

# Hume, Representation, Realism & Cognition

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## *Abstract*

*This paper takes on one aspect of the skeptical realist interpretation of Hume's philosophy. According to this interpretation Hume is both a skeptic and a realist. Setting aside claims regarding Hume's skepticism, I take up the main textual support offered for the claim that Hume was a realist. I argue that the few passages pointed out by proponents of the view in fact do not support their claims once they are understood in light of Hume's broader project.*

# Hume, Representation, Realism & Linguistic Cognition

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*It will be easy to conceive of what vast consequence these principles [of Association] must be in the science of human nature, if we consider that, so far as regards the mind, these are the only links that bind the parts of the universe together, or connect us with any person or object exterior to ourselves. For as it is by means of thought only that anything operates upon our passions, and as these are the only ties of our thoughts, they are really to us the cement of the universe, and all the operations of the mind must, in a great measure, depend on them—Hume, Abstract.*

## I. Introduction

According to one school of thought Hume is committed to (1) a metaphysical thesis affirming the existence of a distinct, shall we say “mind-independent”, Reality. More substantively, on this view, Hume’s considered position is that impressions afford us at best indirect access to the objects and properties they represent. Many students of this school attribute to Hume the additional skeptical thesis that (2) with regard to this independent Reality, “we can know nothing for sure about its nature...<sup>1</sup>” Thus, students of this school of thought maintain a view of Hume according to which he is deeply metaphysically committed; according to which, “The formal distinction between ‘perceptions’ and objects is fundamental;” according to which we interact with a world of machines the “true” nature of which we can never appreciate; a view according to which words, ideas, and impressions “represent bodies” by “producing effects in the mind that are identical or similar to some of the of the effects that are or would be produced by the bodies themselves;<sup>3</sup>” according to which, “the natural belief in the reality of the external world is, *ipso facto*, the most probable opinion;” and, finally, a view according to which “[Hume’s] belief in the external world established by the operations of instinctive probabilistic mechanisms shows him to be a skeptical realist.<sup>4</sup>”

For the purposes of this paper I don’t wish to maintain that students of this school share any interpretive ground beyond their common contention that Hume was consciously committed to a world of objects and properties distinct from our perceptions. I wish to avoid, for example, claims concerning what common ground they may share concerning the object(s) or nature of Hume’s skepticism. While it is certainly true that attributing the metaphysical stance to Hume generally, and perhaps naturally, shapes one’s exegetical view of his remarks on skepticism, it is by no means obvious that anyone who adopts the former, metaphysical stance, need be consciously committed to any particular view concerning the latter; skepticism. It is, in any case, tangential to my main

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<sup>1</sup> Strawson (1989), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Wright (1983), p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Garrett (2006), pp. 311-312.

<sup>4</sup> Buckle (2001), p. 112.

worry. The main worry here is whether Hume, consciously or otherwise, adopted the metaphysical stance attributed to him. The answer I am going to give is negative in two directions. It is negative in the one direction as I will argue that Hume rejected the proposed stance toward objects and properties laid out above. It is negative in the other direction, I shall argue, as Hume, at the same time, did not, in his considered view, maintain that such a metaphysical stance was false. My position may appear to be, at first glance, paradoxical, and thus part of my aim is to show this appearance to be merely superficial. Specifically, what I will contend is that Hume's pronounced attitude was to reject the *language* in which metaphysical questions (and typically their answers) were couched, as well as the language intended to capture the intuitions under-girding these questions. And he rejected this metaphysically loaded language, not because he saw it as false, incoherent or even absurd, but on the grounds that such language was from his point of view, unintelligible.

Given this, it is worth noting at the outset that I am not interested here in arguing the verisimilitude of Hume's view. I don't in fact care, at present, whether Hume is right to maintain this pronounced attitude toward metaphysical theses. Rather, I am interested in arguing that he did maintain such an attitude and that consequently those would-be expositors of Hume that attribute the metaphysical stance to him have seriously and systematically misunderstood the tenor and novelty of Hume's approach to the questions.

The central exegetical thesis that I am disputing here is certainly not limited to those philosophers I have already mentioned. It is in fact widely shared.<sup>5</sup> Nor is it a novel thought in the history of Hume scholarship. Still, in order to express the disagreement clearly it is worth our time to elaborate a bit the specific attribution I am at odds with. To that end I want to say a little, both about what it is, as well as, about what it is not.

