

in *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. by Stefano Di Bella and Tad Schmalz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

## **Hume on Abstraction and Identity**

Donald L. M. Baxter

Hume's critique of traditional abstraction entails a result that undercuts his account of the idea of identity. To save his account of identity, Hume would have to accept abstraction as well. What links these two discussions is (1) Hume's widely shared assumption that traditional abstraction is separating in the mind what are inseparable in reality, (2) his principle that what are different are mentally separable, and (3) his principle that we cannot conceive of the impossible. Given these, it will turn out that abstraction is mentally separating something from itself, which will entail that abstraction is conceiving of something as distinct from itself. But it is impossible for something to be distinct from itself, and so it is inconceivable. Therefore abstraction is impossible.<sup>1</sup> Yet consider Hume's account of the idea of identity. On that account, to conceive of an identity is to conceive of something as one single thing viewed one way and as two distinct things viewed another. How we can take these opposing views of the same thing is a problem that I've termed Hume's Difficulty concerning Identity. It will turn out that we can take the opposing views only if we can conceive of the single thing viewed one way as somehow distinct from itself when viewed the other way. That is, we must be able to conceive of something as distinct from itself. However, if we cannot conceive of something as distinct from itself when abstracting, then we cannot do it when conceiving of an identity. So traditional abstraction and Hume's account of the idea of identity stand or fall together.

I will first give a characterization of traditional abstraction, then explain the problem that Hume finds with it, then show that the same problem affects his own account of identity. Along

the way I will argue that Locke's version of abstraction is the traditional one rather than the partial consideration attributed to him by some commentators.

### 1. Traditional Abstraction

Berkeley distinguishes three senses of 'abstraction': (i) separating in thought parts that are actually united but can exist apart, (ii) separating in thought qualities that cannot exist apart, (iii) separating in thought qualities that make something a particular individual from qualities that make it of a given kind.<sup>2</sup> Hume, like Berkeley, would object only to abstraction in the second and third senses. His express arguments mainly concern abstraction in the third sense and on that I will focus. It shares with the second the assumption that abstraction is separating in thought what are inseparable in reality.

Hume took himself to be confirming Berkeley's arguments against the "receiv'd opinion" concerning abstraction. Berkeley argues against Locke's view. So it is safe to assume that Hume also had Locke foremost in his mind as an expositor of the view to be opposed. Locke is explicit that abstraction is separating in thought what are not separate in reality. Both Berkeley and Hume assume that he is committed to their being inseparable in reality, as well. Berkeley makes the assumption clear in his three-way disambiguation of 'abstraction'. Hume too, as witnessed by his claim "that 'tis utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles" (T 1.1.7.6/ 19).<sup>3</sup> To show that their assumption is correct will take a little argument. I will first discuss mental separation, then discuss inseparability in reality.

Locke gives a version of the traditional account of abstraction.

*Ideas* become general, by separating from them the circumstances of Time, and Place, and any other *Ideas*, that may determine them to this or that particular Existence. (*Essay 3.3.6*)<sup>4</sup>

And also,

Afterwards, when time and a larger Acquaintance has made [children] observe, that there are a great many other Things in the World, that in some common agreements of Shape, and several other Qualities, resemble their Father and Mother, and those Persons they have been used to, they frame an *Idea*, which they find those many Particulars do partake in; and to that they give, with others, the name *Man*, for Example. And *thus they come to have a general Name*, and a general *Idea*. Wherein they make nothing new, but only leave out of the complex *Idea* they had of *Peter* and *James*, *Mary* and *Jane*, that which is peculiar to each, and retain only what is common to them all. (*Essay 3.3.7*)

And again,

And he that thinks general Natures or Notions, are any thing else but such abstract and partial *Ideas* of more complex ones, taken at first from particular Existences, will, I fear, be at a loss where to find them. For let any one reflect, and then tell me, wherein does his *Idea* of *Man* differ from that of *Peter*, and *Paul*; or his *Idea* of *Horse*, from that of *Bucephalus*, but in the leaving out something, that is peculiar to each Individual; and retaining so much of those particular complex *Ideas*, of several particular Existences, as they are found to agree in? (*Essay 3.3.9*)

So for Locke, one starts with ideas of various particulars that have been observed to resemble in some ways. The ideas are complex ones because they are of particulars with a variety of qualities. One then presumably takes one of these ideas and leaves out parts that represent features not shared by all of the particulars. One especially leaves out features that are unique to a given particular such as “existing at any determin’d time and place” (*Essay* 2.27.1). The resulting general idea is able to represent all the individuals that resemble in the ways first observed, because it conforms to all of them. That is, each has all the features represented by the general idea (*Essay* 3.3.6).

The leaving out of parts of the original idea is mental separation in two senses. In the first sense it is a case of thinking of two things and then continuing to think of one while ceasing to think of the other. In the second sense it is a case of having two ideas (especially two parts of a complex idea) present to mind and then continuing to have just one of them present to mind while ceasing to have the other present to mind. On Hume’s reading of Locke, these senses can be used interchangeably, where the relevant separation is removal. The mental separation of *objects* of thought by mentally removing one of them while leaving only the other, just is the separation in the course of thinking of the *vehicles* of thought--the ideas of those objects--by the removal from the mind of one of the ideas while leaving only the other.

There is an additional kind of mental separation that Locke writes of. To mentally separate something extended is “to make in the Mind two Superficies, where before there was a Continuity, and consider them as removed [“disjoined”] one from the other” (*Essay* 2.13.13). In such a case, both the disjoined parts continue to be present to mind. In contrast, in the case of abstraction some parts cease to be present to mind and some parts continue to be present. Of these parts retained the mind makes “a new distinct complex *Idea*” (*Essay* 3.3.9).

