

## A Puzzle about Hume's Theory of General Representation

### Abstract

According to Hume's theory of general representation, we represent generalities by associating certain ideas with certain words. On one understanding of this theory, calling things by a name does not represent any real qualities of those things or any real relations between them. This interpretation runs into difficulty when applied to Hume's own use of such general terms throughout the *Treatise*. Because these distinctions do theoretical-explanatory work in Hume's philosophical system they require that the items so distinguished really are different. This reveals that Hume employs a more sophisticated understanding of the science of human nature than has previously been understood.

While Hume is a thoroughgoing nominalist about terms in the language of the vulgar, he is a realist about the theoretical-explanatory terms of science.

Keywords: Hume, Representation, Scientific Realism, Impressions, Ideas, Simple, Complex

According to Hume's theory of general representation, we represent generalities (such as dog-hood) by associating certain ideas with certain words (like 'dog'). On one prominent understanding of this theory, calling things by one name or another does not represent any real qualities of those things (their dog-hood) or any real relations between them (that they all resemble each other in some real way that they do not also resemble cats). This interpretation runs into difficulty when we turn our attention to Hume's own use of such general terms throughout the *Treatise*. It would seem that Hume's own distinctions—such as the impression-idea distinction and simple-complex distinction—require that the items so distinguished really are different (and are not just associated with different words). This is because these distinctions do an enormous amount of theoretical-explanatory work in the *Treatise*, work which arguably

cannot be done except by assuming that these distinctions represent some real difference between kinds of perceptions. What I will argue here is that this reveals that Hume is working with a more sophisticated understanding of the science of human nature than has previously been understood. In particular, what I will suggest is that while Hume is a thoroughgoing nominalist about terms in the language of the vulgar, he is a kind of scientific realist about the theoretical-explanatory terms of science (or, as Hume sometimes calls it, the true philosophy).

Consider the theory of general representation that Hume presents in section 1.1.7 of his *Treatise*. According to this theory, roughly, we find certain objects to resemble one another, and so apply a single word to all of them. Upon later hearing this word, we call to mind one or more of these objects. At the same time, we are disposed to recall other ideas that resemble these first ones when appropriately prompted. A particular idea thus made general represents the set of all of the ideas that we are disposed to recall upon hearing a certain word, and the meaning of the word, therefore, also extends to the entire set.

This account relies on the notion of our finding certain objects to resemble one another, and this “finding” can be taken in at least two ways. On the one hand, it might be that we discover the real relation that is capital-R Resemblance between these objects.<sup>1</sup> Call this the Ontological Interpretation. To understand Hume that way is to take him to be, in some sense, committed to an anti-nominalist thesis, namely, the thesis that there is at least one real relation: Resemblance. That is not a particularly attractive way to understand Hume given his announced nominalism, although some have argued that it is unavoidable.<sup>2</sup> Hume explicitly eschews the distinctive ontological commitment that the Ontological Interpretation ascribes to him. On the other hand, a line of interpretation is available according to which this “finding” of ideas to resemble one another is the not the discovery of a real relation between these items, but is instead

nothing over and above our associating those items with each other and with the word (or general term) ‘resemblance’.<sup>3</sup> Call this the Nominalist Interpretation. This association is no real relation, but differs only from other associations (e.g. of contiguous items, or of causes and their effects) insofar as we are inclined to associate our resembling ideas with one another, but not also with our contiguous ideas, etc. So, Hume’s associations of ideas do not each represent a different real relation that ideas might stand in to one another, but rather only our inclination to parse our ideas into (roughly) three different groups. On this second, and more *prima facie* attractive, interpretive line, general terms turn out to be, in a sense, arbitrary. While they reflect the tendencies of the human mind to form associations between certain perceptions, this is all that they do. They do not, either in themselves or thereby, reflect any “deeper” reality.

Now consider the place of Hume’s theory of general representation within the broader context of the *Treatise*. That account is essentially situated within his more comprehensive account of the workings of the human mind. Crucial to that account are certain key distinctions that Hume draws both right at the outset of, and throughout, the *Treatise*: the impression-idea distinction, the simple-complex distinction, the distinction between impressions of sense and impressions of reflection, etc. According to the most thorough version of the Nominalist Interpretation of the theory of general representation, each of these distinctions is, again in some sense, arbitrary: they do not reflect any real relations or qualities of perceptions, but instead only how we happen to associate some, but not others, of these perceptions both with each other and with our names for them.

Here, then, is the puzzle. Each of these distinctions is meant to explain some phenomenon of the human mind. The simple-complex distinction, for example, is meant explain the possibility for novel human thought. That explanation, however, has a distinctly, and

arguably ineliminable, *ontological* component: complex perceptions are *composed of* simple ones. That is, for the simple-complex distinction to do the explanatory work that it does in the *Treatise*, there must *really be* a distinction between simple and complex perceptions. The difference between these cannot be merely that some are associated with the term ‘simple’ and some with the term ‘complex’. The latter must be composed of the former. The same will go for Hume’s other core distinctions as well. Each is meant to explain some human phenomena; each plays a crucial role within Hume’s philosophical system; and each has what will turn out to be an ineliminable ontological component that represents a real difference between the items associated with each term.

What I will argue here is that this is enough *prima facie* evidence for thinking that there is something wrong with the Nominalist Interpretation of Hume’s theory of general representation *when it is applied to Hume’s own theoretical-philosophical distinctions*. That is, I will argue that, perhaps despite Hume’s own inclinations, we must understand Hume as a kind of scientific realist. While terms in the language of the vulgar must be understood purely nominalistically, the very explanation of why that (and much else) is the case demands that terms in the language of the scientist of man, such as ‘impression’ or ‘idea’, must be understood as robustly ontologically committing, as tracking real qualities of things and real relations between them. This realism, I will suggest, manifests itself in the form of Hume’s replacing the language of the vulgar with the language of the scientist of man, and thereby endorsing the latter as a more accurate picture of the way that the world (or at least the world of perceptions) actually is.

While I will argue that carefully distinguishing these two modes of speech throughout the *Treatise* allows us to limit the range of the Ontological Interpretation to its appropriate sphere, even this requires a fairly radical departure from the Nominalist Interpretation. It requires us to

understand Hume as working with a much more sophisticated conception of the science of human nature as has previously been attributed to him. That science is not a merely descriptive project, but a theoretical-explanatory one as well, which justifies the employment of ontologically committing theoretical posits.

My procedure will be as follows. The devil here is, as it usually is, in the details, specifically in the details of Hume's articulation and treatment of the particular distinctions at issue. So, my method for presenting this puzzle will be to focus on a pair of case studies: first of the simple-complex distinction, and then of the impression-idea distinction. My conclusion in each case will be that doing the explanatory work to which Hume puts them precludes understanding either of these distinctions as the Nominalist Interpretation would have it, but rather seems to require something more like the Ontological Interpretation. As these case studies will take up most of the space of the current paper, I will close by merely outlining the kind of scientific realism that I take the solution of these puzzles to require. Before I turn to those case studies, though, a brief word is in order about the kind of nominalism against which I will argue with respect to certain of Hume's distinctions.

## 1 Humean Nominalism

As I understand the most strict version of Hume's nominalism it is the thesis that the mind is constituted by nothing other than concrete mental particulars—perceptions—and that the so-called qualities and relations of these are all to be accounted for (or explained away) via appeals to the perceptions themselves and their behaviors. Specifically, according this strictest version of the Nominalist Interpretation, the account of general ideas in 1.1.7 is intended to

provide a procedure for doing just this. A perception is blue not because it has the quality “blue,” but rather because it is associated in the appropriate way with the word ‘blue’. Two perceptions are related to one another, say as resembling, not because they stand in the “relation of resemblance,” but rather because the complex idea of the pair of perceptions is associated in the appropriate way with the word ‘resemblance’. This form of nominalism is admittedly extreme, but what I hope to accomplish in this section is to show that this is the form of nominalism to which Hume commits himself (at least with respect to the language of the vulgar), and that scholars attempting to interpret Hume as employing some less strict version of nominalism fail to do justice to Hume’s texts and arguments.

