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**Hume on Phenomenal Consciousness**

# Introduction

From the present point of view, it might be a surprising observation that Hume says very little about phenomenal consciousness and does not use even the term “consciousness” very often. Nonetheless, he is clearly aware of the concept of phenomenal consciousness. His awareness is already shown by three key passages from the first Book of Hume’s first work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739):

1. “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 1.4.2.7; SBN 190).[[1]](#footnote-1)
2. “consciousness never deceives” (EHU 7.14; SBN 66).
3. “The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness … no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions (T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212).

This raises the question of Hume’s view of phenomenal consciousness. What is his account of it? What could we say about his view even though Hume says so little about phenomenal consciousness? Accordingly, the question of this paper is, how to understand this aspect of Hume’s philosophy?

There is surprisingly little scholarship done on this question, even though it is connected to many central issues of Hume scholarship, such as the much-discussed Hume’s theory of belief, as will be seen below. Perhaps this state of affairs is due to the scant textual evidence we have about Hume’s account of phenomenal consciousness. Hume scholars have had so little text to work on here. Therefore, any interpretation of Hume on phenomenal consciousness has to be more like a rational reconstruction than a historical reconstruction.

Furthermore, I need to admit that accounting for phenomenal consciousness is a problem for an interpretation of what Hume calls “perceptions” that I have defended earlier (Hakkarainen 2012a, b, 2015). As is well-known, Hume divides “perceptions” into “impressions” and “ideas”: roughly, sense-perceptions, bodily feelings (bodily pains and pleasures), passions (e.g., love and hate), and thoughts about them. Another distinction of his is between “simple” and “complex perceptions”: perceptions that do not divide and do divide into parts (T 1.1.1.2; SBN 2). My interpretation of perceptions is limited to simple perceptions: they are particular simple properties or qualities, such as a navy blue or an intense pain in one’s tooth, that is to say, tropes in the present day terms.

My elaboration of this interpretation, proposed in this paper, is, initially, that phenomenal consciousness is an aspect of perceptions (i.e., impressions and ideas). Nowadays, I also prefer emphasizing the point that perceptions are qualities to them being properties (cf. Keinänen & Hakkarainen 2024). Here I restrict my discussion to simple perceptions; I put complex perceptions aside.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First I summarise my published interpretation that simple perceptions are tropes and show its problems. In the second chapter, I discuss Donald C. Ainslie’s (2015, sec. 6.6) “package view of perceptions”. I finish the paper by proposing a solution to the problem that my published interpretation faces. I elaborate upon it with the help of Ainslie’s interpretation.

# 1. Perceptions Are Particular Properties

Earlier (Hakkarainen 2012a, b, 2015) I have defended the interpretation that perceptions are nothing but particular entities in the category of properties. They are qualities and qualitatively simple: they present only a single determinate uniform quality. To illustrate, if I have a simple visual impression of navy blue, there is a determinate uniform navy-blue present to me. To put it in present-day terms, perceptions are mereologically simple or mereological atoms: they do not divide into parts. Recall that I am talking about simple perceptions. So perceptions are particular simple qualities, that is to say, “tropes” in our terms (see Keinänen & Hakkarainen 2024). I have also argued for an interpretation that perceptions are causally inert (Hakkarainen 2011). Illustrations of existing Humean perceptions would be the following: there is a navy blue, there is a crimson, there is a hot, there is a rose aroma, there is an intense toothache and there is (a feeling of) pride. Hume believes, indeed, that these kinds of perceptions are entities (e.g., T 1.4.2.47; SBN 212).

Now I see, however, that there are severe problems for this interpretation. First, how to account for Hume’s constant talk about the *actions* of the mind, perceptions as actions and especially beliefs as *acts*? A telling instance of this is what Hume says about the latter: “belief is an act of the mind arising from custom” (T 1.3.9.13; SBN 114; see also T 1.3.5.7 (SBN 86) and T 1.3.16.8; SBN 178). Second, how to account for the fact that perceptions are *conscious* when a mind consists ultimately of nothing but perceptions, which are rather objects or contents than acts? There are no other mental item types in Hume’s bundle theory of the mind than perceptions and minds:

“But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” (T 1.4.6; SBN 252).

Hence there are no acts, actions, states of consciousness or their subjects *in addition to* perceptions and the mind as the bundle of perceptions in this theory. If there are acts, actions or states of consciousness in Hume’s view, they are not distinct from perceptions.

But are there then two kinds of perceptions: mental acts and their objects or contents? Third, how to account for “force and vivacity”? As is well-known, force and vivacity are those which, according to Hume (at least in the *Treatise* 1), explain the difference between impressions and ideas, on the one hand (T 1.1.1.3, SBN 2-3), and believed and merely entertained perceptions, on the other:

“Thus it appears, 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.” (T 1.3.5.7; SBN 86)

This third problem is reinforced by the fact that in my published view perceptions are nothing but contents or objects and Hume holds that the content of an idea does not change along with its force and vivacity:

“All the perceptions of the mind are of two kinds, *viz.* impressions and ideas, which differ from each other only in their different degrees of force and vivacity. Our ideas are copy’d from our impressions, and represent them in all their parts. When you wou’d any way vary the idea of a particular object, you can only encrease or diminish its force and vivacity. If you make any other change on it, it represents a different object or impression. […] So that as belief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity.” (T 1.3.7.2; SBN 94-5).

