Final Paper

That's Some Fancy Thinkin':
Accounting for Pretended Ideas in Hume's *Treatise*[*]

Introduction

In arguing against some metaphysical objects, David Hume often employs a destructive semantic strategy in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*.[1] Perhaps no one has better described this strategy than the author[2] of the *Abstract* for the *Treatise*: "[W]hen he suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant." (SBN 648-649) According to Hume's empiricist theory of meaning, a term is "insignificant" (that is, non-referring) just in case there is no idea corresponding to it. Finding that our term for a philosophical object is insignificant will have epistemic consequences for that object. According to Hume's own "fourth corollary" to his conclusions about cause and effect at the end of I.iii.14 is "[W]e can never have reason to believe that any object exists, of which we cannot form an idea." (SBN 172)

This conclusion is straightforward enough: if we truly have no idea of these proposed philosophical objects, then we have no business believing in them. In fact, it would seem that we have no business believing in such objects precisely because we are not genuinely capable of believing in them. We lack the corresponding ideas involved in belief in these objects; this should preclude our believing in them in the first place. Yet, somehow, this is not quite what happens to us when we consider suspicious metaphysical objects such as body, substance, or necessary connection.

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[1] Hume, David *A Treatise of Human Nature* L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch, eds., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). All further references to the *Treatise* and appended materials given in the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition will hereafter be given in the text as SBN followed by page number(s).

[2] Hume himself probably was the author of this *Abstract*. But since dealing with this question is well outside the scope of this paper, when I need to refer to the author of the *Abstract*, I shall call him (or her) just that, allowing me to be inelegantly correct if Hume was that author but not embarrassingly mistaken if he was not.

Whether we believe in them or not, many of us seem to have beliefs about these objects. For Hume, this will require that we have *some* idea of each of these objects, even if it is a merely "pretended" one.

Our persistent beliefs in objects of which we have only "pretended ideas" generate an unsavory dilemma about the content of these ideas. As a matter of logic, pretended ideas must either have some content or no content at all.

If they truly have no content at all, then Hume will be correct to say that our terms for them are "insignificant" and that we have no such ideas. But this will make many of his subsequent sections in the first book of the *Treatise* look absurd. Not only does he himself appear to meaningfully employ these "insignificant" terms in these sections; but he does so in the process of arguing against them, in an effort to get us to abandon these ideas. But if these ideas do not exist, such an argumentative goal is a waste of time, if not simply insane. If this is Hume's goal in these sections, it will mean he is spending a massive amount of intellectual energy to disabuse us of ideas *we do not even have*.

Alternatively, supposing that our pretended ideas do somehow exist and have some kind of content (however minimal), we will have to explain where the mind obtained this content, and our prospects for this are not promising. The ground on which Hume concludes that such terms are insignificant is that "no impression can be produced" from which they are derived. If this is true, these ideas will not obey Hume's "copy principle" that all ideas derive from their resembling impressions, and will thereby count as a proof of innate ideas. If this is the upshot of Hume's arguments against metaphysical objects such as body, substance, and necessary connection, he may well retain his popular reputation as a skeptic, but in the process he will warrant gaining a reputation as rationalist, since these arguments will apparently depend on his advocating the existence of innate ideas.

It would appear that either way we might account for the phenomenon of pretended ideas, we will be left with an unacceptable conclusion. If pretended ideas have no content, then we are left with the unacceptably uncharitable conclusion that many of Hume's arguments are pointless, aiming

to destroy objects that do not even exist. If pretended ideas have some content, then we are left with the unacceptably surprising conclusion that Hume is actually a rationalist advocating innate ideas –despite his assertions otherwise– since he advocates a number of ideas whose content does not derive from experience.

At some points in the *Treatise*, Hume seems to be aware of something resembling one horn of this dilemma. For example, in arguing against the idea of necessary connection, he supposes that the problem with the terms for some pretended ideas is not that they are empty, but that they are misapplied. He registers the following suspicion about many of the expressions involved in the analysis of that pretended idea: "…in all these expressions, *so apply'd*, we have really no distinct meaning and make use only of common words, without any clear and determinate ideas. But as 'tis more probable, that these expressions do here lose their true meaning by being *wrong apply'd*, than that they never have any meaning…" (SBN 162) This passage suggests that we should not think pretended ideas are genuinely insignificant, but rather that they do have content, just content that is somehow confused or otherwise misleading.

