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A Puzzle about Fictions in the *Treatise*

JONATHAN COTTRELL*

ABSTRACT I present a hitherto unremarked conflict involving Hume's claim that certain "fictions of the imagination"—like that of an unchangeable, yet enduring object—are "improper," "inexact," or not "strict." I argue that this claim is inconsistent with other commitments that he has, concerning how the imagination produces fictions and how we form general representations. I consider several ways in which he would likely respond to this charge, and argue that he cannot consistently accept any of them. I conclude that we face an unsolved puzzle: how best to develop or amend Hume's views, so as to remove the conflict that I have identified?

KEYWORDS David Hume, fiction, imagination, abstract ideas, duration, distance, identity

IN THE *TREATISE*, HUME CLAIMS TO identify many "fictions of the imagination" among both "vulgar" (that is, ordinary) and philosophical beliefs. To name just a few, these include the fiction of one aggregate composed of many parts (*T* 1.2.2.3; SBN 30–31),¹ the fiction of a material object's identity through change (*T* 1.4.3.2–4; SBN 219–20), and the fiction of a human mind's identity through change and interruption in its existence (*T* 1.4.6.6, 1.4.6.15; SBN 253–55, 259). Hume claims that these fictions and others like them are somehow defective: in his words, they are "improper," "inexact," or not "strict" (*T* 1.2.3.11, 1.4.2.29, 1.4.6.7; SBN 37, 200, 255). I will argue that this claim conflicts with other commitments that he has.

To present the conflict, I will focus on one fiction in particular: that of an "unchangeable" yet enduring object (*T* 1.2.3.11, 1.2.5.29; SBN 37, 65); let us call this *the Duration Fiction*. I have chosen this fiction because it plays an important role for Hume: he argues that we acquire our idea of identity by means of it (*T*

¹Hume's works are cited as follows. References to '*T*' are to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, followed by book, part, section, and, where appropriate, paragraph numbers from the 2007 Norton and Norton edition (references to paragraphs of the Appendix to the *Treatise* and of Hume's "Abstract of a Book Lately Published" are preceded by 'App' and 'Abs,' respectively). Each of these citations is followed by the corresponding page numbers in the 1978 Selby-Bigge edition revised by Nidditch, set off by 'SBN.' References to '*EHU*' are to *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, followed by section and paragraph numbers from the 2000 Beauchamp edition, and the corresponding page numbers in the 1975 Selby-Bigge edition revised by Nidditch, set off by 'SBN.'

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1.4.2.29; SBN 200–201), and that several other fictions arise from it—for example, that of a material object’s identity through change (*T* 1.4.3.2–4; SBN 219–20). However, my focus on the Duration Fiction is only for illustrative purposes; the conflict that I will present extends to Hume’s views about other fictions, including some that do not arise from this one.

I begin by introducing the Duration Fiction and Hume’s claim that it is defective (section 1). I then exhibit the conflict, which involves his accounts of how the imagination produces fictions and of how we form general representations. After examining these accounts (sections 2 and 3), I explain the conflict and show how it extends to other fictions (section 4).

I then consider two ways in which Hume might respond: refining his theory of general representations (section 5) or giving up his claim that fictions are defective (section 6). I argue that he cannot consistently accept any of the responses that I consider. This leaves Hume’s readers facing an unsolved puzzle: how best to develop or amend his views, so as to remove the conflict that I will have presented?

A caveat before I begin: Hume sometimes discusses fictions that we do not believe.² For example, he discusses the “fictions of poetry” and explains that our attitude to them differs from “a serious conviction” or belief (*T* 1.3.10.5–12; SBN 120–23, 630–32). This paper does not concern such fictions, but only those that Hume claims we do believe or, at least, sincerely profess to believe³—as, for example, when he writes that our “propensity to feign the continu’d existence of all sensible objects . . . bestows a vivacity on that fiction; or in other words, makes us believe the continu’d existence of body” (*T* 1.4.2.42; SBN 209).⁴

²In the Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume contrasts fiction with belief: for example, he writes that “an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the *manner* of its being conceived” (*T* 1.3.7.7App; SBN 628; italics in original) and that “an idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us” (*T* 1.3.7.7App; SBN 629; italics in original). Here, he seems to be using the term ‘fiction’ with a different meaning from the one that it has in passages where he says that certain fictions are believed; for an interpretation of this sort, see Loeb, *Stability and Justification*, 144–45, 200–201.

³I say, “believe or, at least, sincerely profess to believe,” because it is controversial whether Hume allows that we can form genuine beliefs about some of the fictions that this paper concerns. For example, he writes that the “fiction” of “a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*” is “unintelligible” (*T* 1.4.6.6; SBN 254; italics in original). This suggests to some commentators that we cannot form an idea that represents a mental substance, for Hume. (For views like this, see Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 11–12; Fogelin, *Hume’s Skeptical Crisis*, 73; and Oliver Johnson, *The Mind of David Hume*, 260–61. For a discussion of the textual difficulties here, see Costelloe, “Phenomenology,” 37–38.) As Hume is standardly interpreted, he holds that a belief is a lively idea (*T* 1.3.7.5; SBN 96). It follows that we cannot form a belief about a mental substance. But all commentators can agree that, in Hume’s view, we use the terms ‘soul,’ ‘self,’ and ‘substance,’ sincerely intending to express beliefs by them, whether or not we really have suitable beliefs to express. (For a sophisticated discussion of the sense in which certain fictions are “unintelligible,” see Loeb, *Stability and Justification*, 162–72.)

⁴David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton anticipate my distinction between fictions that we believe and those that we do not believe, when they distinguish between natural and artificial fictions; see the glossary entry for ‘fiction’ in their 2000 edition of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 576. Following McRae, “Hume’s Theory of Time,” I shall later distinguish two classes of fiction that we believe, or sincerely profess to believe: *application fictions*, such as the Duration Fiction; and *concealment fictions* (see section 4, below). For a different approach to classifying Humean fictions, based on a distinction among powers of the imagination, see Costelloe, “Phenomenology.” Costelloe does not discuss the Duration Fiction in detail, but he seems to regard it as what he calls a *necessary fiction* owing to the *productive power* of the imagination: an idea that “cannot be traced to experience or discovered by reason” and that we

I. THE DURATION FICTION AND ITS DEFECT

Hume introduces the Duration Fiction with the following argument (*T* 1.2.3.6–8; SBN 35–36). Someone can acquire the idea of “time or duration” only if she is first aware of some duration’s taking place. This requires her to be aware of “a succession of changeable objects.”⁵ And this, in turn, requires her to have a succession of changeable perceptions (impressions or ideas). By ‘changeable,’ Hume does not mean *disposed to change* or *capable of change*; he means *actually changing*. By ‘change,’ he means *numerical change*: the succession of one thing in the place of another.⁶ So he is arguing that someone can acquire the idea of duration only if she actually has several perceptions in succession. These successive perceptions are a particular instance of duration. An idea copied from them represents *this particular instance of duration*: that is, it represents both the perceptions themselves and the successive “manner” in which they were arranged (*T* 1.2.3.10; SBN 36–37). If this idea comes to be associated with the general term ‘duration’ and, via this term, with many other ideas of particular instances of duration, it then serves as an abstract or general idea that represents *all particular instances of duration*. When Hume writes of “the idea of time” or “the idea of duration,” he means to denote this general idea (*T* 1.2.3.6; SBN 35).

After giving this argument, Hume observes that both philosophers and the vulgar often “pretend” that “the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects, which are perfectly unchangeable” (*T* 1.2.3.11; SBN 37). It is “common” to believe that an “unchangeable” object—an object that is one thing, not several things in succession—can properly be said to endure. “But,” he continues, this belief is false:

[T]o be convinc’d of its falshood we need but reflect on the foregoing conclusion, that the idea of duration is always deriv’d from a succession of changeable objects, and can never be convey’d to the mind by any thing stedfast and unchangeable. For it inevitably follows from thence, that since the idea of duration cannot be deriv’d from such an object, it can never in any propriety or exactness be apply’d to it, nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration. Ideas always represent the objects or impressions, from which they are deriv’d, and can never without a fiction represent or be apply’d to any other. By what fiction we apply the idea of time, even to what is unchangeable . . . we shall consider afterwards. (*T* 1.2.3.11; SBN 37)

Later in the *Treatise*, he recapitulates this passage as follows:

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. (*T* 1.4.2.29; SBN 200–201)⁷

believe neither rationally nor irrationally (“Phenomenology,” 37–38, 42–43). Costelloe’s category of necessary fictions also includes the fictions of “continued existence, substance and . . . the immortal soul” (“Phenomenology,” 37), which I regard as *concealment fictions*.

⁵Hume allows that observing a succession of diverse *qualities* suffices for being aware of time’s passing (*T* 1.4.3.3–4; SBN 220). In this discussion, then, he seems to use the term ‘object’ in a broad sense, so that qualities count as a kind of objects. I thank Don Garrett for this point.

⁶For these terminological points, see Baxter, “A Defense of Hume,” 331–33; by reference to Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, Baxter shows that these meanings of ‘changeable’ and ‘change’ were standard in the eighteenth century.

⁷In a note attached to this passage, Hume refers the reader back to *T* 1.2.5—not to *T* 1.2.3.11, with which I am connecting it. But the relevant paragraph of *T* 1.2.5 (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65) is intended

When Hume writes of representing something “with” or “by” a fiction, he seems to be using the term ‘fiction’ in an archaic sense, meaning “the act of feigning or inventing”;⁸ in his view, this act is performed by the imagination. Elsewhere, he uses the term ‘fiction’ to denote the products—the representations—that our imagination produces by such acts.⁹ Following Hume, I shall use ‘fiction’ in both of these ways. But I shall henceforth reserve the proper name ‘Duration Fiction’ for the product of the act: that is, for the representation of an unchangeable object as enduring.

