



A Humean Conundrum

Ruth Weintraub

Hume Studies Volume 31, Number 2, (2005) 211 - 224.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>.

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact

humestudies-info@humesociety.org

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/>

A Humean Conundrum

RUTH WEINTRAUB

Abstract: Hume's Copy Principle, which accords precedence to impressions over ideas, is restricted to simple perceptions. Yet in all the conceptual analyses Hume conducts by attempting to fit an impression to a (putative) idea, he never checks for simplicity. And this seems to vitiate the analyses: we cannot conclude from the lack of a preceding impression that a putative idea is bogus, unless it is simple. In this paper I criticise several attempts to account for Hume's seemingly cavalier attitude, and offer one of my own.

1. The Problem

Hume's "first principle . . . in the science of human nature" (T 1.1.1.12; SBN 7),¹ which accords precedence to impressions over ideas, is restricted to simple perceptions: "That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent" (T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4; emphasis omitted). Hume initially suggests that "*all* the perceptions of the mind are double, and appear both as impressions and ideas" (T 1.1.1.3; SBN 2–3; my emphasis), but subsequently realises that a restriction is necessary, having noted two counter-examples to the sweeping principle: an idea he has of the New Jerusalem, which he hasn't seen (and of which he has, therefore, had no impression), and an impression (of Paris) without a corresponding idea.

Here is the puzzle. When he comes to apply his principle, commonly known as the Copy Principle, Hume seems to have forgotten the (sensible) restriction he has imposed on it. In all the conceptual analyses he conducts by attempting to fit an

Ruth Weintraub teaches in the Philosophy department, Tel-Aviv University, Tel-Aviv, Israel.
Email: weintrar@post.tau.ac.il.

impression to a (putative) idea, he doesn't even state, let alone cite any reason for thinking, that the idea is simple. With two exceptions, in fact, the word "simple" isn't even mentioned, and these exceptions do not affect the point.

There is, first, our idea of substance, which, Hume says, "is nothing but a collection of *simple* ideas, that are united by the imagination and have a particular name assigned them" (T 1.1.6.2; SBN 16; my emphasis). Here, Hume is not justifying the use of the Copy Principle to show that we have no idea of substance. If he were doing that, he would be claiming that the idea of substance (if any) is simple. But instead, he describes our idea of substance (as opposed to the bogus philosophers' idea, which he rejects) as *complex*. The simplicity he alludes to is that of the constituent ideas, and he isn't checking whether these are bona fide. Rather, he is *assuming* they are genuine, and stating that they combine to form our idea of substance.

The second case in point is Hume's discussion of the Self. Here, it seems as if Hume is adopting the procedure we would expect. Some philosophers, he suggests, "are certain of [the mind's] perfect identity and *simplicity* . . . [But we do not] have any idea of self, after the manner it is here explain'd. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd? . . . [A] question, which must necessarily be answer'd, if we wou'd have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible" (T 1.4.6.1; SBN 251; my emphasis). This passage shows, Saul Traiger thinks, that "the unnamed philosophers, as Hume understands them, take the idea of the self to be a simple idea . . . [and for] Hume, a simple idea [must] . . . antecedently [have] a simple impression. Hume does not find a simple impression of self, and so he rejects the view that there is a corresponding idea."²

But initial appearances notwithstanding, this isn't what Hume is doing. He discusses two distinct issues pertaining to the mind: its continuity over time and its simplicity at any one time. When discussing continuity, Hume is concerned, *inter alia*, with the idea (of a continuing self). And here, he does look for an impression, but doesn't mention simplicity.

When he (very briefly) discusses the mind's alleged simplicity (T 1.4.6.22; SBN 263), Hume isn't concerned with the *idea* of simplicity: he neither doubts that we have such an idea, nor does he attempt to account for the meaning of the term "simple." He is interested in its erroneous ascription to our minds, for which he provides an explanation: "An object, whose different co-existent parts are bound together by a close relation, operates upon the imagination after much the same manner as one perfectly simple and indivisible. . . . From this similarity of operation we attribute a simplicity to it" (T 1.4.6.22; SBN 263). In discussing our belief that the mind is simple, the simplicity he cites isn't that of an idea, cited by way of justifying a search for an impression, but that of the *mind itself*.

