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“Distinction of Reason” is an Incomplete Symbol

JAMES VAN CLEVE

Abstract: In *Treatise* 1.1.7, Hume poses the problem of how to understand the “distinction of reason” that figures in the philosophies of the medievals, Descartes, and the Port Royalists. The problem in a nutshell is that a distinction of reason is supposed to be a distinction in thought between things that are inseparable in reality; yet according to Hume’s own principles, whatever things are distinct are separable in thought and therefore also in reality. It follows that things inseparable in reality should be neither distinguishable in thought nor distinct, period, so a distinction of reason ought on Hume’s principles to be impossible. Yet Hume goes on to try to make room for it, to the consternation of many commentators. I argue that he can indeed make room for it; the key is to recognize that ‘distinction of reason’ is an incomplete symbol.

Before I leave this subject I shall employ the same principles to explain that distinction of reason, which is so much talk’d of, and is so little understood, in the schools. Of this kind is the distinction betwixt figure and the body figur’d; motion and the body mov’d. The difficulty of explaining this distinction arises from the principle above explain’d, that all ideas, which are different, are separable. For it follows from thence, that if the figure be different from the body, their ideas must be separable as well as distinguishable: if they be not different, their ideas can neither be sepa-

nable nor distinguishable. What then is meant by a distinction of reason, since it implies neither a difference nor separation? (T 1.1.7.17; SBN 24–25)

In this paragraph, Hume poses the problem of how to understand the “distinction of reason” that figures in the philosophies of the medievals, Descartes, and the Port Royalists. The problem in a nutshell is that a distinction of reason is supposed to be a distinction in thought between things that are inseparable in reality; yet according to Hume’s own principles, whatever things are distinct are distinguishable, whatever things are distinguishable are separable in thought, and whatever things are separable in thought are separable in reality.¹ It follows that things inseparable in reality should be neither distinguishable in thought nor distinct, period, so a distinction of reason ought, on Hume’s principles, to be impossible. Yet Hume goes on to try to make room for it in his philosophy, to the consternation of many commentators.² I argue that he can indeed make room for it; the key is to recognize that “distinction of reason” is an incomplete symbol.

The phrase “incomplete symbol” was coined by Russell.³ An incomplete symbol is an expression that has no meaning in isolation, but which is such that statements containing it are meaningful and have truth conditions. It refers to nothing, but it can be provided with a contextual definition showing how to understand statements in which it occurs. An example in Russell’s philosophy is “the present king of France,” which refers to nothing, but statements containing which, like “the present king of France is bald,” can be assigned truth conditions as prescribed in Russell’s theory of descriptions. Another example is the expression “{x:Fx}” in Quine’s theory of virtual classes. Quine provides a truth condition for the entire statement “x belongs to {x:Fx},” namely, x is F, but claims no referent for “{x:Fx}” (Quine 1971). A final example would be “apple” or “table” in forms of phenomenalism like Ayer’s, which give reductive analyses in terms of sense data for statements like “there is an apple before me,” but which (unlike Berkeley’s phenomenalism) decline to identify any class, collection, or clump of sense data as the referent of “apple.”⁴

I contend that “distinction of reason between X and Y” is an incomplete symbol for Hume. He assigns no referent to that phrase, but gives us truth conditions for statements or wider contexts containing it.

Hume illustrates his position on distinctions of reason with the notorious example of the white globe, the black globe, and the white cube. In the presentation of the white globe, there is no difference between the globe’s whiteness and its roundness, nor any possibility of the mind’s apprehending one of these without the other. We can nonetheless do something called drawing a distinction of reason between them:

Thus when a globe of white marble is presented, we receive only the impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form, nor are we able to separate and distinguish the colour from the form. But observing afterwards a globe of black marble and a cube of white, and comparing them with our former object, we find two separate resemblances, in what formerly seemed, and really is, perfectly inseparable. After a little more practice of this kind, we begin to distinguish the figure from the colour by a *distinction of reason*; that is, we consider the figure and colour together, since they are in effect the same and undistinguishable; but still view them in different aspects, according to the resemblances, of which they are susceptible. When we wou'd consider only the figure of the globe of white marble, we form in reality an idea both of the figure and colour, but tacitly carry our eye to its resemblance with the globe of black marble: And in the same manner, when we wou'd consider its colour only, we turn our view to its resemblance with the cube of white marble. (T 1.1.7.18; SBN 25)

