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Hume on the Very Idea of a Relation

MICHAEL COSTA

I think it is a productive strategy in interpreting Hume's philosophy to examine very carefully *exactly* what *constitutes* for Hume the cognitive state of having a certain idea or belief. More often than not, interpretive pressures arise almost immediately when one comes to address the details in such cases. Attempting to relieve these interpretive pressures can have substantial payoffs in understanding and evaluating Hume's philosophy, even when the attempts are not entirely successful.¹

In this paper, I am going to raise the question, "What is the very idea of a relation for Hume?" which I will understand to mean, "What exactly constitutes the cognitive state of having an idea of a relation for Hume?" First I will argue for a particular account of what an idea of a relation must consist in for Hume. The account that I describe is essentially the same as one that has already been introduced by some recent work of Don Garrett,² but I will offer here a new way of arriving at it. Also, I will examine in detail the capacity of the account to deal with each of Hume's categories of relation. Hume has extensive discussions of some of these (the "matters of fact" relations of space, time, identity, and causation), but almost nothing to say about some of the others (the "relations of ideas" of resemblance, contrariety, degree of quality, and quantity and number). All of them raise interpretive problems, and attempting to resolve them will suggest new ways of understanding a number of important issues in Hume's philosophy including: the nature of the cognitive process of comparing ideas and

deriving a general idea from the comparison, the distinction between having a belief and making an assertion or explicit judgment on the basis of one's beliefs, the nature of a fiction or fictitious idea, how Hume thinks that language and symbols enhance cognitive processing, and how we should understand Hume's empiricist criterion of meaning.

The obvious place to start in addressing the question of what ideas of relation consist in for Hume is the section "*Of relations*" that appears early in the *Treatise*.³ Just prior to this section Hume indicates that he thinks of relations as *complex* ideas. He says, "complex ideas may be divided into *Relations, Modes, and Substances*" (T 13). He goes on in the section to draw a distinction between natural and philosophical relations as a distinction between those relations that are connected to associations in thought (the natural relations) and all relations whatsoever that can be conceived (the philosophical relations) (T 13–14). But that distinction does not in itself shed any light on the nature of our ideas of the latter as complex ideas. Nor, initially, do Hume's brief remarks on each of the seven categories of relations (T 14–15), although we will find some interesting issues to mine here after getting a better understanding of Hume's account of relations as complex ideas.

We can get some help by recalling the way in which Hume draws the distinction between simple and complex 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)

A complex idea is one that can be distinguished into parts. Hume's illustration of the apple can easily mislead. He seems to be talking about an apple (physical object) as a collection of qualities. But for this to serve as an illustration of the distinction under discussion we must read him as talking about an *impression* or *idea* of an apple being a collection of *impressions* or *ideas* of colors, tastes, and smells. Applying, then, this distinction to the case of relations we get the result that relations, for Hume, are ideas that consist of collections of ideas.

Now whatever the plausibility of thinking of our ideas of substances, like apples, as merely collections of ideas, it seems not to make any sense to think of ideas of relations in general as merely collections of ideas. Take the relation of resemblance, for example. How is one to think of the idea of resemblance as a collection of ideas? What are the ideas that make up the

collection? We certainly don't have here a collection of colors, tastes, smells, or other qualities. Or take the relations of identity and contrariety. Ideas of colors, tastes, and smells may have some *prima facie* plausibility as components of the idea of an apple, but what are the ideas that are the components of resemblance, identity, contrariety, and the other relations? Nothing comes readily to mind, and this may lead one to search for a different way of understanding what Hume must mean by a relation.⁴

The subsequent discussion of modes and substances (T 15–17) provides a good explanation of why Hume thinks of the ideas of modes and substances as complex ideas. He says, "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..." (T 16). But this very explanation only deepens the perplexity concerning relations as complex ideas, for it begs for an identification of the component ideas that make up the collection that is the complex idea. And Hume has not yet told us what the component ideas are in the case of any of the relations.

Let us drop for a moment the problem of identifying the components of ideas of relation and get a fresh start by reflecting on what an idea of a relation, indeed, what an idea of anything, must be. Ideas for Hume are images of things used in thinking and reasoning (T 1). That is to say that ideas are essentially representational entities. So an idea of a relation must represent that relation. Hume also presupposes that representation requires resemblance. This is implicit from the opening pages of the *Treatise* in which Hume uses 'represents', 'resembles', 'corresponds', and 'copies' as virtually equivalent expressions. But Hume also explicitly uses this presupposition as a premise in arguments throughout the *Treatise*.⁵ It is because an idea that represents an apple must resemble an apple that it seems so natural to Hume to speak of the complex idea of an apple consisting of ideas of the color, shape, and smell of an apple. When we combine these claims, that an idea of a relation must represent the relation and that representation requires resemblance, we have the beginning of the answers to our questions.

The conclusion that follows from these two claims is that an idea of a relation must resemble that relation. Now how can an idea resemble a relation but by being itself an instance of that relation? It appears, then, that an idea of a relation will have to be an instance of that relation, where the *relata* are themselves ideas. An idea of resemblance will consist of resembling ideas, an idea of identity will consist of identical ideas, an idea of space will consist of spatially related ideas, an idea of time will consist of temporally related ideas, an idea of quantity or number will consist in a quantity or number of ideas, an idea of degree of quality will consist of ideas related by that degree of quality, an idea of contrariety will consist of contrary ideas, and an idea of causation will consist of causally related ideas. An idea of a relation must be an instance of the relation. An instance of a relation must

be a complex idea because there must be at least two things to stand in the relation.⁶ Now we can see why we found it difficult to identify the nature of the idea components of complex ideas that are ideas of relations. In an idea of a relation it is not so much the component ideas that determine the nature of the idea, it is *how the ideas are related*, or, as Hume would more likely say, the *manner* of their appearance in consciousness. All that is required of the component ideas is that they actually stand in the relation represented by the complex idea.

