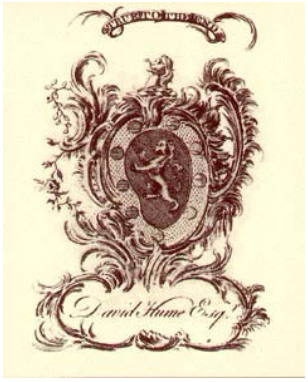

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Hume on Steadfast Objects and Time

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One of the most difficult parts of Hume's account of time to grasp, much less accept, is that a single, temporally simple thing can coexist with a succession of things. This perplexing result follows directly from his discussion of steadfast objects. I show that Hume is committed to this claim, and respond to commentators who suggest otherwise. I then note why the claim seems inconsistent and argue to the contrary that it relies on a consistent, though unusual, theory of time in which a single moment can coexist with successive moments. After formalizing the theory to help show that it makes sense, I defend it against a textual objection, and derive from it some surprisingly commonsensical results. Nonetheless it is not a common-sense theory, and I will end by giving a Humean explanation why his theory of time seems so unnatural.

Being "stedfast and unchangeable" is in contrast to being "a succession of changeable objects" (T 37).[1] A steadfast object, for Hume, is something that is "fast in place, firm; fixed," as Johnson puts it in his dictionary.[2] It does not change; that is, there is no "succession of one thing in the place of another," in Johnson's definition of the relevant sense of "change." The steadfast object is not quickly replaced, nor is it itself a succession. If it were a succession it would have duration, which according to Hume steadfast objects lack (T 37). Yet while it remains unreplaced, other changes occur elsewhere. Not everything is steadfast while it is. Not being a succession and so lacking duration, it nonetheless coexists with successions having duration.[3]

Note that having temporal parts entails being a number of things in succession, for Hume. So, not being a succession entails not having temporal parts. When reasoning about space, he makes the analogous premise for this

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argument explicit. He claims that anything with spatial parts is a number of coexistent things as opposed to a single thing (as opposed to "an unite," T 30). He then says, "All this reasoning takes place with regard to time" (T 31). The difference is that temporal parts are successive, not coexistent (T 36). So anything with temporal parts is a number of successive things as opposed to a single thing. It's a succession. So a single thing remaining unreplaced lacks temporal parts, because it is not a succession. Thus Hume thinks that a single thing lacking temporal parts can coexist with a succession of things.

Not only does such a single thing lack actual temporal parts, it lacks potential temporal parts. Anything divisible has parts according to Hume (see T 29). So something lacking parts is indivisible.

Hume's view is even stranger given his view that moments of time are abstractions from single things in time. Each moment is an abstraction from the temporally simple object occupying it. So the structure of temporal relations between single things in time is exactly the structure of temporal relations between moments. Given this and the foregoing, some single, indivisible moments coexist with some successions of single moments. I won't argue that this conception of time is Hume's by discussing abstraction, however. That is too much to do. Rather I will assume this result of Hume's theory of abstraction and merely reinforce it by the following argument: Hume thinks that time consists of indivisible moments (T 31). Anything in time exists at at least one moment. Something has duration if and only if it exists at distinct successive moments. So something in time that lacks duration exists at a single indivisible moment. Yet there is something that lacks duration, namely a steadfast object, which coexists with something that has it, namely, some succession. If things coexist, then the moments they exist at coexist. So a single indivisible moment coexists with distinct successive moments.

I

There is clear textual evidence that a steadfast object can coexist with a succession. At T 65 Hume specifically discusses a steadfast object regarded at different times, coexisting with "a continual succession of perceptions in our mind." At T 200–1 he says,

> I have already observ'd, that time, in a strict sense, implies succession, and that when we apply its idea to any unchangeable object, 'tis only by a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos'd to participate of the changes of the coexistent objects and in particular of that of our perceptions.

In these places "object" plausibly encompasses external objects. But Hume almost always uses "object" to encompass perceptions as well, and in other places his assumption that a steadfast object exists is specifically an assumption that a steadfast perception exists. Perceptions are in fact of central concern in Hume's discussion of time given what he says at T 34–5:

> The idea of time, being deriv'd from the succession of our perceptions of every kind, ideas as well as impressions, and impressions of reflection as well as of sensation, will afford us an instance of an abstract idea, which comprehends a still greater variety than that of space.

Some commentators have assumed that all temporally single perceptions are uniformly brief. They say that perceptions that seem long are really uninterrupted successions of exactly resembling perceptions.[4] On this view the contrast between succession and steadfast object is really between *perceivable* succession and *unperceivable* succession. One could even say it is the unperceivability of successiveness that prevents getting the idea of time from a steadfast object (see T 35). However the evidence is against the view of these commentators.[5]

At T 35 Hume discusses having a perception but not successive perceptions. He claims that "A man . . . strongly occupy'd with one thought, is insensible of time" (T 35). It does not matter how large an interval the thought takes up. If it is just a single thought, then it is not a succession of thoughts. So it has no duration (T 37). And so he has no sense of time. Time is of course passing; there are successions he is insensible of coexisting with his thought. As Hume states further down, "Wherever we have no successive perceptions, we have no notion of time, even tho' there be a real succession in the objects" (T 35). Thus there are intervals of time when we have a perception but not successive perceptions, even when there is succession elsewhere.

