

6 Supposition and realism in Hume

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Book 1 of Hume's *Treatise* is an entry in logic, which will "explain the principles and operations of our reasoning faculty, and the nature of our ideas" (T Intro 5). One way the *Treatise* aims to improve on previous logics is by providing a thorough account of probable reasoning, which Leibniz had complained was absent from three great logics of the seventeenth century: Locke's *Essay*, Malebranche's *Search*, and Arnauld and Nicole's *Port-Royal Logic* (T Abs 4).¹ A second ambition is to show that previous logics misunderstand the structure of the human understanding. An "establish'd maxim . . . universally received by all logicians" is that there are three operations of the understanding: *conception*, *judgment*, and *reasoning* (T 1.3.7.5n).² Hume defines conception as the "simple survey of one or more ideas," judgment as the "separating or uniting of different ideas," and reasoning as the "separating or uniting of different ideas by the interposition of others" (T 1.3.7.5n). He holds that judgment and reasoning reduce to conception: "What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects" (T 1.3.7.5n).

This suggests that the operations of the understanding are each a mode of conception.³ But there are passages that appear to countenance a cognitive operation of *supposing* that is irreducible to conception. T 1.4.2, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses," claims that "we may well suppose in general, but 'tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions" (T 1.4.2.56). T 1.4.5, "Of the immateriality of the soul," says that it is impossible for us to form a conception of objects "specifically different" from perceptions but that we may nonetheless "suppose [a difference] betwixt them" (T 1.4.5.1).

Supposition had already been discussed by Locke, whose *Essay* invokes the operation in its explanation of our ideas of substances, according to which "we suppose some Substratum" in which sensible qualities inhere (E

2.23.1: 295). The operation also features in Hume's own arguments. His skeptical argument concerning induction concludes that we "suppose, but are never able to prove, that there must be a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those which lie beyond the reach of our discovery" (T 1.3.6.11). Likewise, his projectivism about causal necessity maintains that we "suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them" (T 1.3.14.25). Unlike belief, the nature, causes, and effects of which are subjects of sustained investigation in the *Treatise*, Hume offers no explicit account of supposition. One aim of the *Treatise* is to offer a comprehensive account of human cognition. If supposition is left unexplained, then Hume's uses of it to explain other aspects of cognition have an explanans that itself requires explanation, and his theory of the "principles of human nature" seems incomplete (T Intro 6).

In this paper, I will attempt to reconstruct a theory of supposition that is implicit in the *Treatise*.⁴ This theory has implications concerning Hume's metaphysics, especially his metaphysics of causation. The "true manner of conceiving a particular power in a particular body" is conceiving of a "connexion betwixt the cause and effect," observation of which would enable a thinker "to pronounce, from a simple view of the one, that it must be follow'd or preceded by the other" (T 1.3.14.13). Acquaintance with an instance of thick necessity would license *a priori* inference from the existence a cause to the existence of its effect.⁵ T 1.3.14, "Of the idea of necessary connexion," argues that we have no idea of thick necessity. Accordingly, Hume's attitude toward it has often been understood as either eliminativist or agnostic. But some commentators maintain that he is committed to the existence of thick necessity.⁶ Because belief requires a "LIVELY IDEA," one's having no idea of thick necessity implies that one cannot believe in it. The reading in view holds that this does not preclude realism about thick necessity, because one can suppose that it exists.⁷

I will argue that supposition is, in Hume's view, less conducive to realism than it has been thought. I begin by distinguishing supposition from conception and belief (§1). I then consider the relationship between supposition and the possibility of realism concerning items of which we cannot conceive (§2). While Hume does allow that we can suppose items of which we cannot conceive, supposition in the absence of conception is not a vehicle for realism.

6.1 Supposition, conception, and belief

There are passages in the *Treatise* in which supposition is contrasted with the operation of *conception*. In the *Intellectual Powers*, Reid writes: "Conceiving, imagining, apprehending, understanding, having a notion of a

thing, are common words used to express that operation of the understanding, which the Logicians call *simple apprehension*" (EIP 4.1: 295). Conception is the operation by which the understanding *apprehends* or *barely considers* its object "without any judgement or belief about it" (EIP 4.1: 295). This account of conception is ubiquitous in early modern contributions in what Buickerood (1985) calls "facultative logic," the chief concern of which is an analysis of our cognitive faculties. In the *Method to Science*, Sergeant (1696, 3), too, equates conception with simple apprehension, writing that it is the operation by which "we lay hold of, or take into us the thing, about which we afterwards Judge or Discourse." And in the *Port-Royal Logic* (1997, 23), conception, the "first action of the mind," is defined as

the simple view we have of things that present themselves to the mind . . . as when we represent to ourselves a sun, an earth, a tree, a circle, a square, thought and being, without forming any explicit judgements about them.

