. An analogous case would be confusing the ideas of dog and cat. Suppose that one were such that instances of ideas of dog were connected with a disposition to bring to mind ideas of both cats and dogs. And suppose that when performing cognitive tasks in which questions about the properties of dogs arose, one often gave answers that were true of cats and not of dogs. Then one has a confused

(fictitious?) idea of dogs. One might say that there is a legitimate, albeit artificial, category of dog-or-cat, for which it would be legitimate to combine the two dispositions; but one who had this legitimate disjunctive disposition would not answer questions about dogs with answers that were true of cats and not of dogs.

Of course, confusing dogs and cats is a rather rare cognitive disorder for otherwise competent adults; but Hume thinks that confusing invisible distance with extension is an almost universal cognitive disorder for even the most intelligent persons. And he thinks that he can identify sufficient reasons for this. The visible points separated by invisible distance share similar geometrical and sensible properties with points separated by genuine extension. Moreover, invisible distance accepts visible distance without any movement of the point constituents of the original complex idea. (Imagine bringing a ruler up to measure the distance between the two points of light originally separated by darkness [T 58-9].) In this respect, Hume says, the invisible distance is a kind of cause of genuine extension (T 62).¹¹ It is one of Hume's basic psychological principles, of course, that ideas related by resemblance or causation are intimately associated by the mind. This is why the mind in having an idea of invisible distance is likely, on cognitive prompting, to bring to mind an idea of extension (or vice versa) and resolve the cognitive question on the basis of the wrong idea. It is the physiological correlate to this that Hume is describing in his passage about the animal spirits falling into the contiguous, but wrong, traces (T 62-3).

The conciliatory things that Hume has to say about the idea of a vacuum (T 64 and the Appendix, T 638-9) may profitably be viewed as a variation on the artificial dog-or-cat option considered above. Hume sometimes talks as if there were a genus, called distance, which had two species, invisible and intangible distance on the one hand and extended distance on the other (see, for example, T 59, 60, 62, 63). I think that Hume views this genus of distance as a kind of artificial category (much like dog-or-cat above), and that he would have no objection to it, provided that the disjunctive character were recognized. The questions concerning the conceivability of a vacuum and the need of a vacuum for movement, as well as the fact that the external world may well have in principle invisible and intangible distance in it are all answered by the idea of invisible distance. The fact that intelligent people have argued for ages about the existence of a vacuum, however, is explained by our tendency to form the fictitious idea of a vacuum in having conflated, rather than disjunctive, cognitive dispositions connected to the ideas. There is no harm if we decide to apply the term "vacuum" to invisible and intangible distance, for there are real instances of ideas of this type and it is possible to have a disposition

that restricts itself to these ideas. But then we must recognize that a vacuum is **not empty space**.

III

It is stretching things only a bit to say that strict identity, for Hume, is time's vacuum. In the last two paragraphs of the section of the *Treatise* dealing with the idea of a vacuum (T 64-5), he quickly sketches out an exactly parallel account of the idea of time without change. An idea of space is a complex idea consisting of a contemporaneous array of visible or tangible perceptions. An idea of time is a complex idea consisting of a sequence of perceptible changes. Just as there can be no real idea of space without visible or tangible perceptions, so there can be no real idea of time without perceptible changes. Nonetheless, just as we seem to have an idea of space with no content, so we seem to have an idea of time with no change. Hume attempts to explain the nature of the fictitious idea of time with no change, in exactly the same way that he explained the nature of the fictitious idea of space with no content. In the case of the idea of a vacuum, if the interpretation developed above is correct, two real ideas have their abstract ideas conflated together. There is the idea of invisible and intangible distance, a typical instance of which is a perception of points of light in a totally dark background, and the idea of genuine extension, a typical instance of which is an perception consisting of an array of coloured points. The dispositions proper to these two sorts of ideas get confused together so that an instance of either sort of idea is apt to bring to mind instances of the **other** sort of idea when cognitive tasks arise involving the first sort of idea.

