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“What to Make of the Missing Shade of Blue”¹

I. Introduction

One of the most salient features of David Hume’s celebrated empiricism is his commitment to what many commentators call the “Copy Principle”, or the thesis that all of our ideas are derived from impressions, which they exactly resemble. Hume presents this thesis first in the *Treatise*:

...we shall here content ourselves with establishing one general proposition, *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* (THN 4).

He presents it a second time in the *Enquiry*:

But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience...In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: The mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. Or, to express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones (EHU 97).

The Copy Principle has wide application in Hume’s philosophy, playing a vital role in Hume’s arguments against naïve conceptions of such ideas as of necessary connection, substance, and personal identity.² Despite its role as one of the jewels in the crown of Hume’s philosophy, Hume famously entertains and concedes a counterexample to it:

There is however one contradictory phenomenon, which may prove, that ‘tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions. I believe it will readily be allow’d, that the several distinct ideas of colours, which enter by the eyes, or those of sounds, which are convey’d by the hearing, are really different from each other, tho’ at the same time resembling. Now if this be true of different colours, it must be no less so of the different shades of the same colour, that each of them produces a distinct idea independent of the rest. For if this shou’d be deny’d, ‘tis possible, by the continual gradation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is most remote from it, and if you will not allow any of the means to be different, you cannot without absurdity deny the extremes to be the same. Suppose therefore a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it has never been his fortune to meet with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be plac’d before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; ‘tis plain, that he will perceive

¹ Conversations with William Edward Morris contributed greatly to this paper.

² I write “naïve conceptions of such ideas” because I maintain that Hume’s claim is not that there is no such idea as of necessary connection, but rather that we are often mistaken in what we believe to be the content of this idea. We can continue to use the word phrase ‘necessary connection’ meaningfully, but we must understand that it does not refer to an actually existing, but unobservable causal force in the world. Rather, it refers to a feature of our own psychology.

a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other. Now I ask, whether 'tis possible for him, from his own imaginings, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, 'tho it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of the opinion that he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions; tho' the instance is so particular and singular, that 'tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim (THN 5-6).³

In short, Hume concedes that, at least in this counter-example, it is possible for a person to construct a simple idea to which there is no correspondent simple impression she has previously encountered in experience. In this particular example, the idea in question is of a missing shade of blue. Let us call this concession the MSB Concession ("Missing Shade of Blue" Concession).

The MSB Concession has puzzled both friends and foes of Hume. Why does Hume make this seemingly devastating concession? His critics argue that the MSB Concession has the consequence of preventing the success of many of Hume's important arguments.⁴ They charge that the MSB Concession indicates that either Hume's Copy Principle is not as general as is required by the uses to which he will put it, or that Hume's application of the Principle, despite his declarations to the contrary, is arbitrary. Defenders of Hume offer a wide range of solutions to the puzzle. In this paper I will review and evaluate the adequacy of some of these solutions. Ultimately, I will argue that even the best available solutions are not without their problems.

II. The Complex Idea Solution

Charitable commentators have suggested, and indeed it is natural to think, that Hume might have conceded that a person can construct the missing shade of blue while maintaining that ideas of shades of colors are complex. This would allow the subject of the experiment to create the missing shade by combining simple ideas that have direct antecedents in impressions. This solution initially seems quite plausible. Consider a recent experience of mine. This past summer I decided to paint the walls of my home office. The first step in this process was to select a color of paint. I went to the paint store and examined the plethora of sample cards available. These roughly bookmark-shaped cards displaying approximately five paint colors are quite familiar nowadays (though Hume would have never seen one). I selected one of these cards displaying five shades of light green. I can easily imagine what this card would look like if the third shade were removed and the second and fourth shades placed next to one another. Now suppose that I had never seen this card before. I think I would still judge that there was a greater difference between "Tea House Sage", the second shade, and "Frosty Pine", the fourth shade, than between any other two adjacent shades. Keeping in mind the paint store's formulas for mixing the shades on the card, I might think, "the missing shade has a bit more green pigment mixed in than "Frosty Pine" and a bit less than "Tea House Sage"." Using this thought process I could easily construct "Misty Meadow", the

³ EHU 98-99.

⁴ Arguments against traditional conceptions of necessary connection, substance, personal identity, time without alteration, vacuum, morality, etc.

missing shade and current color of my office walls. As in color theory, perhaps my ideas of shades are complex. Anyone who has taken an art class knows that colors, shades, and hues are never really simple. Creating a palette involves the careful mixing of a variety of pigments.

