Phenomenal Quality and Truth in Hume

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Context and Historical Grounding

In this essay, I explore David Hume's empirical investigation of the mind found in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. As an eminent empiricist, Hume strives to describe the mind based solely on what one can encounter in experience and describes a system by which we get from sensations to ideas to truth and falsehood. Upon a close reading of his theory, I find that Hume's system suggests that we look even closer within experience for the sources truth and falsehood and shift our focus the qualities or attributes of experience itself to understand how we perceive such things. Hume calls for an investigation of the mind independently of its objects, or the specific things we think about such as chairs, tables or ripe red tomatoes. Considering this, I think there is a constant element found in both sensations (which Hume calls 'impressions') and ideas that must be apparent to or presented by the mind. I argue that it is these phenomenal qualities that hold together Hume's famous Copy Principle, or the theory that our ideas are cast from their corresponding sensations. Moreover, I strive to show how David Hume anticipates contemporary phenomenological ideas and the contemporary enterprise of describing experience itself and the knowledge contained within it.

David Hume is one of philosophy's most important and influential thinkers for his revealing inquiries into the nature of human understanding from a strictly empirical position. Unsatisfied with the merit of metaphysics, Hume turns his reason on what is what is apparent to the mind and presents in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that we derive truth not from extensive *a priori* investigations, but rather from experience – a thought that provided philosophy with important suggestions about the role of experience and *a posteriori* conclusions in the perception of truth. Additionally, Hume's work presents a focused empirical investigation that, in hindsight, anticipates ideas about the structure of experience itself, its object-independent character and the importance of phenomenal quality in the perception of truth.

To demonstrate this, I will attempt to present Hume's important conclusions from the *Enquiry* and describe their compatibility with phenomenological ideas about the quality and structure of experience itself. Moreover, I will attempt to show that if we discuss Hume's empirical investigations and analyze them with these phenomenological ideas, we find that the exclusively empirical discovery of truth and falsehood that Hume suggests involves an appeal to the phenomenal quality of experience. However, in order to move forward inspired by Hume's ideas, we must move away from a steadfast empirical strategy. If we are to employ Hume's empirical approach, we are ultimately provoked to develop a phenomenological account of experience if we desire a complete theory of mind.

Powers of the Mind

In Section I of his *Enquiry* (E I.13), Hume comments on the remarkable reality that although the operations or 'powers' of the mind, e.g. will, understanding and imagination, are most intimately present to us, they seem to be obscured and difficult to define. In response, he asserts that it is "no

inconsiderable part of science" to know these operations of the mind and to characterize them in order to dissolve the obscurity they are shrouded in. Here, Hume's use of the word "operations" can be interpreted in an active or passive sense. The term is can be interpreted to refer to the happenings or occurrences of the mind, which are passive to the perceiver. Thus, the "operations" Hume cites refer to the happenings on the stage and the mental occurrences of understanding, imagining etc. On the other hand, we can interpret it as an active operation, i.e. that the mind itself acts and does the understanding, imagining etc. For Hume, it seems that 'operation' can also be understood as "happening in" or "occurrence of" the mind, but we will see that his full theory seems to imply a more active role for the mind. Moving further, Hume says, this task of describing the mind has "no merit when performed with respect to external bodies." Thus, Hume brackets any theories dependent on "the objects of our senses" and focuses on investigating the mind itself in a properly empirical way. Essentially, Hume develops an inquiry that focuses not on objects of the mind found in the external world, but on the character of experience to understand the operations or 'powers' of the mind. He develops his ideas about mental faculties with experience as the major object of investigation, and this technique also breeds phenomenological arguments pertaining to the understanding of truth and falsehood.

Hume notes that mental operations are by no means beyond the scope of human understanding and points out examples of the distinctions he will attempt to define, e.g. those between the understanding and imagining. He offers that these distinctions can be made by reflection and that they will reveal accessible, objective truth and falsehood (E I.14). Respecting that Hume's bracketing of the objects of experience and their qualities, the exemplary distinctions he offers also seem to be rooted in difference in phenomenal qualities and namely how the mind can grasp truth and falsehood *a posteriori* from these differences. For instance, we can understand the difference between the mental acts of imagining and understanding an object, e.g. a square. By

imagining we can picture the square, but by understanding we can address its four 90 degree angles or 4 congruent sides. Our experiences in both cases are independent of the square itself yet differ greatly in their phenomenal quality because they are different subjective experiences, and Hume seems to be pointing to such differences in trying to delineate the mind's operations. Describing the important phenomena in distinctions of the mind's operations is not impossible according to Hume, who offers the example of astronomers' use of phenomena to uncover truths about celestial bodies that coincide with derived laws of nature to encourage that there is "no reason to despair of equal success in inquiries concerning mental powers and economy, if prosecuted with equal capacity and caution" (E I.15).

