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THE CONCEPT OF BODY IN HUME'S TREATISE

Miren Boehm

Abstract

Hume's views concerning the existence of body or external objects are notoriously difficult and intractable. The paper sheds light on the concept of body in Hume's Treatise by defending three theses. First, that Hume's fundamental tenet that the only objects that are present to the mind are perceptions must be understood as methodological, rather than metaphysical or epistemological. Second, that Hume considers legitimate the fundamental assumption of natural philosophy that through experience and empirical observation we know body. Third, that many of the contradictions and difficulties that interpreters attribute to Hume's concept of body should be attributed instead, as Hume does, to every system of philosophy.

Hume is notoriously difficult to pin down on fundamental questions, and this is specially the case of his position with regard to external objects or bodies in the *Treatise*. Although he insists that “nothing is ever really present with the mind but its perceptions or impressions and ideas ...” (T 1.2.6.7)¹, throughout the *Treatise* Hume appeals to *bodies* and *external objects* as such. In her influential paper, “The Objects of Hume's *Treatise*,” Marjorie Grene painstakingly documents the different senses of ‘objects,’ and she convincingly argues that ‘object’ as *external existence* dominates the *Treatise* (Grene 1994). Despite Hume's firm commitment to the thesis that the only objects that can be present to the mind are *perceptions*, the objects most present in the *Treatise* do *not* seem to be perceptions.

Interpretations vary widely. Some argue that perceptions are only the *immediate* objects of the mind, that Hume's “approach to the external world is inside-out” (D. Norton 2004). Others maintain that Hume, like Berkeley, whose self-proclaimed idealism does not prevent him from speaking with the vulgar about *quads* and *trees*, merely engages in the facile discourse of the common man, *endorsing* only the existence of perceptions. For Hume, external objects or bodies are nothing but collections of perceptions. Others find greater significance in Hume's vulgar attitude; Hume appears to be not just *speaking*, but also *thinking* with the vulgar. These interpreters draw a distinction

1 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), hereafter cited as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers. See, for instance, also T 1.4.2.21, 47; T 2.2.2.22; T 3.1.1.2.

between an ordinary context or standpoint that allows bodies and a philosophical standpoint that is reductive and acknowledges only perceptions. Finally, others regard Hume's views irremediably inconsistent, or worse. John Passmore complains of the substantial contradictions displayed in Hume's remarks on the external world (Passmore 1952, 84–91). Richard Popkin refers to Hume as “schizophrenic” and of “split personality” (Popkin 1966, 98). Barry Stroud suggests that Hume's position might be inescapably “paradoxical” (Stroud 1977, 245–50).

This paper falls into two main parts. In the first, I discuss the most serious problems with the first three positions canvassed above, a discussion that will illuminate some of the motivating reasons behind the more discouraging readings. In the second, I put forward a different interpretation. I defend three central points. First, that Hume's fundamental thesis concerning the objects of the mind is *methodological*, rather than metaphysical, or even epistemological. Second, and related, that Hume admits, indeed, insists on different domains of inquiry. Most generally, he contrasts *natural* philosophy, whose subject is *body*, and *moral* philosophy, to which Hume's own *science of man* belongs, and whose subject is *mind*. Third, that there are, indeed, “contradictions and difficulties” involving the concept of body or external existence in the *Treatise*. But they are not Hume's. Rather, as Hume explicitly points out, they are found “in every system concerning external objects, and in the idea of matter, which we fancy so clear and determinate ...” (T I.4.5.1)

I

Bodies as External Existences; Inside-Out

The core idea behind this reading is, as David Norton puts it, that Hume “accepted [the] thesis about the immediate objects of the mind,” and that Hume's “approach to the external world is inside-out” (D. Norton 2004, 117).² Interpretations differ on *how* we cross the bridge from the inside to the outside.

John Passmore favors the Lockean or *inferential* strategy. He argues that for Hume bodies are external objects we infer or conjecture from our internal point of view (Passmore 1952, 13). However, the inferential strategy is in serious conflict with the text. For Hume insists that “tis impossible for us so much

2 Norton also portrays Hume as “firmly committed to the view that our direct experience is limited to mental phenomena” (Norton 2009, 8).

as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions” and that we cannot “conceive any kind of existence, but ... perceptions ...” (T 1.2.6.8) Hume also explicitly rejects the inferential move in his discussion of the doctrine of *double existence*. He argues that “we may observe a conjunction ... between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. ‘Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence ... of the former, we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the latter” (T 1.4.2.47).

