

Notes on Hume's Copy Principle

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The Copy Principle and Its Basis

What is generally known as Hume's Copy Principle (which he calls his "first principle") combines his empiricism and atomism, in asserting:

"that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent." (T 1.1.1.7)

Elsewhere (A 6, E 2.9 n. 1) he acknowledges that this is intended to be a clarification of Locke's empiricism. But whereas Locke's main focus in most of his *Essay* was to argue for empiricism by showing at great length that our various ideas could have an empirical foundation, Hume seems to take empiricism relatively for granted, and uses it as a *tool* to clarify our ideas by finding their empirical source (and sometimes as a *weapon* to reject bogus ideas, as advertised at E 2.9). How far he takes it for granted is perhaps indicated by the extent and force of his arguments for it.

Hume's arguments for the Copy Principle are in fact relatively cursory, and he consistently gives just two. First, he denies that any counterexamples can be found:

"After the most accurate examination, of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without any exception, and that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea." (T 1.1.1.5, cf. E 2.6)

He later spells this out a bit further: "Such a constant conjunction, in such an infinite number of instances, can never arise from chance; but clearly proves a dependence" one way or the other. That impressions give rise to ideas (rather than the reverse) is then clear because I "find by constant experience, that the simple impressions always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas, but never appear in the contrary order". After various examples, Hume sums up: "The constant conjunction of our resembling perceptions, is a convincing proof, that the one are the causes of the other; and the priority of the impressions is an equal proof, that our impressions are the causes of our ideas, not our ideas of our impressions." (T 1.1.1.8).

Hume's second argument appeals to the lack of relevant ideas in those who lack the corresponding sense:

"wherever by any accident the faculties, which give rise to any impressions, are obstructed in their operations, as when one is born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas; ... likewise where they have never been put in action to produce a particular impression [such as] the taste of a pine-apple ..." (T 1.1.1.9, cf. E 2.7)

This second argument is particularly cursory in the *Treatise*, and described as a "plain and convincing phaenomenon" to *confirm* the "convincing proof" claimed in the previous paragraph. But as Bennett (2002, pp. 100-101; 2001, p. 213) points out, it isn't so entirely obvious that

"A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds." (E 2.7).

Maybe the blind man can privately have coloured experiences, and simply be unable to communicate these to us because he is unaware what we mean by "red", "yellow" etc. He might,

indeed, be completely unaware what we mean by “colour”, since he cannot link our use of the word to public external phenomena.¹

Garrett (1997, pp. 46-8) defends Hume from this objection, arguing that although one might not be able to *demonstrate* to others that one was having a simple idea without a simple impression, the fact that blind and deaf people (etc.) don’t *claim* to have such ideas can be taken as significant. If they, like us, find that “the presented content of those mental representations that are less ‘lively’ than (Humean) impressions is copied from the experienced content of those impressions” (p. 47), then that gives empirical support to the Copy Principle.² Further evidence comes from people whose senses are repaired, who for example as adults become able to see for the first time. They report *new* sensations, apparently.

Hume’s first argument seems potentially rather more problematic, especially when he intends to use the Copy Principle to reject supposedly bogus simple ideas on the ground that they lack corresponding impressions. For someone who believes that such an idea – *X*, say – is *genuine* will presumably disagree with the general claim “that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it” – he will allege that *X* is a counterexample to Hume’s first argument, and thus apparently prevent that argument from getting started. Hume doesn’t seem to have explicitly considered this counter-move. Again Garrett defends him, pointing out that Hume doesn’t just use the Copy Principle simplistically as a tool of rejection: “when he argues against the existence of a certain (putative) idea, he never argues *merely* that we do not find such a corresponding impression in experience; he also always argues that no impression could possibly satisfy the requirements we implicitly demand for such a perception.” (p. 49).³ So such an idea would not merely contradict the Copy Principle, “It would ... require the admission of an entirely distinct representational faculty”, in addition to our imagistic imagination. Fair enough, but one might wonder whether this defence is sufficient as applied to “ideas” *which are not obviously imagistic in the first place*, notably those that Hume has to work so hard to explain in imagistic terms (necessary connexion, body, the self etc.). Is it really legitimate to extend an argument which seems plausible in the case of *sensory* ideas to these more contentious cases? It looks as though Hume might have to appeal to explanatory simplicity to address this standoff, by arguing – as Garrett hints – that the Humean account of ideas is to be preferred precisely because it requires only one “representational faculty”. However his opponent could respond that this is an *over*-simplification, given the variety of ideas that we actually possess.

