

FICTION AND CONTENT IN HUME'S LABYRINTH

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In the 'Appendix' to the Treatise, Hume claims that he has discovered a 'very considerable' mistake in his earlier discussion of the self. Hume's expression of the problem is notoriously opaque, leading to a vast scholarly debate as to exactly what problem he identified in his earlier account of the self. I propose a new solution to this interpretive puzzle. I argue that a tension generated by Hume's conceptual scepticism about real 'principles of union' and his account of fictions of the imagination is the defect identified in the 'Appendix'.

Keywords: Hume, personal identity, fictions, the self, mental content.

Two kinds of scepticism are present in Hume's *Treatise: epistemological scepticism* and *conceptual scepticism*. The former aims to show that some class of beliefs lacks epistemic merit. By contrast, the latter aims to show that some class of beliefs is unintelligible or incomprehensible, due to defects exhibited by the concepts involved in those beliefs.¹ A prominent example of Hume's conceptual scepticism is his discussion of causal necessity, in which he argues that we lack 'the most distant notion' of mind-independent necessary connections between objects (T 1.3.14.20; 165). This paper argues that another instance of Hume's conceptual scepticism explains what are perhaps the most controversial passages in his corpus. In T 1.4.6, 'Of personal identity' (hereafter: PI), Hume provides a metaphysical account of the self and a psychological account of why we attribute (diachronic) identity and (mereological) simplicity to the self. But in the 'Appendix' to the *Treatise*, he confesses that this discussion contains a 'very considerable' mistake and laments that he is 'involv'd in such a labyrinth' concerning the self (T App 1; 623, App 10; 633).² Hume's presentation of the problem is notoriously opaque, failing to make clear the exact respect in which

¹ See Fogelin (1985: 6–7), Garrett (2004: 71), and Williams (2008: 84–6).

² References to the body of the *Treatise* begin with 'T' followed by the book, part, section, and paragraph number in Hume (2007). References to the 'Appendix' and 'Abstract' of the *Treatise* begin, respectively, with 'T App' and 'T Abs' followed by the paragraph number. I also provide

his earlier account is defective. Commentators have made a huge variety of proposals as to what problem motivates Hume's 'Appendix' doubts, none of which have achieved general acceptance.³ I present a new solution to this interpretive puzzle. I argue that an instance of what I call the *content tension*—a tension generated by Hume's conceptual scepticism and his theory of 'fictions' of the imagination—is the defect identified by Hume in the 'Appendix'.

Section I gives an overview of Hume's account of the self and introduces his 'Appendix' doubts. Section II introduces Humean fictions and the content tension. Section III argues that an instance of the content tension explains his 'Appendix' doubts.

I. THE IDENTITY AND SIMPLICITY OF THE SELF

PI answers a metaphysical question and a psychological question. The *metaphysical question*: What is the self or mind? The *psychological question*: Why do we attribute simplicity and identity to the self?⁴ The section is usefully divided into three parts. In part 1 (paragraphs 1–4), Hume argues against the view that we are introspectively aware of a self that exhibits 'perfect identity and simplicity' (T 1.4.6.1; 251). For Hume, an object exhibits identity if and only if it is uninterrupted and (qualitatively) invariable (T 1.4.2.30; 201). We have no idea of an identical self, because there is no uninterrupted, invariable impression from which that idea could be derived (T 1.4.6.2; 251). We do not attribute simplicity and identity to the self in virtue of our being acquainted with a self that exhibits these properties. Moreover, the self is not in fact something that exhibits simplicity and identity but rather is 'a bundle or collection or different perceptions' (T 1.4.6.4; 252).⁵ In part 2 (paragraphs 5–14), Hume considers the causes of our ascribing identity to items, such as material objects, plants, and animals, the existence of which is neither invariable nor uninterrupted. Identity is misapplied to variable or interrupted objects when relations between their temporal parts give rise to an association of ideas, such that the 'act of the mind' by which they are considered resembles the act by which an invariable, uninterrupted object is considered (T 1.4.6.7; 255).

page numbers from the Selby-Bigge-Nidditch edition. References to Hume's correspondence begin with 'Letters' followed by the volume and page numbers of Hume (1932). References to Locke's *Essay* begin with 'E' followed by the book, chapter, and section in Locke (1975).

³ I am aware of only one instance of one commentator's endorsing another's solution: Penelhum (2000) gives a qualified endorsement of Ainslie's (2001) solution.

⁴ I borrow this framing from Garrett (2011).

⁵ See also T 1.4.2.39; 207. Hume sometimes qualifies his answer to metaphysical question, claiming that 'the soul, *as far as we can conceive it*, is nothing but a system or train of different perceptions' (emphasis added). See T Abs 28; 657. Strawson (2011) and Thiel (2011) offer interpretations that emphasize this qualification.

In part 3 (paragraphs 15–23), Hume turns to personal identity. The perceptions that constitute the self are distinct existences, but we nonetheless ‘suppose the whole train of perceptions to be united by identity’ (T 1.4.6.16; 259). Identity is ascribed to the self by virtue of two relations that are observed to obtain among the perceptions that constitute it. First, many of our perceptions *resemble* one another. Secondly, the perceptions that constitute the self are observed to stand in causal relations with one another. Causation and resemblance are natural relations that ‘give ideas an union in the imagination’ (T 1.4.6.16; 260). In observing the self, there is a ‘smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected ideas’, which act of mind resembles the act by which an invariable and uninterrupted object is considered (T 1.4.6.16; 260). Thus, the mind is apt to misapply identity to the self. Hume also provides a brief account of the ascription of simplicity to the self. The perceptions that constitute the self are ‘bound together’ by the relations of causation and resemblance, such that the act by which the self is considered resembles that by which a simple object is considered. Thus, the mind is apt to misapply simplicity to the self (T 1.4.6.22; 263).

