

Hume's Argument for the Ontological Independence of Simple Properties

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Abstract

In this paper, I will reconstruct Hume's argument for the ontological (in the sense of rigid existential) independence of simple properties in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1 (1739). According to my reconstruction, the main premises of the argument are the real distinctness of every perception of a simple property, Hume's Separability Principle and his Conceivability Principle. In my view, Hume grounds the real distinctness of every perception of a simple property in his atomistic theory of sense-perception and his Copy Principle. I will also show why Hume's argument should be seen as relevant nowadays. David Lewis and his followers in metaphysics continue Hume's line of thinking in this respect, which is opposed by power ontologists (Brian Ellis, Stephen Mumford), for example.

Keywords: Hume, David, ontological independence, properties, tropes, substance, conceivability

Introduction

For his time, Hume was a radical philosopher in many respects. Before him, Berkeley perhaps excluding, the dominant view in metaphysics was that accidents, modes, qualities, or properties – however they were called – depend for their existence on the individual substance that bears them. In this scheme, individual substances are ontologically independent entities, whereas properties are ontologically dependent; there cannot be properties without individual substances.

In his first work *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1 (1739), Hume turned this upside down. In *Treatise* 1, he argues that some properties are fundamental, basic entities: they are ontologically independent composing individual substances in the sense of minds (temporal individuals) and bodies (concrete, i.e. spatio-temporal individuals) but not in the sense of ontologically independent building blocks of the world. In this paper, I will reconstruct Hume's argument with the result that qualitatively and compositionally (having no parts) simple properties are ontologically independent. The best-known version of that argument is the infamous reasoning of T 1.4.5.5 (SBN 233)¹ where Hume argues that the distinction between substances and accidents or souls and perceptions is inconceivable if accidents and perceptions are supposed to be existentially independent.

In the 20th century, D.C. Williams (1899-1983) and Keith Campbell followed Hume in this respect. They created theories, in which individual substances, or, to use the contemporary term “concrete particulars”, are composed of particular property instances, which are called “tropes”.² As according to Campbell substances are bundles of tropes,

¹ References to Hume's works will be abbreviated in the standard manner as follows. “T” = David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), followed by book, part, section, and paragraph number. “T Abs.” = David Hume, *An Abstract of ... A Treatise of Human Nature*, in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 403-417, followed by paragraph number. “T App.” = David Hume, *Appendix*, in David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature: A Critical Edition*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 396-401, followed by paragraph number. “EHU” = David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), followed by section and paragraph number. “SBN” refers to the old Selby-Bigge Nidditch editions of the *Treatise* and the *Enquiries*.

² I ask the reader to take into consideration that this is an introduction to a primarily historical paper. So it will not be necessary to go into all the details of the contemporary positions.

his account is called “trope-bundle theory of substances”. Moreover, it may be termed “independence trope-bundle theory of substances” because he agrees with Hume on the ontological independence of tropes. (Campbell 1981)

The ontological independence of tropes has been a contested issue since Campbell published his view. Peter Simons and Markku Keinänen have argued against Campbell and defended the view that individual substances are composed of tropes that depend for their existence on each other.³ Let us assume that an individual substance is composed of tropes t_1 to t_4 . Tropes t_1 to t_4 are mutually ontologically dependent in the sense of rigid existential dependence. This means that given one of them, all the others must be there, too (metaphysical necessity). The individual substance is an aggregate consisting of tropes t_1 to t_4 as its proper parts.⁴ As it is the existential dependence closure of these tropes (all the existential needs of tropes t_1 to t_4 are fulfilled), it is rigidly existentially independent from every wholly distinct entity (a whole is merely partially distinct from its proper parts). Simons' and Keinänen's theories can thus accommodate the traditional view that individual substances are ontologically independent (in the sense of rigid existential independence), but they depart from the dominant tradition in that for them, it is properties, rather than substances, which are the basic building blocks of the universe. (Simons 1994 and Keinänen 2011, Ch. 4) Therefore they may be seen as following Hume in this respect *but* at the same time claiming something that Hume thought impossible: there are existential dependences, or in Hume's terms, necessary connections, between wholly distinct parts of a whole (T App. 20; SBN 635-6). Their theories may thus be called “dependence trope-theories of substances”.

Hume's argument for the ontological independence of simple properties is contemporarily relevant for another reason as well. Here I am referring to the recent metaphysical debate over the ultimate nature of the world between Lewisians and power ontologists. David Lewis (1941-2001) claims that

³ Here I am considering their theories together although there are significant differences in the details between them.

