

Hume's Reflective Return to the Vulgar

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Hume's notoriously complex account of perceptual belief, particularly in the section of the *Treatise* entitled 'Of scepticism with regard to the senses' (T 1.4.2),¹ has generated a host of conflicting attempts to identify his own considered view and situate it amongst the classical positions in the philosophy of perception. One long dominant interpretation is usually traced to Hume's Scottish contemporary, Thomas Reid. The genius of Hume, on this view, is that he was able to draw out the radically sceptical consequences that follow from the early modern 'theory of ideas'. Reid tells us:

. . . as the Bishop [Berkeley] undid the whole material world, [Hume], upon the same grounds, undoes the world of spirits, and leaves nothing in nature but ideas and impressions, without any subject on which they may be impressed.²

In the twentieth century such logical positivists as A. J. Ayer saw Hume's alleged reduction to perceptions not as a scepticism to be abjured but as a constructive phenomenalism to be adjusted and developed.³ Thus Hume's achievement was to have initiated the epistemological project of reconstructing all of our problematic beliefs in matter, mind, and causality in terms of immediately apprehended 'sense data'. Both these views, however--of Hume the radical sceptic and Hume the phenomenalist--have found disfavour among Hume scholars following in the wake of Norman Kemp Smith's initial questioning of the standard readings.⁴ In a series of influential works, John Yolton has argued that the early modern 'way of ideas' has been misconstrued quite generally, that it really expressed a view of perception that is 'close to a direct

¹ References given as "T" followed by page number or book/part/section numbers are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987). 'E' refers to Hume's *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

² Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind*, edited by Timothy Duggan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 14.

³ See for example, A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd ed. (New York: Dover, 1946/1952), p. 141.

⁴ Norman Kemp Smith, 'The Naturalism of Hume', *Mind*, 14 (1905): 149-73, 335-47; and *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941).

realism'.⁵ Many other commentators have come to the initially surprising conclusion that Hume's realism is more properly viewed as a near relative of the representational (or indirect) realism of Locke, albeit a distinctively sceptical realism.⁶ Still others would counsel that in the end the only position consistently ascribable to Hume himself is that he is a realist when he's on the street, but a sceptic in the study. As Richard Popkin put it: 'Perhaps it was Hume's view that any 'honest' philosopher would be this sort of schizophrenic Pyrrhonist'.⁷

Each of the standard outlooks in the philosophy of perception--phenomenalism, direct realism, indirect realism, scepticism--has thus been viewed as Hume's own considered position in the eyes of informed commentators. I will argue that Hume does not ascribe univocally to any one of the traditional stances in the philosophy of perception, nor does he leave us only a schizophrenic or 'mood' scepticism. Hume attempted to resolve the traditional philosophical problem (or perhaps more accurately, to set it aside on principled grounds) by transforming the issue from one of theoretical consistency to one of pragmatic coherence. Hume's moderate scepticism and his systematic naturalism entail a reflective 'return' to the vulgar (cp. T 223), a qualified normative endorsement of the directly realist beliefs of common life. The interpretive challenge is to understand the subtle nature of that endorsement, and to explain how it arises out of genuinely Humean doctrines.

The account offered here attempts both to capture Hume's own considered position and to explain the attractions and shortcomings of each of the competing interpretations.⁸ After laying out the elements of Hume's account of perceptual belief (section I), I proceed to examine in some detail two recent attempts to interpret Hume as a realist (sections II-III). I contend that these revisionary accounts ascribe unHumean doctrines to Hume. The interpretation of Hume as an irreducible 'mood' sceptic or as a phenomenalist are in that respect both closer to the mark, but Hume's reflective return to the vulgar has recast the nature of the problem and leaves us with a position that is not reflected in the more traditional interpretations (section IV).

I

⁵ John W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 200.

⁶ See Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), and John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). See also Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

⁷ Richard H. Popkin, 'David Hume: His Pyrrhonism and His Critique of Pyrrhonism', in V. C. Chappel ed. *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 98n.

⁸ Compare the remark made by Justin Broackes in a judicious examination of Galen Strawson's treatment (*op. cit.*) of Hume on causality:

'The interpretation of Hume is a delicate matter, and a short discussion like that [just given] can only advertise the need for something better. But the disagreement among interpreters is not without a pattern: it is provoked by the multitude of directions in Hume's thought, and enflamed by swings of philosophical sympathy in interpreters. The real prize would be a reading of Hume which not only recognized and balanced the different strands in his thought, but recognized and balanced the equally tangled strands in competing readings of him'. J. Broackes, 'Did Hume hold a Regularity Theory of Causation?', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 1 (1993), No. 1: 99-114.

Best to begin where there is least controversy. Hume certainly did accept the validity of a familiar piece of reasoning in the philosophy of perception, one that we may call the argument from perceptual variation.⁹ The slightest reflection, Hume casually asserts in a variety of contexts, shows that we do not perceive external bodies directly but only *the images which they occasion in us*.¹⁰ The variation argument starts out from common cases in which the appearances to a perceiver vary in situations where the external object is not supposed to have changed in any of its intrinsic properties. The same food tastes sweet to the healthy but bitter to the sick; the same coin presents a circular appearance in one circumstance but an elliptical appearance in another; the one pencil presents two images when drawn close to the face; and so on. These variable and contrary perceived qualities (it is argued) cannot be ascribed to the external object itself, which is believed to be unchanging in the relevant respects. Since the variable appearances we directly experience depend ultimately on the condition of the perceiving organism, and since in such cases as double images and hallucinations these appearances are evidently qualities of mind-dependent perceptual images, parity of reasoning suggests that what we are directly aware of even in ordinary perception is *always* a perceptual image.¹¹ As Hume succinctly puts it in the First *Enquiry*:

The table, which we see, seems to diminish, as we remove farther from it: but the real table, which exists independent of us, suffers no alteration: it was, therefore, nothing but its image, which was present to the mind. These are the obvious dictates of reason. . .(E 152).

Ordinary common sense (the belief of 'the vulgar') has it that the directly perceived table exists continuously and independently of our perceiving it. The conclusion of rational reflection, however, must always be that our common sense beliefs are strictly speaking *false*,¹² for what we directly perceive is only a perishing and mind-dependent 'image'. Hume thus describes the

⁹ This argument and related arguments have also been called 'the argument from illusion' and 'the argument from the causal dependency of perception'. For subtle differences between (and criticism of) the various formulations of the argument, see George Pitcher, *A Theory of Perception* (Princeton University Press, 1971), Chapter I.

¹⁰ T 67, 192-3, 210, 226-7, 239; E 139.

¹¹ Of course, many philosophers have held the variation argument to be invalid. Some of the objections are reflected in J. L. Austin's rhetorical question: 'Does anyone [seriously] suppose that if something is straight, then it jolly well has to *look* straight at all times and in all circumstances?' That Hume unquestioningly takes the variation argument to be 'as satisfactory as can possibly be imagin'd' (T 227) threatens to render his views on perception uninteresting to those direct realists who argue that the variation argument is flawed. On the other hand, the fact is that the philosophy and psychology of perception have continued to be pulled in the two different directions of direct realism and indirect/representational realism (or alternatively in the latter case, phenomenalism), and as we shall see, Hume's investigation of perceptual belief is focused precisely on the grounds in human nature for (and the philosophical consequences of) this oscillation in belief.

¹² On the respect in which the vulgar view is false, see T 209, 213. Of course, since I have indicated that Hume in the end returns to the belief of the vulgar (reflectively corrected), the context in which he asserts it to be false must be taken into account. In particular, I will argue that a pragmatic turn occurs in T 1.4.7 (*Conclusion of this book*), one that has not yet taken place in T 1.4.2.

vulgar as 'confounding' perceptions and objects, in that we take our interrupted perceptions of things to constitute the persisting external object itself (T 193, 216).

