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Phillip D. Cummins

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Hume on Qualities

PHILLIP D. CUMMINS

This paper is an attempt to ascertain whether Hume's three approaches to the distinction between simplicity and complexity in Book One of *A Treatise of Human Nature*¹ can be integrated into a consistent whole. The consistency issue will be focused on Hume's position concerning the status of qualities.

I. Types of Complexity and Simplicity

In the opening section of the *Treatise* Hume introduced a distinction between simple and complex perceptions and provided definitions for both. He wrote:

There is another division of our perceptions, which it will be convenient to observe, and which extends itself both to our impressions and ideas. This division is into SIMPLE and COMPLEX. Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts. Tho' a particular colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple, 'tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other. (T 2)

Though hardly a systematic explication of the distinction between simple and complex perceptions, this is a beginning. Complexity is to be understood in terms of internal diversity (distinctness, distinguishability, and separability of

Phillip D. Cummins is at the Philosophy Department, University of Iowa, 269 English Philosophy Building, Iowa City, Iowa 52242-1408 USA.
email: pcummins@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu

parts) and simplicity on its denial. Hume's example is not helpful, since to the uninitiated—those who have read neither Locke nor Berkeley—calling its colour a part of an apple would be extremely puzzling.

The distinction is employed immediately, because several important Humean principles hold only for simple perceptions. For example, blocked by obvious counterexamples from expanding its scope to cover complex perceptions, Hume confidently asserted the principle that "every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea" (T 3). Noting the priority of simple impressions to their corresponding simple ideas, Hume further maintained, "...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, emphasis Hume's). This familiar causal claim plays a well-known and important role in Hume's treatment of ideas, so it is appropriate to consider further what I shall call conceptual simplicity and complexity, the sense of the simple/complex distinction on which it is founded.

In his *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Locke contrasted definable to indefinable words and specified a sense of simplicity for ideas that he correlated with the indefinability of the words expressing them.² An idea is simple if and only if the word or words used to express it are indefinable. Otherwise, it is complex. It seems to me that the sense of the word 'idea' operative when Locke drew this distinction is that of "concept"; ideas in this sense are employed in recognizing objects as well as in thinking about them in their absence. So understood, ideas are intentional; each has an object distinct from itself. The object of an idea is what that idea is of. Thus, the object of somebody's idea of pain is pain and the object of the idea of squareness is squareness. There is, therefore, some basis for saying that the simplicity or complexity of an idea just is the simplicity or complexity of its object. There is then the following order: simple object, simple idea, indefinable word.

A question remains: what is it for the object of an idea to be simple? One could answer that a simple object is an object which does not have other objects as parts, just as one could have asserted that a simple idea is an idea which does not have other ideas as parts. This answer provokes a further question: what indicates that an object lacks object-parts? One answer is: its unanalyzability. This flirts with circularity, but still seems right. To have the concept of some object is to know what it is.³ A simple or unanalyzable object, therefore, is what can be known only with reference to itself, whereas a complex or analyzable object of thought can be known as the product or union of two or more objects of thought, each of which is distinct from the others and from the object being analyzed. A square is a complex object; to know what a square is one must know what equality is. Pain, however, is simple; to know what it is requires no such knowledge of anything distinct

from but essential to pain. That is why, if asked to state what pain is—not, what causes pain, but what pain itself is—one is at a loss. Even though one can describe more or less well different kinds of pains, one cannot state what pain itself is. It is unanalyzable, that is, simple. Hence, one's idea of it cannot be resolved into other ideas; that idea is simple. Hence, too, its name is indefinable. Locke also holds, of course, that because an idea of pain cannot be brought about by combining other (simpler) ideas, an indispensable condition for someone's having an idea of pain is prior or simultaneous experience of pain. A comparable claim is made for all other simple ideas, which led Locke to deny innate ideas and let experience set the ultimate boundaries for what can be thought.⁴

Complex ideas in the conceptual sense also play important roles in Locke's theory of knowledge. One is worth mentioning. Unlike simple ideas, complex ideas can be acquired in a variety of ways, including definition of the name associated with it. Locke held that names for all natural kinds (e.g., gold, iron, apple, oak, lion) are in principle definable and the ideas they express are always complex. This claim is closely linked to Locke's doctrine of nominal essences, according to which, rather than model our concepts of various kinds on real essences, known or unknown, which fix precisely and permanently the boundaries between those kinds, humans develop those concepts and sort things into kinds on the basis of the qualities and powers observed or otherwise discovered in the individuals to be sorted. Sorts, for Locke, presuppose individuals to be sorted, qualities in terms of which sorts, instantiated or uninstantiated, can be defined, and sorters who define sorts and classify individuals in terms of them for a variety of purposes. Moreover, because we know what natural kinds are only by nominal, not real essences, knowledge of non-trivial universal generalizations about them is impossible, at least for kinds of substances.⁵

One need do no more than recall Hume's doctrine regarding the derivation of simple ideas from impressions to realize he took over this sense of the simple/complex distinction and some or all of these results. He even used examples (gold and solubility in *aqua regia*) that readers with a standard eighteenth century English-language philosophical education would probably have recognized as Lockean in origin.⁶ The principle that each simple idea is derived from some corresponding simple impression led Hume to specify the object of a simple idea with reference to the impression from which it was derived. Since he held that every complex idea is composed of two or more simple ideas each of which has an impression as its source and object, Hume concluded that clarifying ideas amounts to searching for and attending to source-impressions. The critical use of this conclusion is best illustrated by Hume's demand that the champions of substance produce the impression that would yield a genuine idea and make the term 'substance' more than insignificant jargon (T 15–16 and 232–233). Its constructive use as an

analytical microscope is to clarify the ideas signified by vague but indefinable words; it is nicely illustrated by Hume's attempt to track down the object of our idea of necessary connection (T I iii 14, especially 155–157).⁷ These examples show the centrality of the distinction between conceptual simplicity and complexity in Hume's philosophy.

I turn next to a second sense of the simple/complex distinction, what I shall call *compositional simplicity and complexity*. It plays an important but strictly limited role in the metaphysical system articulated in the *Treatise*. Except for its final section on the ideas of existence and external existence, Part Two of Book One is a sustained presentation of Hume's solution to one of the pressing problems of late seventeenth and early eighteenth century philosophy—the problem of the composition of entities having extension or duration. Hume, as I have argued elsewhere,⁸ was committed to the view that whatever has extension or magnitude in two or three dimensions is composite, meaning not the weaker thesis that it is capable of being divided into two or more entities, but the stronger thesis that it actually is composed of parts, real beings whose existence its existence presupposes or implies. As had many philosophers before him, Hume developed an answer to the following two-part question: does an extended thing have ultimate parts, that is, parts without parts, and, if so, how are they to be characterized? Hume rejected infinite divisibility and embraced ultimate parts. Holding that what is extended is by nature divisible, he concluded that all extended entities are ultimately composed of unextended indivisible elements, that is, compositional simples.⁹ This concept of simplicity, surely different from the preceding, is equated by Hume with true unity. Borrowing from Malezieu, he wrote, "...Existence in itself belongs only to unity, and is never applicable to number, but on account of the unites, of which the number is compos'd" (T 30). Unity implies indivisibility, hence Hume concluded,

...The unity, which can exist alone, and whose existence is necessary to that of all number,...must be perfectly indivisible, and incapable of being resolved into any lesser unity. (T 31)

Compositional complexity and simplicity have to do with whether an individual thing has other individual things as parts, not whether knowing what it is requires knowing other features distinct from but internal to it, that is, whether its kind (sortal) name can be defined. For Hume no extended thing is compositionally simple, but every extended thing is composed ultimately of parts which are. Whether extension is also conceptually complex has no bearing on either claim.

Consider, then, a golf ball, a white one perhaps. In it we have an entity which for Hume is complex in two recognizably different senses. It is of a kind and just as its kind name, 'golf ball' is in principle definable, so it or the idea

in virtue of which we know what it is is conceptually complex. Moreover, being extended, it is compositionally complex, having indivisible unextended points as its ultimate parts. Our idea of it, as an extended thing, is the idea of a densely ordered collection of a large but finite number of colored and tactile points.

As an example of something considered by Hume to be both compositionally and conceptually simple, I propose a point of color in a visual field. Hume asserted that the ultimate constituents of extended objects, as seen, are unextended points of color. Because it exhibits only a single color, but no magnitude or shape, such a point is conceptually simple. Because it is unextended, it has no parts, and so is compositionally simple. Is there, however, any further sense in which it is complex rather than simple? Perhaps, provided that we distinguish, with regard to this point of color, between the point, an individual, and its color, a quality.

To facilitate discussion of this third sense of the simple/complex distinction, ignore temporarily the rather controversial Humean point of color and instead imagine a second golf ball, this one yellow rather than white. Let the first ball be dubbed 'A' and the second one 'B'. Each ball is an individual. Although it is a uniform golf ball, each is numerically different not only from the other ball and, indeed, from all other golf balls, but in some sense from everything else as well. Each ball is unique. Consider next 'white' and 'dimpled', two of the predicates that can correctly be applied to A. The latter can correctly be applied to B as well, whereas the former can be applied to other individuals besides A, but not to B. The applicability of the same predicate (e.g., 'dimpled') to different individuals, A and B, when other predicates (e.g., 'white', 'yellow') cannot be applied commonly to them convinces many philosophers who believe the structure of language reveals something about the ontological structure of the world that the objective basis for such predicate applications requires in some way a new category of entity in addition to the individuals (e.g., A and B) already acknowledged. Predication is founded, they hold, on ontological complexity, since individuals alone cannot account for predication. One way of marking the supposed complexity is to introduce the word 'quality' to stand for that which grounds the applicability of some predicate to a given individual. According to this view, correctly predicating 'white' of A is founded on a distinction between two entities, an individual and a quality, such that the entity signified by the name 'A' differs in both number and ontological kind from the entity signified by 'white'. In contrast, one who denies that ontological complexity is required to account for predication would deny that there is more than one fundamental ontological kind. Talk of qualities is heuristic, at best. On this view, the objects to which we apply predicates can be said to be ontologically simple.

