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Preface

The intellectual context for this essay is provided by these remarks from David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*:

Concerning perceptions: The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness, command our strongest assent, and are the first foundation of all our conclusions. ... no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions.¹

(Strictly, Humean perceptions not being propositional, presumably what commands our assent and is foundational is that these perceptions exist and that they have the qualities that they appear to have.)

Concerning individuation: Thus the principle of individuation is nothing but the *invariableness* and *uninterruptedness* of any object, thro' a suppos'd variation of time, by which the mind can trace it in the different periods of its existence, without any break of the view, and without being oblig'd to form the idea of multiplicity or number. (T 201)

Concerning perceptions and objects: 'Tis certain, that almost all mankind, and even philosophers themselves, for the greatest part of their lives, take their perceptions to be their only objects, and suppose, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence. (T 206)²

Concerning self-awareness: 'Tis evident, that as we are at all times intimately conscious of ourselves, our sentiments and passions, their ideas must strike upon us with greater vivacity than the ideas of the sentiments and passions of any other person. But every thing, that strikes upon us with vivacity, and appears in a full and strong light, forces itself, in a manner, into our consideration, and becomes present to the

mind on the smallest hint and most trivial relation. For the same reason, when it is once present, it engages the attention, and keeps it from wandering to other objects. (T 339)

In ways that will be explored here, these passages exhibit contrary tendencies in Hume's thought that drove him to despair of reaching his goal of offering a "theory of the intellectual world ... [that] would be free from those contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explication, that human reason can give of the material world" (T 633). These contrary tendencies he found he could neither renounce nor reconcile and so he was led to "plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding" (T 636).

If our world is as Hume thought it, it contains nothing enduring and non-composite. Yet common sense speaks otherwise regarding both material objects and human minds. As natural beliefs, the belief that there are mind-independent enduring material things and the belief that there are enduring minds are found in all of us, Hume included. This Hume not only admitted, but insisted on; see his remarks above, *Concerning perceptions and objects*. But for Hume such beliefs arise from neither sensory nor introspective experience nor reason, but from imagination, and their source is neither direct acquaintance with mind or material objects nor experiential evidence in their favour nor any necessity that reason might discern in their existence. Their origin lies in perceptions and propensities that combine to elicit them without providing evidence on their behalf.

All of this is controversial, but it is not here that Hume's perplexities lie. They concern what for Hume is the deeper matter of how to put together into one explanatory theory all of the desired Humean elements. They reflect, not so much belief in minds or things, but the theory in terms of which belief in minds and things is explicated. The ontology of the theory allows only for perceptions. Perceptions include impressions, and "all impressions are internal and perishing existences" (T 194), and ideas, which are their equally fleeting copies. What Hume says regarding impressions of touch—that they "change every moment upon us" (T 231)—holds without exception in the world of perceptions. Nor have any perceptions any real connections among themselves. In ways to be explored, however, this ontology, restricted to atomistic perceptions, raises perplexing problems when it is used as a basis for explaining our natural beliefs. Our focus here will not be on the details of that explanation but on its essential elements, and even then we shall focus on belief in material things (the "external world"), leaving self and causality aside.

Belief In an External World

In "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" Hume endeavours to explain the fact that people believe that there are physical objects. His topic is "the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body" (T 187-88), not the evidential support which the belief enjoys. He seeks "the principles of human nature, from whence the decision [to believe] arises" (T 188), making no mention of any experiential reports and principles of experiential evidence that together might render the decision rationally defensible. Hume writes that:

We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but 'tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings. (T 187)

But one misreads him if one supposes him to mean that the belief is obviously true, or based on plain and overwhelming evidence, or axiomatic to a system of belief that we are plainly correct in accepting. Hume's taking for granted is a matter of psychological inevitability, not epistemological security.

Hume announces that he

shall begin with a distinction, which at first sight may seem superfluous, but which will contribute very much to the perfect understanding of what follows. We ought to examine apart those two questions, which are commonly confounded together, *viz.* Why we attribute a CONTINU'D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses; and why we suppose them to have an existence DISTINCT from the mind and perception. (T 188)

He means by "distinct" both "in a place where of course the mind, as a non-spatial entity, is not located" and "not dependent on the existence of mind."