Of our common sense or vulgar realism Hume says: 'tho' this opinion be false, 'tis the most natural of any, and has alone any primary recommendation to the fancy' (T 213). This is one main contention in '*Of scepticism with regard to the senses*' (T 1.4.2), the central thread of which is as follows. The conclusion of the variation argument is presupposed throughout the discussion; thus every blink or turn of the eye presents the perceiver with a numerically distinct object of perception. Given this, Hume proceeds to give his well-known account of how it is that these fragmentary and dependent perceptions, when they recur in certain orderly relations, lead us mistakenly to imagine that the perishing items we directly perceive nonetheless continue to exist while we are not perceiving them. Each of us is endowed with (what we may call) an objectifying imagination in that a human being will by nature fortify its experienced world with the idea of mind-independent, persisting bodies, when in reality all that sense experience directly presents us is an orderly succession of fragmentary perceptions. We are thus led to raise up the idea of a continuous object when all that experience has given us is an orderly flux.

According to Hume, however, this cover-up operation will be exposed as soon as one rationally reflects on the nature of perception, along the lines of the variation argument. As a result, the natural cognitive instincts of anyone who reflects on the matter will be pulled in two opposing directions. On the one hand, whenever there is a certain orderliness in the contents of perception, our objectifying imagination produces a belief in the existence of persisting and mind-independent objects of perception (bodies). On the other hand, the causal reasoning of the variation argument for the contrary conclusion is not only an equally natural course for the imagination (upon reflection), but also has the advantage of being rationally consistent and compelling. So then: what would be the consequence of persisting in this latter course, the course of rational reflection?

. . . [A]s a little reflection destroys [the vulgar] conclusion, that our perceptions have a continu'd existence, by shewing that they have a dependent one, 'twou'd naturally be expected, that we must altogether reject the opinion, that there is such a thing in nature as a continu'd existence, which is preserv'd even when it no longer appears to the senses. The case, however, is otherwise. Philosophers are so far from rejecting the opinion of a continu'd existence upon rejecting that of the independence and continuance of our sensible perceptions, that tho' all sects agree in the latter sentiment, the former, which is, in a manner, its necessary consequence, has been peculiar to a few extravagant sceptics; who after all maintain'd that opinion in words only, and were never able to bring themselves sincerely to believe it (T 214).

The variation argument, completely and consistently pursued, should really bring us to the radically *sceptical* conclusion that nothing exists beyond our fragmentary and dependent sense perceptions (cp. T 265). Radical scepticism, however, is a psychological (and so practical) impossibility; however much one may profess, one cannot actually bring oneself to believe that there exists nothing beyond the sensory image of the moment. What in fact happens is that 'philosophers' who reflect on the nature of perception unwittingly end up trying to have it both ways. Rational reflection indicates that we perceive only fragmentary images; our objectifying imagination *compels* us to believe that what we perceive is a persisting external object. Hume sees indirect realism as the natural (but ultimately indefensible) consequence for the philosopher:

In order to set ourselves at ease in this particular, we contrive a new hypothesis, which seems to comprehend both these principles of reason and imagination. This hypothesis is the philosophical one of the double existence of perceptions and objects; which pleases our reason, in allowing, that our dependent perceptions are interrupted and different; and at the same time is agreeable to the imagination, in attributing a continu'd existence to something else, which we call *objects*. This philosophical system, therefore, is the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embrac'd by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other (T 215).

This 'philosophical system' amounts to the representational realism of some of the modern corpuscularian philosophers. Our mind-dependent perceptions are supposed to represent the external world (to the extent that they do) by resembling their independent material causes.

Unfortunately, as Berkeley argued and Hume agrees, the philosopher is now landed in a system that will not stand up to rational examination. To cite the classic objection, what evidence could we possibly have to support our belief in the existence of any independent, persisting objects, when our own philosophical position is that all our experiential evidence is limited to perceptions alone (T 214)? More interestingly, Hume takes his account to reveal that the reason philosophers are led to posit an independent object represented by their perceptions is precisely their original *vulgar belief* that they directly perceive persisting objects; but that is just the belief which their own variation argument has convinced them is false.¹³ The philosophers' systematic distinction between perceptions and objects thus depends essentially upon a selective inattention to their own rational convictions.

Having chased the question of our belief in an external world to this point, Hume asks with respect to both the vulgar and the philosophical systems:

What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them (T218)?

It is at this point that the interpreter understandably wants to find a consistent Humean position behind, or somehow embracing, the confusions and conflicts he has depicted. What is Hume's *own* view on the nature of the objects of perception? What is his considered position as a philosopher? It would appear that Hume has rejected three of the classical options: common sense realism for being false, radical scepticism for demanding an impossible suspension of belief, and representational realism for being evidentially bankrupt and internally incoherent in the way just described.

It is perhaps easy to see why Hume was adopted by phenomenologists as one of their own, by exclusion if nothing else. Versions of phenomenism are many and varied, but in general the phenomenologist argues that the entire content of our basic beliefs about reality can be reconstructed without loss in purely sensory terms. There is additional appeal only to some mechanism (whether logical construction or psychological association) for building complex and

¹³ For a careful and insightful discussion of the two-part strategy of Hume's scepticism in general (viz. attacking the supposed rational/philosophical grounds for a belief in their own terms, but also uncovering the non-rational *causes* of the belief), see Robert J. Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Routledge, 1985).

hypothetical perceptual beliefs out of simple sense contents. Hume's account of our vulgar or common sense realist beliefs might appear to be unproblematically phenomenalist. The variation argument shows us that every moment we are directly aware of new items, different sets of perceptual images; but when these resemble each other and form certain regular series, by our nature we come to believe that we are encountering one and the same table or chair again. The perceiver itself is an instance of this: on the traditional or 'standard' reading of Hume, a person is just a bundle of perceptions. So it is the relations of orderly coherence and constant resemblance among momentary phenomenal contents that lead us, due to the association of ideas, to mistakenly attribute to them an independent, bodily persistence (T 255). On this phenomenalist basis, then, Hume shows how we are further seduced to form the representationalist and (worse) metaphysical beliefs that (on this view) he rightly condemns as fictitious. The twentieth century phenomenalist will perhaps want to replace Hume's associative relations with logical relations, and will also suggest that we need not regard the constructed realist beliefs as mistaken once we are more clear than was Hume about the logic of identity; but from this perspective it looks like the spirit of Hume's philosophy is clearly phenomenalist.

There are at least two different grounds on which the view of Hume as a phenomenalist has been questioned in recent years, leading to somewhat different conceptions of Hume as a realist. Some have argued (in section II, Yolton is taken as representative) that Hume has a conception of belief according to which the direct 'cognitive contents' of our perceptual beliefs--what they're *about*--are the external objects themselves, not any sensory intermediaries. On this interpretation, Hume's account of our belief in a world of external bodies is realist in a basic way that cuts across both vulgar realism and representational realism, and is said to avoid the particular pitfalls of each. More recently, on the other hand, a 'sceptical realist' interpretation has gained currency which sees Hume as never having seriously questioned the idea that there *exists* a mind-independent material world that is responsible for the character of our perceptions, his main concern being only to argue that our *contentful knowledge* of that reality is far more limited than we are determined to think it is. Hume's own position is on this view a version of the philosophical system of indirect realism (section III).