I believe that in taking this suggestion seriously we can find a way out of the interpretive dilemma that pretended ideas pose. If we suppose that pretended ideas do have some genuine content, then there will be no mystery about either how we could have the beliefs about their proposed objects that necessarily involve them or what Hume is doing when he devotes so much effort to arguing against them. In this paper, I will show how at the least the pretended ideas of substance and necessary connection do in fact have content. I will further attempt to avoid the unsavory conclusion that Hume is a rationalist by showing how the content of these pretended ideas can be derived from experience. Beyond this, to understand why Hume would ever claim that ideas with legitimate content are empty or nonexistent, I will point out how the contradictory or circular arrangement of some of this legitimately derived content could understandably warrant such claims.

To show all of this, I will argue in four subsequent sections. In the first, I will clarify and explain away some passages, which, if taken seriously would preclude my interpretation altogether.

With this done, I will then examine Hume's arguments against body, which suggest a strategy for interpreting his arguments against pretended ideas. Body is a metaphysical object that Hume asserts we have no business believing in, but one that he almost never suggests that we have a merely pretended idea of. Understanding why we should not trust the "notion" of body that Hume apparently thinks we do have will give us an insight into how our pretended ideas can have experientially derived content, even if it is content we cannot trust. Understanding what is different about the rare occasions when Hume suggests that we might not have an idea of body will give us an insight into how Hume could think that pretended ideas genuinely have no content. With this strategy in mind, I will use it to explain away the apparent interpretive dilemma for two of the most prominent pretended ideas in the *Treatise*, substance and necessary connection. I will devote a section to each pretended idea, showing what its content is, how this content can be derived from experience, and how this content might still lead Hume to claim in some instances that in some instances such ideas do not exist.

1. Ideas: Simple and Complex.

As a general rule, we already know that Hume believes that all of our ideas are derived from some impression. This is at the heart of his theory of ideas. But there is some ambiguity concerning the mechanics of precisely how ideas derive from impressions.

In some cases, especially in the heat of an argument against a pretended idea as vexing as necessary connection, Hume is given to saying things like "If it be a compound idea, it must arise from compound impressions. If simple, from simple impressions." (SBN 157) But this should probably not be taken as the definitive statement of Hume's theory of ideas, it may just be another case of Hume having "been carried away too far" just as he was at first blush while laying out his theory of ideas in the initial pages of the *Treatise*. There, despite initially supposing something similar, he later observes "that many of our complex ideas never had impressions, that correspond to them..." (SBN 3) This is quite right and just acknowledges the fact that many complex ideas (such as

the idea of New Jerusalem or of unicorn) do not derive from any single complex impression that resembles these ideas, but are instead constructed by the imagination out of simple ideas derived from other impressions. This alternative but equally legitimate way in which complex ideas can be formed is one that Hume openly acknowledges and often assumes in other arguments. In light of this, it would be a mistake to saddle Hume with an official doctrine like the one he hastily states while arguing against necessary connection. Understanding this should clarify the two ways in which we can gain complex ideas from experience, the ideas either being direct copies of complex impressions or constructions from simple materials also gained through experience. But this still leaves open the question of how we gain our simple ideas, and some ambiguity surrounds this question as well.

Even in the calmer initial pages of the *Treatise* Hume "venture[s] 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." (SBN 3) We should already know to treat this exceptionless rule with some suspicion since, only three pages later, Hume himself will provide us with the exception to this rule while discussing the missing shade of blue. But we should furthermore not understand Hume to be insisting with this rule that our simple ideas must derive from impressions which are simple in the sense that they contain only a single indivisible entity and nothing else. Not only would this be a task so difficult as to make it unclear how we could *ever* legitimately gain a simple idea, this would be to deliberately misunderstand what Hume means by "simple". Just one page before this, Hume explains that what it is for a perception to be simple is just that it "admit[s] of no distinction or separation." (SBN 2) Clearly this does not require that the perception come to us unaccompanied, it just tells us that when we can no further distinguish or separate a perception from its cohort, we have found a simple one.

We should still understand Hume's theory of ideas to insist that all (or nearly all) ideas derive from impressions, but this does not mean that a complex idea must be derived directly from a nearly resembling complex impression, nor does it mean that simples must come to us unaccompanied.

This exercise of clarifying obscure points in Hume's theory of ideas will likely now appear to be a diversion, but it will in fact be crucial to my account of pretended ideas. How exactly this works will be detailed in the following sections, but for now it will be enough to notice that the ideas we may or may not have of body, substance, and necessary connection –whatever else their differences– are all complex ideas.

2. Bodies: Vulgar, Philosophical, and Modern

2.1 *The Vulgar and Philosophical Ideas of Body*

It is difficult to find Hume detailing explicitly what the complex idea of body consists in. In fact, it is difficult to find Hume referring to an "idea" of body at all. In the section (I.iv.2, SBN 187-218) where he lays out his major arguments against body, he refers to our idea of it as a "notion" about which we have "beliefs" or "opinions", but almost never does Hume claim that we have an "idea" of body. This is not to imply that Hume displays this tendency because he is busy asserting that we do not have an idea of body because our idea is a merely "pretended" one. In I.iv.2 at least, Hume generally prefers not to use the term "idea" in describing whatever mental entity we have correlating to this (fictitious) object.