Hume's claim is that the two questions about the existence of body "are intimately connected together" since if an object continues to exist unperceived, then it does not depend for its existence on its being perceived. He also thinks that what does not depend for its existence on being perceived "must continue to exist even though ... not perceived," but this seems false. The notion of something distinct and independent from perceptions yet merely momentary is logically consistent whether or not anything actually is like this.

The questions are useful in underlining what Hume supposes us to believe when we think that there are objects. We do not suppose that

there are combinations, really or conventionally connected, of impressions of sensation. We do not suppose objects to be composed of private sensory states, our own or other people's or a combination. We do not think that in (say) "the single apple left on the tree" the referent of "apple" is just your apple-image and mine. We take there to be perception-independent perception-distinct spatially located public objects. Hume takes his common sense straight, rejecting phenomenalist dilutions.

Hume's specific inquiry, then, concerns "whether it be the *senses*, *reason*, or the *imagination*, that produces the opinion of a *continu'd* or of a *distinct* existence" (T 188). The unargued assumption is that these are the three possible sources of the relevant principles. The senses come first. Strictly, it is sensory experience, not sensory faculties, that concern us. The concept *item that is sensed and continues to exist when it is not* is not the concept of an observable property. Hume denies that the mere fact that I observe an item *A* at time *t1* and observe an item *B* at *t2* that is qualitatively identical to *A* entitles me to suppose that *B* is numerically identical to *A*. He also denies that these facts can be set in an epistemological context that would justify that conclusion. Part of his argument seems to be that neither the property *existing unsensed* nor the property *being reidentified as previously experienced* are observable qualities, and if person *S* believes that *X is Q* and *Q* is not an observable quality, then *S*'s belief cannot be explained by reference to *S*'s sensory experience. Let *Q** be an observation-entailed quality if and only if *Q* is an observable quality and *X is Q* entails *X is Q**. Perhaps the argument should also be construed as saying that if *Q** is not an observation-entailed quality then *S*'s belief of the form *X is Q** cannot be explained by reference to *S*'s sensory experience. There will be no sensory experience *E* such that *S*'s *having E* explains *S*'s *believing that X has Q or Q**, if *Q* is not an observable, and *Q** not an observation-entailed, quality. So reference to sensory experience cannot explain our thinking that any thing continues to exist when it is not sensed.

Surprisingly, Hume does not suppose that such considerations rule out the possibility that a belief that objects exist *distinct* from being perceived is explicable by reference to sensory experience, though one might think *being distinct from sensory experience* is no more an observable property than is *existing independent of being perceived*. The argument concerning observable and observation-entailed qualities will show that beliefs that things have distinctness or independence cannot be explained by reference to sensory experience only if we are rightly assured that both of these qualities are outside the class of observable and observation-entailed properties.

Hume supposes the cases to differ in this way. Let *being distinct from sensory experience* be property *D* and *existing independent of being perceived* be property *I*. Hume, we noted, takes *X has I* to entail *X endures unperceived*. Then to suppose that *I* is an observable or observation-entailed property requires that "the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceased all manner of operation" and "that is a contradiction in terms." So it is obvious that *I* is not an observable or an observation-entailed property. But it is not obvious that *D* is not an observable or an observation-entailed quality. It is not a contradiction in terms to so regard it. He explicitly says that, "[t]he supposition of the continu'd existence of sensible objects or perceptions involves no contradiction" (T 208) and so if their independent existence involves a contradiction, their distinct existence must not. Indeed, a not totally implausible line of reasoning suggests that *D* is an observable property.

Hume describes the line of reasoning on which *D* is an observable property as holding that the senses "present their impressions either as images and representations, or as these very distinct and external existences" (T 189). The idea is that:

- (1) *D* is an observable property if and only if either (A) impressions of sensations represent objects as having *D*, or (B) impressions of sensation themselves have *D*.

Either impressions of sensation are pictures of *D*-possessors or they themselves possess *D*. Hume finds neither alternative acceptable.

That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*, is evident; because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some inference either of the reason or imagination. (T 189)

Hume here denies that impressions are images or representations.

- (2) For some impression of sensation *X* and person *S*, *S*'s having *X* is a matter of its sensorily seeming to *S* that a physical object has some observable property.

