



Oliver A. Johnson. *The Mind of David Hume: A Companion to Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature*

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OLIVER JOHNSON. *The Mind of David Hume: A Companion to Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature*. Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995. xi + 375 pages. ISBN 0252064569 US \$24.95 paper.

This work, devoted entirely to Book I of the *Treatise*, has two aims. The first is to provide a "post-textual" rather than a "pre-textual" interpretation; that is, one which avoids adopting "a general point of view...at the outset that molds and guides the...interpretation" but arrives "at interpretative generalizations...only after completing its study deriving these from the text itself" (6). The second is to provide critical evaluation which respects the dictum that "a commentator should read Hume sympathetically" (14). There is much to be said for systematically going through the *Treatise* instead of citing the text only to support one's pre-textual interpretation. Johnson's *Companion* seems a bit "thin" in interpretation, but perhaps precisely because of this, it provides a useful check on one's first take on what Hume might be saying. With this said, let me focus on the second aim, since Johnson's final assessment is: most of Hume's "central arguments collapse under the weight of their internal inconsistencies" (331).

Starting with a seemingly minor claim, Johnson urges that Hume has two theories of memory: the original theory in I i 3 and a revised theory in I iii 5. The original theory claims that memory ideas, unlike the ideas of imagination, (1) are more lively and (2) reproduce impressions as they were originally experienced. This theory is revised because Hume "recognizes that its requirement (2)...can never be applied in practice" (141). We cannot compare an idea with an impression that is gone forever. Thus, "to differentiate between [memory and imagination] we must instead be content with an appeal to...characteristic (1)" (141).

Johnson's reading of I iii 5 is radical: For him, when Hume drops requirement (2), Humean memories cease being memories in any ordinary sense. Johnson writes:

It could be argued that, although Hume concludes that the only way we can distinguish between memory ideas and imagination ideas in practice—or, as he puts it, "in their operation"—"is by their relative vivacity, in reality they differ from each other..." [by condition (2)]. Two responses can be made to this conjecture. Hume's argument gives it no support.... More important, if we cannot

appeal to the distinction in practice, it becomes gratuitous. We may repeat the difference in a verbal definition but in fact we can never put it to use to distinguish the one from the other. (145-146)

What "could be argued" surely is a more sympathetic reading of Hume. The original theory requiring (1) and (2) can be taken to define genuine memory or memory_g. Letting memory_a be apparent or seeming memory—i.e., an idea we take to be memory_g—I iii 5 plausibly asks: What consciously accessible feature makes an idea a memory_a idea, that is, what makes us take an idea to be memory_g? The liveliness condition (1) then answers this question. Let's grant for the argument's sake that distinguishing memory_a and memory_g is "gratuitous" in the sense that we can't justify a memory_a idea to be memory_g. Even then Johnson has given no reason to think that we can't have an idea or concept of memory_g. Since the problem I iii 5 raises is at worst epistemic and not semantic, we needn't saddle Hume with two incompatible theories of memory.

Given his take on Humean memories, Johnson draws the startling conclusion that Hume can't appeal to any notion of constant conjunction:

If we agree that, in order to recollect past constant conjunctions, Hume must return to his original theory of memory, and if we agree that the recollection of such past constant conjunctions is a necessary condition of his having an idea of causation, we are forced to conclude that Hume is caught in a contradiction in his philosophy.... Hume must either give up his empiricist theory of ideas or abandon any hope of developing a viable theory of causation. (157)

I see nothing in Johnson's or Hume's arguments that makes it impossible to remember_g. Even if it is impossible to justify memory_a to be memory_g, if the idea replicates the impressions I had (and any other causal conditions one may require), it still could be true that I remember_g observed conjunctions. More importantly, memory_g of an observed constant conjunction doesn't seem necessary for having an idea of causation. Hume could say: Since it's essential for my taking Cs to cause Es that I take (or have a memory_a of) Cs and Es to have been constantly conjoined in [my] observations, the idea of constant conjunction is a component of my idea of cause. Compare: Since it's essential for my taking him to be a bachelor that I take him to be unmarried, the idea of being unmarried is part of the idea of a bachelor.

At one point Johnson claims, "Past impressions, like external objects, are simply inconceivable to us" (149), and this suggests a semantic thesis. If no concept or idea of a past impression is available, then the ideas of observed

conjunctions and memory_g are not available either. But then it makes no sense to take an idea to be memory_g and the idea of memory_a also evaporates. One would only have lively ideas, ideas which are not even in intent connected with the past and are not memories in any ordinary sense. Though the semantic thesis cannot be derived from Johnson's epistemic arguments, I suspect that, like so many of his other criticisms, it is based on what he calls the "Empiricist Principle": "[A]ll our simple ideas are exact copies of simple impressions" (50) and all complex ideas are compositions or transpositions of simple ideas (see also 56). Since Johnson takes the Empiricist Principle "as setting a standard or constituting a criterion of intelligibility" (50), he could claim: there is no intelligible idea of the past because there can be no impression of the past from which the idea could be copied. Whether or not this reconstructs Johnson's view on memories, his criticism of Hume is largely based on the Empiricist Principle. Here are some examples:

(a) Though we can have impressions of each of two objects having a particular feature, there being no impression of resemblance per se, "we cannot have any idea of resemblance" (64).