In Hume’s view, the Duration Fiction is defective: we form it by applying the general idea of duration to an unchangeable object,¹⁰ and we can “never” do this “in any propriety or exactness” (*T* 1.2.3.11; SBN 37). In what sense is the Duration Fiction “improper” and “inexact,” for Hume? Commentators have given two main answers to this question. According to some, he holds that the Duration Fiction is a false representation. For example,¹¹ Donald L. M. Baxter writes,

Yet another direct consequence of Hume’s account [of duration] is that *only* successions have duration. It is clear that objects which exist only for a brief moment do not have duration, but the difficult case is objects that are ‘steadfast and unchangeable’ (*T* 1.2.3.11; SBN 37). These are cases ‘without any change or succession’ (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65). In such a case there is just a single object, not distinct objects successively. So the idea of a steadfast object cannot convey the idea of duration. So a steadfast object lacks duration. . . . Only by a fiction can one come to think of a steadfast object as enduring. (Baxter, *Hume’s Difficulty*, 21; italics in original)

In a note attached to this paragraph’s final sentence,¹² Baxter adds,

As here, all the fictions I mention in this [chapter] are falsehoods: Taking something without duration to have it, taking distinct things to be identical, etc. Baier asserts that Humean fictions are not false, simply unverifiable, but this seems to be more an attempt to save Hume from himself, than an attempt to take him at his word. (Baxter, *Hume’s Difficulty*, 103n17)¹³

to expand upon *T* 1.2.3.11: see Hume’s footnote to *T* 1.2.3.11, which refers the reader forward to “Sect. 5,” i.e. *T* 1.2.5. So it is fair to describe the quoted material from *T* 1.4.2.29 as a recapitulation of *T* 1.2.3.11.

⁸Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary*, s.v. “fiction.”

⁹Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary*, s.v. “fiction.”

¹⁰For the view that this fiction involves applying the *general* idea of duration to an unchangeable object, see also Schafer, “Hume’s Unified Theory of Mental Representation,” 11, 25n29.

¹¹Other examples are Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, 356–57; and McRae, “Hume’s Theory of Time,” 120. Falkenstein may be another, since he holds that the relevant sense of ‘fiction’ is “an incoherent idea that we manage to think by confusing two importantly distinct though closely related ideas” (“Space and Time,” 66); I presume that an “incoherent idea” is false (but perhaps Falkenstein holds that it is not false, but meaningless). Costa takes the related view that the Duration Fiction involves dispositions to answer certain questions falsely (“Strict Identity,” 5–7); for further discussion, see n. 28.

¹²Although stated in a footnote, this interpretation plays a central role in Baxter’s book: “Understanding that steadfast objects do not endure but that we hold the unshakeable fiction that they do, is crucial to understanding Hume’s account of identity. It is crucial to seeing how the idea of identity is an attempt to reconcile being many with being one” (Baxter, *Hume’s Difficulty*, 30). For further discussion of the Duration Fiction and its role in Hume’s account of identity, see Baxter, *Hume’s Difficulty*, 43–47, 61–65.

¹³Oliver Johnson makes a similar point: “The natural assumption, of course, is to conclude that [Hume] knew what ‘fiction’ meant and that he was using it deliberately, to contrast it with ‘fact’” (*The Mind of David Hume*, 258). However, it is not clear that Johnson accepts that fictions are falsehoods on this ground: he goes on to write that fictions “are not ideas so are by definition meaningless” (*The Mind of David Hume*, 261); so, his considered view seems to be that fictions are not false, but meaningless.

As Baxter indicates, Annette Baier denies that Hume regards fictions as falsehoods;¹⁴ Henry Allison, Galen Strawson, and others agree with her.¹⁵ According to these commentators, Hume allows that fictions may be true, but thinks that they have an epistemic shortcoming: for example, that we cannot obtain sufficient evidence for believing them.¹⁶

I can afford to be ecumenical about this interpretive dispute. I shall assume that the disjunction of these interpretations is correct. That is, I shall assume that Hume holds either that the Duration Fiction is false, or that we lack sufficient evidence for it.¹⁷ I shall argue that, whichever of these claims he means to make, it conflicts with other commitments that he has. Sections 2 and 3 present these commitments; section 4 explains the conflict.

¹⁴Baier, *Progress*, 103, 306. Baxter's claim that Baier—and, by extension, other commentators who deny that Humean fictions are falsehoods—fails “to take [Hume] at his word” would be fair if, but only if, the term ‘fiction’ invariably meant *falsehood* in eighteenth-century English usage. But Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* suggests otherwise. One of its entries under ‘fiction’ is, indeed, “A falsehood; a lie.” But these entries also include, “The thing feigned or invented.” A representation that is *invented* need not, on that account, be *false*. Baier and others might say that this entry gives the meaning of ‘fiction’ in Hume's usage. (For the related view that Hume sometimes uses ‘fiction’ to mean the imaginative process of inventing or constructing an idea, see Frasca-Spada, “Quixotic Confusions and Hume's Imagination,” 169n15.) So the interpretive dispute cannot be settled by appealing to considerations about ordinary language meaning.

¹⁵For example, see Allison, *Custom and Reason*, 280–81; Strawson, *The Secret Connexion*, 55n36; and Strawson, *The Evident Connexion*, 8n18. Costelloe takes a similar view of what he calls *necessary fictions*, which he regards as “essentially *non-rational*,” though “not *irrational*” to believe (“Phenomenology,” 43). Saul Traiger may once have held a similar view, since he has written that “Hume has a core notion of fiction which is fundamentally epistemological” (“Impressions, Ideas, and Fictions,” 382).

¹⁶Louis Loeb's important interpretation combines elements of both approaches to explaining why fictions are defective. In his view, imaginative processes of the kind that produce the Duration Fiction give rise first to contradictory beliefs (or dispositions to form contradictory beliefs) and then to “metaphysical beliefs” whose content is “defective” (*Stability and Justification*, 139–72); this is how he construes the distinction between what I shall call *application fictions* and *concealment fictions* (see section 4, below). Loeb thinks that these imaginative processes tend to produce beliefs that are psychologically unstable and hence epistemically unjustified, given his view that, for Hume, a belief is justified only if it results from a mechanism that tends to produce stable beliefs (*Stability and Justification*, 12–13, 33). I therefore surmise that Loeb would say application fictions are defective because they are both false and unjustified, and that concealment fictions are defective because they exhibit both representational and epistemic shortcomings. Other commentators hold that when Hume calls an idea (or other representation) a fiction, he does not mean that it is false or lacking evidence, but that it does not exist. For example, T. H. Green and Robert Fogelin interpret Hume's view of the fiction by which we acquire the idea of identity in this way (see Green, “General Introduction,” 254–56; and Fogelin, *Hume's Skeptical Crisis*, 73). Since Hume identifies this fiction with the Duration Fiction (*T* 1.4.2.29n37; SBN 202n1), Green and Fogelin have to say that, in Hume's view, we have no mental representation of an unchanging object's enduring—hence, the expression ‘is unchangeable and enduring’ is completely meaningless or unintelligible. This would be a third account of the Duration Fiction's defect. For a response to this view, see n. 29.

¹⁷In his classic study, *Hume*, Barry Stroud seems to hold this disjunctive interpretation: although he often writes as though fictions were falsehoods (*Hume*, 245–50), he sometimes writes more cautiously that they are “false or unjustified beliefs” (*Hume*, 246). Stroud now holds a subtly different view, on which fictions are either falsehoods or beliefs whose explanation does not imply that they are true (“The Constraints of Hume's Naturalism,” 345–47).

2. HOW THE IMAGINATION
PRODUCES THE DURATION FICTION

The first commitment is that we apply the general term ‘duration’ to both unchangeable objects and successions of objects because they resemble each other—most importantly, because they are similarly related to our minds. To see that Hume has this commitment, we must examine his account of how the imagination produces the Duration Fiction. This account is very cursory:

[T]here is a continual succession of perceptions in our mind; so that the idea of time [or duration] being for ever present with us; when we consider a stedfast object at five-a-clock, and regard the same at six; we are apt to apply to it that idea in the same manner as if every moment were distinguish’d by a different position, or an alteration of the object. The first and second appearances of the object, being compar’d with the succession of our perceptions, seem equally remov’d as if the object had really chang’d. To which we may add, what experience shows us, that the object was susceptible of such a number of changes betwixt these appearances; as also that the unchangeable or rather fictitious duration has the same effect upon every quality, by encreasing or diminishing it, as that succession, which is obvious to the senses. (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65)

Here, Hume points to “three relations” between an unchangeable object and a succession of objects, which induce us to “confound our ideas,” and apply the idea of duration to the unchangeable object (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65). At least two of these relations are *resemblances*. First, the unchangeable object is related to our perceptions in the same way as a succession of objects: “being compar’d with the succession of our perceptions,” two appearances of one unchangeable object seem like appearances of two objects in succession—they “seem equally remov’d as if the object had really chang’d.” Second, an unchangeable object affects other things like a succession of objects: it “has the same effect upon every quality . . . as that succession.”

Hume sees no need to enlarge upon this cursory account because, earlier in the same *Treatise* section, he has thoroughly explained a similar phenomenon: our tendency to apply the idea of spatial extension to what he calls relations of “invisible and intangible distance” (*T* 1.2.5.16; SBN 59) or “fictitious distance” (*T* 1.2.5.23; SBN 62). His account of the Duration Fiction is analogous to his account of this spatial fiction: the three relations that he invokes in order to explain the Duration Fiction (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65) correspond to three relations that he invokes in order to explain the spatial fiction (*T* 1.2.5.15–17; SBN 58–59).¹⁸ So we can learn more about how the Duration Fiction is produced by examining its spatial analog and Hume’s account of how this analogous fiction is produced.¹⁹

According to Hume, only visible or tangible objects can stand in spatial relations such as distance (*T* 1.2.3.5, 1.4.5.9; SBN 34, 235). There are two ways for such objects to be distant from each other; he calls these “two kinds of distance” (*T* 1.2.5.19; SBN 60). First, two visible or tangible objects might be separated by

¹⁸For this point, see Costa, “Strict Identity,” 7.

