

# Copy Principle in Hume's Philosophy of Mind

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## 1.

Hume divides our mental episodes into impressions and ideas. Then, he draws a relation between them by introducing the Copy Principle (CP). Here is the CP:

### CP:

“all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.” (T 1.1.1.7)

Hume's resulting empiricist theory of the conscious mind faces several well-known objections, one of which I will mention here. The objection is the famous example of the missing shade of blue (MSB), which Hume acknowledged himself as a counterexample to his Copy Principle (1.1.1.10). He claims that it is possible for us to visualize a particular shade of blue without seeing it by facing other present shades of blue. But if it is true that we have some simple ideas without corresponding simple impressions, his CP is no longer a general principle which we can rely on. His own response to this objection is that “the instance is so particular and singular, that it is scarce worth our observing and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general the maxim” (1.1.1.10).

However, if a general maxim has some counterexamples, there is a responsibility for the author to reassess his maxim and amend it for a better one. In this paper, my intention is to investigate this objection and finally give a new solution to it that would work in Hume's Philosophical System.

## 2.

One of the responsibilities of a person who is researching in works of a philosopher is that although he is working on a special part of his works, he should always have his mind on the whole project of his too. Accordingly, one of Hume's projects that we should bear in mind is the Conceivability Principle.

Due to this principle, for each possible idea we have a corresponding possible impression; in short, if something is conceivable, then it is also perceivable. There is an equal situation in MSB too, we can be sure that the missing shade is perceivable because its idea is possible. Some may concern that due to the fact that MSB is an objection to a general maxim we cannot accept his other inferences and use them in our reasoning. I agree with these considerations, but there is another notion that worth emphasizing on and it is the presupposition of the possibility of the shade in this example. Therefore, when we are talking about the idea of the missing shade, we are considering the relation of it to its corresponding impression whether [or not] this idea derives from a simple impression. The possibility of this impression is another issue which is not the main focus of neither Hume nor his other detractors.

Now that we understand the controversy between MSB and CP, I can give two different solutions to this problem. The first point is a psychological problem that I think this example has according to which we can understand why Hume dismisses it. The second point that I will discuss in this paper is the fact that even if we take this problem seriously, there is no need to alteration of the whole CP and we can fix it by just adding some extra words that Hume did not consider in his view.

For the first part, it is worth considering these conditions and how they are different from the first one which is the real MSB:

**MSB (1):**

you have different shades of blue lined up regarding the intensity of their shades, but there is a blank spot among them.

**MSB (2):**

you have just a shade of blue.

**MSB (3):**

you have different shades of blue lined up regarding the intensity of their shades.

**MSB (4):**

you have different shades of blue lined up regarding the intensity of their shades and there is a blank space at the last spot.

Now, what is the point in here that makes the MSB (1) an objection to CP and not the other ones? First of all, by giving a simple impression or idea we cannot make our way to a second idea which is not correspondent to it, therefore, MSB (2) cannot be the case by which we can see the missing shade of blue.

Before mentioning the differences between other conditions, I should mention another notion which is important in Hume's philosophy of mind. The thing

which is dividing perceptions into two types is the notion of vivacity. Hume explains, all the impressions are much more vivid than their correspondent ideas. He uses vivacity to differentiate memory from imagination too, which is not the main focus of this paper right now.

Now by considering MSB (3) we cannot assure that people will get to the idea of the missing shade by themselves and some people may not even recognize the missing one and I can refer to the *presupposition* that I mentioned earlier which is something that MSB (1) has in it. Accordingly, we narrowed our situations down to MSB (1) and MSB (4). Even though it is arguably acceptable that by considering these two someone can have the idea of the missing shade, the distinction here, by using Hume's own terminology, is the distinction between the vivacity of their ideas. The idea corresponding to the MSB (1) is more vivid than the idea of the MSB (4), therefore we cannot name it a simple idea when we have much more vivid one than that.