The most canonical and concise statement of Hume’s nominalism comes at *T* 1.1.7.6 where Hume writes, “every thing in nature is individual,” but a great deal can be done using other parts of the philosophical system that Hume develops in the *Treatise* to understand what precisely Hume means by this claim, and to extrapolate his particular use of this thesis to other relevant issues. To begin, though, Hume famously uses this version of his thesis to argue, against Locke, that there can be no such thing as an “abstract” idea: an idea that is in some way itself indeterminate. While the Individuality Thesis, as we might call it, by itself, does not commit Hume to the very thoroughgoing nominalism attributed to him here—i.e. the thesis that the distinctions that we draw as described by Hume’s account of general representation do correspond to anything “real” in objects (or perceptions themselves)—what I will argue briefly in this section is that it is plausible to take Hume to be committed to some version of that strong thesis nonetheless. My argument will have three parts. First I will present an argument on Hume’s behalf that moves from the Individuality Thesis and premises that Hume more or less explicitly accepts to the denial of all universals and relations. Second I will look at a few places

in the *Treatise* at which Hume seems to deny the strong nominalist thesis, and explain how these are, despite appearances, nonetheless compatible with that thesis. Finally, I will consider the proposal that while Hume may deny the existence of universals and relations, he might remain a nominalist by maintaining that some distinctions correspond to primitive facts about that between which they distinguish.

Before I turn to those tasks, however, it is worth pausing to note that Berkeley, whose theory of general representation Hume cites as, “one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the republic of letters,” (*T* 1.1.7.1; SBN 17) is explicit in his application of this theory to relations, and Hume may well have simply carried over Berkeley’s conclusion in this regard.<sup>4</sup> Hume’s stated goal in that section of the *Treatise* is, “to confirm it [Berkeley’s theory] by arguments, which I hope will put it beyond all doubt and controversy” (*T* 1.1.7.1; SBN 17). Hume here casts himself as adopting Berkeley’s theory and providing extra reasons in support of it. He does not announce a plan either to rehearse that theory in all of its detail or to amend it significantly. So, it would be unsurprising to find Hume discussing only the hard core of the theory, while omitting some of the less central elements e.g. its application to relations.<sup>5</sup>

Still, it is easy enough to construct an argument available to Hume from the Individuality Thesis to the conclusion that relations themselves cannot exist, using only premises that Hume more or less explicitly endorses. Here is one way:

1. Everything in nature is individual (particular).
2. Relations must be either particular or universal.
3. If universal, relations do not exist. (1)

4. If particular, relations must either exist independently of their relata, or must depend on their relata for their existence
5. For the same reason that the abstract idea of a man cannot exist—either with the qualities of all men, or no qualities at all<sup>6</sup>—a relation cannot exist without relata. (Such a relation would have to either relate all of its relata, or none of its relata.)
6. Thus, if relations exist, they are inseparable from their relata. (5)
7. The Separability Principle: “whatever objects are different are distinguishable and [...] whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination”(T 1.1.7.3; SBN 18)
8. Thus, if relations exist, they are not different from their relata. (6, 7)
9. Just as the “whiteness” of a globe is really just the globe itself, relations between objects are just the objects themselves, i.e. only relata, and not relations, exist. (8)
10. Relations do not exist. (3, 9)

Thus, combining Hume’s stated nominalist thesis—the Individuality Thesis—with a version of the argument that he gives against “abstract” ideas, including his use of the Separability Principle, we arrive at precisely the view attributed to him above: that no relations exist. From this, we can derive the thesis of the Nominalist Interpretation as a specification of that principle: relations of resemblance between objects do not exist. So, in addition to the places in the Hume literature cited earlier (n. 2) where scholars have argued persuasively that Hume must hold some such view, we have here a straightforward argument from premises that Hume accepts that very view.

Notice that while this argument does not undermine the tenability of the more permissive form of nominalism advocated by Tienson, an additional argument similar to the one above can

be given to resist Tienson's proposal.<sup>7</sup> Tienson there distinguishes between skinny universals—e.g. some particular shade of a red—and fat universals—e.g. redness in general—and argues that Hume's nominalism consists in the denial of the existence of fat universals combined with a reliance on the existence of skinny ones. Tienson's thought is that since skinny universals are maximally particular, their existence is compatible with the Individuality Thesis. To show that Hume should deny the existence of skinny and fat universals alike, one can use the Separability Principle, as Hume himself arguably does in his discussion of the whiteness and shape of a globe, to show that skinny universals are not distinct from the objects that are supposed to instantiate them, and so are not existences over and above those objects.

Much of Tienson's positive argument for understanding Hume as positing the existence of skinny universals depends on his argument that since there must be something that makes true propositions that attribute a property to an object, any form of nominalism that denies the existence of universals is incoherent. Of course, Hume explicitly denies that judgments ever have this form<sup>8</sup>—perhaps in part to avoid just such a commitment—but even putting that very serious worry aside, notice that this argument simply begs the question against the form of nominalism advocated here. The argument presupposes that the only thing that could make such propositions true is the object's relation to some universal. According to the current line of thought, what makes a proposition attributing a property to a thing true is that that object is a member of the Revival Set of the relevant term.<sup>9</sup> While there is an extended sense in which that is a property of such an object, the hard core of this form of nominalism is that this “property” is one that is essentially constituted by the associative tendencies of the human mind rather than some worldly item (either the object or its properties).

Tienson also discusses two important places in the *Treatise* where Hume appears to endorse the existence of at least some properties or relations. Given the topic of the current study—the relations of resemblance that are the foundation of Hume’s theory of general representation—perhaps the most important text to address in this regard is the footnote to 1.1.7.6, which occurs in the context of Hume’s discussion of general representation and seems to address precisely the issue of the relations of resemblance among, in this case simple, ideas. So, consider that footnote:

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‘Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou’d be distinct or separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* or *scarlet*; tho’ their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. (*T* 1.1.7.6n; SBN 635)

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What Hume appears to claim here is that simple ideas, say of blue and green, can bear real resemblance relations to each other: simple ideas of blue and green resemble each other (with respect to color), while neither so resembles a simple idea of scarlet. It is such relations that will come to form the foundation for the theory of general ideas: we find certain ideas to resemble each other, but not others, call these by the same name, etc.

The Nominalist, however, can grant that Hume here claims that simple ideas can resemble each other, and that it is this resemblance that grounds the theory of general

representation. His question will then be, "How ought one to *understand* this resemblance?"

What is at issue between the Nominalist Interpreter and the Ontological Interpreter is not whether Hume claims that certain objects resemble each other, but how to understand this claim. The Ontological Interpreter claims that we must understand it as presupposing real relations of resemblance; the Nominalist Interpreter claims that we must understand it as a shorthand for the ideas-that-form-the-revival-set-for-the-term-'resemblance'. In fact, the Nominalist Interpreter will point to the explanatory power of his interpretation at precisely such moments as the one presented in this footnote. The Ontological Interpreter must understand Hume as appealing to a brute primitive fact about the world: certain items just resemble one another, no more explanation is possible or necessary.<sup>10</sup> That is a very odd sort of thing for Hume of all people to appeal to. The Nominalist Interpreter can claim to do better. What *explains* the resemblance of blue to green is not a brute fact about blue and green, but rather the psychological fact about us, that we take blue and green to be more similar to each other than we do either of them to scarlet. An explanation that terminates in a fact about human psychology is much more in line with other parts of the *Treatise*, than is one that terminates in brute ontological facts about the way the world is.

Similarly, in the second set of passages that Tienson considers, understanding those passages depends on how one understands the nature of the relations the existence of which Hume appears to concede. Here is Tienson's presentation of this evidence.

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In the Section of the *Treatise* entitled "Of Relations" (I,i,5) Hume distinguishes between "philosophical relations" and "natural relations." Philosophical relations, he tells us, are all of the

ways objects can be compared. A natural relation is a "quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination" (Treatise I, i, 5; p. 13). When Hume says philosophical relations are ways objects can be "compared," he does not mean to make them subjective; he means, "admit of comparison." He says, for example, "All kinds of reasoning consist in nothing but a comparison, and a discovery of those relations, either constant or inconstant, which two or more objects bear to each other" (Treatise I,iii,2; p. 73). Comparison discovers relations; it does not produce them.

Tienson, 1984: 321

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As Tienson notes, it would be easy enough to understand Hume's talk of 'comparison' here as referring to a subjective activity, if it were not for the passage that he cites at the end here where Hume does write about the "discovery of those relations." It is, therefore, worth taking a closer look at this latter passage.

