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Having argued to the possible existence of mathematical points, Hume concedes that checking for their actual existence is difficult because of the minuteness. He writes:

the points, which enter into the composition of any line or surface, whether perceiv'd by the sight or touch, are so minute and so confounded with each other, that 'tis utterly impossible for the mind to compute their number.¹

He concludes that their minuteness renders points useless for purposes of measurement. "We are sensible, that the addition or removal of one of these minute parts, is not discernible either in the appearance or measuring" (T 48). This objection to his points leads Hume to view measuring, not in terms of points, but as juxtaposition of objects one to another or to a common measure, correcting apparent equality by art and instruments.

And, he argues, correcting comes to an end when one runs out of art and instruments, although correcting, once set in motion, may go on at the level of fancying after art and instruments have announced an end to it. This holds true not only for equality of quantities but of qualities as well.

A musician finding his ear become every day more delicate, and correcting himself by reflection and attention, proceeds with the same act of the mind, even when the subject fails him, and entertains a notion of a compleat *tierce* or *octave*, without being able to tell whence he derives his standard. (T 48-49)

The metaphysical musician, according to Hume, is unable "to tell whence he derives his standard." This objection by Hume looks like it is missing the mark. The metaphysical musician could tell from whence he derives his standard. It is derived from sensible appearances. It is derived from the undifferentiated case which, to ears subsequently more discriminating, turns out to be two different notes, not one. The source of the standard is specified. What, then, does Hume mean when he states that metaphysical musicians cannot tell us from whence they derive their standard? An apparent standard, if it functions as a standard, has objects for its terms. For the standard is neither equality

itself, whatever that might mean, nor an object; rather, the standard is "being equal to this object," whatever the object might be—in this case a musical note. In other words, an unspecified standard—a standard that is neither this nor that—is not a standard. It becomes a standard if and only if it is specified for some object. The question now shifts to the object without which no standard is specified. It could be actual. It could be imaginary. Either way, it is an object. Yet, the metaphysical musicians *rules* that no object satisfies the standard. The outcome is contradiction. If you don't specify the standard, you don't have a standard; and if you do, you contradict the ruling that no object satisfies the standard.

Hume does not explicitly allege contradiction. However, the other side of the contradiction coin is an unspecified standard. And this Hume does allege.

Hume sometimes does speak as if an imagined musical note—the object in this case—is itself a note. He speaks this way out of deference to his general theory of ideas as copies of impressions. However, the claim to contradiction, to incomprehensibility, does not depend on Hume's special doctrine of ideas copying impressions. For when we imagine objects, the objects we imagine, if we are consistent, are *possible* objects. So what we are saying, if we say that we can imagine equal objects is this: equal objects are impossible. Either, then, the metaphysical musician's imaginary correction, the imaginary trek toward absolute equality, is incomprehensible because there is no standard—no objects—by which "correction" makes sense; or else there is such a standard—object equality is possible—and the general rule that object equality is impossible is contradicted.

Suppose we downgrade the a priori necessary rule to a contingent generalization about ordinary objects. Now it is not impossible, only unlikely, that one will find equal actual objects. Given a candidate for prototypicality, one *imagines* that one is mistaken, that the objects one thinks are equal are not, after all, equal, and so on. Here the only equal objects are always possible objects, never actual ones. One simply refuses to use "equal" in respect to any actual object, reserving "equal" for possible objects. Now Hume shifts away from "incomprehensible" to "useless" in rejecting this move. We begin, he states, with prototypically equal objects. If we did not, it is impossible ever to acquire the standard of equality. Since we begin with equal objects, the whole question is one of usefulness. Which is more useful, to thereafter refuse to use the word "equal," because one can imagine being mistaken, or to use the word "equal" and revise the prototype when it proves useful to do so? The correct answer, he thinks, can be read off from our practice. We talk about equal actual objects and revise our prototypes as circumstances dictate. Hence, his conclusion, "the notion

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of any correction beyond what we have instruments and art to make, is a mere fiction of the mind, and useless as well as incomprehensible" (T 48).

The metaphysical musician's mistake, Hume believes, is natural:

But tho' this standard be only imaginary, the fiction however is very natural; nor is any thing more usual, than for the mind to proceed after this manner with any action, even after the reason has ceas'd, which first determin'd it to begin. (T 48)

The reason that determined it to begin! That is the crux of the matter. I might have a reason to revise and, given the reason, revise my prototype. This is unobjectionable. But then, Hume notes, the mind goes on revising where there is no reason. At this point, Hume insists that his actual prototypical objects *are* equal—because he has no *reason* for believing that they are not equal. In other words, if you can imagine equal objects, he can actualize the imagined prototype, and stick with it, until you give him a reason for revising. And, as he is at great pains to make out, imagined reasons are not reasons.

Ordinary language, like the languages of law and of science, provides for revision of prototypes. Revision is open-ended. The philosopher assimilates "open-endedness" to a universally quantified necessary truth, or to a contingent generalization, "No object is ...," and proceeds to defend the assimilation by a natural but fictitious trek toward the absolute.

Consider geometric objects; say, a perfect circle. There is no reason a priori why a physical circle could not be perfect and no reason a priori why two physical circles, whether or not perfect, could not be prototypically equal. The argument against imagining inequality, as a reason for declaring inequality, is no less an argument against merely imagining to be imperfect a prototypically perfect circle.

A word of caution is in order here. Consider the Carnot engine. Anything physical, by definition, is subject to friction, whereas the Carnot engine, by definition, is frictionless. It is, therefore, a contradiction to say that any physical engine is equal to the Carnot engine, in respect to extent of friction.

The objects Hume has in mind, when running the incomprehensible and useless argument against metaphysical musicians, are not abstract objects. They are sensible objects like visual or tangible shapes and musical notes. They are not objects like the Carnot engine. What has been said so far is only this: there is no reason why any two phenomenal colours or musical notes, and so on, could not be equal. And there is no reason why two physical engines, or circles, and so on, could not be equal.

Hume has arguments in addition to uselessness against specifying equality for abstract objects like the Carnot engine. However, let us stick to the argument from uselessness. A standard of equality specified for such abstract objects is useless. It is useless because any physical engine could be prototypically equal to another one, in respect to efficiency. Some engines from the set of equal engines could be selected as an actual limit to a converging efficiency series. Further, the limit so selected could be revised as one is given reason to revise it, keeping in mind that imagined reasons are not reasons. In other words, the same argument against an imaginary trek toward absolute equality applies to limits to converging series. Abstract limits, like the Carnot engine, and correlative specification of a standard of equality in terms of such abstract objects, are useless.

This is the form of Hume's correction argument: first, I say that this object is so and so because it is prototypically so and so; second, it is imaginable that the object, itself, is not so and so; third, imagining something not so and so is not a reason for saying that it is not so and so; fourth, it does not follow from the fact that the hitherto prototypical object is not so and so, that no object is prototypically so and so. For the supposition to the contrary is incomprehensible or useless.

Hume's worry about the uselessness of a coloured or tangible point, not for metaphysics, but for measurement, leads him to look for a standard of equality "different from an enumeration of the parts." He considers and rejects congruity, because, ultimately, congruity leads to part-talk (T 46). In the end, he settles for the general appearance of equality, backed up by stricter methods of comparison, ranging, presumably, from yardsticks to this century's electron microscopes (T 47-48).

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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, 1987), 45 (hereafter cited as "T").