

WRITING SAMPLE
RELATIVE IDEAS AND SPECIFIC DIFFERENCE:
HUME'S SKEPTICAL REALISM ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD
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Be a philosopher; but, amidst all your philosophy, be still a man.
– David Hume [E.1.4.3]¹

It is often said that balancing Hume's skepticism with his constructive task of establishing a science of human nature is the central interpretive dilemma facing every Hume scholar (Coventry 2007: 139). This has perhaps never been truer than during the past three decades due to increased scholarship and controversy over the so-called 'New Hume' interpretations which challenge the traditional balance, tipping the scale away from skepticism in a decidedly realist direction about objects and causation. Debate centers over the puzzle that Hume seems to do the following, which appear to be inconsistent:

- (a) Endorse beliefs in objects and causes,
- (b) Hold that we should not endorse beliefs that do not have appropriate grounding in our impressions (as described in the theory of ideas),
- (c) Hold that the beliefs in objects and causes do not have appropriate grounding in our impressions (Richman 2007: 3).

Those who defend the standard reading of Hume – the 'Old Hume,' as it were – reject or qualify (a) such that Hume is not committed to the truth of beliefs in objects and causes, typically by appealing to Hume's skeptical remarks about them. Those who defend the New Hume accept (a) and reject or modify (b) or (c). In short, the crux of disagreement between Old and New Humeans is the epistemic standing of our beliefs in objects and causes.

While Hume's negative and positive projects are both discussed at some length herein, the present scope of concern is considerably less ambitious than an account of Hume's philosophy, or even a comprehensive discussion of the relative merits of the various New Hume interpretations. Instead, I will focus on Hume's view of our belief in the existence of external objects, and how Hume can plausibly be

¹ I will use the standard format for references to Hume's texts: [T.1.4.2.12] and [E.12.2.13], where "T" and "E" refer to the *Treatise* and *Enquiry*, respectively. All references are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, D. F. and M. J. Norton (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000). The numerical sequence following the first letter of the text's title refers to the book, part, section, and paragraph number, in that order. For example, [T.1.4.2.12] refers to the twelfth paragraph of the second section of the fourth part of the first book of the *Treatise*, and can be found on page 128 of the Norton edition. All italicized emphases are original except where otherwise noted.

interpreted as a realist about such objects. As such, I will center primarily on sections 1.4.2 (“Of scepticism with regard to the senses”) and 1.4.4 (“Of the modern philosophy”) of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, as well as section 12 (“Of the academical or sceptical philosophy”) of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

In Part 1, I summarize Hume’s main discussion about the origin of our belief in the existence of external objects. I then consider Hume’s critical discussion of the theories of single and double existence in Part 2, as well as how that discussion lends itself to a more traditional interpretation of Hume as an antirealist about the external world. Then, in Part 3, I provide an interpretation of some puzzling and infrequent passages about “relative ideas,” “specific difference,” and the resemblance of perceptions and objects. I argue that this interpretation allows for a more realist interpretation of Hume on the external world. I consider some objections to my interpretation in Part 4. In Part 5, I return to the issue of resemblance and consider its epistemic import for Hume as a realist, and conclude in Part 6 with a discussion of how Hume’s skepticism should be understood in light of the considerations I raise.

As a final introductory point, it will be helpful to establish in advance the plausibility of interpreting Hume as a realist about the external world. Hume is pretty clearly a philosophical naturalist and materialist about the nature of mind. These views are completely antithetical if not nonsensical absent realism about the external world.

Evidence for this is not wanting. Hume says that “the examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists” and scientists than philosophers [T.1.1.2.1], and that “by experience... we may certainly conclude, that motion may be, and actually is, the cause of thought and perception” [T.1.4.5.10]. In his discussion of personal identity, Hume considers the dissolution of his body after death where he would be “entirely annihilated” [T.1.4.6.3].

Hume even seems to appeal to what we might now call a neural theory of memory. The passage in which these remarks occur is worth quoting at length:

Twou'd have been easy to have made an imaginary dissection of the brain, and have shewn, why upon our conception of any idea, the animal spirits run into all the contiguous traces, and rouze up the other ideas, that are related to it. But tho' I have neglected any advantage, which I might have drawn from this topic in explaining the relations of ideas, I am afraid I must here have recourse to it, in order to account for the mistakes that arise from these relations. I shall therefore observe, that as the mind is endow'd with a power of exciting any idea it pleases; whenever it dispatches the spirits

into that region of the brain, in which the idea is plac'd; these spirits always excite the idea, when they run precisely into the proper traces, and rummage that cell, which belongs to the idea. But as their motion is seldom direct, and naturally turns a little to the one side or the other; for this reason the animal spirits, falling into the contiguous traces, present other related ideas in lieu of that, which the mind desir'd at first to survey. This change we are not always sensible of; but continuing still the same train of thought, make use of the related idea, which is presented to us, and employ it in our reasoning, as if it were the same with what we demanded. This is the cause of many mistakes and sophisms in philosophy; as will naturally be imagin'd, and as it wou'd be easy to show, if there was occasion. [T.1.2.5]

Note in particular how he says that he hasn't in general relied on what we would now call neurophysiology in explicating his theory of ideas, but says that he *must* have recourse to it to provide an account of erroneous reasoning. This suggests that physiological considerations play an ineliminable role in a full account of his science of human nature.

This commitment carried over into the *Enquiry*. There, in objecting to the design argument for the existence of a God or gods, Hume calls the idea of God that enamors believers an “offspring of [their] brain”

[E.11.15]. Discussing the causal chain in voluntary motion, Hume says that we learn from anatomy that:

the immediate object of power in voluntary motion, is not the member itself which is moved, but certain muscles, and nerves, and animal spirits, and, perhaps, something still more minute and more unknown, through which the motion is successively propagated, where it reaches the member itself whose motion is the immediate object of volition. [E.7.14]

Those more accustomed to traditional interpretations of Hume might find these passages surprising.

