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Hume on Meaning

WALTER OTT

Abstract: Hume's views on language have been widely misunderstood. Typical discussions cast Hume as either a linguistic idealist who holds that words refer to ideas or a proto-verificationist. I argue that both readings are wide of the mark and develop my own positive account. Humean signification emerges as a relation whereby a word can both indicate ideas in the mind of the speaker and cause us to have those ideas. If I am right, Hume offers a consistent view on meaning that is neither linguistic idealism nor positivism but a genuine alternative to these, one that deserves to be taken seriously.

Nearly everything written on Hume's philosophy of language is false. It is striking that despite all the attention recently paid to the role of Hume's theory of meaning in his attack on causal realism, very little has been done to elucidate that theory. Many commentators simply ignore Hume's claims or presuppositions about language, diving right into his theory of ideas. Thus Jonathan Bennett's section on Hume's "meaning empiricism" focuses on the principle that all ideas are copies of impressions, which is not itself a claim about meaning.¹ Barry Stroud's and Don Garrett's impressive books simply do not discuss his views on language at all.² Perhaps these commentators, like Alexander Rosenberg, are assuming that Hume's view is at once transparently clear and transparently borrowed from Locke, as if citing a pedigree were an elucidation.³ When commentators do address the issue, however briefly, their claims are invariably off the mark. Hume has been called a "verificationist" (Rosenberg); he has been said to hold that words refer to ideas

(Beauchamp and Rosenberg; Stanford).⁴ None of these tags accurately reflects Hume's position.

This paper is a first attempt at remedying the situation. Rather than review all of the enormous literature on Hume, I shall single out a few targets that I think are representative. Along the way, a positive account of Hume's views will emerge that is quite distant from the caricature depressingly common in the literature.

I. Hume and Locke

Hume is often supposed to have simply taken over Locke's views on language. At first sight, this seems reasonable. Unlike Locke, Hume does not present any detailed arguments for, or indeed statements of, his views, and if we are casting about for a suitable figure from whom Hume might have borrowed at least the core of his position, Locke is a plausible candidate. Assessing this claim requires that we have before us a sketch of Locke's position. Unfortunately, little about Locke's views is uncontroversial. I shall present my own interpretation as briefly as possible and without doing much to defend it, since I have done so at length elsewhere.⁵

Locke's position centers around the thesis that "Words, as they are used by Men, can properly and immediately signify nothing but *Ideas*, that are in the Mind of the Speaker" (*Essay* III.ii.4: 406).⁶ Words themselves have no content; their only use is to serve as signs of ideas, which, of course, *do* have content in the sense that they can pick out or refer to objects and states of affairs, mental and otherwise. Thus any verbal proposition gets its meaning by a connection to a mental proposition: it signifies a set of ideas and acts in the mind of the speaker. The crucial interpretive question then becomes, what does Locke mean by "signify" and its relatives? My proposal has been to take as our starting point Locke's claim that *ideas* are signs and then use this to illuminate his notion of signification generally.⁷

Ideas are "designed to be the Marks, whereby we are to know, and distinguish Things, which we have to do with" (II.xxx.2: 372–3). It is because I have a certain sensation, say of the color white, that I am justified in inferring the presence of an object in my environment with that quality. Of course, the quality turns out to be nothing more than a power in the object to produce that very idea; the idea does not resemble, but is a reliable indication of, the quality. Thus whether they are "only constant Effects, or else exact Resemblances of something in the things themselves," such ideas are dependable marks or signs⁸ of the objects or qualities of objects that can cause us to have those ideas.

Locke's use of "sign" is in line with a tradition running from Aristotle and the Stoics to Antoine Arnauld and Thomas Hobbes.⁹ A "sign" or "mark" in this sense is a symptom, a ground for inferring to the presence of something beyond itself. Thus when Locke says that "[t]he use then of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*" (III.ii.1: 405), I take him to mean that words provide one's hearers (or readers) with a

symptom or evidence of the speaker's (or writer's) ideas and mental acts. Unlike ideas, of course, words are conventional, as opposed to natural, signs. Nevertheless, both can be reliable indicators of states of affairs.

Later in Book III, Locke relaxes his claim that all words signify ideas, allowing that some words signify mental acts. Syncategoremata like "is," "but," "if," and so on signify, not ideas, but instead "the *connexion* that the Mind gives to *Ideas, or Propositions, one with another*" (III.vii.1: 471). We need words to signify the mental act that as it were ties two or more ideas together into a single thought. Without these, Locke argues in III.vii, there would be no way to generate propositional content.¹⁰ A proposition cannot consist merely of signs of ideas, for then it would be a list rather than something that admitted of a truth value.¹¹ Thus on Locke's view, an affirmative verbal proposition consists of signs of at least two ideas joined by the mental act signified by "is." Other syncategoremata such as "but" and "if" can be used to signify the logical connections we take to obtain between the propositions generated by this mental act and the attitudes we adopt toward these propositions.¹²

This will have to serve as a sufficient background for my argument concerning Hume. To what degree does he adopt a Lockean position on language?¹³

Although Hume is considerably less explicit than Locke on this point, he clearly requires that there be some relationship between a word and an idea if the word is to have meaning. He begins the *Treatise* with his taxonomy of perceptions, probably assuming that the reader will take it for granted that each word must be linked with some mental item, a view that is not distinctively Lockean but was a commonplace among modern philosophers. Given this, he can proceed straightaway to considering those items themselves. There are several places, however, where Hume explicitly requires the word-perception link. In the *Abstract*, for example, he writes: "when [the author] suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks, *From what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant" (T Abs. 7; SBN 648–9).¹⁴ And in the *Appendix*, Hume claims that if we wish to speak of "self" or "substance," "we must have an idea annex'd to these terms, otherwise they are altogether unintelligible" (T App. 11; SBN 633). Similar pronouncements can be found throughout Hume's writings.¹⁵ More common, however, are arguments that depend on this principle. In describing how we come to believe that Caesar was killed on the Ides of March, Hume describes the inferences we make on the basis of the work of historians: "Here are certain characters and letters present either to our memory or senses; which characters we likewise remember to have been us'd as the signs of certain ideas" (T 1.3.4.2; SBN 83).