There is an influential way to read Locke that is an alternative to Hume's and Berkeley's way.<sup>5</sup> While I could still make my points about Hume without defending his interpretation, it increases the interest in them if Hume's interpretation is correct. And I think it is.

The alternate reading sees 'thinks of x' as ambiguous between 'has an idea of x present to mind' and 'has an idea of x present to mind and attends to x'. This ambiguity adds a way to mentally separate objects of thought in addition to separating ideas in the mind. The motivation for the alternate reading is that sometimes the same idea can be both an idea of x and an idea of y. For instance the same idea might be both an idea of triangularity and trilaterality. One might begin by having the idea present to mind and attending to both x and y, and then continue to attend to x while withdrawing attention from y. On the alternate reading, this would be the other way to mentally separate objects. There is no removal of any idea, there is just restriction of attention to less than everything represented by an idea that remains present to mind all along. That is, there is a shift from full consideration to partial consideration of the object of thought.

In my view, this alternate interpretation is motivated more by charity than by the text. It is an attempt to save Locke from Berkeley's and Hume's criticisms by undercutting the interpretation that the criticisms are based on. However, there are textual reasons to refuse the charity.

First, Locke explicitly distinguishes partial consideration from separation. In his discussion of space he says that the parts of space cannot be separated nor even mentally separated. He admits that one part can be considered without attending to the rest, then baldly states, "But a partial consideration is not separating" (*Essay* 2.13.13). Since he distinguishes these and uses the language of separation in explaining the formation of abstract ideas, it is unlikely that there he means mere partial consideration. This point is not conclusive, however,

since the kind of separation under discussion at 2.13.13 is different from that involved in abstraction.

Secondly, in the 3.3.9 passage quoted above, Locke uses the phrase ‘abstract and partial *Ideas*’. A partial idea is a part of an idea, not an idea used in a partial consideration. That would be a complete idea along with restricted attention.

Thirdly, Locke makes clear that the separation in abstraction is the removal of distinct ideas in the following passage.

The Acts of the Mind wherein it exerts its Power over its simple *Ideas* are chiefly these three, 1. Combining several simple *Ideas* into one compound one, and thus all Complex *Ideas* are made. 2. The 2d. is bringing two *Ideas*, whether simple or complex, together; and setting them by one another, so as to take a view of them at once, without uniting them into one; by which way it gets all its *Ideas* of Relations. 3. The 3d. is separating them from all other *Ideas* that accompany them in their real existence; this is called *Abstraction*: And thus all its General *Ideas* are made. This shews Man’s Power and its way of Operation to be much what the same in the Material and Intellectual World. For the Materials in both being such as he has no power over, either to make or destroy, all that Man can do is either to unite them together, or to set them by one another, or wholly separate them.

(*Essay* 2.12.1)

In this passage Locke speaks of three operations on two distinct ideas: (1) uniting them into a compound one, (2) setting them beside each other without uniting them, (3) wholly separating them. In the last sentence of the paragraph the ‘them’ clearly refers to the same distinct ideas

each time. The relevant separation is the removal of one idea from a distinct one, not the mere shifting of attention while keeping the same idea present to mind.

Thus, for Locke, the relevant mental separation, of one object of thought from the other in abstraction is ceasing to think of one object of thought while continuing to think just of the other. That is accomplished by removing from the mind the idea of one while retaining in mind only the idea of the other.

I have said that, in abstraction, the relevant objects of thought are inseparable from each other in reality. Locke does not make this inseparability explicit. The above passage from 2.2.1 is characteristic where he describes abstraction as mentally removing qualities from ones that do accompany them in their real existence, without saying that they *must* accompany them.<sup>6</sup> In another context he says,

Though the Qualities that affect our Senses, are, in the things themselves, so united and blended, that there is no separation, no distance between them; yet 'tis plain, the *Ideas* they produce in the Mind, enter by the Senses simple and unmixed. (*Essay* 2.2.1)

Again, Locke only says that such qualities are not separate, not that they are inseparable.

Nonetheless, Hume and Berkeley are right to assume that for Locke the relevant qualities are inseparable in reality. To avoid some complication, I will confine attention to primary qualities.<sup>7</sup>

The basis for Hume's and Berkeley's assumption is Locke's saying "All Things, that exist, being Particulars . . ." and "all things that exist are only particulars" (*Essay* 3.3.1 and 3.3.6). Even here, Locke does not say that *necessarily* all things that exist are particulars, but he is likely committed to that. The traditional basis for this conclusion, going back to Aristotle and

Plato's *Parmenides*, was that it was impossible for one and the same thing *as a whole* to be common to many items at one time. Boethius gives a succinct presentation of the arguments that it is not possible for universals to be common to distinct particulars, and he concludes that they do not exist but are grasped only by thought.<sup>8</sup> Since Locke's view of abstraction echoes that presented by Boethius, it is safe to assume that Locke is simply following the ancient tradition. From here, the argument to inseparability would presumably go as follows.

1. If the features of an object that make it a particular were separable from it, then the object could exist without any such feature.
2. An object existing without any of the features that make it a particular would not be a particular.
3. Only particulars can exist.
4. So, the features of an object that make it a particular are inseparable from it.

One might object that the first premise is false. After all, it is possible that a given child be separated from his current precise height by growing, even while it is impossible that he exist without some height or other. However, such cases as a child's growth are not relevant to the kind of separation at issue. The separation in thought at issue in abstraction is the ceasing to think of the qualities that make something a particular while continuing to think only of the other qualities that do not. The corresponding separation in reality would then be the ceasing to exist of the qualities that make something a particular while only those continue to exist that do not make it a particular. The so-called "separation" envisioned in the child growing objection is not separation in the relevant sense.

Thus Hume and Berkeley are correct to construe abstraction in Locke's sense as separating in the mind what are inseparable in reality.