So far we have identified what it is to be a specific idea of a specific relation instance. It seems that one might have such specific ideas without having any recognition of what relations are represented. What needs to be addressed is what it is to have the concept of the relation that is needed to recognize the relation that the complex ideas instance.

In the section "*Of relations*," Hume, speaking of the relation of distance, says "we acquire an idea of it by the comparing of objects," and he speaks of "qualities, which make objects admit of comparison, and by which the ideas of *philosophical* relations are produced" (T 14). This makes it sound as if an idea of a relation is a distinct idea produced by an act of comparison. In comparing, for example, two objects that are distant from one another, I acquire the abstract idea of the relation of distance, or, in comparing two objects that resemble, I acquire the general idea of the relation of resemblance. But there are two problems with this interpretation. First, an intentional act of comparison would seem to require that the agent who compares already have the concept that is the basis of the comparison. How can one compare two objects with respect to resemblance or distance unless one already has the concept of resemblance or distance? Consider, "Compare these objects with respect to isomerism." How is one to do that if one has no concept of isomerism?⁷ Second, Hume, eschews thinking of any abstract or general idea as a separate idea from ideas of specific instances. It is to Hume's account of general and abstract ideas that we must turn to properly understand what cognitive state constitutes having the general idea of a relation.

In the section on abstract ideas (T 17–25), we learn that Hume does not think that any kind of abstract idea is a separate idea produced by consideration of instances. The standard philosophical view (as understood by Hume) is that by experiencing a number of resembling instances we can form a distinct abstract idea of the quality in virtue of which the instances resemble. Such an abstract idea is supposedly general in the sense of representing all possible determinations of the quality without itself being any particular determination of the quality. Thus an abstract idea of triangle is supposed to represent all possible triangles without being any particular triangle. Hume argues against the very intelligibility of such abstract ideas (T 18–20).

The detail of his arguments need not detain us here, but we should note that Hume's presupposition that representation requires resemblance makes it easy to see why he is led to this conclusion. A general idea of a triangle must represent a triangle. In order to represent a triangle it must resemble a triangle. In order to resemble a triangle it must have the same shape as a triangle. Since the idea must have the shape of a triangle, it is easy to conclude that it must have the shape of some particular triangle or other.

Hume considers two other ways that one might try to account for abstract ideas. One is to think of an abstract idea as a complex idea that consists of an idea for each possible determinate of the general kind. Thus, in the case of the abstract idea of triangle, it would consist in a collection of ideas of every possible size, shape, and color of triangle. Hume immediately rejects this proposal because it would require an infinite capacity in the mind (T 18). We should note, however, that the suggestion does provide another model of complex idea and that Hume rejects it not because it violates his notion of complex idea but merely because it would require an infinite number of component ideas.

The account of abstract ideas that Hume endorses says that an abstract idea is always a particular determinate idea connected with a disposition to bring to mind other particular determinate ideas of the relevant kind as thought should require. This account applies to abstract or general ideas of relation no less than any other abstract or general ideas. The abstract idea of triangle is not a different idea from the idea of some particular triangle. What makes it abstract is that it is connected with a disposition to bring to mind other specific determinate ideas of triangles. In the same way the abstract idea of a relation (the idea of the philosophical relation) is not a different idea from a particular instance of the relation. What makes it abstract is that it is connected with a disposition to bring to mind other specific instances of the relation as are needed to perform cognitive tasks.

Notice that this provides a new way of understanding something that the rejected standard account would say and a new way of understanding Hume's comments about distance discussed above. The standard account would say that we acquire an abstract idea by means of experiencing instances and noting the quality in virtue of which they resemble. Hume can say this as well, provided we understand what he says in the right way. Hume's account allows him to distinguish between the particular ideas and the abstract idea. Having the particular ideas may produce the abstract idea *in* producing the disposition to bring to mind the related ideas. Developing such a disposition is "noting the quality in virtue of which they resemble." Hume simply denies that there need be a separate idea of the quality in virtue of which they resemble. When Hume says that we acquire an idea of distance by the comparing of objects and when he speaks of the comparison

by which the ideas of philosophical relation are produced, he does not (*cannot* consistently with his account of abstract ideas) think of the idea of distance or any other relation as a separate idea that we derive by considering instances of distance or other such relations. Nor can he be thinking of comparing as a full-blown, intelligent, intentional activity, since this would require that we already have the concept we are supposed to be first acquiring in the comparison. All that he can mean is that we acquire the abstract idea (disposition to bring other instances to mind) of a relation from experiencing instances of the relation. I can be aware of an instance of distance without being aware that it is an instance of distance. What is required for the latter is that I have developed a disposition to associate ideas that are various instances of distance and bring to mind appropriate instances as needed to perform cognitive tasks. After developing this disposition, I have the general concept of distance, which will allow me to compare objects with respect to distance. Before that I have merely the capacity to experience instances of distance.

Let us now move to the project of examining each of Hume's seven categories of relations with respect to this account of ideas of relation. I am going to cover first space and time, because Hume is most clear and explicit about the nature of these two as complex ideas and about how they are represented as abstract ideas. We can then use what we have learned from the cases of space and time to shed light on the more difficult cases, such as identity and cause-and-effect. Finally, we will address the "relations of ideas" of resemblance, contrariety, degrees of quality, and quantity and number. In each case we will find that interpretive tensions arise for the account, but I hope to show that the tensions can be relieved in a way that not only preserves the plausibility of the account but also has payoffs for properly understanding and evaluating Hume's position on related issues.

Space and Time

Hume tells us that an idea of space is a complex idea consisting in a contemporaneous array of visible or tangible ideas. Here is his description of the origin and nature of the idea of extension:

The table before me is alone sufficient by its view to give me the idea of extension. This idea, then, is borrow'd from, and represents some impression, which this moment appears to the senses. But my senses convey to me only the impressions of colour'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner. If the eye is sensible of any thing farther, I desire it may be pointed out to me. But if it be impossible to shew any thing farther, we may conclude with certainty, that the idea of extension is nothing but a copy of these colour'd points, and

of the manner of their appearance.