Galen Strawson identifies in the following passage a different approach: “The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when supposed specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects” (T 1.2.6.9). Strawson argues that “[w]e can conceive it [an external object] only as something that stands in certain relations, or holds a place in a system of relations ... while having no positive conception of its nature considered on its own” (Strawson 1989, 51). One objection to this suggestion is that the relative idea whose content is “that which causes perceptions” does not discriminate external objects as the cause of our impressions from the other two causes Hume recognizes as possible sources: “the creative power of the mind” and “the author of our being” (T 1.3.5.2). There is also the problem that Hume himself considers the passages that include mention of the relative idea as having shown that the notion of an external existence is “absurd” (T 1.4.2.2). For Hume, relative ideas are not vehicles for conceiving of external objects.

Norman Kemp Smith deploys the theoretical tool of a ‘natural belief’ to put forward a *non-inferential* account of the relation between perceptions and objects. Natural belief, he maintains, belongs to “the ultimate instincts or propensities which constitute our human nature. It cannot be justified by reason ...” (Kemp Smith 2005, 86) One such natural belief involves the “apprehension of external reality” (Kemp Smith 2005, 87). Belief can “apprehend” external reality because it “enters into impressions”. “Belief is *native* to sense-perception; independently of any process of inference, it carries us to matter of fact and existence ...” (Kemp Smith 2005, 112)

The question is *how* does belief *carry us to matter of fact and existence* “independently of any process of inference”? Kemp Smith’s final answer is that it does so by way of a *projection* of the mind on to the external world. This is a case of “the mind’s instinctive propensity to spread itself over external objects, and to ascribe to them as their characters any effects in consciousness that they occasion” (Kemp Smith 2005, 118). One significant problem with this interpretation is that Hume only appeals to the mechanism of spreading in the

case of necessity and moral and aesthetic judgments. And, indeed, whereas in the case of necessity and moral and aesthetic judgments there is *a perception in the mind* that gets “spread onto” the world, there is no candidate perception for spreading itself onto the world in the case of our belief in continued and distinct existence.

Bodies as Perceptions

According to the once-traditional interpretation, Hume is a *subjectivist*. This reading relies essentially on the identification of bodies with impressions and ideas (Reid 1764; Green and Grose 1874; Price 1940; Waxman 1994).³ Recently, Yumiko Inukai has put forward a more nuanced version of this view, which she dubs “radical empiricism.” Instead of identifying bodies with impressions and ideas, she argues that bodies are *collections* of perceptions to be distinguished from perceptions considered as such, or as internal existences. According to Inukai, Hume holds the view that “external objects, like apples and hats, just *are* unified bundles of perceptions”, and that “[f]or Hume, strictly speaking, only perceptions exist, constituting both the internal and external world *for us* ...” (Inukai 2011, 203–5)⁴

However, there are passages in the *Treatise* where Hume explicitly distinguishes perceptions from objects: “Wherever we have no successive perceptions, we have no notion of time, even tho’ there be a real succession in the objects” (T 1.2.2.7). And: “all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits” (T 1.4.2.45). And Hume indicates explicitly that “’tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings” (T 1.4.2.1). These passages do not make sense if we substitute “collections of perceptions” for “body”, even if we specify that these collections are *taken* to be bodies. We may also here briefly highlight some of the radical philosophical implications

3 “Ontological idealism” or “ontological phenomenalism” are other names for this view.

4 Radical empiricism is not fundamentally different from subjectivism or ontological phenomenalism or idealism: it is the view that all that exists is perceptions. There are, however, gestures in Inukai that suggest some sort of qualification. She reiterates the phrase “strictly speaking”: the thesis that all that exists is perceptions is one that holds when we are speaking strictly (205). She also emphasizes that Hume never “affirms” the existence of objects other than perceptions, and that his “systematic affirmations” are of perceptions as the only existences (205). What, if anything, is the meaning of these qualifications? Inukai never discusses what it is that is left out, what non-strict-talk amounts to, and most importantly, whether it has any significance.

of “radical empiricism”. The *Treatise* is nothing but a collection of perceptions in Hume’s mind. Hume’s science of human nature is, strictly speaking, a “science” of David Hume. But the intelligibility of Hume’s project depends on the presupposition of the *existence* of other, not just *minds*, but human *beings*, who interact with one another in “the common course of the world” (T Intro. 10). Annette Baier makes this point succinctly in her remark: “Hume’s own “system” needs the supposition of an external world, and one that is peopled” (Baier 1991, 108). Subjectivism, or ontological idealism, or radical empiricism seems to leave no room for these crucial suppositions.

