



Impressions, Ideas, and Fictions

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IMPRESSIONS, IDEAS, AND FICTIONS

I. Introduction

Under the heading of "fiction," Selby-Bigge's index to Hume's Treatise of Human Nature lists no fewer than seventeen distinct fictions.¹ There is the fiction of perfect equality, of continued and distinct existence, of substance and matter, of substantial forms, accidents, faculties and occult qualities, the fiction of personal identity, and many others. The notion of a fiction is central in Hume's philosophy. As the title of this paper suggests, I believe that fictions are so important that what is commonly called Hume's theory of impressions and ideas ought to be called the theory of impressions, ideas, and fictions. Although fictions are at the heart of a number of Treatise passages, they have generally received very little sustained treatment.² This paper is a start at filling a gap in Hume interpretation.

I hope to lay the groundwork for a complete study of Hume's fictions. There are some obvious questions to be addressed in such a study: Is there just one type of fiction or are there many? Is there an essential feature or set of features shared by all fictions? Is the characterization of a view as involving a fiction always a criticism of that view? If fictions are in some sense false or wrong, what do they contrast with? What notions are true or correct? Does Hume's account of fictions mesh with an account of truth? If there is no account of truth, how can there be an account of fictions?

These questions, by no means the only ones which can be raised, are related. They can be seen as hovering around the issue of whether Hume's notion

of a fiction is an ontological notion. Is calling something a fiction denying the existence of that thing? Does believing in fictions (e.g., believing that there are persons) amount to holding a false belief that something exists when in fact it does not? Should we read Hume as claiming, for example, that there are no substances because he calls substance a fiction? Answering 'yes' to these questions has obvious implications for the questions raised in the last paragraph. I believe that while the deflationist reading is not completely wrong, it is wrong enough to account for much confusion in Hume interpretation. Many readers of the Treatise think, for example, that in calling the self a fiction Hume is denying the existence of persons. This makes it completely mysterious why Hume talks about persons throughout the Treatise in a common-sense way, as if they do exist. Though I cannot investigate all the consequences of my interpretation of Hume's fictions for the numerous issues which involve fictions in the Treatise, it is my hope that clarifying Hume's notion of fiction will help shed light on those other notions, such as personal identity, which Hume calls fictions.

I will offer an interpretation which attempts to locate some general features of fictions in the Treatise passages where Hume invokes them. Although there are different fictions, Hume has a core notion of fiction which is fundamentally epistemological rather than ontological. There will be space in this paper to look at only a few fictions, those which occur in or before "Of scepticism with regard to the senses." I believe, however, that the interpretation can be generalized. Finally, I will suggest how my interpretation provides answers to the above questions.

II. Fiction and Imagination

It is tempting to think of Hume's notion of a fiction as an ontological notion because in contemporary usage, the notion of a fiction is ontologically loaded. Fictions are things we construct in our heads; they are the result of concatenating ideas in the imagination. Golden mountains and the Wicked Witch of the East are fictitious; they don't represent anything which exists. If Hume is using this notion of fiction, then he must be doing deflationary ontology. On this view, to call something a fiction is to demote it to the status of something thought up in one's imagination; it is to accord it the rank of something whose existence is not to be accepted.

There is some support for this interpretation in the Treatise. In Book I, Part III, Section IX, Hume distinguishes the regular operations of the understanding from the imagination, calling the products of the latter "the mere fictions of the imagination." (T 108) A page later, talking about how we sometimes "feign another object" when we have an impression, where the feigned object is related to the impression by contiguity or resemblance, Hume characterizes such a feigned perception as "a fiction ... founded on so little reason, that nothing but pure caprice can determine the mind to form it." (T 109) A bit later, Hume tells us that though comic poets tell us things which are obviously not true, the familiarity of their "personages and incidents" makes a formal announcement of their falsehood unnecessary, "even tho' at first sight they be known to be fictitious, and the pure offspring of the fancy." (T 122)

These passages reveal that Hume sometimes uses the word "fiction" or "fictitious" for the mere offspring of the imagination. However, they by no means establish that this is the only or dominant use of the term in the Treatise. In fact, a close look at other passages reveals a richer account of how we acquire fictions and why we come to have them. These other passages, to which we will soon turn, strongly suggest that fictions cannot be treated as the mere offspring of the fancy.