⁴ This is merely a simple example where all the tropes of a simple substance (no other substances as its parts) are necessary to it. It does not have to be so. Simons' and Keinänen's theories can accommodate cases where there are also tropes contingent to a simple substance. Yet these tropes are rigidly existentially dependent on the necessary tropes, which are, in turn, generically existentially dependent on the contingent tropes. So there can be qualitative change according to Simons and Keinänen.

“Humean supervenience is named in honour of the great denier of necessary connections. It is the doctrine that all there is to the world is a vast mosaic of local matters of particular fact, just one little thing and then another. [...] We have geometry: a system of external relations of spatio-temporal distance between points. [...] And at those points we have local qualities: perfectly natural intrinsic properties which need nothing bigger than a point at which to be instantiated. For short: we have an arrangement of qualities. And this is all. There is no difference without difference in the arrangement of qualities. All else supervenes on that.” (Lewis 1986, xi-x)

In contrast with Campbell, Simons, Keinänen and possibly Hume, Lewis is not a trope nominalist but a class nominalist, according to which properties are classes of things (Rodriguez-Pereyra 2008). So the properties about which he is talking in this famous quote are not building blocks of the universe. Rather, that role is played by the “little” things, point-sized objects. Still Lewis agrees with Hume that the ultimate constituents of the world are rather passive than dynamic and the fundamental properties are categorical and intrinsic. He also follows Hume by denying necessary connections between the fundamentals.

Power ontologists such as George Molnár, Brian Ellis and Stephen Mumford oppose this. They see the world as fundamentally dynamic. For them, the basic properties are not inert, categorical, self-contained “perfectly natural intrinsic properties”, between which there cannot be necessary connections. Rather, the world is ultimately composed of powerful dispositions that are necessarily connected with other entities (Ellis 2001, Ch. 8 and Mumford 2004, Ch. 10.6). For example, given that there are two gravitational masses – two dispositions –, it is necessary that they attract each other, which is an event necessarily connected to the masses.

Choosing between Humean supervenience and power ontology has deep consequences for one's view on the laws of nature, for instance. If the world is seen as fundamentally causally inert, it seems that the laws of nature must be either somehow superimposed on it or only law statements. On the contrary, dispositionalist power ontology might make laws of nature as distinct entities in themselves redundant without rendering them mere theoretical statements (Mumford 2004, 15). Another intimately connected issue is the distinction between dispositional and categorical properties. It is natural for a Lewisian to hold that dispositions merely supervene upon categorical properties, which a power ontologist denies – she maintains that at least some fundamental properties are dispositional.

Lewis' Humean supervenience may be seen as continuing the line of Hume's thinking in the respect that fundamental entities are ontologically independent (no necessary connections between them), causally inert and basic properties are categorical, intrinsic qualities. Therefore Hume's argument for the ontological independence of simple properties, which are fundamental entities for him, is in itself – or should be seen as – topical. Accordingly, I will finish the paper by pointing out, for a dependence trope theorist or dispositional power ontologist, some possible soft spots of Hume's argument within the context of contemporary philosophy. The ending is motivated by taking the dependence trope theory and dispositional power ontology more powerful in explanatory force than the Lewisian-Campbellian-Humean line – an assumption that cannot be defended here.

The paper has a four-part structure. In §1, I summarise very briefly the technicalities that are necessary before discussing the argument. The second section consists mainly of quoting the passages that bring forward Hume's argument. In §3, I present Hume's sentences in the logical order of the argument. This leads to a detailed reconstruction of the argument in the fourth part, which concludes truly the argument of the paper. I will finish the paper with an epilogue where I come back to the contemporary issues outlined in the introduction.

1 Necessary Technicalities

It is obvious that every argument must take something for granted; it is not possible to give reasons for everything in a line of reasoning. One of the assumptions of this paper is that by his central technical term “perception”, Hume means the objects of thinking in the broad sense (including sense-perceptions, passions, emotions, feelings, and sentiments), rather than the acts of the mind. He explicitly says that there are perceptions even if some of them are not in space (visual and tactile are spatial, phenomenally) (T 1.4.5.10; SBN 235, see also T 1.2.6.2 and 6; SBN 66-67). So for Hume perceptions belong to the category of existence – , as ideas for Berkeley. In a word, they are entities or elements of being. As perceptions are objects of thinking, they fall into a sub-category of entities that may be called cognitive objects (“cognitive” in the broad sense of thinking).

As is widely known, Hume holds that there are two kinds of perceptions: impressions and ideas. For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to say that sense perceptions are impressions and thoughts about them are ideas.

