

Skepticism and the Idea of Body in Hume

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ABSTRACT In section 1.4.4 of the *Treatise*, “Of the modern philosophy,” Hume offers a skeptical argument concerning the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. The argument in that section is often understood to aim to undermine the modern philosophy’s account of body, according to which bodies lack paradigmatic secondary qualities, by showing that it has “extravagant” skeptical consequences. I argue that Hume does not reject the core commitments of the modern philosophy. His aim in *T* 1.4.4 is not to undermine any particular account of body but rather to establish the deeply rooted inadequacy of our cognition of external bodies.

KEYWORDS Hume, body, primary and secondary qualities, conceptual skepticism

HUME TELLS US THAT FOUR SCIENCES—logic, morals, criticism, and politics—include “almost every thing, which it can any way import us to be acquainted with, or which can tend either to the improvement or ornament of the human mind” (*T* Intro 5).¹ Book 1 of the *Treatise* is a contribution to the first of these sciences, one ambition of which is to explain “the nature of our ideas” (*T* Intro 5). Some of Hume’s investigations of our ideas are vindicating, implying that certain ideas, when properly understood, are free from confusion and obscurity. For example, despite his initial perplexity concerning the source of the idea of causal necessity, Hume concludes that it can be understood as the idea of “that determination of the thought to pass from causes to effects and from effects to causes” (*T* 1.3.14.22). Other accounts of our ideas included in the *Treatise*’s logic have an undermining function, showing that certain ideas are in some respect defective. Such accounts instance what Fogelin calls *conceptual skepticism*. Conceptual skepticism does not aim to subvert the grounds or justification of one’s beliefs; it challenges “the very intelligibility of a system of beliefs.”² By identifying defects in the contents of certain beliefs, conceptual skepticism displays the inadequacy of our cognition

¹Citations of Hume’s *Treatise* give the book, part, section, and paragraph number in the Clarendon edition. Citations of the “Introduction” to the *Treatise* give the paragraph number in the same edition.

²Fogelin, *Hume’s Skepticism*, 6. For discussion of conceptual skepticism, see Garrett, “A Small Tincture,” 71; and Williams, “Hume’s Skepticism,” 85.

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of some domains. I argue that Hume pursues this skeptical strategy in a relatively neglected section of the *Treatise*, 1.4.4, “Of the modern philosophy” (MP), and, moreover, that the section’s skepticism is more forceful and wide reaching than has usually been understood.

MP’s topic is what Hume calls “the modern philosophy.” Whereas “the antient philosophy” is characterized by fictions including substance, accident, and substantial form, the modern philosophy is characterized by a distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of body. In the first phase of MP (paragraphs 1–5), Hume provides a causal proof of what I call the *negative commitment* of the modern philosophy: paradigmatic secondary qualities, such as “colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold,” do not enjoy continued and distinct existence. Instead, they are mere perceptions that do not resemble any real properties of bodies.³ He then infers an “easy consequence,” which I call the *positive commitment* of the modern philosophy: if a sensible quality enjoys continued and distinct existence, then it is among the paradigmatic primary qualities, which include “extension and solidity, with their different mixtures and modifications; figure, motion, gravity, and cohesion” (*T* 1.4.4.3–5).⁴ In the second phase of MP (paragraphs 6–15), Hume argues that the modern philosophy has “extravagant” skeptical consequences (*T* 1.4.4.6).

Hume’s intentions in MP are notoriously opaque. Wright suggests that Hume’s discussion is “too paradoxical to allow us to come to any definitive interpretation of his own views.”⁵ The section is usually understood to undermine the modern philosophy by targeting its distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Pitson understands MP’s skeptical argument as a “*reductio ad absurdum* proof of the falsity of the modern philosophy.”⁶ Qu writes that MP “undermine[s] the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.”⁷ Such interpreters endorse

³Hume follows Bayle in understanding the modern philosophy in this way. Bayle says, “The ‘new’ philosophers, although they are not skeptics, have so well understood the bases of suspension of judgement with regard to sounds, smells, heat, cold, hardness, softness, heaviness and lightness, tastes, colors, and the like, that they teach that all these qualities are perceptions of our soul and that they do not exist at all in the objects of our senses” (*DHC* 364–65).

⁴The modern philosophy’s positive commitment does not, by itself, entail that either primary qualities or bodies exhibit continued and distinct existence. Because the modern philosophers believe in bodies that possess sensible qualities, their positive commitment leads them to believe in the continued and distinct existence of primary qualities.

⁵Wright, “Academic Skepticism,” 423.

⁶Pitson, “Primary and Secondary Qualities,” 131.

⁷Qu, *Epistemological Evolution*, 115. Fogelin (*Skeptical Crisis*, 97) calls MP’s skeptical argument an “attack” on the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Others who endorse at least one thesis of the standard reading include Ainslie, *True Scepticism*, 198–201; Blackburn, “Mezzanine Level,” 276; Kail, *Projection and Realism*, 70; Watson, *Breakdown*, 129; and Winkler, “Color of Virtue,” 15. Clay (“Incredible Demonstrations,” 58–59) says that MP offers an “argument against the primary/secondary quality distinction,” although he also claims neutrality regarding Hume’s attitude toward the modern philosophy’s negative commitment. Fissette (“Lockean Metaphysics,” 122) argues for a variant of the standard view, holding that MP rejects Locke’s “metaphysical interpretation” of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Garrett (*Cognition and Commitment*, 215) claims that the aim of MP is to “deflate” the modern philosophy’s pretension to be “superior in consistency” to the system of the external world constitutive of the ancient philosophy, although he leaves open the possibility that the section has other aims. The standard reading does not deny that Hume goes on to use the results of MP to generate the “manifest contradiction” of *T* 1.4.7 (i.e. in *T* 1.4.7.4). My interpretation resembles one stated but not developed by Broughton (“Inquiry,” 545–46) according

what I call the *standard reading*. This reading holds that (i) Hume's principal aim in MP is to undermine the modern philosophy and (ii) the section undermines the modern philosophy by arguing that its central claims—the positive and negative commitments—imply unacceptable results and ought to be rejected. According to the standard reading, any apparent endorsements of the modern philosophy's core commitments in MP are merely provisional, and the section shows the idea of body to be defective only if those commitments are maintained.

I argue for two theses. First, the denial of the commitments of the modern philosophy is neither the conclusion nor a premise of the argument of MP. Second, that argument does not merely undermine the particular account of body accepted by the modern philosophy but rather undermines any account of body whatever. MP's skeptical force is greater than the standard reading implies: given the cognitive capacities we possess, we are unable to achieve an "adequate notion" of body (*T* 1.4.4.5). Hume endorses the deeply rooted inadequacy of our cognition of external bodies. In addition to my arguments against the standard reading, I argue against recent interpreters who take Hume to reach metaphysical conclusions on the basis of the skeptical argument of MP. While that argument does undermine the epistemic merit of a version of the belief in body that survives MP's conceptual skepticism, Hume does not take it to license conclusions about body's existence.

I begin by situating MP's skeptical argument in its historical context, surveying the destructive purposes to which early modern authors put the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (§1). Next, I outline Hume's account of the idea of body, parts of which emerge during his attempt to rebut paradoxes concerning the infinite divisibility of extension (§2). I then consider the first phase of MP (§3). I present textual evidence both from the *Treatise* and Hume's later works that he endorses the negative commitment of the modern philosophy. I then offer an interpretation of the second phase of MP (§4). Against the standard reading, I show that Hume does not take the conclusion of his skeptical argument to be the negation of the modern philosophy's core commitments but rather to be a dilemma faced by any account of body. Finally, I consider an argument from Hume's first *Enquiry* that is usually understood as a paraphrase of MP's skeptical argument (§5). I show that the arguments differ in their premises and intended conclusions.

I. ANTECEDENTS OF HUME'S ARGUMENT

Many seventeenth-century authors agree that there is a distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of body. In the hands of Locke, this is the distinction between the real qualities of body and qualities that are merely "Powers to produce various Sensations in us" (*E* II.viii.14).⁸ Locke describes the chapter of the *Essay* in which he draws the distinction as a "little Excursion into Natural Philosophy" (*E* II.viii.22). For philosophers with corpuscularian or mechanist

to whom Hume both endorses the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and holds that this distinction entails that we cannot "coherently conceive of physical objects."