Functionalism might be an option to explain the distinction between impressions and ideas. However, a functionalist account of force and vivacity is not very satisfactory, since it has the problem of explaining Hume’s constant phenomenal description of force and vivacity:

“I conclude, by an induction which seems to me very evident, 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 conceiv’d. But when I wou’d explain this *manner*, I scarce find any word that fully answers the case, but am oblig’d to have recourse to every one’s feeling, in order to give him a perfect notion of this operation of the mind. An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*.” (T 1.3.7.7; SBN 629)

There is a further complication of explaining the fact that in Hume’s view we can be mistaken whether a perception is an impression or an idea:

“Thus in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas.” (T 1.1.1.1, SBN 2)

“When any of these passions [impressions] are calm, and cause no disorder in the soul, they are very readily taken for the determinations of reason [ideas]” (T 2.3.3.8; SBN 417).

It is force and vivacity, however, that is the only circumstance that distinguishes impressions and ideas. Hume is also committed to the view that at least the content of perceptions is transparent to the mind when we are conscious of it, as was seen in the first quotes of the paper. So how could one be mistaken about the degree of the force and vivacity of a perception if it were part of the content of the perception?

My published interpretation faces therefore not only the problem of phenomenal consciousness but also the problems of explaining actions or acts of the mind, force and vivacity and the possibility of making a mistake as to whether a perception is an impression or an idea.

# 2. The Package View

Partly to solve these problems, Donald C. Ainslie (2015, sec. 6.6) has proposed the package view of perceptions (cf. Broughton 1992). According to Ainslie, sensory perceptions, for instance seeing navy blue, are packages consisting of the actions of awareness and the image contents of awareness. In his view, a perception is the awareness-of-an-image-content package, in which the action of awareness or phenomenal consciousness and its image content (object) are *aspects* of the perception. These aspects are not numerically or really but only rationally distinct from each other and the perception. They are really one and the same although we can distinguish them in our thinking.

Ainslie suggests that both the image content and the action of awareness are determinate: for example, both a navy blue and the visual sensory awareness of it are determinate. When we are talking about beliefs, the force and vivacity of believed perceptions is a *dimension* of manner of awareness. So Ainslie accounts for belief by a dimension of manner of awareness. There can be more than one such a dimension, such as the dimension of voluntariness and involuntariness.

Ainslie disagrees with Wayne Waxman (1994, 10 and 18), according to whom perceptions are objects of the acts of consciousness that are not perceptions. Waxman distinguishes acts from perceptions. Nonetheless, Ainslie thinks that Waxman’s account is a minority view. According to Ainslie, the dominating account is the object view, according to which perceptions are objects (e.g., Garrett 1997, Baxter 2008). Anyway, it seems to me that Waxman’s interpretation is not compatible with Hume’s official statement of the bundle theory, which I quoted above.

There is some textual evidence for Ainslie’s package account, especially the slightly obscure passage from T 1.3.8.16 (SBN 106):

“In thinking of our past thoughts we not only delineate out the objects, of which we were thinking, but also conceive the action of the mind in the meditation, that certain *je-ne-scai-quoi* [I-don't-know-what], of which ’tis impossible to give any definition or description, but which every one sufficiently understands.”

In this passage, Hume suggests that the action of the mind is something we do not know what. He also states about belief as follows: “So that as belief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity.” (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96; see also T 1.3.7.7 quoted above). One might suggest, perhaps, that Hume’s talk about the manner of conception refers to Ainslie’s awareness aspect.

It seems to me, however, that this textual evidence is suggestive at best. Ainslie’s account is therefore rather rational than historical reconstruction. It “saves” Hume from problems internal to his system like accounting for mental acts, beliefs and the possibility of confusing impressions and ideas with each other.

Before I go on, a few things need to be clarified about Ainslie's view. The talk about mental “actions” or “acts” does not imply that there is an agent who commits these acts or actions: there are only the awareness-of-an-image-content packages and the mind as their bundle. Neither does it mean that all perceptions are active, not passive in the sense of being receptive. Ainslie does not intend to imply either that at least some perceptions involve genuine causal powers, whether active or passive. Rather, perceptions are determinate actualizations of the different “manners” of being aware or conscious: sensing, feeling and thinking. These may be passive in the sense of being receptive like sensing. Some perceptions, impressions in particular, are involuntary, which is a dimension of being aware in Ainslie’s view.

