

Hume and the External World

Stefanie Rocknak
Hartwick College

§ 1 Introduction

Hume's understanding of the external world, particularly, his conception of objects, or what he occasionally refers to as "bodies," is the subject of much dispute. Are objects mind-independent? Or, are they just what we see, feel, smell, taste, or touch? In other words, are objects just sense data? Or, are they ideas *about* sense data? Or, are objects, somehow, mind-independent, but we have ideas *of* them, and we receive sense data *from* them?

Contrary to the "rationalist" tradition from which Hume was emerging, Hume thought that our only access to the world was by way of the data that we receive from our five senses, i.e. what he called sense "impressions." Unlike Descartes and Leibniz, Hume thought that we cannot use anything like "pure rational thought"— i.e. thought devoid of sense data—to grasp or understand the world. This methodology constitutes Hume's "naturalistic" or scientific approach: because we do not have access to anything *beyond* our sense impressions (and any ideas that are caused by them), "reality" can *only* be defined in terms of impressions and ideas. According to Hume, ideas and impressions constitute the only fabric of "reality" that we have access to and that we know. Though a reality or "external world" might, or *could* exist beyond our impressions and ideas Hume believed we have no way of telling, one way or the other.

To some degree, this reading of Hume aligns with what some scholars have characterized as Hume's "phenomenalist" reading of the external world. According to this interpretation, objects are *just* sense impressions, i.e. they are literally what we feel, see, touch, taste or hear.¹ In this case an object such as an "apple," would literally be how the apple tastes, feels, smells, etc.

The phenomenalist position competes with three other major interpretations of Humean objects. Some scholars have argued that according to Hume, objects are “intentional,” i.e. they are the objects of thought (Salmon 1983). In this case, an object, e.g. an “apple” would be an idea that we necessarily think *about*. Still others interpret Hume as a realist, i.e. objects are mind-independent.² In this case, an “apple” would be a thing that exists independently of how we sense it, or think about it. And finally, some think that Hume maintained that objects are imagined ideas, but they are not imagined to be the causes of our perceptions.³ In this case, the object “apple” would be an imagined idea, but we do not also imagine that it causes our sense impressions of it.

Clearly then, much is at stake in regard to how one interprets Hume’s conception of an “object.” Doing so directly affects how one understands Hume’s notion of a “world” that may or may not exist “externally” to the human mind. For as just noted, some scholars claim that Hume thought that objects, and so, the external world, consists of just sense impressions (i.e. the phenomenalist position), while in other cases, it seems that Hume thought that objects and the external world are just the objects of our thought (i.e. the intentional position). Meanwhile, the realists interpret Hume as believing in a mind-independent world, i.e. a truly *external* world, while others thought that external world is, to some degree, *imagined* (i.e. the imagined but non-causal interpretation).

However, although Hume occasionally uses the word ‘object’ in a phenomenalist, intentional, realist and/or imagined but not causal sense, his position on objects, his position on the “external world,” is not effectively captured by any of these scholarly interpretations. Thus, in this paper, focusing primarily on Book I of the *Treatise*,⁴ I present an overview of a fifth, more complicated, and I think, more accurate interpretation of Hume’s notion of objects.

In particular, I suggest that we must distinguish between: a.) Hume's conception of the "vulgar" notion of objects (which may be equated with the "phenomenalist" reading of Hume, noted above), b.) Hume's conception of the "philosophical" position on objects and c.) Hume's *own* position on objects. In all three cases, we do, indeed, *imagine* ideas of objects. Thus, we will see that that regardless if we are in a vulgar, philosophical or Humean state of mind, *Hume thought that we imagine the external world.*⁵ As a result, as already suggested above, Hume was by no means a realist, and so, we can immediately rule out the realist interpretation. How the other three scholarly interpretations sketched above relate to my reading will be explained as we proceed.

In the meantime, we must immediately call our attention to three fundamental differences between the vulgar position, the philosopher's position and Hume's position: 1.) The vulgar imagine that objects are identical to impressions. 2.) The philosophers, in virtue of making a reasoned rejection of the vulgar position, imagine that objects are mind independent and are the causes of our perceptions. However, they are *unaware* that they are imagining objects. Instead, they think that reason, and reason alone, shows that objects exist as mind-independent entities. 3.) Hume thinks that we always imagine that objects are the "invariable and uninterrupted"⁶ causes of our perceptions; this is a condition of possibility for almost all thought, including our ability to reason.

In this very general respect, we may refer to this third position that I am identifying as *Hume's* position, as a *transcendental* conception of objects. Accordingly, all humans must, in order to function properly, almost immediately imagine invariable and uninterrupted objects—i.e. objects that admit of what he calls a "perfect identity." Thus, this process must occur before we employ any kind of reasoning regarding what we believe are uninterrupted and invariable objects. And so, this transcendental process must take place well before the philosopher can use reason to

reject the vulgar position and subsequently imagine that objects are mind-independent objects; the transcendental process is a condition of possibility for the philosophical process—it is what some might refer to as “pre-theoretical” (c.f. (Mounce 1999), (Pears 1990)).⁷

To illustrate the general distinctions between 1.) The vulgar position 2.) The philosophical position and 3.) Hume’s position, I have divided this paper as follows: In §2, I give a general overview of “perfect identity,” since it frames all of Hume’s discussions of objects in the *Treatise*, regardless if he is discussing his own position, the vulgar view, or the philosophical position. In §3, I provide a general explanation of the relationship between the following two pairs of properties: uninterruptedness and invariability v. continuity and distinctness. In §4, I summarize the vulgar position on objects. In §5, I summarize the philosophical conception of objects. In §6, I summarize the transcendental conception of objects which what I take to be Hume’s own position on objects. In §7 I summarize the distinction between natural and philosophical causation and in §8 I summarize transcendental causation. Finally, in §9, I present my conclusion.