⁸Locke initially implies that the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is the distinction between qualities that are inseparable from body and those that are not (*E* II.viii.9–10). Citations of the *Essay* give the book, chapter, and section numbers in the Nidditch edition.

sympathies, the distinction is a contribution to the foundations of natural philosophy. But in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, the distinction is put to destructive purposes by authors including Bayle, Foucher, and Berkeley, according to whom it has epistemological, conceptual, and metaphysical consequences unanticipated by its earlier advocates.

The nominal target of Foucher's *Critique* is Malebranche's *De la recherche de la vérité*. But the *Critique* contains many arguments directed against Cartesianism in general, one of which, cited approvingly by Bayle in his article "Pyrrho," concerns the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (hereafter "primary/secondary distinction"). Foucher begins with the claim that our perceptual acquaintance with extension occurs by means of the same process as that by which we are acquainted with secondary qualities. The primary/secondary distinction "grant[s] to extension the privilege that it is both in our soul and in external objects" (*Critique*, 38). Foucher argues that because our acquaintance with extension occurs in the same way as our acquaintance with colors, we have no more reason for attributing double existence to extension than we do for attributing double existence to color. In the later *Réponse pour la critique*, Foucher says, "It seems to me that [Malebranche] should show how our senses do not deceive us with regard to extension, which they make us judge to be outside of ourselves; since he maintains that these same senses always deceive us when they make us believe that heat and colors exist outside of us" (*Réponse*, 113). If one denies that colors have external existence, then there is no epistemic justification for attributing external existence to extension.

In "Zeno of Elea" of the *Dictionnaire historique et critique*, Bayle argues that extension exists "only in the mind" or "ideally" (*DHC* 363).⁹ Many of Bayle's arguments target the coherence of the very idea of extension. But he deviates from this pattern in providing a skeptical argument that, like Foucher's, undermines the justification for attributing external existence to extension. The "new" philosophers, as Bayle understands them, hold that secondary qualities are "perceptions of our soul" that do not "exist at all in the objects of our senses" (*DHC* 365). Bayle portrays the primary/secondary distinction as being motivated by the perceptual relativity of secondary qualities: because "the same bodies are sweet to some men and bitter to others, one is right in inferring that they are neither sweet nor bitter in themselves" (*DHC* 364). He argues that the new philosophers should accept the same position with respect to primary qualities, because the primary qualities of bodies exhibit perceptual relativity comparable to that exhibited by secondary qualities:

And notice carefully that the same body appears to us to be small or large, round or square, according to the place from which it is viewed; and let us have no doubts that a body that seems very small to us appears very large to a fly. It is not then by their own real or absolute extension that bodies present themselves to our minds. We can therefore conclude that they are not extended in themselves. (*DHC* 365)

⁹In a 1737 letter to Michael Ramsay, Hume tells Ramsay that he should read "the more metaphysical Articles of Bailes Dictionary," including "Zeno of Elea," in order to "easily comprehend the metaphysical Parts of my Reasoning" (Popkin, "So, Hume Did Read Berkeley," 775).

If the new philosophers conclude from the perceptual relativity of secondary qualities that such qualities are mere perceptions, then, Bayle argues, they should extend this conclusion to extension.¹⁰ Bayle and Foucher take the distinction between primary and secondary qualities to imply epistemological skepticism about extension and its modifications.

Some of Berkeley's arguments concerning the primary/secondary distinction establish a similar conclusion. But he departs from Foucher and Bayle in also providing arguments concerning the distinction with conceptual and metaphysical conclusions. In the first *Dialogue*, Hylas defends a version of the primary/secondary distinction: whereas primary qualities are those that "exist really in bodies," secondary qualities are "only so many sensations or ideas existing nowhere but in the mind" (*DHP* 188).¹¹ Philonous poses a challenge to Hylas: "Can you even separate the ideas of extension and motion, from the ideas of all those qualities, which they who make the distinction, term 'secondary'?" (*DHP* 193). Because Hylas holds that bodies have primary qualities but lack secondary qualities, he is committed to the position that bodies are conceivable only if they can be conceived of as possessing primary qualities but lacking secondary qualities. But such a conception of body, Philonous argues, would require a cognitive capacity that we do not possess: the capacity for abstracting ideas of primary qualities from ideas of secondary qualities (*DHP* 193). The argument's conclusion is conceptual: if body is understood as having primary qualities but lacking secondary qualities, then body is inconceivable.

Berkeley takes this conceptual conclusion to have a metaphysical implication. Philonous's argument entails that body, as understood by Hylas, "implies a repugnancy in its conception" (*DHP* 194). In Philonous's view, body as understood by Hylas is inconceivable; it is "repugnant" that there should be a conception of body so understood. Philonous proceeds to introduce what Holden calls Berkeley's *inconceivability principle*: "And can you think it possible, that should really exist in nature, which implies a repugnancy in its conception?" (*DHP* 194).¹² If primary qualities cannot be separated from secondary qualities in thought, then it is impossible that they should exist separately.¹³ Philonous's conceptual conclusion about body, as understood by Hylas, implies that it does not exist. Berkeley's

¹⁰A similar argument occurs in Bayle's "Pyrrho": "If the objects of our senses appear colored, hot, cold, odoriferous, and yet they are not so, why can they not appear extended and shaped, in rest and in motion, though they are not so?" (*DHC* 197). Bayle's use of the terms 'entity' and 'object of the senses' rather than 'body' in these passages is deliberate. Cartesianism maintains that body just is extension; it is analytic that body cannot lack extension. For Cartesians, Bayle's conclusion in these passages amounts to the claim that it is possible that the objects of perceptual experience, which we take to be bodies, are not extended and, hence, are not bodies.

¹¹Berkeley, like Foucher and Bayle, portrays the primary/secondary distinction as holding that secondary qualities are mere perceptions. This seems to mischaracterize the distinction, insofar as authors such as Locke identify secondary qualities with powers of bodies. I defend Hume from a version of this objection in §3.

¹²Holden, "Inconceivability and Impossibility," 107.

¹³Holden ("Inconceivability and Impossibility," 119) holds that Berkeley's argument appeals not to the principle that inconceivability implies impossibility but rather to the principle that inconsistency implies impossibility. Winkler (*Berkeley*, 33) reads the argument as relying on the principle that inconceivability implies impossibility.

2. HUME ON BODY

We will see that Hume's argument in MP differs in significant respects from those of Foucher, Bayle, and Berkeley. The argument presupposes the account of body for which Hume argues in preceding sections of the *Treatise*. The "most judicious philosophers" hold that "our ideas of bodies are nothing but collections form'd by the mind of the ideas of the several distinct sensible qualities, of which objects are compos'd, and which we find to have a constant union with each other" (*T* 1.4.3.2). The idea of body is a complex idea of a collection of sensible qualities. Further, Hume begins *T* 1.4.2, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses," with a question: "*What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?*" (*T* 1.4.2.1, original emphasis). He holds that this question reduces to two others: "Why we attribute a CONTINU'D existence to objects, even when they are not present to the senses; and why we suppose them to have an existence DISTINCT from the mind and perception?" (*T* 1.4.2.2). Because *x* is a body only if *x* enjoys continued and distinct existence, the idea of body is the idea of a collection of sensible qualities that enjoys continued and distinct existence.

Another component of Hume's account of body is introduced in Part 2 of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, where Hume argues for three theses with respect to extension. First, perceptions of extension are not infinitely divisible but rather are constituted by simple impressions or ideas: impressions and ideas that do not have perceptions as proper parts (*T* 1.2.1.3–4). Second, extension, as we conceive of it, is not infinitely divisible but rather is constituted by indivisible parts (*T* 1.2.2.2). Third, we cannot achieve a perception of a vacuum, understood as "space, where there is nothing visible or tangible" (*T* 1.2.5.1). While Hume's nominal topic in *T* 1.2 is extension, the account he provides implies conditions on the conception of body.