In the ‘Appendix’, Hume says that he has ‘not yet been so fortunate as to discover any very considerable mistakes in the reasonings deliver’d in the preceding volumes, except on one article’ (T App 1; 623). Upon reviewing PI, Hume finds himself ‘in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent’ (T App 10; 633). After recounting his reasons for denying that the self is a substance that exhibits identity and simplicity, he begins to articulate the problem:

So far I seem to be attended with sufficient evidence. But having thus loosen’d all our particular perceptions, when* I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective, and that nothing but the seeming evidence of the precedent reasonings cou’d have induc’d me to receive it. (T App 20; 635)⁶

His account in PI held that ‘the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose the mind’ and that ‘personal identity *arises* from consciousness’ (T App 20; 635). For these reasons, the account has a ‘promising aspect’ (T App 20; 635). But, he continues, ‘all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness’ (T App 20; 635–6). ‘In short’, he says,

there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.* Did our perceptions either

⁶ The ‘*’ marks a footnote to page 260 in the Selby-Bigge-Nidditch edition of the *Treatise*. I discuss this footnote below.

inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in the case. (T App 21; 636)

Hume's problem is not evident. The two principles are consistent with each other. This suggests that there are additional principles to which he is committed that are jointly inconsistent with them.

An account of Hume's 'Appendix' doubts should satisfy six conditions.⁷ First, the *inconsistency condition*: an account should specify the additional claims with which the two principles mentioned in paragraph 21 of the 'Appendix' are jointly inconsistent. Secondly, some existing accounts of Hume's 'Appendix' doubts satisfy the inconsistency condition by constructing long, complex sets of principles to which Hume is putatively committed. But because Hume presents the two principles mentioned in paragraph 21 as if they adequately captured the inconsistency with which he is concerned, it is implausible that he understood his problem to be as elaborate as these accounts suggest. According to the *economy condition*, an account should hold that the inconsistency to which Hume alludes in paragraph 21 involves only a relatively small number of principles.

Thirdly, Hume says that the problem arises from his inability to explain 'the principle of connexion, which binds [perceptions] together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity' (T App 20; 635). According to the *origin condition*, an account should explain how this is the source of the problem. Fourthly, Hume says that the problem would be resolved if perceptions inhered something 'simple and individual' or the mind perceived a real connection between perceptions. According to the *solution condition*, an account should explain why these would solve Hume's problem.

Fifthly, Hume's discussion of the self in the 'Appendix' is framed as presenting opposing arguments: 'I shall propose the arguments on both sides, beginning with those that induc'd me to deny the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking being' (T App 10; 633). While Hume does offer arguments against the identity and simplicity of the self, it is unclear what the argument that opposes these is supposed to be. According to the *opposing arguments condition*, an account should explain in what way Hume presents opposing arguments in 'Appendix'.⁸ Finally, in the first paragraph of the 'Appendix', Hume says that he has not found 'any very considerable mistakes' in the *Treatise* but for the problem concerning personal identity and simplicity (T App 1; 263). According to the *singularity condition*, an account should explain why Hume identifies his problem in the 'Appendix' as the single considerable mistake of the *Treatise*.

⁷ I draw many of these conditions from Garrett (2011: 23) and Ainslie (2015: 249–50).

⁸ See Cottrell (2015: 537–42).

II. FICTIONS AND THE CONTENT TENSION

An account of Hume's doubts in the 'Appendix' may hold that Hume's problem primarily concerns his answer to the metaphysical question, the psychological question, or neither.⁹ I defend an account of the second kind, according to which Hume's account of the fictitious ascription of identity and simplicity to the self explains his doubts. In this section, I argue that Hume's conceptual scepticism and his account of fictions of the imagination generate what I call the *content tension*. In the next section, I argue that an instance of this tension provides a compelling explanation for Hume's having found his answer to the psychological question unsatisfactory.

I begin with an overview of Humean fictions. Hume's uses of 'fiction' in the *Treatise* can be organized into two clusters. The first cluster contains uses of 'fiction' that occur in the course of Hume's development of his theory of belief. Fictions in this cluster characteristically have three features. First, they are often contrasted with beliefs and, accordingly, are described as having a low degree of vivacity, which Hume holds is 'the very essence' of belief (T 1.4.2.24; 199, 1.3.5.5; 85, 1.3.7.7; 629, 1.3.10.3; 119). Secondly, Hume distinguishes a wide and narrow sense of 'the imagination' (T 1.3.9.19n; 118). On the wide sense, the imagination is contrasted with memory and refers to all operations of the mind 'by which we form our fainter ideas', including demonstrative and probable reasoning. On the narrow sense, 'the imagination' refers to the same operations excluding acts of reasoning. Fictions in the first cluster, unlike beliefs, are implied to be products of the imagination in the latter sense (T 1.3.9.19n; 118). Thirdly, such fictions are often (but not exclusively) discussed as the inventions of poets (T 1.3.10.5; 121, 1.3.10.6; 121, 1.3.10.10; 631). By contrast, uses of 'fiction' in the second cluster are such as those that occur frequently in T 1.4, 'Of the sceptical and other systems of philosophy'. For example, Hume speaks of the fiction of 'the continu'd existence of body' and the 'fictions of the antient philosophy' (T 1.4.2.42; 209, 1.4.3.1; 219). Like first-cluster fictions, fictions in the second cluster are products of the imagination in the narrow sense. But second-cluster fictions differ from first-cluster fictions in at least two respects. First, Hume rarely claims that second-cluster fictions possess a low degree of vivacity; such fictions are not discussed as contrast-cases with belief. Secondly, second-cluster fictions are not attributed to poets but rather

⁹ Commentators who accept the first kind of interpretation include Cottrell (2015), Fogelin (1985), Garrett (1997), Inukai (2007), Kail (2007), Landy (2018), Loeb (1992), Patten (1976), Pears (2004), Siakel (2018), Strawson (2011), and Stroud (1977). Those who accept the second kind of interpretation include Ainslie (2001), Butler (2015), Ellis (2006), Haugeland (1998), Nathanson (1976), Robison (1974), Roth (2000), Thiel (2011), Waxman (1992), Winkler (2000), Wright (2009), and perhaps Mascarenhas (2001). Those who accept the third kind of interpretation include Kemp Smith (1941), Penelhum (1955), and Swain (2006).

