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Meaning(fullness) Without Metaphysics: Another Look at Hume's "Meaning Empiricism"

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Abstract Although Hume has no developed semantic theory, in the heyday of analytic philosophy he was criticized for his "meaning empiricism," which supposedly committed him to a private world of ideas, led him to champion a genetic account of meaning instead of an analytic one, and confused "impressions" with "perceptions of an objective realm." But another look at Hume's "meaning empiricism" reveals that his criterion for cognitive content, the cornerstone both of his resolutely anti-metaphysical stance and his naturalistic "science of human nature," provides the basis for a successful response to his critics. Central to his program for reforming philosophy, Hume's use of the criterion has two distinct aspects: a critical or negative aspect, which assesses the content of the central notions of metaphysical theories to demonstrate their unintelligibility; and a constructive or positive aspect, which accurately determines the cognitive content of terms and ideas.

Keywords Hume · Meaning empiricism · Bennett · Cognitive content · Abstract ideas · Intelligibility

Although Hume has no developed semantic theory as we now understand that notion, in the heyday of analytic philosophy he was roundly criticized for his "meaning empiricism," which his detractors identified with the so-called "ideational theory of meaning." His "meaning empiricism," and almost all his problems, they claimed, are the result of his uncritical commitment to "the theory of ideas," which they supposed he took over wholesale from Locke. Hume's analytic critics accused

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him of a number of sins; among the most prominent were that his "meaning empiricism"

- commits him to a private world of ideas;
- leads him to champion a genetic account of meaning when he should be offering an analytic one;
- leads him to confuse "impressions" with "perceptions of an objective realm."

My aim in addressing these criticisms is not to resuscitate a theory Hume never held, but rather to show how they are ineffectual against a powerful theory he *did* hold. That theory is central to his program for the reform of philosophy, which advocates the elimination of metaphysics and its replacement with an empirical, descriptive "science of human nature" based on "observation and experience." As such, Hume's project has two distinct aspects: a negative or critical aspect, which assesses the content of the central notions of traditional metaphysical theories in order to show that they are unintelligible; and a positive or constructive aspect, which accurately determines the cognitive content of terms and ideas.

The primary operative element in realizing both aspects of this project is Hume's account of how to determine intelligibility or cognitive content. It is thus a theory of *meaningfulness*, not a theory of meaning, and Hume is convinced that

> If a proper use were made of it, [it] might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace on them. […] When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived*? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality. (Hume 1975, pp 21–22)

We can best begin to assess the objections of Hume's analytic critics by looking at how he deploys this theory of meaningfulness in his characteristic approach to what he considers a paradigm of a philosophical problem—the problem of liberty and necessity.

Liberty and Necessity

In Section VIII of the first *Enquiry*, Hume sets out to resolve—or dissolve—"the long disputed question concerning liberty and necessity" (Hume 1975 p 81). Unlike questions that "lie entirely beyond the reach of human capacity, such as those concerning the origin of worlds," where we expect to find philosophers and theologians "beat[ing] the air in their fruitless contests, … never [to] arrive at any determinate conclusion," the question about liberty and necessity is a "subject of common life and experience." Why, then, has it been so "long disputed"?

Hume's answer is that the question "remains still undecided," because "the disputants affix different ideas to the terms employed," so that "the whole controversy has hitherto turned merely upon words." What we need are "a few

intelligible definitions" to clarify the "ambiguous expressions" that have fueled the dispute, which Hume maintains will "immediately … put an end to the whole controversy."

Although the debate concerns our *ideas* of liberty and necessity, it is evident from Hume's account that he takes it to be just as much a dispute about *words*. He describes the controversy as one that is conducted among competent users of a shared public language, who disagree about the proper application of "liberty" and "necessity" because they "affix" different ideas to them. The public character of the controversy is at the forefront of his diagnosis of why "some ambiguity in … expression" has prolonged it: All of us suppose that "the faculties of the mind" are "naturally alike in every individual," for "otherwise nothing could be more fruitless than to reason or dispute together." But given this, it seems

> impossible, if men affix the same ideas to their terms, that they could so long form different opinions of the same subject; especially when they communicate their views, and each party turn themselves on all sides, in search of arguments which may give them the victory over their antagonists. (Hume 1975 p 80–81)

Hume's discussion of liberty and necessity isn't the only place where he emphasizes the public character of language and the way in which philosophical problems and arguments turn just as much on the intelligibility of *terms* as *ideas*. Language is essential to his account of abstract ideas and to his closely related solution to the problem of "distinctions of reason," where language accounts for our ability to distinguish the content of thoughts of which we can't form independent images.

