

Hume's Empiricism, Relations, and the Subject

Introduction

Hume, in the introduction to his *Treatise*, describes his desire to lay a foundation for the natural sciences with a “science of man” that originates in experience and observation. (xvi) At the outset, Hume is faced with a problem: he finds attempts at discovering the “...ultimate original qualities of human nature” to be fruitless and chimerical, yet he believes that the only hope for success requires marching directly to “human nature itself.” (xvi, xvii) The problem is resolved through the realization that there exists no science or art which derives ultimate principles outside experience. Indeed, the greatest degree of certainty possible lies in “cautious observation,” and so observation remains the sole source of authority in his investigations.

Thus, Hume begins by turning his cautious observation to the act of observation itself. The *Treatise* opens with a description of how our ideas originate from impressions, which include both impressions of sensation—received from the outside—and impressions of reflection that result from the perception of desires and sentiments. Ultimately, our ideas stem from copies of these impressions, which are conjoined to create complex ideas through a process of association. While impressions themselves present only associations of resemblance, ideas are subject to associations of contiguity and causation. (283) The affectation of ideas by these principles is what allows the mind to go beyond a mere receptacle and to process its objects into an active understanding.

In *Empiricism and Subjectivity*, Giles Deleuze identifies two strains of thought within Hume's philosophy. (26-27) The first is atomism, the notion that the mind is dissolvable into the constituent irreducible pieces of impressions and ideas. The second is associationism, the thesis that understanding emerges from the connections between these atomic pieces, drawn along certain principles. Under Deleuze's interpretation, the importance of atomism is

overstated; while it releases ideas from the problematic obligation of having to represent things in the world and gives the mind “a simple origin,” the greater problem for empiricism is not the origin of the mind but rather the constitution of a subject. (31) This is a question which is addressed by associationism, which identifies and tracks the operations of the mind as Newton’s laws distill the principles of motion.

Hume’s experimental method was so-called not simply because it began with empirical data, but because it subjected that data to a form of reasoning which aimed to discover its underlying principles. (Demeter 577, 585) Locke, before Hume, had conceived of reasoning as a chain of connected ideas. But Hume, unlike Locke, did not appeal to a “faculty of reason” to explain the operations of the mind upon these ideas. Instead, his account of reasoning, belief, and knowledge looks towards the causal principles of the imagination. (Owen 34, 63-64) As with fundamental physical law, these principles are defined inductively without explanation of why they are so, or what they are beyond their effects. Deleuze’s problem concerning the empirical subject asks how a mind apprehended as a collection of ideas governed by ineluctable law can also become something which can “say ‘I.’”

While the problem is indeed related to the question of personal identity, it should not be conflated with it. One should be careful to distinguish, in Deleuze’s reading of Hume, between “the subject,” which is the agent of belief produced through reflection, and “the self,” which is the subject conjoined with its perceptions; the former is a term mostly absent from Hume which Deleuze introduces as a tool of his exegesis, whereas the latter is more akin to the object of Hume’s skepticism of identity. (Roffe 112) The problem, instead, is a deeper issue which concerns the nature of Hume’s method: what, exactly, are we discovering with the tools of his empirical psychology? Is it only an elegant representation, a “puppet,” which dissolves into a “...man made with a mortar and trowel,” as Thomas Reid charged? (103) Or, is it, as Hume

hoped, a distillation of human nature which accounts for the ensemble of mental experience without appealing to the fixed essences of past philosophers?

Relations and Necessity

Hume divides the use of the term “relation” into two senses. In one sense, a relation indicates a connection between two ideas in which one idea introduces another. In another sense, a relation indicates a sort of means of comparison through which any arbitrary set of ideas may be connected. He calls those of the former set “natural relations,” and limits them to resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect. It is the latter sense which appears “...only in philosophy,” leading Hume to refer to this category as “philosophical relations.” They are as follows:

1. Resemblance: also a natural relation, and the foundation for all other philosophical relations because no objects may be compared without some degree of resemblance.
2. Identity: the most universal because it is common to everything whose existence has a duration.
3. Space and Time: the source of an infinite number of comparisons, such as contiguity, which is also a natural relation.
4. Quantity or Number.
5. Degree of a Quality.
6. Contrariety.
7. Cause and Effect: also a natural relation. (Flage 25) (Hume 14-15)

These are further divided into two groups: internal relations and external relations. The former sort of relation is ontologically grounded in the entities which it relates and nothing else.