The Vulgar vs. the Philosophical Standpoint

A number of interpreters argue that Hume occupies different standpoints in the *Treatise* from which he issues different claims. Kemp Smith identifies different *stages*: for most of Book 1, Hume occupies the position of naïve realism or “ordinary consciousness”. Then in *Treatise* 1.4.2, he adopts the strict philosophical position that recognizes perceptions as the only objects (Kemp Smith 2005, 114–116). Janet Broughton maintains that at the beginning of the *Treatise*, Hume occupies the *common world* we all take ourselves to be in. Only in *Treatise* 1.3 does Hume assume an internal, introspective philosophical position which acknowledges only perceptions (Broughton 1992). Don Baxter recognizes two different *attitudes*. Hume, like Pyrrho, “passively acquiesce[s] in the natural view thrust upon him by appearance.” But, from within the skeptical standpoint, he does not *actively* endorse the existence of body (Baxter 2006, 116). Finally, Grene identifies a “larger if less philosophically sophisticated surround, from which, somehow or other, we take our perceptions to arise” (Grene 1994, 176). Within this “surround” an “external, extra-impression reference of ‘object’ is not to be eliminated” (Grene 1994, 171). But there is also philosophy or “theory”. Grene concludes: “Thus talk of “objects” in the *Treatise* does indeed, refer to things “out there,” though on the philosophical foundation of the reduction of objects to impressions” (Grene 1994, 176).⁵

Generally, then, there is a vulgar context and a philosophical context, which is Hume’s theory of perceptions. Within the *vulgar* domain, Hume is immersed in what Kemp Smith calls “ordinary consciousness”, unreflectively assuming that bodies are present in sense perception. One major problem is this. If we

5 More recently, Jani Hakkarainen also argues for the need to distinguish between Hume’s attitude with respect to external objects and real causal connections in the domain of philosophy from his view of such objects in the domain of everyday life (Hakkarainen 2012, 283–309).

ask: why is Hume so immersed? Why is Hume's consciousness "ordinary"? The more or less explicit response seems to be simply that *Hume cannot help himself*.⁶ It seems that Hume's vulgar context, which, according to some interpreters enjoys a considerable presence in the *Treatise*, lacks significance.⁷

Another problem is that it is far from obvious how the standpoints or contexts are, or should be, distinguished in the text. If the *philosophical* is simply conceived of in terms of discourse concerning *perceptions*, and the *vulgar* in terms of talk of bodies, then we find that Hume often occupies both the vulgar and the philosophical standpoints within one single thought or sentence. In her discussion of Hume's treatment of space and time, Marina Frasca-Spada remarks: "Hume's discussion implies some sort of presupposition about the existence of external reality. Such a presupposition is not developed, in fact it is not even enunciated, but simply underlies Hume's discussion line after line" (Frasca-Spada 1998, 46). Hume's discussion of infinite divisibility, space and time, and vacuum are surely *philosophical*. But underlying the philosophical, there is, as Frasca-Spada remarks, an all-pervasive assumption about the existence of external reality. Is this a *vulgar* assumption? If so, what meaning can we give to such overlap of standpoints?

Finally, Hume is not just immersed in ordinary consciousness, if he is, but he *reflectively endorses* the existence of body and our attitude toward it. He asserts, "As to what may be said, that the operations of nature are independent of our thought and reasoning, I allow it" (T 1.3.14.28). Hume allows that natural objects are independent of our thought and reasoning *within a philosophical context*, namely his discussion of the idea of necessity, which involves an account of how the mind projects, what is in fact an impression of reflection, onto objects. Hume's point is that whereas necessity is mind-dependent, "the operations of nature" are not. And, as we have seen, at the outset of *Treatise* 1.4.2 Hume endorses our taking for granted of the existence of body. Hume also confirms the attitude of "taking for granted" at the *end* of *Treatise* 1.4.2, as we discuss later. Such reflective endorsements strongly suggest that either

6 Grene claims that we return to the surround, "either because as non-philosophers we have never left it, or because as sceptical philosophers we nevertheless indulge our inescapable propensity to feign" (Grene 1994, 176). Baxter, as we saw above, maintains that Hume finds the force of appearance irresistible. Popkin writes: "In one mood, the difficulties overcome him, in another, the necessities do" (Popkin 1966, 98).

