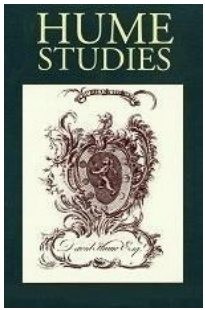


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ANNEMARIE BUTLER

Donald C. Ainslie's Hume's True Scepticism (hereafter "HTS") is a wonderful book—clearly written and forcefully argued—and was deservedly honored with Journal of the History of Philosophy's Book Prize for 2016. The focus of the book is part four of the first Book of Hume's Treatise, "Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy." Ainslie develops an interpretation that takes seriously Hume's psychological claims, using them to solve puzzles in Hume scholarship, including the extent of Hume's scepticism, the nature of his sceptical crisis, and the basis for his second thoughts on personal identity.

I would encourage Ainslie to go further in tracing Hume's psychological explanations. In what follows, I will discuss three areas: the role of language in the formation of the "vulgar" (or non-philosophical) belief in body; Hume's analysis of continued existence; and the nature of secondary ideas.

## 1. The Role of Language in the Vulgar Belief

Hume explicitly credits the "great philosopher" Berkeley (T 1.1.7.1n4; SBN 17n1) for his rejection of abstract general ideas and his theory of general ideas. "[A]ll general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annex'd to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recal upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them" (T 1.1.7.1; SBN 17).[1] Ainslie describes Hume's account of general ideas as "a model for the later fictions Hume develops" (HTS 67), particularly noting the use of a word or term to facilitate thought.

Ainslie reconstructs Hume's explanation of the "vulgar" belief in objects in Treatise 1.4.2. The "vulgar" includes anyone who is not engaged in philosophical reflection (T 1.4.2.38, 53;

Annemarie Butler is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Iowa State University. 437 Catt, 2224 Osborn Dr., Ames IA 50011-4009.
Email: butlera@iastate.edu

SBN 206, 216), including non-human animals. (Hume describes animal causal inferences about objects in Treatise 1.3.16.) According to Hume, the "vulgar" do not distinguish between objects and perceptions; we think the hat or stone is the very thing we sense (T 1.4.2.31; SBN 202).

Ainslie holds that there is a "linguistic element" that scholars overlook in Hume's account of the vulgar belief in objects. According to Ainslie, language serves a normative role, distinguishing between good and bad judgments about whether something is the same object or not. Ainslie offers a developmental story (HTS 94–97), in which one develops beliefs in object-identity and linguistic skills together. The associations that a child or adult makes are modified in response to linguistic prompts from other people in his or her social group. Not only would it take more argument to establish that language can perform the task Ainslie thinks Hume assigns to it, the interpretation is textually underdetermined. As Ainslie admits, there is not much evidence in Treatise 1.4.2 to support this interpretation (HTS 92, 96–97); instead, he points to Treatise 1.4.3 ("Of the antient philosophy") and Treatise 1.4.6 ("Of personal identity"). In Treatise 1.4.2, I would argue, Hume is more interested in the fundamental questions of how we can conceive and believe in continued and distinct existence at all. That is, given the starting point of impressions and ideas, how can I conceive (and believe) that one and the same object that I believe to exist now also existed and operated at earlier times when I did not observe it? On my interpretation, this automatic, vulgar belief in objects is common both to humans and non-human animals, and is therefore pre-linguistic.

## 2. Continued Existence

In Treatise 1.4.2, Hume aims to explain the causes of belief in body (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187); to this end, he searches for the experiential origins of the idea of externality. He distinguishes two features of external existence: continued existence and distinct existence (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188). According to Hume, continued existence involves belief that the same objects exist "even when they are not present to the senses" (ibid.). Distinct existence includes existence and operation independent of the perceiving mind. Hume adds, "Under this last head I comprehend their situation as well as relations, their external position as well as the independence of their existence and operation" (ibid.). According to Hume (and for reasons he does not explain well) continued existence entails distinct existence and vice versa (ibid.), and belief in continued existence produces belief in distinct existence and vice versa (T 1.4.2.23, 44; SBN 199, 210).