By considering these distinctions from the above, we can infer these conditions which are necessary for MSB to make a correspondent simple idea in our minds:

- 1- according to MSB (2) we understand there should be a variation of shades.
- 2- according to MSB (3), we should be aware of the possibility of a missing shade, otherwise, we cannot have the idea of it.
- 3- according to MSB (4), for MSB to be an objection, it should make a vivid idea which we can call a simple one.

Now we can see that so narrow and rare is the MSB that it is not the case that even if it was true we had to omit Hume's maxim for it. And, we can have some sympathy for him when he says "it is scarce worth our observing". In addition, we could see some of it is rather psychological than a philosophical problem and it is not a universal judgment in every similar case.

However, despite the rarity of it, it is still a counterexample that worth paying attention due to the fact that for a maxim to be satisfying it should meet all the conditions. Accordingly, there should be some solution for making it better and more accurate which brings us to the next part of the paper.

### 3.

There are two approaches regarding MSB. Some may neglect the objection by saying that a shade of a color is not simple, some others, on the contrary, may accept its simplicity and dig his writings a little deeper to find a better solution

for it. In my opinion the second approach is more accurate due to the fact that in the process of reading a philosopher's works the easy way out of the contradictions is simply just by stating that the opinion or the statements of his are false; however, we can all agree that he should have considered these problems and controversies and the only hinder for him not to complete his statements was the limitations of time.

For the first approach, we should consider that Hume emphasizes on the fact that these are simple impressions and ideas and we should read his works more sympathetic rather than easily reject his ideas, so we should not say that it is not simple. However, there is a mediated solution between these two approaches, namely radically saying that a shade of a color is not simple or saying that it is. According to Durland<sup>1</sup>, Hume never says that in reality, we have these simple ideas as simple impressions. For example, it is true that we have the simple idea of white color but whenever we see it, it is not distinguishable from a boy carrying it. Durland quotes this paragraph from Hume as an evidence of support:

'Tis certain that the mind wou'd never have dream'd of distinguishing a figure from the body figur'd, as being in reality neither distinguishable, nor different, nor separable; did it not observe, that even in this simplicity there might be contain'd many different resemblances and relations. Thus when a globe of white marble is presented, we receive only the impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form, nor are we able to separate and distinguish the colour from the form. But observing afterwards a globe of black marble and a cube of white, and comparing them with our former object, we find two separate resemblances, in what formerly seem'd, and really is, perfectly inseparable. After a little more practice of this kind, we begin to distinguish the figure from the colour by a distinction of reason; that is, we consider the figure and colour together, since they are in effect the same and undistinguishable; but still view them in different aspects according to the resemblances, of which they are susceptible. When we wou'd consider only the figure of the globe of white marble, we form in reality an idea both of the figure and color, but tacitly carry our eye to its resemblance with the globe of black marble.' (T 25)

Durland, by this argument, claims that although a shade of color is a simple idea, it is not simple in another meaning due to the fact that in a shade of color there are three different aspects, namely saturation, hue, and brightness, by which it differentiates from others. Accordingly, if we are in MBS situation, due to having other variations of the color blue, we can get the exact hue, saturation, and brightness just by seeing the other ones and it is analogous to Hume's example of us getting the idea of the color of black when we face the color white. These three are distributed in other shades and we can have the idea of the missing color just by scanning the other ones.

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<sup>1</sup> Durland, 2011

Durland calls his notion “distinguishing and reconstructing hypothesis” and paraphrases the CP in this way:

**Durland’s CP:**

all our simple ideas in the first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent [unless they are produced by a distinction (or distinctions) of reason].<sup>2</sup>

Even though Durland’s solution to MSB seems possible and can solve some rejections that people have regarding the simplicity of a shade of color, I find this solution yet not as sympathetic to Hume as it should be. Owing to the fact that in Hume’s time there was not still clear that how we can distinguish a shade of color into hue, saturation, and brightness. I think rather than giving him a contemporary scientific solution, we should find some solutions by his own Philosophical System. I contend that he had some idea in mind when he considered this MSB and the solution which Durland gives definitely is not the one that he had in mind. In addition, using reason for the solution of the MSB problem has its own controversies regarding Hume’s Philosophical System which I will mention in next paragraphs.