Impressions of sensation, in this regard, are like passions: "A passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any

other existence or modification" (T 415). In fact, impressions of sensation, Hume holds, are like passions, volitions, and actions.

Now 'tis evident our passions, volitions, and actions, are not susceptible of any such agreement or disagreement [either to the *real* relations of ideas, or to *real* existence and matter of fact]; being original facts and realities, compleat in themselves, and implying no reference to other passions, volitions, and actions. 'Tis impossible, therefore, they can be pronounced either true or false, and be either contrary or conformable to reason. (T 458)

Impressions of sensation are single perceptions, complete in themselves, copies of nothing (and so of nothing external), images or pictures of nothing, and non-representational. In sum, Hume rejects alternative (A) in (1); alternative (B) remains.

Alternative (B) is naive or direct realism: our having sensory experience is (not always but typically) a matter of our seeing, hearing, etc., things that exist independent of and distinct from our experiencing them, and we have good reason to believe that this is so. One reason we might have for thinking it so is that our impressions represent objects in such a manner as allows us properly to infer from impressions to objects. But this can be so only if impressions are representational.³ Another sort of reason would be that we see, hear, touch, etc., material objects, as (B) claims. Hume has various reasons, explicit and implicit, for rejecting alternative (B). One reason appeals to the view that direct awareness precludes error.

Add to this, that every impression, external and internal, passions, affections, sensations, pains and pleasures, are originally on the same footing; and that whatever other differences we may observe among them, they appear, all of them, in their true colours, as impressions or perceptions. And indeed, if we consider the matter aright, 'tis scarce possible it shou'd be otherwise, nor is it conceivable that our senses shou'd be more capable of deceiving us in the situation and relations, than in the nature of our impressions. For since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear. Every thing that enters the mind, being in *reality* a perception, 'tis impossible any thing shou'd to *feeling* appear different. This were to suppose, that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken. (T 190)

CONTINUITY, CONSCIOUSNESS, AND IDENTITY

Hume's view is that an ontology restricted to what we are certain exists will be restricted to perceptions; see his remarks above, *Concerning perceptions*. But our knowledge regarding perceptions is secure. These remarks suggest a deceptively simple argument against naive realism:

- (1) We cannot be mistaken regarding the existence or properties of what we are directly aware of.
- (2) We can be mistaken regarding the existence and properties of physical objects.

So,

- (3) We are not directly aware of physical objects.

The argument obviously requires revision. Hume plainly embraces the transparency thesis regarding perceptions, both impressions and ideas. He embraces, that is, this thesis:

- (T) For any person *S* and perception *P*, if *P* is *S*'s perception, then for any quality *Q*, *P* has *Q* if and only if *S* is aware of *P*'s having *Q*.

On this account, one's perceptions are entirely naked to one's view, having neither inside nor other side where a quality might hide.

Elsewhere he writes that

the phaenomenon of belief, ... is merely internal, ... belief ... arises immediately, without any new operation of the reason or imagination. Of this I can be certain, because I never am conscious of any such operation. (T 102)

If one's mind does *X*, one is aware of its doing *X* (and, of course, conversely). But one's mind may be affected without one's knowing it:

the past experience, on which all our judgments concerning cause and effect depend, may operate on our mind in such an insensible manner as never to be taken notice of, and may even in some measure be unknown to us. (T 103)

So Hume is sensitive to the need for restrictions on any such claims as (T). The question remains as to how the restriction should be stated.

Let the class of properties such that I do not know whether what I am directly aware of has them or not be the *ignorance class* relative to my direct awareness. For any property *Q* in the ignorance class relative to some *X* of which I am directly aware, either *X is Q* is true or *X is not Q* is true and it is logically possible that I believe the false

member of the pair. It is plain that for any person and any of her perceptions, there is an ignorance class. Concerning an ache or a pain that I am indisputably conscious of with no inference required, there are all sorts of properties that characterize the ache or pain that I do not know that it has. There is some number N such that N represents the number of aches or pains that I have now had, given the one in question, yet I have no idea which number N is. I may well not know the unpleasant experience's cause. I very likely will not know whether its intensity falls exactly between the most and the least intense of its kind, even within my own experience.

Perhaps we can put the point more precisely. Consider a simple counter-argument.