¹⁹For a different approach to interpreting the Duration Fiction’s spatial analog in light of Hume’s theory of abstract ideas, see Frasca-Spada, *Space and the Self in Hume’s Treatise*, 183–88.

other visible or tangible objects located between them, as the letters A and E are separated by the letters B through D in this diagram:

ABCDE

Hume would say that A and E are separated by a “real extension,” or “composition of visible and tangible objects” (*T* 1.2.5.14; SBN 58): a “composition” made up of B, C, and D. Second, two visible or tangible objects might be separated and yet have no other visible or tangible object located between them, as the letters F and G are separated in this diagram:

F G

Hume would say that F and G are separated by an “invisible and intangible distance” (*T* 1.2.5.16; SBN 59) or “fictitious distance” (*T* 1.2.5.13; SBN 62).

We have seen Hume say that we apply our idea of duration—which is derived from a succession of objects—to unchangeable objects, which are not successions. Likewise, he holds that we apply our idea of spatial extension—which is derived from a “composition of visible and tangible objects,” like B, C, and D—to “invisible and intangible distances,” which are not compositions of visible and tangible objects (*T* 1.2.5.14–21; SBN 58–62). This is the spatial analog of the Duration Fiction.

Just as Hume accounts for the Duration Fiction by citing three relations between an unchangeable object and a succession of objects, he accounts for its spatial analog by citing three relations between an invisible, intangible distance and a real extension (*T* 1.2.5.15–18; SBN 58–59). Again, two of these relations are resemblances (*T* 1.2.5.21; SBN 62). First, objects separated by an invisible, intangible distance and objects separated by a real extension are similarly related to our senses. For example, two visible objects separated by an invisible distance “affect the senses in the same manner, and form the same angle by the rays, which flow from them, and meet in the eye, as if the distance betwixt them were fill’d with visible objects, that give us a true idea of extension” (*T* 1.2.5.15; SBN 58–59).²⁰ And when we successively touch two objects that are separated by an intangible distance, we feel the same “sensation of motion,” in moving our hand from one to the other, as we feel when we successively touch two objects that have other tangible objects located between them (*T* 1.2.5.15; SBN 58–59). Second, objects separated by an invisible and intangible distance affect other things as do objects separated by a real extension: in either case, “all qualities, such as heat, cold, light, attraction, &c. diminish in proportion to the distance” (*T* 1.2.5.17; SBN 59).

Hume then claims that these resemblances between an invisible, intangible distance and a real extension give rise to a further resemblance, which involves “actions of the mind”:

²⁰See also Hume’s earlier claim that “The angles, which the rays of light flowing from them, form with each other; the motion that is requir’d in the eye, in its passage from one to the other; and the different parts of the organs, which are affected by them; these produce the only perceptions, from which we can judge of the [invisible and intangible] distance” (*T* 1.2.5.12; SBN 58). In the Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume retracts part of this claim: he denies that the angle formed by the rays of light flowing from two objects allows us to judge of their distance, for the Berkeleyan reason that “these angles are not known to the mind” (*T* App 22; SBN 635). But he still holds that there are other ways in which objects separated by an invisible, intangible distance and objects separated by a real extension are similarly related to our senses.

[R]esemblance is the most fertile source of error. . . . Resembling ideas are not only related together, but the actions of the mind, which we employ in considering them, are so little different, that we are not able to distinguish them. This last circumstance is of great consequence; and we may in general observe, that wherever the actions of the mind in forming any two ideas are the same or resembling, we are very apt to confound these ideas, and take the one for the other. (*T* 1.2.5.21; SBN 61)

So there is a third way in which an invisible, intangible distance resembles a real extension. Because of the other resemblances between them, these two kinds of distance are related to our minds in similar ways: the action of conceiving, or forming an idea of, an invisible and intangible distance resembles that of conceiving a real extension.²¹ In Hume's view, this resemblance is the most important factor in his account of how the imagination produces the Duration Fiction's spatial analog.

In light of this, let us now revisit Hume's account of the Duration Fiction. The two resemblances that he cites between an unchangeable object and a succession of objects are analogous to those that he cites between an invisible, intangible distance and a real extension. Just as these two kinds of distance affect our senses in similar ways, an unchangeable object is related to our perceptions in the same way as a succession of objects. And just as the two kinds of distance affect other qualities in similar ways, an unchangeable object "has the same effect upon every quality . . . as that succession" (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65). We can now see that, in Hume's view, these two resemblances will give rise to a third: He will hold that an unchangeable object and a succession of objects are similarly related to our minds—they are conceived by similar mental actions. He will regard this as the most important factor in his account of how the Duration Fiction is produced.

The idea of time or duration is a general idea, in Hume's view (*T* 1.2.3.6; SBN 35); we form the Duration Fiction by applying this general idea to an unchangeable object. As we shall see in more detail in section 3, Hume holds that a general idea represents what it does only in partnership with a general term—in this case, the term 'duration.' So, when he says that we apply the general idea of duration to an unchangeable object, he must think that we apply the general term 'duration' to that object, as well. The paragraph that introduces the Duration Fiction suggests this:

[S]ince the idea of duration cannot be deriv'd from . . . an [unchangeable] object, it can never in any propriety or exactness be apply'd to it, *nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration.* (*T* 1.2.3.11; SBN 37; my italics)

Applying the idea of duration to an unchangeable object goes hand in hand with *saying* that the object has duration—that is, with applying the general term 'duration' to it.

²¹Hume does not say how these mental actions resemble. Later in the *Treatise*, however, he accounts for another analogous fiction (involving the idea of identity) as follows: "That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable [hence, identical] object, and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, *are almost the same to the feeling*" (*T* 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–54; my italics). So it seems likely that, in Hume's view, the action of conceiving an invisible, intangible distance and that of conceiving a real extension *feel* similar; in other words, they are similar in respect of what philosophers today would call their *phenomenal properties* or *qualia*. Thanks to Hsueh Qu for pressing me to clarify this.

In fact, Hume's remarks about language-use suggest that typical cases of the Duration Fiction will involve applying only the term 'duration' to an unchangeable object, without troubling ourselves to form an idea together with this general term:

I believe every one, who examines the situation of his mind in reasoning, will agree with me, that we do not annex distinct and compleat ideas to every term we make use of, and that in talking of *government, church, negotiation, conquest*, we seldom spread out in our minds all the simple ideas, of which these complex ones are compos'd. (*T* 1.1.7.14; SBN 23; italics in original)

'[T]is usual for men to use words for ideas, and to talk instead of thinking in their reasonings. We use words for ideas, because they are commonly so closely connected, that the mind easily mistakes them. (*T* 1.2.5.21; SBN 61–62)

To summarize the findings of this section: The Duration Fiction results from certain resemblances between an unchangeable object and a succession of objects. These resemblances induce the imagination to form a fiction that consists, at least partly, in applying the general term 'duration' to objects of both sorts. So, Hume holds that we apply the general term 'duration' to both unchangeable objects and successions of objects because they resemble each other—most importantly, because they are similarly related to our minds. This is one of the commitments involved in the conflict that I shall present in section 4.

3. ABSTRACT OR GENERAL TERMS AND IDEAS

The second commitment is that, if a resemblance among many particular things induces us to apply the same general term to each of them, then this term's extension includes all and only the particular things that share in this resemblance. In order to see that Hume has this commitment, we must examine his account of *abstract* or *general* terms and ideas. These are terms and ideas by which we represent all the particular things of some sort (*T* 1.1.7.2; SBN 17–18). For example, 'dog' is an abstract or general term: it represents all the particular dogs. The idea that is "annex'd" to this term, in the mind of its speaker or hearer, is an abstract or general idea that, likewise, represents all the particular dogs.

Following Berkeley, Hume claims that an abstract or general idea is intrinsically just like an idea that represents only one particular thing (*T* 1.1.7.1, 1.1.7.6; SBN 17, 20). For example, a general idea of all the dogs might be intrinsically just like a mental image that represents only one particular dog, Fido. Hume must explain how this general idea can represent all the dogs, if not by differing intrinsically from the idea that represents only Fido. His explanation has two components: first, a partnership between the idea and a linguistic term (in this case, 'dog'); second, a resemblance among the many particular things that the idea and term represent.

In Hume's view, there is a reciprocal dependence between the representational properties of a general term and those of a general idea. A general term is meaningful only if an idea is annexed to it (*T* Abs 7; SBN 648–49).²² And which sort of things a general idea represents is determined by the term to which it is annexed (*T* 1.1.7.9; SBN 21–22). For example, if a mental image of Fido were

²²For further evidence that Hume held this view, see Ott, "Hume on Meaning," 235.

annexed to the term ‘dog,’ then it would represent all and only dogs; but if the very same mental image, or one intrinsically just like it, were instead annexed to the term ‘mammal,’ it would have a broader signification, representing not just dogs, but all other mammals as well. If not for its association with a general term, there could be no fact of the matter as to which of these sorts of things the idea represented. So there cannot be general representation without both a general term and idea working in partnership.²³

How is this partnership established? To answer this question, Hume introduces the second component of his account: a resemblance among the many particular things that the term and idea represent. He writes,

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquir’d a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions. But as the same word is suppos’d to have been frequently apply’d to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, which is immediately present to the mind; the word not being able to revive the idea of all these individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allow’d so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquir’d by surveying them. (*T* 1.1.7.7; SBN 20)

Some critics charge that this is circular.²⁴ They say that we cannot “[find] a resemblance among several objects” unless we already have a general idea that

²³Waxman argues that, for Hume, general representation need not involve a partnership between a term and an idea (*Hume’s Theory of Consciousness*, 105–11). Instead, an image of Fido represents all and only dogs just in case it is habitually associated, in its owner’s mind, with all and only her other ideas of particular dogs; and this habitual association can be present in the mind of a non-linguistic creature. I sympathize with Waxman’s motivation (*Hume’s Theory of Consciousness*, 107–10), but his interpretation is untenable. It is crucial to Hume’s view that a person can associate a mental image of Fido with all and only her other ideas of dogs on some occasions, but associate “the very same idea”—that is, a mental image qualitatively just like this one—with all and only her other ideas of mammals on other occasions (*T* 1.1.7.9; SBN 21–22). If we could not do this, then we could not mentally represent the difference between species and genus. Associative relations are a kind of causal relation: to say that an image of Fido is associated with ideas of other particular dogs, on a given occasion, is to say (among other things) that it causes or tends to cause ideas of other particular dogs, on that occasion. But Hume holds that, in general, two qualitatively identical causes must have qualitatively identical effects; this follows from his definitions of ‘a cause’ (*T* 1.3.14.31; SBN 170). How, then, can Hume hold that some images of Fido cause only dog-ideas, while other, qualitatively identical, images of Fido cause ideas of mammals that are not dogs? The answer is that, in his view, an image of Fido alone causes neither dog- nor mammal-ideas. The cause of these ideas is a *pair of things*: an image of Fido and a general term (in the minds of English speakers, either ‘dog’ or ‘mammal’). So general representation requires a partnership between a term and an idea: in order for numerically different, but qualitatively identical, mental images to have different general representational properties, they must be partnered with different general terms.