to philosophers or the vulgar. In what follows, I use ‘fiction’ to refer only to such fictions.¹⁰

The commitments to body, substance and an unchanging object’s enduring through time are examples of (second-cluster) fictions. McRae (1980) makes a useful distinction between two kinds of Humean fiction (McRae 1980: 124).¹¹ Some fictions are *misapplication fictions*. Misapplication fictions are constituted by the misapplication of an idea. For example, the fiction of an unchanging object’s enduring through time is a misapplication fiction: it involves the application of the idea of duration to the idea of an object that is ‘perfectly unchangeable’ (T 1.2.3.11; 37). Likewise, when we misapply identity to the variable succession of perceptions that constitutes the self, this is a misapplication fiction: we misapply the idea of identity to a changing succession of perceptions.

The content tension is generated by a second kind of fiction: *invention fictions*. These are not constituted by the misapplication of an idea but rather by one’s feigning or inventing some new item, often with the aim concealing a conflict between two opposing beliefs. A paradigmatic invention fiction is what I will call the *substance fiction*. Hume says that ‘the particular qualities, which form a substance, are commonly referr’d to an unknown *something*, in which they are suppos’d to inhere’ (T 1.1.6.2; 16). In a letter to Lord Kames, he says that the idea of substance is ‘nothing but an imaginary centre of union amongst the different and variable qualities that are to be found in every piece of matter’ (*Letters I*: 95). The mind commonly makes an addition to the idea of a collection of sensible qualities: it feigns that those qualities inhere in an ‘unintelligible’ or ‘unknown’ something (T 1.4.3.4; 220). Hume calls that which the mind feigns *substance*.¹²

In his *Synopsis of Metaphysics*, Francis Hutcheson says that ‘we call the thing that, despite its change of properties, remains itself, a substance’ (Hutcheson 2006: 131). Hume provides an account of the psychological origins of the notion of substance described by Hutcheson. In stage 1, the mind observes a ‘changeable succession of connected qualities’—the sensible qualities of an object—and ascribes identity to the succession (T 1.4.3.3; 220). This misapplication fiction occurs because the idea of a gradually changing succession of related qualities is apt to be mistaken for the idea of an identical object. In stage 2, the mind notices that the succession has changed, and that these variations ‘seem entirely to destroy the identity’ ascribed to the succession (T 1.4.3.4; 220). In stage 3, the mind recognizes that there is ‘a kind of contrariety’

¹⁰ Cottrell (2016: 48) seems to make an extensionally equivalent distinction. It is controversial whether Hume uses ‘fiction’ univocally across the two clusters. See Traiger (1987: 383–5).

¹¹ See also Costelloe (2018: 56) and Cottrell (2016: 61).

¹² As an anonymous referee notes, Hume recognizes two notions of substance: material substance and internal substance. See T 1.4.3.4; 220 and 1.4.6.6; 254. Unless otherwise noted, I use ‘substance’ to refer to material substance.

between the results of stage 1 and stage 2: the former results in a commitment to the identity of the succession of qualities; the latter denies this identity (T 1.4.3.4; 220). In stage 4, the mind seeks to resolve this contradiction by feigning substance: 'something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations' (T 1.4.3.4; 220). Call this the *identity account of substance*.

Hume also provides the *simplicity account of substance*. In stage 1, the mind considers an object 'whose *co-existent* parts are connected together by a strong relation' (T 1.4.3.5; 221). Because the qualities of the object are closely related, the idea of the object affects the mind similarly to the idea of an object that is 'perfectly simple' (T 1.4.3.5; 221). Thus, the imagination engages in a misapplication fiction: it mistakenly ascribes simplicity to the object. In stage 2, the mind views the object 'in another light' and recognizes that its qualities are 'different, and distinguishable, and separable' and, hence, that the object is not simple but complex (T 1.4.3.5; 221). In stage 3, the commitments produced at stage 1 and stage 2 are recognized as contradictory. In stage 4, to reconcile this contradiction, the imagination feigns a substance to 'give the compound object a title to be call'd one thing, notwithstanding its diversity and composition' (T 1.4.3.5; 221).

Hume's countenancing the substance fiction generates an instance of the content tension in conjunction with two further commitments. First, Hume accepts a radically simple account of the operations of the understanding. A view 'universally receiv'd by all logicians' is that the operations of the understanding are three: conception, judgement, and reasoning (T 1.3.7.5n; 96).¹³ Hume holds that this is a 'very remarkable error':

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 [conception], and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects. (T 1.3.7.5n; 97)

While Hume breaks from the logical tradition in rejecting a distinction between conception, judgement, and reasoning, he retains the traditional account of conception. Just as the authors of the *Port Royal Logic* define 'conception' as the 'simple view we have of things that present themselves to the mind', so too Hume defines it as 'the simple survey of one or more ideas' (Arnauld and Nicole 1996: 23, T 1.3.7.5n; 96). That all operations of the understanding reduce to conception implies that any thought of x requires a conception of x . Secondly, Hume accepts conceptual scepticism about substance insofar as he argues that we have no idea of substance (T 1.1.6.1; 16, T Abs 7; 649).

¹³ Henry Aldrich's *Artis Logicae Compendium* gives these as the three operations of the mind. See Aldrich (1696: 1). See also Watts (1809: ix–x).

In allowing that we may feign a substance of which we have no idea, Hume seems committed to an inconsistent triad:

- (A) We have thoughts of substance.
- (B) If we have thoughts of substance, then we have some conception of substance.
- (C) We have no conception of substance.