We can conclude that in his conceptual analyses, Hume *never* checks for simplicity. But the assumption of simplicity is required for a correct application

of the empiricist principle. We cannot, for instance, conclude from the lack of a preceding impression that a putative idea is bogus, unless it is simple. Yet time and time again Hume applies the principle without even mentioning the issue. And this clearly vitiates the analyses. If the idea isn't simple, Hume isn't justified in looking for a preceding impression; this may well be an idea without one.

Our conundrum, then, is the following: how is Hume's way of proceeding to be explained?

2. Proposed Solutions and Their Shortcomings

We can, I think, dismiss the suggestion made by John Nelson that Hume is being careless.³ Such laxity is extremely unlikely when there is so much at stake. Hume thinks, remember, that the empiricist doctrine "will enable us to bring ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove *all* dispute . . . concerning their nature and reality" (EHU 2.9; SBN 22; my emphasis).⁴ This is an important goal for one who is attempting to study the "powers and qualities" (T Intro. 8; SBN xvii) of the mind; one whose new science of human nature will be improved if "[he] cou'd explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations we perform in our reasonings" (T Intro. 4; SBN xv).

Does Hume perhaps think it so evident that all the ideas to which he is applying the principle are simple that even mentioning it would be belabouring the obvious? This suggestion must be rejected. If we already know the content of a putative idea, its classification as simple or complex is straightforward. That is why Hume can easily tell that the idea of an apple is complex. We distinguish "a particular colour, taste and smell . . . [as] qualities all united together in [it] . . . 'tis [then] easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other" (T 1.1.1.2; SBN 2). And so, similarly, Hume knows the "passions of pride and humility [are] simple and uniform impressions" (T 2.1.2.1; SBN 277). Being able to identify episodes of pride and humility, he can "examine" the impressions, and *see* that they aren't constituted of simpler components.

But Hume's analyses are different. He doesn't, *to begin with*, know what the idea is, and the results of the analyses are often surprising; there would be no point in conducting them otherwise. And he must decide whether the idea is simple or not so as to know *whether* to look for a preceding impression. So the decision most certainly isn't trivial. Indeed, it isn't clear that it can always be made. How, for instance, does Hume know that the idea of extension is simple so as to justify his search for "the impressions similar to this idea of extension, [which] must either be some sensations deriv'd from the sight, or some internal impressions arising from these sensations" (T 1.2.3.2; SBN 33)?

It is even less plausible to suppose that Hume takes the simplicity of the idea of necessity to be evident. In fact, it is more likely to be complex. Ideas of relations

are *all*, he claims (T 1.1.4.7; SBN 13), *complex*. This is because an idea is complex if it “may be distinguished into parts” (T 1.1.1.2; SBN 2).⁵ And relational ideas do have parts. As Locke says, in every idea of a relation both relata are present “so as to take a view of them at once.”⁶ Now, Hume refers to the “the necessary connexion *betwixt causes and effects*” (T 1.3.14.21; SBN 165; my emphasis), so necessity appears to be a relation, and, therefore, complex. Yet Hume goes on to suggest that the “idea of necessity arises from some impression” (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165). If the empiricist principle is here legitimately applied, it can’t be because the idea is straightforwardly simple!⁷

The “self-evidence” explanation is even less plausible when it comes to Hume’s application of the empiricist principle in one of his arguments against the existence of indeterminate ideas. “An idea is a weaker impression,” Hume assumes, “and as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the case must be the same with its copy or representative” (T 1.1.7.5; SBN 19). Hume is applying the empiricist principle sweepingly. He wants, for instance, to show that there is no indeterminate idea of gold, man, apple, and so forth. These are all obviously complex, since even when the inessential aspects have been abstracted away, we remain in each case with more than one quality. So Hume can’t be taking it as evident that the (putative) ideas he is considering here are simple!