II

The interpretation of Hume given in the preceding section presupposed a rather traditional understanding of the nature of Humean perceptions. John Yolton has argued in *Perceptual Acquaintance From Descartes to Reid* that the nature and function of ideas or perceptions in early modern philosophy (I will focus on his treatment of Hume) has been largely misunderstood by nearly all interpreters from Thomas Reid to the present.

The standard interpretation of the 'way of ideas', shared by traditional phenomenologists, representationalists, and sceptics alike, is that the mind is directly acquainted only with its own perishing images, thus raising sceptical questions as to the mind's cognitive grasp of external reality. According to Yolton, the tendency to treat perceptions as if they were a kind of intermediary entity stems from a myopic concentration on only one level of analysis present in the thought of Hume and other early modern philosophers. On the *optical model* of perceptual acquaintance, perceiving objects by means of retinal images is like observing the images that light rays produce on the inside of a *camera obscura* box.¹⁴ What is allegedly missed, however, is what

¹⁴ Yolton, *op cit.*, p. 205. References to Yolton's *Perceptual Acquaintance* will hereafter be given in the text as 'PA' followed by the page number.

Yolton variously calls the 'semantic', 'cognitive', or 'significatory' dimension of Hume's perceptions. While it is true that we are stimulated to perceive an object by means of a causal process that results in the impression of images, the perceiver responds to these impressions with various 'actions of the mind', and at this level *perceiving* is a primitive, irreducible intentional act on a par with understanding, conceiving, and believing. In this sense, to 'have a perception in the mind' means just *to perceive*, that is (in most cases), to apprehend or know the external object itself in a perceptual mode of cognition. As Yolton puts it,

If ideas are not themselves entities, if to have ideas and to be perceptually aware are one and the same. . . , the way is left open for an account of perceptual acquaintance that asserts we see objects, even that we see objects directly (PA 15).

So Hume's perceptions turn out to be certain 'acts of the mind', in particular the cognitive act of belief, and these acts have as their 'contents' the external objects themselves. For Yolton, therefore, the nature of belief vindicates the common sense realism of the vulgar, despite the objection (valid from the point of view of reason) that we cannot account for such beliefs strictly in terms of sense impressions and associative inferences. As Yolton puts it,

the vulgar view is attractive: ideas *are* objects. But ideas lack the properties that even the vulgar give to objects: independence and continuity. Therefore, ideas or perceptions cannot *be* the objects. The imagination helps us think of perceptions as if they were objects by leading us to form the *belief* in the continuity and independent existence of our perceptions. This belief gets as close as any account can to the basic truth that objects are as they appear to us in perceptual acquaintance. The objects we conceive are numerically distinct from our perceptions [i.e. from our acts of perceptual belief]; there are perceptions *and* objects (PA 162).

On Yolton's reading, the distinction between this vulgar realism and what we've seen Hume characterise as the 'monstrous' representational realism of the philosophers only concerns the extent to which our conceptions accurately reflect the nature of the object. In both cases we are able to be in direct cognitive contact with the material objects themselves. It is just that the variation argument (section I) shows us that our specific qualitative conception of objects falls short of the way we suppose material reality to be.¹⁵ In the end, Yolton holds that

Hume believed in and defended a double-existence view, even though he was dissatisfied with all accounts of matter and the external world (PA 161).

. . .but that label, 'the representative theory of perception', or 'representative realism', should no longer carry the association of that other metaphor, 'the veil of perception' (PA 221).

So epistemological concerns aside, Hume himself is throughout a basic realist regarding our perceptual knowledge of external reality.

¹⁵ What, then, has happened to 'the basic truth that objects are as they appear to us in perceptual acquaintance' (see previous quote)?

We might call this the Intentional Act interpretation of Hume's realism, in order to highlight Yolton's notion of the presence of an external object to the mind as the content of a cognitive act of awareness (understanding, conceiving, believing, perceiving). It seems to me, however, that this understanding of the intentionality of thought and perception is not Hume's, however attractive such views may be (though this is one respect in which they are not Humean) in seeking to by-pass certain traditional sceptical challenges to realism. The problem of intentionality in this context concerns how exactly it is that my internal thought or sense impression of an object succeeds in being *about* that external object. On the sort of view Yolton describes, intentionality is a basic, irreducible relation between the knower and the object known. Yolton thus speaks of a 'semantical liaison' (PA 218) in which 'the discourse between the world and the perceiver is not causal, it is significant' (PA 216), and thus Hume's ideas would be 'the cognitive translation of objects, the meaning of things, the intelligibility of the real' (PA 220). Such a 'meaning relation' is thus regarded as not being reducible to complex causal interactions having to do with behavioral and associative habits, image-formation, and so on (PA ch. 11). Rather, the heart of Hume's philosophy is argued to be his account of the various actions of the mind such as judging, comprehending, feeling, conceiving, abstracting, imagining, and so on, by which we cognise 'the meaning of things' (PA 195).

This is not the manner in which Hume accounts for the significance or meaning of our thoughts and perceptions. Consider his account of that 'action of the mind' by means of which we attain general meaning or signification (direct perceptual beliefs will be considered in a moment). A full treatment of Hume's theory of abstract ideas (T 1.1.7) is beyond the scope of this paper, but characteristically Hume attempts to *explain* the particular 'mental action' under consideration in terms of his more basic theoretical resources: distinctive feelings, fundamental associative processes, and perceptions of the mind (as standardly construed). His attempt, to use contemporary jargon, is to 'naturalise' intentionality. He offers a causal account of general signification in terms of learned habits of linguistic usage deriving from the experience of resembling particulars, explaining the 'mental act' of general signification as a complex causal product of perceptions (understood as particular, individual 'existences'), sentiments, and basic habits of mind. The intended effect of this project, one would have thought, is precisely to disabuse us of such notions as that there is an irreducible '*semantical liaison*' that serves to open up the knower to 'the intelligibility of the real' (PA 220).

Furthermore, Hume's use of 'actions of the mind' is not in service of an act/content 'cognitive psychology', but rather refers to descriptive features of our experienced mental life. The 'acts', 'actions', or 'operations' of mind (T 203) with which Hume is generally concerned are certain *felt* dispositions of mind, the character of which depends (as to its proximate cause) on whether our nerves are calm or disturbed. This is especially evident in Hume's genetic account of the mistake that is involved in the common sense realist belief in body. The crucial factor is the descriptive degree of similarity between certain 'dispositions of the mind' in having different sorts of perceptual experiences (T 203). Thus the mind is said to be placed in 'repose' (corresponding to the undisturbed coursing of the 'animal spirits' in the nerves) when we have diverse yet highly resembling experiences; likewise, the mind is placed in a similarly 'smooth and easy' disposition when we briefly experience a 'perfectly identical', unchanging and continuous object. As a result we unwittingly raise up the idea of an unchanging persistence through time when all that we are actually experiencing is a broken succession of non-identical perceptions (T 204). Belief comes with the consequent increase in vivacity of perception, which itself is also a *felt* character of perceptions though one that for Hume has functional significance in relation to

inferences and behaviour in a way that is notoriously underdescribed.¹⁶ Whatever the interpretation, it had better be as applicable to 'beasts' as to humans (T 1.3.16). Image-like properties, associative patterns, distinctive feelings, and so on, are at least the right sort of materials for that task. If Hume's beliefs were Yolton's irreducibly semantic acts of understanding, however, this would appear to be less so. For Hume, '*belief is more properly an act of the sensitive, than of the cogitative part of our natures*' (T 183, italics in original).