Hume's other distinction of perceptions into simple and complex (T 1.1.1.2; SBN 2) is connected to a form of distinction that many Scholastic and some early modern philosophers employed: real distinction.⁵ For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to say that x is really distinct from y iff x is separable from y and *vice versa* (Glauser 2002, 423-4). In Hume's case, real distinction between x and y involves, for the reasons that will become clear in the paper, that they do not share any parts (spatial or not).⁶ Following his predecessors, Hume explicitly distinguishes real distinction from rational distinction or distinction of reason, which does not involve separability but real identity (so it is not real distinction) (T 1.1.7.17-8; SBN 24-5).

In the paper, I also use the notion of ontological dependence/independence. I am aware of the debate over them in contemporary metaphysics (e.g. Correia 2005, Lowe 1998, Ch. 6 and Simons 1987, 290ff.). However, I hope this paper can show that in Hume's case they may be taken in quite a straightforward manner as rigid existential dependence/independence: x is ontologically dependent on y iff there cannot be x without y and x is ontologically independent from y iff there can be x without y .⁷

As will be shown below, Hume's Copy Principle (CP) is necessary for understanding the first premise of Hume's argument. Regarding it, I follow Don Garrett's account. According to Garrett, the CP involves two theses: the Resemblance Thesis and the Causal Thesis (1997, 21-22). The Resemblance Thesis states that every simple idea resembles (is similar to) some simple impression. The Causal Thesis makes the same statement in terms of causality: every simple idea is caused by some simple impression – at least partially. As Hume himself says: “*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*” (T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4) Together with the distinction between simple and complex perceptions, the CP entails that every idea derives fundamentally from impressions because complex perceptions consist completely of simple perceptions (T 1.1.1.6; SBN 4).

Finally, before proceeding to Hume's argument, I must say a word about how my talk about properties should be understood. First, for Hume all properties are particulars

⁵ It may also be called non-identity as if x and y are really distinct, they are not really identical.

⁶ I have made the full case for this elsewhere [self-reference omitted].

⁷ Here I leave the modality in terms of which rigid existential dependence/independence is stated open on purpose. I will specify it in Hume's case below.

because according to him, there are no universals; Hume is a nominalist (T 1.1.7.6; SBN 19-20). Secondly, in terms of the contemporary distinction, they are rather 'categorical' than 'dispositional'. In this paper, I will restrict myself to the perceptions of simple proper sensible properties, which are the objects of one of the five senses (colours, tactile, sounds, smells, tastes). I will exclude the perceptions of passions, emotions, feelings, and sentiments, since it seems that they are not properties. I will show that for Hume proper sensible properties are rather categorical than dispositional because they do not include any disposition or power. Categorical properties are non-dispositional properties.

2 Passages

In the section of the *Treatise* titled *Of the antient philosophy*, Hume writes:

“Every quality being a distinct thing from another, may be conceiv’d to exist apart, and may exist apart, not only from every other quality, but from that unintelligible chimera of a substance.” (T 1.4.3.7; SBN 222)

Of the antient philosophy is the third section of the fourth part in Book 1 of the *Treatise*. Despite its title, the target of the critical discussion in the section is rather medieval Aristotelianism, or how Hume understands it, than ancient philosophy. The specific target of this passage, which appears at the seventh paragraph of the section, is the notion of accident in the Aristotelian substance-accident ontology. According to this (historically simplifying) scheme, accidents are ontologically dependent existents supported by, or as the phrase goes 'inhering in' substances, which are independent in their ontological status. In the passage, Hume argues – tentatively formulated – that this scheme is inconceivable as accidents or qualities are ontologically independent: their existence does not depend on the existence of any other quality or substance.

Unfortunately, Hume's presentation here is very dense so it is not easy to see what his argument actually is. Fortunately, there are other passages in *Treatise* 1, on the basis of which we are able to reconstruct Hume's argument that simple properties are ontologically independent.

The first and most important of them may be found two sections later, near the beginning of *Of the immateriality of the soul*, in paragraph five of this section (1.4.5.5; SBN 233). As will be seen very soon, it is justified to quote this rather long paragraph in its entirety:

“If instead of answering these questions, any one shou’d evade the difficulty, by saying, that the definition of a substance is *something which may exist by itself*; and that this definition ought to

satisfy us: Shou'd this be said, I shou'd observe, that this definition agrees to every thing, that can possibly be conceiv'd; and never will serve to distinguish substance from accident, or the soul from its perceptions. For thus I reason. Whatever is clearly conceiv'd may exist; and whatever is clearly conceiv'd, after any manner, may exist after the same manner. This is one principle, which has been already acknowledg'd. Again, every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination. This is another principle. My conclusion from both is, that since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance."