In such passages, we find Hume mentioning two relations, "annex" and "signify." These turn out to be one: an idea is said to be "annex't" to a word, and a word "signifies" an idea (or impression). The only difference is the direction in

which the relation is said to hold: word-idea or idea-word. But what precisely is this relation?

Hume does not tell us. But we have some important clues before us. For Hume often speaks of signs in non-linguistic contexts. If we assume, as seems reasonable, that he is using the term univocally, we can then apply this non-linguistic notion of signification to the linguistic case. Now, Hume holds that a passion that produces sympathy in an observer “is at first known only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it” (T 2.1.11.3; SBN 317). More clearly: “[w]hether a person openly abuses me, or slyly intimates his contempt, in neither case do I immediately perceive his sentiment or opinion; and ’tis only by signs, that is, by its effects, I become sensible of it” (T 1.3.13.14; SBN 151; see T 1.3.16.6; SBN 178). Putting these passages together, we find the claim that facial expressions, for example, can serve as signs of mental attitudes because they are typically *caused by* a given mental state such as contempt. It seems clear that “sign” is intended in these passages in Locke’s sense: as a symptom or grounds for inference from the sign itself to something unobserved. A blush can serve as a sign of embarrassment, that is, as a reliable indicator of that mental state. My proposal, then, is that Hume construes the workings of language on analogy with these non-linguistic cases of signification, and uses “sign” univocally in both contexts. After all, in both contexts the chief issue is how we reveal our minds to others. What is needed is an indication or symptom of that which is otherwise hidden. The Lockean notion of a sign is defined precisely by its ability to play this role.¹⁶ And Hume himself treats both linguistic and non-linguistic cases together, speaking of signs “in the countenance and conversation” of a subject.

So far Locke and Hume are very much in agreement: the claim that words are signs of ideas is to be read as the claim that words are reliable indicators speakers and writers give to their audience to allow them to infer from those signs to their ideas. But this is where the similarity ends.

First, Hume’s discussion of the association of ideas (T 1.1.4, 1.1.5; SBN 10–4) requires that we find a place for signification among the natural relations he lists. Since signification is not itself on that list, it must be a special case of some more general principle.¹⁷ Hume’s language above indicates that the relation is that of cause and effect: we judge the blushing person to be embarrassed because we have, in our own case, experienced prior constant conjunctions of blushing and embarrassment.

We can make an indirect case for taking Humean signification to be a species of causation as well. Note that signification is clearly one means by which ideas are associated; that is, if *x* signifies *y*, then at least in some minds it must be the case that “the one naturally introduces the other” (T 1.1.5.1; SBN 13). We have then three possible headings under which signification might fall: resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect. Now, resemblance cannot explain

signification, since the conventional sounds or marks we produce need not bear any resemblance to what they signify. Nor is contiguity apposite here, since there is in principle no difficulty with linguistic signification taking place across centuries or continents. This leaves causation.

If I am right, we are left with two problems. First, conventional signs such as language are not straightforwardly caused by mental objects or states in the same sense. Blushing is typically an automatic response to an internal state, whereas words are purely conventional. The causal relationship still holds, however: if we assume that our interlocutor speaks English, i.e., participates in the same linguistic conventions we do, a sincere “go to hell” is as reliable an indicator of contempt as any facial expression. In both cases, it is only because these signs have been associated with the relevant passion that we take them as the *effects* of certain inner states. The fact that it is much easier to deceive with words than, say, with blushing, is a result of the difference between these conventional signs and those that depend straightforwardly on human nature.

Second, Hume’s treatment of causation might itself be thought to raise problems for my reading. After all, only observed conjunctions of *x* and *y* can lead us to connect *x* and *y* as cause and effect. A word signifies the *speaker’s* mental state in virtue of its being effect of that state. But this causal connection could never be observed, except by the signifier himself.

To answer this, we need to distinguish between two aspects of the signification relation. Locke draws a sharp distinction between a word’s (a) indicating an idea in the mind of the speaker and (b) causing us, the hearers, to have an idea. Locke is quite clear that the latter is the usual case in communication; hardly ever do we stop to wonder whether the idea the word revives in us is the same idea the speaker is using it to indicate in his own mind. This kind of laziness is precisely what causes philosophical confusion (III.ii.6,7: 407; II.viii.7: 134). Locke never calls the kind of relation involved in (b) “signification.” By contrast, Hume does not make this sort of distinction. Indeed, he seems to run the two together. The best explanation for this, I think, is precisely his thinking of signification as a species of causation: the speaker’s mental state causes her to utter a given word; hearing that word causes us to think of that mental state. So we have two distinct relations: one between a speaker’s mental state and her utterance, and a second between her utterance and a further mental state, that of the hearer. The first is what allows us to take an utterance as an indication of the speaker’s idea; the second is the product of our so taking that utterance. Hume, perhaps, conflates these precisely because he takes them both to be causal relations and so not different in kind.