Hume's causal explanation of how we all come mistakenly to believe that what we directly perceive persists independently of our minds should not, therefore, suggest a theory of Intentional Acts or the 'semantic presence' of objects to the mind. Even if the latter theory somehow holds out the benefit of preserving realism univocally throughout the travails of vulgar realism and representational realism catalogued in T 1.4.2, Hume himself does not put forth such a view.¹⁷

III

Earlier we saw Hume castigate the representational realism of the philosophers as a monstrous confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions, one that holds out the prospect only of error and falsehood (T 215, 218). Nevertheless, a large number of recent commentators would echo John Passmore's assessment: 'The traditional view ascribes to Hume Berkeley's philosophy without God and the Self; but *in his actual beliefs* he is much closer to Locke than he is to Berkeley.'¹⁸ The claim to be considered in this section is not that Hume supported the representational view only in certain circumstances (or moods or contexts), but that he presupposed it to be true quite generally. This is the contention of the recent 'sceptical realist' interpretation of Hume defended by John Wright and Galen Strawson.

¹⁶ How to understand Hume's notion of belief as vivacity is an opaque interpretive issue. Questions typically raised are those such as: Did Hume understand vivacious feeling as a monadic property of perceptions, on the model of the brightness or faintness of images? ('When you would any way vary the idea of a particular object, you can only encrease or diminish its force and vivacity. If you make any other change on it, it represents a different object or impression. The case is the same as in colours' (T 96). The Appendix broadens 'force and vivacity' to 'feeling' (T 636).) Or might we emphasise the description of vivacity as 'forcefulness' or 'influence on the mind' and offer a functional interpretation built on entrenched associative patterns of ideas and of actions? The negative point made in the text is sufficient for present purposes.

¹⁷ Kemp Smith also gives a 'cognitive' analysis of Hume's notion of belief, but not in terms similar to Yolton's Intentional Act reading of Hume. Rather, he argues that Hume attempts to have *feelings* do the work of (intentional) *judgements*, and he criticises this as a hopeless task (*The Philosophy of David Hume, op. cit.*, pp. 549-551). Yolton's general view might have appealed to Kemp Smith, but not as an interpretation of Hume (in this we agree). As briefly remarked above, I myself would attempt to spell out Hume's views on intentionality in terms of the functional aspects of 'vivacious feeling' (see the 'Abstract' to the *Treatise*, as well as T 1.3.9), in combination with the nominalistic account of general signification offered in 'Of abstract ideas' (T 1.1.7). But that is a task for another day.

For further critical appraisal of Yolton's general outlook on the theory of ideas, see Michael Ayers, *Locke: Epistemology and Ontology* (London: Routledge, 1991), volume I, Part I.

¹⁸ John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980, 1952), p. 90.

In *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*,¹⁹ Wright suggests that while Hume

purports to show that the [vulgar] system of the ordinary man is *false*, he only claims that the theory of the philosophers lacks verification and is psychologically derivative. . . . He quite justifiably continued to assume the truth of the philosophical theory. . . . (SR 59).

The philosophical system is said by Hume to be a monstrous confusion, according to Wright, because the psychological ground for the philosopher's belief in independent objects is not philosophical reasoning, but rather the very same instinct that led to the *rationally condemned* vulgar belief in independent perceptions (SR 55). The resulting philosophical theory is nonetheless true, on Wright's view of Hume. Granted, reason *alone* cannot support the double-existence hypothesis, but this comports with Hume's moderate scepticism as to our capacity to rationally justify our most basic beliefs. The philosophical system properly corrects the vulgar view by showing that our perceptions are dependent and fragmentary existences. While Hume is concerned to uncover its non-rational origins, he nonetheless accepts 'the representative theory of perception as an important part of the foundations of science' (SR 19).

The contention peculiar to Wright is that Hume's reasonings *logically commit* him to the philosophical system (indirect realism), where this is intended not as a criticism but as an account of what Hume himself believes (SR 53). Wright argues as follows:

. . . Hume's argument establishing the mind-dependent character of perceptions rests upon the assumption that there are independent objects which do not undergo certain changes under certain circumstances. . . . [O]nce this assumption is granted, the argument has equal force to establish the indirect realist theory which postulates the existence of both mind-dependent perceptions and independent objects (SR 53).

But this is a mistake, both logically and with respect to Hume's intentions. Wright's claim goes against Hume's own suggestion as to what the variation argument *does* rationally imply. We saw that Hume takes the fully rational consequence to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the initial assumption of an external, persisting body (T 214; 265). This is the conclusion that Hume's radical sceptic would believe if it were psychologically possible to do so; and in Hume's eyes this is presumably what follows from Berkeley's arguments, which 'form the best lessons of scepticism' (E 155n).²⁰ Wright, evidently anticipating this objection, contends that Hume holds the radical sceptic's position to be 'in itself perfectly consistent', but insists that it is self-contradictory if based 'upon Hume's reasonings' (SR 54). But then this creates a mystery: what sort of reasoning Hume *did* think the sceptics employed to arrive at their opinion?

There is more to be said for Wright's overall historical interpretation than this one mistaken contention would suggest. The sceptical realists have emphasised that Hume's texts are littered with apparently straightforward references to a mind-independent, causally constrained

¹⁹ Page references to this work will hereafter be given in the text as 'SR' followed by the page number.

²⁰ What becomes of Berkeley's philosophy on Wright's assumption that the variance argument *entails* double existence realism? It certainly is implausible to hold that Hume, well aware of the use to which Berkeley put the variance argument, would silently *assume* that such arguments entail Lockean realism!

nature beyond the reach of our perceptions. However, when it comes to arguing that Hume himself positively accepted indirect realism, we invariably find the sceptical realists maintaining that one cannot account for this belief solely from *within* the resources of perception and imagination that have traditionally been ascribed to the Humean subject of belief. That is why we find Wright, for example, attempting to show that Hume the philosopher implicitly holds that indirect realism is *logically entailed* by the argument from perceptual variation, despite the manner in which Hume treats the representationalist theory from the perspective internal to our epistemic condition as he himself paints it.

The same consequence is apparent in Galen Strawson's *The Secret Connexion: Causation, Realism, and David Hume*.²¹ Strawson contends, for instance, that Hume simply *took for granted* the 'basic realist' notion that there exists an ultimate reality (whether it is akin to Locke's matter or Berkeley's God we cannot know) with a nature and real causal powers of its own, which by affecting us is responsible for the character and regularity of our perceptions (SC 64-5 and *passim*).²² Furthermore, this (allegedly) unquestioned yet reasonable²³ assumption is said to be presupposed by every thinker who has not been infected with certain confused positivist and anti-realist notions peculiar to our own century. Hume's main concern was to show that we are systematically mistaken in thinking we can achieve a *contentful conception* of this ultimate reality. So on this view Hume simply assumes this most basic causal realism to be true like any other sober philosopher. It seems to me that this implausibly characterises Hume as a dogmatist, despite Strawson's protestations to the contrary.²⁴ For present purposes, however, we may restrict ourselves to Strawson's account of the resources supposed to be available in Hume's philosophy for giving some minimal intelligibility to what is admitted to be an otherwise experientially contentless, purely existential belief; and to see how this relates to the question of Hume's indirect realism.

²¹ Subsequent page references to this work will be given as 'SC' followed by the page number.

²² According to Strawson, Hume simply took for granted that there is something 'about the nature of matter or reality in virtue of which it is regular in the way that it is' (SC 93).

²³ 'Reasonable' according to a rather complex independent argument that Strawson (not Hume) supplies (see SC chapters 5, 22.2, and *passim*), the aim of which is to show that the contrary possibility--namely, that reality might simply exhibit regularities without there being any metaphysical *reason* why it does so--is 'utterly implausible' (SC 21). For then we should have to regard such regularities as simply 'a fluke' (see SC 25-9 for the argument).