7 Grene writes: "But objects as clearly non-mental turn up one hundred times, in addition to twenty-three occurrences of explicitly "external" objects." And she explains that these references well outnumber the references to 'objects' as perceptions. (Grene 1994, 166) Kemp Smith's Hume is in ordinary consciousness for almost all of Book 1.

Hume's *philosophical* standpoint is not reductive, or that there is *more than one* philosophical standpoint. Or something else.

II

The Concept of Body in Hume's Treatise

Hume maintains that all that is present to the mind are impressions and ideas. When we sense anything there is a sense *impression* present to the mind. What are sense impressions? Hume appeals to ordinary facts to focus our attention onto objects whose ultimate individuation will be *non-ordinary*. Hume indicates that the distinction between impressions and ideas maps onto our ordinary distinction between feeling and thinking (T 1.1.1.1). Impressions have more force and vivacity than ideas, except under rare circumstances such as when we are dreaming or are sick (T 1.1.1.1). "To give a child an idea of scarlet or orange, of sweet or bitter, I present the objects, or in other words, convey to him these impressions" (T 1.1.1.8). Sense impressions seem to be objects that are present to the mind when we perceive external objects. But not quite. In the *Abstract*, Hume describes the *Treatise* as beginning "with some definitions" (Abs. 5), and when we search for such definitions in the text we find that the concept of a sense impression is defined as *excluding* its source or causes:

I here make use of these terms, *impression* and *idea*, in a sense different from what is usual ... By the term of *impression* I wou'd not be understood to express the manner, in which our lively perceptions are produc'd in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves; for which there is no particular name either in the *English* or any other language, that I know of. (T 1.1.1.1, ft)

Impressions are *new* objects. In the *Enquiry*, remarks that a "general term or appellation" for these objects is "not requisite for any, but philosophical purposes" (EHU 2.3).⁸ Ideas copy these new objects or impressions; the content of ideas is exhausted by the content of impressions. It follows from all this that there cannot be an idea of an *external existence*.

I propose, then, that the thesis that nothing is present to the mind but impressions and ideas is to be understood as a *methodological* statement. At the outset of Book 2, Hume notes "Tis certain, that the mind, in its perceptions,

8 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), hereafter cited as "EHU" followed by section and paragraph.

must begin somewhere ... there must be some impressions, which without any introduction make their appearance in the soul" (T 2.1.1.2). The mind begins with impressions, and it is with impressions that the *science* of mind ends. The thesis that nothing is present to the mind but perceptions is not metaphysical. It is not even an epistemological thesis; at least it is not one that Hume *starts* his *Treatise* with. Perhaps, in the end, if skepticism is declared the winner, then all we can know is perceptions. But that is not the beginning.

The beginning establishes a method for carrying out Hume's *logic*, whose "sole end" is "to explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas" (T Intro. 5, Abs. 3). This study will appeal only to impressions: to what appears to the mind, without commitment to the source of the appearances.⁹ However, there are other domains of inquiry besides logic, and Hume acknowledges them more or less explicitly. We start with a less explicit but fascinating passage. It contrasts sense impressions with objects; it affirms the *internal* methodology of Hume's science of mind while acknowledging the standpoint of natural philosophy.¹⁰

In order to put this whole affair in a fuller light, let us consider it [the question concerning the causes of causal belief] as a question in natural philosophy, which we must determine by experience and observation. I suppose there is an object, which is present to my senses, and that other, whose existence I infer by reasoning, may be thought to influence each other by their particular powers or qualities; yet as the phenomenon of belief, which we at present examine, is merely internal, these powers or qualities, being entirely unknown, can have no hand in producing it. 'Tis the present impression, which is to be consider'd as the true and real cause of the idea, and of the belief which attends it. (T 1.3.8.8)

There is natural philosophy, for which the causes of causal belief would be "an object, which is present to [the] senses [with] particular powers or qualities". But Hume seems to suggest that the phenomenon of causal belief does not belong properly to natural philosophy, but to his own science of mind because it "is merely internal, these powers or qualities, begin entirely unknown ...". The *object* that is "the true and real cause of the idea, and of the belief which attends it" is the *present impression*.

9 In the *Abstract*, Hume indicates that the project of founding the sciences has already "finished what regards to logic" (Abs. 3).