According to a lecture by Millican<sup>3</sup>, Hume divides relations into constant and inconstant.<sup>4</sup> We have these relations both in our reason and perception. Considering Durland’s CP we can see that his amendment for MBS problem is by using reason as a faculty which can distinguish and then reconstruct the simple idea of a shade of a color. But, we can see that if we say that this kind of idea-making is inconstant and by reason, the only possibility for us to make it is by using the causation, however, Hume argues in his writings that causation as a habit of mind which has no simple impression and therefore no simple idea for it. Accordingly, we should say that by considering Durland’s CP we should contend that this simple idea is reasoned by causation which is not a simple idea and is vague in itself. So, how a simple idea can be made by a habit rather than a simple impression?

Therefore, there remains three ways by which this relation can be explained: constant reasoning, constant perception, inconstant perception. Constant reasoning can be excluded too due to the fact that the only relation in it is about the quantities of a thing and according to Hume this kind of reasoning is about demonstrative ones like mathematical arguments, in which we are

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<sup>2</sup> Durland, 2011, p.117

<sup>3</sup> Millican, 2012

<sup>4</sup> Constant: Those relations that “depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together” (i.e. resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, proportions in quantity or number)

Inconstant: Those relations that “may be chang’d without any change in the ideas” (i.e. identity, relations of time and place, cause and effect).

certain about the truth or falsity of each premise and conclusions. Now that reason is omitted we can reject the Durland's CP, but there are still two possibilities left. The kind of relation that simple ideas and corresponding ideas have is either constant or inconstant (it is clear that they are both in perception). According to Millican, relations about degrees are intuitions and therefore they are considered as constant relations. So, we can make some changes in Durland's CP by introducing this New CP:

**New CP:**

all our simple ideas in the first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent [unless they are produced by a distinction (or distinctions) of intuition].

But we cannot finish here due to the fact that the term intuition is a vague term place of which should be explained in Hume's system. For the New CP to work, we should place the intuition faculty in the impressions and not in imagination or memory because otherwise it would be a part of the ideas' faculty again and we would have the problem of deriving a simple idea from another simple idea, which was not in Hume's CP maxim. On the other hand, if the intuition would be in the impressions therefore when we have the idea of MSB it was distinguished and constructed when we were facing a line of shades. I should mention here that although we used the Durland's terms, it has another usage in this New CP because there is no longer any hues, saturation or brightness for intuition to distinguish and there are just the simple ideas of the shades. One can object this New CP by mentioning that in Durland's CP the impressions were available and the only thing that mind was doing was distinguishing and constructing by using them, but in New CP there is no impression of the MSB and we are not seeing it and it is not present for us. Therefore, you are taking a step backward regarding Durland's CP. I should mention here that this objection is not acceptable for this New CP owing to the fact that I put the place of the intuition in the impression itself, accordingly when we have the idea of the MSB it is because of seeing it intuitively in our impression.

I think we have got to a point in which there is no problem when we consider MSB in New CP. Although there are some other problems someone can address in here, regarding the ambiguity of intuition itself, namely they are: Is intuition a psychological explanation? Is it a rational intuition that someone can achieve by exercising? Does everyone have this ability? Etc... These questions need more investigation and the place for answering them is not in this paper although it is worthy of investigation.

#### 4.

- Durland, Karánn 2011, Hume's First Principle, His Missing Shade, and His Distinctions of Reason
- Dorsch, Fabian, 2016, THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PHILOSOPHY OF IMAGINATION, p.40-54
- Millican, 2012, <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/3-humes-logic-relations-and-forms-argument>