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Hume's Theory of Mental Representation

DAVID LANDY

Abstract: Hume's arguments in the *Treatise* require him to employ not only the copy principle, which explains the intrinsic properties of perceptions, but also a thesis that explains the representational content of a perception. I propose that Hume holds the semantic copy principle, which states that a perception represents that of which it is a copy. Hume employs this thesis in a number of his most important arguments, and his doing so enables him to answer an important objection concerning the status of the copy principle. I further argue that the semantic copy principle is necessary, a priori, and discovered through an analysis of our general idea of representational content.

The precise status of Hume's copy principle—the thesis that every simple idea is a copy of some simple impression—has long been a thorny issue among Hume scholars.¹ On the one hand, if the copy principle is a mere empirical generalization, it lacks the authority whereby it can be used to *refute* the claims of Hume's predecessors that we have such controversial ideas as those of necessary connection, the external world, or the self.² It would seem that each of these, rather than being undermined by the copy principle, would be *counterexamples* to it. On the other hand, the only alternative to the copy principle's being an empirical generalization would be that it is an a priori principle. This alternative is unattractive for at least two reasons. First, accepting it severely undermines Hume's commitment to pursuing a purely *empirical* science of man. Secondly, Hume explicitly denies that there can be any a priori principles regarding the causal connections between ideas, and the copy principle clearly has a causal component.

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So, the copy principle cannot be an a priori principle. Various attempts have been made by recent commentators to avoid spearing Hume on the horns of this dilemma.³

What I will argue below is that all of these efforts have been misplaced, because there is an important sense in which it is not the copy principle (as it has been typically understood) that is meant to do this work in Hume's arguments at all. The copy principle is a claim about the matter of factual relations of simple ideas to their corresponding simple impressions: the former are all copies of the latter. That is, each simple idea exactly resembles and is caused by some simple impression. This claim alone, however, cannot be all that is in play in Hume's arguments. Hume's conclusions all concern what our ideas are ideas *of*.⁴ We do not have an idea *of* necessary connection. We do not have an idea *of* the external world. We do not have an idea *of* the self, and so on. What the copy principle earns Hume is only the claim that we do not have an idea that is a copy of, for instance, a necessary connection. This does not establish that we do not have an idea that is *of* a necessary connection, however, without the additional premise that our ideas are *of* that of which they are copies. Notice that one need not take Hume's conclusions to be even this strong to recognize the need for some principle of semantic determination. So long as Hume's conclusions concern what our ideas are of *at all*—so even if he concludes that our idea of necessary connection *is really just* an idea of constant conjunction, or something more or less robust than this—Hume will only be able to reach such conclusions if he has some principle that determines what our ideas are ideas *of*. This premise is what I will call the semantic copy principle; it is, I will argue, the premise that does all the heavy lifting in Hume's purported refutations of his predecessors.

Thus, it is not the copy principle that stands in need of support (it might be a mere empirical generalization), but it is the semantic copy principle that does. Of course, not much would be gained if the semantic copy principle faces the same fatal dilemma that the copy principle does, but it does not. The problems that face interpretations of the copy principle as an a priori principle do not apply to interpretations of the semantic copy principle. In particular, rather than violating Hume's commitment to empiricism, the semantic copy principle qua a priori principle simply *expresses* this commitment. It expresses Hume's commitment to *concept* empiricism, the thesis that the content of our mental representations (ideas) is derived from experience (impressions). Furthermore, since the semantic copy principle is not itself a thesis that claims that any particular causal connections actually obtain, Hume's adopting this a priori principle is consistent with his condemnation of purportedly a priori knowledge of causal connections.

My procedure is as follows. In the first section, I present and critique Don Garrett's influential solution to the dilemma concerning the status of the copy

principle. I draw what I take to be a crucial distinction between a perception's *pictorial* content and its *representational* content and argue that Garrett's reading of the copy principle concerns only the pictorial content of perceptions while what is needed to make Hume's arguments valid is a premise concerning their representational content. In the next section, I present three of Hume's most important arguments from the *Treatise*, noting the crucial role that the semantic copy principle plays in each of these arguments. In the third section, I demonstrate that the semantic copy principle does not fall prey to the objections that the copy principle does. In the final section, I address two further objections to this reading of Hume, which sees the semantic copy principle as the core of his theory of mental representation. The first objection is that were Hume to use this principle, he would be unable to account for *misrepresentation*. The second objection is that the semantic copy principle cannot account for the representational content of complex ideas. I will argue that both objections can be met by making a slight modification to the semantic copy principle as it applies to complex ideas, which, I argue, are the only ideas that can misrepresent.

I

Before we look at Garrett's defense of Hume's use of the copy principle, a few pieces of business require our attention. First, there is the definition of the copy principle. The copy principle states that every simple idea is a copy of some simple impression. The key notion here is that of being a copy, and Hume is fairly clear about just what this entails. For x to be a copy of y requires that two conditions be met. These conditions are each necessary and together they are jointly sufficient for x to be a copy of y . The first condition is that x must be caused by y . Of course, the word 'cause' must be construed in the proper Humean way here, so that for x to be caused by y is for x and y to be constantly conjoined and for y to always precede x . When Hume sets out to prove the copy principle in the opening pages of the *Treatise*, he observes that exactly these two parts of the causal condition are met.

I first make myself certain . . . of what I have already asserted, that every simple impression is attended with a correspondent idea, and every simple idea with a correspondent impression. . . . That I may know on which side this dependence lies, I consider the order of their *first appearance*; and find by constant experience, that the simple impressions always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas, but never appear in the contrary order. (T 1.1.1.8; SBN 4)⁵

Correspondent impressions and ideas are constantly conjoined, and the former always precede the latter. Thus, Hume can conclude that impressions are the cause of ideas (in the proper Humean sense of ‘cause’).

The second condition that must be met for x to be a copy of y is that x must exactly resemble y . Again, Hume in the opening pages of the *Treatise* offers evidence that this condition is met in the case of ideas and impressions, saying, “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). Of course, Hume goes on to limit his resemblance thesis to *simple* ideas and impressions, and so correspondingly limits the copy principle to just these as well. It is important to note another restriction in scope that Hume places on the resemblance thesis at the end of this quotation, namely, that an idea can exactly resemble an impression even if the degrees of force and vivacity of the two are different. This is because the exact resemblance thesis concerns specifically what Hume elsewhere calls the *circumstances* of these perceptions, which I will call their *pictorial content*.

The circumstance, or pictorial content, can best be explicated by way of an analogy. Consider the following picture.



Fig. 1

The pictorial content of this picture consists of four black lines of equal length arranged at ninety-degree angles to one another against a white background. For another picture to exactly resemble this one, it would also have to consist of four lines of this length arranged at ninety-degree angles to one another against a white background. The pictorial content of an image, including impressions and ideas, is constituted entirely by *intrinsic* features of that image.

This is a point commonly made about Hume’s exact resemblance thesis in order to explicate the notions of force and vivacity, which are not part of the pictorial content of perceptions precisely because they are not *intrinsic* features of a perception.⁶ The idea here is that we ought not to think of the degree of force and vivacity of a perception as affecting how the perception “looks” to the mind’s eye. A less forceful and vivacious image is not faded like an old painting. Rather, we ought to shift our focus from the idiom of “vivacity” to that of “forcefulness” and construe all of this talk functionally. A forceful idea is one that forces itself on the mind, that cannot be easily ignored, and so forth. This is of

enormous help in understanding Hume's claim that any change in a perception other than in degree of force and vivacity changes the content of the perception: if changes in force and vivacity changed the intrinsic qualities of the perception, it would be very difficult to explain why such changes did not also change its content.

In general, the intrinsic features of any given perception are, roughly, just what we normally take to be the features delivered by the various sense modalities, the perception's imagistic features—its particular sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste. One might describe such features of a perception by comparing the perception with some other perception, but such a description would not be essential to the features themselves. Instead, this would merely be a way of gesturing at the features of the perception itself. Thus, even if one describes a rectangle as being an image of a book as a way of "getting at" the rectangular shape of the image, this of-ness is still not an intrinsic feature of the image, although its being rectangular would be.

