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SYMPOSIUM

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On Garrett's Hume

MARGARET DAULER WILSON

Don Garrett's book is impressive for its scholarship; for its friendliness towards Hume (often arguing inventively that rigorous reinterpretation can absolve him from allegations of error or incoherence); and for its emphasis on questions of continuing philosophical worth and interest. As someone who has long found it difficult to enter fully into Hume's system—especially his positions on issues of cognition—I particularly appreciate Don's candid admissions of what one may call (with some pain, in the present context) the serious limitations of Hume's theories in this area. Despite such concessions, of course, Garrett still holds that Hume's achievements in the *Treatise* and later works continue to reward philosophical study and critical involvement. And he makes clear through detailed analysis the force of Hume's critique of principles central to the positions of major Rationalist philosophers—which indeed may seem often “dogmatic.” In the area of cognitive theory specifically, and closely related treatments of such “metaphysical” topics as causality and substance, Garrett explains Hume's systematic opposition to intellectualist doctrines espoused by Descartes and such successors as Spinoza and Leibniz. As Don emphasizes, Hume followed in the steps of Locke and Berkeley in rejecting the Cartesian conception of intellect; but his opposition to this supposed “faculty” was in many ways more systematic and searching than theirs.

But, after all, Hume was working in a later period; and yet (I would be inclined to argue) he intensified (rather than overcame) certain central problems in previous empiricist accounts of human mentality.

I'll try to give some color to this perhaps "unfriendly" suggestion mainly by sketching out some doubts about Garrett's positive claims about epistemological support for the "Copy Principle"—a principle which, as he says, is fundamental to Hume's philosophy, and derives in large degree from Locke. I'll also raise a couple of questions about Hume's imagist conception of "abstract ideas," derived from Berkeley. Garrett makes some interesting appeals to this conception in arguing that apparent conflicts or incoherences in Hume's position can be resolved, if its pivotal role is recognized. But the conception, as he explains it, seems to present sufficient difficulties of its own that one may well wonder whether its pivotal role (assuming Garrett's interpretations are right) is such a good thing.

I'll conclude with some minor queries about certain of Garrett's early remarks about pre-Humean rationalist philosophers.

I.

As explained by Garrett, the Copy Principle encompasses the claims that every simple "idea" (1) has an exactly resembling simple impression (sensory experience); and (2) is at least partly caused by a simple impression—presumably, the very one that it exactly resembles (CCHP 41).¹ (Additionally—in the *Treatise* anyway—Hume holds that every simple impression has a "corresponding" [and I think Don takes this to mean exactly resembling] idea—which is just a fainter copy of itself [CCHP 44]).

Critics (most emphatically Antony Flew) have claimed that Hume presents this principle as if it were an empirically-supported psychological law; but then "outrageously" wields it in a normative way to rule out the very existence of "ideas" that might be presented as counterexamples to it. In other words, the "counterexamples" are not even *entertained* as empirical counter-evidence, but rather doctrinairely ruled out as if inconsistent with a known a priori, necessary truth.

Garrett, however, maintains that Hume consistently presents the principle as an empirically grounded, contingent claim. He writes that "[t]he Copy Principle...is a relatively straightforward empirical claim that the presented content of those mental representations that are less 'lively' than (Humean) impressions is copied from the experienced content of these impressions." He stresses that Hume does seriously entertain possible counterexamples—notably the famous "missing shade of blue"; and that he does not uncritically assume the truth of the principle in the most important normative contexts. One of Garrett's main points in this connection is that on Hume's own theory of causation *any* assertion about a causal relation must be based on experience; and the Copy Principle includes a causal claim. Garrett further says that "the evidence for it, within the context of Hume's cognitive psychology, is reasonably strong" (CCHP 50).

Garrett's claims about evidence in favor of the principle include endorsement of both the contentions that (1) it is supportable by introspection, and (2) that there are more strictly empirical observations in its favor. I will consider these in order.

Just how is the Copy Principle supposed to derive support from introspection? In Hume's terms (which Garrett doesn't challenge) one is supposed to "trace an idea up to its origin and [examine] that primary impression, from which it arises" (CCHP 41). Garrett sees this introspective inquiry as backed up by Hume's challenge to his readers to produce a counter-example: to "produce," that is, an idea not derived from an impression (CCHP 44).

I wonder, though, whether the Copy Principle is even *in principle* subject to such support from introspective inquiry. The question I want to press is just this: how is anyone supposed to be in a position to determine *whether or not* all (or even any) of his or her ideas derive from a preceding impression with exactly the same content?