That a single perception can coexist with a succession is explicit also at T 35, where Hume says that when a given duration coexists with a succession of many perceptions, it seems to go by more slowly than when it coexists with a succession of few perceptions. He is following Locke in thinking that a succession of objects can have more members than the coexistent succession of perceptions of them. When this happens, a given perception smears together the successive objects it is of. In these cases some member of one succession coexists with successive members of the other.

There is further evidence that Hume believes in single perceptions, not just successions of them, coexisting with things in succession. He thinks that a steadfast object produces "none but coexistent impressions . . ." (T 36),

therefore not successive ones. At T 203 he says that in thinking of a steadfast object the mind merely continues an idea in existence as opposed to producing any new one.

> When we fix our thought on any object, and suppose it to continue the same for some time; 'tis evident we suppose the change to lie only in the time, and never exert ourselves to produce any new image or idea of the object. The faculties of the mind repose themselves in a manner, and take no more exercise, than what is necessary to continue that idea, of which we were formerly possest, and which subsists without variation or interruption.

And again he says that in this case the passage of time "distinguishes not itself by a different perception or idea" (T 203).[6] Finally he speaks of having "one constant and uninterrupted perception" as opposed to a succession of many constant but interrupted perceptions (T 204).

Now it might be objected here that perhaps lengthy perceptions are not necessarily successions of perceptions, but surely they are successions of some sort of temporal parts. Thus they have duration. But Hume specifically relies on the fact that "Every thing that enters the mind" is "in *reality*" a perception (T 190). If temporal parts of perceptions have gotten into the mind, then these parts must themselves be perceptions. So a perception that is not a succession of perceptions is not a succession of anything.

Despite the textual evidence, Stroud contends that Hume couldn't believe in steadfast perceptions.

> Of course, there is not any single, identical perception which does remain in existence. If there were, we could get the idea of identity directly from the senses, just from having that perception, and there would be nothing 'fictitious' about the idea of identity at all.[7]

Here Stroud does not take Hume at his word in the passage I've quoted from T 203. Stroud's argument depends on the assumption that a steadfast impression would give us the idea of identity directly. However the assumption is suspect. A steadfast impression would at best give us an idea of unity. "One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity" (T 200). The idea of identity is rather "a medium betwixt unity and number; or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it . . ." (T 201). The attempt to integrate unity and number, which are incompatible, is what makes the idea of identity a fiction. The senses alone could not give

rise to this mongrel idea, even given steadfast impressions. The vagaries of the imagination are required. So Stroud's attempt to stretch Hume's text for Hume's own good is a misreading.[8]

Given the textual evidence, it is hard to understand why in his interesting book Waxman would claim that "Hume denied the possibility of an unchanging view of an unchanging object."[9] There is no citation that directly supports attributing this denial to Hume. Waxman does in the next paragraph quote Hume's claim that "all impressions are internal and perishing existences, and appear as such" (T 194). Even if this quotation about impressions generalizes to perceptions, it doesn't entail that all perceptions perish at the same rate. Waxman accompanies this quotation with Hume's claim that all "actions and sensations of the mind" are as they appear (T 190). Though supporting the thought that perishing perceptions appear perishing, it cuts against Waxman's earlier argument that if there were steadfast perceptions within the imagination, we wouldn't know it. We wouldn't, Waxman says, because the imagination would be on "freeze-frame" so there would be no sense of time.[10] In that case, however, a perception wouldn't be as it appears, after all. Independently of this point, Waxman's argument that we would never know if we had steadfast perceptions is suspect anyway. Perhaps the movie camera analogy is the problem. The analogy makes it plausible to assume that there is only a single succession of perceptions in the imagination, just as there is only one reel of film in the camera. But why should we assume this? Let's rather assume something less like a movie camera and more like a mind, in which various successions coexist, successions occurring at relatively different rates so that relatively more steadfast perceptions coexist with relatively less steadfast ones. Thus we can be aware of steadfast perceptions as such.

Waxman might retreat to Locke to oppose this view of mind. But Locke is no help here. He specifically defines "Contemplation" as an idea "held there [in view] long under attentive consideration," and "Study" as "when the mind with great earnestness, and of choice, fixes its view on my *Idea*, considers it on all sides, and will not be called off by the ordinary sollicitation of other *Ideas*" (II xix 1).[11] Notice the being held for a long time in the first definition, and the coexistence of the studied single idea with the various presumably successive soliciting ideas in the second definition. Or consider Locke's explanation why things in very slow motion are not perceived to move. It is because "their change in distance is so slow, that it causes no new *Ideas* in us, but a good while one after another: And so not causing a constant train of new *Ideas*, to follow one another immediately in our Minds, we have no Perception of Motion" (II xiv 7). In other words, when an idea of a thing moving very slowly stays in mind a "good while" before being succeeded by another,

we do not notice the motion. Think of watching the minute hand of a clock. It seems stationary until suddenly we notice it has moved. At last a new idea of sense has replaced the previous one. Meanwhile our train of impatient thoughts coexisted with the relatively steadfast perception of the minute hand. Otherwise we would not have noticed the passage of time and the slowness of the hand.

