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Hume and Human Error

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Abstract

This work is entitled *Hume and Human Error*. My hope is that it may be of interest to at least two groups of readers: first, to those who are interested in understanding the philosophy of David Hume himself, and second, to those who are interested in explaining the human mind and our propensity to go wrong. My primary objective is to explain how Hume can account, or does account, for human error. In this sense, I am concerned with exposition, and exposition of a rather neglected section of an otherwise comprehensive body of Hume scholarship.

There is a rich philosophical history of attempts to understand and provide solutions to the problems of error. Within this tradition, Hume's account of error is particularly interesting because it should be understood in the context of his general strategy to completely redraft traditional concepts (e.g. substance, causation, self, power) in a way that does not rely on any metaphysical assumptions that cannot be justified by experience. Hume's method, I argue, leads him to reject what I call the "common sense" or "correspondence" theory of error, according to which what it means to have a false belief (for example) is to have a belief that does not properly represent mind-independent facts about an external world. Exactly how, and in what sense, Hume rejects the correspondence theory is quite complicated, and touches on many of the issues at the heart of the New Hume Debate. With this debate in mind, I argue that Hume has a general strategy of redrafting traditional concepts in a way that does not *rely* on the existence of external objects, and that Hume's Theory of Error should be understood in accordance with this general strategy. This is not to say that Hume denies that we can speak meaningfully about external objects, nor that he denies the existence of external objects. Rather, I argue that Hume's Theory of Error should be understood along the same lines as his rejection of the traditional account of substance as substrata. I note, for example, that when Hume rejects the traditional conception of substance it is not because he flat-out denies the possibility that a substratum may exist. In fact, he thinks that we cannot help but believe that external objects exist. Rather, Hume denies the traditional account of substance on the grounds that we never perceive any such thing as a substratum[1], and he infers from this conclusion that we must not ordinarily mean by "substance" what the metaphysicians had thought we mean[2]. But Hume does not stop there. He then goes on to provide an *alternative* theory of substance[3] – one that is explained in terms of perceptions and the relations between them, and one that does not rely on the existence of a substratum. Hume's theory of error should be understood with this same methodology in mind. First, he rejects the traditional correspondence theory of error on the grounds that we cannot perceive any relationship between perceptions and external objects. This does not mean that he must also deny the existence of external objects, or

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[1] "We have no idea of substance distinct from a collection of particular qualities…" (T, 16)
[2] "…nor have we any other meaning when we talk or reasoning concerning it." (T, 16)
[3] "The idea of substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them, but which we are able to recall, either to ourselves of others, that collection." (T, 16)

the possibility of a relationship between perceptions and external objects. It is only the sceptical conclusion that since we do not perceive any such thing, there is no rational argument to make a case either way. But this sceptical conclusion is by no means the end of Hume's story about error. Hume also proposes a positive theory about error – one that he explains in terms of his naturalistic science of man, and one that he intends to replace the traditional conception that he rejects.

With this framework established, the remainder of the thesis then goes on to explore the interesting and difficult issues that arise in the attempt to put forward such a theory. This leads us to consider a series of related and under-explored issues in Hume scholarship, including Hume's treatment of physiology, his account of normativity in natural belief, his idea of the self as created by the passions, and his conception of certainty. Exploring Hume's conception of human error allows us to see all of these separate accounts as unified in a different way that has seldom been explored.

As a result of Hume's novel methodology, many difficult questions arise with regard to providing an account of error. Here are just a few:

- If Hume's theory of error does not rely on the existence of external objects, how can he explain what it means to be fooled by an optical illusion? Surely when we call something an "illusion" what we mean is that the way things *seem* is different from the way things *are*. How can Hume help himself to this sort of distinction?
- Why, if Hume thinks that perceptions are all we can know, does he appeal to physiology as a means to explain how errors of association arise?
- Given that Hume rejects the traditional conception of the self, how can he possibly explain the activity and agency involved in error? Errors don't simply occur; errors are made by agents who could and should have done otherwise. In other words, we think of error as a normative notion. If Hume rejects the idea of the self as an active and unified substance, how can he account for the agency without which an explanation of error would appear impossible?
- Does Hume think that any if our beliefs are immune to error? Are we certain of anything? At some points he suggests that relations of ideas (for example simple mathematical truths) are absolutely certain, but at other times he says that all knowledge resolves into mere probability.

By examining Hume's own body of work, and by discussing this work in the context of the tradition to which Hume responds, I attempt to resolve all of these questions, and others.
Of course, there are many different kinds of errors, and I do not attempt to provide an account of all of them. I do, however, strive to provide a sort of general framework by which all errors, on Hume's view, might be explained.

Ultimately, for all its difficulties, I argue that Hume can indeed provide a very rich and fruitful account of error in his own naturalistic terms. According to this account, error must always be explained in terms of the features of perceptions themselves and the relations between them. If we want to know what any particular error involves, we must ask about the observable conditions that tend to accompany those errors, or how those errors "strike the mind". Hume's is a naturalistic theory of error which, like that of the Epicureans, locates error at the level of judgement rather than immediate sensation. But unlike the Epicurean tradition, Hume's conception of judgment is not explained as the function of a free will or even as the product of an independent mental faculty, but rather as the outcome of the naturally occurring laws that govern perceptions. The pressure to avoid error is also naturalised – it comes from the tendency of creatures like us to avoid the cognitive dissonance that arises from incoherence or contradiction.

For those who want a more robust or absolute sense of error, Hume's account may well prove unsatisfying, but Hume's is one of the earliest attempts to demystify error – to rid it of metaphysical assumptions – and so it is interesting and important for that reason, if for no other.

Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my research higher degree candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

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Publications during candidature

No publications.

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No contributions by others.

Statement of parts of the thesis submitted to qualify for the award of another degree

None.

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I thank also my sisters, Clare and Joy, for their love, encouragement, and support. I hope they will forgive me for using them as an example of error in Chapter Four.

Finally, I thank my brilliant and beautiful wife, Briohny. I don't know what madness inspired her to marry a penniless graduate student in the final stages of his dissertation, but it is the best thing that ever happened to him.

For my parents

Contents

ABBREVIATIONS

T: Hume, David. "*A Treatise of Human Nature,*" Second Edition. L. A. Selby-Bigge & P. H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1739-40/1978)

E: Hume, David. "*Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals,*" Third Edition. L. A. Selby-Bigge & P. H. Nidditch, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1748/ 1975)

All references to these key works will be marked as a **"T"** or an **"E"** followed by the page number.

INTRODUCTION

We humans are often wrong. We hold false beliefs, we misjudge distances, we remember events incorrectly, we make errors of calculation, we are fooled by optical illusions, we may even hallucinate, and so on. Any good account of the human mind should be able to explain these errors.

This work is entitled *Hume and Human Error*. My hope is that it may be of interest to at least two groups of readers: first, to those who are interested in understanding the philosophy of David Hume himself, and second, to those who are interested in the history of attempts to explain the human mind and our propensity to go wrong. If anyone happens to fall into the overlap as I do, all the better. For the most part I will be discussing how Hume can account, or does account, for the various ways in which humans err. In this sense, I am concerned with exposition, and exposition of some rather neglected sections of an otherwise comprehensive body of Hume scholarship.

The central problem I want to discuss is simply: *is it possible to provide an adequate explanation of human error on Hume's terms?* In order to understand just what this question means, and why it is important and difficult, we will first have to understand the history of the problems with which Hume is concerned and how Hume relates to the tradition to which he responds. As such, this work is concerned not only with discussing Hume's theory of error, but also with discussing the longstanding problems of error in Hume's most excellent company.

Hume's is a particularly interesting account of error because he rejects many of the traditional metaphysical doctrines that had been invoked by the tradition in an effort to account for error. We will discuss both Hume and the tradition in a moment. For now, however, let us briefly discuss an example that will help provide a general idea of the problems to be discussed.

A PRELIMINARY EXAMPLE

Imagine that, for whatever reason, I happen to believe that Earth is larger than Jupiter. I am wrong, of course. But *why* am I wrong? What does it *mean* to say that I'm wrong? The common response is simply to point to a difference between the planets themselves (the real objects) and my own beliefs about them (defined perhaps by intentional objects in my mind). This is what we shall call a *correspondence* explanation of error. According to this explanation, a mental state is in error when it does not correspond to (or "depict" or "accurately represent") what is actually the case in a mind-independent world. Even if I sincerely believe that Jupiter is smaller than Earth, I am mistaken because Jupiter and Earth are objects that exist apart from my ideas of them, and, of course, Jupiter is really much larger.

Hume recognises difficulties with this correspondence theory of error when he denies that we can know anything about objects that exist independently of our perceptions of them. According to Hume's empiricism, perceptions are all that we ever directly experience. This does not necessarily mean that perceptions are all that exists. In fact, it is a complicated question to decide whether Hume also denies the existence of anything that is not a perception. (That is one of the chief topics to be discussed in Chapter Two.) But what Hume certainly denies is our ability to *compare* our perceptions with anything that is not also a perception. On Hume's view we do not know in any absolute sense whether or not there are mind-independent external objects to which our perceptions might correspond. Consequently the correspondence theory of error which relies on external objects may seem problematic.

But if Hume does not adopt the correspondence theory of error, then it is not immediately obvious what other theory of error he can have. Some writers, Nicholas Rescher for instance, have argued that correspondence is the only game in town:

> The very idea of error involves subscribing to some sort of realism: Error calls for incorrectness, for conflict with the actual facts, and were there no actual matter of fact there would be no error either.[4]

But if Rescher is right, then Hume may well be inconsistent since, as we will see, Hume is not necessarily a realist (at least not in the traditional sense) and yet he frequently admits the existence of error. Indeed, here are some initial examples of different kinds of errors that Hume allows.

With regard to the confusion of imagination and memory Hume says that:

> …an idea of the memory, by losing its force and vivacity, may degenerate to such a degree, as to be taken for an idea of the imagination; so on the other hand an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment. (T, 86)

This happens, for example, in the case of liars,

> …who by the frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to believe and remember them, as realities. (T, 86)

With regard to our moods or constitution interfering with our sensation:

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[4] Rescher, Nicholas. "*Error"* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 80

> A man in a malady feels a disagreeable taste in meats, which before pleas'd him the most. Upon the different complexions and constitutions of men: That seems bitter to one, which is sweet to another. (T 226)

With regard to optical illusions:

> If you wheel about a burning coal with rapidity, it will present to the senses an image of a circle of fire; nor will there seem to be any interval of time betwixt its revolutions (T, 35)

With regard to hallucination or madness:

> When the imagination, from any extraordinary ferment of the blood and spirits, acquires such a vivacity as disorders all its powers and faculties, there is no means of distinguishing betwixt truth and falsehood; but every loose fiction of idea, having the same influence as the impressions of the memory, or the conclusions of the judgment, is receiv'd on the same footing, and operates with equal force on the passions. (T, 123)

With regard to distances:

> The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove father from it: but the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration. (E, 152)

The last of these examples may seem to suggest that Hume wants to help himself to the correspondence view after all. He speaks of the "real table, which exists independent of us". But, in fact, Hume sets up this view only to reject it. For immediately following this passage we find that, "…it was therefore nothing but it [the table's] image that was present to the mind." And, in the next paragraph, when we come to ask,

> By what argument it can be proved, that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects…? (E, 152-3)

We are told that we cannot possibly experience any such connection.

> 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 anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. (E, 153)

In summary, I will argue that Hume is sceptical of much of the traditional metaphysics but nonetheless wants to explain our propensity for error, and this presents him with a challenge. Can Hume meet this challenge? That is what I intend to explore.

There are many different kinds of errors, and although I shall draw on a variety of examples, I do not hope to provide an exhaustive catalogue of each and every one of them. Rather, more generally, I intend to provide a sort of framework by which the key elements of error, on Hume's view, might be explained. According to the account that I will attribute to Hume – *Hume's Theory of Error* – error is described in terms of observable features of perceptions and the relationships between them, and without reliance on the existence of mind-independent external objects. This explanation, I will argue, is consistent with Hume's overall methodology in the *Treatise* – the same methodology that he tells us is the only foundation on which our knowledge could "stand with any security". (T, xvi)

AN OUTLINE OF WHAT FOLLOWS

There is a longstanding history of attempts to discuss and provide solutions to the problems of error. In Chapter One I provide a survey of the key figures within that tradition, and a summary of Hume's relationship to them. In particular, I discuss the ideas of the Epicureans, and of Descartes, Locke, Malebranche and Berkeley. This chapter provides the historical context that underlies the remainder of the thesis.

In Chapter Two I consider how, and in what sense, Hume rejects the traditional correspondence theory of error, and why he is led to propose an alternative theory. The reading for which I argue is a methodological one: that in the *Treatise* Hume is led by his scepticism to redraft traditional concepts in a way that does not rely on the existence of external objects, and that Hume's theory of error should be understood in accordance with this general methodology. This discussion touches on many of the complex issues at the heart of the New Hume Debate.

I draw a link between Hume's conception of objects and Hume's Theory of Error. When it comes to objects, Hume's method leads him to substitute the question, "Are there external objects?" for the question, "How do we come to have ideas about objects (that we think of as being external)?" Similarly, in the case of error, Hume substitutes the question, "What does it mean to be mistaken?" for the question, "How do we come to think of some perceptions and not others as being mistaken?"

With this framework established, the remainder of the thesis goes on to explore the issues that arise in Hume's attempt to answer that question.

In Chapter Three I examine a curious passage in which Hume attempts to account for errors of association by describing physiological processes – i.e. the paths of the animal spirits. This passage of the *Treatise* is particularly perplexing because Hume prefaces it with the consideration that although he has otherwise "neglected any advantage" that might be gained by providing a physiological explanation, he must nonetheless "make recourse" to physiology in order to "account for the mistakes that arise" from the association of ideas. (T, 60-1) I argue that although Hume can quite consistently consider the physiological causes of error, he cannot consistently appeal to physiology in order to ground an explanation of error in anything more fundamental than impressions and ideas.

Chapter Four examines three specific kinds of errors that Hume himself considers at some length, namely: errors involving memory and imagination, errors involving optical illusions, and errors involving evaluation or judgment. By considering those cases, I develop a kind of framework by which we can understand Hume's Theory of Error more broadly. Ultimately, I find that for Hume error is always a comparative concept. If we regard some memory, or impression, or processes of evaluation as faulty, what we mean is that we have rejected that perception in light of other perceptions that strike us with more vivacity. As Hume puts it, "…An idea assented to *feels* different," from one that we reject.

In Chapter Five I relate Hume's Theory of Error to his rejection of the traditional concept of the self. Specifically, I consider how Hume can both reject the traditional explanation of the self as a unified and active substance, and yet allow that we think of error as a normative concept. In other words, Hume thinks there are cases of error for which people can and should be held responsible. He allows that there is a difference between mere *mistakes* or *misfortunes* (which involve no agency on my part), and *errors* (which I commit by my own free will). Yet it is not obvious how Hume can explain this normativity without appealing to the traditional conception of the human soul as an agent that wills with some measure of metaphysical freedom. By discussing Hume's account of the passions, and of pride in particular, I argue that Hume in fact provides a rich and interesting account of activity within his own naturalistic system, and without reliance on the traditional metaphysics. This account of activity, I contend, provides Hume with the conceptual tools that might allow him to explain the normativity of error.

In Chapter Six I consider whether Hume thinks any of our ideas are completely immune to error. The question is difficult because on some occasions Hume suggests that relations of ideas (for example simple mathematical truths) are absolutely certain, but at other times he tells us that all knowledge resolves into mere probability. I argue that Hume's considered position is that absolute

certainty is not possible, and that all of our beliefs are subject to error in some degree. Nonetheless, I observe that Hume retains a distinction between knowledge and probability, and uses this distinction to explain why we regard some of our beliefs as more certain than others. In this way, Hume provides a framework for understanding the degrees to which our various ideas are prone to error.

In Chapter Seven I offer conclusions, and some closing remarks. There are many problems with Hume's Theory of Error, and it is not my primary intention to defend it. I do contend, however, that even with the limited explanatory tools at his disposal, Hume provides a rich and complex account. Certainly, Hume's is one of the earliest attempts to demystify error – to rid our explanations of unfounded metaphysical assumptions – and so it is fascinating and important for that reason, if for no other.

CHAPTER ONE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE PROBLEMS OF ERROR

The philosophical problems about error are at least as old as the Eleatics, Parmenides and Zeno. With these Greeks they began as puzzles about the possibility of non-existent objects, and these puzzles arose as a result of their theory concerning falsity. Falsity, they maintained, involves stating "that which is not". In other words, they held that false statements are false by virtue of their reference to an un-reality. On the face of it this is a fairly intuitive theory, since it draws a parallel between that which is "false" and that which is "not the case" – i.e. that which is not real. But these Eleatics also believed that there is no such thing as an unreality. "Unrealities" are *not real*. And in this way a puzzle arises: error seems to involve the task of thinking about, or referring to, non-existent objects, and yet this must be impossible, since we cannot think of something that "is not", for what "is not" is not anything at all – not something that could be the object of thought. As Gorgias puts it:

> All subjects of thought must exist and Not-being, since it does not exist, could not be thought of. But if this is so, no one…could say anything false, not even if he said that chariots compete in the sea. For everything would be in the same category.[5]

In the *Theaetetus* the Platonic Socrates addresses this puzzle. For Socrates, the way out of the dilemma is to reject the Eleatic theory of falsity altogether. On his view, error cannot really involve making positive assertions about things that don't exist, but must instead involve making negative assertions about things that do exist.[6] In other words, it is not that false ideas depict non-existent objects, but that they inaccurately depict objects that do exist. Once the theory is adopted, one doesn't need to ascribe properties to a non-existent object in order to make a false claim.[7] Consider, for example, the false claim: "Julia Gillard has a daughter called Mary." On the Socratic theory, the reason this statement is false is simply that Julia Gillard doesn't have a daughter at all, let alone a daughter by that name. There is no need to refer to a non-existent Mary, or to ascribe to this imaginary daughter the peculiar property of never having been born. One problem with this account is that it has trouble explaining the truth or falsity of statements about objects that really do appear to be non-existent – unicorns, for example. The sentence, "A unicorn has three horns," is plainly

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[5] Gorgias, "On Non-Being*"* in Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*, trans. R.G. Bury (Loeb Classical Library, 1949)
[6] Plato, *Theaetetus* in Plato. "*Complete Works*" ed. Cooper, John M. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997) 252 e5-6
[7] See also: Denyer, Nichloas. *Language, Thought, and Falsehood in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1991)

false as any child will tell you, but it can't be evaluated easily using the Socratic analysis, since there is no thing called a "unicorn" to which the sentence can refer.

This ancient puzzle is also the lineage of many modern problems about non-existents in the philosophy of language. Russell, for example, is concerned with just this problem, albeit a more complex version of the problem, when evaluating the truth conditions for statements about the non-existent present King of France.[8] Russell asks why the following statement is false: "The present King of France is bald". The answer, he says, is just that there is no such thing as the Present King of France, let alone one whom is bald. Russell's primary concern is really to understand how the terms in that false sentence refer, and his somewhat complicated analysis goes like this:

> There is an x such that x is a present King of France, and for all y, if y is a present King of France, y = x, and x is bald.

On Russell's analysis, as in Plato's, the reason such a statement is false is because there is simply no x that at present satisfies the requirement and satisfies it uniquely – no thing that is the one and only present King of France.

In the Greeks we also find the origin of the long history of attempts to explain error in terms of *correspondence*. Whether falsity consists in talking about "*what is*" in a negative way (as Plato held it), or "*what is not*" in a positive way (as the Eleatics thought), what we have is a conception of error that treats falsity as involving correspondence to *what is* – in other words: to objective facts about the world. On each of these views, the concept of error is bound to a concept of independent existence.

Furthermore, in the ancients we also find the first debates about which faculties of the mind are to be blamed for error. Epicurus, for example, denied that our senses can ever be mistaken[9] holding instead that there is simply no such thing as sensory error. Epicurus maintained that all sensation is *irrational*[10], by which he really meant what we would call
"*a-rational*" – that rationality has nothing to do with sensation. The 'reports' given by sensation are always 'true', said Epicurus[11], but what he really meant is that the reports given by sensation are never false. In other words, sensations are not the type of things that fall under the categories of

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[8] Russell, B. "*On Denoting,*" *Mind,* 14 (1905): 479--493
[9] Interestingly, this same view was shared by classical Indian philosophers. Matilal writes: "Embarrassed by the persistence of nonveridical perception, the realistic wing represented by the Prabhakara Mimamsaka wanted to combat skepticism, idealism, and solipsism-all in one blow-by denying completely the possibility of error of illusion or even hallucination. According to them, all perceptions are veridical…"
Matilal, Bimal. "Error and Truth: Classical Indian Theories," *Philosophy East and West*, 31, no.2 (Apr 1981) p. 218
[10] Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math*. 8.9; cf. 7.210
[11] Rist, J. M. "*Epicurus*"(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) p.20

truth and falsehood. Aristotle held a similar view, although only for certain kinds of sensory experiences. Arisrotle divided the qualities of sensation into two categories: *specific sensibles* and *common sensibles*. Regarding the first category (which includes colours, sounds, tastes, smells and tactile sensations), the direct perception of any one of those qualities by the sense organ that is given to sensing it, cannot possibly fall into error. Regarding the category of common sensibles, however, (which include shapes, sizes, and motions), he says that our senses are very prone to error.

> "In dealing with each of the senses we shall have first to speak of the objects which are perceptible by each. . . . I call by the name of special object of this or that sense that which cannot be perceived by any other sense than that one and in respect of which no error is possible; in this sense colour is the special object of sight, sound of hearing, flavour of taste. Touch, indeed, discriminates more than one set of different qualities. Each sense has one kind of object which it discerns, and never errs in reporting that what is before it is colour or sound (though it may err as to what it is that is coloured or where that is, or what is sounding or where that is). Such objects are what we propose to call special objects of this or that sense. 'Common sensibles' are movement, rest, number, figure, magnitude; these are not peculiar to any one sense, but are common to all."[12]

Nonetheless, neither Epicurus nor Aristotle denied that we can make errors *about* the things we sense; they only insist that errors are always the result of an opinion or judgment that is added to the sensation.[13] As Diogenes Laertius reports:

> For the opinion they [the Epicureans] use the word *hepolepsis*, which they claim can be right or wrong.[14]

Rist explains:

> We are not given sufficient help by sensation to enable us to judge the truth or falsehood of the vast majority of propositions. In order to do that we have to compare our various sensations with one another and with our general concepts and feelings. We need to invoke what Epicurus calls the principles of 'supporting evidence' and of 'absence of contrary

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[12] Aristotle, "*De Anima*" 418b, Ross, W. D. (Ed.) *The works of Aristotle*. Vol. 3.(Oxford: Clarendon, 1931)

[13] Reading Aristotle on this point is more complicated. This reading is supported by a passage in *De Anima*, 430b 26-30 in which Aristotle compares the intellectual grasping of essences with the perception of qualities. On this reading our sensation of an object is always true as long as we do not judge that some object really has this quality. There are, however, difficulties with this view – see: Block, I. "Truth and Error in Aristotle's Theory of Sense Perception", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 42 (Jan., 1961), pp. 1-9

[14] Diogenes Laertius, "*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*", (trans. C.D. Yonge) X, 34

evidence' in order to understand the 'true' evidence of our senses and formulate propositions whose structure accurately reflects the world as our senses describe it. [15]

It is in this comparison that error occurs. Error is a matter of judgment. Consider the Epicurean example of misperceiving a tower:

> If we wish to make a statement about a tower, which is some distance away, we observe the phenomenon and make judgments about it. We think, for example, that the tower which is square is round. We then approach closer and observe the tower again. Each observation supplies us with evidence about the tower. We are checking the validity of our judgments by adducing supporting evidence… Each sensation provides us with new data. If a sequence of sensations adds further evidence in favour of our original judgment, then that judgment is confirmed and we may say that a proposition embodying it is true. If our inspection provides any counter evidence, then the judgment is false. Of course the falseness of a particular judgment about the tower does not mean that our sensation was false, but that our thought about the sensation was false.[16]

This general idea – that errors must involve judgments and not mere sensations – is intuitive. It seems straightforward to say that although it is an error to *believe* that a straight stick protruding out of the water is bent, it is not an error to *see* it as if it were bent. Although it is an error to *believe* that Escher's Impossible Stairs are possible, it is not an error to acknowledge that they *appear possible* in his brilliant lithograph.[17]

But other intuitions pull in another direction. Sometimes we do want to say that our senses are faulty even if no faulty belief results from them. If my senses are *inclining* me to believe something that is not true, then surely they are not representing reality exactly as it is. And this could be regarded as a kind of error, as we discuss further when we come to Descartes. If I see spirals where there are only circles, *something* has gone wrong. If the lines in the Müeller-Lyer illusion appear to be of unequal length, then surely my visual system is being fooled, even if *I* am not fooled. At the very least there must be a strong connection between the sense in which we can be tricked by an

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[15] Rist, J. M. "*Epicurus"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972)
[16] Ibid. p.38
[17] See Vesey: "A stick half in water looks bent to both the man who says "It's bent" and the man who says " It looks bent ". But the man who says " It looks bent " thereby exhibits his sophistication in the matter of how an object's being half in water leads to his seeing it otherwise than as it is. What an object looks like to somebody is what, on looking at it, that person would take it to be, if he had no reason to think otherwise. If he has a reason to think otherwise then he says, not " It is . . . ", but " It looks . . ."
Vesey, G. N. A. "Seeing and Seeing As," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 56 (1955 - 1956), pp. 109-124]

optical illusion or some faulty suggestion of our sensory organs, and the sense in which we make an error when believe or judge something falsely.

Incidentally, this interest in the ability of optical illusions to fool our senses is very old. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder recounts a pleasing story of two Greek painters who set out to fool each other in the Fifth Century BCE:

> Zeuxis…produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented that birds flew to the stage buildings; whereupon Parrhasius himself produced such a realistic picture of a curtain that Zeuxis, proud of the verdict of the birds, requested that the curtain should now be drawn and the picture displayed; and when he realized his mistake, with a modesty that did him honour he yielded up the prize, saying that whereas he had deceived birds Parrhasius had deceived him, an artist.[18]

Attempts to explain optical illusions are also very old. Take, for example, the illusion, well known to Aristotle[19], and still discussed in contemporary psychology[20], that the moon appears larger on the horizon than it does when it is higher in the sky. As Francis Egan puts it:

> …the moon illusion may be our most persistent scientific puzzle. It has resisted explanation for over 2500 years. Unlike other recalcitrant phenomena in the history of science…the puzzle has persisted through massive changes both in our overall physical theory, and in our very conception of the scientific enterprise.[21]

Indeed, the explanations vary greatly. Ptolemy, for example, offered at least two accounts of this phenomenon. First, in his *Almagest*, he explains the illusion in terms of physics.[22] Later, however, in his *Optics*, he describes the error as involving physiology and possibly psychology.[23] Hobbes explained the illusion physically as a result of atmospheric refraction.[24] Descartes[25] and

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[18] Pliny, "*Natural history*". trans. H. Rackham. (London: Heinemann, 1940) pp. 309-311. For other good examples see: Wade, N. J. "*Perception and Illusion*" (Springer: US, 2005) 5-11

[19] *De Anima*, 373b: "The sun and the stars seem bigger when rising and setting than on the meridian"

[20] See, for example, Lloyd, K. and Rock, I. "The Moon Illusion Thirty Years Later," in *Hershenson* (1989) pp. 193-234

[21] Egan, F. "The Moon Illusion," *Philosophy of Science*, Vol. 65 No. 4 (1998) p. 605

[22] "It is true that their true sizes [of the celestial bodies] appear greater at the horizon; however, this is caused not by their shorter distance, but by the moist atmosphere surrounding the earth, which intervenes between them and our sight. It is just like the apparent enlargement of objects in water, which increases with the depth of immersion" In Ross, H. E., & Ross, G. W. (1976). "Did Ptolemy understand the moon illusion?" *Perception*, Vol. 5, pp. 377–385.

[23] "For generally, just as the visual ray, when it strikes visible objects in [circumstances] other than what is natural and familiar to it, senses all their differences less, so also its sensation of the distances it perceives [in those circumstances] is less. And this is seen to be the reason why, of the celestial objects that subtend equal angles between the visual rays, those near the point above our head look smaller, whereas those near the horizon are seen in a different manner and in accordance with what is customary. But objects high above are as seen small because of the extraordinary circumstances and the difficulty [involved] in the act [of seeing]."

[24] Hobbes, T. "Elements of Philosophy" In *English Works vol. 1*. (London: J. Bohn, 1658/1839) p.452

Malebranche[26] both explained it in terms of a fact about the observer: namely, that when we view the moon on the horizon we also see distant objects (such as trees or buildings) and these provide us with points of reference – they allow us to judge the size of the moon more accurately than we are able when the moon is as its zenith and there are no such objects to provide a comparison. Expanding on this idea, Berkeley attempted to explain the illusion more broadly in terms of the "circumstances which are wont to attend the vision of distant objects." In addition to Descartes' and Malebranche's observation about points of reference, Berkeley also appealed to other facts about the observer that may serve as an explanation of the phenomenon – for example the differing angle of one's head in viewing the moon at the different positions. There are several factors, Berkeley thought, that come to "influence the judgements made", and thus make some objects,

> …appear less than otherwise they would. For any of those things that caused an object to be thought greater than in proportion to its visible extension being either omitted or applied without the usual circumstances, the judgement depends more entirely on the visible extension, and consequently the object must be judged less.[27]

In any case, returning to the broader history of the problems of error, we have observed that Epicurus maintained that judgment and not sensation is the faculty of mind responsible for error. This theory was popular not only among the Epicureans, but almost universally throughout the middle ages and the Early Modern period. Augustine held this view, even if he recognized problems with it.[28] Aquinas also denied that the senses themselves can be deceived, but maintained that other faculties can fall into error when they make use of sensations. He says, for example, that we can make an error when we *recall* the sensation to ourselves.[29]

For Aquinas, error is construed as an abnormal product of the mind, which, by God's design, is really supposed to be a faculty of truth. As Keeler summarises, (quoting Aquinas):

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[25] "…usually, when [heavenly bodies] are very high in the sky ... they seem smaller than they do when they are rising or setting, and we can notice their distance more easily because there are various objects between them and our eyes. And, by measuring them with their instruments, the astronomers prove clearly that they appear larger at one time than at another not because they are seen to subtend a greater angle, but because they are judged to be farther away." Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) p.174

[26] Malebranche, N. "*The Search after Truth*", ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) Book I, Chapters 7&14

[27] Berkeley, G. An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision, in ed. Michael R. Ayers *Philosophical Works (Including the Works on Vision)*. (London: J.M. Dent, 1709 / 1993) p. 33

[28] Evans, G. R. *Getting It Wrong: The Medieval Epistemology of Error* (Boston: Brill, 1998) p.57

[29] Aquinas, T. *XII Libros Metaphysicorum*, ed. R.M. Spiazzi (Turin, 1995), 4.1.4.

The mind being the faculty of truth, error cannot be its normal fruit, but will necessarily have the character of a defective byproduct, an accidental disorder, a miscarriage comparable to 'monstrous births' in nature.[30]

Aquinas also introduced an important distinction between error on the one hand, and mere ignorance on the other, and he explains this distinction by appealing to the *activity* of the mind. For example, it is not an error to simply be ignorant about the relative sizes of the planets, but it is an error to actively believe that Earth is larger than Jupiter.

Error thus adds a certain act to mere ignorance, because one can be ignorant without passing judgment on the things one is ignorant of. One is then unknowing but not in error.[31]

Duns Scotus similarly held that error relates to activity, and is caused by man's poor exercise of his free will.

As Duns Scotus saw it, all error – cognitive and moral alike – stems from acts of the will. Cognitive error arises from improper decisions to acceptance in matters of belief, and moral error arises from improper decisions to action in matters of practise.[32]

Man's will is active and free, but it is prone to error having been tainted by The Fall in the Garden of Eden. Indeed, these theological grounds were the chief reason in the medieval period for denying that a passive faculty could be the origin of error. Error was lumped-together with sin, and since sin is morally reprehensible, all error must involve an activity that is, at least in principle, avoidable. (God would not hold us responsible if we could not have done otherwise.) As Evans points out, it was in accordance with this tradition that Anselm[33] made a unity of moral "rightness" and intellectual "correctness", and afterwards this unity formed the "important ground of the belief that sin has epistemological consequences."[34]

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[30] Keeler, Leo. The problem of Error from Plato to Kant: An Historical and Critical Study (Apud Aedes Pontificae Universitatis Gregorianae, 1934) p. 87
In Chapter Three I will observe that Hume disagrees with this view. On Hume's account error is the source of many good consequences that we humans could not do without.
[31] Aquinas, T. *De malo* trans. Regan, Richard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) Quest. 3. Art. 7
See also, Evans: "It is clear that error and ignorance cannot be equated. Not to know something is not equivalent to being mistaken, though not knowing something may lead to error, either in theory or in practice. Thus there is a great difference between saying 'X does not know that the capital of Australia is Canberra' and 'X mistakenly thinks that Sydney is the capital of Australia'. Ignorance is neither right nor wrong, neither correct nor mistaken. Error, on the other hand, involves being mistaken. When in error we are committed to the truth of some statement: ignorance involves no commitment."
Evans, J. L. "Error and the Will," *Philosophy*, Vol, 38, No. 144 (April 1963) p. 141-142
[32] Rescher, Nicholas. *Error* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 90
[33] Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli*, 4.
[34] Evans, G. R. *Getting It Wrong: The Medieval Epistemology of Error* (Boston: Brill, 1998) p.56

This blurring of theological sin and intellectual correctness is something that tends to separate Medieval accounts from our contemporary neurophysiological accounts of the mind. For many of the Medievals, explaining the bodily functions involved in sensory and cognitive error was of less interest than the issue of interference with these mechanisms by sin.[35] But even if contemporary psychology is concerned with neurophysiology rather than theology, the fact remains that error has always been treated as a normative concept, and rightly so. If I hallucinate and become convinced that that there is a tiger on my desk, then there are normative facts at play here. My senses really *shouldn't* be deceiving me in this fashion; the electrical impulses in my brain aren't working *properly*. Of course, we do not say in these cases that I have sinned – these errors are not morally reprehensible. But there are normative claims at play nonetheless; we would say that my mind is not "working as it should be".

Perhaps this claim – that the mind *should* be working in any particular way – will make the reader sceptical. I hope so, because this is one of the problems with which I will be concerned. Hume is going to find it difficult to explain how any normative fact about the workings of the mind (or the brain) can be justified. For now, suffice it to say that if we allow that the mind makes errors at all, then it appears that we have to think of them in normative terms. No one, except perhaps the most sceptical of philosophers, believes that when I hallucinate that there is a tiger on the desk, this is just "another way of perceiving" as valid as any other. Errors *qua* errors are deviations from a standard of correct perception and hence normative by definition. To say that an error has occurred, and to say that something has gone wrong, is to say the same thing twice.

DESCARTES

Descartes is particularly important for the tradition because, as against the Epicurean school of thought, he allows the possibility of sensory error, and this poses a dramatic challenge to Aristotelian empiricism. Indeed, Descartes draws a distinction between two different kinds of error: errors in judgement (which Descartes calls 'formal falsity'), and errors that occur at a pre-judgmental or sensory level (which Descartes calls 'material falsity'). To understand these two kinds of error and why they are important for the period we will need to briefly discuss Descartes' theory of ideas.

For Descartes, ideas are a type of thought, and the term "idea" can be taken in two senses:

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[35] Ibid. p.57

> [T]here is an ambiguity here in the word 'idea.' 'Idea' can be taken materially, as an operation of the intellect… Alternatively, it can be taken objectively, as the thing represented by that operation...[36]

These two senses are roughly akin to the difference between mental-acts and mental-objects. For example, when I have an idea of the sun my mind is engaged in a certain activity – i.e. thinking about the sun – and this is my having an idea of the sun in the material sense. On the other hand, when I have an idea of the sun I also have an idea about something – about *the sun* – and this is my having an idea of the sun in what Descartes refers to as the objective sense. Insofar as ideas are taken only materially there is, says Descartes, "no recognizable inequality among them." The ideas of the sun, a motion and a chimaera are all equally ideas. But in terms of the different objects by which ideas are differentiated, they differ enormously. As Descartes puts it, insofar as they "represent different things, it is clear that [ideas] differ widely."[37] For example, I may have various ideas "of a man, or a chimaera, or the sky, or an angel, or God,"[38] and all of those ideas are different because of the differences between the things they represent.

That distinction concerns *ideas*, but Descartes also draws another related distinction concerning *objects* which is as follows. Objects have "being" in two senses: on the one hand they have being in themselves (which Descartes calls "formal being"), and on the other hand, they have being as objects of thought (which he calls "objective being"). In other words, the sun has being both by virtue of existing as an external object in the sky, and also by virtue of our thinking about it.

At this point the whole story gets confusing, because these two different distinctions (the first concerning ideas, the second concerning objects) are related in messy ways. Most obviously, something must be said about the relationship between the *objective being* of the object and the *objective reality* of our idea object. Intuitively, given what we've been told so far, it would appear that the two must in fact be identical. After all, Descartes explained that an object's objective being is just the sense in which it exists as the object of an idea, and an idea's objective reality is just the sense in which an idea has an object. Surely, we might think, they must be the same thing. But it would be problematic for Descartes to equate the sun as it appears in my idea with the objective being of the sun, because Descartes also tells us that the objective being of the sun is (in some sense) *the sun itself*. In other words, the sun in my idea would be the very same thing as the sun formally existing in the heavens. Of course, that is objectionable because Descartes cannot have

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[36] Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) II, p. 7
[37] Ibid. p. 28
[38] Ibid.

it that ideas and external objects are identical since he also holds that external objects exist independently of thought.

Now, all of that is complex, but for our purposes here the point to be gleaned is that it relates to the following problem concerning error. If the sun that is the intentional object of my idea were really identical with the sun that is the external object in the sky, then it is difficult to see how my idea of the sun could ever misrepresent the sun in any way. In other words, it would seem impossible that my idea could involve any error.

Descartes avoids this problem, at least on one charitable reading, by denying that there is a straightforward relationship of identity between the idea in the mind and the mind-independent object trading on the idea that things may be not really distinct (and so bound by relations of metaphysical dependence) without being numerically identical. Just what Descartes' view really is concerning this relationship is a complex matter, and one that is hotly debated. The issue has dramatic ramifications for how we understand Descartes for whether an idea just is the same thing as its external object or only the same as some internal proxy, for it determines the character of Descartes' epistemology. As Brown puts it:

> Confusion on this very issue has produced a division within the scholarly community between those who think that Descartes is a representational realist – i.e. someone who thinks the direct objects of thought are immanent or intentional objects from which the mind infers the existence of extramental things – and those who think that he is a direct realist – someone who thinks that the objects of ideas and judgments are the extramental things themselves, by means of their special mode of being in the intellect.[39]

The outcome of this dispute will matter, because it will have implications for Descartes' ability to make sense of error. Those who read Descartes as a direct realist will have to provide a good story about how, although the objects of ideas and judgements are the external objects themselves, ideas of objects can nonetheless fail to get those objects right. As we will discuss further in a moment, they will also need to come up with a story about what it means to say that some ideas have no external objects at all – for example, ideas of unicorns.

The scholarly division regarding Descartes view is understandable, since Descartes' own explanation is quite obtuse:

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[39] Brown, D. J. "*Descartes and the Passionate Mind*" (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2006) p. 90

"…the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect — not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e., in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect"[40]

However mysterious, Descartes does say explicitly that the idea of the sun is ("of course") different (somehow) from the formally existing sun in the sky. And in this way, he leaves open the possibility that the faultiness of our faulty judgments can be cashed-out by appealing to differences between our ideas of objects and the mind-independent external objects themselves.

In any case, as I mentioned, Descartes thinks there are *two* ways that an idea can fall into error. The first is *formal falsity*, which we have been discussing. The other kind is called *material falsity*. Material falsity, unlike formal falsity, does not directly involve judgment and for this reason is more interesting, or at any rate more novel, since it goes directly against the Epicurean tradition.

> Although falsity properly speaking, or "formal" falsity, cannot be found except in judgments (as I noted a little while ago), still there is, surely, another "material" falsity in ideas, when they represent a non-thing as a thing...[41]

So what is a materially false idea? What does it mean to represent a non-thing as a thing? Descartes provides examples:

> …[ideas] like light and colors, sounds, odors, tastes, heat and cold, and other tactile qualities, are not thought by me except very confusedly and obscurely, so that I do not even know if they are true or false, that is, whether the ideas, which I have of them, are ideas of particular things, or of non-things. …The ideas I have of heat and cold are so far from being clear and distinct that from them I cannot say whether cold is just a privation of heat or heat a privation of cold, or both are real qualities, or neither. And since ideas are only as of things, if cold truly is nothing other than the privation of heat, an idea that represents it to me as something real and positive is not without reason said to be false, and so on for the rest.[42]

One of the keys to understanding these examples is to emphasise the role of confusion. "*I do not know* if they are true or false," says Descartes; "*I cannot say* whether cold is just a privation…" This emphasis is necessary, since Descartes' description of materially false ideas as representing

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[40] Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) II, 75
[41] Ibid. II, 30
[42] Ibid. Descartes also talks of "colour" as giving rise to materially false ideas AT, VII 234

"non-things as things" is liable to mislead. It might sound as if material falsity is only another case of an idea of an object failing to correspond to the object itself. For example, one might think that Descartes' point about heat and cold is just that it's possible to have a faulty idea about the thing called "cold" that misrepresents what cold really is. But this is not what Descartes has in mind, because Descartes thinks there is no such positive entitiy called "cold" at all. In the case of materially false ideas, my idea is faulty not because it misrepresents cold, but because it is *of* an object called "cold", when in fact there is no such thing. Cold is only a privation.