The basic problem that strikes me about this is so simple that I'm afraid I must be overlooking something obvious. But, anyway, here it is. How is *anyone*, contemplating an array of present ideas, supposed to be *able* to compare them with, or "trace them up to" earlier impressions? All those impressions have gone fleetingly away, haven't they? And even if some are still around, one would at most be able to determine legitimate ancestry for some of one's ideas, without being able to come to any decision about the genesis of others. One can, of course, consult memory; but memory on Hume's account (as explained by Garrett) is itself a repository of ideas, not original impressions.² So it seems that the issue of establishing introspectively whether or not our ideas all (or almost all) derive from previous impressions has to be, *in principle*, moot.

Consider, in this connection, two contrasting cases: the first is commonsensical; the second one that I take to be supposedly analogous, from the Humean point of view. First, I come upon a printed paper on my desk, which I assume to be a copy from some volume (but I can't place exactly which book it was copied from). For some reason, I want to trace the copy to its original; and I squander a couple of hours sorting through my library to try to find the source. This may be a *fruitless* quest, because there are just too many books to look through; but it's hardly a conceptually incoherent one. (Of course, *not* finding the right book wouldn't prove the paper I have isn't a copy!)

Second, I find myself obsessively reflecting on a peculiar (imaged) shade of green. It occurs to me that perhaps that green-shade image "got into my mind" from my visual encounter with a certain Van Gogh painting in the Art Museum yesterday. But then again, perhaps not: *perhaps I never even had an impression corresponding to that idea!* Now what? I can go back to the Art Museum, and if the Van Gogh is still on exhibit, I can try to see whether it

gives me an impression of green that exactly matches my image. But wait: even if it seems to do so, that will be the match of a shade-image that is *co-occurrent with my re-viewing of the painting*: one not necessarily qualitatively exactly similar to the shade-image I was earlier obsessing over (or so I would assume). And besides, the *impression* that painting causes in me today might conceivably be qualitatively different from the impression it caused in me yesterday (different lighting, for example). And worse: if I honestly conclude that the obsessed-over shade does *not* resemble any impression caused, or likely to have been caused, by the Van Gogh painting, I may literally “have nowhere to look” to determine *whether or not* it was caused by a previous impression.

As far as I can see, these considerations lead to the conclusion that there is something like a conceptual absurdity—not merely an empirical difficulty (as in the first case)—in the enterprise of trying to determine whether my obsessed-over green shade image was or was not copied exactly from an impression. On this basis I propose that the notion that Hume’s Copy Principle is introspectively testable is untenable—or at least in need of a good deal more clarification. By similar reasoning his challenge to readers to produce counter-examples is vacuous (CCHP 48).

There is another, non-introspective line of reasoning that Garrett develops on Hume’s behalf, which seems to me ineffective on different grounds. That line rests on the claim that people who have—by external circumstance or physiology—certain broad sensory deprivations also lack relevant kinds of “ideas” or mental imagery (CCHP 46-48). This claim (setting aside “other minds” issues, which Garrett gives reason to dismiss) is supposed to present direct empirical evidence for the Copy Principle. I take it that the central point is this: if the Copy Principle were *not* true, people with systematic sensory deprivations (such as those blind or deaf from fetushood) might well have “ideas” or images corresponding to those of people with normal sensory experience; but (as far as we can tell) they do not. Thus we have (or Hume has) empirical support for the view that ideas occur only as copies of impressions.

In my opinion, this line of reasoning simply does not, in itself, provide convincing support for the Copy Principle—especially if the Principle is supposed to function as a decisive anti-Rationalist weapon.³ First, it isn’t clear that the lack of visual imagery in a blind person does much, if anything, to suggest that all (or nearly all) visual “ideas” in sighted people originate from exactly resembling visual impressions. Abstractly speaking, it *might* be necessary *and sufficient* to see (some) colors in order to be able to imagine (new) colors: the lack of color images in the congenitally blind doesn’t on the face of it address this possibility. (And I don’t consider this a mere *far-fetched* possibility, from an “intuitive” point of view.) More concretely, is it really so implausible, on the basis of reflective experience, to

think that a visually creative person just comes up with new color images (then, perhaps, strives to replicate them in paint)? Do we really think that Van Gogh must have literally seen those amazing greens somewhere, before setting out to mix the paints to replicate them? (Or, along the lines of the missing shade of blue case, must at least somehow have *inferred* them from a spectrum of close neighbors?) I don't know what others may think about this specific question; my point is just that the argument from the limitations imposed by broad (and unusual) sensory deprivation doesn't go that far towards supporting the Copy Principle—even for the clearest cases of *sensory ideas*.