Waxman has two further objections to steadfast perceptions, though since there is no argument I will have to guess about their details.[12] The first objection is that steadfast perceptions are precluded by Hume's separability principle. The second objection is one raised also by Barry Stroud in conversation some years ago—that a steadfast perception wouldn't be perfectly known. The idea behind both seems to be that a steadfast idea would have temporal subdivisions. The first objection assumes that these subdivisions are separable and so the steadfast idea is really many things, not one thing after all. The second objection assumes that the subdivision could be known only as they come into existence, and only while they are in existence. So the steadfast perception as a whole cannot be perfectly known. The answer to both objections is that there are no temporal subdivisions of steadfast perceptions.[13] They lack duration. Thinking there are subdivisions assumes a theory of time that is not Hume's. Detailing Hume's theory on this point is what I will do next.

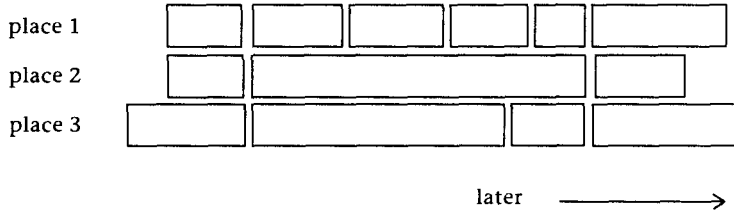
Thus for Hume there are steadfast objects, including steadfast perceptions, that coexist with successions. However an apparent contradiction looms.

II

Hume holds that *all and only successions have duration* (T 37). Hume also holds that *there is such a thing as a steadfast object—something which coexists with many things in succession, but which is not itself a succession* (T 34–7). Thus it seems that Hume has committed himself to a contradiction: a steadfast object lacks duration because it is not a succession, but has duration because it coexists with something which has duration.

We think that the steadfast object must have duration based on three assumptions. First, we assume that having duration is occupying different successive temporal intervals. Second, we assume that something occupying an interval occupies its subintervals. Third, we assume that time is like a line and so if an interval coexists with a succession of intervals, then the latter intervals are subintervals of the former.[14] Thus we think that *if something occupies a temporal interval,* i, *then it occupies all the intervals in any succession of intervals which coexists with interval* i. And so the steadfast object must have duration.

If Hume can consistently deny one of our assumptions, then he can resolve the apparent contradiction. And he can. The third assumption is precisely where we go wrong, on Hume's view. He thinks that literally there are different successions of intervals coexisting in different places, with no subintervals in common. Thus time is not well represented by a line, for Hume. A diagram such as the following is better:



The blocks represent moments. Parts of blocks do not represent moments, nor do they represent parts of moments. For Hume a moment is any thing which is not a succession, just insofar as it is part of a succession. That is, moments are abstractions from members of successions. Some moments are abstractions from steadfast objects. Coexistence of moments is represented by the fact that two blocks could be cut by the same vertical line.[15] However this aspect of the diagram is not supposed to represent anything in reality that explains coexistence. Coexistence is taken to be primitive. That any vertical line which could be drawn through one block would be to the right of any vertical line which could be drawn through another, represents the fact that the first moment is later than the second. Note: Hume thinks that, strictly speaking, only spatial minima are in space, so strictly speaking nothing is in more than one place (T 30–1). Consequently in the diagram no moment is in more than one place.

I've emphasized coexistent successions in different places to draw attention to what is distinctive about Hume's view. However sameness of place cannot be the only way a succession is united. Hume thinks some successions—particularly of perceptions—are in no place at all, as for instance a succession of tastes or smells or sounds or passions (see T 234–7). In fact "the greatest part of beings" exist and yet are nowhere (T 235). Therefore what is distinctive about Hume's view is precisely that some indivisible moment coexists with distinct successive moments, not that they coexist in different places.

If not always place, then what unifies successions? What makes moments members of the same succession of moments? Answering the question requires distinguishing time as it is from time as we experience it. Time as it is consists

simply of moments later than some, coexistent with others, and earlier than still others. It is not objectively divided up into successions with additional principles of unity. However time as we experience it is different. We experience time by experiencing various coexistent successions of objects. It is the ideas of these that we use to form the abstract idea of time. The experienced unity of successions of objects is a result of the principles of association of ideas (T 10–13). In all cases temporal contiguity plays a role. Sameness of place helps unify some successions. The successions of things in no place, however, must be united by the help of resemblance or causation. So if Hume enjoys the succession of tastes in a sip of a complex claret, their resemblance as tastes and their having a common cause helps unify the succession. If Hume simultaneously listens to a birdsong and feels a change of mood, these two successions of perceptions likewise are unified without appeal to sameness of place. (Though it must be said that Hume will naturally attribute place to each to "compleat the union" (T 237)—he'll hear the song as in the bird's throat and feel the mood as in his own breast.)