Arnauld famously pointed out a problem with this view – that the whole notion of "representing a non-thing as a thing" should be impossible according to Descartes' theory of ideas. The objection[43] goes like this: since Descartes thinks that having an idea of an object is for that object to be "objectively in the intellect" then it should be impossible to have ideas of "non-things" at all. As Arnauld argues:

> What is the idea of cold? Cold itself, insofar as it is objectively in the intellect. But if cold is a privation, it cannot be objectively in the intellect by way of an idea of which the objective esse would be a positive ens. Therefore, if cold were only a privation, there could never be a positive idea of it, and so none that would be materially false.[44]

Arnauld's idea here is reminiscent of the Eleatic dilemma with which we started this chapter: it cannot be that error involves having positive ideas of non-things, since non-things are not things at all, and so cannot possibly be the objects of positive thoughts. Descartes has said that all ideas have objective reality, and having objective reality implies the existence of a positive entity. Arnauld extracts the problem:

> …This idea of cold, which you say is materially false – what does it exhibit to your mind? A privation? Then it is true. A positive being? Then it is not the idea of cold.[45]

Arnauld's objection is that material falsity must be impossible on Descartes' own terms since Descartes cannot have it that we ever represent "non-things" as things. The idea of cold may either:

1. Be represented as a privation of heat (but in this case the idea is true and there is no error); or
2. Be represented as a positive entity, (in which case an error of some sort has occurred, but it cannot really be the idea of cold that is being represented. Descartes has said that to have an

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[43] Arnauld actually has out two major objections along these lines, of which I will only consider the first.
[44] Descartes, Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) II, 163
[45] Ibid.

idea of an object is for that object to exist objectively in the mind, and if the idea is of a positive entity, then it cannot be the idea of cold, since cold is not a positive entity.

It is true that Descartes does indeed maintain the theory of ideas that Arnauld attributes to him, and does indeed say that materially false ideas involve representing "non-things" as things. Descartes, however, insists that he has been misunderstood. His reply is quite baffling, because his objection appears to insist that having a materially false idea of cold, does not depend on the objective presence of cold:

> When, however [Arnauld] says that the idea of cold is coldness itself as it is objectively in the intellect I think that a distinction is necessary: for it often happens in confused and obscure ideas, among which those of heat and cold are numbered, that they are referred to a thing other than that of which they are ideas. Thus, if cold is only a privation, the idea of cold is not cold itself…but another thing which I take wrongly for that privation.[46]

The response appears unsatisfactory but note how it is reminiscent of the ancient disagreement between the Eleatics and Plato. Recall that Plato responded to the Eleatic dilemma by arguing that error involves having false ideas about things, rather than positive ideas about non-things. Similarly, Descartes here says that having a materially false idea about cold involves having an idea about a positive entity ("another thing"), and falsely taking that idea to be of cold (which in reality is a non-thing). Descartes is perhaps right to insist that these sorts of errors can and do occur, but he's wrong to think that this move can save his notion of material falsity. If my faulty idea is of a positive entity that I am calling "cold" (even though it cannot really be a positive idea of cold, since cold is not a thing at all), then I have simply made an error of judgment. I am judging that the positive intentional object of my idea is cold itself, but this is an error because there is no positive entity that is the thing called "cold".

This passage aside, Descartes offers another response to Arnauld that is more enlightening. I'm not sure that it successfully saves the notion of material falsity in the context of his theory of ideas, but it may well explain why Descartes thinks there's a concept worth saving at all. According to the particular response I have in mind, what characterises materially false ideas is that they provide *material* for false judgment.[47] As Descartes says:

> …It seems to me that [materially false ideas] cannot be said to be materially false in any other sense that that which I have explicated: namely, whether cold is a positive thing or a

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[46] Ibid. II, p.145
[47] Ibid. II, p.163

privation, I do not have an idea of it other [than the one I have]; instead it remains in me the same one I have always had; and this I say provides *matter for error*.[48]

With this emphasis, the purpose of materially false ideas is that they explain "why we are *prone* to certain kinds of errors", errors of judgement or formal falsity.[49] Because they are obscure and confused, materially false ideas are false in the sense that they *incline* us to make errors of judgment. The interesting question is whether the reason that Descartes defends a notion of material falsity is because he wants to defend the idea that error can occur at a pre-judgmental level. On this view, it is not only false judgments that we call errors, but also confused sensations that may incline us to have those false judgments. Material falsity is advocated as a second kind of error on the grounds that formal falsity simply cannot explain all of errors that we make.

As we have already noted, it is somewhat strange to think of an inclination to error as being an error itself. It's true, perhaps, that the bent stick in water might *incline* us towards falsity, but we are not often actually fooled. We don't actually make any error. Perhaps this is why Descartes is reluctant to describe material falsity as "proper" falsity.

> Although falsity *properly speaking*, or "formal" falsity, cannot be found except in judgments (as I noted a little while ago), still there is, surely, another "material" falsity in ideas, when they represent a non-thing as a thing...[50]

Descartes can only bring himself to say that materially false ideas are "not without reason said to be false".[51] And this reluctance, I think, will prove an interesting point of comparison between Descartes and Hume. Descartes never abandons the idea that "proper falsity" must involve a judgmental faculty over which we humans can exercise a free will, even though he goes to some length to insist that error can occur, at least in some sense, at a pre-judgmental (and therefore passive) level. But Hume who ultimately reduces all mental processes, judgments included, to natural principles, can enjoy a greater freedom to collapse the dichotomy and explore the idea that the relationship between error and judgment lies along a spectrum. At one extreme there are errors that occur at a purely passive and sensory level. These are not "proper errors" since we do not think of them as involving activity or any "wrongdoing" on our part. Nonetheless, to the extent that these sensory errors are causally related to errors of judgment we do indeed think of them as involving error. Then, at the other extreme, there are errors of careful deliberation (i.e. judgment), and these we think of as errors *proper*. I take my time over the arithmetic, for example, but still I get the

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[48] Ibid. (Emphasis added)
[49] Ibid. (Emphasis added)
[50] Ibid. II, p.30
[51] Ibid.

wrong answer. This surely is a proper error – one for which I may be held accountable. The point is just that on this view there is a whole range of errors. The extent to which an error results from our judgment, and the extent to which sensory errors incline us towards errors of judgement, are both matters of degree. This, I think, is an idea born in Descartes, but raised in Hume.[52]

Possibly, however, Descartes deserves even further credit for developing this line of thought. Indeed, Brown points out that Descartes' conception of error involves a spectrum in at least two ways. The first is that materially falsity is a matter of degree in the sense that some confused ideas are more confused than others. Any idea that inclines a false judgment may be called materially false, says Descartes, but the term 'material falsity' is only really applicable in cases where the inclination is great.[53]

> Confused ideas that are consciously constructed at will, such as those of a chimera or false God, typically provide little scope for error, whereas ideas from the senses, particularly those relating to appetite, provide the greatest scope for error and most deserve being called materially false.[54]

One might debate whether Descartes is right to think that ideas of a false god provide little scope for error, especially on Jesuit terms[55], but the general point is a good one. If material falsity is a matter of degree it can explain why some confused ideas are more likely to lead us to hold false beliefs than others. Earlier we wondered whether it was strange to think of the confused idea of the bent stick as involving error, since it does not actually incline us to hold false beliefs. But perhaps our scepticism was only warranted in that instance because the example of illusion was a weak one. The "confused" idea of a submerged stick is not really all that confused. Other examples of confused ideas may prove more convincing.

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[52] The spectrum I am discussing here relates to judgement, and whether or not judgments are justified. This point about justification is a different matter from whether or not a judgment is true. It is quite possible, for example, to have a justified belief that isn't true, or a true belief that isn't justified. The point I am making here, however, is that Descartes and Hume are both part of a tradition that maintained a difference between merely perceiving falsely and actively making an error. This difference is explained in terms of a judgment that is superadded to a falsehood.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Brown, D. "Descartes on True and False Ideas" in *A Companion to Descartes*, eds Janet Broughton and John Carriero. (Blackwell Publishing, 2008) p.203

[55] If false gods provide little scope for error, then why would God issue, as the second of the Ten Commandments, that there must be no false idols?

It is worth noting that Locke doesn't agree on this point. He tells us that ideas of a false god provide serious scope for error – especially in the case of children: "There is nothing more ordinary than children's receiving into their minds propositions (especially about matters of religion) from their parents, nurses, or those about them: which being insinuated into their unwary as well as unbiased understandings, and fastened by degrees, are at last (equally whether true or false) riveted there by long custom and education, beyond all possibility of being pulled out again." Locke, J. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1975) 2.20.9

The other sense in which Descartes may allow that error involves a spectrum is that he seems to think that there are degrees of judgment, and hence possibly degrees of error. Alanen has argued that for Descartes it is "necessary to suppose that sensations and passions involve a non-volitional judgment".[56] Brown, on the other hand, rejects this view on the grounds that a non-volitional judgment cannot be consistent with what Descartes says elsewhere about judgments always involving the will. But, nonetheless, Brown observes:

> Descartes is prepared…to acknowledge the habitual and speedy (but essentially) intellectual 'judgments' we make at the 'third grade' of sensory response, and to admit that this is where falsity occurs. (AT, VII, 437-9) But if it is such judgments that account for the representational content of sensory ideas, it is difficult to know whether Descartes is assuming that there is an act of assent involved, or whether he is invoking a different sense of judgment.[57]

The relevant point is that it is "*difficult to know*" whether Descartes regards sensation as involving any voluntary act of assent. Possibly the problem is merely exegetical – i.e. that Descartes simply isn't clear about the matter. But another possibility is that the reason Descartes isn't clear is that the issue itself is not clear. In other words, perhaps the reason for the ambiguity is that Descartes (like Hume) noticed that judgment is sometimes an ambiguous concept – something that can be intermingled with sensation and can admit of various degrees. I'm not suggesting this view is actually consistent with Descartes' wider philosophy; only that he may have recognised the problem or the possibility.

An intermediary figure on this point is Malebranche, who we will discuss more fully shortly, and who admits quite explicitly that sensation involves an involuntary form of judgment that is different from the kind of judgment associated with volition. For example, Malebranche says that when we perceive an object the soul is "*led to judge*"[58] (falsely) that the cause of sensation is the object itself. This is, he explains, a passive and instinctual form of judgment. The function of this judgment for Malebranche is, as Carl Doxcee puts it, "to guide and preserve the bodily life – a purely practical office."[59] This, as will see, is remarkably similar to Hume's later claim that "nature…determines us to judge as well as to breathe and feel," (T, 183)[60] and it is a long way from the "official" Cartesian

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[56] Brown, D. J. "Descartes and the Passionate Mind" (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2006) pp. 98-99 See footnote 14 regarding a conversation between Alanen and Brown
[57] Ibid. p. 98
[58] Malebranche, Recherche, I, X, VI; vol. I, p. 90.
[59] Doxcee, C. W. "Hume's relation to Malebranche," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 25, no. 5, p.708
[60] John P. Wright describes this process in Malebranche as involving a sort of pre-conscious knowledge acquisition. Another example cited by Wright of natural judgment in Malebranche is that "We make the judgment of size constancy without being conscious of the process by which the separate stimuli are combined." For a discussion of the relationship

position, that error must involve judgment, and that judgment must involve volition. Perhaps, therefore, there is a line of thought that leads from Descartes through Malebranche to Hume on the subject of natural judgment. If so, it is one that is worth tracing if we want to make sense of the relationship between judgment and error in the period.

Setting aside these issues for later chapters, another facet of Descartes' discussion of error is his theodicy – his concern with answering the theological question as to why error should occur at all in a world created by an all loving and all powerful designer.[61] Descartes' answer is that having senses that sometimes deceive us is in fact part of a perfect design. One must understand that the senses are given to us for a purpose – to seek out what is beneficial and to keep us from harm[62], and the appearance of imperfection may arise if do not understand them in these terms. The appearance of imperfection in God's creation can also arise because we lack a sufficiently broad scope. The general laws that govern optics, for example, are those that allow us to see, (and they are perfect,) but they are the same laws that make the submerged stick appear bent.

> It seems to me that, rather than looking at a single creation in isolation when asking whether God's works are perfect, I ought to look at all of them together. For a thing that seems imperfect when viewed alone may seem completely perfect when regarded as a part of the world.[63]

If we, by our own free will, give assent to an unwarranted proposition – that the stick is *actually* bent – then we fall into error. If so, this is not God's imperfect design, but our own imperfection. Error, for Descartes, is the result of two things: our limited scope, and our imperfect use of our God-given freewill.

> I notice that these errors depend on two concurrent causes: my ability to know and my ability to choose freely…[64]

Descartes explanation regarding our limited scope influenced the widely held belief in the modern period that sensory errors occur only in specific contexts for which man's general faculties were not

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between Malebranche's conception of judgment and Hume's account of natural belief see Wright, J. P., "The Sceptical Realism of David Hume" (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983) pp. 66, 67, 74-5

[61] As Evans notes, "For Descartes, the problem was not so much the actual occurrence of error as the ascription of responsibility for its occurrence; of its existence he was convinced, but he felt that it was inconsistent with his general theological position. However, he thought that a reconciliation was possible and did indeed think that he had effected one."
Evans, J. L. "Error and the Will," *Philosophy*, Vol, 38, No. 144 (April 1963) p. 137
[62] Descartes, Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) II, p. 57
[63] Ibid. II, p. 39
[64] Ibid.

designed. This idea, for instance, was echoed in Leibniz' strange suggestion that the actual world, for all its apparent faults, is in fact the most perfect of all possible worlds. But a weaker version of this thesis was widely held in the general culture of the century that followed. Pope's *Essay on Man*, for example, asks, "Why has not man a microscopic eye?" and answers: "For this Plain reason: Man is not a fly." Man's faculties are designed *for man,* and they are perfect for that purpose. "Say what the use if finer optics given / to inspect a mite not comprehend the Heav'n?" Indeed, the general argument in that whole section of Pope's famous *Essay* is that all the apparent imperfections of the human condition are only imperfections in appearance. It may seem to man that his auditory system (for instance) is overly limited and prone to error, but: "If nature thunder'd in his opening ears / And stunned him with the music of the spheres / How would he wish that heaven had left him still / The whisp'ring zephyr and the purling rill?"[65]

LOCKE

Locke is a very important figure, because Hume borrowed from Locke the theory of ideas that underlies all of his explanations of the human mind, including our propensity to err. Indeed, so influential is Locke that when Hume comes to explain his theory of ideas in the Part I of his *Treatise*, he apparently feels no need to explain the theory of ideas as a controversial conjecture to be proven, but simply states it as it were a series of evident and foundational facts about human experience. Indeed, Hume seems to assume that his division of the human mind into various kinds of perceptions, which borrows substantially and conspicuously from Locke, is straightforward and uncontroversial. In reality, neither Locke's nor Hume's theory of ideas is either of those things. But it is important to understand that Hume held Locke's system in this regard. We will discuss the theory of ideas that Hume borrowed from Locke, and its implications for providing an explanation of error, in the following chapter. For now, however, I intend to summarise more generally Locke's place in the history of attempts to address the problems of error.

Locke's own theory of error, aligned with the tradition, is that error should be explained in terms of a lack of correspondence (or a lack of "conformity" as Locke puts it) between our ideas and the external world.

> [W]henever the Mind refers any of its Ideas to any things extraneous to them, they are then capable to be called true or false…the Mind in such a reference makes a tacit Supposition of their Conformity to that Thing'[66]

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[65] Pope, A. "*Essay on Man and Other Poems*" (Ontario: Dover, 1994) p.50
[66] Locke, *Essay*, 2.32.2

Ideas themselves, in so far as they are just appearances, cannot be said to involve error.

> …the ideas in our minds, being only so many perceptions or appearances there, none of
> them are false; the idea of a centaur having no more falsehood in it when it appears in our
> minds, than the name centaur has falsehood in it, when it is pronounced by our mouths, or
> written on paper. For truth or falsehood lying always in some affirmation or negation,
> mental or verbal, our ideas are not capable, any of them, of being false, till the mind passes
> some judgment on them; that is, affirms or denies something of them.[67]

Rather, Locke is another member of the Epicurean tradition that regards judgment as the faculty of
mind that is responsible for error.

> Knowledge being to be had only of visible and certain truth, error is not a fault of our
> knowledge, but a mistake of our judgment, giving assent to that which is not true.[68]

Another important element of Locke's conception of error is that Locke borrowed from Descartes a
theory of *adequate ideas*[69], which he modified to suit his own empirical project, and from which, in
turn, Hume later borrowed and modified to suit his own ends. In all cases, one of the things that a
theory of adequate ideas is supposed to explain is the range of ideas that preclude the possibility of
error. According to Locke, for example, adequate ideas,

> …perfectly represent those Archetypes, which the Mind supposes them taken from; which it
> intends them to stand for, and to which it refers them. *Inadequate Ideas* are such, which are
> but a partial, or incomplete representation of those Archetypes to which they are referred.[70]

Their adequacy means that, "we are sure that they agree to the reality of Things."[71]

Hume attempts to borrow some of this theory from Locke. For example, Hume's theory of ideas is
based on the theory of impressions which, he tells us, like Locke's adequate simple ideas, "seem
what they are, and are what they seem" (T, 190). The point of Hume's explication of impressions,
once again, is similar to the Epicurean view that it is impossible to be mistaken about sensation
itself. One might be mistaken in judging a round tower to be square, but if one *perceives* a tower as
square one cannot be mistaken that the tower *appears* square. This appearance is an example of

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[67] Ibid. 2.32.3
[68] Ibid. 4.20.1
[69] For Descartes, "…if a piece of knowledge is to be adequate it must contain absolutely all the properties which are in
the thing which is the object of knowledge. Hence only God can know that he has adequate knowledge of all things."
CSM, II, p. 155
[70] Locke, *Essay*, 2.31.1
[71] Ibid.

what Hume would call an impression, and, as I will argue in Chapter Four, Hume maintains that impressions are immune to error.

But Hume also applies Locke's theory of adequate ideas to more complex problems – for example, when he explains his own theory of space and extension:

> Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge. But our ideas are adequate representations of the most minute parts of extension. (T, 29)

This is interesting, because it is not obvious that Hume can consistently help himself so greedily and easily to this tradition. For both Descartes and Locke, the distinction between adequate and inadequate ideas is only possible because they both describe to another distinction between what is given in perception, and what is not. Locke, for example, says that inadequate ideas are "incomplete representations" of the external objects to which they are referred. Ideas of substances are inadequate:

> Because those Qualities and Powers of Substances whereof we make their complex Ideas, are so many and various, that no Man's complex Idea contains them all.[72]

In other words, our ideas of ordinary objects do not include the "full picture" of the objects they are supposed to represent. My idea of a horse, for example, certainly lacks many of the features that horses actually possess. There are various breeds of horses, for instance, and since I knowing next to nothing about these, my idea of a horse must therefore be inadequate in that sense. But, even if I knew much more about horses – even if I were an equestrian expert – still my idea of a horse would be inadequate in some degree because it would not contain, as Locke puts it, all of the secret "Qualities" and "Powers" of horses themselves. Besides, he says, even "if we could have, and actually had in our complex Idea, an exact Collection of all the secondary Qualities, or Powers of any Substance," still our idea of a substance would not be adequate, because we would still not know how those qualities "flow" from the internal constitution of the object – our faculties are not "fitted to penetrate into the internal Fabrick and Essence of Bodies."[73]

But Hume, as we will see, has grave doubts about Locke's account of external objects and substances and indeed refuses to affirm the existence of anything that we do not perceive[74].

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[72] Ibid. 2.31.8
[73] Ibid. 4.21.11
[74] The New Humeans deny my reading of Hume in this respect, as we will see in Chapter 2

Consequently, it will prove difficult for Hume to explain how there can be any inadequate ideas at all in the sense that Locke describes. If Hume doesn't have the metaphysical apparatus to talk about objects as existing unperceived, then it would appear that he cannot explain how an idea could be inadequate by referring to the difference between the idea and the mind-independent object itself.

In fact, Hume anticipates this objection directly after the passage above in which he offers the explanation of space that refers to the adequacy of ideas:

> Twill probably be said…that I explain only the manner in which objects affect the senses… without endeavouring to account for their real nature and operations. (T, 63)

And in response to this problem, as Ainslie notes[75], Hume's tactic is simply to "plead guilty",

> …by confessing that my intention never was to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations. (T, 64)

How, then, can Hume have an account of inadequate ideas? The answer matters, because if Hume can't explain how an idea could fall short of "completely representing" an object, then it would seem that *all* Humean ideas must be adequate. This is plainly objectionable because, according to the tradition, adequate ideas are immune to error, and Hume cannot have it that all ideas are immune to error. This is something we will discuss in Chapter Six.

A more general point, relevant to explaining Locke's influence in the tradition, is that Locke was among the first opposed to the so-called Rationalists, who attempted to shift explanations of many of the traditional questions of philosophy (those concerning substance, persistence, identity, natural kinds, etc.) towards psychology and away from metaphysics. In this way Locke is one of the key influences on Hume's scepticism. Descartes had said that,

> Philosophy is like a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches, which arise from the trunk, are all the other sciences.[76]

Locke did not deny this model as a view about ontology, but he certainly doubted its usefulness as a model of explanation. For Locke, there are indeed metaphysical roots that support the world of experience, but experience imposes strict limits on our ability to say much about them. We may well suppose certain metaphysical suppositions – that there is substance, for example – but we can only experience these truths indirectly. As a point of methodology, then, it becomes clear that our

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[75] Ainslie, D. "Adequate Ideas and Modest Scepticism in Hume's Metaphysics of Space,*" Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, Vol 92, No. 1, pp. 61-2
[76] Descartes, Preface to the French edition of the *Principles*, IX-2, 14

epistemology cannot have its roots in an indirect science. We must begin, instead, from what is directly known: facts about our own minds that are immediately confirmable by introspection.

It is on the basis of these Lockean doubts that Hume later rejects the systems of metaphysicians altogether, and attempts to replace them, methodologically speaking, with a wholly observational account of the human mind – one that includes his explanation of human error. Indeed, this is exactly the direction in which Hume sets-off in his introduction to the *Treatise*:

> 'Tis evident, that all the sciences have a relation, greater or less, to human nature; and that however wide any of them may seem to run from it, they still return back by one passage or another… 'Tis impossible to tell what changes and improvements we might make in these sciences were we thoroughly acquainted with the extent and force of human understanding, and cou'd explain the nature of the ideas we employ, and of the operations we perform in our reasonings… In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security. (T, xv-xvi)

MALEBRANCHE & ARNAULD

A stranger influence on Hume's rejection of the traditional metaphysics is Malebranche who was himself a metaphysician. Although in the past Hume's debt to Malebranche has been less recognised than his debt to Berkeley and Locke, the influence is certainly no less direct, and it is now well recognised. Hume certainly read Malebranche[77], and indeed Malebranche's influence extends variously to Hume's treatments of association, causation, passions, the self, reason, ethics, and sympathy.[78] Indeed, as McCracken pointed out in his *Malebranche and British Philosophy,* many of Hume's arguments against metaphysics are borrowed from Malebranche almost word-for-word.[79] This is intriguing since, as McCracken puts it, no two "philosophies are finally more remote from each other than Malebranche and Hume's."[80] Malebranche's philosophy is concerned with teaching the utter dependence of all things on God, while Hume's science of man wants nothing to do with the "Supreme Being". Indeed, in the *Enquiry*, when Hume comes to discuss Malebranche's account of God and Occasionalism, Hume simply decries, "We are got into fairyland. Long ere have we reached the last steps of our theory." (E, 72)

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[77] Indeed, in the *Enquiry* Hume discussed the "*glory* [fame] of Malebranche". (E, 7) Hume also goes on to ascribe to Malebranche "that abstract theory of morals" that was later taken up "by Cudworth, Clarke, and others," (E, 197)
[78] Kail, P. J. E. "On Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche: Causation and Self" *European Journal of Philosophy*, 16:1, 2007, p. 55
[79] McCracken, Charles. *Malebranche and British Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)
[80] Ibid. p.289

Given this wide disparity between the two philosophers, what is it in Malebranche that Hume found so alluring? McCracken's answer is that Hume was interested in Malebranche because Hume read Malebranche's *Search After Truth* as an attempt to provide a catalogue of the errors to which human beings are prone, and therefore regarded it as a "good textbook for a sceptic".[81] Along these same lines, P. J. E. Kail has argued that when Hume borrowed from Malebranche he did so in a deliberate attempt to use Malebranche's own sceptical arguments against him. In other words, Hume saw that Malebranche had used sceptical arguments to explain the false ideas that stand between mankind and Christianity, and Hume intended to use these very same arguments to demonstrate the false assumptions that underlie the Frenchman's own philosophy. "Hume…*exploits* Malebranche's arguments, views and materials against this religious 'true philosophy' and in support of his own secular view of nature."[82]

To understand the relationship between Hume and Malebranche, we should first understand Malebranche's own theory of ideas. According to Malebranche, objects are known to us through ideas that we see in the mind of God. This is a strange position, and as with many strange positions in the history of philosophy, the chief argument in its favour is a process of elimination. Malebranche proposes what he takes to be an exhaustive list of the different ways that we could possibly have ideas of objects, and then, having eliminated all the other options one by one, he concludes that the remaining theory must be the correct one.[83] Only having established the conclusion in this way does he then go on to offer some supporting arguments in its favour.

Before considering the list of serious possibilities, however, Malebranche first rejects off-hand the suggestion that we might directly perceive external objects themselves. "Everyone agrees," Malebranche says, "that we do not perceive objects external to us by themselves," because it is obviously impossible that "the soul [could] leave the body to stroll about the heavens to see the objects present there."[84] Unsurprisingly, not everyone agrees. Most notably, among the objectors was Arnauld who argued that,

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[81] Ibid. 254

[82] See: Kail, P. J. E. "On Hume's Appropriation of Malebranche: Causation and Self" *European Journal of Philosophy*, 16:1, 2007, p. 55-6 (Emphasis added)

[83] Schmaltz notes, that, "In his posthumously published reading notes on the *Search,* Locke objected that there is no proof in Malebranche's text that the enumeration
of the possible ways of perceiving external objects is exhaustive. In the absence of such a proof, according to Locke, we cannot exclude the possibility that there is some way of perceiving bodies other than the Vision in God that we cannot comprehend but that an omnipotent God can bring about."
Schmaltz, T. M. "Malebranche on Ideas and the Vision in God" in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*" ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) p.70

[84] Malebranche, N. *The Search after Truth*, ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 217

…ideas, taken in the sense of representative beings, distinct from perceptions, are not needed by our soul in order to see bodies.[85]

Arnauld's chief objection is that Malebranche has one too many entities in his process. He notes that Malebranche treats ideas as a whole category of intermediary objects that stand mysteriously between our perceptions on the one hand, and objects on the other. Why not simply think that ideas are the same as perception, and then claim that what we perceive are the objects themselves?

This is an interesting objection, but it is not clear that Arnauld is really in a place to throw stones. It is true that Malebranche does indeed seem to define an idea as something separate to the act of perceiving. An idea, Malebranche tells us in the *Search*, is "the immediate object or what is closest to the mind when it perceives some thing."[86] But it is not clear that Arnauld can consistently deny this. After all, as Malebranche points out, Arnauld himself draws a distinction between (i) "the *perception* of a square" which "indicates…the soul as perceiving the square, and (ii) the "*idea* of a Square" which "indicates more directly the square insofar as it is objectively in the mind."[87] In this way, it would appear that Arnauld is committed to the same core assumption as Malebranche, namely: ideas must be distinguishable *in some sense* from the act of perceiving. As for how they are distinguishable – this leads Malebranche and Arnauld to a lengthy debate about the Cartesian puzzles we have already mentioned, and of which a full analysis is far beyond my present scope. There is, however, an important point to observe that is relevant to Hume. Arnauld's objection to Malebranche is an attempt, on his part, to downplay or conflate the distinction between the *act* of having an idea (perceiving), and the idea itself (the thing that is perceived). In so doing, Arnauld's strategy is to insist that the idea should really be explained in terms of the act of having that idea. Ideas, he argues, are not a distinct category of existence[88], but are only "modifications of the soul". In other words, Arnauld argues that the objective reality of an idea is not really distinct from the act of having the idea. This is relevant to Hume because I think we can read Hume as attempting to conflate that very same distinction, but in exactly the opposite way. Arnauld's strategy, as we saw, is to collapse the distinction by explaining the perception-as-object in terms of the perception-as-act. But Hume's strategy goes in the other direction. Hume attempts to explain the act of perceiving in terms of intrinsic features of the objects he calls "perceptions". Take, for example, Hume's conception of belief. Belief, he says, should not be explained as something superadded to an idea. The act of believing is not something ontologically different from the act of having an idea. Rather,

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[85] Arnauld, A. "*On True and False Ideas*" trans. E. J. Kremer (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) p. 18
[86] Malebranche, N. *The Search after Truth*, ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.217
[87] Arnauld, A. "*On True and False Ideas*" trans. E. J. Kremer (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990) p. 20
[88] That is the view he attributes to Malebranche

for Hume, the act of believing is explained in terms of the vivacity or liveliness of the ideas themselves. (T, 86)   Belief is not a separate mental faculty or activity, but only an idea that 'feels a particular way' (T, 103; E, 48), or has a 'great influence' on our other ideas (T 118-20). Moreover, as I will argue in Chapter Five, Hume attempts to explain many of our ideas about the activities and powers of the human mind in terms of the intrinsic features of perceptions and the observable relations between them, and in this way, once again, deliberately conflates the activity of perceiving with the perceptions themselves.

This comparison between Arnauld and Hume is instructive because Hume is sometimes accused of being oblivious to these Cartesian distinctions, and this is unfair. Richard Price, for instance, famously accused Hume of being "misled" by language into regarding the "immediate object of the mind in perception to be the same with [the act of] perception..."[89] Certainly Price is right that Hume often does conflate the two, but I'm not so sure that we should attribute this move to mere carelessness or ignorance on Hume's part.

Setting Arnauld's objection aside, Malebranche follows Descartes in thinking of ideas as objects – i.e. the things that we perceive. Taking this as a premise, he then proposes the following list of the possible ways in which we might come to have ideas:

> We assert the absolute necessity, then, of the following: either (a) the ideas we have of bodies and of all other objects we do not perceive by themselves come from these bodies or objects; or (b) our soul has the power of producing these ideas; or (c) God has produced them in us while creating the soul or produces them every time we think about a given object; or (d) the soul has in itself all the perfections it sees in bodies; or else (e) the soul is joined to a completely perfect being that contains all intelligible perfections, or all the ideas of created beings.[90]

Malebranche offers various arguments against all of the first four options (a) – (d), leaving him with (e) – which he takes to be the correct explanation. The most complex and interesting of his arguments to this end is his argument against possibility (c) – that God creates ideas of objects in each of our own souls. That possibility Malebranche rejects according to the following argument. We know that there must be an infinite array of possible ideas. We imagine a particular triangle, for instance, and we understand that by adjusting the length of its sides or angles by tiny increments,

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[89] Price, R. "Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals" 3rd. ed. (London: A. Miller, 1787) Appendix, Note C
[90] Malebranche, N. *The Search after Truth*, ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.219

there are infinitely many possible triangles that could be derived.[91] It is not that we ever actually perceive the whole infinite set of ideas – the soul is finite and cannot contain an infinite set.[92] Rather, it is only that we have a *general idea* that an infinite number of possible ideas must exist. And because we know that we humans could not possibly contain the infinite set, it must exist outside of ourselves. Moreover, even if we suppose that our souls could contain an infinite set of ideas there would still be a problem as to how the soul could choose which idea to present to itself on any given occasion.

> But even if the mind had a store of all the ideas necessary for it to perceive objects, yet it would be impossible to explain how the soul could choose to represent them to itself, how, for example, the soul could make itself instantly perceive all the different objects whose size, figure, distance and motion it discovers when it opens its eyes in the countryside. Through this means it could not even perceive a single object such as the sun when it is before the body's eyes. For, since the image the sun imprints in the brain does not resemble the idea we have of it (as we have proven elsewhere), and as the soul does not perceive the motion the sun produces in the brain and in the fundus of the eyes, it is inconceivable that it should be able to determine precisely which among the infinite number of its ideas it would have to represent to itself in order to imagine or see the sun and to see it as having a given size.[93]

The straightforward objection is that the objects themselves might determine which idea we have. Why not think that I contain within my soul an infinite stock of possible ideas of the sun (representing the sun as having various sizes, colours, etc.), and that the sun itself causes me to have one of these ideas (or some subset of these ideas) rather than all the others. Malebranche's anticipates this suggestion, and replies simply that the sun does no such thing. According to the physics Malebranche adopts from the period, there is no mechanism by which the sun could transmit intentional forms through matter to the sense organs,[94] and thus no causal process by which the sun could pick-out a particular idea from within my soul.

With these assumptions granted, Malebranche arrives at the following argument. *Somehow* I manage to choose a particular idea from an infinite set. My soul doesn't do it, and neither does

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[91] Ibid. p.226
[92] Malebranche, N. *The Search after Truth*, ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.227
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid. p.220

nature. Therefore, it must be God who does it. The soul must be "joined to a completely perfect being that contains…all the ideas of created beings."[95]

Hume, of course, does not agree with Malebranche's conclusion, but he does recognise the importance of the problems that Malebranche is attempting to solve. Hume agrees, for example, that there are infinitely many possible ideas about a triangle. Indeed, the mind, Hume tells us, has "*unlimited* power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing…ideas." (E, 47) We can mentally adjust the size and angles of a particular triangle to imagine other related ideas, and since there are an infinite number of possible modifications we could make to the size and angles of a triangle, there must be an infinite number of possible ideas. For Hume, unlike Malebranche, this does not imply that the infinite set of ideas must really exist somewhere – neither in the mind of God, nor lying latent in the soul. Nonetheless, Hume still acknowledges that there is a mystery regarding how it is we manage to produce any particular idea from an apparently infinite set. Unfortunately, rather than offering a solution, Hume simply says that it is beyond our ability to solve. He says of our apparent power to produce ideas:

> We only feel the event, namely, the existence of an idea, consequent to a command of the will: but the manner, in which this operation is performed, the power by which it is produced, is entirely beyond our comprehension. (E, 68)

One of the difficulties of Malebranche's conclusion that all ideas are in the mind of God, is that he has to come up with an explanation of how we humans make errors, without also attributing those errors to God himself. One might think, after all, that if all of our ideas are God's ideas, and some of our ideas are faulty, then it follows that some of God's ideas must be faulty. But, of course, this conclusion would be incompatible with Melbranche's belief that God is perfect, and so Malebranche is in need of a work-around. His proposed solution involves two important steps. The first is to follow Descartes in explaining error as resulting from man's imperfect judgment. That is: we have a free will, but having been tainted by the Fall in the Garden of Eden, we sometimes exercise our will poorly when we do not make decisions in accordance with Grace. The second, and more complex part of Malebranche's account, is to draw a distinction between ideas and sensations. On the one hand, ideas, as we have seen, are located in the mind of God. But sensations, Malebranche goes on to argue, are located in us. Sensations are simply modifications of our own souls.

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[95] Ibid. p.219

It is certain that the soul sees in itself, and without ideas, all the sensations and passions that affect it at the moment—pleasure, pain, cold, heat, colors, sounds, odors, tastes, its love and hatred, its joy and sadness, and all the rest…[96]

Importantly, 'the soul's sensations and passions" do not "represent anything resembling them outside the soul."[97] In other words, sensations do not give us ideas of objects. They are simply the raw sensual content we experience at any given moment.

Now, as for error: that occurs Malebranche explains when the soul, by its own free will, confuses sensations with ideas – for example if the soul judges that mere sensations actually represent real objects in the mind of God. The stick appears bent to sensation, and we make an error if we confuse our sensation of the stick for a true idea of the stick. Or, to use Malebranche's implausible example, the sun may appear to our senses as being only a few feet in diameter, and we make an error when we judge that the sun really is as it appears. Error is made possible by the fact that we are naturally led to attribute sensations to objects,[98] and error actually occurs when our imperfection leads us to judge that the sensations really do belong to the objects.

Malebranche also adds that the reason we humans are so liable to error is that our sensations and passions are more lively than our ideas. The passions "dazzle our mind with false lights," and because we are such flighty creatures, we are therefore disposed to the confusion that leads to error. This idea finds echoes in Hume who, as will discuss in the following chapter, similarly holds that sensations are more lively than ideas.

Setting aside Malebranche's core thesis that objects are known to us through ideas in the mind of God, there are many more particular features in Malebranche's philosophy that appealed to Hume, and from which Hume borrowed. Consider, for example, Hume's famous rejection of the Cartesian conclusion that each of us has a clear and distinct idea of our own self as a unified thing. Undoubtedly, Hume was heavily influenced by Malebranche in this respect:

I am unable, when I turn to myself, to recognize any of my faculties or my capacities. The inner sensation which I have of myself informs me that I am, that I think, that I will, that I have sensory awareness, that I suffer, and so on; but it provides me with

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[96] Malebranche, N. *The Search after Truth*, ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p.228
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid. p.55

no knowledge whatever of *what* I am - of the nature of my thought, my sensations, my passions, or my pain – or the mutual relations that obtain between all these things.[99]

Indeed, the similarity between Malebranche's scepticism, and Hume's later rejection of the Cartesian conclusion is astounding:

> There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self […] For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. (T, 252)

Understanding Hume's debt to Malebranche on this point is particularly important for understanding Hume's Theory of Error because, as we will discuss in Chapter Five, these doubts about the self make it difficult for Hume to subscribe to the traditional concept of agency. The difficulty arises because the traditional concept of agency appears to be a prerequisite for explaining error. The things we call "errors" – holding false beliefs, making false judgments, etc. – do not simply *occur*; they are *made*. Errors are made by agents who could and should have acted otherwise. Hume is therefore confronted by the following problem: if he cannot provide a robust concept of agency, it seems he cannot explain how errors are *made*; he could only ever have it that what we call errors are simply acts of nature over which we lack control and responsibility And that, as we will discuss later, would be a very unsatisfying account of error.

Descartes had already wrestled with these problems about agency when he recognised the power that our passions exert upon our will.[100] But the similarity between Malebranche and Hume on this point is more interesting, since Malebranche's treatment of agency anticipates not only Hume's problem with the traditional conception of agency, but also a good part of Hume's proposed solution. Let me explain. There is a problem, well known in the Early Modern period, that the traditional conception of a free will stands threatened by the fact that our ability to act freely is so often at the mercy of our passions, habits and inclinations and these, by definition, are not formed in us freely. One traditional response to this problem is to emphasise the power of man's metaphysical will, set apart from his natural flow of emotions, which can stand defiant against the flow of

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[99] Malebranche, Nicolas; *Dialogues on Metaphysics in Western Philosophy, An Anthology*, Dialogue III, ed. Cottingham, John (Blackwell: 1996) pp. 155–156

[100] "Towards the end of his life and largely through the prompting of Princess Elisabeth, Descartes came to see that not even with the best will in the world, (and being infinite, ours really is as good as it gets), can the mind easily gain dominion over itself let alone the body while it lacks direct control over its passions and sensations" Brown, D. "Agency and Attention in Malebranche's Theory of Cognition," in Emotion and cognitive life in medieval and early modern philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.218; Cf. Descartes, AT 11: 363–4

passionate stimuli. On this view, the will and the passions are thus adversaries in a sense that relates to metaphysical freedom. Another option, one that Malebranche glimpsed, is that key features of our experience of agency (for example, the orienting of attention away from direct impulses and towards reasoned deliberation) can themselves be explained in terms of interactions between passions. In this sense, our experience of choosing freely is not, therefore, the enemy of the passions, but instead something that might be explained by them (at least in part). Certainly, as we shall see, this is the view that Hume adopts, but it has its roots in Malebranche (and possibly Descartes). Take, for, example, Malebranche's discussion of the passion called "wonder". Wonder, according to Malebranche, arrests motion in the body, and in this way might be thought of as "buying time" before action – allowing the subject to consider a matter more fully in the light of reason before falling headlong into error. Moreover, since the chief object of wonder is the infinite[101], wonder turns our attention to God's grace, and this, by the will of God, steers us towards truth and away from error. As Brown comments:

> So long as wonder remains active, there is no reason to think it cannot help arrest the natural buffeting of the will by passions and provide it with a motive for deploying reason to examine the objects and ideas under consideration.[102]

Malebranche's discussion of wonder is interestingly similar to Hume's discussion of pride, which I shall examine in Chapter Five. In each case a feature of our experience of agency is explained by appealing to the associative effects of certain passions – passions less in the grip of direct stimuli, and related more closely to ideas of the self.

Of course, Malebranche does not go so far as Hume as to reject the metaphysical conception of the will entirely. In fact, if anything, Malebranche renders the metaphysics somewhat more mysterious by arguing that action is made possible by the illuminating power of God. Nonetheless, Malebranche's account of the self in which the orienting of attention and the experience of agency are explained in terms of associations between passions suits Hume wonderfully. As Passmore puts it: although Malebranche saw all things in God, "God, Hume thought, he could excise."[103]

As a general point, despite the fundamental difference in the respective conclusions of Hume and Malebranche, their stated methodologies are really quite similar. In the introduction to the *Treatise, for example,* Hume lays-down his proposed methodology with some fanfare, declaring that he will

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[101] Malebranche, N. "*The Search after Truth*", ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. 269
[102] Brown, D. "Agency and Attention in Malebranche's Theory of Cognition," *in Emotion and cognitive life in medieval and early modern philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.230
[103] Passmore, John. "*Hume's Intentions*" (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.88

rely exclusively on the introspective science of man, and that he will use it to set the traditional questions of philosophy on a "foundation almost entirely new". "There is no question of importance," Hume says, "whose decision is not compriz'd in the science of man." (T, xvi) Perhaps Hume was the first to attempt to rely *exclusively* on this method, but it should be noted that Malebranche had already told us, "Of all the sciences the science of man is the most worthy."[104]

BERKELEY

Before turning directly to Hume and more specific issues related to the problem of error, we must examine Berkeley's view, since of all the philosophers we have looked at, Berkeley is the closest to Hume on the theory of ideas and he and Berkley share a variety of broad assumptions that leads them to share a variety of problems when it comes to explaining error. Most importantly, it was Berkeley, before Hume, who extended the scepticism of Locke concerning material substance to the point of outright rejection. Berkeley's works, as Hume says in the *Enquiry*, contain "the best lessons of scepticism, which are to be found either among the ancient or modern philosophers." (E, 155)

Without matter, Berkeley's metaphysics is then left with only two categories: ideas and spirits. Berkeley rejects Locke's conception of mind-independent material substance with a series of arguments, the main thread of which is that we never *perceive* material substance.