Here is an opposite explanation of Hume’s procedure. Perhaps the requisite classification is *too difficult*, and Hume is forced to invoke the unrestricted principle qua statistical generalisation. This thought, too, can be dismissed. Hume notes that “there is in general a great resemblance betwixt our complex impressions and ideas” (T 1.1.1.5; SBN 3). But “the rule is not universally true” (T 1.1.1.5; SBN 3). So the application of the (statistical) principle to an idea whose status (simple/complex) is unknown will engender a verdict which is merely probable. And the uncertainty attaching to it isn’t negligible. Hume observes that “*many* of our complex ideas never had impressions that corresponded to them” (T 1.1.1.4; SBN 3; my emphasis). If he cannot always tell so as to be able to draw a categorical conclusion, he ought to state his results with the appropriate qualification. But he doesn’t. He suggests categorically that “the idea of necessity arises from some impression” (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165), and (even more confidently) that “the impressions similar to this idea of extension, *must* either be some sensations deriv’d from the sight, or some internal impressions arising from these sensations” (T 1.2.3.2; SBN 33; my emphasis). And this is quite typical. Hume *never* evinces caution when applying the empiricist principle.

Here is a solution derived from Edward Craig.⁸ He (rightly) wonders why, when analysing the idea of the self, Hume looks for a preceding impression without checking that the idea is simple. The answer, Craig suggests, is that Hume’s real concern is the genesis of the belief in the existence of the self, and not the analysis of the concept of self (23). With this aim in mind, Hume is justified in

looking for a preceding impression without checking that the idea is simple. A complex idea can be acquired without having its correspondent impression: by putting together its (simple) constituent ideas. That is why we cannot require a complex idea to have a preceding impression (120). Things are different when it comes to belief: “To produce a belief, the various impressions would have to occur together as a single, complex impression . . . it must be an *actual* impression to generate a belief, and whether it is simple or complex is of no consequence” (ibid.; emphasis in original). Merely encountering the impressions of its (simple) constituents isn’t sufficient to engender the belief. If it did, “we would find ourselves ascribing reality to everything we imagine” (ibid.), dragons, unicorns, and sirens.

Craig’s interpretation is presented very sketchily, and has to be clarified before its cogency can be assessed. From his wording, it might appear as if Hume thinks a *corresponding* preceding impression is required for the occurrence of a belief. But this is not true. True, this is one way in which a belief can come about, as happens when we come to believe something through the senses. But a belief in an imaginary creature, for instance, isn’t preceded by the corresponding impression. And, indeed, neither is the belief in the existence of the self. We “suppose ourselves possess of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro’ the whole course of our lives” (T 1.4.6.5; SBN 253), although “there is *no* impression constant and invariable” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 253; my emphasis).

Hume attempts to explain the occurrence of beliefs which are not preceded by the corresponding impressions: “A belief is a lively idea produc’d by a *relation* [contiguity, resemblance or causality] to a present impression” (T 1.3.7.6; SBN 97; my emphasis). The preceding impression doesn’t have to be simple. So when citing a preceding impression so as to explain the occurrence of a belief, one needn’t check whether the belief is a simple idea.

So much for the clarification. The objection to Craig’s interpretation is that it doesn’t account for all of the relevant cases. It is simply not true that Hume’s concern in all the cases he discusses is doxastic rather than conceptual. There are numerous cases in which Hume is quite straightforwardly concerned with conceptual questions (necessity, substance, abstract ideas), so Craig’s solution will not apply to them. Of course, Craig would admit as much. Although he thinks (implausibly, to my mind) that conceptual analysis is for Hume *subservient* to epistemology, he doesn’t go as far as to deny that he often engages in it (108). But this means that his explanation as to why Hume “spends no time on . . . whether the idea of the self might not be a complex idea” (119) cannot be applied to his other conceptual analyses.