Resemblance, for instance, is an internal relation; if two things resemble one another, that relationship is entirely dependent on their qualities, and if either of the resembling items were to change their resemblance would be affected as well. External relationships, however, are grounded in something outside of their entities, and thus can change without any alteration of the entities involved. If two items have a relationship of contiguity by virtue of being next to each other in space, one could alter many features of either item without affecting the relationship of contiguity at all. (Hausman 261-262)

In "Hume on the Very Idea of a Relation," Michael Costa offers an interpretation of what exactly we are to make of the concept of a "relation" which Hume presents us with. Costa's interpretative strategy involves applying Hume's philosophy towards itself, by asking a deflationary question which Hume directs towards notions of mental and physical substance: what corresponding impression gives rise to the idea? Given that a relation is a sort of complex idea, any relation must be made of constituent ideas derived from impressions. However, in external relations, the relation is not simply made of its two relata—it relates them through something else. And in both external and internal relations, we consider them abstractly by describing the kind of connection being made in all of its instances regardless of what is being related—also, the same pieces relata might display multiple forms of mutual entanglement. Therefore, the idea of a relation should have some sort of component parts beyond any single instance of its relata. (Costa 72-73)

To answer the riddle, Costa reminds of us of two claims about ideas which Hume makes in the *Treatise*. Firstly, a Humean idea is a fundamentally representational entity, and secondly, a representation requires a relationship of resemblance. Thus, any idea of a relation must resemble that relation. For an idea to resemble a relation, it must therefore be an instance of that relation. At first blush, this answer appears to dodge the thrust of the question entirely. The

point was to discern what a relation consists of beyond the things being related; the answer, irritatingly, replies that what a relation consists of is *the way* its pieces are being related, without saying anything more about what that “way” is. The idea of resemblance is a manner in which two ideas may stand in relation to each other, and because the idea of resemblance is a representation of resemblance, it resembles resemblance to become itself a case of resembling. (Costa 74)

The apparent circularity of this explanation is assayed by Costa’s appeal to Hume’s theory of abstraction. Hume, like Berkeley before him, discredited theories of abstraction which ask for an indeterminate general representation which can encompass all of its instances. For Hume, an abstract idea is nothing more than a particular idea which has the tendency to enliven other ideas which carry some relation with it. The idea of a relation, then, must consist of some particular instance of that relation which has a tendency to call to mind other instances of its kin. (75) Deleuze comes to a similar conclusion, citing a passage (shortly after the famous billiard ball example) in which Hume argues that the idea of necessity arises not from an impression of the senses, but from an internal “impression of reflection”—that of propensity. (Hume 165) Necessity, then, consists of nothing more than a tendency for one idea to provoke another, and any abstract reflection on its nature can discover nothing beyond particular instances of this phenomenon. (Deleuze 29)

Recalling the distinction between external and internal relations, we might ask which category this relationship of necessity—or cause and effect—belongs to. Hume places it firmly in the external camp; in fact, his account of causality depends a great deal on his position that it is a relationship external to its terms. If causation were an internal relationship, it would suggest that in each case of A causing B we would find some properties of A that make it inconceivable for B to not follow. Consider, for instance, that in a case of A resembling B, we find properties in

each which make it inconceivable for such a relationship not to hold. One cannot imagine a case in which a father and son share the same nose, eyes, and hair but fail to resemble one another. One can, however, imagine a case of holding a hand over a hot flame and not feeling warmth; while it seems unlikely, it is indeed conceivable.

Here, we can see an apparent connection between Hume's taxonomy of relations and his division of knowledge into matters of fact and relations of ideas. But does the latter separation correspond neatly with the division of internal and external relations – can it be said that matters of fact are composed of external relations while relations of ideas are internal? This might also suggest a connection between certainty and type of relation, in which internal relations guarantee intuitive certainty while external relations achieve only the probabilistic certainty of matters of fact.

A connection between demonstrative reasoning, internal relations, and analytic truth, and another connection between matters of fact, external relations, and probabilistic truth, both seem to hold at first glance. However, they are easily complicated through closer scrutiny. As we have seen, it is impossible in Hume's system to point towards any single idea which embodies a cause. One can turn over each instance of a cause and effect relationship and find nothing more than constant conjunction in experience—or, in other words, cases of contiguity which resemble one another. Hume's investigation of the grounds of causality thus ends with an internal relationship—resemblance—paired with an external relationship of contiguity. As Hausman puts it: "...although we are directly acquainted with such facts as A is to the left of B, we are not acquainted with such facts as A causes B." (264) We find, oddly, that the external relation of contiguity is something directly perceivable and thus more fundamental than the external relation of causality.