To begin, first, with what it is not, it is not a claim about the possibility of conducting scientific inquiries or, for that matter, naturalized inquiries of any sort. It is not, in the first order, a question about whether the items that give rise to inquiry, or the theories that arise from such inquiries, are laden with mistaken metaphysical commitments—certainly some of them are. It is not a question about knowledge, knowability, justification or even truth. Along these lines, I am contending that Hume is nowhere interested in, to take just a few examples, “causation”, “substance” (corporeal or otherwise), “power”, “moral rightness”, “virtue”, “free-will”, “nativism”, “laws according to which nature is governed”, “matter”, “naturalistic theories of perception”, “dualism”, “monism”, “natural kinds”, “non-natural kinds”, or “kinds” of any sort! He is not interested in these things as the object of natural philosophy for the simple reason that he is engaged in something sharply distinct from the project of natural philosophy. He is,

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance; Fogelin, (1985), (1993), especially his (1985) remarks concerning the connection or similarity between Hume's views and those of the Logical Positivists; Stroud, (1977), “the belief in the unobserved arises completely naturally...”, p. 76; etc. Both of these authors among others construe Hume's remarks to concern the epistemic grounds for our “natural” belief in a world of external objects. Contrary to the interpretation I am proposing these folks suppose that Hume's remarks commit him both to the “naturalness” of the belief, as well as, simultaneously, to the project of explaining the falsity of these beliefs. Hume's skeptical reasoning is consequently constituted by both an endorsement of his putative realism, and a simultaneous mitigation of it through these same skeptical remarks. To put the point more bluntly both of these authors situate Hume's remarks within the context of a discussion regarding the epistemic properties of our assertions, rather than within the actual context in which they are made: a context in which the central question is not their truth or falsity but their intelligibility.

however, I hasten to say, not at odds with the global project of natural philosophy (i.e. science). Natural philosophy, whence it is freed from its metaphysical bonds is just fine on its own. It is, from Hume's point of view, not simply fortuitous that the metaphysics that occasionally goes hand and foot (or head and tail) along with the microbiologist's explanation of a bacteria's toxicity is eliminable without loss of explanation. Such metaphysical parasites add nothing to the explanation. Natural philosophy will be just fine once purged of such neglect-able amendments.

But, what are we to say of "moral philosophy"? What are we to say of Hume's "capital or center" of philosophical inquiry generally, Hume's "science of Man"; "human nature itself"? If metaphysical inquiries can find a substantive purchase anywhere, they'll find it here. If there is a place suited to questions of the form "What is x" (i.e. & e.g. 'what is virtue,' 'what is causation,' 'what is a kind or category,' and so on), then it would seem to be here. "Here," after all, is where all "true" judgment occurs.<sup>7</sup> It is here, that we attempt to comprehend the "cognizance of men," and the "powers and faculties" of their understanding. And when we run up against difficulties "here" we are given free commerce with metaphysics. We are entitled to borrow freely and, dare I say, quite liberally, from whatever point of view we choose.

But, why? Why should "moral philosophy" differ significantly, in this regard, from "natural philosophy". In other words, if metaphysical assumptions are, eliminable from natural philosophy without loss of explanatory value then why should they be ineliminable from the point of view of developing a "naturalistic science of man"? In fact, Hume never takes up this inquiry and instead assumes the obvious implication of the question. The obvious implication of the question is that metaphysical presumptions hold no more real ground here than they do within the context of moral philosophy's "natural" cousin. There is, in Hume's view, no more reason to suppose that the philosophically problematic theses, of the metaphysically minded academics, shine any brighter a light on questions within the domain of "moral philosophy" than the vacant darkness they cast over questions in "natural philosophy."

Before getting on to *what I am saying*, it might be worth stepping back a pace or two toward what I am not saying. This, because, I worry that what I am saying has bled into my discussion of what I am not saying. I am not saying that one cannot foray, philosophically, into a discussion of 'virtue,' 'substance,' 'causality,' or what have you, on Hume's considered view. Such questions are no more "off limits" than discussions of "forces," "textures," and "affinities," were in the natural philosophy of Hume's day.

In point of fact, I think (and I shall endeavor to convince you), that what Hume is interested in are the cognitive conditions under which inquiries concerning these topics and the variety of answers that follow trail make sense, or become intelligible for creatures like us (being, as we are, so cognitively constructed). What I am saying is that Hume's considered response to the bothersome metaphysical theses of his day was not principally to maintain that they were true, false, or incoherent (if we mean by this "contradictory"). Rather, his principal aim was to show the assertions in question to be lacking in content sufficient to make them comprehensible by the mind of man let alone susceptible of any genuine epistemic judgment.