Here Hume clearly argues against substance-accident ontology. His point is that if substance is defined as ontologically independent entity, it cannot be distinguished from accidents, or the soul as a substance from its perceptions. For it follows from the two principles, which Hume considers established at this point in the *Treatise*, that qualities and perceptions are ontologically independent, that is, they are substances rather than the qualities of substances or the perceptions of spiritual substances.

Hume uses the second principle explicitly in two other similar passages for the same conclusion concerning perceptions. In them, the first principle is more implicit. The first of the passages is from the beginning of the infamous *Of personal identity* (1.4.6):

"All these [perceptions] are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately consider'd, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence. After what manner, therefore, do they belong to self; and how are they connected with it?" (T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252; see also 1.4.6.16; SBN 259-60)

The other passage is part of Hume's summary of his thinking on personal identity in the *Appendix*, which was inserted into Book 3 of the *Treatise* published 20 months later than Book 1:

"WHATEVER is distinct, is distinguishable; and whatever is distinguishable, is separable by the thought or imagination. All perceptions are distinct. They are, therefore, distinguishable, and separable, and may be conceiv'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity." (T App. 12; SBN 634)

3 Argument in Hume's Words

The first premise of Hume's argument in his own words concerns perceptions:

"all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe" (T 1.4.5.5; SBN 233)

"All perceptions are distinct." (T App. 12; SBN 634)

The original formulation is in terms of qualities:

“Every quality being a distinct thing from another”. (T 1.4.3.7; SBN 222)

Premise two is the first of Hume's two principles. In the literature, it is called, following Garrett (1997, 9), Hume's Separability Principle (SP):

“every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination.” (T 1.4.5.5; SBN 233)

“Whatever is distinct, is distinguishable; and whatever is distinguishable, is separable by the thought or imagination.” (T App. 12; SBN 634)

The other principle forms the third premise of the argument. This is Hume's Conceivability Principle (e.g. Millican 2009, 649) or Conceivability Criterion of Possibility (Garrett 1997, 24) (CCP):

“Whatever is clearly conceiv'd may exist; and whatever is clearly conceiv'd, after any manner, may exist after the same manner.” (T 1.4.5.5; SBN 233)

Hume takes these three premises to entail that

“they [perceptions] are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence.” (T 1.4.5.5; SBN 233)

“All these [perceptions] [...] may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence.” (T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252)

“They [perceptions] [...] may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity.” (T App. 12; SBN 634)

Compare this with the original passage:

“Every quality [...] may exist apart” (T 1.4.3.7; SBN 222).

Thus, the entire argument in Hume's words from T 1.4.5.5 (SBN 233) goes as follows:

- (1) “all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe”
- (2) “every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination.”
 - a) SP
- (3) “Whatever is clearly conceiv'd may exist; and whatever is clearly conceiv'd, after any manner, may exist after the same manner.”
 - a) CCP
- (4) “they [perceptions] [...] may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence.”

4 Reconstruction of the Argument

The first premise of the argument concerns the distinctness and difference of perceptions. This might appear as a rather easy principle to understand, but it involves

complications; here we are at the heart of Hume's system in the *Treatise*. So the premise requires careful reformulation and commenting.

I think the most cogent reformulation of the first premise is that *the perception of every simple property is really distinct from the perception of every other entity*. This raises three immediate questions. (1) Why does it make a statement of *simple* properties only? (2) Why is it formulated in terms of perceptions rather than properties? (3) Why are the perceptions of simple properties *really* distinct from the perception of every other entity? After all, Hume does not qualify distinctness and difference in any way in the passages under discussion.

The answer to the first question is simply that the perceptions of simple properties are simple perceptions of properties in Hume's view. The reason for this is that simple perceptions are nothing but simple properties in the *Treatise* (when simple perceptions of passions, emotions, etc. are excluded). As Hume says at 1.1.7.6 (SBN 20), “to form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simply is the same thing”. Here “object” must include properties because Hume speaks about “qualities” in the context. So the implicit transition from qualities in the initial quote (1.4.3.7; SBN 222) to perceptions in the later passages is justified. The perception of a simple property, the simple perception of this property and this property are the same (recall that I presuppose that for Hume perceptions are objects). This is also the reply to the second question, why the first premise is formulated in terms of perceptions rather than properties, in addition to the structure of the argument. As will be seen below, first Hume draws a conclusion concerning perceptions and then he attains a more general metaphysical result on the basis of this conclusion.

There is an implicit interpretation of Hume's simple perceptions that the first premise involves. This interpretation may be called compositional as according to it, simple perceptions do not have any proper parts – whether parts are spatial or not.⁸ This is due to two points. (1) It represents the view that there are properties that are parts (not necessarily spatial) rather than modifications, modes or accidents. (2) In themselves

⁸ This is relatively neutral on how Hume's complex perceptions should be understood. Even Donald L.M. Baxter, who has denied that complex perceptions are single entities in Hume's view, subscribes to it. According to Baxter, complex perceptions are merely many things occurring together without forming any individuals. (Baxter 2008, 25-8) By contrast, Garrett thinks that they are individuals consisting of simple perceptions as their ultimate proper parts (Garrett 1997, 61-4 and 68-75).