But, second, consider the argument from the point of view of a committed Rationalist, one who believes in the existence of ideas that have no sensory origin. Suppose this person *accepts*, on the basis of the argument from sensory deprivation, the claim that there are no sensory ideas (in Hume's sense of "idea") that don't have their origin in sensory experience. How likely is it that this person will find his position seriously challenged? My guess is that it's totally *unlikely*—and not just because Rationalists tend to be dogmatic. The more the Rationalist insists on a radical distinction between ideas of sense and ideas of intellect (it seems to me) the more likely he is to respond that there can be no legitimate extrapolation from what may be the case for the former (in terms of genesis) and what we should believe about the latter. (Or, to express the point less tendentiously, *no legitimate extrapolation* from a claim about ideas acknowledged to be sensory to a conclusion about the nature and source of ideas in general.) As far as I can see, this would be an entirely reasonable response to Hume's "empirical" argument for the Copy Principle, as interpreted by Don Garrett. And that is to say that I'm not yet persuaded that the Copy Principle is in fact supported to any significant degree by any evidence—nor in fact that Hume was entitled to suppose that it was.

(I should mention that Garrett also considers the issue of "support" for the Copy Principle—or at least its "Resemblance" component—from a couple of other angles. He explains in some detail that Hume, like Locke before him, tried to show that important problematic concepts could be handled from his empiricist perspective. And he notes that Hume alleges, in a dramatic passage at the beginning of the *Treatise*, that "the most eminent philosophers"—Garrett suggests he especially has in mind those who "claim to be most guided by intellect"—offer only systems based on unsound principles and reasoning, leading to endless disputation and disarray [CCHP 22-23]. I'm unclear, however, why Garrett thinks that the sweepingly dismissive, rather high-handed *Treatise* passage provides or reflects "evidence" for the Resemblance Principle.)

Two more quick points about the Copy Principle, before I briefly turn to the conception of abstract ideas that Hume largely derives from Berkeley.⁴ Garrett, as noted, stresses that the Principle has a causal component: this provides one reason, he plausibly observes, for taking it to be intended as empirical and contingent. But how, I have to ask him, are we to interpret it within the framework of Hume's own analysis of causal judgements? For instance, are we to suppose that Hume means to suggest that the individual mind (or the ideal observer's mind, to adopt an element of Garrett's explication of Hume's two definitions of 'cause') develops a "customary felt determination" to associate impressions with ideas? (I believe that there are many absurdities lurking here, but will leave this question for now at the rhetorical level.)

Second, it seems to me that however much Flew's line of criticism might be mitigated by careful analysis, such as Garrett provides, there still remains something uncomfortable about normative uses of Hume's principle. In other words, any attempt to undermine someone's claim to have a certain idea, such as the idea of necessary connection in nature, by appeal to the Copy Principle, can be met with "so much the worse for the Copy Principle," as easily as with surrender of the original claim. I suppose I cling to this view, in the face of Garrett's arguments, largely because I'm unpersuaded by claims of confirmation for the Principle.

II.

In order to avoid introducing any kind of non-imagistic, intellectual mental entities into the empiricist theory of mind, Berkeley and Hume depart from Locke in insisting that all mental representations are "entirely particular and determinate" (CCHP 103). Still, of course, we think generally about *dogs*: not only about this or that dog (nor both together). How do we do this, if all ideas are merely particular images? The empiricist answer, I take it, is supposed to be (roughly): each of us has one particular image in mind, say of my chihuahua Chink-Chink, or my neighbor's Lab Mogul; this image calls up in our thought indefinitely many "resembling instances" of the class of dogs, and thus it becomes general.⁵

Is it a problem for this theory that imaged entities belong to *many* classes or kinds? Mogul, for instance, is not merely a *dog*: she's a mammal, a female, a yellow Labrador retriever, a non-human resident of New Jersey, and more. It seems I could use her image, on Hume's terms, to think about any of these classes of things, as well as just about Mogul herself. But then, how do we explain the difference between thinking about dogs, say, and thinking about mammals (or about an individual dog)? *Qua* mammal, Mogul "resembles" Patches the cat; *qua* dog she does not: without an independent kind-designation, how does our mind "know" which "resemblance" is

relevant on a given occasion, in order to call up the *right* class of ideas? Garrett, apparently, does not view this as any kind of problem for Hume's theory of abstract ideas (CCHP 103-104). I take it (on the basis of several different passages) that his reason is that images are thought to function as abstract ideas only in conjunction with *words* (see, e.g., CCHP 24). That is, Mogul-image/'dog' thoughts lead to one set of associations; Mogul-image/'mammal' thoughts to another. The *words* ("terms"), if I follow, are *already* general, as a result of having been applied to numerous "resembling" items, on the grounds of the particular "resemblances." But if this is right, then I'm not very clear why Hume needs to bring in "abstract exemplar ideas" at all (i.e., just what conceptual work it does). Why aren't the various terms by themselves enough to call up ranges of instances to which they've been applied in the past? (Indeed, Garrett almost seems to say that it is enough: see CCHP 24 on "revival sets.")⁶ Anyway, I'd be interested to hear more about Don's view of this matter, should he care to elaborate.