The content tension is the difficulty of identifying the cognitive basis of thought about incomprehensible items. Hume's apparent commitment to this inconsistent triad is one instance of the tension. In brief: Hume often denies that we have an idea of some x that we nonetheless *feign*. But because this implies that we have no conception of x , it seems to preclude Hume's explaining how the understanding can achieve thoughts about x .¹⁴

Several commentators have argued that Hume has a solution to the tension. I consider three prominent solutions and argue that none is adequate. The *empty fiction solution* denies that Hume accepts (A). The empty fiction solution holds that the substance fiction is contentless and thoughts about substance are empty.¹⁵ In allowing that one can feign substance, Hume does not thereby accept that one can have thoughts *about* substance but rather that one can have empty thoughts that one mistakenly takes to be thoughts about substance. The empty fiction solution is inadequate for at least two reasons. First, the solution fails to generalize. The content tension arises with respect to several items of which we have no idea. When generalized, the solution holds that all thoughts about such items are contentless. However, Hume provides *different* accounts of how we come to have thoughts of these items. Assuming that thoughts are to be individuated by their content, the solution in view renders Hume's procedure confused: he provides different explanations of the very same (contentless) thought.¹⁶ Secondly, Hume's accounts of the substance fiction presuppose that there are thoughts about substance to be explained. If Hume takes these thoughts to require explanation, then they must have *some* content, even if that content fails to represent substance. Hume's accounts of the substance fiction seem to presuppose that the substance fiction is contentful.

The *linguistic solution* also rejects (A) but denies that is the explanandum of Hume's accounts of the substance fiction.¹⁷ The linguistic solution holds that the substance fiction is constituted by dispositions to linguistic behaviour. The substance fiction is not constituted by one's thinking that substance underlies the sensible qualities of an object but rather by one's being disposed to use 'substance' and associated terms in the appropriate way. The linguistic solution

¹⁴ Commentators who have noted the tension include Fogelin (1985: 12), Loeb (2001: 145), Stroud (1977: 235), and Williams (2008: 85).

¹⁵ See Fogelin (2009: 89–90).

¹⁶ See Loeb (2001: 148) and Strawson (2011: 51) for this criticism.

¹⁷ See Craig (1987: 126), Williams (1985: 281), and Winkler (2009: 499).

is also inadequate. A passage from PI shows that Hume could not have accepted the linguistic analysis:

Thus the controversy concerning identity is not merely a dispute of words. For when we attribute identity, in an improper sense, to variable or interrupted objects, 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, or at least with a propensity to such fictions. (T 1.4.6.7; 255)

Hume says that identity ascriptions and disputes over those ascriptions are not merely verbal because they have a cognitive basis: a fiction of the imagination (or a propensity to such a fiction). The linguistic solution is inconsistent with this passage. Were the substance fiction constituted by linguistic dispositions, the substance fiction would itself be verbal. That we participate in that fiction would not render questions concerning identity non-verbal. The substance fiction cannot be accounted for in terms of linguistic dispositions.

The *non-ideational* solution to the tension rejects (B): that thought about substance requires a conception of substance. This solution's central claim is that Hume does not regard his theory of ideas as providing an exhaustive account of the content of thought. According to this solution, Hume takes the existence of mental contents non-identical with impressions and impression-derived ideas to be consistent with his considered theory of the mind. Thus, we can form thoughts without conception because we can have thoughts the content of which is non-ideational. Strawson (2011) argues that 'Hume's theory of ideas was never put forward as a completely general theory of meaning or content' (p. 6). For Strawson, the theory of ideas is not a theory of all mental content but rather is a theory of content that is 'empirically warranted' and appropriate for use in philosophy (2011: 6–8). We need not have an idea or conception of substance in order to have thoughts about it.¹⁸ According to Costelloe (2018), some fictions have content—'suppositional content'—that is non-ideational and does not derive from sensory impressions. Such fictions are 'unintelligible according to the theory of ideas' but nonetheless 'they have intentional content: they are about something' (p. 34). Wilbanks (1968) identifies in the *Treatise* a 'special usage' of 'imagination'. This usage includes acts of supposing or feigning where 'no idea (in Hume's sense of the term) of the entity supposed or imagined to exist is possible' (p. 80). The supposition of substance is

¹⁸ That Hume's theory of ideas is not intended as a general theory of mental content is a common position among those who accept the 'New Hume' interpretation, according to which Hume is committed to the existence of mind-independent necessary connections over and above constant conjunctions. See Craig (1987: 126). Proponents of the New Hume include Craig (1987), Kail (2007), Strawson (2014), and Wright (1983).

non-ideational insofar as ‘there is no accompanying or corresponding image present to the mind’ (p. 82).¹⁹

Call the theory of ideas *comprehensive* just in case there is no mental content that is not within the scope of that theory. Hume’s theory of ideas is comprehensive just in case there is no mental content that is not an impression or an impression-derived idea. The non-ideational solution denies that Hume takes his theory of ideas to be comprehensive in this sense. This should be rejected for at least four reasons. First, Hume’s initial presentation of his theory of ideas implies that he intends it to be comprehensive. Hume claims that ‘[a]ll the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS’ (T 1.1.1.1; 1). Moreover, he indicates that his ‘perception’ is equivalent to Locke’s ‘idea’ (T 1.1.1.1n; 2). A Lockean idea is defined as ‘whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks’ (E 1.1.8). Thus, that every perception is an impression or idea amounts to the claim that all contents apprehended by the mind are impressions and ideas. Secondly, the *Treatise* aims to provide a ‘science of MAN’ one part of which is an account of the human understanding (T Intro 4: xv–xvi). A complete account of the understanding has a genetic component: a causal explanation of how the contents apprehended by the mind originate. Hume does not provide a genetic account of mental contents that fall outside the scope of his theory of ideas. An interpretation according to which Hume does not take his theory of ideas to be comprehensive must understand him to have knowingly provided an incomplete genetic account of mental content.