In the case of the fictitious idea of changeless time, there are also two different sorts of real ideas. The first is an idea of an unchanging perception viewed at different times (*we consider a steadfast object at five-a-clock, and regard the same at six* [T 65]). The other is the complex idea of a sequence of perceptible changes, that is, the genuine idea of time. Hume's explanation for why these two ideas get confused by the mind runs exactly parallel to his explanation for the ideas involved in the fiction of a vacuum. There are the same three sources of the confusion.

(1) The perceptions of the unchanging object seem as temporally separate as if the object had actually undergone a sequence of changes. (In the case of the idea of invisible distance, it is that the objects separated by invisible distance affect the senses in the same way as if they had been separated by real extension.) (2) Experience shows us that the object could have undergone a sequence of changes. (In the case of invisible distance, it is that experience shows us that invisible distance can become real extension.) (3) The qualities of the object are

increased or diminished in the same way as if they had been separated by a sequence of changes. (In the case of invisible distance, it is that the qualities of the object are diminished in the same way as if they had been separated by real extension.) (Compare T 58-9 with T 65.)¹²

It is these relations of resemblance and causation between the two distinct sorts of ideas that lead the mind to confuse them and form a single conflated disposition, or fictitious idea, that covers them both. When a cognitive task arises involving either idea, the mind will often give the answer that is appropriate to the other sort of idea.

Now let us consider what Hume has to say specifically about the idea of strict identity later in the *Treatise* (T 200-201). I think we shall see that the basis of his account has already been laid in his account of the idea of time without change. Hume begins by providing a name for the idea of a continuous, unchanging perception. He calls it the idea of unity, and he clearly states that this is not the same as the idea of identity. *One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity* (T 200). Nor does the idea of a multiplicity of objects convey the idea of identity. *[Identity] must lie in something that is neither of them* (T 200). To remove this difficulty, Hume specifically directs the reader back to his account of time and the section concerning the idea of a vacuum. He says,

This fiction of the imagination [the idea of time without change] almost universally takes place; and 'tis by means of it, that a single object, plac'd before us, and survey'd for any time without our discovering in it any interruption or variation, is able to give us a notion of identity. (T 201)

Note first that the idea that gives us a notion of identity, for Hume, is that of an unchanging object continuously perceived; but it is able to do this only by means of the fiction of time without change. When we look back to the example that gives us **this** fiction it is of an unchanging perception viewed at different times (*when we consider a stedfast object at five-a-clock, and regard the same at six* [T 65]). It is easy to see how the mind would assimilate the case of two experiences of an object separated by a genuine sequence of changes with the case of experiences of a genuine sequence of changes. We could represent the two sequences of perceptions as follows:

- (1) A B C D E A
- (2) A B C D E F

What is difficult to understand is how Hume at this point can find any logical difference between the two cases. Why should we not just

consider case (1) also to be a case of a sequence of changes, albeit a case in which the first member in the series **resembles** the last member in the series? How can Hume represent the case as one in which we view the **same** object twice, when this experience is supposed to be the means by which we acquire the idea of strict identity? Moreover, the kind of case in question is one to which the strict idea of identity does not even apply because of the interruption in perception of the object. It seems to be a case of attributing continued existence to an external object, and Hume seems to think that this is possible only because we already have an idea of strict identity. So, the experience that gives rise to the idea of time without change is one that requires possession of the idea of continued existence of an external object, but the latter requires having the idea of strict identity, and the idea of strict idea comes about by means of the idea of time without change. Hume seems to have himself in a considerable muddle here. However, I can suggest a way of reading Hume's words that will clear the muddle a bit, if not completely dissolve it.