Nevertheless, it is clear from his arguments in I.iv.2 that we do have an idea of body with a determinate enough character, it is just not an idea we should trust. Extrapolating from his discussion of it in this section, a plausible definition of the complex idea of body could be "an object which we perceive that has an existence distinct from and continued beyond our perception of it."[3]

I have deliberately stated this definition to be vague enough to encompass both the vulgar and philosophical beliefs in body. The major difference between the two is that the vulgar take themselves to perceive bodies directly, whereas the more philosophically minded take themselves to perceive bodies indirectly, via some medium. This distinction will have serious consequences for how Hume supposes the imagination brings us to these opinions, and therefore how Hume will

[3] This definition of the idea of body is especially suggested by the questions Hume sets out to examine, beginning at SBN 188.

argue against them. But this difference is only salient at the level on which the imagination brings us to these beliefs. At a more basic level, concerning the question of whether we might ever have an impression of these objects, the distinction between vulgar and philosophical will be irrelevant. Whether we believe we perceive these objects directly or indirectly, Hume will insist that it is impossible to believe through perception alone in an object that has an existence distinct from and continuing beyond perception itself.

Our perception could not bring us the idea of an object which continues beyond our perceiving it because

> 'tis evident these faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the *continu'd* existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses. For that is a contradiction in terms, and supposes that the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceas'd all manner of operation. (SBN 188)

Furthermore, we could never experience an impression whose content conveys an object whose existence is independent of that impression, for

> that our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*, is evident; because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some inference either of the reason or imagination. (SBN 189)

Hume will go on in this section to explain in great detail how the imagination brings us to contrive the idea of body, but these arguments are less important for present purposes than something else that is striking about these considerations.

This is the fact that in these arguments, the reason that we are not entitled to believe in bodies is because our idea of them is a mere fiction of the imagination. It is not just that we do not in fact have any impression of such things from which our idea of them could derive; it is that body is the sort of object of which we *could not have* an impression. We must therefore conclude that our idea of it has some other origin. What is puzzling about this is the fact that body appears to be a paradigmatic candidate to be a pretended idea: there is and can be no impression from which this idea is derived, yet Hume almost never thinks of it in these terms.

I hope it will be evident by the end of this paper that Hume does not consider body to be a pretended idea in I.iv.2 because of the content of the idea of body and the way that content is arranged. In order to see this, we should first consider the question of where the imagination might get the content for the idea of body, and then examine how this content is arranged.

If we are willing to grant that the content of the complex idea of body is "an object which we perceive that has an existence distinct from and continued beyond our perception of it" then we might well be willing to grant to Hume that we could never have a single impression with this content arranged in this way. But this does not mean we must conclude that this content is somehow innate or a pure invention of our imagination. Its parts can just as easily derive from other impressions.

While in the process of arguing for something else, Hume gives us a perfect example of an experience from which we might derive the idea of continued and distinct existence. "The paper, on which I write at present, is beyond my hand. The table is beyond the paper." (SBN 190) Consider the paper in relation to the table. The table clearly has an existence that is distinct from and continues beyond the existence of the paper. It might be enough to merely lift the paper off the table to be able to notice this. If it is not, we could easily destroy either the paper or the table and then witness the remaining object to continue on in its distinct existence.

There is nothing inherently suspicious or illegitimate about the idea of an object having a distinct and continued existence from another object. The problem only arises when we arrange this idea with our idea of our perceptions in order to suppose that there is some object that we perceive that bears this relation to our perceptions. The idea of an object like that could not have come to us through any single impression with precisely that content, though the components of precisely that content could have come to us through a variety of other impressions.

Thus, when we use the term 'body', we can know perfectly well what we are talking about and pick out a unique idea that we genuinely have. Indeed, we can only notice that body is not the sort of thing of which we could have an impression if we understand this idea of body well enough

to see this. Hume seems to believe that there is no internal contradiction in the idea of body itself; the contradiction only comes when we suppose that we might actually perceive such objects or have gained the idea of such objects purely through our perception. Because we could not have any experience of such objects, we ought not believe in them and should recognize our idea of them as a fiction of our imagination, despite the fact this artificial idea has legitimate and understandable content of which we might meaningfully speak. Even though the idea of body is one our imagination (or as Hume also calls it, our "fancy") cobbled into existence, it is not an idea we merely fancy ourselves to have.