In fact, Craig’s interpretation isn’t plausible even in the case of the self (T 1.4.6), the only one which he discusses. True, Hume is certainly concerned with our belief that the mind is invariable and simple. “There are some philosophers,”

he suggests, “who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our Self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence” (T 1.4.6.1; SBN 251). But their confidence is misplaced: “Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251). But when Hume attempts to account for the belief, the word “impression” isn’t even mentioned. The explanation he gives is that we confuse “perfect” identity with a “succession of related objects” (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–4).

When Hume looks for a preceding impression, he is concerned with the *idea* of the self: “nor have we any idea of the self. . . . For from what impression cou’d this idea be deriv’d? This . . . is a question, which must necessarily be answer’d, if we wou’d have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251). So even in the case of the self, Hume’s search for a preceding impression is an application of the Copy Principle, and Craig’s explanation of Hume’s omission to check for simplicity fails.

The final suggestion to be considered is Louis Loeb’s.⁹ Hume, according to him, thinks that the putative ideas that do not have a corresponding impression are, indeed, defective in meaning, but nonetheless have a “surrogate meaning”; they couldn’t otherwise figure in beliefs whose psychological origin Hume attempts to explain. If, for instance, the term “substance” were completely meaningless, it wouldn’t be possible for the “antient philosophers” to “feign an unknown something, or original substance” (T 1.4.3.5; SBN 221). Their belief may be false, but it must have a content!

If this is Hume’s aim, Loeb thinks, he can afford to be perfunctory in his application of the Copy Principle. His “destructive arguments to meaninglessness are merely intended to generate a presumption that a would-be concept is not strictly meaningful. . . . Since Hume has in hand an explanation of the (quasi-)content of the concepts, these presumptive arguments can be brief. His overall argument is not complete until he supplements the presumptive argument with an explanation . . . of how the relevant quasi-content arises” (Loeb, 152).

This suggestion won’t do. There are three possibilities with respect to the term “substance.” First, it may denote a simple idea. Second, it may denote a complex idea. The third, espoused by Loeb’s Hume, is in terms of quasi-content. To uphold his own explanation, (Loeb’s) Hume must rule out the first two alternatives. The first is incompatible with the Copy Principle, since there is no corresponding impression. But how is he to rule out the second? The absence of a preceding impression doesn’t even create a presumption against it: the Copy Principle is *silent* with respect to complex ideas. Neither is the third alternative, the one that Loeb’s Hume favours, simpler or more parsimonious, so no methodological considerations can be invoked to uphold it as against the (remaining) rival. We must conclude that the polemical strategy that Loeb ascribes to Hume is inadequate. We do (interpretatively) better if we look for another.

3. A Better Solution

Here is a better explanation of Hume's omissions. His single formulation of the empiricist doctrine expresses *two* distinct principles. One delimits the set of ideas which can be had (by human beings), and the other constrains the way they are acquired. They are both formulated in terms of the relationship between ideas and impressions, but they have different scopes, that of the first being more extensive than that of the second.

Hume starts by establishing a genetic principle, pertaining to the acquisition of ideas. He first entertains a sweeping version, "ideas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other" (T 1.1.1.3; SBN 3), and then notes two counter-examples, on the basis of which he concludes that the principle must be restricted to simple perceptions.

Hume then notes a counter-example even to the restricted principle, the missing shade of blue. But he decides to retain the principle even in the face of this counter-example: "[T]he instance is so particular and singular, that 'tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim" (T 1.1.1.10; SBN 6). I shall return (section 5) to consider his attitude to the counter-example.

According to the genetic (causal) principle, then, every simple idea is caused by a corresponding impression. In other words, we come to understand the meaning of a term denoting a simple idea by having the corresponding impression. Hume now goes on to derive from the genetic principle a more general claim: "Thus we find, that all simple ideas and impressions resemble each other; and as the complex are formed from them, we may affirm *in general*, that these two species of perception are exactly correspondent" (T 1.1.1.6; SBN 4; my emphasis). Clearly, this can't be the genetic principle. The "*many* of our complex ideas [which] never had impressions, that corresponded to them" (T 1.1.1.4; SBN 3; my emphasis) haven't gone away. Hume has had to restrict the genetic principle because of these counter-examples, the New Jerusalem, for instance. So what is this (sweeping) principle?

