Hume's philosophy of mind or 'mental geography'

In section one of the *EHU* Hume makes it clear that the first step toward a science of human nature involves what might appear a rather trivial exercise: to discriminate and distinguish the parts and operations of the human mind. The reason why this might appear trivial is that, as Hume states, simply ordering and distinguishing the parts of physical nature is a task that has no real merit; so the question is why has this task any merit in the case of the science of human nature? Hume argues that the objects of the science of human nature as opposed to those of the physical sciences are in many cases obscure and fleeting and so they require a particularly sensitive mode of reflection to identify. For Hume it is much more difficult to identify an idea, say, - a constituent of the mind - than it is to identify a rock or a table. It is this context that Hume introduces the idea of a "*mental geography*". Mental geography has two aspects:

- A survey of the *parts* or *atoms* of the mind (*EHU* section 2)

- A study of how these parts are related, that is to say to the *powers* or *laws* of the mind (*EHU* section 3).

Mental Geography (1): Impressions and Ideas (*EHU* section 2)

The basic point to be clear about concerning Hume's philosophy of mind is that it operates within the framework established by Locke and continued by Berkeley. This framework is typically called either the "*theory or way of ideas*". The basic point of the theory is worth reiterating: the object of any mental act is a mental object. In other words, what we are aware of when we are aware of anything whether in thought or perception is some entity *in our mind*. This theory is called the theory of ideas simply because typically these mental entities are called ideas. Why did philosophers like Locke and Hume and indeed why do some philosophers today think that the object of any experience is a mental entity? What's wrong with the common sense idea that the object of experiences are out there in the world - actual, physical tables and chairs? Why should we accept something so counter-intuitive?

The way of ideas, again

One basic argument is a generalised form of the argument from illusion: when we merely take ourselves to see, e.g., a tree (when in fact there is no tree there; either it's an illusion – it's a fake

movie-set tree – or it's an hallucination – I have taken LSD) we seem to be in the very same subjective state as we would be if we actually saw a tree – the states are subjectively or phenomenologically indistinguishable. Based on a broadly Cartesian or empiricistic understanding of the structure of our subjective states that leads us to conclude that we are in fact in the very same state in both cases (the phenomenological claims leads to an ontological claim). But since in the former case we do not see the actual tree (since there is no actual tree there to be seen) but rather simply suffer an appearance (where appearance is something purely subjective) it follows that in the latter case (the veridical perception) since we are in the same state we also do not see the actual tree but rather suffer an appearance. ('Appearance' can just be thought of as the name we give to perceptual ideas.) It is argued that despite this conclusion we can still distinguish the former (illusion and hallucination) from the latter (actual seeing) by bringing in certain contextual or relational facts in particular to do with the causal structure and history of the relevant state: in actual perception unlike hallucination we are put into the relevant state due to the direct causal influence of the object itself. To enhance the plausibility of such a view it is often thought that we need to make a general claim about the stability or reliability of this causal link: to be a perceiver and thereby a knower there does not just have to be a causal link between an object and our senses but that link needs in general to be reliable. This view – perhaps most obviously attributable to Locke - is however problematic.

The claims about causal relations concern facts that are essentially out with our conscious grasp: how can I step outside my subjective states to check whether they are being reliably caused by the appropriate objects? Surely any such attempt to step outside would itself be no more than another subjective state whose credentials I would also have to assess? Perhaps we could depend upon an *abductive* inference (an inference to the best explanation): the actual presence of a tree before me is the best explanation for why I take myself to be seeing a tree. But this is problematic in a epistemological context that is governed by empiricist principles: we have no experiential access to the tree, only speculative (rational) access. As we shall see these doubts are precisely the ones that fuelled Hume's so-called scepticism about the external world. Hume sought to explain how in an empiricist setting we could so much as have the idea that an external world exists when we can never in principle attain evidence for it.

Before these problems can be addressed however it is important to set out Hume's distinctive take on the way of ideas.

Perceptions

Hume starts by telling us that the basic units or atoms of his mental geography are perceptions and not ideas as they were for Locke. What this means is that for Hume:

- *there is no part or constituent of the mind that is not a perception.*

But we need to be careful here, Hume is clearly using "perception" in a technical sense. By "perception" Hume clearly means what Locke meant by "idea" that is to say something like "any conscious state whatsoever". The point of this clarification is to indicate that Humean perceptions are not simply the experiences associated with what we today call perception (seeing, hearing, etc.).

Distinguishing Impressions and ideas

That Hume does not limit the idea of perception to what we today call perception is made clear when he goes on to distinguish two species of perception (a distinction that recalls Locke's distinction between ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection):

- sensory perceptions or what he calls "*impressions*";

- thought perceptions or what he calls "*ideas*".