A possible response is to simply say that Hume is inconsistent in endorsing belief in causation and external objects given his considered views on causation and external objects. Such is the tact taken by Bernard McBreen:

[Hume] is not consistent in applying his analysis of causality...Given his analysis of causality, the only way he could rid himself of this inconsistency is by renouncing the language of causality. But Hume does not do this. (McBreen 2007, 427)

The same could be said of these apparently realist passages on the external world; Hume was simply and systematically careless.

Another strategy would be to claim that the mere fact that Hume uses realist language does not necessarily mean that he is a realist about the external world. These passages could be interpreted as misleading, and should be reinterpreted in light of Hume's *real* position on the epistemic standing of the external world.

These are *possible* interpretative strategies, but they are not very *plausible* ones. Hume appeals to science to explain how sensation functions in the brain. He is clearly not talking about the brain as merely an idea. It is hard to imagine a less ambiguous commitment to belief in external objects. Adopting a New Hume interpretation is motivated in part because it provides a satisfying account of these pretty clear endorsements of external objects.

1. Hume's Explanation of Belief in the External World.

In order to set some context, it is important to begin with a general overview of Hume's discussion of the external world. Under Hume's theory of ideas, the existence of 'the external world' poses a particular problem. The reason for this is that "nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas" [T.1.2.6.7]. Nonetheless, we believe that there is an external world beyond our impressions. Indeed, Hume thinks that belief in the external world is a natural belief, a belief which we *inevitably* have. Hume therefore considers asking the question "Whether there be body or not?" to be in vain because we take the existence of body for granted in all of our reasonings [T.1.4.2.1].

Since we take it for granted that there are external objects, Hume asks instead "What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?" Hume then splits this question into two parts:

1. Why do we attribute *continued* existence to objects when they aren't present to the senses?
2. Why do we attribute a *distinct and independent* existence to them apart from the mind and perception? [T.1.4.2.2]

He then goes on to ask which of our three mental faculties – sensation, reason, or the imagination – is responsible for the formation of our belief that there are distinct and independent objects that continue to exist apart from our perception of them, i.e. what causes us to believe in an external world. Hume's discussion of these three faculties will be treated in turn.

However, before doing so, I must introduce a bit more of Hume's theory of ideas. "Impressions" is Hume's term for what we perceive, i.e. "all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul" [T.1.1.1]. "Ideas" are 'faint images' or copies of these impressions that we use in

thinking and reasoning. Drawing on a distinction present in earlier empiricists like Locke, Hume distinguishes impressions into three kinds:

- 1st Class – Primary Qualities: figure, bulk, motion, and solidity.
- 2nd Class – Secondary Qualities: colors, tastes, sounds, and smells.
- 3rd Class – Qualities such as pleasures and pains. [T.1.4.2.12]

This threefold distinction of impressions will be important for what follows in the rest of this section.

1.1 The Senses.

Hume first considers the senses as the source of our belief in external objects. He argues that the senses cannot give rise to a belief in the continued existence of objects because this is “a contradiction in terms” [T.1.4.2.3]. The senses cannot confer a belief in objects because the senses cannot convey what does not appear to them, and an object’s continuing to exist apart from the senses cannot appear to the senses and thereby ground a belief or allow us to form an idea of external objects. He then argues that the senses cannot motivate the belief that something is distinct, independent, or external either. His argument proceeds by appeal to various standard experiments showing perceptual variation:

When we press one eye with a finger, we immediately perceive all the objects to become double, and one half of them to be remov’d from their common and natural position. But as we do not attribute a continu’d existence to both these perceptions and as they are both of the same nature, we clearly perceive, that all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits. [T.1.4.2.45]

Hume gives other examples, such as the variation in the size of objects according to distance, changes in color and other qualities due to sickness and distemper, and the disposition of the organ [T.1.4.2.45, E.12.1.6]. In short, the senses cannot cause us to believe in the distinctness, independence, and externality of objects.

One might suspect that the existence of one’s own body is proof enough of an external world, a possibility which Hume considers. That is, by sensing our hand, we sense an external object. Hume says that our own body “evidently belongs to us; and as several impressions appear exterior to the body, we suppose them also exterior to ourselves” [T.1.4.2.9]. However, Hume points out that this suggestion *presupposes* that our senses can give us the idea that something, i.e. our body, is an external object. Hume counters that one’s

body is itself but a particular collection of impressions [T.1.4.2.9], and therefore cannot occasion the belief that external objects exist.

1.2 Reason.

Hume then briefly considers the claim that belief in external objects results from reason. He mentions how philosophers have offered what they have taken to be convincing arguments to this effect. However, Hume points out that the vast majority of people aren't familiar with these arguments, and neither were philosophers before engaging in such study, so belief in external objects cannot be the result of philosophical arguments, rather, philosophical arguments are motivated by the belief we *already* have. He concludes that it cannot be reason that gives ordinary people an assurance of the continued and distinct existence of body because they believe in external objects without any help from reason [1.4.2.14].

1.3 The Imagination.

Recall that, for Hume, belief in external objects must come from the senses, reason, or the imagination. We have seen that belief in external objects does not arise from the senses or from reason. Nonetheless, we do believe that there are external objects. So, it is unsurprising that Hume argues that the belief in external objects must come from the imagination.