That there are coexistent things that are nowhere seems inconsistent with Hume's claim at T 36 that "that quality of the coexistence of parts belongs to extension . . . ." Here he must mean that all extended things have coexistent parts. He can't mean that all coexistent things form something extended. Coexistent tastes or smells or sounds or passions don't (T 234–7).

I've also pictured successions of moments as not overlapping in the diagram. However successions of perceptions or objects united by natural relations (see T 13–14) might have some members in common. Suppose the left hand and right hand parts on a piano come together at the same note for a couple of beats and then separate again. One might hear the successions of lower notes and higher notes merging then diverging. However this fact about time as it is experienced doesn't affect the core fact about time on Hume's view that an indivisible moment can coexist with successive moments. The above diagram as it stands serves for the current purpose simply of illustrating this fact.

It may well seem contradictory to say that an indivisible moment coexists with a succession of moments. It would have to be both momentary and long-lasting it seems, and these seem inconsistent. Thus the seeming contradiction for steadfast objects can be resolved only if this seeming contradiction for steadfast moments can be. What is required is to show that being momentary—in the sense of being indivisible, not being a succession—is consistent with being long-lasting in the sense of coexisting with some succession. To show that what Hume thinks is not contradictory, I will formalize Hume's assumptions about coexistence and successiveness.[16] The domain of discourse is a set of moments. The primitive relation is the later-than relation, represented

by '>'. I will not assume that moments are ordered discretely, though Hume believes they are, since this assumption is irrelevant to resolving the apparent contradiction.

Assumptions

Later-than is irreflexive, is asymmetric, and is transitive:

(1) $(x)\sim(x>x)$
(For all x, it is not the case that x is later than x.)

(2) $(x)(y)(x>y \rightarrow \sim(y>x))$
(For all x and all y, if x is later than y then it is not the case that y is later than x.)

(3) $(x)(y)(z)((x>y \ \& \ y>z) \rightarrow x>z)$
(For all x, all y, and all z, if x is later than y and y is later than z then x is later than z.)

Definition of Coexists With:

(4) $x@y =_{df.} \sim(x>y) \ \& \ \sim(y>x)$
(By definition, x coexists with y if and only if it is not the case that x is later than y and it is not the case that y is later than x.)

There is at least one moment which some successive moments coexist with:

(5) $(Ex)(Ey)(Ez)(x>y \ \& \ (x@z \ \& \ y@z))$
(For some x, some y and some z, x is later than y and x coexists with z and y coexists with z.)

If one moment coexists with another, then any moment later than one is later than any moment the other is later than.

(6) $(w)(x)(y)(z)((x>w \ \& \ x@y \ \& \ z>y) \rightarrow z>w)$
(For all w, all x, all y, and all z, if x is later than w and x coexists with y and z is later than y, then z is later than w.)

Consistency

(1)–(6) do not jointly entail a contradiction: one model consists of {1,2,3,4} as the domain, and {<4,3>, <4,1>, <3,1>, <2,1>} as the extension of '>'. In this model, 4 is later than 3, both are coexistent with 2, and all three are later than 1.

Consequences

By (4) and (1), Coexists With is reflexive. Since nothing is later than itself, by definition everything is coexistent with itself.

(7) $(x)(x@x)$
(For all x, x coexists with x.)

By (4) and commutivity, Coexists With is symmetric. If neither x nor y is later than the other, then each coexists with the other.

(8) $(x)(y)(x@y \rightarrow y@x)$
(For all x and all y, if x coexists with y then y coexists with x.)

By (4) and (5), Coexists With is not transitive. Since successive moments can coexist with the same moment, moments that do not coexist can coexist with the same moment.

(9) $\sim(x)(y)(z)((x@y \ \& \ y@z) \rightarrow x@z)$
(It is not the case that for all x, all y, and all z, if x coexists with y and y coexists with z then x coexists with z.)

It follows from (6) and (4) and (1) that a moment between moments which coexist with the same moment, also coexists with that moment. For suppose the in-between moment did not coexist with the steadfast moment its flanking moments coexist with. Then the in-between moment would have to be either earlier or later than the steadfast moment. But then there are coexisting moments (i.e., the steadfast moment and a flanking moment) such that our moment in question is earlier than one and later than the other. This couldn't happen unless it could be later than itself, which it can't be. Thus:

(10) $(x)(y)(z)((x@z \ \& \ y@z) \rightarrow (w)((x>w \ \& \ w>y) \rightarrow w@z))$
(For all x, all y, and all z, if x coexists with z and y coexists with z, then for all w, if x is later than w and w is later than y then w coexists with z.)