The wording is somewhat vague. What is it for a complex idea to be "formed from" simple ones? The (implicit) answer is found in Hume's discussion of the association of ideas, the rules governing the way complex ideas are formed from simple ones: "[N]ature point[s] out to every one those simple ideas, which are most proper to be *united* into a complex one" (T 1.1.4.1; SBN 10–11; my emphasis). And he gives as an example of a complex idea the "particular colour, taste and smell [which] are . . . all united together in this [idea] of an apple" (T 1.1.1.2; SBN 2). A complex idea, we glean, is the *aggregate* of simple ideas.

The genetic principle isn't true in general. A complex idea is acquired *either* by having the preceding impression or by putting together simple ideas. But Hume can nonetheless establish—by considering both kinds of ideas (simple and com-

plex)—a general claim pertaining to *humanly possible ideas*. Every possible idea is the aggregate of (one or more) simple ideas. A simple idea, the genetic principle tells us, is acquired only through its corresponding impression. So for each possible simple idea there must be a corresponding possible impression. It couldn't otherwise be acquired.

A complex idea is the aggregate of simple ideas. By the above, each has a corresponding (possible) impression. So the complex idea also has a (possible) corresponding impression: the aggregate of these impressions.

The conclusion is an *unrestricted* semantic principle: any humanly possible idea is a copy of a possible (human) impression. This principle is pertinent if one is concerned—as Hume often is—to establish an idea's credentials (find out whether it is genuine or bogus), or to investigate its content (show its real meaning, about which we may be confused). Because it is unrestricted, Hume doesn't need to check whether the (putative) ideas he is investigating with the aid of the principle are simple, and even allows himself to apply it to ideas that appear complex: abstract ideas and the idea of necessity.

The suggestion explains why during the course of his investigations Hume always states the principle without the restriction he has himself imposed. When he discusses abstract ideas, Hume says that “*all* ideas are deriv'd from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them” (T 1.1.7.5; SBN 19; my emphasis), and when he considers the idea of existence, he cites a principle according to which “*every* idea arises from a similar impression” (T 1.2.6.3; SBN 66; my emphasis). He opens his discussion of the ideas of space and time by claiming that “[n]o discovery cou'd have been made more happily for deciding all controversies concerning ideas, than that . . . impressions *always* take the precedence of them” (T 1.2.3.1; SBN 33; my emphasis), and suggests, just before he begins his search for the impression that is required to vindicate the idea of the self, that “[i]t must be some one impression, that gives rise to *every* real idea” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251; my emphasis).¹⁰

The explanation makes much better sense of Hume's (seemingly sloppy) way of proceeding, and it can also be confirmed by noting that he takes different sorts of facts to be relevant to the two principles. When the context is genetic, claims are made about a concrete history: “I can imagine to myself such a city as the New Jerusalem . . . tho' *I never saw* any such,” Hume reports (T 1.1.1.4; SBN 3; my emphasis). Clearly, his concern here is aetiological, rather than semantic. He is not raising a question about the content or legitimacy of the idea of the New Jerusalem, but rather, considering its acquisition.

That the genetic principle is being discussed is even more apparent when Hume refers to “our simple ideas *in their first appearance*” (T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4; my emphasis). Here, Hume is concerned with acquisition *episodes*. A simple idea is acquired on a particular occasion, when it is copied from a (present) simple impression.

When Hume is investigating the content of an idea, rather than its genesis, he considers *all possible impressions* as potential sources.

If [the idea of substance] be perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or a sound, or a taste. The idea of a substance must therefore be deriv'd from an impression of reflexion, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflexion resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possibly represent a substance. (T 1.1.6.1; SBN 16)

There is no such an idea to be had, because it isn't a faint copy of any *possible* impression. The idea of a winged horse, by way of contrast, is genuine, since there is a possible impression for it (which no one has had).

When discussing abstract ideas, Hume dismisses the possibility of an indeterminate idea by appealing to a fact about *possible* impressions, whether actual or not: “[N]o impression can become present to the mind, without being determin'd in its degrees both of quantity and quality. . . . That is a contradiction in terms” (T 1.1.7.4; SBN 19).

