Comments on Dario Perinetti "Hume's Sceptical Solutions"

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Perinetti's paper is interesting and provocative, covering a broad range and suggesting fruitful readings that deserve to be explored further and in detail. Unfortunately, time prevents me from doing these justice, so I shall confine myself mainly to comments on and objections to his general approach. In brief, I shall suggest that his interesting ideas about Hume's theory of ideas and their limits might be better divorced from his consideration of Humean "sceptical solutions".

First, there is an obvious difficulty in seeking a *general* "understanding [of] what is for Hume a sceptical solution", because Hume uses the phrase "sceptical solution" only once – in the title of Section 5 of the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* – and gives no indication there of the phrase's having any special significance or implicit reference to other authors, ancient or modern. Moreover the phrase cannot be found, as far as I know (after a search on ECCO and EEBO) in the writings of any of his contemporaries, so any attempt to derive a *general* understanding from the single instance is bound to be speculative. Kripke's suggestion, quoted in Perinetti's second footnote, is perhaps as good a try as any:

> "a *sceptical* solution of a sceptical philosophical problem begins … by conceding that the sceptic's negative assertions are unanswerable. Nevertheless our ordinary practice or belief is justified because – contrary appearances notwithstanding – it need not require the justification the sceptic has shown to be untenable." (Kripke 1982, p. 66)

This fits pretty closely with a plausible interpretation of what Hume is up to in Section 5 of the *Enquiry*: showing that our inductive practice is unaffected by the "sceptical doubts" of Section 4 because it depends on instinctive *custom* rather than rational *insight*. But I remain doubtful whether there is anything to be gained by treating Hume's use of the phrase "sceptical solution" as a focus of investigation into his wider purposes. Suppose we judge that arguments in other sections of his works display a similar pattern – what then? The more we find similarities between *Enquiry* 5 and other sections, the more reason we have to doubt that we have correctly identified what led Hume to use the phrase in just this one instance. The thematic similarities may be rich and illuminating, but the phrase itself gives us no help at all.

In moving on to consider the general character of Hume's sceptical discussions, Perinetti's own preferred theme is "the relation between epistemological and semantic scepticism in Hume's writings". Some of Hume's discussions can indeed be seen as hinging on this relation, but *not* his treatment of induction and custom – his one explicitly identified "sceptical solution" to "sceptical doubt" – which is purely epistemological without a hint of semantic scepticism. Many Hume commentators, encouraged by his interweaved discussion in the *Treatise*, have tended to run together his discussions of induction and causation (the latter of which indeed hinges largely on semantic issues). But it is striking that in the *Enquiry*, the very work which talks of a "sceptical solution", Hume's "sceptical doubts" about induction are treated quite independently of his analysis of causation, and come long before there is any mention of his quest for the impression of necessary connexion, with its strong semantic overtones.

I also have a concern about the idea that Hume's philosophical views can appropriately be characterised in terms of a consistent "relation between epistemological and semantic scepticism". Perinetti contrasts what he takes to be the two dominant interpretations, on the one hand that for Hume "epistemological scepticism entails semantic scepticism", and on the other that "epistemological scepticism … is compatible with holding

the cogency of some metaphysical views about the ultimate structure of reality". The latter view, identified as New Humean, enables us "to read Hume as holding … that, though real causes or external objects cannot be known, their existence is nevertheless a reasonable supposition". And by contrast the former, Old Humean, reading is seen as denying the existence of these things. Perinetti then proposes "a third way to understand the relation between epistemological and semantic scepticism", whereby "Epistemological scepticism leads 1) to the discovery that the ideas [concerned] are 'confused' or 'obscure' and 2) to a radical revision of the content of the beliefs under scrutiny. The practical significance of sceptical arguments lies in [their helping to reveal] the psychological mechanisms underpinning problematic beliefs."