After arguing that continued and distinct existence are not given features of sensory impressions (T 1.4.2.3–13; SBN 188–93) and are not the conclusions of reasoning (T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193), Hume concludes that belief in continued and distinct existence is produced by imaginative processes (T 1.4.2.15; SBN 194). His explanation begins from the initial situation of the mind: the only things I am directly aware of are impressions and ideas, and they last only as long as they are perceived. Hume offers two psychological accounts of how non-philosophers come to attribute continued existence to the very things they perceive: an inference from constancy (qualitatively indistinguishable perceptions repeated at different times, T 1.4.2.18–19,

23–43; SBN 194–95, 198–210) and an inference from coherence (T 1.4.2.19–23, 42; SBN 195–99, 208–209). Hume devotes more space to explaining the inference from constancy.

Hume divides his explanation into four parts. The first part is Hume's principle of individuation (T 1.4.2.26; SBN 200).[2] An identical thing is "invariable" and "uninterrupted" "thro' a suppos'd variation of time" (T 1.4.2.30; SBN 201). Two perceptions are "invariable" if and only if their qualities are "perfectly resembling" (T 1.4.2.42: 208; cf. T 1.4.2.18, 24; SBN 194–95, 199). Two constant perceptions are "interrupted" if and only if there is one or more moment between them when there is not a related perception—in the case of the belief produced by constancy, the relevant relation is perfect resemblance. The second and third parts explain the psychological processes by which the imagination identifies perfectly resembling, but interrupted, perceptions, and then invents and attributes continued existence to the resembling perceptions in order to maintain the identity ascription in the face of interrupted experience. In the fourth part, Hume applies his account of belief to explain how the fictive idea of continued existence is enlivened.

My criticism here applies mainly to Ainslie's interpretations of parts two and three. Like the interpretation offered by Stefanie Rocknak, Ainslie thinks that, in the second and third parts, Hume describes two different (stable) beliefs.[3] Let's consider an illustration. Suppose that, over a long period of time, I have had many perfectly resembling mountain-impressions, with other impressions and ideas mixed in between (books, fires, mail, and so on). In this sequence of impressions, the many mountain-impressions (not just today, but over many observations) exhibit what Hume calls "constancy," because they are "invariable" or perfectly resembling. The current mountain-impression is automatically associated with memories of other mountain-impressions, on account of their perfect resemblance. Attending only to mountain-impressions and mountain-memories, my imagination feels an "easy transition" from thinking of one perception to the next (T 1.4.2.34, 35; SBN 204). This "uninterrupted progress of the imagination" feels just like thinking of a single perception (T 1.4.2.34; SBN 204). This second resemblance in feelings of the mind leads the imagination to "confound" the selected collection of constant perceptions with a single perception (ibid.). If this process stopped here—as Rocknak and Ainslie's interpretations allow that it could—this would result in my believing that I continuously sense the mountain. (Notice that the supposition of one continuous occurrent perception achieved in the second part is not Hume's explanandum [viz. the idea of continued existence even when unperceived], which does not arise until the third part.[4]) This belief in continuance and identity would be false, because the mountain-impressions were experienced as interrupted (T 1.4.2.36; SBN 205).[5] In the third and fourth parts, Hume explains that this tension (between the imagination's ascription of identity and the senses' experience of interruption) prompts the vulgar mind to invent continued existence, by supposing that the mountain continues to exist even when it is not perceived. This supposition reconciles the tension by admitting (with the senses) that there are times at which the mountain is not perceived, but accepting (from the imagination) that the different impressions are appearances of numerically the same mountain (ibid., cf. T 1.4.2.43; SBN

209). Thus, interruption is a crucial component of Hume's explanation of the experiential origin of the idea of continued existence.