- (1) For any proposition P , if P is not a negative existential, if P is true of item X , then there is some quality Q such that X has Q and P is true of X because X has Q .
- (2) For all persons S and items X , even if S is *directly aware of* X is true, there are a great many propositions that are true of X that S does not know to be true of X .
- (3) If there are a great many propositions that are true of X that S does not know to be true of X , there are a great many qualities that X has that S does not know that X has.

So,

- (4) For all persons S and items X , even if S is *directly aware of* X , there are a great many qualities that X has that S does not know that X has.

It is false, of course, that if a proposition of the form, *There are no X's* is true, then it is true of X 's (hence the qualification on [1]). There are no unicorns for (U) *There are no unicorns* to be true of, and if whatever is true must be true of something then presumably (U) is true of the world. It seems that (1) through (3) are true and entail (4), and in any case I take (4) to be plainly true, and thus suppose our incorrigible knowledge even of our private non-representational states (for example, our aches and our after-images) to be very limited. Proposition (4) provides relevant background for (though it does not entail):

- (5) There are many propositions about what I am directly conscious of that (i) are false, and (ii) I might nonetheless believe.

Further, (5) also is plainly true, and if (5) is true, then (T) is false.

One might try to revise (T) on the grounds that (T) concerns *observable* qualities, open to introspection; non-observable counter-examples do not affect (T)'s intent. This raises the question of how, exactly, we are to understand the notion of an observable quality. Obviously, if one is interested in defending (T), it will not do to say that observable qualities are the ones that we cannot be mistaken about, for the question we seek to answer is which ones these are.

One might suggest that it is *intrinsic* or *non-relational* properties of what we are directly aware of that we cannot be mistaken about. If we are directly aware of physical objects, of course this will not do. *Being made only of lead*, for example, is an intrinsic property, as is *being crystalline* or *containing bone marrow*. Obviously we can be mistaken about whether something has these properties, and about whether objects (if any) that we are directly aware of have these properties.

A similar problem arises concerning "internal" states. Consider an overall blue image with seven separate pink dots. *Having seven pink dots* is an intrinsic feature of the blue image, and it is an observable feature of the image if the notion of an observable property has purchase here. Yet it seems plain that one could believe that there were exactly six or eight pink spots and so have a mistaken belief about the intrinsic, observable properties of something that one is directly aware of. It is hard to see how to rightly revise (T).

Seeing Perceptions as Perceptions

As we saw (cf. T 190), Hume embraces a strong thesis regarding our awareness of perceptions *as* perceptions. Humean perceptions, we noted, appear to consciousness as they are and are as they appear.⁴ Perhaps it is possible to restate the original argument more modestly without appealing to the transparency thesis or its revisions:

(1A) We cannot be mistaken about the existence of what we are directly aware of.

(1B) We can be mistaken about the existence of any physical object.

So,

(1C) We are not directly aware of any physical object.

The (1A) through (1C) argument draws back from concern with (other?) qualities and focuses on existence alone. It seems indisputable that if I am directly aware of *X* then there is an *X* for me to be directly aware of. The (1A) through (1C) argument, however, goes beyond the scope of this certainty. It requires that if one takes what one is directly aware of to be a perception, then it is a perception. It needs a proposition of the form:

(T1) For all persons *S* and items *X*, if *S* is directly aware of *X* and takes *X* to be a *Y*, then *X* is a *Y*,

where one value of “*Y*” is “perception.” Hume in fact holds the stronger:

(T2) For all persons *S* and items *X*, if *S* is directly aware of *X* then *S* takes *X* to be a *Y* if and only if *X* is a *Y*.