§2 Perfect Identity: A Summary

Hume introduces what he calls “perfect identity” in the *Treatise* section “Of Skepticism with regard to the senses,” which culminates in the statement that the two essential properties of identity are invariability and uninterruptedness (T 1.4.2.30; SBN 199-201). Hume repeats this claim in “Of personal identity” (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 253-5). According to Hume, “perfect identity” is the paradigmatic definition of how he thinks we conceive of identity—it allows us to determine how and when an “object” may be characterized as such, e.g. how and when is a “chair” actually a “chair”?

Moreover, it is *ideas* that admit of perfect identity, not impressions, and not mind-independent objects (“Of Skepticism with regard to the senses,” i.e. T 1.4.2.29; SBN 200-1 and “Of personal identity,” i.e. 1.4.6.6; SBN 253). Also, Hume tells us in “Of skepticism with regard to the senses” and “Of personal identity” that the properties of invariability and uninterruptedness are *imagined*.⁸ This is the case because, according to Hume, our perceptions, by their very nature, are never invariable and/or uninterrupted. And thus, neither impressions nor any idea that exactly represents⁹ an impression could be invariable and uninterrupted. However, impressions and ideas may surely *resemble* each other to a very high degree, and thus, they do admit of a certain kind of “constancy” (T 1.4.2.18; SBN 194–5). However, *this* kind of constancy (resemblance) is not invariability, although, confusingly enough, Hume also uses the word ‘constant’ to mean “invariable,” especially when claiming that we never experience invariable and uninterrupted impressions.¹⁰

Regardless of this confusion regarding the word ‘constant’—i.e. in some cases it means “resembling,” and in other cases, it means “invariable”—Hume makes it abundantly clear that although we can perceive a high degree of resemblance among our impressions and any idea or ideas that exactly represents them, we never perceive them to be uninterrupted and/or invariable, unless we *imagine* them to be so.¹¹

According to Hume, when we imagine that something has a perfect identity, we are imagining an idea of a thing, say a chair, that we *think* is uninterrupted. This means, in brief, that even if we stop having chair perceptions (e.g. by looking away), we *imagine* that the object “chair” does not become interrupted. Similarly, although our chair perceptions might vary, e.g. they shift with the changing light, we *imagine* that the object “chair” does not vary.

§3 Invariability and Uninterruptedness v. Continuity and Distinctness

Throughout Book I, Hume seems to use the property of continuity interchangeably with the property of uninterruptedness. In some places, he speaks of imagining a continuous object (T 1.4.2; 15-24; SBN 194-199), and in other places, he speaks of an uninterrupted object (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74). However, in both cases, he seems to mean the same thing: we are imagining an object that is not affected by the way in which we intermittently perceive it. In other words, if an object is conceived of as uninterrupted, then it is, simply by definition, also conceived of as continuous; and *vice versa*; an uninterrupted “object” continues in the respect that its existence is not interrupted when we are not perceiving it. Likewise, an “object” that is not interrupted by our gaps in perceiving it, continues. Moreover, according to Hume, if an object is conceived of as continuous, it must also be conceived of as distinct. This also makes sense; for instance, if I believe that an “object,” say, a melon, continues to exist when I am not having impressions of it, then I must also believe that the melon exists *distinctly* from my perceptions—such that it is not affected when I stop perceiving it (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 187-8).

However, although uninterruptedness and continuity are interchangeable, distinctness and invariability are not: I could easily imagine an object existing distinctly from my perception of it, while simultaneously imagining that it varies, or changes, e.g. with time. Thus, we must conclude that the two pairs of properties, i.e. continuity and distinctness v. uninterruptedness and invariability are not strictly interchangeable.

Throughout Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume alternates between talking about imagining continuous and distinct objects v. imagining uninterrupted and invariable objects. It is entirely plausible that Hume switches from discussing objects that we imagine to be continuous and distinct to objects that we think are uninterrupted and invariable in order to introduce the notion of “time.” In particular, in “The same subject continu’d” and in “Of skepticism with regard to the senses,” he

explains how “time”—which in one respect is an imagined object¹²—can change or vary the perceptions of those things that we imagine to be otherwise uninterrupted and invariable (T 1.2.5.29; SBN 65, 1.4.2.29; SBN 200-1). With this caveat in mind, we will use the two pairs of imagined properties interchangeably.

§4 The Vulgar Conception of Objects

Hume explains in “Of skepticism with regard to the senses” that the “vulgar,” or everyday person—which includes all of us at least some of the time—is consistently fooled into thinking that certain resembling sense-impressions may be identified with each other (T 1.4.2.36, 38; SBN 205, 207). As a result of doing so, we tend to think that sets of resembling perceptions constitute the objects of the world. For example, If I look at, say, a bicycle, at time T_1 , and then again at time T_2 , and still again at time T_3 - T_n , my current sense perceptions and my past impressions of the bicycle would all seem to significantly *resemble* each other. In this respect, they are “constant” but not invariable. However, the vulgar mistake this constancy for invariability, and so, they are led to imagine an idea of an “invariable” object (“Of skepticism with regard to the senses,” i.e. T 1.4.2.31; SBN 201-2).