Once the distinction between individuals and qualities is taken to be metaphysically fundamental, one can proceed to ask how they are related to

one another. The answer indicates the form one's commitment to ontological complexity takes. One alternative is to portray individuals as wholes whose ontological parts are qualities. On this account qualities are internal to and constitutive of the individuals to which their names can be correctly applied. They are parts of those individuals, but ontological, not spatial, parts. At any given time an individual is a whole consisting partially or entirely of co-existing qualities; over time it is a succession of such wholes. (One might but need not hold that ultimately the constituent qualities turn out to be conceptually simple.) On this account, the complex/simple distinction once again is understood on a whole/part model. Ontological complexity translates into the thesis that all individuals are complex, that is, are wholes. A rival account is that all qualities are *extrinsic* to the individuals of which their names can be predicated. Individuals, on this view, exemplify or instantiate qualities, but do not comprise them. On this approach, ontological complexity is founded on category diversity—the diversity of individuals and qualities. Neither type of entity can be reduced to the other.¹⁰ Different though they are from one another, both of these accounts by positing qualities endorse ontological complexity. Both deny that individuals alone can account for predication. Both invoke qualities to do the job. That there is disagreement on the further question of whether ordinary individuals are complexes of qualities should not obscure the fundamental agreement.¹¹

The foregoing distinctions enable me to formulate the central thesis of this paper, which is that although it is tempting to hold that Hume defended ontological complexity, especially the whole/part version, it is a mistake to do so. Hume rejected ontological complexity. This implies his denial that predication requires qualities over and above individuals. The temptation towards the opposite conclusion arises because, I shall claim, Hume did embrace the distinction between conceptual complexity and simplicity and used the language of qualities in stating and exploiting that distinction. Moreover, he did not clearly indicate when he was engaged in conceptual analysis or sharply distinguish such contexts from contexts in which ontological issues are at the forefront. Nonetheless, I shall claim, although he insisted that there are both conceptually complex and simple objects of thought and insisted that there are both compositionally complex and simple objects of experience, he rejected ontological complexity. For him predication does not require a genuine distinction between individuals and qualities and individuals are not ontological wholes.¹²

II. Nominalisms

Hume is uniformly classified as a nominalist, a practice I shall not challenge. 'Nominalism' is a blanket term vague and broad enough to cover a wide range of positions. Indeed, being a nominalist is compatible with both

endorsing or rejecting ontological complexity. Knowing, therefore, that Hume is a nominalist does not inform us regarding his position on qualities; further distinctions are needed. They can be introduced by assuming ontological complexity, posing several philosophical questions about qualities, and reviewing the alternative answers.

One question is: Are qualities independent entities? It asks: Are there or can there be qualities which are neither exemplified by nor internal to any individual whatsoever? One who answers in the affirmative I shall call a Platonist.¹³ More precisely, a *minimal Platonist* would hold that qualities *can* so exist; a *moderate Platonist* would hold that at least one quality *does* so exist; and a *maximal Platonist* would hold that *all* qualities exist apart from individuals. Anti-Platonism can also vary in strength. A *weak anti-Platonist* would deny that any qualities *do* exist uninstantiated; a *strong anti-Platonist* denies that any qualities *can* so exist. Since the Platonism/anti-Platonism issue was formulated in terms of the question, "Are qualities independent?", it is extremely important to emphasize that while one way to be a strong anti-Platonist is to concede the existence of qualities but deny they can occur uninstantiated, a more radical approach would be to insist flatly that there are no such entities as qualities. To reject ontological complexity is one way to preclude Platonism.

Most anti-Platonists tend to be strong anti-Platonists. This may be because there is a plausible argument that weak anti-Platonism is provable only if strong anti-Platonism is provable. It begins by noting that 1, there is and can be no evidence for the existence of an uninstantiated quality, is logically compatible with 2, there are uninstantiated qualities, so that 1 does not entail *not-2*. Given, furthermore, the difficulty of providing conclusive or even convincing evidence for any premise linking 1 to *not-2* or linking any truths about the world to the truth of *not-2*, one might well conclude that the proper way to secure *not-2* is to prove the impossibility of an uninstantiated quality, which is to argue directly for strong anti-Platonism. Such is the difficulty of rigorously proving a general negative existence claim.¹⁴

Here is a new question about qualities. Put crudely, it is: Are qualities universals? One can formulate it more precisely. I shall do so with reference to our two golf balls, A and B, which are numerically different from one another and yet can be characterized or described by the same univocal predicate, 'dimpled'. The more precise version of the new question is: Is the quality in virtue of which 'dimpled' can truly be predicated of A identical to or different from the quality in virtue of which 'dimpled' can truly be predicated of B? *Quality nominalism* answers: Different. It holds that two qualities, not one, ground the applicability of 'dimpled' to A and B, since qualities are unique to the individuals instantiating them. Whether they are instantiated internally or externally, qualities are not universals. In contrast, *quality realism* answers: Identical. It holds that one and the same quality grounds the applicability of

'dimpled' to both A and B. Indeed, that quality is literally common to all of the things of which its name, 'dimpled', can truly be predicated. It is either a common constituent of them all or is commonly exemplified by them all. It is a universal.¹⁵

Before it is explored further, the distinction between quality nominalism and quality realism must be amplified or clarified. Suppose that some predicate [not a definite description] in fact applies to only one thing. Assume, for example, that only one item in nature is dimpled. Assuming ontological complexity, a quality is posited. Is it a universal or not? A *quality realist* would hold that even though the quality signified by the predicate is in fact unique to the individual having it, its *nature* or the nature of instantiation is such that the quality *could be* instantiated or exemplified by some other individual. To be a universal, at bottom, is to be capable of multiple instantiation or shared existence. A *quality nominalist*, in contrast, holds that qualities *cannot* be shared. If a quality is a constituent of or is exemplified by some individual, it cannot be a constituent of or be exemplified by another individual. Thus, despite their profound disagreement on whether qualities are universals, quality nominalists and quality realists agree that whichever is the case is not a contingent matter of fact.

The issue of quality nominalism versus quality realism arises whether individuals are construed as collections of qualities or as simples all of whose qualities are extrinsic to them. On the latter construal the nominalism-realism issue is formulated as the question: can two different individuals exemplify one and the same quality? The issue of Platonism versus anti-Platonism also cuts across the two ways of relating individuals to their qualities. There are, then, four questions about qualities. First, must we posit qualities to account for predication? Second, is a quality extrinsic to or constitutive of the individual instantiating it? Third, can a quality exist uninstantiated by any individual thing? Fourth, can a quality literally be common to two or more individuals? Whether or not there are metaphysical or logical principles which make any combination of answers to them at bottom inconsistent, it is important to realize they are different questions.¹⁶

Next, something must be said about relations. A relation can be thought of as the ground for the applicability of a two-or-more-place predicate, for example, 'taller than'. Quality nominalism is frequently held to require supplementation by a theory of relations—specifically, similarity or resemblance—in order to account for the applicability of single or one-place predicates, such as 'dimpled', to numerically different individuals. If predicating the univocal term 'dimpled' of both A and B is problematic because A and B are numerically different from one another, it would remain so for one who invokes qualities as ontological grounds for predicates, but insists that no quality of A is numerically identical to any quality of B. The relation of resemblance is introduced to meet this criticism. The exact resemblance of a

quality of A to a numerically different quality of B is taken to justify the application of a single predicate to both qualities or both individuals. The resemblance solution to the problem of arbitrariness yields what may be called *augmented quality nominalism*.

Consider next a philosopher inclined towards nominalism who reflects on the dialectical situation leading to augmented quality nominalism. Such a philosopher might well regard the resemblance solution as at best a step towards a streamlined position that posits only individuals and relations, eliminating qualities altogether. He or she notes that individual qualities by themselves proved inadequate to secure predication of general terms and that resemblance had to be invoked to perform that task. Resemblance, then, is theoretically indispensable for nominalism. So are the individuals to which the predicates are applied. This being so, the argument continues, individual qualities, which play no theoretical role, can be eliminated as the terms of the resemblance relation in favor of the individuals to which the predicates are applied. The ontological analysis of "A is white," which is usually thought to be an instance of non-relational predication, actually requires only individuals and resemblance, a relation, since that proposition asserts only a relationship of resemblance between A and some other unspecified individuals. Let us call this position *no-quality nominalism*. It is interesting, among other reasons, because it denies any genuine distinction between individuals and qualities. It is also a way, a radical way, of securing strong anti-Platonism.

III. Qualities—Some Problem Texts

Where did Hume stand? What did he hold on these ontological issues? The central question is: did Hume commit himself to a genuine distinction between individuals and qualities? It might seem undeniable that besides endorsing qualities, he also construed individuals as ontological wholes, complexes of qualities. One needs, it seems, only to consult virtually any of his discussions relating to substance. For example, writing of ideas of modes and substances early in the *Treatise*, he denied that one has an idea of substance *per se*:

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 16)¹⁷

The qualities in question, as concerns sensory experience, are specified in the same context, where Hume tried to show why a substance, considered as distinct from its qualities, cannot be experienced. He wrote,

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. (T 16)

If these passages are taken at face value, the only remaining questions are, first, was Hume a nominalist or realist regarding qualities and, second, was he a Platonist or, as one might expect, an anti-Platonist? This way with the issue is, however, premature.

In the first place, if the distinctions drawn among conceptual, compositional and ontological simplicity and complexity are sound, one must be careful not to take a claim which in fact concerns, say, conceptual complexity, to be a claim about ontological complexity. Moreover, there are passages in which Hume seems to deny that individual things can even be distinguished from their qualities, let alone be composed of them. The following example, from his discussion of distinctions of reason, is spectacular:

'Tis certain that the mind wou'd never have dream'd of distinguishing a figure from the body figur'd, as being in reality neither distinguishable, nor different, nor separable; did it not observe, that even in this simplicity there might be contain'd many different resemblances and relations. Thus when a globe of white marble is presented, we receive only the impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form, nor are we able to separate and distinguish the colour from the form. (T 25)

The globe obviously is compositionally complex. It would seem to be conceptually complex as well. In that case, the simplicity being asserted of it is ontological and Hume was straightforwardly denying a genuine distinction between individuals and qualities. It might be objected, however, that having invoked qualities to compose individual things and so make substances dispensable, he could not consistently reject qualities, so that one must either reject the obvious reading of this passage or acknowledge a fundamental inconsistency in Hume's philosophy.¹⁸ To push us towards the first alternative, our objector might add that Hume would be doubly inconsistent in denying qualities, since they are also required to save from absurdity his doctrine that extended things are composed ultimately of unextended points. In presenting that doctrine he acknowledged that his account of the composition of extended things would fail if he had to concede that because the points he posited as ultimate parts are unextended, they are non-entities. It is absurd, he wrote, to suppose a real extended thing is composed of non-entities. To avoid this result, Hume held each point is endowed with a quality—a tactile quality, in the case of a tangible point, a color in the case of visual points. Qualities, therefore, appear to be indispensable (T 40).

Given these arguments and counter-arguments, what needs to be discovered is whether Hume's various discussions of simplicity and complexity and of the relationships between individuals and qualities reveal a systematic pattern that blocks this charge of two-fold inconsistency. I hold that they do.