Convincing as this solution might be, it is not available to Hume. He is very insistent that our ideas of colors and shades are simple:

‘Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou’d be distinct and separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho’ their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. ‘Tis the same case with particular sounds, tastes and smells. These admit of infinite resemblances upon general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms *simple idea*. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest. ‘Tis the same case with all the degrees in any quality. They are all resembling, and yet the quality, in any individual, is not distinct from the degree (THN 637).

According to color theory, green is surely a complex of blue and yellow pigment. Here it seems clear that Hume regards ideas and impressions of green as simple.

The problem with the complex idea solution is, well, more complex than a mere unavailability of textual support. In his influential book *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* Don Garrett points out that the complex idea solution violates a different important principle of Hume’s, the “Separability Principle.”⁵ The Separability Principle follows closely on the heels of the Copy Principle in Hume’s *Treatise*:

We have observ’d, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the *inverse*, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different (THN 18).

Violating this principle is more damaging than conceding a rare exception to the Copy Principle. If Hume allows that colors and shades are not simple ideas, then he will find himself in a metaphysical pickle. What could be said to comprise a color idea? A natural response might be brightness, muted-ness, saturation, etc. If we allow each of these aspects of a color idea to be components of a complex idea, then we are left with simple ideas of brightness and muted-ness that several color ideas have in common. Brightness, for instance, taken as a simple, would then be conceived of as somehow underlying or connecting distinct simple impressions and ideas. Garrett summarizes the problem that is avoided nicely:

...because hues cannot exist without some intensity, saturation, or brightness, and vice versa, treating any of these as simples would violate the Separability Principle and introduce real connections between simple perceptions. This would be a far more

⁵ Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, p. 58.

serious matter for him than an isolated exception to the Copy Principle, especially when the exception in question does not call for any major revision of the Resemblance Thesis or the theory of representational faculties. Instead, Hume provides an account that permits hues, intensities, degrees of saturation, and degrees of brightness to be distinguishable aspects of a single simple perception (which is *of* both, and also *of* a single shade). He does so in a way that does not violate the Separability Principle or introduce real connections among distinct perceptions.⁶

The seemingly attractive complex idea solution is not only unavailable to Hume, it is also too expensive for him. In the following two sections of this paper I will discuss and evaluate two types of alternative solutions to the missing shade of blue puzzle: solutions that involve weakening the Copy Principle and solutions that attempt to preserve it as a thoroughgoing empirical principle.

⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

III. The Linguistic Turn: Copy Principle Weakening Solutions

A number of commentators have attempted to “solve” the missing shade of blue puzzle by weakening the Copy Principle in one way or another. Jonathan Bennett is a good representative of this approach.⁷ In his well-known book *Learning from Six Philosophers*, Bennett offers a solution to the missing shade of blue puzzle based on a novel interpretation of the Copy Principle. He begins by suggesting a series of “helpful revisions” and then attempts to show that a properly revised Copy Principle dissolves the problem raised by the missing shade of blue. Bennett is well aware of what is at stake if Hume cannot find a way to explain why the MSB Concession does not do violence to his important anti-metaphysical arguments. The alleged problem, according to Bennett, has less to do with the MSB Concession and more to do with the nature of the Copy Principle. He writes:

According to Hume’s announced way of distinguishing impressions from ideas, the copy thesis says that our simple mental contents (‘perceptions’) are of two kinds, vivacious and faint, and that any faint one that occurs in a mind is caused by an earlier vivacious one that is otherwise just like it. He tried to make this the foundation of a large philosophical edifice, but it cannot carry the weight.⁸

In short, Bennett thinks that the Copy Principle, as is, is not up to the tasks to which Hume puts it.

