

HUME'S DIFFICULTIES WITH DISPOSITIONS

Houghton Dalrymple
University of Texas at Arlington

In his paper, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," Wolff claims that at some point in the writing of Book I of the *Treatise* Hume made the "profound discovery" that empirical knowledge cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the contents of the mind but must be supplemented by an understanding of the functions of mental activities.¹ He says that Hume "very quickly came to see that knowledge and belief result from what the mind *does* with contents rather than simply from the nature of those contents."² Wolff seems to be assuming that mental contents and mental activities are exclusive, and that Hume saw that they were, but to Hume mental activities are included in the conscious contents of the mind. "All actions and sensations of the mind," he says, "are known to us by consciousness."³ It would have been better if Wolff had said that Hume had made the discovery that understanding mental dispositions is necessary for understanding belief and knowledge, but that dispositions are difficult for Hume to talk about within the limits of his system. In this paper I argue that Hume was unable to construct an adequate theory of dispositions because of his imagistic theory of ideas. I will first consider some features of dispositions and of statements that contain dispositional terms.

1. Many dispositional statements are explicable in terms of subjunctive conditionals. For example, "If an object is put into water, then the object is soluble in water if and only if the object dissolves in the water," is at least an approximate operational definition of "solubility in water."

2. An object may have a disposition even if it is not being manifested. That sugar cube that started dissolving two minutes ago was also soluble two hours ago though it was not then dissolving.

3. An object may have a disposition even though it has never been manifested. Thus, the rubber band is elastic even if it has never been stretched.

4. Every disposition has a basis and this basis is present even when the disposition is not being exercised. Ryle was right when he said that dispositions are potentialities, but wrong when he said that potentialities are "nothing actual."⁴ A youth who is merely a

potential criminal and a potential musician is neither an actual criminal nor an actual musician, but because of something in his make-up he is somewhat more likely to become a criminal or a musician than the average youth. And there is something about the pumice-stone that makes it possible for it to float in water whereas there is nothing about the block of granite that makes it possible for it to float.

5. On the ontological level, the disposition and its basis are identical. Suppose a large fan, its sharp blades left completely unguarded, and the blades rapidly whirling around. It has the power of cutting off my hand, and it is the revolutions of its sharp blades that *constitutes* its power. "Power of cutting off my hand" and "the sharp, rapidly whirling blades of the fan" are expressions with different meanings, but when they are used to refer to a present condition of the fan, they refer to the same condition. The latter fact is a fact about the way things are, not a fact about linguistic meaning.

6. We can find out that an object has a disposition without finding out what its basis in the object is. This is so because the concept of a particular disposition does not entail what its particular basis is.

7. Our idea of a disposition as something that is distinct from its manifestations is a relative idea. It is whatever it is in the object that disposes it to act in certain ways in certain circumstances.

I will now try to determine what Hume's theory of dispositions is, and I will try to glean it from what he has to say about dispositions, and from his predications of dispositions to objects. In being concerned with his theory of dispositions I am primarily concerned with his idea of a disposition, but here a difficulty arises, which arises whenever we want to talk about a relative idea. Whenever we characterize something by means of a relative idea, we always leave room for characterizing it in other ways that do not involve its relations to the things it is related to. We need not, however, know what these other ways are, and knowing what they are is not essential to knowing the meaning of the term that expresses the relative idea. So we must distinguish the relative idea from some other idea that would single out the same thing. The concept of power, like the concept of any disposition is a relative idea. Thus our idea of a power is not the same thing as our idea of the power itself. Two questions will be asked (1) What is Hume's idea of a power? and (2) Does he have a concept of power itself? I will concentrate on Book II, Section X of the *Treatise* and the sections dealing with causation in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. These are the only parts in which I can find Hume talking about what power is.

Hume seems to have the following ideas of power. 1. Power is a feeling of certainty. 2. The term "power" is a meaningless

term. 3. Power is the same as the exercise of power. 4. Something's having a power consists merely in its behaving in certain ways in certain circumstances.