## 2. Inseparability and Identity

Hume takes as a principle that things inseparable in reality are identical. Given this principle, abstraction is mentally separating something from itself. Let me call the principle at issue, the Real Separability Principle. Strictly speaking, it is not a principle for Hume, since he derives it from two others: what I will call the Mental Separability Principle and the Conceivability Principle.

Hume states the Mental Separability Principle early on:

*First*, We have observ'd that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the *inverse*, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different. (T 1.1.7.3/ 18).

I assume from context that by “in the *inverse*” Hume means what we mean by ‘conversely’.<sup>9</sup>

When Hume says ‘different’ he means numerically distinct. For instance, in discussing time, he argues that the impression of time that one has in hearing five musical notes is not “different” from the impressions of the notes themselves, which is to say it is “not a sixth impression” (T 1.2.3.10/36). Were it different, it would be a sixth impression, i.e., numerically distinct. Likewise at 1.3.1.1/ 69 he explicitly uses the phrase ‘numerically different’.

When Hume says that things are “distinguishable,” he means that we can think of them as numerically distinct. As he argues in his passage on distinctions of reason, where we cannot think of things as numerically distinct, they are “in effect the same and undistinguishable.” Any apparent distinguishing of “them” is really a distinguishing of things related to “them” (T

1.1.7.18/ 25).

This move from what is true to what we can think calls for some explanation. Hume must mean that for any different things we can *in principle* distinguish them. The fact that we might be unacquainted with them, or the fact that we might not be practiced in telling them apart cannot be serious counterexamples to Hume's principle. However, might it not be possible that there be distinct things that we *in principle* cannot be acquainted with, or *in principle* could never tell apart? I suspect that Hume's answer would be that such things could not be objects of thought.

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 any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. (T 1.2.6.8/ 67)

Things that we in principle could not think of, or in principle could not tell apart would be too different from perceptions to be something we could think of at all.

Hume's appeal to the possibility of a "relative idea" does not rebut this claim. Relative ideas do not allow us to think of objects specifically different from perceptions. The notion of such an object is absurd. "For as to the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shown its absurdity" (T 1.4.2.2/ 188). Relative ideas only allow us to approach somewhat toward thinking of such an object. "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" (T 1.2.6.9/ 68). However, " 'tis impossible to found a relation but on some common quality" (T 1.4.5.11/ 236). So even the unknown relative must be thought to have some resemblance to some perception even to be thought of as a relative. Hume does

allow that “we may suppose, but never can conceive a specific difference betwixt an object and impression” (T 1.4.5.20/ 241), but this does not count as thinking of such a thing. We may use the phrase ‘object specifically different from perceptions’ in our supposition, but without an idea the phrase has no meaning (see 1.3.14.14, 1.4.3.10, 1.4.5.6/ 162, 224, 234).

So in the Mental Separability Principle, there is an implicit restriction to possible objects of thought. That hardly seems a restriction, however. It is like pointing out that in a universal generalization, there is an implicit restriction to objects that we can quantify over.<sup>10</sup>

When Hume says objects are “separable by the thought and imagination” he means that it is possible to cease thinking of one while continuing to think of the other. Presumably we would do this by ceasing to have an idea of the one while continuing to have an idea of the other. When things are *inseparable* by the thought and imagination it is not possible to think of one while ceasing to think of the other. For instance, “A person, who desires us to consider the figure of a globe of white marble without thinking on its colour, desires an impossibility” (T 1.1.7.18/ 25).<sup>11</sup>

Hume takes having an idea of something to be the same as conceiving it to exist (T 1.2.6.4/ 66-67). Therefore, for Hume, to mentally separate two things is to conceive of one continuing to exist on its own in the absence of the other.

In sum, Hume assumes the *Mental Separability Principle* that *objects are numerically distinct only if we can think of them as distinct, and we can think of them as distinct only if we can continue thinking of one while ceasing to think of the other (in other words, only if we can conceive of one continuing to exist on its own in the absence of the other)*.

I have suggested that we mentally separate the objects of thought by separating during the course of thinking the vehicles of thought--the ideas. For example we might mentally separate a cause and an effect by separating during the course of thinking the idea of the cause from the

idea of the effect. Assuming that this is correct, Hume must be presupposing another proposition about separability, one undergirding the Mental Separability Principle: *if ideas are distinct then they are separable in the course of thought*. Call it the *Idea Separability Principle*. As a shortcut in reasoning, he will sometimes use the Idea Separability Principle interchangeably with the Mental Separability Principle, but strictly speaking they should be distinguished.

The other main principle is the *Conceivability Principle*. Hume says that “nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible” (T 1.1.7.6/ 19-20), and “’Tis an establish’d maxim in metaphysics, *that whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence*, or in other words, *that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible*” (T 1.2.2.8/ 32), “Whatever is clearly conceiv’d may exist; and whatever is clearly conceiv’d, after any manner, may exist after the same manner” (T 1.4.5.5/ 233), and “whatever we conceive is possible” (T 1.4.5.10/ 236). Here Hume uses a principle tracing back to Bishop Tempier’s condemnations in 1277, that the clearly conceivable is possible.<sup>12</sup>

Using the two main principles, Hume reasons as follows:

1. If things are distinct, then we can think of them as distinct, so can clearly conceive of one continuing to exist without the other.
2. The clearly conceivable is possible.
3. So the one can continue to exist without the other.

In other words, he uses the Conceivability Principle to infer from the Mental Separability Principle a result about real separability—viz., that *any numerically distinct things are really separable*. I call this result the *Real Separability Principle* (despite its being derived).<sup>13</sup>

These principles raise a problem for traditional abstraction.