It is important to understand what Bennett takes to be the goal of the Copy Principle. Bennett thinks Hume wants to employ it to show “that certain terms that philosophers use are meaningless or unintelligible.”⁹ If you want to find out whether a given term is meaningful, it is wrong-headed, Bennett thinks, to search for the meaning in the history of the term. Whether the term is meaningful or not is a matter of its service to us *right now*. He writes:

If the best approach to questions about meaningfulness lay in the past, then they could not matter to us now *qua* philosophers rather than biographers. In fact, meaning does matter to us now and in the future, and it can do so because it shows up in how expressions are used. So the important question about whether someone has a meaning for an expression should be tacked in terms of what uses he can make of it, rather than of where he got the meaning from.¹⁰

Bennett thinks that in our quest for the meaning of terms what matters most is a given person’s competence in relating words to words and words to the world. Hume’s impressions do not connect to the objective world, as Hume questions the existence of such a world. Because of this, Hume “deprives the copy thesis of its only chance of relating intelligibly to something interesting that might be true.”¹¹

Bennett takes the Copy Principle to be describing the relation between impressions and ideas as one in which the impressions cause the ideas and are copied by

⁷ See Robert Fogelin’s *Philosophical Interpretations* and Robert Cummins’ “The Missing Shade of Blue” for alternative Copy Principle weakening solutions.

⁸ Bennett, Jonathan, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, p. 211.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

them. Given this characterization of the principle, Bennett thinks “we cannot see how to get evidence for or against it, how it could legitimately be used as a weapon of criticism, or why it matters.”¹² Thus, he proposes three revisions of it:

- 1) We must establish a connection to the external world. According to Bennett, “we must understand the copy thesis as saying something about how ideas relate to *sensory contact with the world of material things*.”¹³
- 2) We must completely abandon the Humean “ideas are images” picture, adopting a picture in which ideas are understood as meanings or concepts.

These suggested revisions combine to produce the following transformed Copy Principle: One way for me to come to have a meaning for a given word W is for it to be defined verbally in terms of words for which I already have meanings. If its meaning is not definable in this way because not complex, then I can come to associate it with W only through an ostensive definition—a procedure in which I am told that W applies to things that look thus or sound so.¹⁴

The Copy Principle transformed in accordance with 1) and 2) will not avoid the misguided historical search for meaning Bennett wants to avoid. As it stands, in order to determine whether a speaker has a meaning for W, we still have to look to the past and ask where she acquired it. Thus, Bennett suggests a third revision to the Copy Principle:

- 3) We must take the Copy Principle as concerned with the criteria for, not the sources of, meaning:

I choose to (mis)read the copy thesis as being concerned not with the sources of, but rather with the criteria for, meaning and understanding. Rather than a doctrine about how one comes to be linguistically competent, I take it to be about what such competence consists in, what sorts of linguistic behaviour constitute the meaningful use or understanding of language.¹⁵

Now that Bennett’s “triply-revised” Copy Principle is on the table, let us examine how he employs it to dissolve the problem posed by the missing shade of blue.

Bennett begins by pointing out that without the first two revisions, we cannot be certain that the man in the missing shade of blue counter-example has not had an impression of the missing shade. If the Copy Principle does not insist on a connection to the external world, then there is no way to be sure that the man could not have had an impression of the missing shade, as an impression is merely a forceful and vivacious perception. If we agree with Hume that the man has an idea of the missing shade, we judge this to be the case on the basis of his linguistic competency with the name of the missing shade. The real nail in the coffin of the missing shade of blue puzzle is delivered by the third revision:

Does not the third revision abolish the problem? It turns the copy thesis into something *analytic*—a thesis about what it is to understand or have a meaning for an expression; but Hume’s missing-shade problem essentially concerns the *genetic* thesis that understanding must be preceded by sensory inputs or...etc. His problem has this

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

form: here is a man with a certain kind of mental present who has not had the required kind of mental past. Can we not just walk out on this?¹⁶

Bennett says “no” to the last question, but given what he goes on to write, he should have said “yes”. He answers “no” because we can still ask questions about how the man in the example was able to identify the missing shade, but, on the “analytic Copy Principle” account, these questions are boring and easily answered.

The problem with this kind of “solution” will become more apparent when I contrast Bennett’s interpretive approach with that of Don Garrett. For now I will say that this “solution”, and I am intentionally using scare-quotes, is not satisfactory because it is not a solution to Hume’s problem. The interesting project here is to explain why Hume, given his own principles, would make the MSB Concession with so little concern. A truly satisfactory solution will explain why Hume can concede the counter-example *and* retain the Copy Principle as an empirical principle. We should beware of solutions that dispense with one half of the dilemma, particularly when the half that is dispensed with is the Copy Principle. The Copy Principle represents what is radical and interesting about Hume’s empiricism. Unlike Bennett, I am not inclined to abandon it in favor of a modern “analytic” principle.