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All kinds of reasoning consist in nothing but a comparison, and a discovery of those relations, either constant or inconstant, which two or more objects bear to each other. This comparison we may make, either when both the objects are present to the senses, or when neither of them is present, or when only one. When both the objects are present to the senses along with the relation, we call this perception rather than reasoning; nor is there in this case any exercise of the thought, or any action, properly speaking, but a mere passive admission of the impressions thro' the organs of sensation. According to this way of thinking, we ought not to receive as reasoning any of the observations we may make concerning identity, and the relations of time and place;

since in none of them the mind can go beyond what is immediately present to the senses, either to discover the real existence or the relations of objects. 'Tis only causation, which produces such a connexion, as to give us assurance from the existence or action of one object, that 'twas follow'd or preceded by any other existence or action; nor can the other two relations be ever made use of in reasoning, except so far as they either affect or are affected by it. *T* 1.3.2.2; SBN 73-74

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From what follows the sentence that Tienson quotes, it is clear that the relations that Hume here writes about our discovering are only causal relations. It is reasoning that engages in comparison, and thereby discovers such relations, and the point of this passage is to argue that the reasoning at issue here is probable reasoning, or reasoning from cause to effect and vice versa. Of course, when it comes to causal relations, Hume is notorious for casting these as a mental phenomenon of a kind that fits nicely with Nominalist Interpretation: what one finds when one investigates the idea of causation is not a worldly relation between objects, but rather a custom or habit of the human mind. So, the passage on which Tienson's textual case depends supports his case only if one endorses a highly controversial interpretation of Hume on the reality of causal relations.<sup>11</sup>

Like Tienson, Vision also takes Hume to be committed to the reality of at least some relations and qualities, in this case to abstract particulars, which are much like Tienson's skinny universals.

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Examples of simple ideas given by Hume include scarlet, orange, sweet and bitter. If a simple idea of sight or touch is a particular idea of, say, a quality separated from other qualities (and not merely attended to separately), then it is an abstract particular of just the type Berkeley execrates.

Vision, 1979: 531

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Vision's thought is that the kinds of simple ideas that he cites are particular as opposed to general, but still abstract: they are qualities of objects, not objects themselves. This understanding of simple ideas, however, misses much of what is interesting about Hume's ontology of the mind (about which I will have a great deal to say in the following sections).

While Vision is correct to notice that we only arrive at the ideas of these simple ideas through a process of "distinguishing," we must be careful to keep this process distinct from the process of abstraction that Locke endorses and Hume rejects. It is not that the simple idea of the sweetness of the apple is an abstract idea of a property as distinct from its object, but rather that simple idea is one of the concrete particular ideas that *constitute* the concrete particular complex idea of the apple. That this is the case is one of the interesting and distinguishing features of Hume's philosophical system.

As Vision himself notes, whatever evidence there is from the texts in which Hume appears to commit himself to the reality of skinny universals, abstract particulars, or relations, this evidence must be balanced against passages in which Hume explicitly denies the existence of precisely such things.

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Despite this, in the last paragraphs of the section of the *Treatise* entitled “Of Abstract Ideas” Hume denies that we can consider the figure of a piece of a marble without its colour. Moreover, in the *Enquiry* he rejects the distinction which would permit ideas of a primary quality without concomitant (ideas of) secondary qualities. What he is criticizing in both places are prime instance of abstract particulars of just the kind associated with Berkeley’s attack. However, I do not see any recourse but to say that here Hume is simply inconsistent with elements more firmly embedded in his total philosophy. *Vision*, 1979: 532–33

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Along these lines, the Nominalist Interpreter can also point to texts such as the following.

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The word Relation is commonly used in two senses considerably different from each other. Either for that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and the one naturally introduces the other, after the manner above-explained; or for that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them. (*T* 1.1.5.1; SBN 13)

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Here Hume certainly seems to be saying that relations are *entirely psychological* phenomena, of just the kind for which the theory of general representation is meant to account. I.e. when we say of two items that they are related, this amounts to nothing more than the claim that they belong to some shared revival set. Thus, Hume’s reference to *relata* being “connected together in the

imagination” and being the result of “the arbitrary union” “in the fancy.” In the case of resembling ideas, this would be the revival set of the term ‘resemblance’.<sup>12</sup> If we suppose, *contra* Vision, however, that Hume did indeed take over Berkeley’s theory of general representation, including his denial of the existence of abstract particulars and relations, and read his arguments in 1.1.7 as supporting that theory rather than replacing it, we can avoid having to attribute to Hume inconsistencies of the kind that Vision must.

One final way of understanding Hume’s nominalism as permitting the existence of some form qualities or relations comes from a recent paper by Hakkarainen that argues that Hume is a *trope* nominalist who holds that *all* that exists are Tienson’s “skinny universals,” Vision’s “abstract particulars,” or tropes.<sup>13</sup> This position has the advantage of circumventing the earlier argument against Tienson that moves from the inseparability of skinny universals from their objects to the nonexistence of such skinny universals because the trope nominalist is able to accept this inseparability on the grounds that such objects are *nothing but* a bundle of tropes.

As with Tienson and Vision, though, the primary objection to understanding Hume in this way is textual. Hakkarainen bases much of his case on two passages that support his conclusion only when considered apart from the particular contexts in which they occur. The first is a passage from *Of the antient philosophy*:

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Every quality being a distinct thing from another, may be conceiv’d to exist apart, and may exist apart, not only from every other quality, but from that unintelligible chimera of a substance. (*T* 1.4.3.7; SBN 222)

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Considered in isolation this passage certainly does make Hume sound like a trope nominalist.

The context in which Hume is writing, however, is one in which he is arguing against a form of Aristotelian substance-accident ontology. So, while Hume's idiom here makes it appear that he is arguing for the independence of "qualities", instead he is, as he so often does throughout the *Treatise*, adopting the objectionable vocabulary of his predecessors (the false philosophy) in order to engage their arguments and theses. Hume's real target in this section is *substance*, and that he makes his argument against this notion by arguing that it is nothing over and above what the Aristotelian calls 'accidents' or 'qualities', but which *he* will ultimately understand as perceptions themselves, does not imply that he himself endorses their view of these.

The same explanation applies to the second of Hakkarainen's crucial passages, this one from *Of the immateriality of the soul*:

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If instead of answering these questions, any one shou'd evade the difficulty, by saying, that the definition of a substance is something which may exist by itself; and that this definition ought to satisfy us: Shou'd this be said, I shou'd observe, that this definition agrees to every thing, that can possibly be conceiv'd; and never will serve to distinguish substance from accident, or the soul from its perceptions. (*T* 1.4.5.5; SBN 233)

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Here what evidence there is for Hakkarainen's conclusion is even less definitive because Hume now explicitly distinguishes the "accidents" of the antient philosophy from what he calls

‘perceptions’. This distinction is important because while Hume bills the argument that he goes on to make—that since the soul is nothing distinct from particular perceptions, it is not itself a real existence—as applying equally to accidents and substance, it implies that the relation of accidents to *perceptions* is itself one that should not be taken for granted. As we have seen, in discussing Tienson and Vision, though, much of Hume’s consideration of this relation occurs in 1.1.7, and favors the conclusion that “accidents” (skinny universals, abstract particulars, or tropes) are merely phantom reflections of the associations that constitute general ideas.

There is one final way of understanding Hume’s nominalism that I will briefly consider before moving on. What the previous proposals all have in common is the reification of some kind of entity—relations, universals, tropes—that violates the letter or spirit of Hume’s commitment to the existence of only perceptions. It is possible, however, to understand Hume as countenancing the reality corresponding to certain distinctions, such as that between resembling and non-resembling perceptions, without having to accept the existence of any such obscure metaphysical entities. For example, one might suppose that Hume simply takes facts about resemblance to be primitive and unexplainable. Appeals to universals, abstract particulars, and tropes are all ways of explaining these primitive facts about resemblance, this line would go, and that is part of where such attempts go wrong. Facts about resemblance cannot be explained in terms of facts about any more obscure entities, but are also not reducible merely to the associative tendencies of the human mind.<sup>14</sup>

As I hope will become clear, when it comes to the distinctions that Hume employs in the course of his pursuit of the science of human nature—the simple-complex distinction, the impression-idea distinction, perhaps the distinction between resembling and non-resembling perceptions—I am mostly sympathetic to this line. I do, however, count it as moving beyond

what is allowed by the Nominalist Interpretation. The motivation for taking this broad view of nominalism stems from the importance of the reductive nature of Hume's account of general representation. That is, if general representations consists of *only* what Hume describes, then supposing that our use of general terms corresponds to real facts is at best superfluous and at worst (if Hume follows Berkeley as I have suggested) contrary to the intended purpose of that account. Thus, I count this line as a version of the Ontological Interpretation because while it may forego talk of universals and relations *per se*, it nonetheless commits Hume, in some sense, to the *reality* of the distinctions at hand. That is a thesis to which I will return in the final section of this paper, wherein I turn to what I will argue is Hume's *scientific* realism.