²⁴For a classic statement of this charge, see Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume*, 260; for a recent one, see Allison, *Custom and Reason*, 33. Jerry Fodor objects to this part of Hume’s account for a different reason: “If there’s a problem about how [the idea] RED can apply to many different shades of color, why isn’t there the *same* problem about how [the term] ‘red’ can?” (*Hume Variations*, 44n21). In response, Hume should say that we have neither an idea nor a term that *represents* all of the dogs (or shades of red) at this stage in the process of acquiring a general representation. When he says that “we apply the same name to all of them,” he means only that we utter the same term in the presence of each of the objects. (Of course, at this stage we cannot mentally represent the fact that we are uttering the same term in the presence of each of the objects; we could only do this by using a general idea of the linguistic type to which the various token words that we utter belong.)

represents each of those objects. For example, we cannot form the thought that all dogs resemble each other, unless we already have a general idea that represents all dogs. So Hume explains how we acquire an idea that represents all dogs only on the assumption that we already have such an idea—hence, does not explain it at all. But we can interpret Hume more charitably. When he says that we “[find] a resemblance among several objects,” we should interpret him as saying that there is a resemblance among these objects, and that this resemblance affects us: it induces us to “apply the same name to” (or, utter the same term in the presence of) each of them. We need not mentally represent the fact that this process is taking place in us; that is, we need not mentally represent that some objects resemble each other, and that this resemblance is affecting us. So Hume is not, circularly, assuming that we already have a general idea that represents all of the objects in question.²⁵

Once we thus acquire the “custom” of applying the same term to each of many resembling objects, hearing the term “revives,” or calls to mind, two things: first, it revives the idea of one of the particular things to which we customarily apply the term; second, it revives the custom of associating the term with ideas of the many other particular things that resemble this one. Following Don Garrett, let us call these ideas—the idea that a general term revives, together with the many other ideas associated with the term—the “revival set” of that general term.²⁶ Because the idea before the mind is associated, via the term, with ideas of many other objects (that is, with the other members of the term’s revival set) it serves as a general representation of all things of a certain sort.

So Hume’s account of abstract or general ideas and terms implies that, if a resemblance among many particular things induces us to apply a single general term to each of those things, then this term acquires a revival set that includes an idea of each of those things.

A general term or idea has an *extension*, comprising those particular things such that, when the term or idea is applied to them, the result is a true proposition.²⁷ For example, the term ‘dog’ has an extension, comprising all the particular dogs; since Fido belongs to this extension, applying the term ‘dog’ to him results in the true proposition that he is a dog. In Hume’s view, the role of a general term’s revival set is to present us with members of its extension, in order to guide our use of it:

[A]fter the mind has produc’d an individual idea, upon which we reason, the attendant custom, reviv’d by the general or abstract term, readily suggests any other individual, if by chance we form any reasoning, that agrees not with it. Thus shou’d we mention the word, *triangle*, and form the idea of a particular equilateral one to correspond to it, and shou’d we afterwards assert, *that the three angles of a triangle are*

²⁵For this response on Hume’s behalf, see Garrett, “Hume’s Theory of Ideas,” 46; and Baxter, “Space and Time,” 134–35.

²⁶Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 24. A revival set is not an abstract entity, hence is not a ‘set’ in the set-theoretic sense of that term; as Garrett notes elsewhere, Hume includes no abstract entities in his ontology (“Hume’s Naturalistic Theory of Representation,” 302). To talk of a general term’s revival set is to talk of a plurality of concrete particulars: namely, the many particular ideas that are associated with the term.

²⁷Hume does not state a view of what propositions are, but he seems to hold that some propositions are composed of ideas placed in a certain order (*T* 3.3.4.13; SBN 613; see also *T* 1.3.7.5n20; SBN 96–97) and that others are composed of words (*T* 3.1.1.19n69; SBN 464). Hence, it seems likely that he shares Locke’s view that there are both mental and verbal propositions (Locke, *Essay*, Book IV, Chapter v, Section 2).

equal to each other, the other individuals of a scalenum and isosceles, which we overlook'd at first, immediately crowd in upon us, and make us perceive the falshood of this proposition, tho' it be true with relation to that idea, which we had form'd. (*T* 1.1.7.8; SBN 21; italics in original)

This suggests that, if a general term's revival set includes an idea of a particular thing, then this particular thing belongs to the extension of that term. In order to "perceive the falshood" of the proposition "*that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other*," we must perceive that the extension of 'triangle' includes scalene and isosceles triangles as well as equilateral ones. And if we are to perceive this by perceiving that there are ideas of such triangles in the revival set of 'triangle,' the ideas in this revival set must represent particulars belonging to this term's extension.

How can Hume guarantee that each idea in a term's revival set represents a member of its extension? Perhaps he holds that a particular thing belongs to the extension of a term just in case it is represented by an idea in that term's revival set. But this view has unattractive consequences. Suppose that we are encountering Fido, a member of an unusual-looking dog breed, for the first time. Because Fido does not obviously share the resemblance that induced us to form our revival set for 'dog,' we do not immediately include an idea of Fido in that revival set. On the view we are now considering, it follows that Fido is not in the extension of 'dog.' But this is the wrong result: Fido is a dog, so he is in that extension. Hume should therefore prefer the view that a particular thing belongs to a term's extension just in case it actually shares the resemblance that induced us to form our revival set for that term—whether or not we have yet discovered that it shares this resemblance. This view gives the right result about Fido: since he actually shares the resemblance that induced us to form our revival set for the term 'dog,' this view correctly implies that he is in its extension. For the time being, then, let us provisionally accept that this is how Hume conceives a general term's extension; in section 5, I shall consider how he might refine this conception.

To summarize the findings of this section: For Hume, if a resemblance among many particular things induces us to apply the same general term to each of those things, then this term acquires a revival set that includes an idea of each of those things. And a particular thing belongs to the extension of a general term just in case it shares in the resemblance that induced us to form that term's revival set. It follows that, if a resemblance among many particular things induces us to apply the same general term to each of them, then this term's extension includes all and only the particular things that share in this resemblance.

4. A CONFLICT AMONG HUME'S COMMITMENTS

In section 1, we saw that the Duration Fiction is improper and inexact, in Hume's view. By this, he seemed to mean either that this fiction is false, or that we cannot obtain sufficient evidence for believing it. I shall now argue that, whichever of these claims he meant to make, there is a conflict among his commitments.

In sections 2 and 3, we saw that Hume has the following commitments. First, that we apply the term 'duration' to both unchangeable objects and successions of objects because they resemble each other—most importantly, because they are

similarly related to our minds (section 2). Second, that if a resemblance among many particular things induces us to apply the same general term to each of them, then this term's extension includes all and only the particular things that share in this resemblance (section 3). Taken together, these commitments imply that the extension of the term 'duration' includes both unchangeable objects and successions of objects. Therefore, applying this general term to an unchangeable object results in a true proposition—it is true that an unchangeable object has duration. The Duration Fiction represents an unchangeable object's having duration. Therefore, this fiction is true, not false. If Hume means to claim that it is false, this conflicts with his other commitments.²⁸

Perhaps Hume does not mean to claim that the Duration Fiction is false. When he says that it is improper and inexact, perhaps he means that we cannot obtain sufficient evidence for believing it. But this retreat will not help him. If I have interpreted him correctly, then the Duration Fiction has the following truth-condition: an unchangeable object has duration just in case it shares the resemblance that induced us to form our revival set for 'duration'—that is, just in case it is conceived by the appropriate sort of mental action. Given that this is its truth-condition, we can have sufficient evidence that the Duration Fiction is true if we can have sufficient evidence that we conceive an unchangeable object by the appropriate sort of mental action—the sort by which we conceive both unchangeable objects and successions. And Hume thinks that we can have conclusive evidence for beliefs about every aspect of our mental actions. He writes,

[E]very impression, external and internal . . . appear, all of them, in their true colours, as impressions or perceptions. And indeed, if we consider the matter aright, 'tis scarce possible it shou'd be otherwise, nor is it conceivable that our senses shou'd be more capable of deceiving us in the situation and relations, than in the nature of our impressions. For since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear. Every thing that enters the mind, being in *reality* a perception, 'tis impossible any thing shou'd to *feeling* appear different. This were to suppose, that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken. (*T* I.4.2.7; *SBN* 190; italics in original)

According to the view that Hume takes here, each mental action is "known . . . by consciousness" to its subject. It must therefore "appear in every particular what [it is]": in other words, every feature of a mental action is apparent to its subject. And it must "be what [it] appear[s]": in other words, every apparent feature of a mental action is a real feature of it. Hume invokes these principles in order to justify a claim that extends not just to the intrinsic features of mental entities (their "nature"), but to their relational features as well: "nor is it conceivable that our senses shou'd be more capable of deceiving us in the situation and relations, than in the nature of our impressions." So, he must think that the relations in which