(b) To conceive succession, Hume must "find an original impression from which its idea is derived" (92). But since such an impression is not available to any of the senses, "it follows that Hume can have no idea of succession, hence...no...idea [of time]" (92).

(c) There being no impression of a body continuing to exist unperceived, "we have no source in our impressions to generate any idea of such a body. To fill the gap, Hume creates 'fictions' which, because they are not ideas...are by definition inconceivable" (261). Since beliefs require ideas, "Hume cannot...believe in the...continuing existence [of objects]" (261).

(d) The Empiricist Principle cannot allow for a mind beyond a succession of perceptions. But, "if minds are nothing but perceptions and perceptions do not perceive, perceived perceptions do not exist. With their exit, the universe vanishes" (309).

To those of us who try to defend Hume's views (at least to a point), Johnson presents a genuine challenge. His criticisms are difficult to escape if complex impressions and ideas are conceived in what seems to be Johnson's way: the mere summing of simple elements. The challenge then is to find a richer notion of complexity (or non-simplicity) which still abides with the spirit of Hume's vision that ideas must in some sense be derived from impressions. Four aspects of this challenge and possible ways of trying to render Hume more consistent might be noted, the latter two relating to ideas only.

(1) It is natural to say that in seeing a red square and a red circle we see both of them being red. Clearly, "A is red and B is red" entails "A and B are both red," and this in turn entails "A and B have a common property."

Can what we see or have an impression of be a state of affairs having logical structure or something like it? If Hume can allow impressions to have some such structural complexity, the impression of A and B each being red might "contain" their resemblance and resemblance needn't be seen as an item on a par with color patches to be "summed" with them.

(2) Though it is puzzling how we can, we think we can see motion, and if we can, our perception (of motion) must have duration. Why then can't Hume allow a temporally complex impression of a ball or color patch moving? Granting that such a complex impression can't be a mere sum of impressions of momentary static states, can't Hume allow a "specious present" in which we can have a complex impression of succession and duration because the immediate past isn't irretrievably lost?

(3) In I i 6 Hume urges that the "principle of union" be "regarded as the chief part of the complex idea" of substance. He allows in I i 7 that the idea of an equilateral triangle can serve as an abstract idea of different things (regular figure, triangle, etc.) depending on the differing words and habits (or verbal dispositions) attached to that idea. These complex ideas can't be identified by their constituent simpler ideas and must appeal to operations or dispositions of the mind. An account of such a complexity is not obvious but appeal to it may explain our concept of resemblance so that beyond having impressions of things resembling we can have impressions that things resemble. We can still distinguish between straightforward concepts (resemblance and contiguity) and problematic ones (substance and cause) because the latter require more than Humean abstraction and are thereby less directly related to complex impressions.

(4) Hume's appeal to fictions is an interpretive nightmare. Typically, contradictory impulses engender them: to claim the identity of invariant and uninterrupted perceptions, the conflict between multiplicity and unity is resolved by the fiction of a duration without change. Again, the fiction of unperceived existence renders identity and interruption consistent. The fiction of a time dimension beyond the specious present might similarly resolve the tension between a lively [memory] perception of pain and a lively [sense] perception of being pain-free. The problem with these fictional ideas of X (and what perhaps makes them fictional) is the logical impossibility of having an impression of X. But it doesn't follow that the idea of X is itself contradictory, and Hume insists on this for unperceived perceptions. Lest ideas be restricted to those of logically possible impressions (as Johnson's conception of complexity tends to suggest), couldn't we take Hume's fictions to be coherent constructs engendered by contradictory impulses? The obvious obstacle is that the impossibility of having an impression seems too close to a Humean guarantee for the non-existence of the corresponding idea. But why can't Hume make a special proviso for ideas which are complex constructs of accredited ideas even if having the corresponding

impression is impossible? After all, no idea of Lockean substance or Cartesian self can be constructed out of accredited ideas; they appeal to unaccredited notions like inhesion.

Johnson's challenge remains, since I've only suggested lines which might be pursued in response. The book is therefore a useful, sobering reminder of the difficulties in rendering Hume's views plausible. Yet when so many of Hume's views come out inconsistent on Johnson's conception of complexity in relation to the Empiricist Principle, it would seem a sympathetic reading (which Johnson insists upon) should have been pursued in ways which might render the *Treatise* more consistent. In the end, Johnson's conclusion is the timeworn one that Hume is the *reductio* of empiricism: "Classical Empiricism truly found its executioner in Hume" (332). Given this conclusion, whether it is based on a pre- or post-textual interpretation is of small moment. The book's failure to pursue the project of rendering Hume's views optimally consistent cannot but tempt one to see it as a hatchet job on Hume.

NOTE

This review has benefited from helpful comments and suggestions from my colleague Noel Fleming.

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