What concerns us here, however, is a slightly different contrast. Notice that in describing the image above, we made no reference to what that image is an image *of*. That is, we described the intrinsic features of that picture but did not mention, for instance, that it is a picture of a building as seen from directly above, or of a book seen from straight on, and so on. We can call what a picture is a picture *of* the *representational content* of that image, and it will be important for what follows to notice that it is, pre-theoretically, at least possible for the pictorial content of an image and the representational content of that same image to come apart.⁷ For instance, there are certain abstract paintings that certainly have *pictorial content* (a bunch of red, yellow, and blue paint splashes on a white canvas) but which do not have any *representational content* (these paintings are not paintings *of* anything). Conversely, in typical cases, the pictorial content of a written or spoken word is, in a sense, irrelevant to what it represents—hieroglyphics and onomatopoeia aside. Such words are not *iconic* representations ('dog' does not look like a dog), but they do have representational content (they are *representations*).⁸

In summary, Hume's copy principle states that all ideas are copies of impressions, that is, all ideas are caused by and have exactly the same *pictorial* content as some corresponding impression. It is important to note that the copy principle, as formulated here, does not say anything about the *representational* content of impressions or ideas. It is merely a thesis concerning the causal relations between impressions and ideas and the sameness of their pictorial content. It is the causal relation that is of particular concern to those who have worried about the justificatory status of the copy principle in the *Treatise*, and we are now in a position to turn to Garrett's defense of that status.

Garrett's defense is aimed, first and foremost, at critics of Hume such as Anthony Flew, who claims that while the evidence that Hume offers in favor of

the copy principle justifies its use as a defeasible empirical generalization, Hume's *actual* use of it implies that it is a necessary truth. Flew argues that

such sentences as “all our ideas . . . are copies of our impressions . . .” [are] ambiguous: most of the time they are taken to express a contingent generalization; but at some moments of crisis [Hume] apparently construes them as embodying a necessary proposition. Such manoeuvres have the effect of making it look as if the immunity to falsification of a necessary truth had been gloriously combined with the substantial assertiveness of a contingent generalization. (Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief*, 25–26)

The idea here is that if the copy principle is, as it seems to be in the opening pages of the *Treatise*, a mere empirical generalization, then Hume's use of it to argue that we do not have ideas such as those of necessary connection, the external world, or the self cannot be justified. These should be seen as *counterexamples* to that principle rather than as *violations* of it. However, the copy principle would be strong enough to play this role only if it were not an empirical generalization but rather a necessary proposition. It cannot, however, be necessary because the copy principle asserts that a certain *causal* relation holds between impressions and ideas, and all causal relations are contingent for Hume. Thus, Hume's use of the copy principle in the *Treatise* is unwarranted.

Garrett's defense of Hume's use of the copy principle centers on the claim that rather than mysteriously granting the copy principle the status of a necessary truth, and thus violating some of his deepest commitments to empiricism, Hume grants the copy principle the status of an empirical generalization *with a good deal of evidence in its favor* and uses it as one among many pieces of evidence weighing against the claim that we have certain controversial ideas. Garrett writes,

there is no need to interpret Hume as maintaining that it is either a priori or necessary that every simple idea has a corresponding simple impression. He need only maintain that we have *found* this to be the case, thereby raising a reasonable expectation that the search for an original impression for a problematic idea will shed light (due to the greater clarity and vivacity of impressions) on whether the idea really exists and, if it does, on its nature. (*Cognition and Commitment*, 49)

According to Garrett, the copy principle has a good deal of evidence in its favor, but it is neither necessary nor a priori. Impressions are more forceful and vivacious than ideas, so if we have some evidence that every idea is a copy of some impression, it seems prudent to seek out the original impression for particularly obscure ideas in order to gain a better understanding of them. If we cannot find

such an impression, given that the idea was questionable to begin with, we have *some* good evidence that we do not really have such an idea.

Furthermore, Garrett points out that the copy principle is not the only piece of evidence in play in the debate over these controversial ideas. He says,

In each of these cases, admitting a counterexample to the copy principle would mean not merely violating the Resemblance Thesis but violating it in such a way as to allow nonimagistic ideas that could not, even in principle, resemble impressions. It would thus require the admission of an entirely distinct representational faculty, and hence a very serious modification in the cognitive psychology that Hume thinks he finds otherwise well supported by experience. (*Cognition and Commitment*, 49–50)

The evidence that the copy principle provides against these controversial ideas is supplemented by the evidence that Hume has for his cognitive psychology as a whole. As Garrett mentions here, Hume's cognitive psychology is one according to which all cognition is accounted for in terms of perceptions, which are themselves all *images* of various kinds (including sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and so on). Images, of course, all have *pictorial content*—this is what makes them images, and Garrett's point here is that the ideas in question, were they to exist, would have to be such that they lacked pictorial content. The implausibility of such an idea, combined with the implausibility of a violation of the copy principle and the inherently unclear quality of such ideas, amounts to enough evidence for Hume to reject the claim that such ideas exist.

So, Garrett's position is as follows. The copy principle, which states that all simple ideas are caused by and have exactly the same pictorial content as their corresponding impression, is a well-supported empirical generalization. Hume never treats it as either necessary or a priori. The work the copy principle does in the *Treatise* is merely to *support* Hume's claim that we can have no ideas of necessary connection, the external world, or the self. In further support of this claim is Hume's similarly well-founded cognitive psychology, which purports to explain all human cognition in terms of images, mental items with pictorial content. While I find this account of the use of the copy principle reasonable and compelling, I will now argue that it is still not enough to establish Hume's conclusions.

Here is the gist of my argument. What Garrett's interpretation of Hume's use of the copy principle earns for Hume are the following theses: (a) that we have no ideas with certain problematic pictorial content, and (b) that we have no ideas without any pictorial content at all. From these theses alone, however, it does not follow that we do not have ideas *of* necessary connection, the external world, or the self (or any *other* conclusions concerning what our ideas are ideas *of*). What is needed to establish those claims is a thesis about the *representational* content of

ideas. If we accept Garrett's defense of the copy principle, what we earn for Hume is justification for the claim that we do not have ideas that are images consisting of necessary connections, the external world, or the self. This is because, as we have seen, the copy principle is a thesis about the causal connection between impressions and ideas, and the relation of the pictorial content of these. It is *not* a principle about representational content.⁹

What Garrett gets Hume is the claim that we do not have ideas with certain pictorial contents. That is an important step in Hume's argument, but it cannot be the final step. What is still needed to make those arguments good is a thesis that links the pictorial content of an idea to its representational content. It is only by employing such a thesis that Hume can earn his conclusions that we cannot have ideas *of* necessary connection, the external world, the self, and so on. The most plausible such thesis is what I have called the semantic copy principle, which states that the representational content of any perception is that of which it is a copy.¹⁰ To put it another way, the semantic copy principle states that a perception is *of* that of which it is a copy. It is *this* thesis that allows us to move from the claim that we do not have an idea with a certain *pictorial* content to the claim that we do not have an idea with certain, corresponding *representational* content.¹¹ In particular, it allows the move from, for instance, (1) "We have no idea that is a copy of a necessary connection," to (2) "We have no idea that is *of* a necessary connection." (2) is what Hume is after in the *Treatise*, while (1) is merely a necessary step along the way. (1) is what Garrett earns Hume, whereas (2) is only earned via the *semantic* copy principle.

To understand this point, we must understand what each of (1) and (2) are claiming, and this task seems particularly thorny when it comes to (1). What would it mean for an idea to be a copy of *a necessary connection*? At first blush, that might seem to be a category mistake. We earlier cashed out 'exact resemblance' in terms of pictorial content, but necessary connections (and the external world, and the self) do not themselves *have* pictorial content. So, (1) seems trivially true. To see that it is not, we need to alter slightly our definition of exact resemblance. To do so, an example will help.

Consider a standard office copier. What it produces are copies just in case these are caused by the original (they are not produced *ex nihilo*) and exactly resemble that original (they exactly replicate all the relevant intrinsic features of the original). Notice that even if the original is not something with pictorial content (we noted earlier that words, for instance, are not iconic representations and so do not have pictorial content), it can still be copied. This is achieved, roughly, just in case the copy reproduces certain relevant intrinsic features of the original. The copy has to replicate the shapes on the page, for instance, but can be made of a different kind of paper. So, our earlier definition of 'exact resemblance' was a simplified

instance of this more general one. The precise details need not concern us here; a rough idea is all that Hume employs and should suffice.

So, (1) states that no idea is caused by and exactly resembles a necessary connection. The key is that there is no idea that itself consists in a necessary connection between distinct items. We can grant that Hume presents enough evidence of various kinds to establish that much. What (1) does not establish, however, is that we do not have an idea *of* a necessary connection (or that our idea of necessary connection is *of* something altogether different than this). To earn that conclusion, what Hume needs is a theory of what determines the representational content of ideas. This theory will have to be such that his claim that we have no idea that is a *copy* of a necessary connection is sufficient to establish his further claim that we have no idea *of* a necessary connection either. My suggestion, of course, is that the semantic copy principle is the most plausible candidate to play this role.