The globe passage reveals Hume's actual ontological position, no-quality nominalism. He endorsed qualities not as a genuine category of entities, but only as entities of discourse and, in a very restricted way, of thought. His analyses of ordinary things as collections of qualities are to be understood as attempts to ground the conceptually complex in the conceptually simple, rather than the ontologically complex, individuals, in their ontological constituents, qualities. To establish Hume's denial of qualities I shall argue in Parts IV and V for the following two main claims. First, in the contexts specifically concerned with their ontological status, Hume denied the existence of qualities. Second, the deepest principles in his philosophy virtually dictate that he do so. I shall also sketch an account of how his position on abstract ideas and their objects permitted him to speak of qualities and how his Lockean anti-essentialism and fragmentation of sensory experience led him to portray ordinary things and kinds as collections of qualities, that is, as conceptually complex. I shall argue in Part VI that this account will also permit a no-quality interpretation of Hume's assignment of qualities to his compositional simples. Positing qualities as ontologically basic was not required to raise his ultimate parts of extended things above the level of non-entities. He was only required to characterize his points as capable of supporting the resemblance relationships needed to secure qualitative discriminations.

IV. Against General Ideas

In "Of abstract ideas," Hume addressed the question of how one thinks of or represents by ideas general objects such as kinds and abstract properties.¹⁹ He announced that he would follow Berkeley's lead in rejecting the received position on this issue, which he formulated as the question of how a mind's idea of, say, a man, can represent a kind whose members are not completely uniform, but differ from one another both in specific qualities and in the degrees of their qualities. One must in some way abstract from these qualitative differences, since as Hume put it, "an object ceases not to be of any particular species on account of every small alteration in its extension, duration and other properties" (T17). He continued,

The abstract idea of a man represents men of all sizes and all qualities; which 'tis concluded it cannot do, but either by representing at once all possible sizes and all possible qualities, or by representing no particular one at all. (T 18)

The received opinion is the second option, which holds that abstract ideas are general or indeterminate and so "represent no particular degree either of quantity or quality." It is widely accepted, according to Hume, because, supposedly, the alternative position cannot be true, since it implies "an

infinite capacity in the mind" (T 18). An infinite capacity is required, presumably, because, without a general object, a person thinking of a kind must consider individually each possible member of that kind. Hume's attack on the received position was two-fold: he first tried to show that it is "utterly impossible" to conceive any quantity or quality without forming a precise "notion" of its degrees. Secondly, he attempted to take away the main argument for the received position by showing its rival is not absurd, since

we can at once form a notion of all possible degrees of quantity and quality, in such a manner at least, as, however imperfect, may serve all the purposes of reflexion and conversation. (T 18)²⁰

Though it does not instantly refute it, Hume's talk of quantity and quality in formulating the issue under examination hardly supports my thesis that he was a no-quality nominalist. Neither, on a superficial reading, do the three arguments he proceeded to give against the received position. Hume's conclusion, in each case, is that one cannot form an idea of a quality in general distinct from one's idea of the precise degree of the quality. He did not explicitly conclude that the distinction between thing and quality is not genuine. Moreover, his arguments make frequent reference to precise degrees of quality and quantity. Even when he invoked the principle that everything in nature is individual as the foundation for his third argument, his language and the context indicate that all he was required to mean by this formula is the thesis that there are no determinable or non-determinate qualities (e.g., shape itself) over and above all of the determinate instances of the qualities (e.g., square).²¹ Hume explicitly was attacking *determinable qualities*, which lack precise degrees, in order to deny ideas of such entities. This is not surprising, since the controversy over abstract ideas was portrayed by Hume as a controversy regarding ideas of kinds and determinables.

Nevertheless, Hume's three arguments against the received view that one can think of the general or the determinable in isolation from particularizing features provide important evidence for his no-quality nominalism. One of them includes an explicit denial of a genuine distinction between individuals and their qualities and all of them are constructed on the basis of principles which make a genuine distinction between individuals and qualities yield minimal Platonism, a position we have reason to believe Hume dismissed as absurd. Although he only used his premises to reject ideas which perspicuously represent general qualities, those premises, if true, warrant his inferring that there is no genuine distinction between things and their qualities, a conclusion he drew immediately afterwards in his remarks concerning distinctions of reason.

Hume's three arguments against abstract ideas which are general in nature move in each case from what is or what must be to what can be thought, that

is, from the ontological to the psychological or conceptual. This may seem like the reverse of the required order, but it is not. The question Hume was attempting to settle concerns the nature of abstract ideas of kinds and general properties and the way in which they represent those kinds and properties. In each case he argued in effect that genuine ideas represent their objects perspicuously, but that perspicuous representation is constrained by what is being represented. Hence, he first stated the salient features of the object to be represented, then drew a conclusion about the nature of the idea which perspicuously represents it. The third of Hume's three arguments reveals this pattern of development most strikingly. He began: Everything in nature is individual. It is utterly absurd to suppose that there is "a triangle really existing which has no precise proportion of sides and angles" (T 19). He next asserted,

If this therefore be absurd in *fact and reality*, it must also be absurd *in idea*; since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. (T 20)

Note that Hume first claimed to know the ontological situation, which is that the existence of indeterminate individuals is impossible. From this he argued to what must be the situation regarding the ideas representing reality, which is that one has no idea of an indeterminate, purely general thing.

The principle which secures the connection between reality and thought is the biconditional that a situation or entity is impossible in reality if and only if it is impossible to have a clear and distinct idea of it. Let us call it the Idea/Reality Principle.²² In other contexts it warrants inferences from ideas to objects.²³ For example, it provides the reason why Hume confidently rejected all arguments for the infinite divisibility of extension. Hume claimed, as an observationally secured psychological fact, possession of a perspicuous or adequate idea of an indivisible part of extension (T I ii 1–2, especially T 32). He concluded that such a part of extension is possible, so that attempts to demonstrate the opposite must one and all be defective. It is equally important for his argument against the certainty of inferences drawn from constant correlations in past experience. Regarding the latter, he wrote,

We can at least *conceive* a change in the course of nature; which sufficiently proves, that such a change is not absolutely impossible. To form a clear idea of any thing, is an undeniable argument of its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it. (T 89, emphasis added)²⁴

The Idea/Reality Principle can also be used to reach conclusions about ideas on the basis of claims about reality. In the case of Hume's third argument it is used to establish a conclusion about whether one can perspicuously represent

by ideas non-determinate general objects. The argument begins with supposed knowledge of what is impossible (an entity that is neither individual nor determinate) and proceeds to the conclusion that there cannot be an idea of such an entity. The key premise is that if there were an idea of such an entity, that entity would be possible, whereas we know it is not.²⁵

Were this Hume's only argument, one might reasonably reject his attack on the received position. He seems to have totally ignored the alternative that even though in one sense only individuals really exist, they may possess or even be constituted by qualities some or all of which are general in their nature. Motivating the concession (only determinate individuals can really be said to exist) and the rebuttal (nevertheless, general qualities exist) is a distinction between dependent and independent entities, which permits one to posit non-autonomous beings which exist, but only as constituents or properties of other, self-subsistent, beings, which alone are said to really exist. Taking it seriously, one might hold, for example, that although all lines are individual and determinate, sound philosophical analysis requires acknowledgement of qualities, e.g., length, distinct from the lines. On this view, lines are self-subsistent entities which either exemplify or are constituted by genuine, but non-autonomous qualities, some of which could be general. The latter are dependent entities inasmuch as they cannot exist uninstantiated or outside such individuals. Though dependent they are distinct entities which can be represented by simple ideas, even though the ideas which can occur separately in thought are always more complex. This undiscussed alternative is also ignored by Hume's second argument.

That argument turns on the claim, introduced in T I i 1, that ideas exactly copy impressions, differing from them only in force and vivacity.²⁶ It allows Hume to move from an alleged truth about impressions to a conclusion about ideas. The truth alleged is that

...no object can appear to the senses; or in other words,...no impression can become present to the mind, without being determined in its degrees both of quantity and quality. (T 19)

This, Hume implied, is a necessary truth; to deny it is to be guilty of contradiction.²⁷ The passage continues, "Now since all ideas are deriv'd from impressions and are nothing but copies and representations of them, whatever is true of the one must be acknowledg'd concerning the other." Hume concluded, "An idea is a weaker impression; and as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the case must be the same with its copy or representative." This argument also begins with the supposed ontological properties of things (objects or impressions are determinate) and by a linking principle—this time, ideas copy impressions—reaches a conclusion about the nature of ideas. It, too, fails to consider the supposition that

although the object (impression) itself is determinate, it has dependent indeterminate qualities which can be represented by ideas. In fairness to Hume, though, it should be noted that the supposition had already been rejected in his first argument, if only by fiat.

Hume initiated that first argument by setting forth key principles concerning difference, distinguishability, and separability in thought. He wrote,

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)

Hume in effect asserted two biconditionals and inferred a third. Let us call them the Difference Principles. They are, first, an object is different from another if and only if it is distinguishable from the other; second, an object is distinguishable from another if and only if it is separable in thought and imagination from the other; and, third, an object is different from another if and only if it is separable in thought and imagination from the other.²⁸

The way in which Hume formulated these principles and thereby opened them to a telling objection may reflect his commitment to the principle, noted earlier, that "...Existence itself belongs only to unity..." (T 30).²⁹ As formulated, the second and third biconditionals invite the objection that they fail for every entity which is composed of parts. A whole is different and distinguishable from each one of its parts, yet strictly speaking cannot be separated in thought or reality from any of those parts. If C comprises A and B, C is both different and distinguishable from A, yet one's proper idea of C includes an idea of A. Having an idea of C without thereby having an idea of A is impossible, which is to say C cannot be conceived separately from A. This objection could have been circumvented had Hume stated his principles so as to exempt wholes in relation to their parts. Why did Hume not see any problem here and make the appropriate modifications in his biconditionals, for example to "each of two things are wholly distinct from the other if and only if they are fully distinguishable from one another"? Perhaps because when thinking metaphysically he habitually thought in terms of principles applicable to the true unities rather than the ontologically suspect wholes composed of them. Hume was well aware, as Donald Baxter has emphasized, that a whole is inseparable from its parts in the sense that its existence and continued existence presupposes the existence or continued existence of its parts.³⁰

Hume's first argument continues,

...Tis evident at first sight, that the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself; nor the precise degree of any quality from the quality. These ideas, therefore, admit no more of separation than they do of distinction and difference. They are consequently conjoined with each other in the conception; and the general idea of a line, notwithstanding all our abstractions and refinements, has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality; however it may be made to represent others, which have different degrees of both. (T 18–19)

Note well what Hume claimed to be "evident at first sight." First and especially relevant to our concern with ontological complexity, the precise length of a line is neither different nor distinguishable from the line itself. Second and more relevant to Hume's concern with whether abstract ideas are general in nature, the precise degree of any quality (presumably the precise length of the line, that is, given the first point, the line itself) is neither different nor distinguishable from the quality (presumably length). Thus, Hume flatly denied that there is in the line any diversity which would permit the recognition of distinguishing features and thus the formation of two or more clear and distinct ideas from a single source, the line. Since one cannot form ideas of distinct elements within the line, one cannot separate in thought, while representing them perspicuously, the line from its precise length or the precise length from length in general.

