A Precis of *Consciousness, Time, and Scepticism in Hume's Thought*
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Lorne Falkenstein
lfalkens@uwo.ca

1

Consciousness, Time, and Scepticism in Hume's Thought (hereafter short-titled *Hume's Remedy*) begins with a problem Hume ran into, that of how we can make ourselves wise. Hume wrote that

> A wise [person], therefore, proportions [their] belief to the evidence.

But he also wrote that

> belief is the necessary result of placing the mind in such circumstances. It is an operation of the soul, when we are so situated, as unavoidable as to feel the passion of love, when we receive benefits; or hatred, when we meet with injuries. All these operations are a species of natural instincts, which no reasoning or process of the thought and understanding is able, either to produce, or to prevent. (EHU 5.8, see also T 1.4.1.7–8 and Appendix 2)

There is no conflict between these two passages. They jointly entail that if the wise proportion belief to the evidence, it is because something about their circumstances determines them to do so. Not everyone is considered "wise," so these circumstances must be special to them. That is where the problem lies.

Not everyone is wise. Even wise people are not *always* wise. There are factors that prevent our beliefs from being determined just by the evidence.

Hume was sensitive to these facts. He did more than almost anyone else at the time to catalogue extra-empirical influences on belief and explain how and why they determine our belief. Realizing these things, he was determined by his circumstances to consider whether there is something that might more effectively determine us to proportion our beliefs to the evidence. He maintained that being impressed by the force of sceptical arguments is one such determinant. The topics taken up in *Hume's Remedy* arise in connection with his effort to advance and apply this remedy.

2

The remedial sceptical argument to which Hume devoted the most attention denies that we have good reason for accepting that we experience an external world. This argument invokes a distinction between what is external and what is internal, what exists independently and what is dependent. But internal to what? Dependent on what? Not, for Hume, a mind. (The Hume of the *Treatise* famously claimed to be unable to understand what minds are beyond bundles of perceptions.)

Hume's Remedy argues that "external" and "independent" refer to what lies beyond the visual and tactile sensory fields. In developing this position, *Hume's Remedy* studies how Hume understood the relation between conscious states (for Hume, sense impressions, ideas, and passions), time, and space.

3

In Hume's day, thought on the relation between conscious states and time was monolithic. Everyone, including Hume, accepted that perceptual consciousness is confined to what exists at the present moment. What existed earlier can only be known by memory. Early modern accounts of memory were uniformly disastrous,[1] except for Thomas Reid's, which is invested in the contentious tenet that we can conceive non-existent objects. (For Reid, to remember is not to now be conscious of an image or representation of what was past, but to directly conceive that past and no longer existent object.)

Hume's Remedy argues that Hume and Locke could not account for the experience of succession without tacitly abandoning their accounts of memory and instead relying on the notion that consciousness extends some way into the very recent past (that we are somehow able to now "take notice" of what has just passed, as if we could see it still standing there where it was (is?) off in the past, just as we see what is off to the left standing off to the left).

4

Early modern thought on the relation between conscious states and space was more divided. In Hume's day, it had coalesced around two rival positions.

Thinkers such as Descartes, Malebranche, and Reid maintained that the mind is an unextended spiritual substance. None of its sensory states (pain, pleasure, taste, smell, colour,[2] etc.) could be located in space.

Descartes and Malebranche maintained that our beliefs that pains occur in personal body parts and that colours are extended over a visual field are juvenile preconceptions or natural but mistaken judgments.

Reid maintained that we are innately so constituted that, under appropriate stimulus conditions, we perform acts of conceiving spatially extended objects. The acts are nothing like the objects conceived. In particular, they are not located in space (unlike the objects they are "of"). He further maintained that none of our sensory states is anything like any of the qualities of objects. No one, not even the "vulgar" thinks that any of the qualities of their sensory states exists anywhere in space.

