

A Precise of *Consciousness, Time, and Scepticism in Hume's Thought*  
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*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, Hume 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.

(The remedy works by making us lastingly unsure of ourselves. Only those beliefs that are constantly reconfirmed by sensory experience can overcome this diffidence. We cannot resist believing that throwing a piece of dry wood onto a fire augments the flame, that running into sharp, heavy, hard bodies is injurious, and that immersion in water is suffocating. The beliefs induced by these matters of everyday life and common experience are ones that we cannot doubt for long without being snapped back into line by renewed customary experience. Other beliefs, being determined by factors that are more inconstant and conflicting in their operations, are not like that. Those who have been impressed by the force of sceptical arguments acquire a diffidence about the effectiveness of their cognitive powers that counterbalances or at least greatly reduces the influence of the more “trivial” and “inconstant” factors determining belief. They are also made more hesitant in all their beliefs and more ready to abandon them as new evidence comes in. They confine their beliefs to matters of common life and practice while being sceptical of speculative inquiries, at least when not well founded in replicated experimental evidence. Sceptical arguments are a universal tool for developing such a disposition, one that only empirically guided beliefs are suited to overcome.)

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) and our experience of space and time.

In Hume's day, thought on this topic had coalesced around two rival positions.

Thinkers such as Descartes, Malebranche, and Thomas Reid maintained that the mind is an unextended spiritual substance. None of its sensory states (pain, pleasure, taste, smell, colour,<sup>1</sup> 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. 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, gardeners, 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).

Thinkers such as Berkeley, Robert Smith, and Condillac agreed that the mind is an unextended spiritual substance and that none of its sensory states are, as they might have been more inclined to put it, "immediately perceived" to be located in space. But they 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. (The main point of contention between the two schools can without too much distortion be identified as one over nativism and empirism in the theory of perception, where "empirism" is distinguished from "empiricism" as a psychological rather than an epistemological theory).

Berkeley only partially executed the empirist project of accounting for all spatial localization as an effect of association of aspatial information. He never managed to account for localization on the two dimensional visual field. Smith and Condillac attempted more but with questionable success.

Hume, and later Kant, rejected both of these accounts and adopted a novel and very different approach. They 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. Kant's distinction between appearances and things in themselves allowed him to be sanguine about the implication that mental states are disposed in space. Hume was happy to embrace it as

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<sup>1</sup> Except for Reid (an 18<sup>th</sup> century anomaly) all references to colour are to qualities inconceivable to those blind since birth.

evidence that the question of the materiality or immateriality of the soul does not admit of resolution (T 1.4.5).

Early modern thought about temporal experience was not so divergent. 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, except for Reid's, which is invested in the contentious tenet that we can conceive non-existent objects.

*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).

*Hume's Remedy* argues for a second major conclusion on this topic. Hume was not a psychological atomist. He did not think that simple sensory experiences exist, except in rare and mostly pathological circumstances, where consciousness is artificially confined. Originally given perceptual consciousness is complex. It is divisible into simple parts, but it is rarely ever divided into those parts. Sensory consciousness typically extends over an entire field of spatially disposed coloured points and an entire field of spatially disposed tactile points, the latter being normally thought of as our own bodies. 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. The manner of disposition is not reducible to or derivable from anything found in the disposed simple impressions or coloured and tactile 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. Consciousness of all sorts is also temporally extended (in the sense of extending into the very recent past.)

There is 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. 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.

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

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.)

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 from the one to the other appears to be impossible. Plausibly, Hume was so deeply committed to the view that whatever we see always appears at a location on a 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.

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. 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 even more telling 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, independently 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 independent 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.