SPACE AND THE SELF IN HUME'S *TREATISE*

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Introduction

> He is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.
>
> (T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the individual talent', *Selected Essays*, 3rd edition, London 1951, p. 22)

The work that follows is an interpretation of Hume's treatment of the idea of space. Let me start *in medias res* by mentioning some well-known facts. This is a part of Hume's philosophy which appears with some prominence in his *Treatise of Human Nature* – it is the subject of Book 1, Part 2 – and hardly at all in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and which has often been dismissed as weak and unsatisfactory; its absence has even been seen as a sign of Hume's greater maturity of thought in the *Enquiry*.[1] One of the assumptions of the present work is, indeed, that the case of the idea of space typifies the difference between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. Accordingly I shall show how closely the treatment of the idea of space is bound up with other themes of Hume's theory of the understanding that are central in the *Treatise* and that disappear or whose discussion is radically abridged and simplified in the *Enquiry*: for instance, the problem of the existence of external objects, the problem of the self, the problem of abstract ideas. From this point of view, the treatment of the idea of space appears as crucial in the definition of the philosophical substance of the *Treatise*. So, the question of why I have decided to examine Hume's theory of the understanding through a detailed analysis of the treatment of the idea of space, may, in fact, be generalised: why have I decided to privilege the *Treatise* – especially since Hume himself was famously so explicit in advising his readers to do the opposite?

A first answer is that I find the *Treatise* more fun than the *Enquiries* – in

[1] For instance, see J. Noxon, *Hume's Philosophical Development*, Oxford 1973, pp. 114ff., and A. Flew, *Hume's Philosophy of Belief. A Study of His First Inquiry*, London 1961, pp. 61ff.

other words, it is in large part a matter of taste. Yet it may be of some interest to outline what is involved in concentrating on material peculiar to the *Treatise*, while showing how the idea of space is central to any such reading. This is what I do in the *Intermezzo*, where I tell of the reactions to, and appropriations of, the *Treatise* by Hume himself and by some other contemporary and more recent readers, organising the story around the general problems of authorial intention and contemporary reception.

But now it is expedient to give a proper preview of the work. To start with, my discussion follows the order of Book 1, Part 2 of the *Treatise*. Chapter 1 examines Hume's rejection of the 'doctrine of infinite divisibility', with which he opens his treatment of the idea of space (sects. 1–2). The focus of this chapter is on how the mind establishes the relation between mental and real objects: I show that the key feature of the overall argument of sections 1–2 is Hume's way of articulating the passage from the existence of indivisible impressions and ideas to the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of real extension. Chapter 2 is on the origin of the idea of space (sect. 3) from the 'disposition' or 'manner of appearance' of the indivisible impressions or perceptual data. An apparent exception to the first principle that all our ideas are copies of impressions, the notion of 'manner of appearance' is, I suggest, related to belief as 'manner of conception', and may be seen as expressing an original contribution of the mind to experience. With this, my examination of Hume's direct presentation of his doctrine is over. The following two sections of the *Treatise* contain what he calls 'Objections answer'd'; and chapters 3 and 4, which follow the *Intermezzo* on reading and interpretation, are devoted to them. These chapters expand on themes introduced or intimated in chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 3 addresses the relation between knowledge and belief and the classic Kantian question of the Humean a priori by focussing on Hume's treatment of geometry as a source of possible objections against the theory of perceptual indivisibles (sect. 4), and his location of geometry in an ambiguous position between knowledge and probability (Part 3, sect. 1). At the end of this chapter, I consider Hume's treatment of curiosity and the love of truth in the conclusion of the book on passions (Book 2, Part 3, sect. 10). Chapter 4 is devoted to Hume's discussion of the idea of empty space (sect. 5). I show how, according to Hume, we only have a pseudo-idea of empty space and a vacuum which is associated with, and brought about by, our use of the terms 'empty space' and 'vacuum'. In the light of this, I suggest that the formation of the very

idea of space from the 'dispositions' or 'manners of appearance' of perceptual objects involves a reflexive act of the mind similar to those responsible for the formation of abstract ideas by means of distinctions of reason. I conclude the chapter with remarks on the role of sociability and conversation in Hume's theory of language and the understanding.