Through a very complex process involving dispositions (states of mind) and the imagination, the vulgar proceed to imagine an idea of a sense impression that they think is not only invariable, but also, is uninterrupted (T 1.4.2.31-35; SBN 201-4). However, the vulgar ultimately reject this position because it becomes clear to them that they cannot simultaneously believe that a perception is both interrupted and not interrupted (T 1.4.2.36; SBN 205). In turn, they posit the existence of an uninterrupted and invariable unperceived perception (i.e. an unperceived impression (T 1.4.2.37-40; SBN 205-8)).¹³ However, the “philosophers” proceed to make short

work of the idea of an unperceived perception, i.e. they summarily reject it by using simple logic (modus tollens) and a thought experiment (T 1.4.2.45; SBN 210-11).¹⁴

In sum, the vulgar a.) think that objects are impressions b.) they are initially inclined to imagine that impressions are uninterrupted and invariable thanks to resembling dispositions (states of mind) and c.) upon rejecting this conception of objects they posit the existence of an unperceived perception. d.) The first phase of the vulgar position (i.e. b.) above) is rejected by the vulgar themselves and the second phase, (i.e. c.) above is rejected by the philosophers.

In all cases, the vulgar *imagine* that they are thinking of an object with a perfect identity, but they are not because, as noted above, they cannot effectively imagine the property of uninterruptedness.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, in “Of personal identity,” Hume explicitly refers to the vulgar position on objects as “improper” (T 1.4.6.7; SBN 255). As such, it is an instance of “*imperfect identity*” (T 1.4.6.9; SBN 256; emphasis added).

At this point, it should be clear that the vulgar position clearly captures the “phenomenalist” position sketched in the Introduction to this paper, where, it is alleged, Hume identified objects with impressions. However, as we will see, Hume’s conception of objects, and so, his conception of the external world, is surely not to be confused with the vulgar position. For one thing, as noted above, he clearly must reject the vulgar position; it does not allow for an effective conception of perfect identity, it is “improper” and “imperfect.” Secondly, and most importantly, he presents an entirely different psychological process of imagining ideas of objects that, as such, a.) cannot be conflated with either the vulgar or the philosophical process and b.) is never explicitly rejected by Hume.¹⁶ Thus, Hume was not a “phenomenalist” when it came to the external world. He did *not* simply identify objects with sense impressions.

§5 The Philosophical Conception of Objects

As already noted above, the philosophical position emerges as a result of rejecting the vulgar position, particularly the second phase of vulgar thought, i.e. the idea of an “unperceived perception.” More specifically, according to Hume, the philosophers conclude that reason (and reason alone) shows that the vulgar perspective of objects is false. Concomitantly, it seems that reason (and reason alone) shows that there must be mind-independent objects; particularly objects that are the continued and distinct causes of our perceptions (T 1.4.2.46; SBN 211).¹⁷

However, Hume explains, although the philosophers think that reason is solely responsible for proving that mind-independent objects exist, this is not entirely accurate. Rather, Hume argues, in conjunction with their reasoned rejection of the vulgar conception of objects, the philosophers must inevitably employ the imagination; philosophers are actually *imagining* ideas of continued and distinct objects that, as such, allegedly cause our interrupted and varied perceptions of them (T 1.4.2.49-50; SBN 213). In this respect, he explains in “Of skepticism with regard to the senses” that the philosophical conception of objects is the “monstrous offspring” of reason *and* the imagination (T 1.4.2.52; SBN 215).

Hume’s first extended account of the philosophical position on objects occurs at the end of the section “Of scepticism with regard to the senses,” where he discusses the philosopher’s rejection of the vulgar perspective (T 1.4.2.43-53; SBN 209-16). Hume’s second extended account occurs in the course of discussing three variants of the philosophical conception of objects, namely, the ancient conception of objects (“Of the antient philosophy,” i.e. T 1.4.3.1-11; SBN 219-225), the modern conception of objects (“Of the modern philosophy,” i.e. T 1.4.4.1-15; SBN 225-231) and the notion of an immaterial soul (“Of the immateriality of the soul,” i.e. T 1.4.5.1-35; SBN

232-251). Hume's final extended account of the philosophical position on objects occurs in the course of discussing personal identity in 1.4.6, i.e. "Of personal identity."

§6 The Transcendental Conception of Objects

There are three moments in Book I of the *Treatise* where Hume discusses a process of imagining ideas of objects that is clearly distinct from the way in which the vulgar and the philosophers respectively imagine ideas of objects. These occur in: 1.) "Of probability; and of the idea of cause and effect." (T 1.3.2.1-2; SBN 73-4), where Hume discusses "secret causes," 2.) "Of skepticism with regard to the senses," (T 1.4.2.15-24; SBN 194-199) which occurs in the course of a discussion of the role that the two levels of constancy and coherence of our impressions play in regard to our conception of objects and 3.) "Of skepticism with regard to the senses," (T 1.4.2.25-30; SBN 199-201) which constitutes part 1 of 1.4.2's four part system, where Hume presents his "*principium individuationis*," i.e. the principle of identity.¹⁸ These three moments provide the textual evidence for my transcendental interpretation of objects.