Hume is interested in accounting for the acquisition of fictions such as substance, perfect standards, and personal identity, but not in accounting for why any particular person comes to have the particular products of the imagination he in fact has. An explanation of why an individual thinks of a golden mountain on a particular occasion would have to include both facts about that individual and principles of psychological association. It is not Hume's concern to explain why Jones dreamed about a three-headed monster last night. Instead, Hume wants to account for the origin of certain central notions, notions shared in human nature. The fables of poets and novelists result from the "very irregular motion" of thought "in running along its objects" which "may leap from the heavens to the earth, from one end of the creation to the other, without any certain method or order." (T 92) So there's not much to be said about the generation of such ideas. Hume is concerned with figuring out the regular motions of thought; and fictions, Hume shows, result from a particularly regular motion of thought.

Fictions are not products of the imagination, when imagination is construed narrowly as the faculty which merely generates, by concatenation, complex ideas for which there may be no resembling antecedent

complex impressions. Hume's conception of imagination, however, is much broader. Understood in the wider sense, the imagination is where fiction generation occurs.

So far I have only shown that there is no obvious way to link Humean fictions with our everyday notion of fiction. I've shown what Hume's fictions are not. I turn now to the program of showing exactly what Hume is claiming when he calls something a fiction.

III. The Fiction of Duration

One of Hume's first uses of the term "fiction" in the Treatise appears in his discussion of time.³ (Book I, Part II, Section III) Both the vulgar and philosophers mistakenly think that "the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects." (T 37) Hume's reason for thinking that their application of the idea of duration is improper is that the idea of duration cannot be derived from an unchangeable or "stedfast" object. Hume refers the reader to T 65 for an account of this fiction. When we think of an unchanging object as enduring we already have the idea of time. We get that idea from the ever-present flow of perceptions and it is "for ever present with us." (T 65) We apply the idea of time to the unchanging object "as if every moment were distinguish'd by a different position, or an alteration of the object." (T 65) That is, we somehow compare the unchanging thing to the succession and imagine that it had changed. The fictitious duration is an application of an idea to something from which that idea cannot be derived. We "confound" our ideas when we apply the idea of

duration to unchangeable objects when the idea of duration is derived from the ever-present flow of perceptions.⁴

A proper application of an idea is an application only to those objects from which the idea can be derived. After claiming that the idea of duration cannot be derived from an unchangeable object, Hume concludes:

For it inevitably follows from thence, that since the idea of duration cannot be deriv'd from such an object, it can never in any propriety or exactness be apply'd to it, nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration. (T 37)

Notice that Hume does not say that this fiction is false. What is false is the view that the idea applies properly, that is, that the idea of duration is derived from the object to which it is applied. One who uses the fiction need not hold this. Nothing suggests that this fiction itself is false, only that it is improper or inexact.

A fiction is an idea applied to something from which it cannot be derived. We can apply the idea of duration to unchangeable objects; it is just that it "can never in any propriety or exactness" be applied to them. This does not mean, however, that we ought not apply the idea of duration in just this way. Hume has no objection to our doing so. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such ideas, although philosophers get into trouble with them when they make metaphysical claims based on the (usually implicit) supposition that the idea is derived from such objects.

IV. Fictional Standards

The same notion of fiction is at work in Hume's discussion of certain "imaginary" standards of equality, octave, color, motion, etc. Hume says that there is a standard of equality which

...is plainly imaginary. For the very idea of equality is that of such a particular appearance corrected by juxta-position or a common measure, the notion of any correction beyond what we have instruments and art to make, is a mere fiction of the mind, and useless as well as incomprehensible. (T 48)

Hume immediately adds that though imaginary,

the fiction however is very natural; nor is any thing more usual, than for the mind to proceed after this manner with any action, even after the reason has ceas'd, which first determin'd it to begin. (T 48)

Hume is talking about the idea of things being perfectly equal. The idea arises, Hume says, when we consider some actual standard, say a ruler, and imagine that some "minute part" is removed from it. We are insensible of the change. We wouldn't detect it, though we can imagine the production of such a ruler. Have we imagined a perfect standard? No, we've only imagined a better standard. But the better standard is not the rule minus the part of which we are insensible. Rather, in order to imagine the second ruler, we had to imagine a third standard by which we could compare the first ruler with the imagined altered ruler. It is this third standard which Hume calls a fiction. (T 48)

Hume says that the standard of equality we "use" when we compare some actual ruler with an imagined ruler minus some undetectably tiny part is "a mere fiction of the mind, and useless as well as

incomprehensible." (T 48) He adds that though it is imaginary, there is an explanation of how we come up with this idea, since we generally do come up with it. These imaginary standards are part of the fabric of our conceptual scheme, and so Hume feels compelled to explain them. The explanation involves the idea that we have trouble halting some mental process once it has been set into motion. Hume thinks that there are certain 'trains of thought' which, "like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse." (T 198) What is the train here? Hume doesn't actually tell us for the case of measurement of length. Instead he immediately goes on to explain how this phenomenon arises in the case of time, where he does talk about "a perfect and entire equality." (T 48, emphasis added.)

