

Humean Skepticism and the Metaphysics of Impressions: Questions for Falkenstein

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Lorne Falkenstein's terrific book is a study of central themes of Hume's theoretical philosophy, with due focus on the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*.¹ The book displays an impressive combination of breadth and depth. While the discussion includes a wide range of topics, such as belief, identity, space and time, the metaphysics of mind, and skepticism, Lorne's consideration of each is exacting and detailed. Another virtue of the book is its rigorous and illuminating interrogations of Hume's positions and arguments. It is a major contribution to the study of Hume's philosophy, and every scholar of eighteenth-century metaphysics and epistemology would benefit from engaging with it. I begin by considering a cluster of claims that Lorne advances concerning the nature of sensory impressions. I then consider his interpretation of Hume's skepticism as remedial in intention.

1. Impressions

Some modern philosophers argued that materialist theories of mind are unable to explain the fact that conscious experiences are, under normal conditions, unified rather than fragmented. Lorne calls this the "comprehension problem" (38). One version of the problem is stated by Samuel Clarke, according to whom no material system can constitute an "individual Conscious Being," because matter always consists of "actually separate and distinct parts."² In Clarke's view, the mind's having

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parts would render the unity of consciousness unintelligible. Hume's view that some experiences are literally extended presents a version of the comprehension problem. For Hume, visual and tactile experiences are complex impressions that are spatially extended, composed of spatially related, simple impressions. An objection is that this cannot explain the unity of perceptual consciousness. Were visual experiences mere aggregates of simple impressions, there would be no explanation for how sight may provide us with a unified experience of an object, rather than so many distinct experiences of its parts.

Lorne argues that this objection misunderstands the nature of Humean complex sensory impressions. Complex impressions, like all original impressions, are perceptions that arise "without any antecedent perception" (T 2.1.1.1).³ They are not products of the mind's compounding simple impressions. On this point, Hume disagrees with Locke, according to whom all ideas enter the mind "simple and unmixed."⁴ Lorne infers that "visual and tactile complex impressions are undivided wholes. Parts may be separated from or distinguished within them, but are originally given in them" (42). When a subject has a complex sensory impression, she has an experience that is not, at that time, divided into parts. Her perceptual experience, moreover, is not a mere aggregate of impressions.

I want to consider the sense in which complex sensory impressions are, according to Lorne, "undivided." One candidate is purely spatial: a complex sensory impression is undivided merely insofar as the parts of the impression stand in (the ancestral of) the relation of spatial contiguity. This is not Lorne's view. His Hume denies that a complex sensory impression is "nothing more than a collection of simple impressions disposed alongside one another in space" (42). Moreover, Lorne is impressed by the claim that "a collection of spatially disposed impressions is not the same thing as the impression of a space" (42).

There is another candidate sense of "undivided": a complex sensory impression is undivided insofar as the simple ideas of which it is composed are not, prior to the mind's acts of separation and comparison, distinct. This is perhaps suggested by Lorne's claim that, in complex sensory impressions, "the whole precedes the parts" (42). But it would be unacceptable to Hume, in view of two theses to which he is committed. The first is what Thomas Holden has called the "actual parts doctrine."⁵ Hume first appeals to the doctrine in his argument that no idea is infinitely divisible. One premise of that argument is that "whatever is capable of being divided *in infinitum*, must consist of an infinite number of parts" (T 1.2.1.2). This is an implication of the actual parts doctrine, according to which, for any x , if x is divisible into n parts, then x has n parts. In order for x to be divisible into n parts, x must have n parts actually, not merely potentially. Lorne allows that every complex sensory impression is divisible into parts. In view of the actual parts doctrine, it follows that every complex sensory impression has distinct parts.

The claim that complex sensory impressions are undivided in the sense of not actually having distinct parts is also in tension with Hume's separability principle: "whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination," where these propositions are "also true in the *inverse*" (T 1.1.7.3). According to the separability principle, difference, distinguishability, and separability in thought are mutually entailing. The notion of difference relevant to the principle is "difference of *number*" (T 1.1.5.10).⁶ The simple impressions of which a complex sensory impression is composed are distinguishable. If they are distinguishable, then they are numerically distinct, and the impression is not undivided in the present sense but is composed of a multiplicity of impressions. My question for Lorne: in what sense are complex sensory impressions "undivided," such that their being so provides a solution to the comprehension problem?