The question is: just what qualities of impressions force our imagination to produce the belief that there are external objects [T.1.4.2.15]? It can't be the vivacity of impressions, because all impressions are vivacious. Nor can it be the involuntariness of impressions, because many impressions are not regarded by anyone as having an external existence, but are nonetheless involuntary. For example, when stabbed with a knife, one cannot help but feel pain. Yet this pain isn't regarded as existing beyond the impression of it [T.1.4.2.16].

Rather, Hume's account is that many impressions are *constant* and *coherent* in a way that distinguishes them from other impressions which do not have this constancy and coherence. Constancy is a particular quality of some impressions which gives rise to belief in their continued existence, and which distinguishes them "from the impressions whose existence depends upon our perception" [T.1.4.2.18]. As an example of

constancy, Hume mentions that “these mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear’d to me in the same order” [T.1.4.2.18]. Not all impressions have this quality. A pin-prick is ‘fleeting and perishing,’ and due to this inconstancy we don’t suppose that it continues to exist apart from our perception.

It isn’t just constancy, however, because bodies often change their position and qualities such that they may become hardly knowable after an absence or interruption. Yet, despite these changes, there is a coherence amongst some series of impressions. They “have a regular dependence upon each other,” which produces “the opinion of their continu’d existence” [T.1.4.2.19]. For example, Hume says that when returning to an unattended fire after an hour passes, “I find not my fire in the same situation, in which I left it: But then I am accustom’d in other instances to see a like alteration produc’d in a like time, whether I am present or absent...” [T.1.4.2.19].

The gist of Hume’s account is that imagination attributes an identity to ‘broken and interrupted’ perceptions. This *illusion* of identity across varying perceptions results in our propensity to attribute a unity to constant and coherent, yet numerically distinct impressions; to ‘make’ an external object of them. The force and vivacity of this conception, i.e. the belief in external objects, arises from this propensity [T.1.4.2.24-41]. Hume summarizes his account of imagination producing the belief in external objects as follows:

[T]hese interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible. This supposition, or idea of continu’d existence acquires a force and vivacity from the memory of these broken impressions... and according to the precedent reasoning, the very essence of belief consists in the force and vivacity of the conception.² [T.1.4.2.24]

This then, is Hume’s account of the origin of our belief in the external world from our impressions of it. Imagination is responsible for our belief in external objects. He then goes on to assess two views about the existence of external objects, which we shall tackle next.

2. Three Views of Existence.

² Hume’s ‘deflationary’ account of belief is that beliefs are nothing but particularly ‘strong’ ideas for us. He discusses this at T.1.3.7.4.

The first view about the existence of external objects, the view of ordinary men, is the theory of single existence. The second view, the view of philosophers, is the theory of double existence. Hume goes on to distinguish a variant of the double existence theory, the view of modern philosophy. These will be discussed in turn.

2.1 The Vulgar View.

The vulgar, or common view held by all, is the supposition that the first and second class of impressions have a distinct and continued existence. In other words, we don't distinguish between impressions of the first and second class and externally existing objects, and in that sense, we suppose that impressions *just are* external objects. This means that the existence of external objects cannot be inferred or deduced from impressions of them on the vulgar view, because doing so assumes we are operating with the distinction between impressions and objects, which we are not. Furthermore, Hume holds that the slightest bit of philosophical reflection – such as the experiments showing perceptual variation just mentioned above – leads to the conclusion that the vulgar view is wrong. It is wrong because impressions do not have distinct and continued existence.

2.2 The Philosophical View.

The philosophical view regards objects at most resembling the first and second class of impressions as having external existence. The vulgar and philosophical views agree that impressions of the third class are merely perceptions, i.e. pleasure and pain are not in external objects. In short, the philosophical view is a representational realism; it posits an ontology of double existence: perceptions and objects. The former are interrupted, perishing, and changing, the latter are uninterrupted and preserve a continued existence and identity [T.1.4.2.46].

According to Hume, however, this philosophical hypothesis has “no primary recommendation... but acquires all its influence on the imagination from [the vulgar view]” [T.1.4.2.47]. By this, he means that no one would be inclined to accept the philosophical view if they were not already taken by the vulgar view. We

don't ordinarily distinguish external objects from our impressions of them, but philosophical reflection leads us to reject the vulgar view as simply false, even though it is the most natural view [T.1.4.2.48].

2.3 The View of the Modern Philosophers.

The view of the modern philosophers is a more specific form of the philosophical view. What distinguishes the view of the modern philosophers from the more general philosophical view is that it is more restrictive about the extent of resemblance between impressions and objects. According to the modern philosophers, impressions of the first class resemble and represent real objects which have primary qualities whereas secondary qualities – colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold, etc. [T.1.4.4.3] – exist only in the mind, failing to resemble objects in this respect.

Arguing against the modern view, Hume follows Berkeley; the supposed primary qualities have no external archetype if secondary qualities do not:

The idea of extension is entirely acquired from the senses of sight and feeling; and if all the qualities, perceived by the senses, be in the mind, not in the object, the same conclusion must reach the idea of extension, which is wholly dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. [E.12.1.15]

It is important to note that Hume doesn't ultimately follow Berkeley to his idealistic conclusion. Hume does follow Berkeley as far as saying that endorsing the modern philosopher's primary-secondary quality distinction does lead to idealism. Here, Hume approves of Berkeley's skeptical arguments, but this is a double-edged sword. They are sufficient to dissuade one from belief in the view of the modern philosophers, but are 'merely sceptical,' in the sense that "they admit of no answer and produce no conviction. Their only effect is to cause that momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion" [E.12.1.15, note 32].