I think Perinetti is right to endorse this third way in the case of causation, where Hume quite explicitly sets out to identify the impression-source of the idea of power or necessary connexion as a means of removing obscurity and clarifying the beliefs concerned. Here, moreover, Hume succeeds in finding the impression he seeks, proving that the idea is indeed legitimate. As I read him, Hume is no sceptic about causation, and he *does* believe in real causes; indeed his investigation reveals what it takes to be a real cause, namely, satisfaction of his two definitions.[1] But I am not convinced that Perinetti is right to see the same pattern at play in the case of the external world, where Hume's investigation does not discover any *bona fide* impressions as the original of our ideas of continuing external objects, but instead reveals those supposed ideas to be "fictions" of doubtful legitimacy, based on "trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by … false suppositions" (*T* 1.4.2.56, SB 217). Here there is no apparent "radical revision of the content of the beliefs under scrutiny"; instead, we are counselled to ignore the difficulty and carry on believing as before as we quit our study for the dinner or backgammon table: "Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy" (*T* 1.4.2.57, SB 218).

Summing up so far, I am sceptical about "big picture" interpretations of Hume that gloss his various arguments as functioning in more or less the same way. As I see it, very crudely, on induction, we have an epistemological conclusion with implications for cognitive science, but no significant element of semantic scepticism. On causation, we have an argument whose direct aim is the clarification of our ideas, and with implications that *can* be read as sceptical, but can equally be read as constructive (depending on whether one rejects or accepts the Humean view of causation). On the external world, we have an investigation into the origin of certain ideas that leads to a sceptical *semantic* conclusion about those ideas, and which can also be read as generating an *epistemological* scepticism about the corresponding beliefs. If we went on to include others of Hume's famous arguments, we would find yet more variations on these themes.

Despite these cautionary words, I agree with much of what Perinetti says about Hume's Copy Principle, and in particular his key claim that Hume's use of it is generally "about the pretended *origin* of some key ideas" and "not about whether they do have an origin or are merely empty words". Hume's own presentations of the Principle are in this respect rather misleading. In the *Treatise*, he introduces it primarily as a way of settling the issue of

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[1] This is not to deny, of course, that there is plenty of room for debate about the interpretation of Hume's two definitions, and how far they make room for a genuine notion of causal power in objects. For a sketch of my own preferred approach, see "Hume, Causal Realism, and Causal Science", *Mind* 118 (2009), pp. 647-712, §4. Perinetti, near the end of his paper, seems to take a more sceptical view: "The result of the sceptical challenge is not suspension of judgment about causality. The result is that we give up all attempts to find causality as a real property of external objects. And we give up these attempts … because the sceptical challenge and solution cause us to no longer *wish* to understand causality in these terms. We no longer think, that is, that anything short of realism about causality is an unsatisfactory conception of it."

innate ideas (*T* 1.1.1.12), with no indication at that stage of its analytical role. In the *Abstract* and *Enquiry*, it is presented more as a means of identifying bogus ideas:

> All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure: … They are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas; and when we have often employed any term, though without a distinct meaning, we are apt to imagine it has a determinate idea, annexed to it. On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: The limits between them are more exactly determined: Nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them. When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. … (*E* 2.9, SB 21-2; cf. *Abstract* 7, SB 648-9)

Later in the *Enquiry*, the Copy Principle is applied only to the idea of power or necessary connexion, and as we have noted, is there used to identify the genuine impression rather than to dismiss the idea. To find cases in which Hume uses it to "confirm our suspicion … that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea", we must look instead to the *Treatise*. Candidates for such bogus would-be ideas include those of material substance, existence, and the self, but even as such bogus ideas are being dismissed there is usually a caveat:

> "We have therefore no idea of substance, *distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities*, nor have we any *other* meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it." (*T* 1.1.6.1, SB 16)

> "… the idea of existence is not deriv'd from any particular impression. The idea of existence, then, *is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent*." (*T* 1.2.6.3-4, SB 66)

> "… we have no impression of self or substance, *as something simple and individual*. We have therefore, no idea of them *in that sense*" (*Appendix* 11, SB 633)

Only very rarely do we find Hume unambiguously *rejecting* a term as meaningless using his Copy Principle, as opposed to *replacing* a confused notion with a clearer alternative. The best examples I have found are those of mental substance and inherence:[2]