## II. The Arguments

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<sup>6</sup> See Hume's "Introduction" in, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby Bigge, p. xiv.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*, p. xv.

In attributing the metaphysical stance to Hume, advocates of the view employ a range of tactics. One broad strategy is to appeal to what they take to be the metaphysically invested language employed by Hume throughout his writing. Thus Strawson writes, “[Hume] *standardly* accepts that there is some unknown ‘ultimate cause’ of our perceptions (T84), which has some unknown or unknowable essence.<sup>8</sup>” Wright maintains, “a *central aim* of Hume’s philosophy of the understanding is to show that we retain commerce with a world of independent objects through a species of natural judgments....<sup>9</sup>” The view that emerges out of Hume’s language is one according to which bodies external to and independent of the mind cause perceptions therein. We can of course never gain certain insight into the true nature of these bodies or, for that matter, even be certain of the correctness of our hypothesis. Nonetheless, according to Garrett Hume’s acceptance of the hypothesis, “is *implied in dozens if not hundreds of remarks* throughout his philosophical writings.<sup>10</sup>”

One of the main tactics employed by these authors is consequently to recite the passages where Hume “mentions” items like the “ultimate causes” of our impressions or the “objects” of perception<sup>11</sup> and then proceed to argue that he “uses” these notions to lay out a distinctively metaphysical picture. Frequently, moreover, the existence of such passages is taken to entail or imply that laying out this view is one of Hume’s “central” aims. In its most general form it commits Hume to the belief in a “external reality” distinct from, and, strictly speaking, inaccessible through, our perceptions. Coupled with its often attendant skepticism it commits Hume to a position according to which he, does not claim to know the correctness of any Basic Realist position about the nature of objects...he takes for granted that there does exist an external reality, i.e. something other than our perceptions, something which affects us and gives rise to our perceptions; and in this sense he does positively, and crucially, adopt a Basic Realist position of some sort with regard to ‘the objects’.<sup>12</sup>

In a similar vein, proponents of this view cast Hume as an exponent of the mechanical philosophy who is bringing to bare his mechanistic teeth in the domain of moral philosophy; mechanizing, that is, the “Science of Man”. This theme is most pronounced in Wright (1983) and Buckle (2001).<sup>13</sup> Though it takes its cue from Hume’s dispersed mentions of “objects” and causes” it goes well beyond merely attributing to Hume an adherence to the belief in an external reality. According to this mechanistic interpretation we must recast the whole import of Hume’s theory of ideas in mechanistic terms. In order to fully appreciate this mechanistic transcription of Hume’s account of

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<sup>8</sup> Strawson (1989), p. 65 (italics added). The passage that Strawson has in mind which presumably demonstrates Hume’s “standard” acceptance of the metaphysical thesis Strawson attributes to him occurs at T. 1.3.5, “As to those impressions which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and ‘twill always be impossible to decide with certainty,...”. While it is beyond my present aim, it is worth noting that there is nothing obvious about Strawson’s reading of the passage. Along these lines it is worth considering the relation of this remark to what Hume says elsewhere. In particular it is instructive to consider his remarks at T. 1.4.2. concerning “reasons” capacity to provide us with “the opinion of a continu’d and distinct existence.”

<sup>9</sup> Wright (1983), p. 5 (italics added).

<sup>10</sup> Garrett (2006), 306 (italics added).

<sup>11</sup> On Hume’s talk of ‘objects’ see Greene (1994).

<sup>12</sup> Strawson (1989), pp. 67-68.

<sup>13</sup> See Buckle (2001), throughout; and Wright (1983), esp. pp. 213-221.

human understanding, and equally the problems it faces, it may well be worth our time to briefly rehearse the familiar (standard) foundational apparatus of Hume's theory of the understanding.