We are now in a position to answer the objection. Although the speaker’s idea, taken as an individual mental token, is of course unobservable, the connection between a word and that idea-type is anything but. For if we participate in the same linguistic practices, we will have experienced many tokens of word-type/idea-type

connections in our own cases. It is in part because when I say “dog” I form the idea of dog that I take others’ utterances of “dog” to signify a token of the same idea-type in their minds. Consider Hume’s account of the natural language of physical expressions. In his discussion of sympathy, Hume argues that the causal relation between an expression of passion and the corresponding mental state is the means “by which we are convinc’d of the reality of the passion” (T 2.1.11.8; SBN 320). “’Tis indeed evident, that when we sympathize with the passions and sentiments of others, these movements appear at first in *our* mind as mere ideas, and are conceiv’d to belong to another person” (T 2.1.11.8; SBN 319). On Hume’s view, what converts this mere idea into a passion that deserves the name of sympathy is in part the resemblance that we take to obtain between the subject’s mental states and our own. “[N]ature has preserv’d a great resemblance among all human creatures . . . we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves” (T 2.1.11.5; SBN 318). In fact, Hume requires this resemblance, not merely to explain sympathy, but to explain why we take, for example, another person’s blushing to signify embarrassment in the first place. The inference to the “reality of the passion” is secured not just by cause and effect but by a judgment of resemblance between ourselves and the subject. Here again we find a difference between natural and conventional signs, since in the case of the passions, our judgment concerns the uniformity of human nature, whereas in language, it is a judgment of membership in the same linguistic community. But this difference should not obscure the main point: the direct epistemic inaccessibility of the interlocutor’s mental states is not a barrier to the use of words as signs so long as we have first person evidence of those mental states. And of course what we infer to in these cases is not different in kind from what we ourselves experience, viz., ideas and impressions. And even in the case of language, Hume invokes the uniformity of human nature: it is because all minds are subject to the “gentle force” of the association of ideas that “languages so nearly correspond to each other” (T 1.1.4.1; SBN 10). Our minds, being similarly structured and running along more or less the same principles, will naturally gravitate toward roughly similar conceptual structures, which are then mirrored at the level of language. We have, then, a sort of automatic head start in interpreting the utterances of our interlocutors.

The question remains, however, precisely how a convention like language can get going, given the in principle unobservability of each speaker’s ideas. Everything I have said so far, it might be argued, answers the initial objection well enough if we assume that the interlocutors in question speak the same language. But how is such a communal practice to get off the ground, if we cannot start off with a direct correlation of word and idea? Now, Locke has a good deal to say in this direction, both in his discussion of the remedies for the abuses of language (III.xi) and of language learning. Briefly, Locke invokes a combination

of ostensive definition and metaphorical transference of meaning to explain how an entirely arbitrary and non-natural system of signs can be instituted. Hume, as far as I can tell, has no corresponding account. But it is not difficult to suppose that he took Locke's answer to be more or less correct, and saw no need to spend much time on it. (Whether he was right to do so is of course controversial.)

A further point of contrast with Locke emerges at the level of the signification of ideas. Locke, as we have seen, thinks of simple ideas of sensation as indicators of qualities in the objects that produce them. Hume also thinks that some perceptions can serve as signs in the sense of indicators, as in the case of a person's crimson face and her embarrassment. And as we shall see, Hume also thinks some ideas can signify others, in virtue of being used as *general* ideas. But we should be wary of taking this agreement between Locke and Hume too far. For on Hume's account, there is no sense to be made of Lockean matter. "We never can conceive any thing but perceptions, and therefore must make every thing resemble them" (T 1.4.2.54; SBN 216). As a result, even the philosophers with their doctrine of double existence never succeed in producing an idea of anything specifically different, i.e., different in kind, from perceptions (see also T 1.1.6.1; SBN 15–6). Hume could not agree with Locke's claim that an idea of sensation is that "by which I know, that that Quality or Accident (*i.e.* whose appearance before my Eyes, always causes that *Idea*) doth really exist" (IV.xi.2: 631). Still less could he agree with Berkeley's claim that "everything we see, hear, feel, or any wise perceive by sense . . . [is] a sign or effect of the Power of God."¹⁸ Both Locke and Berkeley take all sensations as signifying the powers of a subject-independent reality: the world denuded of properly sensorial qualities for Locke; God, for Berkeley. Given his stand on these issues, it is not surprising that Hume rejects what we might call the semiotic epistemology of his immediate predecessors.

Finally, and most importantly for our purposes, Hume has no place for Lockean "particles." It is striking that Hume never says that words can serve as signs of mental *acts* as well as objects. This is no accident, since he repudiates Locke's theory of judgment,¹⁹ which itself was taken over from traditional Aristotelian sources. Locke makes a sharp distinction between words that signify ideas and what he calls "particles" that indicate acts of the mind, which in turn allow us to combine or separate our ideas and so to form propositions. For Hume, by contrast, this is a serious mistake.

Hume begins his attack on the traditional theory by examining the sentence "God is." The traditional view is forced to read this existential claim as involving a judgment, and thus as involving at least two ideas, joined by the mental act corresponding to the copula. Hume does not think that we have an idea of existence, over and above the idea of the object said to exist (T 1.3.7.2; SBN 94). This echo of Suárez's dictum that existence is not a predicate leads Hume to question the entire traditional way of understanding judgments. The "vulgar" distinction of

mental acts into conception, judgment, and reasoning, is simply false; the latter two “resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects” (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 97).²⁰

The moderns sometimes use “idea” when they clearly mean “proposition” or “judgment.”²¹ Hume is at least not guilty of this kind of carelessness, since for him, a proposition formed by the mind *just is* an idea, considered in a certain way. Although proceeding from an important insight about existential predications, Hume’s view is widely regarded as disastrous. For the distinction between simple perception and judgment was not a bit of Scholastic detritus; it is well-motivated, at least within the broadly mentalistic framework common to Hume and his predecessors. How can an idea, like that of God, have a truth value?