(separately considered), simple perceptions are qualitatively simple (present only one property); as it was noted regarding the first question, they are simple properties⁹. There is also ample textual evidence for the compositional interpretation of simple perceptions – first and foremost, Hume's official definition of the distinction between simple and complex perceptions:

Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admitting of no distinction or separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts.” (T 1.1.1.2; SBN 2)¹⁰

The paradigm example of a Humean simple perception of a property is the simple visual impression of an unextended colour point, say, red. Although it might present other properties to the mind as a part of a complex perception such as a certain location, in itself and separately considered it is nothing over and above a particular instance of redness. (T 1.2.3.13-16; SBN 38-9) According to Hume's theory, our visual field consists of this kind of simple impressions, which are coloured mathematical points (T 1.2.3.4; SBN 34).¹¹

That simple perceptions do not have proper parts has important implications, regarding the third question (why *real* distinction): that x is a proper part of y means that x is a part of y but y is not a part of x where parthood is a primitive binary relation (proper parthood is thus irreflexive). For that reason, they cannot share proper parts with any other entity. They do have an improper part though because a thing is its own improper part (improper parthood and parthood are reflexive). From this, it follows, however, that two

⁹ This cannot be challenged by the fact that in the footnote at T 1.1.7.7 (SBN 20-1), which Hume inserted into the *Appendix* to T 3, he says that simple ideas may have different points or circumstances of resemblance. Later in the footnote, he is explicit that the “very nature” of simple ideas “excludes all composition” (T 1.n.5App; SBN 637). Garrett has also pointed out that simple ideas may have aspects because it is possible that they bear different resemblances to distinct ideas (1997, 63). But the point is that then they are not conceived in themselves, separately from everything else.

¹⁰ See also 1.2.1.2-5; SBN 26-8, 1.2.2.9; SBN 32, 1.2.3.12-5; SBN 38-9, 1.2.4.1; SBN 39, 1.2.5.12; SBN 57-8, 1.4.4.8; SBN 228, and 1.4.5.9; SBN 235. In addition, Hume says that visual and tactile simple perceptions are coloured mathematical points (T 1.2.4.3; SBN 40 and 21; SBN 46-7) and his definition of a mathematical point is “neither length, breadth nor depth.” (T 1.2.4.9; SBN 42) Therefore he must think – in order to be consistent – that visual and tactile simple perceptions are spatially actually indivisible. T 1.4.5.9 (SBN 235) confirms that he actually thinks so: “Whatever marks the place of its existence either must be extended, or must be a mathematical point, without parts or composition.”

¹¹ It would be an interesting question of Lewis scholarship whether he was influenced by Hume on space in his thesis of Humean Supervenience.

entities cannot have the same improper part. Thus, simple perceptions cannot share even improper parts with any distinct entity. In addition, according to Hume, simple perceptions cannot be in the same place at the same time, which *might* make them not only spatially but also compositionally overlapping.¹² Hence, they cannot share any parts with any other entity including perceptions: they are mereologically disjoint. Recall that for Hume real distinction between x and y involves that they do not share parts. Thus, simple perceptions are really distinct from every other perception and entity.

Clearly, this is an atomistic account of perceptions because simple perceptions are indivisible into proper parts. In order to see Hume's theoretical reasons for this view, let me first say something about Hume on space, or interchangeably for him, extension. In T 1.2.3¹³, Hume grounds his account of the perception of extension in his equally atomistic account of simple visual and tactile impressions and his radically sensiblist or empiricist theory of the understanding. First Hume puts forward his Copy Principle:

“every idea is deriv'd from some impression, which is exactly similar to it” (T 1.2.3.2; SBN 33).

