FICTITIOUS DURATION AND INFORMATIVE IDENTITY IN HUME'S *TREATISE*

JAMES R. O'SHEA

Philosophy Department,
University College, Dublin,
Belfield,
DUBLIN 4,
IRELAND
jim.oshea@ucd.ie

Hume's famous account of our idea of the identity through time of persons and objects is based upon a principle of individuation according to which the idea of numerical sameness properly applies only to unchanging objects. Hume derives this idea of identity from a 'fiction of the imagination' concerning the possibility of time without change. I argue that the puzzle Hume raises concerning identity and change is an important one in the form that he raised it, and not misguided as some have suggested; however, I show that his recourse to the duration fiction in attempting to account for our ascriptions of identity lands him in a vicious circularity. In the course of these arguments I take a close look at the nature of Humean fictions. In the final section I then suggest that there are resources in the Treatise *for a more successful Humean account of the idea or 'fiction' of identity, based primarily on certain aspects of Hume's theory of abstract ideas.*

INTRODUCTION

Hume's account of our idea of the identity through time of bodies, artifacts, living things, and persons is familiar from

the famous section of the *Treatise* entitled 'Of personal identity' (*T* Book I, Part IV, § vi, 251-263). When in ordinary life we assume that objects persist through their changes, as well as continuing to exist apart from our interrupted viewings of them, we imagine, in some sense mistakenly, that there is a "perfect identity" when in fact all that is given to us in perception is a succession of significantly related but numerically distinct items.[1] For the idea of (perfect) identity for Hume is the "idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time; … this idea we call that of *identity* or *sameness*" (*T* 253). If an object changes in the slightest, or if our view of it is interrupted, these successive changes can be ascribed only what Hume calls an "imperfect identity" (*T* 255-6): "For as such succession answers evidently to our notion of diversity, it can only be by mistake we ascribe to it an identity" (*T* 255). The imperfect identity of ordinary things, then, consists in our mistakenly applying the idea of identity to what is only a particular kind of diversity.[2]

---

[1] I use 'items' as a categorially neutral term.

[2] It is my view that in the end Hume contends that our ordinary "vulgar" beliefs are justifiable despite their involving such mistakes as the one just described. I have argued elsewhere that the sceptical theoretical inquiries in Book I of the *Treatise* prepare the way for a pragmatic defence of our vulgar beliefs in general, a move that occurs primarily in the final section of Book I (O'Shea, 1996). The question of how Hume achieves this positive result will not be considered here. It should be kept in mind, however, that when I make such assertions as that for Hume the mind is directly aware only of its own ever-changing perceptions, the matter is actually far more complex when Hume's *whole* story is in. In short, while from one perspective Hume characterises the vulgar view as *false* (*T* 213), in the article cited I have argued that he ultimately defends it.

But what of the idea of identity or sameness itself? Although the treatment of that idea occupies only two pages of the *Treatise* (*T* 200-1), it is clearly genetically prior to, and makes possible, all of the more famous conclusions of the rest of Book I, Part IV. I propose to take a closer look at Hume's "*principium individuationis*", or idea of identity, and in particular at the way in which he attempts to derive that idea from the fictitious belief that there could be a duration of time "without any changeable existence" (*T* 65). I will attempt to clarify Hume's puzzle concerning identity by setting it in the framework of the general problem of identity as it has since come to be understood. This will provide the background for a close examination of the relationship between the idea of identity and the fiction of duration without change, during the course of which I offer an analysis of the structure and function of Humean *fictions*. The upshot of this discussion is that while Hume's recourse to the fiction lands him in a vicious genetic circularity, the problem he has raised is an important one, and the general framework in which he raises it need not be rejected. In the final section of the paper I suggest how Hume might have accounted for the idea of identity while preserving his basic principles and main conclusions, doing so without reliance on the fatal notion that identity properly applies only to unchanging items, but nonetheless retaining the 'fictional' character of Humean identity. This will require interpreting and highlighting the importance of Hume's theory of *abstract ideas*.

1. HUME'S PRINCIPLES AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY IN GENERAL

Let us begin by highlighting two fundamental Humean principles. In accordance with Hume's *copy principle*, all ideas in the mind – i.e. each simple idea, and so in content, if not in form, all complex ideas as well – are originally caused by, and resemble, preceding impressions (*T* 2-5). Or as the principle is summed up later in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*: "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are *copies* of our impressions or more lively ones" (*E* 19; emphasis added). The copy principle is clearly put forward as a criterion of the meaningfulness of terms (*T* 33; cp. *E* 22) – but here caution is in order. For while it is importantly true that ideas "always represent the objects or impressions, from which they are deriv'd, and can never without a fiction represent or be apply'd to any other" (*T* 37), such 'fictions' figure so prominently in Hume's account of human nature that we should not expect to settle *at the outset* the bearing of the copy principle on subtle questions of meaning, justification, and truth.

To appreciate the complexities of Hume's account of identity we must also impress upon ourselves the importance of what I will call his *separability principle*, which he states as follows[3] (*T* 18):

> ...We have observ'd, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the *in-*

---

[3] For the *separability principle*, see for example *T* 10, 18, 24, 27, 36, 40, 54, 66, 79-80, 87, 233, 252, 634.

verse, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different. For how is it possible we can separate what is not distinguishable, or distinguish what is not different?

At this level of Hume's analysis, wherever there is any distinguishable difference in perceptible content – as happens with every turn of the eye or tick of the clock – we have genuinely distinct items.

According to Hume, as we have seen, a perfectly identical item is one that remains changeless to an uninterrupted gaze (*T* 201, 255). An imperfect identity, on the other hand, is the mistaken application of the idea of a perfect identity to successions of diverse items that are appropriately related by resemblance, causality, or contiguity. Whenever I return to my familiar desk (as we say), experience presents me with a numerically distinct reality. But each such encounter so highly resembles previous encounters (Hume's notion of "constancy," *T* 194) that my mind is placed in a certain calm disposition, one which resembles the calm state of mind that arises from an uninterrupted gaze at a 'perfectly' identical object. The resemblance between the states of mind leads me to substitute the ideas, in accordance with Hume's general theory as to how such mistakes occur (*T* 60-1). I thus respond to cases of significantly related diversity by substituting the idea of a perfect, *unchanging* identity through time, and I thereby imagine that my desk remains perfectly identical through change and interruption.[4]

---

[4] Note that the 'imperfect identity' of the desk is in Hume's view not another *kind* of identity, but rather the mistaken attribution of (perfect) identity to a particular kind of diversity.

Imperfect identities are legion, of course, and they receive careful treatment in the section on personal identity (*T* Book I, Part IV, § vi, 251-263). As mentioned above, however, a "principle of individuation", articulated in two of the most dense pages of the *Treatise*, provides the foundation for that account. For Hume, as for philosophers long before and long after him, the very notion of *sameness with difference* is deeply puzzling. The difficulty as formulated by Hume is that it seems that the idea of identity must be an impossible "medium betwixt unity and number" (*T* 201):

> First, As to the principle of individuation; we may observe, that the view of any one object is not sufficient to convey the idea of identity. For in that proposition, *an object is the same with itself*, if the idea express'd by the word, *object*, were no ways distinguish'd from that meant by *itself*, we really shou'd mean nothing, nor wou'd the proposition contain a predicate and a subject, which however are imply'd in this affirmation. One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity.
>
> On the other hand, a multiplicity of objects can never convey this idea, however resembling they may be suppos'd. The mind always pronounces the one not to be the other....
>
> Since then both number and unity are incompatible with the relation of identity, it must lie in something that is neither of them. But to tell the truth, at first sight this seems utterly impossible. Betwixt unity and number there can be no medium; no more than betwixt existence and non-existence (*T* 200).[5]

---

[5] Since Hume is engaged in explaining how the vulgar and philosophical systems are built upon the idea of identity, it should *not* be assumed that the term 'objects' in this passage is meant *to contrast with perceptions*. 'Object' for Hume frequently simply refers to any experi-

To see what is at issue in this passage it will be helpful to view his puzzle from a post-Fregean standpoint.