¹ Later in the paragraph just quoted, Hume makes the parallel point about ideas of passions and emotions: “A man of mild manners can form no idea of inveterate revenge or cruelty; nor can a selfish heart easily conceive the heights of friendship or generosity.” (E 2.7). Bennett’s privacy-based objection seems weaker in these cases, because we express our passions indirectly through action and speech, and it can become clear through conversation if someone is incapable of empathising with, for example, expressions of revenge or friendship. Whether it is true that someone incapable of such empathy is incapable of forming the relevant ideas is potentially controversial: does an idea of revenge really require one to have the relevant feeling oneself, or is it sufficient to have a conceptual understanding that some people feel a strong desire to harm others in return for harms caused to themselves?

² We can also consider whether we have any ideas (imagistic components of thought) that are not copied from sensory or reflective experiences – perhaps ideas that might be presented sensorily if only we had other faculties (e.g. bat-like sonar).

³ Echoing Hume, Garrett then instances putative perceptions of a vacuum, time without change, objective necessary connexions or moral values, and simple physical or mental substances.

The Missing Shade of Blue and the Copy Principle

Immediately after arguing for his Copy Principle, in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*, Hume rather confusingly offers a potential counter-example to it, his famous “missing shade of blue”:

“There is however one contradictory phaenomenon, which may prove, that ’tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions. I believe it will readily be allow’d, that the several distinct ideas of colours, which enter by the eyes, or those of sounds, which are convey’d by the hearing, are really different from each other, tho’ at the same time resembling. ... Suppose therefore a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue, for instance, which it never has been his fortune to meet with. Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; ’tis plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other. Now I ask, whether ’tis possible for him, from his own imagination, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, tho’ it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of opinion that he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions; tho’ the instance is so particular and singular, that ’tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim.” (T 1.1.1.10, copied almost *verbatim* at E 2.8)

The prominence of this counter-example suggests that Hume does not see it as particularly damaging to his “first principle”, but his final sentence may seem overly complacent – wouldn’t *any* counter-example pose a serious objection to his relying on that principle? And is the example really so “particular and singular”, given that parallel examples could be imagined for other senses also (such as hearing of particular notes, or feeling of different levels of warmth)?

In Hume’s defence, we can start by noting that he clearly presents his Copy Principle as an *empirical* claim – founded on observation and experience – so admission of an occasional exception is not nearly as damaging as if he had claimed that the Principle was founded on an *a priori* demonstration.⁴ Moreover – and despite the contrary impression given by his strident assertion of it at E 2.9 – Hume generally *uses* his Copy Principle not so much to dismiss would-be ideas as bogus (on the basis that they have no corresponding impression), but rather, to shed light on their real nature (by revealing their actual impression-source).⁵ Again, this makes the

⁴ As Hume himself would certainly appreciate: “’Tis not in demonstrations as in probabilities, that difficulties can take place, and one argument counter-balance another, and diminish its authority. A demonstration, if just, admits of no opposite difficulty; and if not just, ’tis a mere sophism, and consequently can never be a difficulty. ’Tis either irresistible, or has no manner of force.” (T 1.2.2.6).

⁵ The most prominent case of this is Hume’s search for the impression of necessary connexion (in T 1.3.14 and E 7), which he uses not negatively to dismiss the corresponding idea, but positively to define both cause and causal necessity. Some other examples: “we have ... no idea of substance, *distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities*” (T 1.1.6.1, emphasis added; the italicised caveat should be borne in mind also when Hume appears to deny the notion of mental substance at T 1.4.5.2-6, though he does there entirely reject the notion of *inherence*); “The idea of existence ... is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent” (T 1.2.6.4); at T 1.4.4.12, Hume rejects the idea of solidity *when understood “without any resembling objects” as “affirm’d by modern philosophy”* (which does not rule out a sensation-based idea of solidity); “We have no impression of self or substance, *as something simple and individual*. We have, therefore, no idea of them *in that sense*.” (T Appx 11, emphasis added).

occasional exception far less damaging, since the Principle is being used as a tool for investigation, rather than as a would-be decisive criterion.

Another obvious point is that the idea of the missing shade of blue is clearly one that *could* have a corresponding impression – the person concerned has just never yet encountered such an impression. So it might seem that this sort of exception to the Copy Principle does nothing to weaken it as applied to ideas for which we cannot even imagine a corresponding impression, such as alleged “pure and intellectual” ideas of mathematical objects (T 1.3.1.7), simple substances and selves, or Descartes’ supposed innate ideas of God and extension. (All well and good, but note again, as in the final paragraph of the Copy Principle discussion above, that Hume’s opponent could simply respond that such ideas – for which no sensory impression or idea can be imagined – are precisely those that demonstrate the falsehood of the Principle.)