One might reply on Hume’s behalf by noting that, if ideas are the primary bearers of truth-values, they can in fact be said to be true or false to the degree that they correspond with what they represent. So a lively idea of God is “true” just in case there is a God. After all, on Hume’s view, this capacity for bearing truth-values is a key difference between ideas and passions: “[a] passion is an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification” (T 2.3.3.5; SBN 415). By contrast, an idea, as an ectype, can at least correspond or fail to correspond with its archetype. True enough; but this is no answer to our objection. There are in fact two levels to the objection. We have been focusing on the problem of propositional unity and content: in virtue of what does an idea come to be the sort of thing that can be the object of an attitude like belief? But even if we waive the difficulty of propositional structure, it remains the case that ideas at least must be referred to, or taken to be representative of, states of affairs, before they can have a truth value. In other words, truth and falsity only come on the scene when we assert (or deny) a proposition; Hume thinks these attitudes can only consist in differences in the vivacity of the idea in question. But if believing that God exists is simply having a particularly “lively or vivid” idea of God, it is hard to see how a theist and an atheist could be said to disagree. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Hume, in this respect, represents a significant step backward in the philosophy of language.

However that may be, Hume’s theory of judgment is clearly at odds with that of Locke. Although they agree that meaning requires that each word be annexed to an idea, Locke relaxes this stricture when he comes to discuss particles (III.vii) so he can draw a distinction between ideas and propositions. Hume makes no such concession. Moreover, Locke is sensitive to the difference between joining ideas in a proposition and adopting an attitude to that proposition. Some syncategoremata provide propositional unity, while others indicate the attitudes taken toward the proposition so generated (III.vii). Hume has no mechanism for marking this difference.

Having taken account of these divergences from Locke's view, we can now complicate our picture of Hume's position to accommodate general terms. There is no intrinsic difference between these kinds of words or the ideas they signify and particular words and ideas, of course; rather, the difference lies in the roles they play. "[G]eneral ideas are nothing but particular ones, annex'd to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them" (T 1.1.7.1; SBN 17). A general idea is a particular idea that has the power to call to mind any one of a given class of other particular ideas, where that class is determined by resemblance in a common respect. This two-tiered signification in the case of general words means we need a more complex model for Hume's overall view. If we focus on words themselves, it is clear that they both (a) provide a symptom or reliable indication of an idea in the speaker's mind and (b) cause us to form another idea (besides that of the word itself). If we look at a general word, we find that, while it plays roles (a) and (b), the idea it causes us to form itself plays role (b), in virtue of belonging to a resemblance class. It is in this sense that a general idea can be said to "signify" other ideas.

This background puts us in a position to examine other common readings of Hume and judge how well they capture his intent.

II. Hume as Linguistic Idealist

At the very start of their *Hume and the Problem of Causation*, Tom Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg write, "notoriously, Hume holds that the real meaning of a term is the idea to which it refers."²² On their view, then, signification amounts to reference. ("Refer" might be used here in its pre-theoretical sense, where it means "what one is talking about," or in its Fregean sense as the extension, as opposed to intension, of a concept or word. My comments below apply either way.) No text is adduced to support this; presumably the adverb is supposed to indicate that the fact is so well known it needs no defense.

The adverb also indicates that the view is in ill-repute, and here the authors are quite right. William Alston famously stigmatized the view that words refer to ideas as "linguistic idealism."²³ The standard response to this view is not argument but mockery. John Sergeant anticipated Alston in 1697 when he wrote that "when a Gentleman bids his Servant fetch him a Pint of Wine; he does not mean to bid him fetch the *Idea* of Wine in his own head, but the wine it self which is in the Cellar."²⁴ Later, J. S. Mill wrote, "[w]hen I say, 'the sun is the cause of the day,' I do not mean that my idea of the sun causes or excites in me the idea of the day."²⁵ One need not invoke the private language argument, whatever that is, to show that linguistic idealism makes a shambles of our ordinary communicative practices.

The very obviousness of these criticisms should alert us to the possibility that they are aimed at a strawman. The view is simply not to be found in the modern period; perhaps Bertrand Russell in his logical atomist period is the only figure in the history of philosophy to have held anything remotely like linguistic idealism.

It should be obvious at this stage that signification is not reference. Hume's examples make this clear: a person's facial expression does not refer to a mood; it *indicates* it. Similarly, words do not refer to ideas; they either allow us to infer what the speaker is thinking about or cause us to form certain ideas, or both. Even if we read Hume as a thorough-going idealist, it would still be the case that words do not refer to the ideas of the speaker. Although contemporary investigations of language have been conducted in terms of reference, Hume, on my reading, is simply silent on the topic. Indeed, I think it would be anachronistic to import this notion into a discussion of Hume.

III. Hume as Verificationist

There are two possible sources of support for the verificationist reading of Hume. The first appeals to Hume's copy principle; the second, to his distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. Since no commentator I know of explicitly makes these arguments, I shall do my best to construct them. As we shall see, the copy principle in no way implies verificationism; with the second line of argument, matters are more complex.

What I shall call "classical verificationism" is the doctrine that any meaningful proposition is either (a) analytic or (b) capable of being confirmed or disconfirmed by some possible experience. In his introduction to *Language, Truth, and Logic*, A. J. Ayer weakens (b) and allows meaning to any synthetic proposition for which there can be some empirical evidence one way or the other. This does not require that any synthetic proposition admit of being completely confirmed.²⁶

For my purposes, there are two important features of classical verificationism:

- (1) It is forward-looking. That is, it says exactly nothing about the *origin* of the proposition or its component "ideas"; what is at issue is how, if at all, experience can be relevant to determining its truth-value. (This is true even if we widen the scope of (b) to include propositions for which there *could have been* evidence.)²⁷
- (2) It takes whole propositions as its object. A classical verificationist will not wonder about a phrase like "the external world" in isolation; the strategy is always to take such phrases and put them in sentences that make existential claims. The verificationist looks to see how one might go about determining *whether there is* such a thing as an external world, causation, or the self, not how we represent these things in the first place.