> Idiosyncratically, Reid also maintained that no one, not even painters, interior decorators, florists, cosmeticians, clothiers, etc. ever uses "colour" or the colour terms of any language to refer the qualities of their visual sensations. These words are only ever used to refer to something invisible (the microstructure of visible objects).
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> I flag this idiosyncratic position for two reasons. First, it provided Reid with a ready response to anyone who would cite "colour" as a counterexample to the thesis that no private sensory states are disposed in space. For Reid the objection cannot even be

[1] Some examples are Hobbes, *Elements of Law* 1.3.7, "Seeing then the conception, which when it was first produced by sense, was clear …; and when it cometh again is obscure, we find missing somewhat that we expected; by which we judge it past and decayed" (what tells us that there was any less decayed conception?), and Locke, *Essay* 2.10.2 "the mind has a power in many cases to revive perceptions, which it has once had, with this additional perception annexed to them, that it has had them before" (what gives us the idea that it existed "before?" is this an innate idea?).
[2] Except for Reid (an 18th century anomaly) all references to colour are to qualities that are inconceivable to those with no sense of vision.

formulated as anyone who observes that “colours” are disposed in space could only mean that parts of external objects are disposed in space. No private sensory state is named by any colour term.

Second, Reid maintained that our visual sensations are so uninteresting to us that they have no names in any language.

He was wrong about that. They do in at least one language: Hume’s language. Hume wrote that “A blind man can form no notion of colours.” (EHU 2.7, see also T 1.1.1.8–9). For Hume, someone with no sense of vision cannot know what it is like to see a “coloured” object, where terms like “colour,” “red,” “scarlet,” and “shade of blue” refer to what it is like to have visual experiences, not to what causes them.

Hume further wrote that “[M]y senses convey to me only the impressions of colour’d points dispos’d in a certain manner.… [T]he idea of extension is nothing but a copy of these colour’d points, and of the manner of their appearance.” (T 1.2.3.4) For Hume, vision displays “coloured” points as being disposed in space to compose an extended surface, where “colour” refers to what it is like to be in a visual sensory state.

Hume’s Remedy uses Hume’s language to say, in reply to Reid on Hume’s behalf, that nothing is more immediately evident to the sighted than that “colours” (that is, sensory states consisting of points of quality that are inconceivable to anyone blind from birth) are disposed in space over an extended visual field.

Descartes, Malebranche, and Reid all appealed at some point to innate or original principles to account for what leads us to assign qualities (be they qualities of our private sensory states or qualities of external objects) to locations in space. In contrast, proponents of the second major position on the relation between conscious states and space, the “empirist”[3] position of theorists such as Berkeley, Robert Smith, and Condillac, maintained that we learn to associate purely qualitative and temporal features of visual and tactile sensations with the locations occupied by objects in ambient space. They agreed, however, that the mind is an unextended spiritual substance and that none of its sensory states are, as they were more inclined to put it, “immediately perceived” to be located in space. This common fundamental metaphysical commitment posed a common problem, which I will call the “localization” problem.

For everyone except Reid, we are disposed, however mistakenly or “mediately,” to perceive coloured and tactile points as disposed at particular locations on visual and tactile fields. Even for Reid, we are disposed to conceive our different visual and tactile sensations to be caused by different external objects or different body parts, differently located in an ambient space. But, for everyone except Reid, the same colour or tactile sensation could be judged or perceived to be anywhere on the sensory field without change or loss of its identity. And even for Reid, the same visual or tactile sensation could be caused by an object placed anywhere within the range of vision or by a distemper occurring in any body part. What, then, determines us to assign colours and tactile sensations (or, for Reid, their causes) to any one location on an extended sensory field as opposed to any other? Since any coloured or tactile point could occur anywhere on the sensory field, there can be nothing about the sensations themselves that guides us how to do this, nothing that serves as a basis for association or a key for an innate law to make assignments one way rather than another.