We can distinguish two ways in which a cognitive operation might be simple. An operation is *attitudinally simple* just in case it does not involve a commitment to things' being thus-and-so.⁸ A paradigm of an operation that is not attitudinally simple is belief. An operation is *conceptually simple* just in case it does not require exercise of a thinker's conceptual capacities.⁹ If perceptual experience requires subsumption of the percept under a concept, then perception is not conceptually simple.¹⁰

Conception is usually understood to be attitudinally and conceptually simple. It is frequently defined in opposition to judgment, where the latter but not the former involves an attitude of assent or denial. Reid says that everyone "is conscious that he can conceive a thousand things, of which he believes nothing at all" (EIP 4.1: 295). Chambers' *Cyclopædia* (1728: 293) claims that conception is "perception, which we have of any thing, without proceeding to affirm, or deny any thing about it." Further, the operation is not usually understood to require in all cases exercise of one's conceptual capacities. Conception of an object is a prerequisite for, not a product of, one's subsuming it under a concept.¹¹ One need not employ the concept TRIANGLE or any other concept in order to conceive of a triangle.

In a footnote to T 1.3.7, "Of the nature of the idea or belief," Hume writes: "Conception is defin'd to be the simple survey of one or more ideas" (T 1.3.7.5n). Humean conception is attitudinally and conceptually simple. He says that "'tis certain there is a great difference betwixt the simple conception of the existence of an object, and the belief of it" (T 1.3.7.2). Judgment presupposes conception. But the latter does not involve commitment to things' being a certain way. Moreover, in T 1.1.7, "Of abstract ideas,"

Hume offers an account of concepts according to which they are general ideas. A general idea of a kind is a particular idea of an item of that kind, which idea is associated both with other ideas of members of the kind and with the custom of reviving such ideas as needed. Possession of a Humean concept occurs only as a result of one's having particular conceptions.¹²

There are at least two ways in which Humean supposition differs from conception. The first is that supposition, unlike conception, is not attitudinally simple. Hume says that we "suppose, but are never able to prove, that there must be a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those which lie beyond the reach of our discovery" (T 1.3.6.11). His position is that a commitment to resemblance of past experience with future experience underlies probable reasoning. Further, he claims that our propensity to project impressions onto the objects by which they are caused explains "why we suppose necessity and power to lie in the objects we consider, not in our mind, that considers them" (T 1.3.14.25).¹³ The supposition produced by the mind's propensity for projection involves an attitude of assent to the external existence of causal necessity. Moreover, T 1.4.2 aims to explain 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; emphasis added). This passage's use of "suppose" as equivalent to "attribute" suggests that to explain the supposition is to explain one's taking an object to exhibit distinct existence.

Another difference between conception and supposition concerns modality. Hume accepts the "established maxim in metaphysics" that "*whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence*, or in other words, that *nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible*" (T 1.2.2.8). The *Treatise* distinguishes two kinds of modality. First, there is causal modality. Causal necessity, at least so far as we have an idea of it, is either "the constant union and conjunction of like objects" or "the inference of the mind from the one to the other" (T 2.3.2.4). Second, there is absolute or metaphysical modality. Absolute necessity is that "which makes two times two equal to four, or three angles of a triangle equal to two right ones" (T 1.3.14.23). Conceivability implies absolute possibility: "whatever we conceive is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense" (T Abs 11). Thus, one cannot form an idea or conception of what is absolutely impossible. By contrast, one can suppose what is absolutely impossible. This is presupposed by Hume's discussion of the projection of smells, tastes, and sounds onto their causes. Non-visual, non-tactile sensory impressions necessarily lack spatial location. But the imagination is disposed to attribute to such impression's spatial location in the bodies by which they are caused. That such perceptions should be spatially located in a body is "something altogether unintelligible and contradictory" (T 1.4.5.13).

I now turn to supposition's relation to judgment or belief. These are alike at least insofar as neither is attitudinally simple. This might suggest that supposition is equivalent to or a species of belief.¹⁴ Hume does sometimes use "supposition" to mean "belief." In the "Abstract," he claims that "when we believe any thing of external existence, or suppose an object to exist a moment after it is no longer perceived, this belief is nothing but a sentiment of the same kind" (T Abs 27). In addition, he treats suppositions, like beliefs, as proper objects of epistemic evaluation. For example, the philosophical system of the external world includes a supposition that is not "just" (T 1.4.2.54). While it is true that some suppositions discussed in the *Treatise* are merely beliefs, I will argue that Hume holds that there is an operation of supposition that is importantly different from belief. Some of Hume's uses of "suppose" are not equivalent to "believe" but instead refer to a distinct operation of the mind.