The basis of Hume's distinction is simple: if we are seeing, hearing, or smelling something, that is to say sensing something then the immediate object of that sensing is always an impression, an impression of, for example, colour, sound or smell. If we are, for example, thinking, imagining, remembering, or expecting something then the object of that thinking, imagining, remembering or expecting is an idea.

It is worth noting that Hume does in fact distinguish between two species of impressions:

- *outward sensations*

- *inward sensations*

This distinguishes rightly between sensory impressions - the impressions that are a result of seeing, hearing, etc., - and reflective or introspective impressions such as the sensation of joy, happiness, sadness, anger, etc.

With these distinctions in place we can ask how Hume proposes to clarify and secure the distinction between impressions and ideas. It is clear that Hume thought that he didn't need to say very much about this distinction; he thought it so obvious. The examples Hume offers make it clear why he thought it obvious. Hume declares that no-one unless mad or deranged would ever mix up being in love, that is to say the actual experience or impression of love, with the thought of love, that is to say the idea of love. Equally the experience of being angry is not the same as thinking about anger. As Hume puts it, no poetry no matter how splendid can make us mistake the landscape described in the poem for the real landscape - that is to say mix up the mere thought of the landscape with the real landscape experienced in perception.

This then gives us what amounts to Hume's official criterion for distinguishing impressions from ideas:

- *impressions are distinguished from ideas by their different degrees of force and vivacity.*

Ideas are *always* the less forcible and vivacious, while impressions are always the more forcible and vivacious. It is clear that for Hume impressions and ideas are distinguished only be degree and not by kind, that is to say that ideas are just what we might call faded impressions or copies of impressions. An idea of a sound is a faded impression of a sound, an idea of a colour is the faded impression of a colour.

Many philosopher since Hume have expressed extreme dissatisfaction with Hume's criterion; indeed Hume himself gives the best reason for us to be dissatisfied with his claims. Hume insists as he must do if he is to make his distinction between impressions and ideas convincing that impressions are *always* more forceful and lively than ideas. But in the course of making this criterion explicit Hume himself admits that the ideas of people who are mad and deranged can be and often are as lively as normal impressions but yet Hume still insists that they are ideas and not impressions. Now while madness is not the normal condition of human beings it is clear nevertheless that Hume does need to offer at least a supplement to his initial criterion if he is to make a convincing case for it. What might this supplement be? Some people have suggested it is *reliability* - a mad person's experience does not form a coherent whole and hence their judgements both sensory and intellectual are unreliable. Other have suggested that Hume requires a criterion

of *objectivity* - that is to say a criterion that would rule out the madman case precisely because no hallucination however strong is ever objective in the sense of being of an objective object (indeed that's what makes hallucinations *hallucinations*).

Impressions and ideas: distinction between simple and complex ideas

Here is Hume's basic thought:

> All our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones. (EHU 2, 5)

(Note that since ideas are copies of impression this implies that impressions are the originals so are therefore more basic - the basic units of experience. This again makes clear Hume's commitment to *empiricism* - impressions obtained from sensory experience seem to be the most basic units of experience).

The basic thought seems to be this: that there is a two way correlation between impressions and ideas. In other words, Hume seems to be committed to the following two claims:

(1) *every impression has a corresponding idea*

(2) *every idea has a corresponding impression.*

(1) seems relatively unproblematic - if you've ever seen something then you can always think about it, remember it, etc., again at a later date. If you've seen red, for example, then you will automatically have the idea of red. It is (2) that seems deeply troubling. Why?

We have the idea of many things that we clearly have never seen, heard, etc. Hume's example: golden mountain, virtuous horse. The point of these examples is that since there are no golden mountains or virtuous horses we cannot ever have an impression of them. This seems to imply that (2) is simply false. To solve this problem and to rescue (2) Hume deploys Locke's distinction between simple and complex ideas. Just as there are two sorts of impression - outward and inward impressions; there are two sorts of idea:

- *simple* ideas
- *complex* ideas.

Turning to the idea of the golden mountain, Hume claims that such an idea is not a problem for his theory because it is a complex idea. That is to say it can be broken down or analysed into smaller parts. Hume goes on to claim that (2) is not false because ultimately ideas such as the idea of a golden mountain can be analysed into simpler ideas - the idea of gold and mountain - that do have corresponding impressions. Note it may well be that "mountain" is itself a complex idea: this does not affect Hume's point because all this means is that the idea of "mountain" must in turn be composed of simple ideas.