IV. Promising Simple Idea Solutions

The most promising solutions to the problem raised by the missing shade of blue appear in Garrett’s *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*. He offers two solutions, both of which depend upon a particular and, I think, correct interpretation of Hume’s Copy Principle. This interpretation is preferable to the one advocated by Bennettian commentators for four reasons. I should begin by briefly describing the preferred interpretation, and then I will explain why it is preferable.¹⁷ According to the preferred interpretation, the Copy Principle is an *empirical* thesis, nothing less and certainly nothing more. In fact, Hume’s consideration of the missing shade of blue counter-example itself can be seen as part of an effort to emphasize the empirical nature of the Copy Principle, and, thus, as a reason to prefer this interpretation. The second, and perhaps most compelling, reason to adopt this interpretation of the Copy Principle is that it is consistent with the whole of Hume’s highly empiricistic philosophy. If the Copy Principle were knowable *a priori*, then the causal properties of various degrees of force and vivacity would also have to be knowable *a priori*. This would have to be the case because Hume repeatedly asserts that impressions and ideas differ only in force and vivacity. However, Hume does *not* think that the causal properties of degrees of force and vivacity are knowable *a priori*. A clear statement of this position appears in the *Enquiry*:

If we would satisfy ourselves, therefore, concerning the nature of that evidence, which assures us of matters of fact, we must enquire how we arrive at the knowledge of cause and effect. I shall venture to affirm, as a general proposition, which admits of no exception, that the knowledge of this relation is not, in any instance, attained by reasonings *a priori*; but arises entirely from experience, when we find, that any particular objects are constantly conjoined with each other. Let an object be

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁷ I use the term ‘Bennettian’ to refer generally to the Copy Principle weakening approach to the MSB Concession. I do not intend to capture any of the nuances of Jonathan Bennett’s view with this term.

presented to a man of ever so strong natural reason and abilities; if that object be entirely new to him, he will not be able, by the most accurate examination of its sensible qualities, to discover any of its causes or effects. Adam, though his rational faculties be supposed, at the very first, entirely perfect, could not have inferred from the fluidity and transparency of water, that it would suffocate him, or from the light and warmth of the fire, that it would consume him. No object ever discovers, by the qualities which appear to the senses, either the causes, which produced it, or the effects, which will arise from it; nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matter of fact (EHU 109-110).

In addition, Hume cannot mean to treat the Copy Principle as necessary. As Garrett points out, “[Hume’s] Conceivability Criterion of Possibility entails that the Copy Principle cannot be a necessary truth if its denial is conceivable, but he is equally insistent that the denial of *any* causal claim is conceivable.”¹⁸ The Copy Principle is a generalization from particular cases that describes a relation between the idea of ‘idea’ and the idea of ‘impression’. Hume does not regard the principle as necessary because he thinks we could easily conceive of a different empirical generalization holding instead of the famous Copy Principle. The relation between the idea of ‘idea’ and the idea of ‘impression’ could have been different than it, in fact, generally is.

My third reason for preferring this interpretation of the Copy Principle to the alternatives is that the principles of charity demand it. Charity requires one to take Hume as making an interesting and important contribution to philosophy. One should not then jump to the conclusion that his use of the Copy Principle was inconsistent and arbitrary. Rather, one should attempt to see his use of it as consistent and directed by systematic considerations. Hume’s rejection of metaphysics and adoption of a naturalistic empiricism should be taken at face value.¹⁹ We do not do him justice when we assume that he was unable to apply his Principle consistently, and we think even less justly of him when we assume that he is not completely genuine about his rejection of traditional metaphysics. There is nothing to set him apart from his metaphysics-loving predecessors and contemporaries if we do not take his staunch empiricism seriously. Thus, I argue that it is important to see his Copy Principle as a carefully and consistently applied empirical principle.²⁰

My fourth and final reason for preferring this interpretation is that the most prominent argument in favor of the Bennettian interpretation can be refuted. Many commentators who oppose the interpretation I adopt do so on the grounds that though Hume may have *intended* the Copy Principle as an empirical thesis, he offers no empirical evidence for it. Hume, of course, did not conduct the kind of empirical research now being conducted by contemporary philosophers working in moral psychology, but it is reasonable to think that Hume took himself to have done the requisite amount of research required to make the sorts of claims about human nature that

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁹ There is, of course, a hearty debate about the extent to which Hume was a naturalist versus the extent to which he was a skeptic. I will not say much about that debate here, as this topic is too large to undertake here. I prefer a more naturalistic reading of Hume. I think this reading is supported by the fact that Hume is engaged in the positive project of explaining from where our causal expectations ultimately derive.