To see what is at issue here, it might help to consider some *alternative* semantic principles to the one that I have proposed Hume employs. So, consider instead a twentieth-century theory of representational content: Jerry Fodor's. Being a twentieth-century philosopher rather than an eighteenth-century philosopher, Fodor is able to abandon Hume's commitment to imagism, the thesis that all mental items are images of some kind or other. Fodor thus constructs his theory of content as a theory of how certain items (for example, brain-states) come to represent other items (for example, cows) as follows: "Cows cause 'cow' tokens, and (let's suppose) cats cause 'cow' tokens. But 'cow' means cow and not cat or cow or cat because there being cat-caused 'cow' tokens depends on there being cow-caused 'cow' tokens, but not the other way around. 'Cow' means cow because . . . noncow-caused 'cow' tokens are asymmetrically dependent upon cow-caused 'cow' tokens."¹² According to Fodor, it is in virtue of the fact that any token of 'cow' that is caused by something other than a cow is asymmetrically dependent upon tokens of 'cow' that are caused *by cows* that 'cow' comes to represent cows. The particulars of this theory are not our concern here. The point here is that this is an example of a theory that, if Hume held it, would undermine the move from the application of the copy principle to the conclusion that we do not have the controversial ideas at issue in the *Treatise*. Let me explain.

Suppose that we accept Garrett's defense of Hume's use of the copy principle as it stands, and grant that Hume is justified in making something like the following argument.

1. We have no impression the pictorial content of which includes a single subject of experience persisting through time. ("There is no impression constant and invariable" [T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251].)
2. All simple ideas are copies of some simple impression. (The copy principle)

3. So, we have no idea the pictorial content of which includes a single subject of experience persisting through time. (1, 2)

If, as I claim he does, Hume holds the semantic copy principle, the argument would continue as follows.

4. So, we have no idea the *representational* content of which is a single subject of experience persisting through time. (3, The semantic copy principle)¹³

Now, suppose that instead of the semantic copy principle, Hume held Fodor's theory of representational content. In that case, (4) would not follow. Whether or not we have an idea with such-and-such representational content, on Fodor's line, is a matter of what ideas asymmetrically depend on what other ideas. Pictorial content, and thus copying, is not a factor in determining representational content at all. So, from the fact that we do not have an idea that has the *pictorial content* "self," it does not follow that we do not have an idea that has the *representational content* "self." We would still have an idea *of* the self, on Fodor's line, if that idea bore the appropriate asymmetrical dependency to a self, regardless of what the pictorial content of our ideas is.

The point here is not that Hume could have held Fodor's theory of representational content. Rather, it is that it *matters* what theory of representational content Hume holds. In fact, his conclusions that we do not have ideas *of* necessary connection, the external world, or the self (or that our ideas of these are radically different than his predecessors had supposed) *necessarily depend on* his theory of representational content. The copy principle, because it is a thesis only about the *pictorial* content of our ideas, does not establish anything about the representational content of those ideas without supplementation by an appropriate theory of representational content. What I will argue is that just such a theory is readily available to, and employed by, Hume. It is the semantic copy principle that explicitly licenses *exactly* the move from conclusions about pictorial content established by the copy principle to conclusions about corresponding representational content.

Before I show that, however, I want to make what is at issue here salient in one more way. Consider again Garrett's defense of Hume's use of the copy principle. The copy principle states that every simple idea is a copy of some simple impression. We have been considering a worry that despite what the copy principle might purport to establish, Hume's predecessors might nonetheless find themselves with such controversial ideas as those of necessary connection, the external world, and the self. Armed with the semantic copy principle, we can now see that their claim is ambiguous. On the one hand, they might be claiming to have an idea with a certain *pictorial content*, and on the other they might be claiming to have an idea with a certain *representational content*.

The copy principle can most plausibly be used to refute only the former claim. In that case, the dialectic would unfold roughly as follows. Hume's predecessors

claim to be able to form mental images of things like necessary connections, the external world, the self, and so on. Hume leverages his well-supported, but defeasible, copy principle to show that they can form no such mental pictures. While this dialectic does seem to make Hume's argument *strong* enough, it also portrays him as arguing against a *straw man*. As portrayed here, Hume's argument can only ever be successful against an opponent that already accepts that all thinking is imagistic. Certainly no rationalists would be willing to make this concession, and it is arguable that neither of Hume's most important fellow empiricists, Locke and Berkeley, would either.¹⁴ All of these philosophers could agree with Hume that we can form no *images* of these controversial ideas but consistently maintain that we could nonetheless have mental representations with this controversial representational content.

If, however, we see Hume's opponents as making a claim about their ability to form mental representations with certain controversial *representational content*, Hume's use of the semantic copy principle engages his predecessors head on. Their claim then amounts to one that we can form mental representations *of* such things as necessary connections, the external world, the self, and so on. Hume's refutation of *this* thesis then has two parts: an analysis of what it is for an idea to have representational content and a well-supported empirical generalization to the effect that these conditions are not met in the controversial cases.

On this reading, the status of the copy principle is much more comfortable. Even on Garrett's reconstruction, it is still somewhat awkward to use even a well-supported empirical generalization to prove to people that they do not have ideas with a certain pictorial content that they claim to have. Here, the copy principle is relieved of that burden. Hume's opponents are not disputing his claim that their ideas do not have a certain *pictorial* content. That can be a point of agreement, especially once Hume's study establishing the copy principle is complete. What is at issue is something that we would expect to be much less transparent to an individual thinker: not the "phenomenology" of their ideas but their *representational content*. Once we separate these two notions of content out, it seems clear that what Hume is after is a conclusion about the latter kind, and that the semantic copy principle is exactly what he will use to reach it.

Having now argued that Hume *must* employ a theory of representational content, the next item on my agenda will be to show Hume *actually* doing so. In the next section, I present selections from three of Hume's most important arguments in the *Treatise* and show that each one of these, more or less explicitly, makes use of not just the copy principle but also the semantic copy principle. At that point, we will have established that Hume *ought* to employ the semantic copy principle and that he *does* employ it, but not *how* he *can* employ it consistently with his other commitments. That is, we will not yet have addressed how his use of the semantic copy principle avoids falling prey to a straightforward iteration

of the dilemma that the copy principle faced. Thus, in the third section, I argue that for Hume, the semantic copy principle is a priori, necessary, and the result of an analysis of the idea ‘representational content,’ and that he can defend each of these positions. Before that, however, it is on to the arguments.

II

Before examining the arguments in which Hume concludes that we do *not* have certain controversial ideas, a word is in order about the role that these conclusions play in the *Treatise*, and how to understand them. This is because, while Hume clearly does argue that there are certain ideas that we *do not have* (as we are about to see), he equally clearly holds that we *do* have certain other ideas which *answer to the very same names as the ones that we do not have*. Thus, the waters can be very murky here indeed.¹⁵

To bring out this tension, we can consider two kinds of contrasting texts: those in which Hume states one of the negative theses that we have been examining but also hedges its negativity and those in which he seems to state a *positive* thesis that directly contradicts the hedged-negative one. For example, having just presented what “some philosophers” take our idea of the self to be, Hume writes, “nor have we any idea of the *self*, after the manner it is here explain’d. For from what impression cou’d this idea be deriv’d? This question ’tis impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity; and yet ’tis a question, which must be answer’d, if we wou’d have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251). Notice that what threatens the philosopher who purports to have an idea of the self here is not having made a mere mistake, but the loss of all *intelligibility*. This philosopher must demonstrate that the idea of a self comes from some impression in order to show that this notion is of anything at all. The test of whether there is any impression from which the idea of a self comes is not *just* a test of whether there *is* an idea that properly bears this description but also a test of whether any idea that we *do* have could possibly have *this* as its content.

Notice also, however, that while this is a clear statement of one of the negative theses that we have been supposing Hume to make, it is also, in a sense hedged. Hume does not state that we do not have any idea of the self (or idea answering to the term ‘self’) but, rather, that we have no idea of the self “*after the manner it is here explain’d.*” That is, what Hume argues for is the conclusion that our idea of the self cannot be what “some philosophers” have taken it to be (an idea of a single, simple subject of experience that persists through all phenomenological change). Demonstrating that *this* idea is one that we cannot have will still require the use of the semantic copy principle, but this is a slightly weaker conclusion than the conclusion that we have no idea answering to the term ‘self’ at all.