2.2 *The Modern Idea of Body*

So far I have been discussing the idea of body as it presented in I.iv.2. There, we find that body is a coherent idea that we do have, it is just not one we should believe in. In discussing this, I have noted that Hume *almost* never refers to an "idea" of body or suggests that we do not have such an idea. It is now time to examine a case in which he does.

In his section "Of the modern philosophy" (I.iv.4, SBN 225-231) Hume examines a different idea of body, eventually concluding there that "there remains nothing, which can afford us a just and consistent idea of body." (SBN 229)

This idea of body is the one proposed by the modern philosophers, who apparently believe that they might account for the idea of body in terms of "primary qualities" such as motion, extension, and solidity. But Hume argues[4] that none of these ideas could possibly be used to account for and legitimate our idea of body, because each one them (in one way or the other) presupposes the existence of body to be itself understood. Thus, when the modern philosophers attempt to account for body[5] in terms of these ideas they "run in a circle, and make one idea depend on another, while at the same time the latter depends on the former. Our modern philosophy, therefore, leaves us no just nor satisfactory idea of solidity; nor consequently of matter." (SBN 229)

[4] See SBN 228-229.
[5] Which Hume sometimes also refers to as "matter".

It will not be necessary to understand in any greater detail Hume's argument for this conclusion, nor to find it to be a sound argument to understand its structure, since this is what is crucial to notice for our present purposes.

Instead of arguing as he did in I.iv.2, and claiming that the modern idea of body is perfectly comprehensible but not one we should trust because it is not something of which we could have an impression, Hume argues that we should not trust the modern idea of body because it is incomprehensible. Its content is arranged in a circle. The modern term "body" might well be vacuous, since this circular content is proof that we have no stable and informative notion of this object called "body".

The modern idea of body, then, should be rejected due to its internal circularity. This fact about body may well entail that we could never have an impression of such an object, but that is not our primary reason for rejecting it. Our rejection of circular or otherwise contradictory ideas will not amount to deciding that we *shouldn't* hold them; it will instead amount to noticing that, one way or another, we *cannot* hold them. In some sense, we really don't know what we're talking about when we discuss the modern idea of body. Thus, it is easy to see how Hume might consider this term for body an "insignificant" one of which we have no (or a merely "pretended") idea.

The case of our idea of body is a convenient one to examine in order to highlight the distinction between two ways in which Hume argues against metaphysical objects. This is because the two different sorts of arguments are textually separated and are directed at distinct ideas of body, so it is easier for us to distinguish them. In the sort of argument that Hume deploys against both the vulgar and philosophical idea of body, it is not mysterious what our idea of body is, nor how it could have enough content to be able to create a vexing belief in us. In the other sort of argument that Hume deploys against the modern idea of body, it is not mysterious why Hume might think that there is no such idea and that our term for it might be merely insignificant.

With other proposed metaphysical objects such as substance or necessary connection, it is less easy to keep these two different sorts of arguments and considerations separate, either because the distinct sorts of ideas are considered in very close textual proximity, or the content of the idea itself contains aspects that will prompt both sorts of counterargument. But with this distinction in mind, I hope to show in my remaining sections how both sorts of argument are at play against the pretended ideas of substance and necessary connection, and how this fact can resolve the dilemma discussed in the introduction to this paper. Examining pretended ideas in this light will show how such ideas can have enough content to vex us and to warrant Hume arguing against them, as well as occasionally providing Hume with reason to claim that there are no such ideas.

3. Substance

Just as I decided to consider the both the vulgar and philosophical ideas of body together due to their relevant similarity, I will here consider both material and immaterial substance together, since they are relevantly similar in a closely analogous way. Both material and immaterial substances are the unknown somethings in which our perceptions are supposed to inhere, the difference between them being that material substances are supposed to hold up the properties contained in a single material object while immaterial substances are supposed to hold up the perceptions contained in a single soul (or mind).

3.1 *The Content of Substance*

Against the philosophers who "are the curious reasoners concerning the material or immaterial substances, in which they suppose our perceptions to inhere." Hume knows "no better method, than to ask these philosophers in a few words, *What they mean by substance and inhesion?*" (SBN 232) Hume desires that "those philosophers who pretend that we have an idea of the substance of our minds, to point out the impression that produces it." (SBN 233) When neither this nor a satisfactory definition of substance can be produced, Hume concludes simply that "[w]e have, therefore, no idea of a substance." (SBN 234)

But it would be too hasty to end our discussion of substance here, supposing that it is a genuinely vacuous idea. In the two primary sections in which Hume argues against substance (I.iv.3, SBN 219-225; and I.iv.5, SBN 232-251) he apparently has *some* notion of the object he is arguing against, and from these considerations, we can again extrapolate a plausible analysis of the contents of the complex idea of substance.