It is well widely appreciated that Hume divides perceptions, the basic units of cognition, into impressions and ideas. Both ideas and impressions may be either simple (i.e. indivisible wholes) or complex (i.e. divisible into parts.) Both lie on a continuum of degree of force and vivacity. Yet, with respect to the distinction between impressions and ideas this continuum is not well ordered as both are potentially intermingled, at least, near the midpoint of the spectrum. Thus, Hume tells us, "in any violent emotions of the soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Hume adopts what some expositors have termed the *copy principle*. According to this principle "*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*"<sup>15</sup>

According to Hume, the only objects on which the understanding may operate are those perceptions which are suitably connected to impressions, or experience. Impressions or observations are *given* in our experience and ideas are copied from them. Of course to say that ideas are "copied" may be misleading. The vast arrangement of our ideas is complex in nature, and it consequently involves a variety of simple ideas. Hume's contention is that the simple ideas, of which complex ideas are composed, represent or correspond to simple impressions or basic observations. For Hume it is the function of the understanding to permute and combine our simple ideas thus deriving compound or complex ideas which may or may not (in the case of fictions) track (or correspond with) impressions. As he says,

Nothing is more free than the imagination of man: and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all of the varieties of fiction and vision.<sup>16</sup>

How exactly we are to understand Hume's talk of 'impressions' is precisely what is at issue with the mechanistic interpretation of Hume. Proponents of this view generally locate Hume squarely within the mechanical tradition and treat his talk of impressions as part of a mechanical theory of perceptions according to which objects (individuals and properties in the "world") literally leave their "impressions" on us. Fading over time these impressions devolve into less faithful representations or ideas. Hume on this view is

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<sup>14</sup> For the references throughout this section I adopt the following conventions: The present reference is to *A Treatise on Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), and occurs in Book 1, Part 1, Section 1, on page 2: for brevity, T 1.1.1, p. 2 hereafter. Other references to Hume are from either David Hume. *An Abstract of a Book lately Published*, in: *A Treatise on Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978) and abbreviated as A, p. xx or to; David Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition revised by P. H. Nidditch. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), abbreviated as EHU, p. xx.

<sup>15</sup> T 1.1.1, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> EHU. 47.

“centrally” interested in explaining “psychological processes in physical terms,” in terms of the “forceful motions of animal spirits.<sup>17</sup>” On this mechanistic reading the world is composed of the natural analogues of machines; analogues which function according to the same principles and laws governing the artifacts of human design.<sup>18</sup> According to this view the world is composed of objects pushing against, and pulling upon, one another and the mind for Hume is a consequence of these actions. As Buckle articulates it,

The sense organs can be understood as structures that have the internal constitution necessary to respond to pressing... Sensations can be understood as impressed forces. A perception lasts as long as the relevant force (the perceptual stimulus) is applied, and is replaced by a new perception once a new force is applied... Hume’s adoption of the term ‘impression’ is thus strong if circumstantial support for his accepting a background picture that is not only realist, but mechanical.<sup>19</sup>

Now the thought that Hume *might* have endorsed some such mechanistic theory of perception is not, on its face, particularly troubling to me. There are, however, a few riders that typically come along with it that I do find troubling. The first, and principle concern, is the idea that such a commitment thoroughly informed Hume’s philosophical views. Secondly, it is typically asserted that we are, of a sort of constitutional necessity, epistemically detached from these natural machines which, nonetheless, make their impressions on us and thereby produce the contents of the understanding. Finally, though not lastly, proponents of the mechanistic alteration typically trade in a seriously mistaken understanding of mechanistic accounts of explanation and equally of a mistaken account of the reshaping of explanations in the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in light of the controversy over Newton’s attempt to account for gravitational phenomena. They, thus, in a systematic fashion misconstrue Hume’s remarks concerning Newton. However, I’ll leave this last issue for another moment. Respecting the first two riders then, Buckle maintains Hume’s philosophy,

...is realist in that it affirms that we live in a world that exists independently of us, and that has real powers that *reflect* its specific constitution. It is skeptical because of its skeptical interpretation of experience: it implies that we are not able to penetrate beyond appearances—the mechanical effects of that world on us—to discover the *essential nature* of the world.<sup>20</sup>

Hume’s skepticism surfaces, according to Buckle, with the “copy principle”. As Buckle sees it the mind in Hume’s portrait is largely the passive receptacle of ideas which are little more than degraded impressions since “for an idea to arise through a copying process is for it to arise through a mechanical process in which the mind plays no active role.<sup>21</sup> For Buckle then, Hume’s ‘copy principle’ encapsulates his realist commitments through it’s “obvious” realist overtures, as well as his skeptical attitude.

### III. What I’m Saying

There is no doubt that those who would choose to attribute the metaphysical stance to Hume will not be at a loss to discover, in his writings, passages that lend credence to their

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<sup>17</sup> Wright (1983), pp. 211, 213 respectively.