In "Zeno of Elea," Bayle asserts a trilemma: extension, if it exists, is either (i) infinitely divisible, (ii) constituted by physical points, or (iii) constituted by mathematical points. Hume follows Bayle in rejecting (i), beginning his discussion with arguments against both the infinite divisibility of our idea of extension and the infinite divisibility of extension as we conceive of it. With respect to the latter, borrowing from Nicolas de Malézieu, he claims that "existence in itself belongs only to unity" and therefore that it is "utterly absurd to suppose any number to exist, and yet deny the existence of unites" (*T* 1.2.2.3). Were extension infinitely divisible, extension would not be constituted by true unities, and its existence would be inconsistent with these principles. Hume also follows Bayle in rejecting (ii) and (iii), as the latter understands them. Were extension constituted by physical points, it would be constituted by parts that are extended but indivisible. Hume argues that a part of extension is indivisible only if it is not extended: "A real extension, such as a physical point is suppos'd to be, can never exist without parts, different from each other; and wherever objects are different, they are distinguishable and separable by the imagination" (*T* 1.2.4.3). Were extension constituted by mathematical points, it would be constituted by parts that are indivisible and

unextended (*T* 1.2.3.14). Bayle argues against mathematical points on the assumption that such points are nonentities: “persons of the slightest depth can comprehend with complete certainty, if they give the matter a little attention, that several nonentities of extension joined together will never make up an extension” (*DHC* 359–60). Assuming that Bayle’s characterization of mathematical points as nonentities is correct, Hume accepts this argument (*T* 1.2.4.3).¹⁴

Hume does not take these arguments to establish that extension is unintelligible. In his view, extension is constituted by points that, like mathematical points, are unextended and indivisible (*T* 1.2.3.14–15). Unlike Bayle’s mathematical points, Hume’s points are not nonentities but are “fill’d with something real and existent” (*T* 1.2.4.2). They are filled with *color* and *solidity*: they are “atoms or corpuscles endow’d with colour and solidity” (*T* 1.2.3.15). Extension is intelligible when conceived of as constituted by colored or solid points.¹⁵ Because extension must be conceived of in this way, the idea of a body must include ideas of colored or solid points. Solidity and color are, in this way, conceptually compulsory.¹⁶ “There is nothing but the idea of their colour or tangibility, which can render [the parts of extension] conceivable by the mind” (*T* 1.2.3.15).

3. MP’S CAUSAL ARGUMENT

MP begins with a distinction between “permanent, irresistible, and universal” principles of the imagination and those that are “changeable, weak, and irregular” (*T* 1.4.4.1). The modern philosophy claims to arise from “consistent” principles of the former kind, which include the “customary transition from causes to effects, and from effects to causes” (*T* 1.4.4.1–2). What Hume calls the “fundamental principle” of the modern philosophy is that paradigmatic secondary qualities—“colours, sounds, tastes, smells, heat and cold”—are “nothing but impressions in the mind, deriv’d from the operation of external objects, and without any resemblance to the qualities of objects” (*T* 1.4.4.3). This is the negative commitment of the modern philosophy.¹⁷

Hume follows Bayle in portraying the negative commitment as being motivated by the perceptual relativity of secondary qualities. He presents an argument for the negative commitment founded on Rule 4 of *T* 1.3.15, “Rules by which to judge of causes and effects”: “The same cause always produces the same effect, and the

¹⁴For detailed discussion of Hume’s arguments in *T* 1.2, see Baxter, “Space and Time;” Frasca-Spada, *Space and the Self*; and Holden, *Architecture of Matter*.

¹⁵Hume’s response to Bayle’s trilemma anticipates Lewis’s Humean mosaic, which is constituted by “perfectly natural intrinsic properties which need nothing bigger than a point at which to be instantiated” (Lewis, “Introduction,” x).

¹⁶Winkler, “Sensible Qualities,” 266.

¹⁷Hakkarainen (“Primary and Secondary Qualities,” 238) takes the negative commitment of the modern philosophy to hold that all *proper sensibles* are sensory impressions, not properties of bodies, where a proper sensible is a sensible quality exclusive to an individual sense. Aristotle’s *De Anima*, book II, chap. 6 is the locus classicus of this notion. A problem for this interpretation concerns the quality of solidity. Hume follows Locke in holding that solidity is a proper sensible of touch (*T* 1.2.3.15; 1.2.5.1; 1.2.5.13; 1.2.5.16). Thus, according to Hakkarainen’s interpretation, the negative commitment entails that solidity is identical with sensory impressions and is not a property of bodies. But Hume’s argument in the second phase of MP presupposes that solidity is not among the qualities shown by the causal argument of the first phase to be identical with perceptions (*T* 1.4.4.6–9).

same effect never arises but from the same cause" (*T* 1.3.15.6). The argument is as follows:

- (1) Many secondary quality impressions are caused by objects that do not resemble them.
- (2) If many secondary quality impressions are caused by objects that do not resemble them, then all impressions of secondary qualities are caused by objects that do not resemble them.
- (3) All secondary quality impressions are caused by objects that do not resemble them.

I call this the *causal argument*. Hume appeals to perceptual relativity in support of (1). A body appears to have different colors depending on the distance from which it is perceived. Because a body cannot, at a time, have different qualities of the same sense, many color impressions produced by the body do not resemble it in respect of color (*T* 1.4.4.3). (2) is an application of the second conjunct of Rule 4. All color impressions resemble each other at least insofar as they are color impressions. If many color impressions are caused by bodies that do not resemble them, then, by the second conjunct of Rule 4, no color impressions are caused by bodies that resemble them. From (1) and (2), the negative commitment follows: secondary quality impressions have "no external model or archetype" (*T* 1.4.4.4). They are "nothing but impressions in the mind" (*T* 1.4.4.3).

The causal argument suffers from a defect identified by Berkeley. In the *Principles*, Berkeley claims that arguments from perceptual relativity used to establish that secondary qualities "exist only in the mind" can "with equal force be brought to prove the same thing of extension, figure, and motion" (*PHK* 15).¹⁸ He also notes a limitation of such arguments: "it must be confessed this method of arguing does not so much prove that there is no extension or colour in an outward object, as that we do not know by sense which is the true extension or colour of the object" (*PHK* 15). Because impressions of secondary qualities are similar in respect of some but not all of their intrinsic and extrinsic properties, the second conjunct of Rule 4, on any plausible construal, implies only that the causes of such impressions are alike in some respects. This is compatible with some but not all causes of impressions of secondary qualities resembling those impressions in respect of being colored, even if it is unknown to us which causes resemble the impressions in that respect. The application of Rule 4 on which (2) depends is thus illicit.¹⁹ Arguments from perceptual relativity are insufficient to establish the conclusion that impressions of secondary qualities do not resemble bodies. At best, they establish that we do not know which impressions of secondary qualities resemble bodies.

While the causal argument may be deficient, Hume believes that it is exceptionally strong. He describes the argument as an instance of our reasoning "justly and regularly from causes and effects" (*T* 1.4.7.4). He treats the conclusion of the argument as established fact: the idea of colored extension is a "false idea"

¹⁸Citations of Berkeley's *Principles* give the section number in the Luce and Jessop edition.

¹⁹Loeb (*Stability and Justification*, 222) describes the argument as "far from just and regular." Winkler ("Sensible Qualities," 253) says that the application of Rule 4 is "very crude." Butler ("Hume's Supposed Rejection") offers a more sympathetic approach to the argument.

(T 1.4.4.10). And in Book 3 of the *Treatise*, he likens vice and virtue to secondary qualities and refers to the negative commitment as a “discovery”: “And this discovery in morals, like that other in physics, is to be regarded as a considerable advancement of the speculative sciences” (T 3.1.1.26).²⁰ Indeed, Hume regards the causal argument as an inductive proof. The *Treatise* distinguishes between three kinds of reasoning: knowledge, proofs, and probabilities. Knowledge is “the assurance arising from the comparison of ideas” (T 1.3.11.2). Proofs are “those arguments, which are deriv’d from the relation of cause and effect, and which are entirely free from doubt and uncertainty” (T 1.3.11.2). Probabilities are inductive arguments the conclusions of which are uncertain. This distinction does not necessarily “denote a Superiority of one above another” (LG 26).²¹ The moral certainty of inductive arguments may “reach as high a Degree of Assurance” as the certainty of demonstrations, as is the case with respect to inductive proofs (LG 26). Because the causal argument is not a demonstration, the negative commitment of the modern philosophy is not an instance of knowledge. That Hume regards the causal argument as a proof rather than a mere probability is confirmed by his claiming that its conclusion is “as satisfactory as can possibly be imagin’d” (T 1.4.4.4, emphasis added).