In particular, in the second moment (T 1.4.2.15-24; SBN 194-199) we must imagine an idea of an object that we think represents the properties of continuity and distinctness, while in the two other cases (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 73-4, T 1.4.2.25-30; SBN 199-201), we must imagine an idea of an object that we think represents the properties of invariability and uninterruptedness (where, as noted above, for our purposes, we may assume that invariability and uninterruptedness are roughly interchangeable with the properties of continuity and distinctness). This means that according to Hume, particular objects that seem to admit of what he calls a "perfect identity" are imagined, complex ideas.

Moreover, ideas of objects that we think admit of a perfect identity appear to be very similar to abstract ideas. However, these ideas represent *particular* objects, not general objects. To understand why this is the case—at least in broad terms—recall that Hume, similar to Berkeley, defines an abstract object as follows: “all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annexed 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). According to Hume, a general idea is actually a particular idea with a “certain term” attached to it. For instance, upon experiencing a set of resembling ideas of “objects” (say, of dogs), we generally call them by the same name, regardless of any small variations (T 1.1.7.7; SBN 20). Afterwards, whenever we hear the name “dog,” we call to mind one of the particular ideas of the set which “revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and properties” (T 1.1.7.7; SBN 20). This means that a particular idea not only represents a particular impression, but the entire “revival set” (Garrett 1997: 53). However, it does not exactly represent the entire revival set since “the word not being able to revive the idea of all these individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allow’d so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquir’d by surveying them” (T 1.1.7.7; SBN 20). Thus, our idea of a dog (in general) brings to mind a great deal of what we have experienced upon perceiving dogs, but not everything. When we think of a dog, in general, we bring to mind the idea of a particular dog that we have had an impression of, but now augmented with an imagined compilation of other dog perceptions.

Hume has a very similar process in mind in the three sets of passages noted above regarding particular objects. More specifically, we must first experience respectively, a “species” (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74) or a number of “constant and coherent” perceptions (T 1.4.2.15-24; SBN 194-9) or a

“number” of “resembling” perceptions (T 1.4.2.27; SBN 200). Following, we imagine a “secret cause” (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74) of this set of resembling perceptions, which is explained below.

In particular, we imagine an object that we think is invariable and uninterrupted (or continuous and distinct). To do so, we imagine that one of the perceptions from the set of resembling perceptions is a.) the cause of that set and b.) it is invariable and uninterrupted (or continuous and distinct). In other words, we imagine that it has a *perfect identity*. As such, as in the case with a general, abstract idea, we use a particular perception from a revival set, i.e. the “species” or “number” to represent the whole set. However, this particular perception does not *exactly* represent any impression because it has certain imagined qualities, particularly: a.) we imagine that it is invariable and uninterrupted (or continuous and distinct), where, recall, we never perceive any of these qualities. In precisely this respect, it is a “secret cause;” we do not “see or feel” it (T 1.3.2.3; SBN 74). And b.) we imagine it to be a cause, where we never perceive it to be what Hume refers to as “constantly conjoined” with the perceptions that we imagine that it causes (T 1.3.6.12; SBN 92). This is the case because, as just noted, we never “see or feel” it, so we cannot *perceive* it, much less perceive it as being constantly conjoined with another perception.

For instance, although our idea of a particular chair object would be based on a particular chair impression that we have actually had, we must *imagine* that this idea is not only invariable and uninterrupted (or continuous and distinct), but that it is the *cause* of any perception that resembles it, i.e. the set of our resembling (but invariable and interrupted) chair perceptions. And thus, Hume explains, our imagined idea of an object that admits of perfect identity is “oblique[ly]” and “indirect[ly]” related to our experience (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 197), precisely because it does not exactly represent an impression. However, it is *based* on an impression; in particular, it belongs to the “species” noted above, but with imagined qualities.¹⁹

Moreover, our ability to imagine such causes seems to be *presupposed* by, at least, our ability to employ what Hume calls philosophical causation. And thus, this process is fundamentally distinct from the philosophical process of imagining causes, which, recall, only occurs by way of rejecting the vulgar position, a rejection that necessarily incurs the use of, at least, philosophical probable reasoning. To understand why this is the case—at least in general terms—we need to briefly examine i.) The distinction between “natural” and “philosophical” causation and ii.) The way in which we imagine a “secret cause.”

§7 Natural Causation v. Philosophical Causation: A Brief Overview

For our purposes, we can distinguish between what Hume refers to as the “natural” and “philosophical” relations of causality as follows: The natural relation of causality is the product of a conditioning process (specifically, the repetitive association of impressions [T 1.3.14; SBN 155–72]). In this respect, the natural relation of causality is reflexive, not reflective. Indeed, this is what the negative argument concerning induction is meant to show: the natural relation of causality is not a reasoning (comparing) process,²⁰ nor is it justified by any reasoning process or reasons. Philosophical relations of causality however, are not mere reflexes. Rather, after we have become conditioned to think in terms of natural relations of causality, we use “reason”—i.e. a comparing process—to determine if two objects are causally related (T 1.1.5.1–2; SBN 13–14, T 1.3.6.12–16; SBN 92–93, T 1.3.14.31; SBN 169–170).²¹