These chapters are relatively independent, if obviously associated studies, each with a definite scope and with a precise task. By the end of the final chapter, however, it will be evident that one fundamental question underlies each of Hume's sections on the idea of space, making them, as well as my readings, variations on the same theme: what is a mind, and what and how can it know about itself?

The precise task I set for my four chapters is, in each case, that of interpreting an exemplary obscure or puzzling passage from the relevant section of Hume's *Treatise*: four passages – on a grain of sand (*T*/27), on the impressions offered by the surface of the table (*T*/34), on the standard of equality and the definition of a straight line (*T*/51), and on the use of the word 'vacuum' (*T*/64) – define the fields of investigation of my four studies; and the interpretation is the occasion for a reconstruction of the principles involved. My reconstructions are not meant, of course, to say the final word on those principles, but simply to reveal aspects of them which would perhaps remain in the dark in a more systematic analysis. So my writing about Hume's philosophy does not attempt to tidy it up, and is deliberately regressive. It is a feature of this procedure that interpretation of a passage starts with the often laborious accumulation of material – through examination of context, reconstruction of sources and contemporary usage, close reading and comparison of parallel passages – before a reconstructive argument can be presented. This technique draws, to some extent, on the traditions of commentary and argumentative reconstruction. Some philosophical texts, for example Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, invite, or even demand this approach;[2] because of its local clarity and

[2] See D. Henrich, 'Identität und Objektivität. Eine Untersuchung über Kants tranzendentale Deduktion', *Sitzungsberichte der Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 1976, pp. 1–112, esp. pp. 1ff., on the difficulties of Kantian interpretation. The ideal set by Henrich is, in my view, revealing: 'One can only follow the texts of such an author really closely if one is sure of always being able to decide where one is staying within the bounds of his point of view, and where one begins to substitute for it other, though related and possibly also more convincing, ones. Kant's basic ideas will only come to be understood when one is able to bring the force of analysis of arguments fully into the analysis of texts. If that is not achieved, philosophical investigations will result which are related to Kantian thought and orchestrated with Kantian quotations; but Kant's historical attempt at a theory will remain in the twilight from which no one has yet been able to draw it clear' (p. 14).

apparent smoothness (at least in the *Enquiries*), Hume's prose does not. But many will agree, I think, that we cannot regard the text of the *Treatise* as a transparent vehicle of philosophical ideas, and it is my conviction that interpretative effort focussed on especially irksome parts may cast a sharper or more interesting light on the *Treatise* as a whole. This is why, rather than starting with a chapter on the copy principle and concluding with, say, a chapter on the meaning of Hume's 'science of human nature', this interpretation contains, among other things, a series of sketches of the copy principle and of the 'science of human nature' from different, sometimes unusual, perspectives.

So my investigations do not single out certain principles as the essential ones from which to derive consequences in order to build up a Humean philosophical system. On the other hand, my reading of Hume's treatment of the idea of space does claim to be, in fact, a reading of Hume's theory of human understanding concentrated on his treatment of the idea of space. This claim may naturally suggest to the reader some more general questions – what kind of Humean philosophy is presupposed by and constituted in this reading? Is it naturalistic or sceptical? Answering such questions is very difficult – indeed, making it clear that answering such questions is very difficult, and showing why, are among my aims here. As will become evident, I am reluctant to use such summarising terms as 'naturalism', 'scepticism', or 'realism' because they are, in my opinion, unhelpful – inadequate to decribe the complexities of the real thing. 'Scepticism', 'naturalism', and 'realism' are not the only summarising terms I am reluctant to use. I would also feel uneasy repeating once more that, for example, Hume has a psychological rather than a logical ideal of certainty, or a psychological rather than a philosophical interest in the problem of induction, and so on. Nor do I think that calling Hume's 'science of human nature' a 'psychology', and contrasting it with a 'philosophy' or a 'logic' would be a good interpretative move. That post-Humean categories and expectations, including our own, focus and direct our readings is inevitable; their unreflective use is a different matter. An ancient text such as Hume's *Treatise* is a very delicate object – or, to put it more accurately, we, as present-day readers of Hume's *Treatise* and the like, are very delicate objects: our balance may be easily upset by uncautiously using our, rather than its own, terminology, and we risk reading into a marvellous eighteenth-century book a second-rate twentieth-century one.