Hume rules out the existence of *possible* impressions corresponding to the (putative) idea of causal necessity. When “I cast my eye on the *known qualities of objects* . . . I immediately discover that the relation of cause and effect depends not in the least on them” (T 1.3.2.12; SBN 77; my emphasis). Finally, he adduces (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251–2) several arguments designed to show that there can be no impression of self, and—correlatively—no idea of self. Thus, “[s]elf or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251).

We can now rebut an objection levelled against Hume by Jonathan Bennett. “The crucial trouble,” Bennett says, “is that Hume’s theory is genetic rather than analytic; he expresses it as a theory about what must occur before there can be understanding, rather than about what . . . it is for an expression to have a meaning” (*Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, 230). But Bennett, we can now see, is mistaken. Hume doesn’t offer a genetic theory *instead* of an analytic one: he offers both. He provides one principle to account for the genesis of our concepts, and another, citing necessary and sufficient conditions for meaningfulness. The two are distinct, although they are (sensibly) related: possible concepts must be acquirable.

4. The *Enquiry*

Hume’s discussion of the Copy Principle in the *Enquiry* is as confusing, but I believe the same interpretation is appropriate.¹¹ He starts by stating an unrestricted

principle: “[A]ll our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones” (EHU 2.5; SBN 19). This is the semantic principle, as is attested by the explanation he gives of its significance after “proving” it:

[I]f proper use were made of it, [it] might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings . . . if it be impossible to assign any [impression to an idea], this will serve to confirm our suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea . . . [and] remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning [the] nature and reality [of ideas]. (EHU 2.9; SBN 21–2)

The genetic principle is mentioned in the course of Hume’s defence of the semantic one: “[W]hen we analyze our ideas, however compounded . . . we always find that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as *were copied* from a precedent feeling or sentiment” (EHU 2.6; SBN 19; my emphasis). The simple ideas are copies of simple impressions we *have had*. But the complex ideas needn’t be: “When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, gold, and mountain, with which we were formerly acquainted” (EHU 2.5; SBN 19). It is the genetic principle which is pertinent when Hume subsequently discusses the missing shade of blue, which “may serve as a proof that the *simple* ideas are not always . . . *derived* from the correspondent impressions” (EHU 2.8; SBN 21; my emphasis).

In the *Treatise*, the mind is capable of very modest feats: it can form complex ideas by uniting simple ones and separate complex ideas into their simple constituents. Greater creative powers are imputed to the mind in the *Enquiry*. We have “the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, [and] diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience” (EHU 2.5; SBN 19). Furthermore, the idea of God, Hume suggests, “arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, *without limit*, those qualities of goodness and wisdom” (EHU 2.6; SBN 19; my emphasis). This is problematic. Augmentation without limit will seemingly engender ideas for which there is no corresponding (possible) impression. Is there an impression of infinite size, pain, sweetness or loudness? And if there isn’t, we can form ideas without a corresponding (possible) impression, in violation of the semantic Copy Principle.

5. The Missing Shade of Blue Revisited

Hume concedes it would be possible for a person who has “all the different shades of . . . [blue] except . . . [a] single one, be plac’d before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest . . . from his own imagination, to raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade . . . and this may serve as a proof, that the simple

ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions” (T 1.1.1.10; SBN 6). But he decides to retain the Copy Principle even in the face of this counter-example: “[T]he instance is so particular and singular, that ’tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim” (T 1.1.1.10; SBN 6).

From the wording, it is clear that Hume has in mind the genetic principle: he is concerned with the *acquisition* of a concept. And his dismissal of the missing shade in this context is unwarranted. It simply isn’t true that “the instance is so particular and singular.” There are many identically-structured cases, simple qualities which are naturally ordered: colours, pitches, degrees of loudness. And they engender a host of counter-examples. For instance, the idea of a middle C can be filled in by somebody who has only had (auditory) impressions of the surrounding notes on the scale.