I turn to another issue concerning sensory impressions, also raised by Lorne's discussion of the comprehension problem. He claims that Hume's views regarding complex sensory impressions require that he qualify a principle endorsed in the "Malézieu argument" against the infinite divisibility of extension: that "existence in itself belongs only to unity, and is never applicable to number, but on account of the unites, of which the number is compos'd" (T 1.2.2.3). According to a strong reading endorsed by Donald Baxter, the principle holds that "only single things really exist."⁷ According to a weaker reading, it asserts the ontological priority of part to whole.⁸ At one point, Lorne seems to accept the strong reading of the principle, taking it to say that "only units exist" (87). But he goes on to write that any composite is "only an arbitrarily delimited collection of units" that "exists in virtue of the existence of the units of which it is composed" (88). In allowing that composites exist, Lorne presupposes the weak reading of the Malézieu principle.

There is support for the weak reading of the principle. First, it is suggested by a difference between Malézieu's and Hume's presentations of the principle. Malézieu claims that "*l'existence appartient aux unités, et non pas aux nombres.*"⁹ Here, existence *simpliciter* pertains only to unities. By contrast, Hume writes that "existence in itself belongs only to unity" (T 1.2.2.3). This weakens Malézieu's premise: existence *per se*, not existence *simpliciter*, belongs only to unities. Traditionally, existence *per se* is independent existence. Hume's claim is that independent existence belongs only to true unities and, hence, only to simples. Composites exist but depend for their existence on the existence of their parts. Second, that composites exist is suggested by the final sentence of the argument in which Hume applies the principle, where he writes that the existence of indivisible unities "is necessary to that of all number" (T 1.2.2.3). Third, Hume draws the distinction between complex and simple impressions in mereological terms: "Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these,

and may be distinguished into parts” (T 1.1.1.2). Because complex perceptions are, by definition, perceptions that have perceptions as proper parts, the strong reading of the Malézieu principle would imply that no complex perceptions exist.¹⁰

Lorne holds that Hume’s views regarding complex sensory impressions imply that the Malézieu principle is not true in full generality. While Hume may allow that it is true when understood as an “ontogenetic principle,” he must hold that the principle has “no psychogenetic validity” (93). As I understand him, Lorne’s view is that Hume is committed to denying that the principle is true of all perceptions, because it fails to hold true of complex sensory impressions. He supports this with two claims. First, Hume denies that complex sensory impressions are products of “acts of association or comparison performed on previously given simples” (93).¹¹ Second, a complex sensory impression is “not just the sum of the parts; it is the parts in certain relations to one another” (42). Hume is committed to each of these. But neither is incompatible with the application of the Malézieu principle to complex sensory impressions. The principle would be incompatible with the first claim if the principle entailed that complex sensory impressions are caused by antecedent simple impressions. But the kind of dependence salient to the principle is not causal. Hume introduces the principle with this example: “Twenty men may be said to exist; but ’tis only because one, two, three, four, &c. are existent” (T 1.2.2.3). Here, the dependence cannot be causal, not least because, on the one hand, the collection of men exists simultaneously with each of the men and, on the other hand, causes cannot be simultaneous with their effects (T 1.3.2.7). That complex sensory impressions depend, in the sense required by the Malézieu principle, on their parts is not in tension with Hume’s denial that such impressions are causal effects of the mind’s operating on simple impressions. Further, that a complex sensory impression includes relations between the simple impressions of which it is composed is compatible with the Malézieu principle. What the principle requires is that any complex impression—a whole consisting of parts standing in certain relations—depends for its existence on the existence of its simple parts.