Further complications occur when one closely scrutinizes Hume's discussion of necessity. In the following passage, he appears to claim that even the truths yielded by relations of ideas are ultimately grounded on the operation of a cause and effect relation occurring within thought:

Thus as the necessity, which makes two times two equal to four, or three angles of a triangle equal to two right ones, lies only in the act of the understanding, by which we consider and compare these ideas; in like manner the necessity or power, which unites causes and effects, lies in the determination of the mind to pass from the one to the other. (166)

This would appear to suggest that even the certainty afforded by demonstrative reasoning is conditioned by a contingent mental relation of cause and effect. Hume's assertion that "...all knowledge resolves itself into probability..." seems to rest on the same insight. In his discussion of skepticism in regards to reason, Hume writes that even the certainty achieved in mathematical demonstration rests on "...the original uncertainty inherent in the subject." While Hume must reject skepticism of reason as "superfluous" and contrary to nature, he nevertheless maintains that its arguments suggest that belief is an act of the "sensitive" rather than the "...cogitative part of our natures." (181-183)

What allows us to see a relation as the case is not something viewed in the relation, but ultimately a feeling of easy transition. Thus, relations are not prior to the activity of the mind. This sentiment is echoed by Hume's quip that because equality is a relation, it is "...not, strictly speaking, a property in the figures themselves, but arises merely from the comparison, which the mind makes betwixt them." (46) It would seem then that the distinction between external and internal relations describes not a difference in origin or means of acquisition, but a divergence in

form. In describing the distinction between them as a difference of what they are “grounded” in, one should not take “ground” to mean “cause.”

In his reading of Hume, Deleuze draws great importance from what he sees as a fundamental innovation of empiricist philosophy: the notion that relations are external to their terms. Deleuze does not mean simply that Hume proposes that some relations are external. Rather, he claims that Hume presents us with a fundamental exteriority which encompasses all relations, philosophical, natural, external, and internal: “That an idea naturally introduces another is not a quality of the idea, but rather a quality of human nature....ideas do not account for the nature of the operations that we perform on them, and especially of the relations that we establish among them.” (Deleuze 101) Furthermore, relations are said to be the effect of the principles of association. This indicates that even philosophical and internal relationships of ideas are the product of tendencies of the mind, which are applied to their objects rather than derived from them. Relations cannot be said to be caused by the properties of the ideas they connect, but are instead caused by those principles which determine a subject that generates relations.

Even so, Deleuze maintains that “...association is insufficient to explain relations.” While the principles of association allow for their possibility, they fail to explain how philosophical relations can be entertained between seemingly remote ideas. Association provides for the generation of all relations, but it cannot explain all relations; this, apparently, is a defect of associationism in general, which can only account for a formalism of thought which neglects its particularities. To provide for this gap, Deleuze appeals to a notion of “circumstance” which, he claims, is a constant theme in Hume’s philosophy. Circumstance might also be understood as affectivity; the state of a subject’s sentiment and desires, placed into a particular configuration which is governed by the principles of the passions: “If the principles of association explain that

ideas are associated, only the principles of the passions can explain that a particular idea, rather than another, is associated at a given moment.” (103) Thus, circumstance has an “individuating” effect on a subject, and provides for the variables upon which the principles of association and the principles of the passions act.

Here, Deleuze returns his analysis of the theory of relations to the central problem he poses towards Hume’s “science of man.” With the principles of association providing for mental form, and the principles of the passions providing for content, we might assume that a picture of the operation of human nature is completed; the human subject results from a unity of relations and circumstance. However, Deleuze cautions that such an interpretation should not be understood to put forth a division between singular circumstances and universal principles, a dichotomy which seems to aspire towards the kind of essence which is anathema to Hume. He suggests that the unity of relations and circumstances is inseparable, and that this inseparability underlies Hume’s empirical treatment of the subject:

The fact that there is no theoretical subjectivity, and that there cannot be one, becomes the fundamental claim of empiricism. And, if we examine it closely, it is merely another way of saying that the subject is constituted within the given, then, in fact, there is only a practical subject. (104)

What does Deleuze mean when he speaks of the impossibility of theoretical subjectivity, and the resulting existence of only a so-called “practical” subject? I will now turn to the connection between Hume’s treatment of self identity and his theoretical method, which should provide some necessary illumination of Deleuze’s claims.