One final point in favor of the Nominalist Interpretation. The theory of general representation that Hume presents in 1.1.7 accounts for our ability to form general representations without forming "abstract" ideas, ideas that are anything other than fully determinate particulars. The Nominalist Interpreter will point out that it would be odd for this elimination to be paired with, and in fact depend upon, an acceptance of the universals, relations, or real distinctions that would seem to be required by the Ontological Interpretation. I.e. the Ontological Interpreter would have us eliminate abstract ideas, by relying on real relations of resemblance (or the corresponding real universals). While this is not inconsistent, it does at least seem to be an unhappy marriage.

Thus I conclude that the Nominalist Interpretation is not only a live option for understanding Hume's position in the *Treatise*, but enjoys a number of important benefits over the Ontological Interpretation: it maintains consistency between Hume's declared nominalism and the conclusions that can be drawn using it, it is more in line with the spirit of Hume's typical order of explanation (using psychological facts to explain supposed ontological ones), it can

account for the relevant texts, and it avoids having to make a special exception for the treatment of the term ‘resemblance’, which on the Ontological Interpretation requires, unlike any other term, an account other than the theory of general representation to explain it. From this I further conclude that the Nominalist Interpretation deserves to be privileged wherever it can be as how we understand the nature of the resemblance relation. If, however, the reader remains unconvinced of the viability of the Nominalist Interpretation, so be it. What I hope to show in what follows is that whatever one makes of this approach vis-à-vis the language of the vulgar, it will not suffice as an account of the general terms that Hume employs in his science of human nature. To that end, I will now turn to the first of two case studies: the simple-complex distinction.

## 2 The Simple-Complex Distinction

We will begin with Hume’s distinction between simple and complex ideas. My argument here will be roughly as follows.

1. One’s phenomenology is always complex along multiple dimensions.
2. Therefore, the revival set for the general term ‘simple idea’ will consist of complex ideas.
3. Therefore, the general term ‘simple idea’, must represent either (a) the complex ideas that constitute its revival set, or (b) something other than merely the members of its revival set.
4. If the general term ‘simple idea’ represents the complex ideas that constitute its revival set, then the simple-complex distinction loses its explanatory power (e.g. its role in explaining the novelty of human thought).

5. If the general term ‘simple idea’ represents something other than the member of its revival set, then the Ontological Interpretation of at least that distinction must be correct.

The more general conclusion that I will draw by the end of this section is that what Hume offers in the opening sections of the *Treatise* is a *theoretical scientific account* of experience. Our experience, the phenomena that a science of human nature must explain, is of only complex ideas. The nature of experience is explained in terms of posited simple perceptions that are governed by general laws and principles such as the Copy Principle, the laws of association, etc. This scientific theory of ideas should be contrasted with a descriptive phenomenology. If we restricted ourselves to experiential items that can be introspectively isolated, we would not appeal to simple ideas. Simple ideas are *posits*, or *theoretical entities*, because we have no direct experience of them as simple. It does, however, seem in line with an important strand in Hume’s philosophy that simple ideas come to be known through a sophisticated scientific analogy with complex ideas. Hume’s commitment to simple ideas is grounded not in direct experience of them, but in their *explanatory power*.

That is a fairly radical conclusion up to which we must work our way slowly. To begin our case study of the simple-complex distinction, then, consider the following. Human phenomenology, of the kind that Hume describes, is always and everywhere incredibly *complex*. Our visual field at any given time is a complex of spatial points; our diachronic experience is a complex of (themselves complex) temporal parts; our experience as a whole is a complex of perceptions delivered by our various sense modalities. The flipside of this observation about the ubiquitous complexity of human phenomenology is that that phenomenology is never *simple*. That is, it is never the case that one’s phenomenology consists entirely of a single *simple* perception.<sup>15</sup> One’s visual field always consists of multiple perceptions arranged spatially; one’s

diachronic experience always consists of multiple perceptions *succeeding* one another; one's experience as a whole is always an experience involving perceptions delivered by more than one sense modality.

Of course, it is one of Hume's central theses that this *complexity* is precisely a complexity *composed of* absolute simples: *minima sensibilia*. As we have seen, another important thesis of Hume's is that the meaning of any general term is the set of ideas associated with that term (in the way described in 1.1.7). And, of course, 'simple idea' is itself a general term.

<ext>

And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms *simple idea*. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. (*T* 1.1.7.7, fn. 5; SBN 635)

</ext>

Here, then, arises a new puzzle: if our phenomenology is always complex, and the term 'simple idea' derives its meaning from being associated with some set of ideas, then it would seem to follow that the ideas from which the meaning of 'simple idea' derives are themselves *complex* ideas. That is, according to 1.1.7, the meaning of any general term is the set of ideas associated with that term. In the case of the general term 'simple idea', since our phenomenology is always complex, this set must consist of *complex* ideas. And, in fact, this is exactly what we find in the *Treatise*. Consider, for example, one of Hume's proofs that some such *minima sensibilia* exist.

<ext>

Put a spot of ink upon paper, fix your eye upon that spot, and retire to such a distance, that at last you lose sight of it; 'tis plain, that the moment before it vanish'd the image or impression was perfectly indivisible. (*T* 1.2.1.4; SBN 27)

</ext>

Consider carefully this procedure, and the image that it is meant to produce. One sees a spot on a piece of paper. That is a spatially complex perception. As one moves away from this piece of paper, the spot grows smaller and smaller until it disappears completely. That experience is both spatially *and* temporally complex. Presumably, one is hearing, smelling, seeing, etc. various “background noise” during this experience as well. What Hume’s experiment presents, then, by way of demonstrating the existence of simple ideas is a spatially, temporally, and sense-modally *complex* set of experiences. So, insofar as this kind of procedure is what one is meant to recall upon hearing the term ‘simple idea’, one is clearly meant to recall a complex *idea*.<sup>16</sup>

<ext>

Tho’ a particular colour, taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple, ‘tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other. (*T* 1.1.1.2; SBN

2)

</ext>

Here the simple ideas that we are meant to observe are the ones derived from the different sense modalities involved in a *complex* experience of an apple. All of those simple perceptions occur only as parts of the spatially, temporally, and sense-modally complex experience of biting into an

apple. None is experienced *all on its own*, so to speak. So, in picking out such perceptions, ‘simple idea’ cannot be straightforwardly associated with just simple ideas.

Of course, what one *wants* to say here is that while it may be certain complex ideas that we are meant to recall upon hearing the term ‘simple idea’, it is the simple components of these ideas that we are picking out when we do so. We are meant to “focus on” the simple ideas to which these complex experiences “draw our attention”. That may well be, but the question before us concerns what the *mechanism* is by which we are supposed to perform this operation. Hume offers a theory of general representation, and “focus” and “attention” are nowhere to be found in it. Insofar as a general representation as Hume describes it, “picks out” something over and above the set of ideas that one is disposed to recall upon hearing a certain term, such as the simple idea itself, then one has left the preferred Nominalist Interpretation well behind. It would, of course, be too hasty to draw this conclusion just yet.