It follows from (6) and (4) that successive moments cannot each coexist with both of successive moments. Otherwise the earlier of the first succession and the later of the second succession would coexist and yet also be in succession. Thus:

(11) $(x)(y)(z)((x>y \ \& \ (x@z \ \& \ y@z)) \rightarrow \sim(Ew)(w>z \ \& \ (x@w \ \& \ y@w)))$
(For all x, all y, and all z, if x is later than y and x coexists with z and y coexists with z, then it is not the case that for some w, w is later than z and x coexists with w and y coexists with w.)

It follows from (6), (1), and (4) that for moments which coexist, at least one is such that anything later than it is later than both. For suppose there are coexistent moments such that each has a moment later than it but not later than the other. If not later than the other, then what? Not earlier, because the same moment cannot be later than one of coexistent moments yet earlier than the other. Not coexistent, because then the later moment in one sequence would turn out to be coexistent with a moment it is later than. Thus:

(12) $(x)(y)(x@y \rightarrow ((z)(z>x \rightarrow z>y) \vee (w)(w>y \rightarrow w>x)))$
(For all x and all y, if x coexists with y then either for all z, if z is later than x then z is later than y, or, for all w, if w is later than y then w is later than x.)

Sentences (6), (10), (11), and (12) convey that there is a rough coordination of different successions, despite the lack of the precise coordination afforded by an equivalence relation of simultaneity.[17] The coordination is in both temporal directions. In other words (6), (10), and (11) can both be rephrased using "earlier than," and (12) is true even when substituting for Later-than, Earlier-than defined as follows:

(13) $x<y =_{df.} y>x$
(By definition, x is earlier than y if and only if y is later than x.)

I can now explain some of the terminology I used in introducing the apparent contradiction. A succession of moments is several moments such that for any two, one of them is later than the other and such that for any two either no moment is between them or some moment between them is a member of the group. Thus distinct coexisting moments are not in the same succession, though they could be in different successions which otherwise have all the same moments. An interval is either a moment or a succession of moments. An interval coexists with another just in case each moment in one coexists with some moment in the other, and vice versa.

III

One objection to this interpretation of Hume, as interpretation, could be based on his claim that it is absurd that distinct moments be coexistent, since it is of the essence of time that all its parts be successive (T 31). He seems to reiterate this claim at T 36 where he says, "'Tis evident, that these parts of time are not coexistent: For that quality of the coexistence of parts belongs to extension, and is what distinguishes it from duration." He reiterates this

at T 429. In all three places Hume seems to assume that moments that coexist with each other are the same moment.

However the opposite is entailed by Hume's claims that commit him to steadfast objects, as we have seen.

The best way to reconcile all these claims consists of two parts. The first is to read Hume as using "duration" interchangeably with "successiveness" (see T 37). When he talks about duration he is talking about being a succession. If this is so, then it makes sense for him to say that having parts in succession is the essence of duration (being a succession), and is to be contrasted with having parts that are coexistent and not in succession.

The second part of the reconciliation is to conceive of the manner in which more than one coexistent succession is arrayed. Hume does not supply a term for this but it could be "coexistent successiveness." This creates a possible ambiguity in the word "time." Hume has used it for a succession in general (duration). But it would seem appropriate also for coexisting successions in general. To prevent ambiguity let me call this last "complex time," and use "simple time" for what Hume calls time. Complex time is a complex of simple times—a complex of coexisting successions. Hume doesn't characterize complex time directly; I'm doing it on his behalf. In complex time some distinct moments are coexistent; in simple time none can be. The claims at T 31, 36, and 429 concern simple time. Those entailed by his discussion of steadfast objects concern complex time.

Thus the seeming inconsistency in Hume's conception of steadfast object can be resolved in a way consistent with the text. There are even some advantages of conceiving of time in this Humean way. This conception justifies two deeply held common sense convictions about time: (a) that time is very unlike space, and (b) that time flows.

(a) Something without temporal parts can coexist with a temporal succession. But something without spatial parts cannot be located along a spatial succession. So time is very unlike space.

The closest one could come to a spatial analog for a steadfast object would be the perception one would get when looking out a window at a pitch black sky along a visible horizon. Since darkness conveys no idea of extension (T 56), the experience would be like seeing a partless black extent, framed by the window, alongside of an extended landscape. Strictly speaking, however, in perceiving the sky there is not a perception of blackness; rather there is no perception at all. So neither at the level of external objects nor at the level of perceptions is there really something unextended stretched out alongside of something extended.[18] So there is no spatial analog to a steadfast object.

(b) Any temporal succession moves with respect to any other it coexists with. For example a succession with 5 moments moves with respect to a succession with 7 moments, at the rate of 5 moments per 7 moments.[19] If we perceivers of external events have a background succession of perceptions[20] with which to compare any sequence of *sense* impressions, then successions of sensed external events will always seem to flow in comparison with this background succession. The background succession would presumably consist mostly of ideas and impressions of reflection, and perhaps impressions of sense that one is hardly attending to. Successions of the sensed external events one is paying attention to, will seem to flow faster if the sequence of sense impressions speeds up relative to the background succession. Likewise they will seem to flow more slowly if the reverse holds true.