Hume admitted in the final clause of the passage just quoted that we are entitled to say *in some sense* that lines do differ from one another in length and qualities do differ from one another in their precise degrees. This acknowledgement was not as such an admission of inconsistency; it merely established the minimal condition for there being a problem about abstraction and indicated the need for Hume to explain how there can be distinctions at the level of language which have a foundation neither in ideas nor in the objects of those ideas.³¹ It set him the task of showing how we are able in some way to abstract qualities from their instances and general types of qualities from their precise degrees. For him to succeed, the objects we consider when forming our ideas and abstracting from precise differences in some way must warrant the distinctions being drawn. Still, given this, one might well wonder why Hume was so confident that there is no difference between a line and its precise length or between the latter and length in general. Why did he find no need to argue in detail against ontological complexity, that is, against the individual/quality distinction?

My answer is that a genuine distinction between an individual, a line, and a quality, its precise length, implies an absurdity on his principles. The

absurdity, I submit, is Platonism. My hypothesis is that Hume took strong anti-Platonism to be, not just true, but obviously true and took all forms of Platonism, including minimal Platonism, to be metaphysical nonsense. Not only is the existence of an indeterminate non-individual impossible, the existence of an uninstantiated quality—no matter how determinate—is so as well. Minimal Platonism is metaphysical nonsense. Yet its truth can be demonstrated, given the Idea/Reality Principle and the three Difference Principles, if one grants an ontological difference between a line and its precise length or, more generally, between an individual and its quality. From that difference it follows that one can distinguish the line from its length and, therefore, form distinct ideas of both. Now just as no two impressions are perfectly inseparable, so no two truly distinct ideas, being ultimately derived from impressions, are perfectly inseparable (T 10). Were a line and its length truly different, then, given Hume's three Difference Principles, the former could be separated in thought from the latter by means of two different ideas, each of which clearly and distinctly represents one of those two entities. Since, Hume held, whatever can be clearly thought is possible in reality, it would follow that it is possible for a quality, the length of a line, to exist separately from the line and indeed from everything else as well. A quality could then exist uninstantiated; minimal Platonism would be true and strong anti-Platonism false. I am attributing to Hume, therefore, the following implicit argument. On the three Difference Principles and the Idea/Reality Principle, either some form of Platonism is true or else a line and its length are not truly different. But strong anti-Platonism is true, self-evidently so, and all forms of Platonism are absurd. Hence, a line and its length are not truly different; the line is individual, determinate, and simple. Consequently, one's idea of it and one's idea of its length are one and the same.

If one distinguishes between individuals and their qualities, but wants to resist even minimal Platonism, one must hold that some items having ontological status are not capable of existing in isolation. One must distinguish things which are capable of existing alone from those which can exist only when connected to some other entity. Hume, however, decisively broke with this tradition. One of his most interesting arguments against substance makes this perfectly clear. To one who defines "substance" as "something which may exist by itself" Hume objected "that this definition agrees to every thing, that can possibly be conceiv'd; and never will serve to distinguish substance from accident, or the soul from its perceptions." He continued,

For thus I reason. Whatever is clearly conceiv'd may exist; and whatever is clearly conceived, after any manner, may exist after the same manner. This is one principle, which has been already acknowledg'd. Again, every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination. This

is another principle. My conclusion from both is, that since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of anything else to support their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance.
(T 233)

This argument pulls together two groups of principles which are stated separately in the first and third arguments against general ideas. In the third argument he invoked the principle linking conceivability and possibility, writing, "...Nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible." In the first argument he articulated biconditionals linking difference, distinguishability, and separability in imagination. Here the full linkage is made apparent for the sake of showing that the definition of substance as that which can exist alone is satisfied by everything of which one can have a clear and distinct idea. The reverse side of this coin is that the expression 'dependent entity', meaning "necessarily dependent entity," is inconsistent if an entity is understood to be something that can be represented perspicuously by an idea. Consider two entities of which one is supposed to be strongly dependent upon the other, meaning thereby that its existence necessarily requires the existence of the other. That necessary dependence means it is impossible for the dependent entity to exist in the absence of that upon which it depends. Hume's argument would be that we have agreed there are two different entities, which implies one can distinguish them by forming ideas of each. Since distinguishability implies separability of ideas in imagination, one can conceive of the allegedly dependent entity as existing apart from the other. But since anything can exist in the manner in which it is clearly conceived to exist, the entity which supposedly cannot exist in the absence of the other can so exist. Its separate or independent existence is possible. The notion of a necessarily dependent entity is thus incoherent.

For Hume, then, were there genuine qualities in addition to the individuals whose qualities they are, those qualities would be ontologically independent of those individuals. This indicates why Hume would have dismissed the objection raised against his second and third arguments against general ideas, founded as it was on the supposition of dependent qualities. It also yields an intellectual motive for—that is, provides a rational explanation of—his denial of a distinction between individuals and qualities. Were Hume to endorse that distinction, he would be committed to positions entailing Platonism.³² I submit, therefore, that Hume embraced no-quality nominalism and did so to avoid Platonism.³³

V. Abstract Ideas and Distinctions of Reason

Before examining other passages in which Hume explicitly endorsed no-quality nominalism, I must attend to an important item of unfinished business. After stating his three arguments against the received position on abstraction, Hume offered an explanation of how abstract thinking works, of how, that is, one can think of kinds and general qualities when all of our ideas are individual and determinate. That explanation is revealing.

For John Locke, words become general in meaning by being made to stand for general ideas and ideas become general by abstracting that which is common to many things from those features with respect to which they differ. Hume, of course, rejected this account of abstracting. What is less frequently noticed is that he also rejected Locke's claim that general words presuppose general ideas, whereas general ideas do not presuppose general words.³⁴ For Hume, the reverse is true. We can apply ideas beyond their nature, that is, their individuality and determinateness, and use them to represent a kind in all of its variety, only through the mediation of general words. Hume defended this surprising position in the following passage:

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions. But as the same word is suppos'd to have been frequently applied to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, which is immediately present to the mind, the word not being able to revive the idea of all these individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allow'd so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquir'd in surveying them. They are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power; nor do we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. (T 20)³⁵

It is not really impossible to think of all members of a given kind because, once general terms are introduced on the basis of various resemblances among wholly determinate individuals (objects or impressions), the ideas of those individuals can acquire a secondary representation. When an idea is brought to mind by a name which applies commonly to its object and other objects which resemble that object in a distinctive way, either it or the name activates a tendency to recall as needed ideas of one or more of those objects.

Imperfectly, non-perspicuously, but in a manner sufficient to serve "all the purposes of reflexion and conversation" (T 18), one represents a general kind by an idea that, in itself, perspicuously represents only a particular instance of that kind.

Since resemblance plays a key role in his explanation of how a general term acquires meaning and how an idea of an individual represents all other members of the class which is the extension of that general term, Hume owed his readers a fuller account of that relation. He paid that debt, at least in part, in his Appendix to the *Treatise*, writing,

'Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou'd be distinct or separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho' their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. 'Tis the same case with particular sounds, and tastes and smells. These admit of infinite resemblances upon the general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. (T 637, Appendix)

Blue and green are different simple ideas which resemble one another. So claimed Hume, who also asserted, "nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance should be distinct or separable from that in which they differ." It cannot be necessary, since, he added, it is not even possible, being excluded by "their perfect simplicity." Were the point of resemblance in each idea distinct or separable from its point of difference, each of the two simple ideas would be complex, comprising at least a point of difference and a point of resemblance. But that is incompatible with their simplicity. Satisfied with this negative point, Hume left unanswered the question of how the resemblance of the two simple ideas is to be explained or clarified. Clearly an appeal to a quality is out of the question, since a quality would be just the kind of distinct point or circumstance that has been excluded. The most one can say, I suspect, is that given what blue, green, and scarlet are, green is fundamentally dissimilar to blue—hence they are conceptually different, yet is less dissimilar to blue than it is to scarlet.

Hume continued to exploit the simplicity of simple ideas in order to deny distinct grounds for resemblance. The passage continues:

And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms *simple idea*. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest.³⁶

Because applying a common label to a group of things is based on resemblance, all the ideas which we can correctly label "simple" resemble each other. However, there cannot be a circumstance or ground of simplicity resemblance that is distinct in each case from the remainder of the idea. If in some idea one could distinguish that ground from the remainder, the idea would not be simple. However, by hypothesis, it is simple.

Let us apply this variant of the argument from simplicity to the impressions from which a number of simple ideas are derived. So understood, the argument is that the resemblance with respect to simplicity of a group of conceptually simple but numerically different impressions does not require a common circumstance as the basis for their resembling, since if it did they would not be simple. In each one, on that requirement, one could distinguish that common circumstance from the remainder, in which case the supposedly simple impression would not be simple. It is worth noting that both Hume's argument concerning simple ideas and the parallel argument concerning simple impressions clearly require the assumption that the alleged ground for resemblance with respect to simplicity, if real, would be incompatible with the *conceptual* simplicity of the item under consideration. This seems to generate a serious problem for Hume's argument. If, as I contend, there is a genuine distinction between conceptual simplicity and ontological simplicity, such that neither implies the other, there is real danger that the arguments under consideration involve a fallacy of equivocation. One who holds that resemblance requires a foundation in a quality and so endorses ontological complexity is hardly embarrassed by the conclusion that a [conceptually] simple impression turns out on those principles to be [ontologically] complex.³⁷

Perhaps one or both of his arguments are or can be freed from equivocation, but that is far from obvious.³⁸ The problem just noted should not distract us from the real point of the Appendix passage, which is that predication is founded on resemblance, but resemblance is not founded on a ground or circumstance (a quality). Predication requires resemblance, Hume insisted, but not a genuine ontological distinction between individuals and their qualities. His fundamental entities neither exemplify qualities external to themselves nor unite and comprise internal, constitutive qualities. They may be conceptually complex, being named by definable words; they may be compositionally complex, being extended objects constituted by vanishingly small indivisibles; but they are never ontologically complex.

