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# Hume's Demarcation Project

*John Losee*

## Demarcation, Ideas and Impressions

David Hume sought to exclude certain concepts from the domain of empirically significant discourse. He was critical of talk about "substances" that bear qualities, "forces" that cause motions, "powers" that produce effects, "necessary connections" that determine sequences of events, "extension without matter" and "time independent of succession or change in any real existence."<sup>1</sup> Hume proposed a demarcation of ideas, a demarcation intended to exclude these notions. The demarcation project, if successful, would exclude Locke's notion of "substance" as well as Newton's notions of "Absolute Space" and "Absolute Time."

Some interpreters have taken the demarcation project to be the centrepiece of Hume's philosophy. Others have seen it to be an incidental aspect of Hume's search for an empirical theory of human nature. I believe that David Pears was correct to insist that an acceptable account of Hume's philosophy include both the "destructive emphasis" and the "constructive emphasis."<sup>2</sup>

Hume's demarcation project is based on a presumed relation, or relations, between ideas and impressions. Hume made the following claims about "simple ideas," those ideas that "admit of no distinction nor separation" (T 2):

- 1) every simple idea in its first appearance is derived from some impression (Derivability Principle);<sup>3</sup>
- 2) every simple idea in its first appearance copies some impression (Copy Principle);<sup>4</sup>
- 3) every simple idea represents some impression (Representation Principle);<sup>5</sup>
- 4) simple ideas and impressions resemble one another;<sup>6</sup>
- 5) simple ideas correspond to impressions;<sup>7</sup>
- 6) every simple idea is borrow'd from some impression;<sup>8</sup>

- 7) for every simple idea there is some temporally antecedent impression;<sup>9</sup> and
- 8) impressions cause simple ideas.<sup>10</sup>

*Prima facie*, these claims are empirical claims about the genesis of our ideas. But within Hume's demarcation project these claims also function as criteria for membership in the class of simple ideas. Those ideas that satisfy the criteria constitute raw material from which complex ideas are formulated.

Complex ideas are constructed from simple ideas. However, they are not copies of simple ideas. A particular complex idea is empirically significant provided that, 1) it is derivable from simple ideas; and 2) each of those simple ideas is derivable from impressions.

### The Case of the Missing Shade of Blue

Tensions arise within the demarcation project in part because Hume employs nonequivalent criteria—Derivability Principle, Copy Principle, Representation Principle—as if they were equivalent. The tension is acute in the case of the missing shade of blue. The “missing shade” is an idea formulated by a person with extensive experience of colours, but no prior exposure to the shade in question. If this idea is a simple idea, then it is false that every simple idea copies some antecedent impression.

Why did Hume cite—in both *Treatise* and *Inquiry*—this apparently destructive exception? Bernard Rollin has suggested that Hume may have cited the missing-shade-of-blue example as a rhetorical device to protect his dichotomous division of propositions into those that are analytic a priori and those that are synthetic a posteriori (including the Derivability Principle).<sup>11</sup>

John O. Nelson agreed that Hume is concerned to emphasize the contingent, empirical status of the Derivability Principle.<sup>12</sup> Nelson suggested that Hume sought to make two points. The first point is that an exception to the Derivability Principle is empirically possible. The second point is that thought-experiments like the missing-shade example are inadequate to establish conclusions about matters of fact. To entertain such thought-experiments is to lapse into hypothetical speculation, a violation of the “experimental method of reasoning.”<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps it was for this reason that Hume dismissed the missing-shade case as unimportant. Hume urged that this case is “so particular and singular” that it provides no good reason to abandon the Copy Principle (T 6).

D. M. Johnson has developed a hypothesis to explain why Hume believed that this exceptional case is not damaging to his demarcation project. According to Johnson, Hume may have believed that

for a person to reconstruct a shade he never saw before, he must have developed an appropriately detailed 'habitual spectrum'—*i.e.*, an ordered set of tendencies and expectations concerning colours, built up as a result of long experience with things having these colours—which he then employs as a basis for generating that shade.<sup>14</sup>

On this hypothesis, it is expectations about the ordering of colours that enables a person to form the idea of a missing shade. The idea of a missing shade does not copy an impression, but extensive prior colour experience is a necessary condition of having the idea. A person able to form ideas of missing shades as an adult presumably would have been unable to form these ideas as a child.