Whatever “enters the mind” is characterized as “being in reality as the perception”—that is, as being as it appears. He tells us that “all sensations are felt by the mind, such as they really are” (T 189). But he also adds that

when we doubt, whether they present themselves as distinct objects, or as mere impressions, the difficulty is not concerning their nature, but concerning their relations and situation.
(T 189)

And this, in one way, is puzzling. A difficulty about whether an item is a perception or a physical object would seem precisely a difficulty about that item’s nature. In any case, in this passage (T 189) Hume at least verges on admitting that *being a perception*, in both of its instances (*being an impression* and *being an idea*), is *not* an observable property. That it not be an observable property should be no surprise. Consider the observable property *being red*. If one can detect its presence by observation, one can detect its absence by observation. The predicate “being red” refers to a quality and “not being red” refers, not to another quality, but to the absence of the quality that “being red” refers to. Typically, if the presence of a quality is observably detectable, so is its absence, even if observationally detecting its absence is a matter of detecting the presence of other qualities that are incompatible with it. Thus, without special reason to think otherwise, if *not being a perception* is not observably detectable—if *X* is not a perception cannot be observationally confirmed regarding any *X*—then neither is *being a perception* observably detectable and neither can *X is a perception* be observationally confirmed regarding any *X*. Strictly, it is the case that:

- (O1) If *being Q* is an observable property of *X*, then *X*’s lacking that property is observably detectable; and
- (O2) if it is logically possible that *X is Q* be observationally confirmed, then it is logically possible that *X is not Q* be observationally confirmed,

are reasonably accepted in any case in which there is not special reason to think otherwise. Hume argues that, at least in its manifestation *being a physical object, not being a perception* is not a concept whose applicability is observationally detectable. So, if (O1) and (O2) are true, without special reason to the contrary, a Humean should conclude similarly concerning the applicability of the concept *being a perception*; if *not being a perception* is not an observable quality, neither is *being a perception*.

Another argument against (B) runs:

Now if the senses presented our impressions as external to, and independent of ourselves, both the objects and ourselves must be obvious to our senses, otherwise they cou'd not be compar'd by these faculties. The difficulty, then, is how far we are *ourselves* the objects of our senses. (T 189)

Hume points out that questions regarding "the nature of the uniting principle which constitutes a person" are abstruse questions that appeal to sensory experience will not answer. The assumption seems to be that if we are directly aware of ourselves, this will permit us to offer a proper account of the nature of personal identity, and I see no reason to grant this assumption. Without it, we need not conclude that we lack introspective self-awareness just because we have to do philosophy (or something like it) in order to produce a view on the nature of persons. Even if, as Hume contends, "in common life 'tis evident these ideas of self and person are never very fix'd nor determinate," it does not follow that "[t]is absurd, therefore, to imagine the senses can ever distinguish betwixt ourselves and external objects" (T 189-90). As Leibniz noted, it is false that *Person S can distinguish between X and Y* entails *S has a clear idea of X and Y*. The argument, then, that:

- (1) I am directly aware of physical objects only if I am directly aware of something distinct from myself;
- (2) I am directly aware of something distinct from myself only if I am directly aware of myself (as well as something distinct therefrom);
- (3) I am directly aware of myself only if I am able, from that awareness, to offer a proper account of *being a self*; and
- (4) I have no awareness possession of which allows me to offer a proper account of *being a self*;

so,

- (5) I am not directly aware of myself;

so,

(6) I am not directly aware of something distinct from myself;

so,

(7) I am not directly aware of physical objects,

fails in that there seems no reason to suppose (3) true. These arguments, at any rate, seem not sufficient to show that sensory experience is not the source of our belief in material objects. Thinking that they are, Hume suggests that reason also is not the source. The relevant reasoning would be causal and,

When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude, that neither colour, sound, taste, nor smell have a continu'd and independent existence. When we exclude these sensible qualities there remains nothing in the universe, which has such an existence. (T 231)

He concludes that this leaves only the imagination, and explanation of belief in the external world by reference to imagination will not involve reference to anything that would justify that belief. Our interest, however, has been in the ways in which these arguments manifest Hume's ontology.

Minds

Hume writes that

we may observe, that what we call a *mind*, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos'd, tho' falsely, to be endow'd with a perfect simplicity and identity. Now as every perception is distinguishable from another, and may be consider'd as separately existent; it evidently follows, that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind; that is, in breaking off all its relations, with that connected mass of perceptions, which constitute a thinking being. (T 207)

