

CHAPTER - IXConcluding Note : Hume - Kant Linkage through Imagination

Hume's theory of mental activity reaches its fullest development in his treatment of our belief in material objects. The argument is carried on in several different passages in Book I of the Treatise, and a great deal of restatement and interpretation is needed to present it in coherent form. The first passage is a discussion of substance which comes as part of an examination of relations, modes, substances, and abstract ideas in Part I. It is little more than a page in length, and the laconic manner in which it proceeds suggests that Hume did not consider his views especially original. Nevertheless, his remarks are exceptionally suggestive, albeit brief.

What is our idea of substance ? asks Hume (p.15). Does it derive from an impression of sensation or of reflection (p.16) ? Surely neither, he answers, for no one impression is the origin of the idea of a substance. Hence it must be an idea of "a collection of particular qualities" (p.16). To the qualities, or their ideas in our mind, is attached a name, by which we may recall all or some of them when necessary. As we learn more about those qualities which bear an intimate relation to the given collection, our idea of it expands, and the number of ideas which its name recalls becomes larger. Thus, a first idea of gold may include the qualities yellow, hard, and heavy. When the quality of solubility in aqua regia is learned, this is add to the collection,

and henceforth the word "gold" is capable of calling it to mind.

Now Hume adds a highly significant sentence, which unfortunately is left without comment : "The principle of union (of the qualities) being regarded as the chief part of the complex idea, gives entrance to whatever quality afterwards occurs, and is equally comprehended by it, as are the others, which first presented themselves" (p.16). Ideas of substance are distinguished by this fact from ideas of modes. Modes are also collections of qualities, to be sure. But the qualities are either not closely connected by the relations of contiguity and causation - Hume offers the example of a dance - or else are united together, but in such a way that "the uniting principle is not regarded as the foundation of the complex idea" (p.17). To introduce a new quality, therefore, destroys the particular unity to which the name is attached, and occasions a new name. Thus an arrangement of colors may be beautiful, but the beauty is not a substance. For if it were, one could attach other related qualities to the collection without destroying the idea of the beauty. What in fact happens, of course, is that any addition or subtraction produces a new idea - of an equal beauty, perhaps, but different from the old idea (p.17). On the other hand, one can subtract from or add to the qualities of a substance without thereby destroying its unity. A man is still the same substance whether he gains weight cuts his hair, gets a tan, or even loses several limbs. So, too, for other substances. They remain the "same thing" through a variety of changes.

Indeed, on Hume's view it would make no sense to speak of learning about a thing, unless our concept of it were in some way more than an idea of the qualities we conceive it to possess. For otherwise an added quality would be part of a new thing, not a new quality of the old thing.

Three questions are raised by Hume's preliminary analysis of the idea of substance. First, what is the "principle of union" by which the imagination unites the qualities of a substance? Second, how does the imagination form the principle of union? And third, what does Hume mean by his statement that the principle of union is the "chief part" of the idea of a substance?

The principle of union is described by Hume as being the manner in which the various qualities "are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned to them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or others, that collection" (p.16). This description is so remarkably similar to the account of "abstract ideas" given in the very next section of the Treatise that I shall draw on that account for an expansion of Hume's brief analysis of substance. Why he did not himself unite the two is a mystery, for he would thereby have strengthened considerably his entire theory of our concepts of objects.

In the light of the section "Of Abstract Ideas" we can construct the following interpretation of Hume's view of the unity of a substance. The "principle of union" is a habit or custom of the mind to which is attached a word. The habit determines the mind to reproduce in imagination one or more

of a set of ideas, when the word for that set has been uttered or thought or otherwise invoked. Once the mind has formed the habit, it can reinvoked it at will, and by "one of the most extraordinary circumstances" of the mind's powers (p.21), a false assertion about the membership of the set will often provoke the mind to reproduce just that member which will effectively belie the ascription. Thus, if the mind ascribes the quality of dryness to water, it will immediately recall the idea of wetness without running through the qualities of coldness, lucidity, and so forth. It will, furthermore, recognise the idea of wetness as having been called forth by the habit associated with the word "water". Hume does not pretend to know how or why this delicate capacity is possessed by the mind. He says that "To explain the ultimate causes of our mental actions is impossible. ~~That~~ " 'Tis sufficient, if we can give any satisfactory account of them from experience and analogy" (p.22).