2. Skepticism

Humean skepticism is often thought to have a purely destructive influence, one that is checked only by the psychological power of certain belief-forming mechanisms. Lorne’s contention is that Hume instead regards skepticism as a constructive solution to a problem concerning irrational belief. We form beliefs that are at odds with the evidence available to us. The concern of T 1.3.13, “Of unphilosophical probability,” is to enumerate the causes of this, among which are general rules, or the difficulty of our following a “long chain of connected arguments,” and the decay of memory. These causes are “unphilosophical,” not regarded by philosophers as “reasonable foundations of belief and opinion” (T 1.3.13.1). As Lorne reads him, Hume is com-

mitted to doxastic determinism, according to which a subject's beliefs are necessitated by her psychological circumstances, some of which will include unphilosophical factors. We might agree that subjects should only hold beliefs that are in accord with the evidence available to them. If doxastic determinism is true, then there is no guarantee that a subject will cease to form beliefs lacking evidential support by virtue of her being presented with arguments according to which only beliefs proportioned to the evidence are justified.¹² How might we be led to form beliefs that are proportioned to the evidence?

Lorne's Hume holds that skepticism provides an answer. Someone who has been exposed to and impressed by the force of skeptical arguments undergoes a psychological change, one product of which is an "enduring distrust of our cognitive powers" (2). This recalls the first species of mitigated, consequent skepticism discussed in the first *Enquiry*: "the greater part of mankind," being "affirmative and dogmatical in their opinions," would be inspired with "more modesty and reserve," were they made aware of "the strange infirmities of human understanding" (EHU 12.24). Subjects who have undergone this change form beliefs the causes of which are "receiv'd by philosophers": "As it turns out, the beliefs determined by the circumstances recognized by philosophers are the ones those impressed by the force of sceptical arguments are compelled to accept, whereas the beliefs disclaimed by philosophers are the ones those impressed by the force of sceptical arguments hesitate over accepting" (3). Skepticism is remedial insofar as exposure to skeptical arguments removes or destabilizes beliefs the causes of which are unphilosophical and disposes one to form beliefs that are responsive to the empirical evidence available to one. Lorne writes: "For Hume, scepticism does not pose a problem. It enables us to proportion belief to the evidence" (303). I refer to beliefs with causes of which philosophers do not approve as "unphilosophical beliefs." Lorne does not hold that exposure to skeptical arguments results in a total elimination of unphilosophical belief.¹³ Exposure to skeptical arguments causes us to abandon unphilosophical beliefs when it does not cost us "too much pain to think otherwise" (305).

There is a well-known tension between Hume's skepticism and his naturalism. Hume's deployment of wide-reaching skeptical arguments would seem to undermine his ambition to construct a "science of man." I call this the "integration problem."¹⁴ Lorne suggests that the remedial interpretation "weaves Hume's naturalism and his skepticism into a consistent whole" (3). I am doubtful that it provides a full solution to the problem. There are two versions of the problem. The first is psychological: how, given Hume's endorsement of wide-reaching skeptical arguments, does he continue to form beliefs required for the construction of a science of human nature? The second is normative: how, given Hume's endorsement of wide-reaching skeptical arguments, does he continue to regard the beliefs that he adopts in the course of his inquiry into human nature as epistemically justified? The psychological problem concerns how Hume continues to believe after his having been exposed to skeptical arguments.

The normative problem concerns how Hume is justified in continuing to believe, in view of the skeptical arguments to which he has been exposed.

Lorne's proposal solves the psychological integration problem. Encounter with skeptical arguments does not produce lasting, unmitigated doubt. Subjects who have been impressed by skeptical arguments, while distrustful of their faculties, nonetheless continue to believe. The proposal does not seem to solve the normative integration problem. Lorne allows that at least many of the skeptical arguments of the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* are, by Hume's lights, sound. For example, he writes that "Hume famously argued that there is no justification for believing that what has customarily happened up to now will continue to happen that way" (2).¹⁵ This is an allusion to the argument of *Enquiry* 4 and, perhaps, *Treatise* 1.3.6, the apparent conclusion of which is that beliefs formed on the basis of probable reasoning are epistemically unjustified. At least many of Hume's philosophical commitments are themselves products of probable reasoning. They are, according to this argument, epistemically unjustified. The claim that Hume's skepticism is remedial in intention does not block this conclusion. If that claim is correct, then the effect of exposure to the skeptical argument concerning induction is one's forming beliefs taken to be proportioned to the evidence. But if that argument is sound, then all inductive expectations are, in fact, unjustified. That skeptical arguments characteristically have certain psychological effects does not resolve the normative problem raised by them.

