Mental Geography (2): laws of association (*EHU* Section 3)

Associationism

The second vital element in Hume's philosophy of mind relates to the question of how ideas are related - what are the laws that govern the relation of ideas? Commentators have come to label Hume's theory here, "*Associationism*". Hume claims that

> there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity (*EHU* 3.1).

Moreover, resonating with the previous reference to Newton, Hume states that this "principle of connexion" is a "universal principle which [has] an equal influence on all mankind" (*EHU* 3.1). Hume's thought, then, is that the way in which one idea leads naturally to another in our mental lives is explained by a regular, predictable, essentially mechanistic process. In the *Treatise*, Hume describes this process as a "gentle force which commonly prevails" (1.1.4), and as a "kind of attraction". It seems clear that what he has in mind here is something like a mental analogue of Newton's theory of universal gravitation. So Hume takes it that the mind is *naturally disposed* to relate ideas, and he takes it that the mind does so in terms of three basic laws (which together form *the* principle Hume talks of):

- *resemblance*
- *contiguity in time and place*
- *causation*

The best way to understand Hume's point is through examples: when I think of post boxes I have a natural tendency to think of telephone boxes. Why? Because post boxes *resemble* telephone boxes in the sense of sharing a colour. In other words, I naturally *associate* post boxes and telephone boxes. When I think of the Sphinx I tend to think of the Pyramids. Why? Because the Sphinx is *contiguous in place* with the Pyramids. In other words, I naturally *associate* the Sphinx and Pyramids because they are next door to each other. When I think of thunder I tend to think of lightning. Why? Because lightning is the *cause* of thunder.

Natural laws

What is essential here is how these laws tie in with Hume's *naturalism* - these laws are supposed to be entirely natural - they take note of how the mind is naturally inclined or disposed to relate ideas. In other words, in some sense we can't help but think using these laws. Hume attempts to do justice to the fact that very many ideas come to us entirely naturally - we don't really choose to see resemblance between ideas rather one idea simply strikes us as resembling another. Here there is a strong analogy between physical and mental laws inasmuch as both are seen to be in some

sense mechanical. We see here a clear example of Hume's attempt to delimit the pretensions of reason. It's not so much that in being mechanical these laws are irrational - clearly such a claim would be too strong - but Hume is clear that they are in some sense primarily the concern of the faculty of *imagination*. It is our imagination rather than our reason - our understanding - that in many cases makes the relevant connections.

To highlight the issue it is worth just bearing in mind what the idea of a natural – or causal – law might contrast with. Paradigmatically, the laws of logic have been thought to be non-natural; they have been thought to be laws of pure reason not nature. A simple example can make the point: the law of non-contradiction states that you cannot assert both a and not-a ("it is raining", "it is not raining") simultaneously. What is the sense of this "cannot"? It is clear that *as a matter of fact* anyone could (and indeed many people often do) contradict themselves. In this sense then the law of non-contradiction does not appear to be a *causal* law; we are not "forced" in any sense to think one thing rather than another. Instead the "cannot" seems to be *normative*, a matter of what we *ought* to think rather than what we will in fact think: we ought not to contradict ourselves on pains of not managing to say anything at all. This distinction is however not that clear cut. Once we come to recognise the logical or rational force of the law of non-contradiction (and other logical laws) it seems that that law begins to take on almost a causal role: I simply find it *natural* to think logically. Of course this doesn't make the law a causal law but it just point to the fact that such laws can have causal force.

It is worth drawing attention to two further features of Hume's account here: first, our ideas of the three principles of association (the ideas that enable us to think about those principles) must be ideas of reflection. The picture that Hume gives us is that there are not only impressions and ideas in our heads, but also patterns to those impressions and ideas. We have impressions of those patterns, from which our ideas of them are derived. Secondly, Hume takes the principles of association to be innate, in the sense of present from birth (which is why they have "an equal influence on all mankind"). Thus Hume not only (for the most part anyway) follows Locke in rejecting the doctrine of innate ideas, he also follows Locke in allowing that the mind does have certain innate operating principles. So, in a sense, while the furniture of the mind isn't innate for Hume, the laws that govern how you may move the items of furniture around are.