1. Power is a feeling of certainty. In all his discussions of the power of a cause (or necessary connection, or energy, etc.) Hume is consistent in maintaining that power is something in the mind, not in the objects, but the something in the mind is variously described. In my opinion, the clearest expression of what Hume means is found in the *Enquiry*

But there is nothing in a number of instances, different from every single instance, which is supposed to be exactly similar; except only, that after a repetition of similar instances, the mind is carried by habit, upon the appearance of one event, to expect its usual attendant, and to believe that it will exist.⁵

It is this belief or expectation or feeling certain that the effect will follow that is "the impression from which we form the idea of power."⁶ Other passages leave more to the imagination and may cause a careless reader to think that Hume identifies power with a mere transition of thought from one object to another, but not even constant conjunction produces power unless it produces belief. There is indeed one passage that is so confusing that it needs to be singled out. It is the passage in which he says that power is the "customary transition" that is produced by constant conjunction.⁷ What is produced by constant conjunction is a habit. But he says a few lines down that the customary transition is "felt by the soul," and a habit would not be. Perhaps Hume did not make a clear distinction between a habit and its exercise.

2. "Power" is a meaningless term. Readers of Hume must have wondered what he was up to in those detours in which he discusses necessary connection. He presents a disjunction: "Either we have no idea of necessity, or necessity is nothing but that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects or from effects to causes."⁸ Many must have thought that Hume wanted us to accept the second disjunct, but I believe it is now commonly recognized that Hume thought that no one had, or could have, an idea of necessary connection between cause and effect. In some places he is quite explicit. For instance, in the *Enquiry* he says: "We have no idea of this connexion, nor even any distinct notion of what it is we desire to know, when we endeavour at a conception of it."⁹ And in the *Treatise*: "All ideas are deriv'd from and represent impressions. We never have any impression that contains any power or efficacy. We never therefore have any idea of power."¹⁰ Then what was Hume up to? I think he was trying

to show how we could seem to have the idea of power without actually having it.

3. Power is the same as the exercise of power. In the *Treatise* section on necessary connection there is the single sentence: "The distinction which we often make betwixt *power* and the *exercise* of it, is equally without foundation."¹¹ Nothing leads up to the sentence, and there is no defense of the thought contained in it. But the thought was no mere flash in the pan. He picks it up again in Book II, Part I, Section X. He begins the discussion by saying that the distinction between power and its exercise "is entirely frivolous, and that neither man nor any other being ought ever to be thought possess of any ability, unless it be exerted and put in action."¹² He puts the case that he meets an enemy, and no magistrates are around. The enemy has a sword, but he himself is unarmed. In such a case he admits that he would feel an uneasiness, but if the enemy does not in fact harm him, "philosophically speaking, . . . the person never had any power of harming me; since he did not exert any; . . ."¹³

4. Something's having a power consists merely in its behaving in certain ways in certain circumstances. Appearing in the midst of his explanations designed to show that power is the same as its exercise are two passages that point to an analysis in terms of subjunctive conditionals. Hume says that "power always has a reference to its exercise, either actual or probable, and that we consider a person as endow'd with any ability when we find from past experience, that 'tis probable, or at least possible, he may exert it."¹⁴ And in the next sentence: "power consists in the possibility or probability of an action, as discover'd by past experience and the practice of the world." Since the passages appear in the middle of his argument that power is the same as its exercise, one cannot be sure that Hume does not think that "power is the same as its exercise" has the same meaning as "power always has a reference to its exercise." And one's doubts are increased when in the very next paragraph Hume says that the man had not had the power to harm him because he had not in fact been harmed. Still, it is only fair to Hume to regard the more adequate analysis as his more considered opinion. And there is at least one passage in which Hume couches his thought about power in terms of a subjunctive conditional. In the course of giving his definition of "liberty" in the *Enquiry*, Hume in effect defines "mobility of an agent": if we choose to move, we may.¹⁵ An analysis of power in terms of subjunctive conditionals can reasonably be attributed to Hume, but I can find nothing in Hume's analyses of power to suggest that he thought that there is more to power than this, that whenever an object can be said to possess a power there is always the power itself--some feature of the object that is present even when its power is not being manifested. In one place he even says that