A counterexample seems to be the perceived circle of fire when the coal is wheeling so fast that it travels the whole circuit during the time of our briefest visual impression (T 35). Here the sensed external succession is very fast relative to the background succession, yet there appears to be something stationary—the circle of fire—not something fast. However there is a straightforward response. It is the comparison of background succession to succession of sense impressions that matters, not to what is really happening in the world. It may well be that when the visual impressions can't keep up, the mind stops exerting itself to produce new impressions and lets a steadfast one serve (cf. T 203). So there is no speedy succession of sense impression, so the case would not be a counterexample after all. I must acknowledge, however, that even when seeing the stationary circle of fire, we additionally in some way perceive the coal as something indistinct moving quickly. My guess is that we incorporate some knowledge—the knowledge that the circle of fire perception is the culmination of gradually less acute perceptions of something gradually moving faster. Plus we see the hand swinging the cord with the coal at the end. Without some knowledge of the context we wouldn't perceive the speed in any way. There are further hard cases no doubt, but in general if the background succession goes relatively faster then the sensed events seem relatively slower, and if the background goes relatively slower then the sensed events seem relatively faster.

That all coexistent successions flow relative to each other does not preclude us from fixing on an intersubjective standard for the rate of flow of successions. We can take some external successions, like the tickings of clocks, to be the standard by which we judge the rate of other successions. If we come to believe, as we tend to, that there is an ultimate standard succession of the briefest possible moments, then philosophers driven beyond common sense may even come to think that although that standard flows relative to other successions, it doesn't really flow, except perhaps trivially relative to itself.

IV

To say that Hume's theory justifies the common-sense convictions that time flows and is unlike space, is not to say that it is a common-sense theory. Hume himself emphasizes that we naturally come to think of steadfast objects as having duration—that is, as being successions—because of coexisting successions (T 65). This fiction is the source of the failure to distinguish complex time from simple time. I'll explain the fiction, then the failure.

What is at issue is how we come to think of an object, which is in fact steadfast, as if it rather had duration. In other words, the issue is how we come to think of something, which is in fact a single thing coexisting with a succession, as if it rather were many things in succession. In doing so we take no note of its steadfastness.

Noting its steadfastness will come later in the order of acquisition of ideas when we acquire the idea of identity (T 200–11). By then we have acquired the unbreakable habit of regarding everything that coexists with a succession as having duration. Then we are faced with an irresistible counterexample—a steadfast object perceived as such. Thinking of the object as having duration, we think of it as many. Thinking of it as steadfast, we think of it as one. The idea of identity arises out of the crisis that occurs when we realize that we can't help but think of the steadfast object as both one and many. After resolving the crisis, we start applying the idea of identity to what are really successions when acquiring the ideas of body and of self (T 202–5, 253–60). Even later we distinguish bodies from perceptions (T 210–11). Only after this would we be able to attribute duration to steadfast perceptions. Presumably we would do so by attributing identity to them, since their steadfastness could not be overlooked if we are paying attention to them.

Again, however, all this will be later in the order of acquisition. Here I focus just on the first step when we don't recognize the object's steadfastness. Unaware, we take what is in fact steadfast to be successive. At this level Hume's account is fairly simple and obvious, though there are some underlying interpretive problems.

The explanation occurs at T 65. He says "there is a continual succession of perceptions in our mind; so that the idea of time . . . [is] . . . ever present with us." The idea of time must be particularly important to be ever present. Not all abstract ideas derivable from one's sequence of perceptions are ever present. For instance the abstract idea of a perception is not. Anyway "we are apt to apply" the idea of time to a steadfast object which we pay attention to at different times, but not continuously.[21] For instance "we consider a stedfast object at five-a-clock, and regard the same at six . . . ." When we do so, "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." What he means here, I contend, is that these successive experiences of a single steadfast object seem just like experience of a succession of objects that are not steadfast. Consider Hume's phrase "seem equally remov'd." Johnson's first definition of "Remove" is "To put from its place; to take or put away."[22] Recall that a steadfast object is one fixed in place. So an object that is removed is not steadfast; it is rather one of a succession; it is changed in the sense of replaced. Thus because we are constantly experiencing succession, we tend to think of an object experienced at one time (i.e., the first appearance) and that object experienced at a later time (i.e., the second appearance), not as one steadfast thing but as many things in succession. The fact is, though, that the object *is* steadfast. So the idea of it as a succession is a fiction.