Why might one think Hume is committed to verificationism? Perhaps the principle that every idea is a copy of an impression will suffice. But the copy principle applies to ideas, not words: it is not a thesis about how sentences or words get their meaning, but about how ideas and impressions are related. To be sure, it has consequences for a theory of meaning, but it is not itself *about* any of these linguistic issues. In the *Enquiry*, for example, Hume discusses the copy principle in the context of his attempt to “fix, if possible, the precise meaning” of terms like “*power, force, energy, or necessary connexion*” (EHU 7.3; SBN 61–2). There is no way to fix the meanings of terms without specifying the ideas they signify. But there is an extra step here: Hume requires that we “[p]roduce the impressions or original sentiments, from which the ideas are copied” (EHU 7.4; SBN 62). Fixing a term’s meaning is just settling what idea it signifies. The distinctive element Hume adds to this commonplace demand for clarity is that one trace the idea back to its origins in experience. But again, this functions at the level of ideas, not words. Thus I think it is a mistake for Jonathan Bennett to take Hume’s “meaning empiricism” to consist in his use of the copy principle.²⁸ The copy principle cannot by itself commit Hume to verificationism. To do so it would need to be supplemented by a thesis about the relation between ideas and words. Another way to put this is to say that verificationism is supposed to tell us when sentences have meanings and when they do not; but the copy principle tells us where an idea came from, not what a string of symbols signifies. A sentence gets its meaning by signifying an idea; there is no corresponding further fact in virtue of which an *idea* has meaning.²⁹

Even if we put this aside, the copy principle has neither of the two features above. Unlike the verification principle, it is essentially backward-looking or genetic. It asks, from what impression is this idea copied, not, how might one go about finding out whether there is something corresponding to the idea outside the mind. This is closely connected with the second feature: the copy principle, as Hume deploys it, is directed at parts of propositions, not propositions themselves. This is true even though Hume thinks of propositions as ideas considered by the mind in a certain way.

We can see this more clearly if we look at Hume on the self. Keeping in mind the quotations from the *Appendix* above, we can see that Hume wonders, not how we might confirm the existence of a Cartesian ego, but rather, what entitles us to speak of such a self in the first place. If we cannot trace the alleged idea back to an impression, there is no idea there at all.

Alexander Rosenberg argues that Hume anticipates, not classical verificationism, but an earlier version of the theory according to which any meaningful term “require[s] a set of observationally necessary and sufficient conditions of application.” According to Rosenberg, Hume’s “semantic claim that ideas refer to impressions” lands him with a view “indistinguishable” from this early verificationism.³⁰

First, it is not clear in what sense an idea can be said to *refer* to an impression. As we have seen, ideas can signify other ideas, and impressions can signify ideas. And when someone uses a term without signifying an idea by it, she utters nonsense. But none of this implies that ideas *refer* to impressions. Second, although early verificationism seems to have lacked the whole-proposition feature (2) above, it retains the forward-looking feature (1): the criterion states that there must be a set of conditions under which it would be legitimate to use the term in question. By contrast, Hume's copy principle asks about the origins of the mental item allegedly signified by a given term.

There is a more plausible way to argue that Hume is a verificationist, however. This approach would appeal, not to the copy principle, but to Hume's famous distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas, two categories of propositions which he claims are both exhaustive and mutually exclusive. Any object of human reasoning must fall into one or the other, and these just seem to be categories (a) and (b) above. Why isn't this enough to make him a verificationist?

First, it is not clear that category (a)—analytic statements—maps straightforwardly on to relations of ideas. This depends, of course, on how one defines analyticity. But suppose we take an analytic sentence to be one whose denial issues in a contradiction, something of the form "A = A" or reducible to this form by the substitution of synonymous expressions. If this is our definition, Hume's notion of a relation of ideas is at least not co-intensive, and perhaps not co-extensive, with analyticity. Although Hume does not juxtapose "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact" in the *Treatise*, he in effect draws the same distinction. Some propositions can be known simply by inspecting our ideas, while others can be known only through experience (T 1.3.1; SBN 69–73). In the latter cases (what Hume would later call "matters of fact"), the order in which the constituent ideas come to us is relevant to determining the proposition's truth-value. If an impression of two billiard balls moving rapidly away from one another always preceded an impression of their collision, we would not judge that the collision caused the movement. By contrast, the relations of resemblance, contrariety, degree in quality, and proportion in quantity or number make no reference to such extrinsic facts. Of these four relations, only the last is the object of demonstration; the remaining three belong to intuition. That yellow is lighter than orange (a difference in degree) can be known simply by looking at the relevant ideas, but it is not analytic on the above definition.³¹

What is more important, there is at least one decisive case where Hume appeals to the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact to show, not that a given claim is meaningless, but that there is no justification for it. In the *Treatise*, Hume argues that if reason were responsible for our inference from an impression to an idea, it would have to "proceed upon that principle ['UN'], *that instances, of*

which we have had no experience, must resemble those, of which we have had experience, and that the course of nature continues always uniformly the same" (T 1.3.6.4; SBN 89). But how is UN to be supported? Hume divides the possible sources of argument into knowledge and probability. In the *Treatise*, as we have seen, only four relations yield genuine necessity (that is, their denial is inconceivable, either because it is self-contradictory or can be seen to be impossible by inspecting the relevant ideas). Let us call these N-relations. If we could argue to UN by appeal to N-relations, UN itself would have to be an N-relation, that is, it would have to be impossible for it to be false. But this is clearly not the case. Since UN is not a necessary truth, it must be supported, if at all, by appeal to experience. But this, of course, would beg the question, since all inferences from experience depend on, and so cannot support, UN. But neither in the *Treatise* nor the *Enquiry* does Hume suggest that UN is meaningless or nonsensical. UN is perfectly intelligible: there is no difficulty envisioning a state of affairs in which it holds true. The difficulty comes only when we try to justify it. Thus the matter of fact/relation of ideas distinction functions in at least one case to show that a claim is not meaningless but unsupported by reasoning. By contrast, the verificationist must claim that UN is gibberish, since it falls neither into class (a) or (b).