10 As David Norton explains, "In Hume's time philosophy had two distinctive branches. One, natural philosophy, included those subjects we now think of as the physical and natural sciences. The other, moral philosophy, focused on humans or human activity, and included those subjects we would think of as the core of philosophy (theory of knowledge, metaphysics, ethics, and the philosophy of religion) ..." (Norton 2009, 4).

The following passages involving discussion of *the idea of distance* reveal a similar pattern. Hume's Appendix correction is particularly interesting and relevant.

The sole difference betwixt an absolute darkness and the appearance of two or more visible luminous objects, consists, as I said, in the objects themselves, and in the manner they affect the senses. The angles, which the rays of light flowing from them, form with each other, the motion that is requir'd in the eye, in its passage from one to the other; and the different parts of the organs, which are affected by them; these produce the only perceptions, from which we can judge of the distance. (T 1.2.5.12)

In the Appendix, Hume adds the following correction: "I say, that the distance betwixt two bodies is known, among other things, by the angles, which the rays of light flowing from the bodies make with each other. 'Tis certain, that these angles are not known to the mind, and consequently can never discover the distance" (App. 22).

The background of these passages is Hume's rejection of the idea of a vacuum.¹¹ Originally, Hume's account of how we acquire the idea of distance includes considerations that belong properly to natural philosophy. In the Appendix, he excises considerations involving "the angles of the rays of light flowing from bodies" because these angles are "not known to the mind". Hume does not say, or even intimate, that angles of rays of light should be expunged from all science, and specifically, not from natural philosophy.

The *science of mind* appeals only to "what is known to the mind", or to appearances. And this is why Hume remarks, provocatively, that the question of the "ultimate causes" of sense impressions is not in "any way material" to his purposes. Instead: "We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses" (T 1.3.5.2). Let sense impressions be mere illusions of the senses, Hume's science of mind remains intact.

However, the question concerning the causes of sense impressions may indeed be examined by *anatomists*: "The examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral" (T 1.1.2.1). Indeed, anatomy is a domain of inquiry that Hume upholds as legitimate even in the most skeptical parts of Book 1. Toward the end of "Scepticism with regard to the senses", Hume maintains that "all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits" (T 1.4.2.45), and later he observes that "nerves and animal spirits [can convey] a certain sensation

11 For a discussion of this context and Hume's intentions regarding the vacuum, see my paper (Boehm 2012).

to the mind" (T 1.4.4.13). Moreover, on a few occasions, the scientist of the mind, who officially is only concerned with impressions and ideas, steers away from his own domain, albeit apologetically, and crosses over to anatomy. Hume takes "advantage" of the standpoint of natural philosophy when attempting to explain the causes of his *principles of association* and imagines a "dissection of the brain" that would reveal the mind's ability to dispatch "spirits into that region of the brain [where the] spirits always excite the idea, when they run precisely into the proper traces, and rummage that cell, which belongs to the idea" (T 1.2.5.20).

Indeed, natural philosophy in general and mathematics have a pronounced presence in Book I. There is extensive discussion concerning the infinite divisibility of space and time *themselves*. Hume invites objections from "metaphysics or mechanics" (T 1.2.5.22). The role of vacuum within Newtonian philosophy is examined and consequences are explicitly drawn (T 1.2.5.26-App.2). There is detailed treatment of geometry, and examination of the "foundations of mathematics" (T 1.4.2.22). And, of course, there is groundbreaking discussion of the nature of *necessity* where it is shown that "the supposition of an efficacy in any of the known qualities of matter is entirely without foundation" (T 1.3.14.7).¹²

Throughout these discussions, Hume *grants* or *allows* that *bodies appear to the senses*. The attitude is not a mere vulgar, unreflective assumption. Hume is rather adopting the standpoint of empirical natural philosophy whose fundamental tenet is, as Hume himself explains in his Introduction, that through *experience* and *observation* we know body. In the Introduction to the *Treatise*, Hume makes explicit the agenda of moral philosophy of emulating natural philosophy in its experimental method, which has enjoyed such spectacular success. The ultimate "authority" of all sciences, including Hume's science of man is "experience and observation" (T Intro. 7-10). Experience and observation are supposed to yield all the knowledge we can hope to attain of *body* and of *mind*.