Here, perceptions are the mind's constituents, and the doctrine that each perception is separable is plainly in force. Further, the passage seems intended as a report regarding one's experience of the mind as well as enunciating a doctrine regarding minds, the doctrine intended to be a result of the report. The proposed principle of individuation between objects of awareness plainly is viewed as ranging over perceptions and as yielding the result that each perception is an atom

on its own, a possible world in and of itself; compare the opening passage, *Concerning individuation*. But that passage, in its reference to invariableness and uninterruptedness, suggests not so much perceptions as constituents as objects of awareness; not things our awareness is made up of, but things it observes. Other passages suggest this theme. For example, the transparency thesis treats perceptions as objects of the mind's attention; the least that seems required is that there be second order perceptions related to first order perceptions so that for any observable quality *Q* of any first-order perception *A*, *A* has *Q* if and only if there is a second-order perception *B* to which *A* appears to have *Q*. Then *A* depends for its existence upon *B* and (since no second-order impression can exist without its first-order colleague) *B* also depends for its existence upon *A*. But then there are "real connections" between *A* and *B*. Presumably to treat perceptions as capable of reflexive consciousness would be to give them a complexity beyond anything an orthodox Humean could countenance. If Hume asserts regarding the mind that "there is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different" (T 253), he also contends that "the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other" (T 261), which would seem real enough connections; compare the passage, *Concerning self-awareness*.

Hume distinguishes between "personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves" (T 253), and we will not try to track this distinction here. Suffice it to note that in the passage concerning self-awareness (from book 2, "Of the Passions") perceptions are said to be *present to* the mind whose attention they engage. As in the doctrine of the transparency of perceptions, perceptions are taken as *objects* of consciousness, not (merely?) as constituents. So there is at least a significant minor theme on which perceptions have real connections with one another and serve as objects of consciousness, and it is in discord with the major theme on which perceptions are atomistic constituents. No wonder, then, that Hume says that

as the *appearance* of a perception in the mind and its *existence* seem at first sight entirely the same, it may be doubted, whether we can ever assent to so palpable a contradiction, and suppose a perception to exist without being present to the mind. (T 206)

Even after offering a doctrine on which a perception *can* exist independently, he says:

But when we compare experiments, and reason a little upon them, we quickly perceive, that the doctrine of the independent existence of our sensible perceptions is contrary to the plainest experience. (T 210)

The Appendix Confession

Considerations concerning continuity and identity arise elsewhere in Hume's philosophy. His famous appendix remarks are a case in point:

In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences*, and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*. Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in the case. For my part, I must plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding. I pretend not, however, to pronounce it absolutely insuperable. Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions. (T 636)

But plainly there is no contradiction between

- (P1) every perception exists distinct from every other;
and
(P2) the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct perceptions.

In fact, if (a) *S perceives X* entails (b) *There is an X*, and if (c) *There is a real connection between X and Y* entails (d) *X and Y are not distinct existences*, (P1) entails (P2). Claim (P1) is not implausibly viewed as a necessary truth about any Humean perceptions; if it is, and (c) entails (d), then (P2) is also a necessary truth. Understandably, commentators have been puzzled by Hume's comments regarding (P1) and (P2).

My own suggestion is that Hume is assuming

- (P3) if there is a (substantial) mind, then there are real connections among perceptions;
and
(P4) if there are real connections among (its) perceptions, a mind will perceive them.

Hume explicitly says, in the passage just quoted, that "there would be no difficulty in the case" were it true that

(P5) perceptions inhere in something simple and individual;

or that,

(P6) the mind perceives real connections among perceptions.

Proposition (P5) is tantamount to the claim that there is a (substantial) mind and propositions (P3), (P4) and (P5) together entail (P6).

Hume realizes that he holds views that press him toward (P5) and (P6) as well as views that push him away from them. It seems fairly clear that what is decisive is an argument that confirmed him in his conviction that "I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd" (T 66).

The Distinct is Different Argument

Early in the *Treatise*, Hume writes:

We have observ'd, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the *inverse*, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different. For how is it possible we can separate what is not distinguishable, or distinguish what is not different? (T 18)⁵

It is noteworthy that when he comes in the appendix to confess that "upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" and goes on to "propose the arguments on both sides, beginning with those that induc'd me to deny the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking being" (T 633), he offers this argument again. I suggest that Hume found this argument, and its relationship to the question as to whether anything endures, as decisive as anything was for his view on this matter. He holds, of course, that "all impressions are internal and perishing existences, and appear as such" (T 194). But the "appear as such" is as controversial as what precedes it, and the premises of the argument in question at least apparently require no restrictive clause to specify any limits over their range of application, and it at least apparently establishes that nothing

endures. Even if it does not appear to sensory or introspective experience that “every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind” (T 193), it might be so. The different/distinguishable/separable passage suggests an argument with the intent of showing that it is so—the *distinct is different* argument. The argument’s explicit background assumptions are:

(A1) *X* is different from *Y* if and only if *X* is distinguishable from *Y*.