This should be expected because, for example, later in this same section, Hume claims that the bundle theory of the self reflects “the true idea of the human mind” (T 1.4.6.19; SBN 261). Therefore, Hume cannot earlier have meant that we have *no* idea of the self: we do have *an* idea of it: the idea of a bundle of perceptions. Instead, what Hume is arguing is that the idea that *his predecessors* took us to have of the self is not one that we can possibly have. As I argued in the previous section, for this argument to be a success, Hume will have to employ some premise concerning not just the pictorial content of the relevant ideas but also one about their *representational* content. Thus, whether one lays the emphasis on Hume's *negative* conclusions or on their *positive* counterparts, in either case, Hume's argument for these conclusions will only go through if he employs some principle of semantic determination in them. My suggestion has been that he puts the semantic copy principle to this end, and with this clarification about Hume's *conclusions* in hand, we can now continue to the task of examining his *arguments* for evidence of his use of precisely this premise.

I will begin with a passage from Hume's argument in *Treatise* 1.4.6 for the conclusion that we do not have the kind of idea of the self that his predecessors have supposed that we have: “For from what impression can this idea be deriv'd? This question 'tis impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity; and yet 'tis a question, which must necessarily be answer'd, if we would have the idea of the self pass for clear and intelligible” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251). What Hume demands from such philosophers is that they produce the impression from which the idea is copied, and what is at stake in meeting this demand is the very *intelligibility* of that idea. That is, we cannot so much as make sense of an idea of the self, if there is no impression of which it is a copy. This is a much stronger claim than merely that we cannot have such an idea. The notion of an idea with that representational content is unintelligible unless we find the impression from which such an idea is copied. This stronger claim would only be true if there is something about the very notion of an idea's representational content that implied that it is a copy of some impression. This is exactly what the semantic copy principle states.

Hume's argument continues:

It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of the self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the

idea of self is deriv'd; and consequently there is no such idea. (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251–52)

Here we see the structure that we outlined earlier with both the copy principle and the semantic copy principle being employed.

1. Every idea is a copy of some impression. (The copy principle)
2. Since our impressions are varied, there is no enduring, simple impression that has an unvaried pictorial content.
3. Thus, there is no enduring, simple idea that has an unvaried pictorial content. (1, 2)
4. Thus, there is no idea *of* the self. (3, definition of 'self' given by predecessors, the semantic copy principle)

Hume's argument is intended to show that we do not have an idea the representational content of which is a single subject of experience persisting through time. His methodology is to show, first, that we cannot have an impression with the appropriate pictorial content, next, that we cannot, therefore, have an idea with the appropriate pictorial content, and finally, that we cannot, therefore, have an idea with that representational content. We will see this same methodology employed in at least two other cases.

Hume's argument about the idea of the external world is less straightforward than his argument about the idea of the self. This argument proceeds via a process of elimination. Hume first argues that this idea can only be a product of either the senses, reason, or the imagination. He then gives a two-part argument that this idea cannot originate with the senses, followed by an argument that it cannot originate with reason, and finally an explanation of how the relevant idea that we *do* have comes from the imagination and how it is an idea with a very different representational content from that which his predecessors proposed. What is of interest to us here is the first of these stages. Here is Hume's argument for the conclusion that our idea of a being that *continues* to exist when it is no longer perceived cannot originate with the senses:

To begin with the senses, 'tis evident these faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the *continu'd* existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses. For that is a contradiction in terms, and supposes that the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceas'd all manner of operation. (T 1.4.2.3; SBN 188)

The key to interpreting this quick argument is to decipher what the contradiction is to which Hume here appeals. The obvious candidate is something like, "The senses

sense what they do not sense." This contradiction alone, however, is not enough to license the conclusion that the senses do not *produce an idea of* an object that continues to exist when it is not sensed. It is possible, that is, that although the senses do not *sense* what is unsensed, they still *cause* an idea to come into existence that itself is an idea of something unsensed. The conclusion that *this* is not possible does follow, though, if Hume is employing the semantic copy principle. This is because if the senses do not sense what is not sensed, then whatever ideas are *copied* from the data of the senses cannot have as their representational content anything that is not sensed. The only ideas that can be copied from the data of the senses will necessarily be ideas whose content is sensed precisely because the representational content of an idea is that of which it is a copy. Thus, the senses cannot produce an idea whose content is an object that continues to exist when it is no longer perceived.

The second part of Hume's argument regarding the senses is also of interest. That argument is for the conclusion that an idea of a being that exists *distinctly* from oneself also cannot originate with the senses. Here is that argument:

That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*, is evident; because they convey to us nothing but a single perception, and never give us the least intimation of any thing beyond. A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence, but by some further inference either of the reason or imagination. (T 1.4.2.4; SBN 189)

The argument here is fairly straightforward. Our senses produce single simple impressions. Any ideas that trace their roots to the senses, therefore, have as their representational content only such simple impressions, not "any thing beyond." Again, this conclusion only follows if we suppose that an idea is *of* that of which it is a copy. Otherwise, the fact that an idea is a copy of a single impression does not at all imply that it cannot be *of* anything other than this impression. Hume *must* be employing the semantic copy principle here as well.

Finally, there is Hume's argument concerning our idea of necessary connection. Again, rather than go through the entire argument at length, it will suffice to focus on a key passage in which Hume is explicitly engaged in the negative portion of his argument, where he argues that we cannot have an idea of necessary connection. Here is Hume's concise refutation of the suggestion that our idea of necessary connection is the idea of a power or efficacy:

All ideas are deriv'd from, and represent impressions. We never have any impression, that contains any power or efficacy. We never therefore have any idea of power. (T 1.3.14.11; SBN 161)

Here Hume is at his most explicit about the use of the semantic copy principle. Notice that in the first sentence Hume distinguishes two claims: that all ideas are derived from impressions (the copy principle) and that all ideas represent impressions (the semantic copy principle). In the next sentence, he is careful to restrict his claim to the *pictorial* content of our impressions. Rather than assert that we never have any impression *of* a power or efficacy, he instead writes that we never have any impression that *contains* any power or efficacy. That is, the claim is that there is no impression that has *as part of it* a power or efficacy. That is a claim about the intrinsic features of ideas, about their *pictorial* content. Finally, Hume concludes from these three premises—the copy principle, the semantic copy principle, and an observation about the pictorial content of our impressions—that our ideas cannot have ‘power’ as their *representational* content. That is, he concludes that we never have any idea *of* power. Again, this argument only goes through on the supposition that Hume is employing not only the copy principle but also the semantic copy principle.

My argument up to this point has been as follows. The copy principle is a thesis that concerns the pictorial content of ideas and impressions, but not their representational content. In the various arguments throughout the *Treatise* concerning controversial ideas such as those of necessary connection, the external world, and the self, Hume needs a premise that addresses not just the pictorial content of these ideas but also their representational content. We have seen that Hume needs *some* theory of representational content to make his arguments valid, and the semantic copy principle would validate exactly the move that we have seen that Hume needs: from a conclusion that we cannot have ideas with certain pictorial content to a conclusion that we cannot have ideas with a certain corresponding representational content. We have also now seen that Hume seems, throughout these arguments, to employ exactly this principle.

That said, there is still an important item on our agenda. We began the current study with the following dilemma. Either Hume treats the copy principle as an empirical generalization, in which case he cannot use it to refute his predecessors’ claims that we have certain ideas, or he treats it as necessary and a priori, in which case he must hold that some causal connections are necessary and a priori (which he explicitly denies), and thus violate his commitment to empiricism. We have since seen that Garrett provides Hume with a plausible way through the horns of this dilemma but that his solution cannot be all that there is to the story, given that we also need to account for Hume’s use of the *semantic copy principle*. That is, the copy principle alone does not suffice for rejecting these controversial ideas. We also need the semantic copy principle, and so, Hume would seem to face another iteration of the same dilemma. Either the semantic copy principle is necessary and a priori, or it is empirical, and so on. Here Garrett’s solution will not work, both because Hume does not actually marshal evidence for the semantic

copy principle, as he does for the copy principle, and because it is unclear what such evidence *could be*. What I will propose is that the semantic copy principle (if true) is, unlike the copy principle, necessary and a priori. I will also argue that, in this case, unlike the case with the copy principle, this is not bad. The objections to construing the copy principle as necessary and a priori were first, that doing so would require holding that some causal connections are necessary and a priori and secondly, that this would violate Hume's commitment to empiricism. I will show that holding that the semantic copy principle is necessary and a priori avoids both of these objections.