Remarking on the above passage, Quine diagnoses Hume's puzzlement as a confusion of sign with object.[6] On the face of it, an identity statement asserts a *relation*, but Hume seems to think (Quine suggests) that the statement 'the object *is the same as* the object' – of the relational form '*aRa*' – says nothing more than 'the object exists' and so does not really assert a relation at all. The correct view, according to Quine, is that "what makes identity a relation, and '=' a relative term, is that '=' goes between distinct occurrences of singular terms, same or distinct, and not that it relates distinct objects." Quine holds that identity itself *is* a relation, but one which holds "between the named object and itself."[7] By "what makes identity a relation" Quine is referring not to what makes an identity statement *true* but, rather, to what provides for "statements of identity that are true and *not idle*" (*ibid.*, my emphasis). This is suggested by another remark of Quine's on identity (and again on Hume):

---

ential content present to the mind. Even when he does contrast 'objects' with 'our perceptions', in certain contexts the intended distinction is often simply between passively received *impressions* and our ideas as representations of them.

[6] See Quine ((1960), p. 116) for this and the next several quotes.

[7] After commenting on Hume's confusion, Quine remarks: "Similar confusion of sign and object is evident in Leibniz where he explains identity as a relation between the signs, rather than between the named object and itself: '*Eadem sunt quorum unum potest substitui alteri, salva veritate*'."

> Since the *useful* statements of identity are those in which the
> named objects are the same and the names are different, it is
> only because of a peculiarity of language that the notion of
> identity is needed. [Footnote:] Thus it was that Hume had
> trouble accounting for the origin of the identity idea in expe-
> rience (Quine (1982), p. 268).

Setting aside momentarily the question of whether it is indeed
only "a peculiarity of language" that underwrites the usefulness
of the concept of identity, Quine's remarks do help to focus
the issue. We confront here a classic puzzle concerning iden-
tity statements (the *locus classicus* is Frege). If an identity
statement asserts a relation, it must assert that this relation
holds either between one object and something else, or else
between that one object and itself (i.e., reflexively, as in the re-
lational statement 'Joe *is the same size as* himself'). One thing
cannot be numerically identical to *another* thing, so it seems
that statements of identity must be asserting that the object is
the same as the object. But as Hume remarked in the passage
quoted above (*T* 200), "imply'd" in an affirmation of identity is
a difference in content ("the idea expressed by the word")
which is not captured by the proposition, *the object = the object.*
("No one outside a logic-book ever wishes to say '*x* is *x*'," as
Russell remarked ((1956), p. 55).) In Frege's terms, 'the Morn-
ing Star is the Evening Star' (namely, Venus) can differ in *cog-
nitive value* from 'the Morning Star is the Morning Star'. The
former is an *informative* identity claim, the latter is not.

   Contrary to our own philosophical usage, the term
'identity' for Hume refers exclusively to informative identities.
If there is no difference in content presented in a statement of
sameness, then we have what Hume calls a mere 'unity'. (It
might be a mere *nominal* unity, however, for the only *real* uni-

ties are the perceptual *minima* or atoms.[8] The point is that in such attributions of sameness only one content is ostensibly presented.) Identities, on the other hand (i.e., informative identities) "contain a predicate and a subject" in the sense that two distinct contents or 'ideas' are asserted to be (somehow) one and the same item. And that, of course, is the source of the puzzle. Given *two* contents, the "mind always pronounces the one not to be the other" (*T* 200). How can two be one?

Quine's remarks might suggest that the difference in informativeness can be accounted for solely by the difference in the singular terms 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' alone: two names for one object.[9] But as Frege pointed out, the use of these particular words or signs is arbitrary in a way that does not do justice to the epistemological situation: "a difference [in cognitive value] can arise only if the difference between the signs corresponds to a difference in the mode of presentation of the thing designated" ((1960), p. 57). To put it loosely, our partial human insight into the nature of things has made it the case that the sentence 'the Morning Star is the Evening Star' at one time expressed an astronomical discovery (two substan-

---

[8] "...the whole universe *may be consider'd as an unite.* That term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination, which the mind may apply to any quantity of objects it collects together; nor can such an unity any more exist alone than number can, as being in reality a true number. But the unity, which can exist alone, and whose existence is necessary to that of all number, is of another kind, and must be perfectly indivisible, and incapable of being resolved into any lesser unity" (*T* 30-1).

[9] I am not here presenting or investigating Quine's own subtle treatment of the topic of identity. See his classic article, "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis" (1953).

tively different cognitive routes to the same planet). On Frege's (mature) view, this epistemological difference is reflected in the fact that the terms 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star', which both refer to (*bedeuten*) the planet Venus, have different *senses*.

However, a Fregean distinction between sense and reference cannot be easily adapted to resolve Hume's present dilemma. The distinction to be developed in *T* Book I, Part IV, § ii, between external bodies and our own perceptions of them (as expressed first in ('vulgar') direct realism, and then in ('philosophical') indirect realism, is itself the product of an analysis conducted within an initial realm of given sensible contents. Since statements of identity involving 'Venus', 'Evening Star', and 'Morning Star' are informative, Hume's copy principle requires a difference in perceptible content associated with these terms, ultimately traceable to impressions.[10] We take it that the content *Morning Star* and the content *Evening Star* (whatever these may be) in some sense bear the interesting relation of *referring to* the planet Venus (not to *the content Venus!*). But for Hume this putative relation of reference is part of the general problem he is investigating. We have direct access to sensible contents ('perceptions of the mind'). How it is that the contents *Morning Star* and *Evening Star* bear a special relationship to the content *Venus*, such that we take ourselves to be referring to an independent body (the

---

[10] On Hume's separability principle any distinction in content indicates numerically distinct existences (*T* 18). I say 'distinction in content' in recognition of those *distinctions of reason* which Hume builds upon his account of abstract ideas (*T* 25). See section 5 below for Hume's account of abstract ideas.

planet Venus), is no less problematic initially than the more famous difficulty as to how it is that some present bundle of perceptions and certain past bundles of perceptions all 'belong to' (have reference to) one *self.* For many ideas to belong to or refer to one thing in any sense is just that aspect of the ancient problem of the One and the Many with which Hume is struggling in his account of the idea of identity.

From a Humean perspective, then, we cannot offer a linguistic solution to Frege's puzzle and refrain from addressing the epistemological situation (the work done by Fregean senses, cognitive content); but neither can we simply rely upon a distinction between sense and reference and thereby presume some solution to a problem which Hume is facing.[11] For Hume:

> to form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simply is the same thing; the reference of the idea to an object being an extraneous denomination, of which in itself it bears no mark or character (*T* 20; cp. *T* 68).

I might add that neither can we appeal on Hume's behalf to a *causal* theory of reference to explain this "extraneous denomination." For whereas such theories take their start from assuming the existence of independent bodies, the resolution of the present difficulty concerning identity is part of Hume's task of accounting for just such an assumption.

---

[11] Citing Frege's distinction between sense and reference, Bennett ((1971), p. 335) states summarily: "Hume's problem has been solved." As my discussion indicates, I do not believe Hume's problem to be so easily dismissible.

Identity propositions thus seem to be infected with absurdity at their root. Wittgenstein put it succinctly in the *Tractatus*:

> Roughly speaking: to say of *two* things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of *one* thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing (5.5303).