> It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding…yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations…?[105]

Influenced strongly by Locke, Berkeley realises that this argument is open to the straightforward objection that even if the objects we perceive are indeed just ideas and sensations, this conclusion does not provide us with any reason to refute the position that our ideas could be representations of other things – things that we don't directly perceive but which resemble our perceptions – i.e. Locke's material substances. In response to this anticipated objection, Berkley introduces the "likeness principle":

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[104] Malebranche, N. "*The Search after Truth*", ed. and trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p. xxxix
[105] Berkeley, "Principles", in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957) 9 vols, Section 4

But say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure.[106]

Just why we should adopt this likeness principle, however, Berkeley does not quite adequately explain. As Winkler notices, one possible explanation is provided in his Philosophical Commentaries when Berkeley tells us that, "Two things cannot be said to be alike or unlike till they have been compared."[107] The question then turns on whether or not it is possible to compare ideas with mind independent objects, and in what is sometimes called the Master Argument, Berkeley argues that such a comparison is impossible:

…if you can but conceive it possible for one extended moveable substance, or in general, for any one idea or any thing like an idea, to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause…. But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and no body by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it: but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call *books* and *trees*, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? But do not you your self perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose: it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible, the objects of your thought may exist without the mind.[108]

Basically, Berkeley's argument is that whenever you try to compare your ideas with something else – something mind independent – you must inevitably fail, since the best you can do is compare your idea with other ideas. There are problems with this argument – most notably that Berkeley seems to conflate the tools we use to think of an object (i.e. our perceiving) and the object that is being represented (i.e. the content of our perception)[109]. It is trivially true that in the act of perceiving the

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[106] Ibid. Section 8

[107] Berkeley, "Philosophical Commentaries*"* in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957) 9 vols, 377

[108] Berkeley, *Principles*, Sections 22-3

[109] Russell made this point in his *Problems of Philosophy,* and claimed it is the ultimate fallacy upon which Berkeley's argument rests: "There is on the one the thing of which we are aware – say the colour of my table – and on the other hand the actual awareness itself, the mental act of apprehending the thing. The mental act is undoubtedly mental, but is there any reason to suppose that the thing apprehended is in any sense mental? Our previous arguments concerning the colour did not prove it to be mental; they only proved that its existence depends upon the relation of our sense organs to the physical object…Berkeley's view that obviously the colour must be in the mind, seems to depend for its plausibility upon confusing the thing apprehended with the act of apprehension.
Russell, B. "*The Problems of Philosophy*" (London: Oxford Paperbacks, 1912) p.22
See also: Pitcher, G. "*Berkeley"* (London: Routledge, 1977) p.113

objects of thought are always *thought-of* (i.e. perceived). But this does not mean that the objects themselves, things represented by the content of the thought, might not exist unperceived. We will consider these problems in the following chapter in the argot of Hume. My intention for the moment is only to trace a history – to show that these arguments find echoes in Hume. Here, for example, is a Humean version of Berkeley's argument against our ability to conceive of material substance.

> …since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows, that 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the Heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive of any kind of existence, but those perceptions which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd. (T, 67-8)

Berkeley and Hume both deny that we have coherent ideas of mind independent material substances; what is the particular problem with relation to error? The problem is that the reasons for rejecting mind-independent substance, are also reasons for doubting the "common sense" correspondence theory of error. If there are no mind-independent objects to which my ideas correspond – that is, no independent objects that my ideas are supposed to *represent* or be *about* – then it is not clear how on earth my ideas could ever be said to be true or false. The problem is: if my ideas cannot possibly be measured against something else – some independent truth maker or yard stick – then in what sense could they possibly fail?

Berkeley discusses this problem in the *Dialogues* when he has Hylas ask:

> What say you to this? Since, according to you, men judge of the reality of things by their senses, how can a man be mistaken in thinking the moon a plain lucid surface, about a foot in diameter; or a square tower, seen at a distance, round; or an oar, with one end in the water, crooked?

Berkeley's response, given by Philonous, is similar to the Epicurean line that we have already discussed – namely, that although the perceptions themselves cannot be faulty, we can nevertheless make false judgments about those perceptions if we make unjustified inferences from them.

> He is not mistaken with regard to the ideas he actually perceives; but in the inferences he makes from his present perceptions. Thus in the case of the oar, what he immediately

perceives by sight is certainly crooked; and so far he is in the right. But if he thence conclude, that upon taking the oar out of the water he shall perceive the same crookedness; or that it would affect his touch, as crooked things are wont to do: in that he is mistaken.[110]

The difference between Berkeley's version and the Epicurean version, however, is that Berkeley has no mind-independent objects, and therefore his conception of "faulty judgment" cannot be explained in its faultiness by appeal to any deeper correspondence between judgments and mind-independent facts. And moving the problem from sensation to judgment won't help. According to Berkley's theory of mind, if I make the false judgment that a round tower is square, it must be that my error is explicable solely in terms of mind-dependent things. There's nothing else to which my error could possibly refer.

Berkeley sets about meeting the challenge of explaining error in terms of mind-dependent facts by observing, simply, that when I get closer to the tower (and have a better look), I discover that the tower is in fact round, and not square as I had mistakenly predicted. The faultiness of the belief is explained in terms of that faulty prediction. Now I'm closer to the tower, I find that I am having ideas of roundness, and not ideas of squareness as I had previously thought. My former judgment was faulty because it does not cohere with these new sensations. As Berkeley puts it:

> …[the] mistake lies…in the wrong judgement he makes concerning the ideas he apprehends *to be connected* with those immediately perceived.[111]

What Berkeley has, therefore, is a theory of error that appeals not to correspondence between ideas and something else, but to *ideas themselves* and the coherence of connections between them. This is something Hume too will find very appealing, and it commits them both to all sorts of interesting problems. Not least of these problems is that without mind-independent truth makers, error appears a very flimsy notion. For example, it may be true, as per Berkeley's example, that on closer inspection the tower turns out to appear round and not square, and for this reason I think that I made an error and revise my beliefs. But am I *right* to think that I made an error? What good reason do I have to prefer these new perceptions to the old ones? By what criterion can I decide that some perceptions are better than others? I get closer to the tower to have a "better look". But if the tower is only an idea in my mind, then in what sense is the look now to be privileged?

Interestingly, Berkeley seemed to have a way out of this problem that he does not take – namely, "let God decide!" Berkley is very well known and often derided for the view that God sustains the

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[110] Berekely, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957) 9 vols, p. 238
[111] Ibid.

existence of objects when we do not perceive them. Recall, for example, the Knox limerick[112]. But if we do allow him that doctrine, then it seems he could have simply escaped the problem described above by helping himself to a version of the correspondence theory after all. That is: our ideas are false insofar as they do not correspond to the perfect ideas that exist in the mind of God. This option should remind us of Malebranche. On this view, the facts about the tower would be decided by whatever God thinks about them. If there is a difference between my ideas of the tower and God's ideas of the tower, then I must be the faulty one, because God doesn't make mistakes. There would, perhaps, remain a puzzle about how I could ever compare my ideas with God's ideas, but regardless of whether I could ever *know* about error in this sense, there would at least be an absolute fact of the matter.

But Berkeley does not take this path. He does not take it because, as Fred Ablondi puts it,

> Berkeley [does] not conceive of the relation between God's idea and our idea as one of original-to-copy…his direct realism prohibits this sort of 'it looks like x but really it's a 'y' type of scenario. All of which I am, or can be, aware is what is immediately perceived by me, and these are my sensations."[113]

God sustains the existence of objects, on Berkeley's view, but he doesn't do it in the sense that he makes the objects 'hang about' – as if material objects – whenever we are not thinking about them. This would simply be a version of the doctrine of material substances, the very thing Berkeley rejects, and he will not have it. Just *how* God sustains objects on Berkley's view is a very complex question, and somewhat beside the point for our purposes since Hume does not appeal to God's conserving role anyway. But the point to understand is simply that Berkley opts to reject the correspondence theory of error, even if that theory would appear open to him at a *prima facie* level. As Ablondi summarises Berkeley's view:

> There is no material substance with an absolute existence, that is, an existence independent of any perceiving mind, to which my sensation can be compared for accuracy, nor do God's

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[112] There was a young man who said "God
Must find it exceedingly odd
To think that the tree
Should continue to be
When there's no one about in the quad."

Reply:
"Dear Sir: Your astonishment's odd;
I am always about in the quad.
And that's why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by, Yours faithfully, God."
[113] Ablondi, F. "Berkeley, Archetypes, and Errors," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol XLIII, 2005, p. 499

ideas stand as the model to which my perceptions need to be tested for their correctness. So however Berkeley is to account for errors in perception, it cannot be due to a failure of the sensation to 'match up' to its ideal.[114]

Lastly, we should note an important point of different between Berkeley and Hume. Berkley is absolutely committed to the rejection of the correspondence theory of error in a way that Hume may not be. The reason is that Berkeley not only *doubts* the existence of external material objects, but explicitly *denies* their existence. Some commentators, in the history of Hume Scholarship, have read Hume as sharing with Berkeley in this conclusion. T. H. Green thought that in this respect, "Hume is as much a Berkeleian as Berkeley himself."[115] But Green's reading of Hume, I shall argue, is mistaken, and I cannot think of any contemporary scholar who would read Hume in this way. Just what Hume's view of external objects really is, however, is a very complex and disputable question, and it is the chief subject of the next chapter. The outcome matters a good deal, because if it turns out that Hume is merely agnostic about the existence of material substance, then it follows that Hume need not outright reject the correspondence theory as Berkeley does.

Hume certainly shares with Berkley the view that we are unable to *compare* our perceptions with a mind-independent material objects. But if it remains possible that if Hume is agnostic about material substance then, regardless of whether we know it or not, our ideas may correspond to external objects, and we might still think that error should be explained in terms of correspondence. It is crucial therefore, that we understand what Hume thinks about external objects, and where he stands in relation to the tradition that we have discussed.

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[114] Ibid.
[115] Green, T. H. "General Introduction," *David Hume: The Philosophical Works*, eds. Thomas Hill Green and Thomas Hodge Grose, Vol. 1, reprint of the London edition (Germany: Scientia Verlag Aalen, 1886/1964) p.163

CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING HUME'S THEORY OF ERROR IN THE CONTEXT OF HUME'S THEORY OF MIND

Hume has a primary goal in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* to explain the human mind in terms of observable facts about perceptions. He adopts this methodology because he wants to rid Moral Philosophy – that is, "the science of human nature" (E, 5) – from what he describes as the "noise and clamour" of metaphysics. Indeed, Hume says, the problem with the metaphysical systems is that they tend to arise,

> …either from the fruitless efforts of human vanity, which would penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding, or from the craft of popular superstitions, which, being unable to defend themselves on fair ground, raise these entangling branches to cover and protect their weakness. (E, 11)

In direct opposition to these "abstruse" speculations that pretend to uncover what cannot be uncovered, Hume makes it his stated goal to never "go beyond experience, or establish any principles which are not founded on that authority". (T, xvii) By relying only on what can be observed, he hopes to "establish…a science, which will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension." (T, xix) The study of perceptions, Hume says, is the only foundation on which human knowledge can "stand with any security." (T, xvi)

In this chapter I will explain how this methodology that underlies Hume's theory of mind also provides the context for understanding Hume's Theory of Error. This discussion will lead us to examine the complex question about how we should interpret Hume's rejection of the traditional metaphysics, and how we should understand his positive project as a response to his scepticism. More specifically, I will consider how we should read Hume's sceptical arguments concerning the existence of external objects. Getting to the bottom of Hume's view of objects is important since, as we saw in the previous chapter, the traditional explanation of error that we find, for example, in Descartes, is very tightly bound to a theory about the relationship between our ideas on the one hand, and the mind-independent objects of the material world on the other.

Ultimately I will argue that Hume is deeply sceptical of any theorising about external objects conceived as mind-independent material substances. Unlike Berkley, this does not lead Hume to deny the existence of material objects. His scepticism does, however, lead him to propose an alternative theory of objects in terms of his own empirical science of man. Once again, this is part of his overarching project to place knowledge on a more secure foundation of experience. We will

find that according to Hume's proposed alternative theory, everything is to be explained in terms of perceptions and the associative principles that govern their interactions.

My goal in this chapter is to provide a framework for understanding Hume's Theory of Error and to explain why Hume proposes an alternative theory of error at all. The answer, in short, is that Hume wants to tackle the traditional problems of error that we discussed in the previous chapter in just the same manner that he tackles the other traditional problems of philosophy: by relying only on facts that can be confirmed by observing one's own perceptions.

TWO THEORIES OF ERROR

Let us begin by contrasting two theories of error. According to the first view I have in mind, error involves a lack of correspondence between my perceptions and the world. I may, for example, believe that Earth is larger than Jupiter, but it isn't. That belief doesn't correspond to facts about the external objects themselves, and that's why it's false. Planets are things that exist in space, independent of my mind, and their respective volumes are what they are regardless of what I happen to think about them. On this view, the world itself serves as a standard of correctness for my beliefs and judgements. If they don't match the world, then my judgments are mistaken – and that's that. I will call this view the "correspondence" theory of error, and use that term to include any explanation of error that relies on the relationship between perceptions on the one hand, and external mind-independent objects on the other.

Now, there is a difficulty with the correspondence theory of error – one that Hume was keen to stress, and one that I intend to explore in this chapter: we never directly experience the external objects themselves. If Hume is right about that, a puzzling question arises: how can I meaningfully appeal to the world as the standard for determining whether my beliefs are true or false? Everything of which I am immediately aware is a perception of some sort. I cannot, when it pleases me, transcend my own experience and apprehend the mind-independent objects of the external world. For this reason, I have no way to *compare* my perceptions with anything that isn't also one of my perceptions. And if this is right, then it is good reason to doubt the common sense view of error, since it means we have no way to judge the faultiness of perceptions by checking how they relate to something of a different kind. If it is *impossible* to make a comparison between perceptions and things that aren't perceptions (i.e. external objects), then we better not hang too much hope on a theory of error that relies on such a comparison. Or so the argument goes.

A second and alternative theory of error is that instead of explaining error in terms of the relations between perceptions and external objects, we should explain it in terms of the relations between

different perceptions themselves. On this view, which we've already seen advanced by Berkeley, the reason that my belief about the planets is faulty is that it does not fit or cohere[116] with my other experiences. For example, I have read scientific books; I have seen diagrams depicting the relative sizes of Jupiter and Earth; I could, perhaps, use a telescope and learn how to make the necessary calculations for myself. And if I really did believe that Earth is larger than Jupiter my friends would all insist that I am mistaken. All of these activities involve building a body of experience. In Hume's language, they involve having a variety of perceptions. And according to the alternative view of error, it is because my faulty belief does not fit with this wider body of experience, that it is indeed mistaken.

Contra Berkeley, however, it is important to note that adopting this alternative explanation of error need not entail idealism. The position in question is only that everything we *know* about objects is gleaned from the content of perception. This is an important distinction to make, since even if Berkeley is right that everything we know is a perception of some sort, it remains possible that there are other things that we do not know – mind-independent external objects, perhaps. Moreover, it remains possible that whether I know it or not, my beliefs sometimes correspond to these external objects and sometimes fail to correspond, and error may consist in exactly such a failure to correspond. It should therefore be recognised that the two theories of error outlined above are not mutually exclusive. For example, it might be argued that the correspondence theory of error is a theory about what error *is*, and the second alternative view is a theory about how we come to detect our errors. This is just the difference between a metaphysical explanation of error and an epistemological one. In what follows, however, I will argue that Hume adopts the alternative explanation both as a theory of what we *know about error*, and also as an explanation about what error *is* or at least what "error" *means*. This is not because Hume outright denies the possibility that there are mind-independent objects which our perceptions represent, truly or not. It is because Hume also has a positive project: to completely redraft the meaning of various traditional concepts by relying only on the introspective "science of man", for the purpose of putting human knowledge on a more secure footing.

In order to explain this method, I propose to compare Hume's Theory of Error with Hume's account of the traditional account of substance as substrata. As we will see, when Hume rejects this conception of substance it is not because he denies the *possibility* that such a substratum may exist. What he denies is that we ever perceive a substratum on the grounds that we never have an impression of any such thing[117], and he infers from this sceptical conclusion that we must not mean

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[116] Of course, these words, "fit" or "cohere", will themselves need to be explained
[117] "We have no idea of substance distinct from a collection of particular qualities…" (T, 16)

by "substance" what the metaphysicians had thought we mean[118]. But Hume does not stop there. He then goes on to provide an *alternative* explanation of substance[119] – one that is described in terms of perceptions and the relations between them, and one that does not rely on the existence of a substratum. And this process is the blueprint for the whole Humean method. Indeed, it is the same process he follows when it comes to his treatments of causation and the self. In each case Hume rejects the traditional conceptions on the grounds that we never perceive any such thing (i.e. no necessary connection, no unified-soul stuff), and then goes on to completely redraft the traditional terms in light of his own science of man – that is, in light of the study of perceptions. What I will argue, is that Hume's Theory of Error should be understood in this same way. Hume rejects the traditional correspondence theory of error on the grounds that we cannot perceive any relationship between perceptions and anything that is not a perception. But this doesn't lead him to deny the possibility of correspondence, nor is it the end of his story. Hume also offers the beginnings of a positive theory about error – one that is cashed-out in terms of his naturalistic science of man, and one that he intends to replace the traditional conception that he rejects. I propose to follow that theory to see where it leads.

In any case, to piece of all this together we will need to look more closely at Hume's rejection of the traditional metaphysics, and how he attempts to re-explain the traditional concepts in his own naturalistic argot. All of that I intend to explain in what follows. Before proceeding, however, let me note right from the outset that the alternative theory of error that I attribute to Hume – *Hume's Theory of Error* – raises all sorts of difficult and possibly damning questions, and in later chapters I will explore these. For many reasons it is worth doubting Hume's theory, and it is not my primary intention to defend it. What I do claim, however, is that getting to the bottom of Hume's Theory of Error will prove revealing – both of Hume's wider philosophy, and also of the tradition to which Hume responds. My overriding intention is to understand the account of error to which Hume does subscribe, or to which he could subscribe given his theory or mind. In accordance with how seriously you regard Hume's philosophy, you may variously regard the resulting theory of error as a legitimate theory, a troubling reductio, or just another nail in the coffin of Hume's crazy empiricism. I don't mind – Hume is interesting and important, regardless.

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[118] "…nor have we any other meaning when we talk or reasoning concerning it." (T, 16)

[119] "The idea of substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them, but which we are able to recall, either to ourselves of others, that collection." (T, 16)

THE EXEGETICAL PROBLEM CONCERNING EXTERNAL OBJECTS

Understanding Hume's view about external objects is difficult, because Hume often appears to contradict himself. In Section VI of his *Treatise*, for example, he tells us that, "nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas" and that it is "impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions." (T, 67) This passage certainly seems to suggest that Hume must be a phenomenalist: that he must regard objects, or at least *everything we can know about objects*, as perceptual phenomena, and not as things in themselves. If we read this passage alone, it might seem obvious that Hume must follow Berkeley in thinking that error cannot possibly refer to correspondence between perceptions and external material objects, since perceptions are all that there is, or at any rate the only things we ever know anything about. But if we do try to read Hume this way, we will be puzzled when he goes on to speak of "objects we do not see or feel" (T, 74), of "senses changing their objects" (T, 11), and even of our ability to "go towards a conception of external objects" by "…forming a relative idea of them". (T, 68) These latter passages seem to suggest that Hume must be a realist of some sort, and that he could quite happily adopt the correspondence theory of error after all.

So how are we to make sense of these apparently conflicting statements? On the one hand, Hume seems to affirm that perceptions are all we can know, and on the other, he seems to allow that we can talk and know about external objects that are not themselves perceptions.

PHENOMENALISM

Traditionally, Hume has most commonly been construed as a phenomenalist. This is how Jean Bernard Merian and other members of the Prussian Academy interpreted Hume[120]; the German idealists[121] read him this way; and it seems this is also Russell's interpretation[122]. And not without reason – the phenomenalist reading really does seem to capture a large part of what Hume himself says. In rejecting reason as the guiding principle of human life, Hume is viewed as striving to reduce all of our knowledge to its base in experience. And since, for Hume, it is 'obvious' that 'nothing is ever really present' (T, 67) in our experience but perceptions, it should follow that he cannot have any conception of objects that goes beyond perceptual phenomena. This is why Jean

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[120] Merian, J, B. "On the Phenomenalism of David Hume" trans. Peter Briscoe., *Hume studies*, Vol. 23, no.1, (April 1997) pp. 178-19

[121] As Majorie Grene points out in her essay, *The Objects of Hume's Treatise*, The *Philosophisches Journal*, for example, is full of articles by Fichte (under the pseudonym Anaesidemus) about how wonderful it is that all we know is our own minds, and our own minds as little inner bits." (p. 163)

[122] See: Russell, B. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1940); and Russell, B. *Human Knowledge: It's Scope and Limits* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948)

Bernard Merian, in his *Sur le phenomenisme de David Hume*, claims to coin the term 'phenomenalism' to describe Hume's position in which "all that we feel, imagine, think, know, is reduced to phenomena"[123]. Merian's reading of Hume has him arguing that "subject and substance …are terms empty of meaning, pure creations of reason …that it pleases us to name improperly with these fine names"[124]. And in support of this reading, we find passages in the *Treatise* such as this one:

> We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we talk or reason concerning it. (T, 16)

Many have followed Merian in reading Hume in this way. Maurice Mandelbaum, for instance, says that Hume is the arch subjectivist where 'subjectivism' is defined as "the thesis that all we can know on the basis of sense perception are our own states of mind."[125] Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* says that "Hume banished the conception of substance from psychology as Berkeley had banished it from physics."[126]

There is, however, a serious difficulty facing the phenomenalist reading. The difficulty is that Hume quite frequently, explicitly, and (apparently) deliberately, admits the existence of objects that are not themselves perceptions. Indeed, in light of these observations, there has been in recent years an increasing tendency in Hume scholarship to think that the phenomenalist reading must be mistaken. In order to get to the bottom of this exegetical problem, we need to begin with Hume's theory of mind as laid down in the first parts of his *Treatise*.

GROUNDWORK

Hume groups all the 'objects of the mind' – that is, everything that is "ever present to the mind" (T, 67) – under the banner 'perceptions'. And perceptions, he says, are of two types: *impressions*, that are lively or 'vivacious' perceptions; and *Ideas* that are less lively copies of impressions. It is worth noting here that Hume has borrowed the theory of ideas directly from Locke, but altered his terminology. Locke had called all of the 'objects of the mind' '*ideas*' (instead of perceptions), but Hume rejected this terminology, and, in so doing, declared that he was "restoring the word, idea, to its original sense, from which Mr *Locke* had perverted it." (T, 2)

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[123] Merian, J. B. "On the Phenomenalism of David Hume" trans. Peter Briscoe., *Hume studies*, Vol. 23, no.1, April 1997, p.179
[124] Ibid, p.180
[125] Mandelbaum, M. "*Philosophy, Science, and Sense Perception: Historical and Critical Studies*" (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1964)
[126] Russell, B. "*A History of Western Philosophy*" (London: Routledge, 2000) p. 636

It will be useful, for now, to think of Hume's *impressions* as being our immediate and vivid sensation, passion, or emotion, as it first strikes us; and his *ideas*, conversely, as being fainter copies of these impressions that arise before the mind whenever we recall those impressions and think or reason about them. As it turns out, Hume cannot consistently distinguish between impressions and ideas in this fashion, since, for reasons that become apparent later, he is forced to maintain that the distinction is to be cashed-out solely in terms of properties of the perceptions themselves, and not via an appeal to causal explanations such as this one. But we need not dwell on this point at present. For now, let us simply note that (i) Hume is grouping 'everything that is present to the mind' under the banner 'perceptions'; (ii) that there are two kinds of perceptions – impressions and ideas; and that (iii) ideas are less vivid 'copies' of impressions.

Each of the two kinds of perception can be further divided into two sub-categories: those that involve *sensation* (e.g. seeing red, or feeling cold), and those that involve *reflection* (e.g. having desires, passions, or emotions). In this manner four types of perception are derived: (i) impressions of sensation; (ii) impressions of reflection; (iii) ideas of sensation; and (iv) ideas of reflection. Hume observes that the chronology in which these various perceptions strike the mind is (i),(iii),(ii),(iv). It works, he says, like this: a person experiences a particular sensation – say, feeling cold. Of this impression a copy is taken in the form of an idea about it, and this idea of sensation remains after the lively sensible impression has ceased. Whenever this idea of 'cold' is recalled it produces, in turn, a new impression of desire or aversion; or hope or fear. This is called an *impression of reflection*. Again, a copy of this impression is taken by the mind in the form of a fainter idea; and this idea can be recalled via the memory or imagination and, perhaps, gives rise to further ideas, and so on.

It is obvious why this theory of mind so readily lends itself to a phenomenalist reading. If everything that we can possibly know is reducible to sense experience, then our knowledge of external objects must also be reducible. We cannot possibly contend that we can know about objects that are beyond our ability to experience. And in support of the phenomenalist reading we can find a multitude of passages in the *Treatise* and *Enquiry* that seem to confirm it:

Hume speaks, for example, of objects and impressions being equivalent:

> …no object can appear to the senses; *or in other words, that no impression can become present to the mind*, without being determin'd in its degrees both of quantity and quality. (T, 19 – italics mine)

The phrase, "in other words,' seems to imply that the terms "objects" and "impressions" are, on Hume's view, the very same thing. To say that an object appears to the senses is the same thing as saying that an impression becomes present to the mind. Hume often talks in this way. Take, for example, this passage in his treatment of extension:

> …My senses convey to me only the impressions of colour'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner. If the eye is sensible of any thing further, I desire it may be pointed out to me. But if it be impossible to shew any thing farther, we may conclude with certainty, that the idea of extension is nothing but a copy of these colour'd points, and of the manner of their appearance. (T, 34)

Notice the strength of the claim. It is not only that our impressions function as an intermediary between ideas and extended objects, but that the idea of extension is *nothing but* the impressions of colour'd points.

And then there are other passages that would seem to put the case for reading Hume as a phenomenalism beyond any doubt:

> …'Tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. (T, 67)

But however emphatic these passages are, Hume also gives us good reason to question them. He talks, for example, about objects that are absent from our senses:

> We readily suppose an object may continue individually the same, tho' several times absent from and present to the senses… (T, 74)

And he even speaks quite explicitly about external objects influencing external organs:

> Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. (T, 275)

Indeed, this passage would appear to be a direct reference to Descartes' division between three kinds of ideas in the *Meditations*: ideas that arise within the mind itself, ideas that arise from within the body (appetites, pain), and ideas that arise from external objects.[127] But how could the phenomenalist reading of Hume possibly allow him that sort of reference? How, for example, could an object be "absent from our senses" if an object is only a bundle of sensations? What on earth is

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[127] Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) II, p. 26

the difference between an idea that arises "within the soul" and an idea that arises from "external objects", if there are really no such thing as external objects, and all ideas of objects are only perceptions in the mind?

REALISM

Problems with the phenomenalist reading have been suggested to us by many authors including, for example, Norman Kemp Smith[128], John Passmore[129], Robert Fendel Anderson[130], Galen Strawson[131], John P. Wright[132], and in various ways by all of the advocates of what is now called "the New Hume"[133]. These writers have each sought to demonstrate that the phenomenalist reading rightly interprets only one of several themes contained in Hume's *Treatise*. It is true, they say, that Hume is seeking to reduce all of our inferences to their base in immediate experience. But he is not, as has been traditionally thought, thereby doing away with the external world. Indeed, they point out that Hume frequently talks about the external world, and often without any apologies or even a hint of evidence that he finds himself guilty of contradicting his own perceptual doctrine. In fact, in a particularly scrupulous survey, Majorie Grene sets about counting and categorising Hume's use of the word 'object' throughout his work, and finds exactly one-hundred-and-twenty-three occasions in the *Treatise* in which "objects" clearly refers to *external objects[134]*. The sheer weight of numbers leads her to write:

> There is surely [for Hume] a real world we are all living in, and are part of. Only we are treating that world here in terms of moral rather than natural philosophy; we are starting with our perceptions, not with the anatomy or physiology that would attempt to describe their causes.[135]

This, therefore, is one of the alternative readings of Hume that has recently come into vogue. Hume, it is emphasized, is undertaking an investigation into the 'science of man' and is beginning not from the physiological realm, but from the psychological one. His intention is not to conclude, as the phenomenalist would have it, that statements about objects can only ever be statements about perceptual phenomena. Rather, Hume's intention is to undertake an investigation of cognition that

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[128] Smith, Norman Kemp. "*The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines*" (London: Macmillan, 1941)
[129] Passmore, John. "*Hume's Intentions*" (London: Duckworth, 1980)
[130] Anderson, R. F. "Hume's account of the Knowledge of External Objects" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Vol. 13, Oct 1975, pp. 471-480 and
Anderson, R. F. "*Hume's First Principles*" (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966)
[131] Strawson, G. "*The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume*" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)
[132] Wright, J. P., "*The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*" (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983)
[133] See: "*The New Hume debate*" eds. Rupert Read and Kenneth A. Richman. (London: Routeledge, 2007)
[134] Grene, Majorie. "The Objects of Hume's Treatise," *Hume Studies* Vol. XX, Number 2, (Nov 1994) p. 170
[135] Ibid., p. 164

begins from the assumption that perceptions are the only objects that can enter into our psychology, and then strives to explain all of our inferences and beliefs solely in these psychological terms. Within this project, everything physical or physiological has to be constructed from human perceptions. But Hume's project itself does not seek to show that external objects are non-existent. Rather, Hume's work is said to bypass or ignore the concerns of the physical natural sciences.

Other writers, however, have gone even further. Passmore, for instance, contends not only that Hume cannot be a phenomenalist, but that he is, in fact, an *anti-phenomenalist* since, "he regarded phenomenalism as a variety of 'excessive scepticism', the sort of scepticism which no one can persistently maintain."[136] True, Passmore admits, Hume *is* a phenomenalist in a narrower sense, in which we cannot *know* anything but perceptions "in that restricted sense of 'know' in which it means 'be certain of, without any risk of error'." But supporting conclusions upon this type of reasoned certainty is not Hume's primary concern. Passages such as this one suggest that Hume is too practical for that:

> 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, 152)

This leads Passmore and others to contend that Hume "believed in the existence of both material objects and of perceptions, and thought that perceptions were 'appearances of' material objects."[137] Proponents of this realist reading happily admit that our belief in material objects cannot be defended against scepticism by reason, but this, they contend, says nothing against the belief itself and everything against the supposed sovereignty of the reasoned scepticism that is intended to refute it. Berkeley's scepticism can be brought to bear against the Lockean belief in objects; but for Hume "something like Lockeanism must be true even though it is not rationally defensible."[138] Berkeley's subjectivism, Hume says, "produces no conviction". (E, 155)

A NEW READING OF HUME?

What is certainly right about the realist reading is that Hume allows that some beliefs that cannot be justified on rational grounds can nonetheless be recommended on other terms, and the belief in external objects is one of these. This is part of his overarching contention that custom, and not reason, is the guiding principle of the human mind. He tells us, for instance, that although the sceptic cannot defend his beliefs by reason, nature has not left the matter to this choice.

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[136] Passmore, John. "*Hume's Intentions*" (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.90
[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.

> Thus the sceptic still continues to reason and believe, even tho' he asserts,
> that he cannot defend his reason by reason; and by the same rule he must
> assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho' he cannot
> pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has
> not left this to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great
> importance to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations. (T, 187)

There is serious disagreement in the contemporary literature, however, as to how we should interpret the sense in which Hume recommends believing in external objects. Richman summarises this division in his introduction to *The New Hume Debate.*[139]

> A puzzle in the interpretation of Hume, perhaps the main puzzle, is the fact
> that Hume appears to do the following: (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), and (c) hold that the beliefs in objects and causes do not have the
> grounding in our impressions. Defenders of the old reading of Hume reject
> or qualify (a), arguing either that Hume does not endorse these beliefs, or
> that he endorses them in a way that does not commit him to the truths of the
> beliefs. …New Humeans accept (a), and either reject or modify (b) or (c).[140]

This debate is very complex, and involves many subtleties. The crux of the whole matter, however, in my opinion, can be reduced to the following question: when Hume recommends the natural belief in external objects[141], is this recommendation supposed to be a *justification* of that belief, or does he simply endorse the belief in external objects on pragmatic grounds – that is, *in spite of the fact that the belief lacks justification* – either because it has good consequences, or because we cannot help but believe it? This question is important because it will decide whether Hume should be read as defending some version of realism. And deciding that question, in turn, will help decide the nature of Hume's Theory of Error. For example, if Hume intends his recommendation of the natural belief in external objects as a full-blown philosophical justification of that belief, then we should certainly read Hume as a realist. And if we do read Hume as a realist, then we might also read Hume as subscribing to the traditional correspondence theory of error that relies on the existence of real external objects. In that case, we might say that Hume thought the traditional metaphysicians were

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[139] The New Hume Debate is focused primarily on the question of causation, but for the purpose of this chapter I will concentrate on the sections relating to Hume's belief in external objects

[140] Richman, K. A. "Debating the New Hume" in *The New Hume Debate,* revised ed., eds. Kenneth A. Richman and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2007), 3

[141] Or the natural belief in real causes

right, but for the wrong reasons. That is, They were right to argue that there is an external world beyond perception, and right to think that error occurs when our perceptions fail to properly represent the external world, but wrong to maintain that any of those truths can be defended by reason. On the other hand, if Hume's recommendation of the natural belief in external objects is merely pragmatic, then we might say that Hume only recommends realism in the sense that it is sometimes good for us to believe things that aren't necessarily true. On this reading, we could take Hume more seriously when he tells us that perceptions are all that we ever know. We would not describe Hume's position as realism in any proper sense, even though it is happily conceded that Hume frequently recommends realism in a pragmatic sense.

Deciding the question is difficult because the text itself isn't clear. Indeed, depending which passages you emphasise, it is not difficult to make a prima facie case for either side. For example, on the one hand, Hume says that we believe in the external existence of objects merely because it "sets us at ease" to believe it (T, 215). We believe it, that is, as the result of the natural inclination to avoid cognitive dissonance.

> Nature is obstinate, and will not quit the field, however strongly attack'd by reason; and the same time reason is so clear in the point that there is no possibility of disguising her. Not being able to reconcile these two enemies, we endeavour to set ourselves at ease as much as possible, by successively granting to each whatever it demands… (T, 215)

But on the other hand, there are passages in which Hume appears to offer something closer to full-blown justification for our natural beliefs. Not least is the famous passage in which Hume tells us that reason not only *is* but *ought to be* the slave of the passions. (T, 415) Kemp Smith's reading of that passage extends the normative claim about passions to natural beliefs as well. He paraphrases: "Reason is, and ought to be, 'the slave' *of the natural beliefs*."[142] If this reading is right, then Hume not only thinks that our beliefs must be *explained* in terms of passions and sentiments (that much is uncontentious), but also maintains that beliefs can be *justified* by natural principles. Beliefs *ought* to result from natural passions, and since our belief in external objects results from natural passions, the belief in external objects must be a good and proper belief. Indeed, Kemp Smith says that, for Hume, nature acts as the "arbiter" of our belief.

> In the difficulties and complexities of man's life, irrevocably natural, and yet in such large part also conventional, he stands in need of a twofold philosophical discipline—a sceptical discipline to open his eyes to the deceptiveness of the mistaken endeavours, both moral and

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[142] Smith, Norman Kemp. *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941) p.131 (emphasis added)

speculative, into which his specifically human powers are ever tending to betray him, and a positive naturalistic philosophy to mark out the paths upon which he can confidently travel without any such attempted violation of his human nature, and in the furtherance of its essential needs. In this twofold task it is Nature, through the beliefs to which it gives rise, which acts as arbiter. It defines the conditions of health, and the regimen suitable for its maintenance. Scepticism serves as an ally, but in due subordination, not as an equal.[143]

Thus, nature not only provides a justification for belief, but nature is in fact reason's senior partner when it comes to belief justification. Only where "reason is lively, and mixes itself with some [natural] propensity," can we assent to that belief. "Where it does not," reason can never "have any title to operate upon us." (T, 270)

But, once again, it is not obvious how Hume intends us to interpret this relationship between rational justifications on the one hand and natural propensities on the other. Kemp Smith is right that for Hume natural propensities are required for the process of justifying beliefs, and right that Hume thinks nature trumps reason in this respect. But the difficult question remains: does Hume also intend to *assert the truth* of the beliefs that result from those natural propensities?

For my part, I am inclined to side with the Old Humeans who think that Hume's recommendation of the belief in external objects does *not* commit him to the truth of realism. I think the textual evidence falls quite clearly on the side that the belief in external objects is something we simply "take for granted".

> Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy. For this reason I rely entirely upon them; and take it for granted, whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, that an hour hence he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world…" (T, 218)

For Hume, the only real recommendation of this natural belief is that it has pleasing pragmatic consequences.

> Tis happy…that nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time, and keeps them from having any considerable influence on the understanding (T, 187)

"If I must be a fool," says Hume, then "my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable." (T, 270)

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[143] Ibid. 131-2

I think we might compare the sense in which Hume recommends realism to the sense in which a doctor recommends a placebo. A placebo may cure a man if he believes it will, and for that reason the doctor may be justified in prescribing him a sugar pill. But this is not because the doctor believes sugar pills are real medicine; it is because she thinks fostering the false belief in the patient will incur a good result. The reason is pragmatic, and so it is with Hume's position. It would be a mistake to think that because Hume recommends believing in the existence of external objects on natural terms, that he must therefore think that realism is true or justified in anything but the pragmatic sense. Consider, for example, the passage in Book I Section VII, in which Hume describes how confounded he becomes when confronted with the "clear" but "sceptical" dictates of reason: that there is nothing rational about the belief in external objects. If Hume really believed that naturalism or custom offered a proper way out of this dilemma – a full-blown philosophical justification of the belief in external objects – then he would have no serious cause to be upset that the belief cannot also be justified by reason. And yet we find that Hume is quite upset. Indeed, he moans for many pages about the "spleen and indolence" he feels at the hands of the sceptical conclusions of reason. Finally, at the end of this tirade, he arrives at a cure for his depraved sceptical condition: to expect a victory from "the returns of a serious good-humour'd disposition" and not "from the force of reason". (T, 270) [144] But this is not at all what we should expect if Hume were really attempting to *justify* our belief in terms of nature, in a way that might guarantee or even support its truth. Instead, the belief functions as something more like a natural cure for "philosophical melancholy":

> Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium. (T, 279)

Alternatively, one might argue that Hume regards the belief in external objects as being natural in the sense of being literally unavoidable[145]. In that case, the belief in external objects would not be like a prescribed placebo, since it's not something that we could choose to do. R. J. Butler apparently took this view:

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[144] Of course, Hume is careful to add that he has no desire to let the simplicity of natural conviction overtake him completely, and remove all sceptical doubts from his mind. He feels a "curiosity" and "ambition" arise in him, and he wants to contribute to "the instruction of mankind". These are "sentiments" that "spring up naturally" in his present disposition, and he would be a "loser in point of pleasure" if he did not yield to them. This, he tells us, is the origin of his philosophy. (T, 271)

[145] Kemp Smith says that the belief in external objects is, for Hume, "among the facts of experience that cannot be questioned." In support of this reading, he quotes from T, 187: "'Tis in vain to ask whether there be body or not." But, as I will discuss in the next section of this chapter, this cannot be the correct reading of that passage since Hume himself asks the question – viz. whether or not there is body. Hume's point in that passage is only that the question of external objects cannot be answered definitively.

Hume indicates that natural beliefs are non-rational, that they have a certain degree of force, *and that they are unavoidable.*[146]

This reading might be supported by a passage in which Hume tells us that there are some beliefs without which human nature would "immediately perish and go to ruin".

> I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistable, and universal…And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular…The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; but on the contrary are observ'd only to take place in weak minds, and being opposite to the other principles of custom and reasoning, may easily be subverted by a due contrast and opposition… (T, 225)

Later, in the Enquiry, he says that we "always" suppose an external universe.

> It seems evident that men are carried by a natural instinct or pre-possession to repose faith in their senses, and that without any reasoning, or even almost before the use of reason, we always suppose an external universe which depends not on our perception but would exist though we and every sensible creature were absent or annihilated (Enquiry, 151)

But Hume cannot really regard the belief in external objects as literally unavoidable, since he, himself, on quite a few occasions, entertains the possibility that it's not true. In fact, directly after that passage from the Enquiry we find:

> But this universal and primary opinion of all men is soon destroyed by the slightest philosophy, which teaches us that nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image… (E, 152)

Rather, if we examine the text more carefully we find that the sense in which Hume regards the belief in external objects as unavoidable is only the sense in which it is unavoidable in the "common operations" of life. Hume admits that "the reader's opinion at the present moment," may well be that there are no external objects. But "an hour hence," when he leaves the study, and

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[146] Butler, R. J. "Natural Belief and the Enigma of Hume" in *Archiv fur Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1960, pp. 73-I00.

forgets about philosophy, "he will be persuaded there is both an external and internal world…" (T, 218) Hume's position is simply that we cannot maintain the sceptical position for long. [147]

But even if Hume *were* to regard the natural belief in external objects as literally unavoidable, he needn't consequently think the belief is also true, since an unavoidable belief is not at all the same thing as a true belief. Possibly Hume could make that inference if he also believed that the dictates of nature are always good. If so, he could argue: (1) nature makes us believe in external objects; (2) nature always makes us believe things that are true, (3) therefore, the belief in external objects must be true. Wright implies this argument may be open to Hume when he observes that, "Hume appears to prefer a sense of the word 'natural' which requires that what is natural to man be both beneficial and truth-preserving."[148] And Wright is correct that Hume usually talks of nature in this beneficial way. Indeed, as a point of style, Hume often personifies nature as a thoughtful and considerate force.