Given Hume's adherence to the independence of the mind from its objects, our means to distinguish mental operations should involve an account of experience itself and its character. Thus, we will first have to distinguish the different qualities of experience itself if we wish to describe the mind's object-independent operations and shed light on how truth is perceivable and intelligible by experience alone. Similar to the astronomer, Hume engages us in the task of looking at the phenomena of experience itself in order to discover what it true and false. Also, if we are to understand the mind in this way and bracket arguments employing objects of experience, we must examine phenomenal qualities (i.e. what it feels like to understand or imagine an object) rather than particular object-contingent phenomena if we want to fully describe the operations of the mind Hume wishes to investigate.

Phenomenal Feel and the Copy Principle

In Section II of the *Enquiry*, Hume addresses the origin of ideas. Beginning by considering the different 'perceptions of the mind' when one feels, imagines or anticipates the pain of excessive

heat or pleasure of moderate warmth (E II.1), Hume distinguishes the phenomenal qualities of different experiences, realizing that there are clear differences in the phenomenal feel of experiencing heat that depends on the heat's magnitude. Hume advances by delineating the perceptions of the mind as either impressions or ideas based on their 'degrees of force and vivacity,' where impressions are our more lively perceptions, i.e. sensations, which, and lead to the formation of ideas, the less lively and vivacious components of our experience (E II.2). For Hume to discover this while bracketing objects of perception, he made this distinction by resolving differences in the phenomenal qualities and experiential character of impressions and ideas in experiences of sensation and imagination, respectively. He even says, "[memory or imagination] represent their object in so lively a manner that we could almost feel or see it…but they can never arrive at such a pitch of vivacity as to render these perceptions indistinguishable" (E II.1) showing his attention of the differences in the phenomenal quality of experiences.

The above arguments concerning ideas and impressions comprise Hume's Copy Principle, or the theory that our thoughts and ideas are less vivid copies of past impressions and sensory experience. In this context, Hume also offers that the operations of the mind ought to be considered, namely the compounding, transposing, augmenting or diminishing the materials afforded to us by the senses and experience that occur in copying impressions into ideas (E II.3). Hence, the different elements of our experiences and sensations appear parsed together by the mind, but what makes this operation even possible? Hume's distinction between ideas and impressions seems to be the driving force in this matter, and it is a distinction made based on the differences in the phenomenal qualities of impressions and ideas as more and less vivacious and, thus the character of experience itself – experiencing a sensation just feels different than experiencing an idea or memory of that sensation. This phenomenological argument seems pivotally important in understanding Hume's theory and reveals the recognition of different phenomenal

qualities as an essential operation of the mind. Although Hume does not explicitly discuss this manner, it can be posited inside Hume's framework that the recognition and delineation of the distinctive qualities of experience itself by the mind is a necessary condition for copying impressions to ideas independently of the objects of perception. Since Hume wants to discount the particular objects of experience in his arguments, we are thus left with the mind's ability to delineate differences in the phenomenal qualities of experience itself as the basis for understanding the impression-idea distinction. The qualities that distinguish Hume's impressions and ideas – liveliness and vivacity – seem to be essential variables in his conception of sensation and perceptual experience (i.e. impressions), and their relation to thoughts and ideas.

Hume offers further proof for his arguments concerning impressions and ideas by appealing to the evident truths that we (1) find that our thought or ideas always resolve themselves into simpler ideas as copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment found in experience and (2) that a man 'not susceptible' to any species of sensation is equally not susceptible to the ideas corresponding to that sensation (E II.4-5). In (1), Hume posits that ideas can be reduced to correspond to their original impressions, forcibly linking our thoughts and ideas to the qualities of experience itself. In (2), it follows that if an individual lacks the means or sensory apparatus to perceive the phenomenal qualities contained in an experience, she will not be able to have any ideas or thoughts relating to it. The operations of the mind then, for Hume, appear contingent upon recognition of differences in experience and phenomenal quality firstly because Hume brackets arguments from objects of perception and secondly because without experience, there would be no basis for ideas. In short, Hume suggests that our ideas must be derived largely, if not entirely, from the phenomenal qualities of their corresponding impressions. Thus, the phenomenal qualities of an experience must be recognized or perceived by the mind and play an essential role in the formation of thoughts and ideas, which are subsequently used to discover truth and falsehood.

Truth Value and Experience

Section III of the *Enquiry* begins with a discussion concerning the association of ideas as a prelude to arguments concerning truth and falsehood. Hume begins by presenting that, "it is evident that there is a principle of connection between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity" (E III.1) and offers that these connections are resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect (which are referred to from now on as "associative properties" for clarity). With respect to the Copy Principle of impressions and ideas, it appears that associative properties exist in impressions and ideas by virtue that the latter are cast from the former. That is, since ideas are connected to one another by the associative properties, these properties must have also existed in their corresponding impressions in the form of phenomenal likeness or experiential character if we exclude arguments relating to the object(s) of perception. For if there was no similarity among impressions, how could the mind form associations among the ideas cast from them? If not by some similarity in the original impression, the mind would have had to contrive a connection between ideas *a priori* to produce ideas, but this would be incompatible in Hume's empirical approach. Thus, there must be some independent phenomenal qualities of experience itself that are perceived and categorized by the mind to make Hume's properties of association possible.