Hume also puts significant weight on the fact that we don't always actively consider the ideas we "affix" to words. "In talking of" complex abstract ideas like

> *government, church, negotiation, conquest*, we seldom spread out in our minds all the simple ideas, of which these complex ones are compos'd. 'Tis however observable, that notwithstanding this imperfection we may avoid talking nonsense on these subjects, and may perceive any repugnance among the ideas, as well as if we had a full comprehension of them. Thus if instead of saying, *that in war the weaker have always recourse to negotiation*, we shou'd say, *that they always have recourse to conquest*, the custom, which follows the words … makes us immediately perceive the absurdity of that proposition; in the same manner as one particular idea may serve us in reasoning concerning other ideas, however different from it in several circumstances. (Hume 1978 p 23)

In the normal run of conversation, we frequently "omit the idea" altogether, letting custom and habit determine our uses of words: "it being usual, after the frequent use of terms, which are really significant and intelligible, to omit the idea, which we wou'd express by them, and to preserve only the custom, by which we recall the idea at pleasure" (Hume 1978 p 224).

Hume's emphasis on language runs throughout his moral theory, and is especially evident in his account of the artificial virtues (Ardal 1977). The conventions of promising, justice, and property all presuppose language use, which can't be established by promise-like conventions. Language must arise instead from a kind of "agreement" more primitive than the conventions that require language for their

adoption (Hume 1978 p 490). Hume's discussion of the artificial virtues emphasizes that language presupposes a shared world where people check their speech and regulate their thoughts by reference to shared criteria:

> Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed 'twere impossible we cou'd ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation. (Hume 1978 p 482)

This emphasis on the public character of language and its importance for human life doesn't mean that Hume is abandoning "the theory of ideas," but it does show that his commitment to it doesn't commit him to an incoherent view about the *privacy* of those ideas.

For Hume, "experience and observation" is experience and observation of a world of persons with whom we interact, from whom we learned language, which in turn makes possible the thoughts we have when we describe what we observe (Broughton 1992). Instead of the Lockean picture of introspecting one's ideas, Hume's scientist of human nature observes people seeing, hearing, and saying things:

> We must therefore glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures. (Hume 1978 p xix)

These "observations" include the testimony of others, which is the primary way we extend the range of our experience to include things we haven't directly observed, which may have occurred in distant places and times. To be sure, all these "cautious observation[s]" are the observer's experiences and they consist of Humean "perceptions," for

> No man can have any other experience but his own. The experience of others becomes his only by the credit which he gives to their testimony; which proceeds from his own experience of human nature. (Greig 1932 p I 349)

Nevertheless, the Humean scientist's "experience" receives the testimony of others in a public language. What we conclude we can report to others, which will convince or fail to convince them, and which we can defend or retract in response to their reactions.

Hume's accounts of the liberty/necessity controversy, abstract ideas, distinctions of reason, and central problems in his moral theory provide ample evidence that he didn't think of his experience as locking him into a private world of mental images. This is one important way in which Hume's version of "the theory of ideas" differs substantially from Locke's, and it provides a successful response to the first objection of his analytic critics to his "meaning empiricism."

Hume's Theory of Definition

Hume begins to disambiguate the "ambiguous expressions" that fueled the issue over liberty and necessity, by examining "the doctrine of necessity," observing that "it is universally allowed that matter is actuated by a necessary force," so "would

we … form a just and precise idea of *necessity*, we must consider whence that idea arises when we apply it to the question of bodies" (Hume 1975 p 82). Hume is confident he can do this because he has already done it. The two definitions of "cause" with which he concluded the preceding section of the *Enquiry* capture this "just and precise" idea of necessity.

Spelling out the method he used in that same section, Hume notes that "the chief obstacle to our improvement in the moral or metaphysical sciences is the obscurity of the ideas, and ambiguity of the terms" (Hume 1975 p 61). And he immediately adds that

> There are no ideas, which occur in metaphysics, more obscure and uncertain, than those of *power, force, energy* or *necessary connexion* …. We shall, therefore, endeavour … to fix, if possible, the precise meaning of these terms, and thereby remove some part of that obscurity, which is so much complained of in this species of philosophy. (Hume 1975 pp 61–62)

Here also he is as concerned with *words* as he is with *ideas*.