Of course, experience and observation will not advance knowledge of the *essence* of body or mind: "the essence of the mind being equally unknown to us with that of external bodies" (T Intro. 8). But such knowledge is not attainable anyway. In his discussion of the idea of distance and vacuum, Hume considers the objection that "I explain only the manner in which objects affect the senses, without endeavouring to account for their real nature and operations" (T 1.2.5.25). In response, Hume pointedly remarks that penetrating "into the nature of bodies" or explaining "the secret causes of their operations" is

12 I cannot take up here the question of why Book I contains extensive discussion of subjects that belong to natural philosophy, but I do so in my paper (Boehm 2013).

“beyond the reach of human understanding, and that we can never pretend to know body otherwise than by those external properties, which discover themselves to the senses” (T 1.2.5.26). Hume continues:

... I content myself with knowing perfectly the manner in which objects affect my senses, and their connexions with each other, as far as experience informs me of them. This suffices for the conduct of life; and this also suffices for my philosophy, which pretends only to explain the nature and causes of our perceptions, or impressions and ideas. (T 1.2.5.26)

To this passage Hume adds the following in an appendix: “As long as we confine our speculations to the *appearances* of objects to our senses, without entering into disquisitions concerning their real nature and operations, we are safe from all difficulties ... (emphasis in original) (T 1.2.5.26, App 12)

The “external properties” of bodies appear to our senses. We can attain knowledge of properties of bodies and the connections between bodies through experience. This suffices for *Hume’s philosophy* “which pretends only to explain the nature and causes of our perceptions, or impressions and ideas” (T 1.2.5.26). And now the question: How can Hume identify knowing the external properties of *bodies*, which is all that natural philosophy can hope for, with explaining the nature and causes of *our perceptions*, which is all that Hume’s philosophy is happy to accomplish?

We need to turn skepticism’s central premise on its head to take advantage of the phenomenological fact that when we consider *the senses alone*, we cannot tell whether bodies appear to them, or whether, to paraphrase Hume, they display mere illusions (T 1.3.5.2). As far as the senses are concerned, bodies might indeed be present. Natural philosophy relies on the appearance of *bodies* to the senses. Hume’s moral philosophy purposefully and explicitly disavows such commitment, but it allows for, endorses, and even puts forward arguments supporting the thesis of the *appearance* of bodies to the senses.

In *Treatise* 1.2 Hume argues for an idea of body that is essentially grounded in the senses. The idea of extension, Hume remarks, “is conveyed to mind by two senses, sight and touch,” (T 1.2.3.15), and he concludes that “however we may express ourselves, we must always confess, that we have no idea of any real extension without filling it with sensible objects, and conceiving its parts as visible or tangible” (T 1.2.5.27). *Treatise* 1.4.2, as its title indicates, “Of scepticism with regard to the senses”, concerns centrally *the senses*. At the outset, Hume sharply distinguishes between two questions: “We may well ask, *What induces us to believe in the existence of body?* but ‘tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings”

(T 1.4.2.1). The existence of body is taken for granted; in particular, it is “the *principle* concerning the existence of body” that cannot be questioned, not a *mere* vulgar unexamined assumption (my emphasis) (T 1.4.2.1). At the end of what is an extremely rich but tempestuous section, Hume characterizes his examination of the senses as beginning “with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this would be the conclusion, I should draw from the whole of my reasoning” (T 1.4.2.56).

The question “we may well ask”, the question Hume's science of mind may ask is, specifically, concerning the causes of the belief in the *continued and distinct* existence of body (T 1.4.2.2). If bodies are the things that appear to the senses, then *bodies* cannot explain our belief that bodies have a continued and distinct existence from the senses. Hume's science of mind is best suited to investigate the nature of this belief because beliefs in general fall under its purview, but most importantly, because the belief in continued and distinct existence *must* have its origins in the mind. Of course, once we “step into” the science of mind, the *internal* method kicks in and what we are concerned with is “merely the perceptions themselves” (T 1.1.1.1, ft). This is why Hume observes at one point, that “properly speaking, ‘tis not our body we perceive, when we regard our limbs and members, but certain impressions, which enter by the senses” (T 1.4.2.9).