III

Consider, then, the first objection: that Hume is committed to the claim that no causal connections are necessary or a priori. This poses a problem for holding that the copy principle is necessary and a priori because the copy principle states, in part, that all ideas are caused by some impression. If that were necessary and a priori, it would clearly violate Hume's commitment. We would know a priori that impressions are the cause of ideas. Notice, however, that the semantic copy principle allows for no such parallel objection. What the semantic copy principle states is that a perception is *of* that of which it is a copy. This *does* imply that *if* a perception is of something, then it was caused by that something, but it does not *assert* that any such causal connections actually obtain. Whether such causal connections obtain, and so, whether any of our perceptions have representational content, is entirely contingent and a posteriori. What is necessary and a priori here is simply what determines the representational content of a perception. Hume has no in-principle grounds for rejecting *that* claim. In fact, I have argued, he accepts it.

One might be tempted to reply here that the semantic copy principle, if necessary, allows us to know a priori that representations are caused by that which they represent. That is certainly right, but as I hope to show in a moment, being caused by that which a representation represents is part of what it means to be a representation, so this becomes a much less worrisome charge. For example, the following inference seems like a dangerous one for Hume to make.

1. I have an idea that is a representation of a single red *minima sensibilia*.
2. That of which this idea is an idea (a single red *minima sensibilia*) exists.

Putting aside the issue of *misrepresentation*, which will be addressed in the next section, I want to argue that Hume, in fact, can endorse this inference. Notice what happens when we substitute the *definition* of 'representation' given by the semantic copy principle.

3. I have an idea that exactly resembles and is caused by a red *minima sensibilia*.

4. Therefore, I have an idea that is caused by a red *minima sensibilia*.
5. Therefore, some red *minima sensibilia* exists.

Here it becomes clear that the inference is not from the existence of *one* perception to the existence of another. Rather, since the first perception is already taken to be a *representation*, the inference is from the existence of *two*, *causally related* perceptions, to the existence of one of those, which is certainly something knowable a priori.

Next, consider the second possible objection to holding that the semantic copy principle is necessary and a priori: that this violates Hume's commitment to empiricism. Again, this poses a problem for the copy principle because the copy principle asserts that certain matter of factual relations hold between impressions and ideas: that the latter are caused by and exactly resemble the former. Clearly, a commitment to empiricism precludes accepting that either of these is necessary or a priori. Again, though, the semantic copy principle does not imply that either of these relations actually holds. What it states is that our ideas have representational content if and only if these relations *do* hold.

In fact, not only does holding the semantic copy principle not violate the spirit of empiricism, it is actually an expression of exactly that commitment. 'Empiricism' is a term that is applied broadly, and for this reason it can be construed in a number of different ways. One of those ways, though, is plausibly via a commitment to *concept empiricism*—that is, to the thesis that the representational content of our perceptions is determined entirely by their relation to *experience*.¹⁶ The semantic copy principle is one, very straightforward way of cashing out this commitment. The representational content of all of our perceptions is determined entirely by that perception's being a copy (of some experience).

Of course, all of this leaves open the question of just how it is that the semantic copy principle *is* necessary and a priori. This is a particularly thorny question to answer because, keeping in mind what has been called Hume's Fork, we are faced with only two options: the semantic copy principle must be either a matter of fact or a relation of ideas. Clearly, if the semantic copy principle were a mere matter of fact, it could not be necessary and a priori. On the other hand, if we inquire into what the ideas are the relation of which yields the semantic copy principle, there does not seem to be a straightforward answer. Furthermore, there also seems to be a sense in which genuine empirical investigation is needed to uncover the semantic copy principle: we seem to need to *learn* that an idea represents that of which it is a copy, as opposed to simply reflecting on our ideas of such things.

We can begin to make sense of all of this by noticing that what the semantic copy principle states is a kind of *definition*, a definition of 'representation' (and its synonyms). This observation is helpful because Hume, of course, has on offer an account of how it is that terms come by their definitions—the theory of general representation in T 1.1.7, and there are numerous examples throughout the *Treatise*

of his putting that account to work. While it will be helpful for present purposes briefly to review that account, it is well-worn territory in Hume scholarship, so we need not go into much exegetical detail about it. Rather, I will simply present the theory in Hume's own words, and try to extract as non-controversial an interpretation of the relevant passage as possible. Here is that passage:

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquir'd a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions. But as the same word is suppos'd to have been frequently apply'd to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, which is immediately present to the mind; the word not being able to revive the idea of all these individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allow'd so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquir'd by surveying them. They are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power, nor do we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. (T 1.1.7.7; SBN 20–21)

When we hear a certain word repeatedly in the presence of various ideas that all resemble one another, we come to associate that word and that idea. Subsequently, upon hearing that word, we call to mind some, but not all, of these resembling ideas and stand ready, so to speak, to recall the rest. This is how the general term gains its meaning. Hume relies on this theory at numerous points throughout the *Treatise* to provide a methodology for giving the proper analysis of the controversial ideas that his predecessors have claimed to have. What is of interest to us here is that these applications of the theory of general representation all seem to result in definitions that share the otherwise puzzling features of the semantic copy principle that we noted above. They are the result of an *empirical* investigation into what particular ideas are associated with some term, which results in the discovery of the *true definition* of that term, which definition is necessary and *a priori*, even if it is not at all *obvious*.

So, for example, consider Hume's application of the theory of general representation to the idea of space in T 1.2.3. Hume begins that section precisely with a study of what the particular ideas are that constitute the meaning of the general term 'space' (T 1.2.3.1–5; SBN 34–35). What he finds is that these ideas all share certain essential characteristics: they are all complex ideas of relations of *minima*

sensibilia to one another. That space is a relation of *minima sensibilia*, then, is something that is discovered only through empirical investigation into the contents of the term 'space.' Once it is discovered that this is what the term 'space' means, however, this fact about space is likewise discovered to be necessary and a priori. Once we have discovered the true meaning of 'space,' we can see that this fact is, in later parlance, *analytic* (even though it is an empirical fact, which takes a good deal of work to discover, that this is the true meaning of 'space').

Likewise for the (in)famous two *definitions* of 'cause' that Hume gives (whatever one makes of these and of their relation to one another). What Hume is after is the true meaning of the term 'cause' (as opposed to the meaning that his predecessors have taken that term to have). His procedure for producing these definitions is to examine the ideas that constitute the meaning of that term to see, first, if he can find any ideas answering to the account that his predecessors have given, and second, failing this, to see what ideas really are associated with that term. What this procedure yields is the true, if unobvious, meaning of the term 'cause.' And so, *with these two definitions at hand*, it becomes analytic that, for instance, a cause is constantly conjoined with its effect (again even if it is not at all obvious at the start that these *are* the proper definitions of 'cause'). Again, what is empirical here is the lengthy process that leads to the discovery of the *meaning* of this term: that process requires tracing up the general term to the set of ideas that form its content. What is necessary and a priori is that, *given the two definitions of 'cause'*, a cause is constantly conjoined with its effect.

That space is a relation of *minima sensibilia* or that causes are constantly conjoined with their effects do not, at first blush, seem to be necessary and a priori claims. They seem, rather, paradigmatic results of Hume's *empirical* approach to philosophy. What is essential here, though, is to be clear on precisely what is empirical in Hume's method and what is not. Consider the classic example of an analytic truth: 'All bachelors are unmarried.' One classic take on this example is that, *insofar as one knows the meaning of the words in it*, one cannot but recognize that it is true. So, once one knows these meanings, it is supposed to be uncontroversial that the proposition is necessary and a priori. What I want to suggest is that the same is true in the case of Hume's definitions, the important differences being that for the terms at hand ('space,' 'cause,' and 'representation'), it is *much less obvious* what their meanings are. These meanings are so unobvious, in fact, that it takes a great deal of empirical investigation, via the theory of general representation, to settle that question. Once it is settled, though, once one knows the meanings of the terms involved, certain necessary and a priori truths come to be exposed.

What all of this means is that *dialectically* the force of Hume's use of the semantic copy principle will only be as strong as his evidence that (a) his theory of general representation provides the correct method of determining a term's definition

and (b) the discovery of semantic copy principle is the result of applying that method to the term 'representation' (and its synonyms).¹⁷ It is the purpose of this section, therefore, to apply this method, to conduct this *empirical* investigation, on Hume's behalf, and thereby to establish, in the only way that Hume allows, the truth, necessity, and a priority of the semantic copy principle. Of course, Hume does not explicitly take up this investigation himself. My proposal is that he does so *implicitly*. So, our results will not be, strictly speaking, *Hume's*, but rather the results that Hume *could* and *would* arrive at, were he to conduct the investigation himself. That said, since we have already demonstrated in the first section that Hume needs to have some theory of representational content in order to make his arguments good, it will suffice here to show that the copy principle is a possible and plausible candidate. That is, what I want to show here is merely that a Humean analysis of 'representational content' could consistently yield the semantic copy principle as its result.