Hume means that Berkeley's arguments and reason itself are only sufficient to cast doubt on both versions of the philosophers' view, but are not enough to dissuade us from believing that there is an external world. The reason for this is that "nature is obstinate, and will not quit the field" [T.1.4.2.52]. We cannot reconcile these 'two enemies'; our reason stands against nature, which implores us to believe in external objects. We "grant each whatever it demands, and by feigning a double existence, where by each may find something that has all the conditions it desires" [T.1.4.52]. Hume means that we feign a double existence of

objects and impressions to grant reason the distinctness and independence of objects, but we wouldn't be inclined to posit a double existence were it not for finding problems with the vulgar view, as discussed above.

Hume addresses this 'inconsistency':

Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our sense; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continued and independent existence of body. When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude, that neither colour, sound, taste, nor smell have a contin'd and independent existence. When we exclude these sensible qualities there remains nothing in the universe, which has such an existence. [T. 1.4.4.15]

Rather than attempt to resolve the opposition, Hume leaves it intact, considering it irresolvable in philosophical solution, going so far to say that any solution is impossible and that it is "a malady which can never be radically cur'd" [T.1.4.3.56-57]. Instead, he gives a practical remedy – carelessness and inattention – to resolve it [T.1.4.3.57]. Hume leaves us with no choice but "betwixt a false reason and none at all," of which he "isn't sure what ought to be done" [T.1.4.7.7]. Hume puts the point even more poignantly in the Abstract to the *Treatise*:

By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive, that the philosophy contain'd in this book is very sceptical, and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience; and the belief, which attends experience, is explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment, or lively conception produced by habit. Nor is this all, when we believe any thing of *external* existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind. Our author insists upon several other sceptical topics; and upon the whole concludes, that we assent to our faculties, and employ our reason only because we cannot help it. Philosophy wou'd render us entirely *Pyrrhonian*, were not nature too strong for it. [Hume 2000, 413-414]

In other words, the 'solution' to the philosophical problem of the external world is to stop doing philosophy. Reason by itself would make us Pyrrhonian skeptics. Yet we have the unavoidable sentiment of belief that there are external objects.

Traditional interpretation of Hume take this to mean that Hume's endorsement of belief in external objects is therefore of a non-epistemic sort. It is *merely* a sentiment. However, in the next section, I argue that this isn't the whole story, and focusing only on this skepticism ignores another side of Hume's thought which provides a basis for thinking he was a realist about external objects. So, while our belief in external objects is a sentiment, it is not *merely* a sentiment.

3. Relative Ideas, Supposing, and Specific Difference.

There are several passages in Hume that pose a problem for Old Hume interpretations. I argue that by taking these passages into account, on the whole, Hume is more accurately understood as a realist. In these passages, Hume seems to hold that we do have a limited idea of mind-independent objects ‘apart from’ or ‘beyond’ our perceptions of them. The infrequent occurrence and obscurity of these passages has led to their being downplayed if not ignored, but taking them seriously affords a plausible alternative understanding of Hume’s view on the external world.

Hume concludes the section “Of the idea of existence, and of external existence” with the following puzzling passage, which will serve as a good starting point for discussion in the rest of this section:

The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos’d *specifically different* from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. Generally speaking we do not suppose them specifically different; but only attribute to them different relations, connexions and durations. But of this more fully hereafter. [T.1.2.6.9]

This passage is particularly pregnant, and it is not immediately obvious what Hume is getting at. While Hume alludes to offering a further explanation of these points more fully, which he does at 1.4.2, he does precious little in either place to explain the terms “relative idea,” “specific difference,” and what he means by distinguishing *conceiving* from *supposing* or what importance they should be regarded as having in his philosophy.

3.1 Relative Ideas.

While Hume doesn’t explicitly say so in the passage just quoted, he is invoking a distinction between positive ideas and relative ideas that was common at the time amongst 18th century empiricists such as Locke, Berkeley, and Reid.³ A positive idea is simply a copy of an impression or impressions, i.e. an idea whose content comes from perception. A relative idea picks out an unperceived entity based on its relation to a perceived entity, i.e. a positive idea, but which has no content of its own. Considering the way the notion of a

³ For a more detailed historical discussion of some of these and other passages, see Daniel Flage’s “Hume’s Relative Ideas,” *Hume Studies* 8, No. 1 (1981): 55-73.

relative idea was used by other 18th – century British empiricists helps illuminate what Hume might have meant by it.

Locke clearly distinguishes positive and relative ideas in his famous discussion of our idea of substance in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). He makes it clear that our idea of substance is a relative idea:

We have no such clear idea at all, and therefore signify nothing by the word “substance,” but only an uncertain supposition of we know not what; *i.e.* of something whereof we have no particular, distinct, positive idea, which we take to be the *substratum*, or support of those ideas we do know. (Locke 1995: 51)

Elsewhere, Locke writes on how we come to have relative ideas of substances:

Our obscure and *relative idea* of substance in general... We come to have relative ideas of particular substances by combining simple ideas from experience which are therefore *supposed* to flow from the particular internal constitution or unknown essence of that substance. (Locke 1995: 209)

Berkeley also distinguished between positive ideas and relative ideas. Speaking of the Locke’s view as the “received opinion,” Berkeley says that:

Say you, I have no idea of Matter and therefore cannot explain it. I answer, though you have no *positive*, yet, if you have any meaning at all, you must at least have *a relative idea of Matter*; though you know not what it is, yet you must be supposed to know what relation it bears to accidents, and what is meant by its supporting them. (Berkeley 1982: 28-29, emphasis added).

In *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), Berkeley – as Philonous in the dialogue – claims that it is absurd to argue against the existence of an object only from “having no direct and positive notion of it,” because that alone doesn’t count “against the reality of any notion or existence of any thing,” but if “we have not even a relative notion of [the existence of a thing]” it follows that we use words without purpose or with no signification whatever (Berkeley 1975, 213).