Johnson noted that the available evidence does not support the "habitual spectrum" hypothesis. Children may be less articulate than adults in using colour-language, but

there are no obvious reasons for supposing that one's ability to imagine a colour he has not previously seen depends on, and develops as a result of age, practice and experience.<sup>15</sup>

Hume's claim that the missing-shade exception is relatively insignificant has been challenged by a number of commentators. These commentators have pointed out that the missing colour-shade is typical of numerous graded-scale sets of ideas.<sup>16</sup> I believe that this conclusion is correct. But if there are simple ideas of colours, shapes, textures and sounds that do not copy antecedent impressions, then the Copy Principle is ineffective as a criterion of demarcation. It is ineffective because it is inconsistent to maintain both that all simple ideas copy impressions and that some simple ideas do not copy impressions.

However, the inconsistency is easily removed. It may be removed either by denying membership in the class of simple ideas to the missing shade of blue or by abandoning the Copy Principle. The first strategy receives some support from Hume's remarks about the distinction between simple ideas and complex ideas. Hume declared that simple ideas

are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts. (T 2)

One might argue that the idea of the missing shade is a complex idea because we can distinguish in this case both simple ideas with respect to which it is a *missing* shade, and some property (for example, wavelength) the augmenting or diminishing of which yields the idea of the missing shade. In the *Inquiry*, Hume noted that the “creative power of the mind” is a “faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience” (*Inquiry*, 27). Presumably, the idea of the missing shade of blue may be constructed from other colour ideas by a process of augmentation or diminution.

There is a drawback to implementation of the first strategy. A person whose colour ideas include the idea of the missing shade of blue has both simple ideas of colours and at least one complex idea of colour. Each simple idea stands in a one-to-one relationship to a temporally antecedent impression. But the complex idea stands in a one-many relationship to antecedent impressions, since it may be constructed from diverse sets of simple colour ideas. Each colour idea is *derived from* antecedent impressions, either directly or by extrapolation. However, only the simple colour ideas are *copies* of antecedent impressions.<sup>17</sup>

Suppose person *A* possesses simple colour ideas for each successive equal addition of white paint to a bucket of blue paint, and that person *B* possesses simple colour ideas only for the mixtures produced after each second addition. Suppose also that *B* possesses complex colour ideas for the intermediate “missing” cases. Insofar as *A* and *B* are equally accurate in their identification of the various mixtures, the “cash value” of their knowledge of colours would be the same.

I believe that Hume would accept the Pragmatic Maxim that “a distinction ought make a difference.”<sup>18</sup> He declared, for instance,

- 1) it is impossible to form the idea of an object unless that object possesses a “precise degree” of quality and quantity (T 20);
- 2) no idea is possible of a “colourless globe” or a “figureless colour” (T 24-25); and
- 3) no idea is possible of “time without any changeable existence” (T 65).

To retain the Copy Principle and deny that the missing shade of blue is a simple idea is to violate the above Pragmatic Maxim. That *A* possesses twice as many simple colour-ideas than does *B* may be of

interest to a biographer, but A's "advantage" has no practical consequences.

The first strategy is unacceptable then because it requires a violation of the Pragmatic Maxim that Hume employs elsewhere. Fortunately, the second strategy is promising. Hume does not need the Copy Principle to carry out his demarcation project. Consider Hume's argument against the supposition that there exists a substratum of qualities.

### Hume's Substance Argument

I wou'd fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident, and imagine we have clear ideas of each, whether the idea of *substance* be deriv'd from the impressions of sensation or reflection? If it be convey'd to us by our senses, I ask, which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceiv'd by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or a sound, or a taste. The idea of substance must therefore be deriv'd from an impression of reflection, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflection resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possibly represent a substance. We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it. (T 15-16)