> Nature has proceeded with caution in this case… (T, 118)

> Nature has, therefore, chosen a medium… (T, 119)

> Nature is always too strong for principle… (E, 168)

> Nature has not left this [the belief in body] to his choice, and has doubtless esteem'd it an affair of too great importance. (T, 187)

In this sense, Hume aligns not only with the philosophical tradition exemplified by Descartes, but also with the normative view of medicine in the 18th C. A close acquaintance of Hume, for instance, Dr John Gregory, observed "that nature is good at doing things that are good for human beings, maintaining health and correcting its loss." Gregory regarded health, therefore, as "an example of a normative dimension of nature that is directly observable."[149] Similarly, as we have seen, the *Treatise* contains passages in which Hume talks of health as if it were the norm of nature. (T, 270)

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[147] Winkler notes that, "There are two ways in which a belief might be inescapable: it might be absolutely irresistible, or it might be necessary for life." Hume denies both of these. Nonetheless, he certainly subscribes to a weaker version of the second thesis: viz. that *most of the time* (i.e. in the common operations of daily life) the belief in external objects is necessary for life.
Winkler, K. P. "The New Hume," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4, p.562
[148] Wright, J. P., "*The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*" (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983) p.229; See also p. 225 – Wright compares Hume's conception of natural belief to that of Malebranche. "Malebranche and Hume hold that in what nature teaches us there is some truth contained."
Kemp Smith similarly says that the belief in external objects, because it is motivated by nature, has "all the *de facto prescriptive rights* which Nature, in thus predetermining us to them, has conferred upon them." p.125 (emphasis added)
[149] McCullough, L. B., et al. 2008. "Scientific and Medical Concepts of Nature in the Modern Period in Europe and North America," *Philosophy and Medicine*, Vol. 97, 2008, p.164

But although Hume *generally* regards nature in this beneficial light, he is also quite prepared to admit that it gives rise to faulty beliefs as well as veridical ones:

> …one who is tormented he knows not why, with the apprehension of spectres in the dark, may, perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too: But then it must be in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, tho' it be contrary to health, the most agreeable and most natural situation of man. (T, 225)

And elsewhere, in the *Dialogues*, Hume makes it quite clear that nature is not always benevolent. Rather, on a "more narrow" inspection we find that nature appears to be a contemptuous creature, who supplies creatures insufficiently with the means to sustain their own happiness.

> Look round this universe. What an immense profusion of beings, animated and organised, sensible and active! You admire this prodigious variety and fecundity. But inspect a little more narrowly these living existences, the only beings worth regarding. How hostile and destructive to each other! How insufficient all of them for their own happiness! How contemptible or odious to the spectator! The whole presents nothing but the idea of a blind Nature, impregnated by a great vivifying principle, and pouring forth from her lap, without discernment or parental care, her maimed and abortive children![150]

This context of this passage is quite different from the *Treatise* or the *Enquiry*. Hume's intention in that passage is to demonstrate a difficulty with the Argument from Design for the existence of God.[151] It is however an evocative example of what I think is fairly obvious anyway – that Hume is deeply sceptical of the Cartesian conception of nature as the product of a perfect God, and moreover he is quite prepared to entertain the possibility that nature is completely blind. Anyone who reads Hume's account of nature in the *Treatise* as providing some sort of providential foundation on which to justify the truth of our natural belief in external objects, is going to have a tough time reconciling that reading with Hume's more general scepticism about providence. To be sure, Hume often speaks of nature *as if* it were providential, but that is not the same thing as thinking the nature really is providential. I think Richmond is right to observe that,

> In describing nature in this way…[Hume] meant merely to point out that certain aspects of the natural world are fortuitous enough for us to be *as if* there were some intentional wisdom

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[150] *Dialogues*, Philo to Cleanthes, Part XI

[151] Philo: "Is the world, considered in general, and as it appears to us in this life, different from what a man, or such a limited being, would, beforehand, expect from a very powerful, wise, and benevolent Deity? It must be strange prejudice to assert the contrary. And from thence I conclude, that however consistent the world may be, allowing certain suppositions and conjectures, with the idea of such a Deity, it can never afford us an inference concerning his existence."

behind them, although, the view continues, there is no reason to believe that such wisdom actually exists.[152]

In any case, from a methodological point of view, Hume cannot consistently maintain that natural beliefs are always true, since he maintains that *all* beliefs are natural, and would be committed to the absurd conclusion that all beliefs are always true. As we will explore in Chapter 4, Hume's whole theory of belief is decided entirely by natural facts about how an idea feels. (T, 94-95) And all beliefs, for Hume, are decided in this naturalistic way.

For all of those reasons canvassed above, I cannot accept the New Humean reading of Hume as a realist, (even a sceptical one). We all agree that Hume thinks that we *do* believe in external objects as a sheer matter of fact, and also that he *endorses* that belief – at least in the pragmatic sense (because it "sets us at ease" to believe it, and because, most of the time, nature simply compels us to believe it). But having acknowledged those facts I think it would be a mistake to infer from these uncontentious conclusions that Hume must therefore be a realist in anything more than the pragmatic sense.

Nonetheless, I acknowledge that there are many arguments against this position that I cannot address here, and to which, by omission, I may have done injustice. In light of that fact, I offer the following deflationary consideration for any New Humean who finds herself unable to agree with my reading. The outcome of the New Hume debate will not affect the primary conclusion that I wish to establish in this chapter, which is simply that Hume's Theory of Error does not *rely* on the existence of external objects. According to my own reading:

(a) Hume does not argue for the truth of realism
(b) Hume does not subscribe to the traditional correspondence theory of error that relies on the truth of realism
(c) Because Hume is sceptical of realism, Hume redrafts traditional concepts in a way that does not rely on the truth of realism
(d) Aligned with this general strategy, Hume's Theory of Error does not rely on the existence of external objects (or correspondence between perceptions and external objects)

If the New Humeans are right, (a) is false, and consequently (b) is probably false too. If Hume really does think that the belief in realism is a true belief, then he might just as well think that the correspondence theory is correct as well. As I said, I think that premise is false and Hume has no

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[152] Richman, K. "*Nature and Natural Belief in Hume 's Science of the Mind*" (PhD dissertation, Rutgers University, 1997), p. 185

reason to accept the conclusion. But, even if I'm wrong about that, the only conclusions for which I argue in this chapter – the only ones that will be necessary to support the following chapters – are (c) and (d). What I claim is that regardless of whether or not Hume is a realist about external objects, he certainly attempts to offer a theory of error that does not *rely* on the truth of realism.

RELATIVE IDEAS & AGNOSTICISM REGARDING EXTERNAL OBJECTS

For all Hume's talk of natural belief, there is one strange passage in which he seems to allow that we can form ideas of external objects, even on *rational* grounds. We will consider that passage here for two reasons: firstly, because Hume's account of relative ideas (of which this section is the primary example) provides a useful addendum to the proceeding discussion about Hume's treatment of realism; secondly, and more importantly, because this passage demonstrates that Hume clearly allowed that we can speak meaningfully about the *possibility* of external objects. Relative ideas are therefore significant for Hume because they describe the limits of what we can meaningfully say about external objects, and also, I contend, the limits of what we might say about the correspondence theory of error.

We find the passage in the section of the *Treatise* entitled "*Of the idea of existence and external existence*". It is quite long, but worth quoting in full. I will call the two paragraphs [A] and [B] for ease of reference.

> [A:] Now since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind; it follows, that 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible: Let us chase our imagination to the Heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive of any kind of existence, but those perceptions which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd.

> [B:] 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 67-8, emphasis added)

This passage should immediately remind us of the difficulty of understanding Hume. In [A] he denies that we can ever escape the 'narrow compass' of perception (so much the better for a

phenomenalist reading). Yet in [B] he says that we can form a 'relative idea' of objects even if we can't comprehend them (so much the worse). There is certainly some kind of change or softening going on between these two paragraphs. Passmore observes this shift of view between [A] and [B]. Speaking of the first paragraph, he writes,

> This is high eloquence; taken at its face value it would mean that 'existence' is just another word for 'perception', and 'non-existence' not a word for anything.[153]

If that were so, it would be literally meaningless to say that there is anything "existent" that is not a "perception". But, says Passmore, now commenting on the transition between paragraphs,

> …we must ignore the rhetoric and concentrate on the phrase 'specifically different from ideas.' For Hume goes on to admit that we can form a 'relative idea' of objects by attributing our perceptions 'different relations, connexions and durations.' We cannot think of anything except as being a perception of some sort, but we can suppose that certain of our perceptions are systematically interconnected.'[154]

But if Passmore's view is that these two paragraphs involve a transitional 'softening', Robert Fendel Anderson contends that they involve something more like a complete change of view. Speaking of the two paragraphs, Anderson writes,

> Passmore is assuming that "them" in the second sentence of the final paragraph, refers to perceptions. I observe, however, that in the first sentence "them" refers to external objects. It seems more probable, therefore, that "them" in the second sentence refers to external objects also. If so, then Hume seems there to be saying that we attribute a variety of relations, connections and durations to external objects. Or perhaps "them" in the second sentence refers to both external objects and perceptions. If so, then Hume may there be saying that we attribute different relations, connections and durations to external objects than we do to perceptions, thus apparently allowing that we do have some conception of external objects as distinct from perceptions.[155]

Anderson's observation – that the word 'them' in the second sentence of [B] cannot refer only to perceptions – is an important insight. Once we realize that this is so, it seems that when Passmore says, "We cannot think of anything except as being a perception of some sort, but we can suppose

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[153] Passmore, John. "*Hume's Intentions*" (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.99
[154] Ibid.
[155] Anderson, R. F. "Hume's account of the Knowledge of External Objects" *Journal of the History of Philosophy* Vol. 13, (Oct 1975) p. 473

that certain of our perceptions are systematically interconnected",[156] he isn't going far enough. True, it is the case for Hume that we cannot think without perceptions – indeed, to think, for Hume, is just for perceptions to be present – but it does not follow that we cannot think of anything 'except as *being* a perception'.[157] There is a difference between thinking *with* perceptions, and thinking *about* perceptions.[158] This is an interesting distinction, since it allows the possibility, as against the phenomenalist reading, that we can form ideas about external objects after all. Indeed, despite the fact that we cannot "pretend to comprehend the objects themselves" we can nevertheless form an idea of external objects as being things that are related to our perceptions, but are not themselves perceptions. In other words, everything that is present to the mind is a perception, and the content of every perception derives entirely from impressions, but, using these tools, we can perceive that there may be other kinds of objects even if we cannot 'comprehend' (Hume's word) those objects themselves.[159] This is the sense in which Winkler explains that for Hume, "The mind's reach (though not its grasp) extends beyond our ideas."[160]

This, I think, is a fairly natural way of reading [B]. That is, although we cannot reasonably pretend to 'comprehend' external objects, we can conceive of their possibility. What we have is an idea of external objects as being *things* (we know not what) that may be related to our perceptions in some way. In Hume's words, "We are oblig'd…to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative." (T, 241) How does this work? Flage explains the point nicely:

> …One must have a clear and distinct positive idea of both the *relation* that provides the basis for the relative idea and of the relation that obtains between that idea and the unknown *relatum.* In Hume's parlance, both the idea that provides the basis for the relative idea and the idea of the relation must be copies of impressions…But since in many cases the presumed relation obtains between a positive idea and a non-ideational entity, the question *whether* the relation in question obtains may remain open, a point Hume stressed.[161]

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[156] Passmore, J. "*Hume's Intentions*" (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.99
[157] Ibid. Italics mine.
[158] Richard Price accused Hume of failing to recognise this sort of distinction when he said that Hume was misled by language into taking the "immediate object of the mind in perception to be the same with perception itself."
Price, R. "*Review of the Principal Questions and Difficulties in Morals*" 3rd. ed. (London: A. Miller, 1787) Appendix, Note C
[159] Strawson also emphasises the importance of this passage: "We cannot "comprehend" external objects in any way . . . Nevertheless (Hume seems to be saying), even if we cannot form any idea of external objects that counts as positively contentful on the terms of the theory of ideas, we can still form a 'relative' idea of such objects. It is a merely relative idea because we cannot in any way conceive of or descriptively represent the nature of an external object as it is in itself (when it is supposed specifically different from perceptions); we can conceive it only indirectly.
Strawson, G. "*The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume*"(Oxford: Clarendon Pressm 1989) p. 50-51
[160] Winkler, K. P. "The New Hume," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 11, No. 4, p.553
[161] Flage, D. "Relative Ideas Re-viewed," in *The New Hume Debate,* revised ed., eds. Kenneth A. Richman and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2007) p. 146

As for how external objects may be related to our perceptions, Hume doesn't say in this passage, but given other things he says throughout the Treatise, causation seems a likely candidate. He says on a few occasions, for example, that we think of perceptions as being *occasioned by*, or *arising from*, external objects.

> …external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion. (T 67)

> Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. (T 275)

Another possibility is that Hume may have thought that external objects could be conceived as providing a "support" to perceptions. If so, then Hume would be following Locke who had already described relative ideas of substance in exactly those terms. As Flage summarises:

> Locke's discussion makes several points clear. First, substance *as such* is known solely on the basis of a relation, the relation of inhesion or support, which obtains between a positive idea conceived as a quality of a thing and the thing of which it is a quality. Second, this relation of support is central to one's relative idea of substance in general. Finally, this relative idea provides one with no understanding of the intrinsic properties of a substratum.[162]

But Hume does not actually adopt this view, and "support" is not listed in Hume's seven categories of relations. (T, 13-14) Hume's reasons for this omission are likely to be similar to those of Berkeley who had already pointed out a difficulty with Locke's theory of substances providing a support for modes. Simply put, the objection is that Berkeley has no idea what "support" is supposed to mean.

> I desire that you would explain what is meant by matter's *supporting* extension: 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 accident, and what is meant by supporting them. It is evident *support* cannot here be taken in

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[162] Flage, D. "Relative Ideas Re-viewed," in *The New Hume Debate,* revised ed., eds. Kenneth A. Richman and Rupert Read (London: Routledge, 2007) p. 142

its usual or literal sense, as when we say that pillars support a building: in what sense therefore must it be taken?[163]

Hume, perhaps, is somewhat more lenient than Berkeley when it comes to allowing the possibility of relations we know nothing about. "I am, indeed, ready to allow that there may be several qualities both in material and immaterial objects, with which we are utterly unacquainted." (T, 168) But Hume certainly shared Berkeley's scepticism of Locke's theory of substance. Hume's point is that, *whatever* relation we imagine as pertaining between external objects and perceptions, our imaginings will "be of little consequence to the world," since, if external objects do exist and do bear relationships to our perceptions, we still know nothing at all about them. (T, 168) The problem with relative ideas of external objects is that they contain very little content:

> Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable something…a notion so imperfect that no sceptical will think it work while to contend against it. (E, 155)

Regardless of this scepticism, what is important about Hume's notion of relative ideas is that he allows that we can *conceive* of external objects, and we can therefore meaningfully discuss them. We might, therefore, compare Hume's idea of external objects to the sense in which an agnostic may speak meaningfully about the possibility of a creator. On the agnostic's view the name "Creator" may not necessarily refer to a deity that actually exists, but it can nonetheless be used as a meaningful term. For example, the idea of a Creator can be thought about in terms of attributed properties – for instance, as an omnipotent being who created the universe.[164] In a similar sense, Hume thinks that we can meaningfully talk about external objects in terms of their possible effects on our perceptions. At one point he appears to deny this when he says, "Tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not*?" (T, 187) But he certainly does not mean that it is impossible to ask the question. Hume cannot mean that the question is meaningless, since Hume himself asks it. (T, 67-8) Rather, the point is just that the metaphysical question about whether there really are external objects cannot be decided by perception, and perceptions are all that we have. It is therefore not worth *dwelling* on this metaphysical question, (i.e. 'Tis in vain…), because we simply cannot answer it.

However, in terms of providing an account of error, Hume's agnosticism about external objects means that the following position is open to him: *if* external objects exist, then error may consist in

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[163] Berkeley, G. *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, Eds. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957) II, 47-48

[164] Indeed, the "meaningfulness' of the term is what the ontological argument takes as its first premise.

a lack of correspondence between our beliefs and those objects. One way to understand this implication is to realise that in a limited sense Hume can meaningfully state the conditions for a distinction between appearance and reality. "Appearance", for example, would refer to perceptions; "reality" would refer to the object (I know not what) in my relative idea of external objects. Using this distinction, Hume could then explain that certain kinds of error involve mistaking the way things appear for the way they really are. But, as we have seen, Hume regards this manner of thinking in terms of relative ideas as being limited in the extreme. Although we can imagine what such a distinction would entail, we have no (rational) reason to suppose that one half of the distinction, "reality", exists at all. And even if it does exist, we have no way to compare our perceptions to it. It would be a mistake, therefore, to think that Hume's theory of relative ideas allows him any serious recourse to the traditional correspondence theory of error.

In any case, it is not Hume's general strategy to rest content with this sort of conditional and highly sceptical conclusion. Hume's primary project in the *Treatise* is the positive endeavour to explain the human mind in natural terms and without reliance on the traditional metaphysics. He thinks that the mind can be explained on "a foundation entirely new", and sets about doing just that. Indeed, Hume thinks that the study of the mind (the study of perceptions) is the only foundation on which our philosophical system could "stand with any security." (T, xvi) The argument I am making in this chapter is that Hume's Theory of Error should be understood in accordance with this methodology firmly in mind. Hume first gives us reason to be sceptical about the traditional correspondence theory of error, and then goes on to provide an alternative theory to take its place. To understand exactly how that two-stage methodology works, I propose to compare Hume's Theory of Error to Hume's treatment of substance.

HUME'S THEORY OF SUBSTANCE

According to the traditional account of substance, (found, for example, in Locke *via* Descartes *via* the Medievals *via* Aristotle,) substances are objects that can exist independently of anything else. What these various historical accounts have in common is that substances are thought of as independent substrata for the qualities we perceive, and on which the existence of these qualities depend, but which do not themselves depend upon anything else for their existence. The traditional account of substance is basically the common sense view that the ordinary objects of the world are not merely collections of the qualities that we perceive, but are mind-independent *things* that *have* these properties.

Hume, however, thinks that the traditional conception of substance as mistaken, since he argues that we never perceive substances construed in this way.

If [the idea of substance] be convey'd to us by our senses, I ask, which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceiv'd by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so of the other senses. But I believe none will assert, that substance is either a colour, or a sound, or a taste. The idea of substance must therefore be deriv'd from an impression of reflection, if it really exist. But the impressions of reflection resolve themselves into our passions and emotions; none of which can possibly represent a substance. We have, therefore, no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we talk or reason concerning it. (p, T63)

Hume thus argues that there is no metaphysical distinction to be drawn between the qualities we perceive, and the objects to which the qualities belong. He denies the traditional distinction between *substances* (that are independent existences), and *modes*[165] (the existence of which depends upon the existence of a substance.)

But although Hume denies the traditional metaphysical distinction he maintains that there is a distinction to be drawn in other terms. His point is that substances cannot be what we thought they were, but they are something nevertheless – "substance" and "mode" are meaningful terms. This is typical of Hume's style as Kemp Smith rightly observes:

It can…be maintained as a general principle that Hume never denies the existence of any conception which has been the subject of controversy. …The fact that there has been controversy in regard to an idea shows, he holds, that the idea is there to be discussed.[166]

Hume's own distinction between substance and mode is expressed as the distinction between two kinds of complex idea. The ideas of substances and modes, he says, are both collections of simple ideas united by relations, and "have a particular name assigned to them, by which we are able to recall …that collection." (T, 16) But there is a difference in the way that we treat the names[167] that signify substances and those that signify modes. Whereas the qualities that form our idea of a *substance* are commonly referred to an 'unknown *something*' in which they are supposed to be united, the particular qualities that make up *modes* are not likewise considered as united together. For example, our ideas of gold (a substance) and beauty (a mode) are similar in that both ideas can be completely reduced to simpler impressions of particular qualities. But the difference is that the

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[165] Or "accidents" (The terms 'mode' and 'accident' have a complex relationship in the tradition – especially in Descartes.)

[166] Smith, Norman Kemp. "*The Philosophy of David Hume*" (London: Macmillan, 1941) p. 254

[167] The fact that we are talking about *names* is not unimportant here. The language is borrowed from Locke. Locke tells us for example in *Essay II. 16. 5* that simple ideas "put together without a *name* or mark to distinguish that precise collection will hardly be kept from being a heap in confusion."

complex idea of a substance (gold) is comprised of qualities that are considered as *inhering together in something*, while our idea of a mode (beauty) is comprised of a bundle of qualities that are not considered as inhering together in this way. The idea of gold is formed from simpler ideas of malleability, solidity, 'yellowness', etc., just as our idea of beauty is formed from simpler (though perhaps less explicable) ideas of qualities. But the qualities that make-up our idea of gold differ from those that make-up our idea of beauty, in that the qualities that comprise our idea of the former are thought to *inhere together in something* – even if it is impossible for us to have an idea of that 'something' itself.

The important fact for Hume is not that the qualities which make-up a substance *actually* inhere in something, but that they are *considered* as inhering in something. Ideas of substances, unlike ideas of modes, involve *unification*, "the principle of union being regarded as the chief part of the complex idea." (T, 16) This is a psychological observation about how we *consider* objects, and not a speculative conjecture about their metaphysical status.

A direct consequence of Hume's method of demarcation between substances and modes is that while our beliefs about substances are open to revision, our beliefs about modes are not. In the case of substances it is possible that we may find that they have some previously undiscovered quality, but this is impossible in the case of modes.

> …our idea of gold may at first be a yellow colour, weight, malleableness, fusibility; but upon the discovery of its dissolubility in *aqua regia*, we join that to the other qualities and suppose it to belong to the substance as much as if its idea had from the beginning made a part of the compound one. […] That this cannot take place in modes, is evident from considering their nature. The simple ideas of which modes are formed, either represent qualities, which are not united by contiguity and causation; …or if they be all united together, the uniting principle is not regarded as the foundation of the complex idea.

Hume concludes, 'the reason is obvious why [modes] cannot receive any new idea, without changing the name, which distinguishes the mode.' This reason, not as obvious as Hume intends, is that the meaning of the name that picks out a mode is identical to the unique set of qualities that comprise the complex idea. If we change any of the qualities in any way, we simply have a new quality.

In general, Hume's strategy is to retain the psychological facts about the ways we consider objects without retaining the metaphysics that was traditionally thought to explain these facts. Hume thinks that, as a point of methodology, we can't possibly get beyond perceptions – and so our explanations

about objects must be perceptual all the way down. But even on these terms, Hume's theory of substance retains many of the features that the traditional notion of substance was supposed to explain: e.g. the ability of objects to persist through change, the ability to take-on or lose qualities, the ability to be *considered* as an external object, etc.

Consider passages from Locke and Hume side by side:

Locke: "Ideas of substances are such combinations of simple ideas as are taken to represent distinct particular things, subsisting by themselves; in which the supposed or confused idea of substance, such as it is, is always the first and chief."[168]

Hume: "The idea of a substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a *collection of simple ideas*…the difference betwixt these ideas consists in this, that the particular qualities, which form a substance, are commonly refer'd to an *unknown something*, in which they are supposed to inhere …the principle of union being regarded as the *chief part* of the complex idea." (T, 16 – emphasis added)

It is remarkable how obviously Hume borrows from Locke here in both style and content. It is not because the theories themselves are same. In fact, as we know, they are very different. But what is revealing about the similarity of the passages is that Locke and Hume are clearly trying to answer the very same problem. The problem is why some of our ideas (which we call modes) seem to rely on other of our ideas (which we call substances).

In this same sense, Hume's treatment of substance is also consistent with theories dating as far back as Aristotle. Take, for example, the Aristotelian theory concerning substance as drawn up in chapter 4 of his *Categories*. Aristotle tells us that there are ten headings by which we can categorize an object or quality; namely: *substance*, *quality*, *quantity*, *relative*, *place*, *time*, *situation*, *habit*, *action*, and *passion*. His intention here is to examine the "heads under which *nouns* and *adjectives* fall."[169] What Aristotle observes is that the existence of the latter nine (of these categories) are always considered as dependent upon the existence of the first. For example, we never find that there is a *quantity* without it being a *quantity of something*. There is no such thing as redness unless there is some object that is red. And the same is true of the other terms of the latter nine categories: actions, for example, cannot exist unless they are performed by *a* substance. It makes no sense to speak of there being a "jumping" unless *something* has jumped; no sense to speak of a "thinking" unless someone has thought. Building upon these observations, it seemed natural to the philosophers of the

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[168] Locke, *Essay* II. 12. 6
[169] Normore, C. "Accidents and Modes" in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, Vol. 2. eds. Robert Pasnau and Christina Van Dyke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 674-685 (Emphasis added)

Middle Ages, to come to think of substances as real mind-independent things that underlie the qualities we perceive. In order for a quality or an action to exist, there must be a real object (a substance) that *has that quality* or *performs that action*. But, interestingly, in the *Categories*, Aristotle does not make these additional metaphysical assumptions.[170] And insofar as Aristotle makes only *psychological* observations about our language and our ideas, Hume can happily agree with him. Of course, I am not saying that Aristotle and Hume really are alike in this sense. Certainly Aristotle was a metaphysician, and made all sorts of metaphysical assumptions (for example in Book Z of the Metaphysics). But the point I am making is that part of the driving impetus behind the long tradition concerning the metaphysics of substance was a series of observations about the way that we treat language. Aristotle was *right* that we treat language in this way, and Hume agrees with him. Where Hume disagrees is with the metaphysical conception of substance that Aristotle and others invoked to explain these facts. But as far as the facts themselves go, Hume admits that they are indeed there to be discussed and explained.

It's not clear whether Hume really can help himself to the psychological explanations without accepting some sort of metaphysics. It is interesting to note, however, that some prominent modern philosophers have effectively tried to do the same thing. Take, for example, Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity,* which can be surely be used as something of an exemplar. In that essay, Kripke argues that we can speak meaningfully about objects and their properties in the absence of metaphysical substrata. Indeed, he writes:

> Philosophers have…asked, are these objects behind the bundle of qualities, or is the object nothing but the bundle? Neither is the case; this table is wooden, brown, in the room, etc. It has all these properties and is not a thing without properties, behind them; but it should not therefore be identified with the set, or 'bundle' of its properties…[171]

What's interesting is that this passage is often regarded as a criticism of Hume, since Kripke rejects not only the traditional conception of substances, but also the (apparently Humean) conception of objects as bundles. But, in reality, Kripke and Hume have a lot in common. Recall that for Hume ideas of substances, unlike ideas of modes, are considered as "*unions*". These unions can take on new properties and yet still be considered ideas of the same object. Although Hume explains objects in terms of bundles of perceptions, he insists that we have a natural ability to refer to these bundles

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[170] Although, it should be noted that Aristotle makes all sorts of metaphysical assumptions elsewhere – for example, in Book Z of the *Metaphysics*. Aristotle's explanation of substance in the *Categories* is purely negative (a substance is 'neither in a subject nor said of a subject'). In the *Metaphysics,* however, Aristotle goes on to explain what substances actually are in terms of their being hylomorphic compounds of form and matter. Obviously, Hume cannot follow Aristotle to these conclusions.

[171] Kripke, S. "*Naming and Necessity"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1972) p. 52

as persisting unions, even if the unions themselves are not real metaphysical things. This, perhaps, is a very mysterious thing for Hume to say, but virtually the same view is found in Kripke, and it is equally mysterious:

> Don't ask: how can I identify this table in another possible world, except by its properties? I have the table in my hands, I can point to it, and when I ask whether it might have been in another room, I am talking, by definition, about *it*.[172]

In fact, Kripke's description of how we refer to objects that are neither "bare particulars" nor merely "bundles of qualities" is almost exactly the same as Hume's description of how we refer to "unions" that are neither substances nor distinct collections of properties. In both cases what we have is the ability to refer to a particular object that acts like a traditional substance but isn't a metaphysical substratum. This is fascinating, I think, since it means that Kripke, (who is often said to have "revived metaphysics") and Hume, (who "rejected all metaphysics"[173]), in fact share some very crucial assumptions.

Another way of thinking about the positive phase of Hume's argument regarding substance is to realise that Hume offers a theory about how we come to form ideas of objects. By discussing perceptions, he attempts to explain the psychological mechanisms which lead us to think of some ideas as being unions (substances) and some ideas as being dependent on those unions (modes). This theory of objects is important for understanding Hume's Theory of Error, because it allows Hume to retain the straightforward piece of common sense that errors involve objects. In other words, if I am wrong about the size of Jupiter, then there must exist a thing called "Jupiter" to be mistaken about. But if the existence of Jupiter is not to be explained in terms of an external substance, then what on earth is it?

The answer, for Hume, is that ordinary objects are explained in terms of our experience of bundles of different perceptions. For example, our idea of Jupiter may include various ideas and impressions such as: being a gaseous sphere, coloured red, orange and white, and moving around the Solar System in a particular ellipse. At least, thinking in these simple terms is useful as an example. More precisely, we should say that on Hume's view our idea of Jupiter is to be explained as a drastically complex interrelated system of ideas and impressions, all of which are weighted in various degrees according to their respective vivacities and the relative strength of their relationships to other ideas within the bundle. But regardless of whether we think of bundled objects as very complex or quite

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[172] Ibid.
[173] "Of Hume we may say not merely that he was not in practice a metaphysician, but that he explicitly rejected metaphysics." Ayer, A. J. "*Language, Truth and Logic"* (London & New York: Penguin, 2001) p.40

simple, the theory is the same: Hume explains ordinary objects as bundles of perceptions connected by relations and associations.

Hume goes into some detail explaining the principles of mind that govern the way our ideas of objects are bundled together. Firstly, there's the fact that I can't form my idea of Jupiter however I like. For the most part, my ideas are bundled together for me, by nature. I don't, by any deliberate mental effort, carve up the world I experience into particular objects. Rather, there is a sense in which the world of experience arrives in my mind pre-carved. We don't often observe Jupiter, so let's take a more familiar example to illustrate the point – the moon. Imagine that one evening I have the impression of a crescent-shaped heavenly body and, on a later evening, I observe a disc-shaped heavenly body. On Hume's view, it is because of customary principles of association that this process leads me to have just one complex idea of a unified object: *the moon*. Each of the impressions I receive are different. For instance, they are separated from one another by time, and also differ in respect to certain qualities (e.g. their shape). There may be, therefore, no strictly logical reason that I should think of them as being unified – as being the very same thing. But, nevertheless, the imagination, by natural principles of association, is "*convey'd* from one idea to another" and 'connects' the two ideas into a union. (T, 11)

These natural associative principles that govern the way we form ideas of objects are, Hume says, are just as powerful and instructive as Newton's laws that govern the physical universe. These psychological principles are "…the principles of union or cohesion among our simple ideas" (T, 12) and,

> …in the imagination supply the place of that inseparable connexion, by which they are united… Here is a kind of attraction, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to shew itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are every where conspicuous; but as to its causes, they are mostly unknown, and must be resolv'd into *original* qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain. (T, 12-3)

If our ideas of objects were not "guided by some universal principles" our impressions and simple ideas would be "loose and unconnected". "Chance alone wou'd join them; and 'tis impossible the same simple ideas should fall regularly into complex ones (as they commonly do)." (T, 10)

Hume's own example of an object formed in this way is his 'chamber', and in this case the natural principle of association is resemblance.

> I survey the furniture of my chamber; I shut my eyes, and afterwards open them; and find the new perceptions to resemble perfectly those which formerly struck my senses. This resemblance is observ'd in a thousand instances, and naturally connects together our ideas of these interrupted perceptions… (T, 204)

The crucial point to note here is that while the perceptions are 'interrupted' the object is not. Hume's idea of the chamber is fluid and uniform; it is an idea of a particular object that changes over time. And this fact is explained as the result of observable associative principles that govern the mind.

Incidentally, this reading of Hume has him sounding a bit like Kant: the unconsciously "attributed" relations that Hume describes as "*original* qualities of human nature" (T, 13) are quite similar to Kant's transcendental preconditions for experience. In each case we have the world of experience being shaped by the mind in the very act of perception. If so, it seems possible that Kant is closer to Hume than he is willing to admit. (Perhaps, in 'waking' Kant 'from his dogmatic slumbers,'[174] Hume also dressed him, made him breakfast, and stuck around to buy him lunch.[175])

In any case, Hume allows that we experience objects as opposed to loose and unconnected perceptions, and it is important to acknowledge this. It will save us from the temptation to infer from Hume's assertion that perceptions are all that we know, that he must also deny the existence of ordinary objects. Neither Hume nor Berkeley denies the existence of the things we perceive in everyday life – tables, chairs, wine, whatever. They both simply think that the ordinary objects of experience are perceptions, or bundles of them. Perceptions are all that we experience, and since we evidently experience ordinary objects, it follows (so the argument goes) that ordinary objects must *be* perceptions. Once again, this is not to say that there can't possibly be external objects to which our perceived objects correspond, and it is certainly not to say that we don't often think about objects *as if* they have an external existence. It is only to say that the ordinary objects of experience – the things we perceive – are explained by Hume in terms of bundles of perceptions.

Having recognised Hume's theory of objects, we can now see how Hume's Theory of Error can survive one naïve criticism: that without realism, having a conception of error is flat-out impossible – that it can't even get off the ground. Rescher, for example, argues that having a conception of

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[174] Kant, I. "*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*" ed. Paul Carus (Chicago, 1949)
[175] Despite the legend to which I refer, there is some doubt that Hume really had such direct influence on Kant. Hume's *Treatise* was not published in German until after Kant's first *Critique* was published, and by all accounts Kant did not read English. [For a discussion of this topic, see: Anderson, A. "The Objection of David Hume," in *Rethinking Kant*, Vol. 2, ed. Pablo Muchnik, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010) (the first chapter of "Kant's Awakening" – book in progress)]
In any case, I am not arguing in this instance for any historical connection; I am only pointing out the similarity between the two views.

error must necessarily involve "subscribing to some sort of realism" on the grounds that "…the oriental mystic who denies reality altogether and sees everything mundane as an illusion," must regard error as "non-existent or, if you prefer, all-pervasive – for lack of an authentic reality to contrast it with."[176] But, as we have seen, Hume's Theory of Error survives this criticism, since his scepticism concerning metaphysical realism does not commit him to asserting that the world is therefore a "non-existent" "illusion". Hume's arguments against the traditional metaphysics are not arguments against the existence of ordinary objects. Hume emphatically allows that there are objects to be mistaken about. He simply argues that we should not explain these objects in terms of a mysterious substratum that we do not perceive.

HUME'S ALTERNATIVE THEORY OF ERROR

Having better understood Hume's theory of substance, we are now in a position to ask more precisely what can be deduced regarding Hume's Theory of Error – the discussion of which will occupy the remainder of this dissertation. Let me first quickly summarise the important conclusions of the proceeding discussion.

1. Hume thinks that perceptions are the only things we can possibly experience.
2. Hume does not deny the possibility that there are things other than perceptions – external objects.
3. Hume does, however, deny that we know anything at all about these external objects, if indeed they exist.
4. Hume rejects the traditional account of substance. He thinks that we never perceive a substratum.
5. Having rejected the traditional metaphysical account, Hume does not rest content with having argued for the negative conclusion. He thinks that the traditional problems of philosophy are there to be solved.
6. Indeed, the whole point of the *Treatise* is that Hume thinks the human mind, and many of the problems of philosophy, can be explained in terms of his "science of man". In other words: he wants to redraft the traditional concepts in terms of perceptions and the relationships between them, without any reliance on the traditional metaphysics.
7. Hume's conception of substance is one such example. Substances are explained in terms of our natural tendency to treat some objects as "unions", and in terms of the conceptual roles those ideas play in our system of ideas. Hume explains how we form ideas of objects according to natural principles of association that govern our perceptions.

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[176]Rescher, N. "*Error*" (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 80-1

What I argue is that we should read Hume's Theory of Error as explicable according to this same general strategy. If that fact is not already obvious, let me state the argument with reference to the conclusions above, marking the numbers of those conclusions in brackets as they become relevant.

Hume points to a difficulty in the correspondence theory of error in the sense that [1]: we cannot possibly compare our perceptions with external objects to see whether they correspond to a mind-independent reality. It is not merely that Hume thinks we cannot possibly know whether or not our perceptions correspond to the properties of external objects. Regarding the possible existence of mind-independent objects, [2]: Hume remains an agnostic. But because [3]: we cannot possibly know anything about external objects, [4]: Hume would refuse to affirm the correspondence theory of error in the same sense that he refuses to affirm the traditional conception of substance (and the traditional conceptions of necessary connection and the unified self) – we never perceive any such thing. But [5]: Hume cannot rest content with the negative sceptical conclusion. Hume never rests content with that sort of scepticism. He thinks that [6]: the human mind should be explained according to the science of man, and he thinks that error is one facet of the human mind that needs explaining. As we saw in the cases of substances and objects, [7&8]: Hume has a general strategy of attempting to redraft the traditional metaphysical conceptions in naturalistic terms. Moreover, in so doing, Hume takes himself to be explaining what the traditional terms really *mean* – and even what those concepts really *are* insofar as we can attempt to answer such a question.[177]

> The idea of substance as well as that of a mode, *is* nothing but a collection of simple ideas. (T, 16)

> "What we call a mind," says Hume, "*is* nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions." (T, 207)

And this methodology provides the context for understanding Hume's Theory of Error. According to that theory, error must be explained by relying only on our perceptions and the relationships

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[177] Of course, Hume does not claim to have penetrated into the "secret nature" or "ultimate principles" of those concepts. That is not the sense in which he claims to have explained them. In fact, Hume thinks the discovery of "ultimate principles" is impossible, and indeed argues that the attempt to discover ultimate principles is one of the chief defects of the traditional metaphysics. Hume gladly owns that his explanations are merely collections of observable facts. "But if this impossibility of explaining ultimate principles should be esteemed a defect in the science of man, I will venture to affirm, that 'tis a defect common to it with all the sciences, and all the arts, win which we can employ ourselves, whether they be such as are cultivated in the schools of the philosophers, or practised in the shops of the meanest artizans." (T, xvii)

between them. How far can Hume take such a theory? How successful could it possibly be? These are the issues that I intend to explore throughout the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PHYSIOLOGICAL CAUSES OF ERROR

> Hume does nothing whatever to solve, why association sometimes operates and sometimes fails to operate." – Passmore[178]

When Hume comes to discuss the fact that we make errors of association, he does something quite strange: he provides a physiological explanation. This is not *historically strange* (physiological explanations of errors of judgement, particularly those influenced by the passions were popular in the 17th and 18th Centuries[179]), nor is it very different from the kinds of explanations we find appealing today. It is strange because it seems to oppose the method to which Hume, at all other times, officially adheres. Indeed, as we saw in the proceeding chapter, Hume's general mode of operation is to explain the various activities of the human mind by taking perceptions and associations as basic. Simple perceptions, and the principles of association that guide them, are always the *explanans* and never the *explanandum*. They are the tools by which everything else is to be explained. Why do we believe in substance? Why do we believe in the self? Why do we uphold certain principles of morality? All of these questions are to be decided by pointing to certain features of perceptions and the associations that guide them. Even the concepts of space and time are explained in the language of ideas. On more than one occasion Hume affirms that perceptual explanations are the only proper kind of explanations to be had, (since "nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions," and "external objects become known to us only by those perceptions they occasion."). But even if we set these passages aside, we still find that Hume generally wants nothing to do with physiological explanations.

> 'Tis certain, that the mind, in its perceptions must begin somewhere; and that since the impressions precede their correspondent ideas, there must be some impressions, which without any introduction make their appearance in the soul. As these depend upon natural

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[178] Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p108

[179] Descartes: "It is not [the figures] imprinted on the external sense organs, or on the internal surface of the brain, which should be taken to be ideas—but only those which are traced in the spirits on the surface of the gland H (where the seat of the imagination and the 'common' sense is located)." (AT XI:176, CSM I:106)"

Malebranche: "However it sometimes happens that persons whose animal spirits are highly agitated by fasting, vigils, a high fever, or some violent passion have the internal fibers of their brain set in motion as forcefully as by external objects. Because of this such people *sense* what they should only *imagine*, and they think they see objects before their eyes , which are only in their imaginations. (Malebranche, N. *The Search after Truth*. trans. T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1980) 88, II.I.i)

Even Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, describes the Devil's tempting of Eve in the garden of Eden as an effort to pervert the operations of her otherwise pure 'animal spirits': "Squat like a toad / Assaying by his devilish art to reach / The organs of her fancy / …he might taint / *Th' animal spirits* that from pure blood arise'"

and physical causes, *the examination of them wou'd lead me too far from my present subject*. (T 275 – emphasis added)

> 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, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. *Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose.*" (T 84 – emphasis added)

It is surprising, then, that in just[180] this case – when it comes to explaining *error*s of association – Hume decides that he "must have recourse" to a physiological explanation. We find this case in *Book I, Part II, Section V*. Hume has been discussing several of our ideas concerning the relations between objects.

> 'Twould have been easy to have made an imaginary dissection of the brain, and have shewn, why upon the 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 make 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 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 shew, if there was occasion. (T 60-1)

Why is it that Hume thinks he needs the animal spirits here? Why, specifically, when it comes to explaining the causes of faulty associations, does he not just say what he said regarding the causes of original impressions – that it is impossible to decide and that it is not his concern anyway?

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[180] This is not the only time Hume refers to physiology. In fact, he talks about it quite often. But this is the only case in which it seems to be related to explaining his theory of ideas rather than merely discussing science. I will explain what I mean later in this chapter.

I propose to examine the role that this physiological explanation plays in Hume's overarching explanation of error, and to see whether it can be reconciled with his rejection of metaphysical explanations.

CLOSELY RELATED IDEAS

We should first observe that Hume wants to establish a "*general maxim*" – that is, a *firm principle* in his science of human nature – that when two ideas are closely related we are disposed to mistake them. (T, 60) The acceptability of this maxim is going to be crucial, since it is later going to explain many of the errors that we make. Notably, it will explain the important philosophical error that gives rise to our belief in the continued and constant existence of external objects.[181]

> When we gradually follow an object in its successive changes, the smooth progress of the thought makes us ascribe an identity to the succession…When we compare its situation after a considerable change the progress of the thought is broken; and consequently we are presented with the idea of diversity: 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, 220)

Our propensity to make these kinds of associative errors is *so common,* on Hume's view, that he speaks of it as a "malady, which can never be radically cur'd."

> Philosophers deny our resembling perceptions to be identically the same, and uninterrupted; and yet have so great a propensity to believe them such, that they arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions, to which they attribute these qualities. I say, a new set of perceptions: For we may well suppose in general, but 'tis impossible for us to distinctly conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions. …This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away… (T, 218)

So when it comes to explaining some of our most fundamental beliefs, associative error is important. And this is why when Hume sets up his maxim:

> …We may establish it as a general maxim in this science of human nature, that wherever there is a close relation betwixt two ideas, the mind is very apt to mistake them, and in all its discourses and reasonings to use the one for the other.