In Hume's terms, any informative identity necessarily goes beyond a merely unitary content (ultimately, a simple perception) and imputes a numerical sameness to what are in fact separable and therefore numerically distinct contents (the separability principle). "The mind always pronounces the one not to be the other": that is, they are a number of objects (perceptible contents) "whose existences are entirely distinct and independent" (*T* 200). Significant identity requires a difference in content, but as soon we introduce one, our idea explodes into that of diversity. 'Perfect identity', it initially appears, can no more resist reduction to diversity than the 'mistaken' or *imperfect* identifications it is called upon to explain.

2. UNITY, IDENTITY, AND THE DURATION FICTION

"To remove this difficulty," Hume suggests, "let us have recourse to the idea of time or duration" (*T* 200). The move is somewhat surprising. How will the idea of time help to unravel the puzzle concerning identity? Hume's proposal, loosely put, is that the idea of *mere temporal passage* can provide the informative element in the idea of identity without introducing a

real, separable difference in content: "we suppose the change to lie only in the time" (*T* 203).

Earlier in the *Treatise* Hume had used the copy principle to argue that the idea of temporal duration is given (and given only) by *successions* of perceptible content:

> ... time cannot make its appearance to the mind, either alone, or attended with a steady unchangeable object, but is always discovered by some *perceivable* succession of changeable objects (*T* 35).[12]

> ... Five notes play'd on a flute give us the impression and idea of time; tho' time be not a sixth impression, which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses...(*T* 36).

> ... the indivisible moments of time must be fill'd with some real object or existence, whose succession forms the duration, and makes it be conceivable by the mind (*T* 39).

So any temporal duration, however brief, must consist of a succession of diverse, indivisible, contentful moments. Hume's task now becomes one of explaining how we can form the idea of a passage of time which is not constituted by a real diversity. Otherwise the proposal to rescue the idea of identity by appeal to the idea of time would only reconfirm the original difficulty. For Hume wants to make use of an idea of strict numerical identity to account for the mistaken identification of really distinct contents (imperfect identity). The problem was that informative or significant identity for Hume would seem to re-

---

[12] "Change*able* objects" simply refers to an actual succession or exchang*ing* of perceptible contents. Hume is not talking about dispositional properties here. The various textual contexts make this clear, but see also Baxter ((1987), pp. 331-2) and van Steenburgh (1977) for arguments in favour of this interpretation.

quire a distinction in perceptible content, but any real difference in content will reduce (by the separability principle) to a real diversity. So he wants a difference in mere time to secure a significant identity without going to the length of a real perceptible diversity. But, on his own account of time, the idea of duration is *constituted by* just such real successions of diverse contents.

A certain *fiction of the imagination* is now called upon to provide the solution (*T* 201). For reasons to be examined presently, Hume holds that we are apt to mistakenly imagine that the idea of temporal duration would be applicable even to a perfectly *unchanging* object. This fictitious notion of a duration without succession will then generate the idea of a significant identity:

> This fiction of the imagination almost universally takes place; and 'tis by means of it, that a single object, plac'd before us, and survey'd for any time without our discovering in it any interruption or variation, is able to give us a notion of identity (*T* 201).

The survey of such a content affords "a medium betwixt unity and number ... according to the view, in which we take it" (*T* 201). Since there is (somehow) a passage of time involved, we can, on the one hand, pay attention to the fact that the object existed at two different times. The object "must be multiply'd, in order to be conceiv'd at once, as existent in these two different points of time."

Or:

> ... on the other hand, we may trace the succession of time by
> a like succession of ideas, and conceiving first one moment,
> along with the object then existent, imagine afterwards a
> change in the time without any *variation* or *interruption* in the
> object; in which case it gives us the idea of unity (*T* 201).

This is a difficult statement to interpret, but the intended effect is clear. The fiction of a changeless yet enduring object allows us to view the object surveyed as a non-successive *unity*. In fact, the fiction contains all the materials needed for the idea of identity, the only difference apparently being that the fiction suppresses the aspect of succession and focuses on unity (the unchanging object), while the diversity aspect of identity brings the successiveness explicitly to mind. The fiction thus underwrites the unity component of identity by enabling us to imagine an indivisible and unitary object nonetheless persisting through diverse moments of time. In this way we come to believe that a thing could be both one and many:

> We cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that an object is
> the same with itself, unless we mean, that the object existent
> at one time is the same with itself existent at another. By this
> means we make a difference, betwixt the idea meant by the
> word, *object*, and that meant by *itself*, without going the length
> of number, and at the same time without restraining ourselves
> to a strict and absolute unity (*T* 201).

In the rest of this section and in the next I will be concerned with the intricacies of this proposal. Since perfect identity serves as the fulcrum for Hume's account of our belief in external reality (with all its derivative 'imperfect identities' concerning bodies, substances, persons, artifacts, etc.), it

would seem that the coherence of his entire analysis of our ideas of the self and its world is at stake. As Robert McRae recognised, the:

> fictitious duration which we attribute to unchangeable objects has remarkable consequences for the remainder of Book I of the *Treatise*. Out of this fiction are generated in a logically ordered series the basic metaphysical categories in terms of which the mind thinks, and all of them are fictitious ((1980), p. 124).

The idea of identity that is built upon the duration fiction includes a succession which is, as Hume says, "scarce felt" or noticed or discovered (*T* 203). He appears to have in mind primarily the succession of our thoughts or ideas (*T* 201, top). This quiet diversity component provides a real duration. There is also what Hume variously calls the single, invariable, uninterrupted, and unchangeable object, a content that we *suppose* to continue the same for some time (*T* 201-3). As Barry Stroud has pointed out, however, there appears to be a blatant and vicious circularity here ((1977), pp. 101ff.). The idea of identity, for Hume, is the idea of a qualitatively unchanging and continuously perceived content that nonetheless is supposed to persist through a duration of time (the 'supposed' in the following quote points to the fiction of duration without change):

> Thus the principle of individuation is nothing but the *invariableness* and *uninterruptedness* of any object, thro' a suppos'd variation of time, by which the mind can trace it in the different periods of its existence, without any break of the view, and without being oblig'd to form the idea of multiplicity or number (*T* 201).

The question was: how do we acquire that idea, when all we are presented with is diversity and mere unity? Well, Hume proposes, we *imagine* that there is *an unchanging object that nonetheless persists through time*. But that (Stroud suggests) just *is* the idea of identity! And to *imagine X*, as Stroud points out, we must have an idea of *X*, and ideas are copied from impressions. Hume would never explain how it is that we come to *possess* an idea by simply throwing up his hands and declaring that we are able to imagine it. Stroud concludes that the account is incoherent. "Hume seems to 'explain' our acquisition of the idea only on the assumption that we already have it, and so he does not explain it at all" (p. 104).

One possible response to Stroud's circularity charge would be to adopt an irenic attitude toward Humean fictions.[13] It is undeniable that the reliance on a fiction of the imagination indicates that the copy principle alone is unable to fully account for the idea of identity. Since the idea of identity is generated from a fiction, the present suggestion would be that there is no need to worry about 'circularity' in this domain at all. The idea of identity that emerges out of the fiction of a changeless duration is at bottom a complex primitive product of the imagination.