Consider the following example: One may become conditioned through “constant conjunction” (T 1.1.1.8; SBN 4) to think that fire causes paper to burn. And so, every time she sees fire engulfing paper (or remembers fire engulfing paper), the enlivened idea of paper burning reflexively comes to mind. Thus, according to one of Hume’s many senses of belief,²² she believes

that the paper will burn; indeed, the enlivened idea *is* the belief (T 1.3.7.5-6; SBN 96). This is what we may think of as a causally-produced belief; it occurs as the result of a conditioning process, which comprises the natural relation of causality. However, as a result of reflection, i.e. “reason,” she may also come to believe the causal *relation* that “every time fire engulfs paper, it will burn.” In this respect, a causal relation is, in effect, a “principle;” it is a causal relation that we believe to obtain between “fire,” i.e. the cause, and “paper burning,” i.e. the effect. Thus, we may refer to this kind of belief, and, in fact, any kind of belief that is based on the comparison of a cause and an effect as a *philosophical* probable belief. As such, philosophical probable belief is a result of reason, not a conditioning process. We can call this reasoning process “philosophical probable reason.”

In order to engage in philosophical probable reason, we must, it seems, be able to explicitly distinguish between the cause and the effect, e.g. we must be able to distinguish “fire” from “paper burning.” We must also be able to distinguish these causes and effects from *ourselves*, or at least, we must be capable of thinking of these things as existing independently from our perceptions of them. Otherwise, it seems, our situation would be hopelessly complicated; e.g. if we thought that both “fire” and “paper burning” were actually parts of ourselves, then the fire would not actually cause the “paper” to burn. Rather, somehow, we would be “causing” a part of ourselves to “burn.” In other words, we would lack what Bennett calls “objectivity concepts” (1971: 324); concepts that Bennett disparages Hume for not employing in the *Treatise*.²³

However, it seems that such “objectivity concepts” need not be in place when it comes to thinking in terms of *natural* causation, e.g. whenever we have an impression of fire engulfing paper, we automatically and reflexively think of paper burning, without necessarily thinking of these perceptions as being distinct from ourselves. Moreover, we don’t even reflectively

distinguish these ideas from each other, we are just compelled to think of one whenever we have the impression of the other one. Thus, although Hume does not explicitly say as much, this seems to be another aspect of the distinction between natural and philosophical causation: the former does not, it seems, necessarily invoke objectivity concepts, while the latter does.²⁴

§8 Transcendental Causation

At this point, we may consider, in bit more detail, the process behind imagining “secret causes.” Doing so will show us how this process is fundamentally different from the process where, by way of a reasoned reaction to the vulgar, the philosophers imagine that objects are the causes of our perceptions.

Recall that Hume explains in the first passage pertaining to what I call transcendental causation that we must move “beyond the impressions of the senses” to imagine a “secret cause” such that in turn, we are better able to make comparisons (i.e. reason about) objects that admit of a perfect identity (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 73-4). In particular, as explained earlier, we experience a set of resembling impressions that we imagine are caused by an object with a perfect identity. Thus we are thinking in terms of *some* kind of causal inference; particularly, one that associates a set of resembling impressions with an idea (i.e. an imagined cause).

Indeed, Hume tells us in the second portion of text pertaining to transcendental causation—found in “Of skepticism with regard to the senses”—that this is a very *special* “kind of ... causation” (T 1.4.2.19; SBN 195)) which, in virtue of being “considerably different” (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 197) from other kinds of causation, enables us to imagine an “insensible” (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 198) idea of an object that admits of a perfect identity. In particular, Hume explains, before we

imagine their respective and “insensible” causes, our perceptions appear to us as “loose[ly]” (1.4.2.22; SBN 198) and “irregular[ly]” (T 1.4.2.21; SBN 197) “constant and coherent” (T 1.4.2.20; SBN 195). However, once we imagine that an object with perfect identity is causing such perceptions, the constancy and coherence of our perceptions appears more “regular,” “compleat” and “uniform” (T 1.4.2.22; SBN 198). Hume explains that this phenomenon is somewhat analogous to the way in which we might imagine a “correct and exact” standard of equality when doing mathematics. This standard is based on the “loose” notions of equality that we actually perceive. In virtue of imagining an exact standard, it makes what we actually perceive, i.e. our “loose standards” (T 1.4.2.22; SBN 198), seem more precise. Moreover, imagining such causes enables us to coherently think in terms of ordinary (i.e. non transcendental) causal relationships which obtain between objects that *do* admit of a perfect identity (T 1.4.2.20; SBN 196).²⁵

In the third portion of text pertaining to transcendental causation—also found in “Of skepticism with regard to the senses”—Hume explains how we imagine the object “time” as a cause of change, similar to how we imagine objects that admit of perfect identity to cause sets of resembling perceptions. Doing so, very generally speaking, allows Hume to explain how we might imagine ideas of objects with perfect identities that persist in “time,” although our *perceptions* of such objects change, i.e., vary with “time.” Thus, in order to even think of anything as occurring in “time,” we must first imagine time as a cause, and, more complicated still, imagine objects that admit of a perfect identity as persisting “in time.” Again, this is a very special “kind” of causation because the cause that we imagine is never perceived, regardless if it is the object “time” or the typical objects that we imagine to admit of a perfect identity, i.e. objects that we believe we have impressions of, e.g. tables, chairs, etc.