Lastly, Thomas Reid also distinguished between a “direct” and a “relative” conception in *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind* (1788):

Of some things, we know what they are in themselves; our conception of such things I call *direct*. Of other things, we know not what they are in themselves, but only that they have certain properties or attributes, or certain relations to other things; of these our conception is only *relative*. (Reid 1969: 7)

Based on these passages, it should be clear enough that other influential empiricists who were part of Hume’s intellectual milieu distinguished between positive, direct, or specific ideas on the one hand and relative ideas

or notions on the other, that they regarded such relative ideas as a legitimate component of their epistemologies, and that relative ideas have meaning and signification, even if we cannot *conceive* of the objects themselves that such ideas signify.

Hume's discussion of relative ideas should be clearer in light its precedent in the empiricist tradition, as it is plausible to regard Hume as meaning the same thing by 'relative idea.' Everything he says about them suggests this is so and nothing suggests to the contrary. In addition to the passage above where Hume talks of the relative idea of external objects, Hume mentions relative ideas elsewhere. In one passage, Hume implores us to:

Remember, that as every idea is deriv'd from a preceding perception, 'tis impossible our idea of a perception, and that of an object or external existence can ever represent what are specifically different from each other. Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt them, 'tis still incomprehensible to us; and we are oblig'd either to conceive an external object merely as *a relation without a relative*, or to make it the very same with a perception or impression. [T.1.4.5.19, emphasis added]

Here again, Hume says that we cannot *comprehend* the difference between perceptions and objects since we have no positive idea of objects, but can only conceive of objects either as a 'relation without a relative' or by thinking, with the vulgar, of objects and impressions as the same thing. In other words, we can conceive the idea of an external object based on our impressions, but, if our view is to be distinct from that of the vulgar, we can at most conceive *that* there is an external object related to our impression of it, but can't conceive the external object itself.

Hume also mentions relative ideas once in the *Enquiry*. The following passage occurs in the context of his discussion of causation:

[T]he idea of power is relative as much as that of cause; and both have a reference to an effect, or some other event constantly conjoined with the former. When we consider the *unknown* circumstances of an object, by which the degree or quantity of its effect is fixed and determined, we call that its power: And accordingly it is allowed by all philosophers that the effect is the measure of the power. But if they had any idea of power, as it is in itself, why could not they measure it in itself? [E.2.60, note]

There are a few things worth mentioning about this passage. Here, Hume is discussing the ideas of power and cause as relative ideas. So, Hume holds that not only ideas of external objects, but other ideas are relative as well. He also implies that we have no idea of power as it is in itself, i.e. that we have no positive idea of

power, since we cannot measure power as it is in itself. Also, since this passage is from the *Enquiry*, it is clear that Hume countenanced relative ideas not just in the *Treatise*, but also in his later, more mature work.

As a brief aside, it is worth noting a similarity between the interpretation of Hume given here and Immanuel Kant's view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Early on, Kant says that:

If we consider this empirical object in general and... ask whether it represents an object in itself, then the question of the relation of the representation to the object is transcendental... The transcendental object however, remains unknown to us. (Kant 1998: A 46/B 3)

Kant seems to be making a very similar point to Hume and the other empiricists. Kant agrees that cognition is essentially discursive, operating only on the impressions it receives. Just as Hume thought that we could “suppose, but never can conceive” external objects, Kant said that “even if we cannot cognize these same objects as things in themselves, we at least must be able to think them as things in themselves” (Kant 1998: B xxvi-xxvii), and that this object “must be thought of only as something in general = x , since outside of our cognition we have nothing that we could set over against this cognition as corresponding to it” (Kant, 1998: A104). Put differently, even though we cannot conceive external objects/things in themselves, we can think *of* them in a more minimal sense as the x in a relative idea – the literally inconceivable *relata* – to perceptions.

3.2 Supposing versus Conceiving.

In these passages where Hume explains his view of the external world, he seems to be invoking a distinction between supposing and conceiving, in addition to the distinction between positive and relative ideas. Hume makes this distinction between supposing and conceiving most clearly when he says that:

Since we may suppose, but never can conceive a specific deference betwixt an object and impression; any conclusion we form concerning the connexion and repugnance of impressions, will not be known certainly to be applicable to objects; but that on the other hand, whatever conclusions of this kind we form concerning objects, will most certainly be applicable to impressions. The reason is not difficult. As an object is suppos'd to be different from an impression, we cannot be sure, that the circumstance, upon which we found our reasoning, is common to both, supposing we form the reasoning upon the impression. 'Tis still possible, that the object may differ from it in that particular. [T.1.4.5.20]

Here, Hume means that while we cannot actually *conceive* objects as they are in themselves, we can *suppose* a specific difference between objects as they are in themselves and objects as they appear to us, i.e. as

impressions. Presumably, Hume intends what is normally meant by “suppose,” i.e., that we can form as a hypothesis, a probable opinion.

The distinction between supposing and conceiving tracks the distinction between positive and relative ideas. We can conceive only positive ideas, which are copies of impressions. Yet we can form the relative idea of objects – we can “suppose, but never can conceive” a specific difference between an object and an impression [T.1.4.5.20].