Suppose that in the extended object, or composition of colour'd points, from which we first receiv'd the idea of extension, the points were of a purple colour; it follows, that in every repetition of that idea we wou'd 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 colour'd points, of which they are compos'd, 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 carry'd 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, consider'd 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)

This passage provides strong support for two of the central elements of the account presented here. First, Hume says explicitly that a particular idea of extension is a complex idea consisting simply of a contemporaneous array of colored or tactile component ideas. There is no *separate* idea of the manner in which they appear; the idea of extension is simply a collection of ideas that appear in a certain manner. Second, the abstract idea of extension also does not consist in a separate idea of the manner of appearance. Rather, it consists simply in a particular complex idea of extension connected with a disposition to bring to mind other particular complex ideas of extension (in which the points are different colors or even just tactile points). Hume, in this passage, *explicitly* applies his account of abstract ideas to the abstract idea of extension. Note once again that this allows Hume to make some distinction between a particular idea of extension and the abstract idea of extension. Someone can have experiences of extension without having the abstract idea of extension. Acquiring the abstract idea of extension requires acquiring the disposition to bring to mind other complex ideas of extension should they be needed for some cognitive task. So it is perfectly legitimate for Hume to speak of the (abstract) idea of extension being derived from the comparison of particular ideas of extension. One can have ideas of extension without recognizing them as instances of the abstract idea of extension. The

mind's recognizing them as instances of extension requires that the mind have developed the appropriate associative disposition.

It is true that the mention of comparison suggests an intentional mental act. But, as we have seen, this would put the cart before the horse. Comparing ideas with regard to extension as an intentional act would require that one *already have* the concept of extension to provide the basis for the comparison. We must understand the comparing as something that initially just happens in the formation of the associative disposition. The intentional or intelligent comparison of items with respect to extension presupposes that the disposition has already been acquired.

Hume's detailed and explicit description of the idea of time also fits perfectly with this interpretation of ideas of relation. Remember that this account says that a particular idea of a relation is simply a complex idea consisting of component ideas standing in the relevant relation. An abstract idea of relation is simply a particular idea of the relation together with an associative disposition to bring to mind other particular ideas of the relation as the cognitive situation should require. Now here is what Hume says about the idea of time:

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. Five notes play'd on a flute give 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. These five sounds making their appearance in this particular manner, excite no emotion in the mind, nor produce an affection of any kind, which being observ'd by it can give rise to a new idea. For *that* is necessary to produce a new idea of reflection, nor can the mind, by revolving over a thousand times all its ideas of sensation, ever extract from them any new original idea, unless nature has so fram'd its faculties, that it feels some new original impression arise from such a contemplation. 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 each other. (T 36-37)

Hume first identifies a succession of impressions as the source of an idea of time. He then goes to considerable effort to make clear that the idea of time is simply a copy of the succession of impressions, no more, no less. It is *not* a separate idea from the complex idea consisting of the succession of ideas. While Hume says that we take notice of the manner of appearance of these impressions, which may suggest in itself that we form a separate idea of just the manner of appearance, he tells us quite clearly that there is no impression source for a separate idea. The only plausible interpretation is that the way in which we “notice the manner” is in forming an ability to bring to mind other particular temporal sequences of ideas—other instances of ideas arrayed in the same manner. We don’t notice the manner by forming a separate particular idea, but by forming a disposition to bring to mind other particular ideas of the same kind. We notice the manner by forming a general or abstract idea of time in precisely the way that other general or abstract ideas are formed, as we (and Hume) have previously discussed.

Let us attend now to some of the interpretative pressures seemingly raised by this account of the ideas of space and time. For an idea to represent space it must resemble space, and to do that it must itself be an instance of the spatial relation, i.e., it must consist of ideas that are spatially related. Thus, an idea of space is literally spatially extended. For an idea to represent time it must resemble time, and to do that it must itself be an instance of the temporal relation, i.e., it must consist of ideas that are temporally related. Thus, an idea of time is literally temporally extended.

Let us take first the consequence that ideas of space are literally extended. We should note that Hume explicitly recognizes this consequence and swallows it without evidence of distaste. In his discussion of the question of the materiality or immateriality of the soul (T 232–251), Hume explicitly states that our impressions and ideas of extension are extended and uses this fact as a basis for arguing against the view that the mind is an immaterial substance. Hume thinks that it is incoherent to think of an extended impression or idea being in (or inhering in, or being supported by) an unextended substance. Hume also thinks that some of our ideas are unextended (indeed, it seems that he thinks that *this* is the more bizarre claim, that something can exist and yet be nowhere [T 235]), and he uses this as a basis for arguing against the view that the mind is a material substance. His conclusion, of course, is that it is incoherent to think of the mind as any kind of substance, and he subsequently provides his own account of the mind as simply a collection of perceptions, some of which are extended and some unextended. The important point for our purposes is that whatever *we* may think about the implausibility of the claim that our idea of extension is itself extended, this was clearly not taken as a bizarre consequence by Hume. Hence it provides no basis for criticizing this

interpretation of Hume's idea of relations. In fact Hume's recognition of the consequence lends credence to the interpretation of relations that obviously has this consequence.

It is also a consequence of this interpretation that it takes time to have an idea of time. There is no direct textual evidence that I know of to indicate that Hume recognizes this consequence. Yet the consequence does raise apparent difficulties. Suppose that I at this time make the judgment that tomorrow's meeting will last fifty minutes. My judgment occurs now, and it may indeed have some duration. The problem is that Hume's account of the idea of time seems to suggest that my idea of fifty minutes duration, in order to represent fifty minutes duration, must resemble fifty minutes duration. And that seems to require that it *be* a succession of ideas that is fifty minutes long. But my judgment certainly doesn't take fifty minutes to occur.