Ainslie analyzes the relevant concepts[6] (HTS 52, 70): continued existence (C), distinct existence (D), and in addition, he offers an identity version of continued existence (I):

(Cn) The belief of an object (say, a table) that has been sensed but is not currently being sensed, that it (the table) exists;

(Dn) The belief, of an object (the table) that is currently being sensed, that it (the table) exists;

(In) The belief, of an object (the table now) currently being sensed and of an object (the table then) that was previously sensed, that it (the table) is one continuing object.

On Ainslie's interpretation, In is the belief formed in the second part of Hume's explanation of the vulgar belief in continued existence formed from constant impressions (including memories of impressions). According to Ainslie, this is "the belief of an object, such as the bed, seen before and after our blinking, that it is one bed" (HTS 75). In parts three and four, Ainslie claims, Hume describes a new belief, Cn, on which "even when we are not perceiving it, we believe that the bed continues to exist" (ibid.).

I agree that there is a difference between In and Cn, but I disagree with Ainslie's analysis. In the second part, Hume is clear that he is not considering only brief interruptions, such as blinking. Hume writes, "I now proceed to explain the second part of my system, and show why the constancy of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect numerical identity, tho' there be very long intervals betwixt their appearance, and they have only one of the essential qualities of identity, viz. invariableness" (T 1.4.2.31; SBN 201–202; second emphasis added). In the above example, when I identify the different mountain-impressions, I do so because the "interrupting" impressions of non-mountains are not included in the association by resemblance. But to believe that this sequence of mountain-impressions is actually one and the same mountain over time requires including all times between the first impression and the current impression. This requires conceiving of many distinct times when there were no mountain-impressions. When these "interrupting" impressions are included, the supposed identity is destroyed. The only way to save the supposition of identity is by distinguishing existence and being perceived; that is, by attributing existence to the mountain at times when I happened not to perceive it. This is Cn (as I interpret it).

Thus, the psychological processes involved in the second part will never alone yield a belief in an object's existence when it is not perceived. They yield supposition of the continuance and identical existence of an uninterrupted thing—that is, the supposition of a thing uninterruptedly perceived. Notice that the continuance involved in the supposition of identity in the second part is not Hume's technical sense of "continued existence," which is a component of the concept of external existence (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188). Mere continuance does not entail distinct existence—Hume acknowledges "stedfast" or "unchangeable" perceptions.[7] To explain the experiential origin of the idea of continued existence, interruption is required.[8] This experienced interruption contradicts the imagination's supposition of continuance and

identity, and the supposed identity cannot be sustained. The supposition of the object's continuing to exist when not perceived resolves this psychological tension.

Ainslie claims that In is a version of Cn, because Hume "often cashes out the belief in continued existence as a belief in the identity of an object across interrupted perceptions" (HTS 49). On Ainslie's own analysis, Cn is not a more general account of belief in continued existence, because Ainslie requires for Cn that the object "is not currently being sensed," but in In beliefs, the object is "currently being sensed." However, for Hume, In is incorporated into Cn (in part 3), and only with Cn do we get the supposition of something's existence when it is not perceived.

I agree with Ainslie that Hume thinks that we believe in continued existence both in cases in which we currently perceive the object and when we do not currently perceive the object. I disagree with Ainslie that the inference from constancy ever operates in cases in which the supposedly continuing object is not currently perceived; on my interpretation, that belief is produced by the inference from coherence. Nevertheless, I think we can modify Ainslie's analysis of the belief in continued existence so that it encompasses both inferences. The correction I would offer to the analysis is:

> (Cn*) The belief of an object (say, a table) that is currently being thought about and of an object that was previously thought about, that it (the table) is one continuing object.

