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A Second Copy Thesis in Hume?

George S. Pappas

The copy thesis which applies to simple ideas and impressions in Hume is well known; every simple idea is supposed to be a copy of, that is, to exactly resemble, some simple impression. Or very nearly so, at any rate, for there is the famous missing shade of blue to take into account. There seems to be another copy thesis in Hume, however, and one on which Hume places a great deal of weight. We find it expressed early on in the *Treatise*, incorporated into Hume's discussion of space and time. He says:

Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge. But our ideas are adequate representations of the most minute parts of extension; and thro' whatever divisions and subdivisions we may suppose these parts to be arriv'd at, they can never become inferior to some ideas, which we form. The plain consequence is, that whatever *appears* impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be *really* impossible and contradictory, without any farther excuse or evasion.¹

Fogelin has recently described this as a "remarkable passage," one which is "a match for anything found in the writings of the rationalists."² Perhaps it is such a match, perhaps not, but Fogelin is certainly right to regard this as a remarkable passage, at least for Hume. After all, Hume here seems to be endorsing some form of representationalism, a doctrine we typically do not associate with Hume's philosophy.

Two important questions emerge from this passage: just what are these adequate ideas of which Hume speaks; and, in what sense can it be true that they form the foundation of all of our knowledge? I believe that a correct answer to each of these questions has some strong implications for our understanding of Hume's philosophy.

I. Humean Adequate Ideas

So far as I can discover, the above-quoted passage is the only place where Hume talks about adequate ideas. The only text which I have

found which even suggests the same sentiments occurs in "Of the Passions" where Hume discusses ideas and truth (T 448-49), but no mention is made there of adequate ideas. So I think we have to concentrate on the passage from the *Treatise* in the attempt to understand what Hume is telling us.

Hume seems to refer to adequacy as a feature of individual ideas, and also to groups or systems of ideas. The latter is suggested by his reference to relations, contradictions, and agreements between ideas, while the former is indicated by the first clause of the quoted passage, where Hume mentions adequacy but makes no reference to relations between ideas. Instead, adequacy in the relations between ideas seems to be a consequence of adequacy of individual ideas. Moreover, that individual ideas are supposed to be adequate is made clear from the argument Hume immediately gives regarding the alleged infinite divisibility of space. He writes:

I first take the least idea I can form of a part of extension, and being certain that there is nothing more minute than this idea, I conclude, that whatever I discover by its means must be a real quality of extension. (T 29)

Hume's reasoning here can be interpreted in two different ways, but both rest on the adequacy of individual ideas. He might be read as saying that one starts with a least-sized idea, and infers that there are bits of extension which are the *same* size as the least-sized idea. The inference *from* the feature of the idea *to* the feature of the bit of extension rests on the claimed adequacy of the idea. The other reading of Hume's reasoning is that one starts with the least-sized idea and then infers that there is (a) a bit of extended matter that small, *and* (b) that there is no smaller bit of extended matter. Of these two readings, I think the second is the right way to understand Hume here, for only it supports the argument's conclusion that space is not infinitely divisible.³ But notice that this second version of Hume's reasoning also rests on the adequacy of individual ideas. From the claim that there is no idea smaller than a given one, presently attended to, Hume infers that there is no bit of extension smaller than that idea. Since the latter bit of extension has some finite dimension, however slight, an infinite number of such bits would add up to an infinite extension, which would run counter to the claim that each *finite* bit of extension may be infinitely divided.

Since, as I indicated above, Hume apparently infers the adequacy of groups of ideas from the adequacy of individual ideas, I will refer to the latter as *primary* adequacy and the former as *secondary*. Both

support inferences from ideas to objects, but the inferences are not quite of the same kind.