However, in all three cases, although it is abundantly clear that Hume thinks that this process involves some kind of inference, i.e. a *special* kind of causation, it does *not*, at least initially, seem to involve any kind of a comparison, or reasoning process. For like natural causation, this process seems to be almost reflexive, in the respect that upon experiencing a set of resembling perceptions, we are naturally and “always” and “almost universally” (T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201) led to imagine an invariable and uninterrupted (or continuous and distinct) cause of those perceptions. Indeed, Hume writes just before discussing “secret causes” that: “we ought not to receive as reasoning any of the observations we may make concerning *identity*” (T. 1.3.2.2; SBN 73) He also claims—in no uncertain terms—that we do *not* use “reason” to establish “the belief of objects independent of the mind,” as the philosophers mistakenly do. Rather, this belief is “*entirely* [owed] to the imagination.” (T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193)

It is entirely plausible then, that, like natural causation, transcendental causation is a kind of inference, but it is reflexive—we don’t think about it, we just “universally” and “always” do it. However, like natural causation, it may eventually *yield* a comparison, i.e. what we might characterize as a kind of “philosophical” transcendental causation. For example, we may eventually compare what we take to be a mind-independent thing that causes our perceptions with the perceptions themselves; at this point we would be explicitly aware of our “objectivity concepts,” although we would not, it seems, be aware that we imagined them. Indeed, when such “objectivity concepts” are in place—i.e. when we are made aware of them *via* what we may characterize as transcendental philosophical reasoning—we may then, and only then, proceed to engage in philosophical probable reason, where we compare ideas of objects that we think are not only independent of each other, but are also independent of ourselves. Indeed, in order to use basic logic, e.g. the *modus tollens* that the philosophers use to refute the vulgar, we must be able to think

in terms of objectivity concepts and, at least, philosophical probable reasoning, where the later presupposes the former, as explained above. For how else could we think in terms of “if p then q” where we distinguish p and q not only from each other, but from ourselves, and in turn, think of “if p then q” as a principle, which, it seems, is derivative of the philosophical probable relation of “p causes q?”

Thus, the philosophers simply could not reject the vulgar without having objectivity concepts in place, i.e. without first imagining causes. And thus, the philosophical position on the external world is fundamentally distinct from Hume’s transcendental account of the external world; the former presupposes the latter.

§9 Conclusion

We have seen that Hume thinks that we *imagine* objects, and so, *we imagine the external world*. Moreover, we have seen that the process described in what I call the three transcendental moments of Book I of the *Treatise* is fundamentally different from both the vulgar process of imagining objects and the philosophical process of imagining objects. In particular, the transcendental process differs from the vulgar process in the respect that 1.) The transcendental process does not assume that objects *are* impressions, while the vulgar process does. 2.) Rather, in the transcendental process, objects are imagined to be the *causes* of our interrupted and variable impressions 3.) Moreover, in the transcendental process, objects are *effectively* imagined to have a perfect identity, i.e. they are effectively imagined to be uninterrupted and invariable, or (roughly) equivalently, that they are continuous and distinct. However, Hume characterizes the vulgar conception of identity as “improper” and “imperfect” because the vulgar *cannot* effectively imagine the property of uninterruptedness (T 1.4.6.9; SBN 255-256).

Meanwhile, the transcendental process differs from the philosophical process of imagining objects in the respect that: 1.) In all three cases of the transcendental process, objects are *not* imagined as a result of a calculated, conscious rejection of the vulgar position, which, in turn, inspires a rather troublesome union between reason and the imagination. Rather, in all three cases, it seems clear that Hume was committed to a process that is a necessary condition of possibility for ordinary experience; this is something that, Hume claims, we must “always” “almost universally” and it seems, *reflexively* do (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74, T 1.4.2.29; SBN 201). In particular, we must be able to effectively imagine ideas of invariable and uninterrupted objects such that we may, in turn, reason *about* objects; generally speaking, such ideas constitute what Bennett calls the missing “objectivity-concepts” (1971, 324) in Book I of the *Treatise*. Similarly, they constitute what Pears (1990) and Mounce (1999) would refer to as “pre-theoretical” aspects of the *Treatise*.

2.) Moreover, in the case of the Ancient and Modern philosophical position on objects, as well as cases where philosophers imagine immaterial soul-objects, ideas of objects are not based on impressions (T 1.4.3-5; SBN 219-251). For instance, the Ancients’ idea of a “substance” is not based on any substance impression. In principle, it could not be; by definition, “substances” cannot be apprehended with our senses—they are, as Hume puts it, “invisible” (T 1.4.3.4; SBN 220). Similarly, Modern philosophers who believe in primary qualities and immaterial souls maintain that we never have an impression of either. As a result, Hume thinks that all of these philosophical conceptions of objects are utterly “incomprehensible” and smack of the “occult” (T 1.4.3.8; SBN 222). However, in the three instances where Hume discusses the transcendental account of objects, the ideas that we imagine are *not* incomprehensible. Rather, they are based on impressions, specifically sets, or what Hume refers to as “species” of “perfectly resembling” but interrupted perceptions (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 74).

Finally, we might conclude that in a very general respect, Hume anticipated Immanuel Kant's later work in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, written approximately forty years after Hume's *Treatise*. There, Kant presented a complicated and lengthy account of transcendental conditions, including "objectivity concepts." Thus, in many respects, both Hume and Kant influenced the field of what we currently call "psychology;" both philosophers were deeply concerned with understanding how the human mind works, especially in regard to how it allows us articulate what we think is the "external world."