Returning to Hume's example, we see that the mind has formed the habit of calling up yellowness, weight, malleability, and fusibility when it conceives the word "gold". These several ideas are united solely by the mind's habit, though they are associated by the relations of contiguity and causation (p.16). We are brought then to the second of our three questions : how does the imagination form the habit which unites the qualities ? The full answer to this question is only developed by Hume in Part IV of Book I, which I shall examine presently. In this earlier section, however, he indicates the line which his argument will take. The difference

between the qualities of a substance and those of a mode,
he tells us,

Consist(s in this, that the particular qualities, which form a substance, are commonly refer'd to an unknown something, in which they are supposed to inhere; or granting this fiction should not take place, are at least supposed to be closely and inseparably connected by the relations of contiguity and causation (p.16).

As in the case of causal inference, the mind forms a habit of reproducing perceptions as the result of certain perceived relations of objects.

Finally, in what sense is the habit or principle of union the chief part of the idea of a substance? A possible answer is that Hume means to call the principle of union a necessary condition of the idea of the substance. The idea, to be sure, must contain some quality-ideas, for otherwise it would consist of a principle of union with nothing to unify. The mind would have a habit of reproduction with did not dispose it to reproduce anything at all. But among the several qualities which we impute to a substance, no single one is essential to our conception. One man's idea of gold may include the qualities yellowness, heaviness, malleability; another's conception might omit the color yellow and yet include solubility in acid, and so on. The principle of union, on the other hand, is a necessary element in the idea of any substance. It is for this reason that it is the "chief part" of the idea. If it is omitted, the mind is left with an unstructured assortment of ideas which are not bound up in any manner warranting the assignment of a special name.

The major discussion of the belief in material objects occurs in the long section, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses," which forms the core of Part IV. Hume defines his subject as "the causes which induce us to believe in the existence of body ...," for, as he says a few lines earlier :

He may well ask What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body ? but 'tis in vain to ask Whether there be body or not ? That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings(p.187)

Specifically, it is our belief in the continued and independent existence of bodies which needs explanation. As this belief does not arise from the impressions alone, it must arise "from a concurrence of some of their qualities with the qualities of the imagination" (p.194). Hume discovers two kinds of regularity in our impressions : constancy and coherence. Constancy is the simpler, for it depends solely upon the repetition of resembling impressions, which coherence depends upon a second-order regularity, namely constancy of the principle of alteration. Nevertheless, Hume discusses coherence first.

It frequently happens that an impression which has in the past been regularly associated with another will make an appearance in perception alone, thereby "contradicting" past experience. For example, the sound of a squeaking door, if not accompanied by a sight of the door, runs against the past experience in which the two have been conjoined. In order to preserve the coherence of my experience, I assume a door (or, better, the visual aspect of a door) to exist, even

thought I do not perceive it. This would seem to involve a new propensity of the mind (p.198).

But, Hume announces, the propensity to preserve and extend coherence is very different from the customs and habits which explained causal belief (p.197). Mere habit can explain a belief only in what is actually inculcated by experience. If we condition a parrot to say "Two plus two is four," knowing that it has the capacity to learn simple phrases, we ought not to be surprised if it speaks the words back. But if, one day, the bird is heard to say "Two plus three is five," then we shall either discover who has been secretly coaching it or be very surprised indeed. Now our believing in the continued existence of objects is like the parrot saying "Two plus three is five," for although experience teaches us to expect coherence in the impressions we perceive, it does not, and obviously could never, teach us to expect perceptions to continue to exist when we do not perceive them. The mind here actually imparts to its perceptions a greater regularity than they naturally possess.