When an individual idea is adequate, then it represents objects and does so adequately. How shall we understand this notion of primary adequacy? If we go back to the second quoted passage from Hume, we note that he says "I conclude, that *whatever* I discover by its means must be a real quality of extension" (T 29, emphasis added). The point is that *whatever* feature there is in an adequate idea, is also a feature of a bit of extension. True, Hume is here talking only about least-sized ideas, which perhaps are simple ideas in Locke's sense, rather than about all adequate ideas; but this is merely because the context of his argument requires him to talk of such simple ideas. His point about adequacy, however, seems more general. So, I propose that we understand the adequacy of any individual idea along the lines of Hume's indicated notion of adequacy of a simple adequate idea. Doing this we get the following:

Primary Adequacy. An individual idea, I, is adequate just in case for every feature of I, there is a real object with all of those features.⁴

Secondary adequacy of ideas, as I am calling it, is a different concept. An illustration can be devised under one of the categories Hume mentions, namely that of relations between ideas.⁵ Consider ideas of a red square and a green square, respectively. These two ideas are similar, and this similarity is a relation between the ideas. From this, according to Hume, we may infer the same similarity in real objects: any actual red square will be similar to an actual green one, and in the same manner and degree.

Hume refers to relations, contradictions and agreements between ideas. By "agreements" I believe he means something like "sameness," so that two ideas of triangles agree in each having three bounded sides. One feature of the first idea is the very same as a feature of the second idea. Contradictions between ideas arise in virtue of contradictions between certain of their features. An idea of a circular shape is contradictory to an idea of a square shape, because circularity and squareness are mutually incompatible.

What if I have an idea of a golden mountain and also an idea of a silver mountain? Then there are similarities between the two ideas that are obvious enough; but there are no actual golden or silver mountains. I suspect that Hume wants to rule this out as a case of (what I am calling) secondary adequacy of ideas. Recall how the first-quoted passage begins:

Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects. (T 29)

So, secondary adequacy obtains only for groups of ideas each member of which has primary adequacy. We can say this:

Secondary Adequacy. For any group of two or more ideas, each of which has primary adequacy, every relation, contradiction, or agreement between the ideas in the group, is a relation, contradiction or agreement between the objects represented by the individual ideas in the group.

II. Metaphysical and Epistemic Adequacy

As hitherto explicated, both primary and secondary adequacy are *metaphysical* in the sense that they are statements of actually obtaining connections between features of ideas and features of objects. These connections obtain, if at all, regardless of what anyone may believe or know about them. In this sense, the mere fact that such connections obtain is not of itself an epistemic matter; but Hume makes it one.

We can best see this by recalling parts of each of the two passages already quoted from Hume. In the first, he says:

The plain consequence is, that whatever *appears* impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of ideas, must be *really* impossible and contradictory, without any further excuse or evasion. (T 29)

While in the second, we find:

I first take the least idea I can form of a part of extension, and being certain that there is nothing more minute than this idea, I conclude, that whatever I discover by its means must be a real quality of extension. (T 29)

Both of these passages make essentially the same point: if a person has an idea with primary adequacy or a group of ideas with secondary adequacy, then the person can tell or know appropriate facts about the objects to which the ideas are correspondent.

Notice how much the person knows in the case of the least-sized idea. He knows that there is an object which is the size of the idea; but, he also knows that there is no object which is smaller than that idea. This means that Hume has a very generous notion of which features of

an individual idea which has primary adequacy correspond to features in real objects. The features class includes not only first-level properties, such as being of a certain size, but also facts about the idea, such as that there are none smaller.

The metaphysical aspect of both primarily and secondarily adequate ideas is certainly a copy thesis to rival the well known first copy thesis, that is, the simple idea—simple impression version, but it is far more radical in scope. First, it is not a copy thesis of ideas to impressions at all; rather, Hume tells us that adequate ideas are copies of real features of real objects. There is no routing of this copying or representation through impressions; indeed, impressions seem to be wholly by-passed. Moreover, there is considerable epistemic import claimed for adequate ideas and of a kind not associated with the first copy thesis. Adequate ideas provide one means by which one knows a good deal about real objects and not merely something about impressions.

So, from what we have seen so far, it would seem right to conclude that there is a second copy thesis in Hume, one which goes well beyond the first with respect to the entities said to be copied and with respect to the epistemic import claimed for the thesis. But perhaps this conclusion can be resisted, if the second copy thesis can be reduced to the first.