Thirdly, we have seen that Hume rejects the traditional division of the operations of the understanding into conception, judgement, and reasoning (T 1.3.7.5n; 97). The non-ideational solution implies that Hume’s opposition to the logicians is disingenuous. Because conception is the ‘simple survey of one or more ideas’, Hume’s allowing for non-ideational content would imply that there are operations of the understanding not reducible to conception (T 1.3.7.5n; 97). Fourthly, the non-ideational solution renders problematic Hume’s uses of his copy principle. Hume uses the copy principle to argue against philosophers’ claim that they possess ‘spiritual and refin’d perceptions’ that are ‘comprehended by a pure and intellectual view’ (T 1.3.1.7; 72). If Hume holds that there exist mental contents neither identical with nor derived from impressions, then he cannot take his copy principle—along with the observation that we have no ‘spiritual and refined’ impressions—to imply there are no purely intellectual ideas. Such intellectual ideas could be precisely the contents not covered by his theory of ideas and copy principle. The non-ideational solution implies that Hume makes a mistake in his

¹⁹ Loeb (2001) proposes that Hume accounts for the content of the substance fiction in terms of ‘quasi-content’. Loeb’s proposal differs from other non-ideational solutions insofar as it maintains that beliefs with quasi-contents are strictly meaningless. See Loeb (2001: 151).

rejection of intellectual ideas. For these reasons, the non-ideational solution is untenable.²⁰

III. EXPLAINING THE 'APPENDIX' DOUBTS

Three prominent solutions to the content tension that have been attributed to Hume are inadequate. This does not imply that no solution can be constructed from Humean materials. But this section argues that Hume himself despaired of providing a solution to at least one instance of the tension. My evidence for this is a novel interpretation of his 'Appendix' doubts concerning PI's discussion of personal identity and simplicity.

Hume says that 'the true idea of the human mind' is the idea of a bundle of causally related perceptions (T 1.4.6.19; 261). The bundle is synchronically composite insofar as, at a time, it is composed of numerous perceptions and diachronically composite insofar as it, as a changing succession of perceptions, has temporal parts. Call this the *idea of self*₁. Three points about this idea. First, the idea of self₁ is in no way content deficient: Hume holds that we have unproblematic introspective access to the self, by forming secondary ideas of the succession of perceptions that compose it. Secondly, while we often misapply simplicity and identity to the idea of self₁, Hume gives no indication that the idea of self₁ per se is a fictitious idea. The idea of self₁ is constituted neither by a misapplication fiction nor by an invention fiction. Thirdly, Hume calls the idea of self₁ the 'true' idea of the self. Because truth with respect to matters of fact consists in 'the conformity of our ideas of objects to their real existence', Hume holds that the idea of self₁ is a veridical representation of the self (T 2.3.10.2; 448). In these respects, the idea of self₁ is an unproblematic representation, one which is apt for entering into Hume's explanations of other mental states.

Generally, commentators have taken the idea of self₁ to be the idea relevant to understanding the 'Appendix' doubts. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the idea of self₁ is the *only* idea of the self. For example, in the 'Abstract', Hume says: 'our idea of any mind is only that of particular perceptions' (T Abs 28; 658). But Hume is committed to countenancing an additional idea of the self, one which includes something of which, he has claimed, we have no conception. I will argue that this commitment explains Hume's 'Appendix'

²⁰ A related proposal holds that Hume appeals to a *relative idea* of substance to resolve the content tension, understood as the cognitive analogue of the definite description 'the item which supports a collection sensible qualities'. This proposal faces three objections. First, there is no textual evidence for Hume's appealing to relative ideas in this context. Secondly, Hume says that we have *no* idea of substance. See T 1.1.6.1; 16, 1.4.5.4; 233, App 19; 635. Thirdly, to form that relative idea, we require the idea of relation of *support*, which idea Hume denies that we have. See T 1.4.5.6; 234.

problem. We have seen that, because the perceptions that constitute the self stand in relations of causation and resemblance, we are apt to misapply identity to the idea of self₁. While we may ‘incessantly correct ourselves by reflection’, we cannot ‘remove this bias from the imagination’ (T 1.4.6.6; 254). Committed both to the identity and non-identity of the self, we feign a ‘soul’ or ‘self’ to ‘justify ourselves this absurdity’ (T 1.4.6.6; 254). As Hume acknowledges, this account—the *identity account of the self*—is analogous to the identity account of substance. Hume also presents the *simplicity account of the self* in PI, analogous to the simplicity account of substance. The perceptions represented in the idea of self₁ are ‘bound together by a close relation’, such that the idea of self₁ affects the mind in the same way as a ‘perfectly simple and indivisible’ object (T 1.4.6.22; 263). Because of this similarity, we attribute simplicity to the bundle of perceptions and ‘feign a principle of union as the support of this simplicity’ (T 1.4.6.22; 263).

Hume’s identity and simplicity accounts of the self entail that there is an idea of the self distinct from the idea of self₁. Whereas the content of idea of self₁ includes only related perceptions, the content of *idea of self₂* also includes an invention fiction: a ‘soul’, ‘self’, or ‘principle of union’. Call this the *principle of union fiction*. The principle of union fiction differs from the substance fiction: whereas the latter is supposed to unite the qualities of an external object, the principle of union fiction is supposed to unite the perceptions that compose the self. Moreover, in the simplicity account of the self, the principle of union fiction is described in functional terms: it is *whatever* we feign to ‘support’ the simplicity of the self (T 1.4.6.22; 263). The principle of union fiction is best understood as a species of fiction, which species includes any fiction the function of which is to ‘justify’ the ascription of identity and simplicity to the self (T 1.4.6.6; 254).²¹ Thus, one instance of the principle of union fiction is one’s feigning an *internal* substance (T 1.4.6.6; 254). Another may be one’s feigning ‘something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts’ of the self (T 1.4.6.6; 254). For sake of simplicity, I will continue to speak of the ‘principle of union fiction’ and use ‘principle of union’ to refer to that which is feigned.