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[181] See *Of scepticism with regard to the senses*

He immediately feels he must say more:

> This phenomenon occurs on so many occasions, and is of such consequence, that I cannot forbear stopping a moment to examine its causes. (T, 60)

The fact that Hume is trying to garner support for his maxim is well evidenced by the general structure and tone of the passage. He begins by offering a very broad theory about the physiology of the brain. He tells us that ideas excite animal spirits to run through 'proper' traces and excite other ideas that are related to them[182]; yet since the motion of these spirits is 'seldom direct' and naturally swerves a little off course, other related ideas are presented "in lieu of that which the mind at first desir'd to survey." Having provided this theory in brief, Hume seems to expect his readers to find the explanation definitive and convincing. That it is true, he tells us, "will naturally be imagin'd," and besides, it "wou'd be easy to shew, if there was occasion." (T, 61)

In reality, further discussion is certainly warranted. For one thing, it just *isn't* 'easy to shew' how our neurophysiology operates. But more urgently, we are left wondering what it is that makes a 'proper trace' of the animal spirits *proper*? It may well be useful to reduce a mental error to a physiological one. But it does give rise to another question that remains unsolved: what is it that makes a *physiological* process *faulty*? How do we decide if the trace of the animal spirits has hit its target or "missed its mark"?

IMPROPER TRACES

Hume gestures towards an answer. He tells us that the trace of the animals spirits is *proper* when it results in the "excitement" of the idea that "the mind *desir'd* first to survey." The trace is improper, conversely, when it leads to the excitement of an idea that is *different* from the idea that the mind first desired to survey. In other words, if I meant to think of X, but instead thought of Y, then the animal spirits must have swerved. But it is not clear that Hume can really subscribe to this view. For one thing, it paints a picture of a mind that is far too intentional – one that smacks of the active powers that Hume elsewhere emphatically rejects. He speaks here of our *desire* to consider a particular idea causing that idea to be excited, (or, in the case of an error, causing another similar idea to be excited.) But this does not sound like the official Humean brand of associationism. This intentional language contrasts with his more precise way of thinking in which association is the result of 'natural principles of the mind' that 'cannot be further enumerated'.

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[182] In 1.1.5 Hume tells us that ideas can be related in seven different ways which he describes under the headings: Resemblance, Identity, Space and Time, Quantity, Quality, Contrariety, Cause and Effect.

It is better, if possible, to avoid reading active powers into Hume's explanation of error. Instead, we could attribute to him a physical account that places the animal spirits as the root cause of all of our perceptions. Such an account could go something like this: when it comes to error, the mind finds itself with a desire to attend in thought to X but instead is prompted by the animal spirits to have an idea of Y, and in this way confuses X and Y. The animal spirits are the *root cause* of both of these ideas, and the *diversion* of the animal spirits is the root cause of error. The mind's *desire* to attend to X is not the cause of the idea X or the cause of the idea Y, but certain movements of the animal spirits are the causes of all ideas.

If this is Hume's view, then it would have appealed to many philosophers of the 20th Century. It is the kind of thing an epiphenomenalist might say about qualia: that the appearance of casual relationships between qualia is illusory and should really be attributed to common physical causes in the brain.[183] It is also the kind of explanation a reductionist might provide when it comes to folk psychology: that desires, beliefs, fears, and hopes all *seem* to cause effects in the body and the mind, but in reality the causes of all effects and all propositional attitudes lie deeper in the chain of supervenience. It may seem that my desire to move my arm is what causes me to move my arm, but it would be more accurate to say that certain brain processes caused both the desire and the movement.

But how can Hume have this view? After all, "'Tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions." (T 67-8) This apparent inconsistency is, I think, the reason why Passmore ignores Hume's physiological explanation and says simply that,

> We are not to ask…*why* association operates as it does; but we can describe *how* it works – by means of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. Just as Newton put aside the search for the causes of attraction, so we must refuse to be led into any discussion of the causes of association.[184]

Kemp Smith, on the other hand, acknowledges that Hume offers the explanation – in fact, he quotes the relevant passage in full. But, interestingly, Kemp Smith entitles his chapter: "The Association of Ideas *may be* physiologically or otherwise conditioned, but is for us an Ultimate"[185]. He is reluctant to take Hume's appeal to physiology seriously, and this reluctance is accompanied by a typical quote – one that more obviously harmonises with Hume's general strategy:

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[183] See, for example, Jackson, Frank. "Epiphenomenal Qualia", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 32, (1982) pp. 127–136
[184] Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p108
[185] Smith, Norman Kemp. *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941) p239 (Emphasis added)

> 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 would lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations. (T, 13)

Kemp Smith is right to be reluctant. But Hume *does* offer the strange physiological explanation, even if he shouldn't have. This is worth noticing. Perhaps it is a sign that the present case is in some way special or more difficult. Hume wants there to be a difference between good association and bad, and since the principle of association is itself the key explanatory principle in his science of human nature, divisions within that principle appear inexplicable in the typical Humean argot. The difficulty is one of explaining the very mechanism of explanation.

Yet, inexplicable though they may be, the passages that follow Hume's account of the animal spirits make it clear that associative error is something that Hume wants to allow. All of the examples that follow his account of physiology are cases in which the natural principle of association goes wrong. The most straightforward example is the fact that we often confuse ideas with the words that are 'assigned' to them, because they are so "closely connected" in our minds. But we are also given examples from poetry, mechanics, and the belief in the possibility of a vacuum. In fact, says Hume, "we shall see *many* instances" of these kinds of errors "in the progress of this Treatise." (T 61)

The specifics of these examples are not very important for the moment. What *is* important is that errors of association are supposed to be the result of a "close connection" between ideas, and that this close connection is portrayed as not merely conceptual or mental, but *physical*. Error, we are told, occurs when the animal spirits miss their mark.

HUME, ANIMAL SPIRITS, AND NEUROSCIENCE

We have already objected that the physiological facts involved here are really much more complicated than Hume allows, but we should also admit that Hume isn't talking outright nonsense either. For one thing, Hume's account is in line with the science of his day. Descartes, for example, had already offered a very similar account of association as being the result of traces in the brain:

> These traces consist simply in the fact that the pores of the brain through which the spirits previously made their way owing to the presence of this object have thereby become more apt than the others to be opened in the same way when the spirits again flow towards them. And so the spirits enter into these pores more easily when they come upon them.[186]

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[186] Descartes, *Passions* 1.42, AT xi.360, CSM I.344

Descartes compared the process of association to a needle passing through a linen cloth. Here paraphrased by Sutton:

> Descartes gives an analogy with a linen cloth (*une toile*) which has had 'several needles of engravers' points' repeatedly passed through it. Some holes in the cloth will remain open after the needles have been withdrawn, but even if they close, physical 'traces' left in the cloth will enable them to open again easily.[187]

This explains why we more easily associate ideas that we have associated in the past. And there are elements of this theory that we still find appealing today. Although we have obviously come much further in studying the particulars of brain processes, our modern neurological theory – that associations in the brain are caused by the decreasing resistance levels of synapses in a neural network – is essentially Cartesian in this respect. As Lashly puts it: if we substitute the word 'nerve impulse' with 'animal spirit', and 'synapse' with 'brain pore', we can easily read into Descartes the "the doctrine of learning as change in resistance of synapses."[188] Similarly, Patricia Churchland wrote in *Scientific American* that modern neuroscience is just modernizing and expanding upon Descartes' doctrine of reflex action in neural nets.[189]

Hume's account of the brain is also appealing as compared directly to contemporary explanations. For example, it is said today that similar kinds of ideas are sometimes correlated with adjacent regions of the brain. Of course, we don't think that ideas are located in "cells" that can be "rummaged" by "animal spirits". But we do think that the respective neurological pathways of similar ideas often share some sort of spatial relationship. Moreover, we do evoke such explanations to explain error. Consider, for example, some contemporary work conducted by the neurologist Vilayanur Ramachandran on Synesthesia. Synesthesia is the fascinating condition in which patients confuse the information from one sensory medium with information from another. For example, a Synesthesic person may see the colour blue whenever they experience the number 3 or hear the sound C#. In this way, colours and numbers (or colours and sounds – whatever the case may be), are inextricably associated in the patient's mind in such a way that they actually experience the one with the other. Interestingly, Ramachandran says that such cases involve '*confusion*' and his explanation for the confusion is that it results from a defective trimming between two (or more)

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[187] Sutton, J. *Philosophy and Memory Traces*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p.59
[188] Lashley, Karl. "In Search of the Engram," extracts repr. In J.A. Anderson and E. Rosenfeld (eds.), *Neurocomputing: Foundations of Research* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 59-63
See also: Sutton, J. "*Philosophy and Memory Traces*." (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1998) p.51
[189] Churchland, P. "From Descartes to Neural Networks" *Scientific American*, 261; 1 (1989), 100
See also: Sutton, J. "*Philosophy and Memory Traces*." (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1998) p.51
Of course, we should not read too deeply into this comparison; Descartes' account is intentional in a way that modern accounts are not.

adjacent modules of the brain. "We were struck," he says "by the fact that, if you look at the fusiform gyrus, the color area of the brain is right next to the area that deals with visual graphics and numbers, almost touching it."

> Now, what I'm arguing is that these people have more cross-wired brains, so they can more easily relate seemingly unrelated concepts.[190]

In other words, the basic idea behind Hume's account of the animal spirits – that *conceptually associated idea*s are correlated with *physically associated events* – is believed today. So too is Hume's idea that this might explain error.

Using this explanation, Hume could also draw the distinction between mistakes that arise from (statistically) *normal* brain states, and mistakes that arise from (statistically) *abnormal* brain states or brain legions. For example, it is one kind of error to be fooled by an optical illusion (as all of us sometimes are as a result of the way that our brains work) but it is another kind of error to lose one's memory entirely, or to suffer a stroke and mistake one's wife for a hat, as Oliver Sacks recounted in a famous case.[191] Certainly, Hume did not draw this distinction explicitly, but I think he could have helped himself to it. The examples we find in the *Treatise* are generally of the first, more common, kind: Hume discusses the fact that we mistake ideas for other ideas that are similar as a result of normally occurring brain processes. The animal spirits, says Hume, "*naturally*" turn a little "to one side or the other" and thus "present other related ideas in lieu of that which the mind desir'd first to survey." (T, 61) The motion of the animal spirits is "seldom direct", and we are thus "very apt" (T, 60) to make mistakes. But in his *Early Memoranda,* Hume provides an example of the other kind – an error arising from serious brain damage:

> There is a remarkable Story to confirm the Cartesian philosophy of the Brain. A man hurt by the fall of a Horse forgot about twenty years of his Life, and remember'd what went before in a much more lively manner than usual.[192]

Clearly this accident is a statistical abnormality and Hume needn't explain it as a result of "normal" brain processes of the kind he is describing in the passage we have been considering. But, for Hume, the distinction between errors caused by *normal* brain processes and errors caused by *abnormal* ones is only a difference of degree rather than kind. And this, I think, may be the right view, since the difference between "normal" and "abnormal" brain processes is not clear-cut. Very

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[190] See: Ramachandran VS, Hubbard EM. "Psychophysical investigations into the neural basis of synaesthesia." *Proc R Soc Lond B Biol Sci.* 268 (2001) pp. 979-983
[191] Sacks, Oliver. *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat, and Other Clinical Tales*. (Summit Books: 1985)
[192] Hume, D. "Hume's Early Memoranda 1729-1740: The Complete Text" ed. E. C. Mossner, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 9, 492-518.

few of us suffer severe brain damage of the kind Hume describes in the case of the equestrian accident. But all of us, or at any rate almost all, are fooled by optical illusions. Many sorts of human error fall somewhere in-between on the scale of normality and abnormality; they affect a certain proportion of us. For example, according to one estimate, one in every twenty-three of us has some form of Synaesthesia,[193] and according to another: about eight in every hundred males has some form of colour-blindness.[194] These in-between cases of commonality are especially interesting, since we are sometimes unsure whether to regard them as errors at all. When it comes to Synaesthesia, for example, Ramachandran sometimes describes the condition as involving "*confusion*" which implies he thinks of it as an error. But he also contends that the confusion exists in all of us to some degree or other, and that these "confusions" may in fact be the neurological causes of human creativity. In other words: he contends that an "error" – a *cross wiring* between adjacent sensory modules in the brain – is also the origin of the creative ability that we covert and treasure so much. Indeed, this is the ambitious conclusion of the fourth of Ramachandran's 2003 Reith Lectures: that by understanding the "error" called synaesthesia, it may take us,

> …all the way to understanding abstract thought and how it might have emerged. Metaphor, Shakespeare, even the evolution of language: all of this in this one little quirk...[195]

Kathryn Schulz provides another interesting example of the relationship between error and right-thinking when she discusses an optical illusion, commonly experienced by travellers to the Arctic:

> …you find yourself on a ship in the Arctic looking at very large mountains, which you therefore conclude are very nearby [although they aren't really].[196]

The illusion, she points out, results from a quirk in the brain's natural ability to "recalibrate scale according to distance" when it is placed in abnormal situations (in this case, a situation in which there is no common reference point by which to judge scale). She goes on: our ability to recalibrate scale according to distance is "a handy trick 99.99 percent of the time." It is, for instance, what allows us to effortlessly make sense of the fact that a person walking towards us is not literally growing in stature or that a soccer ball does not shrink as we kick it towards the goal. Concerning the arctic quirk, Schulz' conclusion is that "being wrong is often a side effect of a system that is functioning exactly right."

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[193] Simner J, Mulvenna C, Sagiv N, *et al.* "Synaesthesia: the prevalence of atypical cross-modal experiences". *Perception,* 35; 8 (2006) pp. 1024–33

[194] Sharpe, LT; Stockman A, Jägle H, Nathans J. "Opsin genes, cone photopigments, color vision and color blindness". In Gegenfurtner KR, Sharpe LT. *Color Vision: From Genes to Perception*. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1999)

[195] Ramachandran. V. S. "Purple Numbers and Sharp Cheese" Presented as Lecture Four of the 2003 Reith Lectures

[196] Schulz, K. "*Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*" (London: Protobello Books, 2010) p. 61

That's part of what makes optical illusions, and errors more generally, so unforeseeable and surprising: not only do they arise from processes we can't feel, they arise from processes that, under normal circumstances, work to our advantage.[197]

Hume himself anticipated a weaker version of this same line of thought two and half centuries earlier. Hume maintained that the very same kind of brain process (in this case, animal spirits missing their mark) may be the cause of good consequences on the one hand, but also error on the other. Hume certainly says that when the animal spirits miss their mark this involves a kind of *fault*: his language – "missing the mark" – makes that clear, and he says explicitly that it is the cause of "many mistakes and sophisms in philosophy." (T, 61) But he also contends that these same associative processes of the animal spirits are what give rise to some very fortunate consequences that we could not do without: for example, it is this same natural mechanism of faulty association that Hume thinks leads us to believe in substance (though it is fictitious), and to ascribe an identity to objects through time (although they are not strictly identical). (T, 218) "*'Tis happy*," Hume adds, that nature leads us to these beliefs, since if it did not, we would be left in a state of utterly unsatisfying scepticism. As we have already discussed in Chapter 2, if it were not for the fact that we mistakenly attribute an identity to closely resembling ideas, we could not think of objects as persisting through time, or indeed as being *objects* at all.[198] The point, then, is that on Hume's view, (as with Ramachandran's) a certain kind of brain structure which is conducive to the kinds of associative principles upon which we depend, also makes us prone to certain kinds of associative errors.

This means that Hume cannot possibly maintain that the question of what makes an error an error could be wholly decided by facts about the neurological causes of brain processes, since, (at least sometimes,) the ideas we think of as veridical, and the ideas we think of as faulty, are caused (on his view) by the same kind of neurological mechanism. What then is the difference between the two cases? There are a couple of possibilities. One possibility is that the difference between good association and bad might be decided by the degree of the physiological process in question. For example, perhaps a *wild* swerving of the animal spirits might lead one to mistake his wife for a hat. A milder swerving of the animal spirits, on the other hand, might work to one's advantage. Indeed, perhaps it was a case of mildly swerving animal spirits that gave Shakespeare the creativity to write *Hamlet*, as Ramachandran (almost) suggested above.

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[197] Ibid.
[198] See Chapter 2 in which I discuss Hume's conception of objects.

Another possibility is that the difference between good associations and errors of association is dependent on the *environment* one finds one's self in. This explanation harmonises nicely with some of views of the period that we have already discussed in the first chapter. We saw that Descartes, for instance, maintained that the general laws that govern optics are those that allow us to see, but they are the same laws that, under different conditions, make the submerged stick appear bent.

> …a thing that seems imperfect when viewed alone may seem completely perfect when regarded as a part of the world.[199]

The difference between the veridical mechanism and the faulty mechanism is explained by the peculiar scenario. This is also the basic lesson of Schulz' example above – that our brains are not suited (i.e. not adapted) to strange Artic environments, but they do fine in more familiar situations. Hume could simply borrow from Berkeley a way to explain this sort of phenomenon in the language of association. Berkeley had already argued that distance is learned by association. Indeed, in his *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley set out to "shew the manner, wherein we perceive by Sight the Distance, Magnitude, and Situation of Objects."[200] He concludes that we learn to judge distance by frequently associating certain visual sensations with the sensations of the muscles controlling the eyes. If this is right, then he could argue that when we find ourselves in peculiar situations (for example, the Artic), the reason we're often fooled is simply that the visual environment is novel. We haven't had any practise of associating our muscular sensations with those particular visual cues.

In any case, as we will see, Hume's more considered position is that there is nothing intrinsically faulty about any perception, or any brain process. It is only by discussing how we come to *regard* our perceptions in our system of ideas, that we can understand what an error is.

While we are comparing Hume's account of the animal spirits to contemporary accounts of neurology, however, we should admit that we are often quite prepared to accept neurological facts as good *explanations* of mental phenomena. If the question is raised in psychology: "Why do we sometimes mistake certain ideas for others that are similar?" an answer cashed-out in terms of the

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[199] Ibid.
[200] Berkeley, George. "*Philosophical Works, Including the Works on Vision*". Ed.Michael R. Ayers. Everyman edition. (London: J. M. Dent, 1975), I

physical properties of brain states may well satisfy us. Ramachandran and Hubbard certainly expect such an explanation to be convincing.[201]

The problem for Hume is that physiological explanations aren't supposed to be admissible in his system. But we need to be very careful about that conclusion, for it is true in one sense, and not in another. It is true that Hume maintains that original impressions and associative principles are not the kinds of things that could be explained by appealing to anything more basic. This is what we learnt in the previous chapter; this is the sense in which Hume rejects the traditional metaphysics, and maintains, as a point of epistemology, that we cannot possibly trace our knowledge further back than impressions. We do not know if impressions are caused by our material physiology, or by some other corporeal or spiritual event, or by God. (T, 7) Nonetheless, Hume in no way denies the usefulness of science. Far from it. Hume very happily and consistently allows the existence of brains and bodies even if he denies these objects an independent metaphysical status. The following scientific claim, for example, is not at all out of bounds for Hume:

> There is a correlation between a certain kind of brain wiring and a propensity to have certain kinds of associative ideas that we think of as mistakes.

He can even say quite consistently that our impressions are *caused* by physiological processes. He only needs to be careful that he is using the term "causation" in his reinterpreted sense, and that he is discussing science rather than what he calls the "secret nature" of things. What Hume *can't* do is treat physiological claims as if they were about something *prior* to impressions and the principles of association – as if they provided a more ultimate explanation than perceptions. For Hume, impressions are the beginning of all knowledge and all belief. And they,

> …arise…in the soul originally, from unknown causes. (T, 7)

From these impressions our entire edifice of knowledge, including our scientific knowledge, is born. But once this epistemological point is granted, Hume can then go on to make all sorts of scientific claims in harmony with his epistemology. He says, for example, that:

> …all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits… (T, 211)

He talks about pains and pleasures,

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[201] See: Ramachandran V. S., Hubbard E. M., "*A Window into Perception, Thought and Language*" *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, No. 12, (2001) pp. 3-34

…that arise naturally from the applications of objects to our bodies, as by the cutting of our flesh with steel… (T, 192)

And he discusses how our nervous system conveys sensations to our mind:

The nerves of the nose and palate are so dispos'd, as in certain circumstances to convey such peculiar sensations to the mind. (T, 287)

The important philosophical point is that none of these passages is an attempt to get at the *real causes* of our perceptions. They aren't an attempt to ground our perceptions, metaphysically speaking, in anything more fundamental. Indeed, for Hume, no kind of explanation could be more fundamental than an explanation cashed-out in terms of perceptions and the relations between them. Instead, these physiological claims are only observations and inferences based on the correlations and contiguities that we discover by means of perception.

WHY DOES HUME PROVIDE THE PHYSIOLOGICAL ACCOUNT?

So what, then, is the role of Hume's physiological account if not to provide a more fundamental explanation of error? One unsatisfying answer is that the account doesn't play any important explanatory role at all. In other words: it may just be a tangent. Hume's language sometimes suggests that this is the case. He says, for instance, that because associative error, "occurs on so many occasions, and is of such consequence," he just, "cannot forbear stopping a moment to examine its causes." (T, 60) On this reading, we imagine Hume pausing, out of sheer interest perhaps, to discuss the scientific accounts of association that were common in the period. He is dabbling in experimental biology rather than expounding his naturalistic philosophy. He is not rejecting what he says elsewhere about our inability to go inquiring after real causes. He is only discussing a scientific account that is compatible with his epistemology – *compatible* because science, for Hume, is a body of knowledge *built out of* our perceptions and the laws of associations.

This would be a consistent reading, but I am not sure that it can be the correct one. Why, for example, if it were only a tangent, would Hume insist that he "*must* make recourse" to physiology in order to account for associative error? Why would he say that although he has "neglected" any "*advantage*" of physiological accounts in other lines of inquiry, that it is *necessary* to make use of them now? (T, 60 – emphasis added) Surely this language implies that Hume regards his physiological account as providing an explanation of serious philosophical importance. And indeed, if one reads the passage at T, 60 in full, it is clear that Hume is not merely dabbling in popular science; he really is attempting to justify a distinction between good and bad association by grounding association in physiology. He is attempting "to account for the mistakes that arise from

these relations"– to *reduce* associative errors to the natural consequences of certain contiguous brain processes in an effort to provide a more fundamental explanation of error. As I have argued, Hume cannot consistently do this. This is why Passmore rightly concludes that Hume can do "nothing whatever" to explain "…why association sometimes operates and sometimes fails to operate."[202]

The inconsistency is made all the more puzzling by the fact that even if we were to allow Hume his reductive physiological account, it isn't clear how it could provide him with an adequate explanation of error, anyway. For one thing, it leaves him open to the problematic question that I asked towards the beginning of this chapter: how are we to decide what it is that makes an associative error *an error?* If his answer to this question is only that an error of association is really an error in our brain processes, then he has only created a new problem: namely, what is it that makes *the faulty brain processes* faulty? What grounds, for instance, does he have to say that a certain wiring in the brain is "a miswiring" rather than just "another sort of wiring"?

If he wanted to meet this challenge he could go in a variety of different ways. On the one hand, he could try to explain how brain processes really can be described, in and of themselves, in normative terms. But this, I think, is bound to fail. It is pretty obvious that the brute physical processes of the brain do not themselves involve errors in any normative sense, (even though we often talk about them as if they do). There is no meaningful question as to whether massive bodies *ought* to tend towards each other, or whether an electron *ought* to describe a particular path through space. Neither do we have any good reason to suppose that neurons, synapses, dendrites, or animal spirits, should be different in this respect.

Another alternative is that we could say that *because* errors are reducible to brain processes (and because there aren't normative facts about these processes), then this means that there aren't normative facts about error after all. In this way, the whole concept of error is lost in the reduction. If it turns out that there isn't anything normative to say about error, then it is difficult to see how there could be *anything* to say about error. Unless error is in some sense a bad thing – *a faulty* thing – then we have surely deprived the term "error" of all sensible meaning.[203] In any case, Hume certainly regards error as a normative concept. Indeed, Hume frequently explains our aversion to

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[202] Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p108

[203] I don't mean to imply that we always think of error in pessimistic terms. Of course, we often learn from our mistakes, and in this sense errors are valuable. We also talk of "fortunate mistakes" when, for example, an inventor who means to invent one thing, in fact invents another thing of a greater value. But even in cases where we speak of error in these optimistic terms we still, surely, think of the error itself as carrying a negative normative value. Indeed, in order to make sense of what it means to make a "fortunate error" we need to suppose that some *faulty process* gave rise to some good consequence. The good consequences don't make the mistake any less of a *mistake,* even if they d*o* mean that the mistake turned out well.

error in the same way he explains our aversion to the moral vices: in terms of the sentiments of disapprobation we feel toward them. This is not to say that Hume thinks cognitive errors and errors of morality are the same thing. It is only to say that he thinks they are of the same kind[204]; they are both ideas to be explained in a similar fashion – that is, in terms of the natural inclinations that arise in us against them. When, for example, it comes to immorality, Hume argues:

> …when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment or blame from the contemplation of it.   (T, 469)

And similarly when it comes to cognitive error, he describes our aversion to the error in terms of a sensible displeasure. In describing our aversion to a contradiction, for example, he says that:

> Nothing is more certain from experience, than that any contradiction either to the sentiments or passions gives a sensible uneasiness. (T, 205)

Later Hume explains that our approbation and blame are only "fainter" versions of the passions love and hatred.

> The pain or pleasure which arises from the general survey or view of any action of quality of the mind, constitutes its vice or virtue, and gives rise to our approbation or blame, which is nothing but a fainter and more imperceptible love or hatred. (T, 614)

We will discuss this sentimental view of error further in the following chapters. But the point I am trying to make for now is that Hume can avoid the problems of reduction entirely if he simply avoids attempting to explain the normativity of error in terms of physiology. And all throughout the rest of his work this is exactly what he does. Rather than striving to explain error in terms of anything more fundamental than perceptions, Hume explains error in terms of the features of perceptions themselves and their effects they have across the system of ideas that we call the mind. Of course, this naturalistic account is not without its own problems, and these are issues that we will discuss. The suggestion is simply that it is especially strange that Hume should try to help himself to an inconsistent physiological reduction of error, since even if we grant him that explanation it won't do him much good.

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[204] Rescher sometimes argues for a similar view in his contemporary book on error: "Error consists in doing things wrong, and sin is…one of the most notable sorts of wrongdoing there is." (p. 68) "Moral error is a version of practical error." (p. 69)
Rescher, Nicholas. *Error* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007)

More often in the *Treatise* Hume addresses the normative question about error in the argot of his science of man. In line with his usual methodology (that we will explore in the following chapter), Hume deliberately conflates the philosophical question, "what makes an idea faulty?" with the psychological question: "how do we come to *regard* an idea as faulty?" This substitution of psychological questions for philosophical questions is part of Hume's more general view that as for "all the sciences, and all the arts".

> None of them can go beyond experience or establish any principles which are not founded on that authority. (T, xviii)

As Stroud puts it, this belief leads Hume to attempt to answer the problems:

> …*in the only way possible* – by observation and inference from what is observed. Hume saw them as empirical questions.[205]

Hume makes his intentions clear:

> …by confessing that my intention never was to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations. For besides that this belongs not to my present purpose, I am afraid that such an enterprize is beyond the reach of human understanding… (T, 64)

Hume's discussion of physiology is instructive, because it reveals that Hume allows that the natural sciences are an entirely permissible method to help us help decide questions about error. Problems with such explanations arise only if we attempt to think of physiological explanations, for example, as getting at the "secret nature" (i.e. fundamental causes) of error, and as we have seen, I think that Hume occasionally strays in this problematic direction. More often, Hume explains error by discussing perceptions more directly. In the next chapter we will get to the bottom of Hume's naturalistic account of error by discussing some specific examples. We will see that Hume's more considered view of error is that it is not to be explained in terms of physiology, but rather, in terms of the fact that "an idea assented to *feels* different" from an idea that we reject. (T, 629)

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[205] Stroud, Barry. *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977) p.222 (emphasis added)

CHAPTER FOUR: CASE STUDIES IN HUMEAN ERROR: MEMORY, ILLUSION, AND EVALUATION

There are many kinds of errors, and we should not suppose that Hume has one explanation to fit them all. I do not hope to provide an exhaustive account of all the things we call "error", but I will strive to provide a framework by which various kinds of common errors, on Hume's view, can be explained. In so doing, I take as a general premise that all of Hume's explanations must be compatible with the theory of mind that we have been discussing in the previous chapters. In this way, Hume's explanations of various specific errors will be systematically related. In this chapter I will examine three specific types of errors – involving memory, illusion, and evaluation – and by discussing these individual cases, arrive at a better understanding of how Hume can explain error more generally.

ERRORS INVOLVING MEMORY

Sometimes we mistake an imagination for a memory. We think we remember something that didn't really happen, or else, conversely, we think we are only imagining something that really did take place. Hume allows both of these errors:

> …an idea of the memory, by losing its force and vivacity, may degenerate to such a degree, as to be taken for an idea of the imagination; so on the other hand an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment. [T, 86]

Let's take an example and think through it in Humean terms. I happen to have an example that is close to home. My sisters, as children, were each given a toy push-chair of their own– one blue, one red. Now, as adults, they can't agree about who owned which one, and for whatever reason they seem to think it is very important. Each of them insists that she vividly remembers the *blue* push-chair being hers. Of course, they can't both be right, so at least one of them must just be imagining having owned the blue push-chair. I say "at least one of them" because it is possible that neither of my sisters properly remembers who owned which, and they are both just imagining – *confabulating* as the psychologists say. In that case, one of my sisters would happen to be right about the colour of the push-chair she owned, but not because she actually remembers having owned it.[206] But, for the

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[206] In this case, the sister who is correct (but for the wrong reasons) would still be making an error of a different kind. Natika Newton makes the following point about belief, which I think is true also of memory: "There are two sorts of belief error, and both are problematic. One kind occurs…when the belief is false. The other kind occurs when the belief has been wrongly formed or is unjustified."

sake of example, let's suppose that one of my sisters really is remembering accurately while the other is not. I suspect this sort of disagreement is common.

How does one decide this sort of question? Naturally, we go looking for external evidence. We ask the parents (who refuse to comment) or we look through the photographs (which haven't helped). More generally, where there is a disagreement about memory we look to the wider evidence to settle it.

Hume, however, draws the distinction between the memory and the imagination in terms of the liveliness or "vivacity" of the perceptions themselves.[207] In other words, he draws the distinction between what it is to remember and what it is to imagine, in terms of the way that those perceptions *feel*. According to Hume, a memory is a more lively kind of idea than an imagination, and "this alone" distinguishes them.

> Thus it appears, that the *belief* or *assent,* which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of the perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination. To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory. [T, 86]

This may seem a strange view. It implies that the only person who is in a position to know whether or not they are really remembering is the person whose perception it is. As Passmore puts it:

> If [on Hume's view] someone tells us he is 'remembering', there is no way of disputing his assertion: he knows, and he alone can know, whether he is having a vivid idea – and that is the decisive fact.[208]

If this is true, then it means that if my sisters really do both vividly recall having owned the blue push-chair, then they are both remembering having owned it, even though we know for a fact that it was owned by only one of them. Indeed, on this reading of Hume, as long as my sisters' ideas remain sufficiently vivacious, then the external evidence won't help settle the matter at all: even if tomorrow we find a whole album of unambiguous photographs, and even if a host of childhood

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Newton, Natika. "Error in Action and Belief," *Philosophia*, 19, no. 4 p. 363

[207] Earlier in the *Treatise* Hume proposes that there are in fact *two* ways to distinguish a memory from an imagination: (i) vivacity, and (ii) "that the memory preserves the original form in which its objects were presented," yet "the imagination is not restrained to the same order and form with the original impressions." (T, 9) But later Hume says that this second manner of distinction, "is not sufficient to distinguish them in their operation or make us know the one from the other," since it is "impossible to recall the past impressions, in order to compare them without present ideas, and see whether that arrangement be exactly similar." (T, 85) Hume concludes that vivacity alone must be the criterion for distinction.

[208] Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.96

witnesses come forward to offer their unanimous testimony, *still* this will not change the fact that they were both remembering having owned the blue push-chair.

Hume has often been criticized for this view, and it is easy to see why. Passmore, for instance, thinks that Hume is just plain wrong:

> We may assert with any degree of vigour and no intention of lying that we are remembering a particular event, but if it can be shown that we were not in a position to observe it (were not alive or were not there) this settles the matter. It will immediately follow that we were not remembering but only imagining.[209]

Oliver Johnson is willing to entertain Hume's strange conception of memory, but emphasises that it is indeed very strange:

> If the person has a lively idea of the event as being of a certain nature, then he remembers it in that way; if, later, he has a lively idea of its having been of a different nature, then he remembers it in that way. Both are equally cases of remembering, and that is the end of the matter. This may not be what we ordinarily mean by memory but then Hume's is no ordinary theory.[210]

But if these criticisms are right, then Hume makes a grave contradiction when he goes on to tell us that the memory is prone to error. For, as we have seen, Hume allows that "…an idea of the memory, by losing its force and vivacity," might be "taken for an idea of the imagination." But if liveliness is the only criterion by which to distinguish something remembered from something imagined, then a lively imagination would not merely be "taken for" a memory; it would actually *be* a memory. If being an idea with a sufficient amount of vivacity is a sufficient condition for being a memory, then any idea that comes to have that vivacity will, of course, be a memory.

Hume's own example is the case of a liar:

> This is noted in the case of liars; who by the frequent repetition of their lies come at last to believe and remember them… [T, 86]

But if being a particularly vivacious idea is the only quality that separates a truth from a lie, then the liar who vividly believes his lies would not really be a liar at all.

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[209] Ibid.
[210] Johnson, Oliver. "'Lively' Memory and 'Past' Memory" *Hume Studies*, Volume 13, Number 2, (November 1987) pp. 343-359

A similar puzzle for this reading can be found in 2.1 of the *Enquiry*. There Hume tells us that imaginations can never quite reach the vivacity of sense perception, with the following important exception: when the "mind be disordered by disease or madness". The problem with this exception is that if vivacity is really the only criterion by which a memory can be distinguished from an imagination, then the madman who imagines sufficiently vividly, is not really imagining, and in fact may not be mad at all – since (on the reading of Hume we are considering) we should really say that he is having a memory rather than a wild imagination.

Happily, Hume can be saved from these criticisms, and the absurd implications do not really follow from what he says. This becomes obvious, I think, once we appreciate an important distinction between two senses in which we can remember something. I will call this distinction the difference between *remembering* and *remembering truly*. It is a fairly straightforward distinction, and one that I think Hume recognized, even if he did not spell it out explicitly. It explains, I will argue, how Hume can consistently allow that our memory is prone to error while also maintaining that there is a difference between the memory and imagination that should be explained solely in terms of vivacity – in terms of the way that ideas feel.

E. J. Furlong once concluded an article about memory (and, in part, about Hume) with the following rhetorical question:

> For what is it to remember but to remember correctly?[211]

But this question is not at all rhetorical. There just *is* a sense in which we can remember without remembering correctly. This will be more obvious once we reflect that we can *see* things that aren't there, and *believe* things that aren't true. In both cases we are still *seeing* and *believing*; it is only that we aren't seeing or believing truly. We do not deny that the mad man *perceives* a tiger in the room. Indeed, it is precisely *because* he perceives the tiger that we think he is mad; he perceives something that isn't there. Could it also be argued that it is possible to remember something that didn't happen? After all, if we accept that there could be a false memory, shouldn't we accept that not all the things we remember are remembered correctly? Saying that a man is remembering, and saying that a man is *remembering truly*, could be two different things.

If you like, you can think of merely *remembering* something as having what J. Smith calls a *quasi-memory*:

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[211] Furlong, E. J. "Mr. Urmson on Memory and Imagination" *Mind,* 313 (1970) pp. 137-138

A quasi-memory being a state subjectively indistinguishable from a memory but which need not derive from the past history of the subject him or herself.[212]

Except, for Hume, this definition applies not to "quasi-memories" but to memories proper. Anything that is subjectively indistinguishable from a memory is a memory, regardless of any relations it does or does not bear to past events. Indeed, Hume tells us that his "intention" in discussing the vivacity of the perceptions is only to express the manner in which memories *feel* more real to us than mere imaginations, and tend to have different (and more pronounced) effects in the mind:

And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a *superior force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that *act of the mind*, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination. (T, 629)

To remember is just to have a vivacious (forceful, solid, firm, steady) idea.

On the other hand, to *remember truly* is to have a veridical memory – a reliable memory. What it means for a memory to be "veridical" or "reliable" must itself be explained, and we will get to that shortly. But for now suffice to say that when someone is remembering truly, what we mean is that they are both remembering and remembering well.

Perhaps this distinction seems precious or obvious, but it is important since, once acknowledged, it saves Hume from the criticisms discussed above. Passmore objected that,

We may assert with any degree of vigour and no intention of lying that we are remembering a particular event, but if it can be shown that we were not in a position to observe it (were not alive or were not there) this settles the matter.

But what is settled? Certainly it has been settled that the memory was faulty; we were not *remembering truly*. But this in no way implies that we were not in the psychological state called remembering. Just the opposite – surely we were in such a state since we were having a false memory. And this psychological sense, I think, is the only sense in which Hume claims that vivacity alone distinguishes the memory from the imagination. Moreover, because this is all Hume claims his theory of memory and imagination is not objectionable in the way that Passmore and others have implied.

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[212] Smith, J. "Which Immunity to Error?" *Philosophical Studies*, 130 (2006) p. 277

Indeed, in light of the distinction we can better understand what Hume means when he says that an idea of the imagination, by being imbued with a greater liveliness, could be "taken for" an idea of the memory. He is simply describing the process by which we can come to remember something that is false.[213] This might occur, says Hume, by the constant repetition of an imagined idea, (since he observes that a constant repetition tends to be accompanied by an increase in liveliness.) And this is plausible enough; we know that repeating a lie, or repeating a memory, really is the sort of thing that can lead one to believe it. Of course, there are other ways in which we can come to believe a lie, and there is a vast body of psychological literature given to explaining the various conditions that tend to foster false memories. Particularly relevant are what the psychologists call "flashbulb memories" – very vivid recollections, often formed by some sort of important event. These are the kinds of memories that come to mind when one is asked, "Where were you on 9/11?" or "Where were you when Kennedy was shot?" An interesting result of research about these flashbulb memories is that despite the fact they are very vivid, they are also very prone to error. Neisser, for example, one of the leading researchers in this field, discusses a flashbulb memory of his own about the bombing of Pearl Harbour: he recalls how, as a child, he was watching a baseball game when the news interrupted the broadcast to announce the tragedy. But, writes Neisser:

> This memory has been so clear for so long that I never confronted its inherent absurdity until last year: no one broadcasts baseball games in December! (It can't have been a football game either; professional football barely existed in 1941, and the college season ended by Thanksgiving.) Apparently flashbulbs can be just as wrong as other kinds of memories; they are not produced by a special quasi-photographic mechanism.[214]

Neisser went on to confirm his suspicions that flashbulb memories are often false in a series of studies[215], and this conclusion is now widely recognised. But for my purpose, the relevant point is that this psychological literature acknowledges this distinction that I have been attributing to Hume: that it is one thing to say that someone is having a vivid (flashbulb) memory and another thing to decide whether they are actually remembering truly.

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[213] Incidentally, it also describes the process by which we come to once more remember something that we had forgotten. Hume provides the example of two people who once shared an experience, and yet only one of whom is able to recount the details of that experience. Hume imagines the one who remembers describing the details of the event to the other, who first merely receives the ideas as "mere fictions of the imagination." However, finally they stumble upon some detail that jogs his memory by presenting an idea that is much livelier than the others. "…The very same ideas now appear in a new light, and have, in a manner, a different feeling from what they had before. Without any other alteration, beside that of the feeling, they become immediately ideas of the memory, and are assented to." (T, 627)

[214] Neisser, U "Memory: What are the Important questions?" in ed. Neisser, *Memory Observed* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1982) pp. 3-19

[215] Neisser, U. & Harsh, N. "Phantom Flashbulbs" in eds. Eugene Winograd and Ulric Neisser. *Affect and Accuracy in Recall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 9- 31;
See also: Schacter, D. "*The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*" (Houghton Mifflin, 2001)

At any rate, Hume explicitly allows that we can have false memories. I think it would be unusually uncharitable to read him as having a theory of memory that, although laid out in the very same section, obviously precludes this possibility. My reading, on the other hand, allows it. Hume's distinction in terms of vivacity is not supposed to decide the manner by which we judge the *reliability* of our memories, but only the manner by which we distinguish between two kinds of mental states. Thus, my reading can allow everything that Hume says about the memory without accusing him of any obvious contradiction.

But apart from making good sense of what Hume says, there is further evidence: the fact that Hume, having spelled out the distinction between the memory and the imagination in terms of vivacity, then goes on to provide an additional theory about the ways in which we can evaluate our beliefs. One such method involves considering the testimony of others. Hume discusses this when he talks about historical beliefs:

> Thus we believe that CAESAR was kill'd in the senate-house on the *ides of March',* and that because this fact is establish'd on the unanimous testimony of historians, who agree to assign this precise time and place to that event. (T, 83)[216]

Naturally this same criterion could also be used to evaluate a *memory* – not least because memories *are* beliefs about history, albeit very modern history.

> For what is memory but a faculty, by which we raise up the images of past perceptions? (T, 260-1)

So, let's apply this method of testing by testimony to my example. Suppose that a large group of reliable witnesses[217] now testify that one of my siblings is wrong. They all say that she owned the red push-chair and not the blue one as she had thought. Naturally, if those witnesses really were numerous and reliable, then this would lead that sister to doubt her memory and probably to reject it entirely.[218] Of course, this does not necessarily mean that she will cease to remember having owned it in the sense of having a vivid recollection of having owned it. It only means that she will now come to regard her recollection as being faulty.

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[216] Hume seems to have borrowed this example from Locke. *Essay*, 2.20.15

[217] Reliability is important for Hume. Although he allows testimony as a means of revising our beliefs, he also says that we humans have tendency to place "a too easy faith in the testimony of others," and this is another source of error. (T, 112)

[218] Indeed, as at least one medical textbook defines "delusion" as "*a false belief not held by others*," and neither of my sisters is prone to delusion. It is interesting that this definition is one that Hume could accept. It does not appeal to a lack of correspondence between what the delusional patient believes and what is actually the case in the external world. Rosdahl, C. B. & Kowalski, M. T., "*Textbook of Basic Nursing*", 9th ed. (Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, 2007) p. 1469

This process of evaluation by testimony is analogous to the case of being shown an optical illusion. We might be told by reliable witnesses that a certain effect is illusory and believe them. But although we believe them, we may still be fooled by the illusion. It is quite possible to disbelieve what one sees, and yet continue to see it nonetheless. For my part, this is exactly what happens when I stare, for example, at Escher's *Waterfall*: a lithograph that depicts the impossible scenario of a closed circular stream in which the water always appears to flow downhill. A similar thing happens when I go snorkelling on holidays – I know that underwater objects, when viewed through my snorkel mask appear large or closer than they really are, but nonetheless I continue to misjudge the distances as if I didn't know it at all. And as with optical illusions, so with memory: it is quite possible to doubt the veracity of a memory on the grounds of testimony, and yet continue to remember it vividly.