An example may better illustrate the point above: If I have an idea of the color green derived from the impressions of a traffic light, a patch of grass and army figurines, my impressions were different in their objects, but similar in their phenomenal quality because they all cast an idea of green in my mind that stands unrelated to the particular objects of each experience. That is, to have this idea of green independently of the particular objects of experience, the mind must have

grasped a common phenomenal quality in the character of each impression and cast my idea of green from it. Since Hume argues that an idea is produced by 'copying' its corresponding impression, and that ideas are related by the associative properties, it follows that the associative properties must have also been present in the impressions themselves. Thus, it seems that the associative properties originate in impressions, and their corresponding ideas that are relatable because the common phenomenal qualities of experience itself are cast into ideas. Hume himself says, "all we can do…is to run over several instances and examine carefully the principle which binds the different thoughts to each other, never stopping until we render the principle as general as possible," and the phenomenal quality of experience seems to be this general principle.

In Section IV, Hume discusses 'relations of ideas' and 'matters of fact' as the objects of human reason and includes an important discussion of cause and effect when speaking of the latter that can be argued to reflect the importance of phenomenal qualities in finding truth and falsehood. For Hume, truth known by relations of ideas is obtained by manipulation of pre-existing ideas and concepts as performed in algebra and geometry, i.e. *a priori*. By contrast, matters of fact, such as the daily rising and setting of the sun, are identified as true by virtue of repeated perception of cause and effect (E IV.1-2). In essence, truth contained in relations of ideas is discoverable by 'the mere operation of thought' while truths contained in matters of fact are discoverable through cause and effect. Since Hume suggests that some truths are derived from relations of ideas and we have seen that these relations seem to be derived from analogous relations found in impressions, truth can be ultimately derived from relations in the phenomenal qualities of impressions and the character of experience itself.

Regarding matters of fact, Hume "venture[s] to affirm" that the knowledge of cause and effect is not attained by *a priori* reasoning, but entirely from experiences – particularly those that present repeated conjunctions of in impressions or ideas (E IV.6). As such, we must discuss matters

of fact in *a posteriori* terms to respect this claim and therefore must rely on the experience of cause and effect (i.e. conjunction) to extract truth from matters of fact. However, this brings about the problematic notion and a weak argument that causality can be reduced to a correlation in the phenomena of experience. From what aspect(s) of the cause and effect experience then, is truth derived if not from a mere correlation of phenomena? Given that Hume brackets the objects of experience in his investigation, we find that we are again left to discuss phenomenal qualities or character of experience itself. From here, the endeavor becomes a phenomenological study. That is, Hume's cause and effect must be defined by a distinctive quality of the "cause and effect experience" that is apparent to the mind and realized as different than the qualities attached to the experiences of the other associative properties. Therefore, it seems to follow in this system that truth found in matters of fact is discoverable through the quality of experience itself rather than anything relating to the direct objects of experience or *a priori* reasoning. In support of this notion, Hume offers that, "nor can our reason, unassisted by experience, ever draw any inference concerning real existence and matters of fact" (E. IV.6). This conclusion allows us to form a theory of truth that considers the empirical framework provided by Hume and the proto-phenomenological ideas therein that foster discussions about the nature of experience itself.

Experience as Evidence

Hume's framework provides us with some principles to consider in postulating the operations of the mind, namely that we should not resort to arguments concerned with the objects of perception or their qualities. Rather, Hume suggests that we look objectively at experience itself for the essential thing the mind delineates in impressions and casts into ideas via the Copy Principle. Considering this, impressions and ideas must contain in them some similar phenomenal quality or

experiential character that allows for the association of ideas, and that these qualities are the *a posteriori* source of truth and falsehood underlying the associative properties suggested by Hume. Furthermore, since ideas are cast from their corresponding impressions and can be related by one another by the associative properties (resemblance, contiguity in space and time, and cause and effect), the phenomenal or experiential qualities that enable the association of ideas must be discoverable in some form by examining the nature of impressions themselves. By examining the phenomenal qualities or unique character of impressions, we then may be able to find the essential source of truth that Hume argues to be apparent to and discoverable exclusively *a posteriori*. However, a wholly empirical inquiry will not suffice for such a task and we would have to apply *a priori* manipulations to evidence found in experience in order to formulate a complete theory about the operations of the mind that account objectively for the truth found in the subjective nature of experience.

Reference

Hume, David (1748) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford University Press, 1999.