This attempt to help Hume trivialises his basic philosophical method. Central to the *Treatise* is the attempt to explain our acquisition of various ideas. In this attempt, the basic principles of the imagination certainly do function as primitive posits at the foundation of Hume's system, but particular fic-

---

[13] Although I have not found this suggestion explicitly in the literature, I have encountered variations on this theme in many interpreters' attitudes toward Humean fictions.

tions of imagination emphatically do not. Hume takes great pains to *explain* how certain relations among perceptions, combined with the principles of association and a naturalistic hypothesis concerning the confusion of resembling ideas, conspire to lawfully generate the peculiar misapplication of ideas in which fictions consist. The friend of Hume will not treat his fictions as easy loopholes for the evasion of difficulties, for fictions themselves are among the most interesting explananda in the science of human nature. Hume would not tolerate having recourse to a fiction in explaining our acquisition of an idea if he felt that the idea was needed to account for the fiction in the first place. In short (to echo a famous remark of Quine's), to call a fiction a fiction is not to patronize it as a genetic inexplicability.

Stroud's accusation of circularity is, nonetheless, too quick. For while we have seen that in describing how the fiction gives rise to the idea of identity Hume does indeed refer to a "single object, plac'd before us, and survey'd for any time without our discovering in it any interruption or variation" (*T* 201), it is clear that the unchanging "single" object we survey for a time is somehow supposed to be understood (as a result of the duration fiction) as a mere *unity*. Hume's intention is not to inform us that it is simply by means of surveying a single *identical* object for a time that we generate the confessedly problematic idea of identity over time. Rather, we allegedly survey a changeless unity and then make use of the fiction (that changeless unity can participate in duration) to generate the two components of the idea of identity. There is no genetic circularity at least on the surface here.

In the end, however, my own conclusion will confirm Stroud's general suspicion. In order to properly assess Hume's proposal we need to follow up his own explicit reference to his earlier account of the duration fiction itself (*T* 65) – a line that is pursued neither by Hume's critics nor his defenders – and reconsider the circularity question against an enriched understanding of Humean fictions. How exactly does Hume argue that an indivisible unity – despite having no duration – can nonetheless be (mistakenly) imagined to have the same duration as a succession of perceptions? Although the interpretation I develop of these matters will not rescue Hume's account as it stands, a more accurate picture of the subtlety of his position will reward the labor and prepare the way for a revised account in the final section.

3. DURATION WITHOUT CHANGE AND EXTENSION WITH-OUT MATTER

Hume began his original account of the duration fiction (*T* 64-5) by pointing out that we cannot have "the idea of time without any changeable existence," since we have no such impression. The idea of temporal duration, as we have seen, is given only by succession.[14] However:

---

[14] The idea of time or duration, strictly speaking, is an *abstract idea* deriving from the successive *manner* in which our perceptions occur. I discuss abstract ideas in section 5. The copy theory remains sufficient for ruling out duration without succession, for 'abstract ideas' are essentially particular ideas – in this case, particular successions – caught up in certain associative tracks involving linguistic habits. The arguments in this section are unaffected by suppressing the role of abstract ideas.

... tho' it be impossible to shew the impression, from which the idea of time without a changeable existence is deriv'd; yet we can easily point out those appearances which make us fancy we have that idea. For we may observe, that there is a continual succession of perceptions in our mind; so that the idea of time being for ever present with us; when we consider a stedfast object at five-a-clock, and regard the same at six; we are apt to apply to it that idea in the same manner as if every moment were distinguish'd by a different position, or an alteration of the object. [1] The first and second appearances of the object, being compar'd with the succession of our perceptions, seem equally remov'd as if the object had really chang'd. To which we may add [2], what experience shews us, that the object was susceptible of such a number of changes betwixt these appearances; as also [3] that the unchangeable or rather fictitious duration has the same effect upon every quality ... as that succession which is obvious to the senses. From these three relations we are apt to confound our ideas, and imagine we can form the idea of a time and duration, without any change or succession (*T* 65, bracketed numerals added).

The passage appears to describe two experiences separated by an hour-long succession. On this reading, the 'steadfastness' of the object must be interpreted as a way of referring to the *invariableness* (i.e., qualitative identity) of the two contents at five and again at six o'clock. On this reading, then, what does "the stedfast object" pick out in our experience? The most obvious response is that we have here two resembling perceptions that are *vulgarly believed* to be one continuous object. But this is clearly incompatible with the later use to which Hume puts the duration fiction, when he has recourse to it in attempting to explain the origin of the idea of (perfect) identity. The vulgar raise up that idea in response to significantly related perceptions, and so come to believe (mistakenly) that interrupted, resembling perceptions are really one continuous (identical) being. 'The object' at five o'clock and at six o'clock therefore

cannot be construed as a vulgar re-identification, not without making a sham of Hume's account of our acquisition of the idea of identity.

Let us take a closer look at the notion of a *fiction* as it is operating in the present context.[15] Although Stroud correctly pointed out that the imagination of *X* standardly requires an idea of *X*, a fiction in Hume's technical sense presents a different story. As the present passage makes clear (*T* 65), in the case of a fiction, the imagination of *X* consists in our mistakenly *imagining that we can form an idea* of *X*. There never was an impression of *X*, so there is no idea of *X* for the imagination to entertain. The fiction consists in our *misapplying* otherwise well-grounded ideas. In the case at hand, we imagine that we can form "the idea of time without any changeable [i.e., successive] existence." The idea of duration properly applies only to that from which it could be derived, namely, to a succession of diverse contents. The fiction, then, consists in our somehow applying a duration-idea to what is not a succession.

A brief look at Hume's parallel fiction of *spatial extension without matter* will help to clarify further the fiction of a temporal duration without change (*T* 58-9). For, as duration always requires a succession of diverse contents, so real spatial extension requires a string or array of visible or tangible co-existent contents. We imagine that we can form the idea of an extension without matter because we are led to misapply genuine instances of the idea of extension in cases involving complete

---

[15] I will speak generally of the role of fictions, but I do not wish to claim that *every* aspect of the mechanism employed in the present case holds for all other Humean fictions. For an instructive account of the workings of Humean fictions, see Costa (1990).

perceptual nullity. For example, the idea of extension given by an unbroken string of five lights might be confused with a case in which two lights are separated by a gap of total darkness. [16] The darkness itself has no positive content, according to Hume, and as far as it *alone* is concerned, we no more attain an idea of extension by sight than does a blind man (*T* 55, 57). Nonetheless we imagine that the gap affords a real spatial extension, because the two separated lights produce effects on our senses similar to those produced by two lights on each end of a genuine string of lights (*T* 58-9). We also find by experience that separated lights are capable of receiving between them a continuous string of lights, so as to transform the 'fictitious distance' of the gap into a real extension or string (*T* 59). Such relations of resemblance and causality lead us to raise up an idea of *gappy* contents (a complex idea with a 'gap' in it, if you will) in "discourses and reasonings" that are ostensibly concerned with genuine *extension* (*T* 60):

> This change we are not always sensible of; but continuing the same train of thought, make use of the related idea, which is presented to us, and employ it in our reasoning, as if it were the same with what we demanded. This is the cause of many mistakes and sophisms in philosophy ...(*T* 61).

We thus come to fancy that there is genuine extension where there is complete non-existence; these are "the causes why we falsly imagine" we can form the idea of "a vacuum or extension without matter" (*T* 58).

---

[16] In what follows I simplify Hume's *threefold* relation for ease of exposition.

This account of a Humean fiction might be objected to on the essentially Wittgensteinian grounds that no intelligible sense can be made of the notion that one might 'mistakenly imagine that one has an idea of X without one's *ever having* any idea of X.[17] (This certainly *is* Hume's account of fictions – "we can easily point out the appearances which *make us fancy we have that idea*" – so it is the coherence of that account and not my interpretation of it that would presumably be at issue here.) The mention of Wittgenstein may remind us, however, that Hume himself, in the passages just examined, emphasises the role of *language* in his account of fictions. The idea of spatial extension is that of a string or array of co-existent perceptible contents. In the case at hand, however, we are led by a subtle process of association "to talk instead of thinking" (T 62): we retain the idea of *gapped perceptions* – a genetically unproblematic structure of ideas in itself – while continuing "discourses and reasonings" (T 60) concerning 'extension'. The objection thus brings out a rather subtle aspect of Hume's account: in disputes concerning the existence of a vacuum, the language of spatial extension has gone on holiday (cp. T 638-9).