"Being thought about" includes cases in which the object is currently being sensed and that the object was previously sensed, which accommodates the inference from constancy and some of the inferences from coherence (for example, fire). But Hume gives other examples of the inference from coherence in which the external object is not currently observed: for example, he believes that his unobserved staircase exists now, which is inferred from the porter's arrival in his chamber, which is not on the ground floor. This inferred staircase is believed to be one and the same as the previously observed staircase. But Hume also gives examples in which the external object may never have been observed: for example, "a letter, which upon opening I perceive by the hand-writing and subscription to have come from a friend, who says he is two hundred leagues distant" (T 1.4.2.20; SBN 196). It may be that Hume has never been to the land from where his friend writes, but he may identify it as one and the same place attested to by maps or other testimony.

Hume adds that once we have developed an idea of continued existence and have applied it to a variety of constant and coherent experiences, we can apply continued existence "to objects, which are perfectly new to us, and of whose constancy and coherence we have no experience." Hume explains, "'tis because the manner, in which they present themselves to our senses, resembles that of constant and coherent objects; and this resemblance is a source of reasoning and analogy, and leads us to attribute the same qualities to the similar objects" (T 1.4.2.42; SBN 209).

## 3. Secondary Ideas

Hume famously distinguishes between impressions and ideas. Hume writes, "Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking" (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1–2). He articulates and defends the general proposition (with "singular" exceptions, T 1.1.1.10; SBN 6), "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). Hume appeals to experience to confirm that impressions precede ideas: to give a child the new idea of orange or bitter requires presenting an orange or bitter object to the child; we cannot "produce the impressions by exciting the ideas" (T 1.1.1.8; SBN 5). Similarly, if one never uses a sensory organ, he or she will never acquire the corresponding sensory impressions or ideas (T 1.1.1.9; SBN 5).

Hume extends this claim about the priority of impressions to ideas to a class of perceptions he calls "secondary ideas":

> But besides this exception, it may not be amiss to remark on this head, that the principle of the priority of impressions to ideas must be understood with another limitation, viz. that as our ideas are images of our impressions, so we can form secondary ideas, which are images of the primary; as appears from this very reasoning concerning them. This is not, properly speaking, an exception to the rule so much as an explanation of it. Ideas produce the images of themselves in new ideas; but as the first ideas are suppos'd to be deriv'd from impressions, it still remains true, that all our simple ideas proceed, either mediately or immediately, from their correspondent impressions. (T 1.1.1.11; SBN 6–7)

As I interpret this passage, secondary ideas are copies of those ideas derived immediately from impressions. For ease of exposition, let's call the immediately derived ideas "primary ideas." On my reading, Hume is claiming that secondary ideas are not a counterexample to his maxim that impressions precede ideas; secondary ideas are mediately derived from impressions, through the intermediary primary ideas.

Ainslie interprets this passage as allowing that secondary ideas may be copies of primary ideas or of impressions. Ainslie distinguishes between primary and secondary ideas in terms of the content of what is copied (HTS 121–34, 211–12). In primary ideas, only the content of the impression is copied. I have an idea of the apple (HTS 123; cf. HTS 212). In contrast, in secondary ideas, not only is the content copied, so is the "action of the mind" (T 1.3.8.16, 3.3.1.2; SBN 106, 456) or "awareness" (HTS 212). I have an idea of seeing the apple (in the case of a secondary idea of an impression) or of thinking about the apple (in the case of a secondary idea of an idea).

This strikes me as a not-very-economical psychological process. For each impression, not only would the memory have to copy the content of the impression in a primary idea, but the memory would also have to copy the action of the mind in a secondary idea. On the

alternative explanation, only one copy is made for each impression, copying both the content and the action of the mind in one and the same primary idea. Against this complaint, I suspect Ainslie would point to Hume's descriptions of the difficulties (and the philosophical errors induced) in trying to keep straight which perception one attends to when introspecting.

Still, I have a couple of questions for Ainslie's interpretation.