(A2) *X* is distinguishable from *Y* if and only if *X* is separable from *Y* by thought and imagination.

So,

(A3) *X* is different from *Y* if and only if *X* is separable from *Y* by thought and imagination.

There are problems with the assumptions. For example, (A1) is ambiguous between

(A1a) *X* is different from *Y* if and only if it is logically possible that *X* be distinguished from *Y*;

and

(A1b) *X* is different from *Y* if and only if knowers of ability *N* can distinguish *X* from *Y*.

While (A1a) seems unproblematic, (A1b)—which has as many varieties as there are degrees of ability among logically possible knowers—is questionable. Perhaps *X* and *Y* are different if and only if God can distinguish them, but why go lower—why think that it *follows* (for all values of “*X*” and “*Y*”) from the fact that (say) an angel could not distinguish between *X* and *Y* that *X* and *Y* are numerically identical? Isn’t it plainly false that (for all values of “*X*” and “*Y*”) it follows from the fact that I cannot distinguish between *X* and *Y* that they are distinct?

Further, as the *Treatise* context in any case makes plain, the axioms seem plainly cast to deal with objects or constituents of direct awareness—with sensations or perceptions. However helpful this may be in replying to the objection just rehearsed, it ruins the axioms as appropriate background to an argument against direct realism, since axioms cast to cover private states need cut no ice regarding public objects.

It is possible, however, to take inspiration from (A1) and (A2) and offer this line of reasoning. Begin with the assumption that

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- (1) something or other *X* exists at time *T1* and something or other *Y* exists at time *T2*.

Then continue with

- (2) if *X* exists at *T1* and *Y* exists at *T2* then it is logically possible that *X* exist and *Y* not exist and logically possible that *Y* exist and *X* not exist.

So,

- (3) it is logically possible that *X* exist and *Y* not exist and that *Y* exist and *X* not exist; and
- (4) if it is logically possible that *X* exist and *Y* not exist and that *Y* exist and *X* not exist, then *X* is not numerically identical to *Y*.

So,

- (5) *X* is not numerically identical to *Y*.

The argument moves from *sheer* temporal diversity to numerical difference. It abstracts from (A1) and (A2) anything that restricts them to sensations or perceptions, appeals only to temporal difference, and endeavours by that appeal to slay standard substantive philosophies for which something is a substance only if it either is eternal or else endures through times.

The argument as stated makes no distinction between (JJ) *John at T1 cannot be numerically identical to John at T2* and (JB) *John at T1 cannot be numerically to Bill at T2*. Even Hume will not reject (JJ) on one reading thereof: for Hume the person that is John at *T1* can be numerically the same as the person that is John at *T2* because a person is a series of bundles and two numerically distinct bundles can be successive parts of a single series. The (1) through (5) argument concerns simples, not composites. If you like, it concerns substances if substances can be items that have qualities but do not endure. Hume remarks that if a substance is "*something, that can exist by itself, 'tis evident every perception is a substance, and every distinct part of a perception a distinct substance*" (T 244). If *X is an enduring entity* is entailed by *X is a substance*, Hume will reject it. But he has no problem with there being non-enduring quality-bearers. A perception, after all, can be round and red, or sour and tart; it can have observable qualities; and if Hume sometimes speaks of perceptions as if there were qualities, he typically treats them as quality-bearers. But they must be very short-lived quality-bearers, and the argument under review endeavours to show that they are.