1. Whatever are numerically distinct are separable in reality (by the Real Separability Principle).
2. Whatever are inseparable in reality are numerically identical (by contraposition).
3. Abstraction is mentally separating what are inseparable in reality.
4. Thus abstraction is mentally separating something from itself.
5. Things that are mentally separable can be conceived to be distinct (by Hume's converse of the Mental Separability Principle).
6. So if abstraction is possible, then something can be conceived to be distinct from itself (by 4. and 5.)
7. If something is impossible, it is inconceivable (by contraposition on the Conceivability Principle).
8. It is impossible for something to be distinct from itself.
9. So nothing can be conceived to be distinct from itself.
10. So abstraction is not possible.

Hume certainly held 8. It is a contradiction that something be distinct from itself. Were something distinct from itself, it would have to be both one single thing and yet two distinct things, which Hume explicitly says is impossible (T 1.4.2.28/ 200).

Hume did not give the precise argument that I've given. He gives three related ones. His general example of abstraction is of forming an idea of a quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degree: for example, forming an idea of a line without forming an idea of its precise length. His first argument is that "it is evident at first sight" that the quantity or quality is identical ("not different nor distinguishable") with the degree of it. Therefore, they are not

mentally separable, by the converse of the Mental Separability Principle. Hume's second argument is that no impression can be of a quality lacking a precise degree, all ideas are copied from impressions, so no idea can be of such a quality. Hume's third argument is that it is impossible in reality for a quality or quantity to exist without having a particular degree, so by Modus Tollens on the Conceivability Principle, it is impossible to conceive the one without the other. So it is impossible to mentally separate them (T 1.1.7.3-6/ 18-20).

The argument I have given borrows the principles and approaches of Hume's arguments, plus the traditional assumption about abstraction, to draw the consequence that abstraction would entail conceiving of something as distinct from itself. This result, however, raises a problem for his theory of identity.

### **3. Identity and Hume's Difficulty**

Given Hume's principles and the traditional view of abstraction, abstraction entails thinking of something as distinct from itself. As I will argue, Hume's account of identity entails the same thing.

I've been talking so far as if by 'identity' Hume meant the same thing as we do-- numerical identity. Officially, however, by 'identity' Hume means numerical identity through time (T 1.1.5.4, 1.4.2.29, see also 1.4.3.4/ 14, 201, 220).<sup>14</sup> For identity at a time he apparently uses 'simple' or 'inseparable' as well as 'same' (T 1.1.1.2; 1.1.7.7 n. 5App; 1.1.7.18, 1.4.6.22/ 2, 637, 25, 263). Nonetheless, I will continue to use the word 'identity' as we do. As I will show, Hume's account of the idea of identity through time is designed to solve a problem about identity in our more general sense. So I will often talk as if he is giving an account of the idea of identity

in our sense. Furthermore, the feature of his account that comes into conflict with his critique of abstraction is best expressed using our current sense of ‘identity’.

Hume begins his account with a problem I’ve called *Hume’s Difficulty concerning Identity*. The difficulty begins with the fact that sometimes we don’t know whether or not two things are identical. When I say ‘two things’ here, I am speaking colloquially and not prejudicing the case in favor of them being distinct. When we don’t know whether or not two things are identical, we can alternately imagine them to be two distinct things and imagine them to be one and the same thing. Hume thinks that it is essential to the concept of identity that it include the possibility of imagining both ways. Whether two things are identical is not something we can know *a priori*; it is not a relation of ideas, in the terminology of the first *Enquiry* (EHU 4.18).<sup>15</sup> For things knowable only *a posteriori*--matters of fact--both alternatives are imaginable. Hume makes this clear about identity. In a case of identity, the alternative is conceivable.<sup>16</sup> “Two objects, tho’ perfectly resembling each other, and even appearing in the same place at different times, may be numerically different” (T 1.3.1.1/ 69). Hume is here using ‘two objects’ colloquially as well. It is clear from context that he is not stating a necessary truth. Rather he is saying that two objects which are in fact identical, may for all we know be numerically distinct.

It seems obvious that something appearing at different times can sometimes be thought of as either distinct or identical. If I show you a coin, conceal it, then show it to you again, you can’t be sure whether I have shown you the same coin or two exactly resembling coins in succession. What is not so obvious is that the coin can be thought of either way even when there is no interruption in view, when it seems manifest that it is the same thing. For consider that you can place a coin in front of a very young child and after a bit quickly grab it away, and the child will not see your motion. To him it will appear as if the coin just disappeared. Likewise you

could quickly substitute another in its place without detection. We can imagine that a sleight of hand artist could repeat the experiment with us adults. So even when we are watching without apparent interruption, we can nonetheless alternately imagine something at one time and the same thing at another time to be one and the same thing or two distinct things. We will believe that there is a single coin, but can still suspend the belief and imagine the alternatives.

Hume takes it to be essential to the concept of identity that it allow for these alternate imaginable possibilities. An analysis of the concept of identity that does not explain the possibility of thinking of the identical things alternately as two distinct things and as one and the same thing, is not a full analysis of identity, he thinks. This requirement on the concept of identity is what he explores at the beginning of his extremely compressed discussion of the origin of the idea of identity.

One might protest that Hume's requirement on the concept of identity is asking for more than is necessary. All he needs to explain is why identity claims are not knowable *a priori*. For that, he needs to explain is how it is possible that we can fail to know that something is one single thing. And, reminiscent of Frege (1980), the explanation is merely that we fail to know that something is one thing when we have distinct representations of it and do not know if they are representations of one thing or two things.

To the contrary, there is more to explain. That more is how, for the things taken to be identical, we might have thought of them as distinct--them, without thought of their representations. For example, suppose you meet a new colleague at a meeting and another day meet a new neighbor, and suppose, like me, you are someone who has trouble recognizing people in different contexts. You may wonder whether or not the person who is the new colleague and the person who is the new neighbor are the same person. You can imagine that



they are and can imagine that they are not. You are thinking of them, and can imagine that they are two distinct persons. You are thinking of them even if they are in fact one and the same person. You are certainly not thinking of your representations of them and wondering whether they co-refer.