This is the first suggestion of the manner in which the causal connections of perceptions lead to our conceptions of objects. Taking Hume's example, the mind is accustomed to perceiving the movement of the door together with the squeak, which is its effect. When presented only with the squeak, the mind makes a causal inference in the manner described above, concluding that the door exists though it is unperceived. This in turn supports the causal belief, for the isolated squeak can then be interpreted as a positive,

rather than a negative, instance of the causal relation. Were the mind limited merely to its causal beliefs, the force of the connection would be weakened. By creating the "fiction" of a continued and independently existing object, the mind is enabled to preserve and increase the order of its perceptions. In a manner of speaking, the mind's propensity reinforces the causal inference, protecting it from the excessive disconnectedness of experience. The two propensities together subdue a chaos which would overwhelm the "causal" propensity and greatly diminish its effectiveness.

The second characteristic common to "objective" impressions is the constancy with which they reappear in experience. We must explain the effect of this constancy upon the mind, says Hume, for coherence and the propensity it invokes are "too weak to support alone so vast an edifice, as it that of the continu'd existence of all external bodies"(P.198-99). Hume summarizes his explanation before presenting it in detail :

When we have been accustom'd to observe a constancy in certain impressions, ... We are not apt to regard these interrupted impressions as different (which they really are) but on the contrary consider them as individually the same, upon account of their resemblance. But as this interruption of their existence is contrary to their perfect identity ... We ... are involv'd in a kind of contradiction. In order to free ourselves from (it we suppose) that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible (P.199).

As Hume intends to explain why we impute a continued and independent existence to objects, he must first make clear what we mean when we speak of various impressions as being the impressions of an object. Although the perceptions are

distinguishable (and hence discrete) we treat them as one, supposing the object to be identical with itself at different times. But one impression gives the idea of unity; several impressions give the idea of number or multiplicity.

 Betwixt unity and number there can be no medium. ... After one object is suppos'd to exist, we must either suppose another also to exist; in which case we have the idea of number: Or we must suppose it not to exist; in which case the first remains at unity (P.200).

 The escape from the dilemma lies in the relation of time to our awareness of mental contents. Time is the idea of the manner in which successive impressions appear to the mind. Now imagine a series of exactly similar impressions, among which the mind distinguishes no mark of difference. If attention is paid to the passage of time (by noticing the alteration of other impressions, for example) then we distinguish among the members of the series and conceive the idea of number. If only their invariable and uninterrupted similarity is attended to, then we conceive the idea of unity. The idea of identity is a mixture, or confusion, of the ideas of number and unity. As Hume puts it :

 By this means we make a difference, betwixt ... object and ... itself, without going to the length of number, and ... without restraining ourselves to a strict and absolute unity (P.201).

 But experience all too rarely provides the mind with conditions for the conception of identity. Even resembling impressions are interrupted in their appearance. Hume now

explains why the mind extends its identity-judgements to these faulty series.

The resemblance of impressions induces in the mind a habit of recollecting them together. The habit or disposition by which the mind recalls an uninterrupted series is, to be sure, different from the habit by which it recalls a discontinuous series. But the two dispositions are alike (P.203), and just as the mind is prone to associate like impressions, so it is prone to confuse similar dispositions. "Whatever ideas place the mind in the same disposition or in similar ones," Hume says, "are very apt to be confounded" (P.203).

No sooner has the mind confused its several dispositions and denominated the discontinuous impressions "identical" than it is thrown into the baldest contradiction. The successive impressions are obviously not continuous and uninterrupted. Hence they ought not to be called identical (P.205). Confronted with this conflict, the mind chooses the bolder alternative, and rather than declare the impressions different, "unite(s) these broken appearances by the fiction of a continu'd existence" (P.205). Apparently this means that the mind, in recollecting the discontinuous series, "fills in" the lacunae by reproducing other resembling perceptions in positions where none were experienced. Hume says :

Our memory presents us with a vast number of instances of perceptions perfectly resembling each other, that return at different distances of time, and after considerable interruptions. This resemblance gives us a propension to consider these interrupted perceptions as the same; and also a propension to connect them by continu'd existence, in order to justify this identity, and avoid the contradiction, in which the interrupted appearance of these perceptions seems necessarily to involve us (PP.208-9).

In the terminology which I have employed, the mind approaches experience with the propensities which, in the case of each object-belief, operate to develop two dispositions. The dispositions together produce the idea of a continued and unified object.

