HUME ON RELATIONS

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Russell has attributed to Kant the view that relations are supplied by the mind, experience being only the occasion. He then goes on to remark that Kant has been very influential:

> Many philosophers, following Kant, have maintained that relations are the work of the mind, that things in themselves have no relations, but that the mind brings them together in one act of thought and thus produces the relations it judges them to have.[1]

One of Russell's examples is that of an earwig in his room. It does not seem to Russell that thought has anything more to do with the reality of the earwig being in his room than it has to do with the reality of the earwig or the reality of his room. The philosophers he is talking about, on the other hand, though they might admit that the earwig and the room are independently real, would claim that the relation has been produced by the mind's comparison of the two particulars. Although Russell does not mention it, the same view has been attributed to the British empiricists--Locke, Berkeley and Hume. The evidence is less than conclusive that either Locke or Berkeley held the view, and I will maintain that the attribution of the view to Hume is based on misinterpretation of some of the things that Hume says. If Hume had thought that relations were dependent on the mind's activities, he probably would have called them "fictions." Not only does Hume not say that, there is not even a suggestion that he ever thought that. Although Hume is sometimes said to have endorsed atomism, this would be a form of atomism so extreme as to make nonsense out of his theory of knowledge.

The view that relations are made by the mind has been widely attributed to Locke. Thus Bennett may have felt that Locke thought that relations are a product of the mind's creative activity because he says that Locke maintains that "all relations stem from comparisons," and he quotes the passage in which Locke says that relations are "not contained in the real existence of things, but are something extraneous and superinduced."[2] Morris describes Locke's view of complex ideas (which includes relations) as follows:

> Locke's view of course is that we perceive simple qualities and then in some way group these simples together into complex ideas of things. These complex ideas would have no existence without some activity on the part of the individual minds which group these qualities; their existence is essentially dependent on our reflecting or thinking.[3]

Hendel says that "Locke has declared that the mind makes relations;"[4] he even ascribes to Locke the theory that knowledge is "made by the mind."[5]

Although there are things that Locke says that seem to support this interpretation, appearances may be deceiving. The assertion that relations are "something extraneous" and "not contained in the real existence of things" may seem conclusive, but it may be merely Locke's way of making the obvious point that relations are not intrinsic, or monadic, properties of things. This is suggested by his contrasting relations to ideas "that the mind has of things, as they are in themselves."[6] Hendel relies heavily on those chapters of Book II of the *Essay* entitled "Of Complex Ideas" and "Of Relations." Section 1 of "Of Complex Ideas" is entitled, "Made by the Mind out of simple Ones." What did Locke mean to convey by the title of Section 1? Did he mean that the contents of our perceptions of complex objects are made by the mind? Or did he merely mean that the mind frames its concepts of objects out of the simple ideas supplied by the senses? If he meant the latter, there is no suggestion that he thought that complex objects are in any way dependent on the mind, or that our knowledge of them is made by the mind. Hendel cites Sections 1 and 5 of the chapter, "Of Relations." In Section 1, Locke says we get our idea of relation from the comparison of one idea with another. Hendel (and others) may suppose that Locke takes comparison to be a creative activity. I do not. In Section 5, Locke says that "relation consists in the referring or comparing of two things one to another; from which comparison one or both comes to be denominated."[7] The statement is ambiguous. The first part of the statement suggests that relation is the mental operation of relating, whereas the latter part of the statement gives the name, "relation," to something external. Perhaps, without quite realizing it, Locke uses two senses of the term, "relation." Locke is subject to the same kind of misunderstanding in his treatment of universals. Though he says that "general and universal belong not to the real existence of things; but are the inventions and creatures of the understanding," he follows with the clarification that he does not mean "to deny, that Nature, in the production of things, makes several of them alike." Nature has provided the "similitude" that the understanding "observes amongst them."[8] The mind selects from among these

objective resemblances the ones it needs and can use.

Hendel says that relations "can be nothing real" for Berkeley. We have only a "notion," and notions are "disreputable outcasts in the philosophy of Berkeley."[9] Though he does not say so, Hendel is evidently referring to a paragrah that was added to the second edition of Berkeley's *Principles*. The paragraph reads in part:

> It is also to be remarked that, all *relations* including an act of the mind, we cannot so properly be said to have an idea, but rather a notion, of the relations and habitudes between things. But if, in the modern way, the word *idea* is extended to *spirits*, and *relations*, and *acts*, this is, after all, an affair of verbal concern.[10]

Berkeley puts relations in the good company of spirits and acts of spirits. There is certainly no reason to believe that Berkeley thought that spirits and their acts are not real. Indeed, in one sense, they are the only things that are real. On the other hand, Berkeley may have had trouble with relations because of his dictum that *esse* is *percipi* or *percivere*. Apparently, Berkeley did not think that we could perceive relations, because if we could perceive them, we could have an idea of them. And relations are certainly not perceivings, nor are they spirits.