It might appear presumptuous to propose a definition of the complex idea of substance since at one point Hume claims that "neither by considering the first origin of ideas, nor by means of a definition are we able to arrive at any satisfactory notion of substance…" (SBN 234) It is fortunate that Hume does not say "by means of *any* definition" since he comes to this conclusion on the basis of rejecting a single proposed definition of substance. This proposed definition is "*something which may exist by itself* " (SBN 233), a definition which Hume rightly rejects for being too promiscuous and applying to every distinct object, thereby getting us no closer to a unique idea of substance. But this is hardly the best or most plausible of the possible definitions of the complex idea of substance, so it will be worth the effort to see if a better definition can be produced.

Based on the way he argues against substance in both sections I.iv.3 and I.iv.5, a plausible definition of substance might be "the single, simple, and unchanging thing in which the perceptions of one object inhere and which itself survives change."[6] From this definition it may already be apparent why Hume might think that we do not or cannot have such an idea, since it contains an apparent contradiction. But notice both that this contradiction comes from the way the content of this proposed idea is arranged in a way that we can readily understand; and that we can apparently account for all the components of this idea's content (simplicity, singularity, inhesion, and change) from benign experiential sources.

[6] The ideas of unity, simplicity, unchangeability, and surviving change are suggested by Hume's discussion of material substance in I.iv.3. Being the object in which perceptions inhere is primarily suggested by his discussion of immaterial substance in I.iv.5.

Simplicity should be the easiest of these component ideas to account for since we need only look as far as our simple impressions or simple ideas to experience the notion of a thing that "admit[s] of no distinction or separation."[7] (SBN 2)

Singularity should also be easy to account for. It seems that all we might need to generate the idea of one as opposed to many would be to see a handful of marbles all of which are white except for one that is red.

Inhesion will be a little more difficult, especially since Hume himself reasons to the conclusion that "[w]e have, therefore, no idea of inhesion." (SBN 234) But this conclusion immediately follows the following considerations: "Inhesion in something is suppos'd to be requisite to support the existence of our perceptions. Nothing appears requisite to support the existence of a perception." (SBN 234) This reasoning can only hope to show that in the context of our perceptions and the entity in which they are supposed to inhere, we can derive no idea of this inhesion. But these considerations are not enough to establish that we have no idea of what it is for one object to inhere in another. Hume himself hints that he has an idea of inhesion when he says that it is something that is "suppos'd to be requisite to support" something else. In the case of substance and perceptions, we might well have no idea of what it is for a substance to be requisite to support the existence of a perception. But this does not mean that in the case of pudding and raisins that we do not know what it is for the raisins to inhere in the pudding. From the examination of something as mundane as a single bowl of raisin pudding, we can gain the idea that the pudding is requisite to support the position of the raisins, preventing them from sinking to the bottom. Despite Hume's claims otherwise, we *do* have an idea of inhesion, even one that derives from experience.

Change is probably even more difficult than inhesion to account for in experience, but this is not to say that it cannot be done. One might think that the idea of change could be brought to us by observing any single object undergo alterations. As we watch the snowman melt, we observe his height, mass, and shape change, thereby gaining the idea. But it could be objected that this

[7] Ironically enough, it appears that the idea of simplicity is not itself a simple idea.

inappropriately supposes some substance-like entity behind these disparate perceptions which allows us to understand it as a single object undergoing change, rather than as merely a succession of distinct but resembling perceptions. If we must allow this objection, we need not yet give up hope of grounding the idea of change in experience. Even if we must understand our melting snowman as a succession of distinct perceptions rather than a single changing entity, we can still derive the idea of change from this succession of perceptions. Whenever the previous perception is replaced by the subsequent one, we can notice that what it is we are currently perceiving has changed, and gain the idea this way. If our present perception is different from the one that preceded it, we can notice that our perceptual content has changed. This does not require that we take ourselves to be perceiving persistent, unified objects. In fact, it does not even require that the succession of our perceptions resemble each other in any way other than simply being perceptions. We can still notice (and in fact are more likely to notice) that what we are currently perceiving has changed if the content of our later perceptions is radically different than that before. Thus, whether we take ourselves to be perceiving a single object that changes or a succession of distinct perceptions that replace one another, we can still derive the idea of change from experience.[8]

Once we have legitimately gained an idea of change, all we need do is negate it to generate our idea of unchanging, and we will thereby have grounded in experience all the content of our

[8] I am less than entirely sure that I have done all the work necessary to ground the idea of change in experience in this paragraph. The very consideration that led me to refine my account might well be deployed again to undermine it. The reason one might suspect that we cannot get the idea of change from a perceiving a single object as it undergoes alteration is that having such a conception of a single object surviving change looks to presuppose the idea of material substance, which involves the very concept we are attempting here to analyze. Similarly, it looks as if in order to notice that what I am currently perceiving has changed will presuppose immaterial substance. To notice something like this, I must have some idea of myself as a mind, perceiver, or other entity that persists through time, so that the change in the succeeding perceptions can be detected as alterations in what a single perceiver is perceiving.