Let us read Hume at T 65 as referring to a case in which we have continuously experienced an unchanging (*stedfast*) object for an hour. Having such an impression does not antecedently require having an idea of identity. An idea of it would simply represent an idea of unity. When we **think about** (*consider* or *regard*) such an impression, it **seems to us** as if we can have distinct ideas of the object as existing at five o'clock and at six o'clock; but this is already a symptom of a confusion. For thinking of a slice of the object as existing at five o'clock and another slice at six o'clock is not to form an idea of the same type as the perception experienced. Such an idea is an idea of number (**two** slices), not an idea of unity. Yet we find ourselves having such an idea because we are constantly aware of changes in other perceptions (the idea of time is always with us). The idea of a single unchanging impression is closely associated with the idea of a succession of changes, and the idea of a succession of changes is closely associated with an idea of a single thing as extended (temporally) over those changes. It is this confusion of different ideas under a single cognitive disposition that represents the abstract but fictitious idea of time without change. Whereas the confusion in the case of a vacuum was between ideas of invisible distance and ideas of extended distance, here it is a confusion between ideas of unity ("invisible" time) and ideas of true time. I suggest that it is basically this same confusion that represents the abstract but fictitious idea of strict identity. Consider the way that Hume continues his account of strict identity at T 201:

For when we consider any two points of this time, we may place them in different lights: We may either survey them at the very

*same instant; in which case they give us the idea of number, both by themselves and by the object; which must be multiply'd, in order to be conceiv'd at once, as existent in these two different points of time: Or on the other hand, we may trace the succession of time by a like succession of ideas, and conceiving first one moment, along with the object then existent, imagine afterwards a change in the time without any **variation** or **interruption** in the object; in which case it gives us the idea of unity. Here then is an idea, which is a medium betwixt unity and number; or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it: And this idea we call that of identity.*

On this interpretation, the parallel between T 65 and T 201 is apparent. Indeed we might say that strict identity and time without change are basically the same fictitious idea for Hume (identity is time's vacuum). When we consider an unchanging object and ask whether it is the same object at six o'clock as the object at five o'clock the idea of unity gets confused with ideas of time, and this leads us to answer "yes." This would be a judgment of identity. When we consider whether time has passed for an unchanging object, the idea of time leads to the idea of unity, and this leads us to answer "yes." This would be a judgment of time without change.

It is precisely this state of cognitive confusion that is the logically incoherent, but psychologically real, medium between number and unity. Two distinct sorts of instances of ideas, the instance of a single, unchanging idea, and the (complex) instance of a sequence of changes, are gathered under a cognitive disposition that groups them together. It is only because of the existence of this confused disposition that an idea of an unchanging object can do service as an abstract idea of strict identity or that an idea of genuine time can do service as an abstract idea of time without change. Strictly speaking, there are no instances of the abstract idea of strict identity or time without change, just as, strictly speaking, there are no instances of the abstract idea of a vacuum. But all these abstract ideas have psychological reality, and Hume seems to think that they are virtually irresistible psychologically.

IV

Before concluding, let us consider some tangential points of interest. I have assumed that we should take Hume at his word when he speaks of a continuous, unchanging perception, but this point is an object of some contention. Some commentators, notably H. H. Price and Barry Stroud, claim that Hume can not coherently allow for a continuous

perception, and must settle for a sequence of exactly resembling perceptions. This issue has been discussed in some detail by Donald Baxter,¹³ and since I am in general agreement with what Baxter has to say I shall speak here only to those points on which the interpretation developed above has something to add to Baxter's treatment.

One reason that Stroud gives for thinking that Hume cannot allow for an continuous perception is that Stroud thinks that an idea of this perception would have to count as a legitimate, and not a fictitious, idea of identity.¹⁴ But we have seen above that the idea of a continuous perception merely counts as an idea of **unity** for Hume. This is a genuine idea and insofar as the abstract idea of unity would consist merely in the tendency to think of other unities, it would be a genuine, non-fictional (albeit rather trivial and uninteresting), abstract idea. There are no genuine idea instances of identity for Hume. The abstract idea of identity involves the confused disposition to think of instances of time and unity together as if they comprised a logically coherent category.