A central claim of Hume's theory of belief is that belief lies in the manner of conception. To believe is to have a lively or forceful idea, where the liveliness of that idea derives from its association with an impression: "An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION" (T 1.3.7.5). Hume's definition suggests that only ideas that are enlivened by virtue of their association with an impression qualify as beliefs. But his considered account is less restrictive than this in at least two respects. First, he allows for perceptual beliefs, which are identical with sensory impressions (T 1.3.5.7). Sensory impressions exhibit vivacity "originally," not as a result of association. Second, he allows for memorial beliefs: lively ideas copied from previous sensory impressions (T 1.3.5.7). Memorial beliefs are instances of belief that have a high degree of vivacity not by virtue of association. Thus, Hume says that "the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present" (T 1.3.5.7). I use "belief" to refer to states characterized by Hume's official definition.¹⁵

Belief may be identified with an occurrent or dispositional state. If Hume accepts the former identification, then belief in something requires an occurrent perception of it. If he accepts the latter, then a thinker need not have an occurrent perception of something in order to believe in it; instead, belief is identified with a thinker's exhibiting a certain set of dispositions, such as the disposition to form a lively idea of the object in which she believes or dispositions to engage in certain mental and bodily actions. Hume's definition of "belief" implies that beliefs are occurrent perceptions.¹⁶ That definition appeals only to the causes and phenomenal properties of perceptions ("liveliness" and "vivacity"). But Hume also acknowledges that there is a causal profile characteristic of belief. The "ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent" have an "influence on the

will” that is greater than the influence of mere ideas but less than the influence of sensory impressions (T 1.3.10.3, 1.3.10.5). The causal influence of beliefs approximates the causal influence of impressions: “The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions” (T 1.3.10.3). Beliefs have a characteristic causal profile distinct from those characteristics of mere ideas and sensory impressions. A belief that includes the “prospect of pain or pleasure” approximates the causal profile of an impression of pain or pleasure by tending to produce affective response and action (T 2.3.3.3). This is explained by the fact that beliefs approximate the force and vivacity of impressions, which give them “a superior influence on the passions and imagination” (T 1.3.7.7). Ideas that lack the force and vivacity characteristic of beliefs also differ from beliefs in their causal profile, exhibiting a lesser influence on passion and action.

That there is a difference between belief so understood and supposition is presupposed by T 1.4.2’s explanation of the belief in body. Hume’s second explanation of the belief, according to which it is produced in response to sensory impressions that exhibit constancy, is divided into four stages. First, an object exhibits diachronic identity just in case it exhibits both invariable and uninterrupted existence. Second, because an object that exhibits constancy resembles an identical object, the imagination is apt to mistake the former for the latter and, accordingly, to predicate identity of the constant object. Third, the mind notices that the constant object has an “interrupted” appearance, which, because identity requires uninterrupted existence, seems inconsistent with one’s ascription of identity. In order to remove the tension between one’s ascription of identity and observation of interruptedness, one supposes that the constant object continues to exist between one’s observations of it and, hence, enjoys uninterrupted as well as invariable existence. Stages 1–3 jointly explain one’s “supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible” (T 1.4.2.24). Stage 4 provides an explanation of the psychological mechanisms by which the supposition is replaced with belief, where this involves “the supposition, or idea of continu’d existence, acquir[ing] a force and vivacity” (T 1.4.2.24).

This account of the belief implies that to explain the supposition of the continued existence of body is not thereby to explain the belief in the continued existence of body. Moreover, Hume takes himself to have explained the belief in the continued existence of body only after having explained how a thinker comes to have a lively idea thereof. By contrast, no reference is made to force and vivacity in Stages 1–3 of his explanation, the explanandum of which is the supposition of the continued existence. This suggests that supposition and belief are dissimilar at least insofar as the former lack the force and vivacity characteristic of the latter. Because the causal profile

of a belief is at least primarily explained by its force and vivacity, suppositions lack, in general, the effect on passion and action characteristic of belief. Thus, supposition is a species of cognitive commitment that exhibits an influence on the mind's subsequent actions that is, in general, lesser than the influence of belief. Another difference stems from belief's relation to conception. Belief requires a conception of what is believed (T 1.3.7.6). We have seen that one can suppose but cannot conceive of what is absolutely impossible. Belief's requiring conception implies that the former cannot, unlike supposition, outstrip what is absolutely possible.

A further difference between supposition and belief stems from Hume's holding that the latter is an occurrent mental state. In the *Principles*, Berkeley addresses the objection that his denial of the existence of matter is inconsistent with what we commonly believe. His response is that "it will not perhaps be found that so many as is imagined really do believe the existence of matter":

Strictly speaking, to believe that which involves a contradiction, or has no meaning in it, is impossible. . . . In one sense indeed, men may be said to believe that matter exists, that is, they act as if the immediate cause of their sensations, which affects them every moment and is so nearly present to them, were some senseless unthinking being. But that they should clearly apprehend any meaning marked by those words, and form thereof a settled speculative opinion, is what I am not able to conceive.