²⁸According to Costa, Hume thinks that forming the Duration Fiction is akin to including ideas of both cats and dogs in one's revival set for the term 'dog,' and that this is defective because "when performing cognitive tasks in which questions about the properties of dogs arose," one would "often [give] answers that were true of cats and not of dogs" ("Strict Identity," 5). For example, when asked whether some dogs meow, one would answer affirmatively. The problem with this suggestion is that, if a resemblance among cats and dogs induces one to include ideas of cats in one's revival set for the term 'dog,' the sentence 'Some dogs meow' will express a truth. So one will not be disposed to give *false* answers to cognitive tasks, after all.

a person's mental actions stand, as well as the intrinsic properties that they have, are "known to" that person "by consciousness." Consider the mental actions by which we conceive an unchangeable object and a succession of changeable objects. Because Hume holds that these mental actions are "known to us by consciousness," he must hold that their relations are apparent to us. So, in Hume's view, it must be apparent to us that we conceive an unchangeable object by a mental action like that by which we conceive a succession of changeable objects—"consciousness" affords us conclusive evidence that this resemblance obtains. So we can have sufficient evidence that the Duration Fiction is true. If Hume means to claim that we cannot, then—again—this conflicts with his other commitments.²⁹

So far, I have focused on the Duration Fiction. What of the numerous other fictions that Hume claims to identify in his discussions of space and time, material objects, and the human mind—does the conflict that I have presented extend to his views about these fictions, as well? Consider another fiction: that of a unitary aggregate. In Hume's view, we cannot derive the idea of unity or simplicity³⁰ from an aggregate, or "multiplicity," of things: each individual member of an aggregate affords us the idea of unity, but the aggregate itself affords us the idea of "number," or plurality, which is contrary to that of unity (*T* 1.4.2.26–28; SBN 200). Nonetheless, we apply the general term or idea of unity to certain aggregates,³¹ like twenty men (*T* 1.2.2.3; SBN 30–31) or the sensible qualities that compose an ordinary object, like a peach or melon (*T* 1.4.3.5; SBN 221). We do this because the mental action of conceiving such an aggregate resembles that of conceiving a genuinely unitary, simple object:

Suppose an object perfectly simple and indivisible to be presented, along with another object, whose *co-existent* parts are connected together by a strong relation, 'tis evident the actions of the mind, in considering these two objects, are not very different. The imagination conceives the simple object at once, with facility, by a single effort of thought, without change or variation. The connexion of parts in the compound object has almost the same effect, and so unites the object within itself, that the fancy feels not the transition in passing from one part to another. Hence the colour, taste, figure, solidity, and other qualities, combin'd in a peach or melon, are conceiv'd to form *one thing*; and that on account of their close relation, which makes them affect the thought in the same manner, as if perfectly uncompounded. (*T* 1.4.3.5; SBN 221; italics in original)

As we should expect, Hume holds that the aggregates to which we apply this general term or idea have only a "fictitious" unity or simplicity, just as an unchangeable object has only a "fictitious duration":

[T]wenty men *may be consider'd as an unite*. The whole globe of the earth, nay the whole universe *may be consider'd as an unite*. That term of unity is merely a fictitious

²⁹Could Hume avoid conflict if he held that the Duration Fiction is unintelligible, because we cannot form an idea that represents an unchangeable object's enduring? (Green and Fogelin think he holds this view; see n. 16.) Not if my arguments in sections 2 and 3 are correct. Taken together, these arguments imply that we have a general idea of duration that represents or applies to both unchangeable objects and successions of changeable objects.

³⁰Hume treats *unity*, or oneness, and *simplicity*, or the absence of composition by parts, as equivalent (*T* 1.4.3.2, 1.4.3.5; SBN 219, 221). For discussion, see Baxter, *Hume's Difficulty*, 6, 17, 22–29; see also Garrett, "Difficult Times," 437.

³¹Hume writes, "That term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination" (*T* 1.2.2.3; SBN 30), indicating that this fiction involves applying the general term 'unity' to an aggregate of things.

denomination, which the mind may apply to any quantity of objects it collects together.
(*T* 1.2.2.3; SBN 30; italics in original)

And, as we should also expect, Hume thinks that this fiction is somehow defective. He writes that, although “we commonly regard” an aggregate of sensible qualities “as ONE thing,” the aggregate’s “acknowledg’d composition is evidently contrary to this suppos’d *simplicity*” (*T* 1.4.3.2; SBN 219; italics in original). Hence, he calls the fiction of a unitary aggregate an “evident contradiction” (*T* 1.4.3.2; SBN 219). Similarly, he writes later that the human mind is an aggregate—“a bundle or collection of different perceptions”—and infers that “[t]here is properly no *simplicity* in it . . . whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity” (*T* 1.4.6.4; SBN 252–53; italics in original).

Hume’s account of this fiction is analogous to that of the Duration Fiction. In each case, he says that a resemblance among certain objects—their being conceived by similar mental actions—induces us to apply the same general representation (of duration, or of unity/simplicity) to each of them. And, in each case, he says that this is an improper use of the general representation. So a version of my argument above could be constructed to show that there is a conflict among Hume’s views of the fiction of a unitary aggregate. Another fiction analogous to these two is “fictitious identity” (*T* 1.4.6.15; SBN 259).³²

Robert McRae has observed that Hume claims to find two sorts of fictions among our “vulgar” and philosophical beliefs.³³ Some fictions consist in, or are produced by, applying an idea or term improperly and inexactly. The fictions that we have considered so far are of this sort; let us call them *application fictions*. Other fictions are “*means* by which we endeavour to conceal” application fictions (*T* 1.4.3.2; SBN 219; italics in original). For example, after we apply the idea of unity or simplicity to an aggregate of sensible qualities (an application fiction), we try to “conceal” this fiction from ourselves by “feign[ing]”—that is, producing the fiction of—a unitary substance, underlying these sensible qualities (*T* 1.4.3.5; SBN 221); let us call this a *concealment fiction*. Arguably, other examples of concealment fictions include the “vulgar” fiction of our impressions’ continued existence, at times when no mind perceives them (*T* 1.4.2.36–40; SBN 205–8); the “philosophical” fiction of a double existence of perceptions and bodies (*T* 1.4.2.52; SBN 215); and the fiction of a simple, identical mental substance underlying one’s various perceptions (*T* 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–55).³⁴ We form each of these fictions to conceal an improper and inexact application of the idea of identity.³⁵

³²For discussion, see section 5, below.

³³McRae, “Hume’s Theory of Time,” 24.

³⁴Edward Craig writes that “two vitally different sorts of belief are covered by Hume’s concept of a fiction”: beliefs about perceptions, such as the belief in the continued existence of impressions at times when nobody perceives them; and beliefs about non-perceptions, such as the “unintelligible” fiction of a substance underlying sensible qualities (Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man*, 125–27). By my lights, this is a distinction within the category of concealment fictions.

³⁵The fiction of continued existence is produced to conceal a conflict between the interruptions in our sensory impressions and our ascription of identity to them (*T* 1.4.2.36–40, 42; SBN 205–8, 208–9). The fiction of double existence is produced to conceal a further conflict arising from this ascription of identity (*T* 1.4.2.52; SBN 215–16). The fiction of a mental substance is produced to conceal a conflict between the variability and interruptedness of our successive perceptions and our ascription of identity to them (*T* 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–55).

Does the conflict that I have presented extend to these concealment fictions? It may seem not to do so. Unlike an application fiction, a concealment fiction does not involve applying a general term or idea. Instead, it consists in forming a representation of a particular thing; for example, a representation of a particular substance underlying some sensible qualities.³⁶ However, forming a concealment fiction must involve using some general representations. To see this, suppose that Jane observes a particular aggregate of sensible qualities in a fruit bowl, and applies her general idea of unity to this aggregate, representing it as *one peach*. In order to conceal this application fiction, it is not enough that she “feign[s]” a particular, unitary substance; she must also represent this substance in relation to each of the sensible qualities that she observes—she must represent each of these qualities as an *accident* of the one, substantial peach that she has feigned. Hence, Hume writes that “[t]he notion of *accidents* is an unavoidable consequence of this method of thinking with regard to substances” (*T* 1.4.3.7; SBN 222; italics in original). Because Jane must be able to apply this “notion of *accidents*” to each of the many sensible qualities that she observes, Hume must mean that those who form the fiction of a substance cannot avoid using a *general* representation of accidents. A version of my argument can now be constructed: We apply the general term ‘accident’ and its accompanying general idea to diverse collections of sensible qualities, because they are similarly related to our minds. For example, when observing a peach and a melon, we say both that the orangeness, fuzziness, roundness, and softness that we observe are accidents, and that the yellowness, smoothness, roundness and hardness that we observe are accidents: the former, accidents of a peach; the latter, accidents of a melon. If Hume adds that it is false that any qualities are accidents of a substance, then these claims will conflict with his account of general terms and ideas. If, on the other hand, he adds that we cannot have sufficient evidence that any qualities are accidents of a substance, then these claims will conflict with his account of general terms and ideas, taken together with his views about our evidence concerning our own mental actions. So, again, his views conflict either way.

5. HOW MIGHT HUME RESPOND?

In section 3, I argued that Hume has this commitment: if a resemblance among many particular things induces us to apply the same general term to each of them, then this term’s extension includes all and only the particular things that share in this resemblance. I drew my evidence for this from the early *Treatise* chapter “Of abstract ideas” (*T* 1.1.7). In a later chapter (*T* 1.4.6), Hume discusses an application fiction involving identity. This discussion suggests that he would respond to my argument in section 4 by refining his account of general terms and ideas.