The sentence in which Hume's italicized phrase "distinction of reason" occurs does nothing to elucidate that phrase by itself or find any relation for it to refer to; instead, it offers an account of what is going on when one *draws* a distinction of reason. The truth condition for "S draws a distinction of reason between the whiteness of the globe and its roundness" is "S believes the white globe resembles the white cube but not the black globe colorwise, and S believes the white globe resembles the black globe but not the white cube shapewise." Since differential resemblance is possible even in what possesses no distinct or separable elements internally (see the note added in the Appendix to 1.1.1.7), these beliefs may be totally true even though there is no distinction between the globe's color and its shape.

Because they have taken a distinction of reason to *be* something, previous commentators have struggled to find interpretations that simultaneously respect Hume's text and make him coherent. If there is such a thing as a distinction of reason, it must be either (i) a distinction that holds between a thing and itself or (ii) a distinction whose relata are not what Hume says they are.

An illustration of difficulty (i) is provided by Norman Kemp Smith, who says, "By "distinctions of reason" Hume therefore means distinctions which imply neither difference nor separation" (265). Kemp Smith sets off on the wrong foot by supposing there is such a thing as a distinction of reason, in which case it would be hard to deny that it is a distinction—but then it would be a distinction that does not imply distinctness!

An illustration of difficulty (ii) is provided by Maurice Mandelbaum, who says that shape and color are inseparable in our impression of them, but that

we must learn to regard them as distinct through acts of comparison with other sets of impressions, that is, by transforming what were originally complex impressions into ideas. . . . Hume's axiom that what is distinguishable is separable holds only in relation to what results from acts of thought and imagination; it is not properly construed as a description of what is given in experience. . . . [T]here are elements which are in fact inseparable in experience, but which are later distinguished and treated as separable when they have been reproduced in our mind's eye. (245)⁵

We turn our impressions into ideas so as to get items that are separable and distinguishable and between which a distinction of reason may hold—as the items actually are distinct. But Hume says distinctions of reason hold precisely between items that are *inseparable* and *indistinguishable*!

A further illustration of difficulty (ii) may be provided by Don Garrett, who says the following about the distinction involved in a distinction of reason: “There is certainly a sense in which a distinction has been made, but it is not a distinction between two different *perceptions* or *objects*. Instead, we have distinguished two aspects of the *one* perception-token, or as Hume put it, two “separate resemblances”—that is, two different ways in which it may resemble others” (63). Whether you call them aspects or resemblances, there are *two* of them—so here again we find items that actually are distinct for the distinction of reason to hold between.⁶

Yet another scholar who incurs difficulty (ii) is Hsueh Qu (2012, 109). He takes the *relata* in a distinction of reason to be abstract ideas,⁷ and he points out that the abstract ideas of whiteness and of roundness are distinct because they are associated with distinct “revival sets” in Garrett’s sense. But what Hume puts forth as the *relata* of a distinction of reason are the globe’s whiteness and the globe’s roundness, which are not the same as the abstract ideas of whiteness and roundness. The former “two” are identical for Hume and the latter two are not identical for Qu.⁸

Donald Baxter, cited in note 1 for his exposition of the relation between real and mental separability, does not run into difficulty (i) or (ii), but he makes a criticism of Hume that is avoidable if Hume is read my way. Baxter claims that Hume falls into the following contradiction:

1. In respect of its color, the white globe resembles the white cube and fails to resemble the black globe.
2. In respect of its shape, the white globe resembles the black globe and fails to resemble the white cube.
3. The globe’s color = its shape.
4. Therefore, in respect of its shape, the white globe resembles the white cube and fails to resemble the black globe—from 1 by substituting in accordance with 3, but contradicting 2 twice over.