References

- Bennett, J. (1971) *Locke, Berkeley and Hume: Central Themes*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Costa, M. J. (1989) "Hume and Causal Realism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 67, no. 2, pp. 172–90.
- DePierris, G. (2002) "Causation as a Philosophical Relation in Hume," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 499–545.
- Dicker, G. (2007) "*Hume on the Intermittent Existence of the Objects of the Senses*," Paper presented at the 153rd Creighton Club Conference, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, NY.
- Flage, D. (1990) *David Hume's Theory of Mind*, London: Routledge.
- Garrett, D. (1997) *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Grene, M. (1994) "The Objects of Hume's Treatise," *Hume Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 163–177.
- Haymond, W. (1964) "Hume's Phenomenalism," *Modern Schoolman—A Quarterly Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 41, pp. 209–226.
- Hume, D. (2000). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (T.L. Beauchamp ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hume, D. (1978) *A Treatise of Human Nature* (2nd ed.), (L.A. Selby-Bigge ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press; abbreviated as SBN.
- Hume, D. (2002) *A Treatise of Human Nature* (D. F Norton & M. J. Norton ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press; abbreviated as T.
- Mounce, H. O. (1999) *Hume's Naturalism*, New York: Routledge.
- Owen, D. (1999) *Hume's Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Pears, D. (1990) *Hume's System*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Price, H. H. (1940) *Hume's Theory of the External World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rocknak, S. (2013) *Imagined Causes: Hume's Conception of Objects*, Dordrecht: Springer
- Rocknak, S. (2007) "The Vulgar Conception of Objects in 'Of skepticism with regard to the senses,'" *Hume Studies*, vol. 33, no.1, pp. 67–90.

- Salmon, C. V. (1983) *The Central Problem of Hume's Philosophy*, New York: Garland.
- Schliesser, E. (2007) "Two Definitions of 'Cause', Newton and the Significance of the Humean Distinction between Natural and Philosophical Relations," *The Journal of Scottish Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 83–101.
- Smith, N. K. (1941) *The Philosophy of David Hume; a Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines*, New York: Macmillan.
- Steinberg, E. (1981) "Hume on the Continued Existence and the Identity of Changing Things," *Hume Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 105–120.
- Strawson, G. (2007) "David Hume: Objects and Power," R. Read & K. Richman (eds.), *The New Hume Debate* (revised ed., pp. 31–51), New York: Routledge.
- Waxman, W. (1994) *Hume's Theory of Consciousness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilbanks, J. (1968). *Hume's Theory of Imagination*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Wilson, F. (1989) "Is Hume a Skeptic with Regard to the Senses?" *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 49–73.
- Wright, J. P. (2007) "Hume's Causal Realism: Recovering a Traditional Interpretation," R. Read & K. Richman (eds.), *The New Hume Debate* (revised ed., pp. 88–99), New York: Routledge.

Notes on Contributors

Stefanie Rocknak is a Professor of Philosophy, Chair of the Philosophy Department and the Director of the Cognitive Science Program at Hartwick College in Oneonta, NY. She is also a professional sculptor; her work may be seen at www.steffrocknak.net.

¹ Grene 1994, Bennett 1971, Steinberg 1981, and Dicker 2007.

² Wilson 1989, Flage 1990, Costa 1989, G. Strawson 2007 and Wright 2007.

³ Price 1940, Kemp Smith 1941, Wilbanks 1968, and Waxman 1994.

⁴ Because the *Treatise* is so unique and complicated, I cannot properly contextualize it with Hume's broader corpus without a great deal of explanation. For this reason, we will not take Hume's other work (e.g. *The Enquiry*) into consideration here.

⁵ Hume also thought that the "self" is imagined. However, most would argue that the "self" is not a part of the "external world," and thus, the "self" falls outside the purview of this paper.

⁶ Or alternatively, the "continuous and distinct" causes; see §3 of this paper.

⁷ However, it is not my intention to carefully explicate the textual evidence needed to show that Hume did, indeed, present a transcendental position in the *Treatise*. For such evidence, I point the reader to my book, *Imagined Causes: Hume's Conception of Objects* (Springer, 2013). In this paper, by summarizing the evidence, I hope to show the reader why it is, at least, on a very general level, *plausible* to conclude that Hume employed a transcendental conception of objects.

⁸ T 1.4.2.29-30; SBN 200-1, T 1.4.6.6; SBN 200-1, T. 1.4.6.15; SBN 259

⁹ A careful discussion of Hume's notion of representation would take us too far afield. Thus, for our purposes, we can think of it as a kind of copying. For more detail, see (Rocknak 2013: 15-27).

¹⁰ Note: "'Tis impossible for the mind to fix itself steadily upon one idea for any considerable time; nor can it by its utmost efforts ever arrive at such a constancy" (T 2.1.4.2; SBN 283; emphasis added). That is, we cannot fix our minds upon one object such that it appears "steady," or "constant" to us, i.e. *invariable*. Also consider 1.4.6.2; SBN 251: "*there is no impression constant and invariable*. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time" (emphasis added). Here again, in the course of explaining that we never experience an invariable impression, Hume uses 'constant' interchangeably with 'invariable.'

¹¹ To see that is the case, in no uncertain terms, consider: 1.3.2.1-2; SBN 73-4, 1.4.2.11; SBN 192, 1.4.2.15-22; SBN 194-8, 1.4.2.3-10; SBN 188-191, 1.4.6.2; SBN 251-2, 1.4.6.4; SBN 252-3, 1.4.6.5; SBN 253, 1.4.6.6; SBN 253-5. C.f. (Rocknak 2013: 125-38).