[3] “Empirism” is used in preference to “empiricism” to designate a theory of the psychogenesis of perceptual experience, as opposed to a theory of the foundations of knowledge.

> This problem is nowhere as clearly implicated as by Hume's "separability principle," the tenet that things are different if and only if distinguish*able* and distinguish*able* if and only if separ*able*. I stress the derivational form of the last two terms. Hume did not use the indicative, "distinguished" and "separate." Modestly, this is because he never meant to claim that what is different can be thought or imagined all by itself, apart from anything else. He only meant to claim that what is different can be thought or imagined in surroundings that are different from its given surroundings. In other words, it can be moved somewhere else without alteration or loss of its identity.

This is not the place to go into how nativist and empirist theorists attempted to resolve the localization problem. Suffice to say they were not very successful. It is very difficult to derive disposition in space just from things that are originally nowhere in space. (For instance, Berkeley's accounts of visual depth perception, perception of objective magnitude, single vision, erect vision, and eye/hand coordination all take localization on a 2D visual field or localization on a tactile field for granted.) It is most relevant here that, at the time, there was another, more radical solution to the localization problem.

Hume, and later Kant, maintained that visual and tactile sensations are immediately experienced as disposed in space. For Hume, space is a "manner" in which simple visual and tactile sensations are disposed in complex visual and tactile impressions. For Kant, it is a form of intuition. Too bad if that does not fit with the supposition that no mental state could be disposed in space. (Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves allowed him to be sanguine about that implication. Hume was happy to embrace it as evidence that the question of the materiality or immateriality of the soul does not admit of resolution [T 1.4.5].)

Their way of dealing with spatial localization has implications for time, but neither Hume nor Kant cared to go that way.

5

Hume's Remedy argues that Hume's position on localization entails that he cannot have been a psychological atomist. He did not think that simple sensory experiences exist, except in rare and mostly pathological circumstances, where consciousness is artificially confined.

For Hume, a coloured point only exists as a coloured point insofar as it is hemmed in on all sides by points of contrasting colour (or of no colour). It is different and distinguish*able* and separ*able* from those surrounding points in the sense that it can be moved to other surroundings (and those surroundings found to surround other points). But it is also always localized somewhere in those surroundings. Otherwise, it would appear as the sort of abstract idea Hume thought cannot exist: a colour or extension without bounds or place.

Originally given sensory experience is a complex whole (a complex impression). It is divisible into simple parts, but it is rarely ever divided into those parts. It extends over a field of spatially disposed coloured points embedded in a surrounding field of spatially disposed tactile points (the latter being identified with our own bodies). Hume should have, but best only implicitly thought of this visuo-tactile field as embedded in a temporal field, comprised of current and earlier visual and tactile field states extending some little way into the very recent past (far enough to constitute an experience of succession). These fields are not just aggregates of sensible quality points. They are sensible quality points disposed in a certain fashion. The manner of their disposition is a further feature of complex sense impressions. It is present in

complex impressions as they originally exist prior to any operations of the imagination or understanding. It is not reducible to or derivable from anything found in the disposed sensible quality points. To exist at all, it must exist as a feature of an originally given whole. Visual and tactile sensory experience (consciousness) takes up space, and perceptual consciousness is also temporally extended into the very recent past.

6

"Consciousness" was not a technical term for Hume, and he rarely used it. But he did write things like "we receive only the impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form" (T 1.1.7.18); "my senses convey to me only the impressions of colour'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner" (T 1.2.3.4); and "'tis not our body we perceive, when we regard our limbs and members, but certain impressions, which enter by the senses" (T 1.4.2.9). Such remarks call for interpretation, and any interpretation could aptly be called a Humean theory of consciousness.