With the vacuum fiction before us, perhaps the corresponding temporal case (i.e., the changeless-duration fiction) is to be understood as follows. Suppose I am in my office at five o'clock, I leave for an hour and then return to find things as they were. Consider only the two resembling contents at both ends of this hour-long excursion into the hallway. To avoid the genetic-circularity threat these two exactly resembling contents

---

[17] This objection was put to me in discussion by Jay Rosenberg, and also by Michael Hodges in his comments on an earlier version of this paper.

must not be explicitly mistaken for one office which endured even while unperceived. Nonetheless, experience does reveal a vast store of previous strings of office experiences not interrupted, as in this case, by one's absence. This is by way of explaining Hume's remark that "[2] the object was susceptible of such a number of changes betwixt these appearances" (quoted above, *T* 65) – the *actual* changes here being those experienced in the hallway, the (ideas of) *possible* changes deriving from the previously experienced strings of office-contents. Furthermore, the contents at both ends of the hallway excursion considered alone, as separated, have otherwise the same effects as the termini of any continuous string of office experiences ([3] "the unchangeable or rather fictitious duration has the same effect upon every quality...as that succession, which is obvious to the senses"). The two office encounters separated by the hour-long succession will fit into my standard workday in much the way an hour-long string of office experiences usually does, thus producing the resembling calm state of mind that leads to the confusion and idea-substitution described earlier.

Unfortunately, while the analogy with the vacuum case has helped to clarify the duration fiction, it now also becomes clear that the latter cannot be understood without either *presupposing* that we already possess the idea of identity (i.e., of the same object over time), or otherwise undermining Hume's later "recourse" to the fiction (*T* 200). Let us grant the complex resemblance between the gappy invariable contents at five and six o'clock, on the one hand, and the ever-present succession of contents, on the other. At six o'clock I might be led, as explained, to substitute the gapped-idea of "the object" for the

idea of a temporal succession and, hence, to imagine that I can "form the idea of a time and duration, without any change or succession." But what is this "stedfast object," *"the same" at five and six o'clock*, if not something with identity over time? If we prescind from identification across the gap, on the other hand, we are left with mere diversity. Hume is clearly not thinking that 'the object' is the momentary unity at six o'clock alone.[18] Nor can I see how it will improve matters to suggest that "the unchanging object" is really a succession of qualitatively identical contents. We are supposed to confound succession with an object, but without an idea of identity it is no more easy to consider a succession of similar contents to be an object than it is to so consider a variable succession. The unchangeable object of the fiction is therefore just as impossible a "medium betwixt unity and number" as the idea of identity it is supposed to afford us.

Hume's "principle of individuation" is thus an unsuccessful bootstrapping affair. On the wider story, belief in independent bodies for Hume is supposed to result from our confusing the feeling arising from interrupted encounters with closely related contents with the feeling arising from the contemplation of a putatively unchanging, perfectly identical content. In accordance with the copy principle, however, temporal passage requires sensible diversity, and on inspection Hume's

---

[18] Without *somehow* bringing to mind both appearances of 'the unchanging object' there would not be sufficient resemblance with the contemplation of succession to explain our confounding the two ideas. In the later employment of the fiction there are likewise *two* considerations of 'the object' within the unity component of identity (*T* 201). A momentary unity alone will not do.

attempt to have it otherwise in the fiction presupposes that we already have at hand the problematic idea of a transtemporal unity, i.e., the idea of identity.

4. STAYING WITH HUME'S BASIC PRINCIPLES

It would be quite natural to blame one or both of the two fundamental Humean principles I have highlighted –the copy principle and the separability principle – as the source of the tangle detailed above concerning the idea of identity. Given the failure of Hume's own derivation of the idea of identity, the demand that all real content be recognised as splintered (because splinterable) into atomic perceptions threatens to leave the combining principles of human nature with no idea for supporting even a fiction-generated *belief* in the persistence of objects through time. Must we conclude that Hume's basic setup of the problem of identity was in some way wrongheaded?

It might be objected, for instance, that Hume's separability principle is a misguided corollary to an equally misguided notion *that identity is incompatible with change.* Terence Penelhum makes the case for the latter charge in his well-known article 'Hume on Personal Identity' (1955), arguing that Hume is simply confused about the language of identity. Penelhum cites a passage from the section 'Of Personal Identity' that conveniently summarises what we have seen to be Hume's overall position on identity:

> We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a supposed variation of time; and this idea we call that of *identity* or *sameness.* We have also a distinct

idea of several different objects existing together by a close re-
lation; and this to an accurate view affords as perfect a notion
of *diversity*, as if there was no manner of relation among the
objects. But tho' these two ideas of identity, and a succession
of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct, and even
contrary, yet 'tis certain, that in our common way of thinking,
they are generally confounded with each other (*T* 253).

The passage describes the mistaken substitution of the idea of
a perfect identity for that of a related succession. Penelhum
comments as follows:

> It is not hard to find [Hume's] error here. . . Let us call the
> unchanging single object *X*. *X*, we would say, is the same
> throughout. Let us call our succession of distinct but related
> objects *A, B, C, D, E, F*, etc. Here, if we count, we obviously
> have several not one. But we can quite easily produce a class-
> name for the series of them, say φ, such that a φ is, by defini-
> tion, any group of things like *A, B, C, D, E, F*, etc. So there
> would be no contradiction in saying there are six objects and
> one φ; this is what a φ is. Quite obviously our ordinary lan-
> guage works this way. A succession of notes is one theme
> ((1955), pp. 225-6).

There is certainly something to Penelhum's truism (and it
points toward a more adequate Humean account; see section 5
below), but his sanguine response underestimates the diffi-
culty of the puzzle that Hume has raised concerning identity.
Understanding in what sense this is so will also enable us to
appreciate that there is much to be said in defence of Hume's
separability principle.

Hume's contention that identity is incompatible with
change is not a simple linguistic confusion. The import of the
separability principle in Hume's discussion of identity is an
application (restricted within a supposed domain of epistemi-

cally transparent perceptible contents) of the principle of the *indiscernibility of identicals*, or *Leibniz's Law*: a difference in property is sufficient for a numerical difference of objects.[19] In Hume's terms, "how is it possible we can separate what is not distinguishable, or distinguish what is not different?" (*T* 18). The challenge concerning identity then arises with regard to the elements of any succession of contents over time, since "the mind pronounces the one not to be the other" (*T* 200).

It is true that on our full scheme of belief imagined distinctions do not always entail real pluralities, and it is true that we often take there to be differences where there is really identity – witness the Evening Star/Morning Star case. Rendering such 'intentional' facts consistent with Leibniz's Law presents well-known difficulties (Frege (1960), Quine (1960)). But if we are operating at a level of analysis such as Hume claims there to be, where perceptible contents "must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear" (*T* 190), then the claim that the separability principle (along with the copy principle) leaves us with solely an atomistic reality represents a powerful challenge to the concept of identity, not a simple confusion about it. Change *prima facie* entails a change in property, and hence, on the present line, a plurality of objects. Or to consider another type of case familiar from ontological discussions of identity: how is it possible for one and the same entity to be numerically identical to both of the

---

[19] Of course, the term 'Leibniz's Law' is often used so as to include the converse thesis, the more controversial and distinctively Leibnizian 'identity of indiscernibles': complete sharing of properties entails numerical identity of object. By 'Leibniz's Law' I mean only the indiscernibility of identicals.

sums of matter that entirely compose it before and after a change, when these two sums are clearly not identical to each other? (Consider, for example, the two mereological molecule-sums that *entirely compose* a given plant in spring and then in summer.) Here change in composition raises difficulties in relation to the transitivity of identity as change in property does in relation to Leibniz's Law. These are substantive philosophical problems, not *mere* linguistic confusions. (Which is not to deny that investigations concerning language might hold the key to their resolution.)