In assessing the argument, it will be useful to compare it with claims that, while not unlike what Hume needs, differ from what must

be so if he is right. For example, consider the following different scenarios:

- (S1) John is tall at $T1$ and Bill is short at $T1$. (X is Q at $T1$ and Y is not- Q at $T1$ and X is not Y)
- (S2) The tall man is in the room and the basketball centre is in the room and the tall man is the basketball centre. (X is $Q1$ and Y is $Q2$ and X is Y)
- (S3) The man who is tall at $T1$ is also tall at $T2$. (X is Q at $T1$ and Y is Q at $T2$ and X is Y)

If Hume's reading of any actual (S3) scenario requires

- (s3a) there is a Z such that X and Y are successive parts of Z ,

there is a reading of such scenarios on which

- (s3b) there is one non-composite X that exists at both $T1$ and $T2$, though X 's existing at $T1$ of course is distinct from X 's existing at $T2$.

That *John's existing at one time* is not identical to *John's existing at some other time* does not get in the way of John's enduring, even if John is incomposite. On this account, *John's existing at $T1$* and *John's existing at $T2$* are not proper parts of John (all of John exists whenever John exists) and there is nothing that *John at $T1$* refers to other than John who exists (among other times) at $T1$.

If we are to evaluate the (1) through (5) argument, we need to distinguish a controversial claim from some non-controversial ones. Consider:

- (I) If it is logically possible that X exists and Y does not exist, then X is not Y .
- (II) If it is logically possible X exists at T and Y does not exist at T , then X is not Y .
- (III) If it is logically possible that X exists at $T1$ is true and X exists at $T2$ is false, then X 's existing at $T1$ is not (numerically identical to) X 's existing at $T2$.

What can exist without some (other) thing ever existing is not that thing, so (I) is true. What can exist at T without some (other) thing existing at T is not that thing, so (II) is true. The state of affairs of some thing existing at some time is not identical to the state of affairs of that

thing existing at some other time, so (III) is true. But none of these claims suffices for Hume's purposes.

Compare:

- (IV) If it is possible that *X* exists at *T1* and *X* does not exist at *T2* then the *X* that exists at *T1* is not the *X* that exists at *T2*.

Hume's argument needs, not (I), (II), or (III), but (IV). Contrast:

- (V) If it is logically possible that *X's existence at T1* is not identical to *X's existence at T2* then *X* cannot exist at both *T1* and *T2*,

which would also serve Hume's purpose.

Now (IV) and (V) altogether lack the obviousness of (I) through (III). What (IV) tells us, in effect, is that only something that *necessarily* exists at *T1* and *T2* if it exists at all *can* exist at *T1* and *T2*. But there seems no reason at all to believe that. Why should the fact that not only do I lack logically necessary existence, but also presumably lack the property of existing necessarily at a certain moment if I exist at all—lack the essential property, relative to any times, that if I exist at all then I do so at just those times—prevent me (even as incomposite) from existing at more than one time? It is not logically impossible that I exist at two times even if it is logically necessary that *my existing at T1* is a distinct fact from *my existing at T2*. It is compatible with those states of affairs being distinct that it is also necessarily true that if an incomposite I exists at *T1* and an incomposite I exists at *T2* then I exist at two times. If this is so, then (IV) is false.

Claim (V) supposes that, from the necessary fact that if I exist at as many as two times, then the state of affairs of my existing at one time is different from the state of affairs of my existing at another time, one properly can conclude that I cannot endure. But even if I am an everlasting incomposite being, it remains true (and compatible with my longevity) that my existing at one time is a different state of affairs than my existing at another. So far as I can see, then, (V) is plainly false, and (IV), while it expresses what Hume needs and believes, also seems false. At the least, it is sufficiently controversial as to provide no good reason for anyone to accept Hume's conclusion.

I have suggested, then, that Hume is right to think that his basic philosophical views contain contrary tendencies and incompatible doctrines. I have argued that what he takes as bedrock enough at least to securely anchor one of those tendencies in fact is false in one version and at least highly controversial in its other. The *distinct is different*

argument does not establish that numerical identity over time of conscious or material substances is an impossibility. But the argument, and its surrounding issues, are complex enough for one to see how Hume might think otherwise.

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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), 212 (hereafter cited as "T"). Cf. "the perceptions of the mind are perfectly known" (T 366).
2. Re: minds, cf. T 254.
3. Of course, it is by no means obvious that Hume is right about sensory experience not being, as Brentano would say, intentional regarding objects; but it is no part of my purpose to pursue that issue here.
4. I take it that this applies to ideas as well as impressions.
5. Cf. also T 232, 233, where Hume applies this argument to the soul.