²⁰ To take the Copy Principle as *a priori* and necessary, rather than as empirical, would amount to saddling Hume with the very brand of metaphysics he intends to reject.

he makes. Hume put forward a principle grounded in his own examination of human nature and invited challenges to it:

Those who would assert that this position is not universally true nor without exception, have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing that idea, which, in their opinion, is not derived this source. It will then be incumbent on us, if we would maintain our doctrine, to produce the impression or lively perception, which corresponds to it (EHU 98).

Hume not only invited challenges, but, as we are all now well aware, he even concedes a counter-example. This is not the behavior of a man who is not worried about the empirical adequacy of his Principle. As Garrett writes, “the publication of the *Treatise* and especially of the first *Enquiry*... itself constitutes a sort of ex post facto questionnaire: if counterexamples are at all common, then these discussions should help to elicit reports of them.”²¹ Hume’s Copy Principle should not be weakened on account of a lack of empirical evidence. Hume attempted to compile the most empirical evidence for his Principle he could using the best available means: careful observation of human nature.

Solution 1

Having argued for my preferred interpretive approach to the Copy Principle, I will now turn to Garrett’s first solution to the MSB Concession, which, as I previously mentioned, relies on said interpretive approach. Both of Garrett’s solutions depend on Hume’s doctrine of natural resemblances among simple perceptions. This relation of resemblance is somewhat obscure as compared to the relation between resembling complex perceptions. Resembling complex perceptions are, as Garrett observes, rather straightforward. They “resemble each other in virtue of one containing, as a part, some simpler perception that is qualitatively identical to a part of another.”²² When I think of my tool set, for example, my idea of my Phillips head screwdriver resembles my idea of my flat head screwdriver in virtue of having the same kind of handle. Resemblances between simple perceptions do not work this way. One may wonder how Hume can even maintain that there are resemblances between simple perceptions given his nominalism. However, as quoted before, Hume does think that simple perceptions resemble each other:

‘Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou’d be distinct and separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho’ their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. ‘Tis the same case with particular sounds, tastes and smells. These admit of infinite resemblances upon general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms *simple idea*. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other **in their simplicity**. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest. ‘Tis the same case with all the degrees in any quality. They are all resembling,

²¹ Garrett, Don, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*, p. 48.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

and yet the quality, in any individual, is not distinct from the degree (THN 637, my emphasis).

Simple impressions and ideas do not, by definition, have parts, so they do not resemble each other in this respect. However, they do resemble each other, at the very least, in their simplicity.

Garrett thinks this resemblance between simple perceptions provides the basis for one explanation as to how one might construct a simple idea of the missing shade of blue without an antecedent simple impression in experience. He writes:

The subject has instead [of an exactly corresponding simple impression] a very large number of simple impressions that naturally resemble the missing impression very closely and are even arranged in such an order as positively to *point*, given the nature of the resemblances, to the content of the missing impression. The operation of the mind using an array of resembling shades to fill in the blank within an ordering of simple ideas—especially when it is an ordering of elements whose principle the mind understands (through the relevant abstract ideas)—is arguably quite similar to the operation of the mind when it interpolates missing elements into other series that do not require the formation of a new simple idea.²³

Referring back to the sample card at the paint store, “Tea House Sage”, “Frosty Pine”, and the other two colors on the card naturally resemble “Misty Meadow” very closely and they are arranged such that the place where the “Misty Meadow” would appear is indicated by the arrangement of the other colors. The mind works in the same way for the person who has never seen “Misty Meadow” as for the person who has, and who, thus, has a preceding impression of “Misty Meadow”. An analogous process occurs in the MSB case. This solution is appealing because it grounds the construction of the missing shade in experience. The resembling shades used to construct the missing shade were caused by and resemble simple impressions as described by the Copy Principle.