The negative commitment is also endorsed in Hume’s later works. In a 1762 letter to Hugh Blair, Hume criticizes Reid’s position that “the Vulgar do not believe the sensible Qualities of Heat, Smell, Sound, & probably Colour to be really in the Bodies, but only their Causes or something capable of producing them in the Mind.” He complains that “this is imagining the Vulgar to be Philosophers & Corpuscularians from their Infancy. You know what pains it cost Malebranche & Locke to *establish* that Principle” (Wood, “David Hume on Thomas Reid,” 416, emphasis added). In a footnote to “The Sceptic,” he reminds his readers of “that famous doctrine, supposed to be fully proved in modern times, ‘That tastes and colours, and all other sensible qualities, lie not in the bodies, but merely in the senses.’” He claims that “the case is the same with beauty and deformity, virtue and vice” and asks, “as it is certain, that the *discovery* above-mentioned in natural philosophy, makes no alteration on action and conduct; why should a like discovery in moral philosophy make any alteration?” (*Essays*, 166n).²² Likewise, in “Of the

²⁰Hume says just before the passage quoted, “Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind” (T 3.1.1.26). One might understand Hume’s inclusion of “according to the modern philosophy” as an attempt to distance himself from the primary/secondary distinction. But this inclusion is simply a reminder to the reader that the distinction is endorsed by his contemporaries. Similarly, in the first *Enquiry*, Hume says that section 12’s argument concerning the primary/secondary distinction “represents [the belief in body] as contrary to reason: at least, if it be a principle of reason, that all sensible qualities are in the mind, not in the object” (EU 12.16). Kail (*Projection and Realism*, 70) takes Hume to be “insinuating that there is something dubious here.” But Hume includes the qualification simply because the *Enquiry* does not establish that the negative commitment is a “principle of reason”; that work offers no argument corresponding to the causal argument of MP. Citations of the first *Enquiry* give the section and paragraph numbers from the Clarendon edition.

²¹Citations of “Letter from a Gentleman” give the paragraph number in the Clarendon edition of the *Treatise*.

²²Hume may not endorse all of the views expressed by the speaker in “The Sceptic.” That there are similar endorsements of the negative commitment found in Hume’s later philosophical writings suggests that this passage from the “The Sceptic” does represent Hume’s considered view. For example, a footnote included in the 1748 and 1750 editions of the first *Enquiry* also endorses the distinction:

Standard of Taste,” Hume provides an account of the “true and real” color of objects, according to which it is “the appearance of objects in day-light, to the eye of a man in health” (*Essays*, 234). This account allows that color is “merely a phantasm of the senses” (*Essays*, 234).

Hume’s praise of the causal argument and his numerous endorsements of its conclusion admit of a simple reading: he holds that the negative commitment is true. But as we have seen, the standard reading of MP holds that Hume’s acceptance is at best provisional.²³ Adjudicating this issue requires consideration of the skeptical argument in the section’s second phase. But a significant objection to the standard reading should be noted: nowhere in MP does Hume claim to have shown that the negative commitment of the modern philosophy is false. This and his repeated endorsements of the commitment suggest, against the standard reading, that Hume does not regard the commitment as false.

Hume understands the negative commitment of the modern philosophy as the claim that secondary qualities are identical with sensory impressions. Commentators have objected that this misunderstands the primary/secondary distinction. Sturgeon writes that Hume’s account of the negative commitment is a “wild . . . misrepresentation.”²⁴ The objection is that proponents of the primary/secondary distinction do not identify secondary qualities with perceptions but rather with powers to produce perceptions. Locke holds that secondary qualities are “nothing in the Objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their *primary Qualities*” (EII.viii.10). And Boyle says that a sensible quality of a body is “a disposition of its Constituent Corpuscles” (*Origine of Formes and Qualities*, 319).

Hume’s putative misunderstanding of the primary/secondary distinction has been overstated. There are at least three ways in which we might understand colors. *Dispositional colors* are dispositional properties of bodies to produce perceptions of color. *Perceptual colors* are perceptions of color. *Phenomenal colors* are phenomenal properties included in the content of perceptions of color. Sturgeon’s objection is that whereas the negative commitment of the modern philosophy, as characterized by Hume, identifies colors with perceptual colors, prominent proponents of the primary/secondary distinction identify colors with dispositional colors. But such authors allow a use of color terms on which they signify perceptions produced by powers of bodies: perceptual colors. Locke sometimes speaks of colors as ideas produced by powers in bodies. When enumerating “Ideas, *which have admittance only through one Sense*,” he includes “Light and Colours, as white, red, yellow, blue;

“But a late Philosopher [Hutcheson] has taught us, by the most convincing Arguments, that Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular Being; in the same Manner as the Distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular Feeling of each Sense or Organ” (EU 232).

²³Blackburn (“Mezzanine Level,” 276) says that MP voices Hume’s “distaste for any primary/secondary quality distinction.” See also Ainslie, *True Scepticism*, 201; Fisette, “Lockean Metaphysics,” 113; Fogelin, *Hume’s Scepticism*, 90; and Pitson, “Primary and Secondary Qualities,” 130–31. Garrett (*Cognition and Commitment*, 218) writes that “Hume himself . . . does not ever assert the *truth* of the modern philosophers’ conclusion about the unreality of secondary qualities.” While strictly true, this assessment does not do justice to Hume’s praise of the causal argument and his endorsements of the negative commitment in later works.

²⁴Sturgeon, “Moral Skepticism and Moral Naturalism,” 15.

with their several Degrees or Shades, and Mixtures, as Green, Scarlet, Purple, Sea-green, and the rest, come in only by the Eyes" (*E* II.iii.1, original emphasis). Boyle suggests that a body's having a certain quality consists in "its having such a disposition of its Constituent Corpuscles that, in case it were duly apply'd to the Sensory of an Animal, it would produce such a sensible Quality, which a Body of another Texture would not" (*Origine of Formes and Qualities*, 319). Here, Boyle uses 'sensible quality' to signify a sensation produced by the corpuscular texture of a body.²⁵ Malebranche explicitly endorses the view that secondary-quality terms are ambiguous: "If by heat, color, flavor, you mean such and such a movement of insensible parts, then fire is hot, grass green, sugar sweet. But if by heat and the other qualities you mean what I feel near fire, what I see when I see grass, and so forth, then fire is not hot at all, nor is grass green" (*Search after Truth*, 441).²⁶ Moreover, these authors each affirm that perceptual colors do not resemble bodies. Hume's description of the negative commitment appears not confused but incomplete. He omits one central claim of proponents of the distinction: that colors, properly so-called, are dispositional colors. But he accurately describes another of their commitments with respect to secondary qualities: perceptual colors do not resemble bodies.

We can also challenge the claim that Hume's statement of the negative commitment omits a central claim of the position he intends to characterize. Not all proponents of the primary/secondary distinction hold that colors are properly dispositional colors. In his correspondence with Collins, Clarke holds that secondary qualities "do [not] reside in, or at all result from, the whole System [of matter], in *any proper Sense*" (*Defence of an Argument*, 93, original emphasis). Clarke departs from Locke and Boyle in denying that secondary qualities are powers to produce sensations: "Neither in *any Sense at all*, in which [secondary qualities] can be ascribed to that Body or System of Matter to which they are vulgarly supposed to belong, are they truly *Individual Powers*" (*Defence of an Argument*, 93, original emphasis). Instead, the secondary qualities of bodies are merely "*Effects* occasionally produced by it in some other Substance" (*Defence of an Argument*, 94, original emphasis). Clarke holds that secondary qualities are merely modes of thinking substance and, accordingly, departs from Locke and Boyle in identifying colors with perceptual colors.²⁷ Hume's characterization of the negative commitment of the modern philosophy is consistent with one prominent version of the primary/secondary distinction.

Hume may have neglected to discuss the account of secondary qualities according to which colors are dispositional colors because he was concerned to characterize a different version of the primary/secondary distinction. Another (compatible)

²⁵Boyle, in *Origine of Formes and Qualities*, 321, uses 'Heat' to signify a sensation rather than the power that produces it.

²⁶Kail (*Projection and Realism*, 153) identifies Malebranche as a source of Hume's non-Lockean understanding of the primary/secondary distinction. In the 1762 letter to Blair, Hume writes that the principle that secondary qualities are not "really in the Bodies" is accepted by "Malebranche & Locke" (Wood, "David Hume on Thomas Reid," 416). This suggests that he sees no important difference between Locke's and Malebranche's versions of the distinction.

²⁷Russell ("Hume's *Treatise*," 102) argues that Hume was familiar with the Clarke-Collins correspondence.

explanation is that such an account is irrelevant to the skeptical argument in MP's second phase. When a perceiver has an occurrent sensory impression of color, she is acquainted with an instance of phenomenal color. Phenomenal colors are properties of sensory impressions (i.e. perceptual colors). As stated by Hume, the negative commitment holds that bodies lack phenomenal color. Locke and Boyle are committed to this claim, regardless of their identification of colors with dispositional colors. MP's skeptical argument applies to any account of body according to which phenomenal colors are to be excluded from the idea of body. Hume's neglecting to consider Locke's and Boyle's identification of colors with dispositional colors has no bearing on the soundness of his skeptical argument.

