

Hume's Sceptical Texts 4: Of the Modern Philosophy

(*Treatise* 1.4.4)

4.1 Principles of the imagination: the General/Trivial Distinction

In the final paragraph of *Treatise* 1.4.3, "Of the antient philosophy", Hume ridicules Aristotelian philosophers for attributing emotions to external objects:

"among all the instances, wherein the Peripatetics have shewn they were guided by every trivial propensity of the imagination, no one is more remarkable than their *sympathies, antipathies, and horrors of a vacuum*. There is a very remarkable inclination in human nature, to bestow on external objects the same emotions, which it observes in itself; and to find every where those ideas, which are most present to it. This inclination, 'tis true, is suppress'd by a little reflection, and only takes place in children, poets, and the antient philosophers. It appears in children, by their desire of beating the stones, which hurt them: In poets, by their readiness to personify every thing: And in the antient philosophers, by these fictions of sympathy and antipathy. We must pardon children, because of their age; poets, because they profess to follow implicitly the suggestions of their fancy: But what excuse shall we find to justify our philosophers in so signal a weakness?" (T 1.4.3.11)

But this raises a natural objection, given that Hume's own investigation of human nature crucially depends on induction, which he has analysed as depending on *custom*, a principle of the imagination:

"But here it may be objected, that the imagination, according to my own confession, being the ultimate judge of all systems of philosophy, I am unjust in blaming the antient philosophers for making use of that faculty, and allowing themselves to be entirely guided by it in their reasonings. In order to justify myself, I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes: And the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular; such as those I have just now taken notice of. The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, ... The latter are neither unavoidable to mankind, nor necessary, or so much as useful in the conduct of life; ... For this reason the former are received by philosophy, and the latter rejected." (T 1.4.4.1)¹

In the conclusion of Book 1, at T 1.4.7.7, Hume will characterise this a bit differently, as between "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination" and "the trivial suggestions of the fancy". Hence I shall from §6.1 onwards name it The General/Trivial Distinction. It becomes crucial in that section when it appears to break down under pressure from Hume's sceptical investigations, especially his "scepticism with regard to reason". But for now, Hume sets out to investigate whether the "*modern philosophy*" of Locke is based – as it "pretends to be" – on "the solid, permanent, and consistent principles of the imagination" (T 1.4.4.2).

4.2 The basis of the modern philosophy

The "fundamental principle" of the modern philosophy is Locke's distinction between **primary qualities** (such as size, shape and motion), which are understood to be genuinely present in objects, and **secondary qualities** (such as colours and tastes) which are understood to be "nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv'd from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of the objects" (T 1.4.4.3).²

Hume suggests that the only "satisfactory" argument for this view "is deriv'd from the variations of those impressions, even while the external object, to all appearance, continues the same". Such variations can depend on our state of our health, "the different complexions and constitutions of men", and "the difference

¹ The paragraph continues: "One who concludes somebody to be near him, when he hears an articulate voice in the dark, reasons justly and naturally; tho' that conclusion be deriv'd from nothing but custom, ... But one, who is tormented he knows not why, with the apprehension of spectres in the dark, may, perhaps, be said to reason, and to reason naturally too: But then it must be in the same sense, that a malady is said to be natural; as arising from natural causes, tho' it be contrary to health, ..."

² Here Hume is misinterpreting Locke, who considered secondary qualities (e.g. colour, taste, smell) to be *powers in objects* to produce the relevant ideas in us, by means of their primary qualities (e.g. shape, size, texture, solidity). But he is right to say that secondary qualities are understood to differ from primary qualities in lacking any *resemblance* to the qualities of objects.

of [objects'] external situation and position". The conclusion drawn, he says, "is likewise as satisfactory as can possibly be imagin'd" (T 1.4.4.3), with the argument going as follows (T 1.4.4.4):

1. "When different impressions of the same sense [e.g. different colours] arise from any object" it is not possible for the object to resemble all of these different impressions.
2. Therefore "many of our impressions have no external model or archetype", being "nothing but internal existences" arising "from causes, which no ways resemble them".
3. These impressions appear "nothing different from the other impressions of colour, sound, &c."
4. "From like effects we presume like causes."
5. We conclude that all of these sensory impressions "are deriv'd from a like origin" – so *all of them* are "internal existences" without resembling causes.

If secondary qualities are not in objects, then we are left with "primary qualities, as the only *real* ones, of which we have any adequate notion", namely "extension and solidity, with their different mixtures and modifications; figure, motion, gravity, and cohesion" (T 1.4.4.5).

4.3 Hume's objection to the modern philosophy

Hume opposes this Lockean theory by focusing on one objection, which takes inspiration from George Berkeley: "If colours, sounds, tastes, and smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive is possest of a real, continu'd, and independent existence; not even motion, extension and solidity, which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on." (T 1.4.4.6). The objection claims that *we cannot form any coherent idea of a body with these (supposedly objective) primary qualities, when all of our primary quality ideas are inextricably bound up with (supposedly only subjective) secondary quality ideas.*

Here is an outline of Hume's argument for this objection, as presented at T 1.4.7-9:

"The idea of motion necessarily supposes that of a body moving. Now what is our idea of the moving body? It must resolve itself into the idea of extension or of solidity; ... I have [already] shewn that 'tis impossible to conceive extension, but as compos'd of parts, endow'd with colour or solidity ... [ultimately] such as are perfectly simple and indivisible. These simple and indivisible parts, not being ideas of extension, must be ... conceiv'd as colour'd or solid. Colour is excluded from any real existence. The reality, therefore, of our idea of extension depends upon the reality of that of solidity, ... The idea of solidity is that of two objects, which ... cannot penetrate each other; ... Solidity, therefore, is perfectly incomprehensible ... without the conception of some bodies, which are solid, ... Now what idea have we of these bodies? The ideas of colours, sounds, and other secondary qualities are excluded. The idea of motion depends on that of extension, and the idea of extension on that of solidity. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that the idea of solidity can depend on either of them. For that wou'd be [circular]. Our modern philosophy, therefore, leaves us no just nor satisfactory idea of solidity; nor consequently of matter."

He goes on to elaborate this argument further (T 1.4.10-14), before concluding on a highly sceptical note:

"Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses; or more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continu'd and independent existence of body. When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude, that neither colour, sound, taste, nor smell have a continu'd and independent existence. When we exclude these sensible qualities there remains nothing in the universe, which has such an existence." (T 1.4.4.15)

Here "cause and effect" comes into the picture through step 4 in the argument above, "From like effects we presume like causes".

This final paragraph seems to be hinting that "the modern philosophy" is not after all defensible in terms of "principles [of the imagination] which are permanent, irresistible, and universal; such as the customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes", assuming that belief in "the continu'd and independent existence of body" is also plausibly one of these principles. Thus Hume's attempt to "justify" his own philosophy in T 1.4.4.1 is looking threatened. This threat will grow hugely when the sceptical argument of T 1.4.1 is brought to bear in the conclusion of Book 1 (at T 1.4.7.7).