Strawson does attempt to find some textual support for ascribing this belief (if not the argument for it) to Hume, as in the statement in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (J. V. Price, ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) that 'Chance has no place, on any Hypothesis. . .' (p. 228; SC 200). However, here as elsewhere there is available an alternative traditional construal in terms of our 'natural beliefs': pure chance (for all we know) might be logically and metaphysically possible (conceivable as a mere 'philosophical relation' in Hume's sense, perhaps?), but *in any conceivable inquiry* we are determined by our nature always to seek causal relations of production between kinds of events (a 'natural relation'), projecting the internal impression of necessity onto experienced regularities.

²⁴ See SC chapters. 3, 9, and 22.2. Strawson argues that the respect in which Hume has a strong, non-sceptical belief only concerns the *existence* of an (otherwise unknowable) ultimate material nature the changes of which are necessitated by real causal powers; Hume is a sceptic regarding our *conception* of the character of that nature. Furthermore, Hume as a sceptic may have this existential belief without claiming to have *knowledge*. (Against this last claim, however, traditional scepticism allowed belief regarding 'the appearances', but certainly not regarding any supposed ultimate causes of the appearances. As we shall see in Section IV, Hume's own sceptical recommendations follow this tradition.)

Strawson contends that Hume's (indirect) realism is ultimately based on a purely relational existential 'supposition' or 'relative idea'. The primary basis for the interpretation consists in three or four remarks in the *Treatise* where Hume notes that the 'farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects' (T 68; cp. T 188, 218, 241). Strawson thus contends that in the *Treatise* 'Hume explicitly endorses the supposition that there is an external world of objects distinct from the internal world of his perceptions' (SC 141; 56).²⁵ Of course, certain perception/object *resemblance* claims of the modern representationalist systems may have to be modified or even abandoned (SC 58n), but Hume's purely suppositional realism is claimed to survive this scepticism. Citing Hume's remark that 'we may well suppose in general, but 'tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions' (T 218), Strawson explains:

Hume's point here. . . is that if external objects are indeed entirely specifically different from our perceptions, then if we suppose them to exist, as Hume does, we can only form a 'relative' idea of them: e.g. as 'that which gives rise to our perceptions' (SC 54).²⁶

Hume makes the 'suppose/conceive' distinction in more detailed fashion in the later passage:

Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt. . . [a perception and an external object conceived as specifically different from a perception], 'tis still incomprehensible to us; and we are oblig'd either to conceive an external object merely *as a relation without a relative*, or to make it the very same [as] a perception or impression. . . [We] may suppose, but never can conceive a specific difference betwixt an object and impression. . . (T 241).²⁷

Strawson comments as follows:

This looks like a move from a theory-of-ideas-motivated epistemological claim --we have no idea of such an external object--to an ontological claim: there is definitely no such thing. But it isn't. What Hume is saying (arguably fully anticipating Kant in this respect) is only that we have no positive *conception* of an external-object-specifically-different-from-a-perception, or 'External Object', for short; he is not saying that there is definitely no such thing (SC 54).

²⁵ Strawson refers us to T 217-8. Hopefully it will soon be clear (Section IV) that such a categorical statement is a bull in Hume's china-shop. The move from explicit statements in certain contexts (particularly T 217-18) to explicit *endorsements* by Hume is not at all straightforward. (See note 12 above.)

²⁶ There appears to be no Humean text cited for the quoted phrase, 'that which gives rise to our perceptions', but it is certainly of a piece with many of Hume's statements (e.g. T 2n and 84).

²⁷ As quoted with emphasis added, SC 54.

Hume's alleged supposition that such (unknowable) 'External Objects' exist enables Strawson to read Hume as being himself a 'Basic Realist' (albeit a *knowledge-sceptic*) in a 'highly unspecific' sense (SC 65). That is, Hume supposes that there exists *something* 'which (1) is other than our perceptions and which (2) affects us and which (3) is the reason why our perceptions are as they are' (SC 64-6; cp. T 84). According to Strawson, then, Hume himself was an indirect realist at least in the attenuated sense given by (1)-(3).²⁸

Strawson explains that we can *refer to* 'External Objects' (or ultimate reality) by picking them (or it) out by means of an identifying description: 'when we talk about objects . . . we genuinely refer to *whatever thing X it is that affects and thereby gives rise to our experience*' (SC 122, 124; emphasis added).²⁹

We can successfully refer and genuinely talk about something, as Hume acknowledges in his use of the notion of a relative idea, even though there is a sense in which we don't know what we are talking about, or what we are saying (SC 122-3).

Thus 'our words can be supposed to *reach out referentially beyond our experience*' (SC 124).

However, the suggestion that Hume himself embraced such a suppositional realism would make central and laudatory in his philosophical belief what is in fact peripheral and *prima facie* derogatory in his philosophical writings. The distinction between 'supposing' and 'conceiving' and the allied notion of a 'relative idea' do not occur explicitly in any works (in particular, not in the first *Enquiry*) apart from the four instances in Book I of the *Treatise* noted above (T 68-9, 188, 218, 241ff.).³⁰ In one of those passages Hume refers us back to his first mention of the distinction (T 68-9), and remarks as follows:

²⁸ Hume is thus one who 'supposes, in a (Basic) Realist way, that there are external objects specifically different from perceptions that affect us and give rise to our perceptions and are the reason why our perceptions are as they are. . .' (SC 136).

²⁹ Donald Flage, in *David Hume's Theory of Mind* (London: Routledge, 1990), also sees Hume's 'relative ideas' as in this respect anticipating Russell's theory of descriptions: 'one may linguistically express the intent of one's relative idea of a material object (although not describe the relative idea itself) by the definite description, 'the entity that causes *a* and is not itself a perception', where *a* is a perception of which one is aware, one's relative idea succeeds in singling out a material object just in case it is true that there is exactly one thing *x* that causes *a* and *x* is not a perception' (p. 45). Flage emphasises that on Hume's view we cannot know if such a condition is in fact satisfied (p. 48). Strawson holds that Hume 'took it for granted' that some such condition is satisfied generally, but not necessarily by material objects; the 'ultimate cause' could (for all we know) be God. Flage, for his part, finds the notion of a 'relative idea' central and ubiquitous in Hume's philosophy (despite its occurring explicitly only in the four brief and negative passages from the *Treatise* cited earlier). Although I disagree with Flage's interpretation, his conceptual reconstructions are interesting both in this case and with regard to the problem of intentionality (and abstract ideas) discussed in Section II.

³⁰ Simon Blackburn remarks on these four passages: 'In none of these cases is Hume actually contrasting a specific versus relative idea of any one property or relation, enjoining us that we can know a property or object by its relations even if we cannot know it by some stricter standard derived from the theory of ideas. On the contrary, in each context it is the impossibility of conceiving a 'specific difference' between external objects and perceptions that is the focus of attention.' 'Hume and Thick

. . . [we] shall consider, whether it be the *senses*, *reason*, or the *imagination*, that produces the opinion of a *continu'd* or of a *distinct* existence. These are the only questions, that are intelligible on the present subject. For as to the notion of external existence, when taken for something specifically different from our perceptions, we have already shewn its absurdity (T 188).