Hume holds that we can derive the idea of identity³⁷ only from an object that is both unchangeable (or “invariable”) and uninterrupted (*T* 1.4.2.29–30; SBN

³⁶Some commentators will deny that we can represent a particular substance; see n. 3. They might say that a concealment fiction consists in using a singular term (like ‘that peach’) as though it represented a particular thing.

³⁷For Hume, identity can only be identity through time (*T* 1.4.2.26–30; SBN 200–201).

200–201). But we habitually apply this idea and the general term ‘identity’³⁸ to successions of diverse or interrupted objects (*T* 1.4.6.5–19; SBN 253–61). For example, we “ascribe” or “attribute” identity to a puny sapling that exists at one time and a mighty tree that exists at a later time, even though “there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same” (*T* 1.4.6.12; SBN 257). We do so because we conceive these successions and invariable, uninterrupted objects by similar mental actions:

That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable object, and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, are almost the same to the feeling, nor is there much more effort of thought requir’d in the latter case than in the former. . . . This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects. (*T* 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–54)

In Hume’s view, these successions of related objects have “only a fictitious” identity (*T* 1.4.6.15; SBN 259); when we ascribe identity to them, we do so “in an improper sense” (*T* 1.4.6.7; SBN 255).³⁹

From what we have seen so far, Hume’s account of this application fiction involving identity is parallel to those we have already examined, involving duration and unity. But it also introduces a distinction that has no counterpart in those other accounts: Hume writes that an invariable, uninterrupted object has a “perfect identity” (*T* 1.4.6.8; SBN 255), while a succession of variable or interrupted objects has only an “imperfect identity” (*T* 1.4.6.9; SBN 256). He tells us that this imperfect identity is “constitute[d]” by the distinctive sort of mental action—“the uninterrupted progress of the thought”—that leads us to apply the term ‘identity’ habitually to successions as well as to invariable, uninterrupted objects (*T* 1.4.6.9; SBN 256).

Here, Hume seems to be refining his earlier account of general terms and ideas. He now seems to accept that we include both ideas of variable or interrupted successions and ideas of invariable, uninterrupted objects in our revival set for ‘identity,’ because they are conceived by similar actions. But he wants to distinguish two subsets⁴⁰ within this revival set: a *core*, including only ideas of invariable, uninterrupted objects; and a *periphery*, including ideas of variable or interrupted successions.⁴¹ He can then say that the *perfect extension* of the term ‘identity’ includes all and only objects that share the resemblance that induced us to form the core of this term’s revival set. In light of this refinement to his theory of general terms and ideas, Hume has two ways of explaining why it is improper to apply the term ‘identity’ to objects outside of its perfect extension. First, he might say that this

³⁸Hume writes, “[W]hen we attribute identity, in an improper sense, to variable or interrupted objects, our mistake is not confin’d to the expression” (*T* 1.4.6.7; SBN 255). This shows that the fiction involves using the general term (or “expression”) ‘identity.’

³⁹See also Hume’s claim that “there is **properly** no . . . *identity* in [the mind] in different [times]; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that . . . *identity*” (*T* 1.4.6.4; SBN 253; italics in original, my boldface).

⁴⁰Like a revival set itself, these subsets should be understood as pluralities of concrete particulars, not as abstract entities; see n. 26.

⁴¹Thanks to Eric Hiddleston and an anonymous referee for suggesting this way of framing Hume’s likely response and the terminology with which I express it.

term only has one extension—its perfect extension—and that we therefore speak falsely, and so improperly, when we apply it to the successions of objects represented by the peripheral members of our revival set. Alternatively, he might say that the term ‘identity’ has two extensions: its perfect extension and also an *imperfect extension*, including all and only objects that share the resemblance that induced us to form the whole of this term’s revival set, including both core and periphery. It will then be true that a variable or interrupted succession has identity, in one sense of ‘identity,’ because it does belong to this term’s imperfect extension. But Hume might say that using a single term to express both of these extensions is liable to confuse us and lead us into error, and that this is why our use of the term ‘identity’ is improper.

Suppose that Hume generalized this strategy, distinguishing cores and peripheries within the revival sets of ‘duration’ and ‘unity’ or ‘simplicity,’ as well as that of ‘identity.’ He could then avoid the conflict that I have presented. But he must be able to explain what is special about a revival set’s core, in virtue of which it determines an extension (perhaps the only extension) of the general term and idea to which it belongs. Otherwise, he will have given us no reason to think that a general term or idea has an extension other than its *imperfect* one. Hume presumably thinks that he can answer this demand, but he does not tell us how he would do so. In the rest of this section, I will survey several answers he might give,⁴² and argue that none of them affords him a satisfactory response to my argument in section 4.

Consider again our revival set for the term ‘duration.’ Because we are prone to form the Duration Fiction, it includes both ideas of successions and ideas of unchangeable objects. Hume will want to say that only the former ideas make up its core, while the latter make up its periphery. What might he say is special about the former ideas—our ideas of successions—that differentiates them from the periphery and allows them to determine an extension of the term ‘duration’ other than its imperfect one?

First, Hume might say that our ideas of successions represent objects that *genuinely* resemble each other, but our ideas of successions and our ideas of unchangeable objects, taken together, do not: these ideas represent objects whose only common feature is being conceived by similar mental actions, and this is only an ersatz resemblance, not a genuine one.⁴³ Hume’s discussion of “philosophical relations” (which I take to be his term for relations generally)⁴⁴ suggests that he would endorse this answer. He divides relations into two classes: those that “depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together,” and those that “may be chang’d without any change in the ideas” (*T* 1.3.1.1; SBN 69). He explains this division as follows:

⁴²The answers that I shall consider are based in part on other commentators’ discussions of general representations and fictions. My criticisms of these answers are not directed at these commentators, who neither consider the argument that I have presented in section 4 nor intend to help Hume answer it. I do not mean to question the philosophical or textual merit of their work, independently of its usefulness in answering the demand that I have made to Hume: that he explain what is special about a revival set’s core.

⁴³Costa considers a version of this answer (“Strict Identity,” 6–7).

⁴⁴Here, I follow Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes*, 250–51.

'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. On the contrary, the relations of *contiguity* and *distance* betwixt two objects may be chang'd merely by an alteration of their place, without any change on the objects themselves or on their ideas; and the place depends on a hundred different accidents, which cannot be foreseen by the mind. (*T* 1.3.1.1; SBN 69; italics in original)

Here, Hume seems to be making two distinctions and asserting that they coincide. First, he is making an epistemological distinction: some relations, like the equality between a triangle's three angles and two right angles, can be known to obtain just by considering our ideas of the relata; others, like distance, cannot be known to obtain in this way ("cannot be foreseen by the mind"). Second, he is making a metaphysical distinction: some relations, like the equality, must obtain thanks to the intrinsic properties of their relata; others, like distance, need not (hence, these other relations "may be chang'd . . . without any change on the objects themselves"). Hume includes *resemblance* in the first class of relations (*T* 1.3.1.2; SBN 70): that is, he classifies it as a relation that can be known to obtain just by considering our ideas of its relata, and as a relation that must obtain thanks to the intrinsic properties of its relata.⁴⁵ So he is likely to say that there is no genuine resemblance among all the objects to which we habitually apply the term 'duration.' True, all these objects are conceived by similar mental actions. But this supposed resemblance is not a relation that must obtain thanks to the intrinsic properties of unchangeable objects and successions: had our minds been constructed differently, we would not have conceived all of these objects by similar actions. In contrast, Hume will say that there is a genuine resemblance among successions of changeable objects: each of them is, intrinsically, composed of several objects in succession. This—he might then say—is what is special about the core of our revival set for 'duration': its members represent objects that have a genuine resemblance, not just an ersatz one.

Unfortunately, there are two reasons why Hume cannot accept this otherwise attractive answer to my demand. First, he holds that any related things must resemble each other (*T* 1.1.5.3; SBN 14); since he explains the Duration Fiction by citing "three relations" between unchangeable objects and successions of changeable objects (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65), he must accept that there is a genuine resemblance between these objects. Second, he holds that an unchangeable object and a succession have some of the same causal powers—they have "the same effect upon every quality"—and that this contributes to explaining the Duration Fiction (*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65). According to his fifth rule for judging causes and effects, "where several different objects produce the same effect, it must be by means of some quality, which we discover to be common amongst them" (*T* 1.3.15.7; SBN 174).⁴⁶ Taken together, these views imply that unchangeable objects and successions

⁴⁵These claims about resemblance seem incorrect. Two men may resemble each other, in respect of being fathers. But we cannot know that the two men resemble in this respect by considering our ideas of them alone; and this resemblance is not necessitated by the two men's intrinsic properties. Hume might respond by distinguishing the relation of *internal* or *intrinsic resemblance* from that of *external* or *extrinsic resemblance* and saying that only intrinsic resemblances belong to the first class of philosophical relations. He could then say that a revival set's core is special because its members represent objects that have an intrinsic resemblance. But he cannot consistently accept this claim; see n. 47.

⁴⁶Thanks to Kenneth Winkler for showing me Rule 5's importance here.

have a common quality.⁴⁷ Again, Hume must accept that there is a genuine resemblance—not just an ersatz one—shared by all of the objects whose ideas we include in our revival set for ‘duration,’ be they successions or unchangeable objects. So he cannot say that the ideas in a revival set’s core are distinctive in virtue of representing objects that share a genuine resemblance.