Though I do not know how to adequately respond to this worry, I have not yet taken it as reason to abandon my current account. This is because I understand it to be an instance of a very general problem in Hume scholarship that is not unique to my account and is well beyond the scope of this paper to engage or hope to resolve. My current difficulty in grounding the idea of change in experience looks to be just another symptom of Hume's tendency to require and assume capacities of the human mind that his official theory of the mind as just a bundle of perceptions is incapable of accommodating.

I include this footnote in order to acknowledge what I take to be a weakness in my account. If I am not entitled to gently overlook this problem as the result of a deep and general difficulty in Hume's overall picture, and if this worry cannot be otherwise resolved, I will readily admit that my account is flawed and requires revision.

proposed definition of substance ("the single, simple, and unchanging thing in which the perceptions of one object inhere and which itself survives change").

3.2 *Two Arguments Against the Idea of Substance*

Now that we have seen how we might have an idea of substance with content legitimately derived from experience, all we have left to understand is how this content could lead Hume to both devote energy to arguing against it while sometimes contending that we in fact have no such idea.

The reason that Hume employs both of these kinds of arguments against the same idea of substance is because the content of that idea has aspects which invite both kinds of counterargument. Just like the vulgar or philosophical ideas of body, the idea of substance contains content which, on reflection, we notice we could not receive from a single impression of a complex object. When Hume turns his attention to this aspect of the idea of substance, he can argue that we have and understand this idea well enough to see that we should not trust it. Just like the modern idea of body, the idea of substance also contains content that appears contradictory and therefore vacuous. When Hume turns his attention to this aspect of the idea of substance, he can argue that we do not even understand the term and that no such idea exists.

Part of the content of our proposed idea of substance is that it is a single, simple entity that unifies into one thing the multiple properties of a complex object. It is the thing that allows us to believe that "the colour, taste, figure, solidity, and other qualities, combin'd in a peach or melon, are conceiv'd to form *one thing*… [and] affect the thought in the same manner, as if perfectly uncompounded." (SBN 221) As we have seen in the previous section, none of these component ideas are such that we could not have derived them from other impressions, but when the ideas are arranged like this, it should be evident that our perceptions of such complex objects such as peaches and melons could never themselves bring us the idea that they are single objects that "admit of no distinction". Certainly, we might find the idea of simplicity in the idea of a peach, once we decompose it into its component simple ideas, but the idea of the peach itself is complex, and on its own cannot suggest to us that it is simple.

It is not impossible to suppose that there is some simple entity behind the multiple qualities of a complex object in which they inhere and are thereby collected into a unified whole; but it is a mistake to suppose that we have ever *perceived* such an object performing this function in this context. Instead, as Hume will go on to explain, this supposition is due to our imagination supplying this idea when we perceive complex objects in order to resolve a conflict in our understanding. When we attend to this aspect of the idea of substance, there is no mystery about where the idea got its content (experience), how the idea was formed and how we came to believe in it (the imagination compounding it and suggesting it to us), or why we should not trust this idea (it is one for which we could have no resembling corresponding impression).

Just as in the cases of the vulgar and philosophical beliefs in body, in this case when Hume asks "*from what impression that pretended idea is derived?*" we can rightly claim that there is and can be no such single impression from which this idea derives. But this does not warrant the conclusion that the term is insignificant. Instead, the only thing that enables us to discern that there could be no such single impression is the fact that the idea has enough content (derived from other impressions) arranged in such a way as to make it clear that it would be impossible for us to have such an impression.

The other relevant part of the content of our proposed idea of substance is that it is an "unchanging object that survives change." Just like the circularity contained in the modern idea of body, this aspect of the idea of substance is a prime candidate to be a pretended idea whose corresponding term is genuinely insignificant, because it contains an obvious contradiction. It is easy to see how, when we use a term containing a contradiction like this, we might well have no idea what we are talking about. Because the idea of substance contains such a contradiction, we can understand how Hume could sometimes take it to be an idea that could not exist and is vacuous.

Admittedly, there is not much text in which Hume himself cites this aspect of the idea of substance as the grounds on which we should consider substance a pretended idea. The nearest thing we have to an acknowledgement that this aspect of the idea of substance is problematic is when

Hume calls substance an "unintelligible something" that the imagination "supposes to continue the same under all these variations" in order to resolve the contradiction we find in supposing that we perceive single, persistent objects undergoing change. (SBN 220) The fact that this "something" is "unintelligible" suggests that its concept may be contradictory or vacuous.