Various strands of Hume's thought regarding ontological complexity are exhibited in his treatment of distinctions of reason, the philosophical device commonly invoked to deny ontological significance to distinctions occurring within language or thought. Hume first invoked his Difference Principles to render distinctions of reason problematic, writing,

The difficulty of explaining this distinction arises from the principle above explain'd, *that all ideas, which are different, are separable*. For it follows from thence, that if the figure be different from the body, their ideas must be separable as well as distinguishable; if they be not different, their ideas can neither be separable nor distinguishable. What then is meant by a distinction of reason, since it implies neither a difference nor separation? (T 24–25)

Why is there a difficulty? In part because a genuine difference between body and its figure would imply that the idea of a figure would be different and thus separable in thought from the idea of the body whose figure it is. Why is that a problem? Because, I contend, the existence of the figure separate from the body would turn out to be possible, since for Hume whatever can be clearly conceived (represented by a genuine idea) is possible. That he portrayed the separability of the two ideas as a difficulty shows, I think, that even minimal Platonism regarding figures and other qualities is for him a completely unacceptable result. His way out was radical indeed. It begins with the passage quoted earlier,

'Tis certain that the mind wou'd never have dream'd of distinguishing a figure from the body figur'd, as being in reality neither distinguishable, nor different, nor separable; did it not observe, that even in this simplicity there might be contain'd many different resemblances and relations. Thus when a globe of white marble is presented, we receive only the impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form, nor are we able to separate and distinguish the colour from the form. (T 25)

A body—for example, a globe—is not ontologically different from its figure. Provided the individual and qualities under consideration are objects of the same sensory experience, there is no genuine *ontological* distinction between an individual and one of its qualities or between two conceptually different qualities of a single individual. As there is no distinction between individual and quality, so there is no distinction between an idea of the individual and an idea of its quality. Consequently, there is no longer a problem of how there can be dependent entities or distinctions which hold only in thought.

A problem, a different problem, remains. We obviously do have a distinction at the linguistic level between body and figure, point and color, marble object and its shape. Hume's very language in stating and then rejecting the traditional problem acknowledges these distinctions. Hence he needed to explain how there can be a distinction in language and non-perspicuous thinking when there is no ontological distinction and therefore no distinction at the level of clear and distinct ideas. To solve this problem he

appealed once again to resemblance. Despite the absence of a distinction between individuals and qualities, individuals can stand in numerous relations of similarity and dissimilarity to other equally simple individuals, thus permitting the applicability of various ranges of predicates to them. An entity, *A*, can resemble *B*, *C*, *D*, and *E*, even though *B* and *C*, which resemble one another, do not resemble *D* and *E*, which also resemble one other. *A* can thus be a member of two different classes. One thus can compare an individual to other individuals from a wide variety of classes. One can truly say of a globe that it is both white and round and distinguish its color from its shape because one can compare it to both the individuals it resembles in one way (color) and the individuals it resembles in yet another way (shape). Thus a single idea, the idea of a single individual, can function as an idea of an individual, an idea of its color, and an idea of its shape. The multiple resemblances of a single object or impression can support different general words, for example, 'white' and 'round'; and the idea of that object, when called forth by a sequence of such words, can represent successively a sequence of different general kinds. The kinds are indeed different and the difference is marked linguistically, but there is no ontological ground for the similarities and dissimilarities which generate various class distinctions. So goes Hume's account of distinctions of reason, which might better be called distinctions of discourse, since words are crucial to the whole process and the distinctions, for example, between figure and body, disappear when one moves from words to things or even our genuine ideas of things.

If the above interpretation is correct, Hume's tendency to write of the qualities of things and to characterize objects as collections of qualities did not commit him to an ontological category of qualities, since when he makes such claims he is operating at the linguistic level of analysis. Since ordinary individuals were for Hume conceptually complex, it was convenient for him to refer to them as collections of qualities. In such contexts, however, qualities are objects of language-mediated thought, not objects represented by perspicuous, that is, clear and distinct ideas. Nor are they fundamental entities. What is fundamental? Hume's account of the passions seems to me unspeakably difficult, so that in answering this question and thereby summarizing my overall argument I shall restrict myself to impressions of sensation, objects of sensory experience. Regarding them, I claim Hume held:

- 1 The basic impressions of each sense are ontologically simple in the primary sense; they neither consist of nor exemplify qualities, where by 'quality' one means a supposed ground for the applicability of a one-place predicate such as 'white'.
- 2 The simple individuals stand in relations, among others relations of similarity and dissimilarity.

- 2a Some (points of colors and tactile points), which are compositionally simple, stand in spatial relations to one another and thus can and do become the ultimate parts of composite extended things.
- 2b Other ontologically simple impressions (sounds, odors, pains) do not stand in spatial relations; they are never constituents of composite extended things.³⁹
- 2c Simple impressions of both kinds stand in relations of resemblance to one another; on the basis of these similarities, they are classified—assigned various common names. Thus are quality distinctions drawn.
- 3 Once quality names are introduced, ideas of individuals also function as ideas of qualities and thus abstract thinking takes place.
- 4 Ideas acquired from several senses are combined because of the temporal or spatial contiguity of their source impressions; when general terms are also associated with those ideas, names for conceptually complex combinations of qualities can also be introduced.

Thinking of natural kinds, such as dogs, complex modes, such as dancing, and ordinary (conceptually complex) individual things, such as the Statue of Liberty, by means of their descriptions, can now occur. With (3) and (4), however, we are no longer in the realm of ontologically fundamental items. We have entered the realm of discourse and non-perspicuous representation.

VI. Qualified Points Without Qualities

Earlier I raised for my position the objection that Hume's doctrine of compositional simples required him to acknowledge a distinction between individuals and their qualities and thus embrace ontological complexity. Central to that argument was Hume's thesis that the ultimate parts of an extended being are unextended. A standard objection to this position, which is usually called the mathematical points theory, is that unextended points are nothings, so that no collection of such points, no matter how numerous or how arranged, can compose an extended being. The claim that unextended points are nothings can be taken in two different ways. One is to emphasize that the magnitude of an unextended point is zero and to argue that the magnitude of an extended being is the product of the number of its parts and the magnitude of each part, assuming the parts are uniform. The problem is that when the magnitude of each part is zero, the product will be zero, no matter how many points are assumed. This is the quantitative interpretation of the nothingness objection. Hume interprets it differently. For him the great problem with the ultimate parts of extension is supposed to be that since they are unextended, there is nothing to them and so they are non-entities.

That he so interpreted the objection can be seen from his response to the following:

It has often been maintain'd in the schools, that extension must be divisible *in infinitum*, because the system of mathematical points is absurd; and that system is absurd, because a mathematical point is a non-entity, and consequently can never by its conjunction with others form a real existence. (T 40)

Hume's formulation of the objection in terms of the impossibility of generating a real existence from non-entities suggests that his concern is not with quantity or magnitude. His response confirms this. He wrote:

This wou'd be perfectly decisive, were there no medium betwixt the infinite divisibility of matter, and the non-entity of mathematical points. But there is evidently a medium, viz. the bestowing a colour or solidity on these points; and the absurdity of both the extremes is a demonstration of the truth and reality of this medium. (T 40)

The medium cannot be what Hume called a physical point, that is, an extended but indivisible object, because what is extended has parts and so is divisible, not indivisible. The only medium is an unextended point of color or solidity, something which is both a mathematical point and a genuine entity.

In the previous section of the *Treatise*, Hume had anticipated his response to the objection, writing of the idea of an ultimate part of extension:

It is plain it is not the idea of extension: for the idea of extension consists of parts; and this idea, according to the supposition, is perfectly simple and indivisible. Is it, therefore, nothing? That is absolutely impossible. For as the compound idea of extension, which is real, is composed of such ideas, were these so many nonentities there would be a real existence composed of nonentities, which is absurd. Here, therefore, I must ask, *What is our idea of a simple and indivisible point?* No wonder if my answer appear somewhat new, since the question itself has scarce ever yet been thought of. We are wont to dispute concerning the nature of mathematical points, but seldom concerning the nature of their ideas. (T 38)

In a passage rendered somewhat confusing by his switch from consideration of the idea of an ultimate part of extension to consideration of the idea of space as a whole, Hume stated his answer to the new question, writing,

The idea of space is convey'd to the mind by two senses, the sight and touch; nor does any thing ever appear extended, that is not either visible or tangible. That compound impression, which represents extension, consists of several lesser impressions, that are indivisible to the eye or feeling, and may be call'd impressions of atoms or corpuscles endowed with colour and solidity. But this is not all. 'Tis not only requisite, that these atoms shou'd be colour'd or tangible, in order to discover themselves to our senses; 'tis also necessary we shou'd preserve the idea of their colour or tangibility in order to comprehend them by our imagination. There is nothing but the idea of their colour or tangibility, which can render them conceivable by the mind. Upon the removal of the ideas of these sensible qualities, they are utterly annihilated to the thought or imagination. (T 38-39)

One can give meaning to the expression 'ultimate part of extension' negatively in terms of an indivisible and thus unextended part of what is extended and divisible. Hume demanded more, asking what one conceives to be unextended and indivisible. His answer was that one's idea of an ultimate part of extension is either the idea of a color or the idea of solidity.

In ignorance of Hume's account of how quality distinctions are generated for language and thought by multiple comparisons, one might well think that this answer concerning the nature of ultimate parts committed him to a genuine ontological distinction between individuals, the points, and their qualities, the color or solidity, with which they are endowed. Given that account, though, it should be clear that all he was insisting upon was the occurrence of some entities which can stand in spatial or temporal relations as well as be subjected to the comparisons which generate quality distinctions at the level of language and non-perspicuous thought. In the wake of his account of distinctions of reason in T I i 7, Hume could speak of points endowed with color in T I ii 3 and 4 without committing himself to both points and colors as distinct ontological kinds. All that he needed or thought he needed for his account to work were unextended visual objects with sufficient content to be classified as a determinate color, e.g., purple, upon comparison with other visual items, or as colored, a determinable, upon comparison with items which could themselves be given a determinate classification.

The application of the doctrines of abstraction and of distinctions of reason to Hume's account of our idea of extension is manifested in the following passage:

Suppose that, in the extended object, or composition of colour'd points, from which we first received the idea of extension, the points were of a purple colour; it follows, that in every repetition of that idea

we would not only place the points in the same order with respect to each other, but also bestow on them that precise colour with which alone we are acquainted. But afterwards, having experience of the other colours of violet, green, red, white, black, and of all the different compositions of these, and finding a resemblance in the disposition of coloured points, of which they are composed, we omit the peculiarities of colour, as far as possible, and found an abstract idea merely on that disposition of points, or manner of appearance, in which they agree. Nay, even when the resemblance is carried beyond the objects of one sense, and the impressions of touch are found to be similar to those of sight in the disposition of their parts; this does not hinder the abstract idea from representing both, upon account of their resemblance. All abstract ideas are really nothing but particular ones, considered in a certain light; but being annexed to general terms, they are able to represent a vast variety, and to comprehend objects, which, as they are alike in some particulars, are in others vastly wide of each other. (T 34)

Since it had just been articulated, it is hardly surprising that Hume utilized his account of abstract ideas and distinctions of reason to secure his account of the ultimate parts of extension.