Here one might also be tempted by the following line. While the revival set for ‘simple idea’ will be composed of complex ideas, it is the simple components of these ideas (and not the complexes of which they are a part) that stand in the associative (resemblance) relations that are constitutive of this revival set. Thus, while the revival set is composed of complex ideas, it is not the composition of the revival set alone that fixes its content, but rather those of its components that stand in the proper associative (resemblance) relations to one another. Thus, because it is the simple components of the complex ideas that fix the content of the revival set for ‘simple idea’, this revival set straightforwardly represents simple ideas as such.<sup>17</sup>

Again, though, I believe that the framing problem of this paper once again rears its head, and one must ask: in virtue of what do the resemblance relations among the complex ideas that one actually stands disposed to recall upon hearing ‘simple idea’ hold between the simple

components of these ideas rather than the complex ideas themselves? A revival set consists of a number of associated ideas, where ‘associated’ means that upon recalling one of these ideas one stands disposed to recall the others. The particular association at work in revival sets is resemblance, and it is tempting to think, as above, that the ideas constituting the revival set all resemble each other in some way or other, e.g. in virtue of their simple components. What is at issue here, however, is exactly how to understand these resemblance relations. According to the distinctions that I have been employing, to suppose that the ideas constituting the revival set of ‘simple idea’ resemble each other “in virtue of” their simple components, is to deploy the Ontological Interpretation rather than the Nominalist Interpretation because the former supposes that there is some relation of resemblance over and above the mere associations available via a descriptive phenomenology. Limiting ourselves just to such descriptions, we could only say that we recall, or stand disposed to recall, certain complex ideas upon encountering the words ‘simple idea’. The temptation here is to suppose that there is something underlying such associations, something that explains that phenomenology. In fact, this is exactly what I will conclude is necessary by end of this paper. Still, at this point in the dialectic, I am supposing that this is a conclusion that, given the arguments for the Nominalist Interpretation in the previous section, we should expect Hume to hope to avoid. So, our question is this: how can Hume rely on absolutely simple ideas to explain experience when we experience only complex ideas, and even the term ‘simple idea’ itself appears to pick out a revival set of only *complex* ideas?

The key to answering this question is to see that simple ideas are *theoretical posits*. Hume’s “science of man” (*T* Intro. 4; SBN xv) is meant to explain various phenomena. And like the natural sciences, Hume’s science of human nature will employ in its explanations theoretical objects that are themselves not phenomena and not “directly” experienced. They are, in a later

parlance, *unobservables*. Hume posits such entities on the grounds that they *explain* certain phenomena. In particular, Hume posits simple ideas on the grounds that they explain how it is that experience alone can account for the complex ideas that we in fact have. This strategy can be seen as being introduced in the opening passages of Treatise that we have already begun to discuss. In these opening paragraphs, Hume is aiming at the first, crucial, theoretical proposition, the Copy Principle: *that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent* (*T* 1.1.1.7; SBN 4). He first motivates the Copy Principle by affecting to notice that all of his ideas exactly resemble some impression he has experienced.

<ext>

The first circumstance, that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity. (*T* 1.1.1.3; SBN 2–3)

</ext>

Upon further reflection he sees that he has many ideas of which this appears to be untrue, offering as examples the imagined New Jerusalem and inaccurately-remembered Paris.

<ext>

Upon a more accurate survey [...] I observe, that many of our complex ideas never had impressions, that correspond to them, and that many of our complex impressions are never exactly copy'd in ideas. (*T* 1.1.1.4; SBN 3)

</ext>

The resemblance between ideas and impressions struck him as a plausible, naive beginning to an account of the origin of these ideas. In fact, once these apparent counterexamples are dealt with, Hume will go on to use the exact resemblance of simple ideas to simple impressions to do an enormous amount of work in the remainder of the *Treatise*. So, already treating the Copy Principle as true, he suggests that our mental architecture must be more nuanced than one might suppose pre-theoretically. In particular, he now puts to work the distinction between simple and complex ideas that he introduced a few paragraphs previously.

<ext>

After the most accurate examination, of which I am capable, I venture to affirm, that the rule here holds without an exception, and that every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea. (*T* 1.1.1.5; SBN 3)

</ext>

In line with the interpretation of Hume as realizing that simple ideas are not experienced “as such”, this passage should not be read as saying that he confirms the Copy Principle by an “accurate examination” of simple ideas “in isolation” along with copied impressions that are similarly experienced on their own. Hume is instead noticing that it will be virtually impossible to find a counterexample to the thesis that the imagination can construct complex ideas from postulated simple ideas that are themselves always copied from correspondingly postulated simple impressions.

Of course, because simple ideas *constitute* complex ideas, there is a sense in which all experience is “of” simple ideas. This sense in which we do experience simples must, however, be brought into sharper contrast with the sense in which we never experience simple ideas “as such.” Consider, for example, that a pure sample of mercury in a beaker consists of nothing but mercury atoms. Now, when we look at this mercury or plunge a finger into it and feel it, we certainly do not have visual or tactile experience of individual mercury atoms “as such”. This is so despite the fact that, by assumption, we are seeing or feeling nothing but the mercury atoms insofar as we see or feel the sample of mercury. We experience the mercury as a silvery cold liquid, but (especially before learning about atomistic theory) not as a complex substance consisting of billions of individual atoms of atomic weight 80. The vial mercury *consists of* mercury atoms, but in seeing or touching it, we do not experience it *as* a collection of mercury atoms. Analogously, while Hume’s science of human nature teaches us that our phenomenology *consists of* a large number of simple ideas, we do not experience this phenomenology *as* a collection of simple ideas. Also analogously, just as we do not typically, or ever at all, experience single individual mercury atoms “in isolation,” but come to posit these as explanations of certain observed phenomena, we also do not ever experience simple ideas “in isolation,” but come to posit these as explanations of certain observed phenomena (in this case, certain psychological phenomena).<sup>18</sup>

One might be tempted here to draw an important *disanalogy* between the vial of mercury and Hume’s phenomenological explorations on the grounds that while we might be wrong about the composition of the mercury, we cannot similarly be wrong about the composition of complex ideas because the latter are available to us through introspection and in this way present themselves *as* the simple elements of our complex ideas. If what I have been arguing thus far is

correct, this line of thinking has to be a mistake, and I believe that there is much in the *Treatise* to recommend against it. Because space is limited, a quick example will have to suffice to make this point. Consider that no matter what interpretive line on the *Treatise* one takes, one frequently finds Hume pointing out the *errors* that his predecessors have made in their theorizing about human nature. That is only possible on the presupposition that the deliverances of introspection, which his predecessors surely also employed, is fallible. We can be, and often are, *mistaken* about what it is that goes on in our minds. The hypothesis that our phenomenology is a complex composed of simples is a *substantial* scientific/philosophical thesis, in need of evidence and defense. This would not be the case were it possible to introspect and thereby become infallibly aware of the truth of this supposition. Thus one should not suppose, merely on the grounds that Hume is seeking to explain our *phenomenology*, that everything in that explanation will either likewise be accessible to introspection, nor that even if it is, we can know it infallibly.

Of course, positing simple ideas does no *explanatory* work until one says something about their nature. In fact, Hume introduces simple ideas in much the same way that other scientists introduce their own theoretical posits. He introduces a *model* for simple ideas, and then describes how the posit both resembles and differs from the model. In Hume's case, the model is *a complex idea* that is experienced in the normal way. Here again is the passage in which Hume introduces the distinction.

<ext>

Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit no distinction nor separation. The complex are contrary to these, and may be distinguish'd into parts. Tho' a particular colour,

taste, and smell are qualities all united together in this apple, 'tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least distinguishable from each other. (*T* 1.1.1.2; SBN 2)

</ext>

Simple ideas are much like complex ideas; most importantly, they are mental images. The main difference is that the complexes but not the simples can be distinguished into parts. As we see later on in the *Treatise*, this model is enough to do heavy lifting for Hume. It specifies how simple impressions are copied by simple ideas. It also explains how complex ideas can come to have the structure they do. It will also play a role in accounting for the *content* of complex ideas: they are composed of simple ideas, their content derives from the simple ideas. And, as already noted, we have an explanation of how complex ideas often, but not always, resemble complex impressions: simple ideas resemble simple impressions, but can be recombined to form novel complex ideas.

What all of this amounts to is a *theoretical scientific account* of experience. Our experience, the phenomena that a science of human nature must explain, is of only complex ideas. The nature of experience is explained in terms of posited simple perceptions that are governed by general laws and principles such as the Copy Principle, the laws of association, etc. This scientific theory of ideas should be contrasted with a descriptive phenomenology. If we restricted ourselves to experiential items that can be introspectively isolated, we would not appeal to simple ideas. To repeat, simple ideas are *posits*, or *theoretical entities*, because we have no direct experience of them as simple. It does, however, seem in line with an important strand in Hume's philosophy that simple ideas come to be known through a sophisticated

scientific analogy with complex ideas. Hume's commitment to simple ideas is grounded not in direct experience of them, but in their *explanatory power*.