4. MP'S SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

The first phase of MP concludes with Hume's drawing a consequence from the negative commitment: "upon the removal of sounds, colours, heat, cold, and other sensible qualities, from the rank of continu'd independent existences, we are reduc'd merely to what are call'd primary qualities, as the only real ones, of which we have any adequate notion" (T 1.4.4.5). According to the positive commitment of the modern philosophy, a sensible quality belongs to a body and, accordingly, exhibits continued and distinct existence only if it is a primary quality: "extension and solidity, with their different mixtures and modifications; figure, motion, gravity, and cohesion" (T 1.4.4.5). The modern philosophy holds that we have an "adequate notion" of these qualities. The second phase of MP presents a skeptical argument that is "very decisive" against the modern philosophy (T 1.4.4.6).

What is the scope of MP's skeptical argument? To what accounts of body does it apply? On the one hand, Hume begins the argument with a statement of its conclusion: "If colours, sounds, tastes, and smells be merely perceptions, nothing we can conceive is possess of a real, continu'd, and independent existence; not even motion, extension and solidity, which are the primary qualities chiefly insisted on" (T 1.4.4.6). Because to have a conception of body is to conceive of a collection of sensible qualities as enjoying continued and distinct existence, Hume's claim is that the negative commitment itself implies that body is inconceivable. This passage suggests the *wide reading* of the argument's scope, according to which the argument applies to *any* account of body that accepts the negative commitment. On the other hand, we will see that Hume uses both the negative and positive commitments in support of the premises of the skeptical argument. This suggests the *narrow reading* of the argument's scope, according to which the skeptical argument does not apply to all accounts of body that accept the negative commitment but only to those that accept both the negative and positive commitments.

The central question by which to determine whether the wide or narrow reading is correct is: does the negative commitment, in Hume's view, entail the positive commitment? If the answer is affirmative, then the class of accounts to which, according to the narrow reading, the skeptical argument does not apply—accounts of body that accept the negative commitment but deny the positive commitment—is empty. When introducing the positive commitment, Hume says that it "seem[s] to follow by an easy consequence" from the negative commitment (T 1.4.4.5). This suggests that he takes the negative commitment to entail the positive commitment.

But several scholars have taken Hume's use of 'seem' to suggest that he denies that the negative commitment entails the positive commitment.²⁸

I argue that the positive commitment is, by Hume's lights, an entailment of the negative commitment. *T* 1.4.2 makes an exhaustive distinction between three classes of sensory impressions. The first class includes impressions of primary qualities: "those of the figure, bulk, motion and solidity of bodies" (*T* 1.4.2.12). The second class includes impressions of secondary qualities: "those of colours, tastes, smells, sounds, heat and cold" (*T* 1.4.2.12). And the third class includes "the pains and pleasures, that arise from the application of objects to our bodies" (*T* 1.4.2.12). The first two classes of impressions include all and only impressions of items that Hume calls "qualities." We have an impression of a quality just in case an impression of that quality is included in either of those two classes. Further, for any quality, we have an idea of a quality just in case that idea is copied from an impression included in the first two classes. Thus, we have an idea of a quality just in case the quality is either a primary quality or a secondary quality. Moreover, an idea of body is an idea of a bundle of qualities (*T* 1.4.3.2). This and the distinction from *T* 1.4.2 imply that any idea of body must be of one of three kinds: any idea of body either (i) includes both primary and secondary qualities, (ii) includes only primary qualities, or (iii) includes only secondary qualities. The negative commitment holds that bodies lack secondary qualities and, hence, implies the rejection of (i) and (iii). The idea of body must be of kind (ii). To conceive of body in this way is to accept the positive commitment of the modern philosophy: primary qualities are the only qualities to be attributed to bodies. The positive commitment is a deductive consequence of the negative commitment, coupled with other claims to which Hume is committed.

The narrow reading holds that MP's skeptical argument does not apply to accounts of body that accept the negative commitment but deny the positive commitment. Because the negative commitment, in Hume's view, entails the positive commitment, he holds that this class is empty. The narrow reading of the argument's scope should be rejected in favor of the wide reading. The latter implies that the argument of MP applies to any account of body whatever. The first phase provides an inductive proof of the negative commitment. This proof functions as an argument against any account of body that denies the negative commitment. And the skeptical argument of MP's second phase targets any account of body that accepts the negative commitment.

Jointly, the negative and positive commitments imply that bodies may only be understood as having primary qualities but lacking secondary qualities. I call body so understood *body_{mp}*. The skeptical argument of MP's second phase aims to establish a claim about *body_{mp}*. There are three possible conclusions of the argument. First, its conclusion might be conceptual: the idea of *body_{mp}* suffers from a conceptual defect. Second, its conclusion might be metaphysical: *body_{mp}* does not exist. Third, its conclusion might be epistemological: the belief in *body_{mp}*

²⁸Fisette ("Lockean Metaphysics," 113) writes that Hume, despite accepting the negative commitment, "place[s] some critical distance between himself" and the positive commitment. Likewise, Hakkarainen ("Why Hume," 148) says that the modern philosophy's commitments are "logically independent."

lacks epistemic merit.²⁹ It is clear that, in the first place, MP's skeptical argument aims to show that the idea of body_{mp} suffers from a conceptual defect. Hume says that the negative commitment implies that "nothing we can *conceive* is possest of a real, continu'd, and independent existence; not even motion, extension and solidity" (T 1.4.4.6, emphasis added). And he says that the modern philosophy implies that we have no "just and consistent idea of body" (T 1.4.4.10).

To see from what kind of conceptual defect the idea of body_{mp} suffers, let us consider the skeptical argument itself. The argument shows that the modern philosophy is committed to a triad:

- (1) The idea of motion included in the idea of body_{mp} depends on either the idea of extension or the idea of solidity. (T 1.4.4.7)
- (2) The idea of extension included in the idea of body_{mp} depends on the idea of solidity. (T 1.4.4.8)
- (3) The idea of solidity included in the idea of body_{mp} depends on either the idea of motion or the idea of extension. (T 1.4.4.9)

Hume does not identify the kind of dependence to which these claims appeal. One passage suggests that the relevant kind of dependence is ontological dependence: Hume says that "[t]he reality, therefore, of our idea of extension depends upon the reality of that of solidity" (T 1.4.4.8). But in T 1.4.5, "Of the immateriality of the soul," Hume argues by means of his separability principle that we have no idea of ontological dependence relations (T 1.4.5.6). He is not entitled to appeal to the notion of ontological dependence in MP's skeptical argument. Neither can the relevant kind of dependence be causal dependence. Hume writes that the idea of motion "must *resolve itself into* the idea of extension or of solidity" (T 1.4.4.7, emphasis added). The relevant kind of dependence is not one that implies the distinctness of the items between which the dependence relation holds. Because, for Hume, causes are distinct from their effects, the relevant kind of dependence cannot be causal dependence (T 1.3.14.31).

The relevant kind of dependence is conceptual dependence.³⁰ This accords with

²⁹Bracken ("On Some Points," 440) holds that the argument's conclusion is primarily epistemological, glossing Hume's claim that the primary/secondary distinction leaves us with no "satisfactory idea" of matter as the claim that "we cannot turn to sense impressions supposedly caused by either primary or secondary qualities to provide evidence for our belief in the continued and independent existence of objects." Allison (*Custom and Reason*, 268) takes MP to establish the metaphysical claim that primary qualities cannot exist apart from secondary qualities. Similarly, Loeb (*Stability and Justification*, 219) holds that MP argues against the existence of primary qualities. I discuss these readings below.