Then he makes a statement of visual simple and complex impressions and ideas:

“my senses convey to me only the impressions of colour'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner. If the eye is sensible of any thing farther, I desire it may be pointed out to me. But if it be impossible to shew any thing farther, we may conclude with certainty, that the idea of extension is nothing but a copy of these colour'd points, and of the manner of their appearance.” (T 1.2.3.4; SBN 34)

According to Hume, the same holds of tactile simple and complex impressions:

“the impressions of touch are found to be similar to those of sight in the disposition of their parts” (T 1.2.3.5; SBN 34)

Hence he may conclude concerning all complex impressions of extension and the simple visual and tactile impressions that compose them:

“That compound impression, which represents extension, consists of several lesser impressions, that are indivisible to the eye or feeling, and may be call'd impressions of atoms or corpuscles endow'd with colour and solidity.” (T 1.2.3.15; SBN 38)

And of every complex idea of extension and its ultimate proper parts, which are simple visual and tactile ideas:

¹² Hume rules the possibility out that spatial simple perceptions (visual and tactile) can be in the same place at the same time (T 1.2.4.4-7; SBN 40-2 and 1.4.4.9-12; SBN 228-30). For this very reason, mere simultaneity cannot make simple perceptions compositionally overlapping, since co-existing simple perceptions must be in different places or not in space at all.

¹³ See also T 1.2.1.3-4; SBN 27.

“The parts, into which the ideas of space and time resolve themselves, become at last indivisible” (T 1.2.4.2; SBN 39)

The simple-perception part of this argument may be generalised to concern *every* simple sensible perception in the following manner. According to Hume, the atomistic account is correct about the simple sense-impressions of the three other senses than sight and touch as well. This is evident from his remark that “those perceptions, which are simple, and exist no where” because sounds, smells and tastes are non-spatial for him (T 1.4.5.11; SBN 236). Thus, by the CP, it also holds of the ideas of these simple sense-impressions of the three other sense modalities. As Hume says:

“NOW since all ideas are deriv’d from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them, whatever is true of the one must be acknowledg’d concerning the other. Impressions and ideas differ only in their strength and vivacity.” (T 1.1.7.5; SBN 19)

The simple ideas of hearing, smell and taste are therefore also compositionally simple and really distinct.

According to Garrett, Hume grounds the general result concerning simple perceptions in the Resemblance Thesis of the CP. It entails that the difference between an impression and its corresponding idea cannot introduce any metaphysical difference because their intrinsic difference is not that of properties. Thus, if a simple impression is actually indivisible and really distinct, the corresponding simple idea will be, too. (Garrett 1997, 66 and 68) In other words, the CP explicates a radical sensiblist or empiricist theory of the faculty of the understanding. Recall that according to the CP, every simple cognitive object derives from simple impressions (sense-impressions, bodily feelings, passions).

Hence, behind the first premise of this argument of Hume, there are his atomistic theory of sense-perception and radical sensiblist or empiricist account of the faculty of the understanding.

The second premise of the argument is Hume's Separability Principle (SP), or to be precise, its form that is restricted to perceptions, which I, as was seen before, presuppose to be beings in Hume's view. In its general form, the SP concerns potentially every entity, actual or possible. This is a justified move although in this context Hume speaks about “thought and imagination”, that is, about ideas. The reason for this is that as was seen just a moment ago, impressions and ideas cannot differ metaphysically. Then they cannot differ in terms of distinctness and separability either. If the idea of x is really distinct and separable, then so is the impression of x .

However, this again raises the question, why the SP should be stated in terms of *real* distinction and not mere distinction. The simple answer sufficient here is that not all entities that are distinct from each other in some way or other are separable in Hume's view. He explicitly says that rational distinction does not imply separability: "What then is meant by a distinction of reason, since it implies neither a difference nor separation?" (T 1.1.7.17; SBN 24-5) Real and rational distinction are two forms of distinction that Hume *explicitly* recognises.¹⁴

From the first two premises, the third premise or first sub-conclusion follows: *the perception of every simple property may be separated from the perception of every other entity, that is, may be conceived of without it.* If (1) the perception of every simple property is really distinct from the perception of every other entity and (2) real distinction entails separability in terms of perceptions, then (3) the perception of every simple property is separable from the perception of every other entity.

There is a presupposition, a hidden premise in this line of reasoning that should be made explicit before going to the next step. That presupposition rules out the following possibility. Even if the perceptions of simple properties did not share parts with any other perception, they would still be inseparable from some other perceptions, since they causally necessitate these other perceptions. This possibility is thus that the perceptions of simple properties cause other perceptions when causation is taken as a stronger necessary connection than Hume's constant conjunction (e.g. absolutely necessary connection): somehow the effects of the perceptions of simple properties could be read off from them. Recall that I am limiting myself to simple proper sensible properties and the perception of a simple proper sensible property is the simple proper sensible property. Therefore the presupposition is that simple proper sensible properties are causally inert. They do not involve any power that would make them inseparable from their effects. The clearest statement of Hume's endorsement of this principle can be found in the *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) where he claims about sensible qualities in general, not restricting himself to simple proper sensible qualities, as follows:

¹⁴ I have argued elsewhere ([self-reference omitted]) that Hume's system in the *Treatise* is compatible with a third kind of distinction as well: partial distinction (*x* and *y* share parts but are not identical).