The sort of representational item, whether impression or idea or description or sense or whatever, does not matter. That we can imagine two such representational items alternately picking out one thing or two things does not help in explaining the alternate imaginable possibilities essential to the concept of identity. We are able alternately to imagine that two things are one and the same thing, on the one hand, or two distinct things, on the other hand. How we can do this is Hume's concern.

Hume's talk of needing distinct ideas of the objects involved in order to have a meaningful identity proposition should not mislead us (T 1.4.2.26/ 200). The point of seeming to need two ideas is to be able to think of the identical things as two distinct things. We think about the identical things *via* ideas; we do not think *about* the ideas and their relations to the identical things.

Before turning to Hume's text, let me note that where I talk about his analysis of the concept of identity, Hume talks about the origin of the idea of identity. For our purposes these are interchangeable. Hume's Copy Principle links the parts and structure of an idea to its origin. Ideas are what Hume thinks concepts are. So in explaining the origin of ideas he is giving the parts and structure of concepts.

Hume begins by saying that the idea of identity is not copied from the impression given by a single object. There must be more to the idea than that. It is not possible to think of a single object, recognized as such, as two distinct things. That would be to think of it as distinct from

itself. So the idea copied from such an impression does not allow for the alternate possibilities essential to the concept of identity. “One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity” (T 1.4.2.26/ 200).

For example, suppose you have a single impression of a man. According to Hume, to think that he is identical with himself, you would have to be able to imagine that the man before you is distinct from the very man before you. But that would be to imagine that someone you are seeing is distinct from himself.

Everything will depend on understanding this point that to think of a single object, recognized as such, as two distinct things, is to think of it as distinct from itself. Two natural ways to attempt to evade it both involve equivocation.

First attempt: It would seem possible to think of a single thing *with two parts* as two distinct things. But that would be to think of it as *composed* of distinct things that it is distinct from. What is needed for the idea of identity is the possibility of thinking of it as *being* two distinct things. The first attempt involves equivocating between identity and the composition relation.

One might persist by saying that a single thing with two parts is numerically identical with the two parts collectively; that’s what composition is.<sup>17</sup> So that allows for the possibility of thinking of the whole as being two distinct things. However, the goal is to be able to think of what are identical with each other as distinct from each other. So the goal would be accomplished only if one could somehow think of the whole as identical to the distinct parts *individually*, not just collectively. So, the first attempt still equivocates between identity and composition, even given this special version of the composition relation.

Second attempt: It would seem possible to think of a single thing as two distinct things by unknowingly representing it with the *two different ideas* copied from two different impressions. However, the possibility of representing a single thing with two distinct ideas is not yet to think of it as two distinct things. It is at best a failure to know that it is a single thing. This attempt to evade the point I am making depends on an equivocation between ideas and what they are of. Furthermore, it overlooks that the concern is with a single thing, recognized as such.

So Hume says that the idea of identity is not copied from the impression given by a single object. It is not possible to think of a single object, recognized as such, as two distinct things. That would be to think of something as distinct from itself.

Likewise, Hume says that the idea of identity is not copied from the impressions given by a multiplicity of objects. Suppose there are two objects. It is not possible to think of two objects, recognized as such, as one and the same thing. If we can imagine, for two things recognized as such, that they are one and the same thing, then we can imagine the situation in the reverse. We can imagine, for one thing recognized as such, that it is two distinct things, and so distinct from itself. However, as we have seen, we cannot imagine something being distinct from itself. When we perceive a multiplicity recognized as such, we cannot think of those very objects we are perceiving as anything but many. “The mind always pronounces the one not to be the other, and considers them as forming two, three, or any determinate number of objects, whose existences are entirely distinct and independent” (T 1.4.2.27/ 200). So multiple objects would convey the idea of number, not that of identity.

But what is the alternative to copying the idea of identity from an impression of a single thing, recognized as such, and from impressions of more than one thing recognized as such? “Betwixt unity and number there can be no medium; no more than betwixt existence and non-

existence” (T 1.4.2.28/ 200). One is perceiving there to be either one single thing or more than one.

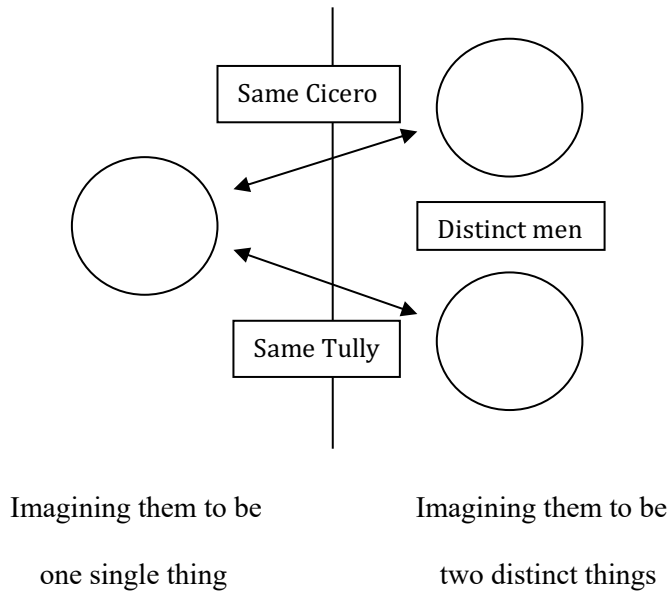
My saying “recognized as such” adds a wrinkle that at first glance does not appear in Hume’s text. But it is clear from the text that Hume is not so much concerned with how many things are actually being perceived as with how many things one perceives there as being. This distinction between what there really is that is being represented vs. what one is representing there as being is important for understanding Hume’s account of identity. If what are really many things are, through some confusion, perceived as being a single thing, then that impression cannot be the source of the idea of identity, for the reasons Hume has given concerning the perception of a single thing. Likewise if what is really a single thing is, through some trick, perceived as being many things, then those impressions likewise cannot be the source of the idea of identity. So when I speak of an impression of a single thing recognized as such, I am only concerned with the fact that the impression represents there as being a single thing. Likewise, impressions of many things recognized as such, represent there as being many things.