What of the semantic principle? It might seem as if here the missing shade of blue needn’t plague Hume, since it doesn’t constitute an exception. There *is* a corresponding (possible) impression, which the person in Hume’s thought experiment hasn’t had “the fortune to meet with” (T 1.1.1.10; SBN 6). But he *might have*, and that is enough, one might suppose, to show that the idea is legitimate, *possible* for humans. The philosophers’ ideas of substance, self and objective necessity, on the other hand, do not have corresponding impressions, even unactualised ones. So Hume can invoke the semantic principle to show that they are bogus. Or can he?

The answer is “No.” Although the missing shade doesn’t constitute a counter-example to the semantic principle, *it impugns its grounds*. To see this, remember how the semantic principle is derived (section 3). Every humanly possible idea, Hume argues, must have a (possible) corresponding impression, since it is a sum of simple ideas, each of which has a corresponding (possible) impression. And the requirement that each simple idea have a corresponding impression is based on the genetic principle: one cannot acquire a simple idea unless one has had the corresponding impression, so a possible impression must exist. But the missing shade shows that simple ideas *can* be acquired without a preceding impression, thus depriving Hume of his rationale for requiring a *possible* impression. So the ideas of necessity, self and substance—whether simple or complex—may well be perfectly legitimate, the lack of corresponding impressions notwithstanding.

Things would be different if the semantic principle were analytic: it would be grounded independently of the genetic principle, and wouldn’t be impugned by counter-examples to it. And one might suppose that this is how Hume conceives of it. He seems to *define* ideas as copies of impressions: “Those perceptions,” he says, “which enter with most force and violence, we may *name* impressions. . . . By ideas I *mean* the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning” (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1; my emphasis). And in the *Enquiry* he says in a similar vein that “all our ideas or

more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions *or* more lively ones” (EHU 2.5; SBN 19; my emphasis). But—*pace* Basson and Bennett¹²—this is not a satisfactory interpretation.

Hume cites here two features of ideas. The first is phenomenological: an idea is a faint sensory content (an impression being, complementarily, a vivid one). The second feature is functional: we think with ideas and feel with impressions. And this feature, too, is cited as definitional. Ideas are “the faint images of [impressions] *in thinking and reasoning*” (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1; my emphasis), and “under [the] name [impression] I comprehend all our *sensations, passions and emotions*” (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1; my emphasis). In the *Enquiry*, he considers the possibility that “a philosophical term is employed without any meaning *or* idea” (EHU 2.9; SBN 21–2; my emphasis), the “or” denoting synonymy.

Because these two features are logically independent, and the distinction between impressions and ideas is exhaustive, ideas can have at most one in virtue of their definition; the other they possess contingently. Which definition are we to impute to Hume? There are three reasons for choosing the functional one.

First, only the functional definition can render intelligible the occurrence of faint impressions and vivid ideas. If “it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas” (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1), this must be because ideas and impressions are defined functionally. A faint impression is a contradiction in terms on the phenomenological definition. Second, the phenomenological definition isn’t theoretically promising: why should one set out to investigate vivid images and their faint copies? The functional definition, in terms of “thinking and reasoning,” which is reminiscent of Locke’s,¹³ is certainly pertinent for one who aims to study human nature. These are clearly important human activities.¹⁴

The third reason for imputing to Hume the functional definition of ideas and impressions is his very attempt to derive the semantic Copy Principle from the genetic one. If ideas were defined as faint sensory images, the semantic principle would be *analytic*: every faint image has—of logical necessity—a *possible* vivid copy. And one could straightforwardly and incontrovertibly ground the semantic principle by appealing to the definition. The genetic principle, by way of contrast, is empirical even on the phenomenological definition: it is committed to the existence of *actual* impressions occurring in the mind, and to the causal precedence of impressions over ideas. That is why Hume can view the missing shade as an exception. Not only is the justification of the semantic principle *via* the genetic one much more complicated; it is far less secure: the empirical genetic principle is inductively, and therefore inconclusively, confirmed. That Hume resorts to it suggests that he doesn’t view the semantic principle as analytic.