H. H. Price acknowledges that Hume does countenance continuous perceptions, but Price thinks that this is a mistake on his part. All that Hume can really mean by unchanging object is a monotonous and continuous series of exactly resembling perceptions. Price gives two reasons: (1) the fact that the perception **could have been** interrupted, and (2) the fact that different parts of the perception would have different temporal properties.¹⁵

I think we can see better the basis for Price's first reason if we consider an example (which Hume, interestingly, never considers) relating to extension. Consider an impression of a homogeneously coloured expanse. Presumably, Hume would view this as an idea of extension, and so it must be viewed as consisting of an array of coloured points; but that is not the way that it is experienced, and Hume could hardly deny this. Hume's reason for claiming that an idea of this impression is not a simple idea must be that we **could** distinguish in imagination the coloured points that make up the expanse. If things are distinguishable in imagination, then they are really distinct (T 18); so we should view the idea of a homogeneously coloured expanse as a complex idea consisting of an array of coloured points. Now it may seem that Hume's handling of a perception of an unchanging object is inconsistent with this. Even though the unchanging object is not perceived as a sequence of objects, since we can in imagination slice it into a sequence of (exactly resembling) perceptions, then in reality it is just such a sequence. If distinguishability by imagination is sufficient for distinctness with respect to spatial distinctness, then it must also be so for temporal distinctness.

The point missed in this objection is that, for Hume, a perception of an unchanging object is **not** imaginable as a sequence of exactly resembling perceptions. The only kind of sequence of perceptions for Hume is a sequence of noticeably different perceptions. It is true, as we have seen, that confusion with the temporal sequences of concurrent changing perceptions will tempt us to imagine an idea consisting of what we think of as exactly resembling temporal parts of the object, but since this would be an idea of **number** it couldn't possibly represent the **unity** with which we started.¹⁶

With respect to the second reason, Hume would deny that the continuous perception had any parts, so, perforce, it has no parts with different temporal properties. Now the perception as a whole has temporal properties. It comes before some perceptions and after others. What do we say about its temporal relations to those changes that take place in other things while it is being perceived? We would have to deny that any part of it was occurring at any of those intermediary moments. It, as a whole, did not occupy any of those intermediary moments either. Taking an object that was perceived continuously from t_1 to t_{10} , we would have to say that neither it nor any part of it occupied any of the moments from t_1 to t_{10} . Hume could recognize that this would sound highly counter-intuitive to us; but he could say that this is because the cognitive confusion involved in the idea of time without change is so pervasive and seductive.¹⁷

V

Any interpretation of Hume's account of the idea of identity must come to grips with the fact that Hume considers identity a complex idea and characterizes it as a confusion and fiction. It must also accommodate Hume's theory of abstract ideas. This latter imposes a substantial constraint, since abstract ideas are nothing for Hume except particular ideas connected with dispositions to bring to mind other particular ideas of the same sort. The problem in the case of identity is that there are, strictly speaking, no instances of ideas of identity and, hence, no ideas of the same sort. Finally, an account of the idea of identity must explain why Hume found the source of it in the idea of time without change, and why he finds the latter to be in exact parallel with the idea of a vacuum.

The interpretation developed here takes seriously Hume's characterization of space, time, and identity as complex ideas. Instances of space and time are literally complex in consisting of arrays of other ideas. Identity is a complex idea insofar as it essentially involves ideas of time. Space and time as abstract ideas are simply individual complex ideas of space and time connected with dispositions to bring to mind other particular ideas of space and time as prompted

by the need to perform various cognitive tasks involving the concepts. The case of the idea of a vacuum provided for us, as it did for Hume, a model of how an abstract idea is possible without any instances of it. Such abstract ideas occur when a cognitive disposition develops that conflates together more than one kind of idea instance and performs cognitive tasks by substituting what is true of the one sort of idea in cases involving the other. In the case of a vacuum the ideas conflated are those of invisible distance and true extension. In the case of the idea of time without change the ideas conflated are those of a continuous unchanging perception (= "invisible" time), and a sequence of perceptible changes (= true time). When we consider that an idea of a continuous unchanging perception is an idea of unity for Hume, and that an idea of a sequence of perceptible changes is an idea of number, we can see the sense in which the idea of time without change underlies the idea of strict identity. Strict identity is characterized by Hume as the incoherent medium between unity and number, but it is grounded psychologically by the same confused cognitive disposition that underlies the abstract idea of time without change.