Recognizing the wrinkle makes Hume’s question be, what could be in between representing there as being one single thing and representing there as being many distinct things? Can we represent there as being one and a half things--one and a half apples, say? But half an apple is still a single thing. So, one and a half apples are two distinct things. So we would be representing there as being two distinct things. Alternatively, to find a medium could we say that there is one thing that exists and a second thing that only half exists? But what would this mean? Something that half exists is something, and therefore it exists. So, again, we would be representing there as being two distinct things.

The upshot is *Hume's Difficulty concerning Identity: how can we represent there as being things that are perhaps identical and perhaps distinct?* If we represent some things as being one, then we cannot alternatively represent it as being many because we can't alternatively represent it as being distinct from itself. If we represent some things as being many, then we cannot alternatively represent them as being one single thing. If we could, then we could represent it as being them, which leads to the same absurdity.

Take an example. Suppose we meet Cicero one day and Tully another and later wonder whether they are the same person. Having met them, we are equipped to wonder about them. Current philosophers may segue into wondering about their names, and whether or not these names are co-referential, but that is not what is going on here. We are wondering about Cicero and Tully, not about their names. Suppose we first imagine that Cicero and Tully are the same person. Then we must be able to imagine as well that this person we imagine there to be is the same Cicero as Cicero and the same Tully as Tully, even when we imagine Cicero and Tully to be distinct. For we are imagining, of Cicero and Tully themselves, alternately that they be identical and that they be distinct. So, it is the same Cicero and the same Tully in either imagining. So, again, we must be able to imagine of the Cicero/Tully of the imagining that there is one person, that it is the same Cicero and the same Tully as the distinct Cicero and Tully of the other imagining. So we must be able to imagine there being someone of whom we can imagine that he is distinct from himself.

## DIAGRAM OF THE ALTERNATE IMAGININGS



The idea of identity apparently needs to be a medium betwixt the idea of unity and the idea of number that is somehow alternately both. But such a medium seems impossible. Further, there seem to be no impressions from which such an idea could be copied.

Hume's answer to this difficulty is that the idea of identity is cobbled together by means of an irresistible fiction (where 'fiction' entails 'falsehood').<sup>18</sup> Here is where Hume brings in time, so that in answer to a problem concerning identity in general, he proposes an account of identity through time in particular.

The fiction that Hume appeals to is the fiction of a steadfast object with duration. Hume holds that the idea of duration is copied from the impressions received when perceiving a succession recognized as such. Consequently the idea of duration is the idea of successiveness.

He holds further that no idea can be applied without fiction to something it could not be derived from. He holds lastly that sometimes we perceive steadfast objects, where steadfast objects are non-successions that coexist with successions (T 1.2.3.6-11/ 35-37). It follows that applying the idea of duration to a steadfast object is a fiction. After all, it is false that a non-succession has successiveness. Nonetheless, Hume argues that we naturally come to apply the idea of duration to steadfast objects in addition to successions. One first gets this fiction by having a succession of ideas that are in fact of the same steadfast object, though one does not pay attention to that fact. Such application becomes a habit we cannot resist (T 1.2.5.28-29/ 64-65).

I have already observ'd, that time, in a strict sense, implies succession, and that when we apply its idea to any unchangeable object, 'tis only by a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos'd to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects, and in particular of that of our perceptions.

This fiction of the imagination almost universally takes place; and 'tis by means of it, that a single object, plac'd before us, and survey'd for any time without our discovering in it any interruption or variation, is able to give us a notion of identity. (T 1.4.2.29/ 200-01)

One day in our development, we contemplate a steadfast object and are struck by its non-successiveness. We never paid attention to that before. And yet, despite this striking experience, we cannot resist the habit of regarding everything that is not minimally brief as having duration. So we are faced with a palpable non-succession that we, nonetheless, cannot resist regarding as a succession. The mind is unable to give up either of these incompatible views of the steadfast object, so the mind alternates between them. The alternation hides this incompatibility from the mind. It is in this alternation that the idea of identity comes into being.

Here then is an idea, which is a medium betwixt unity and number; or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it:

And this idea we call that of identity. (T 1.4.2.29/ 201)

A succession is many things in succession. A steadfast object is a single thing that coexists with successions but is not a succession itself. So, to regard a steadfast object alternately as a succession and as a non-succession, is to regard it alternately as many distinct things and as a single thing. This is Hume's closest approach to representing there as being a medium betwixt unity and number.

So the idea of identity is the result of alternating between an accurate idea of the steadfast object as a single thing and a fictitious idea of the steadfast object as many distinct things.

Unfortunately, Hume's idea of identity is at best a way of evading Hume's Difficulty. It certainly is not a solution, and, it turns out, is not even a successful evasion. Even a successful evasion in this way would involve the very problem entailed by his critique of abstraction: thinking of something as distinct from itself. The idea of identity was suppose to be a way around this problem, but it isn't.

In order to explain in detail why Hume's attempt to simulate an idea of a medium betwixt unity and number cannot work, let me return to a distinction made earlier, that between *what there is that an idea represents* and *what an idea represents there as being*. For example, suppose in the dark you mistake a mailbox for a boy scout. What your idea is of is a mailbox. What your idea represents there as being is a boy scout.