The idea of a perfect and entire equality of temporal interval arises from "the various corrections of our measures." (T 48) This is the basis for a generic account of fictional standards. Getting them comes from a train of thought, and that train is made up of better and better measures or standards. Of course none of these are objectively better in the sense that they conform to a perfect standard; rather the idea of a perfect standard is derived from these better and better ones. Nothing in Hume's account appears to depend on giving an explanation of the nature of the fictional standard. All he needs to say is that such standards are beyond any actual sensible (perceptible) standard.⁵

The idea of any perfect standard is a "loose idea" which we cannot fully explain. It is an idea which cannot in principle be properly derived from any actual measurement, yet we attempt to apply it in actual measurement. Our standards are in fact derived from "repeated trials" which we carry beyond

reason to form "the loose idea of a perfect standard." (T 49) As in the case of duration applied to an unchangeable object, perfect measurement applied to any actual measure is fiction; it is an idea applied to something from which that idea cannot be derived. We can't derive the idea of a perfect standard from such a standard because perfect standards can't be experienced. All we ever experience are standards capable of further refinement.

V. The Fiction of Continued Existence

Fictions are at the heart of Hume's discussion of continued existence in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses." There Hume refers to the fiction of duration and he introduces two new fictions, the fiction of continued existence and the fiction of double existence. To reconcile the incompatibility of unity and number in identity, we make use of the fiction of duration. Hume does not say here that identity is a fiction, only that our identity attributions proceed by "means of it." (T 201) Identity is inexact or improper, because it depends on our having the fiction of duration. But inexactness is just what is needed: the fiction of identity allows us to admit both unity and number in a non-strict sense. In a strict sense, unity and number are incompatible.

Later in the same section, continued existence is called a fiction:

This propension to bestow an identity on our resembling perceptions, produces the fiction of a continu'd existence; since that fiction, as well as the identity, is really false, as is acknowledg'd by all philosophers, and has no other effect than to remedy the interruption of

our perceptions, which is the only circumstance that is contrary to their identity. (T 209)

Acquiring the notion of continued existence depends on our already having the fiction of duration. What makes continued existence itself a fiction, rather than something merely dependent on a fiction? When we take something to be a continued existence, we are attributing identity to what is in fact a sequence of different perceptions. Those different perceptions are not the material from which the notion of identity could be derived. Indeed there is no one perception from which identity over time could be derived, since identity involves the idea of duration, and the idea of duration can only be acquired from a succession. Thus, applying the idea of continued existence to the succession is really 'improper.' There's nothing continued in the succession, nothing which endures unchanged. When we say that something continues in existence we are applying a notion to something which is supposed to exist unchanged. But such an unchanging thing could not be the thing from which the idea is derived. In fact, we get the idea of continued existence from something which is not continued at all.

It is important to keep the fiction of continued existence, which the vulgar embrace, distinct from its philosophical sibling, the fiction of double existence. Hume believes that it takes very little philosophical reflection to see that our perceptions are interrupted and not continued. Philosophical reflection, however, is not able to completely overcome the influence of nature, which

has sometimes such an influence, that she can stop our progress, even in the midst of our most profound reflections, and keep us from running on with all the consequences of any

philosophical opinion. Thus tho' we clearly perceive the dependence and interruption of our perceptions, we stop short in our career, and never upon that account reject the notion of an independent and continu'd existence. (T 214)

The conflict leads us to "contrive a new hypothesis," the doctrine of the double existence of perceptions and objects. We allow that perceptions are interrupted and perishing, but we attribute the continued existence to "something else, which we call objects." (T 215)

What is the fiction here? Ascribing the interruption to our perceptions is not fictitious -- to do so is to apply the notion of interruption to the very thing from which we get the idea of the interruption. The fiction is the notion of object in its philosophical use. Just as we could not properly conceive of a perfect standard of equality, we cannot conceive of anything other than perceptions. (T 216) Philosophers attribute continued existence to something (objects) which could never give rise to such an idea. The idea could only come from other perceptions.

VI. Occult Properties

The notion of an occult property is also a fiction for Hume. (T 244 ff.) It is easy to see how this fiction can be understood in light of the interpretation developed above. The occult properties of objects are those properties which properly apply to persons, but which we attribute to other things. The attribution of sympathy and antipathy to objects is fictitious, since these are emotions found in us. Once one is clear about the origins of such things as sympathy and antipathy it becomes clear

that in applying these notions to external objects we are making use of a fiction; we have an idea applied to something from which the idea could not be derived.