Even if the missing shade of blue does little to weaken the Copy Principle as applied to the supposedly bogus would-be ideas that Hume wishes to target, it might seem a little odd that he accepts the counter-example so complacently rather than attempting to explain it away. One likely consideration here is his commitment to the simple/complex distinction, and his use of it to explicate his Copy Principle. Coloured points are his paradigm simple visual ideas,⁶ and if a simple idea could be derived from other simple ideas – rather than by being copied from a simple impression – then this seriously smudges the simple/complex distinction and complicates the formulation of an adequate Copy Principle.

But could Hume perhaps simply change his mind on the simplicity of colour ideas, and treat them as *complex*, for example by thinking of them as mixtures of *hue*, *saturation*, and *brightness*, with each of these components liable to individual variation that can generate different colour ranges? First, it’s not clear that this would provide a sufficiently radical solution, because one could easily imagine a “missing hue” or “missing level of brightness” problem parallel to the initial missing shade of blue problem. But also, as Garrett points out (1997, p. 73), such a solution would imply a violation of Hume’s Separability Principle, which (at least in the *Treatise*) he would be reluctant to accept.⁷ So this would potentially threaten his atomism and his simple/complex distinction much more broadly than just in the case of colour ideas.

A more attractive solution would be to accept that *colour* ideas in particular – and perhaps some other sensory ideas – can “blend” together, as Hume indeed hints when discussing the blending of “impressions and passions”:

“Ideas never admit of a total union, but are endow’d with a kind of impenetrability, by which they exclude each other, and are capable of forming a compound by their conjunction, not by their mixture. On the other hand, impressions and passions are susceptible of an entire union; and *like colours*, may be blended so perfectly together, that each of them may lose itself, and contribute only to vary that uniform impression, which arises from the whole. Some of the most curious phaenomena of the human mind are deriv’d from this property of the passions.”
(T 2.2.6.1, emphasis added)

⁶ This becomes clear with Hume’s ink spot thought-experiment at T 1.2.1.4.

⁷ The point here being that one cannot have a *hue* without some *saturation* and *brightness* – these qualities are not separable.

This occurs in a context where Hume is discussing the “blending” of love with benevolence (and hatred with anger), in attempting to account for a “stubborn” complication in his philosophy of the passions (T 2.2.6.2). Here he acknowledges that quite distinct ideas, which are “different ... and only conjoin’d ... by the original constitution of the mind” (T 2.2.6.6) can “be blended so perfectly together” that they “contribute only” by affecting the single “uniform impression, which arises from the whole”. And in illustrating what he has in mind, he gives the blending of *colours* as an illustrative example!⁸ So it would then seem entirely in the same spirit to allow for blending of *colour ideas*, allowing that a *simple* “uniform” idea of a new colour can be generated by the blending of other simple ideas of colour (which themselves were copied from simple impressions). This would, however, still complicate Hume’s statement of the Copy Principle, for it would no longer be the case that every simple idea has to be copied from a simple impression. And perhaps Hume felt that it might also open the door to more potentially awkward complications, and further pressures on the simple/complex distinction, if blending of simple ideas were to be acknowledged as a possibility. In a context where Lockean empiricism was already widely accepted, and his Copy Principle was therefore likely to be relatively uncontroversial, perhaps Hume felt that it was most prudent not to open this can of worms!

The Copy Principle and Meaning Empiricism

Hume often equates a word’s being meaningful with its being associated with a legitimate idea. In this light, the Copy Principle – that any legitimate idea must be copied from an impression – takes us close to a form of “meaning empiricism”, whereby any meaningful term has to have some “empirical cashability” in experience. In an influential discussion, Bennett (2002, pp. 103-5) suggested that Hume’s principle is motivated by an implicit grasp of this empiricist principle, rather than by any psychological consideration about mental images etc. This has not been a popular line in more recent literature, but even if one takes it to be interpretatively implausible, there is interest in seeing such a connection being drawn between Hume’s own philosophy and the meaning empiricism that his work inspired (not least in the Logical Positivist tradition of the Vienna Circle and writers such as A. J. Ayer).

Secondary References

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⁸ This is a point noted by Garrett (1997, p. 52), who develops this sort of approach in more detail.