Recent work by Donald C. Ainslie suggests a second way of explaining what is special about a revival set’s core. As we have seen, Hume holds that general representation requires language: there could be no fact of the matter what sort of things a general idea represented, were it not partnered with a general term.⁴⁸ In *Treatise* Book 3, he observes that languages arise from interpersonal conventions (*T* 3.2.2.10; SBN 490). Ainslie infers that, for Hume, the extension of a token general term or idea is not determined solely by the revival set that a particular speaker or hearer associates with it; interpersonal conventions governing the use of terms or ideas of that type also play a role in determining the extension of that token:

I think that Hume’s insistence on the role of language in our general thinking is an attempt to introduce a public and normative dimension into our conceptual activity. . . . When thinking of [a particular] red tomato, one person might be disposed to think of limes, pine trees, mold, grass, Granny Smith apples and so on, while another might be disposed to think of cherries, stop signs, cardinals, and Red Delicious apples. Human nature is such that most people tend to be influenced by their associative propensities similarly, but there is no guarantee that there are not deviant cases. The general term, ‘red,’ however has been enmeshed in a series of conventions so that the latter revival set is considered appropriate and the former inappropriate. (Ainslie, “Adequate Ideas,” 50)

Suppose that a particular, deviant speaker habitually applies the term ‘red’ to both ripe tomatoes and Granny Smith apples, due to some resemblance among these objects, and forms a revival set that includes ideas of both. If Ainslie is right, Hume would not infer that a token of ‘red’ uttered by this speaker has both ripe tomatoes and Granny Smith apples in its extension. The English-speaking community has adopted a convention whereby a different resemblance—one that holds among ripe tomatoes, cardinals, and so forth—should guide its members in using the term ‘red.’ Hume can say that this convention differentiates the core of any particular speaker’s revival set from its periphery: the core is made up of ideas whose objects share the conventionally sanctioned resemblance. For example, the core of the deviant speaker’s revival set for ‘red’ includes only her ideas of ripe tomatoes, because only they represent objects that share in the “appropriate,” conventionally sanctioned resemblance governing our use of the term ‘red.’ Her ideas of Granny Smith apples do not represent objects that share in this sanctioned resemblance, so these ideas belong to the periphery of her revival set. Analogously, Hume might say that only successions of changeable objects share in the conventionally sanctioned resemblance governing our use of the term ‘duration,’ and that this is what differentiates the core of our revival set for ‘duration’ from the periphery.

⁴⁷I take it that, by a “quality . . . common amongst them,” Hume understands a shared intrinsic property. So he cannot say that a revival set’s core is special because its members represent objects that have an intrinsic resemblance; see n. 45. Because they have similar causal powers, there must be an intrinsic resemblance between successions and unchangeable objects; but the latter are represented by ideas in the periphery of our revival set for ‘duration.’

⁴⁸See section 3 and n. 23.

But how does a resemblance come to be selected as the “appropriate,” conventionally sanctioned one? Hume has two options here. He might say that the appropriate resemblance is the one that guides the majority of the linguistic community in their use of a general term. Alternatively, he might say that the appropriate resemblance is the one that guides a select minority of the linguistic community—for example, a group of experts, to whom the community’s other members defer. Unfortunately, neither of these options will help Hume answer my demand concerning the core of our revival set for ‘duration.’ In his view, the Duration Fiction is pervasive throughout our linguistic community. It arises in the minds of both experts and laypeople: it is “the common opinion of philosophers as well as of the vulgar” that “the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects, which are perfectly unchangeable” (*T* I.1.2.3.11; SBN 37). So, whether Hume appeals to the majority’s usage or to an expert minority’s usage, the resemblance that causes the fiction will be the conventionally sanctioned one for the term ‘duration.’ If Hume tries to explain what is special about a revival set’s core by appealing to conventionally sanctioned resemblances, then both our ideas of successions and our ideas of unchangeable objects will count as belonging to the core of our revival set for ‘duration.’ Whatever its other merits, then, Ainslie’s account of general representation does not give Hume a satisfactory response to my argument in section 4. It draws the distinction between core and periphery in the wrong place for this purpose.

Third and finally, recent work by Saul Traiger suggests another way of explaining what is special about a revival set’s core. In his view, Humean fictions are analogous to *legal fictions*—artifices by which a law is applied to cases that would not otherwise have fallen under it. As Traiger explains,

In the law, there are often situations where strict application of the legal code would fail to apply to situations where a legal decision is needed. For example, where the law codifies responsibilities and rights of parents and their offspring, the law may fail to apply to adopted children, since they are not, strictly speaking, the offspring of their adoptive parents. One remedy is to amend the law to cover such cases. Another is to employ a legal fiction, an agreement to ignore the difference between a natural offspring and an adopted one, thereby agreeing to treat the adopted child as if it were a natural child for the purposes of the law. With the introduction of a legal fiction, the law can change while the written code remains unchanged. (Traiger, “Experience and Testimony,” 52)

Traiger shows that Hume was familiar with legal fictions and that he sometimes discusses them. Suppose, then, that Hume regards the general term ‘duration’ and its accompanying general idea as analogous to a law extended by a legal fiction: strictly speaking, only successions of changeable objects have duration; but after we employ a fiction—an agreement to ignore the difference between a succession of changeable objects and an unchangeable object for certain purposes—we can say that both have duration. Hume can then say that our ideas of successions are special because they belong to our revival set for the term ‘duration’ prior to, and independently of, our fiction or agreement; this explains why these ideas form a core that determines this term’s perfect extension.

Whatever the other merits of Traiger’s interpretation, there are problems with this attempt to explain what is special about a revival set’s core. First, Hume’s

account of how the imagination produces the Duration Fiction does not clearly involve anything analogous to an *agreement* to apply the term ‘duration’ to unchangeable objects. Second, this account does not suggest that we adopt the Duration Fiction for any *purposes*: it mentions neither an intention or desire that would be satisfied by forming the Duration Fiction, nor a beneficial result that would, or could be expected to, ensue from our forming it. But let us set these points aside and grant that the Duration Fiction is analogous to a legal fiction in this weak sense, at least: in each individual thinker’s mental life, there is a definite event of ceasing to apply the term ‘duration’ just to successions and starting to apply it to unchangeable objects as well—whether or not this event is analogous to an agreement, and whether or not it takes place for any purpose.⁴⁹ Can Hume answer my demand by saying that our ideas of successions belong to our revival set for the term ‘duration’ prior to, and independently of, this event of extending the term’s application; and that this explains why they form a core that determines this term’s perfect extension?

Unfortunately, he cannot. Suppose that, upon first learning the word ‘dog,’ a child applies this word only to objects with sensible qualities like those of dogs that are familiar to her, such as Labradors and collies. At this stage in her linguistic development, her revival set for ‘dog’ excludes ideas of unusual-looking dogs, like Chihuahuas and hairless Chinese crested dogs. Suppose further that, in this child’s mental life, there is a definite event of learning that the term ‘dog’ stands for a biological kind, not an observational one—and hence of ceasing to apply this word only to familiar-looking dogs and starting to apply it to unusual-looking members of this biological kind as well. Hume would not wish to say that the ideas of Labradors and collies in this child’s revival set for ‘dog’ continue to form its core, and to determine its perfect extension, after this change in her use of the term. So it is not generally true that, when our use of a term changes at a definite moment, our earlier use of the term is in any way privileged. And so, even if there is a definite event of starting to apply the term ‘duration’ to unchangeable objects—an event that is weakly analogous to a legal fiction—this does not explain why the ideas that we first included in its revival set continue to determine its perfect extension, after this event takes place.

I do not claim that this brief survey exhausts all the ways in which Hume might try to explain what is special about a revival set’s core, in virtue of which it determines a term’s perfect extension. I have focused on the three ways that seem to me to have the strongest foundations in Hume’s texts. Other ways of explaining what is special about a revival set’s core will take us farther from the texts, and it will become increasingly difficult to justify the claim that they are ways of developing or amending Hume’s views, rather than alternatives to his views.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Of course, there need not be such an event. Perhaps we gradually transition from reserving the term ‘duration’ for successions, to applying it to both successions and unchangeable objects. Hume’s account of how the imagination produces the Duration Fiction does not tell us which of these he had in mind.

⁵⁰Since this paper was accepted for publication, Don Garrett has argued that the meaning of a Humean general idea has several elements. As well as a revival set, which corresponds to the idea’s

So far, I have assumed that the Duration Fiction is defective, in Hume's view. In light of the problems we have seen, should he consider abandoning this view? In the next section, I consider this option and argue that he cannot consistently adopt it, either.

6. CAN HUME ACCEPT THAT
FICTIONS ARE NOT DEFECTIVE?

Suppose that Hume responded to my argument in section 4 by giving up his claim that the Duration Fiction is defective (meaning either that it is false or that we cannot have sufficient evidence for believing it). He must then say that this fiction is a true representation, because the term 'duration' can truthfully be applied to any object that is conceived by the appropriate sort of mental action, and unchangeable objects are so conceived. And he must say that we can have sufficient evidence for believing this fiction, because our mental actions are "known to us by consciousness" (*T* 1.4.2.7; SBN 190), and so we can have sufficient evidence that unchangeable objects are conceived by the appropriate sort of mental action. It might help to compare the view of duration that Hume would then hold with Locke's view of secondary qualities. For Locke, secondary qualities are "nothing in the Objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their *primary Qualities*."⁵¹ Power "*includes in it some kind of relation, (a relation to Action or Change). . . . [S]ensible Qualities, as Colours and Smells, etc. what are they but the Powers of different Bodies, in relation to our Perception, etc.*"⁵² For Locke, then, having a secondary quality, like yellowness, involves standing in a certain relation to our faculty of sensation; so the term 'yellow,' and its accompanying abstract idea, can truthfully be applied to all and only those things that stand in this relation. Similarly, Hume would say that the term 'duration' and its accompanying idea can truthfully be applied to all and only those things that are related to our minds in a suitable way—that is, those things we conceive by a certain sort of mental action.

Hume may even have intended to take this view.⁵³ Other Early Modern philosophers seem to have used cognates of the terms 'fiction' and 'fictitious' to express views like it. Hobbes's discussion of space, in his *De Corpore*, provides an example.⁵⁴ Hobbes claims that the "place" (*locus*) of a body is "feigned"

extension, these elements include a set of "attributed relations," which form the idea's "inferential role" (*Hume*, 57). Garrett suggests that, when a fiction leads us to include deviant ideas in a revival set—for example, when the Duration Fiction leads us to include ideas of unchangeable objects in our revival set for the term 'duration'—a mismatch develops between revival set and inferential role (*Hume*, 57, 98–99). This affords Hume a fourth way of explaining what is special about a revival set's core: he can say that the core is made up of all and only those ideas that are well matched to the general idea's inferential role, while the periphery is made up of mismatched ones. Unfortunately, discussing this proposal is beyond this paper's scope.