The passages just cited, and others like them, speak of a subject, an impression, and something the impression is "of." But for Hume these three things do not come apart. Hume had some difficulty understanding what it means for a subject to "receive" or "perceive" impressions, or for impressions to be "conveyed" to it by its senses. He rejected the notion that it involves the inherence of the impression in a substance on the ground that we can attach no clear meaning to the terms "substance" and "inhesion" (T 1.4.5.2–6). He also found it unintelligible that impressions could be either modifications or acts of a soul (T 1.4.5.25 and 27). The one notion he did not find unintelligible (and the only one he proposed to investigate in this context) is that of what he called "local conjunction" of an impression with a soul or subject (T 1.4.5.8).

What sort of "subject" could an impression be "locally conjoined" with?

Hume's claims concerning the "reception" or "perception" of impressions "conveyed by the senses" are most plausibly read as referring to the local conjunction of impressions with a sensory field. His references to "local conjunction" are correspondingly best read as references to the occurrence of impressions at locations on the sensory field or the constitution of the sensory field by spatially and temporally disposed impressions.

As the "subject" disappears into a field of disposed impressions, so, for Hume, any distinction between impressions considered as "vehicles" for some "content" collapses. He wrote that "We have no idea of any quality in an object, which does not agree to, and may not represent a quality in an impression" (T 1.4.5.21). For him, an impression "of" a red square just is a red, square impression, consisting of multiple red points disposed in the configuration of a square, and itself disposed somewhere on a field of other such points, where "red" and all other colours are qualities inconceivable to those with no sense of vision, and where the impression is an originally complex whole.

> According to a classic A "Jamesian" objection, taking a collection of conscious subjects, each of whom is conscious of a single red point, standing them in a square configuration, and jamming them as closely together as you can, could never produce the consciousness of a red square.
>
> But for Hume, there are not many conscious subjects (many simple impressions) to start with. A simple impression first appears on a sensory field, where it appears from the start in spatial relations to other points on the field. Once we have described a field where phenomenal colour qualia are spatially related in a certain way, we have described "what

> it is like" to be visually conscious, and it is unreasonable to look for anything more. There is no subject of consciousness, and the "of" in "conscious of" does not introduce a distinction between vehicle and content or "subject" and "object" of consciousness; it introduces a description of what it is like to be that conscious state.

The real question is not how simple consciousnesses combine to form a complex consciousness, but how an originally given whole comes to be parsed into portions, some of which are identified with external objects.

7

This brings up a second difficulty with Hume's arguments for external world scepticism: his cavalier approach to the distinction between sense impressions or "images presented by the senses" and publicly observable objects. In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume began his investigations into the workings of the mind by talking about sense impressions, instanced by private sensory states like pleasures and pains, tastes, and phenomenal colour qualia. But whenever the subject turned to relations, most notably causal relations, he dropped references to impressions in favour of references to publicly observable objects, like billiard balls, bread, wine, fire logs, and swords. It takes some work to account for how a field of spatially and temporally disposed coloured or tactile points takes on the character of a private, image of an apple or a table. It then takes more work to identify such images, which are temporary and perspective-dependent, with multi-faceted, enduring, mobile objects that change in regular ways over time.

Hume never did that work. His famous account of causal inference appeals to regularity in the succession of species of external objects, simply assuming that these objects are as directly perceived as impressions of pain or anger. And, when talking about external world scepticism he claimed that ordinary people take their very sense impressions or (in the *Enquiry*) the "images presented by the senses" to be external objects ignoring that ordinary people take things like hats, shoes, and stones to be external objects and that the one cannot be simply identified with the other.[4] In making both of these moves, he opened himself to a Kantian objection, classically presented by H.H. Price and Lewis White Beck. Hume, they charged, took the achievement of recognizing objects for granted, neglecting the essential role of a priori concepts in this operation.

Hume's Remedy argues that Hume had the resources to address the Kantian objection. But he never thought to draw on them. One of Hume's principal mistakes was his attempt to account for all empirically guided belief by appeal to causal inference. One of his principal oversights was his neglect of association by contiguity and resemblance. *Hume's Remedy* draws on association by contiguity and resemblance to formulate Humean positions on how we come to orient ourselves in space, parse the sensory fields into "images presented by the senses," and ascribe identity over time to these images, even across gaps in observation.