The fiction included in Hume's idea of identity is that the steadfast object has duration. We think of it via a succession of ideas that represent it as being many distinct things. Thus what there is that the succession of ideas represents is in fact a single steadfast object. What the



succession of ideas represents there as being, however, is something with duration, i.e. a succession. Because they are successive, they represent what they are of as being a succession.<sup>19</sup>

Next, we think of the steadfast object as one single thing via a single idea copied from an uninterrupted contemplation of the object. Because it is a single idea, the idea represents the steadfast object as being a single thing. To have the idea of identity is to alternate between these views. Hume intends that this makeshift idea will simulate a solution to Hume's Difficulty, since there is no genuine solution. How do we represent there as being things perhaps identical and perhaps distinct? We alternate between an idea representing it as a single thing and some successive ideas representing it as being many distinct things.

However, the makeshift idea cannot even simulate a solution. To alternate between a single idea and a succession of ideas is just to have a longer succession of more ideas. Being successive, they will represent what they are of as being successive. So, the longer succession would still only represent the steadfast object as being a succession. So even if the mind is in fact alternating between views of the object as one and the object as many, there is no way on Hume's account for the mind to recognize that it is doing so. For the makeshift idea even to simulate a solution to Hume's Difficulty something extra must be added that Hume cannot account for. Somehow the viewer must *recognize* that it is the same object in the alternating views. Its merely *being* the same object is not enough.

In other words, Hume's account cannot distinguish (i) representing something simply as many things in succession, some of which are briefer and some of which are longer, from (ii) representing it alternately as one thing and as many things in succession. His account could only supply the same sequence of ideas for each of these crucially different cases. What it cannot

supply is a recognition of the sameness of what the alternate views are of, as the second case requires.

Let me give an illustration. Suppose a drunk's eyes were crossing then uncrossing as the same bug flies around his head. He alternately sees one bug then a doubled bug, even though it is in fact the same bug each time. For all the drunk knows he is being plagued by a succession of bugs, some of which fly in pairs. To think that it is the same bug viewed in different ways, he has to think that each bug in the apparent pairs of bugs is the same bug as the apparent single bug. Hume's account gives no way to think of this sameness. If it did, it would solve Hume's Difficulty.

Here then is the problem with Hume's account. For Hume's makeshift idea of identity even to simulate a solution to Hume's Difficulty, it would have to be a genuine solution. The idea would have to represent there as being the same thing whether viewed as one single thing or viewed as many distinct things. The idea would have to represent a single thing as a single thing and then switch to representing it as the same 'it' and yet as distinct things. But as we have seen, it could do this only if it could represent there as being something distinct from itself.<sup>20</sup>

Thus in his account of identity Hume faces the same problem that he raises for the proponents of traditional abstraction. The problem of abstract ideas is a version of Hume's Difficulty concerning Identity. In order to abstract we must be able to think of the same thing alternately as one and the same thing and as two distinct things. So we must be able to think of something as distinct from itself. If we cannot conceive this, Hume's account of the idea of identity falls. If we can, then his critique of traditional abstraction falls. For Hume, traditional abstraction and his account of identity thus stand or fall together.<sup>21</sup>

## Works Cited

- Ayers, M. R. 1975. Editor's Introduction to *Philosophical Works*, by George Berkeley, vi-xxiv. London: Dent.
- . 1986. "Are Locke's 'Ideas' Images, Intentional Objects, or Natural Signs?" *The Locke Newsletter* 17:3-36.
- Baxter, Donald L.M. 1988a. "Many-One Identity." *Philosophical Papers* 17:193-216.
- . 1988b. "Identity in the Loose and Popular Sense." *Mind* 97:575-82.
- . 1989. "Identity through Time and the Discernibility of Identicals." *Analysis* 49:125-31.
- . 1997. "Abstraction, Inseparability, and Identity." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57:307-330.
- . 1999. "The Discernibility of Identicals." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 24:37-55.
- . 2001. "Instantiation as Partial Identity." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79:449-464.
- Berkeley, George. 1982. *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Knowledge*. Edited by Kenneth Winkler. Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing.
- Black, Max, and Peter Geach, eds. 1980. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bosley, Richard N. 2006. *Two Distinct Division None: Essays in the History of Philosophy concerning Principles of Separabilism at*  
[http://www.themean.ca/pdf/two\\_distinct\\_div.pdf](http://www.themean.ca/pdf/two_distinct_div.pdf).
- , and Martin Tweedale. 1997. *Basic Issues in Medieval Philosophy*. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press.
- Bricke, John. 1980. *Hume's Philosophy of Mind*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Descartes, René. 1988. *Principles of Philosophy*. In *Descartes: Selected Writings*, edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flage, Daniel E. 1986. "Berkeley on Abstraction." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24:483-501.
- Frege, Gottlob. 1980. "On Sense and Meaning." In *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, edited by Max Black and Peter Geach. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Garrett, Don. 1997. *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Treatise*. Oxford University Press.
- Grant, Edward. 1982. "The Effect of the Condemnation of 1277." In *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hume, David. 2000. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- . 2007. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hume, David. 1978. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Second edition. Edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge and Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Laird, John. 1931. *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature*. New York: Dutton.
- Locke, John. 1975. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mackie, J. L. 1976. *Problems from Locke*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Pitcher, George. 1977. *Berkeley*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Sider, Theodore. 2007. "Parthood." *Philosophical Review* 116:51–91.
- Spade, Paul Vincent, ed. 1994. *Five Texts on the Mediaeval Problem of Universals*.  
Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing.
- Taylor, C.C.W. 1978. "Berkeley's Theory of Abstract Ideas." *The Philosophical Quarterly*  
28:97-115.
- Traiger, Saul. 1987. "Impressions, Ideas, and Fictions." *Hume Studies* 13:381-99.
- Traiger, Saul. 2010. "Experience and Testimony in Hume's Philosophy." *Episteme* 7:42-57.
- Urmson, J. O. 1982. *Berkeley*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Weinberg, Julius R. 1965. "The Nominalism of Berkeley and Hume." in *Abstraction, Relation,  
and Induction*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Winkler, Kenneth. 1989. *Berkeley: An Interpretation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Yi, Byeong-Uk. 1999. "Is Mereology Ontologically Innocent?" *Philosophical Studies* 93:141–  
60.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For predecessors of this approach see Weinberg 1965, Pitcher 1977, Winkler 1989, and my 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Berkeley 1982, Introduction, paragraph 10.