III. Restrictions on Complex Adequate Ideas

If we focus attention on ideas with primary adequacy, a natural classification would sort them into simple and complex ideas. A simple idea would be one which had no ideas as constituents, while every complex idea has some simple ideas as constituents. Primarily adequate simple ideas, like the least-sized simple idea Hume refers to, would (by the first copy thesis) have simple impressions correspondent to them. If primarily adequate complex ideas all have as their only constituents simple ideas each of which is primarily adequate, then at least primary adequacy would be potentially explicable in terms of the first copy thesis. I say "potentially" because such an explication would require a powerful auxiliary assumption, namely, that every simple impression which has a simple idea as a copy, is *itself* a copy of a real feature of an object. We see the need for this assumption when we recall that primarily adequate ideas, whether simple or complex, are copies not of impressions but rather of real features of objects. Then here is how the explication of the second copy thesis in terms of the first would proceed.

For primarily adequate simple ideas, there is an intermediate copying stage. Each simple idea is a copy of a simple impression; and, given the lately referred to auxiliary assumption, each simple

impression is a copy of a real feature of a real object. Hence, by transitivity of the copy relation, each simple idea is a copy of a real feature of a real object. Primary adequacy of simple ideas is secured via the first copy thesis and the auxiliary assumption.

It is much the same for primarily adequate complex ideas. We require merely that each such complex idea be composed wholly of primarily adequate simple ideas. Then, the two-stage copy relation goes through as above. Thus, all primarily adequate ideas are really copies of impressions in just the way called for by the first copy thesis, and for this reason one can legitimately say that the second copy thesis is really nothing more than the first, clothed in a different manner. The second copy thesis reduces to the first; or very nearly so, for the assumptions we have noted are also needed.

Are the assumptions acceptable to Hume? Consider the first, that every simple impression is a copy of a real feature of a real object. If a person looks at a red apple, we know that under certain conditions the apple may appear blue rather than red. In Hume's terminology, this means that the person experiences a blue impression; but there is no blue feature of a real object present. Moreover, there is nothing special or unusual about such a case; objects often appear other than as they are. Hence, Hume is in no position to accept the first assumption, nor should we attribute it to him.⁶

The second assumption comes into play only for complex ideas, for it holds that every primarily adequate complex idea is wholly composed solely of simple ideas, each of which is also primarily adequate. I do not deny that Hume accepts such a claim; he might. What I maintain instead is that there is no evidence in favour of such an ascription to Hume. He certainly makes no mention of such a restriction on complex adequate ideas in the passages we have been examining. Hence, there is no basis for ascribing the second assumption to Hume.

In a way this does not matter, for we have already seen that the first auxiliary assumption is not plausible anyway, and the first assumption is needed for both simple and complex primarily adequate ideas if we are to reduce the second copy thesis to the first. It is better to conclude, instead, that the reduction does not go through, and that there is a remarkable, thoroughly representationalist copy thesis in Hume.

IV. Adequate Ideas and Knowledge

In the passages we have been examining, Hume claims not only that there are adequate ideas, but also that they form the foundation for all our knowledge. Note what a sweeping claim this is. In the *Enquiry* Hume argues that causal inferences underlie all our reasonings concerning matters of fact, and that contention is typically reckoned as

equivalent to the view that causal inferences underlie nearly all empirical knowledge.⁷ His allegation concerning adequate ideas goes considerably beyond even this, extending as it does to *all* of human knowledge.

It is clear from the manner in which Hume argues against the infinite divisibility of space that he regards possession of adequate ideas as sufficient for knowledge of objects. More generally, our earlier point that there is an epistemic component to adequate ideas comes to the same thing. What is not clear is whether this sufficiency is to hold for all adequate ideas, or just those that are simple. Either way, we have to be careful to note just what piece of knowledge an adequate idea is sufficient for. We do not want to say that possession of an adequate idea of an object *O* is by itself sufficient to know of some instance of *O*; for example, that it exists, or is located at some place, or that it has or lacks certain qualities not correlated with the features of the adequate idea, and so on. What I think an adequate idea is sufficient for is this: (a) that there is (or was) an object of the relevant sort; and (b) that any object of that sort has qualities correlative to the features of the adequate idea.