⁵¹Locke, *Essay*, II.viii.10; italics in original.

⁵²Locke, *Essay*, II.xxi.3; italics in original.

⁵³The commentator who comes closest to suggesting that he did is Miren Boehm. She writes, of the Duration Fiction's spatial analog, that "[Hume's] references to *imaginary* distance and *fictitious* distance [involve] in each case a discussion of how perceivers or their organs react to the perceived" (Boehm, "Filling the Gaps in Hume's Vacuums," 85; italics in original).

⁵⁴As Paul Russell notes, "there are significant affinities between" Hume's theory of spatial representation and Hobbes's (Russell, *The Riddle of Hume's Treatise*, 110); this encourages the thought that Hume's views on spatial (and, by analogy, temporal) fictions are akin to Hobbes's view of "feigned" location.

(*ficta*);⁵⁵ ‘ficta’ is a form of ‘fingo,’ the Latin verb from which the English terms ‘fiction’ and ‘feign’ derive. By this claim, Hobbes cannot mean to deny that a body is located, or to denigrate our evidence for believing that bodies are located.⁵⁶ Instead, he seems to mean that being located involves a relation between a body and our minds: he explains that the location of a body is an “imaginary space, which is coincident with the magnitude of [the] body,”⁵⁷ and that an imaginary space “depend[s] upon our cogitation”—it is “an effect of our imagination.”⁵⁸ In Hobbes’s usage, then, saying that a body has “feigned” location means that it is related to our minds in a certain way: namely, that it produces a certain effect in our imagination. This is similar to the view that we are now supposing Hume might take, according to which an object has duration (or perhaps just “fictitious duration” [*T* 1.2.5.29; SBN 65]) if and only if we conceive it by a certain sort of mental action.⁵⁹

If Hume were to take (or did take) this Hobbesian view of the Duration Fiction, then he would have to take similar views of application fictions in general, including the fiction of a unitary aggregate and the various fictions of identity through change or interruption that he discusses. But he could not do this, consistently with at least one important discussion of fiction: “Of scepticism with regard to the senses” (*T* 1.4.2). Here, Hume aims to explain how “the unthinking and unphilosophical part of mankind”—that is, “all of us, at one time or other” (*T* 1.4.2.36; SBN 205)—come to believe in the unperceived existence of certain sensory impressions. The crucial part of this account is as follows. As we have seen, an idea of identity can only be derived from an uninterrupted object (*T* 1.4.2.29–30; SBN 200–201). But the sensory impressions that we have before and after an interruption in our experience of an ordinary object typically resemble each other closely. For example, suppose that I close my eyes for a moment, and momentarily cease to have any sensory impressions of the furniture around me.⁶⁰ The furniture-impressions that

⁵⁵Hobbes, EW 1:105.

⁵⁶In Hobbes’s view, motion consists in changing location (EW 1:70; see also EW 1:109). Changing location presupposes having location. So, if Hobbes meant to deny that bodies are located, then he would have to deny that bodies move; and, if he meant to deny that we have evidence that bodies are located, then he would have to deny that we have evidence that bodies move. But Hobbes could not accept either of these claims: he argues for a mechanistic metaphysics, according to which all causation is by moving bodies (EW 1:124–26), and he would not accept that this metaphysics is false or that we lack evidence for it.

⁵⁷Hobbes, EW 1:105.

⁵⁸Hobbes, EW 1:105.

⁵⁹Similarly, in the Appendix to *Ethics* Part I, Spinoza claims that “all final causes are nothing but human fictions [*figmenta*]” (Spinoza, *Works*, 442). He may seem to be saying that all attributions of final causes to natural things are false. But he later writes, of the kind of “order” that a believer in final causes claims to find in nature: “[A]s if order were anything in Nature more than a relation to our imagination” (*Works*, 444). For Spinoza, then, it seems that ‘*figmentum*’—another cognate of ‘fiction’—can be used to denote a relation of things to our imagination. However, I do not claim that this is always, or even often, what Spinoza means to denote when he uses a cognate of ‘fiction.’ The *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* discusses “fictitious ideas” (*fictae*) at some length (*Works*, 23–30), but does not suggest that a fictitious idea need represent, or otherwise involve, a relation of an object to the imagination.

⁶⁰Some commentators deny that impressions are representational, in Hume’s view, and might therefore resist my suggestion that I have “impressions of the furniture”; for example, see Cohon and Owen, “Hume on Representation, Reason and Motivation,” 54–55. In place of this phrase, these commentators can substitute “impressions of the sort that I typically believe to be furniture” or “impressions of the sort that are items of furniture” (for more idealist-leaning interpreters of Hume). This substitution will not affect my argument.

I have upon opening my eyes closely resemble those that I had before closing them. Drawing upon his discussion of the Duration Fiction and its spatial analog, Hume argues that the mental action of conceiving these interrupted impressions resembles that of conceiving an uninterrupted object; and that, because of this resemblance, we “ascribe an *identity*” to our interrupted impressions, as well as to our uninterrupted ones (*T* 1.4.2.3 1–35; SBN 201–5; italics in original).

According to the Hobbesian view of application fictions that we are now considering, the general term ‘identity,’ and its accompanying general idea, can truthfully be applied to an object if and only if the action of conceiving it resembles the action of conceiving an uninterrupted object. If Hume were to accept this view, then he would have to say that this term and idea can truthfully be applied to a pair of interrupted impressions, like my furniture-impressions; in other words, he would have to say that my belief in the identity of those impressions is true. But this is not what he says. Instead, he calls our practice of attributing identity to interrupted impressions an “error and deception with regard to identity” (*T* 1.4.2.3 2; SBN 202). He suggests that our ascription of identity to our interrupted impressions implies that those impressions continue to exist, whilst no longer perceived (*T* 1.4.2.3 6–40; SBN 205–8). And he argues that the latter proposition is false: no sensory impression continues to exist at times when it is not perceived (*T* 1.4.2.4 4–45; SBN 210–11). It follows that, in his view, it is false that our interrupted impressions have identity, even after we have formed a habit of applying the term ‘identity’ to them.

If Hume were to give up his claim that application fictions are defective, in favor of the Hobbesian view that we have been considering, he would therefore have to make significant changes to his account of belief in the external world. He could no longer accept his argument against the “vulgar” form of this belief, which represents certain sensory impressions as having a “continu’d and distinct existence”—an argument that he presents in both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* (*EHU* 12.8–9; SBN 151–52). And he could no longer claim to have identified “contradictions and difficulties in every system concerning external objects” (*T* 1.4.5.1, App 10; SBN 232, 633).⁶¹

I conclude that Hume cannot respond to my argument in section 4 by giving up his claim that fictions are defective, consistently with other important views that he holds.

7. CONCLUSION

I have argued that, however we interpret it, Hume’s claim that the fictions we believe are defective—improper, inexact, or not strict—conflicts with other commitments that he has (sections 1–4). I have considered several ways in which he might respond to this argument, either by finessing the other commitments (section 5), or by giving up the claim (section 6). I have argued that he cannot consistently give any of these responses.

⁶¹For evidence that Hume regards the “vulgar” belief in the continued and distinct existence of sensory impressions as one of these “systems,” see *T* 1.4.2.46; SBN 211, where he calls it the “vulgar system.”

This leaves us, Hume's readers, with an unsolved puzzle: how best to develop or amend his views, so as to avoid the conflict that I have presented? Like Hume, when he found a different inconsistency among his commitments,⁶² I hope that "[o]thers . . . or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions" (*T* App 21; SBN 636).⁶³

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⁶²"[U]pon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (*T* App 10; SBN 633). Of course, there is notoriously little agreement as to what inconsistency Hume means to express in the *Treatise's* Appendix. But we can be confident that it is not the conflict that I claim to have identified in this paper. Hume thinks that the inconsistency he expresses in the Appendix concerns only the *Treatise* section, "Of personal identity"; for this point, see Ainslie, "Hume's Reflections," 574–77. In contrast, the conflict that I claim to have identified concerns his views on fictions in several other sections of the *Treatise*; had Hume identified this conflict, he could not have thought that it concerned only "Of personal identity."

⁶³This paper is the latest in a succession of changeable writings that I have produced on the topic of fictions in Hume. For comments on previous members of this succession, which have only a fictitious identity to the present one, many thanks to Ralf Bader, David James Barnett, Ned Block, David Chalmers, Shamik Dasgupta, Kit Fine, Laura Franklin-Hall, Eric Hiddleston, David Landy, Béatrice Longuenesse, Colin Marshall, Tim Maudlin, John Morrison, Lewis Powell, Katrina Przyjemski, Hsueh Qu, John Richardson, Karl Schafer, Jonathan Simon, Nick Stang, James Stazicker, Sean Stidd, Saul Traiger, Peter Unger, David Velleman, Kenneth Winkler, and several anonymous referees. Thanks also to audiences at several meetings of the NYU Thesis Preparation Seminar; two meetings of the Washington Square Circle; the NYC Workshop in Early Modern Philosophy held at Fordham University in February, 2011; the Pacific APA meeting held in San Diego in April, 2011; and the 38th International Hume Society Conference held at Edinburgh University in July 2011. Special thanks to Donald Ainslie, for comments at the Pacific APA and much helpful feedback on other occasions; to Miren Boehm, for comments at the Hume Society Conference; and to Don Garrett, for introducing me to the topic of fictions in Hume, and for his unstintingly generous feedback, advice, and encouragement in the years since. Research on this paper was supported by an ACLS/Mellon Dissertation Completion Fellowship; I thank the ACLS and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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