Strawson, as we have seen, contends that although Hume variously characterizes the supposition of a specific difference between the realm of perceptions and external reality as *unintelligible*, *incomprehensible*, *inconceivable*, and *unknown*, this is only to point out that we have 'no positively contentful, impression-copy content' or *conception* of such a reality, not to suggest that such a supposition fails to *refer* to it (whatever it may be; SC 127). In fact, Strawson thinks that Hume himself took the supposition to constitute a belief that is true and one that we also have good reason to believe.³¹ In the passage cited, however, Hume states that he has shown the supposition to be *absurd*, and it is quite a strain to see this, with Strawson, as merely Hume's recognition of the descriptive inadequacy of the terms in an otherwise true and reasonable supposition.

In discussing the philosophers' distinction between primary and secondary qualities in the *Enquiry*, Hume does appear to mention the sort of purely existential supposition Strawson ascribes to him--but again only to criticize it in the strongest terms. Having raised an objection to the primary/secondary distinction, Hume mentions Berkeley's argument against the possible rejoinder that 'the ideas of those primary qualities are attained by *Abstraction*', and he takes Berkeley to have shown that opinion 'to be unintelligible, and even absurd' (E 154). (By 'absurd' in *this* context, at any rate, Hume does not mean descriptive-inadequacy-*cum*-referential-success.) As Hume then sums up the overall critique, Berkeley's 'philosophical objection' to 'the opinion of external existence'

represents this opinion as contrary to reason: at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object. Bereave matter of all its intelligible qualities, both primary and secondary, you in a manner annihilate it, and leave only a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions; a notion so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it (E 155).

On Strawson's interpretation (e.g. SC 136-8), Hume's *own* realism is based on the supposition of just such inexplicable somethings-or-other 'that affect us and give rise to our perceptions and are the reason why our perceptions are as they are' (SC 136). But it is precisely the 'notion' of an 'unknown, inexplicable *something*, as the cause of our perceptions' that is said to be 'so imperfect, that no sceptic will think it worth while to contend against it'. Far from wearing its imperfection on its sleeve, however, for Strawson's Hume *that* notion must represent not only a truth but one that exhibits to the highest possible degree a proper recognition of our limited conceptual capacities and a due scepticism regarding our ability to know the real natures of external objects,

Connexions' in *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 96. I have benefited from Blackburn's discussion here, and in conversation.

³¹ SC 123, 128, 133n, 135n; chapters 6.5 and 12, *passim*.

while also expressing our reasonable and purely referential basic realism. Perhaps we are to interpret 'so imperfect' here, not as 'so completely vacuous as to be an absurd belief', but as 'so informatively minimal in its modest claim' that even sceptics would 'take it for granted' and not think to dispute it. Hume, however, often characterizes 'extravagant sceptics' as challenging the grounds for the belief that anything *exists* beyond our present perceptions (e.g. T 214, 265), not just the claim that we may know or have a contentful conception of its real nature.

The 'supposition' of a specific difference between the vulgar realm of perceptible objects and their unknowable ultimate causes is one made by 'the philosophers'.³² Hume clearly states that 'generally speaking' we do *not* form a relative idea and suppose objects and perceptions to be 'specifically different', but 'only attribute to them different relations, connexions and durations' (T 68). The latter refers to the vulgar and philosophical systems of T 1.4.2--that is, when the philosophers, as is usual, make their 'objects' simply 'a new set of perceptions' (T 218), unlike the relative idea supposition. If Hume's use of 'relative ideas' is (as I have argued) not intended to be a positive referential tool, how then are we to explain what exactly is going in the minds of those who do make the 'absurd' supposition? What sort of weak and avoidable notion is it, then, to 'conceive of an external object as a relation without a relative' (T 241)?

There is a place in Hume's science marked out for such notions. Hume bases his general theory of fictions upon our mistakenly confusing resembling or related ideas, where the unwitting substitution is caused by our using 'words for ideas, and to talk instead of thinking' (T 60-62). Since we never have *any* proper idea at all for elucidating the content of the 'specifically different' external object itself, the 'relative idea' fiction (if I may so call it) cannot easily be thus explained as the mistaken substitution of related ideas or dispositions of mind.³³ Hume does, however, employ one explanatory principle that is capable of accounting for 'inconceivable' (idea-bereft) suppositions, where we 'talk instead of thinking'. Consider his genetic account of how consolation comes to (scholastic) philosophers

in their invention of the words *faculty* and *occult quality*. For it being usual, after the frequent use of terms, which are really significant and intelligible, to omit the idea, which we would express by them, and to preserve only the custom, by which we recal the idea at pleasure; so it naturally happens, that after the frequent use of terms, which are wholly insignificant and unintelligible, we fancy them to be on the same footing with the precedent, and to have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection (T 224).

In their doctrines of substance the ancient philosophers were guided by such trivial and avoidable propensities of the imagination (T 224), and of course no one would suggest that Hume himself embraces such beliefs. But it seems to me that the avoidable, contentless supposition of an unknown *something* as the cause of all our perceptions is in no better shape, in Hume's eyes, than the avoidable, contentless supposition that all perceptible qualities inhere in a substance or substratum that is likewise conceived as 'an unknown *something*' (T 16; cp. T 222-4). (The latter avoidable fiction must of course be distinguished from the more permanent and less 'hypothetical' fictions of object-identity and persistence.) If we make such suppositions, we are

³² The context shows that this holds for each of the four passages in which 'relative ideas' are mentioned.

³³ Nor, for the same reason, can it be understood as the projection of an internal impression, as in the case of the idea of necessary connexion.

metaphysicians talking without clearly conceiving, and we will have failed to avoid 'that error, into which so may have fallen, of imposing their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles' (T xviii).

I suggest, then, that Hume takes the supposition of an unknown, incomprehensible *something* as the cause of our perceptions to be the result of imaginative or fictive postulation carried to its avoidable, metaphysical extreme. We should resist the current tendency (in Yolton and Wright, as well) to interpret the notion of a relative idea and the supposition of a specific difference between objects and perceptions as constituting Hume's own belief in a version of indirect realism.

I have argued that the reasons adduced by the sceptical realists in support of Hume as an indirect realist are not persuasive. Hume is said to be an indirect realist either because he takes it to *follow logically* from the perceptual variation argument (despite his indicating otherwise); or because he simply *takes it for granted* that there is a corresponding reality that is causally responsible for the character of our perceptions (without this being a dogmatic assumption); or because the notion of *purely existential supposition or reference* is far more central to Hume's thinking than has hitherto been recognized. Perhaps I have raised just enough doubt concerning the sceptical realist interpretation for it to seem worth looking again at our question from a more traditional perspective. That is, what should be said about Hume's own belief regarding the objects of perception when the matter is considered solely from within the epistemic resources traditionally thought to be ascribed by Hume to the subjects of his inquiry?

IV

Hume's considered view on the status of our perceptual beliefs cannot be reconstructed from first-order arguments and remarks on perception scattered throughout his works. Passages may be found to support each of the conflicting classical positions in the philosophy of perception, and we have seen reason for doubt regarding recent revisionary readings. Hume does have a systematic, considered position on the question of the objects of perception, but his unique contribution arises out of subtle second-order questions concerning the possibility of systematic inquiry in general. The key section is the conclusion to Book I of the *Treatise*, along with corresponding discussions in Section XII of the First *Enquiry*.

Hume's 'experimental' investigation in Book I, while uncovering certain general principles of human nature, has left us with the sceptical results outlined in Section I. His reflections have shown that there is no systematic account available to the understanding to justify our most basic beliefs beyond tracing their origin to the instinctive promptings of certain habits and feelings peculiar to the imagination. So it seems to Hume that only the imagination is left to supply a criterion of truth (T 265) for constructing and evaluating his own projected system of the moral sciences (T xvi), in particular the upcoming investigations into the passions and morals. But how can the imagination be trusted as a guide to the truth, he asks, when reflection has just shown that the natural tendency of the imagination is to promote incompatible beliefs regarding our perception of the external world (T 265)? Both our causal reasonings and our belief in external bodies have been shown to be based on 'equally natural and necessary' principles of imagination; yet it is impossible 'for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu'd existence of matter' (T 266). For the causal reasoning of the variation argument, pursued to its natural conclusion, would call for an impossible sceptical suspension of belief in all matters beyond one's own present sensations.