"power itself" is meaningless, but I do not claim that this is decisive.¹⁶

I will say that a person has a nonreductive theory of dispositions if he thinks that having a basis in the object enters into our understanding of the ontological status of the disposition, and I will say that a person has a reductive theory if he thinks that having a basis does not enter at all into our understanding of what dispositions are. Bricke has argued that Hume had both a reductive and a nonreductive theory of dispositions. Evidently, Bricke feels that his case for reductionism is stronger than his case for nonreductionism, because he says that though he is arguing that Hume "endorsed a non-reductionist theory," his evidence may support only the weaker claim "that Hume's nonreductionist *practice* is inconsistent with its reductionist theory."¹⁷ If reductionism is mistaken it is to be expected that Hume's practice would have been at variance with his theory, and Hume could have had reasons for being a nonreductionist without being a nonreductionist. Also, the examples that Bricke gives to show that Hume was a nonreductivist would not have been convincing to a reductionist such as Ryle. According to Hume, an abstract idea consists of an idea of a particular object along with a "custom" that produces ideas of other particular objects as needed. These other ideas are present to the mind "only in power."¹⁸ Hume's example is the idea of a triangle: if we form the idea of an equilateral triangle and say to ourselves "*that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other*," ideas of other particular triangles "crowd in upon us" and make us see that we have made a mistake.¹⁹ Whereas a nonreductionist would suppose that corresponding to the custom there would be an enduring state describable in terms that make no mention of stimuli or responses, there is no evidence that Hume supposed that. The same could be said of Bricke's other examples--virtue and character--and in fact character is one of Ryle's favorite examples of a complex set of dispositions. Finally, it is odd to say that Hume endorsed both a reductionist and a nonreductionist theory. To endorse something is to know what you are endorsing. Hume would have certainly seen that a reductionist and a nonreductionist theory are inconsistent, and would not have endorsed both.

In trying to show that Hume is a reductionist, I have not considered his motives, but it seems clear that Hume had strong motives for being a reductionist and that it would have been difficult to have fitted nonreductionism into his system. The idea that is expressed by a dispositional term is a relative idea. To assert that an object has a disposition is merely to assert that the expected manifestations will occur. It asserts nothing about the basis. Ryle found this aspect of dispositional statements immensely attractive. It enabled him to provide meanings for many mental terms while

eschewing talk of inner states or events. Hume also gained an advantage by accepting the reductionist view. As compared to his simplistic view that the disposition and its exercise are the same, this kind of reductionism seems to capture the relative character of a disposition while obviating the need to find an impression of the disposition. An argument similar to one of Hume's would go like this: All ideas are derived from impressions; I have never had an impression of power itself; therefore, I have no idea of power itself. The minor premise is false. If it is the fact that the pumice-stone is honeycombed with small holes that bestows its floatability upon it, I can have impressions of the small holes. But would Hume have seen that, without prodding?

I believe that Hume had difficulty with the concept of a disposition because he had not thought out a conception of relative ideas. If he had have, he would have seen that there is something wrong with one of his basic premises. A relative idea refers to a thing by means of ideas we have of the thing's relations to other things, and the relative idea does not include within it an idea of what the thing is apart from these relations. Any pictures that we might form in our minds in order to understand the meaning of a term expressing a relative idea would not be pictures of what is singled out by means of the relative idea. For example, if I need mental pictures in order to understand the concept of the pumice-stone's floatability in water, I do not form pictures of the holes in the pumice-stone, but instead form several pictures of the pumice-stone floating in water. In other words, the feature which constitutes the pumice-stone's ability to float in water is not imagined at all in our understanding of the meaning of the dispositional term. Yet, according to Hume's official view, the idea could refer only to floating, because floating is what we have images of when we think of the pumice-stone's ability to float in water.

My explanation of the difficulty that Hume would have in accepting a nonreductive theory of dispositions is valid only if it is a fact that Hume held the imagistic doctrine of ideas. The idea that he did is not a novel idea of mine, and the many passages in which Hume says that ideas are such exact copies of impressions that the only differences between them is vivacity would seem to clinch the matter. Nevertheless, several recent writers seem to be claiming that he never held the doctrine. If all they mean is that the doctrine cannot account for many of Hume's ideas, I agree, but they seem to be claiming more than that. Flage argues that "Hume held a doctrine of relative conception,"²⁰ though he admits that "Hume's discussions of relative ideas are few in number"²¹ and "he did not devote so much as a paragraph to stating the doctrine."²² The internal evidence that Flage refers to consists of a number of passages in which Hume uses the term "relative idea," but citing

these passages do not do anything to show Hume's awareness that the acceptance of these ideas is inconsistent with a straightforward reading of his basic premise. Flage realizes that for his interpretation to hold up the expression "All ideas are copies of impressions" must be taken to mean "All positive ideas are copies of impressions." But this expression and others like it appear with considerable frequency in Hume's writings, and in no instance does he use a qualifying adjective. Flage realizes that relative ideas are inconsistent with the imagistic doctrine, but he professes himself satisfied with Yolton's having shown that Hume did not hold the doctrine.²³