Since Hume does not explicitly address this kind of problem, what follows is an attempt to construct a response for him. Perhaps the first point to address is why *he* does not address this problem. If the account of ideas of relations supported here is right, then the problem should have been as obvious to him as it is to us. So either this account is wrong, or Hume intentionally ignored the problem, or there is some explanation for why *Hume* does not think that the problem arises. I think that there is such an explanation. Notice that there is a hidden premise in the construction of the problem. Namely, the problem arises only if the idea of fifty minutes duration must be an element or component of the judgment in question. This may seem to be an unproblematic premise. Isn't it obvious that a judgment consists in the combining of the relevant ideas or concepts? Hume, it seems clear to me, would answer, "No." Hume does not think of judgments as necessarily involving combinations of ideas. Arguing for this point in detail is the subject of another paper, but I can briefly state here some of the salient parts of that argument.

First, there is an extended footnote in the *Treatise* (T 96–97) in which Hume explicitly denies the standard view of a judgment as the separating or uniting of different ideas and states his own view that in a judgment the act of mind is nothing more than a simple conception. But this view may seem to raise even more serious problems for Hume. What possible conception could adequately represent the content of the judgment that tomorrow's meeting will last fifty minutes? Having an idea that adequately represents a meeting is problem enough. The line of argument that we have used to support this account of ideas of relation would suggest that an idea can represent a meeting only if it resembles a meeting, and that to resemble a meeting it must be an instance of a meeting. Clearly, something has gone wrong here even before we address the issues of how to represent the temporal ideas of tomorrow and fifty minutes and how these elements are included in the content of the judgment without the judgment consisting in the combining of ideas.

One of the things that has gone wrong, it seems to me, is that we accept without thinking the view that judgments and beliefs have propositional content. We also accept the orthodoxy that thinking and cognition consist in the production, derivation, and modification of states that have propositional content. I want to suggest that such a view is alien to Hume's theory of cognition. In Hume's theory, thinking and cognition consist most basically in the production, derivation, and modification of ideas—image-like, not proposition-like, entities. Hume's ideas do not have proposition-like structure. There is nothing in an image to correspond to or represent grammatical categories such as subject or predicate, or logical categories such as predication, quantification, logical connectives, modal operators, and so on. The content of propositions includes concepts. An idea as image cannot include concepts. A particular idea, as we have seen, can serve as a general idea (concept), but it doesn't have that general idea as its *content*. Rather the general idea consists in the relations of that particular idea to other particular ideas as realized in the mind's dispositions of thought. When an idea is a complex idea, it and its components can serve as general ideas, but again those general ideas are not contents of the complex idea and their relationship to each other in the idea does not match the syntactical or logical structure of any proposition.

What I want to suggest and make at least initially plausible is the view that for Hume the machinery of cognition operates directly on image-like things, not on proposition-like things. The machinery of the mind can produce *acts* of judgment, the endorsing or rejecting of items that have propositional content, just as it can produce other kinds of intelligent acts, such as speaking or playing whist. The machinery of the mind can also produce *acts* of comprehension, understanding the assertions of items having propositional content by oneself and others, and *acts* of consideration and contemplation of items with propositional content. These are not, however, the machine-level activities of the mind. The capacity to do them must be explained in the terms of machine-level processing that involves only the production, derivation, and transformation of image-like content. I cannot, of course, do justice to explaining or arguing for this view here, but I hope I have said enough to allow me to use it tentatively to explain how temporal judgments are possible. I will follow this explanation with some additional considerations in favor of the view.

We have been discussing the judgment that tomorrow's meeting will last fifty minutes. The propositional content of this judgment includes at least the concepts of tomorrow, meeting, lasting, and fifty minutes. Moreover, there is the logical or syntactic structure of the proposition that combines these elements in a way to assure that the proposition attributes the property of being fifty minutes long to the meeting, not to tomorrow. If I understand Hume's theory of cognition, there is no mental item that has

this propositional content or structure. The “judgments_m” that take place in the mind are nothing more nor less than beliefs, vivid images. The “judgments_a” that consist in the acts of assenting to or dissenting from items that have propositional content have to be explained in terms of the events that actually occur in the mind, the production, derivation, and transformation of images or judgments_m. I show that I have understood a judgment_a by having a set of mental operations and dispositions on judgments_m that allow me to evaluate the evidence for or against the judgment_a and respond appropriately to questions about the truth, falsity, or probability of the judgment_a. When I consider an item having the propositional content that tomorrow’s meeting will be fifty minutes long, I may or may not have a particular fifty-minute-long idea. I almost certainly do not have a particular idea of tomorrow or meeting. (What possible *image* would represent either?) What I must have, if I understand the content of this item, is a set of particular ideas and dispositional properties to have other ideas that will provide me with the capacity to make an appropriate action response.

The distinction between judgments_m (beliefs or vivid images) and judgments_a (acts of endorsing or rejecting items with propositional content) is, I admit, not explicitly present in Hume’s text. What little explicit discussion of judgments occurs in the text seems to characterize judgments only as beliefs or vivid images (as in the footnote at T 96–97). But Hume must acknowledge that human beings do consider and make judgments about the truth, falsity, and probability of items with propositional content (paradigmatically, declarative sentences). And there are places at which Hume explicitly talks about the consideration of propositions. For example:

Suppose a person present with me, who advances propositions, to which I do not assent, *that Caesar dy’d in his bed, that silver is more fusible than lead, or mercury heavier than gold; ’tis evident, that notwithstanding my incredulity, I clearly understand his meaning, and form all the same ideas, which he forms.* (T 95)

I take these passages to be consistent with the distinction that I have drawn, though they do not in themselves demand the distinction. Other considerations, however, provide strong motivation for it. Animals (other than humans) do not have the capacity to consider and decide whether to assent or dissent from propositions. Yet Hume is clear in asserting that human and animal intelligence and cognition is basically similar in character (T 176–179). Animal cognition does not (plausibly) consist in judgments about the truth, falsity, or probability of items with propositional content. So, neither does human cognition in its essential character. The distinction between judgments_m and judgments_a seems to provide a helpful way of expressing these views of Hume’s. Animals and humans both make

judgments_m, but only humans make judgments_a, and judgments_a must be explained in terms of cognitive processes that involve most basically judgments_m.