Now for a concession or, rather, acknowledgement of the phenomenological situation. It would not be wildly inaccurate to say that the phenomenal items which are the source impressions for our ideas of extended things and our ideas of red or purple, are particularized qualities, meaning that in some sense they are both qualities and individualized. It needs to be acknowledged, even emphasized, that for Hume those items are not qualitatively neutral individuators, pure or bare particulars as it were. Their difference, of which we are aware, is more than mere numerical difference. That is why the two impressions support different comparisons and resemblances. Thus, one of two visual impressions may be said to differ qualitatively from the second in the sense that the members of the class of visual impressions it closely resembles are numerically different from those in the class of visual impressions the second closely resembles. This is true even or especially at the level of compositional simples. That is why it is not wildly inaccurate to say Hume's phenomenal building blocks are particularized qualities. It is, however, somewhat misleading, since to characterize them so is to invoke linguistic and conceptual distinctions which arise only after multiple comparisons have been made. A visual impression can be thought of as a quality, but only after the required comparisons have occurred and even, perhaps, after the required linguistic structures have been erected.

Although his position on abstract ideas and distinctions of reason was carried over to and employed in defense of his account of our ideas of

extension, duration, space, and time, it should be emphasized that Hume's business in Book I, Part ii of the *Treatise* was to secure a pair of theses that were meant to provide innovative and complete solutions to three prominent and long-standing metaphysical issues. One was the very old question of the composition of the continuum. The second, equally old, concerned the possibility of a pure space, that is, a being which is extended but not a body. The third, more recent, was whether sound philosophy requires or allows a distinction between primary and secondary qualities. In relation to the first issue Hume claimed that there are *compositional simples* which are the ultimate parts of extended things. His second thesis was that one can conceive of an ultimate, because unextended, part of extension only through or by an idea of a colored or solid point. Besides staving off the criticism that he was absurdly constructing real beings out of non-entities, Hume used his second thesis to secure a further claim and thus resolve the other two issues. He invoked it to argue that to form an adequate idea of an extension is to form the idea of a class of contiguous points, either colored or tactile. He held that this implies that extension cannot be conceived independently of both colors and tactile qualities. This conclusion was used to discredit the modern philosopher's claim that though secondary qualities such as colors and tactile qualities cannot exist unsensed, extension and other primary qualities can and do so exist (T 225–231). Hume also held that because of the nature of the idea through which alone an extended thing can adequately be conceived, one cannot form an idea of a completely empty space—a pure extension—even though we uncritically think that we can.⁴⁰ A parallel to this final argument was developed regarding time. In brief, Hume maintained that time requires a succession and a succession requires items succeeding one another. Since the idea of duration and time can only be derived from a succession of impressions, any genuine idea of time must include ideas of some objects or states succeeding one another. Thus there can be no idea of time itself or time devoid of objects in time (T 64–65). This argument will be examined more fully in the final section of this paper.

VII. Hume and Ontological Complexity

I cannot end this discussion without some critical comments⁴¹ regarding Hume's no-quality nominalism, one of which will raise the question of whether he merely rejected qualities or instead rejected ontological complexity altogether. First, it could be argued that what he has shown is, at most, that one who endorses his highly non-traditional principles, the Idea/Reality Principle and the three Difference Principles, can avoid minimal Platonism only by embracing radical no-quality nominalism. One sharing those principles might well prefer to endorse an individual/quality distinction even at the cost of embracing minimal Platonism—which after all only asserts that a

quality can exist uninstantiated, rather than accept no-quality nominalism. Following the example of Thomas Reid, one might go further by repudiating the four biconditionals we have labelled Hume's Idea/Reality Principle and Difference Principles.⁴² One could defend such a move by noting that it spares one the unpalatable choice between minimal Platonism and no-quality nominalism. Even allowing Hume his four principles, one can raise a methodological worry. Sometimes he makes claims about what is possible or impossible in order to draw conclusions about the nature of our ideas. At other times he first describes an idea and proceeds to argue that what it represents is possible. Should Hume be allowed to argue in both directions, both from reality (at least, possibility) to ideas and from ideas to reality? Is there not a real danger of circularity or at least *ad hoc* argumentation if inferences in both directions are allowed?⁴³

Next I want to raise two objections to Hume's appeal to resemblance as his ground for generating quality distinctions. Recall our two golf balls. Since we can apply 'dimpled' to both, they must resemble, since resemblance alone can be the basis for the application of a single adjective to two individuals. On the other hand, one cannot apply 'white' to both of them, since one of them is yellow. With respect to color, A and B do not resemble. This yields a dilemma: Either Hume must grant there is a contradiction (A both resembles and does not resemble B) or he must introduce qualities to be the terms of his resemblance relations. (On the latter option, q_1 in A resembles q_2 in B, so one can say both A and B are dimpled, but q_3 in A does not resemble q_4 in B, so one cannot say both A and B are white.) The former alternative instantly refutes his theory, since it implies a contradiction. The latter alternative is no less unattractive since it amounts to abandoning no-quality nominalism in favor of augmented quality nominalism, which recognizes a genuine distinction between individuals and their qualities and therefore, given Hume's Idea/Reality and Difference Principles, implies minimal Platonism. The only system-preserving response to this argument is to insist that there are different varieties of resemblance relations. (One could then maintain that A and B resemble₁, which permits one to say A and B are dimpled, but that A and B do not resemble₂, so that one cannot say both A and B are white.) This solution permits one to avoid the contradiction without assuming qualities. But is it intelligible—have we ways of distinguishing resembles₁ from resembles₂ without appealing to qualities? And can it really generate all the quality distinctions recognized at the level of language?

The second objection assumes either that the above dilemma is faulty in itself or that the multiple-similarities solution to it works. It concentrates on the status of resemblance and any other relations Hume endorsed. The objection is not that Hume cannot consistently posit relations and retain his principle that everything in nature is individual (T 19). It is what I take to be the deeper problem that if resemblance is to do the job of accounting for the

qualitative distinctions (the distinctions of reason) found at the linguistic level, it must be genuinely different from the individuals which it relates to one another. If this is so, Hume did not reject ontological complexity; he merely preferred an individuals/relations ontology to an individuals/qualities ontology. This result is unacceptable, however, since what was wrong with the individual/qualities distinction was that it introduced ontological complexity, which, given the Idea/Reality and Difference Principles, implied minimal Platonism. Given those same principles and an ontological distinction between individuals and relations, it would follow that resemblance (or any other genuine relation) could exist separately from any and all individuals. This is a variant of minimal Platonism as noxious and undesirable as the rest, so Hume's appeal to resemblance to eliminate the need for qualities is indefensible at best and inconsistent at worst.

Hume's theory of relations is recognized by many to be one of the most obscure departments in his philosophy. It certainly is one of the least developed, especially considering its centrality. It does seem that Hume thought that he could give relations prominent roles in various parts of his philosophy despite or, perhaps, *because* they lacked full ontological status. A passage from the section of the *Treatise* discussed in Part VI of this paper nicely illustrates how Hume exploited both the reality of relations and their non-robust ontological status to achieve a philosophical end. In accounting for our idea of time, Hume wrote:

In order to know [whether] any objects, which are join'd in impression, be separable in idea, we need only consider, if they be different from each other; in which case, 'tis plain they may be conceiv'd apart. Every thing, that is different, is distinguishable; and every thing, that is distinguishable, may be separated, according to the maxims above-explain'd. If on the contrary they be not different, they are not distinguishable; and if they be not distinguishable, they cannot be separated. But this is precisely the case with respect to time, compar'd with our successive perceptions. The idea of time is not deriv'd from a particular impression mix'd up with others, and plainly distinguishable from them; but arises altogether from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number. (T 36)

The point made about the status of our idea of time is illustrated by a musical example. Hume wrote:

Five notes play'd on a flute gives us the impression and idea of time; tho' time be not a sixth impression, which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses. Nor is it a sixth impression, which

the mind by reflection finds in itself....But here it only takes notice of the *manner*, in which the different sounds make their appearance; and that it may afterwards consider without considering these particular sounds, but may conjoin it with any other objects. The ideas of some objects it certainly must have, nor is it possible for it without these ideas ever to arrive at any conception of time; which since it appears not as any primary distinct impression, can plainly be nothing but different ideas, or impressions, or objects dispos'd in a certain manner, that is, succeeding one another. (T 36–37)

The source in experience of the idea of time is the manner in which the five notes occur; they succeed one another in a distinctive manner, that is, a way different from the way in which five highly similar notes might succeed one another. In experiencing them one is aware of more than just the five notes and subsequently, after experience of similar sequences of qualitatively different impressions, that something more can be considered without considering the same five notes. Still, Hume insisted, the manner in which the notes succeed one another is no sixth impression. Time does not appear as any "primary distinct impression." That is why thinking of temporal succession requires ideas of a set of entities (impressions, ideas, objects) "dispos'd in a certain manner, that is, succeeding one another." That is also why the Difference Principles and the Idea/Reality Principle do not require us to acknowledge the possibility of time without objects standing in temporal relations. Although there is something more than the five notes, the something more is not a distinct entity, so the key principles governing possible objects do not apply.

In the passages just considered Hume invoked the relation of succession obtaining among the five notes in order to account for the idea of time. He not only assigned a very unusual status to the relation of succession—it is not a distinct entity on a par with the others—he exploits its unusual status in order to block the inference to the possibility of time without successive objects. One cannot form a distinct idea of such a thing, so no such thing is possible. This way of arguing parallels Hume's use of resemblance to account for qualitative sameness and difference without positing qualities. In seeing two spots, one aquamarine, one turquoise, I am aware of more than two spots, yet, Hume contends, what I see involves only two entities. This is doubly so. In the first place, as has been argued in this paper, there is no quality in each on which that similarity is based. Furthermore, though the spots resemble, their resemblance is not a distinct entity. Their similarity, unmistakable though it is, is founded on and ontologically exhausted by what each object is. At the level of ideas, Hume's position amounts to the claim that despite one's ability to recognize and to some extent represent in thought and language the similarity of the two spots, that similarity cannot be represented by a distinct

or perspicuous idea. That is why, I submit, Hume thought that grounding distinctions of reason on resemblance, far from generating the possibility of relations without relata, perfectly avoided the unwanted Platonistic consequence of acknowledging qualities, which unavoidably introduces ontological complexity. Hence, what may seem to us an obvious consequence of and a fatal flaw in Hume's appeal to resemblance—a relation—to provide distinctions of reason when qualities could not, seems to him to have been blocked by the special ontological status of relations, which, according to Hume at least, can be perspicuously represented at the level of ideas even though there are no distinct ideas of relations.⁴⁴

NOTES

Earlier versions of this paper, under various titles, were presented to the NEH Hume Institute, the Midwest Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy, and to philosophy departments at the University of Oklahoma, Wayne State University, University of Michigan/Flint, and Brown University. I appreciate having had these opportunities to receive comments and criticisms, too numerous to be acknowledged individually, which without question have improved the paper, whatever flaws it may still have. I want, however, to acknowledge the special help of Donald L. M. Baxter, who provided very useful comments on an early draft.