Thus we apply the idea of duration to what is in fact a steadfast object "in the same manner as if every moment were distinguish'd by a different position, or an alteration of the object." We are reinforced in this fiction by our recognition of two things. First, the object *could have* changed between five and six. It could have been replaced, moved, or altered. The second is harder to interpret. Hume tells us experience also shows us "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" (T 65). He could be talking about the qualities of the steadfast object. He could mean that things change imperceptibly when they are to all appearances steadfast. So for instance paper yellows, though it takes a long time to notice it. But if Hume were saying this he would be saying that the duration was real but imperceptible. He rather says it is fictitious. Alternatively Hume could be talking of the qualities of coexistent objects: at the end of a moment occupied by a steadfast object, there is as much alteration in coexisting things, as there is at the end of the duration occupied by a coexisting succession of objects. In other words, things coexisting with steadfast objects alter just as much as things coexisting with successions of objects.

This interpretation relies on Hume's claim that only successions have duration (T 37). However two interpretive problems arise. First, Hume's mention of alteration seems to suggest that a non-succession—namely something altering—could have duration, contrary to what I have argued. However, Hume regards altering things as really successions of distinct things. He regards "variation" as "evidently contrary" to identity through time (T 219). Presumably he is solving the standard problem of variation, alteration, in one of the possible ways—a powerful and tempting one. The problem is that if the same thing first has a property then lacks it, then the same thing has and lacks a property, which is impossible. One easy solution—Hume's, I suggest—is to deny that there is the same thing.

Second, Hume also seems to say that an object merely "distinguished by a different position" has duration. I am tempted to say that motion is a species of alteration and so, again, the object is really a succession. This would conform with his implying that a case of wheeling a burning coal about is a case of "real succession in the objects" (T 35). However this interpretation conflicts with his apparent assumption that the parts of a mass of matter can "continue uninterruptedly and invariably the same, whatever motion or change of place we may observe either in the whole or in any of the parts" (T 255). All I can guess is that in the case of motion, the relevant succession is a succession of events—the object occupying one place, the object occupying the next place, etc. Thus the idea of duration would be applied to the object only insofar as it successively stood in a relation to different places. Strictly speaking it couldn't be applied to the object considered by itself.

Support for this interpretation is found at T 12: there Hume says that causation is a relation between objects even when "one causes the actions or motions of the other" as opposed to its existence. The reason why includes what is here relevant:

> For as that action or motion is nothing but the object itself, consider'd in a certain light, and as the object continues the same in all its different situations, 'tis easy to imagine how such an influence of objects upon one another may connect them in the imagination.

What is an object "consider'd in a certain light?" Hume tends to use this phrase when talking about thinking of an object while paying special attention to some relation it stands in. So for example he says,

> 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)

In this context to consider them in that light is to consider them insofar as they resemble in a certain respect various other ideas. The relation is resemblance.

Notice it is the same object despite the relations it is considered in, in the case of motion as well as in distinctions of reason. Thus I propose that motion is the same object considered in the light of successive contiguity to a succession of place (where these places are abstractions from parts of some extended thing or things). Thus there would be a succession of pairings of

object and place. This as I have said is strictly what would have duration, not the object taken independent of its relations.

So, despite the worry about motion, I think it best to continue to say that for Hume only successions have duration.[23]

Thus we get into the habit of applying the idea of duration to everything, whether a succession of changeable objects or not. This is the fiction I promised to explain. Now for the promised explanation of the failure to distinguish simple from complex time: that we develop this habit would explain why it is so hard to conceive of a single moment coexisting with a succession of moments. The scenario is a steadfast object coexisting with a succession of other objects. We naturally think of the steadfast object as a succession like the coexisting one. So we naturally think of the single moment abstracted from the steadfast object as a succession of moments. Presumably we would think of the steadfast object's moment as divided into parts corresponding to the moments of the members of the coexisting succession of objects. The division often is not exact since the first member of the succession of other objects might precede the steadfast object or vice versa. (That would mean that one of them might coexist with an object preceding the other.) The same sort of mismatch might happen with the last member of the succession and the steadfast object. In such a situation we would have to think of the steadfast object and the succession as of approximately the same duration. Note however that a fast, long-term succession would provide sub-successions that could pretty closely approximate the feigned "duration" of any steadfast object or the duration of any succession. Noticing this, the mind tends to concoct a fiction that there is an exact standard for judging the equality of the duration of any two "things" (whether steadfast object or succession). This standard for time is exactly analogous to the one for space of which Hume says, "But tho' this standard be only imaginary, the fiction however is very natural" (T 48). He goes on to say:

> This appears very conspicuously with regard to time; where tho' 'tis evident we have no exact method of determining the proportions of parts, not even so exact as in extension, yet the various corrections of our measures, and their different degrees of exactness, have given us an obscure and implicit notion of a perfect and entire equality. (T 48)

This exact standard would, presumably, be a succession none of whose single moments coexist with any succession. In any event, thinking this way would yield a fictitious belief in everything having ultimate temporal parts each one precisely coexistent with exactly one part in everything else. The succession

of moments at any one place would exactly resemble the succession at any other place as well as those in no place. So difference in place, or in any other principle of unity for a succession, would seem irrelevant to succession of moments. So the distinction between simple time and complex time would seem a distinction without a difference.