3.3 Specific Difference.

What does Hume mean by “specific difference?” Hume says that our idea of a perception, and that of an external object, can never represent what are “specifically different” from each other [T.1.4.5.19]. Here, “specific” is meant in the medieval sense of “species.” So, saying that we can never conceive of objects as “specifically different” is saying that they are of different species. To put the point in more contemporary terminology, there is a difference in kind between ideas and objects. David and Mary Norton interpret Hume similarly on this point:

We can formulate the hypothesis that there are, over and above perceptions, *objects*, but we cannot conceive of these objects as being significantly or specifically different from our perceptions of them. What we experience determines what we can conceive. (Norton 2000: 477)

Bringing “relative idea,” “supposing,” and “specific difference” together now, what Hume means at 1.2.6.9 is that we can form the hypothesis that external objects are different in kind from impressions, but cannot conceive external objects themselves, as we are able only to conceive of them as ‘a relation without a relative’ or make the object into an impression so as to conceive it.

3.4 The Relative Importance of Relative Ideas, and Resemblance.

There is disagreement amongst Hume scholars, even amongst those advocating the New Hume interpretation, about the importance of relative ideas in Hume’s philosophy. I believe that we should not place too much importance on external objects as the objects, or referents, of relative ideas in interpreting

Hume. In *The Secret Connexion*, Galen Strawson offers a New Humean interpretation that commits what I take to be the error of overemphasizing relative ideas. Regarding our view of external objects, Strawson says:

We may for example conceive [an external object] as something that stands in a certain relation (the relation of cause) to our perceptions. We can conceive it only as something that stands in certain relations, or holds a place in a system of relations... while having no positive conception of its nature considered on its own. But a merely relative idea (or term for) something X is not no idea of (or term for) X at all. Coupling Hume's notion with a more modern idiom, we may note that a merely 'relative' idea of X is, precisely, merely relationally of X. Nevertheless – to use a different form of the Latin word from which 'relative' and 'relational' derive – it does *refer* to X, in this case. (Strawson 1989: 51)

The problem with this line of interpretation is that it places too much emphasis on the *foreignness* of external objects. A merely relative idea of an external object is, as Strawson puts it, “incomprehensible” and “contentless,” or, as Hume puts it, an “unknown *something*” [T.1.1.6.2]. Such is Locke's idea of substance; a supposition of “something we know not what,” a notion for which Hume holds little esteem. This is the impetus behind Hume's “very decisive” objection against (Locke's) modern philosophy. There, Hume says that rather than explaining the operations of external objects, taking on the modern philosophical view of double existence entails that “we utterly annihilate all these objects and reduce ourselves to the opinions of the most extravagant skepticism concerning them” [T.1.4.4.6].

There is a further, potentially more serious problem. Hume says “as to the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shewn its absurdity” [T.1.4.2.2]. The ‘already shewn absurdity’ that Hume is referring to is 1.2.6, which, curiously, is where Hume seemed to have allowed that we can form a relative idea of external objects, as discussed above. On the face of it, Hume seems inconsistent. Doesn't Hume first endorse relative ideas and later regard them as an absurdity?

It is important that this passage not be taken out of context to avoid misunderstanding what Hume might have meant. It occurs towards the beginning of Hume's discussion of the origin of our idea of ‘a continu'd or of a distinct existence,’ where he considers the senses, reason, or the imagination as candidates for that origin (as explained in Part 1 above). Hume then says that “these [i.e. the origin of our ideas of continu'd and distinct existence] are the only questions, that are intelligible on the present subject” before he

goes on to mention the absurdity of the notion of external existence specifically different from our perceptions.

Putting the passage in context suggests that the absurdity is to regard external objects as themselves intelligible, i.e. as something we can conceive as specifically different from impressions. In the passage Hume is referring back to, he discussed the ‘pretty obvious’ observation which is ‘universally allow’d by philosophers’: “nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and idea, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion” [T.1.2.6.7]. This is why it is absurd to think we have any ‘notion,’ i.e., a positive idea, of external objects since it is “impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions” [T.1.2.6.8]. Put differently, the absurdity is to think we could form a *positive idea* of the unperceived relata, the ‘relation without a relative.’ We can *suppose* them specifically different, but they will always be “incomprehensible to us” [T.1.4.5.19].

Acknowledging this absurdity is not inconsistent with our being able to suppose a relative idea of external objects. Nonetheless, these passages further suggest that relative ideas do not play a strong role in Hume’s epistemology. The relative idea of external objects can only be supposed after we have formed the belief of continu’d and distinct existence, which is caused by the imagination. It would be absurd to think that, for Hume, relative ideas of external objects are responsible for our belief in external objects. Rather, it is our natural belief in external objects that makes relative ideas of them something we can legitimately suppose.

Instead of stressing the unknownness of relative ideas, we must take note that Hume often speaks of our perceptions as *resembling* external objects. “Generally speaking we do not suppose [external objects] specifically different; but only attribute to them different relations, connexions and durations” [T.1.2.6.9]. It is not the mere unknownness of relative ideas of external objects that we should focus on, but rather on their *similarity* with the impressions we suppose them to occasion, when we distinguish between them at all. For example, Hume says that we “suppose external objects to resemble internal perceptions” and “must make every thing resemble them” [T.1.4.2.54]. Elsewhere, Hume says that we infer the “resemblance betwixt the image and the object” by interacting with it in various ways [T.1.3.9.11]. To cite one last example, Hume

writes that we suppose that external objects “resemble our perceptions, so we take it for granted, that every particular object resembles that perception, which it causes” [T.1.4.2.55].

Stressing the importance of resemblance between impressions and external objects as Hume does is not to say that relative ideas are useless. Relative ideas enable us to think that our representations of objects don't fully (or fully accurately) capture their reality. P.J.E. Kail makes a similar point in saying:

There may be facts about such objects over and above those represented in perception by resemblance. Such differences are not anything we can properly grasp, and so we cannot grasp any 'specific difference' between objects and perceptions. But such a possibility is left wide open.
(Kail 2007: 60)

Kails' interpretation on this point seems correct. More needs to be said about the epistemic standing of the resemblance relation between external objects and impressions, how Hume is a realist, and what this means for Hume's skepticism. But before taking on these final issues, it is first worth entertaining a few objections against the interpretation of Hume offered thus far.