Another line of objection has to do with the notion that Humean abstract ideas are *entirely determinate* images (as Garrett expresses it). As far as I've found, Garrett explains this claim only to the extent of stressing that ideas, since they precisely replicate the content of impressions, must be just as determinate as impressions. But *how* determinate is *that*? One understands, of course, that one is supposed to start with an image that represents, say, a particular dog (or set of dog-impressions?), reflecting some of its particular characteristics (large size, yellow coat, friendly manner, etc.). But how far is this supposed to go? I mean, for instance: is the dog-image supposed to be fully determinate in the sense of not "leaving out" *any* of the perceivable (perceived?) qualities of the particular dog (perhaps on some particular occasion)? This could mean that it would have to include everything from a particular weight, to a small cut on the left ear, to the exact number of whiskers on both sides of the head, to (perhaps) barking or sleeping.⁷ I don't know whether you find in your mind any images like that, but I'm quite sure I don't (to paraphrase Berkeley). *Lockean* abstract ideas seem almost easy in comparison! (This, again, is in part a request for clarification of how Don wants us to understand Hume's position.)

III.

I conclude with a few minor points about the Rationalists, as portrayed by Garrett. First, in explaining Descartes's distinction between imagination and intellect, Garrett says that the representations of the former are derived from sensation (CCHP 14); and seems to suggest that Descartes regarded imagistic ideas as inherently inadequate (CCHP 24). These interpretations do seem in conformity with the piece of wax example; but I suggest there are contrary indications elsewhere. For instance, at the beginning of Meditation

V, Descartes claims *distinctly* to imagine continuous quantity; and in his correspondence with Elizabeth on the mind-body relation (1643), he holds that while body can be known by the intellect alone it is known “much better” by intellect aided by imagination. Second, Garrett says that “Descartes’s general conception of causal relations is one in which causes can be seen to entail their effects...” (CCHP 34). I’m not sure how to assess this claim, and would be interested to know more about Don’s reasons for maintaining it. (One has to keep in mind that Descartes has been viewed as a proto-occasionalist because of his doctrine that continuous re-creation is required to keep both the finite mental, and the material world in existence: hence, some say, “natural change” must on his theory reduce to God’s re-creating (say) bodies in successive places at successive moments. Even if one doesn’t go all the way to an occasionalist reading, it seems that the continuous re-creation doctrine is at odds with an “entailment” view of *natural* causality, at least.) Third, Malebranche of course did not merely find the Cartesian causal link between mind and body unintelligible (CCHP 96), but also natural causality in general (except as shorthand for the necessitating “occasional” efficacy of God). In one way this puts him closer to Hume (no intelligible causal connections *in nature*); though in another way it underscores Garrett’s point that Hume’s position was radically novel in relation to his predecessors (by virtue of separating the notion of causal judgement from “intelligibility”). Finally, I was mildly puzzled by Garrett’s statement that “Leibniz rather grudgingly allows, in the ability of beasts to learn from experience, a kind of animal ‘reasoning’ that operates on ideas of imagination, and of which humans are also capable” (CCHP 27). Certainly Leibniz distinguishes this “empirical” process from true reasoning; but he says it’s what even humans rely on three-quarters of the time! (One could say it was left to Hume to take away the other quarter, in interpreting our cognition of nature!)

NOTES

1 Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Hereafter abbreviated as “CCHP” with page numbers inserted parenthetically in the text.

2 I realize this move seems too quick; but I’ll leave it at that for now. It seems that fully evaluating the legitimacy of appeals to memory in this context would be a very complex task.

3 Even if Hume thought it did: I don’t mean to challenge Garrett’s views about how Hume *thought* the principle was justified.

4 Though Berkeley insists on the designation "general" ideas.

5 Is this an even *prima facie* plausible account of generality in thought and discourse? I presume not, since the reliance on the notion of summoning up a range of individual "resembling" images still seems beside the main issue about general thought: that it is not reducible to actual individuals one has experienced, or can conjure up. But here I focus on some other questions.

6 For what it's worth, I think Berkeley construes the generality of ideas as *prior* to the generality of terms.

7 Somewhere it was said (I seem to recall) that an idea must be determinate in "quantity and quality." But I think this needs explanation, too, especially with regard to "quantity" (and the more so if we are supposed to be able to read off from the idea a precise number of *minima sensibilia*!).

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