<sup>18</sup> In the face of this view it’s tempting to plea for Philo to rise up from his literary tomb in Hume’s defense but I will avoid making such a plea at present.

<sup>19</sup> Buckle (2001), pp. 133-134.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 194.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 135.

interpretation, provided we carry with us, as we proceed into this exegetical foray, the common philosophical intuitions we were reared on. Those intuitions tell us, after all, how we are supposed to read philosophical nomenclature. Consider the following passage from “The Sceptic”:

[1] If I examine the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems, I endeavor only, by my enquiries, to know the real situation of the planets, that is in other words, I endeavour to give them, in my conception, the same relations, that they bear towards each other in the heavens. To this operation of the mind there seems to be always, though often an unknown standard, in the nature of things; nor is truth or falsehood variable by the various apprehensions of mankind<sup>22</sup>.

But if this passage doesn't provoke our learned proclivities, there are others which speak specifically to Hume's supposedly “obvious” mechanistic sentiments. At T. 1.2.5, for example, Hume writes,

[2] '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.

Now what could be more obvious, in light of these manifestations, than the fact that Hume's views were under-written by a peculiar theory of perception. There is no need to revisit the details of the theory. Our aim here is, instead, to observe its obvious instantiation in [1] & [2] above. I will grant my opposition this much: Hume felt himself freely entitled to discuss, and I imagine meaningfully, “planets,” “their relations,” “nature,” “neural fluids (animal spirits),” “the topography of the brain,” and so on. But what exactly are the passages supposed to evince? Our philosophical upbringing perhaps suggests to us that if one speaks of ‘planets,’ ‘animal spirits,’ ‘objects,’ and ‘causes’ then one must believe in planets, animal spirits, objects, and causes no matter how skeptical they may be of our capacity to comprehend these distal natures. But here I object!

I believe my opponents have gotten off track with their reading of Hume. But this is not so much because I believe they have incorrectly assigned to Hume a view of perception he fails to endorse. His main project is not to say what an adequate theory of perception would look like. Nor do I believe that a commitment to any such view is necessary to his science of human understanding. Hence I don't believe such an account (of perception) “grounds” the remarks he makes respecting the science is trying to develop. Hume is instead interested in developing an account of cognition and what characteristically underwrites his account is a criterion of intelligibility that he employs to eliminate any tendentious metaphysical baggage from the theory.

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<sup>22</sup> Hume (1875), pp. 217-218.

Like Locke, Hume thought that terms *signify* ideas, and he maintained that a term is intelligible or meaningful only insofar as it signifies some idea. But Hume's account goes beyond this. Whether or not some idea is signified by a term is a function of the impression(s) to which the idea corresponds or from which it is copied. While meaningful terms signify *genuine* ideas, unintelligible terms or expressions signify, at best, a "feigning" of the imagination."<sup>23</sup> Such feigned ideas are not genuine because there are no corresponding impressions from which the feigned thought is derived. As Hume saw it these later terms were unintelligible. This framework, then, grounds Hume's intelligibility criterion and in turn, his criticisms of the school metaphysics of his day. Characterizing it in the *Abstract*, he tells us that he practices a method according to which,

wherever any idea is ambiguous, he has always recourse to the impression... when he suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks from what impression that pretended idea is derived? And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant and it were to be wished, that this method were more practised in all philosophical debates.<sup>24</sup>

In short, impressions produce the content on which the understanding operates. Accordingly, when Hume claims a term is unintelligible he is saying that no genuine idea is being signified by its use. That is, no idea whose simple parts can be traced to their corresponding impressions is signified by the expression. It is within this context that Hume claims at T. 1.4.3 that "substance" is an "unintelligible chimera" and that at T. 1.3.14 he says of 'power', "We never have any impression, that contains any power or efficacy. We never therefore have any idea of power." And it is in this context that Hume maintains at T. 1.4.2 that "the only questions, that are intelligible," concerning our idea of a continued and distinct existence concern whether the idea arises from the "*senses, reason, or the imagination.*"<sup>25</sup>

If we were to confine ourselves to just those ideas that are simple we can think of them as intentional representations. Of course, on Hume's account, the only things that these intentional representations might be "of or about" are the observations (impressions) which gave rise to them. Moreover, "original" impressions are not themselves intentional since there is nothing of which we can have any idea that they might be of or about, that is to say they don't represent. Talk about 'the thing(s) that give rise to our impression(s),' when it is taken in a specifically metaphysical sense, is itself a bit of nonsense in Hume's view. Consequently, if simple ideas were all there were Hume's criterion of intelligibility would be reducible to the view that *a term is intelligible if and only if it is associated with a representation (Idea) which corresponds*

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<sup>23</sup> Hume variously speaks of the Imagination feigning ideas as he does when accounting for how his opponents attempt to resolve the contradiction in attributing both "simplicity" and "diversity" to a series of impressions: "In order to reconcile which contradictions the imagination is apt to feign something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls a *substance, or original and first matter* (T 1.4.3, p. 220)." See also: EHU, pp. 21-22...