The objection can be raised from a different angle. The remedial interpretation maintains that skepticism is a cure for "irrational beliefs," among which are beliefs with causes not approved by philosophy. When we are presented with skeptical arguments, the effect of this is that we abandon, or at least hesitate to accept, irrational beliefs. A belief is descriptively irrational when it is not a product of reason. A belief is normatively irrational when, roughly, it goes against the epistemic reasons for belief available to the thinker. I take Lorne to use "irrational" in a normative sense. But if Hume offers skeptical arguments that he both regards as sound and takes to apply, collectively, to every belief whatever, then the result is a pessimistic version of what Kevin Meeker calls "epistemic egalitarianism": no belief is more rational than any other.¹⁶ Lorne seems to allow that Hume was interested in the normative problem raised by skepticism (3). I would like to know whether and how, according to the remedial interpretation, he achieves a solution to it.

One response available to Lorne holds that Hume is not ultimately concerned with normative questions about belief due to his doxastic determinism: because normative questions about belief presuppose that belief is "up to us," they are misguided.¹⁷ But Hume denies that a domain of which determinism holds true is thereby one for which normative questions are inapt. He is not only a determinist about belief but also about human action and character.¹⁸ Crucially, he holds that determinism is a presupposition of normative questions concerning the latter domain. Because

causation implies necessitation, in the sense of the two definitions of “necessity” provided at T 2.3.2.4, an agent is responsible for an action only if it is necessitated by her character, where this, too, will have been necessitated by antecedent causes. Thus, it is “only upon the principles of necessity, that a person acquires any merit or demerit from his actions” (T 2.3.2.6). One’s beliefs, like one’s actions and character, are “the necessary result” of one’s circumstances (EHU 5.8). But as in the cases of action and character, Hume would deny that this renders normative questions concerning belief inapposite.

I close with two questions raised by Lorne’s use of the notion of unphilosophical belief. First, how does Lorne understand the relationship between the categories of *unphilosophical* belief and *irrational* belief? His claim that skepticism cures irrational belief by dislodging unphilosophical beliefs suggests either that these are coextensive or that the former is a subset of the latter. There is reason to think that this is not Hume’s view. Among the doxastic causes of which philosophers do not approve are general rules. Some beliefs caused by general rules are irrational, including those that Hume provides as examples of prejudice (T 1.3.13.7). But not all beliefs formed as a result of the application of a general rule are, by Hume’s lights, irrational. Towards the end of his discussion of unphilosophical belief, he says: “We shall afterwards take notice of some general rules, by which we *ought* to regulate our judgment concerning causes and effects” (T 1.3.13.11, emphasis mine). This is an allusion to the eight “rules by which to judge of causes and effects.” Hume’s epistemic approval of the application of these rules is implied by his claim that they constitute “all the logic I think proper to employ in my reasoning” (T 1.3.15.11). Beliefs formed as a result of the application of these rules are unphilosophical yet rational.

Another question concerns the remedial interpretation’s claim that Hume regards skepticism as a cure for unphilosophical belief. According to Lorne, Hume prefers belief guided by empirical evidence to unphilosophical belief. What explains the preference? A candidate explanation is that Hume prefers empirically guided belief on epistemic grounds. But, as we have seen, Lorne accepts that Hume takes his skeptical arguments to be sound. Collectively, these undermine the epistemic merit of all beliefs alike. Lorne does not (or should not) endorse an explanation according to which empirically guided beliefs are epistemically superior to unphilosophical beliefs. Another candidate explanation is that one’s holding beliefs of the former kind is of greater practical benefit than one’s holding beliefs of the latter kind. But it is not generally true that empirically guided beliefs are practically superior to unphilosophical beliefs. Some of the latter are practically indispensable. For example, the belief in body is unphilosophical in the stipulated sense, a product of “trivial qualities of the fancy” (T 1.4.2.56). It is also among those beliefs without which “all human life must perish” (EHU 12.23). If empirically guided beliefs are neither epistemically nor, in general, practically superior to those with causes of which philosophy disapproves,

why does Hume regard it as a good that we be led, by virtue of acquaintance with skeptical arguments, to form empirically guided beliefs and disinclined to form unphilosophical beliefs?