(PHK 54)

Because the notion of unthinking matter is incoherent, belief in it is unavailable to us. We believe in the existence of matter only in the sense that we act as if we hold that belief. Commitment to things in which we cannot believe is, in at least some instances, constituted by one's engaging in certain mental and physical actions: those which we would expect a thinker who does, *per impossible*, hold the relevant belief to perform.

There is evidence for Hume's holding, similarly to Berkeley, that whereas some suppositions involve occurrent thought of what is supposed, others are exhausted by a thinker's mental and physical actions or dispositions to such actions.¹⁷ Hume argues that when engaging in probable reasoning, we "suppose, but are never able to prove, that there must be a resemblance betwixt those objects, of which we have had experience, and those which lie beyond the reach of our discovery" (T 1.3.6.11). His view is not that whenever one engages in probable reasoning, one forms the occurrent thought of the uniformity principle. Rather, when one engages in probable reasoning, one reasons as if the principle were true. Hume's account of the "vulgar" version of the belief in body

provides another example. The vulgar “take their perceptions to be their only objects, and *suppose*, that the very being, which is intimately present to the mind, is the real body or material existence” (T 1.4.2.38). The vulgar commitment to body involves the supposition that sensory impressions exhibit continued and distinct existence. The vulgar may consciously affirm, of the beings “intimately present to the mind,” that they exhibit continued and distinct existence. More often, however, they take this for granted without consciously affirming it. The vulgar act, reason, and speak as if the immediate objects of perceptual experience exhibit continued and distinct existence without having the occurrent thought that they exhibit continued and distinct existence. While some suppositions do not involve the thinker’s having an occurrent state that represents what is supposed, Hume sometimes writes of supposition as involving thought of that which one supposes. Occurrent suppositions are involved in what Hume calls “hypothetical arguments” or “reasonings upon a supposition” (T 1.3.4.2). In his identification of the mechanisms that generate the indirect passions, he “supposes” that “every cause of pride, by its peculiar qualities, produces a separate pleasure, and of humility a separate uneasiness” (T 2.1.5.1).

In summary, there are at least three respects in which Hume takes supposition to differ from belief. First, because supposition lacks the force and vivacity characteristic of belief, it exhibits a lesser influence on a thinker’s thoughts and actions. Second, belief but not supposition is constrained by absolute possibility. Third, whereas a Humean belief is an occurrent representation of what is believed, suppositions can be constituted merely by a thinker’s acting and thinking, or being disposed to act and think, as if what is supposed were the case. There is, however, a significant similarity between the operations of supposing and believing, in addition to the fact, noted above, that neither is attitudinally simple. The causal profile of supposition differs from that of belief, because supposition lacks the force and vivacity characteristic of belief. But there are respects in which the causal profile of supposition mimics that of belief. A theory of belief must acknowledge at least two aspects of its causal profile. First, one’s believing in x disposes one to assert and accept sentences that state or imply that x is the case. Second, one’s believing in x disposes one to perform cognitive operations that presuppose that x is the case. These aspects of the causal profile of belief relate to causal properties associated with both occurrent and implicit supposition. With regard to occurrent supposition, one’s occurrently supposing that x exists disposes one to utter and accept sentences according to which x exists and to engage in cognitive operations that presuppose the existence of x . With regard to implicit supposition, implicit supposition is at least partially constituted by these aspects of the causal profile of belief. For example, one’s supposing the truth of the

uniformity principle is, in some cases, exhausted by one's reasoning as if the unobserved resembles the observed.¹⁸

6.2 Supposition and realism

Supposition has been thought to provide Hume with a means of endorsing realism concerning domains of which we cannot conceive. Wright (1986, 433) claims that, for Hume, although we have no idea of thick necessity, we nonetheless “naturally suppose that there is an objective necessity linking those events which we have constantly experienced in succession.” According to Wright, supposition facilitates commitment to items of which we have no idea.¹⁹ So understood, supposition is a vehicle for realism concerning a domain of which we have no conception. I will argue that supposition in the absence of conception is not a vehicle for realism.

Supposition should be distinguished from another notion with which it is sometimes conflated. Hume says that “the farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos'd *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects” (T 1.2.6.9). This passage mentions supposition in the course of introducing relative ideas. Flage (1981, 55–56) understands a Humean relative idea as the “cognitive analogue of a definite description” which “singles out an unperceived entity on the basis of its relations to a perceived entity.” A relative idea of *x* requires an idea of an item to which *x* is related and an idea of that relation. Relative ideas have seemed to some to provide a means of conceiving of that of which we have no non-relative idea. According to Strawson (2014, 187), although we cannot form a *positive* idea of thick necessity, we can form a *relative* idea of it.