<sup>24</sup> A, pp. 648-649.

<sup>25</sup> T 1.3.14, p. 161.

with some feature of our experience (i.e. impression or set of impressions). Fortunately, things are not so simple.

Obviously, those of our ideas which constitute fictions do not themselves correspond to any impression or observation. Consequently, they are not intentional objects in the same sense that simple ideas can be said to be. On the other hand complex ideas clearly will have some intentional content insofar as they derive this content from the simple ideas of which they are comprised. On this reconstruction we can think of Hume's criterion of intelligibility as coming to the claim that *a term is intelligible if and only if it is associated with a representation (Idea) all of whose simple constituents correspond with some feature of our experience (i.e. impression or set of impressions)*.

In holding that Hume was interested in providing an account of cognition I am maintaining that Hume is interested in the cognitive processes that underlie our various beliefs and ideas and that he is decidedly not interested in the physical interactions constituting our impressions. With respect to which theory of perception it is rationally advisable to adopt Hume remains non-committal. Hume makes this explicit in opening Book II.<sup>26</sup> An example may help illustrate the difference between the two interpretations a hand.

Consider the case of causation. According to the skeptical realist Hume believes that causal powers exist in the world independent of our ability to have an accurate grasp of the objects in which these powers reside. Hume, on this view, is thus advocating a metaphysical theory of causation. The interpretation of Hume as agnostic cognitivist on the other hand understands him to be offering an account of the cognitive content of our causal beliefs. And since, as was illustrated earlier, that cognitive content must terminate in impressions of one sort or another any talk of the antecedent powers which give rise to the impressions will be unintelligible insofar as it aims at signifying anything that outstrips our impressions. 'Causal powers', in the realist manner of speaking lacks cognitive content.

To return then to the foregoing passage from "The Sceptic" it should be clear that if we are to be the least bit charitable to Hume and treat him as being consistent with a standard of intelligibility that he placed center stage in both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, then the entirety of that passage ought to be read as having the only sort of significance that Hume could have taken to have. Thus, when Hume says, "I endeavour to give them, in my conception, the same relations, that they bear towards each other in the heavens," we should take him to be asserting that a celestial mechanics of any sort is simply attempting to discern the coherence among our impressions. Not surprisingly he immediately characterizes this activity as "an operation of the mind". And if we continue on through the passage carefully he speaks only to the natural tendency to refer our conceptions of how the world is to some external existence.

I am not suggesting that Hume avoided the charge of realism by staking out a sceptical position with respect to whether we have epistemic access to the proposed

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<sup>26</sup> T 2.1.1: "there must be some impressions, which without any introduction make their appearance in the soul. As these depend upon natural and physical causes, the examination of them wou'd lead me too far from my present subject, into the sciences of anatomy and natural philosophy. For this reason I shall here confine myself to those other impressions, which I have call'd secondary and reflective, as arising either from the original impressions, or from their ideas. Bodily pains and pleasures are the source of many passions, both when felt and consider'd by the mind; but arise originally in the soul, or in the body, whichever you please to call it, without any preceding thought or perception."

causal antecedents of our impressions. Neither claim would be consistent with the cognitivist project, the pursuit of which, I believe, constitutes Hume's chief end. His commitment to this project imposes a rational obligation on him to do what he can, in light of his account of the content and operations of the understanding, to explain our most ordinary and natural beliefs. To fail to do so would in fact constitute a serious flaw in the project. On this view of Hume's project, then, it should come as no surprise that we find him attempting to account for the natural tendency toward realist beliefs. But to develop an accurate understanding of these passages we must first appreciate that this is conducted under the light of a theory of the understanding and the accompanying account of intelligibility. In that light our beliefs, realist or other wise, derive their content exclusively from the impressions that give rise to them. This does not mean that we cannot rationally speculate about the causal antecedents of our impressions but only that in doing so the cognitive content of our theories will be limited by the sequence of our impressions.

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