The argument may be reconstructed as follows, where

- Ix        x is a simple Idea
- Mx        x is an iMpression
- Dxy      x is D<sub>e</sub>rived from y
- Sx        x is an impression of S<sub>e</sub>sation
- Fx        x is an impression of reF<sub>e</sub>lexion
- s         the "notion" of S<sub>u</sub>bstance, *qua* substratum of qualities
- Px        x is a P<sub>a</sub>ssion
- Ex        x is an E<sub>m</sub>otion
- Rxy      x R<sub>e</sub>presents y

1.  $(x) [Ix \supset (y) (My \cdot Dxy)]$
  2.  $(x) [Mx \supset (Sx \vee Fx)]$
  3.  $\sim \diamond (\exists x) (Sx \cdot Dsx)$
  4.  $(x) [Fx \supset (Px \vee Ex)]$
  5.  $\sim \diamond (\exists x) (Px \cdot Rxs)$
  6.  $\sim \diamond (\exists x) (Ex \cdot Rxs)$
- $\therefore \sim Is$

The argument as stated is invalid because Hume did not make explicit the relation between "derivation" and "representation." The relation required to make the Substance Argument valid is

7.  $(x) (Dsx \supset Rxs).$

Implicit premise 7 states that 'for all  $x$ , if the notion of substance is derived from  $x$ , then  $x$  represents that notion'. Hume's usual position is that bona fide simple ideas represent impressions, but not vice versa.

At the beginning of the *Treatise*, Hume placed in italics the following proposition about the relationship between ideas and impressions:

*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent. (T 4)*

In this important passage, Hume affirmed both that each simple idea is *derived from* a corresponding impression, and that each idea *represents* a corresponding impression. Thus Hume appears to be committed to the generalization

8.  $(x) (y) [(Ix \cdot My \cdot Dxy) \supset Rxy].$

In the case of the putative idea of substance, the corresponding generalization about impressions is

- 7\*.  $(x) (Dsx \supset Rxs).$

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Statement 7\* is 'for all  $x$ , if the notion of substance is derived from  $x$ , then substance represents that notion'. But this is not the implicit premise—premise 7—that is needed to render valid Hume's argument to prove that the notion of substance is not an idea.

It is tempting to conclude that Hume simply made a mistake in formulating the Substance Argument. Perhaps he meant premises 5 and 6 to read "the notion of substance cannot possibly represent our passions or emotions," thereby reversing the representation relation; that is,

$$5*. \sim \diamond (\exists x) (Px \cdot Rxs)$$

$$6*. \sim \diamond (\exists x) (Ex \cdot Rsx),$$

in which case the needed implicit premise is

$$7*. (x) (Dsx \supset Rsx).$$

By attributing this mistake to Hume, the Substance Argument can be salvaged. Moreover, this approach seems to be plausible, since Hume did affirm generalization 8 above.

Hume's Substance Argument, thus revised, is based on the Derivability Principle alone. No explicit use is made of the Copy Principle. Nor does it follow that because ' $x$  represents  $y$ ' that ' $x$  copies  $y$ '. Cyan, magenta, and yellow may be represented by index cards on which #, \*, and \$ are inscribed. The representation achieved is not a matter of producing a "copy of an original." Representation does not entail resemblance.

But Hume may have believed the contrary. Robert Anderson has argued that Hume was committed to the principle that representation does require resemblance.<sup>19</sup> If Hume did believe that representation requires resemblance, then the Substance Argument is implicitly valid.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, even if representation is taken to require resemblance, it does not follow that because ' $x$  resembles  $y$ ' that ' $x$  copies  $y$ '. Iron pyrites ( $\text{FeS}_2$ ) may resemble the real thing, but "fool's gold" is not a copy of real gold.

Hume's Substance Argument is a paradigmatic application of his demarcation project. The argument, as revised, is based on the principle that ideas are derivable from impressions, and that, consequently, ideas represent impressions. The fact, if it is a fact, that there exist ideas that do not copy impressions is irrelevant to this application of the demarcation project. What is decisive is whether or not these ideas can be derived from impressions.

Nevertheless, Hume did subscribe to a Copy Principle. He maintained that simple ideas are “less intense” copies of antecedent impressions.<sup>21</sup> Farhang Zabeeh has argued that although Hume was very much concerned to defend the Derivability Principle, he was not particularly concerned to defend the Copy Principle.<sup>22</sup> Robert Anderson, however, has concluded that the textual evidence indicates that Hume was concerned to defend the Copy Principle.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the intensity of Hume’s commitment to the Copy Principle, the principle is not a requirement of his demarcation project.