A complication that need only be mentioned is that for Hume the laws of association are in some sense more fundamental than the physical laws uncovered by Newton. Elsewhere Hume calls the laws of the mind the "cement of the universe" - in other words, for Hume there is a clear sense that it is not gravity, etc., that holds the experienced universe together but the laws of association! This strange view follows on from Hume's view that the science of human understanding

although itself empirically sensitive is more basic than the purely empirical sciences. With this in mind it is easy to see that Hume's use of "fundamental" here is limited: Hume makes his claim that the laws of the mind are more fundamental than the physical laws that relate things because without the former we would have no sense of the latter. (Although rarely noted this view is one that forms a basic insight of Kant and in this sense we might call Hume a "*transcendental*" philosopher.) Of course if one reads Hume as a genuine sceptic about the external world then one might think that Hume believes the laws of the mind to be fundamental in a more fundamental sense viz., the laws of the mind are more basic because there are *no* physical laws! This thought will not be pursued here.

The limits of Associationism

Here is a reason for Hume to worry. At least some ideas are supposed to be concepts (interpreted as quasi-sensory states). But then how, on Hume's picture, do concepts get combined to make thoughts? Hume's answer must presumably be "via the operation of the three principles of association". But simply associating the concepts (ideas) of, say, DAVID, LOVE, and VICTORIA in your head, in a kind of list, doesn't give you the thought that <David loves Victoria>. In fact, Hume's own theory of thinking occasionally oversteps the constraints imposed by Associationism. Consider, for example, his account of the imagination. Hume is clear that this psychological faculty, which is "more free" than any other such faculty (*Treatise*, 1.1.4), typically functions according to the three principles of association. The imagination is supposed to combine simple ideas (as copied from simple impressions received in experience), "in what form it pleases", in order to produce the complex ideas that constitute our imaginings. Hume thinks that this mental activity would be inexplicable and random, were it not for the fact that the principles of association are usually in operation. However, he also leaves room for the imagination to perform tricks that are not explained by the principles of association. Where the imagination is concerned, mental gravity is "not to be consider'd as an inseparable connexion" (*Treatise* 1.1.4), which is why it's a gentle force that commonly prevails.

There are other problems. Recall, that Locke claimed that words become general by becoming the signs of general ideas, and that the mind makes general ideas by a process of *abstraction*. Berkeley rejected this doctrine of abstract general ideas as absurd. Hume accepts Berkeley's criticisms of Locke. He also follows Berkeley in holding that a particular idea can be made to stand for other ideas of the same sort. An idea used in this way by the mind achieves generality not by becoming the sign of an abstract idea, but by bearing certain functional relations to other particular ideas. In more detail Hume's own specific account of general ideas proceeds as follows (This account is not in *EHU*. It is in the *Treatise* 1.1.7.) When we encounter lots of objects that resemble each other (say Fido, Rover, Tramp, Gnasher etc.), we form (what Hume calls) a "custom" of applying the same word (say "dog") to them, thus establishing a connection in the mind between the word

in question and objects of that sort. When we hear that word ("dog"), a particular idea of one of the objects that I have encountered comes into the mind (say my idea of Fido). Now, of course, the specific object to which this particular idea refers has all sorts of characteristics that other objects in the relevant class do not have (e.g., Fido might be large, short-haired and brown, whereas Gnasher is small, long-haired and black). Nevertheless, the particular idea that is before my mind (the idea of Fido) can be said to represent all objects of the appropriate sort (all dogs), since there is a mental link in place between the word that triggered that idea (namely 'dog') and all such objects (all dogs). Thus each of the particular ideas that represents each of those other objects is potentially in my mind, ready to pop up if the cognitive context so demands. For Hume, this readiness explains why one does not end up over generalising from the specific example that is before one's mind (e.g., why we don't expect all dogs to be just like Fido). If we are tempted to over generalise (e.g., claim that all dogs have short hair), the other particular ideas that were potentially before our minds 'crowd in upon us, and make us perceive the falsehood of this proposition' (*Treatise* 1.1.7). The first thing to say here is that it is a mystery on Hume's theory how we ever make mistakes in our generalisations. The second is that more complicated principles than simply those of resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect are in play. For example, it seems that these three principles alone cannot explain why the counter-examples to a nascent false generalisation 'crowd in upon us' to prevent that generalisation being made. A process of something like hypothesis testing seems to be going on.