On my interpretation, Hume has general principles of fiction generation, just as he has principles about the causal origin of other ideas. Hume says, however, that occult properties derive from principles which are "neither universal nor unavoidable."⁶ (T 226) This is not a problem for the interpretation offered here; the avoidability of these principles of fiction generation is consistent with their being regular or general principles. Hume's explanation of the fiction of occult properties is like his explanation of belief in miracles: Though belief in miracles can and should be avoided, there are causal explanations of why such beliefs are widely held. It is important to note that while Hume stresses the avoidability of occult properties, he doesn't claim this for the other fictions.

I've suggested that the passages considered all contain the same basic notion of fiction, though there is not one fiction, but many. In each fiction, we have a notion which is used in a way incompatible with the way that notion is acquired by the mind. In the fiction of duration, we attribute duration to unchangeable objects. But unchangeable objects are not capable of giving rise to the idea of duration, and so our attribution of duration to them is 'inexact,' 'improper' or 'fictitious.' In the vulgar belief in continued existence, we find that we attribute continued existence to what is really a succession of resembling perceptions, not a continued existence at all. We get the idea of continued existence from the succession; the derivation of the

idea is different from its application. It is fictitious because the succession is not a continued existence.

VII. McRae on Fictions

Robert McRae, in a paper on Hume's theory of time, has also advanced an interpretation of Hume's fictions.⁷ It will be helpful to compare his reading with the one developed here. There are points of agreement as well as important differences. Both McRae and I see the fiction of duration as the first fully developed fiction of the Treatise, and in line with the account developed here, McRae sees this fiction as an idea applied to something from which it cannot be derived. For McRae, however, the fiction of duration has a special status. He writes:

Out of this fiction are generated in a logically ordered series the basic metaphysical categories in terms of which the mind thinks, and all of them are fictitious. There are two main types of fictions in the Treatise.⁸

Fictions other than duration, on McRae's view, arise to resolve contradictions which are generated by the existence of this first fiction. The generation of subsequent fictions is explained in part by Hume's talk of transitions which result from the "smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought." (T 220)

It is important to look for a relationship among the various fictions, and this McRae does. Clearly Hume's views about identity and continued existence, for example, don't make sense in isolation from his account of the fiction of duration. But the fact that some fictions are related in this way doesn't mean that there is some underlying mechanism

of fiction generation which make all fictions follow from the fiction of duration. In fact the text fails to support such a view.

McRae doesn't explain many of the early fictions of Book I. Fictional standards, I have argued, are fictions, and so are occult properties. Hume's account of the former occurs much in advance of the discussion of the fiction of duration and doesn't seem to be connected to it. Occult properties are straightforward examples of fictions, yet their generation is unrelated to the fiction of duration. The worry is not merely that McRae looks only at some fictions; the same is true of my treatment here. Rather, McRae claims that the interconnectedness of the fictions he looks at provides the basis for an account of all fictions. This claim is called into question by fictional standards and fictional (occult) properties.

In contrast, the account I offer of Hume's fictions holds that all fictions are ideas applied to something from which the idea is not derived, and that this is the central feature which fictions have in common. In my view, fictions are much more like other perceptions than is normally thought. Their appearance is not limited to an isolated set of related (though important) concerns in the Treatise, as McRae suggests. They play a more pervasive role in Hume's philosophy than McRae's interpretation allows.

VII. What's wrong with fictions?

Fictions are inexact and improper. This suggests that there is something wrong with fictions, that one who entertains a fiction has a false belief. The matter is more complex. Fictions are special

ideas. Their origin is different from those simple and complex ideas which are derived from antecedent and resembling impressions. But a fiction is more than this. A fiction involves an improper application of an idea. The impropriety can be quite harmless. However, Hume takes himself to be uncovering some sort of mistake or misconception in at least some of the passages considered, and it is important to try to say what error Hume thinks he has revealed.

In order to assess what Hume felt was problematic with fictions, we must appreciate that fictions appear in two distinct contexts. First, there are the naturally occurring fictions of the vulgar; the fiction of duration and the fiction of continued existence are among these. Some fictions are inescapable; we all have them. Others can be avoided, such as occult properties and the philosopher's fiction of double existence. These are fictions which philosophers are prone to have, usually when trying to reconcile obviously incompatible but undeniable facts.