> "I know no better method, than to ask these philosophers in a few words, *What they mean by substance and inhesion?* … This question we have found impossible to be answer'd with regard to matter and body: But besides that in the case of the mind, it labours under all the same difficulties, 'tis burthen'd with some additional ones, which are peculiar to that subject. As every idea is deriv'd from a precedent impression, had we any idea of the substance of our minds, we must also have an impression of it; which is very difficult, if not impossible, to be conceiv'd. … Thus neither by considering the first origin of ideas, nor by means of a definition are we able to arrive at any satisfactory notion of substance … We have, therefore, no idea of a substance. … We have … no idea of inhesion. 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* 1.4.5.2-6, SB 232-3)

It would be interesting to see a systematic study of Hume's use of the Copy Principle; I believe it would largely confirm the emphasis that Perinetti suggests on the basis of his own examples: the ideas of a vacuum and absolute time (*T* 1.2.5.29, SB 65), and the self (*T* 1.4.6.2, SB 251).

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[2] Solidity might be another example (*T* 1.4.4.11-14), although Hume's attitude to it remains somewhat unclear. In the *Abstract*, (7, SB 649) he says "… if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant. 'Tis after this manner he examines our idea of *substance* and *essence*". But in fact he never examines the idea of *essence* in this way, and standardly talks of essences himself in a way that seems intended quite sincerely.

However my doubts about Perinetti's "big picture" return again when he goes on – in his section on "Meaning and confusion", to "push the claim a bit further". That section includes a tantalising discussion of Hume and the blind poet Thomas Blacklock, which deserves attention in itself.[3] But given my role as critical commentator, I want to pick up instead on Perinetti's grouping together of a range of ideas – "time", "necessary connexion", "external object", "substance" and "God" – most of which Hume seems to me to treat rather differently from each other. Most of these have already been mentioned above, and the newcomer, the idea of God, is accounted for by Hume in a very straightforward manner that makes no mention of confusion:[4]

> "The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom." (*E* 2.6, SB 19)

I also have a worry that Perinetti might be running together different kinds of "confusion" and treating them all under the umbrella of his interesting theory. His footnote 12 usefully collects together various Humean references to confused *notions*, *ideas*, or *conceptions*, but these cover quite a wide range, from losing track in complex arguments (*T* 1.3.13.6, SB 146 and *E* 9.5 n. 20, E 107 n.), to mistaken "spreading of the mind" in the case of a fig's taste (*T* 1.4.5.13, SB 238), to misunderstanding terms in discussions of liberty and responsibility (*T* 2.3.1.13, SB 404). Later he glosses Hume as saying that "the psychological mechanism of confusion" is "the cause of many mistakes and sophisms in philosophy" (*T* 1.2.5.20, SB 61). But here Hume is referring to the mechanism of *association*, by which the animal spirits can be speculated to "rummage that cell" in the brain where an idea resides and thus disturb related cells, sometimes leading us to replace one idea for another without noticing. It's not clear to me how well this coheres with Perinetti's theory: for example, rummaging of cells is presumably indifferent between specific and general ideas.[5] But aside from this sort of broad reservation, I think his 7-step attempt to reconstruct "Hume's views on confusion" is interesting and illuminating, well worthy of further research. How far it genuinely reflects Hume's own worked-out position is unclear, but that is inevitable: many of us will know what it is like trying to fit together a mixture of Humean claims, garnered from a range of texts written over a decade or more, and having to resort to our own invention to fill in the gaps as coherently as possible. Perinetti has collected a decent framework of quotations to build his theory, providing a plausible basis for systematic investigation and refinement in the light of a more comprehensive survey of how his theory will match up to what Hume says elsewhere. It will not surprise me if something like his theory survives scrutiny as a fairly plausible reconstruction of a strand of Hume's view on confusion of ideas. But though open-minded on the matter, I rather doubt that any more solid result can be achieved here. A lot turns on how far Hume's theory of general or abstract ideas – presented in *Treatise* 1.1.7 – informs what he says elsewhere, and the evidence for this is rather thin. Apart from *Treatise* 1.1.7 itself, that theory gets mentioned only at *T* 1.2.3.5-6 (ideas of space and time), 1.3.14.13 (a general idea

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[3] Perinetti's perceptive reference to the Blacklock case can perhaps be strengthened by noting that a 1754 letter to Joseph Spence in which Hume discusses it (*HL* i 200) seems to be referring to events somewhat earlier, apparently around 1742 (when Hume first met Blacklock) and around 1753 (cf. *HL* i 183).