This is hardly a wealth of uncontroversial textual evidence, but it suggests a contradiction that we can see to be a contradiction and that would warrant concluding that we have no idea of substance. This is more promising than the three explicit reasons Hume cites for such a conclusion.

The first of these reasons is that we can see that we could have no impression of substance from which our idea derives. (SBN 232-233) This is perfectly true; but, as we have just seen above, not for reasons that would lead us to believe that we have no idea of substance. The second is that we are not "by means of a definition…able to arrive at any satisfactory notion of substance." (SBN 234) I hope the definition and analysis I provided in section 3.1 has shown this claim to be false. The third reason is that the idea of substance depends on the idea of inhesion and that "[w]e have…no idea of inhesion." (SBN 234) As I have already claimed, we need look only as far as a bowl raisin pudding to see that this claim is false. In light of this, we are perhaps best served to seek as our reason to conclude that the idea of substance is vacuous in a contradiction that is much more promising and easily understood, even if this contradiction is merely hinted at in Hume's texts.

Now that we better understand the origin of the content of our idea of substance and how its arrangement can reasonably provoke two sorts of counterargument, we are in a position to see that, at least in the case of this pretended idea, Hume does not face the interpretive dilemma identified at the outset of this paper: The idea of substance is not empty, but since it contains a contradiction, we can understand how Hume could sometimes treat it as if it was. Furthermore, it is true that there we have no single resembling impression from which our idea of substance derives, but this does not mean that the content of the idea is not derived from experience. Our idea of substance is a fiction that our imagination has cobbled together from ideas derived from other impressions. The imagination has further fooled us into believing in substance, in order to resolve a

contradiction in our understanding. The ubiquity of our belief in this fictitious object gives Hume reason to argue against it. The nature of our idea of it explains both how Hume can understand it well enough to dismiss it and how Hume can sometimes treat it as if it does not, or could not, exist.

4. Necessary Connection

Given the amount of space Hume devotes to the idea of necessary connection in the *Treatise*, my section on it will be surprisingly short. This is because I understand its component ideas to be fewer and simpler than those of the complex idea of substance, and because much of the groundwork necessary to draw my conclusions about this idea has already been provided in the previous sections.

In investigating the question of "*What is our idea of necessity, when we say that two objects are necessarily connected together* [?]" (SBN 155) Hume offers at least two distinct possible answers. One of these answers will account for the passages in which Hume treats the idea as an empty or nonexistent one; the other will account for the passages in which Hume behaves as if he understands the idea well enough to see that we cannot trust it.

The account of necessary connection that would lead us to believe that it is an insignificant term and a vacuous idea goes by quickly, as a ground clearing exercise, before Hume goes on to detail the impressions that suggest the other account of the idea. To this effect, he says

> I begin with observing that the terms of *efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion,* and *productive quality*, are all nearly synonimous; and therefore 'tis an absurdity to employ any of them in defining the rest. By this observation we reject at once all the vulgar definitions, which philosophers have given of power and efficacy; and instead of searching for the idea in these definitions, must look for it in the impressions, from which it is originally deriv'd. (SBN 157)

This argument goes by so quickly that we might miss it, but once we pause for a moment to examine it, we can see that any account of the idea of necessary connection that is like this will be just like the modern idea of body, a collection of ideas that "run in a circle, and make one idea depend on another, while at the same time the latter depends on the former." (SBN 229) If Hume understands

all the analyses of necessity that involve any of these other terms to be circular, it is entirely understandable how he could consider such ideas to be vacuous and the terms meant to pick out such ideas insignificant. Whether or not Hume is correct in identifying all these terms as so closely "synonimous" as to involve circularity when they appear in the definitions of one another is beside the point. Definitions so arranged are common throughout philosophy, and if Hume understands these definitions to be circular, he is right to treat their proponents as if they are talking nonsense and using insignificant terms. When the idea of necessary connection is thought to involve a circularity, it is easy to see how Hume can conclude that we have no such idea.

But there is another idea of necessary connection that is partially derived from impressions and is not vacuous. It is the idea we actually hold, according to Hume, and it has enough content for us to see that it is not one that we can trust, just like the vulgar and philosophical ideas of body.