What we are looking for, then, is an idea or set of ideas, that could plausibly be that which we associate with the term 'representational content' (or its synonyms). My suggestion is that the set of ideas constituted by those ideas that are *copies* of something—that are caused by and exactly resemble some single thing—fits this mold perfectly for Hume. The first thing we should note is that this set can only be comprised by *perceptions*. That is, whatever the general idea of representational content will be, it can consist in only perceptions, simply because, according to Hume's theory of general ideas, *all* such ideas are collections of associated perceptions. The second thing we should note is that it is, at least on a first pass, plausible to suppose that this set will be comprised of *pairs* of perceptions: the perception that *has* some representational content and the perception that is the *object* of that content. With these two conditions in place, it is also worth noticing that if these pairs of perceptions are to come to play this role, they will need to be previously *associated* with another. That is, only a pair of associated ideas could come to be linked together closely enough to form the further association between this pair and the term 'representational content' being analyzed. Finally, we should note that the ways that this pair of ideas can come to be associated are fairly limited. Hume holds that there are only three such kinds of association: resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect (T 1.1.4.1; SBN 11).

As we have already seen, Hume's analysis of the idea 'copy' relies on exactly two of these kinds of associations: x is a copy of y just in case x exactly resembles and is caused by y . So too, then, will our Humean analysis of 'representational content': x has y as its representational content just in case x exactly resembles and is caused by y . That is, according to this analysis, our general idea of representational content consists of the set of perceptions that are copies of one another. If all of this is right, then the semantic copy principle can be cast as a necessary a priori principle that is discovered via the analysis of our idea of representational

content in accordance with Hume's theory of general ideas, and the final hurdle to interpreting the semantic copy principle as a necessary a priori principle will, thereby, have been cleared.

IV

At this point, we must consider a final important emendation that must be made to the semantic copy principle before concluding our investigation. As we noted earlier, Hume restricts the copy principle to simple impressions and ideas. The content of this claim from early on in the *Treatise* is only that every *simple* idea is copied from some *simple* impression. Correspondingly, then, if it is only simple ideas that are copied from simple impressions, the *semantic* copy principle must, it seems, similarly only be applicable to simples. That is, since the semantic copy principle states that a perception is *of* whatever it is a copy of, and only *simple* ideas are copies of anything, then it would follow that only simple ideas are *of* anything. This, however, cannot be right.

First of all, any plausible theory of mental representation must be able to account for the representational content of thoughts of complex items, such as that of a dog, a person kicking a ball, and so on. Hume's theory clearly does so by appealing to the complexity of the thoughts themselves. So, Hume must have some account of how such ideas represent what they do. He certainly writes as if he does:

I can imagine myself such a city as the *New Jerusalem*, whose pavement is gold and walls are rubies, tho' I never saw any such. I have seen *Paris*; but shall I affirm I can form any such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions?
(T 1.1.1.5; SBN 3)

This is only one of a vast number of instances in which Hume indicates that he takes complex ideas to have representational content. What we need is an account of how he explains such cases in a way that is consistent with his use of the semantic copy principle as that which determines representational content.

Hume's statement about the New Jerusalem and Paris also suggests a second potential objection to the current reading of Hume. Any plausible account of mental representation must be able to accommodate the fact that we sometimes *mis*represent. At first glance, the semantic copy principle makes this impossible. If a perception is of that of which it is a copy, then the object of any perception with representational content is always guaranteed to exist (since it had to be copied in order to be represented), and so such representations can never go wrong. As we saw in the above quotation, Hume is clearly aware of the phenomenon of misrepresentation: we can represent New Jerusalem even though it has never existed,

and our representation of Paris does not correspond exactly to the details of the actual city.¹⁸

What is also indicated by the above quotation is that Hume takes these two problems to be connected: it is our ability to form complex ideas with representational content that leads to our making such errors. Recall the context in which Hume writes the above. He has just proposed for the first time that all of his ideas exactly resemble some impression. He then notices these two kinds of examples and uses the distinction he has previously drawn between simple and complex ideas to restrict the scope of his claim to simple ideas. The implication certainly seems to be that it is the fact that such ideas are complex that keeps them from exactly resembling some impression, and that this is not the case with simple ideas. Simple ideas cannot misrepresent; only complex ideas can.

Our focus, then, should clearly be on the nature of complex ideas, so here is Hume's first enumeration of the distinction between simple and complex perceptions:

Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit no distinction or separation. The complex are contrary to these, and may be distinguished 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)

Complex perceptions are those that have simple perceptions as their *parts*. They are aggregates of simple ideas. (In fact, they are aggregates of some *finite number of smallest possible* simple ideas (T 1.2.1.2–3; SBN 26–27).) These are claims about the *composition* of complex ideas, and they can straightforwardly be extended to their *pictorial content*. That is, if complex ideas are literally composed of simple ideas, then the pictorial content of a complex idea—which is itself constituted by the *intrinsic features* of a perception—must also be, in some way, determined by the pictorial content of the simple ideas from which it is composed.

Consider our earlier example.



Fig. 1

The pictorial content of this picture consists of four black lines of equal length arranged at ninety-degree angles to one another against a white background. The

picture is *composed* of four black lines and a white background. It is a complex image with those as its parts. Of course, it is only the picture that it is because those four black lines are *arranged* a certain way *against* the white background. That is, complex pictorial content, while *composed of* a straightforward aggregation of simple(r) parts, is *also* determined by the specific arrangement of those parts. This is a *square-shaped* figure, after all, not a trapezoidal picture, or a non-polygonal figure, and so on. So, complex ideas have simple ideas as their parts and have certain *arrangements* of these simple ideas as their pictorial content.

Since what we are looking for on Hume's behalf is a way of moving from facts about an idea's pictorial content to conclusions about its representational content, it is natural to assume here that just as the pictorial content of a complex idea is more than a mere sum of the pictorial content of its parts so will be the representational content of such an idea. That is, complex ideas do not have as their *representational content* merely the simple impressions from which they are composed but also represent these impressions *as being arranged* a certain way. This is captured in the Humean slogan that a representation of a complex is a complex of representations. We represent complexes of impressions by forming complexes of representations of these impressions. Consider, for instance, Hume's account of the origin of our representations of spatial complexes.

The table in front of me is alone sufficient by its view to give me the idea of extension. This idea, then, is borrow'd from, and represents some impression, which this moment appears to the senses. But my senses convey to me only the impressions of colour'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner. If the eye is sensible of any thing farther, I desire it may be pointed out to me. But if it be impossible to show any thing farther, we may conclude with certainty, that *the idea of extension is nothing but a copy of these colour'd points, and of the manner of their appearance.* (T 1.2.3.4; SBN 34; emphasis added)

Our complex idea of a spatial complex comes to have that representational content by being a collection of simple ideas of coloured points arranged in a way that exactly resembles the arrangements of the spatial complex being represented. We represent the relation that some simple impressions stand in to one another by arranging simple representations of each of these impressions into *the same relation*. We represent *a* as being next to *b* by placing an idea of *a* next to an idea of *b*. The idea of a spatial complex is thus nothing more than a spatial complex of ideas.

Hume is clear that our representation of temporal complexes works in the same manner. He writes,

The idea of time being deriv'd from the succession of our perceptions of every kind, ideas as well as impressions, and impressions of reflection as well as of sensation, will afford us an instance of an abstract idea, which comprehends a still greater variety than that of space, and yet is represented in the fancy by some particular individual idea of a determinate quantity and quality. (T 1.2.3.6; SBN 34)

Hume's claim that our idea of time is "deriv'd from the succession of our perceptions" is that we represent two items as being related, now temporally, by placing them in a temporal relation to one another. That is, for example, we represent one thing as happening before another by having a representation of the former followed by a representation of the latter. So, whereas we represent a spatially complex state of affairs by forming a kind of picture before our mind's eye, we represent a temporally complex state of affairs by forming a kind of movie there.

More generally, then, we can see that for Hume a complex representation represents a complex state of affairs by representing the elements of that state of affairs and arranging these representations in the same relations with one another as those in which the elements of the state of affairs represented stand in to each other. To represent two items as being next to one another, we place ideas of these items next to one another; to represent two items as succeeding one another in time, we have an idea of one of these items succeed an idea of the other, and so on. This is essentially the *resemblance* aspect of the semantic copy principle as it applies to complexes. It would seem that for a complex idea to represent, it must exactly resemble its object.

Of course, exact resemblance is a symmetric property. Not only do complex ideas exactly resemble the complex states of affairs that they represent, but those states of affairs also exactly resemble those ideas. The states of affairs, though, do not *represent* the ideas. A picture of a cat next to a picture of a dog might represent a cat as being next to a dog, for Hume, but an actual cat's sitting next to an actual dog does *not* represent a picture of a cat as being next to a picture of a dog. So, as in the case of simple ideas, there must be something more to representation than just exact resemblance. Once again, *causation* seems to fit this role perfectly for Hume.