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited as T in the text.

2 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), hereafter cited as *Essay*; see especially *Essay* II ii 1–3, II xx 1, II xxii 9–10, and, for the most extended discussion of the indefinable/simple link, III iv 11–14. See my "Locke's Anticipation of Hume's Use of 'Impression'," *The Modern Schoolman* 50 (1973): 297–301, for evidence that Hume was quite familiar with *Essay* III iv, which bears the title, "Of the Names of Simple Ideas."

3 Perhaps one should say instead that to have a genuine concept of something, as opposed to an imperfect or relative notion, is to know what it is. I have a genuine concept or idea of diarrhea; I know what it is. As it happens, I know what it is because I have experienced it. What I have experienced and identify as diarrhea is a collection of symptoms. I believe something causes or is the physiological ground of those symptoms, but do not know what it is. Though I do not know what that cause is, the expression "the cause of my diarrhea" has meaning for me. In the terminology of seventeenth and eighteenth century writers, I have only a notion or relative idea of the cause of diarrhea. Daniel Flage, in a series of papers, among them "Hume's Relative Ideas," *Hume Studies* 7.1 (1981): 55–73, and in his *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), has done very useful work on this important distinction.

4 Were this a paper devoted to Locke on simple ideas, I would have to face the question of whether for him an indispensable condition of having a simple idea (an idea of a simple) is having a prior or simultaneous experience of the object of that idea. He seems to have allowed some counterexamples, most notably in the case of the idea of power, which seems to require only a distinctive pattern of experienced change; see *Essay* II xxi 1.

5 On nominal essences and sorting, see *Essay* III ii. On our lack of knowledge of natural kinds, see *Essay* IV vi and IV viii 4–10. My sketch, obviously, has ignored important problems in the interpretation of Locke on nominal essences. See, for example, Martha Brandt Bolton, "The Idea-Theoretic Basis of Locke's Anti-essentialist Doctrine of Nominal Essence," in *Minds, Ideas, and Objects: Theories of Representation in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Phillip Cummins and Guenter Zoeller, North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy, vol. 2, (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1992), 85–95.

6 T 16. See, too, T I i 1, for Hume's discussion of the derivation of simple ideas.

7 See, too, David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), hereafter EHU, where Hume wrote, "Complex ideas may, perhaps, be well known by definition, which is nothing but an enumeration of those parts or simple ideas, that compose them. But when we have pushed up definitions to the most simple ideas, and find still some ambiguity and obscurity, what resource are we then possessed of? By what invention can we throw light upon these ideas, and render them altogether precise and determinate to our intellectual view? Produce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied. These impressions are all strong and sensible. They admit not of ambiguity. They are not only placed in a full light themselves, but may throw light on their correspondent ideas, which lie in obscurity. And by this means, we may, perhaps, attain a new microscope or species of optics, by which, in the moral sciences, the most minute, and most simple ideas may be so enlarged as to fall readily under our apprehension, and be equally known with the grossest and most sensible ideas, that can be the object of our enquiry" (EHU 62).

8 See my "Bayle, Leibniz, Hume, and Reid on Extension, Composites, and Simples," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990): 299–315.

9 To some extent Hume's position on extension was based on his view that spatiality and temporality are essentially relational. He regarded an extended object as having both external spatiality—its spatial relations to other things, and internal spatiality—that which determines its magnitude and shape. Relations must have terms (relata), so extended things are understood with reference to parts whose spatial relationships to one another generate for the whole class of parts an extension of a determinate magnitude and shape. In a similar way, a thing's duration is a function of the temporal order of its distinct parts. Hume also claims it cannot be conceived or represented by a perspicuous idea unless the idea is of the parts so ordered. In the final section of the present paper, this doctrine about duration and time will be examined.

10 There is a third alternative, according to which each individual, in the

ordinary sense, is a whole, but has both qualities and a special individuating particular among its parts. On this view both forms of ontological complexity are endorsed. Ordinary individuals are wholes, complexes, and the analysis of those individuals invokes entities of two diverse types. A full investigation of all the options available to defenders of ontological complexity, which will not be pursued in this paper, would reveal some unusual positions. One might hold, for instance, that individuals have both internal qualities, which constitute their natures, and other, external qualities which are their accidental features. Unless its defender can find an alternative to the whole/part model for explicating intrinsic predication, this alternative implies that individuals are ontologically complex. For my purposes, therefore, it can be ignored.

11 In two of the three senses of complexity surveyed in Part I of this paper, a whole or collection is the model for complexity. In the case of ontological complexity, however, the need to augment individuals to account for predication is the key idea. One who would reduce individuals to qualities and thereby return to a single category of entities must treat them as wholes. Ontological complexity has not been eliminated; it has only been modified. Although in this sense the two models for ontological complexity are equivalent, it should be noted that the whole/part version is more important for trying to understand Hume. As will be seen in Part III, one reason for thinking that Hume endorsed qualities is that he seems to endorse the position that ordinary individuals are wholes consisting of qualities.

12 A sense of the simple/complex distinction which Hume did not seem to have employed is what I call the physical composition sense. One might say that a drop of water is physically complex, meaning that it is composed of heterogeneous elements, hydrogen and oxygen. Water in this respect would be contrasted to hydrogen. Further, one specifies the composition of water by the familiar formula, H_2O , which provides a ratio of the constituent elements of the two kinds. Physicists, of course, go far beyond the charts of chemical elements in providing their accounts of the composition of natural objects and processes, but their search for the ultimate elements does not involve a sense of compositeness and non-compositeness beyond what I have called the physical composition sense. Even when new criteria of compositeness are developed and applied, composition is understood in terms of the types of entities a thing comprises, the number of units of each type, and the natural forces which bind the units together.

13 Authentic (historical) Platonism may have little or nothing to do with the three forms of Platonism I shall define. There is considerable evidence, especially in *Parmenides*, that Plato distinguished his ideas (forms) from both individuals and their observable qualities. Plato's forms are archetypal—models.

14 Consider the parallel case of weak and strong immaterialism. The former is the claim that there are no material substances, the latter the claim that material substances are impossible. What is required to prove weak immaterialism? It is not enough to prove (a) we have no evidence for the existence of material substances, since that is compatible with both (b) there are no material substances and (c) there are material substances which cannot

be known. One must therefore also eliminate (c) the nescience hypothesis, in order to secure (b). But how? The difficulty of this task motivates the attempt to prove that material substances are impossible, which directly implies (b). Sometimes, it seems, a position is provable only if a more sweeping or stronger position is provable. This is not to assert, of course, that either strong immaterialism or strong anti-Platonism is provable. Nor is it to claim that they are easier to defend (give good reasons for) than their weaker counterparts.

15 Edwin B. Allaire convinced me many years ago that avoiding confusion over the ontological status of qualities requires distinguishing between the issue of whether qualities are universal or particular and the issue of whether they have or can have separate existence. This is not to say he currently would endorse these distinctions or my use of them. It should also be emphasized that using these distinctions in relation to Hume and his contemporaries is not in principle anachronistic. The following passage from Thomas Reid's discussion of attributes in his essay on abstraction in *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), Essay 4, chap. 1, 465, reveals this. Reid wrote, "...It may be observed, that every individual object that falls within our view has various attributes; and it is by them that it becomes useful or hurtful to us....Now all attributes must from their nature be expressed by general words, and are so expressed in all languages. In the ancient philosophy, attributes in general were called by two names which express their nature. They were called *universals*, because they might belong equally to many individuals, and are not confined to one; they were also called *predicables*, because whatever is predicated, that is, affirmed or denied of one subject, may be of more, and therefore is a universal, and expressed by a general word." For an account of Reid's theory of abstraction and its links to Locke, see my "Reid on Abstract General Ideas," in *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations*, edited by S. F. Barker and T. L. Beauchamp, Philosophical Monographs (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1976), 62–76.

16 After Hume's fundamental principles are examined, it will be possible to consider the interconnection of these questions more precisely. See note 32.

17 The next paragraph begins, "The idea of a substance as well as that of a mode, 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 to others, that collection. But the difference betwixt these ideas consists in this, that the particular qualities, which form a substance, are commonly refer'd to an unknown *something*, in which they are supposed to inhere...." At T 14, Hume wrote, "When a quality becomes very general and is common to a great many individuals, it leads not the mind directly to any one of them...." On T 15 he added, "When any two objects possess the same *quality* in common, the *degrees* in which they possess it, form a fifth species of relation." See, too, T 219–221.

18 David Hausman, "Can Hume's Use of a Simple/Complex Distinction Be Made Consistent?" *Hume Studies* 14.2 (1988):424–428; Hausman worries about inconsistency in these and similar passages of the *Treatise*. He even suggests, as I shall, that anti-Platonism may motivate Hume's position on distinctions of reason. However, he utilizes a distinction between logical and psychological simplicity that does little to clarify Hume's thought on the issues under

consideration and his remarks on the topics discussed in the present paper are brief, even cryptic.

19 Hume's terminology was Berkeley's and Locke's, but whereas the latter two agreed that there are general ideas, i.e. ideas which represent general objects such as kinds and determinable properties, and disagreed as to whether a process of abstracting yields ideas of these objects, Hume stipulated that there are abstract ideas, ideas which represent abstract objects such as kinds, and inquired whether those ideas do so by truly representing general objects. They asked, are general ideas abstract or not? He asked, are abstract ideas general or not? For a detailed treatment of Berkeley and Hume on abstraction and the roots underlying their verbal and real differences, see Dennis E. Bradshaw, "Berkeley and Hume on Abstraction and Generalization," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (1988): 11–22. See also Harry M Bracken, "Hume on the 'Distinction of Reason'," *Hume Studies* 10.2 (1984):89–108.

20 If I understand him correctly, Julius Weinberg makes a serious mistake in his discussion of how Hume responded to the two alternatives under consideration: "As we have seen, Berkeley in one passage (the unfortunate blunder to which I have alluded several times) supposed that Locke's abstract general idea was intended to represent, conjunctively, all specific variants of itself. Hume completely ignores this, and supposes that the abstract general idea must either (1) represent all specific variants of itself *disjunctively*, or (2) represent none of the variants. The first alternative is dismissed at once on the ground that the unlimited number of variants implies an 'infinite capacity' in the mind" (Weinberg, "The Nominalism of Berkeley and Hume," a chapter in his *Abstraction, Relation, and Induction* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965], 32–33). This is far from correct. Hume stated what was taken to be a decisive refutation of the first alternative, only to answer it with his positive theory. Even when Weinberg considers that positive theory, he does not cancel the above claim by noting that Hume has attempted to show how all specific variants can be represented without supposing the infinite capacity of the mind. Weinberg's error may come from supposing Hume intended to reject abstract ideas, which is not so. His thesis was that ideas which function as abstract ideas are not general in nature. See note 19.

