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SOME PROBLEMS IN HUMEAN PHILOSOPHY

There are several passages where Hume deals with the mind as made up of 'mental organs'. Thus, for example, when talking about our impressions and emotions, he tells us that " we must suppose, that nature has given to the organs of the human mind, a certain disposition fitted to produce a peculiar impression or emotion.." and that " here then is the situation of the mind, as I have already describ't it. It has certain organs naturally fitted to produce a passion.." he is dealing with such 'organs of the mind.'[1] It will be the purpose of this paper to show how Hume's image of the mind as made up of such organs is important in dealing with certain perplexing problems within his philosophy. The first problem I call 'the problem of terminology' . Hume repeatedly uses words like 'action', 'activity' and 'exercise' in talking about the mind. I will show how Hume's use of such words can be understood if we see Hume dealing with the mind as made up of 'organs'. The second problem I will call 'cognition and idea'. Here we will deal with how it is possible for him to look upon vividness as the sole criterion of truth and falsity if vivid delusions are to be counted as false and how we can have an idea of a shade of colour even if we have never seen it previously. The answer to both of these questions will be found in what I take to be his conception of normal properly functioning organs. Thus, for example, I will show that for Hume, the proper criterion for the truth of something is the vividness of its object but only if the vividness is produduced by a *normal properly functioning organ.* Vivid delusions then will not be accepted as true because they are not created by such normal functioning. Here too, all our simple ideas are noramally copies of particular impressions. The 'organ' which produces our ideas normally works in this way. It is part of its normal proper functioning to produce ideas in this manner. Because, as I will hope to show, Hume is only interested in such normal functioning, he can forget about all those cases where it is not functioning normally e.,g. he can forget about the case where it produces an idea of the missing colour. Let me then go over each of these problems individually and attempt to prove my case.

The Problem of Terminology

Hume repeatedly uses words like 'action', 'activity', and 'exercise' in talking about the mind. Thus when Hume tells us that :

Resembling ideas are not 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 and that :

What we may in general affirm concerning these *acts of the understanding* is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects. Whether we consider a single object or several; whether we dwell on these objects, or run from them to others; and in whatever form or order we survey them, *the act of the mind* exceeds not a single conception.

He is talking about actions or activities of the mind or parts of mind (in this case of the understanding).[2] The use of such words by Hume seems extremely paradoxical until we realize that the mind for him is made up of organs. Organs do have activity. The heart, an organ, for example, is active. And this would also seem to be true of other organs like our lungs, for example. It would thus seem that if we see Hume dealing with the mind as made up of organs we can then see why for him, the mind is active and he becomes a much more coherent thinker than scholars generally assume.

Cognition and Idea

There would seem to be very good evidence that Hume looks upon vividness as the criterion by which one tells whether something is true or false. Thus Hume tells us that " ..the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination " where it would appear that for him we differentiate between something that we believe to be true, like those perceptions found in our memory and our senses, and those which are false, those found in our imagination, by the

degree of vivacity each of those perceptions possess.[3] The difficulty however, occurs when he deals with imagination where it would appear that he allows certain fantasies to be just as vivid as what one empiricallty has reason to believe to be the case. Thus, for example, when Hume tells us that "..liars, by the frequent repetittion of their lies, come at last to remember them.." he is talking about fantasy becoming so vivid that it is taken as a truth of memory.[4] This has led Humean scholars like Professor Church to believe that here there is a basic contradiction within Hume's thought.[5] It seems to me, however, that this seeming contradiction can be got rid of quite easily if we see Hume assuming that among the organs of the mind are organs of cognition which may be either functioning properly or improperly. For us to get knowledge from such cognitive organs they must be functioning properly and one should therefore question what one becomes conscious of when such organs aren't functioning as they should. It is like the case where I have two images of an object because I am pressing my eye ball.[6] I question the truth of what I am seeing because my 'cognitive organ' (in this case my eye) is not functioning properly. In the same way, it would seem, we must question the truth of what the 'cognitive organs' of our mind are showing us when they are not functioning properly. The excessive vividness now found in the fantasy becomes an example of such an improper functioning of an 'organ' (in this case that of the fantasy) and should make us wary about accepting the 'truth ' that it makes us aware of. Vividness allows us a criterion for the truth of what we are consicous of only if the 'organ' which makes us conscious of such vividness is functioning properly; in the same way that the image we see allows us to say that there is an object in front of us only if our eyes are functioning properly. Thus the degree of vividness normally found in our sensual impressions is as it should be for that given organ and we may accept the truth of the objects it makes us aware of (i. e. the truth that they are objects 'in front of us') while the vividness normally found in our fantasy is also as it should be and we may accept the truth of the objects it makes us aware of (i. e. the truth that they are ideas ' in our heads' and not 'outside of them'). When, however, these 'organs' are not working properly and their vividness is abnormally high or low we should then question what our 'organs' make us aware of. The ghost I 'saw' in the room really wasn't there, I just had too much