<sup>3</sup> Hume 2007 and 1978, cited by (T book.part.section.paragraph/ Selby-Bigge page).

<sup>4</sup> Locke 1975, cited by (*Essay* book.chapter.section).

<sup>5</sup> Ayers 1975, xx, and 1986, 12-13; Mackie 1976, 107-12; Taylor 1978, 97-115; Urmson 1982, 26-27; Winkler 1989, 39-41.

<sup>6</sup> Locke uses the word “*Ideas*”, but he has cautioned us by saying, “which *Ideas*, if I speak of sometimes, as in the things themselves, I would be understood to mean those Qualities in the Objects which produce them in us” (*Essay* 2.8.8).

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to consider abstract ideas of secondary qualities or of the features of acts of an immaterial mind, for instance, but it is simpler not to worry about those here.

<sup>8</sup> Boethius, From His Second Commentary on Porphyry’s *Isagoge*, in Spade 1994, 21-22.

<sup>9</sup> Garrett calls this simply the Separability Principle and says it and its converse are new with Hume, (1997, 58). See also Bricke 1980, 68. However, see Descartes’s discussion of distinctions in *Principles*, Part I, Principles LX-LXII (1988, 160-212), as well as medieval and ancient antecedents such as those cited in Bosley 2006. See Laird against the mental separability principle (1931, 82-83).

<sup>10</sup> This appeal to possible objects of thought answers Laird’s challenge to Hume’s contention that “all differentials are distinguishable” (1931, 82-83).

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Descartes 1988, which uses the phrases “only distinct . . . by thought” and “differ only in thought” (*Principles*, Part I, Principle LXII ‘Of the distinction created by thought’).

<sup>12</sup> See Bosley and Tweedale 1997, editors’ introductions, pp. xx-xxi, 440-441. See also Grant 1982.

<sup>13</sup> Garrett 1997 does not distinguish the mental separability principle from the real separability principle. I think he is concerned with both. By the way, despite the use of the words ‘real’ and ‘really,’ I am on Hume’s behalf still talking about the world of appearance.

<sup>14</sup> Nonetheless, as Annemarie Butler pointed out to me, Hume says that “difference of *number*” is “oppos’d” to identity, which suggests that he there means numerical identity in general (T 1.1.5.10/ 15).

<sup>15</sup> Hume 2000, cited by (EHU section.paragraph).

<sup>16</sup> For the interchangeability of imagining and conceiving, see T 1.2.2.8/ 32.

<sup>17</sup> See my 1988b, 575-582, as well as Yi 1999, 141-160, and Sider 2007, 51-91.

<sup>18</sup> Hume’s concept of fiction is ambiguous. There are two senses, identified by Saul Traiger, in which a fiction is not a falsehood. In his first sense a fiction is an idea of a characteristic that is applied to an object from which the idea cannot be derived. The idea cannot be derived because the object does not have the characteristic. For instance, and paradigmatically, when an idea of duration is applied to a steadfast object, the idea of duration is a fiction. In Traiger’s second sense a fiction is a feigning, a regular “process of the imagination” by which something that lacks a characteristic is treated as if it has it. In both case there is an opinion about something lacking a characteristic that it has that characteristic. This is a third sense of ‘fiction’ that does entail falsehood, and this is the sense I use here. Hume uses it when he characterizes the “fiction of a continu’d existence” as “really false,” just like the “false

---

opinion that any of our objects, or perceptions, are identically the same after an interruption” (T 1.4.2.43/ 209). See Traiger 1987, 385-86, and Traiger 2010, 52.

<sup>19</sup> There is a later fiction that occurs for Hume after one has the idea of identity. One takes successive objects in close relation to be the same thing (see T 1.4.2.34-35/ 203-04; 1.4.6.6/ 253-55). One, as it were, “runs together” these distinct objects. However this subsequent more famous fiction is not part of Hume’s discussion of first forming the idea of identity.

<sup>20</sup> I myself think that Hume is exactly right about what the concept of identity requires. The fact that Hume’s Difficulty follows means that an account of identity needs to be able to address the difficulty. In the terms of my own peculiar account of Many-One Identity, sense *can* be made of someone’s being distinct from himself. I say that numerical identity is relative to “counts.” And I say that “aspects” of a person can be numerically identical in one count and numerically distinct in another. “Cross-count identity” is secured by the “aspectival identity” of these aspects. Thus to say that Cicero/Tully is distinct from himself, in a sense that is not contradictory, is to refer to his Cicero aspect and to his Tully aspect in the count in which they are identical and then to predicate distinctness of them in a count in which they are numerically distinct. In addition to my 1988b, see my 1988a, 193-216; 1989, 125-131; 1999, 37-55; and 2001, 449-64.

<sup>21</sup> I’m grateful for comments from audiences at these conferences: *The Problem of Universals in Modern Philosophy*, Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa; *Hume’s Metaphysics and Humean Metaphysics*, University of Tampere, Finland; and *The 39th International Hume Conference*, University of Calgary, Alberta. I’m especially grateful for discussion with Stefano Di Bella, Jani Hakkarainen, Don Garrett, Philipp Keller Blum, Roberta Ballarin, Todd Ryan, Tad Schmaltz, Samuel Newlands, Antonia Lolordo, Tom Stoneham, Lawrence Nolan, Saul Traiger,



---

Annemarie Butler, Lewis Powell, Jonny Cottrell, Dario Perinetti, and Donald Ainslie. Thanks also to Toby Napoletano for research assistance.