We are now in a position to return to our framing puzzle. On the one hand, we can understand the simple-complex distinction as the Nominalist Interpretation has it: as merely reflecting our custom or habit of associating some perceptions with the term 'simple' and other with the term 'complex'. On the other hand, we can understand it as the Ontological Interpretation has it: as reflecting a real distinction between two really different kinds of perceptions, in this case, those that can be *distinguished into parts*, and those that cannot. As predicted, the preferred Nominalist Interpretation appears to run into some fairly serious trouble here. In particular, Hume posits simple ideas for the sole purpose of gaining certain *explanatory power*, but that power is lost if one supposes that simple ideas *are just* those "complex" ideas that are associated with the term 'simple idea'.

Notice first that the key thesis here—that complex ideas are composed of simple ideas—on its most natural reading, comes out *obviously false* on the Nominalist Interpretation. Complex ideas are not composed from, in any recognizable sense of that word, the particular complex ideas that are associated with the term 'simple idea'. Recall that the revival set of the term 'simple idea' will include in it various complex ideas, the paradigms of which are the dot on the piece of paper and the complex sense experience of biting into an apple. If we take the Nominalist Interpretation seriously, Hume's thesis would have to be that *all* of our ideas are *composed of* ideas resembling these. In fact, though, the Ontological Interpretation has an even stronger case to make here. As we noted earlier, the revival set for 'simple idea' is composed entirely of certain *complex* ideas. The Ontological Interpreter will argue that what is needed, given the fact of the complexity of human phenomenology, is precisely a way to move *beyond*

what can be captured in a revival set. What is needed, the Ontological Interpreter will insist, is a way of understanding Hume's theory of general representation according to which the associations that are involved in using a general term can (or can fail to) capture some *real relations* of the objects represented. On this line, while it is true that what we *associate* with the general term 'simple' is a certain set of complex ideas, what is captured by, or reflected in, or represented by, this association is the *real difference* between simple and complex ideas.

Let me spell out this line a bit more. Beginning with Hume's assertion that the difference between simple and complex perceptions is that the latter, but not the former can be *distinguished* into parts, we can take the revival set of 'simple idea' to be a set of ideas in which this distinguishing manifestly fails. So, for instance, consider again the example of the disappearing dot. One can, again using the theory of general representation, distinguish the parts of the scene imagined, and in particular the dot from its background by forming a revival set consisting of, for example, ideas of similar dots against different colored backgrounds, etc. Because the dot itself, however, is a *minima sensibilia*, one cannot similarly distinguish any of its parts from one another. The revival set for 'simple idea' will consist of many instances of such distinguishing and failures to distinguish. The question before us, then, is how to understand what is represented by such revival sets. If the Nominalist Interpretation is right, the answer is nothing. These acts of distinguishing and failing to distinguish represent nothing real, but must be understood as merely a (rather perverse) subset of the associative tendencies and customs of the human mind. Philosophy makes us do weird things, and this is one them.

Something about that last sentiment certainly rings true for Hume, but as I've been trying to emphasize, endorsing it comes at a steep price. Consider finally the explanation itself that the Nominalist Interpreter must see Hume as offering. The question before Hume is how to explain

the great novelty of human thought, given the *prima facie* plausibility of the thesis that all ideas are derived from impressions. According the Nominalist Interpretation the answer to this question is that all perceptions associated with the term ‘complex’ are “composed of” perceptions associated with the term ‘simple’. As we noted earlier, this is simply and obviously false. What is worse, though, is that it robs Hume’s response of all of its *explanatory power*. The power of the simple-complex distinction lies in its ability to make easy sense of compositionality, decompositionality, combination, and recombination. The Nominalist Interpretation, by understanding ‘simple’ as, as we might put it, complex-but-associated-with-‘simple’, undermines all of those resources. It is not enough that we come to associate some perceptions with ‘simple’ and others with ‘complex’. For this explanation to work, those associations *must* reflect some real properties of the perceptions so associated: namely their *simplicity*, *complexity*, and the fact that the latter are composed of the former. The mere *associations* of certain but not other of our perceptions with the terms ‘simple’ and ‘complex’, while it might explain *something*, in no way explains that which the simple-complex distinction is meant to explain, namely, the novelty of human thought. Again, the mere fact that we associate some perceptions with the word ‘simple’ and others with the word ‘complex’ does not explain how it is that we can create novel ideas from the limited store provided by experience.

So it seems that understanding Hume’s simple-complex distinction using the Nominalist Interpretation of the theory of general ideas undermines the explanatory role that is the primary purpose of introducing that distinction. As we are about to see, this is not a feature particular to the simple-complex distinction. It causes a similar problem with the impression-idea distinction, and generalizes to all of Hume’s most important theoretical apparatuses.

### 3 The Impression-Idea Distinction

In order to begin our study of the impression-idea distinction we must first settle on a single understanding of what that distinction actually is (although, as we will see, the puzzle we are considering would arise equally for alternative interpretations of the distinction as well). For many years, there was fairly widespread consensus in the secondary literature, insofar as the issue was considered at all, that the constitutive difference between impressions and ideas is, for Hume, that the former are more forceful and vivacious than the latter. Hume does, after all, open the *Treatise* by drawing this distinction in what appears to be just that way.

<ext>

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the degree of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. (*T* 1.1.1.1; SBN 2)

</ext>

Prompted by Barry Stroud's famous critique of this way of understanding the distinction,<sup>19</sup> recent scholars have explored alternative renderings of it with varying degrees of success. My own proposal has been that the difference consists in the fact that whereas ideas are *copies* of some other mental entities (impressions), impressions are, by contrast, mental *originals*.<sup>20</sup> While we talk about impression and ideas as feeling and thinking, and while we recognize each using their degree of force and vivacity, the real difference between them, what *grounds* this talk and this recognition, is that whereas ideas are copies of some other mental entity, impressions are

mental originals. There is not the space here to rehearse the defense of this interpretation, so I will not do so. Instead, my plan is to proceed by accepting this line on the impression-idea distinction, and seeing what insights it yields with respect to the place of this distinction in the broader context of the theory of human nature that Hume presents in the *Treatise*. To do that, it will be helpful to walk through the opening pages of the *Treatise*, where this distinction is first introduced, and to see how this line portrays Hume's development of it.

As we should expect, having peeked ahead to the theory of general representation, Hume begins his articulation of the impression-idea distinction by priming his reader to form the appropriate revival sets for the terms 'impression' and 'idea'. To do that, he needs to draw his reader's attention to those salient qualities of each kind of perception that will cause the reader to form the associations of resemblance linking impressions on the one hand, and ideas on the other. We have already seen Hume taking the first step in doing this, drawing his reader's attention to the phenomenal qualities by which each can be recognized: their degree of force and vivacity. Next, Hume offers up paradigm examples of each, which are meant to bring into focus the resemblance relations that he hopes his reader will form.

<ext>

under this name [impressions] I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in the thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse, excepting only those which arise from the sight and touch, and excepting the immediate pleasure or uneasiness it may occasion. (T1.1.1.1; SBN 2)

</ext>

Next, Hume relates the new distinction that he is drawing to what he takes to be one that is antecedently and pre-theoretically familiar to his reader.

<ext>

it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking. (*T* 1.1.1.1; SBN 2)

</ext>

Finally, Hume contrasts his own idiom to that of one of his important predecessors.

<ext>

Perhaps I rather restore the word, *idea*, to its original sense, from which Mr. *Locke* had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions. (*T* 1.1.1.1, fn.2)

</ext>

Despite what his opening force-and-vivacity idiom suggests, then, Hume has *not yet* actually drawn the distinction between impression and ideas, and has not yet told us in what, if anything, this distinction consists. Thus far, the only important philosophical work that Hume has done is to have primed his reader to begin forming the associations of resemblance between what he will call ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’.

A proponent of the Nominalist Interpretation might be tempted to think that the story ends there. Having gotten his reader to form these associations, there is nothing more that Hume

*can* do to draw this distinction because the theory of general representation is explicit that *this is all there is* to such terms. It is odd, then, to find Hume, after also introducing the simple-complex distinction, writing the following.