Kemp Smith, Church and Hendel are among writers who have said, or have seemed to say, that Hume denied the reality of relations. Kemp Smith asserts that Hume's treatment of time and space is in conflict with his fundamental assumption that all complex ideas are resolvable into simple ideas, and then goes on to say "His way of circumventing problems confronting him in such cases is to contend that the new non-sensational factors are not *constituent* of what is apprehended. . ."[11] In speaking of space, Hume asserts that "my senses convey to me only the impressions of colour'd points dispos'd in a certain manner."[12] Then he compares our ideas of space and time: "As 'tis from the disposition of visible and tangible objects we receive the idea of space, so from the succession of ideas and impressions we form the idea of time, . . ."[13] Evidently Kemp Smith takes the words "manner" and "disposition" to imply that time and space are "not constituent of what is apprehended," and perhaps he supposes that Hume thought that time and space are something added by the imagination to the sensory contents. By contrast, I take "manner" and "disposition" to refer to the relations of contiguity and succession that are perceived when we see the colored points or hear the notes played on the flute.

Hume must have been speaking with his tongue in his cheek, if the interpretation of Church is correct, when he gave the name

"relation" to philosophical relations, because in the final analysis philosophical relations are not relations at all.[14] Church's interpretation is based mostly on what Hume has to say in a short appendix to the *Treatise*.[15] In that appendix, Hume observes that simple ideas may resemble one another even though their perfect simplicity excludes the possibility of the ideas having a circumstance in common. Church interprets Hume as meaning that the claim that two simple ideas, p1 and p2, are similar is simply the claim that p1 is p1 and p2 is p2. Church then extends the analysis first to similar complex ideas and then to all the other philosophical relations. He concludes that "association does not presuppose, but is relation in the single sense in which, for Hume, "to relate" is "to connect."[16] Association is, of course, something that the mind does. So it follows that all relations are mental and that philosophical "relations" are nothing real.

No one has been more insistent than Hendel in claiming that Hume regarded relations as products of the imagination. Philosophical relations, no less than natural relations, are "products of the imagination," but the former, unlike the latter, are "arbitrarily produced."[17] But it would be well to quote portions of Hendel's chapter entitled, "The Theory of Relations and Mental Habits."

> We know them contemporaneously with our giving of the objects their relation in thought. They are not represented to us in the beginning. They are not to us the foundation of our inference. Indeed they are more truly its outcome. For Locke had declared that the mind makes relations--and Hume differs with Locke only in characterizing the mind's operation as a "natural" one and not deliberate or voluntary.[18]

Like Church, Hendel denies that Hume thinks that association presupposes relation:

> When Hume revised this section in the *Inquiry*, he was careful to suppress the term, "*qualities*." For it suggests perceivable data on the basis of which we unite our ideas. But association is precisely the case of a union among ideas where all ground in perception or reason is missing. . . The relation is *established* by an act of mind.[19]

Hendel interprets Hume's treatment of resemblance in about the same way that Church does:

> What underlies the finding of such resemblance is the assimilative tendency of the mind itself, and

> nothing in the perceived things.[20]

Even complex impressions, such as my impression of the arrangement of the items on my desk, are the products of imagination.

> . . . *complex impressions* must have their origin somewhere in the mind below the threshold of conscious and voluntary thought. There is impulsive imagination bringing to pass an "association of impressions" . . .[21]

Hendel thinks that Hume's theory of relations enables him to "escape skepticism,"[22] but this theory (if Hume had held it) would have mired him in skepticism at the same time that it was making nonsense out of all his epistemological writings. This is evident from even a cursory view. I am now looking at a copy of the Selby-Bigge edition of the *Treatise*. Even to perceive the book as it is apart from other things I have to perceive certain relations. For instance, the book has a certain thickness, and its thickness is a relation--the distance between the front and back covers of the book. Compared to the book lying next to it, the *Treatise* is the thicker book. But if relations are not to be found among the perceivable data, there is no reason why I should think that the *Treatise* is the thicker book, nor is there any reason for me to think that the books are lying side by side. And if relations are a mystery, association is also completely mysterious. Though he is not bothered, Hendel is well aware that the association is a mystery. He quotes with approval the passage from the *Treatise* that reads, "Its effects are everywhere conspicuous; but as to its causes, they are mostly unknown and must be resolv'd into *original* qualities of human nature, which I prefer not to explain."[23] Hume is only saying that he cannot explain why resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect produce association, though Hendel may have thought that he was saying it is impossible to explain why we associate x with y.

Hendel and Church are wrong in thinking that for Hume association does not presuppose relation. This is evident in one of the Humean passages that Hendel cites to show the opposite. *"The qualities from which this association arises*, and by which the mind is after this manner convey'd from one idea to another, are three, viz. RESEMBLANCE, CONTIGUITY in time and place, and CAUSE and EFFECT"[24] (Italics mine; capitalization Hume's). Hendel says that this does not provide an explanation of the phenomena of association, but Hume thought it did, and it is the only explanation he ever gives.