With these resources, Hume could have provided an account of how impressions and "images presented by the senses" are mediately perceived as publicly observable objects, without needing to appeal to a priori concepts.

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[4] Devoting pages and pages to explaining what induces us to suppose that impressions continue to exist unperceived is not the same thing as explaining how what appears on the sensory fields comes to be identified with publicly observable objects.

But this answer comes at a cost. It calls for a more robust account of temporal experience and spatial representation than Hume provided.

8

The Hume of the *Treatise* maintained that nothing unchangeable "can ever be said to have duration." This doctrine frustrated his ability to offer an adequate account of identity over time. He was also unable to abide by it. One can't coherently write that "an object, which exists for any time in its full perfection without any effect, is not the sole cause of that effect, but requires to be assisted by some other principle, which may forward its influence and operation." (T 1.3.15.10, "Rules by which to judge of causes and effects") while maintaining that no unchanging object lasts for more than a moment. A rule directing us to search for hidden activators could have no purpose under such a supposition.

Hume's Remedy argues that Hume's non-endurance doctrine is not justified by any of the reasons Hume offered in its support, or by reasons commentators have so far been able to come up with on his behalf. (And that this is all to the good because Hume's failure in this regard preserves the integrity of his views on more important matters.)

9

The Hume of the *Treatise* also maintained that "we can form no idea of a vacuum, or space, where there is nothing visible or tangible." This doctrine frustrated his ability to recognize abiding visual and tactile field boundaries and their role in spatial orientation. One can't coherently write that "the eye at all times sees an equal number of physical points" (T 1.3.9.11). while maintaining that "when two bodies present themselves, where there was formerly an entire darkness, the only change that is discoverable is in the appearance of these two objects" and that the surrounding "darkness or negation of light … causes no perception different from what a blind [person] receives" and "afford[s] us no idea of extension" (T 1.2.5.11).

To justify his position, Hume attempted to do for the experience of vacuum what Berkeley had done for the experience of visual depth. As Berkeley had maintained that we do not immediately perceive visual depth, but only learn to infer tangible distances from qualitative cues like eye muscle sensations, which we come to read or "mediately perceive" as signs of outward distance, so Hume attempted to show that we do not immediately perceive empty spaces between lone visible bodies, but only learn to infer "filled intervals" from qualitative cues like eye and hand muscle sensations. Because we think the filled intervals are there, but do not see anything between the lone bodies we "falsely imagine" that the lone bodies are separated by an invisible distance, and so falsely imagine we are perceiving a vacuum.

It is one thing to offer an associationist account of visual depth perception. It is much more difficult to offer an associationist account of localization on the 2D visual field. It is similarly difficult to offer an associationist account of the "false imagining" of vacuum. If all that exists, visually, are two lone luminous bodies, the notion of moving the eye from one to the other makes no sense. We think of moving the eyes as involving bringing first the one object, and then the other to the centre of the field of view. But in the lone body case, there is no field of view with a centre. The two lone bodies are supposed to be all that appear, and they appear, according to Hume, without any space being perceived around or between them. Under such conditions, many eye motions would have no observable effect. Some would cause one or both of the lone bodies to disappear or reappear. But there would be many that have that effect. Associating the appearance of the lone bodies with any particular eye motion had while

experiencing a filled interval appears to be impossible. Plausibly, Hume was so deeply committed to the view that whatever we see always appears at a location on an extended visual field that he failed to notice he had it and was using it.

Hume's Remedy argues that this is the case with all the distance cues Hume invoked. His associationist account only works by relying on what it proposes to deny.

When considering Hume's account of memory, Reid objected that Hume was only able to account for the kind of memory he thought we have (a more vivacious idea) by tacitly appealing to the kind of memory he denied we have. The same applies to Hume's account of what leads us to falsely imagine that we perceive empty space.