Now let us pull together the results of the analysis of Book I, and see whether the interpretation outlined in Section II of this paper has been substantiated. It was there suggested that Hume had developed a theory of mental activity in which the key elements are certain innate propensities, and the dispositions which result when those propensities are "activated" by sensation. I think it is now clear that the various "principles" invoked by Hume do have the characteristics of dispositions and propensities. Consider first the role of sensation in the formation of empirical belief. The mind is presented with a variety of impressions which rapidly come and go in regular patterns. Stimulated by these perceptual regularities, certain mental propensities are activated, and the mind becomes disposed to reproduce its perceptions in imagination according to some established rule. Thereafter, this disposition can be "touched off" by the appearance of a suitable impression, which acts as stimulus to the mind. The similarity to the conditioning of Pavlov's dog is evident: first the bell and salivation together (first the cause and effect together), then the bell alone (the cause alone), and by virtue of the conditioned reflex (the mental disposition) the salivation (idea of the effect) occurs (is produced).

Furthermore, the impressions serve as the individuating factors of a disposition. For example, the disposition

to recollect together the properties of gold may be based on a general propensity to develop such "substance-disposition," but that the mind should associate hardness and malleability with yellow rather than with green is a result of the particularities of sensory experience. Were the patterns of perception different, the mind would associate together different qualities. It is easy to imagine a well-ordered, comprehensible world in which fire is cold, rocks are soft, gold is brittle, and water tastes like honey. But in such a world, there would be causes and effects and there would be continuous independent objects, for our conception of causes and objects depends on the propensities of the ~~mind~~ itself. Without them, Hume tells us, "human nature (would) immediately perish and go to ruin" (p.225). Thus the impressions of sensation are the stimuli which activate propensities and individuate dispositions. The "permanent, irresistible, and universal" principles, or propensities, lie ready for experience. The dispositions, on the other hand, wait upon experience, for their individual nature is determined by the qualities of the impressions.

Finally, there propensities and dispositions are all mental principles, Hume at times conceals this important fact by his associationistic language. In some passages he seems to suggest that perceptions are attracted to one another by a "gentle force" of association (pp.10-11), without the interference of the mind. When he actually comes to describe the "transitions" and "principles of union," however, he makes it clear that the transition is a transition of the mind from

one perception to another; that the principle of union is a principle by which the imagination recalls a set of perceptions; and in general that the propensities which precede experience and the dispositions which result are mental pronenesses to reproduce perceptions in imagination.

We are now in a position to make a list of the propensities which Hume describes in Book I of the Treatise. Hume never groups them together in this fashion, but if he had, the result might well have been labeled a "Table of categories," for the propensities actually play a role quite similar to that of the categories in the Critique of Pure Reason. The list is as follows.

1. The propensity to develop, under the stimulus of repeated conjunction of resembling pairs of objects, a disposition to reproduce the idea of the one when presented with the impression of the other.

2. The propensity to develop, under the stimulus of a set of impressions which (by the first propensity) are conceived as causality interrelated, a disposition to reproduce the impressions together, and by confusing the related set with a series of resembling impressions to conceive the reproduced perceptions as identical.

3. The propensity to develop, under the stimulus of a causal inference from a present object to an absent object, a disposition to conceive that absent object as existent, and hence to reinforce both the causal inference and the belief in continued existence of objects.

4. The propensity to develop, under the stimulus of a discontinuous series of resembling impressions, a disposition to reproduce the series as if it were continuous, filling in the lacunae with suitable ideas, and thus permitting the ascription of identity and continuity to the series.

5. The propensity to develop, under the stimulus of a present perception, a disposition to conceive an associated perception with a greater firmness of belief, the more firmly the present perception is conceived and the closer the association between them.

The first propensity is responsible for our causal inferences. The second, dealing with the "principle of union," the third, which depends on "coherence", and the fourth, whose stimulus is "constancy", are jointly responsible for our conception of unified, independent, continuous objects. The fifth propensity is the source of the belief in causal influence and an external world. Taken together, these five propensities comprise the principles which Hume calls "permanent, irresistible, and universal" (p.225). The first four propensities determine which perceptions the mind reproduces, and the fifth determines the manner in which they are reproduced.