The claim that “properly speaking, ‘tis not our body we perceive” is also part of Hume's reenactment of the developments that lead *modern philosophers* to embrace the untenable doctrine of double existence.¹³ *Treatise* 1.4.2, as the title also makes clear, is where problems for *body* begin to emerge. Hume recounts how the mere experiment of pressing our eyeball with a finger, which causes “bodies” to double in appearance, proves that we are only aware of perceptions. Ironically, however, the conclusion drawn from this experiment both undermines and reinforces the standpoint of natural philosophy: “all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits” (T 1.4.2.45). Perceptions are dependent on what are *not* perceptions. Confronted with the limitation of our awareness to inner objects or perceptions, modern philosophers proceed to invent *new objects*. But, as Hume insists, we can never *infer* the existence of *external* objects, once we occupy the internal standpoint. At the end of *Treatise* 1.4.2, Hume admits failure *within* his own science of mind. The “implicit faith in the senses, or *rather* imagination” with which he sets out to examine the senses cannot be maintained (emphasis in original) (T 1.4.2.56). The essential role played by “trivial properties of the

13 The general title of Part 4 of Book 1 is “Of the Sceptical and other systems of philosophy”, which suggests that scepticism is another system of philosophy Hume aims to examine.

imagination” in the belief in continued and distinct existence renders Hume unable “to justify” the belief.¹⁴

In *Treatise* 1.4.4, “Of the modern philosophy”, Hume identifies “the fundamental principle of [modern] philosophy” as “the opinion concerning colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold; which it asserts to be nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv’d from the operations of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects” (T.1.4.4.3). In his criticism, Hume reminds us of his arguments in *Treatise* 1.2: “[I] have shown that ‘tis impossible to conceive extension, but as compos’d of parts, endow’d with colour or solidity” (T 1.4.4.8). However, Hume cannot but agree with one reason in favor of the core tenet of modern philosophy: “Upon examination, I find only one of the reasons commonly produc’d for this opinion to be satisfactory, viz. that deriv’d from the variations of those impressions, even while the external object, to all appearances, continues the same” (T 1.4.4.3). Despite his arguments in *Treatise* 1.2, which he continues to affirm in *Treatise* 1.4, Hume finds himself in the throes of modern philosophy’s unstable predicament to which he is delivered by the kind of reasoning he defends in *Treatise* 1.3.15. The principle “from like effects we presume like causes,” (T 1.4.4.4) is but a short version of Hume’s rule four in *Treatise* 1.3.15. Because in *some* cases color and sound are not qualities of bodies, we presume that *all* qualities are nothing but impressions in the mind. Bodies become external existences denuded of sensory qualities. However, “the difficulty still remains, how to form an idea of this object or existence, without having recourse to the secondary and sensible qualities” (T 1.4.4.11). The modern philosopher’s “solution” is to strip down bodies and displace them to a realm beyond possible experience. But this is not a way out for Hume.

Hume never resolves the difficulties. In the conclusion of *Treatise* 1.4.4, he poignantly notes: “Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses . . . When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude, that neither colour, sound, nor smell have continu’d and independent existence. When we exclude these sensible qualities there remains nothing in the universe, which has such an existence” (T 1.4.4.15). In *Treatise* 1.4.5, *body* is put to rest. The section begins: “Having found such contradictions and difficulties in every system concerning external objects, and in the idea of matter, which we fancy so clear and determinate . . .” (T 1.4.5.1) Hume’s keen eye then turns to what appears a much clearer and straightforward subject: the soul. Unfortunately,

14 Earlier in Book 1, Hume dismisses central ideas of geometry precisely because of the role played by what Hume considers to be trivial properties of the imagination in their genesis. See, for example, *Treatise* 1.2.4.24.

as we know, soul proves as impossible as body. In the Appendix to his account of personal identity, Hume refers to the difficulties with *body*: the “contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explanation, that human reason can give of the material world” (App. 10). Hume then walks us through the “labyrinth” of the soul.

Conclusion

Hume's views concerning body are philosophically sophisticated and profound. Hume identifies the concept of body as belonging to natural philosophy. In particular, he respects the fundamental assumption of (empirical) natural philosophy that we know bodies through experience and observation; that bodies appear to the senses. However, Hume's own science of mind does not rely on this thesis, explicitly excluding causes or sources from the concept of a sense impression. By doing so, Hume's science of mind is strategically poised to survive the skeptical assault so craftily reenacted toward the end of Book 1. If skepticism triumphs, Hume has already carried out his foundational project in Book 1 and shown us how to continue doing natural philosophy by relying merely on the perceptions of the mind. If skepticism does not carry the day, natural philosophy has been established on a new foundation nonetheless. As Hume argues, many of the ideas central to natural philosophy, such as the idea of a vacuum, are in violation of the fundamental methodological principle that experience and observation must be our only authority.

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