³⁰This relation does not appear in the taxonomy of relations provided in T 1.1.5, "Of relations," according to which there are seven (philosophical) relations: resemblance, identity, relations of space and time, relations of quantity, relations of quality, contrariety, and causation. Hume may hold that conceptual dependence is reducible to a subset of these. He appeals to relations of conceptual dependence elsewhere in the *Treatise*. In his discussion of free will, he claims that necessity "makes an essential part" of the concept of cause (T 2.3.2.4). In the introduction of his search for the idea of necessary connection, he argues that the idea of causation is "deriv'd from" the relations of contiguity and priority; these are "essential" to causation (T 1.3.2.6–7). His claim is that causation is conceptually dependent on contiguity and priority. Further, in "Of the obligation of promises," he argues that "*a promise wou'd not be intelligible, before human conventions had establish'd it*" (T 3.2.5.1, original emphasis). That the practice of promising depends for its intelligibility on convention implies that the former conceptually depends on the latter; like solidity, promising is "perfectly incomprehensible alone" (T 1.4.4.9).

the way in which Hume argues for each component of the triad. He supports (1) by arguing that the “idea of motion necessarily supposes that of a body moving” (*T* 1.4.4.7). To conceive of motion, one must conceive of a body moving, which, by the positive commitment, must be conceived of as either extended or solid. With respect to (2), Hume’s arguments in *T* 1.2, as we have seen, imply that extension must be conceived of as being constituted by points that are either colored or solid. Moreover, because the modern philosophy accepts the negative commitment, ideas of colors are excluded from the idea of body_{mp}. Thus, the idea of extension included in the idea of body_{mp} must depend on the idea of solidity. Hume’s argument for (3) rests on the claim that “idea of solidity is that of two objects, which being impell’d by the utmost force, cannot penetrate each other” (*T* 1.4.4.9). The conception of solidity requires a conception of bodies that do not penetrate one another when forced together. The latter conception requires a conception of *bodies*, which conception must, by the positive commitment, include the idea of solidity or the idea of extension.

Hume aims to show that (1), (2), and (3) imply that the idea of body_{mp} suffers from a conceptual defect. There are two possible defects from which the conception might suffer. First, the conception may be defective insofar as it is contentless or empty. Second, the conception may be defective insofar as it is incoherent or absurd. These defects are distinct and incompatible. A conception’s being incoherent requires that it include contents that are jointly inconsistent; a conception’s lacking content precludes its being incoherent.³¹ As we will consider below, the *Enquiry* provides an argument concerning the primary/secondary distinction that resembles MP’s skeptical argument. The *Enquiry* argument might be thought to support the interpretation according to which MP’s skeptical argument shows that the conception of body is empty. The former argument concludes with the claim that the primary/secondary distinction leads us to “annihilate” body and renders body “only a certain unknown, inexplicable *something*” (*EU* 7.16, original emphasis). Hume’s conclusion in the *Enquiry* is that the idea of body_{mp} is empty. We might take MP’s skeptical argument to have the same intended conclusion. However, this does not do justice to Hume’s references to the inconsistency of the idea of body_{mp}. He says that the removal of secondary qualities from bodies leaves us with no “just and *consistent* idea of body” (*T* 1.4.4.10, emphasis added). And he says that he has found “such *contradictions* and difficulties in every system concerning external objects, and *in the idea of matter*, which we fancy so clear and determinate” (*T* 1.4.5.1, emphasis added).³²

³¹Hume does not make explicit his understanding of what it is for an idea to be incoherent. It might be understood in terms of what he calls a “repugnance”: for an idea to be incoherent is for it to include ideas between which a repugnance obtains (*T* 1.4.5.20–21). At least some instances of repugnance might, in turn, be understood in terms of contrariety, which is included in *T* 1.1.5’s taxonomy of relations.

³²Hakkarainen (“Why Hume,” 149) cites this passage in support of the claim that neither “in the *Enquiry* nor in the *Treatise* version of the second profound argument does Hume say that the notion of Body involves a contradiction.” Garrett (*Cognition and Commitment*, 218) proposes a reading of this passage according to which it does not imply that there is a contradiction within the idea of body_{mp}. According to Garrett, Hume’s conclusion in MP is that body_{mp} is inconceivable. Nonetheless, the modern philosophers *believe* in body, and belief in *x* requires a conception of *x*. Thus, Garrett claims, the modern philosophers must, against their own principles, believe in bodies understood to possess

That the idea of body_{mp} is incoherent is implied by (1), (2), and (3), coupled with the assumption that relations of conceptual dependence are necessarily asymmetric. The triad to which the modern philosophy is committed implies, absurdly, that the idea of body_{mp} includes symmetric relations of conceptual dependence. (2) says that the idea of extension depends on the idea of solidity. (3) says that the idea of solidity depends on the idea of motion or extension. But (1) says that the idea of motion depends on the idea of extension or the idea of solidity. These claims are all true only if there is at least one symmetric relation of conceptual dependence included in the idea of body_{mp}. If conceptual dependence relations are necessarily asymmetric, the idea of body_{mp} includes an incoherence or absurdity. This reading receives support from Hume's repeated references to the modern philosophy's being committed to a "circle" (*T* 1.4.4.9–10). And it accommodates his claim to have found "contradictions" in "the idea of matter" (*T* 1.4.5.1). Further, what is contradictory "cou'd [not] ever be conceiv'd" (*T* 1.2.4.11). Thus, if the idea of body_{mp} is incoherent, then body_{mp} is inconceivable.³³

In addition to this conceptual conclusion, several scholars have taken the skeptical argument to have a metaphysical implication. Allison and Loeb understand the argument to imply that body_{mp} does not exist. I call this the *metaphysical reading* of the argument. In Loeb's view, MP argues against the existence of primary qualities.³⁴ Allison takes the section to establish the metaphysical claim that it is impossible that body_{mp} should exist, because primary qualities cannot exist apart from secondary qualities.³⁵ This implies that Hume follows Berkeley in using the primary/secondary distinction in support of a metaphysical verdict about body.

The metaphysical reading is mistaken. MP's skeptical argument implies the metaphysical conclusion attributed to Hume by Allison and Loeb only with application of a principle that is unacceptable to Hume. According to Allison, Hume (implicitly) uses his "conceivability principle"—if *x* is conceivable, then *x* is possible—to derive the metaphysical claim that body_{mp} does not exist from the claim that body_{mp} is inconceivable.³⁶ In fact, the argument requires not the conceivability principle but the inconceivability principle: that *x*'s being inconceivable implies that *x* is impossible. Hume does not state this argument in MP because it is objectionable by his own lights. He holds that use of the principle that "whatever *appears* impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of . . . ideas, must be *really* impossible and contradictory" requires that one's ideas are "adequate representations of objects" (*T* 1.2.2.1, original emphasis). To show that it is impossible that *x* is F from the fact that it is inconceivable that *x* if F, one must have an *adequate* idea of *x*.³⁷ Hume does not say under what conditions an idea is

secondary qualities. I do not think that this reading accommodates the passage in view, in which Hume says that the idea of matter *itself* includes a contradiction.

³³As Hume uses it, the verb 'conceive' sometimes takes an idea as its object, not that of which the idea is a representation (*T* 1.1.7.7; 1.2.1.3). In this sense of 'conceive,' MP's skeptical argument implies that the idea of body_{mp} is inconceivable.

³⁴Loeb, *Stability and Justification*, 218.

³⁵Allison, *Custom and Reason*, 268.

³⁶Allison, *Custom and Reason*, 268.

³⁷Millican ("Causal Realism," 677) holds that Hume restricts the inconceivability principle but not the conceivability principle to adequate ideas. Kail ("Conceivability and Modality") argues that Hume restricts the conceivability principle to adequate ideas.

adequate. But because MP's skeptical argument implies that the idea of body_{mp} suffers from a conceptual defect, the argument plausibly implies that the idea of body_{mp} is inadequate. Hume denies that the inconceivability principle can be used in the way that Allison's argument requires.³⁸ MP's skeptical argument differs from the argument of Berkeley's *Dialogues*: the latter, but not the former, aims to establish a metaphysical conclusion about body_{mp} using the inconceivability principle.³⁹

We are now in a position to understand Hume's aim in MP. According to the section's second phase, the modern philosophy's negative commitment implies that the idea of body_{mp} is defective in a way that renders body_{mp} inconceivable. According to the standard reading, Hume rejects the negative commitment on the basis of this result. But nowhere does Hume say that the negative commitment should be rejected. And nowhere does he say that the second phase is a *reductio* of its first phase. As we have seen, he repeatedly claims *after MP* that the primary/secondary distinction is a "discovery" in natural philosophy. He does say that the modern philosophy "leaves us no just nor satisfactory idea . . . of matter" (*T* 1.4.4.9). But this stops short of recommending the rejection of the negative commitment. Likewise, Hume does say that the skeptical argument in the second phase constitutes an "objection" to the modern philosophy (*T* 1.4.4.6). But to show that the modern philosophy's negative commitment is problematic in the respect identified by MP's skeptical argument is not yet to affirm that the commitment ought to be rejected. There is a respect in which the skeptical argument shows the modern philosophy to be false. The modern philosophy holds that we have an "adequate notion" of the primary qualities (*T* 1.4.4.5). MP shows that this is false insofar as the negative commitment is accepted. But because this thesis about the adequacy of our notion of primary qualities is neither equivalent to nor entailed by the negative commitment, to establish that the former is false is not to argue that the negative commitment ought to be rejected. Further, Hume begins *T* 1.4.5 by restating MP's conclusion: he claims to have "found such contradictions and difficulties in every system concerning external objects, and in the idea of matter, which we fancy so clear and determinate" (*T* 1.4.5.1). But, as we have seen, the standard reading holds that the idea of body is defective only if the commitments of the modern philosophy are accepted—that is, only if the idea of body is understood as the idea of body_{mp}. Thus, if, as that reading maintains,