Hume’s demarcation project involves a burden-of-proof challenge. A person who maintains that a particular notion is a bona fide idea is invited to specify the impression or impressions from which it is derivable. It remains to decide what counts as a “derivation.” Given that a derivation is not a copy, the likely choices are that a derivation is either a logical relation or a causal relation. If a derivation is a logical relation, then there are valid arguments that link statements about impressions and statements about ideas. If a derivation is a causal relation, then, according to Hume, either there is a *de facto* constant sequential conjunction between impressions of a given type and ideas of a given type, or there is a subjunctive conditional relationship between impressions and ideas (*Inquiry*, 79).

To execute Hume’s demarcation project, it is necessary to assess relationships—logical or causal—between impressions and ideas. However, Hume declared that impressions are “internal and perishing existences” (T 194). As such, they are unavailable for testing claims about the derivability of ideas. Moreover, as Antony Flew has emphasized, impressions necessarily are private to the person who has them, and as such are inaccessible to public observation.<sup>24</sup> But questions about a relationship between impressions and ideas are meaningful only if formulated within a language whose descriptive terms refer to publicly observable objects.

### Demarcation Without the Copy Principle

Hume’s position on impressions thus may appear to render problematic his demarcation project. To exclude the notion of substance, for instance, Hume argues (or rather, ought to have argued)<sup>25</sup> that no idea can represent a passion or an emotion. How could Hume establish the truth of this premise? Perhaps a distinction drawn by Donald Livingston may be of service.

Livingston, who takes the Derivability Principle to be the “first principle” of Hume’s “philosophy of common life,” has argued that Hume distinguishes between “ideas” and “full or adequate ideas.”<sup>26</sup> Ideas *simpliciter* are entities that satisfy public criteria. A putative referential term ‘T’ connotes an idea just in case language users

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consistently apply the term to single out instances that are "cases of T."<sup>27</sup>

Livingston's interpretation divorces Hume's demarcation project from the phenomenalist assumptions of the Copy Principle. Applications of the Derivability Principle involve the ostensive showing of meanings.<sup>28</sup> Idea *I* is derivable from impression *M* only if language users consistently predicate '*I*' of some feature of an object, event or situation. Ideas are thus "internal to the public world of common life."<sup>29</sup>

The contrapositive of the above relation expresses the burden-of-proof challenge of Hume's project. If no public criteria for application of *I* exist then *I* is not derivable from impression *M*.

The idea 'robin's-egg-blue' meets the above challenge. There are public criteria of application for the idea. Moreover, a person who never has encountered this colour nevertheless may be able to use the phrase correctly. And if this particular colour is a "missing shade" in the colour experience of a person, that person may be able to identify correctly a sample of this colour upon first presentation. Such a person progresses from an "idea" of the colour to a "full or adequate idea" only upon application of the idea to her own experience of colours.

Hume's demarcation project, as applied to "ideas" (and not to "full or adequate ideas") is a procedure for ascertaining whether claims about the world are empirically significant. Members of the Vienna Circle were correct to cite Hume as a precursor of their program to show the meaninglessness of all metaphysics.

Unfortunately, the above divorce of derivability from copying eviscerates the demarcation project. Consider the case of 'substance' (*qua* 'underlying substratum of qualities'). A Lockean philosopher might argue that there can be effective communication about 'this substance'—for example, the pen I hold up to view. There are public criteria of application for this idea. One speaks correctly of 'this substance' provided that there is an approximate constancy over time of some vaguely circumscribed set of qualities, found to be associated in different regions of space at different times. The public criteria admittedly are vague. But there are public criteria of correct usage.

Hume acknowledged that we do converse meaningfully about "substance" in this sense. However, he claimed that the "substance" about which we do communicate is

nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or others, that collection. (T 16)

But this is not the Lockean notion of “substance” as “a something, I know not what, which is the bearer of qualities.” According to Hume, it is this latter notion that is devoid of empirical significance.