Hume would thus have reason not to be content with responding to the identity puzzle by *simply* citing our practice of classifying diverse elements as one thing. (But see section 5.) "That term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination, which the mind may apply to any quantity of objects it collects together" (*T* 30; see note 9). Hume's contention is that as far as the contents directly presented in perception are concerned, there is no numerical identity with difference.[20] The separability principle and the copy principle will force us to recognise in *some* way that sameness, like necessary causal connection, is 'a determination of the mind'. Hume wants to explain our modes of habit and belief compatibly with this discovery. Our task in the final section will be to see what we can save of the spirit of Hume's explanation, attempting to preserve his basic outlook while abandoning its spurious foundation in an unchanging 'perfect identity'.

Before turning to that task, however, I would like to examine briefly one interesting but, it seems to me, ultimately

---

[20] Recall the proviso regarding such statements given in note 3 above.

unsuccessful attempt to save Hume's account of the idea of identity as it stands. Donald Baxter (1987) rightly focuses on the role of indivisible unity in Hume's account. The governing intuition behind the circularity objection is that it is hard to see how a perfectly indivisible unity – an experiential atom (*T* 30-1, 38-9) – *could* play the role of the 'single object surveyed for a time' that Hume's story requires. Baxter suggests, however, that not all atomic perceptions in Hume's philosophy are *momentary* (itself a controversial claim)[21] and consequently that some of these indivisible, simple perceptions are able to last for a stretch of time despite their having no 'duration'. Baxter thus recognises that no unitary impression can have the least duration for Hume, since Humean duration is by definition a *succession* of distinct items. Still, he insists that there is room in Hume for a *non*-durational way (as he puts it) of 'taking up time'. I will call such a unitary content a *stretched* perception. The fiction then requires both a succession to constitute the duration and a 'stretched' atomic unity *that takes up the same time as that succession*, and this without itself having any temporal duration. As before, the fiction is then intended to enable us to imagine the unity as partaking of the duration given by the diversity, and the resulting idea of identity consists

---

[21] It is difficult to settle on the textual evidence whether all Humean perceptions that are indivisible unities are at bottom *momentary* (setting aside 'nominal unities', etc.), though I regard this as the most straightforward interpretation and one which perhaps best preserves the analogy with Hume's *spatial* "points" as perceptible minima. The texts Baxter cites in support of non-momentary perceptions are inconclusive, as they can be construed as *presupposing* the idea of identity and the duration fiction, or as speaking with the vulgar.

of both these aspects, available in two separate 'views' of 'the object'.

The virtue of this reading is that clearly no idea of identity has been presupposed, but only – and quite properly – Hume's notion of a unity. However, even supposing that the notion of a temporally stretched and non-durational perception is Humean, it seems to me that an objection once raised by H.H. Price against a similar interpretation applies to the present proposal as well.[22] On Baxter's account the stretched perception is supposed to take up the same time as the succession. Here, then, is the first tick of a second-hand against a clock-face, and here is the second tick against that 'same' (uninterruptedly viewed) clock-face. The ticks are to be the diversity component and the clock-face the unity component of the idea of identity (alternatively, an unbroken and invariable auditory tone might be used for the unity component). Surely, however, on Hume's general view we are capable of distinguishing in imagination the two clock-face contents associated with each tick of the hand (imagining, for example, that the clock entirely perished prior to the second tick); and on Hume's separability principle, if we *can* so distinguish them, they are *really distinct* (*contra* hypothesis).[23] And indeed Baxter

---

[22] H. H. Price ((1940), pp. 46-7). See Costa ((1990), pp. 11-12) and Baxter ((1987), p. 327) for attempts to reply to this objection. The attempted replies to Price amount to hand-waving in both of these otherwise carefully argued pieces.

[23] Here it seems that I must also disagree with E. W. Van Steenburgh's claim that on Hume's view, "Imagining a[n indivisible] moment shorter than a given moment divides no moment into shorter moments" ((1977), p. 185). This appears to me to violate Hume's separability principle (whatever is distinguishable is numerically dis-

is forced to acknowledge that on his interpretation neither the stretched perception itself nor any part of it (since it has no parts) *exists during any of the three successive moments*. In an attempt to illustrate the putative independent plausibility of this notion, Baxter claims that the event of *holding one's breath for a minute* does not exist during any sub-intervals of that minute. But this is a *de dicto/de re* confusion: the holding of one's breath over the course of a minute is itself – however it may be *described* – clearly a successive being and not a unity in Hume's sense. (For example, "Is she still holding her breath?" is appropriately asked throughout the minute. Note that here again Hume's distinction between real unities and merely 'nominal' unities is pertinent; *T* 30-1.)

We need not raise further difficulties for Baxter's proposal, however, for it seems to me that Hume cannot possibly be interpreted as employing a stretched unitary perception in his *original* account of the duration fiction (*T* 65). For it is unlikely (to say the least) that Hume intends us to take the steadfast object in that passage to be an occurrently perceived and simple unity: since "our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions" (*T* 252), such a content from five to six o'clock would have to stretch across an extraordinarily petrified hour. To the contrary, as we have seen, when Hume speaks of the first and second "appearances" of the steadfast object in the earlier passage, he is not asking us to stretch a perfectly simple perception the length of an hour but seems to be describing an interruption and *re*appearance of 'the object'

---

tinct): a real *comparison* of one stretch of time with a *shorter* stretch of time will, on Hume's view, always serve to show that the former is not in fact an indivisible unitary moment.

– in accordance with the reading offered above in section 3, and with the unfortunate consequence of vicious circularity.

5. ABSTRACT IDEAS AND A MODIFIED HUMEAN IDEA OF IDENTITY

In the section of the *Treatise* entitled 'Of modes and substances' (*T* Book I, Part I, § vi, 15-17) Hume argues that the copy principle entails that "the idea of a substance":

> ... is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or others, that collection (*T* 16).

There are thus three elements in the idea of a substance: (1) the perceptible contents or (let us call it) the *quality-complex* typically exhibited by members of the given kind (e.g., by *horses* or samples of *gold*); (2) the "name" or *general term* ('gold') associated with this quality-complex;[24] and (3) the *principle of union* associating the elements of the quality-complex.

---

[24] Here I make the assumption that for Hume the reference of proper names and other singular terms is to be explained in terms of criteria supplied by the quality-complex, the principle of union, and an associated general term. 'Paris', for example, refers essentially to *a city* satisfying a complex general description. The use of the proper name does not require an idea of the entire complex, of course: "I have seen *Paris*; but shall I affirm I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions?" (*T* 3). For objections to traditional accounts of proper names developed along these lines, see, of course, Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (1980). By making this assumption I do not mean to imply that there is a developed theory of proper names in Hume's work.