10

In attempting to make his case against the perception of a vacuum, Hume maintained that it is possible for two coloured points to appear without appearing as disposed in space. In doing so he allowed that we can have colour sensations that are nowhere in space. Reid never picked up on this, but it is an admission that, were it valid, would have legitimated Reid's view that colour sensations are nowhere in space. (Hume's contrary claim that colour sensations are in space is based on appeal to introspection and his position on vacuum denies that introspective evidence.) It would also have lent credence to the radical empirist position that we learn to associate originally aspatial colour sensations with locations in space. It is fortunate that Hume's case against the perception of a vacuum collapses. It is also instructive that his failure was due to the fact that it is so difficult to conceive lone bodies without conceiving them to be disposed in space that even when Hume thought he had succeeded at doing so, he had not.

Hume's positions on endurance without change and the conceivability of a vacuum are a betrayal of his account of time and space as manners of disposition. That account marks the first articulation of an "intuitionist" account of temporal experience and spatial representation. It recognizes temporal and spatial fields as originally perceived, irreducibly real entities. It is more plausible than its nativist and empirist rivals and was later recognized in his own way by Kant. Having gone so far as to recognize the spatiality of visual and tactile sensory states, Hume turned his back on it, treating space and time as if they had no reality, neglecting the importance of association by contiguity in space and contiguity in space over time, denying that it is possible to perceive or conceive a vacuum, and maintaining that temporal passage cannot be experienced in the absence of change. *Hume's Remedy* argues that he was wrong to say what he did about endurance and vacuum and shows how he could have developed robust accounts of identity and objectivity had he corrected the oversights and errors that led him to neglect the further development of one of his best ideas.

11

What about Hume's aim to offer a sceptical remedy to the wisdom problem? Do the corrections that *Hume's Remedy* offers to his accounts of space, time, and objectivity still leave room for that project?

The Hume of the *Treatise* attempted to show that the belief in "body" (publicly observable objects) is based on "trivial qualities of the fancy conducted by false suppositions." That attempt was abandoned in the *Enquiry*, in favour of considering the belief in body to arise from a natural instinct or prepossession. Yet the *Enquiry* is far more explicit than the *Treatise* about pursuing the remedial project. (The author of the *Treatise* might even be accused of having wanted to

prosecute that project on the sly.) Whatever we might think about why Hume abandoned the disparaging account of the causes of the belief in body he had offered in the *Treatise*, he cannot have thought his remedial project required it. *Hume's Remedy* argues that the *Treatise's* attempts to impugn acquaintance with external objects based on the senses, on causal reasoning, on what he called "coherence," and on what he called "constancy" fail on all counts. But the *Enquiry* shows he would not have been upset by this result. His external world scepticism and his remedial project do not rest on these attempts. They rest on a pair of "veil of perception" arguments originally presented in the *Treatise* (1.4.2.44–8 and 1.4.4.6–15) and retained in the *Enquiry* (12.9–14 and 15). The remedial project does not disproof of the belief in body. It only requires that there be proof against proof.

The "proper" sceptical arguments retained in *Enquiry* 12 conclude that the sensory fields are not windows on an external world but monitors, on which images are projected. These images exist only on the monitor and only for as long as they are projected there. They only display spatial and temporal relations between private, phenomenal "qualia."

Hume's Remedy argues that Hume could have identified equally respectable (empirically guided) factors inducing us to vividly imagine and so believe that sensory images also exist behind occluding images and beyond the boundaries of the fields. These factors are continually activated by ongoing experience, so we cannot escape continuing to believe that we encounter an external world.

But wherever our conclusions fail to receive that continual reinforcement, the memory of the sceptical arguments suffices to weaken them. Those of us who have been impressed by sceptical arguments end up being determined to proportion their beliefs just to the evidence, that is, to be wise.