Another line of argument for the distinction derives from consideration of the different degrees to which the respective types of judgments are subject to will. Judgments_a are literally *actions* of assenting or dissenting. As actions, they are intended and performed for reasons. One can also, at least sometimes, refrain from them. Judgments_m, as beliefs, are not subject to will at all, according to Hume's view (T 629; EHU 47–48). While he sometimes speaks of them as acts of the mind or understanding (as in the footnote at T 96–97), we must understand the “acts” in question as “activities” (things the mind does) rather than intentional actions.

I will, in the discussion of the relation of identity and other relations below, return to this distinction between judgments_m and judgments_a and make further use of it in explaining Hume's notion of a fictitious idea. I think that the explanatory resources of the distinction provide yet another line of support for it.

Identity

If the preceding interpretation of Hume's account of ideas of relations is correct, then the relation of identity should prove to be problematic to Hume. The other relations all consist in complex ideas having two or more idea parts. But it would seem that only a single simple idea could serve as an instance of identity. A complex idea, in consisting of distinct parts, would seem to be an instance of diversity rather than identity. Hume gives evidence that he recognizes the problematic nature of this relation in his very introduction of it. Rather than saying that identity is a category of relation, he hedges revealingly by saying merely that identity “may be esteem'd” a species of relation (T 14).

Later in the *Treatise* (T 200–201) Hume returns to the discussion of identity and what he says there provides strong confirmation of this interpretation. He says that a simple idea conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity. A complex idea, however, conveys the idea of number rather than the idea of identity. Identity seems to require some medium between a simple and a complex idea, but Hume denies the existence of any such medium. He resorts, therefore, to the device of a “fiction” to explain what is taking place in our minds when we are making judgments concerning identity.

As I understand his account, it goes something like this. There is no genuine instance of an idea of identity. Therefore, there is no genuine general idea of identity, since a general idea requires genuine instances of that idea.⁸ We can have a continued, uninterrupted, unchanging idea; but

this is an instance of unity rather than identity. We can also be contemporaneously aware of a sequence of other distinguishable perceptions. The later, as we have seen, provides an instance of an idea of time. The idea of time does not literally apply to the idea of the unchanging object. Hume has made this quite clear earlier in the *Treatise* (T 37). Since the idea of time cannot be derived from a single, unchanging perception, it does not properly apply to it. One can see that applying the idea of time to the idea of the unchanging perception would be to combine an idea of number and the incompatible idea of unity into a single idea. Even the imagination cannot combine contrary ideas. But the mind can combine reference to the two incompatible ideas into a single judgment_a (but not a judgment_m) about the object. Hume tells us:

We cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that an object is the same with itself, unless we mean, that the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another. By this means we make a difference, betwixt the idea meant by the word, *object*, and that meant by *itself*, without going the length of number, and at the same time without restraining ourselves to a strict and absolute unity. (T 201)

Compare this to what he has said earlier about the “fiction” of applying the idea of time to what is unchangeable:

But tho' it be impossible to shew the impression, from which the idea of time without a changeable existence is deriv'd; yet we can easily point out those appearances, which make us fancy we have that idea. For we may observe, that there is a continual succession of perceptions in our mind; so that the idea of time being for ever present with us; when we consider a stedfast object at five-a-clock, and regard the same at six; we are apt to apply to it that idea in the same manner as if every moment were distinguish'd by a different position, or an alteration of the object. The first and second appearances of the object, being compar'd with the succession of our perceptions, seem equally remov'd as if the object had really chang'd. To which we may add, what experience shews us, that the object was susceptible of such a number of changes betwixt these appearances; as also that the unchangeable or rather fictitious duration has the same effect upon every quality, by encreasing or diminishing it, as that succession, which is obvious to the senses. From these three relations we are apt to confound our ideas, and imagine we can form the idea of a time and duration, without any change or succession. (T 65)

I apply the fictitious idea of identity when I make a judgment_a that “confounds” the idea of time and the idea of a continuing unchanging thing by attributing them both to a single object. This is what I am doing when I judge_a that an object at this time is the same with itself at that time. I combine ideas in judgment_a that cannot be combined in idea (judgment_m). So the relation of identity really is explained in terms of a complex of ideas, even though there is no particular complex idea that is an idea of identity.

I suggest that this account of the idea of identity provides the framework for a general explanation of Hume’s device of a fiction. There are at least two sorts of fictions recognized by Hume. One sort is relatively unproblematic. This kind of fiction is a complex idea that consists of simple ideas put together by the imagination in a way that doesn’t correspond to any previously experienced complex impression. An example would be a winged horse or a fiery dragon (T 10). But there is also a more problematic kind of fiction, an instance of which is the fictitious idea of identity. A fiction of this kind is a confused general idea. A genuine general idea is the capacity to bring appropriate instances of a concept to mind to make judgments_a involving that concept. A confused general idea is a tendency to combine in a single judgment_a about an object instances of incompatible concepts (ones that cannot be combined in a judgment_m). Other examples are: applying an idea of extension and an idea of empty distance to the same object (the fiction of a vacuum), applying an idea of determination of thought to an idea of an object (the fiction of causal power), applying an idea of an unchanging object to resembling and closely related perceptions (the fiction of body and the fiction of self), and applying an idea of slightly different objects to an idea of apparently equal objects (the fiction of perfect equality). The tendency to combine ideas in judgments_a that cannot be combined in ideas (judgments_m) occurs typically when the ideas (and the mental actions of forming them) resemble one another (the ideas of vacuum, body, and mind) or when the ideas regularly occur at the same time (the ideas of identity, causal power, and perfect equality).⁹

Cause or Effect

An idea of causation is an instance of one idea causing another. The idea of the cause (effect)—together with the condition of the mind produced by previous experience—causes the mind to conceive vividly the idea of the effect (cause) and produces an idea of determination. So there are at least three component ideas involved: the idea of the cause, the idea of the effect, and the idea of causal power. The idea of causal power results from and hence represents the transference of vivacity from the idea of the cause to the idea of the effect (or vice-versa). We do not observe causal powers in our ideas any more than we observe them in objects. Still, ideas can be causally

related and only ideas that are causally related can resemble and represent an instance of causation.