4. Objections.

Hume scholars disagree on the legitimacy of relative ideas in Hume's epistemology. Advocated the 'Old' Hume have trouble accommodating them. Some attempt to discount the passages just discussed in this paper. Others argue that they are incompatible with Hume's epistemology.

4.1 Blackburn's Objection.

In “Hume and Thick Connexions,” Simon Blackburn resists interpretations of Hume which place any weight on relative ideas or the supposing-conceiving distinction. He argues that “the texts give no direct support to this interpretation of Hume,” that the passages occur “very sparingly,” and that Hume never uses or mentions relative ideas in the *Enquiry* “in any context at all.” All of this leads Blackburn to conclude that they are “unlikely candidates for a central role in understanding [Hume's] mature philosophy” (Blackburn 2007: 101-102).

While it is perhaps true that the texts do not give any *direct* support to the interpretation advocated herein, Blackburn's objections can be met nonetheless. In the first place, Hume often assumes the existence

of external objects in his writing, which is indirect evidence that he was relying on the supposition that we have a relative idea of external objects. That he does not always couch those discussions in the technical terminology of relative ideas should not be surprising. The fact that the passages occur sparingly can also be accounted for by Hume's emphasis on the limits of human understanding and that relative ideas, which we can suppose but cannot conceive, are at the fringe of our understanding on the theory of ideas. Furthermore, Blackburn's claim that Hume never mentions relative ideas in the *Enquiry* is simply false, as Hume clearly does so (E.2.60 note, discussed above at 3.1). This sheds further doubt on the force of Blackburn's objection.

However, Blackburn does seem correct that relative ideas do not play a major role in Hume's epistemology. This was Strawson's mistake, and Blackburn's criticism applies to that interpretation. But I have argued that Hume puts more stock in the resemblance of impressions and external objects than is suggested by appeal to a mere relative idea that we can form of them.

4.2 Johnson's Objection.

Oliver Johnson provides a stronger objection than Blackburn in *The Mind of David Hume*. Rather than simply downplay the importance of relative ideas, Johnson argues that they are impossible on Hume's epistemology:

Hume seems to be affirming that we can have an idea of a relation without also having ideas of the objects the relation relates. But how is this possible?... if we have no ideas of objects – as we do not, according to the explanation of a relative idea I am trying to reconstruct from Hume's account – we cannot have any relation either, because we have nothing to connect... To have a relative idea of any external object, on the only account Hume gives of what a relative idea might be, requires that we have an idea of the object (or objects) being related. But he has denied that we have any such idea. It follows, therefore, that a relative idea of an external object is an impossibility on Hume's epistemology. Such an oddity simply cannot exist... According to his epistemology, if we are to have an idea of any object *whatever* it may be, we must have an impression of it, of which our idea is a copy. Either we have the required impression or we do not. If we have it, then it is an ordinary impression... Its idea, which copies it, is also an ordinary idea. If, on the other hand, we have no impression of the object, we can have no idea of it either. There is simply no place in Hume's epistemology for a 'relative idea.' (Johnson 1995: 115)

In short, on Johnson's interpretation, since we have no impressions of external objects, we have no idea of external objects, relative or otherwise. Johnson takes himself to be providing an interpretation of Hume, but

rather than providing an interpretation of what Hume might have meant by “relative idea” or how it could be accommodated in terms of Hume’s theory of ideas, Johnson says that such an accommodation is impossible. But, as shown above, all empiricists in the philosophical canon, including Hume, accept relative ideas. If a more charitable interpretation is available that can accommodate this, it is to be preferred, and I believe such an alternative is available.

One way of responding to Johnson’s objection is to claim that Hume wasn’t an empiricist at all. In *The Mind of God and Works of Man*, Edward Craig takes this strategy. Commenting on Hume’s commitment to empiricism, Craig says it is a “general truth that he has in fact little real interest in the theory of ideas and impressions” (Craig 1987: 120). However, this interpretation is so grossly implausible that it need not even be considered further.

Johnson’s error is not attributing to Hume the theory of ideas which he did not actually believe, but in interpreting Hume’s theory of ideas too strictly. Granted, there is some textual evidence for the strict interpretation of the theory of ideas which Johnson adopts. For example, Hume says that “*all our ideas are copy’d from our impressions*” [T.1.3.2.7]. I suggest that here, Hume meant that all our *positive* ideas are copied from our impressions. Nearly all the time, Hume omits the adjective, as it is natural to do, considering that nearly all of our ideas are positive rather than relative.

Also, in one of the earliest passages of the *Treatise*, Hume says 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.1.1.17]. Note that Hume is here talking only of simple ideas. Hume allows that many of our complex ideas never had impressions that correspond to them [T.1.1.4]. Since a relative idea is constituted by a relation to a positive idea(s), – such as our perception of a chair – and the supposition of specific difference from our perception – the chair’s *not being* our perception of it – it makes sense to regard relative ideas as complex ideas. Also, we form a relative idea of external objects late in the game, and even as adults, not always. Furthermore, relative ideas are consistent with Hume’s theory of ideas in the sense that all ideas are occasioned by experience. Relative ideas can be accommodated on the theory of ideas. At any rate, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Reid thought that they could.