An Objection

In *Learning from Six Philosophers*, Jonathan Bennett criticizes Garrett’s first solution. He writes:

Garrett holds that Hume could, relying on this passage [*Treatise* 637], weaken his theory of idea-origins so as to allow that a single idea might be ‘ultimately derived from a set of closely resembling impressions’ (1997: 50-5). This, Garrett says, would not open the door to supposed ideas that Hume wants to exclude—vacuum, eventless time, necessary causal connections, and so on. Perhaps some such line of thought was at the back of Hume’s mind in this performance of his, but it is far from satisfactory. As soon as he admits that the copy thesis is false, and that ideas can be formed in at least one other way, the game is up. The idea of eventless time (say) cannot be formed in either of the two ways so far described, but what now is the argument for holding that it cannot be formed in some third way?²⁴

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

²⁴ Bennett, Jonathan, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, pp. 218-219.

Bennett thinks that Garrett is too cavalier in conceding that the missing shade of blue is an exception to the Copy Principle. Garrett is confident that Hume can make the MSB Concession without putting any of his important arguments at risk. Ideas that are worrisome for Hume, such as eventless time, cannot be generated in the same way as the missing shade of blue, so Garrett concludes that there is no reason to fret about the seemingly isolated instance of an idea being formed in a way not described by the Copy Principle. Bennett challenges Garrett on the grounds that all he has shown is that the ideas Hume wants to exclude cannot be generated in the same way as the missing shade of blue. Garrett has not ruled out that such ideas might be formed in a third way.

Allow me to respond to this objection on Garrett's behalf. As I see it, there are two points on which Bennett fails to raise a truly worrisome objection to Garrett's proposed solution. The first alarming feature of this objection is that in it Bennett describes Garrett as "admitting that the Copy Principle is false". This characterization surely overlooks the pains Garrett has taken to explain that the Copy Principle is an empirical generalization. To admit that ideas can be formed in ways other than the way described by the Copy Principle is not to admit that the principle is false. If the Copy Principle is an empirical generalization, then it tells us that, for the most part, on balance, more often than not, ideas are copied from impressions they exactly resemble. Admitting that on rare occasions ideas are formed in some other way does not diminish the force of this generalization. If ideas were frequently formed in another way, then would we be forced to abandon the principle.

This leads me to the second alarming feature of Bennett's objection. Bennett seems to think that Hume and Garrett, writing on Hume's behalf, are not concerned about the empirical adequacy of the Copy Principle. On the contrary, as previously mentioned, Hume invites challenges to it:

Those who would assert that this position is not universally true nor without exception, have only one, and that an easy method of refuting it; by producing that idea, which, in their opinion, is not derived this source. It will then be incumbent on us, if we would maintain our doctrine, to produce the impression or lively perception, which corresponds to it (EHU 98).

To answer Bennett's query, the argument for holding that the idea of eventless time cannot be formed in some third way is that no third way has been proposed as of yet. Hume is fully aware that he must abandon the Copy Principle if he is ever met with a sufficient number of ideas, especially ideas of a peculiar metaphysical character, that are formed in a way other than the way described by the Copy Principle. The burden is on Bennett to produce such an idea. Hume can retain his principle as an empirical generalization until that time.

Solution 2

I will now discuss the second solution offered in *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*.²⁵ Garrett's second solution is grounded in the following passage from the *Treatise*:

Ideas may be compared to the extension and solidity of matter and impressions, especially reflective ones, to colours, tastes, smells, and other sensible qualities.

²⁵ Garrett attributes this solution to William Edward Morris and this view is sketched in Morris's Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on David Hume.

Ideas never admit of total union, but are endowed with a kind of impenetrability by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture. On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union, and, like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression which arises from the whole. Some of the most curious phenomena of the human mind are derived from this property of the passions (THN 366).

In the case of the passions, two emotions can be “blended” to make a third that is similar to the two that were blended to create it. The “new” emotion does not contain the original two as parts. Garrett thinks a similar phenomenon could occur with simple ideas of shades of colors. He writes:

Let us now imagine a similar process by which ideas of a lighter and darker shade could be imaginatively “blended” so as to produce a simple *idea* intermediate between them. This would differ from the blending of *impressions* only in the lesser force and vivacity of the perceptions on which it operated. And although Hume describes the blending process as one that applies to impressions rather than ideas, he also characterizes it as one that applies specifically to colors. Hence, one might not be surprised to find the imagination having at least a limited capacity to “blend” ideas of closely resembling colors.²⁶

In short, just as Hume claimed that two emotions can blend to create a third that resembles, but does not contain as parts, the two emotions that blended to create it, he might also claim that two simple ideas of shades of blue might blend to create a third that resembles, but does not contain as parts, the two simple ideas that blended to create it. This solution is attractive for the same reason Solution 1 is attractive: it maintains a strong connection to experience. If either Solution 1 or Solution 2 is correct, then the missing shade of blue counter-example “constitutes a very near miss for the Copy Principle.”²⁷