Hume has found a mechanism with which we can eliminate the obscurity and uncertainty that plagued previous attempts to get clear about ideas and terms like "necessary connection"—his account of definition. He describes it as "a new microscope or species of optics" (Hume 1975 p 62), predicting that it will produce as dramatic results in the moral sciences as its hardware counterparts have produced in natural philosophy.

Hume's theory of definition is essentially the *reverse* of what is generally called the "Copy Principle": simple ideas are fainter copies of simple impressions, to which they correspond and exactly resemble. Although the Copy Principle is usually taken to be the cornerstone of Hume's "empiricism," I believe his use of its reverse is not only a brilliant strategic device but also the most innovative feature of his "system."

Hume's theory uses a simple series of tests to determine the cognitive content of a word or an idea. Begin with a term. Ask what idea is annexed to it. If there is no such idea, then the term has no cognitive content, however prominently it may figure in philosophy, theology or anywhere else. If an idea is annexed to the term, and it is complex, break it up into the simple ideas that compose it. Then trace each component simple idea back to the impressions that spawned it. These impressions, Hume maintains, "admit not of ambiguity. They are not only placed in a full light themselves, but may throw light on their correspondent ideas, which lie in obscurity" (Hume 1975 p 62).

If the process fails at any point, the term or idea lacks cognitive content. When carried through successfully, however, Hume's theory yields a "just definition"—a precise account of the content of the troublesome idea or term. Anticipating in his *Abstract* of the *Treatise* the passage from the first *Enquiry* I quoted above, Hume concludes that, whenever we are suspicious that

> Any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression is that pretended idea derived*? And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant. […] it were to be wished, that this rigorous method were more practiced in all philosophical debates. (Hume 1978 pp 648–649)

The theory of definition is the centerpiece of Hume's theory of meaningfulness, but it is not all there is to his theory. Its other principal component is his theory of abstract ideas.

Hume's Theory of Abstract Ideas

Crediting Berkeley, Hume describes the theory of abstract ideas as "one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the republic of letters." Although he claims merely to be providing some arguments to confirm it, a closer look reveals that his version of the theory, unlike Berkeley's, is couched in terms of the associative mechanisms.

Language is an essential component. For Hume, abstract ideas are particular ideas "annex'd" to general terms, "which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals … similar to them" (Hume 1978 p 17). What makes this "more extensive signification" possible is *association*: a custom established by the resemblance relation. As Hume puts it,

> A particular idea becomes general by being annex'd to a general term; that is, to a term, which from a customary conjunction has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination. (Hume 1978 p 22)

When we've found a resemblance among several objects that frequently and regularly recur in our experience, we apply the same name to them, despite their differences. "After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of the objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions" (Hume 1978 p 20). The term, Hume says, "revives that custom, which we have acquir'd by surveying them," and in this way, makes it possible for ideas to be "*particular in their nature, but general in their representation*."

It is absolutely necessary that it is the *term*, and *not* any particular idea associated with it, which plays the role of "reviving" the customary conjunction of particular resembling ideas. It is necessary because the particular idea "annex'd" to the general term can also be associated with many other ideas to which it bears many other different relations of resemblance, so the occurrence of that particular idea can't be what recalls, merely by its presence, one set of resembling instances rather than another.

My idea of my Golden Retriever, Maggie, is very likely to be the particular idea that I will "annex" to several general terms, such as "Golden Retriever," "Retriever," "Dog," "Mammal," "Animal," and so on, so my simply having an idea of Maggie on a particular occasion can't determine what particular custom is supposed to be revived on this occasion: only the general term can do that. To paraphrase Wittgenstein, if God looked into my mind on that occasion, she would see only my idea of Maggie. Even she couldn't tell what abstract idea I'm considering, unless she also knew the general term to which my idea of Maggie happens to be "annex'd" on this occasion.