Baxter is quite right to note that Hume is committed to 3. But in my opinion, he is wrong to reify respects, as he does in making resemblance (or the lack of it) a three-term relation among two objects and a respect. Hume is a nominalist, and a self-respecting nominalist would lose the respects, stating 1 and 2 in terms of dyadic relations of color-resemblance and shape-resemblance.

Baxter agrees that Hume is a nominalist, but I still fault him for reifying respects. As just noted, a nominalist needs a dyadic relation of color-resemblance or resembling colorwise.⁹ If there is such a relation, Hume need not reify respects as in Baxter's three-term relation. Not, of course, a three-term relation among two objects and a universal. But nor, as in Baxter's proposal, a three-term relation among two objects and a particular, such as "the shape of this globe."¹⁰ If premises 1 and 2 are stated in terms of a dyadic relation, there is no term in them for which substitutions may be made using premise 3. Together, the dyadically rewritten 1 and 2 state what S believes in drawing a distinction of reason: S believes the white globe resembles the white cube but not the black globe colorwise, and S believes the white globe resembles the black globe but not the white cube shapewise.

A referee wonders whether resembling shapewise and resembling colorwise would not turn out really to be the same relation, since color is the same as shape.¹¹ If so, we would arrive at a contradiction akin to Baxter's. The answer, to put it in a way that may sound paradoxical, is that there is no *color* in *colorwise*, nor any *shape* in *shapewise*. Resembling colorwise really is just a dyadic relation, holding between two objects and not involving any third thing, whether universal or particular, that could be called color. Nor is there any color component in the relation for which we could substitute anything that is identical with it.¹² We nonetheless understand the difference between resembling colorwise and resembling shapewise, because we apprehend instances of each. The first holds between the white globe and the white cube; the second holds between the white globe and the black globe.

The treatment of distinctions of reason I have found most congenial to my own is that of Paul Hoffman. I am in total agreement with Hoffman's negative conclusions: there is no difference or distinction for Hume between a globe's color and its figure, and there is no inconsistency between Hume's treatment of distinctions of reason and his principle that distinction implies separability. To miss either of these points is to miss the radicalness of Hume's position. But Hoffman has little to say about what, if anything, a distinction of reason might positively be, and he makes no suggestion that "distinction of reason" is an incomplete symbol.

A referee suggests that on Hoffman's interpretation, a distinction of reason holds between different higher-order thoughts about the various resemblances an object may stand in and says that in that case, Hoffman would fall victim to the second horn of my dilemma. Yes, in that case Hoffman would indeed fall victim to the second horn of my dilemma. But I do not find any place where Hoffman explicitly identifies the relata of a distinction of reason.¹³ Insofar forth, his view

is compatible with my own—that there is no relation called a “distinction of reason” that holds between any relata. But Hoffman never formulates or advances any view to that effect.

It would be anachronistic, of course, to credit Hume with registering explicit awareness of the companion notions of incomplete symbol and contextual definition.¹⁴ But an author may use a device without giving notice to the reader and perhaps even without having methodological consciousness about it himself; that is what I claim is happening here.

In brief, my view is that there is no such thing in Hume’s philosophy as a distinction of reason, but there is such a thing as *drawing* a distinction of reason. That may sound paradoxical, but it is not—no more so than saying there is no such thing as the average plumber, but there is such a thing as the average plumber’s having 2.3 children.

My interpretation of Hume fits the text insofar as Hume never says what a distinction of reason is in his philosophy; he only says what you do when you draw one. Moreover, it avoids the two difficulties I have warned against in other interpretations: as soon as there is such a thing as a distinction of reason, it must be either (i) a distinction between a thing and itself or (ii) a distinction between things other than the things between which Hume says we draw a distinction of reason.