21 The passage in which he invoked the principle reads, "... 'Tis a principle generally receiv'd in philosophy, that every thing in nature is individual, and that 'tis utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles" (T 19) .

22 The biconditional I have called the Idea/Reality Principle combines two conditionals that are logically independent of one another. The conceivability principle asserts that if some state of affairs or being is conceivable, then it is possible. The inconceivability principle asserts that if some state of affairs is inconceivable, then it is impossible. When combined into the Idea/Reality Principle, they warrant inferences both from what is possible or impossible to what can or cannot be conceived, respectively, and from what can or cannot be conceived to what is possible or impossible, respectively. In the final section of this paper I shall present some critical comments about Hume's dual use of this principle. For more on these points, see Albert Casullo, "Reid and Mill on Hume's Maxim of Conceivability," *Analysis* 39 (1979): 212–219.

23 A key statement in Hume's theory of knowledge occurs at T 29: "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." Four patterns of argument from ideas to objects (actually states of affairs) are founded on this principle: (1) *from* the adequate idea or the conceivability of a state of affairs *to* its possibility; (2) *from* an adequate idea or the conceivability of a state of affairs *to* the non-necessity of the negation of that state of affairs; (3) *from* the inconceivability of a state of affairs *to* the impossibility of that state of affairs; and (4) *from* the inconceivability of a state of affairs *to* the necessity of the negation of that state of affairs.

24 I take "is alone" to mean "is by itself."

25 Having argued that even though in some as yet unspecified way it can represent kinds and common qualities, an abstract idea strictly speaking can only be of what is individual and determinate, Hume proceeded to argue that the *idea itself* must be individual and determinate. He secured this peculiar conclusion by asserting a connection between what an idea is and what it is of. His puzzling premise was "...To form an idea of an object, and to form an idea simply is the same thing; the reference of the idea to an object being an extraneous denomination, of which in itself it bears no mark or character" (T 20). One of the most difficult tasks in the interpretation of Hume is comprehending his theory of how ideas represent what they represent. This passage only adds to the puzzlement. Compare T 239–240. He could have saved space, I think, by simply arguing that since ideas exist and everything which exists must be individual and determinate, they too must be individual and determinate.

26 Hume made it look as though his causal principle, that all [simple] ideas are derived from impressions, plays a role in his second argument, but the argument really turns on the supposed fact that simple ideas exactly copy simple impressions, differing from them only in force and vivacity. Nor does the derivation principle serve to justify the copy (exact likeness) thesis. Later, at T 173 and T 249–250, Hume explicitly argued that considered *a priori* anything could be cause of anything, a position which precludes appeal to *a priori* regulative principles such as "like causes like." Even if each simple idea is derived from some simple impression, which it represents, it does not follow that the categorial properties of the impressions represented are also properties of the ideas which represent them. The exact copy thesis, which states that ideas represent impressions by exactly resembling them, save for force and vivacity, is required to secure that connection. Once invoked it can secure the connection independently of claims about the derivation of ideas from impressions.

27 At T 19, Hume wrote, "The confusion, in which impressions are sometimes involv'd, proceeds only from their faintness and unsteadiness, not from any capacity in the mind to receive any impression, which in its real existence has no particular degree nor proportion. That is a contradiction in terms; and even implies the flattest of all contradictions, *viz.* that 'tis possible for the same thing both to be and not to be." I am not at all clear about how a

contradiction follows from the supposition that an indeterminate or general impression exists.

28 Since Hume formulated his principles in terms of 'whatever's, representing them as biconditionals is slightly misleading, but significantly assists exposition.

29 The principle, it will be recalled, was invoked to secure the reality of compositional simples.

30 See, for example, T 255–256. On Hume's view of wholes, see Donald L. M. Baxter, "Hume on Virtue, Beauty, Composites, and Secondary Qualities," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1990): 103–118, especially 108–110, and Baxter, "Hume on Infinite Divisibility," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (1988): 133–140.

31 In his "Hume and Abstract General Ideas," *Hume Studies* 3.1 (1977): 17–31, George Pappas offers interpretations and criticisms of Hume's three arguments against abstract general ideas. On the first argument, see pp. 20–26. One problem with Pappas' approach is his use of the concept of predicate to explicate distinguishability. For Hume, the problem of abstract general ideas is in part a problem of whether different predicates, for example, 'scarlet' and 'red' signify different entities or not. Consequently, relying upon the concept of a predicate to grasp the elements of his attempted solution may prevent one from appreciating that attempt.

32 Hume's principles also have interesting implications for the question of whether qualities are universals. A quality is a universal if it is capable of being instantiated or exemplified by more than one individual. Since, whether or not one endorses a whole/part analysis of individuals, a quality is distinct from the other fundamental entities, there is no basis for a Humean to deny the possibility of multiple instantiations or exemplifications of qualities. One who endorses qualities and invokes the Difference and Idea/Reality Principles to assert that every distinctly conceived entity can exist apart or separately from every other distinctly conceived entity has no basis for denying either uninstantiated qualities or multi-instantiated qualities. This is to say that a Humean who endorses qualities cannot consistently reject either Platonism or quality realism, according to which qualities are universals.

33 Hume never explicitly discussed Platonism as it is understood in this paper. There is, however, a passage in which he seems to deny Platonism as part of an argument that we have no idea of objective power. At T 161, after recalling his treatment of abstraction, he wrote, "If we be possest, therefore, of any idea of power in general, we must also be able to conceive some particular species of it; and *as power cannot subsist alone*, but is always regarded as an attribute of some being or existence, we must be able to place this power in some particular being, and conceive that being as endow'd with a real force and energy, by which such a particular effect necessarily results from its operation" (emphasis added.). Hume proceeded to reject the consequence. Of course, a substance philosopher or an anti-Platonist who endorses qualities might also insist that "power cannot subsist alone," so one cannot take this passage by itself as proof that Hume rejected Platonism. My question remains, how—given his Difference and Idea/Reality Principles—could Hume be an

anti-Platonist were he to allow qualities in addition to individuals?

34 Compare Locke, *Essay* II xi 9 and III iii 6.

35 Anyone who thinks that Hume made all language meaning presuppose the antecedent possession of ideas probably does so on the basis of Hume's claim that when we have a term we suspect might be at bottom meaningless as being associated with no idea, we are to search for the impression or impressions from which its idea is derived. On this position see Hume, *An Abstract of a Book lately Published...*: "And when he suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant" (T 648–649). Compare Hume in *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*: "When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion" (EHU 22). The position developed in these two passages seems to imply the priority of ideas to words. What is needed is a carefully sorted out account of Hume's views on language which asks whether there is a consistent way of combining his meaning test and the doctrine of language underlying it with the position developed to account for how particular ideas can represent general kinds. To my knowledge, A. Ushenko, in his "Hume's Theory of General Ideas," *Review of Metaphysics* 9 (1956): 236–251, was the first to note the systemic importance of Hume's use of general words to account for general ideas.

36 I am indebted to Daniel Flage for calling to my attention a letter from Hume to Hutcheson in which the same argument is made. See David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., edited by J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon, 1932), vol I, 39.

37 For Hume, kind names (e.g., 'man') are definable. Proper names (e.g., 'Hamlet') can be replaced and so "defined" by a group of words which constitute a description or singular referring expression. This is to say that for him neither kinds nor ordinary individuals are conceptually simple. Perhaps this is why he thought that invoking qualities to account for the applicability of a predicate to an individual is incompatible with its being conceptually simple.

38 It is possible that Hume rejected the principle that the applicability of a predicate to something requires a quality as ground because adding it to two other principles, (i) qualities only exist as parts of the individuals of which they are predicated, and (ii) wholes requires true units—simples—generates a regress of qualities. If no individuals, being wholes, are simples, and there must be simples, some qualities must be simples. But if, for the predicate 'simple' to apply to a quality, there must be an ontological ground, a quality, that is a constituent of the first quality, the first quality is not really ontologically simple. It is a whole. On this interpretation one could claim conceptual simplicity is not at issue. The Appendix on resemblance is one of a number of texts in which one cannot ascertain whether Hume's thinking was guided by his commitment to a distinction between conceptual simplicity and

complexity or by his intuitive grasp of how an ontology of complexity would work. It might, therefore, be prudent to avoid pushing this alternative too far.

39 It is not clear whether one gains or loses by calling such ontologically simple items compositionally simple. They are not, of course, compositionally complex, but since they cannot be building blocks for composites, it is somewhat misleading to call them compositional simples.

40 This is argued at length at T 53–65. Hume's thesis was introduced at T 53 as follows: "If the second part of my system be true, *that the idea of space or extension is nothing but the idea of visible or tangible points distributed in a certain order*; it follows, that we can form no idea of a vacuum, or space, where there is nothing visible or tangible."

41 There is an ample literature in which diverse criticisms of Hume's nominalism are developed. My objections, therefore, are not being offered as original; what is original may merely be the terminological distinctions used in their formulation. For an example of criticisms occurring in the scholarly literature, see R. E. Butts, "Husserl's Critique of Hume's Notion of Distinctions of Reason," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 20 (1959): 213–221.

42 One of the most detailed early critiques of Hume's theory is in Thomas Reid's essay on abstraction in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*; see Essay Five, chap. 6, 523–531. The single most important element in Reid's critique is his rejection of what I have called the Idea/Reality Principle. Reid, knowing full well what the ontological stakes were, criticized various attempts to link conceivability to possibility. See Essay Four, chap. 3, 429–435. See, also, Casullo, "Reid and Mill on Hume's Maxim of Conceivability," 212–216, and Michael Hooker, "A Mistake concerning Conception," 86–94, in *Thomas Reid: Critical Interpretations*.

43 In a paper exploring more deeply several of the topics touched upon here, I examine several strategies Hume might have employed had he been enjoined from arguing both from ideas to objects and from objects to ideas. See "Hume on Possible Objects and Impossible Ideas" in *Logic and the Workings of the Mind: The Logic of Ideas and Faculty Psychology in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by Patricia Easton, North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy, vol. 4, (Atascadero CA: Ridgeview Press, forthcoming.)

44 Weinberg, *Abstraction, Relation, and Induction*, is a key text on the connections between Hume's rejection of general abstract ideas, his account of distinctions of reason, and his treatment of relations; see especially 36–41 and 114–116. So, too, though less accessible, are Meinong's studies of Hume.

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