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1. Hume calls this identity in the *strictest sense* (T 14), and often refers to it as *perfect* (e.g., T 202, 203, 251) or *numerical* (e.g., T 202, 257) identity. References are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., rev. ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1987). Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
2. Among the accounts dealing with the idea of strict identity are: Donald L. M. Baxter, "A Defense of Hume on Identity Through Time," *Hume Studies* 13.2 (November 1987): 323-42; Wan-Chuan Fang, "Hume on Identity," *Hume Studies* 10.1 (April 1984): 59-68; Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941), 354, 474-47; H. H. Price, *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford, 1940), 39-47; Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, 1977), 101-5. My purposes here are not polemical, so I will not engage in critiques of other accounts, though I will mention where appropriate how the account developed here resolves some items that appear puzzling or troublesome to other commentators.
3. See David Hausman, "Can Hume's Use of a Simple/Complex Distinction Be Made Consistent," *Hume Studies* 14.2 (November 1988): 424-8, for a discussion of whether Hume intended simple ideas to be particulars or universals. Hausman's answer is that Hume's distinction is ambiguous. An abstract idea can be a logical

simple without being a psychological simple, and an impression can be a psychological simple without being a logical simple (inasmuch as various distinctions of reason can be made with respect to it). I agree with Hausman on the distinction between logical and psychological simples, but I don't think that Hume had logical simples at all in mind in making the simple/complex distinction with respect to perceptions.

4. This calls for some qualifications, and may not be entirely satisfactory even with the qualifications. Suppose, for example, that I have an **impression** of a particular red apple as I am taking a bite of it. At one and the same time I have an impression of a particular red colour, particular taste, and particular smell. Hume wants to hold that these are distinct impressions, and the reason we know that is that we can distinguish them in thought. I can have an idea of **that particular** red colour without having an idea of the particular taste or smell. But what makes the idea an idea of that particular red impression that I had simultaneously with the taste and smell impressions? Maybe the idea is just an idea of an exactly resembling red colour. The point becomes important when we contrast this case with the case of a distinction of reason. Hume wants to say that I cannot have an idea of the colour of this particular white globe impression that is distinct from its shape. Presumably an idea of an exactly resembling white colour would not count as an idea of this particular white globe unless it also had the same shape. But then why should an idea of an exactly resembling red colour count as an idea of the colour of the particular apple when it is not accompanied by the same taste and smell? I don't think that Hume has the resources to provide a satisfactory answer.
5. Hume is relatively silent on the ideas of space and time in the *Enquiry*, but it is significant that at the places he does mention these ideas (E 154-5, n. 158), he makes favourable reference to this very account of abstract ideas. References are to David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1972). Further references ("E") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
6. Kemp Smith (above, n. 2), 29, n. 1; 297.
7. It would be hard, in any case, to reconcile a non-sensational view of space and time with Hume's explicit comment (T 73) that with respect to space, time (**and identity**), the mind cannot go beyond what is immediately present to the senses.
8. Kemp Smith (above, n. 2), 279-80. See also George Pappas, "On McRae's Hume," *Hume Studies* 7.2 (November 1981): 169.

16. But wouldn't this apply to the case of extension as well? How could an array of coloured points, which surely is an idea of number for Hume, possibly represent what is experienced as a continuously coloured extension? Hume would have to say that the impression of the continuously coloured extension is also an idea of number. There are well known tensions besetting Hume at this point. He wants to say, on the one hand, that every impression is perfectly determinate in its qualities (T 19) and those qualities are perfectly known by the mind (T 190); but, on the other hand, he finds himself compelled to acknowledge that an exact enumeration of the points in any surface would be *utterly impossible* for the mind (T 45). I think this tension is unresolvable within Hume's system.
17. Compare Baxter (above, n. 2).