I think that these writers have misread Hume's theory of relations because they have failed to notice, or have taken

insufficient account of, an important distinction that Hume makes. In Humean terms, the distinction might be put as the distinction between experience and imagination. Our experience consists of what we have perceived and remembered. (Although "perception" is Hume's general term for the contents of consciousness, there are occasions when he uses the term in a narrower sense that is not too far off from what is generally understood by the term. "When both the objects are present to the senses along with the relation, we call *this* perception. . ."[25]) Hume is vague, ambiguous, and seems to contradict himself in his uses of "imagination." He realizes that his usage is loose, and in a footnote, he tries to explain his meanings,[26] but the footnote is not especially helpful. Sometimes, though rarely, he uses the term as a synonym for fanciful thinking. But it seems to me that the explanation he gives in Section III of Book I comes fairly close to the way he usually uses the term. In Section II, he has explained that ideas differ from impressions in being less lively. Now he further explains that the ideas of the imagination are less lively than the ideas of the memory. Since impressions have already been excluded, the imagination includes everything in consciousness except memory and the impressions of sensation and reflection. Thus his definitions of experience and imagination very nearly divide up the field of consciousness, leaving out only the impressions of reflection. If he had been pressed, there is no question but that Hume would have put impressions of reflection on the side of experience. It is important to note that reasonings from causes and effect are included in the imagination and that the conclusions of these reasonings are the liveliest ideas to be found in the imagination, though they are not as lively as impressions and ideas of memory.

Hume's distinction between reason and imagination can also be put as the distinction between inference and what is known without inference. In one place, Hume says, "Tis therefore necessary, that in all probable reasonings there must be something present to the mind, either seen or remember'd; and that from this we infer something connected with it, which is not seen nor remember'd."[27] What is seen or remembered is what Hume means by experience, and the kind of inference he is referring to is an operation of the understanding, which Hume defines as "the general and more establish'd properties of the imagination."[28]

Beliefs arrived at by the imagination receive whatever support they have from experience:

> 'Tis obvious that all this chain of argument or connexion of causes and effects, is at first founded on those characters or letters, which are seen or remember'd, and that without the authority either of the memory or senses our whole reasoning wou'd be chimerical and without foundation."[29]

The experience which is the foundation of all our reasonings must include experience of relations. Hume gave the name "philosophical relation" to those relations that could be perceived by a mere comparison of the objects of experience, and he did not regard this comparison as being a creative activity. Hume's first definition of "cause," in the short *Enquiry* version, which omits spatial contiguity, is "*an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second.*"[30] The relations mentioned, both philosophical relations, are resemblance and succession. (The resemblance between present and past conjunctions of objects is detected by the memory, which has virtually the same status as impressions. One section is entitled, "Of the Impressions of the Memory and Senses.") These relations, as Hume well realized, are independent of the mind. They are, he says, "independent, and antecedent to the operations of the understanding."[31]

The first definition of "cause," being defined in terms of philosophical relations, is itself a philosophical relation. But Hume says that causation may be considered "either as a *philosophical* or as a *natural* relation, either as a comparison of two ideas, or as an association betwixt them."[32] Defined as a natural relation, cause is "*An object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.*"[33] When relation is understood as a natural relation, that is, as association of ideas, the reality of relations does indeed depend on the imagination. Hume, however, sometimes gives the name, "natural relation," to those philosophical relations--resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect--that produce associations. When "natural relation" is understood in this second sense, natural relations are a subclass of philosophical relations, and like all the other philosophical relations, they are independent of the mind. And it should be added that these natural relations not only produce associations, they provide the grounds for our beliefs about matters of fact, or real existence.

Hume's epistemology is a foundationalist epistemology. Foundationalism is in disfavor today, but it seems to me that there is at least one argument in favor of foundationalism. Since inference totally depends on relation, how could our knowledge of every relation be a discovery of inference?

Notes

1 Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York:

Galaxy Books, 1959) 90.

2 Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 16. (The Locke quotation is from his *Essay*, bk. 2, ch. 25, sec. 8.)

3 C. R. Morris, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1931) 84.

4 Charles W. Hendel, *Studies in the Philosophy of David Hume* (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1963) 119.

5 Hendel 87.

6 John Locke, *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*, ed. J. A. St. John (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908) I, 449. (*Essay*, bk. 2, ch. 25, sec. 1.)

7 Locke 471.

8 Locke, *The Philosophical Works of John Locke*, ed. J. A. St. John (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908) II, 14 and 16. (*Essay*, bk. 3, ch. 3, sec. 11, 13.)

9 Hendel 110.

10 George Berkeley, *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings*, ed. David M. Armstrong (New York: Collier, 1965) 121.

11 Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of its Origins and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1960) 209.

12 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1888) 34.

13 Hume, *Treatise*, ed. Selby-Bigge 35.

14 Ralph W. Church, *Hume's Theory of the Understanding* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935) 232.

15 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 637.

16 Church 39.

17 Hendel 133.

18 Hendel 119.

19 Hendel 119.

20 Hendel 125.

21 Hendel 112.

22 Hendel 110.

23 Hendel 119. (Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 13.)

24 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 11.

25 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 73.

26 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 265.

27 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 89.

28 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 267.

29 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 83.

30 David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon, 1902) 77.

31 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 168.

32 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 169.

33 Hume, *Treatise* ed. Selby-Bigge 172.