This alternative idea of necessity is "nothing but an internal impression of the mind, or a determination to carry our thoughts from one object to another." (SBN 165) It arises from a "multiplicity of resembling instances…[which]… constitutes the very essence of the power or connexion, and is the source, from which the idea of it arises." (SBN 163) Roughly, this idea of necessary connection is just the idea that "these two always go together" suggested by the constant conjunction of two types of resembling objects.[9]

For example, once the mind experiences enough perceptions of smoke conjoined with perceptions of fire to become accustomed to considering the two objects together, it can easily derive from this ongoing experience an idea such as "in all the instances that I can currently remember, smoke and fire always go together". Further perceptions of smoke conjoined with fire will only serve to strengthen and intensify this idea. And if the imagination should get ahold of it, it will only strengthen this idea further and perhaps even widen its scope, since, as Hume observes elsewhere in the *Treatise* "the imagination, when set into any train of thinking, is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new

[9] This proposed definition is based on my interpretation of Hume's explanations of and arguments against the idea of necessary connection in section I.iii.14, SBN 155-176.

impulse." (SBN 198) Given this tendency of the imagination, along with the experientially derived idea that "in all the cases that I can currently remember, smoke and fire always go together," it is not difficult to see how the imagination could take this idea's suggestion and run with it, eventually paring down the content of this idea to something as simple and terse as "in all cases, smoke and fire always go together."

If we take something like this as our proposed idea of necessary connection, that, of any two objects "in all cases, these two always go together." It seems that we have an idea that amounts to all the synonymous constructions of supposing that there is a necessary connection between two objects, or a power in one object to always produce another, or an efficacy that one object has in causing another, but is clearly one that has content derived from experience and whose grip on us we can easily understand. In considering a small collection of remembered instances in which smoke was always conjoined with fire, we can legitimately derive an idea of two objects "always going together" in all the cases within this restricted scope. And it is no great feat for the imagination to change this idea into the more general idea that smoke and fire go together in all cases, since it does not need to add any new content to this idea, it merely needs to *remove* the content that qualifies this idea and restricts its scope.

If this is all our ideas of efficacy, necessity, and productive power amount to, it is clear that we could have no impressions sufficiently resembling this idea in order to warrant our trust in it. We will have to conclude that this idea is also a chimera, a fiction of our imagination, because it purports to give us access to more data than our experience could possibly supply us. It will not be enough to notice any particular case in which two supposedly necessarily connected objects exist separately, all this can show is that the idea of necessary connection does not apply to those two objects. Instead, we need only notice that the idea of necessary connection purports to give us knowledge about *all* instances involving two distinct objects (or, more properly, two distinct perceptions) and this extends the scope of our perceptual knowledge beyond its capacity. When the imagination removed the qualification that restricted the scope of this idea to only those perceptions I have had (or, at least,

remember having), it aims the scope of the relation to apply to instances which I have not and even could not perceive, and in doing so it makes it obvious that this is not an idea which could derive directly from our perception, since it purports to describe territory beyond it.[10]

Given these two distinct ideas of necessary connection that share the same name we can understand how Hume might sensibly claim in some cases that we have no such idea. These cases are when he considers the idea of necessary connection as one having circular content. Further, we can understand how in other cases he behaves as if he knows perfectly well what this idea is in its content, origin, and grip on our minds. These cases are when he considers the idea of necessary connection whose scope attempts to reach beyond the bounds of perception.

Even in the cases where Hume seems a bit muddled and argues against an idea he apparently supposes not to exist, we can hardly treat him too harshly for such an error. In the first place, none of the new understandings of Hume's arguments result in different epistemic conclusions. On none of the distinct understandings of the ideas of body, substance, and necessary connection considered above do we find that we have reason to believe in such objects. Our recasting of them merely points out that we have slightly different reasons to disbelieve in them than Hume originally or explicitly cited. Furthermore, the two distinct ideas of necessary connection and the two aspects of the idea of substance are closely related under the same name and otherwise resemble each other in grasping toward the same pretended objects. And as Hume himself points out, close resemblance is responsible for many confusions. As he notes as he argues against the vulgar and philosophical ideas of body:

> Nothing is more apt to make us mistake one idea for another, than any relation betwixt them, which associates them together in the imagination, and makes it pass with facility from one to the other. Of all relations, that of resemblance is in this respect the most efficacious; and that because it not only causes an association of ideas, but also of dispositions, and makes us conceive the one idea by an act or operation of the mind, similar to that by which we conceive the other. This circumstance I have observ'd to be of great moment; and we may establish it for a general rule, that whatever ideas place the mind in the same disposition or in similar ones, are very apt to be confounded. (SBN 202-203)

[10] I do not pretend to have found explicit suggestions of this last argument in the *Treatise* itself. It is instead an argument I am here offering on Hume's behalf to explain how we can understand the origin and unreliability of our idea of necessary connection.

Even if Hume has not supplied us with the resources to entirely forgive his rhetorical and argumentative errors when he confuses one pretended idea for another, he has certainly given us the resources to understand them.