I mentioned earlier that Hume's account of abstract ideas counted heavily against privacy objections to his version of "the theory of ideas." Now it should be easy to see why it does. The general term, which is essential to his account, is a term in a

public language, the use of which I learned through experience. The connection, through custom and resemblance in various respects, between my use of "Golden Retriever" and the many dog-experiences I've had in the past was due, at least in the beginning, to others informing me that the animal in my immediate presence was a type of dog called a "Golden Retriever." When I mistakenly called a Yellow Lab a Golden Retriever, I was corrected, which refined my use of the term, "Golden Retriever," while it also fine-tuned the "revival set" customarily conjoined with it. Although I now regard myself as competent in the use of that and many related terms, I'm still liable to correction if I take the animal in front of me to be a large rat when in fact it is a small Mexican breed of dog.

The process of correction also has philosophical import, which gives Hume's account of abstract ideas a significant role in determining the meaningfulness of philosophical terms of art. His discussion of the alleged idea of power is a case in point.

When Hume investigates "Mr. Locke's chapter of power," which he regards as "the most general and most popular explication" of that notion, he reports that the argument begins with the fact that we find "from experience, that there are several new productions in matter, such as the motions and variations of body," which leads us to conclude "that there must be somewhere a power capable of producing them," from which "we arrive at last by this reasoning at the idea of power and efficacy" (Hume 1978 p 157). Hume then notes that reason can't give rise to this idea, since reason can't ever give rise to an original idea, so "that idea must be deriv'd from experience, and from some particular instances of this efficacy." So, "if we pretend … to have any just idea of this efficacy, we must produce some instance, where the efficacy is plainly discoverable to the mind, and its operations obvious to our consciousness or sensation" (Hume 1978 pp 157–8). But when we look, we find nothing in which we can observe "a power of production." And since "the learned world"—and certainly Locke—has "almost universally rejected" the doctrine of innate ideas, our inability to find any concrete instance of power should justify us in rejecting "the idea as impossible and imaginary."

But Hume realizes that a Lockean with a strong theoretical commitment to the notion of power may not be deterred by our failure to find the source of that idea in impressions, since he may regard power as a theoretical entity employed in metaphysical theoretical explanations, defending it by its usefulness in inferences to the best explanation. As such, he may treat power as an abstract idea. [As Jonathan Bennett puts it, "Confronted by an expression which [Hume's] theory implies to be meaningless, Locke's usual response is not to condemn the expression but to soft-pedal on the theory" (Bennett 2001 p 98).] With this response, the Lockean might simply dismiss Hume's insistence that he can't find an impression of power as dogmatic carping.

But if the Lockean is appealing to an abstract idea of power, for that to be a genuine abstract idea, on Hume's account there must be a concrete instance—a particular idea of power "annex'd" to the general term, "power." But this entails that we've previously experienced at least one concrete instance of power, and we've already determined we haven't. So Locke can't save his theory by appealing to the abstract idea of power. Hume uses this strategy elsewhere, most notably in his treatments of substance, existence, the vacuum, empty time, and empty space.

Genetic or Analytic?

In the heyday of analytic philosophy, one of the most prominent objections to Hume's "meaning empiricism" charged that he mistakenly developed a genetic theory when he should have offered an analytic one. The charge was offered in support of their general objection that Hume confuses *psychology* and *philosophy*, and is frequently doing the one when he should be doing the other. Jonathan Bennett raised the most trenchant form of this objection:

> The crucial trouble is that Hume's theory is genetic rather than analytic: he expresses it as a theory about what must occur before there can be understanding, rather than about what understanding is, or about what it is for an expression to have a meaning. (Bennett 2001 p 103)

For Bennett, Hume is either asking the wrong question or giving the wrong answer to the right one:

> if it really does matter now whether a given expression makes sense, then its making sense or not ought to show now: we ought to be able to settle the question by attending to the present and the future. Yet Hume, in trying to answer the question through his theory, implies that it is best answered by looking to the past. (Bennett 2001 p 103)

Bennett thinks this is ridiculous:

> We have the word in our hands, so to speak; the question is whether it can serve is well, and it is absurd to look for the answer to that in the past rather than in the present and future. (Bennett 2000 p 212)

Bennett thinks this is "absurd" because "understanding is having certain linguistic abilities," so we should look to exercise of those abilities—to how the expression is *used*, rather than—as Bennett thinks Hume does—to someone's past experiences.