5. Resemblance and Realism.

Clearly, then, Hume thinks that are external objects, and that we suppose our impressions to resemble them, when we distinguish between impressions and external objects at all, which we typically do not. We are all mostly vulgar, most of the time. When we distinguish objects from our perceptions of them, Hume doesn't seem at all worried about the *intelligibility* of the resemblance relation between impressions and external objects. Hume says that the "supposition of the continu'd existence of sensible objects or perceptions involves no contradiction" [T.1.4.2.40].

Rather, Hume seems more concerned with the epistemic standing of this relation. One thing is clear – the belief is not justified by reason. Hume emphatically stresses this:

It is a question of fact, whether the perceptions of the senses be produced by external objects, resembling them: How shall this question be determined? By experience surely; as all other questions of a like nature. But here experience is, and must be entirely silent. The mind has never any thing present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connection with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning. [E.12.1.12]

Here Hume means simply that we cannot *prove* that the external world exists via either demonstrative or causal reasoning, i.e. via the conclusion of either a deductively valid argument from self-evidently true premises or a well-grounded causal inference. As such, *rational* belief in external objects is precluded by Hume's fork. Rather, we can at most – and indeed are compelled to – suppose, by way of a (relative) idea, that there is a difference between perceptions and external objects, and also that they resemble one another, even though we can never fully represent what 'belongs' to objects and perceptions and what belongs only to the latter.

When we attribute properties or qualities to objects based on our impressions of them, we can never be certain in our conclusions because any property or quality we perceive may not also hold for the object. As Hume puts it, "*we cannot be sure*, that the circumstance, upon which we found our reasoning, is common to both" the object and impression [T.1.4.5.20, emphasis added]. But the absence of certainty is not the absence of any epistemic credibility whatsoever. Indeed, Hume even says that "external objects *become known* to us

only by those perceptions they occasion” [T.1.2.6.7, emphasis added]. He doesn’t say that we only know impressions, but that we know external objects only via our impressions of them.

So, Hume is not ultimately a skeptic or antirealist about external objects. He believes there is an external world, and while the origin of that belief is psychological in origin, and he is skeptical that we could ever attain *certainty* about the resemblance between external objects and our impressions of them, that they resemble one another in some respects is a matter of fact which Hume thinks is quite reasonable, even if not founded on either demonstrative or causal reasoning (and so not “rational”).

Ultimately, Hume thinks that the belief in the external world is simply too important to be supported by philosophical argument. Reason is too fickle a foundation for the veracity of the existence of body. “Nature... has doubtless esteem’d it an affair of too great importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations” [T.1.4.2.1]. It is instructive that Hume concludes the section *Of skepticism with regard to the senses* not by saying that we do *in fact* have faith in our senses, but by making the normative claim that “we *ought* to have an implicit faith in our senses” [T.1.4.2.56, emphasis added].

Part 6. Hume’s Skepticism, Properly Understood.

What then, of Hume’s self-professed skepticism? Has this interpretation of Hume swung the pendulum too far away from his skepticism in an attempt to account for his seeming realism about external objects? I think not. Hume was a skeptic and a realist. Hume was just not a *Pyrrhonian* skeptic. In “A letter to Stewart,” Hume said “I am not such a sceptic as you may perhaps imagine” (Chambers 1875: 304). Rather, Hume was fond of what he calls *mitigated* skepticism, which he regards as advantageous to mankind. This less extreme form of skepticism requires that we limit our enquiries to only those subjects which are best adapted to the narrow capacities of human understanding [E.12.3.25].

Hume’s skepticism is that we are fallible creatures of limited understanding, and will never know all there is to know or all that we might like to know. External objects are necessarily beyond the reach of impressions and subsequently a subject ill-adapted to our narrow capacity of understanding. Hume says that:

It must certainly be allowed, that nature has kept us at a great distance from all her secrets, and has afforded us only the knowledge of a few superficial qualities of objects; while she conceals from us those powers and principles on which the influence of those objects entirely depends. [E.2.20]

Hume thinks that we know only a few superficial qualities of things, most of nature is and always will be concealed from us, not that we can know nothing at all about her. Rather, the ‘slightest philosophy’ teaches us that:

Nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception, and that the senses are only the inlets, through which those images are conveyed, without being able to produce any immediate intercourse between the mind and object. The table which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: But the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: It was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason; and no man, who reflects, ever doubted, that the existences which we consider, when we say, *this house* and *that tree*, are nothing but perceptions in the mind, and fleeting copies or representations of other existences, which remain uniform and independent. [E.12.1.9]

It is in this light that we can better appreciate why Hume delights in ridiculing metaphysical and theological attempts to go far beyond the narrow compass of our understanding into abstruse reasonings where we are prone to error, not that there are external objects or that they resemble our impressions in certain respects. It is in this sense that skepticism is important for ‘true philosophers’:

Nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher, than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes, and having establish’d any doctrine upon a sufficient number of experiments, rest contented with that, when he sees a farther examination wou’d lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations. [T.1.1.5.6]

Taken in this light, it shouldn’t be surprising that Hume did not focus on the elements of his philosophy discussed in the paper.⁴ In this regard, it is fitting not just that Hume ends Book I of the *Treatise* with his advocacy of skepticism, but more so that he continues on towards less “distant and high enquiries” into the more practical subjects of the common life not having to do with the understanding in Book 2 (“Of the passions”) and Book 3 (“Of morals”). Yet throughout these subsequent discussions, he all the while operates with the supposition that there is both an external and internal world [T.1.4.2.57]. This paper, I hope, does better justice to what Hume might have really thought about this supposition than more traditional interpretations have done.

⁴ Ironically however, that Hume did so is probably responsible for what Hume regarded as the widespread misinterpretations of the *Treatise* that he laments in the beginning of the *Enquiry*, where he effectively abandons the *Treatise* as representing his philosophical views.

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