Another method by which Hume allows that we can evaluate our beliefs is in terms of their *coherence* with one another. He says:

> We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true of false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses.
> (T, 84)

Applied to the memory, this would mean that we can doubt or reject one of our memories if it doesn't cohere with the wider body of things we know or believe or remember. As we remember from our discussion of Hume's epistemology, Hume's version of coherence can't involve comparing our memories with some real external reality since we never perceive any mind-independent objects. All of our comparisons must be comparisons between perceptions. So, when we compare our memories in terms of coherence, the memory that wins out will be something like a net weighted outcome of a psychological process. If we find that two beliefs do not cohere with one another, the reason for rejecting one (rather than another) will always be explained in terms of the relationships between perceptions. And these natural processes may result in any number of outcomes. It could be that a certain testimony is sufficiently convincing to make us doubt a memory. Or else, it could be that the memory is so vivacious that it will lead us to doubt the testimony.[219] Either way, the process will transpire in accordance with natural principles of mind.

This explanation will seem unsatisfying to anyone who wants to know how these psychological processes involving belief map to a mind-independent external reality. We object, perhaps, that the

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[219] Locke provides a nice example of the vivaciousness of an idea winning out over the testimony of friends: "Tell a man passionately in love that he is jilted; bring a score of witnesses of the falsehood of his mistress, it is ten to one but three kind words of hers shall invalidate all their testimonies." [*Essay*, XX, 12]

dispute about the blue push-chair is about a real external thing and not just a subjective bundle of perceptions in my sisters' minds. But any dissatisfaction of this kind should be mitigated by the fact, as we have earlier discussed[220], that Hume does not deny the existence of the objects of ordinary experience. For Hume, there are very plainly tables, chairs, people, and push-chairs. All that Hume denies is that our explanation of such objects should rely on any mysterious underlying substrata that we never perceive. Nonetheless, as we saw in Chapter 2, he certainly allows that memories involve objects, and he does not deny that a dispute about a pushchair really is *about a pushchair*. The novelty of Hume's account is just that the truth makers for memories are explained in terms of perceptions rather than facts about external objects. Knowledge, for Hume, is the "assurance arising from the comparison of ideas." (T, 124) It does not involve comparing an idea with an external reality.

It is instructive to note, however, that Hume's "comparison of ideas" casts a very wide net: it includes many, if not all, of the methods by which we normally decide a question of the memory: we go looking for evidence, we compare our ideas in terms of coherence, we consider the testimony of others, and so on. Having engaged in these activities, one idea, rather than another, strikes us as more convincing – more *lively*; more *vivacious*. This is the idea we will believe, and we will continue to believe it unless a further "comparing of ideas", or some other natural process, reduces its vivacity. If, upon further reflection, this does occur – if we *do* find reason to reject the idea – we will call that belief an error.

Hume's account of the memory has often been criticized – not least because he observes that our memories are prone to error, and yet puts forward a theory of memory that has been interpreted as being straightforwardly incompatible with that observation. I have argued that this reading of Hume is wrong: it fails to acknowledge that it is one thing to explain what it is to have a memory, and another thing to explain what it is for a memory to be veridical. On the one hand he describes what it is to have a memory rather than an imagination in terms of vivacity alone, but on the other hand, he provides a more complex theory about how we decide questions concerning the reliability of memories. The first question as to whether an idea is an imagination can be decided quickly by asking simply: how does this idea feel? The latter question as to whether an idea is veridical is rather more difficult to decide (as indeed we would expect). Hume attempts to explain what it is to have a reliable memory in terms of the "comparing of ideas" and his explanation includes many of the ordinary ways by which we assess the reliability of an idea: by hearing testimonies, by examining whether the idea coheres with other things we know, and so on.

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[220] See Chapter Two.

OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

Let's take an example of a different kind of error – optical illusions. Hume certainly allows that these can fool us. Indeed, he gives an example:

> If you wheel about a burning coal with rapidity, it will present to the senses an image of a circle of fire; nor will there seem to be any interval of time betwixt its revolutions [T, 35]

The sort of error is particularly challenging because it appears to be a case of a faulty impression rather than a faulty idea and, if so, will be more difficult for Hume to explain. As we have seen, Hume thinks we can judge the faultiness of an *idea* by comparing it with other ideas. And the same, he says, is true of impressions:

> 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 whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions…whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses. (T, 84)

But the problem with thinking that impressions are prone to error is that they are supposed to be the standard by which all other knowledge can be evaluated. As Hume puts it, it will "always be impossible to decide" where our impressions come from. We cannot trace our knowledge any further back than impressions because they are "our sensations, passions and emotions as they make their *first* appearance in the soul." (T, 1 – emphasis added) This is why Hume says impressions "must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear." (T, 190) They are the atoms of Hume's mechanistic psychology – the most basic elements of experience.

Unlike Hume, a realist could explain an illusion of the senses in terms of a lack of correspondence between the impression and the external world. Importantly, this sort of explanation refers to things that are *antecedent* to impressions: it compares the impression to the thing that caused it, or the thing that it is supposed to represent. But Hume cannot make this sort of comparison because he thinks we know nothing of anything that is antecedent to our impressions. As such, his explanation of what it means to have a faulty impression must go in the other direction: it must be cashed-out in terms of facts that are *subsequent* to the impression in question. In other words, Hume must explain what it means to have a faulty impression by referring to a wider body of perceptions. And this is precisely what he does when he says that "we may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions" whether our impressions "represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses."

(T, 84) A faulty impression is not faulty because it fails to represent an external reality, but faulty because it fails to cohere with our larger body of experience.

Importantly, this means that there is nothing intrinsically defective about any impression on Hume's view. Let's look at his example. If we wheel about a burning coal we see a circle of fire and can no longer make-out the coal as being a distinct object. Now, certainly it would be an error to take this appearance at face value and *believe* it. In other words, it would be an error to believe that when the coal is spun it *literally* ceases to be a distinct object and becomes instead an indistinct circle of flame. And Hume can explain the faultiness of this belief by pointing out that it does not cohere with other things we believe. But what isn't an error is to *see* the coal *as if* it were a circle of fire. This fact about mere appearances is perfectly compatible with the other things we believe – the laws of physics and optics, for example. Indeed, given our wider body of experience, a circle of fire is precisely how we should *expect* a distinct piece of coal to look if it is wheeled about at a sufficient rate.

A more commonly discussed example of this same phenomenon is the stick protruding out of water. We have already found this example in Descartes, but Hume himself also mentions it briefly in the first *Enquiry*. (E, 151) As we recall, the straight stick may appear bent when it is protruding out of water at the right kind of angle, and we often call this an optical illusion. But in what sense does the illusion actually involve an error? Certainly it would be an error to believe that the straight stick is actually bent when it is submerged in water. But seeing the stick *as if it were bent* is no mistake at all. Indeed, as J. L. Austin said, the fact that the protruding stick *seems* bent is precisely what we should expect given the way our world is[221] – given our wider body of experience involving light and refraction. Indeed, knowing what we do about refraction, what would really be strange is if the protruding stick didn't appear bent.

Hume doesn't really discuss the distinction between an object *being such-and-such* and *appearing such-and-such*, but he does allow its possibility, since he says that our evaluation of an impression is subsequent to our experience of the impressions themselves. He tells us, for instance, that although impressions themselves always seem what they are, and are what they seem, we may, nonetheless, "draw inferences" from the coherence of our perceptions which allow us to make evaluations of these impressions in hindsight. (T, 84) When we see a stick submerged in water and appearing to be bent, there is nothing intrinsically faulty about this appearance. But in hindsight,

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[221] The protruding stick has become the go-to example of optical illusion, even in contemporary discussions. See, for example the famous dispute between Ayer and Austin regarding the argument from illusion. Austin, J. L. *Sense and Sensibilia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962)

when we come to believe that the stick was not really bent as it appeared, we can call the appearance "an illusion' on those terms.

For these reasons, I think the most straightforward way to read Hume is to say that he denies that our impressions are prone to error at all, but allows that we sometimes talk of them loosely *as if* they involve error. In other words, it is true that Hume allowed that we can *reject* certain impressions after having weighed them against our wider body of perceptions. In this sense, we can *call* them "errors" or think of them as errors, but we are reluctant to think of them as errors *proper*. The situation is worth comparing to Descartes' reluctance to describe material falsity as "proper falsity" as we discussed in the first chapter.

> Although falsity properly speaking, or "formal" falsity, cannot be found except in judgments (as I noted a little while ago), still there is, surely, another "material" falsity in ideas…[222]

For Hume, similarly, we can think of impressions as being faulty insofar as they relate to other ideas (i.e. provide material for false judgment), but they do not involve any evaluation or judgment in and of themselves. There are several notable differences, however, between the two accounts. For one thing, Descartes argues that sensory experiences (i.e. Hume's impressions) can be are materially false when they purport to represent a quality of objects that doesn't exist. Hume can't have this appearance/reality gap in his impressions right since they are his most fundamental mechanism of explanation. Another difference is that Descartes' distinction between material falsity and formal falsity is more clear-cut (or at least purports to be more clear cut) than Hume's treatment of error. Descartes thinks there are two distinct categories of error: (1) errors that involve judgment on our part (formal falsity), and errors that occur at a pre-judgmental sensory level (material falsity). For the sake of explaining optical illusions we could attempt to attribute a similar distinction to Hume – between errors that occur at the level of ideas, and errors that occur at the level of impressions. But for Hume the distinction between these two categories cannot be a neat distinction, since, as we will see, he doesn't allow any distinct active faculty of the mind called "judgment" or "belief" that exists set apart from the regular flow of sensory experience. Rather, on Hume's account, belief and judgment are themselves explained entirely in terms of the manner in which certain perceptions strike the mind – that is, in terms of the intrinsic features of perceptions. As he says:

> [T]here is a great difference betwixt the simple conception of the existence of an object, and the belief of it, and this difference…lies in the manner, in which we conceive it. (T 94-5)

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[222] Descartes, Descartes, R. "*Philosophical Writings of Descartes*", 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91) II, 30

[A]n opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction…in the manner of its being conceived. (T, 628)

We must understand, then, how this works, and what means, for Hume, to make an error of judgment or evaluation.

ERRORS OF EVALUATION

"A wise man," says Hume, "proportions his belief to the evidence." (E, 110) This is a normative claim, and it is a refreshing piece of common-sense in a body of work that is sceptical and very often merely descriptive. If Hume is right, then it is obvious what an error of evaluation involves: *failing* to be wise; *failing* to proportion one's belief to the evidence. But it is not clear that Hume's methodology will allow him to explain this normative claim with any consistency.

Just one section earlier, for instance, Hume provides a descriptive account of human reasoning.

All our reasonings concerning matters of fact are founded on a species of Analogy, which leads us to expect from any cause the same events, which we have observed to result from similar causes. (E, 104)

In this sense Hume compares our reason to that of animals:

A horse, that has been accustomed to the field, becomes acquainted with the proper height which he can leap, and will never attempt what exceeds his force and ability. An old greyhound will trust the more fatiguing part of the chase to the younger, and will place himself so as to meet the hare in her doubles; nor are the conjectures, which he forms on this occasion, founded in any thing but his observation and experience. (E, 105)

In fact, he says our reasoning is of just the same kind:

Animals, therefore, are not guided in these inferences by reasoning: Neither are children: Neither are the generality of mankind, in their ordinary actions and conclusions: Neither are philosophers themselves, who, in all the active parts of life are, in the main, the same with the vulgar, and are governed by the same maxims.
(E, 106)

If this is true, we should ask why it is humans tend to surpass animals in reasoning, and why some humans surpass others. Hume considers the question in a lengthy footnote, and lists a variety of factors: (i) the capacity for attention; (ii) the ability to comprehend "a whole system"; (iii) the ability to consider a lengthy chain of consequences; (iv) the capacity to avoid confusing similar

ideas; (v) the degree of subtlety; (vi) the haste and narrowness of judgment; (vii) the extent of experience; (viii) the degree of prejudice; (ix) the confidence in testimony and written accounts; and, Hume tells us, the list could go on. (E, 107)

All of these factors are descriptive, and according to this explanation if your reason surpasses mine it is only because you have a more pronounced natural capacity in one or another of those listed ways.[223]

But if this is our explanation of the wise man, then our account of wisdom seems to lack normativity. We do not yet know if someone *should* be wise – if someone *ought to* proportion their belief to the evidence. All we can say is that some people are wiser than others insofar as they have different natural propensities. If you like, we could also add to this conclusion the observation that people, in general, *want* to be wise, and that the wise are often highly regarded. But these facts are also just descriptive facts, and they won't, at least not by themselves, tell us if people *should* want to be wise, or if the wise *ought* to be highly regarded. This is a worry for our purposes in considering error, since normative facts are surely the facts we need to know if we want to say that someone has made an error of evaluation by failing to evaluate wisely. If Hume's explanations are limited only to descriptions, then a pressing question arises: how can Hume recommend anything at all? As Miriam McCormick puts it:

> …On what basis can he recommend reason over superstition or even over following your gut when reason is just one of the many causes of belief?[224]

To begin with, one fact is certainly clear. Given Hume's naturalistic methodology, he is unable to explain the normativity of evaluation in any absolute sense. Hume portrays the wise man as someone who reasons well, but, for Hume, reason itself is only the slave of the natural passions. (T, 415) When Hume carefully considers the "most exact" of his own evaluations, he finds that he can ultimately "give no reason" why he should assent to them, except that he feels a "strong *propensity* to consider objects *strongly* in that view, under which they appear." (T, 265) Hume thinks that normative claims are just expressions of sentiments.

> …when you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment or blame from the contemplation of it. (T, 469)

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[223] It might be suggested that some of these factors – paying attention, for example – involve voluntary activity, and that voluntary activity can be the proper object of praise or blame. This is something we will discuss in the next chapter. Hume denies the traditional metaphysical conception of a free will. Ultimately, even the "voluntary activity" of the agent must be explained in descriptive terms.
[224] McCormick, Miriam "Why Should We Be Wise?" *Hume Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (2005) p. 9

And this sentimental view of normativity is surely not an adequate foundation on which to support an absolute distinction between good reasoning and bad. Ultimately, for Hume, bad reasoning is just reasoning that conflicts with our passionate inclinations that naturally seek beliefs that are more "steady" and "constant", and as our inclinations differ so too will our view of good reason. If we want to know what constitutes the difference between good reasoning and bad, there is nothing more fundamental, or more absolute, than perceptions to which we can appeal. As we have seen in Chapter 2, Hume's conception of nature is not a conception of a benevolent force, or a belief about the perfect design of a loving God (as contemporaries of Hume believed[225]). Rather, for Hume, nature is a "blind" instinct. (E, 151). Hume seems to allow that there is a possible world in which all humans quite happily reason in ways that we would think of as being terribly unreasonable, and that in such a world, as long as the inhabitants carry on reasoning in this way without any cognitive dissonance, then that manner of reasoning would in fact be a good one.[226] At least, that world's inhabitants would *regard* it as being good, and there are no other facts to which we could appeal in an attempt to settle the matter more absolutely.

We should therefore be somewhat cautions when Hume recommends one method of evaluation over another. For instance, in the *Essay on Miracles*, Hume argues that if someone testifies that a miracle has occurred we ought to do our best to doubt the testimony rather than be caught up by the agreeable emotions of surprise and wonder that tend to accompany hearing a good story. (E, 417) Hume may well be right about this normative claim, but, as he admits elsewhere, he cannot anchor this recommendation in anything absolute. Owen offers an instructive analogy:

> Consider Roman augury by the inspection of a sacrificed sheep's entrails. There is clearly a right and wrong way of performing such actions, and the practice is clearly normative.... But we might still wonder whether the practice was warranted.[227]

Similarly, as we will see in the examples that follow, Hume describes right and wrong ways of reasoning, and he does so in terms of natural principles – in terms of the effects these different methods of reason have in our body of perceptions, but he leaves open the question as to whether there is anything normative to say about the natural principles themselves.

Another interesting example in which Hume recommends one manner of judgment over another involves the fear of heights. Hume describes:

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[225]See, for example, Turnbull, George. *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1740), 2: 164-5; and, Beattie, James. *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* 4th ed. (London, 1773) p.64

[226] Refer, for instance, to the strange passage in which Hume exaggerates that "the general opinion of mankind" is, in the case of morals, "perfectly infallible". (T, 552)

[227] Owen, D. "*Hume 's Reason*" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.140

> …a man who, who being hung from a high tower in a cage of iron cannot forbear trembling, when he surveys the precipice below him, tho' he knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling. (T, 148)

The man trembles because "his imagination runs away with its object" – in other words, because he obsesses about the possibility of danger – and Hume says we should strive to "correct this propensity" where we can. But, once again, Hume's methodology will only really allow us to say that the trembling man is making an error of evaluation insofar as we feel a "strong propensity" to *feel* that way.

Hume's position is obviously sceptical. Despite the scepticism, however, Hume has a good deal to say about the difference between a *good* evaluation and an *error* of evaluation, and that is what I want to discuss in what remains of this chapter. In fact, he provides quite a rich descriptive account of how it is we come to regard some evaluative processes as more warranted than others.

David Pears once pointed out that one of the things a theory of belief should be able to do is explain how it is we form beliefs about which other of our beliefs are warranted.[228] Part of this reflection is the observation that we have meta-beliefs: beliefs *about* beliefs. And this is something Hume allows. For example, Hume discusses a meta-belief at the conclusion of Book I at T, 265 when he asks of his own system: "How can I be sure that in leaving all establish'd opinions that I am following truth?" In other words, having argued for a series of conclusions, he now steps back to ask whether the whole system that has supported the justification of those beliefs is itself really warranted. *Am I justified in believing the beliefs I have expressed?* In any case, as a more general point we might observe that Hume's explanation of the mind readily allows the possibility of meta-beliefs, since Hume describes the mind as a radically complicated system of perceptions that double back on each other and influence each other in countless ways.

> …perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. (T, 253)

Part of Hume's project is to explain how some of our very complex ideas emerge from simpler ones as a result of this multifarious "mingling", and this, I think, includes the possibility of forming beliefs about beliefs. Indeed, I argue that for Hume our ideas about errors of evaluation are to be explained in precisely this way. As we have seen, Hume cannot give any absolute explanation of methods of evaluation; but I think he can explain why it is we tend to agree that some modes of evaluation are better than others.

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[228] Pears, David. "The Naturalism of Hume's Treatise of Human Nature" in *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Idealism: British Academy Lecture on the History of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) p.105

Lome Falkenstein has done much to explain how this is possible by showing how, on Hume's view, a complex idea about an error of evaluation could arise naturally from a series of beliefs and meta-beliefs. I propose to draw on some of Falkenstein's ideas, and apply them directly to the case of error.

> Suppose that…someone who had been (i) induced by one set of natural causes to adopt a particular lower level belief, and (ii) induced by another set of causes to adopt a meta-level belief about the illegitimacy of the first belief, would be led by further causes to either, (i) abandon the lower level belief as a result, or (ii) be less convinced of its truth, or (iii) at least feel embarrassed or unjustified in continuing to assent to it as strongly as previously.

Now, if we apply this to the case of miracles, for example: we can say that it is because someone has a complex meta-belief – *that the frequently observed laws of nature are more reliable than the testimony of a few witnesses* – that they might come to doubt their belief in what they thought had been a miraculous event.

Or, returning to Hume's case of the trembling man suspended in his iron cage – suppose that the trembling man manages to reason himself out of this fear. We might explain that it is because he forms the meta-belief – *that one's beliefs tend to be skewed by irrational fear in this sort of predicament* – that he may manage to mitigate his trembling.

Stated more generally, Hume's process of belief revision works like this: Why is a lower-level belief faulty? *Because it is trumped by a stronger belief, which may be a meta-belief.* Why is it trumped? *Because it does not cohere, or because it is not as vivacious.*

This is a process of evaluation. But this process may *itself* be evaluated in the same kind of way. If, for example, someone does not reject an incoherent lower-level belief (imagine, for instance, the trembling man continues to be afraid despite knowing all the relevant facts about his safety) then we could say that he has made an error of evaluation. But when we say that his evaluation is faulty we cannot mean that it is faulty in any absolute sense; rather, it is only faulty in accordance with *another* belief that may be of an *even higher order*: for example, it might fail to cohere with Hume's broad theory that "the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence".

In principle, this series of meta-beliefs may have no limit.[229] For any belief it should make sense to evaluate it in terms of others. Certainly, for example, it should make sense to ask the question: "why

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[229] There is an infinite regress here, and one might worry that this is objectionable. I do not think it is. The point is that in order to evaluate any belief or system-of-beliefs one must compare it to some other (more abstract) system of belief. But there is nothing to say that every belief *must* be evaluated, and in practise, of course, we do not attempt, *per*

should we be wise?" And several authors have attempted to answer just this question on Hume's behalf. Among these authors there is a general consensus that Hume recommends wisdom on the grounds that it tends to have good consequences, although there is some disagreement about whether the good consequences are to be explained in terms of the fulfilment of our *own* desires, or more generally in terms of the flourishing of society. Garratt, for example, explains the Humean justification in terms of our *own* desires and felt needs:

> Reason is ultimately a kind of natural activity, one that leads us to approve of most of its own operations when we reflect on them in light of our desires and felt needs.[230]

McCormick, alternatively, explains it more broadly in terms of the *world* being a better place:

> I think Hume's preference and recommendation for following reason is politically motivated. The point is that the world will be a better place if more people choose reason as their guide.[231]

It is an interesting dispute, but I think the correct answer is simply "all of the above": Hume approves of wisdom for a variety of reasons, and these reasons vary as the circumstances vary. Sometimes, he recommends wisdom on personal grounds (T, 271); sometimes he recommends it on political grounds (T, 219). The important point is just that Hume recommends wisdom because he has natural inclinations to assent to meta-beliefs about it. It may be that I have the meta-belief: "Proportioning my belief to the evidence tends to bring *me* pleasure." Or else I may reason more abstractly: "When humans proportion their belief to the evidence it tends to increase *their flourishing as a group*." Either way, the general principle of justification is the same, and I think Hume would be happy to allow both or either. David Owen seems to share this view since he lists the whole variety of justifications:

> …[the wise] are happier and better off and more useful to society.[232]

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impossible, to evaluate all of our beliefs. There is no sense, therefore, in which an infinite regress must be carried out in practise. William M. Throop makes just this same point in a reply to Putnam: "To stop the regress…while allowing for the possibility of error at the stopping point, one would apparently need to appeal to an objective notion of error… But is the regress really vicious? It is not obvious that the regress sets us an impossible series of tasks. It is certainly true that we must be able to explain the possibility of error for any member of the infinite series for which a question arises, but it is not clear that we need to this for all members of the series." The point, with which Hume would agree, is that in practise a "question" does not "arise" for every member in the series.

Throop, William. W. "Relativism and Error: Putnam's Lessons for the Relativist," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 49, no. 4 (June 1989) pp. 677-8

[230] Garratt, D. *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

[231] McCormick, M "Why Should We Be Wise?" *Hume Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (2005) pp. 12-3

[232] Owen, D. "*Hume's Reason*" (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) p. 212

It will also prove instructive to notice that in some rare circumstances Hume does not recommend philosophical wisdom at all. He speaks, for example, of "honest gentlemen, who being always employ'd in their domestic affairs…do not engage often in abstract reasoning."

> And indeed, of such as these I pretend not to make philosophers… They do well to keep themselves in their present situation; and instead of refining them into philosophers, I wish we cou'd communicate to our founders of systems, a share of this gross earthy mixture. (T, 272)

This is an exception to Hume's general recommendation of wisdom for mankind, but it only serves to confirm his general strategy for discussing the warrant of beleifs and belief-forming strategies: that the justification for an evaluative process is to be found by comparing it to other beliefs (perhaps beliefs of a higher order), and by having a natural inclination to assent to that way of thinking. It is quite clear that when Hume says that the "honest gentlemen" ought to remain in their state of "earthy" naivety, he does so because he believes that naivety is for such men a more beneficial way to be. "They do well", perhaps, because for those "employ'd in their domestic affairs," ignorance is bliss.

Note that Hume's recommendations are thus always relative to circumstances. As Ainslie puts it:

> …philosophical self-knowledge is a route to a contented life *for those who have a taste for it*.[233]

For those without such a taste, philosophy is not recommended by Hume – at least, not in the same way. And this observation confirms our earlier speculation that Hume must think there is a possible world in which good reasoning involves what philosophers, in this world, would think of as bad reasoning. Indeed, in order to conceive of such a world, one needs only to imagine that all of its inhabitants are Hume's "honest gentlemen" and that no one has ever heard (and would care to hear) of a philosopher.

Anyway, to summarise what we've been discussing, Hume's view is that all of our beliefs are just lively ideas. (T, 86) We believe one thing or another in accordance with describable natural laws that govern the interactions between our perceptions. Simple beliefs work this way and so do our most complex meta-beliefs. Evaluation involves the *comparing* of one or more of our beliefs, and this too is a natural process. Whichever idea emerges from the comparison with the most vivacity will be the idea to which we assent. As for the rules themselves – the ones that govern *which* idea will emerge victorious – they are too complex to provide an exhaustive account. No more could we

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[233] Ainslie, D. "Hume a Scottish Socrates?" *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 33 (2003) p. 153 (Emphasis added)

expect an exhaustive account of the interactions of atoms than we could expect an exhaustive account of the interactions of perceptions. Nonetheless, Hume endeavours to discuss their interactions in broad strokes. For example, speaking of education Hume explains why the beliefs we learn "from our infancy" very often trump others. Education, he says, is a very common source of belief: indeed, he is persuaded that "more than one half of those opinions, that prevail among mankind, to be owning to education." (T, 117) And the reason, he says, that these beliefs are so firm is that they are taught to us for a long period of time and by a very frequent repetition. In this way they,

> …take such deep root, that 'tis impossible for us, by all the powers of reason and experience, to eradicate them; and this habit not only approaches in its influence, but even on many occasions prevails over that which arises from the constant and inseparable unions of causes and effects. (T, 116)

But Hume also allows exceptions to this rule. At one point, for example, he admits that the "maxims" of education are "frequently contrary to reason". This is a nice piece of common sense; it means that Hume thinks education imbues us with some deep-rooted falsities, and he can thus make sense of the quip attributed to Thomas Wolsey that we should be "very careful what we put into our heads, because we will never, ever get it out." But if Hume really wants to allow this exception, he needs there to be naturally occurring circumstances in which we form the meta-belief that some of our other strongest beliefs are unwarranted, despite the fact that they are vivacious. He does not explain specifically how this occurs in the case of education, but more broadly he does explain that vivacious ideas can come to be disbelieved in accordance with more "general rules".

> Shou'd it be demanded why men form general rules, and allow them to influence their judgment, even contrary to present observation and experience, I shou'd reply that in my opinion it proceeds from those very principles, on which all judgments causes and effects depends. (T, 147)

> …We fix on some steady and general points of view; and always in our thoughts, place ourselves in them, whatever may be our present situation. (T, 582)

So, how does Hume explain these general rules?

> According to my system, all reasonings are nothing but the effects of custom; and custom has no influence, but by enlivening the imagination, and giving us a strong conception of any object. (T, 149)

Therefore, if it happens that we revise belief in light of a general rule, it must be that*:*

> The general rule is attributed to our judgment; as being more extensive and constant. (T, 149)

This theory of belief revision is somewhat implausible when it is expressed in the language of "vivacity". Hume is right that we are sometimes more certain of "general rules" than we are of more specific beliefs – even lively ones. But this surely isn't because general rules are more vivacious. For example, consider again the trembling man who is suspended at a height in the iron cage. It is quite possible that this man could come to believe that he is safe on the basis of general rules he has formed from repeated experience. (He knows about the strength of iron, perhaps). But if he does overcome his fear, it is certainly not because the general rules are *more lively* than his present fear. We all know what it is like to attempt to overcome these sorts of emotions – to steady our composure in the face of a very lively fear. And on the rare occasions that we do manage to overcome the fear, it is seldom because our reason shouts louder than the fear itself. Rather, it is because, somehow, we manage to listen to the calm whisper of reason amidst the flurry of emotion, and this is what Hume must explain in the case of general rules.

Another example of a general rule overcoming a lively passion can be found in Hume's theory of justice. According to Hume, our whole system of justice is founded upon general rules, and these general rules are justified because they have good consequences in society.

> …'tis certain, that the whole plan or scheme is highly conducive, or indeed absolutely requisite both to the support of society, and the well-being of every individual… Property must be stable, and must be fix'd by general rules. (T, 497)

But Hume also observes that our feelings about a "single [act] of justice may be contrary" to those general rules, and our feelings may be very lively. He provides an example of someone lawfully, but distastefully, "restores a great fortune to a miser, or a seditious bigot." Now, in response to this act, lawful or not, we may feel within ourselves a strong sentiment of repulsion. The bigot, we may think, is a fool and does not *deserve* the money. "It should not have been returned to him," we may think, "the law be damned!" But for Hume, we are wrong to think in this way, and the general rules that underlie justice can help us overcome our strong feeling in this instance. We realise that,

> …this momentary ill is amply compensated by the steady prosecution of the rule, and by the peace and order, which it establishes in society... When therefore [we] have had experience enough to observe, that whatever may be the consequence of any single act of justice,

perform'd by a single person, yet the whole system of actions, concurr'd in by the whole society, is infinitely advantageous to the whole, and to every part… (T, 497-8)

Once again, Hume's example involves a case wherein the calm dictates of reflection help us to revise our immediate and lively reaction.

It is in light of these sorts of examples, I think, that Hume, in the *Appendix*, feels obliged to revise his theory of "vivacity" and explain mechanisms underlying belief more broadly in terms of a certain "feeling". He realises, that "vivacity" cannot do the job he needs it to do, because general rules (which are calm) often trump emotions (which are lively). Therefore, in order to save his broader theory of natural belief, Hume explains that he only employed the term "vivacity" to capture a certain feeling that could just as well have been explained by other terms such as "solidity," "firmness," or "steadiness".

> This variety of terms which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and the imaginations. (T, 629)

Even in light of the revision, Hume's explanation remains mysterious. But we should also admit that it is no easy task to explain why it is, on introspection, that some general rules feel more certain – less open to revision – than other of our beliefs. I think that if we accept Hume's naturalistic project, then we should probably also accept that he is right to conclude that "in philosophy we can go no further, than assert, that it is something *felt* by the mind," that explains why some beliefs are more sure than others, and thus trump others if ever we compare them. General rules may not feel more "lively", but they really do feel more "firm" and "steady". And, on Hume's view, "Provided we agree about the thing, 'tis needless to dispute about the terms." (T, 629)

CONCLUSIONS OF THIS CHAPTER

Broadly, in conclusion, we can say that on Hume's view error is always a comparative concept. If we regard some memory, or impression, or processes of evaluation as faulty, what we mean is that we have rejected that perception in light of others. No perception is faulty simpliciter. If it is faulty, it is faulty because it does not cohere with some other set of perceptions. More fundamentally, when we reject an idea it is because it no longer strikes us with sufficient vivacity or, as Hume says in the appendix, it is because "an idea assented to *feels* different" from one that we reject. (T, 629)

On first appearance this theory seems to preclude the possibility that we could regard *any* of our lively perceptions as an error. If, for example, a memory is a lively idea, and liveliness is the sufficient condition for an idea being a belief, then how could we possibly disbelieve a lively memory? But, as we have seen, Hume offers a solution to that problem by allowing that we have meta-beliefs: beliefs about beliefs. The reason that we can come to regard a memory as faulty, is that we can have a meta-belief about it, and this meta-belief can be believed more strongly still. Any belief can be trumped by more general rules if those rules are "more extensive and constant".

Once again, we should acknowledge this is a subjective and sceptical conception of error. It seems unsatisfying because it does not allow that we can separate our veridical perceptions from our faulty ones with reference to absolute facts about an external reality. But in light of Hume's very sceptical epistemology, we should also admit that he provides a rich and instructive account of the ways in which we revise our beliefs, even on those sceptical terms.

CHAPTER FIVE: ERROR, ACTIVITY, AND AGENCY

"Mistakes were made." – Ronald Reagan

Many of the things we call "errors" involve activity. If I make an error, then I have *done* something.[234] I have *made* a mistake: I have *spoken* falsely, *acted* irrationally, or *believed* without justification. Along these lines Aristotle distinguished "mistakes" (*hamartêma*) from "misfortunes" (*atuchêma*)[235] – on the grounds that mistakes and not misfortunes are the products of human agency.[236] Reagan's admission of error is unsatisfying because it fails to acknowledge this distinction. It is phrased in the passive tense and thus seems to imply that Reagan's mistakes were only misfortunes. At any rate, he attempts to dodge the question of blame because the subject of the sentence is the mistake itself, rather than the person who made it. We scoff because we know that error is a normative notion. Mistakes[237] are not merely *made*; they are made *by someone* – someone who we tend to think could or should have done otherwise and for the better.[238]

Error doesn't make any sense without activity. But it is not obvious how the facts about activity can be explained in Humean terms. Hume rejects the traditional conception of the self as a unified substantial thing. He rejects also the traditional conception of active powers — the voluntary powers to *will* and to *reason* and to *act*. And so, it may seem, Hume has no framework with which to explain error as involving the voluntary activity of agents.

But Hume does have an account of activity even if it is not the traditional account. Indeed, in recent scholarship it has been increasingly acknowledged[239] that although Hume thinks we have no idea of the substantial self, he nonetheless allows that we have an idea of the self as an active agent. This is

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[234] Not all of all the things we call 'errors' involve voluntary activity. Take optical illusions, for example: if I know that I am looking at an optical illusion and I do not believe my eyes, then it seems natural to say that I am not making any *voluntary* error in being fooled, even if my visual system is misrepresenting what is there.

[235] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, Book I, XIII. See also: Rescher, Nicholas. *Error* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p.2

[236] Interestingly, the etymology of the English word "Error" seems to be routed in activity. Kathryn Schulz writes: "In ancient Indo-European, the ancestral language of nearly half of today's global population, the word *er* meant "to move," "to set in motion," or simply "to go." (Spanish speakers will recognize it as *ir*.) That root gave rise to the Latin verb Errare, meaning to wander or, more rakishly, to roam. The Latin, in turn, gave us the English word, "erratic," used to describe movement that is unpredictable or aimless. And, of course, it gave us "error."" – Schulz, K. *"Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error"* (London: Protobello Books, 2010)

[237] I am using the terms "mistakes" and "errors" synonymously following the Aristotelean distinction. Some other authors have drawn a distinction between "mistakes" and "errors". See, for example:
Hon, Giora. "Going Wrong: To Make a Mistake, to Fall into an Error," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 49, no. 1 (Sep 1995) pp. 3-20

[238] Rescher: "Only when someone commits an error that they could and should at least have *tried* to prevent do they merit reprehension." (p. 71)

[239] See: Annette Baier (1978, 1980, 1982), Amelie Rorty (1990), Lilli Alanen (2006), Amy Schmitter (2009), Donald Ainslee (1999)

not the idea of an independent metaphysical substance that exists prior to our perceptions, but it is a complex idea that is created along with the passions and interactions of everyday life.

When it comes to explaining error, Hume's account of activity has interesting consequences. His rejection of the substantial self means that we cannot draw any deep metaphysical distinction between our voluntary and involuntary mistakes. Hume's own explanation of activity and error must be explained in terms of his science of man. He allows that we act voluntarily and that sometimes we err, but both concepts – voluntary action and error – must ultimately be explained-away in descriptive terms: in terms of observable features of our perceptions and the relations between them.

It is worth worrying whether a descriptive explanation like Hume's could ever be up to the task of accounting for something like voluntary activity. For example, it seems to many of us that a man may willingly and stubbornly choose to make an error (believe something false, for instance) even in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. If so, how can this error be explained in merely descriptive terms and without reference to that man's irreducible freedom? We might list and describe all of the various psychological and physical conditions that attend his false belief, but still not have adequately explained the *voluntary* nature of his error. At least, that is the worry.

In order to decide definitively if the worry is warranted – that is: whether active powers could ever be reduced to non-intentional elements in a scientific psychology – we would first need to address the larger topic of whether the metaphysical notion of freewill is coherent, and I cannot do that here. What I will argue, however, is that Hume's system which attempts to somewhat bypass this metaphysical problem nonetheless allows for a very rich and complex account of human activity – one that is far more fruitful than his critics allow. At the very least I contend that there is no *prima facie* case against Hume's ability to account for the activity implicit in human error. There is no straightforward inference from the fact that Hume denies the metaphysical self and its active powers, to the fact that Hume cannot explain how human error involves activity.

In order to establish this conclusion, I hope to show that Hume can describe, in his own terms, many of the experiences that the traditional metaphysical conception of agency was itself supposed to explain: the appearance of a unified self, the idea of the self as an agent, the voluntary orienting of attention, the experience of free will, and the feeling that one has certain powers, or a lack thereof. The extent to which Hume's account of the self is successful will, in large part, decide the success of his theory of error. Mistakes are made by *people* who *think*, and *deliberate*, and *act*, and we must account for these facts. It won't do to say only that "Mistakes *were made*." I will argue that Hume *can* make sense of all this by explaining that some ideas – the ones we think of as voluntary –

are closely related to complex ideas of the self as an agent. In order to arrive at this conclusion we will have to take a somewhat circuitous route via Hume's discussions of the self and the passions. Only by understanding how the passions – pride and humility, in particular – foster an idea of the self as an agent, can we begin to understand how Hume explains the observable facts about the activity implicit in error without presupposing the traditional metaphysics.

THE SELF

As every student knows, Hume said there is no such thing as the self. Indeed, both of the two great traditions of contemporary Western philosophy – logical analysis, and continental phenomenology – have taken this Humean scepticism very seriously.[240] Russell, for example, often claimed that the subject itself is not "empirically discoverable"[241], and Sartre similarly maintained that although we can perceive the things that are presented to the self (the *pour-soi*) we cannot apprehend the subject itself – the thing to whom they are presented (the *en-soi*)[242]. But Hume's own rejection of the self, insofar as he did indeed reject it, must be qualified very carefully. What Hume rejects is the traditional metaphysical conception of the self as a substance – the view that the self is an *independently existent thing*: a substance that may have different thoughts at different times, and yet literally persist as the very same thing through those changes. Against this substantial view of the self, Hume offers the same arguments that he offers elsewhere against the metaphysics of substance more generally: that we have no impression, (and so no idea,) of substances thus conceived, and that therefore the theory of substance must be meaningless. As we have already seen, Hume thinks that:

> We have…no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it. (T, 16)

Similarly, when it comes to the self, Hume says that he has no idea of a metaphysical substance beyond or behind his perceptions.

> For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of hear of cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are remov'd for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. (T, 252)

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[240] For this topic, see: Chisholm, R. M. "On the Observability of the Self," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 30, no. 1, (Sep 1969), p. 7

[241] Russell, B. *Logic and Knowledge* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956) p.305

[242] Sartre, Jean-Paul, "*L'Etre et le Néant*" (Paris, Librairie Gallimard, 1943) pp. 134, 145, 652-3

His conclusion, in Book I of the *Treatise*, is that the self is nothing but a bundle of perceptions.

> …what we call a mind, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos'd, tho' falsely, to be endow'd with a perfect simplicity and identity. (T, 207)

But Hume describes the bundle as "united", "connected", and "linked" by relations – particularly that of cause and effect. In light of these connections, he later describes the bundle as a *system*:

> …we may observe, that the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. (T, 261)

Later still, in what is possibly an allusion to Hobbes, Hume compares the self to a *commonwealth*:

> …I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its members but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relations of causation. (T, 261)

The point in all of these cases is just that the self is not literally an unchanging independent thing that underlies our perceptions, but is instead a group of perceptions that are *considered* as unified because certain associative principles of mind connect them by relations of cause and effect. This should remind us of our previous discussion[243] regarding Hume's reinterpreted distinction between substances and modes wherein he denies the traditional metaphysics but accepts that there is a distinction between substances and modes in other terms. (T, 16) Now, in a similar fashion, Hume happily admits that there is an object of experience that we call the 'self'; he simply denies that the metaphysicians were right to think that it is an independent and unified existence.

Some commentators, Nathan Brett[244] for example, have rightly emphasized the latter passages quoted above in which Hume insists that the mind is not merely a bundle, but a *system* or a *commonwealth*. "Bundle theory" is the common name for Hume's theory of mind, but the term

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[243] See Chapter Two
[244] Brett, Nathan. "Substance and Mental Identity in Hume's Treatise," *The Philosophical Quarterly*. Vol.22, no.87. (Apr., 1972), pp.110-125

"bundle" tends to conjure up an image of a group of loose and unconnected perceptions, and this is not Hume's view. Although Hume thinks that there are no (discoverable) metaphysical connections between the perceptions, Hume nevertheless maintains that the perceptions that make-up a mind are strongly and closely connected by the natural principles of association – "…the principles of union or cohesion among our simple ideas" that "in the imagination supply the place of that inseparable connexion, by which they are united…" (T, 12) Hume's term "commonwealth" thus provides for the better metaphor. One might think of a Commonwealth as being only a group of people – a 'bundle', if you like. In that sense, if you examine a commonwealth you won't find any independent substance that somehow underlies the group. Yet there is more to say about the concept. A Commonwealth is not *merely* a bundle of people; it is a bundle of people who are *systematically interconnected*. Indeed the ways in which the members are connected – by laws, by customs, by a head of state, etc. – are surely part of what makes the commonwealth the thing it is, and what constitutes the identity of the aggregation as it changes over time. And so it is with Hume's conception of the mind. There is no independent thing that lies behind the perceptions which are its parts, but the parts are massively and systematically interconnected in ways that help make the mind the thing it is. Moreover, as we will see, the metaphor goes even deeper, since the perceptions that make-up the mind are related in terms of a natural "hierarchy" which explains why some perceptions trump others.