So again: with what confidence is Hume to 'launch out into those immense depths of philosophy' which lie before him (T 263)?

The conclusion to Book I does not end in sceptical despair, however. It may require 'the utmost art and industry', but Hume does attempt to bring his study of the understanding 'to a happy conclusion' (T 263). His procedure now is to apply the principles of human nature, uncovered in Book I, to an experimental examination of the practical problem he presently faces. What conduct recommends itself in the light of his sceptical conclusions? Is systematic human inquiry (broadly, science) possible at all? Are we left with any principled grounds for evaluating any given set of beliefs as true or false (or at least, as better or worse)? The investigation takes the form of a narrative describing the consequences of various attitudes toward inquiry.

Hume first argues that the escape from melancholic scepticism held out by modern representationalist philosophers will not bear his own present reflective survey. Having recalled that our objectifying imagination establishes a belief in body which our natural reasoning leads us to suspend, Hume asks:

How then shall we adjust those principles together? Which of them shall we prefer? Or in case we prefer neither of them, but successively assent to both, as is usual among philosophers, with what confidence can we afterwards usurp that glorious title, when we thus knowingly embrace a contradiction (T 266)?

As we have seen (section I), the representationalist philosophers in developing their systematic distinction between perceptions and objects unwittingly rely upon the common sense realism that they are concerned to deny; their resulting system is itself unsupported by reason (1.4.2), and natural extensions of that system in the end 'utterly annihilate all [external] objects' (1.4.4, T 228).³⁴ Hume cannot himself endorse this system of belief while reflectively attending to the possibility of constructing his own systematic moral science.

Given that he cannot follow the philosophers and 'knowingly embrace a manifest contradiction,' Hume considers whether he should simply abandon his melancholic scepticism in favor of the vulgar realism of common life. Throughout Book I, however, even our common sense beliefs have been shown to proceed

merely from an illusion of the imagination; and the question is, *how far we ought to yield to these illusions*. This question is very difficult, and reduces itself to a very dangerous dilemma, whichever way we answer it (T 267; my emphasis).

If we follow our objectifying imagination along to a belief in persisting bodies, we operate upon a principle that embraces falsehood and contradiction, and leads readily to speculative flights of fancy. If on the other hand we attempt to avoid all fiction and restrict ourselves to the natural causal reasonings of the understanding, our reflections lead us back to an excessive, melancholic

³⁴ See T 215-16 for an explicit statement of the 'successive assent' to opposed principles that is involved in the double existence view. Hume himself refers back to T 1.4.4, where the modern philosopher has gone on to distinguish between primary and secondary qualities, and as a result has purged the universe of any independent existence (if the reasoning is followed fully).

scepticism. 'For my part,' Hume momentarily despairs, 'I know not what ought to be done in the present case' (T 268). What happens *in fact* is that even those who do occasionally engage in reflection habitually set it aside in favor of their vulgar fancy; 'yet we do not, and cannot establish it for a rule that [refin'd reflections] ought not to have any influence; which implies a manifest contradiction' (T 268). That is, Hume cannot at present reflectively justify to himself the proposal to abandon his philosophical reflections in favour of the beliefs of common life; nonetheless, as his own investigations into human nature have explained, that is precisely what is bound to happen to him anyway upon leaving his study (T 269).

The general point is that there is no systematic, rational, theoretical perspective from which to evaluate the truth-adequacy of our beliefs; there is only an explanation of their causal formation and practical effects in accordance with the general principles of habit, feeling, and experience. From the perspective of the science of human nature we are able to explain, and be aware upon reflection, that our own nature tends to promote the formation of conflicting beliefs depending on our mood and circumstances. In the study I might be convinced by the variation argument that the direct objects of perception are 'internal and perishing existences', but in the street I will find myself believing with the rest of mankind that I directly perceive persisting bodies. And 'at present' Hume has a second-order awareness of just this natural dialectic (T 269).

It might seem that this is the end of the road, and that the practical question, 'how far we ought to yield to these illusions' has in a sense been answered. The point of Hume's mitigated scepticism would be to recognize that there is no systematic external perspective from which we can be criticised for simply acquiescing in the successive beliefs we find ourselves determined to embrace. Depending on the '*particular instant*' under consideration (T273), Hume himself will successively instantiate the beliefs of a vulgar realist and a 'double existence' philosophical realist (and at times perhaps even be led to the extremes of radical scepticism or speculative metaphysics). There would be no further intelligible question as to Hume's own considered position on the question of perceptual appearance and reality, the subjective and the objective. Along these lines Popkin sees Hume's philosophy as the true fulfillment of ancient Pyrrhonism:

The picture of the two, the dogmatist and the sceptic, is a picture of the perfect Pyrrhonist in his two moods, his split personality. In one mood, the difficulties overcome him, in another, the necessities do. Only by being both can one be a philosopher, and live according to nature.³⁵

We are left with what might be called 'mood pluralism'. Hume would resemble the modern representationalist philosopher in successively assenting to opposed beliefs (T 266, above), but would do so without the latter's self-deceptive claims to a unified, rationally defensible system of belief. Such questions as that which I have asked--did Hume believe that the direct objects of perception are internal and perishing images rather than ordinary objects?--would admit only of temporally relativised answers: when he is reflecting philosophically (as throughout the *Treatise*), yes; when he is playing billiards, no.

The mood-pluralist interpretation, however, does not follow Hume's investigation to its ultimate 'happy conclusion'. The question now governing that investigation is indeed, how far

³⁵ Popkin, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

ought we to follow the imagination in its determination of our beliefs? Philosophers will answer: to the extent, and only to the extent, that the given process of belief-formation tends to produce a rationally justified system of true beliefs. The traditional philosophical problem of perception and external reality, however, has shown itself to be irresolvable when thus approached in terms of the understanding. Is it true that we directly perceive perishing images, or rather that we directly perceive persisting bodies? Neither answer can be both believed and justified in the eyes of the understanding. Hume's inquiry at this point has consequently been transformed into a *practical* one: '. . .we ought only to deliberate concerning the choice of our guide, and ought to prefer that which is safest and most agreeable' (T 271). The terms 'safest and most agreeable' are not lightly chosen. With regard to any policy of action or enduring trait of character, on Hume's moral philosophy its utility or agreeableness to oneself or to others (as approved upon a reflective survey) constitutes the sole ground for normative answers to a question of conduct. The particular practice under consideration at present is the conduct of systematic inquiry, and the question is whether we may hope to establish

a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination (T 272).

The practical problem we face is that we are by nature disposed to follow our rational reflections and our common sense convictions in directions that are opposed to one another, and there is no theoretical resolution of the matter forthcoming. The mood pluralist interpretation leaves us with an irreducible plurality of opposed belief-attitudes, but for his own projected sciences Hume as reflective philosopher is examining the practical possibility of a *system* of beliefs, one that might at least be satisfactory to the reflective, critical mind if not demonstrably true or theoretically justifiable.³⁶ The question is thus: what sort of conduct of inquiry holds out the possibility of a system of belief that would reflectively harmonise one's rational reflections with one's common life convictions?