A Fly in the Ointment

Garrett’s second solution is very appealing. It seems to explain how Hume is able to make the MSB Concession without doing violence to the Copy Principle. However, Garrett’s choice of textual reference is unfortunate. Upon closer examination, it appears to prohibit the solution for which it was invoked. Let us take another look at the passage Garrett cites from Book III of the *Treatise*:

Ideas may be compared to the extension and solidity of matter and impressions, especially reflective ones, to colours, tastes, smells, and other sensible qualities. **Ideas never admit of total union, but are endowed with a kind of impenetrability by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture.** On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union, and, like colours, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression which arises from the whole.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁷ Ibid.

Some of the most curious phenomena of the human mind are derived from this property of the passions (THN 366, my emphasis).

Let us dissect this quotation. Hume seems to be saying that ideas cannot be totally united with each other; that they, in fact, exclude each other; and that we can compound them, but we cannot fully integrate them into a mixture. Impressions, however, *can* be totally united and blended so thoroughly that a person could not pick out one or the other impression. One might think of ideas like hybrid animals. My neighbor owns a retriever-doodle named Berkeley. When I look at Berkeley I can see that his coat is like that of a standard poodle and his body is like that of a golden retriever. It is possible to determine on sight which elements of Berkeley derive from his poodle parent and which derive from his golden retriever parent. One might think of impressions like dollops of paint on an artist's palette. Vermilion is the color that is created when certain amounts of red pigment are mixed with certain amounts of orange pigment. Once the component colors comprising vermilion are fully integrated in a mixture, I can no longer pick out bits that are red and bits that are orange.

The missing shade of blue is an *idea*. Ideas, as the boldfaced portion of the quotation above states, cannot be “blended” to create a new simple idea. At best, ideas can be combined to create complex ideas, but the missing shade of blue is not a complex idea. It is decidedly simple. Thus, it appears that Solution 2 causes a lot of trouble for itself.

IV. Conclusion

I am optimistic that Garrett's first solution can be made to fit the bill of a truly satisfactory solution to the problem raised by the missing shade of blue. Perhaps a step toward an even better solution would be to claim that the idea of the missing shade is actually copied from one of the experienced shades. It would be interesting to investigate whether two ideas could derive from one impression. Suppose that in addition to my idea of “Tea House Sage”, my idea of “Misty Meadow” also derives from my impression of “Tea House Sage”. My idea of “Tea House Sage” is a perfect copy of my impression of “Tea House Sage”, whereas my idea of “Misty Meadow” is an imperfect copy. Imperfect copies are, of course, a deviation from the Copy Principle, but this should not worry us too much. If the Copy Principle continues to hold generally, who cares if an imperfect copy of an impression is occasionally made?

Another step in the right direction might be to focus on defending exceptions to the Copy Principle against the floodgates worry. Jonathan Bennett describes the worry nicely:

A refutation needs a recipe for creating endless counter-examples. But Hume has provided just such a recipe. His account of the missing shade is offered as a confident prediction that could have millions of instances. Not merely with blue and other hues, but also with sounds, tastes, smells, temperatures, and degrees of hardness as measured by felt resistance. These are Hume's standard examples of ‘simple ideas’, and perhaps his only ones, so that the ‘particular and singular’ phenomenon really sprawls across his entire domain.²⁸

²⁸ Bennett, [Learning from Six Philosophers](#), p. 218.

Given what Hume has said about the empirical nature of the Copy Principle and given the pains he has taken to treat it as such, the appropriate response from Hume seems to be “put up or shut up.” If there are a million such exceptions to the Copy Principle, name 50. The lack of counter-example sufficient to refute the Copy Principle once and for all leads me to believe that there are few such examples. If there were as many exceptions to the Copy Principle as Bennett would have us believe, Hume would surely not be held in such high esteem as he currently is within the philosophical community.

If the task of finding a truly satisfactory solution to the problem posed by the missing shade of blue proves to be too difficult, perhaps it is time to question whether the theory of ideas is a good theory. Perhaps Hume just doesn't have the machinery he needs to account for everything we want to say about the inventory of our thought. It is possible that the missing shade of blue has more to teach us about the limits of empiricism than about the quality of Hume's philosophy.

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