[4] Towards the end of his paper, Perinetti suggests that "The idea of God is 'contradictory' because it has a complex relation; on the one hand, to the passions (fear, hope) from which it is derived and, on the other hand, to the understanding that tries to comprehend it." But I cannot find any text in which Hume says that the idea of God itself is contradictory or dubiously comprehensible for this sort of reason, so I am not sure which passages Perinetti is alluding to here.

[5] Perinetti draws on the immediately following *Treatise* paragraph as suggesting the Humean principle: "(6) *Related customs:* two customs are related when ideas in the sets they respectively revive stand in relations of resemblance, contiguity or causation. (*T* 1.2.5.21/ SBN 61-2)". But again it's not at all clear to me that Hume here has in mind his theory of general ideas.

of power presupposes some particular instance), 1.4.3.10 (how a term can rely upon the customary revival of ideas, without any idea present), 2.3.6.2 (general ideas are more obscure and have less influence on the imagination), *Appendix* 2 (no abstract idea of existence), and *E* 12.25 n. 34 (the *Treatise* theory of abstraction might avoid the paradoxes of infinite divisibility).[6] This all adds up to a pretty meagre textual basis for claiming that the theory comprehensively informs Hume's thinking. The same comment would apply equally, for example, to Don Garrett's ingenious reconstruction of Hume's position on the two "definitions of cause", in which again the theory of general ideas plays a key role. Here too I remain sceptical, while applauding the effort to see how the theory *would* apply if Hume himself thought to do so.

After presenting his interesting 7-step reconstruction of Hume's theory of confused ideas, Perinetti suggests that it "sheds new light" on Hume's attitude to intelligibility as informed by the Copy Principle. We should not read Hume "as suggesting that obscure or confused ideas are *radically* unintelligible". Even in the case of "metaphysical ideas that cannot possibly be derived – directly or indirectly – from an antecedent impression, … we should refrain from drawing the conclusion that the term is also altogether *meaningless*. For, it is still open to us to have a 'confused' *general* idea about these metaphysical entities." Maybe that is right, though again I am sceptical that such claims can be justified in advance of detailed consideration of specific cases. And any such detailed consideration would have to take account of Hume's talk of "fictions", which play a major role in some such cases (e.g. our thoughts about external bodies), but are hardly mentioned in Perinetti's paper. How the theory of fictions would mesh with Hume's discussion of general ideas is, as far as I recall, pretty much unexplored territory in the literature.

Coming now to the final section of Perinetti's paper, headed "Sceptical solutions", I very much like the sentence with which it starts: "One of the consequences of the reading I am proposing is that problematic ideas about which sceptical doubts can be raised are not all problematic in the same manner." But there is something of a tension in this final section, pulled between the recognition of variety in Hume's treatments on the one hand, and on the other a desire "to make plain the general features of Humean solutions". As I have explained, I am not convinced that there are such consistent "general features", at least in respect of the *workings* of those "Humean solutions", and I see more variety here than Perinetti himself acknowledges. Moreover those "solutions" that most closely conform to the style he identifies – involving investigation of the source and nature of the relevant ideas – are very distant from the one "sceptical solution" that Hume himself thus names: his appeal to custom as a "solution" to his problem of induction. So I would not be happy for that phrase to be appropriated for that style of treatment. Nevertheless I agree with much of the spirit of Perinetti's final paragraph, which identifies unity in the *point* of the various Humean "solutions", and sees "no tension between Hume's sceptical stance and his naturalistic project of a science of human nature". To end on a note of agreement, therefore:

> "Hume's science of human nature identifies the *particular* disquiets produced by obscure beliefs, and so is conducive to particular positive solutions. In other words … Hume's scepticism is compatible with positive revisions of beliefs and with positive reform of personal, social, and political practices."