In a paradigm case of correct representation, memory, a picture is created of the object represented, and this picture, Hume says, is created *as a result of an encounter with* the object. Thus he writes, "Tis evident, that the memory preserves the original form, in which its objects were presented, and that wherever we depart from it in recollecting any thing, it proceeds from some defect or imperfection in that faculty" (T 1.1.4.3; SBN 9). In the creation of a memory, the original form is *preserved*. Moreover, the form of the memory is meant to correspond to the form of the object of that memory not coincidentally but as a result of the *successful* creation of that memory. Memories are meant to exactly resemble their objects

as a result of being caused by those objects. It is only when this causal process has gone wrong that a memory fails to exactly resemble its object, and an idea that *just so happens* to resemble some object would not thereby be a representation of that object. There is a crucial *causal* process that links a representation to its object.

Of course, as we have already seen, exact resemblance and causation are what make something a copy of something else, and complex ideas are not always copies of that which they represent. Hume's examples of Paris—caused by, but not exactly resembling Paris—and New Jerusalem—exactly resembling, but not caused by New Jerusalem—demonstrate precisely these points. So, neither exact resemblance nor causation can be *necessary* conditions for representation. Furthermore, neither alone can be a *sufficient* condition, since in addition to the case that we have already seen in which x exactly resembles y , but x does not represent y , there are also obviously cases in which something does not represent its cause. (A window's breaking does not *represent* the baseball that causes it.) What we must determine, therefore, is what the roles of exact resemblance and causation are here, since they both play some role in Hume's account.

To do this we can return to our case of correct representation. As we recently observed, when an accurate memory is formed, the representation both exactly resembles and is caused by its object. A *correct* representation *is* a copy of that which it represents. An incorrect representation, then, will be one that, in some sense, *fails* to be a copy. Of course, it cannot be just anything that happens *not* to be a copy, but rather it must be something that, again in some sense, has as its *proper function* being a copy but fails to carry this function out. Exact resemblance and causation enter into Hume's picture as the two ways that such a failure might occur. A representation *ought* to exactly resemble and be caused by its object. A *misrepresentation* misrepresents in virtue of failing in one of these two ways. One can have an idea that is *caused by* Paris but which does not exactly resemble Paris. One can have an idea that *exactly resembles* New Jerusalem but which is not caused by New Jerusalem.

If the representational content of a complex idea is that of which it *ought* to be a copy, what we need now is an account of how it is that something comes to have being a copy as its proper function. What we need is an account not of how a complex idea comes to have the representational content that it has, but rather of how it is that it has representational content *at all*. The key here is to notice again that complex ideas are composed of simple ideas and that simple ideas *are* straightforwardly copies of that which they represent. More specifically, as we have seen, complex ideas are *arrangements* of simple ideas. Complex ideas are arrangements of simple *representations*. That, Hume holds, is sufficient for making such a complex idea itself a representation. Again, we must take seriously the Humean slogan that a complex of representations is a representation of a complex. A spatial complex of representations *is*, for Hume, a representation of a spatial complex. A temporal

complex of representation *is* a representation of a temporal complex, and so on. It is in virtue of being a complex of representations that a complex representation has representational content. A complex representation is formed, for Hume, precisely by arranging simple representations into a complex.¹⁹

To summarize then, simple perceptions have representational content in virtue of their being copies. Their representational content is that of which they are copies. A complex perception has its representational content in virtue of its being an arrangement of simple representations. As such, it represents the simple objects that are the representational content of its simple parts as being arranged in the way that its own parts are arranged. Complex ideas ought to be copies of their corresponding complexes of impressions. They are accurate insofar as they *are* such copies, but they can misrepresent in either of the two ways that they can *fail* to be copies: either by not exactly resembling their objects (Paris) or by not being properly causally connected to them (New Jerusalem).²⁰

What this means for Hume's *arguments* is that his tasks are slightly more difficult than I had earlier presented them as being. To show that we do not have the controversial ideas at issue, it is not enough to show that we do not have any ideas that *are* not copies of such-and-such controversial objects. That only suffices in the cases in which the idea is supposed to be simple. What Hume also needs to show, given our recent conclusion, is that we do not have any ideas that so much as *ought* to be copies of such-and-such an object. That is, he needs to show that we do not have any ideas that *could* be copies of such-and-such an object, if only they hadn't failed to exactly resemble or be caused by their representational content.

In the case of necessary connection, for example, what Hume has to show is that we do not have any idea that *could be* a copy of a necessary connection. He does so by pointing out that no matter how distinct ideas are arranged, they can always be separated, so they could never be arranged in a way that exactly resembles a necessary connection. Rather than being of necessary connections, such ideas are of constant conjunctions. In the case of the external world, he would need to show that we do not have an idea that *could be* a copy of the external world. He does so by pointing out that since the simple components of complex ideas are all of impressions, they could not be copies of anything distinct from such impressions, or of anything that continues to exist independently of such impressions. Notice that in the quotation we saw earlier, when Hume asks from what impression the idea of the self is copied, his answer is not merely that there is no such impression but that there could not possibly be one: "To begin with the senses, 'tis evident these faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the continu'd existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses. For that is a *contradiction* in terms, and supposes that the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceas'd all manner of operation" (T 1.4.2.3; SBN 188; emphasis added). Rather than being ideas of an external world, such ideas are of arrangements of impressions.

In the case of the self, Hume has to show that we do not have any idea that *could be* a copy of a single subject of experience persisting through time. He does so by pointing out that all that what would be required to form an idea of the self would be a perception with a pictorial content that cannot be had. Notice that when Hume asks from what impression the idea of the self is copied, his answer is not merely that there is no such impression but that there could not possibly be one. He asserts that “This question ’tis *impossible* to answer without a manifest *contradiction* and *absurdity*” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251, emphases added), and adds that rather than being of the single subject of experience, such ideas are of a bundle of perceptions.

To conclude, the semantic copy principle is what determines the representational content of any simple idea. The representational content of complex ideas is a function of the representational content of such simple ideas and the way that these simple ideas are arranged to form this complex idea. Thus, it is still the semantic copy principle, rather than the copy principle, that is at work in Hume’s most important arguments, even though this principle does need to be modified slightly to account for the representational content of complex ideas.

NOTES

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1 See, for example, Antony Flew, *Hume’s Philosophy of Belief* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961), 25–26; Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 225–34; Kenneth Merrill, “Hume, Whitehead, and Philosophic Method” in *David Hume: Many-Sided Genius*, ed. Kenneth Merrill and Robert W. Shahan (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 137; Antony Flew, *David Hume: Philosopher of Moral Science* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986): 9–25; Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 41–57; and Ruth Weintraub, “A Humean Conundrum,” *Hume Studies* 31 (2005): 211–24.

2 Putting Hume’s conclusions this way lays the emphasis on the negative side of those conclusions, and it can be tricky to articulate just how it is that Hume can consistently claim that ideas like these do not exist. In other contexts, one could equally well emphasize the positive side of each of these conclusions: that our idea of causation is an idea of constant conjunction, that our idea of the external world is an idea of certain perceptions, that our idea of the self is an idea of a bundle of perceptions, and so on. I

will discuss this more at the start of section II. For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to recognize that Hume rejects the construal of such ideas *given by his predecessors*, the arguments for which will likewise require the use of some principle for determining what I will call the representational content of our ideas.

3 Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, argues that the copy principle is not a *mere* empirical generalization, but a very well supported such generalization. I argue, in "Hume's Impression-Idea Distinction," *Hume Studies* 32 (2006): 119–39, that the copy principle is not merely a well supported empirical generalization but also plays a crucial explanatory role vis-à-vis the distinction between impressions and ideas that gives it not just empirical, but also a more general scientific-theoretical support as well.

4 What follows is not an argument *against* the interpretations of Hume's philosophy along the lines of either the so-called "New Humeans," or the scholars who take Hume to be a more moderate form of realist. Nor is it an argument *for* reading Hume as an idealist who believes that we cannot have ideas *of* necessary connection, the external world, the self, and so on. Such arguments can be found in Kenneth Winkler, "The New Hume," *The Philosophical Review* 100 (1991): 541–79, and Kyle Stanford, "The Manifest Connection: Causation, Meaning, and David Hume," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002): 339–60. Rather, what I will argue here is that *if* one reads Hume as this kind of (semantic) idealist, then one needs to read him as employing not just the copy principle but also what I will call the *semantic* copy principle, and that doing so provides certain benefits (such as extricating oneself from the dilemma just presented).