Relative ideas are frequently discussed as if they were instances of supposition.²⁰ But passages in which Hume explicitly discusses relative ideas, of which there are two in the *Treatise*, suggest that relative ideas are conceptions, not suppositions. According to the first, a relative idea is the “farthest we can go towards a conception” of objects “specifically different” from perceptions. According to the second, to form a relative idea of a specifically different object is to attempt to conceive of it:

Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt [objects and perceptions], 'tis still incomprehensible to us; and we are oblig'd either to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative, or to make it the very same with a perception or impression.

(T 1.4.5.19)

These passages suggest that to attempt to form a relative idea of something is to attempt to conceive of it. My concern is whether supposition *apart from conception* is a vehicle for realism.²¹

It is useful to distinguish between content conditions and acceptance conditions for realism. Shaftesbury's *Moralists* (1999, 266) tells us that a "realist" with regard to virtue is one who "endeavours to show that it is really something in itself and in the nature of things." According to Shaftesbury (1999, 267), a condition on realism about virtue is that one hold that it does not depend on "custom, fancy or will." This is a content condition on realism: a condition that the content of a thinker's commitment must satisfy, in order that it qualify as a commitment to realism. By contrast, an acceptance condition is one that a thinker must satisfy in order to adopt a commitment that satisfies the content conditions on realism. Content conditions on realism specify the characteristics that the content of a commitment must have, if that commitment is to qualify as realist. Acceptance conditions on realism specify the capacities that a thinker must have, in order that she adopt a realist commitment. My thesis that when one supposes something without conceiving of it, one fails to meet an acceptance condition on realism concerning it.

The acceptance condition central to my argument is that the relevant domain must be intelligible. To be sure, it is not an acceptance condition on realism concerning a domain that one be able to explain the domain. Intelligibility in an explanatory sense is not an acceptance condition on realism. Rather, what is required is that one be able to achieve a thought that to some extent succeeds in representing the relevant domain. That is, a requirement for accepting realism concerning a domain is that the domain be thinkable to one. This condition provides a test for whether Humean supposition is, in the absence of conception, a vehicle for realism. Supposition without conception would be vehicle for realism only if it allows one to satisfy the intelligibility condition. In other words, supposition without conception would provide a vehicle for realism only if supposition without conception allows one to achieve a thought that represents the domain in question.²²

Winkler (1991, 556) argues that supposition is subject to constraints imposed by Hume's theory of ideas:

There is every reason to think that acts of supposing . . . should fall within the scope of the theory of ideas, given the generality Hume claims for the theory when he introduces it. Supposing, like conceiving, involves ideas (theory-of-ideas-approved ideas), and thereby falls within the scope of the theory.

According to Winkler, supposition concerning a domain requires an idea and, hence, conception of the domain. This receives support from the apparent generality of Hume's theory of ideas, which is presented as a comprehensive account of mental content. Now, Winkler's reading does imply that a thinker who supposes the existence of a domain satisfies the

intelligibility condition on realism. According to Winkler, any domain about which a thinker can form a supposition is one of which she conceives, and if a thinker conceives of a domain, then she achieves a thought that represents it. But supposition would not provide a vehicle for realism concerning domains of which a thinker has no conception, because supposition of a domain, as Winkler understands it, requires conception thereof.

In Winkler's view, then, supposition without conception would not be a vehicle for realism, because there can be no supposition without conception. There are, however, passages that imply that supposition of a domain does not require an idea or conception of it. Hume argues that we are unable to conceive of specifically different objects: "'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions" (T 1.2.6.8). Two passages imply that we can suppose such objects despite our being unable to conceive of them. First, the distinction between supposition and belief enters into Hume's account of the philosophical belief in body, according to which there exist bodies that are both numerically and specifically different from perceptions.²³ Because philosophers cannot conceive of such objects, Hume claims that they "merely invent a new set of impressions": "I say, a new set of perceptions: For we may well suppose in general, but 'tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions" (T 1.4.2.56). We can "suppose in general" but not conceive of the existence of specifically different objects. Second, another passage discusses supposition of specifically different objects:

To make this evident, let us remember,* as every idea is deriv'd from a preceding perception, 'tis impossible our idea of a perception, and that of an object or external existence can ever represent what are specifically different from each other. *Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt them, 'tis still incomprehensible to us*; and we are oblig'd either to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative, or to make it the very same with a perception or impression.

(T 1.4.5.19)²⁴

We can suppose a specific difference between objects and perceptions despite our being unable to form an idea of such a difference. Possessing an idea of a domain is not required for forming a supposition of it.²⁵

While one's having an idea of an item is not, in Hume's view, a condition on supposing it, I will argue that he denies that supposition in the absence of conception is a vehicle for realism. There are passages that show that supposition in the absence of conception does not allow for satisfaction of the intelligibility condition. Among these are Hume's discussions of substance and ideas of substance. The *Treatise* distinguishes three notions of

substance. First, there is substance as substratum: a “something unknown and invisible” that serves as a subject of inherence for sensible qualities and provides the particular of which it is a metaphysical part with synchronic and diachronic unity (T 1.4.3.4). Second, there is substance as a bundle of qualities, ideas of which are “collections form’d by the mind of the ideas of the several distinct sensible qualities, of which objects are compos’d” (T 1.4.3.2). Third, there is substance as “*something which may exist by itself*” (T 1.4.5.5). While Hume allows that we have ideas that correspond to the second and third sense of “substance,” he denies that we have ideas of substratum.²⁶ He claims that “we have . . . no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities” (T 1.1.6.1).