The principle of union is "the chief part of the complex idea" of a substance (*T* 16), as it will be for all persisting things generally (i.e., whether or not the *substance* fiction is piled upon the identity fiction). For any given kind of persisting object, the elements of the quality-complex will stand in characteristic synchronic and diachronic relations. Call the complex of qualities composing a member of a given kind *K* at a given time, a *K-stage*. *K*-stages will be related by the natural associative relations of resemblance, spatio-temporal contiguity, and/or causation – i.e., "the principles of union or cohesion among our ideas" (*T* 12). In 'Of scepticism with regard to the senses', for example, bodies are re-identified in response to the qualitative resemblance ("constancy") and the causal regularities and spatio-temporal relations ("coherence") exhibited by their stages.

We may call the principle of union for a given kind *K* the *unity relation* for a *K*, i.e., the complex of relations characteristically instantiated by the stages of members of the kind *K*.[25] In the section 'Of Personal Identity' Hume provides a sophisticated account of the unity relations or principles of union for small and large masses of matter, artifacts, plants and animals, institutional objects (a church in relation to its parishioners), rivers, and persons. The parts of an artifact conspiring to fulfil a certain end, the regular replacements of a flowing river, and the complex reciprocal causality among the parts of an organic being are examples of complex unity relations.

---

[25] For the notion of a 'unity relation', see Perry (1975). (The 'unity' in 'unity relation' is, of course, not Hume's technical sense referring to an indivisible perception.)

Hume's official explanation of our identity ascriptions, as we have seen, is that the mind is so disposed as to confuse unity-related succession with the idea of a 'perfectly identical' (unchanging yet fictitiously enduring) object. Since a 'perfect unchanging identity through time' has been unmasked as a fraud, however, we are left to work with the unity relations alone. In discussing the identity of a person, Hume instructively compares the relation of identity with that of necessary connection. We do well, he suggests, to recall that:

> even the union of cause and effect, when strictly examin'd, resolves itself into a customary association of ideas. For from thence it evidently follows, that identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination. Now the only qualities, which can give ideas an union in the imagination, are ... the [three] uniting principles in the ideal world ...'Tis, therefore, on some of these three relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation, that identity depends; and as the very essence of these relations consists in their producing an easy transition of ideas; it follows, that our notions of personal identity, proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected ideas, according to the principles above-explain'd (*T* 259-60).

Leaving perfect identity aside, then, the unity relations constituting identity must be re-interpreted as affording in some other way the pervasive and largely unnoticed "easy transition" of the imagination. In the case of causality, we discover that "the necessary connexion depends on the inference, instead of the inference's depending on the necessary connexion" (*T* 88); similarly in the case of the identity of objects through time and change, we are to discover that in some manner the iden-

tity depends on a certain habit or state of mind, rather than our ascriptions of identity depending on an independently real, essential sameness in the things themselves.

Are there materials in Hume for further explicating the habit or state of mind on which identity might depend, without following Hume in relying upon the dead-end idea of a 'perfect identity'? Recall that the idea of a substance requires (1) a characteristic quality-complex, (2) an associated general term, and (3) a principle of union. (1) and (3) have been explained in terms of unity relations among the K-stages of an object. In order to fill out the crucial role of the associated general term in (2), let us take a closer at Hume's account of general terms in the section 'Of Abstract Ideas'.[26] Perhaps a genuinely Humean nominalistic surrogate for the failed account of a 'perfect identity' can ground a more successful Humean conception of identity through time and change.

A link between the sameness of an object through change and the account of abstract ideas is suggested by the following passage:

> 'Tis evident, that in forming most of our general ideas, if not all of them, we abstract from every particular degree of quantity and quality, and that *an object ceases not to be of any particular species on account of every small alteration in its extension, duration and other properties* (*T* 17; emphasis added).

---

[26] My initially loose use of 'general terms' will be somewhat clarified as the discussion proceeds, in terms of Hume's view of the complex interaction between language, idea, and object involved in 'abstract ideas'.

Just as at any given time the extension of the general term 'gold' covers a wide class of partially resembling but differing samples of gold, so over time in the case of an individual sample of gold the expression 'this lump of gold' will apply across successions of variable but unity-related gold-stages. I suggest that the spirit of Hume's overall view is best preserved by locating the "smooth progress of thought" that constitutes identity not in a supposed confusion with the smooth observation of a spurious perfect identity, but rather in his account of how we form and apply general ideas.

For Hume, "everything in nature is individual," including the ideas that copy impressions (T 19):

> Abstract ideas are therefore in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation. The image in the mind is only that of a particular object, tho' the application of it in our reasoning be the same, as if it were universal (T 20).

I interpret Hume's positive (Berkeleyan) account of abstract ideas as follows (T 20 ff.). In the course of experience we find the same word applied to resembling objects, e.g. 'dog' to individual dogs D_1, D_2, D_3. We thus acquire a habit of applying 'dog' to such D-resembling objects, or 'D-complexes'. Call this the *term-application habit*. Having acquired such a habit, upon hearing the term 'dog' we will (1) form the idea of some particular D-complex, e.g., D_2. (And presumably *vice versa*, upon encountering a dog we are, *ceteris paribus*, disposed to say 'dog'.) More importantly, in addition to raising up the idea of D_2, as also, on hearing the term, (2) become *presently generally disposed* in accordance with the term-application habit in question. Just as the hearing of a single word often revives the ability to run

through a verse by rote (*T* 23), so the hearing of the general term "revives that custom, which we have acquir'd by surveying" the resembling instances.[27]

This term-application habit, revived upon raising up an individual idea in response to its associated word, is a remarkably handy tool for Hume. It putatively allows us to perform general reasonings concerning *kinds* making use solely of particular words and contents:

> For this is one of the most extraordinary circumstances in the present affair, that after the mind has produc'd an individual idea, upon which we reason, the attendant custom, reviv'd by the general or abstract term, readily suggests any other individual, if by chance we form any reasoning, that agrees not with it. Thus shou'd we mention the word triangle, and form the idea of a particular equilateral one to correspond to it, and shou'd we afterwards assert, *that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other,* the other individuals of a scalenum and isoceles ... immediately crowd in upon us, and make us perceive the falshood of this proposition, tho' it be true with relation to that idea, which we had form'd (*T* 21).

Consequently "the very same idea may be annext to several different words, and may be employ'd in different reasonings, without any danger of mistake" (*T* 21). For example, we may reason concerning *figure* and *triangle* alike by forming the idea of a particular equilateral triangle in response to hearing 'figure' or 'triangle' as the case may be. For the two words "excite their particular habits," and it is this *difference in the term-*

---

[27] It is instructive to compare Hume (and Berkeley) on abstract ideas with Wittgenstein ((1953), §73): "for a slip of pure green to be understood as a sample of all that is greenish and not as a sample of pure green – this in turn resides in the way the samples are used."

application habits that is essential. The meaning of general terms, i.e., the "general representation" they make possible, is therefore grounded in our learned habit of applying the same term to appropriately resembling quality-complexes.[28]

To use this understanding of the role of general terms (abstract ideas) to supply a revised (but otherwise conservatively Humean) account of the idea of identity, it is plausible to suggest that we learn to apply the same general term not only to diverse instances of a kind (e.g., to many dogs) but also to the resembling and otherwise unity-related *stages* of an individual member of a substantial kind.[29] The term-application habit associated with 'dog' disposes me to collect each of Fido's unity-related appearances under that common denomination.[30] Note especially that Hume's mechanism of abstract ideas will (allegedly) determine which changes Fido can admit while remaining *a dog*, since the term-application habit appropriate to 'dog' will serve to rule out deviant appearances as falling outside of its appropriate resemblance-class.[31] This account is also clearly in the spirit of the remarks examined ear-

---

[28] Perhaps Hume's nominalism would be rendered more consistent by understanding the initial "appropriate resemblance" among the objects in terms of the uniform application of the given general term itself, instead of vice versa as Hume intends (*T* 20, 23, 637). I must set aside this classically thorny issue (i.e., the problem of universals).