So we naturally come to think that the temporal interval containing a steadfast object has a succession of parts. So it is unnatural to think of a single partless moment coexisting with a succession of moments—unnatural but not inconsistent.

NOTES

I'm grateful for comments, criticisms, and suggestions from Eli Hirsch, Michael Costa, Ken Winkler, Daniel Flage, John Biro, James Dye, and the audiences for earlier versions of this paper at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Boston, 1998, the Twenty-seventh Hume Conference, Williamsburg, VA, 2000, and the Pacific Division Meetings of the American Philosophical Association, San Francisco, 2001.

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Hereafter, T, followed by page number.

2 Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: W. Strahan, 1755).

3 By "steadfast" neither I nor Hume mean permanent. Something relatively short-lived is steadfast as long as it coexists with a succession of shorter-lived things.

4 Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 103–4; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, eds. T. H. Greene and T. H. Grose (London: Longmans Green, and Co., 1878), 254–6; H. H. Price, *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 46–7.

5 The essay is a revision and considerable expansion of my treatment of Hume on time in Donald L. M. Baxter, "A Defense of Hume on Identity through Time," *Hume Studies* 13 (1987): 323–42. An earlier version of parts II and III appeared as "A Humean Temporal Logic," *Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, Volume VI: Analytic Philosophy and Logic*, ed. Akihiro Kanamori (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 2000). Forerunners of my interpretation that not all perceptions are exceedingly brief are Jane L. McIntyre, "Is Hume's Self Consistent?" in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade L. Robison (San Diego: Austin Hill Press, 1976), 79–88; Eli Hirsch, "Hume's Distinction between Genuine and Fictitious Identity," in *Midwestern Studies in Philosophy* 8 (1983): 321–38; and E. W. van Steenburgh, "Durationless Moments in Hume's *Treatise*," in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice

(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), 181–5. See also Michael J. Costa, "Hume, Strict Identity, and Time's Vacuum," *Hume Studies* 16 (1990): 1–16; and Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: University Press, 1997), 52–5.

6 How is the passage of time felt in this case? It surely is felt even if "scarce felt." Presumably we feel the "changes of the coexistent objects" (T 201), even though we are hardly paying attention to them. I'm grateful to James Dye for asking the question here.

7 Stroud, 103.

8 See my "A Defense of Hume."

9 Wayne Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 207.

10 Waxman, 206–7.

11 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). Cited by (book, chapter, section).

12 Waxman, 322, note 11.

13 See Costa, 12.

14 I didn't yet see how to deny the third assumption in my earlier paper and so denied the second by suggesting that an object can occupy a temporal interval without occupying its subintervals. See "A Defense of Hume on Identity through Time," 333 ff. This move, however, relied on a view that a whole is a distinct thing from its several parts. Such a view of parts and wholes cannot be Hume's, not even for temporal intervals which, being abstractions, will have the structure of the wholes they are abstracted from. For Hume on parts and wholes see T 30–1 as well as my "Hume on Virtue, Beauty, Composites, and Secondary Qualities," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 71 (1990): 103–18, and "Hume on Infinite Divisibility," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 5 (1988): 133–40.

15 I mean a vertical line anywhere along the extent of a block, not just at the ends.

16 I'm grateful to Virgil Whitmyer for some corrections.

17 Akihiro Kanamori points out in his editor's introduction that a weak simultaneity relation can be defined on Humean moments which divides them up into equivalence classes that themselves are totally ordered by the later-than relation. Presumably there would be more than one such equivalence class only if not every moment and a moment later than it both coexisted with some moment.

18 For background see Hume's discussion of the idea of a vacuum, esp. T 55–62. Costa gives a good summary of what Hume is up to.

19 I owe this idea of flow rate to Peter D'Alesandre.

20 See T 65. For Hume a perception is any object of direct awareness, whether sensory awareness or some other.

21 Though I am in substantial agreement with Costa's excellent paper, I disagree with him on this point. I think at T 65 Hume is not considering a continuous hour-long experience of the object, but rather interrupted experiences. I think only at T 200–1 does Hume consider a continuous experience of a steadfast object, and then the collision between perceived unity and supposed duration and successiveness gives rise to the idea of identity. See my "A Defense of Hume."

22 Johnson's *Dictionary*.

23 I'm indebted to Eli Hirsch for the following interesting problem. If steadfast objects can change place, and a mass of matter can be composed of shifting steadfast objects, then the mass is the same mass yet has a succession of shapes. If shape is a quality then altering shape is variation contrary to identity through time. So the same mass is not the same mass. In answer, I conjecture that for Hume shape isn't really a quality, because things with shape are not really individuals. Anything extended, rather than being "an unite," is a number of individual minimal points (T 30–1). So except for the degenerate minimal shape, all shapes are relations holding between numerous points. They are external relations—"ones that can be chang'd without any change in the ideas" (T 69)—so change in shape is not contrary to the steadfastness of the shifting points. Granted Hume calls "figure" a "quality" at T 221, but if he is to be consistent he must be speaking loosely.