There are two initial problems with Bennett's critique: he takes Hume to be asking about an individual's understanding of a given term, and he thinks Hume believes that we must look to the person's past experience to determine whether she understands it. Although both points may seem to reflect a natural way of understanding what Hume says, neither squares either with how he actually proceeds, or with Bennett's own characterization of the problem.

If we revisit Hume's discussion in "Of liberty and necessity," it is clear he doesn't regard the dispute as an individual problem; if it were, there wouldn't be a "dispute" to adjudicate. Hume regards the controversy as a social problem, "a subject of common life and experience," where "common" means both "ordinary" or "everyday," but also means "the kind of experience we all have" or that we have "in common." Since he holds that "all mankind, both learned and ignorant, have always been of the same opinion with regard to this subject" (Hume 1975 p 81), Hume can't mean that it is just "my" or "your" experience that is at stake in determining what "necessity" means; it is "our" collective experience that is his concern.

Further, we can't retrieve our past impressions to settle the issue in any case, "it being impossible to recall the past impressions in order to compare them with our present ideas" (Hume 1978 p 85), so when Hume speaks that way, he must not mean

that we somehow literally recapture our former experiences. The best we can do is to remember them, but then we use them to point publicly to the kinds of experiences that give rise to our "common" idea of necessity, where they are subject to "regulation" by the experiences of others.

But once we've agreed that Hume regards the issue as one that concerns a public matter about our common experience, then it should also be clear, *pace* Bennett, that he also regards it as being about the correct *use* of "necessity." So even though the dispute is framed as one concerning the ideas "affix'd" by the disputants to the term "necessity," it is nonetheless also a dispute about *usage*.

Thus Hume, again *pace* Bennett, also regards the dispute as one about whether the term is *understandable*, and he believes the way to settle such disputes is by applying his theory of definition. This still makes Hume's a *genetic* theory, an *empirical* account of meaningfulness or cognitive content.

Although he doesn't say so explicitly, Bennett seems to think that once we begin to investigate understanding in terms of use, the theory ceases to be genetic and becomes analytic, although there is no independent reason to believe this must be the case. Otherwise, it is hard to see what would be behind his attempt to "improve" on Hume's original account by recasting it as explicitly analytic. The same thought seems to be behind Bennett's further objection that

> we could discover a case of understanding that was not preceded by impressions of the sort demanded by Hume's theory. What someone understands now is not logically tied to what he underwent earlier; the account of 'newly born' adults in Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* is a perfectly consistent fantasy. (Bennett 2001 p 10)

But Hume's account, considered as an empirical theory, doesn't claim that what someone understands now is *logically* tied to her past experiences, so a logically possible counterexample doesn't count as an objection to his theory. For an individual, Hume regards it as a well-founded empirical hypothesis that if she understands the meaning of "necessity," then as a matter of fact she will have had certain experiences, and will have observed certain things, in her past.

Besides, it isn't clear that Shaw's picture of 'newly born' adults is coherent, even as "fantasy," any more than *The Time Machine* shows that time travel is logically possible—a criticism that could be raised, with equal plausibility, either by someone of Bennett's neo-Wittgensteinian persuasion or by a follower of Hume. Hume in fact provides a much more plausible fantasy of a "newly born adult" when he imagines that

> Were a man, such as Adam, created in the full vigour of understanding, without experience, he would never be able to infer motion in [a] second [billiard] ball from the motion and impulse of the first. (Hume 1978 p 650)

Even if we equip Adam with words like "cause," "effect," "necessity," and "power," he wouldn't be able to apply them correctly to concrete cases, so he would fail to satisfy even Bennett's—and most certainly Hume's—criteria for understanding.

Although Hume's test for meaningfulness is genetic, the way he deploys it neither ignores considerations of use nor neglects the social character of determining meaningfulness.

Perception of an Objective Realm

Bennett also criticizes Hume's "meaning empiricism" for his "tendency to equate 'impressions' with 'perceptions of the objective realm'." "As an account of what it is to perceive something objective or outer," Bennett maintains, "this is simple to the point of idiocy" (Bennett 2001 p 99).