While Hume denies that we have ideas of substratum, he allows that we may suppose that it exists. He claims that the “particular qualities which form a substance, are commonly refer’d to an unknown something, in which they are supposed to inhere” (T 1.1.6.2). Further, he offers two accounts of psychological illusions that lead one to suppose the existence of substance, the conclusion of which is that “the imagination is apt to feign something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls *substance*, or *original* and *first matter*” (T 1.4.3.4).²⁷ According to the first, supposition of substratum is a product of the mind’s mistakenly applying the idea of identity to a changing succession of related objects (T 1.4.3.3–4). The mind supposes that there is a “*substance, or original and first matter*” underlying those qualities in order to reconcile this ascription of identity with the variation of their succession. According to the second, supposition of substratum is a product of the mind’s mistakenly applying the idea of simplicity to a bundle of related qualities (T 1.4.3.5). The mind supposes that there is a “principle of union or cohesion” underlying those qualities in order to reconcile this ascription of simplicity with their evident diversity.

Hume takes our having no idea of substance as substratum to have implications for its intelligibility. In the “Abstract,” he says that the term “substance” is “*altogether* insignificant,” because it is a term that “has no idea annexed to it” (T Abs 7; emphasis added). In the “Appendix,” he argues that because we have no idea of substance understood as something “simple and individual,” we have “no notion” of substance and the term “substance” is “*altogether* unintelligible” (T App 11; emphasis added). And in T 1.4.3, he says that substance is an “unintelligible chimaera” (T 1.4.3.7).

These passages show that substance is, in some sense, unintelligible. But it has been argued that Hume understands terms such as “unintelligible” and “meaningless” in a weak sense, such that these passages do not imply that we cannot achieve thoughts that succeed in representing

substance.²⁸ There are reasons to reject this. First, Hume infers from the fact that we have no impression-derived idea of substance that substance is “*absolutely*” and “*altogether*” unintelligible and that the term “substance,” when understood to signify something “simple and individual,” is “*absolutely* insignificant.” These claims would be misleading, were it Hume’s view that there is a sense in which substance is intelligible. Second, there are passages in which he uses “unintelligible” that presuppose that it implies an absence of cognitive significance. He writes that certain words “wou’d be perfectly unintelligible, and wou’d no more have any idea annex’d to them, than if they were of a tongue perfectly unknown to us” (T 3.2.2.5). Third, Hume takes the unintelligibility of substance to have implications for the question of its existence: “What possibility then of answering that question, *Whether perceptions inhere in a material or immaterial substance*, when we do not so much as understand the meaning of the question?” (T 1.4.5.6). He also writes: “the question concerning the substance of the soul is *absolutely* unintelligible” (T 1.4.5.33; emphasis added). Were substratum merely unintelligible in a weak sense, this would not preclude the mere question of its existence. Hume holds that substratum is unintelligible in the strong sense that we cannot achieve thoughts that represent it.

Hume accepts both that one can suppose the existence of substratum without conceiving of it and that substratum is unintelligible. This has consequences for his alleged realism. Hume’s discussion of substratum concludes that substratum is unintelligible because one cannot achieve a conception of it. Crucially, he takes the unintelligibility of substratum to follow directly, without appeal to any further considerations, from the fact that one cannot conceive of it. He thereby presupposes that a domain of which one has no conception is unintelligible to one. Thus, he is committed to the claim that one cannot satisfy at least one of the acceptance conditions on realism—the intelligibility condition—without having a conception of the relevant domain. For Hume, supposing the existence of a domain without conceiving of it does not allow one to satisfy the intelligibility condition on realism. Supposition in the absence of conception is not a vehicle for realism.²⁹

In allowing that we can make suppositions concerning domains of which we have no conception, Hume allows we can make suppositions concerning domains that are unintelligible to us. While one can suppose that substance exists, one does not thereby achieve a thought that represents substance. In the case of supposition of a domain unaccompanied by conception thereof, in what sense, if any, is the supposition *about* the domain? One answer is suggested by Winkler (2009, 499). Winkler claims that when a thinker supposes the existence of objects specifically different from perceptions, she is doing nothing other than “intending words to

reach where thoughts or ideas can't." This can be generalized. According to the proposal in view, a thinker's forming a supposition of a domain of which she has no conception is purely linguistic. If a thinker forms a supposition concerning a domain of which she has no idea, then the supposition is merely implicit, constituted by linguistic behaviors or dispositions to linguistic behavior. This finds support in the closing paragraphs of T 1.4.3, where Hume distinguishes three opinions concerning thick necessity: the vulgar, that of false philosophy, and that of true philosophy. False philosophers, Hume writes, acknowledge that there is "no known connexion among objects" (T 1.4.3.9). But this does not "keep them from ever seeking for this connexion in matter, or causes," despite the fact that "we have no idea of power or agency, separate from the mind, and belonging to causes" (T 1.4.3.9). Nature, Hume claims, has provided the false philosophers with a consolation:

This consolation principally consists in their invention of the words *faculty* and *occult quality*. For it being usual, after the frequent use of terms, which are really significant and intelligible, to omit the idea, which we wou'd express by them, and to preserve only the custom, by which we recal the idea at pleasure; so it naturally happens, that after the frequent use of terms, which are wholly insignificant and unintelligible, we fancy them to be on the same footing with the precedent, and to have a secret meaning, which we might discover by reflection.

(T 1.4.3.10)

False philosophers use words such as "faculty" and "occult quality," but those words are meaningless, because no ideas are signified by those terms. Because philosophers have no ideas of faculties and occult qualities, their commitment to the existence of such entities amounts to nothing more than their speaking as if such entities existed. The reading in view holds that such implicit suppositions are *of* "faculties" and "occult qualities" only in the sense that they are, respectively, constituted by uses of or dispositions to use the words "faculty" and "occult quality."³⁰

6.3 Conclusion

Hume's appeals to the operation of supposition to explain other operations of the mind seem problematic, because he seems to neglect to provide an explanation of that operation. I have argued that the *Treatise* contains an implicit theory of supposition, an operation that has been largely neglected by studies of Hume's account of the intellectual powers of the mind. Much of the interest of this theory derives from its importance for understanding his metaphysics of causation and the external world. Supposition has

been thought to provide a vehicle for Hume's alleged realism concerning domains of which we cannot conceive. I have argued that this relies on an understanding of supposition that is not Hume's own.³¹

Notes

- 1 Leibniz's *Theodicy* (1985, 45) complains that these logics "have been very far from indicating to us the true means fitted to assist the faculty whose business it is to make us weigh the probabilities of the true and the false."
- 2 Aldrich (1696, 1) says: "The operations of the understanding are three in total: *Simple Apprehension, Judgement, and Reasoning.*" In both the *Port-Royal Logic* and Watts's *Logick*, conceiving, judging, and reasoning are three "principal operations of the mind" (Arnauld and Nicole 1996, 26; Watts 1809: viii).
- 3 Waxman (2016, 142) attributes to Hume the view that anything that is not a possible object of conception is "ipso facto unthinkable."
- 4 There exists no general account of Humean supposition. A brief discussion is found in Garrett (2015, 52).
- 5 Strawson (2014, 109) holds that realist causation has the "AP property," which is the property that "genuine detection of it brings with it the possibility of making *a priori* certain causal inferences" (emphasis removed).
- 6 Realist interpreters include Strawson (2014), Wright (1983), Kail (2007), Costa (1989), Livingston (1984), and Craig (1997). Critics of the New Hume include Millican (2007, 2009), Winkler (1991), Broackes (1993), Stanford (2002), Loeb (2001), and Blackburn (1993).
- 7 Wright (1986, 433) says that, for Hume, "we naturally suppose that there is an objective necessity linking those events which we have constantly experienced in succession." Costa (1989, 181) writes that "we can 'suppose' what we cannot 'conceive.'" See also Strawson (2014, 48) and Craig (1997, 124). Blackburn (1993, 96) claims that supposition is an "unlikely candidate for understanding [Hume's] mature philosophy."
- 8 This is the dominant sense in which conception is said to be simple. Suárez (2007, 19) equates conceiving "simply and without composition" with conceiving "without affirmation or denial."
- 9 An operation's sometimes involving exercise of conceptual capacities is compatible with its being conceptually simple in my sense.
- 10 An additional notion of simplicity *objectual simplicity*. An operation is objectually simple just in case something is an object of the operation only if it lacks proper parts. None of the authors I discuss here hold that either conception or judgement is objectually simple.
- 11 See Copenhaver (2010, 291) for the view that Reid takes conception to be conceptually simple.
- 12 Hume's definition of conception suggests that its objects are exclusively ideas and not non-ideational items, such as external bodies. There are passages in which he writes of one's having a conception of non-ideational items (T 1.3.7.2). This suggests a distinction between *immediate* and *mediate* objects of conception: the former are ideas; the latter are items of which one's ideas are representations.
- 13 Hume says that we are "led astray by false philosophy" when we "transfer the determination of the thought to external objects, and *suppose* any real intelligible connexion betwixt them" (T 1.3.14.27). See Ehli (2024b) for an account of Hume's projectivism.