vividness in my imagination.

Here as well, it is now possible for us to explain the 'problem of the missing shade of colour' a problem which has continually bothered Humean commentators). It is possible for Hume to both affirm " *that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*" while at the same time affirming that we can have an idea of a particular shade of colour without having first had an impression of it because he is interested primarily in the normal proper functioning of our 'mental organs' and in terms of such normal functioning it is true " *that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*".[7] The idea that we have of the missing shade of colour is " so particular and singular " that we can forget about it when we deal with the normal functioning of our 'mental organs' in the same way that someone who is interested in how the heart normally functions does not have to deal with such abnormal functioning of the heart as occurs, for example, with a heart murmur.[8] We have already seen how we can slove one problem (i. e. the 'problem of cognition') by assuming that Hume is primarily concerned with dealing with normal properly functioning organs and there would seem to be no reason why we cannot also solve this second problem (i. e. the problem of the missing shade of colour) in the same way. I ask you to tell me about the nature of man, I am not interested in how men's organs function when they are not functioning properly. I want you to tell me what happens when they are functioning as they should for only then am I truly dealing with what a man is. What I am saying is that Hume, when he asks about the nature of man, also is not interested in those cases of abnormal functioning.[9] The fantasy which thus acts abnormally and produces too much vivacity, the 'organ' which abnormally produces a simple idea which is not the image of particular impression thus do not have to be dealt with within his philosophy. He just is not interested in the 'abnormal' man but only in the 'normal' one.

Conclusion

It would thus seem that for certain problems in Humean philosophy it is absolutely necessary that we see Hume as conceiving the mind as made up of organs. Here several questions should

arise. First, how does such a conception effect our understanding of his ethics. Second, what is the nature of such organs. In both, no work has ever been done. In later papers I will write, I will show that such a conception must lead us to treat his ethics as Aristotelean and must make into a follower of Hobbes not Berkeley as has traditionally been assumed (sensual impressions are part of the physical world and feelings are fluids flowing in physical organs). It is, however, enough for me if in this paper I have shown, as I hoped to have done, the importance of Hume's conception of the mind as made up of organs; an importance which, need I add, has not generally been recognized by Humean scholars.

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NOTES

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby Bigge (Oxford University Press, 1888) Bk., II, Pt. I., Sec. v, p. 287; ***Treatise*** Bk, II, Pt. II, Sec. xi, p. 396.
2. *Treatise*, Bk. II, Pt. II, Sec. v. p. 61; *Ibid.*, Pt. III, Sec. vii, p. 97. My own italics.
3. *Ibid.*, Sec. vi, p. 86.
4. *Ibid.*, Sec. ix p., 117
5. Ralph W. Church, *Hume's Theory of the Understanding* (Archon Books, 1968), p. 24.
6. Hume deals with this case in *Treatise*, Bk. I., Pt. Iv, Sec. ii. pp. 210-11.
7. *Treatise*, Bk. I. Pt. I, Sec. i, p. 4
8. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
9. Cf. the introduction to the *Treatise*, p. ixvi where he shows his interest in the question.