Such a system of belief will be possible, Hume argues (T 271-3), only if those who are inclined to reflection restrict their inquiries to empirical phenomena and avoid speculative 'hypotheses'.³⁷ 'Had [philosophers] fallen upon the just conclusion, they wou'd have return'd

³⁶ What exactly is the ground for Hume's demand for a unified system of belief (as against a pluralism of conflicting belief-states)? I have presented it as a condition for the possibility of constructing the sort of 'moral sciences' Hume envisions. One might speculate, however, that in the end there are deeper reasons having to do with morality itself and the importance of being able to 'bear one's own survey' when reflecting in a cool hour on one's beliefs and actions (cp. T 620). (Recall Hume's hope for 'a system or set of opinions. . . [that] might at least be *satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination*', T 272.) The practical good of having a certain kind of character would thus sanction the search for systematic unity in inquiry. Although I am not prepared to follow out this suggestion at present, it seems to me to capture the spirit of Hume's life and *corpus*.

³⁷ In this second-order context, the problem with following our objectifying imagination to the length of superstitious dogma is not that such beliefs are unjustifiable in the light of rational reflection--so is common sense realism--but rather that in contrast to most philosophical speculations (as Hume thinks experience shows) superstition, enthusiasm, and speculative metaphysics tend to promote instability 'in the conduct of our lives and actions' (T 272; cp. E 161). The normative restriction of our enquiries to the objects of vulgar belief then provides the reflective justification for the various first-order sceptical arguments Hume puts forth against the pretensions to rationality of natural religion and metaphysics.

back to the situation of the vulgar. . .' (T 223). As he puts it in the First *Enquiry*, philosophers reflectively aware of the conflicting tendencies of their faculties 'will never be tempted to go beyond common life. . .', recognising that 'philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected' (E 162). The ultimate ground for this reflective return to the vulgar has been provided by 'Human Nature. . .the only science of man': human nature happens to be such that only by so regulating our inquiries may we hope to establish a system of beliefs that, if not demonstrably true, will nonetheless be both adequate to our common conduct and stable in the face of our rational reflections. The happy conclusion is reached: 'the hope of this serves to compose my temper from that spleen, and invigorate it from that indolence, which sometimes prevail upon me' (T 273).

From this perspective we must disagree with John Wright's insistence that 'Hume's stress on practice must not simply be taken to indicate his ontological commitments' (SR 13). Hume's conclusion is that ontological claims *can only* be assessed in terms of the possibility of coherent practices as judged in the light of the empirical study of human nature. There is no other systematic perspective open to us.

Hume's optimistic conclusion invites some nagging questions. Given that the theoretical dilemma is not theoretically resolved, what exactly *are* the reflectively corrected, vulgar phenomena to which Hume is to limit his philosophical system? Can we answer our original question by asserting that Hume in the end embraces the direct realism of common sense? How can this be squared with his repeated assertion that the slightest reflection upon the facts of perceptual variation destroys the vulgar opinion in favour of 'perishing images'?

The key point, I suggest, is that the pragmatic criterion of justification outlined above, as Hume sees it (and that is all that I have been concerned with here), will enable the philosopher who has reflectively returned to vulgar phenomena to continue to avail of *both* the subjectivity conclusion of the variation argument and the directly realist beliefs of common life.³⁸ Hume is now reflectively justified in making use of the conclusion that our contact with the world is by means of internal and perishing perceptions, as he has done since the first page of the *Treatise*. But this does not commit him to the philosophical positions of phenomenalism, indirect realism, or radical scepticism. The variation argument takes vulgar bodies as given, and reasons to the direct apprehension of images by the mind. As we have seen, the sceptic now argues for a *reductio*, whereas Wright sees a logical entailment of indirect realism (how else to retain the images *and* the body?). Both are gripped by the contradiction that is indeed latent in the phrase to which Hume continually returns: 'the appearances of objects to our senses' (e.g. T 638). And in uncovering this conflict in our natural beliefs, 'the profounder and more philosophical sceptics will always triumph' (E 153). But the full working out of the consequences of that scepticism has led to the pragmatic turn described above. There is no systematic, reflectively satisfying perspective from which we can be forced to the conclusion that all we are ever directly perceive are internal images. For all the theoretically valid worries that admitting a 'veil of perception'

³⁸ Thus the sceptical beginning and the public-historical end of Hume's philosophy finds a unified framework of justification. For example, the much discussed tension between the 'bundle of perceptions' self of Book I and the public, embodied persons of Books II and III, is relieved. Natural causal reasoning leads us inward, but the result of Hume's mitigated scepticism and reflective return to vulgar phenomena is that such scientific 'anatomy' should not lead us to reject, but rather illuminates, the framework of common sense. As the final sentence of the *Treatise* concludes, 'the most abstract speculations concerning human nature, however cold and unentertaining, become subservient to *practical morality*; and may render this latter science more correct in its precepts, and more persuasive in its exhortations' (T 621).

leads to representational views and thence to scepticism, none of it can constitute a compelling *reason* why empirical investigators of human nature should not believe both that they directly perceive bodies *and* that such perception is always mediated by 'internal perceptions'. If the philosopher persists in reflecting on that proposition, Hume admits that he or she will find no satisfaction ('here philosophy finds itself extremely embarrassed. . .', E 152). Such a philosopher stands in need of the treatment of Book I of the *Treatise*, with its subtle second-order scepticism followed to its pragmatic conclusion.

This explains why Hume is able to regard the traditional arguments of the sceptics, in the form of the variation argument, as 'trite topics':

These sceptical topics, indeed, are only sufficient to prove, that the senses alone are not implicitly to be depended on; but that we must correct their evidence by reason, and by considerations, derived from the nature of the medium, the distance of the object, and the disposition of the organ, in order to render them, within their sphere, the proper *criteria* of truth and falsehood (E 151; cp. 228).

The traditional sceptic will not be impressed. Are not the 'object' and the 'medium' just further perceptions, by parity of reasoning? How can Hume be so sanguine about appealing to the corpuscularian, realist account of the causal production of images in the mind by objects (cp. E 158, 227-8, T 112, 372-5) when he himself has followed that system to its natural sceptical conclusion? Not for the revisionary reasons (as I see them) that Yolton or the sceptical realists suggest. Rather, it is Hume's 'more profound' second-order scepticism and consequent pragmatic turn that explains why such reasoning does not sever us from the world of vulgar objects.

Most philosophers (and among them I must include myself) will find it difficult to accept this as a *resolution* of the problem at issue. Certainly the logician will have hard questions. Can a system be 'pragmatically coherent', in any intelligible sense, in the face of an admitted theoretical contradiction? Or are truth claims to be 'indexed' to frameworks of inquiry or belief-attitudes? As soon as such questions are raised, however, we might find ourselves recalling various pragmatist lines of thought throughout the twentieth century that have continued the attempt to circumvent the alleged dead-ends of epistemology as traditionally conceived. Hume takes himself to have articulated principled grounds, albeit practical ones, for remaining within the bounds of sensibility without collapsing into subjectivism. Of course, we who are presently engaged in philosophical reflection will doubtless feel the call of reason demanding that the theoretical contradiction be *theoretically* resolved. Our remaining at that sceptical impasse is just what the science of human nature would predict. What Hume has attempted to do is to accommodate this classic theoretical aporia with regard to the direct objects of perception--one which is irresolvable in its own terms--by means of a second-order contention that at bottom the conduct of our theoretical inquiries is subordinate to practical questions concerning the possibility of reflectively satisfying and stable conduct generally. To echo Kant, Hume's moderate scepticism denies the possibility of demonstrating global theoretical consistency in order to make room for pragmatically coherent belief.