- 14 Weintraub (2011, 380) argues that Hume treats supposition and belief as equivalent.
- 15 None of these forms of belief explain our commitment to, for example, the conclusion of a demonstration. Hume regards such commitments as instances of knowledge, not belief, and he provides an explanation of the assent involved in knowledge that does not appeal to vivacity (T 1.3.7.3).
- 16 Marušić (2010) argues that Hume accepts an occurrence theory of belief. Loeb (2002, 65–74) reads Hume as identifying beliefs with dispositions.
- 17 Garrett (2015, 52) writes: “To ‘suppose’ something, in Hume’s usage, is to act in at least many respects as though one believed something, but without necessarily forming a lively idea of it.”
- 18 Hume’s concept of supposition bears some similarities to Stalnaker’s (1984, 79–81) concept of *acceptance*. For Stalnaker, to accept a proposition is “to treat it as a true proposition in one way another.” Not all instances of acceptance are instances of belief.
- 19 Similarly, Kail (2007, 123) claims that “any considered realist position [concerning thick necessity] will insist on attitudes like supposition, assumption or taking for granted, attitudes that, independently of the details of Hume’s theory of belief, have different functional roles from belief.”
- 20 Broackes (1993, 107) says: “Hume obviously does in one context use the notion [of a relative idea], to explain a way in which we might ‘suppose’ objects to be categorically different from our perceptions.” See also Strawson (2014, 48) and Kail (2008, 446).
- 21 My argument does not undermine a version of the New Humean interpretation according to which we can achieve a conception, perhaps through relative ideas, of thick necessity or specifically different objects. In forthcoming work, I argue that, in Hume’s view, we cannot achieve relative ideas of thick necessity or of specifically different objects.
- 22 Craig (1997, 124) writes that Hume endorses realism concerning objects “specifically different” from perceptions by supposing them, where supposition explains how “we can at least come to have thoughts about objects which represent them as different in kind from impressions.”
- 23 Winkler (2000, 78) claims that “the distinction between supposing and conceiving plays absolutely no role in Hume’s official account of our belief in the continued and distinct existence of body,” although he perhaps has in mind only the supposition of objects specifically different from perceptions. Wilson (1989, 63) argues that that supposition is included in the philosophical version of the belief in body.
- 24 My “*” marks a footnote to *Treatise* 1.2.6.
- 25 Strawson (2011, 6) claims that “Hume’s theory of ideas was never put forward as a completely general theory of meaning or content.” Costelloe (2018, 34) claims that some mental states have “suppositional content” that does not derive from sensory impressions. See also Wilbanks (1968, 80) and Costa (1989, 181). Loeb (2001, 51) claims that Hume holds that the supposition of substance has “quasi-content,” although he holds that, for Hume, the supposition is strictly meaningless.
- 26 Bozzo (2023) argues that Hume holds only that we lack a clear and distinct idea of substance as substratum, understood as something that supports the sensible qualities of objects. This does not do justice to the passages considered below, in which Hume does not qualify his denial that we have an idea of substance.
- 27 Hume often links the notion of supposition with the notion of *fiction* or *feigning*. For example, he describes the supposition in of a substance in which

- sensible qualities inhere as a “fiction” (T 1.1.6.2). And he writes of “a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos’d to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects, and in particular of that of our perceptions” (T 1.4.2.29). For discussion of Hume’s theory of fictions, see Traiger (1987) and Cottrell (2016).
- 28 See Strawson (2014, 166–67). Costelloe (2018, 34) holds that some mental states are “unintelligible according to the theory of ideas” but nonetheless “they have intentional content: they are about something.”
 - 29 Price (1948, 279) writes that “*supposing* and *conceiving* are not the same. . . . There is no absurdity which I may not be directed to suppose; but it does not follow from hence, that there is no absurdity which I may not *conceive*.” Winkler (1991, 560) suggests that “Hume uses the word ‘suppose’ in the sense identified by Price” and, hence, that Hume holds that “we can *suppose* absolutely anything.”
 - 30 With the suppositions of soul, self, and substance in view, Hume writes that when we mistakenly attribute identity to successions of perceptions or sensible qualities, “our mistake is *not confin’d to the expression*, but is commonly attended with a fiction, either of something invariable and uninterrupted, or of something mysterious and inexplicable” (T 1.4.6.7). This suggests, contrary to the proposal in view, that such suppositions are not merely verbal. Elsewhere, I have argued that Hume’s being unable to provide a satisfactory account of suppositions of domains of which we have no conception is a plausible source of his dissatisfaction with his theory of personal identity in the “Appendix” to the *Treatise* (Ehli 2024a).
 - 31 Thanks to Steve Darwall, Michael Della Rocca, Don Garrett, Jen Marušić, Sadie McCloud, and Ken Winkler for their comments on versions of this paper. The paper is dedicated to Ken, for whose guidance, support, and inspiration I am very grateful.

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