If I am right, there are some important differences between Hume and the verificationists, whether early or classical. His distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas does not map on to the analytic/synthetic distinction and empirical unverifiability does not entail meaninglessness.

IV. Semiotic Empiricism

What, then, is Hume's final position? If we need a tag for it, I suggest "semiotic empiricism":

(SE) Words are reliable indicators of the speaker's ideas and revive ideas in us; if the speaker does not have an idea, they are nonsense.

Although Hume clearly endorses SE with regard to nouns, the situation is more complicated when we turn to the copula. Recall that "God is" does no more than indicate that a speaker has a lively idea of God; "is" makes no independent contribution. At the same time, "is" does have a function in this case: to indicate the relative liveliness of the speaker's idea. Nevertheless, it neither signifies an act of the mind nor joins the idea of God with an idea of existence.

Note that, even in the case of nouns, SE does not require that one have a particular idea in mind: someone uttering "dog" and thinking of a duck-billed platypus is not speaking the same language as us; it would seem strange to claim that the speaker is guilty of nonsense. Nonsense arises when a speaker, as it were, pretends to have an idea she does not, not when she departs from typical usage.

For Hume, convicting a philosopher of committing nonsense is a two-step process: one first shows that a given view could not make sense to us unless we had an idea of a given kind, and then one uses the copy principle to show that we could not have such an idea.³² Arguably, Hume holds that full-blooded cases of nonsense are quite rare. For example, when someone like Locke speaks of extra-mental objects, Hume suggests that he typically is thinking of objects simply as distinct sets of perceptions from his own, and not as anything “specifically different” from ideas, because no one can think of anything specifically different, and, given a modicum of charity, Locke must have been thinking of *something*. A much firmer case is provided by Hume’s treatment of such terms as force, necessity, power, and so on, as applied to objects:

[I]n all these expressions, *so apply’d*, we have really no distinct meaning, and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. But as ’tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrongly apply’d*, than that they never have any meaning; ’twill be proper to bestow another consideration on this subject. (T 1.3.14.14; SBN 162)³³

Even Hume’s first formulation in this passage allows that we have unclear and indistinct ideas when we speak of bodies endowed with powers, rather than no ideas at all. But he clearly thinks the more usual case is one in which we have the “true meaning” in mind—that is, the one specified by Hume’s two definitions of cause—and fail to realize we are making a category mistake when we join this idea with that of an object. To say that *x* has a power to *a*, in the realist’s sense, is like saying that a sensation of taste exists in an object.

To sharpen the consequences of SE for Hume’s empiricism, it is worth glancing back at Locke. As we have seen, Locke would insist SE be revised to incorporate particles:

(SE’) Words are reliable indicators of the speaker’s ideas, mental acts, or a combination of both; if the speaker does not have these ideas or perform the mental acts, they are nonsense.

SE’ is less stringent than SE. A word like “substance,” for Locke, can be meaningful even if it is attached not to a single idea but rather to a complex of mental acts and ideas. “That which lies behind and supports observable qualities” is perfectly in order, from the point of view of SE’, since each word signifies either an idea or a mental act. Locke is consistently ambivalent, however, about the precise status of such terms. He frequently calls the ideas they signify “obscure” or “relative.” At the same time, he sometimes suggests that there is no idea there at all. Thus Locke’s first entry under “Substance” in his index reads: “S. no Idea of it.”³⁴ Such relative

ideas are mere placeholders, indications of gaps in our awareness of the world. From the point of view of SE', of course, there is no special problem with such words, since they can be linked with the mental acts and objects that are signified by the relevant description.³⁵ The difference between these words and those that signify a single idea marks the limits of our experience and knowledge, not of our ability to speak meaningfully.

The tension in Locke's work plays itself out in Berkeley's. At least at one stage in his career, Berkeley wished to adhere to SE, which is considerably more restrictive than its Lockean counterpart. A striking instance of this is afforded by Berkeley's attack on the substance view of the mind in his *Notebooks*. Berkeley writes,

Say you the Mind is not the Perceptions. but that thing wch perceives. I answer you are abus'd by the words that & thing these are vague empty words without a meaning. (*Philosophical Commentaries* Sec. 581)

Here Berkeley challenges the propriety of the syncategorematic term "that," a crucial ingredient in the definite description. (Later, of course, he changed his view.) At this point in his development, Berkeley accepts what he (mis)construes as Locke's linguistic thesis: all significant words must stand for ideas. He then notes that "that" and "thing" do not seem to be correlated with any ideas and uses this to attack the definite description account of the significance "mental substance."