³⁸Hume also holds that to show the impossibility of *x*'s existence from the incoherence of the idea of *x*, one must have an adequate idea of *x*. He implies that the "contradictions and agreements" of ideas are known to be "applicable to the objects" only when the relevant ideas are adequate (*T* 1.2.2.1). If one's idea of *x* is inadequate, then what "*appears* . . . contradictory" in the idea need not correspond to *x*'s being "*really* impossible." A similar claim occurs in *T* 1.4.5, where Hume writes that a conclusion regarding the "connexion and repugnance of impressions" need not be "applicable" to objects (*T* 1.4.5.20). Wright ("Hume's Rejection," 152) argues that, for Hume, "what is inconceivable in idea . . . may very well exist in reality."

³⁹Loeb (*Stability and Justification*, 218) holds that the following passage from MP supports the metaphysical reading: "When we reason from cause and effect, we conclude, that neither colour, sound, taste, nor smell have a continu'd and independent existence. When we exclude these sensible qualities there remains nothing in the universe, which has such an existence" (*T* 1.4.4.15). But the passage admits of a conceptual reading, according to which it is simply a restatement of the conclusion of the skeptical argument: "that after the exclusion of colours, sounds, heat and cold from the rank of external existences, there remains nothing, which can afford us a just and consistent idea of body" (*T* 1.4.4.10).

MP's conclusion is the denial of the negative commitment, then there is *after MP* no remaining "contradiction" in the idea of body. Against the standard reading, the denial of the modern philosophy's negative commitment is neither a premise nor a conclusion of MP's skeptical argument.

Another reading is available. Hume's conclusion in MP is a dilemma. The first horn is established by the first phase, where the causal argument proves that any account of body that denies the negative commitment of the modern philosophy is false. The second horn is established by the second phase. I have argued in favor of the wide reading of the scope of Hume's skeptical argument, according to which it establishes that *any* account of body that accepts the negative commitment renders the idea of body incoherent. If an account of body draws the distinction between primary and secondary qualities and excludes the latter from the idea of body, then the idea of body associated with that account is incoherent. MP's conclusion is that *any* account of body leaves us with no "adequate notion" of body, because any account of body unavoidably renders the idea of body either false or incoherent (*T* 1.4.4.5). Against the standard reading, the section's target is not merely the particular account of body endorsed by the modern philosophy but rather is any account of body whatever. The dilemma with which the argument concludes implies a deeply rooted inadequacy in human cognition of body.⁴⁰

What does the dilemma for which MP argues imply about the epistemic standing of the belief in body? We can distinguish between *theoretical skepticism* and *prescriptive skepticism*.⁴¹ To accept theoretical skepticism about a belief is to hold that the belief lacks epistemic merit. To accept prescriptive skepticism about a belief is to recommend that the belief be suspended.⁴² MP supports theoretical skepticism about the belief in body. If one does not accept the negative commitment of the modern philosophy and, accordingly, includes secondary qualities in the idea of body, then one's belief in body is false. By contrast, if one accepts the negative commitment and, accordingly, excludes secondary qualities from the idea of body, then, because body so understood is inconceivable, one is unable to believe in body. A "just and regular" instance of causal reasoning implies that the only achievable belief in body is false, casting doubt on the epistemic merit of that belief (*T* 1.4.7.4). But Hume does not take MP's skeptical argument to imply prescriptive skepticism about the belief in body. Disbelief in body is possible "in words only" (*T* 1.4.2.50). A prescription to suspend belief in body would be idle.⁴³

I have argued that MP's skeptical force is greater than the standard reading suggests: the section's chief aim is to establish a dilemma faced by any account

⁴⁰Hume's position resembles one discussed by Blackburn, on which we avoid the result that only dispositional properties exist by claiming that the world's categorical properties are "properties available to the subjective view," such as color ("Filling in Space," 258).

⁴¹Fogelin, *Hume's Skepticism*, 5.

⁴²Hakkarainen ("Why Hume," 158) holds that MP advocates for prescriptive skepticism about the belief in body. According to Hakkarainen, Hume holds that it is a "rational norm" that one should not believe in body; even if this norm can be followed only intermittently, we ought to suspend belief in body when possible.

⁴³MP's second phase does not conclude with the completion of the skeptical argument. Hume continues by providing several arguments concerning solidity, according to which while we "naturally imagine, that we feel the solidity of bodies," this is "more popular than philosophical" (*T* 1.4.4.12). See Fisette, "Lockean Metaphysics," for discussion.

of body. In the closing section of the *Treatise's* first Book (*T* 1.4.7, "Conclusion of this book"), Hume argues that MP, in conjunction with *T* 1.4.2's etiology of the belief in body, generates an additional skeptical result. This result is one of the "desponding reflections" that engender the crisis narrated in *T* 1.4.7:

'Tis [the imagination], which makes us reason from causes and effects; and 'tis the same principle, which convinces us of the continu'd existence of external objects, when absent from the senses. But tho' these two operations be equally natural and necessary in the human mind, yet in some circumstances they are* directly contrary, nor is it possible for us to reason justly and regularly from causes and effects, and at the same time believe the continu'd existence of matter. How then shall we adjust those principles together? Which of them shall we prefer? Or in case we prefer neither of them, but successively assent to both, as is usual among philosophers, with what confidence can we afterwards usurp that glorious title, when we thus knowingly embrace a manifest contradiction? (*T* 1.4.7.4)⁴⁴

There is a conflict between two operations of the imagination. On the one hand, *T* 1.4.2 established that the belief in the continued and distinct existence of body is a product of "trivial" propensities of the imagination, such as the propensity to confound related ideas (*T* 1.4.2.56). On the other hand, MP established that one's engaging in "just" causal reasoning—another operation of the imagination—renders one incapable of believing in the continued and distinct existence of body.⁴⁵ As we have seen, the section's first phase offers an inductive proof of the negative commitment of the modern philosophy, and the second phase shows that that commitment in conjunction with the positive commitment leaves one with no "consistent" idea of body and thus renders it inconceivable. Because belief in the existence of *x* requires a conception of *x*, endorsing the commitments of the modern philosophy leaves one unable to believe in the continued and distinct existence of body. The imagination is at odds with itself: one operation of that faculty undermines another.

The closing paragraphs of *T* 1.4.7 describe the revival of Hume's commitment to inquiry after the abatement of his epistemic crisis. These paragraphs appear to mitigate the skeptical conclusions that had inspired his "melancholy and delirium" (*T* 1.4.7.9). Does this mitigation imply a rejection of the skeptical results of MP?⁴⁶ According to the most prominent interpretation of *T* 1.4.7, the central pillar of the section's epistemology is the *title principle*: "Where reason is lively, and mixes itself with some propensity, it ought to be assented to. Where it does not, it never can have any title to operate upon us" (*T* 1.4.7.11).⁴⁷ We are justified in rejecting

⁴⁴My "*" marks a footnote to *T* 1.4.4.

⁴⁵Hume acknowledges a sense in which causal reasoning, like the arguments to which *T* 1.4.2 appeals, is "trivial." He claims that "experience" and "habit" cause one to "form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner" (*T* 1.4.7.3). This liveliness is "the very essence of belief" (*T* 1.4.2.24). But the quality of the imagination by which it enlivens ideas "seemingly is so trivial" (*T* 1.4.7.3). Causal reasoning involves a trivial feature of the imagination when it produces belief.

⁴⁶I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to explain how my reading bears on *T* 1.4.7.

⁴⁷Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment*, 234. Interpreters who ascribe a central place in Hume's epistemology to the title principle include Allison, *Custom and Reason*; Kail, *Projection and Realism*; Magri, *Hume's Imagination*; Sasser, *Demands of Philosophy*; Schafer, "Curious Virtues"; and Schmitt, *Hume's Epistemology*. Dissenters include Ainslie, *True Scepticism*; and De Pierris, *Ideas, Evidence, and Method*. Garrett ("Title Principle") and Qu (*Epistemological Evolution*) offer excellent recent discussions of the principle.

instances of reasoning that are not “lively” and do not “mix” with a psychological propensity. Hume indicates that two of the propensities salient to the principle are the passions of curiosity and ambition (*T* 1.4.7.12).