If it isn’t analytic, how can Hume uphold the semantic principle in the face of the missing shade?¹⁵ The missing shade has features that allow for its impression-

less acquisition: systematic similarity relations between the different (available) elements in the range.¹⁶ The idea can be acquired by *interpolating into* the range of ideas copied from experience. Indeed, in the *Enquiry*, Hume imputes something like such a capacity to the mind, in addition to its combining ability: “[A]ll this creative power amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, *augmenting*, or *diminishing* the materials afforded us by the senses and experience” (EHU 2.5; SBN 19; my emphasis).

So Hume can relax the genetic principle so as to reconcile it with the acquisition of the missing shade of blue (and other ideas of its ilk). And he can then invoke the (now exceptionless) genetic principle to ground the semantic principle. And this will not impugn his destructive conceptual analyses. The (putative) concepts of necessity, substance and the self cannot be acquired even by the more extensive set of operations the mind is now (sensibly) thought to be capable of performing.

6. Conclusion

Hume’s conceptual analyses are vindicated at least to this extent. He hasn’t transgressed the limits within which he can legitimately apply his conceptual principle, even if he is a bit slack in formulating it, and (confusingly) fails to distinguish it from its genetic counterpart.

NOTES

I am very grateful to the editors and the referees for their painstaking and insightful comments.

1 References to the *Treatise* are to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter cited in text as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited in text as “SBN” followed by page number.

2 Saul Traiger, “Hume on Finding an Impression of the Self,” *Hume Studies* 11 (1985): 47–68, 49.

3 John O. Nelson, “Hume’s Missing Shade of Blue Re-viewed,” *Hume Studies* 15 (1989): 353–64, 353.

4 References to the *Enquiry* are to *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (hereafter “EHU”), ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), hereafter cited in text by section and paragraph, and to *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P.H. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), hereafter cited in text as “SBN” followed by page number.

5 And not, *pace* Jonathan Bennett, if it is definable. *Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 256.

6 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P.H. Nidditch (1690; repr., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 2.12.1.

7 Some terms which are related to “necessity,” such as “power,” “force,” “efficacy,” less clearly refer to relations. But if they don’t, they are not synonymous with it.

8 Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

9 Louis E. Loeb, “Hume’s Explanations of Meaningless Beliefs,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2001): 145–64.

10 When he discusses the idea of necessity, Hume says that if “it be a compound idea, it must arise from compound impressions. If simple, from simple impressions” (T 1.3.14.4; SBN 157). This requires an explanation. Surely a simple idea arises from *one* (simple) impression, whereas a complex idea arises from several *simple* ones. Here is an explanation. Hume is considering the *general* idea of necessity. “If we pretend . . . to have any just idea of this efficacy, we must produce some instances, wherein the efficacy is plainly discoverable to the mind” (T 1.3.14.4; SBN 157). And every general idea, even one (blue, for instance) whose exemplars are simple, arises from several preceding impressions. It is constituted by particular ideas (ideas of individual objects falling under the general term), each of which has a preceding impression. But if this is what Hume has in mind, he is mistaken in thinking that a general idea could ever be constituted only by simple (particular ideas). The term, “sweet,” for instance, has a simple exemplar. There is a simple perception of sweetness. But it is exemplified by complex perceptions as well: that of a sweet and white sugar cube, for instance.

11 I am grateful to the editors for pressing me to address this question.

12 A. Henry Basson, *Hume* (Pelican, 1958), 33; Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, 224; and Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 2:204.

13 “[T]hat which [man’s] Mind is employ’d about whilst thinking, being the Ideas, that are there” (2.1.1).

14 Similar considerations will lead us to impute to Hume a functional definition of impressions, “sensations, passions and emotions,” rather than a phenomenological one (in terms of vividness).

15 I am grateful to the editors for suggesting the solution to this difficulty.

16 See Lilly-Marlene Russow, “Simple Ideas and Resemblance,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1980): 340–50; Robert Fogelin, “Hume and the Missing Shade of Blue,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1984): 263–71; David Pears, *Hume’s System* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 25; and Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 51.