Instances of causation are, for Hume, temporally extended. But, as we have seen in our previous discussion, our causal judgments_a do not need to take time just because the idea of causation is temporally extended. Causal judgments_a do not have ideas of causation as parts any more than temporal judgments_a have ideas of time as parts. But there is more to say about the case of the idea of causation. In particular, I want to direct attention upon the way in which ideas of causation are involved in causal judgments, beliefs, and knowledge.

Suppose I judge_a that holding an open flame to a piece of paper will cause the paper to ignite. If my interpretation of Hume is right, then this judgment does not have to be represented by a complex idea consisting of some kind of contemporaneous combination of an idea of an open flame, an idea of causation, and an idea of a piece of paper igniting. Rather it can simply be the case that I, upon seeing an open flame being moved toward a piece of paper, will subsequently have a vivid idea of the piece of paper igniting together with an internal feeling (and a subsequent idea representing that feeling) that I was determined to have this vivid idea.¹⁰ There is an idea of causation involved here, but it isn't distinct from the ideas of the moving flame, the feeling of determination, and paper igniting, and this is a temporally extended idea. My judgment_a can be instantaneous, or nearly so; but it is supported and explained by a temporally extended sequence of ideas. Moreover, it is a temporally extended sequence that "mirrors" the temporally extended sequence of events in the world. This suggests that having causal knowledge, for Hume, simply involves having a set of associative dispositions that "map" or "mirror" the causal dispositions of objects and events in the world. Causal knowledge is *not* a matter of having a set of true causal propositions being justified and functioning as beliefs. Moreover, learning (most basically) is simply a matter of appropriate adjustments occurring in associative dispositions, *not* a matter of inferring new propositions from a set of propositions that serve as evidence. Only human beings make judgments_a or infer new propositions from a set of propositions, but other animals have causal knowledge and learn from experience as well (T 176–179), so knowing and learning do not in general require the propositional contents of judgments_a.

Resemblance

According to the account endorsed here, an idea of resemblance for Hume always consists in a complex idea consisting of two or more resembling ideas. One has, in addition, the abstract or general idea of resemblance when one has the capacity to bring to mind the appropriate

complex idea of resembling ideas that is relevant to the cognitive task at hand. Hume tells us that “no objects will admit of comparison, but what have some degree of resemblance” (T 14). This suggests that *any* complex idea for Hume is an instance of the idea of resemblance. We will return to this point below in the discussion of the relation of contrariety.

Before we go on, however, we should note and address an interpretive problem for Hume’s account of the idea of resemblance. From the very beginning of his discussion of relations (T 13–14), Hume talks about the mind comparing ideas. But Hume denies that there is any intelligent observing entity within the mind (T 252–253) to do the comparing. Even if there were, it would seem that the entity would need to have the concept of resemblance in order to compare two ideas with respect to resemblance. As we have seen, Hume denies that there is any abstract idea of resemblance distinct from instances of resembling ideas and the disposition to access those instances as required by cognitive tasks. So the question is, how does the mind initially compare ideas with respect to resemblance?

The only answer that I can see that is consistent with Hume’s views is the same as that provided above to explain his discussion of how the idea of distance is produced by the comparison of ideas. The initial and most basic kind of comparison of ideas consists simply in the development of dispositions that differentially associate ideas. The mind simply forms stronger associations between certain ideas as opposed to others (and independently of contiguity and casual associations). Those are the ideas that the mind “detects” as more closely resembling. It is only after associations have been established that the mind has the concepts needed to recognize that two ideas resemble in a certain way. Intentional comparison of ideas with respect to this property or that can occur only in a mind that has already developed a network of associations that provide the basis for the comparison.

Contrariety

This, like the relation of identity, presents a special sort of problem for Hume’s account of ideas of relations. For qualities are contrary when they cannot be combined in the same object, so how can contrariety be represented in a resembling complex idea? The ideas of the qualities are ideas having those qualities, and if the qualities cannot be combined then it would seem that the ideas having those qualities couldn’t be combined into a single complex idea. But we neglect here the temporal dimension of complex ideas. An idea of contrariety is a temporally complex idea consisting of an idea of a quality causing the destruction of an idea of the contrary quality. An idea of contrariety *is* an instance of contrariety. Lest the reader, once again, think this too outrageous to consider as Hume’s account,

note what he tells us about this relation in the first *Enquiry*:

For instance, Contrast or Contrariety is also a connexion among Ideas; but it may, perhaps, be considered as a mixture of *Causation* and *Resemblance*. Where two objects are contrary, the one destroys the other; that is, the cause of its annihilation, and the idea of the annihilation of an object, implies the idea of its former existence. (EHU 24 n 4)

Even what little Hume says about contrariety in the *Treatise* fits nicely with this account:

no two ideas are in themselves contrary, except those of existence and non-existence, which are plainly resembling, as implying both of them an idea of the object; tho' the latter excludes the object from all times and places, in which it is supposed not to exist. (T 15)

Consider, for example, two contrary ideas, an idea of a red ball and an idea of a blue ball. These resemble in that both are ideas of a ball. I cannot conceive that the same ball is both red and blue (all over). The incompatibility is represented by a causal sequence in which one of the ideas destroys the other in the imagination. Both the resemblance (the ideas must represent the same object) and the causation (if one idea simply follows the other, there is no representation of contrariety) are essential. Again, an idea representing a relation (in this case, contrariety) must be an instance of that relation. The destruction of the one idea by the other makes the temporally extended complex idea consisting of this sequence an idea of contrariety.