Bennett conceives of "perceptions of the objective realm" as the perceptions or experiences of something that is over and above perceptions or experiences themselves, as something to which impressions presumably refer or represent. In doing so, he consistently misreads Hume's claims about impressions and objects. For example, he reads the following as distinguishing *objects*, conceived as something independent of perceptions, of which we have impressions, from *impressions*:

> no object can appear to the senses; or in other words … no impression can become present to the mind, without being determin'd in its degrees both of quantity and quality. (Hume 1978 p 19)

Hume, however, is equating "objects appearing to the senses" and "impressions becoming present to the mind." When he says that our impressions of "a particular color, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple" (Hume 1978 p 2), he is saying that my perception of this particular *object*—the apple—is nothing over and above the union of my impressions of its qualities of smell, taste, color, and so on. For Hume, the buck stops with impressions. Impressions don't "express the *manner* in which our lively perceptions are produced in the soul." That is, they don't express how they were caused—in particular, they don't express that they are the effect of objects outside and independent of the mind and perceptions. This is why Hume says that impressions of sensation "arise in the soul originally, from unknown causes" (Hume 1978 p 7), and

> As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. (Hume 1978 p 84)

Hume thinks it is worse than useless to speculate about the unknown causes of our impressions of sensation because he believes that to do so takes us beyond the bounds of sense. Hume shifts the focus of inquiry away from the traditional search for "ultimate original principles" that purport to give us insight into the ultimate nature of reality in order to concentrate on a description of the "original principles" that in fact govern human nature. He does so because claims about "ultimate principles" are not just false, but are actually incoherent, because they go beyond anything that can be experienced. Hume's objective—and a central aim of his use of his account of meaningfulness—is to move the discussion away from what he regards as incoherent metaphysics to the only area where he thinks a clear understanding of the central concepts of philosophy can be had—the realm of perceptions, of impressions and ideas. In doing so, he is attempting to lead us away from questions about what J. L. Mackie (1980) once called "the fabric of the world,"

where that "fabric" is something distinct from the "system" Hume describes as "what we are pleas'd to call a reality" (Hume 1978 p 108)—the world of sense, memory, and causal inference, systematically interconnected.

Hume calls this system, "the universe of the imagination":

> Since nothing is ever present to the mind but perceptions, and since all ideas are deriv'd from something antecedently present to the mind … 'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions. Let us fix our attention out of ourselves as much as possible; let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. This is the universe of the imagination, nor have we any idea but what is there produc'd. (Hume 1978 pp 67–8)

Hume explains more about how the "universe of the imagination" works in Part iii of Book I: "We form a kind of system" of our strong impressions of sense and memory, "comprehending whatever we remember to have been present, either to our internal perception or senses; and every particular of this system, joined to the present impressions, we are pleas'd to call a *reality*" (Hume 1978 p 108).

So although impressions are not, strictly speaking, capable of truth or falsity, the systemic character of the "universe of the imagination" gives us a means of accepting or rejecting impressions. The standard is *coherence*: "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" (Hume 1978 p 84).

Impressions, like passions, pleasures and pains, are "original existences." They are not representative and are not, strictly speaking, capable of truth or falsity. Only ideas can represent something beyond themselves. They represent the impressions that caused them, and thus are capable of truth or falsity, of accurate representation or misrepresentation. Impressions are corrigible, however, and they can be measured by a standard: Distinguishing between the *corrigibility* of a perception and its being a *representation* of something external to itself is absolutely essential to Hume's "system."

But the "system" isn't complete when his "universe of the imagination" is populated only with impressions of sense and memories, which are just "the first acts of judgment."

> with this system of perceptions there is another connected by custom … By the relation of cause and effect, [we] proceed to the consideration of [the] ideas [of this second system]; and as [we] feel … in a manner necessarily determin'd to view these particular ideas, and that the custom or relation, by which [we are] determin'd, admits not of the least change, [we] form them into a new system, which [we] likewise dignif[y] with the title of *realities*. The first of these systems is the object of the memory and senses; the second of the judgment. (Hume 1978 p 108)

With the addition of causation, Hume's "system" extends beyond the immediate testimonies of our senses and the records of our memories, providing a much more extensive web of belief, and a more fine-grained mechanism for accepting or

rejecting impressions on the basis of their coherence with the whole. Causal inference

> peoples the world, and brings us acquainted with such existences as, by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of my senses and memory. By means of it I paint the universe in my imagination, and fix my attention on any part of it I please. (Hume 1978 p 108)

Hume's "system" now incorporates all his beliefs:

> All this, and every thing else which I believe, are nothing but ideas, tho', by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from the other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination. (Hume 1978 p 108)

In saying that everything he believes is "nothing but ideas," Hume is saying that everything he believes can be traced back to perceptions. Speculating about the causes of perceptions, where those causes are supposed to be something over and above perceptions, is to engage in the kind of search for "ultimate principles" he rejects as incoherent.