Where does Hume fit in this spectrum? Three features of his view are crucial: he endorses SE, suitably understood; he conflates propositions with ideas; and he holds the copy principle. Given all of this, it seems he must say that lacking an impression of a Cartesian self, causal power as the realist conceives it, or an external world, there is no sense to be made of existential propositions involving these alleged ideas, for a propositional attitude just is a certain way of considering an idea.³⁶ Since "no reasoning can ever give us a new, original, simple idea" (EHU 7.8 n.12; SBN 64), we are left with the materials provided us by experience. What complicates matters, and casts doubt on this admittedly simplistic reading of Hume, is the second feature of his view above. Just as it is totally unclear how an idea can have a truth value, it is unclear how anything we might want to call a proposition could itself be copied from experience. For as Locke has already argued, *some* mental act is required to unite these materials into a proposition; moreover, a further mental act is required to generate an attitude toward the proposition so constructed. This makes it very difficult to tell just how exacting Hume's version of SE actually is: the distinction between SE and SE' is clear only when we are dealing with a view that clearly distinguishes between ideas on one hand and the definite descriptions or propositions (and propositional attitudes) in which they figure.

Conclusion

My goal has been to arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of Hume's philosophy of language than has been presented in the literature. If we consider Hume's claim that words are signs of ideas in its proper context, we see that he holds neither a simple-minded linguistic idealism, which has it that words refer to ideas, nor a proto-verificationism. What often passes for a discussion of Hume's philosophy of language is a consideration of the copy principle, but, as I have argued, the copy principle itself is obviously not concerned in the first instance with meaning. Taking Hume seriously on these issues requires that we consider the context in which he wrote. Humean signification emerges as a relation whereby a word can serve as an indication of ideas in the mind of the speaker and cause us to have those ideas. If I am right, Hume offers a consistent view on meaning that is neither linguistic idealism nor positivism but a genuine alternative to these, one that deserves to be taken seriously.

NOTES

I would like to thank Alexander Rosenberg, Kenneth Winkler, Elizabeth Radcliffe, David Owen, Bryan Hall, three anonymous referees, and the editors of this journal for helpful comments.

1 Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971). I discuss Bennett's position below. I do not mean to imply that the copy principle does not have *implications* for Hume's theory of meaning; thus I discuss appeals to this principle in the context of verificationism.

2 See Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge, 1977) and Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). Those suspicious of my claim need only glance at the indices of these books: neither has entries for "language," "meaning," "words," "reference," etc.

3 See, e.g., Alexander Rosenberg, "Hume and the Philosophy of Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, ed. David Fate Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Rosenberg takes Hume to be a positivist who adopts Locke's views on language. Writers such as Simon Blackburn, "Hume and Thick Connexions," in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), discuss Hume's views in the context of positivism, without explaining precisely what they take Hume's position on the connection between words and ideas to be, or how "positivism" is to be understood in a Humean context. Galen Strawson's *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) has much to say about Hume on meaning but once again ends up focusing on his theory of ideas. More examples could be cited.

4 Tom Beauchamp and Alexander Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); P. Kyle Stanford, "The Manifest Connection: Causation and Meaning in Hume," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40.3 (2002): 339–60.

5 For a full presentation and defense of this interpretation, see my *Locke's Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

6 References to Locke are to *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Niddich (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975) and follow the standard form: Book, chapter, section: page number.

7 "[T]here are two sorts of Signs commonly made use of, *viz.* *Ideas* and *Words*" (IV.v.2: 574).

8 Locke uses the terms "mark" and "sign" interchangeably. For example, immediately after stating that words signify ideas in III.ii, Locke writes, "That then which Words are the Marks of, are the *Ideas* of the Speaker: Nor can any one apply them, as Marks, immediately to anything else, but the *Ideas*, he himself hath" (III.ii.2: 405). I of course have other arguments for my reading of signification; see esp. my *Locke's Philosophy of Language*, chap. 1.

9 Here I can only indicate some characteristic passages; for a complete account, see my *Locke's Philosophy of Language*. Aristotle writes that sign is "a proposition, either necessary or reputable, used to show something." *Posterior Analytics* 70a6–7, trans. J. L. Ackrill, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols., ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Signs, then, are defined by their role in inference; sign-inferences are enthymematic arguments (see *Prior Analytics* 70a10 and *Rhetoric* 1355a6). Signs play the role of antecedents in conditional claims: to use one of Aristotle's examples, if this woman is lactating (sign), then she has recently given birth (significate). In a similar vein, the Stoics claim that a sign is the antecedent proposition "in a sound conditional, revelatory of the consequent." *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1: 209. In the modern period, we find in the Port-Royal *Logic* the claim that "*les mots sont signes d'institution des pensées.*" "*On peut dire en général sur ce sujet, que les mots sont des sons distincts & articulés, dont les hommes ont fait des signes pour marquer ce qui se passe dans leur esprit.*" *La Logique, ou L'art de Penser* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), 143 and 82. Thomas Hobbes writes, "those things we call SIGNS are the *antecedents of their consequents, and the consequents of their antecedents, as often as we observe them to go before or follow after in the same manner.* For example, a thick cloud is a sign of rain to follow, and rain a sign that a cloud has gone before, for this reason only, that we seldom see clouds without the consequence of rain, nor rain at any time but when a cloud has gone before. And of signs, some are *natural*, whereof I have already given an example, others are *arbitrary*, namely, those we make choice of at our own pleasure, as a bush hung up, signifies that wine is to be sold there; a stone set in the ground signifies the bound of a field; and words so and so connected, signify the cogitations and motions of our mind." *De Corpore* I.ii.2 in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, 11 vols., ed. William Molesworth (London: Richards, 1839–1845), 1: 14–5.

10 "Besides Words, which are names of *Ideas* in the Mind, there are a great many others that are made use of, to signify the *connexion* that the Mind gives to *Ideas*, or

Propositions, one with another. The Mind, in communicating its thought to others, does not only need signs of the *Ideas* it has then before it, but others also, to shew or intimate some particular action of its own, at that time, relating to those *Ideas*. This it does in several ways; as, *Is*, and *Is not*, are the general marks of the Mind, affirming or denying. But besides affirmation, or negation, without which, there is in Words no Truth or Falsehood, the Mind does, in declaring its Sentiments to others, connect, not only the parts of Propositions, but whole Sentences one to another, with their several Relations and Dependencies, to make a coherent Discourse” (*Essay* III.vii.1: 471).