Degree of Quality

The ideas of degrees of quality are complex ideas consisting of ideas that stand to each other in relation to the appropriate degree of quality. The two specific examples that Hume gives are color and weight (T 15). An idea of degrees of red would consist in two or more ideas that are different shades of red. An idea of degrees of weight would consist in two or more ideas that are of different weights. One has a general idea of degrees of red when one has some specific idea of degrees of red together with the ability to bring to mind other instances of complex ideas consisting of two or more component ideas that are different shades of red. Likewise, one has a general idea of degrees of weight when one has a specific idea of degrees of weight together with the ability to bring to mind other instances of complex ideas consisting of two or more component ideas that are different weights.

The notion of an idea having color would not give pause to any philosopher of the modern period. Everyone (virtually) agreed that some

ideas had color; the problem was taken to be how to make sense of *objects* having color. But the notion of an idea having weight may seem outrageous. Here we must look more carefully at what property Hume had in mind as weight. He seems to be speaking of weight in this passage as a sensible quality, something like the feeling of "heft" that one would get by lifting or holding an object. One idea then might represent a greater feeling of heft than another, and in this way the combination of the two in a complex idea would represent a relation of degrees of weight. There is also, however, the concept of weight as a causal concept. One object weighs more than another when it tips the scale with respect to the other or moves the indicator needle on the scale further than the other. Here, what we have said above about the relation of cause and effect provides the basis for resolving the apparent problem. I conceive of one object weighing more than another (in the causal sense) when I would causally infer that that object would tip the scale with respect to the other or move the indicator needle further. The inference relations among the ideas of the objects need only mirror the causal relations among the objects to secure the resemblance needed for representation. We need not attribute to Hume the view that the idea of the one would tip a scale with respect to the idea of the other.

Quantity or Number

The account endorsed here holds that the ideas of quantity or number are complex ideas consisting in an appropriate quantity or number of ideas. Abstract ideas of quantity or number are dispositions to bring to mind those particular complex ideas of quantity or number that are relevant to the cognitive task at hand.

Apparent interpretive problems arise immediately. How is it possible to think of a quantity of, say, 1,000, when this would seem to require a complex idea having 1,000 component ideas? There is textual evidence here to show that Hume explicitly recognizes the consequence. He also gives us some explicit direction in responding to this question:

when we mention any great number, such as a thousand, the mind has generally no adequate idea of it, but only a power of producing such an idea, by its adequate idea of the decimals, under which the number is comprehended. This imperfection, however, in our ideas, is never felt in our reasonings.... (T 22–23)

Why does Hume say that the mind has no adequate idea of a great number, such as a thousand? The interpretation endorsed here supplies a ready explanation. An idea of a thousand would be a complex idea literally having a thousand component ideas, and the mind's ability to deal with such a

complex idea would not be adequate to the precise quantity involved. That is to say, the cognitive functioning of an idea with a thousand components would not differ reliably from the cognitive functioning of ideas having anywhere from five hundred to two thousand or more components. From the standpoint of cognitive function, it would simply function as an idea that has a great number of components. We can get the precision required for an adequate idea only by using ideas of numerals and decimals. Mathematical notation allows us to represent numbers that we cannot represent adequately directly in ideas for the purposes of reasoning and computation. If Hume were asked what guarantees that the numerical representation is adequate, I suspect that he would have recourse to an induction. We can *test* the adequacy of representation of numerals for numbers on small numbers for which our direct ideas are adequate, and we can show that the decimal notation and other devices of calculation allow indefinite extension of this representational capacity.

Once again, Hume's recognition of the problem and his treatment of it fit neatly with this interpretation of his theory of relations. Moreover, there seem to me more general and significant insights suggested by this examination of this problem. Hume's example of the idea of a thousand suggests how the use of symbols and language allows us in our reasoning and thought to extend indefinitely the limited direct representational range of our ideas. This is crucial to the plausibility of Hume's theory of relations (and abstract ideas generally) under this interpretation. For under this interpretation, our ideas can directly represent adequately only relatively simple direct empirical content. Remember that Hume thinks that ideas can represent only what they can resemble, and ideas (as copies of internal and external sense impressions) whether simple or complex can resemble only relatively simple direct empirical content. Fortunately, the shapes of symbols and words and the acoustical properties of spoken words are relatively simple direct empirical content. The example of the numerals and decimals shows how we can make use of these ideas of symbols to do cognitive work that indefinitely exceeds what we can do with direct ideas of objects. It is by their means that we can think and reason about such concepts as "*government, church, negotiation, conquest*" (T 23). Certainly, we cannot plausibly claim that we have an idea of government that *resembles* a government, and so on. But we do have ideas of relatively simple and direct empirical contents that we can use to *test* our *talk* about government and make sure that our use of such talk in reasoning and thought is not leading us astray.

This reading suggests a new way of looking at Hume's empiricist test for meaning as expressed, for example, in the following passage:

'Tis impossible to reason justly, without understanding perfectly the idea concerning which we reason; and 'tis impossible perfectly to understand any idea, without tracing it up to its origin, and examining that primary impression, from which it arises. The examination of the impression bestows a clearness on the idea; and the examination of the idea bestows a like clearness on all our reasoning. (T 74–75)

What I suggest is that we read Hume here as describing a test that is like my hypothesized inductive justification of the use of numerals, decimal notation, etc. in mathematical reasoning. To see whether we have any idea of what we are talking about we must go back to some very basic use of the talk that can be given relatively simple empirical content. Then we must make sure that the mechanism by which talk is extended beyond what can be directly tested by our ideas is a reliable mechanism. Hume had no more intention to limit meaningful talk and reasoning to what we can directly represent in ideas than he did to limit mathematical talk and reasoning to numbers less than twenty.