¹² See (Rocknak 2013: 138-151).

¹³ See (Rocknak 2013: 159-178) and (Rocknak 2007).

¹⁴ Hume presents us with the following biconditional, where 'C' denotes "continued existence," and 'I' denotes an "independent existence:" (I \supset C) & (C \supset I). The philosophers conclude that by definition, perceptions cannot exist unperceived, i.e. they do not exist *independently* of our perception. Thus, using the second half of the biconditional and modus tollens, they conclude that sense impressions cannot be continuous i.e. \sim C. However, it must also be *shown* why perceptions do not have an independent existence, i.e. \sim I must be derived rather than merely stipulated, as it was above. So, press an eye with a finger, which will effectively double all your current visual sense impressions. As a result of doing so, you will conclude that our perceptions do not continue when we are not perceiving them because their existence clearly depends on the way in which our eyes perceive them. Thus, you will conclude \sim C. Following, using the first half of the biconditional and modus tollens, you will conclude \sim I. This leads to a logical contradiction (or as Hume puts it, a "fallacy" (T 1.4.2.44; SBN 210)): the vulgar assume I, but given what we have seen above, we must conclude \sim I. Thus, we have both I and \sim I, and so, a formal *reductio*, where the conclusion is \sim I. Following, Hume explains that our impressions obviously vary according to which physical position we might view them from, and according to what state of health we are in, etc. (T 1.4.2.45; SBN 211). As a result, Hume concludes that we have still more evidence to show that impressions are not independent of our bodies — given that they obviously depend on the current physical condition of our bodies. That is, we may conclude, again, \sim I, and thus, again using the second half of the biconditional and modus tollens, we may conclude \sim C. Thus, mirroring what we saw above, the logical contradiction (or again, as Hume puts it, the "fallacy") is: the vulgar assume C, but must conclude \sim C, so, we have both C and \sim C, and thus, a formal *reductio*, where the conclusion is \sim C. Thus, the ultimate conclusion is that impressions are neither independent of our perception, and nor do they continue when we are not perceiving them. See (Rocknak 2013: 181-3).

¹⁵ The bulk of Hume's discussion of the vulgar position is discussed in T 1.4.2.31-40; SBN 201-8 and intermittently in 1.4.3 - 1.4.6.

¹⁶ See (Rocknak 2013: 228-230) to see how Hume's rejection of the vulgar position relates to what he refers to as "true philosophy" on T 1.4.3.9; SBN 223.

¹⁷ See (Rocknak 2013: 181-8). Also, recall that for the purposes of this paper, we are using continuity and distinctness interchangeably with uninterruptedness and invariability.

¹⁸ Although Hume discusses variants of 1.4.2's principle of identity in 1.4.6, the bulk of 1.4.6 consists of giving three separate accounts of the transition from the vulgar perspective to the philosophical perspective. See (Rocknak 2013: 189-217) for more detail.

¹⁹ And so, we must rule out those scholars who maintained that Hume thought that we imagine objects, but we do not imagine them to be causes, e.g. (Price 1940), (Kemp Smith 1941), (Wilbanks 1968) and (Waxman 1994). Moreover, we can also rule out the theory that Hume primarily used the word 'object' in an intentional sense (c.f. (Salmon 1983)). For although Hume did have occasion to use the word 'object' in this sense (e.g. T 1.2.6.2; SBN 66), such usage does not reflect his more comprehensive position on objects.

²⁰See (T 1.3.2.2; SBN 73) and (Rocknak 2013: 29-50). Moreover, it needs to be noted that Hume does, confusingly enough, periodically refer to the natural relation of causality as an "inference" (e.g. T 1.3.6.2; SBN 87, T 1.3.6.12; SBN 92, 1.3.12.20; SBN 139), or as "reason" (T 1.3.8.12; SBN 103). In fact, he even titles 1.3.16, "of the reason of animals," where he discusses non-human animal thought, which is equivalent to the way in which humans naturally associate perceptions. Regardless, this process does not consist of any kind of "comparing."

²¹ C.f. (De Pierris 2002: n. 20), (Schliesser: 2007) and (Owen 1999: 151-153). See also (Rocknak 2013: 29-51).

²² Hume employs a number of different kinds of belief in Book I of the *Treatise*. See (Rocknak 2013: 241-243).

²³ Bennett writes: "The notion of 'contradiction' has no place here unless I already accept a large body of theory: the proposition that I inhabit a world of objects, many hypotheses about their general behavior, and some hypotheses of the form 'I have perceptions of kind K only when in the presence of objects of kind K'" (p. 324). Bennett concludes, "This is the greatest case yet of Hume's failure [to properly] set the scene for an analysis of objectivity-concepts" (p. 324). However, as shown above, Hume does, indeed, take great pains to present "objectivity concepts" on T 1.3.2.1-2; SBN 73-4, T 1.4.2.15-24; SBN 194-199, and T 1.4.2.25-30; SBN 199-201. See (Rocknak 2013: 105-122) where I address Bennett's concerns in the context of the passages that concern him.

²⁴ See (Rocknak 2013), Chapter 2 and pp. 254-9.

²⁵ See (Rocknak 2013: 112-18).