Finally, awareness or consciousness as such does not involve any self-consciousness. There is not always awareness of awareness. Awareness of awareness might require a *secondary idea* about the perception, that is to say, an idea that is about another perception:

“we can form secondary ideas, which are images of the primary; as appears from this very reasoning concerning them. […] Ideas produce the images of themselves in new ideas; but as the first ideas are supposed to be derived from impressions, it still remains true, that all our simple ideas proceed either mediately or immediately, from their correspondent impressions.” (T 1.1.1.11; SBN 7-8)

So, Ainslie suggests that the awareness aspect of perceptions is not always transparent to the mind in Hume’s view. This kind of transparency requires consciousness of the awareness aspect of perceptions.

# 3. Perceptions Are Particular Properties View Elaborated

On Ainslie’s account, perceptions are *episodes* of awareness (i.e., mental events) or mental states rather than objects (of mental acts) (Ainslie 2015, 211). This seems to be at odds with my view that they are particular qualities and properties. However, next I shall show that I can elaborate on my view with the help of the package view: to have its advantages with the merits of my earlier view.

The idea is that I can hold onto my view that perceptions are nothing but particular simple qualities when I qualify this statement: perceptions are particular simple qualities *qua* contents (under this aspect of perceptions). I can complement this with the awareness aspect. Under that aspect, perceptions are *actualizations of different determinate manners of being aware*: forcible and lively manners actualized (impressions, believed ideas of the memory and imagination), manners that are not such actualized (ideas of the imagination), involuntary manners actualized (impressions in given conditions) and voluntary manners actualized (e.g,. ideas in calculations). This is how Hume could account for phenomenal consciousness.

I model this elaboration on Hume’s view of the simplicity of simple ideas:

“And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms simple idea. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable nor separable from the rest.” (T 1.1.7.7n5; SBN 637)

To illustrate Hume here, the simplicity of a navy-blue idea is an aspect of this navy-blue idea, since it resembles every other simple idea. In a similar manner, I can explain the things that have been extremely difficult to account for in my particular properties view. Conscious perceptions are perceptions that involve an awareness aspect. Beliefs are construed as perceptions having the forcible and lively awareness aspect. Confusing impressions and ideas is possible, for instance confusing hallucinating a tiger with seeing a tiger, since the relevant aspect of perception is not always transparent to the mind, even though the content would be always transparent. Finally, it is coherent for me to say that at least sometimes being aware of the awareness aspect of perceptions requires a secondary idea.

What should I say now about the ontological category of perceptions? For Hume, perceptions are not *modes* of the thinking substance as they are for Descartes and Locke, for instance. In Hume’s view, perceptions are existentially independent entities and modes are existentially dependent on substances (T 1.4.5.5; SBN 234). My view is that perceptions are properties (qualities). Ainslie thinks that perceptions are episodes of awareness (e.g., seeing navy blue): mental events. My new proposal is that it is not necessary to construe perceptions as episodes or events even if they have the aforementioned aspects.

Accordingly, I suggest that each conscious perception is being aware in a certain determinate manner of a content: for instance, being aware in a forcible and lively manner of a navy blue. It is a dual-aspect particular property (possibly multi-aspect). Aspect 1 is actualization of being aware in the determinate forcible and lively manner without this awareness being part of the content of the perception.[[2]](#footnote-2) The second aspect of this perception is its content: a determinate navy blue (a quality and property).

To distinguish these two aspects requires abstraction: making a distinction of reason (T 1.1.7.17-8). Following Hume’s view of the simplicity of simple ideas, the aspects are really inseparable or not really distinct: one cannot be had without the other (Hume’s Separability Principle (“Our perceptions are all really different, and separable, and distinguishable from each other, and from every thing else which we can imagine" (T 1.4.5.27; SBN 245-46)) does not apply to the aspects). The perception as a dual-aspect, or possibly multi-aspect, property is mereologically simple, and its content is qualitatively simple because awareness is not in the content. Its two aspects are abstract in this specific sense. Still abstracting does not create them: they are real aspects of perceptions independent of abstraction. They can be distinguished due to the different resemblance relations that hold amongst perceptions.

This metaphysics of perceptions fits better with Hume’s philosophical landscape in early modern philosophy, where one does not find ontologies in which episodes (or events) are a more fundamental category than objects. The metaphysical picture is thus as follows: there are perceptions as these dual-aspect particular simple properties, which are existentially independent entities, for example there is a being aware in a forcible and lively sensory manner of a navy blue or a toothache. Minds are composed of them. Yet one can say that perceptions are had or acted by the mind, when one understands this along the lines of the bundle account of the mind (vs the substance-mode view of minds and ideas).

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1. Following standard conventions, references to Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* will be given in the text in two parts. The first is the Norton and Norton edition (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), abbreviated as ‘T’ followed by book, part, section, and paragraph numbers. The second is the L. A. Selby-Bigge edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), abbreviated as ‘SBN’ followed by page number. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Still, it can be part of the content of a secondary idea of the perception. For example, when I remember being aware of a toothache in the forcible and lively manner. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)