[29] Spatio-temporal *contiguity* and *causality* would have to be regarded as necessary elements in the idea of a substantial identity, so as to rule out the identification (under the relevant abstract idea) of distinct individual members of a given species-kind.

[30] See note 25 above.

[31] The general term would thus fulfill the function traditionally allotted to 'substantial form'. (See Wiggins (1980).)

lier from 'Of modes and substances' (*T* 16), a section that is placed immediately before the section 'Of Abstract Ideas'.

On this reconstructed Humean view, the *kind* to which Fido belongs is the source of his identity through change (not an unfamiliar view in the history of metaphysics), but his belonging to that kind is ultimately grounded in our learned habits of applying the same term to resembling and otherwise unity-related items. The identity of an object through time is thus ultimately referred to the pervasive and largely unnoticed influence of our term-application habits and propensities.

Such an account, if successful, would provide a more plausible basis for Hume's thesis that identity proceeds "entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of thought along a train of connected ideas" (*T* 260). The sense in which identity is *fictitious* will roughly parallel the manner in which our attributing necessary connection to objects themselves is really a (potentially misleading) projection of the mind's own felt determination. In theorising about causal inference, we are inclined to mistake an associative determination of the mind for a necessary connection in the objects. Similarly, we are by nature inclined to believe that our judgements of identity are grounded in something other than the generalising and sorting linguistic habits that truly form the basis of our attributions of sameness. In the case of identity, then, we 'mistakenly' project our own natural and indispensable compulsion for (nominalistic) generalisation onto the various resembling successions that have served to nurture such habits.[32]

---

[32] The interpretation of Humean abstract ideas offered here bears interesting similarities to Quine's investigation of "the inception of

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Hume's challenge to the concept of identity runs deep – so deep, in fact, that his own attempt to explain how it is that we come to believe in the identity of objects through change falls prey to it. In attempting to build an idea of identity upon the fiction of a duration of "time without any changeable existence," Hume either presupposes that we already possess the idea of identity or he violates one of his own basic principles. We have also seen, however, that it would be a mistake to dismiss Hume's problem as misconceived in the form that he raises it. And I have suggested, finally, that there are resources in Hume for a more promising account of the origins of our belief in the identity of objects through change. Instead of responding to the problem of change by tying our idea of *sameness* to *invariableness*, Hume ought to have turned to his own subtle account of how we attribute *sameness of kind* across variable instances. On the resulting modified Humean view, we recognise that the identity or sameness we attribute to things is 'fictional' in the sense of being in large part determined by (or a 'projection' of) our own entrenched linguistic habits. While Hume's account of general terms will, of course, raise further questions of its own, here at least we find ourselves standing on ground that is recognisably fertile for inquiry.[33]

---

the identity predicate" in §15, 'Individuation of bodies', of *The Roots of Reference* (1974).

[33] My thanks to John Biro for his comments.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BENNETT, J. (1966). *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).

BAXTER, D. (1987). A Defense of Hume on Identity Through Time, *Hume Studies*, 323-42.

COSTA, M.J. (1990). Hume, Strict Identity, and Time's Vacuum, *Hume Studies*, 1-16.

FREGE, G. (1960). Sense and Reference, in *Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, P. Geach and M. Black (eds.), 2nd edn. (Oxford, Blackwell).

KRIPKE, S. (1980). *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).

MCRAE, R. (1980). The Import of Hume's Theory of Time, *Hume Studies*, 119-132.

O'SHEA, J.R. (1996). Hume's Reflective Return to the Vulgar, *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 285-315.

PENELHUM, T. (1955). Hume on Personal Identity, *Philosophical Review*, 64, 571-89, reprinted in V.C. Chappell (ed.), *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 213-239.

PERRY, J. (1975). Introduction, in J. Perry (ed.), *Personal Identity* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

PRICE, H.H. (1940). *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).

QUINE, W.V (1953). 'Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis', in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard).

————. (1960). *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T.).

————. (1973). *The Roots of Reference* (La Salle, Open Court).

————. (1982). *Methods of Logic*, 4th edn. (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard).

RUSSELL, B. (1956). *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901-1950*. R. C. Marsh, ed. (London, Allen and Unwin).

STROUD, B. (1977). *Hume* (London, Routledge).

VAN STEENBURGH, E.W. (1977). Durationless Moments in Hume's *Treatise*, in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G.P. Morice (Edinburgh University Press).

WIGGINS, D. (1980). *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, Blackwell).

WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, C.K. Ogden (tr.) (London, Routledge).

————. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (tr.) (Oxford, Blackwell).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BENNETT, J. (1966). *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).

BAXTER, D. (1987). A Defense of Hume on Identity Through Time, *Hume Studies*, 323-42.

COSTA, M.J. (1990). Hume, Strict Identity, and Time's Vacuum, *Hume Studies*, 1-16.

FREGE, G. (1960). Sense and Reference, in *Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, P. Geach and M. Black (eds.), 2nd edn. (Oxford, Blackwell).

KRIPKE, S. (1980). *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).

MCRAE, R. (1980). The Import of Hume's Theory of Time, *Hume Studies*, 119-132.

O'SHEA, J.R. (1996). Hume's Reflective Return to the Vulgar, *British Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 285-315.

PENELHUM, T. (1955). Hume on Personal Identity, *Philosophical Review*, 64, 571-89, reprinted in V.C. Chappell (ed.), *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 213-239.

PERRY, J. (1975). Introduction, in J. Perry (ed.), *Personal Identity* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Hume's challenge to the concept of identity runs deep – so deep, in fact, that his own attempt to explain how it is that we come to believe in the identity of objects through change falls prey to it. In attempting to build an idea of identity upon the fiction of a duration of "time without any changeable existence," Hume either presupposes that we already possess the idea of identity or he violates one of his own basic principles. We have also seen, however, that it would be a mistake to dismiss Hume's problem as misconceived in the form that he raises it. And I have suggested, finally, that there are resources in Hume for a more promising account of the origins of our belief in the identity of objects through change. Instead of responding to the problem of change by tying our idea of *sameness* to *invariableness*, Hume ought to have turned to his own subtle account of how we attribute *sameness of kind* across variable instances. On the resulting modified Humean view, we recognise that the identity or sameness we attribute to things is 'fictional' in the sense of being in large part determined by (or a 'projection' of) our own entrenched linguistic habits. While Hume's account of general terms will, of course, raise further questions of its own, here at least we find ourselves standing on ground that is recognisably fertile for inquiry.[33]

---

the identity predicate" in §15, 'Individuation of bodies', of *The Roots of Reference* (1974).

[33] My thanks to John Biro for his comments.

PRICE, H.H. (1940). *Hume's Theory of the External World* (Oxford, Clarendon Press).

QUINE, W.V (1953). 'Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis', in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard).

————. (1960). *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T.).

_____. (1973). *The Roots of Reference* (La Salle, Open Court).

_____. (1982). *Methods of Logic*, 4th edn. (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard).

RUSSELL, B. (1956). *Logic and Knowledge: Essays 1901-1950*. R. C. Marsh, ed. (London, Allen and Unwin).

STROUD, B. (1977). *Hume* (London, Routledge).

VAN STEENBURGH, E.W. (1977). Durationless Moments in Hume's *Treatise*, in *David Hume: Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G.P. Morice (Edinburgh University Press).

WIGGINS, D. (1980). *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, Blackwell).

WITTGENSTEIN, L. (1922). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, C.K. Ogden (tr.) (London, Routledge).

_____. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*, G.E.M. Anscombe (tr.) (Oxford, Blackwell).