It is important to stress Hume's view concerning the connectivity of perceptions in the mind because part of what fails to appeal about Hume's so-called bundle theory is that a "bundle" seems a very inert sort of thing. Mere "bundles" of thoughts, we think, are not the sorts of things that make choices and, (consequently,) not the sort of things that make errors. Choices and errors seem to be the domain of an active soul that sits behind the bundle. Of course, that intuition may turn out to be true, but the intuition alone will not refute Hume. He has at his disposal the rejoinder that we are simply failing to grasp the complexity of the complex object that is the bundled mind. A commonwealth, after all, is only a bundle of people – there is no thing that exists "behind" the bundle – and yet it is a bundle that wages wars, stages revolutions, and stands for certain ideals. Perhaps someone will insist that this is because each of a commonwealth's parts – its subjects – has a freewill of his or her own. If so, the analogy is a bad one. But the alternative suggestion is that human activity may itself be explained as an emergent property of connected but fundamentally independent parts.

Stated more generally, a common worry about Hume's concept of the mind which avoids inquiring after "real causes", is that it seems to fail to account for what we often think of as the "mysterious" or "irreducible" features of the mind – the ones that Stephen Pinker, for example, calls

"imponderable"[245]. But a closer reading of Hume reveals that Hume offers an argument, or at least the beginning of an argument, that the apparently irreducible powers of the human mind (e.g. voluntary activity) are in fact reducible. Indeed, Hume should be read as one of the earliest attempts to help demystify the human mind by appreciating the complexity of the interactions between perceptions. Forests and oceans are very mysterious sorts of places, and they are no less mysterious for our knowing that they are, essentially, very large bundles of atoms. And for Hume, perceptions are just the atoms of the mind. Natural philosophy is a sort of introspective attempt at chemistry.

SHOULD WE EXTEND NATURALISM TO THE HUMAN MIND?

One difficulty concerns whether or not it is right to compare the inanimate objects of the natural world with the human mind. Many of the early modern philosophers balked at this comparison. Thomas Reid, for example, was one who, like Hume, rejected the Scholastic attribution of active powers to inanimate things, and yet nonetheless maintained that we must continue to attribute active powers to the human soul. In general, Reid was a mechanist who accepted the idea, attributed to Newton, that philosophy can only strive to explain the general laws that regulate nature, and cannot pretend to understand real causes.[246] And yet concerning the human soul Reid writes:

> It is evidently the intention of our Maker, that man should be an active and not merely speculative being. For this purpose, certain active powers have been given him, limited indeed in many respects, but suited to his rank and place in the creation.[247]

Following Descartes, Reid argued that we are plainly conscious of our own abilities to produce motion in the body, and to direct the will.[248] And indeed, even on Hume's strictly observational terms, Reid is surely right. We certainly *are* aware that we have these abilities, or at least that we *seem* to have them. We can, for example orient our attention at will, overcome a passion, or choose between several available options. What separates Reid from Hume is the question as to whether or not these abilities defy a naturalistic explanation.

It would be a mistake, I think, to attribute any considerable naivety to either side of this debate. Reid and Hume should each be read as responding, in different ways, to one of the most difficult and important questions of Eighteenth Century philosophy, and both parties are quite aware of the growing tension between the new mechanical philosophy and the traditional metaphysics.

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[245] Pinker, S. "*How the Mind Works*" (London: Penguin, 1999) p.558
[246] Reid, T. *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, pp. 45-52
[247] Ibid. p.1
[248] Descartes, AT V, 222; AT III, p. 693-4

Reid, for instance, maintained that the soul was a simple spiritual substance, but he was nonetheless quite prepared to glory in the progress of the new naturalistic Newtonian psychology. As Martin and Barresi put it:

> Reid was, if anything, more enthused and expansive about the empirical parts of his account [of the mind] than about its metaphysically spiritual underpinnings.[249]

Others too felt the tension between the science and the metaphysics. Shaftesbury, for example, endorsed Newtonian mechanics in that he thought the "life" of animate matter should be explained in terms of the "sympathizing of parts"[250], and yet he remained a believer in the substantial self:

> Therefore if there be that thing you call substance, I take for granted I am one. But for anything further relating to this question…I am determined neither way'[251]

Berkeley was more resolute about affirming the existence of the substantial mind. Indeed, in his *Three Dialogues* he first has Hylas anticipate Hume's criticism of substance:

> …it seems that, according to your own way of thinking…it should follow that you are only a system of floating ideas without any substance to support them. Words are not to be used without a meaning. And as there is no more meaning in *spiritual* substance than in *material* substance, the one is to be exploded as well as the other.[252]

And then has Philonous outright reject it:

> How often must I repeat that I know or am conscious of my own being, and that I *myself* am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking, active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas.[253]

Nonetheless, Berkeley made much use of the empirical psychology. It was his weapon against Locke's account of primary qualities.

Indeed, so common was this felt tension that even the 18th century poets weigh in. Concerning the "Nature and State of Man", Alexander Pope seems unsure whether a human is something spiritual that "*acts*" or something natural that "*rests*":

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[249] Raymond, M & Buressi, J. "*The Naturalization of the Soul*" (London and New York: Routledge: 2000) p. 49
[250] Shaftesbury, A. *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinion, Times,* ed. J.M.Robertson (Indianpolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company , 1711 / 1964) Vols I–II, p. 99-100
[251] Ibid. p.101
[252] Berkeley, G. "*Principles, Dialogues, and Philosophical Correspondence*" (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1734 / 1965) p.178
[253] Ibid.

> He hangs between, in doubt to act or rest;
>
> In doubt to deem himself a God or Beast[254]

The point I am trying to make is only that Hume's rejection of the substantial self may well be the logical conclusion of an 18th century trend towards providing a wholly naturalistic explanation of the mind, but it is not obvious that the naturalistic attitude *should* be taken so far. Just because many of the features of the world and the mind can be explained in mechanistic terms, doesn't mean that *every* feature must be explainable in these terms. As Reid put it:

> A traveller of good judgment may mistake his way, and be unawares led into a wrong track; and while the road is fair before him, he may go on without suspicion and be followed by others; but when it ends in a coal-pit, it requires no great judgment to know that he hath gone wrong, nor perhaps to find out what misled him.[255]

It is somewhat tempting, I think, for some of us to read Hume's naturalistic science of the mind as if he were presenting the straightforward implications of empiricism to a group of stubborn and dogmatic metaphysicians who have simply refused to extend the plain implications of empiricism to the human mind. Hume's ironic tone when he discusses the self makes this reading all the more tempting:

> If anyone upon serious and unprejudic'd reflexion, thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him… But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions... (T, 252)

But, of course, we should avoid the temptation to read Hume this way. Hume's contemporaries were quite familiar with the naturalistic principles that Hume emphasises. The resistance we find from those in the period must not be understood in terms of any petty dogmatism, but in terms of the commonly held view in the period that a naturalistic account of the mind, such as Hume's could not possibly explain all the facts that needs explaining. As Berkeley put it: "How often must I repeat" that I am not only a collection of my ideas, but I am a thing that "*thinks*" and "*perceives*" and "*knows*" and "*wills*"?[256]

What the philosophers of the Eighteenth Century well understood is that a theory should be judged in accordance with how well it explains the observable phenomena. It is on these terms, therefore,

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[254] Pope, A. *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, I
[255] Reid, T. *Inquiry into the Human Mind*" Chapter I, VIII
[256] Berkeley, G. *Principles, Dialogues, and Philosophical Correspondence*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1734 / 1965) p.178

that I want to consider how adequately Hume can explain agency – the activity of the mind without which error is impossible to explain. In other words, how can Hume's naturalistic account of the mind explain the fact that we are active creatures that *make* mistakes rather than passive creatures who merely suffer misfortunes?

THE PASSIONS

The overriding project of Hume's *Treatise,* as we have already remarked, is to "explain the principles of human nature" by placing them "on a foundation almost entirely new." (T, xx) In Book I Hume lays out this "new" foundation – the science of the mind – and treats of the topic in atomistic terms: replacing the traditional metaphysics with a discussion of individual perceptions and the relations between them. By the end of Book III, Hume hopes to have completed a grand summation of human nature at large including all of our abilities to think, act, and moralise. It is in Book II, on the passions, that the gap between the atomistic world of individual perceptions, and the familiar world of social interaction, is bridged. So, as it is now widely acknowledged[257], it is in Book II that we find Hume's explanation of the self insofar as it concerns activity.

Hume begins his account of the passions with a discussion of pride and humility. This is unusual, perhaps, since these passions hardly seem as important or as common place as other passions – love and hate, for example. But, along with sympathy, pride and humility do the most philosophical work, for Hume, and it is on these passions that I will focus. Indeed, it is these passions that Hume uses to explain how we come to have ideas of ourselves as active agents rather than mere bundled unities.

Hume begins his analysis of pride and humility by observing that they are simple impressions. What he means is that we cannot adequately explain what these passions feel like with "a multitude of words." Everyone, he thinks, knows what it is like to be proud or humble, and "everyone, of

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[257] Although, in 2003, the issue was still fresh enough for Jane McIntyre to label the failure to acknowledge the passions, "the cardinal sin of Hume scholarship," and I think the error is quite common even in very recent literature. For example, in his short book, *How to Read Hume*, Simon Blackburn credits Hume with only "a dim awareness" of one of the idea that "the self is a formal or structural concept, rather than an empirical one." But it is no wonder that Blackburn reads Hume as "dim", since his proposed reading of Hume's conception of the self makes no reference whatsoever to his account of the passions, and it is precisely in Hume's account of the passions that he makes the relevant claims. I am not quite sure how acutely Hume *really* was aware of the implications of his own method, but "dim" is certainly not the right word. Hume explicitly rejects the conception of the self as an underlying metaphysical substance, and explicitly affirms that, in a variety of different ways, our ideas of agency are complexes constructed from simpler experiences. We can be quite sure, I'd say, that Hume would find nothing new in Nietzsche's claim that: "What separates me most deeply from metaphysicians is: I don't concede that the "I" is what thinks. Instead, I take the I itself to be a construction of thinking."
McIntyre, J. L. "So Great a Question: A Critical Study of Raymond Martin's and John Barresi's, Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century," *Hume Studies* (November, 2003) p.369
Blackburn, Simon. "*How to Read Hume*" (Granta: London, 2008) p. 52
Nietzsche, Friedrich. "*Writings from the Late Notebooks,"* ed. Rudiger Bittner. Trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 20-1

himself, will be able to form a just idea of them, without any danger of mistake." But although we cannot describe them further with a multitude of words, Hume says that we can explain pride and humility in terms of the "circumstances" that "attend them." (T, 277) In other words, we can explain them in terms of their functional role in the mind. As Hume tells us later,

> …'tis not the present sensation or momentary pain or pleasure, which determines the character of any passion, but the general bent or tendency of it from the beginning to the end. (T, 384-5)[258]

And Hume sets about explaining the "general bent" of pride. In order for us to feel pride, Hume lists three prerequisites that must be met. Firstly, we must have an idea of some desirable thing – the thing we are proud of. Secondly, we must have an idea of a particular quality (or set of qualities) by virtue of which the thing we are proud of is worth taking pride in. Thirdly, we must have an idea of the self to whom the object is related in a relevant manner. So, to take an example, we might have an idea of a house that we considered desirable in light of its fine architecture or spacious interior, and is related to the self by ownership or craftsmanship. It is only when these three conditions are satisfied that we feel the passion we call 'pride'. Humility is the opposite of pride, but the process is essentially the same. Humility involves having an idea of the self as related to some object with undesirable qualities – for example, being the owner of a termite-ridden cottage.

Of course, it's a relative matter whether any particular object is worthy of pride – a termite-ridden cottage is better than a leaky tent, and both are better than sleeping outside in the rain. I may show-off my tiny flat to friends with some measure of pride, but I would not be similarly proud if the Queen came to stay. The objects of pride are thus relative to one's history, one's preferences, and one's peers – and Hume acknowledges this.

> Hence we form a notion of different ranks of men, suitable to the power or riches they are possest of. (T, 293)

It is our customs that inform our ideas about which objects are desirable. Indeed, Hume says that if an alien, "full-grown, and of the same nature with ourselves, were on a sudden transported into our world," he would not feel pride in the same objects that we do. (T, 293) True enough.

But the most philosophically interesting feature of Hume's conception of pride, at least for our purposes, is that pride orients attention on the self as being an agent.

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[258] For a discussion of this passage see also: Schmitter, Amy. "Making an Object of Yourself: On the Intentionality of the Passions in Hume," *Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Mind*, 9 (2009) p. 234
Schmitter points out that although this claim is made in the context of "how either benevolence or contempt might arise from pity", the point seems to be a general claim about how we think of the various passions.

> 'Pride and humility, being once rais'd, immediately turn our attention to ourself, and regard that as their ultimate and final object…' (T, 279)

Indeed, says Hume, no one can doubt that pride and humility have this effect, for we frequently observe "the constancy and steadiness of [their] operations."

> 'Tis always self, which is the object of pride and humility; and whenever the passions look beyond, 'tis still with a view to ourselves, nor can any person or object otherwise have any influence on upon us. (T, 280)

> "Here at last the view always rests, when we are actuated by either of these passions; nor can we, in that situation of mind, ever lose sight of this object". (T, 286)

This orienting of attention on the self is the *effect* of pride, and Hume distinguishes it from the *cause* of pride (that is: the object of which we are proud.) It is this distinction that Hume has in mind when he says that Pride is,

> …a passion plac'd betwixt two ideas, of which one produces it, and the other is produc'd by it," (T, 278)

But, in fact, as Hume also acknowledges, both the cause and the effect of pride involve an idea of the self. Beauty, for example, is a quality that may be the cause of pride, but it can only have this effect if the beauty is already conceived as being related to the self.

> Beauty, consider'd merely as such, unless plac'd upon something related to us, never produces any pride or vanity…(T, 279)

What we have, then, in pride, is a passion that *requires* an idea of the self, but also *gives rise* to an idea of the self. How can we explain this? What are these ideas and what is their relationship?

DO WE HAVE DIFFERENT KINDS OF IDEAS OF THE SELF?

One possibility is that the idea of the self that appears in Hume's discussion of the passions is different from the idea of the bundle that Hume proposed in Book I.[259] After all, Hume does say that:

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[259] Chazan, Pauline. "Pride, Virtue, and Self-Hood: A Reconstruction of Hume," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22.1 (1992) pp. 45–64

> …we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves.
>
> (T, 253)

Some commentators have taken this as evidence that Hume intends the bundle theory of Book I to explain only the former of these two conceptions, and that what we find in Book II is a completely different idea of ourselves.[260] One virtue of this reading is that it avoids what might otherwise appear to be a contradiction. We remember that In Book I Hume rejected the view of those philosophers:

> …who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity… (T, 251)

And yet in Book II he tells us:

> 'Tis evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves, is always intimately present with us, and that our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that 'tis not possible to imagine, that any thing can in this particular go beyond it. (T, 17-18)

If the idea of the self in this second passage is different from the idea of the self in the first passage, then there is no problem with this view. But if they are the same idea, then it appears we may have a contradiction, and some commentators have accused Hume of just that. Kemp Smith, for example, describes Hume's "uneasy awareness of the contradiction," and Passmore says:

> There are…difficulties…in Hume's theory of pride and humility. He is certainly not entitled, for example, to talk of an 'idea of ourselves'…[261]

But I do not think there is any such contradiction, nor do I think that Hume's conception of the self in the passions is different in kind from the self that appears in Book I. In fact, far from rejecting the bundle theory of the self in Book II, I think it contains the largest part of Hume's explanation about how our idea of the bundle works.

To begin with, the charge against Hume of outright contradiction is easily dismissed. When, in Book I, Hume derides the metaphysicians "who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self", it is plain from the context that Hume is rejecting specifically the

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[260] For a discussion of this debate see: Carlson, Asa. "There is Just One Idea of the Self in Hume's Treatise" *Hume Studies*, 35 (2009) pp. 171-184

[261] Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p. 126

substantial theory of the self. The metaphysicians had supposed that we are always conscious of an underlying substantial unity 'behind' our perceptions; Hume denies that we are ever conscious of any such thing. Then, in Book II, Hume goes on to say that we nonetheless have an "idea, or rather impression of ourselves," and that it "is always intimately present with us." But there is no good reason to read Hume as now accepting what he earlier rejected. That would be very uncharitable. It is more charitable, and indeed more natural, to suppose that Hume held all of the following doctrines, which are not contradictory.

(1) We have no of idea of the self as a substance

(2) *A fortiori*, we are not "always conscious" of the presence of a substantial self

(3) Nonetheless, we have an idea of the self (to be defined in other terms)

(4) We are always (or at least very often) conscious of this idea of the self

What about the passage in which Hume says we must distinguish between two ideas of the self? Here it is in context:

> What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence throu' the whole course of our lives? In order to answer this question, we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves. The first is our present subject. (T, 253)

Hume is not proposing two radically different conceptions of the self. He is instead making a point about our having two different reasons for ascribing identity to the bundled self as it changes over time. There is one reason that involves the understanding (discussed in Book I), and another that involves the passions (discussed in Book II). In the first case, we ascribe the identity because certain relations – resemblance and causation[262] – make us mistake the sequence of distinct perceptions for a unity. In the second case, we ascribe the identity because, for reasons we will discuss in a moment, the passions cause us to do so – they cause us to have a concern for that bundled unity. In an excellent paper on Hume's conception of the self, Asa Carlson makes exactly this point about Hume having the two explanations. Carlson writes:

> In Book 1, Hume explains how thought or imagination makes us believe in a continuous self, and in Book 2, he explains how the passions do the same thing. The words "The first is

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[262] T, 260-1

our present subject..." signals Hume's intention to discuss the second topic later on, as we know he did.

Carlson then goes on to say that this second topic is addressed by Hume in the following passage in which reiterates Hume's doctrine of associationism in the argot of the passions:

> All resembling impressions are connected together and no sooner one arises than the rest immediately follow. Grief and disappointment give rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be compleated. In like manner our temper, when elevated with joy, naturally throws itself into love, generosity, pity, courage, pride, and the other resembling affections. (T, 283)

Carlson is right that these associative principles are part of what causes us to ascribe a unity to the bundled mind, but there is more to say. I think that Hume's discussion of the passions explain the important part of how we form an idea of the self: they explain how it is we come to think of ourselves as active agents. This explanation involves, as Hume says, "*the concern we take in ourselves*." (T, 253)

I should add, before I go on, that in what follows I may ascribe to Hume a view that is not explicitly stated in his own text. What I do claim is that the following reading is consistent with what Hume said. My primary concern is to decide whether Hume could have defended a naturalistic conception of human agency. For my purpose, this is more important than the question of whether or not Hume did in fact defend it.

HOW THE IDEA OF THE AGENT IS CREATED BY A PASSIONATE SPIRAL

According to Hume, having a concern for one's self somehow gives rise to the idea of one's self. How is this possible? Is that not putting the cart before the horse? Surely having a concern for one's self is possible only on the condition that we *already* have an idea of ourselves. This would appear objectionably circular.

The correct reply is that the Humean process by which we come to think of ourselves as agents is not really a circle, but a spiral. It is true that having a concern for one's self presupposes that we already have some idea of what it is to be a self. But this presupposed idea is less complex than the idea of the self that emerges after the passions have done their work.

This is how I read Hume's account of the self as it spans two books: the associative principles of Book I explain how it is we come to imagine a bundled unity out of many distinct perceptions. A

close relation is taken for an identity because the associative principles of the mind are apt to do such things. Later, in Book II, Hume observes, (still on empirical grounds,) that many of our passions tend to have certain effects on the way the bundle is considered. They orient attention to some perceptions rather than others. They cause us to draw a psychological distinction between perceptions that appear to be tightly within the bundle and those that seem to be outside it or only loosely connected to it. The passions also connect the bundle in terms of feelings – desire, pride, and sympathy, for example. These feelings have certain functional effects and one of these effects is that they give rise to notions of power, activity, and voluntary action.

I am conscious that this is a long and winding road to the conclusion I want to draw from this chapter: that on Humean terms we can make sense of the normativity of error. But I think it is the only road home. The philosophical problem under discussion is this: how can a descriptive account of a bundled self possibly account for the agency implicit in error. In order to answer this problem, it is necessary to explain just how complicated the bundle becomes after we have considered the effects of the passions. Deborah Brown once suggested to me the metaphor of a tornado, and I think it is a good one. We should not picture Hume's bundled self as a small collection of inactive perceptions. The mind, for Hume, is a radically complicated whirlwind of perceptions that double-back on each other and influence each other in countless ways. We should take seriously Hume's insistence that the mind is extremely convoluted:

> … [The perceptions] succeed one another with an inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement. (T, 252)

> …[S]everal perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. (T, 253)

With these thoughts in mind, we are in a position to better understand Hume's claim that the passions foster our idea of the self as agent. Recall that pride is caused by having an idea of a desirable object that is related to the self, and that it has the effect of focusing our attention on the self. I think this is an example of a relatively simple idea of the self being converted into a richer, more complex idea of the self via a passion. It is an example of an associative process in which pride gives rise to thought of the self as an active agent, rather than a mere unity.

How does this work? Note that the first idea of the self that is involved in pride – the idea that is the cause – need only be a relatively simple idea[263]. The cause of pride requires only that we think of a desirable object as being closely related to the bundle that we mistake for a unity. All of this can be explained in terms of the principles of association outlined in Book I. But then Hume goes on to observe that having this (relatively simple) idea not only causes us to experience a certain feeling (called "pride"), but also tends to have the *functional effect* of focusing attention on the nexus of perceptions that comprise the self. It makes us "think of our own qualities and circumstances." (T, 287) What results is not merely an idea of the self as a unity, but an idea of a unity considered in light of its ability to feel emotions and to be related, emotionally, to other objects. As Ainsley puts it, the idea of the self that is caused by pride is "specially characterised" by the thing to which it is related.

> …we think of ourselves as specially characterized by whatever it is that causes that pride; pride in our house leads us to think of ourselves *as homeowners*, pride in our virtue leads us to think of ourselves *as virtuous*.[264]

Pride not only focuses our attention on the self, but "…carries with it the structure and train of perceptions accompanying the occurrence of the passion."[265] Indeed, for these reasons Amy Schmitter argues that once the passions have done their work, the Humean conception of the self is no longer simply an "I" that thinks, but is instead a "full-blooded self":

> …a self outfitted with its qualities, possessions, relations, likes and dislikes – it is a character, or personality.[266]

This is right, I think. And as Brown and I have argued elsewhere[267], Hume's pride can therefore be understood as an essentially unifying experience of "mineness". Pride presupposes a certain conception of the self, but it does not presuppose a conception of the self *as agent*. Rather, pride *constitutes* our conception of agency. It is the network of perceptions associated with pride that gives rise to the idea of the self as being the kind of thing that can *take pride*.

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[263] Of course, it is still what Hume would call a "complex idea"; I am only saying that it is less complex than the idea that results.

[264] Ainslie, Donald. "Scepticism About Persons in Book II of Hume's Treatise," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37 (1999) p.482

[265] Schmitter, Amy. "Making an Object of Yourself: On the Intentionality of the Passions in Hume," *Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Mind*, 9 (2009) p. 232

[266] Ibid. p. 236

[267] Brown, D. & Hooper, M. "Hume's Pride: Agency, Attention, and Individuation" (Paper presented to the 35th Annual Hume Conference, Reykjavik, August 2008)

This, I hasten to add, is not as crazy as it may sound. As a point about the order in which we humans acquire concepts, I think it is probably right. When you and I come to think of ourselves as agents this really does require a more abstract level of thinking than we ordinarily engage in. In day-to-day life we do not tend to think of ourselves this obtusely: we desire, act, take pride, love, and hate: we just *do* these things rather than think of ourselves as the agents that do them. This is also the order in which children acquire concepts and abilities: children are plainly capable of emotional experiences and actions before they are capable of thinking about themselves, abstractly, as agents of those actions.[268]

Now, it is true that once we have the idea of the agent, we often *regard* it as something prior to the passions. Hume can allow this. Although the idea of the agent was originally the effect of pride, it can, once in place, also give rise to pride. This fact harmonizes with the spiral-shaped process I have been describing. Once we have the richer idea of the self as agent, the cause of pride need no longer involve a simple idea of the self as a mere "I" that is related to a desirable object. Pride can now take as its cause the idea of an *agent* being closely related to a desirable object. Perhaps, when this happens, the effect on attention is even stronger. If the cause of pride is already the idea of a complex agent being related to something desirable, then possibly the resulting fixation on the self will be even stronger than it would be otherwise. This is plausible, I think, since the perceived relationship of ownership or craftsmanship that causes pride is likely to be more vivacious in such a case. Regardless, what is clear is that Hume can happily allow that we do often *think* of agents as being prior to their passions and actions. He will only insist that, metaphysically speaking, this belief is ultimately a fiction. (T, 259)

To be more accurate, I should say that pride only has the self-synthesizing effects I have been describing in collaboration with other passions. For example, Hume says that it is desire, rather than pride, that leads directly to action. In fact, all of our emotions are linked together in a very complex relationship.

> …[A] suit of fine cloaths produces pleasure from their beauty; and this pleasure produces
> the direct passions, or the impressions of volition and desire. Again when these cloaths are
> consider'd as belonging to ourself, the double relation conveys to the us the sentiment of
> pride, which is an indirect passion; and the pleasure , which attends that passion, returns

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[268] Developmental psychologists debate about the age at which children typically acquire a concept of themselves, and the spectrum of suggestions is pretty broad – ranging from 2 to 8 years. But children are certainly capable of emotional experiences – desires, pleasures, pains, etc. – before the age of 2. For arguments to this end, see: MacArthur, J. D. & MacArthur C. T. Eds. *The Self in Transition: Infancy to Childhood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990)

back to the direct affections, and gives new force to our desire or volition, joy or hope. (T, 439)[269]

What makes pride so important – the reason I have emphasised it – is not that it gives rise to action, but that it accounts for our having an idea of the self *as the kind of thing that can act*. It gives rise to, and focuses our attention on, the self as agent. It also sustains this idea of the agent (T, 286), and thus redirects the attention from desirable things themselves to the nexus of impulses that desire them. In this way, pride is the original cause of a process that makes us think of ourselves as different from mere wantons, for it ensures that our actions are not just direct *re*actions to pleasurable or painful stimuli, but are instead the product of a complicated and conscious internal process – a process we might think of as deliberation.

For Hume, there is only a fairly short step from thinking of ourselves as agents, to thinking of others as agents as well. This occurs, he explains, through the mechanism of *sympathy* by which we are led to experience the passions of others.

> No quality of human nature is more remarkable…than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments… (T, 316)

He describes this sympathetic "communication" of passions as a two stage process. At first, the feelings of others are known only by their effects,

> …and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it. (T, 317)

But having observed these effects, the idea gives rise to an impression of reflection, and by acquiring vivacity, produces an "equal" emotion in ourselves.

> The idea is presently converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce and equal emotion, as any original affection. (T, 317)

Just what it means for "communication" to occur between two bundles of perceptions is somewhat mysterious. By this stage in the *Treatise* Hume has given up talking about selves as "bundles" and

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[269] In fact, Hume says that the passions often merge and mingle together. He compares complex mixtures of passions in the mind to the way that colours can be blended together: "…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." (T, 366)

adopted a more common and convenient mode of speaking[270], so we can only speculate about what Hume might have said. Perhaps he could have provided an account that goes something like this:

I begin by having an idea of certain bodily effects, and I think of these bodily effects as belonging to someone else. (That is: the effects are not conceived as being tightly connected to my *own* bundle, but they are tightly connected to my complex idea of another object – a person.) This idea is then followed by an impression of reflection – some passion or other. I think of the two perceptions as being related, because I have observed similar successions (of ideas and impressions) in the past. By custom, my present impression is naturally associated with the preceding idea of the other person's observable qualities. And *because* I associate it in this way, I come to think of the passion (that I am experiencing) as somehow belonging to the person whose bodily effects I observe.

This is a complicated account of sympathy, but I worry that it is not yet complicated enough. It is extremely difficult to cash-out the passionate activities of the mind in the language of "bundles", and this, perhaps, is why Hume, in Book II, gave up trying. But I see no obvious reason to suppose that Hume's account of sympathy *must* be inconsistent with his rejection of the substantial mind. Hume only needs it to be possible that by some natural process we come to experience an emotion that we think of as being caused by the observable properties of another person – a person who we then come to think of as experiencing that very same emotion. I do not see any reason why this shouldn't, in principle, be explainable in Hume's naturalistic terms.

If that is right, and Hume *can* have his account of sympathy as I think, then he can certainly use it to explain how we come to think of other people as agents. As Hume says, sympathy naturally leads us to think of humans as being fundamentally the same.

> Now 'tis obvious, that nature has preserved a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark and passion or principle in others, of which, of some degree or other, we find a parallel in ourselves. The case is the same with the fabric of the mind, as with that of the body. (T, 318)

Once the idea of the self as agent is produced by the passionate spiral, sympathy will naturally lead us to think of others in just the same way.[271]

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[270] Or else, he speaks in unhelpful metaphors: "As in strings equally wound up, the motion of one communicates itself to the rest, so all the affections readily pass from one person to another, and beget correspondent movements in every human creature." (T, 576)

[271] Although, because the mechanism of sympathy relies, in the first part, on our observing "external signs" in others, "which convey an idea" (T, 317) of their emotion, our degree of sympathy will be influenced by how closely related we are to those people and how closely we can observe their external signs. Thus, Hume later says: "We sympathize more with persons contiguous to us, than with persons remote from us; with our acquaintance, than with strangers; with our

Finally, we are in a position to return to the question of how Hume can make sense of the activity implicit in error. In line with what we have observed, it is obvious that Hume cannot help himself to a sharp metaphysical difference between actions that involve agency and actions that do not. He will instead have a spectrum, and it will be a spectrum that ranks actions in terms of how deliberate we think they are.[272] "Deliberation" itself requires an explanation in Humean terms, and I think it must be explained in terms of the extent to which the causal history of an action is related to ideas of the self as an agent. And this, in turn, will be determined by the extent to which the ideas are related to feelings of pride and humility. For Hume, to *deliberately* pursue one course of action rather than another is just to be aware of an internal process which leads us to procure for ourselves objects that are (or have been in the past) the sources of pride. When we deliberately act against a strong impulse, or overcome a strong desire, Hume need not explain this in terms of the heroic effort[273] of an irreducible faculty of the will. Instead, he can explain it as the result of an even stronger passion – pride – one which often trumps the others, grips the attention on the self, and makes the bundle focus on itself as an enduring and interested thing: as the kind of thing that can procure for itself lasting sources of pleasure that will sustain the pleasurable feeling longer than any fleeting object of desire. As Pall Ardal observes, "Hume does not deny that the word "will" has a meaning: there certainly is such an idea."[274] And indeed, Hume explains the will in terms of how we feel when we are consciously aware of our own endogenous processes:

> I desire it may be observed, that, by the *will*, I mean nothing but *the internal impression we feel, and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind*. (T, 399)[275]

One of the criticisms of Hume's rejection of active powers is that it must mean that the mind is a purely responsive system – a deterministic system. But, as we have discussed, this criticism should be mitigated by the fact that a passive system is not necessarily dispassionate. Hume allows that

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countrymen, than with foreigners." (T, 581) He therefore allows that we can think of some people as having more agency than others. This may also allow him a natural explanation, (though, of course, not a justification) of racism in those are who unable to feel sympathy for others who exhibit (superficially) different "external signs" of their passions.

[272] Rescher also holds this view: "…the issue of culpability…depends on the source or cause of the error. Was it due to inattention, carelessness, reckless disregard of standard safeguards, or some such? Then blame is, indeed, in order. Or was it due to matters lying outside the agent's knowledge and control – to developments he could not be expected to foresee or could not have helped even if he did so? Then that is something else again."
Rescher, Nicholas. *Error* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 70-1

[273] "Heroic effort" is Reid's phrase. Reid, T. "Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind" in *The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, ed. William Hamilton, (Hildesheim: G. Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1983) p. 96

[274] Ardal, Pall S., *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh: University press, 1966) p. 81

[275] Hume continues: "…This impression, like the preceding ones of pride and humility, love and hatred, 'tis impossible to define, and needless to describe any farther." (T, 399)

there is a complex internal and emotional process that underlies decision-making. Our actions are not always just brute reactions to strong desires. They are instead, in cases of pride, the outcome of a complicated and passionate endogenous process.

For these reasons, I think that Hume must maintain that the extent to which we think of someone as having made a mistake (rather than suffered a misfortune) will be determined by the extent to which we think of them as an agent in respect to their error – that is, to the extent that we think of them as having engaged in a certain kind of endogenous process of conscious deliberation. This criterion will be vague, but vagueness may well be desirable in this case. Indeed, precisely because Hume's account of agency is vague, it may for that reason better capture our intuitions about what it is to make an error. In law, for example, we often think of culpability as involving a scale or continuum: one who stands accused is considered less or more blameworthy in proportion to how we think of them as an agent in respect to their crime. Perhaps the accused man's agency, for instance, was inhibited by a disability, or else by alcohol or temporary insanity. Hume' account of agency allows us to see these blurry lines as blurry. Recall, for example, Hume's illustration of the man,

> "…who being hung from a high tower in a cage of iron cannot forbear trembling, when he surveys the precipice below him, tho' he knows himself to be perfectly secure from falling." (T, 148)

There is an obvious sense in which we can think of this man's fear as involving a kind of error. After all, the man "*knows himself*" to be safe, and yet he trembles. We have no reason to suppose he is not an agent like the rest of us, and to this extent we might think of him as being *responsible* for that error. And yet there are clearly mitigating circumstances: after all, he is suspended high above the ground, and Hume rightly allows that in these predicaments it is common that the "imagination runs away with its objects". The man loses sight of his own agency because his attention is focused directly on the objects of the passions themselves. "The circumstances of depth and descent strike strongly upon him." (T, 148) The man experiences a lack of pride (in Hume's sense of the word); he experiences himself as the subject of things and not as the agent of things.

By combining these explanations, Hume can make sense of what is surely our intuitive response to the imagined scenario of the man in the cage. The man *is* making an error in one sense, since he is an *agent* who "*knows*" that he is safe. But his error is very understandable given what we know about the force of the direct passions that overcome us in that sort of scenario.

As we noted earlier, we cannot definitively decide the adequacy of Hume's descriptive account of agency and error without deciding the question of freewill. But perhaps it is point in favour of the

Humean account that it can remain agnostic about this metaphysical question. On Hume's view, it may be the case that for every agent there is a substance with active powers that underlies it. But Hume's project concerning the mind can be read an attempt show how we might explain the concept of agency, without presupposing the mysterious metaphysics.

It is still unclear how far Hume, or anyone, could take this naturalistic explanation of mental activity. Contemporary psychologists often write as if a naturalistic account *must* be the correct account. Julian Baggini, for example, in a passage typical of some popular literature, says of own view and (what he takes to be) Hume's view:

> The trick is to create something which has a strong sense of unity and singleness from what is actually a messy, fragmented sequence of experiences and memories… The point is that the trick works. It's like a mechanic's trick and not a magician's trick.[276]

I am not so certain. What is true is that *if* the naturalistic account is the correct one, then it must be true that the "trick" somehow works: it is a brute fact that we think of ourselves as unified agents, and if there is no metaphysical basis for this fact, then a naturalistic explanation must be along the right lines. But without begging that crucial question, can we really be so sure that Hume and his followers are not just contriving to pull a metaphysical rabbit from a naturalistic hat? The traditional conception of the self as an active substance may be mysterious, but it is a lot to give up. Hume's meagre box of explanatory tools includes only what can be observed about naturally occurring perceptions. Somehow, from this impassive set, he must be able to explain, at least in principle, everything there is to say about activity, agency, normativity, and error. He must explain why it is we *blame* people for their errors, and why we feel *right* to do so. He must explain, or explain away, the appearance of a free will. I have no problem believing that marvellously complex emergent effects can result from simple and non-intentional processes. My computer, for instance, is a wondrously complex thing, and often appears to have a mind of its own, but I do not really find it difficult to believe that its complexity is only the emergent effect of binary coding, circuitry and electricity, plastics and metals. But it is certainly more difficult to believe that the plainly observable facts about human agency – facts that appear so irreducibly *active* and *voluntary* – could be wholly explained by describing the operation of impassive perceptions.

The reason I list all those doubts is to avoid overstating my case. What I have argued is that Hume's naturalistic account of error as it involves activity is rich and fruitful – more so than is commonly acknowledged. We saw that Berkeley argued against rejection of the traditional self by insisting that

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[276] Baggini, Julian. *The Ego Trick* (London: Granta, 2011) p. 119

we are creatures who *act* and *will* and *operate*.[277] But if we think this is a criticism of Hume, then the criticism falls somewhat flat, because Hume simply agrees. He agrees, that is, that we *think* of ourselves as agents who are active and voluntary, agrees that those facts are there to be explained, and indeed sets about trying to explain them. The trouble, for Hume, is that beyond the psychological facts about perceptions there is nothing more we can say about the mind. But what I have tried to demonstrate is that this does not pose a fatal limitation. On Hume's view the psychological explanation can explain a good deal. Even on his sceptical terms, Hume can account for many of the ways in which our conception of error is inextricably tied to a conception of activity because he provides an account of how it is we come to think of people as *agents* rather than merely as passive bundles of perceptions.

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[277] Berkeley, G. *Principles, Dialogues, and Philosophical Correspondence* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1734 / 1965) p.178

CHAPTER SIX: CERTAINTY AND ERROR

On Hume's view, how pervasive is the possibility of error? I propose to tackle this question by discussing Hume's conception of certainty, for where there is certainty there can be no error. Of course, certainty only precludes error as long as the phrase "to be certain" requires not merely a very strong belief, but also a belief that is indubitably *true*. There is another familiar sense of "certainty" in which it's quite possible to be certain and yet mistaken. Wittgenstein said:

> 'I know' seems to describe a state of affairs which guarantees what is known, guarantees it as a fact. One always forgets the expression 'I thought I knew.'[278]

And we could say the same about certainty. Being certain and yet wrong is a grievous but familiar sort of error. We sympathise with the quip attributed to Moliere: that "It infuriates me to be wrong when I know I'm right." Surely all of us have found ourselves convinced of something that turned out to be false. What "certainty" refers to in these latter cases is just a kind of psychological state – *conviction*, we might call it.

But the kind of certainty I want to consider here is not that psychological sense of certainty discussed above, but another sense of certainty – an epistemological sense in which certainty is inextricably tied to truth. The question I want to ask is: does Hume think that there are any beliefs about which we could not possibly be mistaken? It is in this sense of certainty that I want to ask if there are any beliefs that are immune to error: are there any beliefs that are utterly indubitable?

RELATIONS OF IDEAS AND MATTERS OF FACT

If looking for certainty in Hume's epistemology, a likely place to start is with the class of perceptions Hume calls "Relations of Ideas".

> All the objects of human reason or enquiry may naturally be divided into two kinds, to wit, Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact. Of the first kind are the sciences of Geometry, Algebra, and Arithmetic; and in short, every affirmation, which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain. (E, 25)

Relations of Ideas are supposed to be known by the "mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe." The examples Hume lists are what Kant later called *a priori* knowledge: the kind of facts that can be known without reference to experience. "That three times five is equal to the half of thirty," Hume explains, is a truth that does not depend

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[278] Wittgenstein, L. *On Certainty,* trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969-1975) Xii.

on the way the world is. Its truth is self-evident and eternal; such statements "forever retain their certainty and evidence."

Distinct from Relations of Ideas, are what Hume calls "Matters of Fact". These are ideas that express facts about the objects of experience. Hume gives an example of our belief that the sun will rise tomorrow. Whether or not this belief is true depends on the world being a particular way. If the sun rises tomorrow, it will turn out to be true; if not, it will turn out to be false. But our belief about the sun is not the kind of thing that could be true by definition. We cannot decide the matter by the "mere operation of thought". Rather, as Hume says, Matters of Fact are "not ascertained in the same manner" as Relations of Ideas, "nor is our evidence of their truth, however great, of a like nature with the forgoing. The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible." The belief that the sun will *not* rise tomorrow "implies no contradiction." (E, 26)

Having noted this distinction it may seem a straightforward matter to decide what Hume thinks about certainty. After all, he has said explicitly that Relations of Ideas are "intuitively or demonstratively certain" and that Matters of Fact are never certain (in the strictest sense) since the opposite of a Matter of Fact is always possible. But, in fact, Hume's considered treatment of certainty is far more complicated than this. To see why, we need to examine his more extensive treatment of the topic as it appears in the *Treatise*.

KNOWLEDGE AND RELATIONS

In Part iii, Section I of the first book of the *Treatise*, Hume sets about explaining the limits of knowledge. He uses "knowledge" in a variety of senses, but sometimes, when it is used in a narrow sense, it is synonymous with "certainty". Hume first explains that a conception of knowledge relies on a conception of relations, and says that there are seven kinds of philosophical relation: *resemblance, contrariety, proportions in quantity or number, degrees in any quality, relations of time and space, identity, and causation*. (T, 14-15) This list, he then divides into two groups. The first four are said to "depend entirely on the ideas which we compare together". The latter three are "such as may be changed without any change in the ideas." So, for example:

> 'Tis from the idea of a triangle that we discover the relation of equality, which its three angles bear to two right ones; and this relation is invariable as long as our idea remains the same. (T, 69)

But, by contrast, the

> ...*contiguity* and *distance* betwixt two objects may be changed without any change on the objects themselves or on their ideas... (T, 69)

For Hume, only relations of the first kind, "can be the objects of knowledge and certainty." (T, 70)

Of the four relations that involve certainty, three of them – *resemblance*, *contrariety*, and *degrees in quality* – are said to fall "more properly under the province of intuition than demonstration." (T, 70) What Hume means is that these three relations are immediately evident. He admits that it is sometimes "impossible to judge exactly of the degrees of any quality...when the difference between them is very small." But, nonetheless, "when the difference is considerable" it is "easy to decide." "*And this decision we always pronounce at first sight, without any enquiry or reasoning*." (T, 70 Emphasis added)

It is strange that Hume admits that we sometimes make errors about these relations when the difference in question is very small. Of course, he's right to say that we do make these mistakes. But how can *he* concede this given that, in the very same paragraph, he has said that these relations involve a certainty that is immediate and intuitive? Probably the answer is that these relations only *sometimes* involve certainty. Hume does after all qualify his claim about these relations by saying that they "*can* be the objects of knowledge." (T, 70 emphasis added) Perhaps certainty is only to be had if the relation is sufficiently obvious. But in that case it should be fair to ask: *how* obvious does an intuition need to be to constitute certainty? The question is a bit petty, perhaps – "how obvious is *obvious*?" – but the fact that there is a question at all reveals that certainty must be, for Hume, a matter of degree. There must be some threshold, vague or otherwise, after which a "fairly sure" belief becomes a "certain" one.[279] As it happens, this is Hume's more fully worked-out final position, as we will see shortly: that all knowledge, even "certainty", resolves into probability. But this is a far cry from the neat distinction, earlier proposed, between Relations of Ideas that are certain, and Matters of Fact that are not. It is also a far cry from all usual philosophical usage of the word "certainty". When Descartes, for example, is searching for something *certain* in his *Meditations*, nobody supposes that he is only looking for something "fairly obvious". Even "extremely obvious" wouldn't do. Strictly, something that is only "quite certain" isn't really "certain" at all.