How far can we extend this? What about a colour case? Let us take an idea of bright red. Suppose one introspectively satisfies herself that there is (or that she has) no idea of a brighter red. Can we then infer, along the lines of the simple idea of least-size, that: (a) there is in objects a red of that brightness; and (b) that there is no red in objects which is any brighter? If this sort of reasoning is endorsed by Hume for simple ideas of least-size, why not for the colour case? I see no principled way for Hume to answer this question; but to see that Hume needs such an answer, consider another case. I take an idea of a great expanse, and introspectively assure myself that there is no idea of a greater expanse. I assume we will *not* want to infer *both* that: (a) there is an expanse, a bit of real extension, with the same dimensions as the idea; *and* (b) that there is no expanse any greater in dimension. So, some inferences from adequate ideas to real objects are illegitimate. What Hume does not tell us is which inferences these are.⁸

In any case, talk of adequate ideas being in some manner sufficient for knowledge of real objects is not what one would generally mean by talking of adequate ideas as forming a *foundation* of all human knowledge. Typically, *X* is a foundation for *Y* only if without *X* there would be no *Y*. That is, *Y* would be somehow dependent on *X*, where the exact character of the dependence would be further spelled out depending on the context. So understood, Hume would be claiming that all of our knowledge is dependent on the possession of adequate ideas; and, this would mean that without such adequate ideas, we would not have knowledge, or at least that we would not have very much of it.

One need only recall how ideas are acquired in Hume's system in order to see the implications of his claim about adequate ideas forming a foundation for human knowledge. Simple ideas copy simple impressions, by and large; and complex ideas formed by stitching together simple ideas (as in the non-adequate idea of a golden mountain) present no further problem other than another degree of complexity. What if there are adequate complex ideas which are not wholly composed of simple ideas each of which copies an impression? In such a case, as we know from Hume's discussion of ideas of causation, it is at best difficult to see how such ideas might be acquired, given Hume's account of idea acquisition. But if such ideas are sometimes adequate, and if they help form the foundation of all human knowledge in the way described above, then it is clear that Hume would have to accept that there is very little knowledge indeed. For his system does not contain the resources to explicate how these adequate ideas, presumed necessary for knowledge, can be acquired.⁹

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1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 29 (hereafter cited as "T").
2. Robert Fogelin, "Hume and Berkeley on the Proofs of Infinite Divisibility," *Philosophical Review* 97, no. 1 (January 1988): 53.
3. The reason is that on the first reading, it follows only that there is some bit of extension as small as the least-sized idea; from this it does not follow that there is no bit of extension which is smaller than that. If the latter is not blocked, then the claim that there is a series of ever smaller bits of extension and that this series asymptotically approaches a "zero point" is not ruled out.
4. Here I use the word "feature" to mean "property." The proposed characterization of primary adequacy, though, is no clearer than the notion of a feature and, in particular, *which* features are referred to is crucial. Hume speaks of *every* feature, but we cannot take this too seriously. After all, suppose I is the 1,000th idea that a person has acquired; it makes no clear sense to attribute such a feature to a bit of extension. So Hume must mean to refer to a class of favoured features of individual ideas, and within that class, every feature of an adequate idea I is also a feature of a real object. I shall understand primary adequacy along these lines, though I make no attempt here to say what the favoured group of features might be.

5. I understand Hume's reference to relations between ideas here not to be the same as his technical concept of relations of ideas, used to explicate necessary truths.
6. We might try using Locke's account of adequate ideas here. For him, adequate ideas are all instances of real ideas, and all real ideas have some conformity to objects. (See the *Essay on Human Understanding*, bk. 2, pt. 31). I find two problems with such a strategy. First, it is most unclear what Locke means by "conformity" and so I do not see much hope for using his ideas to help understand Hume; but, waiving that, there is the further question of whether Locke's views on this matter can be safely attributed to Hume.
7. I say *nearly all* because such inferences are not needed for immediate knowledge of presently experienced impressions. Yet surely such knowledge is empirical.
8. Maybe Hume would hold that in cases where the inferences fail, the ideas are not adequate anyway. Fine. Then we will need to have a deeper analysis of adequacy, one which gives us a way of picking out what I have called the favoured features. See note 5.
9. One might take this result as evidence that, for Hume, there are no adequate ideas of this kind. That, of course, would require independent evidence for the claim that Hume rejects the sceptical conclusion here referred to, viz., that there is really very little knowledge.