“In reality, there is no part of matter, that does ever, by its sensible qualities, discover any power or energy, or give us ground to imagine, that it could produce any thing, or be followed by any other object, which we could denominate its effect.” (EHU 7.8; SBN 63; see also T 1.3.6.10; SBN 91)

However, I do not think that this presupposition must be made as a premise of the reconstruction of the argument, since it is so self-evidently Humean. In addition, it is natural, although not necessary, to think that proper sensible properties (colours, tactile, etc.), as they are perceived by the senses, are causally inert in the robust metaphysical sense described above. Of course, this leaves it still open that simple proper sensible properties involve passive powers: there is some factor in them that makes them capable of receiving effects and as such they are strongly necessitated by and inseparable from their causes. But Hume does not ever discuss passive powers. So metaphysically robust passive powers at least, including those possibly involved in simple proper sensible properties, must be excluded for him right from the start. The hidden premise may be thus formulated as follows: the perceptions of simple proper sensible properties do not involve any powers that would make them inseparable from their causes or effects.

The next step of the argument is a principle that allows Hume to draw a *general* metaphysical conclusion from the separate *perceivability*, i.e. the conceivability of simple properties.¹⁵ The fourth premise is his Conceivability Principle (CCP): conceivability entails possibility. The CCP and the third premise entail that it is possible for any simple property that is represented by its impression – if there is such a compositionally simple property beyond perceptions – to exist independent of any other entity.¹⁶ However, as Hume scholars know very well, giving an exact account of the CCP is not easy. I will only point out three problems: (1) What is the modality in terms of which the CCP is stated, and: (2) Does Hume qualify conceivability in one way or another in the principle? (3) Can Hume as an empiricist really hold such a rationalist-sounding principle?

The first question is easier to answer. The modality in question is what Hume calls “absolute” or “metaphysical” (T 1.3.14.35; SBN 172). Absolute or metaphysical necessity

¹⁵ At the same time, it establishes Hume's view against Berkeley, for example, that simple perceptions do not need anything to support them, such as a substantial soul.

¹⁶ This is independent of the question whether Hume is a Metaphysical Realist or not – whether he believes in the existence of perception-independent entities or not. Neither does it mean a commitment to some form of representational realism. It only says that *if* there is such a property beyond perceptions and *if* the impression represents it, *then* the property is also ontologically independent. It might presuppose something about the nature of representation though, but that question is out of the scope of this paper.

is bound by the law of contradiction: when proposition *p* is absolutely necessary, *not-p* implies a contradiction. So when *not-p* does *not* entail a contradiction, *p* is absolutely or metaphysically contingent as well as *not-p*. (T 1.3.6.1; SBN 86-7, 1.3.6.5; SBN 89, 1.3.7.3; SBN 95, 1.3.9.10; SBN 111-12 and EHU 12.27-8; SBN 163-4). In contrast with many metaphysicians nowadays, Hume thus runs absolute and logical, and hence metaphysical modalities together (T 1.3.3.2-3; SBN 79).

Hume distinguishes absolute necessity from causal necessity that is *not* bound by the law of contradiction (*not-p* not implying a contradiction) but by constant conjunctions between things (T 1.3.14.35; SBN 172 and EHU 12.28; SBN 163-4; cf. T 1.3.14.23; SBN 166). Causally necessary propositions are thus contingent in terms of absolute metaphysical modality.

There has been debate in Hume scholarship about the exact nature of conceivability in the CCP. Peter Kail, for instance, has defended the account that Hume restricts it to adequate conception; Peter Millican has recently attacked Kail's view vigorously (2009, Ch. 6). Hume himself fuels this discussion because his formulations of the CCP vary from clear and distinct, merely clear or separate conception to bare conception.¹⁷

However, for the present purposes this question is not very relevant. For the perceptions of simple properties conceived of separately from the perceptions of other entities (premise 3) must satisfy the strictest criteria of conception: having a clear and distinct impression or idea; clear and distinct conception *is* – amongst other things – conceiving separately that which is really distinct. So suffice it to formulate the principle and the fourth premise in the following manner: *conceivability entails absolute or metaphysical possibility*. In the Humean terms, this means that if we have an impression or an idea of *x*, then it is absolutely or metaphysically possible that *x* exists.

The third problem challenges Hume's endorsement of this principle. How can he think that he knows that everything that is conceivable is really metaphysically possible? He is an empiricist after all, so he does not have pure intellectual concepts or ideas in order to get access to metaphysical possibilities. How can he rule the possibility out that something that we can imagine is not really metaphysically possible in the end?