There are four further points concerning the principle of union fiction and the idea of self₂. First, Hume calls the principle of union fiction ‘a new and unintelligible principle’ and implies that it is unintelligible in the same way that the substance fiction is unintelligible. Moreover, he answers the question ‘Is *self* the same with *substance*?’ with the claim that he has ‘a notion of neither, when conceiv’d distinct from particular perceptions’ (T App 18; 635). The principle of union fiction and the idea that includes the fiction are content

²¹ This is suggested by paragraph 21 of PI, where Hume says: ‘All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to *some* fiction or imaginary principle of union, as we have already observ’d’ (emphasis added). See T 1.4.6.21; 262.

deficient insofar as we have no idea of that which is feigned. Secondly, the idea of self₂ differs from the idea of self₁: it represents the self as including a principle of union among the perceptions that compose the self. Thus, because the idea of self₁ is a veridical representation, the idea of self₂ is a non-veridical representation of the self.

Thirdly, a *real connection*, in Hume's technical sense, obtains between two items when they are mutually inseparable (Garrett 1997: 254n, Loeb 1992: 221). When engaging in the principle of union fiction, one feigns that there exists a real connection between one's perceptions: something which 'really binds our several perceptions together' (T 1.4.6.16; 259). Fourth, while the initial cause of our ascribing identity and simplicity to the self is our mistaking a succession of related perceptions for an object that is identical and simple, the principle of union fiction is also a cause of those ascriptions. The principle of union fiction 'justifies' our ascriptions of identity to the self and 'supports' its simplicity (T 1.4.6.6; 254, 1.4.6.22; 263). The principle of union fiction causes us to *sustain* our ascriptions of identity and simplicity to the self.

The idea of self₂, unlike the idea of self₁, is a defective representation to which we nonetheless have a strong psychological propensity. My proposal is that Hume's 'Appendix' doubts stem from his countenancing the idea of self₂. Paragraph 20 of the 'Appendix' gives two statements of Hume's problem. In sentence 2, he says:

when I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds [perceptions] together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective, and that nothing but the seeming evidence of the precedent reasonings cou'd have induc'd me to receive it. (T App 20; 635)

Similarly, he says in sentence 10: 'But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness' (T App 20; 635–6). Hume's problem is that he cannot explain a 'principle of connexion' or 'uniting principle'. The principle is described as having two functions: (i) it 'binds' or 'unites' our perceptions; (ii) it causes us to ascribe simplicity and identity to perceptions that compose the self. The central question about these passages is: to what does 'principle of connexion' refer? Commentators have provided many different answers to this question. Neither 'principle of connexion' nor its plural form occurs in PI. PI does use 'uniting principle' to refer to the relations of resemblance, causation, and contiguity, suggesting that at least one of these relations is the referent of 'principle of connexion' (T 1.4.6.16; 260).²² But there is another way in which

²² See Ellis (2006: 204), Thiel (2011: 399–400), and Winkler (2000: 18–19) for this reading. Ainslie (2015: 255) holds that the principles are 'the principles of the association of secondary

these sentences can be understood. With respect to the simplicity account of the self, Hume says that the mind feigns a *principle of union* as the ‘center of all the different parts’ of the self (T 1.4.6.22; 263).²³ With respect to the identity account of the self, he says: ‘All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or *imaginary principle of union*, as we have already observ’d’ (T 1.4.6.21; 262, emphasis added). Moreover, he holds that the principle of union fiction is a fiction that ‘connects [. . .] objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation’ and is responsible for ‘connecting the parts [of an object] beside their relation’ (T 1.4.6.6; 254–5, emphasis added). My proposal is that ‘principle of connexion’ in paragraph 20 of the ‘Appendix’ refers not to causation or resemblance but rather to the principle of union feigned as a result of the processes described by the identity and simplicity accounts of the self.

This proposal implies that Hume’s problem in the ‘Appendix’ concerns his account of the principle of union fiction and not the role that relations of causation or resemblance play in his answers to the psychological and metaphysical questions. He cannot ‘explain the principle of union’ insofar as he lacks an adequate explanation of the principle of union fiction included in the idea of self₂.²⁴ This proposal is textually sound only if the principle of union fiction is correctly described as performing functions (i) and (ii) identified in paragraph 20. With respect to (i), the feigned principle of union ‘binds’ and ‘unites’ the perceptions that compose the self because it is a real connection supposed to unify them synchronically and diachronically. With respect to (ii), when we succumb to the psychological propensities described in the identity and simplicity accounts of the self, we are committed to the ‘real simplicity and identity’ of the self by virtue of our feigning that the perceptions that compose the self are united by a principle of union (T App 20; 635).

There is a possible objection to this reading of sentences 2 and 10 of paragraph 20. As we have seen, sentence 2 says: ‘. . . when* I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds [perceptions] together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective’ (T App 20; 635). My ‘*’ marks a footnote, in which Hume

ideas’. Garrett (2011: 28) suggests that ‘principle’ refers either to causation or to the psychological principles responsible for our identity ascriptions. Loeb (1992: 231) holds that ‘principles’ refers to ‘the metaphysical principles in virtue of which successive perceptions in our thought are united’. See also Inukai (2007: 269). Baxter (2008: 72) holds that the principle is ‘identity itself’.

²³ Hume also uses ‘principle of union’ to refer to material substance. See T 1.1.6.2; 16.

²⁴ As an anonymous referee notes, the *Treatise* ascribes several important cognitive roles to the idea of the self. For example, that idea is essential to Hume’s explanation of the indirect passions and sympathy. I do not have space here to address the important question of to what idea of the self these explanations appeal. As noted above, these explanations could unproblematically appeal to the idea of self₁. If they appeal to the idea of self₂, then Hume’s failure to explain the principle of union fiction is highly significant: it threatens to undermine core components of his theory of the passions and moral judgement.

refers us to page 452 of the 1739 edition of Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*.²⁵ On that page, Hume claims that our ascribing identity to the self is the result of natural relations—resemblance and causation—that obtain between our perceptions. Against my proposed reading of sentence 2, one might conclude from this footnote that the ‘principle’ referred to in that sentence must be a natural relation that causes us to ascribe identity to the self, such as causation or resemblance. Hume’s footnote is less informative than this objection requires. Notice that Hume says ‘when I *proceed* to explain the principle of connection’. In this context, ‘proceed’ is plausibly understood to mean ‘begin’.²⁶ Hume’s footnote merely refers us to the point at which he *begins* his positive account of the means by which we attribute identity and simplicity to the self, which discussion continues through the penultimate paragraph of PI and, therefore, includes discussion of the principle of union fiction. Thus, the proposed reading of sentences 2 and 10 of paragraph 20 is consistent with Hume’s footnote.