NOTES

1 T 1.1.7.3 (SBN 18). References to the *Treatise* are to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Norton and Norton, hereafter cited in the text as “T” followed by book, part, section, and paragraph number, and to Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Selby-Bigge, rev. by Nidditch, cited in the text as “SBN” followed by the page number. See Baxter, “Hume, Distinctions of Reason, and Differential Resemblance,” on the implication from mental separability to real separability, mediated by Hume’s principle that whatever is conceivable is possible.

2 See Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 99, and Baxter “Hume, Distinctions of Reason, and Differential Resemblance,” section I.2 for citations of representative commentators.

3 The idea, but not the term, is present in Russell, “On Denoting.” The term “incomplete symbol” is explained in Lecture 6 of Russell, “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism.”

4 See chapter 7 of Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* for Ayer’s form of phenomenalism and chapter 3 on contextual definition.

5 A warning to readers of Mandelbaum’s article: when he speaks of Hume’s axiom that *different* implies *separable* as “applying” (or not) to certain items, he does not mean that it is true (or not) of those items, but that its *antecedent* is true (or not) of those items.

6 One thing puzzles me about Garrett's resolution. On page 64, after again identifying "aspects" or "resemblances" as the items between which a distinction of reason holds, he says they are not exceptions to the Separability Principle because they "are not themselves things or 'objects' and so they are not within the intended scope of Hume's principle." Well, does Garrett think the aspects or resemblances are inseparable in thought? No; you could entertain one resemblance without entertaining the other. So even if they *were* "objects," they would not be exceptions to the (contrapositive of the) Separability Principle. They would not be items that are inseparable, yet distinct. They are distinct, yes, but also separable. There is no need to declare that they are not objects.

7 Qu says he is following Garrett in taking the relata in a distinction of reason to be abstract ideas, but I do not find Garrett saying that. Garrett draws on Hume's theory of abstract ideas to show how a simple perception token can stand (or not) in various resemblance relations to other things, but it is the "aspects" or "resemblances" that he explicitly identifies as the relata.

8 In a fuller response to Qu, I would extend my interpretation of Hume by arguing that *abstract idea* is itself an incomplete symbol for Hume. That is to say, there are no such things as abstract ideas, but we can give sense to statements like "Jo used an abstract idea to state a theorem about all triangles": namely, she used a particular (=nonabstract) idea in a general way, annexing it to a term that calls up the other particular ideas in its revival set as needed when one considers the theorem.

9 In an article critical of nominalism, Frank Jackson considers "Anything red color-resembles anything pink more than anything blue" as an attempted nominalist paraphrase of "Red resembles pink more than blue." Though he goes on to find other problems with the nominalist strategy, he rejects as question begging the claim that the dyadic "x color-resembles y" can only be analyzed as the triadic "x resembles y in color."

10 Here is an oddity in the view Baxter attributes to Hume: He has Hume using the premise "In respect of its color, the white globe resembles the white cube," where "its color" designates not a universal, but the particular object that is the globe's whiteness (171). Hume identifies that object with the globe itself. The Baxter premise is therefore equivalent to "In respect of itself, the white globe resembles the white cube."

11 Actually, I deny that Hume identifies color and shape (*pace* Hoffman, "Hume on the Distinction of Reason"). There are no such things as just plain color and just plain shape to be either identified or distinguished. What Hume identifies are "the shape of the globe" and "the color of the globe." On the other hand, Qu argues that like it or not, Hume is committed to saying that color and shape are identical. That is because the abstract general ideas of color and shape are individuated by their revival sets, which are necessarily coextensive (at least on certain assumptions about Hume's minima). See Qu, "Type Distinctions," for further discussion of the problem and his own solution.

12 Hume tells us in the Appendix that relations may hold differentially between items in which there is no internal complexity. Just so, they may hold differentially between items even when the relations themselves have no internal complexity.

13 The following sentence comes as close as any: a distinction of reason "is a distinction that arises when one simple thing can be regarded in different ways by relating it

to different things" (Hoffman, 1139). Telling us when a distinction arises is not telling us what its relata are.

14 Quine, "Five Milestones of Empiricism," gives credit for contextual definition, the second of his five milestones, to Jeremy Bentham in his theory of paraphrase.

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