Let me summarize now the main elements of the paper. By looking carefully at what Hume says in the opening section of the *Treatise*, and by interpreting him to mean literally what he says, we arrived at the following account of ideas of relation. A particular idea of a relation is always a complex idea consisting of component ideas that stand in that relation. Thus, an idea of a relation will resemble that relation in being an instance of it. An abstract idea of a relation is a particular idea of a relation connected with an associative disposition to bring to mind other particular ideas of that relation as appropriate to the cognitive task at hand. We applied this understanding of ideas of relation to each of Hume's seven varieties of relations. In each case we encountered interpretive puzzles the resolution of which not only provided additional support for the account of ideas of relation but also led to the discovery of further interpretive results. Included among these was an understanding of the nature of the cognitive process of comparing ideas and deriving a general idea from the comparison, the distinction between having a belief and making an assertion or explicit judgment on the basis of one's beliefs, the nature of a fiction or fictitious idea, how Hume thinks that language and symbols enhance cognitive processing, and how we should understand Hume's empiricist criterion of meaning.

NOTES

I am indebted to the editors and referees of *Hume Studies* for helpful comments and criticisms on a previous version of this paper.

1 I have previously applied the strategy in a number of works including "Hume, Strict Identity, and Time's Vacuum," *Hume Studies* 14.1 (1990): 1–16 (dealing with the issue of what constitutes the states of having ideas of identity and a vacuum); "Hume and Belief in the Existence of an External World," *Philosophical Studies* 32 (1988–90): 99–112 (dealing with the issue of what constitutes the state of believing in the existence of an external world); and "Hume and Causal Realism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1989): 172–190 (dealing with the issue of what constitutes belief in causal realism). The works of Don Garrett cited in note 2 below provide additional examples of the strategy of examining very carefully the details of Hume's cognitive theory in addressing and attempting to resolve interpretive puzzles.

2 See Don Garrett, "The Representation of Causation and Hume's Two Definitions of 'Cause'," *Noûs* 27.2 (1993): 167–190, and *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). I was unaware of Garrett's work when I arrived at the present account through largely a different set of issues and concerns. I would like to think that this instance of independent efforts converging on the same account provides some basis for confidence that my account is on the right track.

3 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 13–15. This work will be cited parenthetically in the text and subsequent notes as 'T'. I will also have occasion to quote from David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 3rd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). This work will be cited parenthetically in the text as 'EHU'.

4 Typical among the items in the literature discussing Hume's view on relations is Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941) and Alan Hausman, "Hume's Theory of Relations," *Noûs* 1 (1967): 255–282. Neither Smith nor Hausman take Hume seriously as giving an account of relations as simply complex ideas. Kemp Smith thinks that Hume's characterizing relations as complex ideas is merely a result of his unthinkingly following Locke's lead in so characterizing them (250–251). Rather, the correct difference between simple ideas and relations is the difference between what is primary or original and secondary or derivative (251). Kemp Smith claims that an idea of relation *has* to be something separate from the ideas of the things related, and he takes Hume to task for evading rather than solving the problem of abstract ideas (261–262). He thinks that Hume's discussion of the distinction of reason commits him to the existence of ideas that are not image-like (266). Hausman also takes Hume to task for not giving "an adequate ontological analysis of what relations are" (273). At one point Hausman actually mentions what seems to me to be Hume's intended theory: "There are no relations apart from pairs of related objects," only to reject it for the reason (which is not further

elaborated) that Hume allows for relations such that “we cannot tell what they connect from the relata alone” (279).

I cite Kemp Smith and Hausman here as examples of sound, sympathetic Hume scholarship that, nonetheless, does not take Hume seriously on what he says about relations. Perhaps this is the result of implicit application of a principle of charity: Hume couldn't have been so silly as to actually have meant what he said about relations. I take on the task here of trying to show that what Hume said about relations is not as silly as it seems on first blush.

5 Consider, for example:

As every idea is deriv'd from a precedent impression, had we any idea of the substance of our minds, we must also have an impression of it; which is very difficult, if not impossible, to be conceiv'd. For how can an impression represent a substance, otherwise than by resembling it? And how can an impression resemble a substance, since, according to this philosophy, it is not a substance, and has none of the peculiar qualities or characteristics of a substance? (T 232–233)

Similar evidence is present in his discussion of our not having an idea of anything “specifically” different from (not resembling) a perception (T 67, 241), our idea of causal power not representing (because not resembling) any quality in the cause (T 165–167), our ideas of sensible qualities not representing (because not resembling) any qualities in the objects (T 243), and our sensations of touch not representing solidity (because they are simple and solidity is compound) (T 231).

6 The problematic “relation” of identity is an exception, which will be discussed in detail later in this paper.

7 “Isomerism” is two or more chemical compounds having the same elements in the same proportion by weight, but differing in properties because of differences in the structure of their molecules.

8 See, for example, Hume's claim that a general idea of power would require that we be able to conceive some particular instance of it (T 161).

9 I agree with Saul Traiger (“Impressions, Ideas, and Fictions,” *Hume Studies* 13.2 [1987]: 381–399) when he says that fictions involve applying an idea to an object from which the idea was not derived and that a fiction is an idea that was not derived from an impression. But I take it that both of these points need to be explained, since on the surface they appear to be incompatible with Hume's first principle. For Hume, there are no ideas (with the possible exception of the shade of blue) that are not derived from impressions, and an idea that doesn't exist can't be applied to anything, rightly or wrongly. My account explains how such ideas can exist (as confused general ideas, not as idea instances) and how they can be applied (by applying two real, but incompatible, ideas to the same object).

10 It is not that my idea of the flame causes my idea of the paper to ignite (thus giving new meaning to the expression “hot head”). The causal relation between ideas is inference, not ignition. The causal relations between the ideas must merely “mirror” the causal relations between the objects to

represent them. I am indebted to an editor of *Hume Studies* for suggesting the need to clarify that the resemblance required for representation does not require identity.

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