<ext>

Having by these divisions given an order and arrangement to our objects, we may now apply ourselves to consider with the more accuracy their qualities and relations. (*T* 1.1.1.3; SBN 2)

</ext>

*Qualities? Relations?* If *all* that it is to be an impression is to be associated with the term ‘impression’ etc. and *all* that it is to be an idea is to be associated with the term ‘idea’ etc., then there can be no good reason for thinking that either all impressions or all ideas will have any other non-trivial *qualities* or *relations* in common. That is, if the theory of general representation is to be understood as the Nominalist Interpretation would have it, the categorizing of our perceptions into impressions and ideas is *arbitrary*, and without any corresponding *ontological* underpinning. If that is the case, however, then Hume should have *absolutely no reason* to expect that impressions and ideas will have *any* qualities or relations in common other than the “quality” or “relation” of being associated with the terms ‘impression’ and ‘idea’ etc. The very essence of the Nominalist Interpretation is that our “finding” certain objects to resemble one another does not reflect anything robust about those objects: it is *merely* a quirk of the associative tendencies of the human mind.

And yet, Hume’s *behavior* here indicates that this is precisely *not* how he understands at least this distinction. He clearly expects to *discover*—and takes himself successfully to

discover—that impressions share certain interesting qualities, that ideas share certain interesting qualities, and that they each bear certain interesting relations *as a kind* to other kinds of perceptions. Our question, then, must be why Hume might find himself with this expectation, and what precisely he takes himself to subsequently discover. To answer the first question, it will be helpful to complete our survey of the opening of the *Treatise* because these pages clearly contain at least a superficial answer to the second question.

So, back to Hume.

<ext>

The first circumstance that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity. (*T* 1.1.1.3; SBN 2)

</ext>

After making the appropriate modification to this observation using the simple-complex distinction, this becomes the Exact Resemblance Thesis: that every simple idea exactly resembles some simple impression. That is significant because the exact resemblance is the first of two necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for something's being a *copy* of something else. The second, of course, is that the copy must be *caused by* that which it exactly resembles. As is familiar, this causal relation itself is divisible into two further conditions: the cause must precede the effect, and the cause and effect must be constantly conjoined.

<ext>

every simple impression is attended with a correspondent idea, and every simple idea with a correspondent impression. [...] I consider the order of their *first appearance*; and find by constant experience, that the simple impression always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas, but never appear in the contrary order. (T 1.1.1.8; SBN 4–5)

</ext>

Thus, Hume is able to establish his famous Copy Principle, the thesis that,

<ext>

All our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly resemble. (T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4)

</ext>

So, perhaps the single most important relation that Hume discovers that impressions and ideas enter into is that the latter are all *copies of* the former. As I suggested at the outset of this section, as I understand Hume, this straightforward *matter of fact* about impressions and ideas will go on to do even more work for him than is normally supposed. In particular, what I have argued elsewhere is that upon discovering the Copy Principle, Hume subsequently takes this matter of fact to be what *grounds* and *explains* the distinction between impressions and ideas. I.e. what Hume discovers in “considering with the more accuracy the qualities and relations of impressions and ideas” is that what it is to *be* an idea is to be a copy of some other perception, and that what it is to *be* an impression is to be a mental original.

To summarize, then, Hume begins by announcing that he wants to call his reader's attention to a certain distinction, one with which they are likely antecedently familiar (in the form of thinking and feeling), and which it should be easy for them to draw (using degree of force and vivacity as its indicator). On the interpretive line that we have been using, he then presents what he takes to be the *real*, underlying difference between these two kinds of objects. While we *talk about* impression and ideas as feeling and thinking, and while we *recognize* each using their degree of force and vivacity, the *real difference between them*, what *grounds* this talk and this recognition, is that whereas ideas are copies of some other mental entity, impressions are mental originals.

An analogy to a familiar scientific example can help bring out the sense in which Hume seems to be committed to a robust *ontological* conclusion here, despite being concerned primarily with what appears to be merely phenomenological. To understand the scientific-explanatory dialectic in which the impression-idea distinction is situated consider the discovery that gold and lead have different atomic weights. Pre-scientifically, we were very good at telling the difference between gold and lead. We could point to certain qualities that made these two kinds of substance easy to tell apart (e.g, their colors). We could present examples of each and expect others to extrapolate from these accordingly. When we discover that gold and lead have atomic weights of seventy-nine and eighty-two respectively, however, we discover what *grounds* the pre-scientific distinction that we drew between them. What the discovery of atomic weights did was to ground our pre-scientific distinction in some *real ontological* one. Gold and lead are *composed of* atoms, these atoms have such-and-such properties, and that is what *makes* gold and lead different. It is the exact same explanatory process that is at work in Hume's impression-idea

distinction: impressions and ideas *are* mental originals and copies respectively, originals and copies have such-and-such properties, and these are what *make* impressions and ideas different.

That is *what* Hume takes himself to discover. The question we must answer now is how we are to understand this discovery. By what right can Hume take himself to have hit upon certain *qualities* and *relations* that provide grounds for anything else?

If we consider just the first few pages of the *Treatise*, then the justification for taking ideas to be copies and for impressions to be mental originals is simply that doing so successfully explains our (mostly correct, but occasionally incorrect, as in “madness or fever”) pre-theoretical use of terms such as ‘thinking’ and ‘feeling’, and our inclination to sort perceptions according to their degree of force and vivacity. For instance, it will turn out to be *because* ideas are copies and impressions originals that the former are less forceful and vivacious than the latter, and it is that fact, in turn, that helps us introspectively distinguish one kind of perception from the other as we do. (The gist of this explanation is that when ideas are copied from impressions some, but not all, of the force and vivacity from the latter is transferred to the former.)

Already here we can see the distinction between impressions and ideas—*qua* the distinction between mental originals and copies—playing a crucial *explanatory* role, which it would be difficult to separate out from its attendant ontological commitment. That is, if the *only* difference between being an impression and being an idea were the term with which a perception was associated, then *explaining our association of those perceptions with those terms*, as Hume seems to do, would be impossible. Imagine how that explanation would have to go. We find ourselves associating certain perceptions with the term ‘impression’ (or ‘feeling’) and others with the term ‘idea’ (or ‘thinking’). We wonder whether there is anything that underlies our doing so. We discover that what we have been calling ‘ideas’ are all copies of what we have

been calling ‘impressions’, etc. That *seems* explanatory until we additionally discover that what it is to be a copy is merely to be associated with the word ‘copy’, which in turn is to be associated with the words ‘resemblance’ and ‘cause’. And so on for any term that comes to play a role in any such explanations. All are cast by the Nominalist Interpretation as *merely* reflecting the associative tendencies of the human mind. If, however, what we are seeking is an explanation *of these very tendencies*, then surely any such explanation is circular and therefore a failure.

This brings us to the real reason that Hume takes himself to have hit upon certain *qualities* and *relations* that provide the grounds of the impression-idea distinction: that distinction affords *enormous explanatory power*, which power is only gained by accepting a *real distinction* between impressions and ideas *contra* the Nominalist Interpretation of the theory of general representation. Consider the implications of accepting the Nominalist Interpretation of this distinction. To be an impression would be *just* to be associated with the word ‘impression’, etc. To be an idea would *just* to be associated with the word ‘idea’. To claim that impressions are more forceful and vivacious than ideas would *not* be to claim that there is an introspectible quality that impressions have to a higher degree than ideas. Except, that is, insofar as what we meant by this claim is that those perceptions associated with ‘impression’ are also associated with the *words* ‘more force and vivacity’.

So where does this leave us? It seems that to do justice to the explanatory role of the impression-idea distinction, we must suppose that the Nominalist Interpretation of the theory of general representation is wrong, at least in this case. But the alternative to the Nominalist Interpretation, the Ontological Interpretation, at least as a way of understanding Hume’s theory of general representation as a whole, is very unattractive.