The causal argument for the negative commitment of the modern philosophy is not, in Hume’s view, among the instances of reasoning that the title principle licenses us to reject. He regards the argument as a simple application of one of his “rules by which to judge of causes and effects” (*T* 1.3.15). That the use of these rules is licensed by the title principle is evident from his continued use of them in, for example, his inquiry into the indirect passions (*T* 2.1.8.7). And the widespread endorsement of the causal argument among Hume’s predecessors suggests that its application of the rules mixes with at least one of our propensities: curiosity. Further, his regarding the causal argument as a “lively” instance of probable reasoning is suggested by his claim that its conclusion is “as satisfactory as can possibly be imagin’d” (*T* 1.4.4.4). That Hume holds that the causal argument survives his introduction of the title principle is implied by his regarding the negative commitment as established fact *after* *T* 1.4.7. As we have seen, he says later in the *Treatise* that the negative commitment is a “discovery” that is a “considerable advancement of the speculative sciences” (*T* 3.1.1.26). Now, just as the title principle does not, in Hume’s view, undermine the causal argument for the negative commitment, so too the principle is inapt to remedy the conceptual defects from which the idea of body suffers when that commitment is accepted. The principle tells us which instances of reasoning are acceptable; it cannot itself repair conceptual defects of ideas.

Hume does not take the title principle to undermine the skeptical results of MP. The conflict between MP’s skeptical conclusions and *T* 1.4.2’s identification of the etiology of the belief in body is not eliminated by the epistemology of *T* 1.4.7. Hume does not abandon the belief in body in the face of this result. Throughout the *Treatise*’s discussions of morals and the passions, he takes for granted the existence of items that exhibit continued and distinct existence. For example, in his account of the psychological mechanisms that engender pride, he writes that one’s “country, family, children, relations, riches, houses, gardens, horses, dogs, [and] cloaths” may be causes of pride (*T* 2.1.2.5). But belief in the continued and distinct existence of such items is precluded by acceptance of the negative commitment of the modern philosophy. Thus, the *Treatise*’s later books assume a belief in body that is inconsistent with that commitment and, accordingly, attributes to bodies secondary qualities such as colors. This is not a product of Hume’s regarding the causal argument as unsound; rather, it is an instance of the kind of “remedy” to skepticism provided by “carelessness and in-attention” (*T* 1.4.2.57).⁴⁸

⁴⁸In a footnote to the *Enquiry*’s skeptical argument concerning the primary/secondary distinction, Hume says that Berkeley’s arguments “form the best lessons of scepticism,” at least in part because “they admit of no answer and produce no conviction” (*EU* 12.15n, original emphasis). Similarly, although MP’s skeptical conclusions are, in Hume’s view, unimpeachable, they do not lead him or anyone else to abandon the belief in body.

5. THE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT IN THE FIRST *ENQUIRY*

Part 1 of section 12 of the first *Enquiry* surveys skeptical arguments “against the evidence of *sense*” (*EU* 12.6, original emphasis). Hume’s survey includes two “philosophical” objections to the senses, the second of which, like MP’s skeptical argument, arises from the primary/secondary distinction. MP’s skeptical argument and the *Enquiry*’s second objection (hereafter “the *Enquiry* argument”) are often taken to be presentations of one and the same argument.⁴⁹ My account of the former implies that its premises and intended conclusion differ from those of the latter. Hume presents the *Enquiry* argument as follows:

It is universally allowed by modern enquirers, that all the sensible qualities of objects, such as hard, soft, hot, cold, white, black, &c. are merely secondary, and exist not in the objects themselves, but are perceptions of the mind, without any external archetype or model, which they represent. If this be allowed, with regard to secondary qualities, it must also follow, with regard to the supposed primary qualities of extension and solidity; nor can the latter be any more entitled to that denomination than the former. The idea of extension is entirely acquired from the senses of sight and feeling; and if all the qualities, perceived by the senses, be in the mind, not in the object, the same conclusion must reach the idea of extension, which is wholly dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. (*EU* 12.15)

All “modern enquirers” allow that sensible or secondary qualities are perceptions that do not resemble anything in bodies. Hume argues that they are thereby committed to a triad:

- (1) The idea of extension is “wholly dependent” on ideas of secondary qualities.
- (2) If the idea of extension is wholly dependent on the ideas of secondary qualities, then one cannot conceive of extension separately from secondary qualities.
- (3) Ideas of secondary qualities are excluded from the idea of body.

Hume argues for (1) on the basis of the source of the idea of extension. Because that idea is “entirely acquired” from the senses of sight and feeling, it depends on the other qualities perceived by that sense: the secondary qualities of hardness and color (*EU* 12.15). (2) follows from the dependence of the idea of extension on ideas of secondary qualities: “An extension, that is neither tangible nor visible, cannot possibly be conceived: And a tangible or visible extension, which is neither hard nor soft, black nor white, is equally beyond the reach of human conception” (*EU* 12.15). (3) expresses the modern philosophy’s negative commitment. (1), (2), and (3) jointly imply that the conception of body does not include any “intelligible qualities” (*EU* 12.16). Thus, (1), (2), and (3) imply that body, when we conceive of it as the modern philosophy requires, is an “unknown, inexplicable *something*” (*EU* 12.16, original emphasis).

The triad for which the *Enquiry* passage argues differs from that for which MP’s skeptical argument argues. Both arguments appeal to relations of dependence. But whereas MP’s argument considers dependence relations that obtain between ideas of primary qualities, the *Enquiry* considers dependence relations that obtain

⁴⁹I am grateful to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to consider the relation between these arguments.

between ideas of primary qualities and ideas of secondary qualities.⁵⁰ Moreover, MP's skeptical argument establishes that the idea of body_{mp} involves conceptual dependence relations that violate asymmetry. The *Enquiry* argument does not appeal to the claim that conceptual dependence is necessarily asymmetric. This difference implies another. MP's argument maintains that the idea of body_{mp} is not "just and consistent" and contains "contradictions" (*T* 1.4.4.10; 1.4.5.1). The *Enquiry* argument does not aim to show that the idea of body_{mp} exhibits incoherence. The argument aims to establish that the idea of body_{mp} exhibits a different, incompatible conceptual defect: the idea of body is rendered empty by the negative commitment, devoid of ideas of "intelligible qualities."

In a footnote to the *Enquiry* argument, Hume claims that the argument "is drawn from DR. BERKLEY; and indeed most of the writings of that very ingenious author form the best lessons of scepticism, which are to be found either among the ancient or modern philosophers, BAYLE not excepted" (*EU* 12.15). By contrast, Berkeley is not mentioned or alluded to in MP. The differences between the arguments explain Hume's acknowledging Berkeley in the *Enquiry* but not in MP. The *Enquiry* argument is effectively the same as the argument from Berkeley's *Dialogues* considered above. In the latter, Philonous issues a challenge to Hylas—"Can you even separate the ideas of extension and motion from the ideas of all those qualities, which they who make the distinction term 'secondary'"—and argues that the challenge cannot be met (*DHP* 193). That primary qualities cannot be separated in thought from secondary qualities is the central premise of the *Enquiry* argument but not of MP's skeptical argument. Hume's not acknowledging Berkeley in MP is explained by the fact that the section's argument, unlike the *Enquiry* argument, is not "drawn" from Berkeley.

6. CONCLUSION

MP does not merely aim to undermine the particular account of body associated with the modern philosophy. Rather, the section aims to demonstrate the deeply rooted inadequacy of our cognition of external bodies. Any conception of body is either false, attributing secondary qualities to bodies that it does not have, or includes incoherent relations of conceptual dependence. The skeptical force of the section is not avoided by means of rejecting the modern philosophy's core commitments. While the argument has negative implications for the epistemic merit of the belief in body, it is, in the first place, one of the *Treatise's* inquiries into the nature of our ideas, the outcome of which is undermining rather than vindicating.⁵¹

⁵⁰MP's argument does presuppose that, for any primary quality, ideas of that quality depend either on ideas of secondary qualities or on ideas of another primary quality, where the former possibility is excluded by the negative commitment of the modern philosophy. The disanalogy between the arguments remains: the *Enquiry* argument does not consider the possibility of there being conceptual dependence relations among ideas of primary qualities.

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