In paragraph 21 of the ‘Appendix’, Hume says that his problem arises from an inconsistency involving two principles: ‘all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences’, and ‘the mind never perceives any real connexion between distinct existences’ (T App 21; 636, emphasis removed). Because the principles are consistent, the inconsistency must arise from the conjunction of them and others to which Hume is committed. I propose that the inconsistency is this:

- (1) Our perceptions are distinct existences.
- (2) The mind never perceives a real connection between distinct existences.
- (3) The mind feigns a real connection between our perceptions.
- (4) If the mind feigns a real connection between our perceptions, then the mind has a perception—an idea—of a real connection between our perceptions.

(1) and (2) entail that the mind has no perception of a real connection between our perceptions. (3) and (4) entail that the mind has a perception of a real connection between our perceptions. (1)–(4) are jointly inconsistent. Hume is committed to (3) because, in PI, he holds that the mind includes in the idea of self₂ the principle of union fiction, which principle is supposed to be a real connection between perceptions that provides them with diachronic and synchronic unity. He is committed to (4) by virtue of his commitment to the claim that all operations of the understanding reduce to conception: the ‘simple survey of one or more ideas’ (T 1.3.7.5n; 96).²⁷ According to this account, Hume’s problem is *not* that he is himself committed to the existence of a principle of union, which commitment cannot be explained by the *Treatise*’s

²⁵ See T 1.4.6.16–18; 260.

²⁶ For instances of Hume’s using ‘proceed’ in this way, see T 1.3.2.13; 78 and T 1.3.8.1; 98.

²⁷ That Hume is committed to (4) is denied by the non-ideational solution considered above.

logic of the understanding.²⁸ Rather, his problem is that his logic precludes his explaining a *confused* but *ubiquitous* psychological phenomenon, one which plays a role in both vulgar and philosophical cognition: the countenancing of a part of the self that is distinct from and unifies the ‘perpetual flux’ of perceptions (T 1.4.6.4; 252). Hume cannot ‘explain the principle of connection’ commonly feigned by the imagination because his countenancing the principle of union fiction is inconsistent with his sparse account of the operations of the understanding and his denial that the mind has conceptions of real connections (T App 20; 635). His problem in the ‘Appendix’ is an instance of the content tension.²⁹

This account satisfies the above conditions on an account of Hume’s ‘Appendix’ doubts. First, according to the inconsistency condition, an account should specify the claims with which the two principles mentioned in paragraph 21 are inconsistent. My account holds that (3) and (4) are those claims and so satisfies this condition. Secondly, according to the economy condition, an account should hold that Hume’s inconsistency involves only a relatively small number of principles. Because my account appeals to only two principles, (3) and (4), which are unstated in the ‘Appendix’, my account satisfies this condition. Thirdly, according to the origin condition, an account should explain why Hume says, in sentences 2 and 10 of paragraph 20, that his problem arises from his inability to explain ‘the principle of connexion, which binds [perceptions] together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity’ (T App 20; 635). I have argued that ‘principle of connexion’ refers to a feigned principle of union. Hume’s problem arises because he is unable to reconcile his countenancing that fiction—a cause of our ascriptions of identity and simplicity to the self—with his conception-based account of the understanding and his claim that the mind never has a perception of a real connection between distinct existences.

Fourthly, according to the solution condition, an account should explain why Hume says that the problem would be resolved if (i) perceptions inhaled in something ‘simple and individual’ or (ii) ‘the mind perceive[d] some real connexion among them’ (T App 21; 636). (ii) is epistemological insofar as it is about the mind’s perceiving some item.³⁰ By contrast, (i) is metaphysical. But the first phase of Hume’s discussion of the self in the ‘Appendix’ shows that (i) has an epistemological corollary. There, Hume reviews the arguments that lead him ‘to deny the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking

²⁸ Strawson (2011: 105–6) seems to endorse an account like this. See also Landy (2018: 254).

²⁹ Ellis (2006: 217–24) holds that the idea of self *simpliciter* is a fictitious idea, and that this fictitious idea is the source of Hume’s doubts. Moreover, he takes Hume’s problem to concern *why* the mind invents the idea of a self. This account is vulnerable to an objection raised by Garrett (2011: 25): Hume never says that the ‘true’ idea of the mind is fictitious.

³⁰ I take (ii) to have a metaphysical corollary: that there *is* a real connection between perceptions.

being' (T App 10; 633). The subsequent discussion is intended, at least in part, to explain Hume's denying the metaphysical claim that perceptions inhere in a simple, identical substance. Crucially, however, some of the arguments presented are *prima facie* epistemological. In paragraphs 11, 15, 16, 18, and 19, Hume provides arguments against our having an idea of a substance in which perceptions inhere. Because these arguments are *both* initially presented as reasons for denying that our perceptions inhere in a simple substance *and* are arguments that we have no perception of such a substance, Hume's discussion presupposes that (i) has an epistemological corollary: we would have a perception of any substance in which our perceptions inhere.

Here is how my account satisfies the solution condition. Hume's problem arises because there is a mental state—feigning a principle of union—the content of which Hume cannot account for. If either (i) or (ii) were true, then the mind would not *feign* a principle of union. Instead, it would be committed to the existence of a principle of union either by virtue of its perceiving that perceptions inhere in a simple substance or its perceiving some other real connection between perceptions, which commitment would be in no way content deficient. If (i) or (ii) were true, there would be no problematic mental state for Hume to explain, and the idea of self₂ would not suffer from content deficiency.

