The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 16

Hume: Copy Principle, associationism

Missing blues. The Copy Principle is puzzling in a number of ways.(1) How do we know that an impression was not residing in our mind before any sensation occurred? (2) How can we be sure that every idea has an antecedent impression? More rigorously, the objection can be put as follows: T 1.3.5.2 T 1.1.1.10

> *MSB* A person having never experienced (i.e. lacking an impression of) a certain shade of blue would nevertheless be able to form an idea of that shade, having been presented with a spectrum of blue colours.

The claim is empirical. It is not merely that there is a *logical possibility* of filling up the gap between two shades of blue—in the sense that no logical contradiction can be derived from it. Nor is it a *metaphysical possibility* under consideration here: if there are certain creatures able to do that, this has no implication for the science of human nature. It is rather that, a person, as he is *actually* constituted, can fill up such a gap.

Arguably, it does not have to be a trivial task, and so many people can fail. But if there is no evidence for this ability and if no other theoretical considerations depend upon it, then we have no reason to believe its existence. As it happens, at this stage in the enquiry there are no independent theoretical reasons to believe in the existence of this ability, and thus the question is whether there is any empirical evidence for it.

Testing the blue. We must set up an experiment with the three colours initially, where the wavelength of C_2 is between the wavelengths of C_1 and C_3. Then we select a subject X, such that X has not been exposed to the colour C_2. However, once X is presented with the colours C_1 and C_3, he . . . does what exactly?

There are, I think, several outcomes ostensibly 'friendly' to MSB. (1) X may simply notice a gap in the spectrum constituted by C_1 and C_3. (2) He may identify C_2 among other colours as the best candidate to fill up the gap. (3) He may actually produce C_2—say, on a canvas.

The first possibility is too weak, I think, to justify MSB. We would not say that X has an idea of C_2 simply on the strength of his belief that *some* colour is missing. The reason is that, in order to have an idea, you should either form it in your imagination, or else merely display some kind of behaviour that would serve as evidence for your mastery of the concept. The two abilities are not equivalent and, moreover, involve two different interpretations of the word 'idea'.

The second possibility is irrelevant for our problem. It indicates the ability to arrange colours (i.e. colour-impressions) on a spectrum. It has nothing to do with the ability to form ideas in our mind in absence of impressions.

Hume himself argues for the third possibility. But I believe that to *establish* the third possibility, whatever we think of its plausibility, will be especially difficult. For it is not clear how can anyone *produce* a novel colour just according to the instruction 'it has to be between C_1 and C_3'? I can, for example, toy with the palette, and, having *already* come across a certain colour, I then place it between C_1 and C_3. My solution may be correct, but it offers no evidence that the idea of that colour was in my mind before I encountered it in experience.

Another major problem, I think, is whether it matters *where* in the spectrum, and in *what* spectrum the shade is missing. Consider the spectrum in Figure 1. It is not difficult to fill in a missing colour between 3 and 4, for example. By contrast,

Figure 1: A simple spectrum of blue.

consider the spectrum in Figure 2. There it is much more difficult, I think, to fill in the gap between 3 and 4. I submit that

Figure 2: A complex spectrum of blue and green.

this would be difficult even *after* you have examined the spectrum. Even more clearly this is the case with exceptionally detailed spectra, as in Figure 3. To return to the Figure 1, what makes it possible to fill up the gap? I suppose it is because

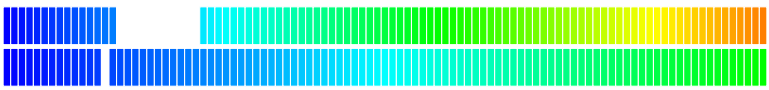

Figure 3: Missing shades in very refined spectra.

we understand the rule, according to which the spectrum is constructed: from dark blue to light blue. So make a circle lighter than 4, but darker than 3, in your imagination, and you can fill up the gap.

But not only do we understand the rule analytically—we can somehow visualise it. This incidentally is also the case in the spectrum of shapes (Figure 4). But then it seems that we do not operate with simple impressions and simple ideas. We construct the missing shades (and shapes) from the yet simpler elements.

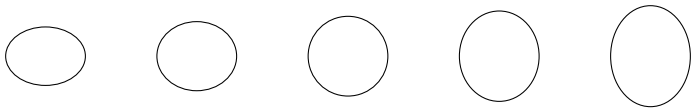

Figure 4: A spectrum of shapes.

Operating with ideas. Hume does not restrict himself to the claim about the origin of ideas. He explores the ways in which ideas populate the mind. If I had a certain experience in the past—say, visiting the Acropolis—I might recall that experience later. In Humese this means that I had a certain impression of Acropolis in 2011, and that on May 4, 2016 I have an idea of Acropolis. Here we have a connection between an object of veridical seeing (NB: I wish to avoid the term 'perception' in order not to confuse it with Humean 'perceptions) and a subsequent idea, and this connection takes place in memory. If, however, I imagine visiting the Pyramids of Giza, then on May 4, 2016 I will have an idea created by my imagination. It will still be based on an earlier impression, but not on the impression of visiting the Pyramids. Hume attempts to find a way to distinguish between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas purely introspectively, but without much success. T 1.1.3

We can also combine simple ideas into complex ones in the course of analysis aided by our imagination. Thus we can imagine and visually represent a centaur by combining the ideas of horse and man. T 1.1.3.4

Association. We can deliberately manipulate our ideas. But even when left alone, ideas do not behave chaotically. There is order in the mental world, just as there is order in the natural world. Imagination and memory bring up our ideas according to certain rules of association. In fact there are only three such rules: resemblance, continguity, and causation. T 1.1.4.1

Example 1 (After Proust). When I taste a piece of a madeleine cake, my mind travels to the days of my childhood and the goodnight kiss my mother used to give me when I was in bed. Why did that happen? Because of *resemblance*: the taste of that cake resembles the taste of a similar cake my mother used to bake for me.

Example 2 (After Tolstoy). When I come to the village where I lived in my childhood, I come across an old tree. I at once begin thinking about the meaning of my life. Why on earth did that happen? Because of *contiguity* in space (at least partly so): the tree is where I used to sit when I was a child and contemplate my life.

Example 3 (After Tolstoy). When I observe a grenade in front of me about to go off, I cannot help thinking of my coming death. Why is that? Because of *cause and effect*: on many occasions explosions were followed by death.

It is of course very hard to believe that all motions of ideas, so to speak, can be explained only by these three principles. Hume does not pretend, however, to offer a further explanation *why* imagination and memory follow exactly these principles. In that he may be said to follow Newton.

Question 4. Give an example showing the limitations of Hume's threefold distinction.

YSB