Self and Identity

In “Hume, Identity, and Selfhood,” Terence Penelhum suggests that Hume’s attack on personal identity actually anticipates a later critique by Kant, who claimed that the doctrine of associationism fails to account for the conditions of possibility for association—which, in Kant’s eyes, involve a transcendental unity of consciousness.¹ Penelhum quotes Norman Kemp Smith writing in favor of Kant: “To attempt to explain the unity of consciousness through the mechanism of association is to explain an agency in terms of certain of its own effects.” (102) As we have seen, this sort of move is precisely what Deleuze finds innovative in Hume’s external relations—the notion that the constancy and operations of thought are the effect of principles of association. At the same time, Smith’s criticism points towards the problem which drives Deleuze’s investigation: how can a theory which constructs a mind composed solely of fluctuating atomic pieces governed by relations also account for the full character of subjectivity? This problem is related to the issue which Penelhum will attempt to account for: how can Hume’s mind conduct an empirical scrutiny of its own operations without presupposing a unity which is being scrutinized, or performing the scrutinizing?

In his argument against personal identity, Hume presupposes an introspective capacity by providing for an “I” which searches for and fails to find a self among its sensations. Penelhum illustrates this point by italicizing Hume’s words: “For *my* part, when *I* enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, *I* always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. *I* never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.” (105) Although it may appear facetious, gesturing towards Hume’s use of “I-language” is the rationalist counterargument in a nutshell. Penelhum maintains, however, that Hume already has anticipated this challenge. The “belonging to me” which ideas and impressions appear to have is not sufficient evidence for a

¹ Penelhum suggests that this critique was not novel in Kant, but actually anticipated by the Rationalists whom Hume directed his argument.(102-103)

unity and continued identity which possesses them; it is merely a "...contingent fact about the way they happen to be grouped together," which the tendencies of thought cause us to distort into a fiction. (105) The failure to find some idea or impression corresponding to the self via introspection demonstrates that what we are searching for is chimerical—the fact that such an introspective search can be carried out at all is only proof of a unified self if one makes the error of attributing a "perfect identity" to what is merely a related succession.

Because identity is a relation, it is something which is added to perceptions rather than derived from them. (112-113) This should hold for both the diachronic identity we attribute to the self through memory, as well as the synchronic identity—the "I that thinks"—which serves as the basis for the aforementioned challenge on the basis of introspection. Nevertheless, in the appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume displays concern about the strength of his arguments against the latter form of identity:

In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.*

(636)

Both Deleuze and Pendelhum call our attention to this particular admission of Hume's self-doubts. For Deleuze, it serves as a representative example of the antimony which drives his investigation of Hume; he notes that Hume suggests that a solution may be possible, and that there is a hope for resolution within his system—such a hope drives the sympathetic exegesis of *Empiricism and Subjectivity*. (32) Similarly, Pendelhum maintains that Hume ought not to worry because a solution indeed lies within his principles. (117-118) He presents a reconstruction of a "logical" defense which he ascribes to Nelson Pike: if the possession of an

idea involves its membership in the body of perceptions which constitute a mind, the idea of synchronic identity is merely a further perception which is included among this series. Statements invoking “I” language can thus be reduced to statements concerning the composition of a body of constituent perceptions, rather than evidence of a continued form or ego which contains those perceptions. Penelhum, however, sees this argument as anachronistic because of its reliance on ordinary language analysis. He presents, instead, a “psychologization” of roughly the same thesis: the bundles of perceptions which constitute “mind” can, on occasion, contain perceptions which are “misinterpretations” of other perceptions. Both the idea of necessary connection and the idea of a unified self are instances of these erroneous perceptions, in which the operations of psychological principles are mistaken for features of what is being operated upon. (55-56, 118) Thus, the perception of “connexion among distinct existences” which provokes judgement of synchronic identity amounts to one part among a diverse set of atomic pieces that fail to exhibit any real unity beyond mutual containment.