1) Ainslie acknowledges that secondary ideas copy both the image-content and the awareness of the primary perception (impression or idea) it copies (HTS 123, 212). However, the mind can focus on the awareness to the exclusion of the image-content (HTS 124). Ainslie uses this psychological ability to explain how I can come to infer an unremembered impression as the cause of my idea. However, if one acknowledges this psychological ability, can't the alternative interpretation use it to explain how I can use primary ideas (as copies of impression) to either focus on the awareness (the sensing) or the image-content (the papaya)?

2) Hume repeats that the act of the mind (sensing or thinking) is not a distinct perception over and above the image-content. He describes force, liveliness, and vivacity as the manner of the perception. Ainslie's interpretation has the problem that a primary idea can copy the image-content of an impression without copying its manner. That is, it separates features of an idea which seem not to be separable. (Compare with HTS 212.) Hume allows that we can form ideas of inseparable aspects using distinctions of reason. For example, I can think of color without thinking of shape (T 1.1.7.18; SBN 25). This will be achieved by calling to mind particular ideas of colored shapes and focusing on the color to the exclusion of the shapes. It stands to reason that ideas of apples or papayas will focus on the remembered apple-content or papaya-content to the exclusion of the remembered sensation. (Compare to Ainslie's use of "stop focusing," HTS 127)

Ainslie convincingly argues that secondary ideas are required for introspective awareness of one's perceptions. Thus, secondary ideas are an ineliminable component of any interpretation of Hume's account of our belief in personal identity. This is one of the lasting and very important contributions of Ainslie's work on part four of the first Book of Hume's Treatise.

## NOTES

1 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.

2 Because Hume offers conceptual analysis, it is awkward to describe this as a "stage" of "a four-stage explanation of how this constancy in experience produces Cn" (HTS 75 and *inter alia*). (Price

also uses "stage," *Hume's Theory of the External World*, 38 and *inter alia*].) Hume himself calls them "four things requisite" "to justify this [vulgar] system" (T 1.4.2.25; SBN 199; cf. "part" in T 1.4.2.31, 36, 43; SBN 201, 205, 209–10; "member of this system" in T 1.4.2.41; SBN 208). Elsewhere, Ainslie describes it as a "four-step argument for the belief in continued existence of sensory objects" (HTS 90; cf. Hume's use of "argument" in T 1.4.2.35n39; SBN 205n).

3 Rocknak, *Imagined Causes*, 160–70. Ainslie explains that his interpretation differs from Rocknak's in holding that In is a belief about "re-encounter[ed]" objects, whereas Cn is about objects not currently being sensed (HTS 90n30).

4 Thanks to David Owen, Donald Ainslie, Nick Stang, and Richard Fry for pressing me to clarify the difference between the supposed continuance in the second part, and supposed continued existence in the third part.

5 This point holds even for Ainslie's example in which the interruptions are blinks. I would not come to believe that the bed is an external object (as In as a species of Cn would imply), only a continuous perception.

6 The subscript "n" denotes the naïve point of view about perceptions that we hold in non-philosophical moments. This is to be distinguished from interpretations that attribute "sophisticated" views (subscript "s") about the nature of perceptions to the vulgar—views which Ainslie persuasively rejects (HTS 49ff.).

7 Hume discusses "stedfast" and "unchangeable" objects at T 1.2.3.11, 1.2.5.29, 1.4.2.29; SBN 37, 65, 200–201. See Baxter, *Hume's Difficulty*, 30–47; and Ainslie, HTS 83–89.

8 To be sure, Hume does describe examples in which the psychological processes described in the inference from constancy are triggered by an uninterrupted sequence of qualitatively different impressions (T 1.4.2.34–35, 1.4.3.3, 1.4.6.6; SBN 203–204, 220, 254). These examples are not showcased in Hume's explanation in *Treatise* 1.4.2, because they could not serve as the origin of the idea or belief in continued existence (that is, existence even when not perceived.)

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