Nonetheless, the Lockean philosopher above has shown that public criteria of application can be provided for the notion of “underlying substratum.” He takes the approximate constancy over time of a set of sensible qualities to be a sufficient condition of correct usage of “this-substance-*qua*-substratum.” Thus, the burden-of-proof challenge of Hume’s demarcation project can be met. Given the existence of public criteria of application for “this-substance-*qua*-substratum,” application of the Derivability Principle does *not* exclude the notion from the domain of empirically significant discourse. To achieve the desired exclusion, Hume needs to appeal to the Copy Principle, and our inability to specify an impression copied by the notion of “an underlying substratum of qualities.”

### Conclusion

Hume’s demarcation project is beset by a number of difficulties. Three options for implementing the project have been examined. Each option receives some support from Hume’s writings. However, no one of the options is effective as a procedure to circumscribe the range of empirically significant discourse.

The first option is to affirm both the Derivability Principle and the Copy Principle, and to take the missing shade of blue to be a simple idea. This option is unsatisfactory because it leads to inconsistency.

The second option is to affirm both the Derivability Principle and the Copy Principle, but to exclude the missing shade of blue from the set of simple ideas. This option is unsatisfactory because it violates the Pragmatic Maxim to which Hume is committed.

The third option is to take the satisfaction of public criteria of application to be a sufficient condition of the derivability of ideas from impressions. This option is unsatisfactory because the demarcation afforded fails to exclude the notion of substance-*qua*-substratum.

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### Acknowledgement

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1. David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Indianapolis, 1955), 73-75 (hereafter cited as *Inquiry*); and David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed.,

- rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1978; reprint, Oxford, 1987), 26-65 (hereafter cited as "T").
2. David Pears, *Hume's System* (Oxford, 1990), 3-15.
  3. T 4, 19, 65, 67, 160, 161, 165, 251.
  4. T 19, 34, 72, 96, 163; *Inquiry*, 26, 28-30, 74.
  5. T 3, 4, 19, 34, 96, 157, 161.
  6. T 3-4, 63.
  7. T 3-4, 33; *Inquiry*, 74.
  8. T 34, 634.
  9. T 5, 33; *Inquiry*, 74.
  10. T 5, 155, 169.
  11. Bernard E. Rollin, "Hume's Blue Patch and the Mind's Creativity," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 32 (1971): 125-27.
  12. John O. Nelson, "Hume's Missing Shade of Blue Re-viewed," *Hume Studies* 15, no. 2 (November 1989): 353-63.
  13. *Ibid.*, 362.
  14. D. M. Johnson, "Hume's Missing Shade of Blue, Interpreted as Involving Habitual Spectra," *Hume Studies* 10, no. 2 (November 1984): 115-16.
  15. *Ibid.*, 117.
  16. See, for instance, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York, 1969), 86-87.
  17. It would be a misuse of language to maintain that the complex idea of the missing shade is a "copy" of the diverse sets of impressions, from whose corresponding simple ideas it is an extrapolation.
  18. Charles S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *Essays in the Philosophy of Science* (New York, 1957), 41. Peirce's version of the maxim is that "we come down to what is tangible and practical as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice."
  19. Robert F. Anderson, "The Location, Extension, Shape and Size of Hume's Perceptions," in *Hume: A Re-Evaluation*, ed. D. W. Livingston and J. T. King (New York, 1978), 163-67.
  20. An anonymous referee has suggested that Hume may have been committed to the generalization (x) [Dsx  $\supset$  (Rsx · Rxs)], from which implicit premise 7—(x) (Dsx  $\supset$  Rxs) follows.
  21. T 197; *Inquiry*, sec. 2.
  22. Farhang Zabeeh, *Hume: Precursor of Modern Empiricism* (The Hague, 1973), 55.
  23. Anderson (above, n. 19), 164-65.
  24. Antony Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief* (New York, 1961), 31.
  25. See p. 57 above.

26. Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago, 1984), 77-78.
27. *Ibid.*, 78.
28. The ostensive showing of meaning is a process subject to various ambiguities. Since the criterion of success in such cases is effective communication within a community of language users, it follows that the process often is successful.
29. Livingston (above, n. 26), 65.