This conclusion is made necessary, ultimately, by Hume’s method of psychological explanation; Penelhum suggests at the outset of his book that the denial of the reality of self is not an unfortunate outcome of Hume’s philosophy, but rather laid within its very foundations. The idea of a “science of man” includes a naturalism which takes the mental as nothing more than a realm of corpuscular pieces subject to general laws; Newtonian science, similarly, explains the mechanics of a universe without supposing that the universe exerts any force itself, or does anything more than simply contain bodies in motion. (7) How does this connection between Hume’s method and his argument against personal identity, then, help to explain Deleuze’s contention that Hume’s empiricism erases the theoretical subject, leaving us with only a practical subject “...constituted within the given”? Consider the following passage,

offered briefly before his admission of doubt in the appendix, in which Hume describes how his observations fail to yield a notion of self:

When I turn my reflexion on *myself*, I never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. 'Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self. (634)

Hume claims in this passage that he cannot perceive any “self” without drawing to mind individual and distinct perceptions, but nevertheless suggests that these perceptions can be composed via relations into something he is willing to refer to as “self.” The form of the argument recalls his attacks on abstraction, in which it is shown, for instance, that one cannot draw to mind the abstract idea of a triangle, but only individual perceptions of particular triangles. (Hume 20) As we have seen, the connection is not superficial; for Hume, there is no abstract idea of any relation, but only resemblances which are perceived between one particular instance of a relation, and other instances. If the self is nothing more than a composition of contingent and particular relations, then there is no sensible way in which we can speak of an abstraction of self, or a form which selves necessarily follow. This is what Deleuze means when he claims that there cannot be a theoretical subject in Hume’s empiricism—such a thing is made impossible by his system. While the fact that “relations are not the object of a representation, but the means of an activity,” prevents us from discovering any theoretical subject, it also allows us to see in Hume a practical subject; because relations are ultimately external to their terms, he can investigate a kind of nature of thought through tracing the operations upon its objects. (120) This is the terrain upon which Hume can march “...directly to human nature itself...” without pretense of discovering any of its “ultimate’ or “original” qualities. (xvi, xvii)

Conclusion

Although written more than a century after Hume's *Treatise*, the following passage in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is illustrative of the connection between Hume's method and the subject:

5.631: The thinking, presenting subject; there is no such thing.

If I wrote a book "The world as I found it," I should also have therein to report on my body and say which members obey my will and which do not, etc. This then would be a method of isolating the subject or rather that in an important sense there is no subject.

(...) 5.633: *Where in the world is a metaphysical subject to be noted? You say that this case is altogether like that of the eye and the field of sight. But you do not really see the eye. And from nothing in the field of sight can it be concluded that it is seen from an eye.*

Here, Wittgenstein presents us with two methods for searching for the subject. The first involves cataloguing a series of atomic pieces—what I found in the world, as he puts it—and discovering that none of them, not even the components of one's own body, can really be said to be under the jurisdiction of a willing subject. The second invokes an optical metaphor: one can conclude nothing about the origin of a field of vision from the contents of that field.² Both methods, he will conclude, fail to yield what they were searching for. Similarly, to state the connection between Hume's philosophical methodology and the nature of his subject in simple terms, one could say that his empirical introspection cannot capture what others have supposed that a subject, or a self, should be, because such a thing cannot possibly be constructed with his tools.

Nevertheless, Hume constructs something; perhaps Reid was correct in his assessment that the

² Presumably he hadn't looked in a mirror.

result is an oversimplification, but I might suggest that its failures bear greater resemblance to the errors of a camera than those of a mortar and trowel.

For Hume, the mind is surveyed as a group of atomic perceptions which are organized and acted upon by relations. These relations may be taxonomized and compared, but they cannot be said to originate in the content of the ideas which they relate; observation would show instead that they ultimately grow from the action of associative principles, which are known only through their effects. While these causal laws bear the origins of relations, our knowledge of relations themselves does not involve grasping their abstract essences but instead relies on our ability to compare cases of resemblance among them. When such a model is applied to the problem of self-identity, it fails to find any evidence for a continued and unified self because the relation of identity in its actual psychological operations fails to fulfill the idealized form which philosophers have invoked—what it yields instead is more relations among ideas, which are external to their terms and thus cannot be said to constitute a unity. Hume's method cannot produce a continuous and unified self, but it produces a psychology of a subject who sows order and vivacity among a flow of bundled perceptions. This subject is nothing identifiable within any of its perceptions, but rather is something constituted through the actions of the principles which act on those perceptions—the measured observation of these causal laws is thus what makes Hume's science of human nature possible.

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