It seems to me that the basis of Yolton's case is that Hume had many ideas that are not pictureable. Passions, emotions and the taste of something sweet are given as examples. Yolton says that the notion of imaging a taste hardly makes sense and to have the idea of sweet is to "know that taste, to be able to recognize it."²⁴ Yolton's explanation of the idea of sweet is much better than any that Hume could give, and he certainly would not have defined the idea dispositionally as Yolton does. An idea for Hume, even if it is not an image, is some kind of content of consciousness. Yolton says that when Hume claims that idea is an "exact representation" of an impression, "exact representation" need not mean image or picture. Hume's more favored expression is "exact copy," and a copy sounds very much like an image. When Hume says that an idea is the copy of an impression, I take him to mean that it is a copy in the same sense as a wax figure is a copy. Yolton says that an "exact representation" is a "thought that gets it right, is the knowledge that the room is made up of these objects."²⁵ Surely, the more literal reading sounds a lot more like Hume than Yolton's reading does. After quoting the sentence, "We have no idea of space or extension, but when we regard it as an object either of sight or feeling," Yolton says he finds it hard to believe that the "it" refers to the idea of extension.²⁶ He should have consulted the *Treatise* passage: "And to cut short all disputes, the very idea of extension is copy'd from nothing but an impression, and consequently must perfectly agree to it. To say that the idea of extension agrees to any thing, is to say it is extended."²⁷ Strange as it may seem, Hume evidently believed that some impressions and ideas are extended, but strange or not, it is at least explicable if every idea is an image, and "image" is taken in the literal sense. Yolton offers reasons in terms of Hume's own thought why he should not have held the doctrine of images, but he does not show that he did not hold the doctrine.

The cramping effects of Hume's imagistic theory did not prevent him from making important discoveries about the capacities of men and animals, and this is because he often operated outside the framework of the "way of ideas." More than any philosopher I

know of Hume was aware of the insignificant part conscious thought has in the formation of many of our most fundamental beliefs. He says that ". . . the past experience, on which all our judgments concerning causes and effects depend, operate on our minds in such an insensible manner as never to be taken notice of, and may even in some measure be unknown to us."²⁸ Here there is no talk of images or conscious contents of any kind. Still, the cramping effects did hurt, and my theory is that they hurt mainly because his imagistic theory prevented Hume from making a clear distinction between mental operations and mental dispositions. If he had clearly seen the difference between the two, he might have given dispositional accounts of such things as knowledge and belief, memory, personal identity and even ideas that would have been superior to the accounts that he gave. Wolff hailed Hume's "great discovery" of the importance of mental activities, a discovery that carried him beyond the limits of his own system. I say that it was Hume's feeling for the importance of dispositions that carried him beyond the limits of his own system and that it is a shame that he never developed a language that was suitable for talking about them.

Notes

¹ Robert Paul Wolff, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," in *Hume: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. V. C. Chappell (Garden City: Anchor, 1966) 100.

² Wolff 103.

³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1888) 190.

⁴ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1949) 119.

⁵ David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1902) 75.

⁶ Hume, *Enquiries* 75.

⁷ Hume, *Treatise* 166.

⁸ Hume, *Treatise* 166.

⁹ Hume, *Enquiries* 161.

¹⁰ Hume, *Treatise* 161.

¹¹ Hume, *Treatise* 171.

¹² Hume, *Treatise* 311.

¹³ Hume, *Treatise* 312-313.

¹⁴ Hume, *Treatise* 313.

¹⁵ Hume, *Enquiries* 95.

¹⁶ Hume, *Enquiries* 77n.

¹⁷ John Bricke, "Hume's Theories of Dispositional Properties,"

- American Philosophical Quarterly* (Vol. 10, No. 1, Jan. 1973) 18.
18 Hume, *Treatise* 20.
19 Hume, *Treatise* 21.
20 Daniel Flage, "Relative Ideas Revisited: A Reply to Thomas,"
Hume Studies (Vol. VIII, No. 2, Nov. 1982), 160.
21 Daniel Flage, "Hume's Relative Ideas," *Hume Studies* (Vol.
VII, No. 1, April 1981) 57.
22 Flage, "Relative Ideas Revisited: A Reply to Thomas" 160.
23 Flage, "Hume's Relative Ideas" 70.
24 John W. Yolton, "Hume's Ideas," *Hume Studies* (Vol. VI,
No. 1, April 1980) 4.
25 Yolton 3.
26 Yolton 10.
27 Hume, *Treatise* 239.
28 Hume, *Treatise* 103.