The part of Hume's philosophical agenda that I shall reconstruct,

whilst doubtless in some loose sense 'naturalistic' or 'pragmatist', has little in common with that of the *present-day* sceptic, or realist, or even naturalist and pragmatist. Given the liveliness of contemporary debate on these issues one point, however, must be made clear. This study contains an interpretation of Hume's theory of the understanding based on a close reading of the treatment of the idea of space, and a reconstruction of its connection with the central doctrines of the *Treatise*. Of course, I believe this interpretation to be new, and also to be legitimate; and I think that the methodology I have used is reasonable and fruitful. But with this I do not intend to suggest that my reading of Hume is the only defensible one, or that my approach is the only one leading to an attractive and convincing interpretation. This would be simply incompatible with the approach I have adopted. Provided they are based on a decent awareness of the past categories and values operating in the past text, approaches more informed by current philosophical (or other) agendas may result in very good readings indeed.[3]

But the prescription to avoid unreflective overriding, or indeed unreflective adoption, of the relevant past categories leaves plenty of scope for divergent interpretations. The attitude to the text that I am advocating requires that, within these limits, we regard Hume's *Treatise* in the same way that many literary critics consider classics: that is, as by their very definition, open to different – differently oriented and ever new – interpretations.[4] This move is clearly appropriate to the historical fortunes of the book we are considering. Seen sometimes as a founding father, sometimes as an exemplary erroneous thinker,[5] the author of the *Treatise* is always in the philosophical pantheon: of analytic philosophers, still paying their typically grudging respects to the first who posed the problems of causation and induction;[6] of phenomenologists, ready to acknowledge the similarity of their reductions with

[3] For example, S. Blackburn, 'Hume on thick connexions' (*Essays in Quasi-Realism*, Oxford 1993, chapter 5, pp. 94–107), offers an exceptionally stimulating 'quasi-realist' Hume by freely improving or criticising Hume's arguments whenever he thinks it useful or necessary, but without for a moment forgetting to be fair and respectful to the text and its pastness. A very good reading of Hume informed by a current socio-political agenda is in T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford 1990, chapter 2: 'The law of the heart', esp. pp. 45–52.

[4] See F. Kermode, *The Classic*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1983, p. 44: 'It seems that on a just view of the matter the books we call classics possess intrinsic qualities that endure, but possess also an openness to accommodation which keeps them alive under endlessly varying dispositions.'

[5] For Hume as a very bad thing see, for example, C. D. Broad, 'Hume's theory of space', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 47, 1961, pp. 161–76 (and references there).

[6] See, for example, J. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, 3rd edition, London 1980, and J. Bennett, *Locke Berkeley Hume: Central Themes*, Oxford 1971. For the anti-canon of analytic philosophy see J. Rée, *Philosophical Tales*, London and New York 1987, pp. 42ff.

Hume's examinations of experience;[7] of positivists, who have seen in his writings the first appearance of their own anti-metaphysical doctrines;[8] as well as of deconstructionists and post-moderns, who, without much effort, have appropriated both his concern with style and writing, and what he calls his 'moderate scepticism' and 'philosophy in a careless manner'.[9] There can be really no doubt about the status of Hume as a canonical philosopher with a vengeance.[10]