5 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter cited as "T" followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph numbers; and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), hereafter cited as "SBN" followed by page number.

6 See Landy, "Hume's Impression-Idea Distinction."

7 One might wonder whether the copy principle itself is meant to concern *both* pictorial and representational content. There do not seem to be any explicit indications of this in the *Treatise*, where Hume's introduction of the copy principle clearly describes a principle that concerns only pictorial content, and Garrett fairly clearly takes this to be the case as well. (For instance, in a later article, he proposes a *radically* different principle of semantic determination to be used in combination with the copy principle. Don Garrett, "Hume's Naturalistic Theory of Mental Representation," *Synthese*, 152.3 (October 2006): 301–19. If the copy principle *is* itself a principle of semantic determination, of course, that would be very close to the conclusion that I will reach in this paper: namely, that Hume employs the *semantic* copy principle for this purpose.

8 Of course the written word 'dog' does have *some* pictorial content (there is something that it is to *look like* that written word), and so it follows that an idea of this word *is* a representation of *the word*. This must be carefully distinguished, however, from what the word represents *qua* a word. In that respect, too, its pictorial content comes into play. Hume's theory of general representation makes it clear that the pictorial content of words (spoken or written) is *essential* to their meaning, although in a way that differs from the one we have been examining. It is the pictorial content of a word that allows different instances of it to be recognized as the same, and it is this perceived repetition

that subsequently causes the associations to form that make possible the use of that term as a general representation.

9 It is worth mentioning here that Garrett does present his own account of Hume's theory of mental representation in "Hume's Naturalistic Theory of Mental Representation." Because Garrett takes Hume to hold that we *do* have the ideas at hand, he is not concerned to show that arguments of *this* form are valid. In fact, his position is exactly the contrary: he predicates his account of Hume's theory of representational content on the claim that Hume *does* hold that we can represent such things. There is not space enough here to refute that claim, so it will have to suffice to point out that this is the ground on which I would object to Garrett's account. Garrett takes Hume to be a realist and so offers an account of his theory of representational content that caters to that realism; I take Hume to be an idealist and will offer a theory of representation that makes that interpretation possible. Furthermore, I believe that my account enjoys the advantage of staying as close as possible to principles that Hume explicitly employs in the *Treatise* (such as the copy principle), whereas Garrett's requires him to do a great deal more *speculation* to produce a suitable account (which, of course, is not a decisive consideration by any means, and is a further charge that Garrett might well resist).

10 This is a crude formulation of the semantic copy principle that will do for present purposes. I will present a more careful rendering in the final section of this paper. What needs to be accounted for is *complex* and *incorrect* representation (which leveraging a strict application Hume's account of copying clearly does not). This will address the argument Garrett makes against reading Hume as employing the semantic copy principle in "Hume's Naturalistic Theory of Mental Representation," 308.

11 Admittedly, there is a more straightforward way to move from pictorial content to representational content that might occur to the astute reader here: rather than using *copying*, which includes both resemblance and causation, one might take resemblance alone to be a principle of semantic determination. I believe that there are several good reasons for rejecting this view, but it will be helpful to have the full-dress version of the semantic copy principle available before delving into these. As this is the business of the final section of this paper, I refer the reader to endnote 20 for the full discussion of this suggestion. (My thanks to an anonymous referee at *Hume Studies* for pointing out the need to address this alternative.)

12 Jerry Fodor, *A Theory of Content and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1990).

13 In fact, Hume's argument concerning the self is much more explicitly concerned with representational content from its outset. Hume *begins* with an instantiation of the semantic copy principle: "If any impression gives rise to the idea of the self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner" (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251). If there is to be an idea *of* the self, it must exactly resemble some impression. This is just the application of the semantic copy principle to the idea of the self. Of course, Hume famously goes on to deny that there is any such impression, and so to conclude that we do not have any idea *of* such a self.

14 Locke's account of substance, for instance, is non-imagistic; Berkeley's account of our "notion" of God is as well.

15 My thanks to the editors at *Hume Studies* for pointing out the need for this clarification.

16 This is one of five kinds of empiricism to which Garrett lists Hume as being committed. *Cognition and Commitment*, 29–38.

17 Here one might worry that we have entered Hume into a vicious circle: we use the theory of general representation to discover the meaning of 'representation,' but the theory of general ideas itself must *utilize* the very notion of representation that will be discovered. That is, Hume's theory of general representation *presupposes* that an idea is of that of which it is a copy. This circularity certainly exists; the question is whether it is vicious, and I argue that it is not. Surely it must be a condition of the correctness of *any* purported definition of 'representation' that it can account for how it itself represents what it does. This is far from a trivial condition to meet, and meeting it is not only not vicious, it is also necessary. It is important, however, that this not be the *only* condition for correctness for such a definition. (Others might include broad explanatory adequacy, coherence with the best overall theory of mental activity, and so forth.) Thanks to an anonymous referee and the editors of *Hume Studies* for pointing out this worry.

18 A more fine-grained gloss on these and other examples would include, at least, a distinction between *misrepresentation* and *imperfect* representation. While Hume might well have the resources for articulating such a distinction, for the sake of brevity, I will simply treat these as of a piece here.

19 It is worth noting that the semantic copy principle is a general principle concerning all perceptions, impressions, and ideas alike. This would appear to imply two fairly controversial theses: first, that all ideas are of impressions, and second, that impressions are not of anything at all (since they are not copies). While I take both of these to be conclusions that Hume, in fact, endorses, there is one simple way to resist both. Both of these conclusions only follow on the assumption that impressions are not copies of anything. While Hume refuses to speculate about whether impressions are copies of something extra-mental, a realist (say, a New Humean, or someone who takes Hume to be a kind of naturalist) might hold that they, in fact, are copies of extra-mental entities, nonetheless. In that case, one would be free to hold that, according to the semantic copy principle, impressions are copies of extra-mental entities and, therefore, represent these. One could likewise hold that, while ideas are copies of impressions, since both the exact resemblance and causal relation, as Hume articulates them, are transitive, they are also copies of such extra-mental entities. It would only take a small amendment to the semantic copy principle to leverage this into the thesis that ideas, too, are of such extra-mental entities.

20 Here I want to return to the alternative to the semantic copy principle introduced in endnote 16. There it was suggested that instead of using *copying* as the relevant principle of semantic determination, we could more straightforwardly use just *resemblance*. Notice first that the suggestion here would be simply that an idea represents that which it resembles. As we have recently noticed, resemblance is a symmetric relation. Thus, if x represents y if x resembles y , and x resembles y if y resembles x , then x represents y if y represents x . That cannot be correct.

A more plausible use of resemblance would be to take on board the distinction with which we have recently been working between that which determines *that* something

is a representation and that which determines *what* it represents. So, we can assume that as with the semantic copy principle, a complex idea is a representation in virtue of its being an arrangement of simple representations (ideas). Noting further that we must allow for the possibility of *misrepresentation*, we can take the current suggestion to be that *what* an idea represents is that which it *would* resemble, if it did resemble anything at all. Here are a few reasons for thinking that the semantic copy principle is superior to that view.

The semantic copy principle allows for cases in which a complex idea resembles some object but is not (thereby) a representation of it. So, if I sit idly imagining (but not anticipating) a car coming around the corner, and then a car resembling the one I was imagining just so happens to come around the corner, my idea is not thereby of *that car*. It is of the car I imagined, which just so happens to be like the one that came around the corner.

The semantic copy principle also more closely ties Hume's theory of mental representation to *perception*: what we can have ideas of are possible objects of perception (objects that could be copied). Not all ideas are of what is perceived, but being of a perceived object is, in a sense, an idea's *proper function*. If resemblance was the principle of semantic determination, incidental resemblance (as in the previous item) would be among the proper functions of an idea.

The semantic copy principle also accounts for the difference between the *ways* that our idea of Paris and our idea of New Jerusalem go wrong, which is a difference that Hume clearly recognizes. While our idea of Paris misrepresents (insofar as it does) because it straightforwardly fails to resemble *Paris* (that which is its cause), our idea of New Jerusalem is not a misrepresentation (insofar as it is one) in the same way. It does not fail to *resemble* New Jerusalem. (One might say that it *necessarily* resembles that hypothetical city.) Here the missing *causal* connection between the representation and its object is what is relevant. The idea of New Jerusalem is not, even distally, causally connected to its object.

If it is right that the unmodified the semantic copy principle is how Hume accounts for simple representations, then the version of the semantic copy principle presented in this section keeps as closely as possible to the spirit of that account, while also accounting for complex representation and misrepresentation