11 Here I echo Peter Geach’s argument against Hobbes: “Hobbes . . . held that the copula was superfluous; but we might very well object that it is necessary, because a pair of names is not a proposition but a list.” *Reference and Generality* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1980), 60. (I do not think Geach’s point in fact tells against Hobbes, since I think Hobbes has a more sophisticated view.)

12 For more on this point, and the distinction between propositional unity and attitude, see my “Propositional Attitudes in Modern Philosophy,” *Dialogue* 41.3 (2002): 551–68.

13 I should point out that what follows is intended to provide an account only of Hume’s claims about the signification of words (although I do address the semiotic relations between general and particular ideas below). My goal is not to offer a comprehensive account of Hume’s conception of the semantic powers of ideas. In this respect, my treatment of Hume is not precisely parallel with my treatment of Locke.

14 References to Hume’s *Treatise* use the following abbreviations: “T” indicates the Clarendon Edition, ed. David F. Norton and Mary Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), while “SBN” indicates L. A. Selby Bigge’s edition, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). First I give the Book, part, section, and paragraph in T, followed by the page number in SBN. References to the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* use these abbreviations: “EHU” indicates the Clarendon Edition, ed. T. L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), while “SBN” indicates L. A. Selby-Bigge’s edition of the *Enquiries*, again revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). References to EHU give the section and paragraph number, while references to SBN give the page number.

15 E.g., T 1.1.7.14 (SBN 23); T 1.3.14.14 (SBN 162); see also EHU 7.4 (SBN 62).

16 A further argument could be made by looking, not at “sign,” but at “annex” and its cognates. In the case of Locke, for example, it is clear that he speaks indifferently of sensations signifying qualities, or qualities being annexed to sensations. See *Essay* II.viii.13: 136–7. Thus the role of “annex” at the level of ideas would provide a corollary to the role of “signify” at the same level, buttressing the case for taking signification to be indication.

17 It is of course possible that Hume simply neglects to mention signification in this list and would, on reflection, have added it as a *sui generis* principle of association. Although possible, I think this unlikely.

18 *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* Part I, §148, in *Philosophical Works, Including the Works on Vision*, ed. M. R. Ayers (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975), 124.

19 I am using “judgment” in the technical sense and thus as Hume, but not Locke, uses it.

20 See my *Locke’s Philosophy of Language*, 146–7, and David Owen, “Locke and Hume on Belief, Judgment, and Assent” (forthcoming, *Topoi*).

21 A word on “propositions” in this context. I take this to refer to the sort of thing that can follow a “that” clause. I mean to be ontologically neutral with regard to their ultimate status. And although there is a variety of uses of the term in the modern period, I think it’s fairly clear that a very common, if not dominant, use corresponds to my own. Consider Hobbes’s definition: “A Proposition is a speech consisting of two names copulated, by which he that speaketh signifies he conceives the latter name to be the name of the same thing whereof the former is the name; or (which is all one) that the former name is comprehended by the latter” (*De Corpore* I.iii.2, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. W. Molesworth, 11 vols. (London: Richards, 1839–1845), 1:30). For his part, Locke claims that the mind, “either by perceiving or supposing the Agreement or Disagreement of any of its *Ideas*, does tacitly within it self put them into a kind of Proposition affirmative or negative” (*Essay* IV.v.6: 576). This is how mental propositions are generated; verbal propositions inherit their meaning from these. And of course Hume himself often uses “proposition” in just this sense. For example, at EHU 7.4 (SBN 62), Hume says he has “endeavoured to explain and prove this proposition” (viz., the copy principle). And at EHU 4.1 (SBN 25), Hume writes, “*That the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two sides*, is a proposition, which expresses a relation between these figures.” Such examples could doubtless be multiplied.

22 Beauchamp and Rosenberg, *Hume and the Problem of Causation*, 3.

23 William Alston, *The Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964), 24.

24 John Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy Asserted Against the Fancies of the Ideists* (New York: Garland, 1984), 33.

25 J. S. Mill, *A System of Logic* (New York: Harper, 1867), 15. Mill’s criticism itself is somewhat unfortunately put, since it depends on reading “is the cause of” in the phrase in question as not itself ideational. To be consistent, Mill’s attempted reductio should have it that “is the cause of,” or each syntactic element in this phrase, refers to an idea.

26 A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952).

27 Admittedly, the tag “forward-looking” is then less felicitous. But the point holds: the verificationist is asking whether evidence can (or could have) accrued to a proposition, not where the constituent ideas of that proposition came from.

28 Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, 225–6.

29 I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

30 Rosenberg, “Hume and the Philosophy of Science,” 66.

31 Relations of ideas might map on to some other contemporary readings of analyticity. I do think, however, that there are some sentences, e.g., “no surface can be red and blue all over at the same time,” that do not fall comfortably into the realm of the

analytic on any contemporary understanding of the concept and yet would be regarded by Hume as true in virtue of a relation of ideas.

32 In this paragraph, I am indebted to an anonymous referee.

33 Quoted in Stanford, “The Manifest Connection” 343; he calls the dilemma Hume offers here “the Choice”: we can either confess to committing nonsense or acquiesce to Hume’s analysis of causation.

34 *Essay*, 745.

35 This is not to say, of course, that Locke can supply the ideas of support and being that enter into the description of substance. See my *Locke’s Philosophy of Language*, 108–13.

36 Obviously I should not be understood here to mean that Hume takes *all* talk of the self or causal power to be nonsense. He offers his own distinctive accounts of what such language amounts to. He does, however, convict certain philosophical views using these terms of nonsensicality.