Fifthly, according to the opposing arguments condition, an account should explain how Hume's discussion of the self in the 'Appendix' presents 'arguments on both sides' concerning his 'former opinions' (T App 10; 633). Cottrell (2015) argues that the opposing arguments condition can be met only by interpretations according to which his doubts arise from a problem concerning his answer to the metaphysical question (537–42). Hume begins his discussion of the self in the 'Appendix' with arguments against 'the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self', which arguments concern Hume's answer to the metaphysical question (T App 10; 633). If paragraphs 20 and 21 of the 'Appendix' present an argument that opposes these, then that argument must also concern Hume's answer to the metaphysical question. Against this, my account can satisfy the opposing arguments condition. The conjunction of PI's answers to the metaphysical and psychological questions constitutes Hume's 'former opinions' with respect to the self. The 'Appendix' presents 'arguments on both sides' insofar as it presents arguments *in favour* of one part of his account—his answer to the metaphysical question—and an argument *against* the other part of his account—his answer to the psychological question. Paragraphs 11–19 of the 'Appendix' present arguments in support of Hume's answer to the metaphysical question, which denies that the self is a simple substance. Hume's answer to the psychological question includes his countenancing the principle of union fiction. Paragraphs 20–21 present an argument against this aspect of his answer to the psychological question. The 'Appendix' presents arguments on both sides because it includes arguments that support

one aspect of his account *and* an argument that undermines a different aspect of his account. The opposing arguments condition does not preclude an interpretation according to which Hume's doubts concern his answer to the psychological question.

Sixthly, in the first paragraph of the 'Appendix', Hume says that he has 'not yet been so fortunate as to discover any very considerable mistakes in the reasonings deliver'd in the preceding volumes, except on one article' (T App 1; 263). According to the singularity condition, an account should explain Hume's identifying the 'Appendix' problem as the single considerable mistake of the *Treatise*. Commentators have generally understood the mistake to which Hume refers in the first paragraph of the 'Appendix' to be his accepting claims inconsistent with the two principles mentioned in paragraph 21 of the 'Appendix': 'that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences' (T App 21; 636, emphasis removed). Despite its being widely assumed, no commentator of whom I am aware has offered an argument for this reading. While commentators have perhaps thought that this is the only available reading of the first paragraph of the 'Appendix', I argue that a subtly different reading is also textually sound.

An often-neglected textual datum in the 'Appendix' is that Hume begins his discussion of the self there with an allusion to T 1.4.5, 'Of the immateriality of the soul'. That section begins with Hume's noting that he has found 'contradictions and difficulties' in every account of the external world (T 1.4.5.1; 232). This result might lead us to expect similar difficulties in attempting to provide an account of the 'intellectual world'. 'But', Hume claims,

in this we shou'd deceive ourselves. The intellectual world, tho' involv'd in infinite obscurities, is not perplex'd with any such contradictions, as those we have discover'd in the natural. What is known concerning it, agrees with itself; and what is unknown, we must be contented to leave so. (T 1.4.5.1; 232)

Whereas Hume is pessimistic about philosophical accounts of the external world, he begins T 1.4.5 with an expression of optimism about our providing a coherent and intelligible account of the intellectual world. Hume's optimism is not offhand but rather expresses his ongoing commitment to the intelligibility of human nature, the *Treatise's* primary object of study.

Crucially, Hume begins his discussion of the self in the 'Appendix' by recalling this earlier optimism:

I had entertain'd some hopes, that however deficient our theory of the intellectual world might be, it wou'd be free from those contradictions, and absurdities, which seem to attend every explication, that human reason can give of the material world. (T App 10; 633)

I propose that Hume begins his discussion of the self in this way because he means to the 'very considerable mistake' to which paragraph 1 of the 'Appendix' refers.³¹ Hume's mistake is that he failed previously to notice that there *is* a contradiction concerning the intellectual world, one which is inconsistent with his earlier, unqualified optimism. The contradiction is that which is explained in paragraphs 20–21: the instance of the content tension generated by his countenancing the principle of union fiction. Hume's inability to 'correct' his opinions so as to remove that tension leads him to recant his claim that the intellectual world is free of contradiction. On this reading, Hume's neglecting to mention in the 'Appendix' the other prominent instance of the content tension—the substance fiction—is unsurprising. Whereas the instance of the content tension generated by the principle of union fiction is inconsistent with his earlier optimism about the intellectual world, the instance of the content tension generated by the substance fiction is, by his lights, unremarkable insofar as it is one of the many 'contradictions and difficulties' concerning the external world (T 1.4.5.1; 232).

IV. CONCLUSION

Hume's philosophy is often understood in terms of the apparent tension between his naturalistic ambition of providing a science of man and his epistemological scepticism. I have argued that a tension between Hume's naturalism and his conceptual scepticism explains his 'Appendix' doubts. Hume denies that we have an idea of a real connection between our perceptions. But he acknowledges that we may feign precisely such a connection: a 'principle of union' that unites the perceptions that compose the self. Hume's conception-based theory of cognition renders these commitments inconsistent, leaving him unable to explain a psychological phenomenon that, while confused, occupies a prominent role in ordinary and philosophical thought about the self. Hume's problem in the 'Appendix' has no straightforward solution. To abandon the claim that we have no conception of real connections between distinct existences would be, for example, to undermine much of the *Treatise's* pivotal discussion of causal necessity. And to abandon the claim that all acts of the mind reduce to conception would be to compromise a pillar of Hume's logic of the understanding. In this way, the present interpretation explains why Hume concludes the 'Appendix' discussion of the self by 'plead[ing] the privilege

³¹ That the above passage is the first sentence of the discussion of the self perhaps offers some evidence for this. Hume goes on to note two further, more minor errors. In each case, the first sentence of his discussion identifies the error in question.

of a sceptic' and hoping that others 'may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions' (T App 21; 636).³²

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