These questions are too difficult and vast problems to discuss in this paper; they require their own proper treatment. I can only point out that Hume's subscription to the

¹⁷ T 1.1.7.6; SBN 19-20, 1.2.4.11; SBN 43, 1.2.2.8; SBN 32, 1.4.5.5; SBN 233, App. 12; SBN 634, 1.2.2.8; SBN 32 and 1.3.3.3; SBN 79-80

CCP in the *Treatise*, which I am mainly discussing here, is pretty sure. He claims it repeatedly (e.g. T 1.1.7.6; SBN 19-20, T 1.2.2.8; SBN 32, T 1.2.4.11; SBN 43; and Abs.11; SBN 650) and employs it in many of his central arguments, such as the one under discussion, the system of “mathematical points” is metaphysically possible (T 1.2.2.9; SBN 32) and causation cannot be an absolutely necessary connection (e.g. T 1.3.3.3; SBN 79). Endorsing the principle is sufficient for my argument in this paper.

Now we are in the position to finish the reconstruction of Hume's argument. Its first sub-conclusion/premise 3 was that the perception of every simple property is separable from the perception of every other entity. From this, it follows by the CCP that the following is absolutely/metaphysically possible. Not only the perception of any simple property, which is already a property, but also the possible non-perceptual simple property represented by this perception (ultimately impression) would exist even if there were no other entity in the world. Ontological independence means exactly this: there could be x even if there were no other/distinct entity. Hence, Hume may conclude, perhaps, that every (qualitatively and compositionally) simple property is ontologically independent.

So the argument reconstructed in its entirety goes as follows:

- (1) The perception of every simple property is really distinct from the perception of every other entity
 - ^ since it does not have proper parts (compositional interpretation of Hume's simple perceptions)
- (2) *Restricted SP*: real distinction iff separability in terms of perceptions
- (3) The perception of every simple property may be separated from the perception of every other entity, i.e. may be conceived of without it (from 1 and 2)
 - ^ presupposition: the perceptions of simple proper sensible properties do not involve any powers that would make them inseparable from their causes or effects
- (4) *CCP*: conceivability entails absolute or metaphysical possibility
- (5) Thus: it is absolutely or metaphysically possible that not only the perception of any simple property but also the non-perceptual simple property represented by the perception (ultimately impression) exists even if there is no other entity (from 3 and 4)
- (6) Ontological independence of x : it is absolutely/metaphysically possible that x exists even if there is no other/distinct entity in the world

(7) Thus: every simple property is ontologically independent (from 5 and 6)

5 Epilogue: Possible Soft Spots of Hume's Argument

In the introduction, I put forward some reasons as to why this argument is still contemporarily relevant. I finish the paper by drawing attention to some points where a dependence-trope theorist or a dispositional power ontologist might deny Hume's conclusion – what the soft spot of Hume's defense is, perhaps. What I am saying is anachronistic and as such not fair to Hume, but my point here is rather Hume's argument within the context of contemporary philosophy than the history of philosophy. Unfortunately, the following must remain more on the level of hints or guidelines for future research than true philosophical argumentation due to the space limit and the nature of the paper.

It seems to me that nowadays premise (1) and the Conceivability Principle are the two most controversial steps in Hume's argument. The first premise is founded on an atomistic theory of perception and Hume's radically sensiblist/empiricist account of the understanding. I am not suggesting that the atomistic theory of perception is dead in the 21st century, but I doubt whether any philosopher or cognitive psychologist would endorse Hume's particular version of it anymore. Hume's radically sensiblist/empiricist account of the understanding, the Copy Principle, is also doubtful as it is not at all clear that all mental content is copied from (resemble and is caused by) perception (including bodily feelings, passions, emotions, and sentiments).

We can see that the CCP was already controversial in early modern philosophy when we understand that for Hume conceivability is having a sense-impression or its copy: an idea of the memory or the imagination. Humean conceivability is thus sensible conceivability: imaginability in this sense. It is obvious that intellectualist or rationalist philosophers like Leibniz did not accept this sensiblist principle. In post-Kripkean philosophy nowadays, the situation has not changed in this respect – only the reasons might be different. This is evident from the fact that there has been a lively discussion on conceivability and possibility in contemporary philosophy as documented by Szabo Gendler and Hawthorne (2002) and Vaidya (2007, Ch. 5). Today it might also be thought, and with good reasons perhaps, that Hume's view on modality is too simplistic – that he does not have a fully developed theory of modality. Hume should have drawn more distinctions between different kinds of modalities; logical and metaphysical modalities,

which Hume runs together, are not co-extensive, for instance (see Lowe 1998, 13-6). In addition, it is epistemically contestable whether sensible conceivability can really track metaphysical possibilities.

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