Hume's attitude toward a fiction depends on that fiction's status as either a vulgar or philosophical fiction. There are problems with each, although Hume is less happy with the philosophical than with the vulgar fictions. The fictions of the vulgar are natural. They can be seen as non-standard ideas. Unlike other ideas, they are not derived from antecedent resembling impressions. We don't get them in the way we get other ideas, yet they are unavoidable. Fictions of the vulgar are most problematic when philosophers get their hands on them.

Philosophers can misuse the everyday fictions of the vulgar. They can also invent their own fictions when the vulgar ones won't do. Hume comes

down hard on fictions such as the fiction of object (non-perception). In exposing it as a fiction, Hume is being critical. But it would be a mistake to take Hume's criticism to involve the denial of the claim that there are objects. Hume does not attack the claim that there are objects. What he attacks is the evidence philosophers have for their belief in the existence of objects.

How does Hume do that? He does it by revealing the psychological facts of how the belief was formed. For example, Hume shows that what leads a philosopher to embrace the philosophical notion of object and the doctrine of double existence is the influence of the vulgar fiction of continued existence. Although reflection shows that our perceptions are not continued, the mechanism by which we come to think that they are continued affects us so strongly that we can't give it up. So we invent a new fiction to handle the contradiction between nature and reflection. The only reason we have for appealing to a notion of object is the pull of nature, the succession of perceptions which gives us the vulgar fiction in the first place.

The nature of Hume's criticism of philosophical fictions can be put quite generally.⁹ Having studied the great metaphysicians, Hume wanted to discover for himself the substance of the world. What he in fact discovers is that all there is are perceptions; a careful look at all the candidates for the substance of the world -- external objects, substance, the soul -- turn out to be fictions, ideas acquired in a special way which invites philosophical misapplication. In showing that all there is are perceptions, that objects, substances and perfect standards, for example, are all fictions, Hume is not showing that there are no objects, substances, or

perfect standards, and he is not showing that only some sort of constructionalist program in metaphysics remains viable. Rather, in providing an account of our acquisition of these notions, he takes himself to have laid the metaphysical theories which so interested him to rest. Calling these notions fictions does express a bit of Hume's disappointment. The substance of the world cannot be found in the analysis of them.

IX. Conclusions

We are now in a position to summarize answers to the questions raised at the beginning of the paper, answers which I hope to have provided throughout the paper. All fictions share the feature of being ideas which are applied to something from which they cannot be derived. The unifying feature is not the feature shared by fictions of poetry and novels. Calling something a fiction is often, but not always, a criticism of that view. It is not Hume's main concern to correct the fictions of the vulgar. In philosophical contexts, however, these notions are often misapplied. When misused by philosophers or other theorists, fictions are false. By calling them false, Hume means that there is no evidence for believing in them. But such an account of the falsity of fictions does not require that true beliefs somehow correspond to actual existing things.

As I've indicated throughout, there is much that remains to be done in providing a full account of Hume's fictions. One important task is to place Hume's use of the term "fiction" in its historical context. Another is to extend the account of fictions to all the things Hume calls fictions. Attention in this paper has been limited to some of

the early fictions in Book I. Finally, and most importantly, the consequences of the interpretation for the general understanding of Hume's philosophy must also be explored.¹⁰

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, L.A. Selby-Bigge, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 662; hereafter cited as 'T' followed by the relevant page number(s).
2. A few recent books on Hume explicitly discuss fictions. Though helpful, they don't contain any sustained treatment of the notion. Cf. John P. Wright, The Sceptical Realism of David Hume, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) and Donald W. Livingston, Hume's Philosophy of Common Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Fictions are discussed in Robert McRae, "The Import of Hume's Theory of Time," Hume Studies VI, November, 1980, pp. 119-132. McRae's paper is discussed in section VII.
3. The first fiction discussed in the Treatise, at T 16, is the fiction of substance.
4. Cf. my "Hume on Finding an Impression of the Self," Hume Studies XI, April, 1985, pp. 47-68.
5. Nothing Hume says about the origin of the fictional standard of length requires that we imagine a series of standards "beyond what we have instruments and art to make," a series which eventually terminates in the idea of a perfect standard. This account may explain why Hume writes of "the loose idea of a perfect standard" at T 49.
6. This problem was raised by Andrew Ward.

7. McRae, op. cit.
8. McRae, p. 124.
9. This way of putting the matter was suggested to me by Donald Livingston.
10. An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Fourteenth Hume Conference, Edinburgh, 1986. I'd like to thank the American Council of Learned Societies for support of research. In thinking about Hume's fictions, I have benefited from discussions with Annette Baier, Marcia Homiak, Donald Livingston, and Andrew Ward.