Here is a sketch of how Hume's "system" works:

> When I wake up and hear certain familiar sounds, I come to believe that it is raining. My judgment is a representation *because* there are perceptions of the sight and feel of rain, perceptions that I will have if I go to the window and look, or if I go outside and feel the rain. These perceptions *are* the "facts" my judgment is about. My judgment is the result of a causal process: given my past associations between a certain kind of sound and the presence of rain, plus a present impression of that certain kind of sound, I *expect* that if I go to the window I will see it raining on my roses. My expectation is representative, and capable of truth or falsity. So if I go to the window to look at my roses, and see that Charlotte is hosing off the screen on our bedroom window, then my belief misrepresented the facts, and what I believed was false. But the facts that lead me to regard my judgment as true or false, as accurately representing or misrepresenting those facts, are themselves perceptions—impressions, and they are not representative of anything beyond themselves.

Just as individual impressions are corrigible, the system as a whole is fallible, and this fallibility is at the heart of what Hume calls his "mitigated scepticism." Modifying and—it is to be hoped—improving the system is a process best described by Neurath's metaphor of the sailors who must repair their boat while keeping it afloat. Hume has shown that a system allegedly built on more secure "foundations"—"ultimate principles" that go beyond perceptions and somehow validate them—is a metaphysical pipe-dream, not the legitimate basis of a coherent account of human nature, judgment, and belief.

We can now locate the source of Bennett's mistake. In arguing that Hume confuses "impressions" with "perceptions of an objective realm," Bennett understands "perceptions of a objective realm" to be about impressions that are *of* something that isn't itself an impression. This "objective realm" is something that he thinks impressions have reference to, or represent. But as we've seen, Hume thinks it

is incoherent to treat impressions as anything but "original existences." The only meaningful questions about impressions concern their fit with a stable system. Treating them as referring to, or representing, something over and above perceptions is something to which we can give no coherent cognitive content.

Bennett is interested in metaphysical questions about "the objective realm," and he sees Hume as someone who shares his interest in these metaphysical questions. In doing so, he fails to see that Hume shifts the ground of discussion from what he regards as incoherent metaphysics to the only area where we can have a clear understanding of the cognitive contents of the central ideas involved. Metaphysics tempts us to regard questions about objectivity as questions about the ultimate nature of reality. Hume shows us how to resist this temptation. It is this that distinguishes him from both his predecessors and many of his descendents, and it is in this that the depth and originality of his philosophical method and his use of his theory of meaningfulness consists.

At the beginning of the first *Enquiry*, Hume argues that we "must cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate." But when he explains what "true metaphysics" is, it turns out not to be metaphysics at all. Hume is urging nothing less nothing less than the total reform of philosophy. A central part of his program is the profoundly anti-metaphysical aim of abandoning the a priori search for theoretical explanations that supposedly give us insight into the ultimate nature of reality, replacing these "hypothes[es], which can never be made intelligible" with an empirical, descriptive inquiry that answers questions about "the science of human nature" in the only way they can be intelligibly answered.

Traditional metaphysicians went wrong in speculating about the "ultimate original principles" governing human nature, for in doing so, they went beyond anything that could have legitimate cognitive content. Their "hypotheses and systems" weren't properly sciences because they "vainly attempt[ed] to penetrate into subjects utterly inaccessible to the understanding."

Hume proposes to replace the "airy sciences" of the metaphysicians with a "delineation of the distinct parts and powers of the mind." His preferred terms for his project, "mental geography," and "anatomy of the mind," characterize the way he conceives of his descriptive anti-metaphysical alternative to traditional ways of theorizing about human nature. Although his is an empirical project, Hume maintains that it can justifiably claim greater certainty than the "absurdity and error" of the metaphysicians' theories.

Hume's program for reform in philosophy thus has two related aspects: the elimination of metaphysics and the establishment of an empirical experimental science of human nature. His method of determining intelligibility—his theory of definition augmented by his account of abstract ideas—is the means by which he will execute both aspects of that project—meaningfulness without metaphysics.

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