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[279] Others have defended the position that there are degrees of certainty. Russell, for example, writes in Human Knowledge: "Another difficulty about self-evidence is that it is a matter of degree...A difficult step in a mathematical argument may be very hard to "see". It is only for the highest degree of self evidence that we should retain the highest degree of certainty.
Russell, B. "*Human Knowledge*" (Routledge: New York, 2009) p.141

The problem gets even more complicated when Hume comes to discuss the relation he calls *proportion in quantity or number*. This too can be the object of knowledge or certainty. But unlike the former three relations of the same kind, this one isn't always intuitive. Sometimes, Hume allows, we can "proceed after the same manner...and might at one view observe a superiority or inferiority betwixt any numbers, or figures..." But in other cases, if the proportion of quantity is not obvious, we must "proceed in a more *artificial* manner" (T, 70) – namely, mathematics.

GEOMETRY AND CERTAINTY

Within mathematics, another distinction is drawn. Algebra and arithmetic are said to involve certainty in a way that geometry cannot. Again, this is an odd thing for Hume to say, since his chief example at the beginning of the section which was supposed to exemplify a relation that involves certainty, is a geometrical one:

> 'Tis from the idea of a triangle, that we discover the relation of equality, which its three angles bear to two right ones; and this relation is invariable, as long as our idea remains the same. (T, 69)

Now, however, just a page later, we find that geometry – "the art by which we fix the proportions of figures" – concerns only "the general appearance of the objects" and cannot capture their "prodigious minuteness". (T, 70-1)

> Our ideas seem to give a perfect assurance, that no two right lines can have a common segment; but if we consider these ideas, we shall find, that they always suppose a sensible inclination of the two lines, and that where the angle they form is extremely small, we have no standard of right line so precise, as to assure us of the truth of this proposition. (T, 71)

Our knowledge about geometry, then, is once again a matter of degree. At one end of the spectrum: it is "impossible for the eye[280] to determine the angles of a chiliagon[281] to be equal to 1996 right angles, or make any conjecture, that approaches this proportion." At the other end of the spectrum: when the eye "determines that...we cannot draw more than one right line between two given points; its mistakes can never be any of any consequence." In general, although geometry "falls short of that perfect precision and certainty, which are peculiar to arithmetic and algebra," it nonetheless "excels the imperfect judgments of our sense and imagination." The goal of geometry, Hume says,

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[280] It is true, as Hume says, that it is impossible for the *eye* to determine one way or another, but we may object that we simply know the difference between a 999-sided-figre and a chiliagon *by definition*. This point may well demonstrate the poverty of Hume's imagistic epistemology. Nonetheless, even if we think we know the difference between these figures in terms of a definition we have stipulated, there is still, I think, room for doubt. I will discuss our ability to doubt analytic or logical truths shortly.

[281] A one-thousand sided figure.

is to converge on certainty, by striving to always deal with sufficiently simple appearances that "by reason of their simplicity, cannot lead us into any considerable error." (T, 72)

IMPRECISION

It is worth asking why a complex idea should involve any more error than a simple one. What seems obviously true is that if shapes belong to external objects, and if we try to form a precise image of these shapes in our mind, we are bound to fail more often with a chiliagon than a square. But this is not the kind of relationship that Hume can have in mind in the present section. The relationships he is now considering are supposed to pertain between *ideas*, and not between ideas and external objects. They are, after all, specifically named "Relations of Ideas" and, as we have seen, Hume denies that we have any mechanism to usefully compare perceptions with mind-independent objects. What Hume must mean, therefore, is that the ideas themselves involve imprecision. But how is this possible? If we are not allowed to compare our ideas with the external objects, what does it *mean* to have an imprecise idea? Compared to *what* is an idea imprecise? Perhaps an idea can be imprecise as compared to an impression of what which it is supposed to be a copy. This would harmonize nicely with Hume's earlier concession in the very first section of the *Treatise* that "many of our complex impressions never are exactly copied in ideas." For example, Hume asks: "I have seen Paris; but shall I affirm I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions?" (T, 3) He concludes that he has no such idea. Why not? He does not say. Possibly complex impressions are too complex to be remembered.

In any case, it is interesting that Hume suggests that we can help remove the precision in our ideas by "proceeding in a more artificial manner" (T, 70). Hume doesn't explain exactly what he intends by the word "artificial", but we can speculate. One option is that Hume is referring to measuring, or any similar mathematical practise that increases accuracy. If so, the suggestion seems plausible, since we know from experience that using a ruler or a protractor really does increase our faith in geometrical ideas. But, once again, it is important to remember that Hume is discussing relations between ideas, and not relationships between our ideas an external world. Hume cannot really have it that using a ruler provides us with a way to compare our vague ideas with the precise objects of the external world. Certainly a ruler provides a way to measure *objects*, but objects themselves, insofar as we experience them, are collections of ideas rather than external substances. How, then, could "proceeding in a more artificial manner" can help us form clearer ideas?

Recall that for Hume the relations that involve intuitive certainty have in common the fact that they are immediately self-evident. But geometry, by contrast, is imprecise because in geometry we are

dealing only with the "general appearances" of mental images. "[Geometry's] original and fundamental principles are deriv'd merely from appearances," and if, for example, an angle is "extremely small" "we have no standard of a right line so precise as to assure us of the truth" of any proposition. (T, 71) Imprecision, therefore, involves a lack of clarity in our ideas. It is easier to form a clear mental image of a triangle than a chiliagon, and it is in this sense that Hume thinks that our idea of a triangle is more precise (and thus more certain) than our idea of a chiliagon. But Hume thinks that imprecision can be somewhat alleviated *by paying deliberate and careful attention* to the idea in question.

> If its weakness render it obscure, 'tis our business to remedy that defect as much as possible, by keeping the idea steady and precise." (T, 73)

This idea is not without merit. Let's take an example. I have some difficulty forming a clear mental image of a dodecagon. I can imagine the general sort of figure that a regular twelve-sided shape might form, but it is not nearly so clear as the crisp mental image I can form of a square. Yet, the more I try, the better I get. Thinking about symmetry helps, and so does comparing a dodecagon to an octagon (which I can more easily imagine.) What helps most of all, is if I try to picture an everyday object such as an Australian fifty-cent coin that actually has 12 sides. Having engaged in this sort of deliberate mental effort, I find that the precision of my present idea of a dodecagon, as compared to my previous idea, is certainly improved. It is now seems more obvious to me – more *intuitive* – what kinds of angles the sides form. It is not only that I can now infer certain facts about dodecagons from the proceeding considerations, but that I can actually form a better image of one in my mind. This, I think, is the sense in which Hume says that we can render our ideas more precise (and 'more certain') by proceeding in an artificial manner.

Nonetheless, Hume thinks that in some cases – the chiliagon, for example – the imprecision of my ideas will never be eradicated entirely, and so, for Hume, these geometrical ideas can never be the object of absolute certainty.

ALGEBRA AND ARITHMETIC

Perhaps, then, Hume might find certainty in other areas of mathematics. This idea looks hopeful since Hume says:

> There remain, therefore, algebra and arithmetic as the only sciences, in which we can carry on a chain or reasoning to any degree of intricacy, and yet preserve a perfect exactness and certainty. We are possest of a precise standard, by which we can judge of the equality and

proportion of numbers; and according as they correspond or not to that standard, we determine their relations without any possibility of error. (T 71)

And as far as the present section goes, this is Hume's conclusion: that algebra and arithmetic are absolutely certain. Later, however, when Hume discusses scepticism, he wavers considerably.

> There is no algebraist nor Mathematician so expert in his science, as to place entire confidence in any truth immediately upon his discovery of it or regard it as any thing, but a mere probability. (T, 180)

> Now as none will maintain, that our assurance in a long numeration exceeds probability, I may safely affirm, that there scarce is any proposition concerning numbers, of which we can have a fuller security. (T, 181)

The inconsistency here arises as a result of Hume's conception of the way in which knowledge about the relations of ideas is grasped. In the earlier section[282] he had maintained that the difference between relations of ideas and matters of fact is to be found in the manner of their apprehension. There is something "immediate" and "intuitive" about relations of ideas – especially mathematical ones – that renders them certain. But Hume does not (and cannot) think of intuition as the Rationalists did: as a special and separate way of knowing. He cannot think of intuition as a faculty distinct in kind from ordinary empirical experience. Even in the early section, Hume makes this clear:

> 'Tis usual with mathematicians, to pretend, that those ideas, which are their objects, are of so refin'd and spiritual a nature, that they fall not under the conception of the fancy but must be comprehended by a pure and intellectual view, of which the superior faculties of the soul are alone capable. (T, 72)

Indeed, Hume insists that philosophers are only fond of the "notion of some spiritual and refin'd perceptions; since by that means they cover many of their absurdities..." In rejecting it, Hume repeats again his mantra "*that all our ideas are copy'd from our impressions*" and insists that all knowledge is grounded in experience.

Later, in Part IV, Hume shows just how far he is willing to take this conception of intuition as being grounded in empirical experience when he discusses the process by which a mathematician arrives at his conclusions:

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[282] Bk I, Part III, Section 1.

Every time he runs over his proofs, his confidence encreases; but still more from the approbation of his friends; and is rais'd to its utmost perfection by the universal assent and applauses of the learned world. Now 'tis evident that this gradual encrease of assurance is nothing but the addition of new probabilities, and is deriv'd from the constant union of causes and effects, according to past experience and observation. (T, 180-1)

This is quite staggering. Recall that the distinguishing feature of Relations of Ideas was supposed to be that that they are "intuitively or demonstrably certain" and can be comprehended by the "mere operation of thought". Moreover, mathematics is supposed to be the prime example of a relation between ideas – the most certain of Hume's certainties. But now we find that our knowledge of mathematics rests, at least in some cases, upon probabilistic inferences from cause and effect, and it too is prone to error:

Our reason must be consider'd as a kind of cause, of which truth is the natural effect; *but such-a-one as by the irruption of other causes, and by the inconstancy of our mental powers, may frequently be prevented. By this means all knowledge degenerates into probability...* (T, 180, emphasis added)

Incidentally, these passages are sufficient reason to reject a certain popular conception of philosophical history[283] in which Hume is supposed to have suggested a neat distinction between *analytic-necessary-a priori-truths* and *synthetic-contingent-a posteriori-truths*, and other philosophers, Kant, Quine, & Kripke for example, who denied this neat distinction, are supposed to have refuted Hume. But from what we've considered, I hope it is obvious that this is wrong. Unless we ignore entirely the larger body of Hume's analysis concerning belief and certainty and the natural principles of mind, we cannot possibly ascribe to Hume such a neat distinction. Indeed, the whole idea that Hume has two distinct epistemological categories is faulty. This is not to say that Hume has no epistemological distinctions at all; certainly he maintains that there is a useful distinction to be drawn between Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact. But Hume's distinction is a messy one – ultimately one of degree rather than kind. And the conception of history which paints

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[283] Note that any student who turns to the popular Wikipedia, for example, will be given the following misleading explanation of Hume's view: "Only certain things can be used to prove other things for certain, but only things about the world can be used to prove other things about the world. But since we can't cross the fork, nothing is both certain and about the world, only one or the other, and so it is impossible to prove something about the world with certainty." As we have discussed, it is quite true that Hume thinks we cannot regard any matter of fact as being certain, but this is not at all because he thinks there is a neat distinction – "a fork" – that cannot be "crossed" between empirical statements on the one hand, and a priori statements on the other. Indeed, quite to the contrary: Hume deliberately and explicitly collapses this distinction. (See: "Hume's Fork" Last modified November, 2010. URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hume's_fork)"

Kant, Quine, and Kripke (among others) as rejecting neat "*Humean*" metaphysical and epistemological categories is not right.[284]

Possibly Kant is to blame for the confusion. In the *Prolegomena*, for example, Kant says that Hume cannot possibly have thought that knowledge is grounded *only* in experience, for then Hume would have been compelled to think also that the mathematical truths are "equally synthetical".

> ...[Hume] could not have based his metaphysical judgements on mere experience without subjecting the axioms of mathematics equally to experience, *a thing which he was far too acute to do*.[285]

In reality, Hume *did* "subject" the mathematical truths to experience when he insisted that the mathematician's "gradual encrease of assurance" in principles "is nothing but the addition of new probabilities…according to past experience and observation. (T, 180-1). Kant's criticism is misled.

Quine too obscures Hume's view. In the very first section of Two Dogmas, he tells us:

> Kant's Cleavage between analytic and synthetic truths was foreshadowed in Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact, and in Leibniz's distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact.[286]

It is true that Kant's distinction is "foreshadowed" in Hume. But when Quine then goes on to argue for Holism, it is obvious that he takes himself to be rejecting *en bloc* a distinction believed unanimously by Hume, Kant and Leibniz.[287] In reality, Hume, like Quine, was deeply sceptical of the distinction:

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[284] I should add that this point is well recognised by some scholars. For example, Arthur Pap argued in the historical introduction to his *Semantics and Necessary Truth* that for Hume not all necessary truths were analytic and that the positivist distinctions didn't map well onto Hume's. (Pap, Arthur. "Semantics and Necessary Truth" (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962))
See also: Cohen, Elliot David, "Hume's Fork" *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*; Winter 1977; 15, 4

[285] Kant, I. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics,* ed. Paul Carus (Chicago, 1949) p. 22 [Emphasis added]

[286] Quine, W. V. O. *From a logical point of view*, 2nd ed. (Harvard University Press: Harvard, 1953)

[287] This is indeed Quine's tone. Although this fact is somewhat strange in light of the fact that elsewhere, in his lecture notes, Quine notices that Hume himself collapses the distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas. In those notes Quine first points out the standard reading: "the only things that we can know, apart from immediate perceptions, would seem to be the demonstrative sciences of arithmetic and algebra…" But immediately following this comment he goes on to say: "But now in a curious argument, pp. 180-182 [Hume] repudiates even these things! For, we can err in calculation; we check, but this can err; we can check, and so on to infinity; probabilities on probabilities, reducing to nothing."
Quine, W. V. "*Confessions of a confirmed extensionalist and other essays.*" Eds. Follesdal, D., & Quine, D. B. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) p. 97
This observation is pointed out by Meeker in "Quine on Hume and the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction," *Philosophia*, Vol 3, 2011, p. 371

> ...*the necessity*, which makes two times two equal to four, or three angles of a triangle equal to two right ones, *lies only in the act of the understanding, by which we consider and compare these ideas*. (T, 166 – emphasis added)

Some have thought that Hume's anticipation of Quine in this sense was merely accidental. For example, in an essay comparing "the psychologism of Hume and Quine", Morton White says that,

> Hume's psychologism leads him unwittingly to undermine his sharp distinction between statements about relations of ideas and statements about matters of fact whereas his psychologistic successors have knowingly treated so-called analytic statements in such a way as to undermine that distinction.[288]

But I think it is uncharitable to think of Hume as ignorant on this point, given the care with which he treats the topic of certainty. Nonetheless, I concede that it is quite true that Hume remains uneasy with his conclusion that all knowledge resolves into probability, and is reluctant to adopt it wholeheartedly. Passmore is right to observe that "the general tenor of [Hume's] argument" is that mathematical truths have a kind of "objective necessity, which can be contrasted with the merely subjective, or 'internal', necessity of causal relations."[289] The reasons for Hume's discomfort and inconsistency are understandable. He is confronted by a difficult dilemma, common to many philosophers, that goes something like this. On the one hand, mathematicians make mistakes. If mathematical errors were impossible, then there would be no such thing as math-class, or at least it would be an inane formality in which every student would ace every exam every time. On the other hand, some mathematical truths are so obvious that we are often prepared to admit that they are completely immune to doubt. There's also the fact that simple mathematical truths *feel* a particular way. The equation "that two plus two equals four" seems not only true, but *certain*, and indeed *so* certain that it appears to belong to an entirely different and exclusive sort of knowledge – one in which error is literally impossible. And together these truths present a prima facie tension: *mathematicians make mistakes, and yet mathematics is an infallible science*. A good theory of knowledge should explain how to resolve that tension.

Wittgenstein, for example, later grappled with this problem in his essay *On Certainty*, when he said, on the one hand, that we know that we…

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[288] White, M. "The ideas of the enlightenment and their legacy: The psychologism of Hume and Quine Compared". In *The Proceedings of the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy*, Volume 7: Modern Philosophy, p.158 See also: Meeker's discussion in: Meeker, K. "Quine on Hume and the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction," *Philosophia*, Vol 3, 2011, pp. 369–373
[289] Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.19

…cannot be making a mistake that 12 X 12 = 144.[290]

But on the other hand he acknowledges that mistakes can be made in the process of calculation. Our actions are:

…liable to forgetfulness, oversight and illusion.[291]

Besides,

` The question 'But mightn't you be in the grip of a delusion now and perhaps later find this out?' might also be raised as an objection to any proposition of the multiplication tables.[292]

Of course, (as Wittgenstein acknowledges,) no one really need accept that mathematicians are infallible in order to hold that mathematical truths are necessary, so one way out of the dilemma is to distinguish mathematical truths themselves from the use to which we put them. Mathematical truths are all necessary, we might think, but error can occur when we try to apply the rules: we can make errors in our working or our calculation. It is in this same way that Descartes contrasts *intuition* with *demonstration*[293], and Hume (sometimes) contrasts rules with their application.[294] As Hume puts it:

In all demonstrative sciences the rules are certain and infallible; but when we apply them, our fallible and uncertain faculties are very apt to depart from them, and fall into error. (T, 180)

This sort of explanation will work as long as there really is a distinction to be drawn between the application of mathematical rules and the rules themselves. On this view mathematics is always a process of discovery: we attempt to find out empirically what is true by necessity. In these cases our mathematical knowledge will never be infallibly certain since empirical processes – calculation and working-memory, for example – are prone to error.

But is it not possible that we sometimes know mathematical truths in a more direct fashion? The Rationalists certainly believed we can. For example, consider how it is we come to know that two

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[290] Wittgenstein, L. "*On Certainty,*" trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969-1975) p. 651

[291] Ibid.

[292] Ibid. p. 658
See also: Hon, Giora. "Going Wrong: To Make a Mistake, to Fall into an Error," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 49, no. 1 (Sep 1995) p. 16

[293] Descartes, "*Regulae*", in *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3 vols., trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91)
Although there seems to be some disagreement about whether even Descartes believed that intuited truths are immune to error. See: Dougherty, M. V. "Descartes' Demonstration of the Impossibility of Error in the Apprehension of the Simples," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 22, no.2 (April 2005) pp.129-142

[294] See: Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p.22

small groups of things are equal. Suppose, for instance, that we see two objects on our left, and we see two objects on our right. We can immediately pronounce the piles equal in number, and this does not seem to require any calculation or counting on our part. We just *see* the equality. Consequently, we might want to say that our judgment, in these instances, arises from pure intuition, and not from any fallible process of experience.

But Hume allows no such intuitive faculty beyond ordinary experience, and although he sometimes says simple mathematical comparisons can be made with certainty, we must remember again that Hume's conception of "certainty" does not pick out a distinct epistemological category. Even in the cases of very simple arithmetic, Hume will not allow that we can be certain in a way that eliminates the possibility of error. "The necessity," Hume says, "which makes two times two equal to four...lies only in the act of the understanding, by which we consider and compare these ideas (T, 166). Anyone who denies this risk of error in these processes must believe that some calculations are so manifestly simple that they are utterly immutable. Hume himself discusses the example of one-to-one correspondence.

> When two numbers are so combined, as that the one has always a unit answering to every unit of the other, we pronounce them equal; and it is for want of a better standard of equality in extension, that geometry can scarce be esteemed a perfect and infallible science. (T, 71)

He admits that if we see two objects on the left and two on the right, then pronouncing the piles equal (on the grounds that each unit can be paired with another without any leftover) really does have the feeling of infallibility about it. But even these intuitions will not escape the depths of scepticism that Hume is willing to entertain. It will always remain possible that we are being deceived.

IS THERE ANY CERTAINTY WHATSOEVER?

Finally, let us consider what Hume might say about the most famous claim to certainty in the history of philosophy: *cogito ergo sum*. As every student knows, Descartes takes his own existence to be an absolute certainty, since, according to the argument, any doubt cast upon the conclusion will only serve to confirm it. That is: if I doubt the proposition that I exist, then, at the very least, I must exist in order to do the doubting.

One reason to think Hume would deny the certainty of the *cogito* as it appears in Descartes is to point to its circularity. The "I" of the conclusion is already present in the "I think" of the premise. As Russell puts it, "When [Descartes] goes on to say, 'I am a *thing* which thinks', he is already using uncritically the apparatus of categories handed down by scholasticism. He nowhere proves

that thoughts need a thinker nor is there reason to believe this except in a grammatical sense."[295] Hume, as we saw in Chapter Five, foreshadowed this line of thought when he denied that we experience any substantial unified self that underlies the perceptions that we have. The categories to which Russell is referring are those we have already discussed in Chapter Two: the categories inherited by the Scholastics from Aristotle, which provided the framework for the metaphysical distinction between substances and accidents (or modes). Russell's point is that Descartes is assuming a suppressed premise that thought (an attribute) cannot exist with being the attribute of something more fundamental – a substance. Without that supressed premise one can't get any further than the conclusion that "there are thoughts". And insofar as what we can know for sure about the self, this is about as far Hume gets: there are bundles of perceptions.

Perhaps, then, we have stumbled upon something that Hume really could consider to be an infallible claim. The sentence "there are perceptions" really does seem indubitable. We may doubt whether things really are as they appear, but what we cannot possibly doubt is the existence of the appearance itself. For example, we may doubt that a stick submerged in water *really is bent*, but we cannot doubt that it *appears* bent. Perhaps, therefore, Hume could have it that, "I am certain that there are impressions." Or, at the very least, he could have it that, "I am certain that there exists this impression that I am having right now.*"*

Certain or not, it is worth admitting that this conclusion is very boring. It does not mean that I am certain that my impression is *of* anything, or even that the impression is *had* by a thinking mind. The certainty of this conclusion is only the kind of certainty that can be generated by the fact that any expression of the form "something is going on here" cannot possibly be mistaken as long as the "something" in the sentence refers to the expression itself.

Philosophers have long been very fond of these sorts of self-sealing certainties. Augustine argued: "If I am mistaken, I am".[296] Like Descartes, Augustine then went on to argue that this trivial conclusion also implies all sorts of other interesting things about metaphysics – for example, what it means to be "alive".[297] These latter metaphysical claims are not really certain in the sense we have been discussing. But the first point – that we cannot doubt the existence of errors – really does seem indubitable in the self-sealing sense. Indeed, Nicholas Rescher explains the point well in his contemporary book on error:

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[295] Russell, B. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2000) p.550
[296] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* Book XI, 26
[297] "By not positively affirming that they are alive, the skeptics ward off the appearance of error in themselves, yet they do make errors simply by showing themselves alive; one cannot err who is not alive." Augustine, *Enchiridion* Chapter XII, section 20

"How do you ever know that you are not in error now?" The answer is, "It all depends!" It will depend what is at issue in that supposedly error prone belief of mine. If it happens to be, "People sometimes err," then it just cannot possibly be in error.[298]

The reason that Rescher, (following Augustine), thinks that this belief is beyond any doubt, rests on a kind of logical trick: either people do make mistakes, (in which case the belief is true,) or else people don't make mistakes, (in which case the belief is false, but therefore a mistake itself, and therefore true.) Either way, the belief that, "People sometimes err," is true, and since there are only these two options to be had, we can be certain of its truth.

Would Hume really regard these conclusions as infallibly certain, though, in the strictest sense? I'm not sure. We are well beyond the limits of what Hume considers in the *Treatise*, but since we have come this far, we might as well speculate. The answer, I think, is *no*. Since Hume disallows that we have any means by which to directly intuit logical truths distinct from experience, it would seem he has no grounds by which to make any claim for complete immutability whatsoever. Experience, on Hume's view, always includes the possibility of error. Suppose, for example, someone asks why it is we are certain of the simple logical laws that govern our acceptance of the axioms that we have been discussing – e.g. *that there are impressions*, or *that people sometimes err*. Probably we cannot produce a reason for our belief in these logical laws. They are simply brute facts, we might think. But suppose you do come up with a reason. The persistent sceptic will then demand what reason you have to believe that reason, and what reason you have to believe the following reason, and so on, *ad infinitum*. At some point, psychologically speaking, this chain of doubts will probably stop making sense – we won't be able to understand exactly what is being doubted or how the doubt is supposed to work. Hume, I think, would be inclined to make exactly that point. We would begin wondering what on earth the doubter is asking (and, of course, why we are asking at all). But even so, the point would remain that for Hume *anything* is doubtable in principle, even if we do not bring ourselves to doubt it.

CONCLUSIONS OF THIS CHAPTER

Of course, the notion that we are certain of nothing, and that all beliefs are open to error, is a bit absurd, and Hume, as much as anyone, is quick to acknowledge the fact. Indeed, for Hume, in the common operations of life, nature pleasingly puts an end to these obtuse chains of reasoning long before we run into the absurdities we have confronted. Let us remember the section *Of Scepticism with Regard to Reason*, where Hume tells us:

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[298] Rescher, Nicholas. *Error* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 35

> All knowledge resolves itself into probability, and becomes at last of the same nature with that evidence, which we employ in common life. (T, 181)

For Hume, the apparent absurdity of this conclusion means that we cannot and will not accept it. If reason says there is no certainty, then so much the worse for reason. In the end, Hume defends the common sense position that nature makes us certain of all sorts of things.

> Shou'd it here be ask'd me, whether I sincerely assent to this argument, which I seem to take such pains to inculcate, and whether I be really one of those sceptics, who hold that all is uncertain, and that our judgment is not in *any* thing possest of *any* measures of truth and falsehood; I shou'd reply that this question is entirely superfluous, and that neither I nor any other person was ever sincerely and constantly of that opinion. Nature, by an absolute and uncontroulable necessity has determin'd us to judge as well as to breathe and feel... (T, 183)

Indeed, Hume's whole point, he tells us, in taking pains to outline the sceptical arguments against certainty was "only to make the reader sensible of the truth of my hypothesis ... *that belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cognitive part of our natures*." (T, 183) Although the possibility of error attends all of our beliefs, we nonetheless can (and do) carry on believing, and being convinced.

We are certain of logical relations, for instance, because of our strong natural sentiments.

> Nothing is more certain from experience, than that any contradiction either to the sentiments or passions gives a sensible uneasiness. (T, 205)

It is because we cannot tolerate this sensible unease that we reject a contradiction with such assurance.

> …the mind must be uneasy in that situation, and will naturally seek relief from the uneasiness. (T, 206)

Conversely, "certainties" strike us with the opposite feeling, which Hume calls a "sensible pleasure".

> Whatever strikes in with the natural propensities…is sure to give a sensible pleasure. (T, 205-6)

In short: the difference between the various states of certainty, probability, doubt, and disbelief, are all explained along a spectrum in terms of natural facts about the way perceptions strike us.

So where does this leave us? In one sense Hume plainly allows that there are truths of which we are certain and these truths, therefore, seem to preclude the possibility of error. Certainty is to be found in relations of ideas rather than matters of fact – more so in simple ones than complex ones, and more so in algebra and arithmetic than geometry. But in another sense certainty – *absolute certainty* – is not possible. Hume denies that there is any path to knowledge beyond experience, and he allows, with the sceptics, that experience will always be prone to error. This is a very typical Humean process: Hume denies that certainty involves a distinct philosophical category over and above ordinary experience. But he does not deny that there is a distinction between certainty and probability that is there to be explained. Bertrand Russell once said that the question, "what do we mean by 'knowledge'?" is just as vague as the question, "what do we mean by 'baldness'?"[299] And this, I have argued, is a very Humean sort of thing to say: knowledge and certainty are matters of degree.

More practically, as we have seen, Hume also allows that we can employ all the usual methods by which to decide a question of how certain we ought to be about a given proposition. We can consult our reason and our intuition; we can discuss the evidence. But ultimately these methods are themselves to be explained in terms of descriptive facts about sentiments, and at base Hume's explanation of certainty is completely reducible to psychological facts about the way an idea strikes us. Is an idea "firm" and "solid"? (T, 269) Is it "vivacious"? (T, 86) Is it "steady" and "precise"? (T, 73) Can we "arrive at a decision at first sight, without enquiry"? (T, 70) Does it "seem to give a perfect assurance"? (T, 71) Does it give a "sensible pleasure"? (T, 205-6) Whatever the answers, they will explain the degree of certainty.

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[299] Russell, B. "*Human Knowledge*" (New York: Routledge, 2009) p.142

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS: HUME AND HUMAN ERROR

We have seen that Hume rejects the correspondence theory of error in the same sense, for example, that he rejects the traditional conception of substance. In its place, Hume offers his own theory of error which is cashed-out in descriptive terms by discussing the observable features of perceptions and the relations between them.

The general tenor of my discussion has been that, all things considered, Hume does an admirable job. Often convincingly, he explains away the traditional metaphysics by substituting metaphysical questions for psychological ones. He substitutes, for instance, the philosophical question, "in what does error consist?" for the psychological question: "how do we come to *regard* an idea as an error?" In so doing, Hume provides a rich account of the ways in which we can variously believe things, doubt things, change our minds, revise our beliefs, and feel certain. He explains how we come to think of ourselves as agents of our actions and thus regard ourselves as the proper objects of blame for errors that we think could or should have been avoided. Since Hume does all of this while denying the traditional metaphysics, we are left with good reason to doubt the proposition that error that necessarily involves "…subscribing to some sort of realism".

> Error calls for incorrectness, for conflict with the actual facts, and were there no actual matter of fact there would be no error either.[300]

With only perceptions as tools, Hume shows that we can explain how we come to believe that some of our perceptions are mistaken. On Hume's explanation, faulty ideas are not faulty because they fail to correspond to facts about external objects, but because, in terms of the relationships with other perceptions, they give rise to sentiments of disapprobation towards them.

However, for all its richness and interest, Hume's theory of error remains deeply sceptical, and for various reasons, unsatisfying. There is a wonderful phrase about knowledge in a poem by the ancient Xenophanes, called upon by Karl Popper to explain how it is we can have a conception of rational knowledge once Hume's sceptical conclusions concerning induction are accepted:

> …all is but a woven web of guesses.

Popper uses this phrase to expand on what he takes to be a Humean position when he says that although induction is irrational we can nonetheless have a rational science in which we strive to falsify – to find errors with – as many hypotheses as we can. In this sense the task of the scientist,

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[300] Rescher, Nicholas. *Error* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007) p. 80

according to Popper, is to admit that all is but a woven web of guesses, but to "endeavor to make the mesh ever finer and finer."[301] In this sense Popper contends that we are at least *approaching* something like knowledge of an external world. But Hume's own view is more sceptical than this. In reading Hume we might usefully think of our knowledge as a woven web of guesses. But, contrary to Popper's proposal, Hume remains agnostic about whether this web of belief actually captures an external reality. Although Hume certainly *believes* in external objects, he thinks there are no rational grounds for this belief. And although he says it is "happy" that nature trumps reason in this respect, he has ultimately has no foundation on which to support the conclusion that natural beliefs must also be true beliefs. On Hume's view, therefore, there may be no sense in which we could strive to make the "mesh" of our web of knowledge "ever finer and finer" since, as far we know, there may be no external reality for our web of belief to catch.

Hume supposedly mitigates this scepticism when he says that "carelessness and in-attention" can afford us a remedy, and assures us that "whatever may be the reader's opinion" when she considers these philosophical matters, she will nonetheless return "an hour hence" to believing "there is both an external and internal world…" (T, 218) This is true enough as an observation about the things we commonly believe, but it is surely, at best, a palliative – a pain-killer – and not a "remedy" for scepticism.

For Hume, the problem is not only that the possibility of error is everywhere, but that if we consider our whole system of perceptions *en bloc* we cannot speak meaningfully of error at all. Error can only be explained by comparing perceptions with one another and by discussing the natural principles by which we come to believe some rather than others. If we want to know if our *whole* "web of guesses" is along the right lines then we are out of luck, for we never experience anything apart from the guesses. This, perhaps, is the sense that Rescher has in mind when he says that if we want to explain the normativity of error then we must also speak of an objective external world. In that case, Rescher's statement is true as long as it is expressed as the conditional: *If* there is a meaningful sense in which we can say that our whole web of perceptions is mistaken, *then* we must also be able to compare our web of perceptions to an external reality. But Hume need not accept the antecedent, and thus need not accept the consequent either. It may well be that "error" only makes sense as a relational concept *between* perceptions. That is: the term "error" may be applicable only to perceptions *within* the web, and not to the web itself. This, as we noticed in Chapter Four, is comparable to Owen's example regarding Roman augury: "There is clearly a right and wrong way"

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[301] Popper, Karl. *Conjectures and Refutations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) p. 37-8

of interpreting the flight of birds, "…but we might still wonder whether the practice was warranted."[302]

Perhaps error must be understood *within* the system of perceptions, and makes no sense if we speak of the system of perceptions as a whole. Of course, we can still meaningfully ask the question as to whether the whole system is warranted, but any attempt to think of the whole system must itself be part of the system, since every thought is a perception. Therefore, we cannot answer that question. As Hume puts it, we can never escape our narrow compass.
(T, 67)

It remains troubling, even maddening, to accept Hume's agnosticism regarding external objects and the correspondence theory of error. Our unease is not made any better by the fact that Hume frequently allows that we are led by natural pleasure seeking principles (T, 205-6) to ignore sceptical conclusions. Hume is happy to allow the sheer fact, for example, that we often *think* of objects as being external, and he therefore also allows that we often *think* of error as involving correspondence between perceptions and the external world. But, nonetheless, he is emphatic about the fact that we cannot justify these beliefs by reason. Although it is true that our belief in external bodies is a "point which we must take for granted in all our reasonings," this is only because "…Nature breaks the force of all sceptical arguments in time." (T, 187)

We should find it strange, I think, that Hume regards this natural fact as "happy", since, while we're in a sceptical mood, it is not clear what reason Hume has to be so glad. The delight in natural principles would be fair enough if Hume's conception of nature was that of a benevolent force, or the design of a benevolent deity. As we have seen, many of Hume's contemporaries maintained that view. Turnbull, for instance, thought of the impulses of our nature as:

> "…right guides, or guides which do not deceive, or lead astray."[303]

Beattie sometimes equated natural impulses with truth:

> I account that to be truth which the constitution of my nature determines me to believe.[304]

But Hume does not hold this conception of nature. As Norton puts it:

> However often Hume may say that we have certain natural propensities to believe this or
> that, he does not go so far as to say that what we must naturally *believe* must be *true*. Hume

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[302] Owen, D. "*Hume 's Reason*" (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) p.140
[303] Turnbull, George. *The Principles of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1740), 2: 164-5
[304] Beattie, James. *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth, in Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* 4th ed. (London, 1773) p.64

does not conflate psychological certainty with certain knowledge or unavoidable doxa with episteme.[305]

For Hume, natural propensities are described in the *Treatise* as "carelessness or inattention". (T, 218) In the *Enquiry* they are, "action and employment and the occupations of common life." (E, 159)[306] Nature is described as a "*blind* and powerful instinct." (E, 151 – emphasis added) In a letter to Gilbert Elliot, Hume even wonders whether our natural propensity to assent to our impulses (in this case our belief in the premises of the teleological argument) is any "different from our Inclination to find our own Figures in the Clouds, [or] our Face in the Moon…"[307]

Donald Ainslie reads Hume as arguing, optimistically, that we should,

> …make our peace with the human perspective and the world of appearances.[308]

If this is right, Hume can think of error along the lines of William James:

> Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf.[309]

But *why* should we be so peaceful or light hearted? Hume rightly observes that in our day to day lives we just *do*, (as a sheer matter of fact,) live at peace with our scepticism. But on what grounds can he *recommend* making peace with the world of appearances to those of us who feel a deep dissatisfaction with these conclusions?

It is true that Hume can say that the dictates of Nature are preferable –that is, *more pleasurable* – than the consequences of Pyrrhonism which would have it that:

> …all human life must perish… all discourse, all action would immediately cease; and all men remain in total lethargy, 'til the necessities of nature, unsatisfied, put an end to their miserable existence. (E, 160)

In this sense, Hume agrees with James that the dictates of nature are "healthier" than scepticism. But apart from allowing us to avoid the miserable Pyrrhonian fate, (which, admittedly, is a good thing) there is no further sense in which the dictates of nature are "happy". They do not lead us to

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[305] Norton, D. F. *David Hume* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982) p. 200
[306] See also: Passmore, John. *Hume's Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1980) p. 147
[307] Hume, *Letter to Gilbert Elliot*, March 1751
[308] Ainslie, Donald. "Comments on Hazony" in *Conference Papers: 36th Annual International Hume Society Conference*, (Halifax, Nova Scotia) p.209
[309] James, William. "The Will to Believe," *The New World*, 5 (1896) Section VII

objective truth or even to approximate it. At least, we do not *know* whether they lead to objective truth or whether there is any such thing to be had. Consequently, when the Humean epistemology implies that everything we know about truth and error must be explained in *natural* terms, we should hardly be overjoyed. [310]

The problem, as well as the appeal, of Hume's account of error is that it most often reduces philosophy to psychology. H. H. Price said that Hume failed to "distinguish philosophical problems from psychological ones."[311] But the conflation is most often deliberate. As we discussed in Chapter Two, Hume thinks there is no other legitimate way to get at the problems of philosophy. As Stroud puts it, Hume sought to answer the problems:

> …*in the only way possible* – by observation and inference from what is observed. Hume saw them as empirical questions.[312]

The Introduction to the *Treatise* makes the point explicitly. As for "all the sciences, and all the arts", says Hume:

> None of them can go beyond experience or establish any principles which are not founded on that authority. (T, xviii)

His intentions are made clear:

> …by confessing that my intention never was to penetrate into the nature of bodies, or explain the secret causes of their operations. For besides that this belongs not to my present purpose, I am afraid that such an enterprize is beyond the reach of human understanding… (T, 64)

This view, to be sure, is not without appeal because it commands the support of our intuitions about scientific methodology. Psychological questions are testable in a way that the metaphysical questions are not, and for all its explanatory power the traditional conceptions of substance really are mysterious as Hume says they are.

Nonetheless, we cannot help but feel that Hume has somehow dodged the important questions. If we set out to know what error involves – if we want to know what error *is* – we are not simply asking for a list of psychological facts about the various conditions that might lead someone to

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[310] As Stroud says: "…the fact that nature can be relied on to deliver us into…a happy state whenever we despair of understanding human nature in the right way does not itself yield a satisfactory understanding of human thought and belief and action. That is what we seek."
Stroud, Barry. "The Constraints of Hume's Naturalism," Synthese, 152 (2006) p. 350
[311] Price, H. H. *Hume's Theory of the External World*, p.15
[312] Stroud, Barry. *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977) p.222 (emphasis added)

revise a belief, or the conditions which would have us think badly of them if they failed to revise it. Yet these kinds of explanations are all that Hume can ultimately provide.

I don't know what we should do with the dissatisfaction we feel for this conclusion. Intuition looms large against it. Yet what other theory of error can we have if the metaphysics is rejected? Hume's account is very sceptical but, as we have seen, it can meet the many of the challenges put forward by his critics, and it has a certain explanatory appeal of its own. In his own psychological argot, Hume can explain away many of the features of the *experience* of error that the traditional metaphysics was itself evoked to explain.

I will finish with what is, perhaps, the strangest paradox of Hume's theory of human error: that if his naturalistic theory is right, then *that theory itself* can only be evaluated in natural terms – that is: as considered in terms of its relationship with other perceptions. Let's ask, therefore, according to Hume's theory, what would it mean for us to say that Hume's theory of error is *itself* in error? Well, as we have discussed, it would mean that we find evidence in our body of perceptions to reject it. It would mean that other competing perceptions are more "vivacious", more "firm", or more "steady". It would mean that his theory does not cohere with our other beliefs. It would mean that believing the theory causes in us a sensible unease – a psychological displeasure.

Strangely, I think most of us would say that these conditions really are met in the case of Hume's theory of error. If this is true, then the strange implication is that if Hume is *right* about the way that error works, then it follows that he must regard his *own theory of error* as being, itself, *an error*.

But lest we think we have just uncovered some deep inconsistency, we find that in the end this strange paradox is something that Hume can consistently admit. In the conclusion of Book I, Hume deplores the outcomes of reason in that they lead him to unbearable scepticism.

> I am ready to reject all belief and reasoning, and can look upon no opinion even as more probable or likely than another.

Luckily, he says, nature steps in and cures us of this melancholy which reason has induced. In place of the rational philosophy which leads ultimately to Pyrrhonism, he offers his own naturalistic philosophy.

> I am *concerned* for the condition of the learned world…I *feel* an ambition to arise in me of contributing to the instruction of mankind…These *sentiments* spring up *naturally* in my present disposition; and shou'd I endeavour to banish them, by attaching myself to any other

business or diversion, I *feel* I shou'd be a loser in point of *pleasure*; and this is the origin of my philosophy. (T, 271 – emphasis added)

…if we are philosophers, it ought only to be…from an inclination, which we feel to… employing ourselves after that manner. (T, 270)

But, what if Hume's own naturalistic philosophy is itself the cause of my current anguish? What if the fact that nature may be the only cure for rational scepticism (as Hume thinks) is itself the cause of our philosophical despair? In that case, Hume's passage might just as well be read as doubling back on his own endeavour. And so, if our current state of mind is anguish, Hume would be well pleased that we have reached the end of these considerations, and may return now to leisure.

Most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium… I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hour's amusement, I wou'd return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strain'd, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any further. (T, 269)

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