## Conclusion

What I want to suggest in closing is that the proper solution to this puzzle is to draw our own distinction between Hume's stance on the general terms of the language of the vulgar and those of the language employed by the scientist of human nature. In a more contemporary parlance, Hume's nominalism is not a blanket ontological austerity, but rather a prioritization of scientific ontology over the ontology of common sense. Surprisingly, Hume is a scientific realist. While we can suppose along with the Nominalist Interpretation that general terms in the language of the vulgar do not represent any real qualities or relations between the items that they represent, this is precisely because the use of such terms is *explained* by the theoretical posits of science. Scientific terms, on the other hand, are ontologically committing: such terms track real distinctions between the items that they represent. Their representative power is still describable using the apparatus of the theory of general ideas, but these representations are *privileged* in a certain way: they explain and therefore supersede the general terms used in the language of the vulgar. This privileging of the language of science, I want to suggest, reflects a priority of the *ontology* of science. As a twentieth-century advocate of both scientific realism and a picture-theory of representation, Wilfrid Sellars, once put it regarding the language of *physical* science:

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[T]he Scientific Realist need only argue [...] that in principle this language could *replace* the common-sense framework in *all* its roles, with the result that the idea that scientific theory enables a more adequate picturing of the world could be taken at its face value. (SM V.90)

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Without being able to delve into any detail just now, what I want to suggest is that Hume's *use* of general terms in his conducting the science of human nature (even in the absence of his explicit endorsement) reflects precisely this brand of scientific realism: it is by privileging one language over another, because of its greater explanatory power, that we picture the world as containing certain objects, qualities, and relations. We ought to be Nominalists about the linguistic framework of common sense, precisely *because* we are ontologically committed to that of the science of human nature.

Scientific Realism is the view that because the entities posited by science explain the behaviors of the entities posited by common sense (or previous scientific theories), the former enjoy an ontological priority as well: scientific entities are what really exist, and explain what common sense takes to exist as being *merely appearance*. This is what happens in the *Treatise*. Common sense takes, e.g. dogs to exist, and represents dogs as existing by using the term 'dog' in describing the world. Hume explains away the existence of dogs precisely by showing that the use of the term 'dog' can be explained entirely by the theory of general representation. All that that term reflects is the associative tendencies of the human mind. Terms like 'simple' and 'complex' or 'impression' and 'idea', however, cannot be so explained, and, in fact, play a crucial role in the explanation of the terms of the vulgar. Thus, the terms employed by the scientist of human nature enjoy an explanatory, and therefore ontological, priority that the terms of the vulgar do not.

Of course, Hume's own distinction between the language of the vulgar and that of the scientist of man is complicated slightly by his introduction of a *third* language: that of the false philosophy (T 1.4.3.9; SBN 222–23). In "Of skepticism with regard to the senses," Hume describes a process whereby in the minds, "of all of those, who reflect ever so little on this

subject”, the false philosophy replaces the language of the vulgar, which changes (for the worse) their conception of, in this case, body (*T* 1.4.2.49; SBN 213). This is an example of the kind of replacement of one language by another, supposedly more explanatory one that, while pernicious in the case of the false philosophy, is precisely what Hume would recommend in the case of the true philosophy (putting aside the concerns about such a change bringing with it melancholy and despair—*T* 1.4.7.1; SBN 264—which concern the effect of such a change, but not the truth of what Hume does, after all, call the *true* philosophy). In fact, the critique that Hume levels in 1.4.2 against the false philosophy is that because the false philosophy provides only a pseudo-explanation of the phenomena already captured by the language of the vulgar, it has no authority that is *independent* of that of the language of the vulgar, and so has no legitimate claim to replace it. That at least weakly implies that should a language have, “recommendation to reason or the imagination,” it would also thereby have “authority of its own,” i.e. such a language would not depend for its acceptance on preserving the distinctions made in the language of the vulgar, but could instead replace these with its own picture of the world. I take these to be precisely the grounds on which the true philosophy, the science of human nature that Hume conducts in the *Treatise*, supersedes the language of vulgar.

One final clarification is needed here. One might suppose that in the case of the distinction between impressions and ideas, for example, the language of the scientist of human nature does not replace the language of the vulgar, but rather that it supplements or enriches it. Hume does claim, for example, that, “Everyone of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking” (*T* 1.1.1.1; SBN 1–2), which could be taken to imply that the distinction between impressions and ideas is one that is already present in the language of the vulgar. I think we ought to resist this implication. The distinction that the vulgar draw between

feeling and thinking is not *the same* distinction that the scientist of human nature draws between impressions and ideas, although the two are intimately related. Consider, for example, that the vulgar will rely on the degree of force and vivacity of a perception to draw this distinction, but as Hume points out, there are times when the degree of force and vivacity of an idea can exceed that of an impression and times when our impressions are so faint as to render them indistinguishable from an idea (*T* 1.1.1.1; SBN 2). So, the way that the vulgar draw this distinction can lead them to classify some perceptions as ideas that the scientist of human nature, using the Copy Principle, will classify as impressions and vice versa. As Hume's description of such circumstances indicates, though, these are cases in which the degree of force and vivacity of a perception is *misleading*. For this to be possible, the two distinctions must be different, and while the distinction that the vulgar draw is *methodologically* prior to that of the scientist, what I hope to have shown is that we have reason to take Hume to believe that it is the scientist's distinction, because of its greater explanatory power, that is *ontologically* prior.

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<sup>1</sup> What it is for a relation to be *real* in the appropriate sense, and the corresponding question of the specific form of nominalism at issue here, will be the subject of the following section.

<sup>2</sup> Baxter, “Abstraction, Inseparability, and Identity.”

<sup>3</sup> Russow, “Simple Ideas and Resemblance,” brings out why Hume must take this position and the trouble that it causes him to do so. Gamboa, “Hume on Resemblance, Relevance and Representation.” presents compelling evidence that Hume accepted something like the Nominalist Interpretation, and defends Hume against objections stemming from this. Hawkins, “Simplicity, Resemblance and Contrariety in Hume’s *Treatise*,” is an early presentation of some of the pressing problems with the Ontological Interpretation. Nelson and Landy “Qualities and Simple Ideas: Hume and his Debt to Berkeley,” also explores the Nominalist Interpretation. For a defense of the Ontological Interpretation against the Nominalist Interpretation see Tienseon, “Resemblance and General Terms.”

<sup>4</sup> Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Vol. 1 of 4*. For citations from Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* I employ the standard convention of citing the book, chapter, section, and paragraph number from the Clarendon edition, followed by the page number from the Selby-Bigge/Nidditch edition.

<sup>5</sup> A similar point can account for the fact—raised by Vision, “Hume’s Attack on Abstract Ideas: Real and Imagined,”—that while Hume’s arguments address abstract general ideas, they do not address abstract particular ideas. I discuss the details of Vision’s interpretation briefly below.

<sup>6</sup> T 1.1.7.2; SBN 18.

<sup>7</sup> Tienson, “Hume on Universals and General Terms.”

<sup>8</sup> T 1.3.7.5n; SBN 97

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<sup>9</sup> (A revival set is roughly the set of resembling ideas that one recalls upon hearing a certain word.) ‘Revival Set’ follows Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*.

<sup>10</sup> See Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy*.

<sup>11</sup> Which, of course, some do and other do not. Cf. Read and Richman, *The New Hume Debate: Revised Edition*.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the discussion of natural and philosophical relations in Beebe, “Hume’s Two Definitions: The Procedural Interpretation.”

<sup>13</sup> Hakkarainen, “Hume’s Argument for the Ontological Independence of Simple Properties.”

<sup>14</sup> As we will see in the following two sections, the facts at issue cannot be *just* facts about the associative tendencies of the human because that would undermine the explanatory power that Hume clearly needs such facts to play.

<sup>15</sup> Of course, we can grant to Hume that such a case is *possible*, for there to exist a mind that consists only of a single perception. In fact, for all we know, some such mind is *actual*. Still, such is not the case for anyone, for instance, *reading this paper*.

<sup>16</sup> Now, one might object here that one is *not* meant to recall this procedure in its entirety, but only the simple idea that is its focus. But what would that be like to do? Even if one could recall, for a moment, *just* the dot without any of the other perceptions that surrounded it (which we do not, in fact, do) even this image would be part of a *temporal* complex from which it would need to be distinguished, etc.

<sup>17</sup> My thanks to an anonymous reviewer at the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* for pointing out the need to address this way of understanding the relations that constitute general ideas.

<sup>18</sup> This example is borrowed from Nelson and Landy, “Qualities and Simple Ideas: Hume and his Debt to Berkeley.”

<sup>19</sup> Stroud, *Hume*.

<sup>20</sup> Landy, “Hume’s Impression-Idea Distinction.”