This brings me to another important point. My reading of Book 1, Part 2 of the *Treatise* is both closely textual and contextual. But the types of context to which I shall appeal in my readings will perhaps look somewhat idiosyncratic, having reference more to readership and reception, than to influence and authorial intentions. For example, I shall deliberately avoid comparing Hume's tenets with Locke's and Berkeley's. There are several other reasons for this: in particular a certain dissatisfaction with the standard story of the British empiricists, which, at any rate, has been carefully explored by many others. Also, every line of such authors as Locke and Berkeley has been subjected to nearly three centuries of comments, interpretations, refutations, imitations, developments – their texts are so charged with meanings of all sorts and origins, that there is room for doubt about their efficacy in sorting out interpretative problems in the text of Hume. In my contextual readings, I shall set out to make sense of Hume's pages by reconstructing the climate of opinion to which they belonged, rather than by establishing a system of influences among authors of philosophy classics. For example, I shall consider Hume's relation to the 'way of ideas',

[7] See A. Reinach, 'Kants Auffassung des humeschen Problem', *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik*, 141 (1908), pp. 176–209 (English transl. by J. N. Mohanty, in K. R. Merrill and R. W. Shahan (eds.), *David Hume: Many-sided Genius*, Norman 1976, pp. 161–88), and C. V. Salmon, 'The central problem of David Hume's philosophy: an essay toward a phenomenological interpretation of the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*', *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* X, 1929, 299–449. See the discussion of G. Davie, *A Passion for Ideas: Essays on the Scottish Enlightenment*, vol. 2, Edinburgh 1994, chapters 7 and 8; interesting material in D. W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life*, Chicago 1984, pp. 48ff.

[8] For example, see H. Reichenbach, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*, Berkeley 1951, and A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd edition, London 1946 (as well as his *Hume*, Oxford 1980), and such literature as F. Zabeeh, *Hume Precursor of Modern Empiricism*, The Hague 1973, and D. F. Pears (ed.), *David Hume: A Symposium*, London 1963.

[9] See, for instance, Z. Parusnikova, 'Against the spirit of foundations: post-modernism and David Hume', *Hume Studies* 19 (1), 1993, pp. 1–17, and J. Christensen, *Practicing Enlightenment: Hume and the Formation of a Literary Career*, Madison and London 1987.

[10] Very aptly for my purposes, Harold Bloom defines the canon as either 'the choice of books in our teaching institutions' – in its original meaning – or as 'the relation of an individual reader and writer to what has been preserved out of what has been written' (*The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York, San Diego and London 1994, pp. 15 and 17.)

not in terms of the influence of Locke's *Essay* on Hume's *Treatise*, but rather through the mediation of theoretically less charged books, such as eighteenth-century dictionaries, natural-philosophical treatises, or textbooks – or even novels – which have the advantage both of having been widely read and highly thought of then, and of being not very familiar to militant philosophers now. (And, when citing books still somewhat popular today, such as, for example, Bayle's *Dictionary* or the Port-Royal *Logic*, I shall sometimes use period editions and translations rather than the results of the most recent scholarly efforts.)

There is, of course, another kind of 'influence' which needs considering when one has to do with canonical authors. Hume is no longer the same after having been read by, say, Kant, Husserl, Ayer, and Kemp Smith, Laird, Passmore, Bennett, Livingston, Baier. The Hume read by me, by us, is partly constituted by them.

To me, Hume is of interest, for a start, as the author of a significant eighteenth-century book – a book as significant and even as entertaining as *Tristram Shandy* or *Tom Jones*, and as far from (or as close to) our present philosophical concerns as those are far from (or close to) the forms of our present moral and social life. But that the *Treatise* is interesting now is a fact. Why? It is tempting to suggest that 250 years are not enough to change human nature and its innate metaphysical instinct – to put it in the terms of the *Treatise*. On the other hand, it is also a fact that Hume's philosophical works (including the *Treatise*) have been read and commented on extensively and continuously during these 250 years, and have accordingly contributed to our own human nature and metaphysical instinct. It may well be that such differently oriented Hume readers can now so easily meet and, if necessary, so politely agree to disagree, because there is something deeper than their Hume interpretations that they share – the historically determined standards of, for example, historical fairness and analytic rigour, as well as the tradition of fair discussion and polite disagreement, to the establishment of which Hume's writings have so greatly contributed.