A principle of empiricism

On the basis of this distinction Hume is able to present what we might call his "*principle of empiricism*":

every idea is either:
(a) derived from a corresponding impression; or

(b) composed of simpler ideas, each of which is derived from a corresponding impression.

How does Hume defend this principle? Hume makes two points in defence of his principle:

(1) *think of a counter-example* - Hume simply challenges us to think of an idea that is neither derived from a corresponding impression nor composed of simpler ideas.

(2) *sensory defects* - Hume claims that his principle is true in part because it is clear that someone unable to obtain certain impressions could never obtain the corresponding ideas. Blind people cannot form ideas of colour and deaf people ideas of sound. His more concrete though less politically correct example is that neither Laplanders or Negroes can appreciate the taste of fine wine.

Is Hume's defence defensible?

(1) What has always confused people is that immediately after challenging us to find a counter-example to his principle Hume himself takes up the challenge and presents a counter-example. This is the infamous "*missing shade of blue*". Here is the scenario: imagine someone who has never seen a particular shade of blue (say, ultramarine) but has seen other shades of blue; also imagine that this person understands how colour charts or spectra work - moving from the deeper shade

to the lighter. Hume asks could such a person fill in the gap in spectrum or colour chart - in other words could the person have the idea corresponding to the missing shade of blue (ultramarine) without the corresponding impression? Hume in fact says "yes" - and he seems right. Hume states that the person's imagination would stand every chance of providing the idea. This then seems to challenge the truth of Hume's principle. Although he accepts it Hume simply dismisses the counter-example as irrelevant to the truth of the general principle.

> '[This] instance is so singular, that it is scarcely worth our observing, and does not merit, that for it alone we should alter our general maxim' (EHU 2.9).

Is there a better defence? Stroud (Hume, p.34) argues that the target claim is a contingent, empirical hypothesis which therefore might be able to tolerate occasional exceptions. He also suggests that Hume might have appealed to the imagination as a mental faculty that could produce the idea in question without thereby violating the principle that all simple ideas must be derived from simple impressions. And Beauchamp (in the Introduction to the Oxford Philosophical Texts edition of *EHU*, p.19) argues that Hume's *theory of meaning* might help him out here. Hume held that for a term to have meaning, it must have its source in an impression. No impression, no meaning. This idea can be worked up into an empiricist theory of meaning, since, by extension, one might hold that a term has meaning only if it refers to something that can be experienced, or if it can be analysed into elements that *could in principle be experienced.* Thus the term for the missing shade of blue turns out to be meaningful when used by the person in question, because that shade *could be* experienced, even though, as a matter of fact, that specific person has not experienced it, and even if, as a matter of fact, no one else has ever experienced it.

(2) *sensory defects*: could a totally colour blind person ever come to possess a colour concept? The answer to this does in fact seem to be "yes". Hume's conception of what it is to possess a concept is relatively primitive. In particular his attempt to tie concepts strictly to experience seems to us today rather unconvincing. We might understand this in terms of Russell's famous distinction between two forms of knowledge:

- knowledge by *acquaintance* (e.g., 'I know my best friend David')

- knowledge by *description* (e.g., 'I know that my best friend is tall')

Could our knowledge of what it is for an object to be, say, blue be descriptive rather than a matter of acquaintance? If so then it would seem possible for one to be able to use concepts without being acquainted with anything that actually instantiates them. This seems plausible to us today in part because of certain aspects of scientific understanding. There are, for instance,

elements from the periodic table that are almost in principle unexperiencable (at least in any natural sense of that term) and yet we feel able to deploy the concepts of those elements in our scientific theorising. In less specialised setting we also perhaps feel intuitively that there is some sense to the idea that we can know, e.g., what a pineapple tastes like (Hume's example) and thereby have a grasp of the relevant concept without actually ever having tasted a pineapple: it is sweet but with a slight tartness, etc., etc.

The importance of the principle for philosophical methodology

Having supposedly defended his principle Hume goes on to tell us why this principle is important. Since we have agreed that every idea has a corresponding impression or at least is composed of simple ideas that do then we can say logically that if an idea does not fit into either category then it is not an idea at all but is a fiction, an illusion. In other words, for Hume the legitimate usage of any idea, concept or term is dependent ultimately upon that idea, etc., having a corresponding impression. If there is no corresponding impression then the idea is bogus. Using this principle we can go back and clarify a central element in Hume's philosophical methodology. Hume wants to think of philosophy as the search for the impressions corresponding to certain important philosophical ideas, such as "substance", "self", "God", "causation". Often for Hume the outcome of an enquiry involves not so much the abandonment of the relevant idea but rather coming to identify a source of the corresponding impression other than we expected ("causation" is the clearest case in point here).