NOTES

1 Lorne Falkenstein, *Consciousness, Time, and Scepticism in Hume's Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2024). Hereafter cited in text by page number.

2 Samuel Clarke, *A Defence of an Argument Made Use of in a Letter to Mr. Dodwell, To prove the Immateriality and Natural Immortality of the Soul*, in *A Letter to Mr. Dodwell*, 6th ed. (London: James and John Knapton, 1731), 87–103, 22–23.

3 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2 vols., ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), cited in text by Book, part, section, and paragraph.

4 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.ii.1, cited by Book, part, and section.

5 Thomas Holden, *The Architecture of Matter: Galileo to Kant* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 16.

6 P. J. E. Kail offers a different reading of the principle, according to which Hume's notion of "distinct existence" is to be analyzed in terms of phenomenal distinctness. See P. J. E. Kail, *Projection and Realism in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 134.

7 Donald Baxter, "Hume on Space and Time." In *The Oxford Handbook of Hume*, ed. Paul Russell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 173–90, 179.

8 Don Garrett writes that the relevant premise is that "complex objects derive their existence from the existence of their parts." See Don Garrett, "Difficult Times for Humean Identity?" *Philosophical Studies* 146, no. 3 (2009): 435–43, 437.

9 The relevant selection of Malézieu's *Éléments de Géométrie* is given in Todd Ryan, "Hume's 'Malezieu' Argument," *Hume Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 105–18, 108–09.

10 There is a related question of how to square the existence of composites with the separability principle. See Jani Hakkarainen, "A Third Type Distinction in the *Treatise*," *Hume Studies* 38, no. 1 (2012): 55–78; Hsueh Qu, "Complex Ideas and Hume's Separability Principle," *Mind* 131, no. 522 (2022): 517–34; and Graham Clay, "Hume's Separability Principle, his Dictum, and their Implications," *Mind* 133, no. 530 (2024): 504–16.

11 Lorne writes: "the impressions from which our ideas of space are derived could not be built up from an aggregation or summation of preexisting parts. They are sense impressions, after all, which means that they must be 'original' (as Hume put it at *Treatise* 2.1.1.1) and not the products of any act of imagination" (83).

12 The problem does not depend on the truth of doxastic determinism. It suffices that thinkers often form beliefs that are at odds with the evidence available to them, even when they accept that they ought to proportion their beliefs to the evidence.

13 An example is the belief in body. On the one hand, that belief is a product of “trivial qualities of the fancy” (T 1.4.2.56). One of these is the mind’s propensity to ascribe identity to related objects, which, in view of its role in the ancient philosophical fiction of “substance, or original and first matter,” is among the causes of belief that is “rejected” by philosophy (T 1.4.3.3; 1.4.4.1). On the other hand, durable suspension of the belief is possible “in words only.” Appreciation of skeptical arguments concerning the belief in an external world does not lead to lasting diminishment of one’s belief in the existence of body.

14 I borrow this label from Donald Ainslie, *Hume’s True Scepticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22.

15 Elsewhere, Lorne writes that Hume’s skeptical arguments establish that “empirically guided inference cannot be rationally justified” (6).

16 Kevin Meeker, *Hume’s Radical Scepticism and the Fate of Naturalized Epistemology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 17. This would be implied by Hume’s taking the argument of T 1.4.1 to be a sound skeptical argument. Lorne seems to allow that that argument is skeptical in intent (309).

17 This might be understood to presuppose the principle that “ought” implies “can.” For an argument that Hume rejects that principle, see Hsueh Qu, “Hume’s Doxastic Involuntarism,” *Mind* 126 (501): 53–92.

18 For an argument that Hume is committed to the general truth of determinism, see Peter Millican, “Hume’s Determinism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 40, no. 4 (2010): 611–42.

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