

# Hume's Sceptical Texts 3: Scepticism with Regard to the Senses

## (Treatise 1.4.2)

### 3.1 Explaining the vulgar belief in the continued (and distinct) existence of body

- §§1-2 Hume starts by explaining that his aim is to investigate “What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?”, a belief that involves attributing both *continued* and *distinct* existence to the supposed external objects. (He also claims that *continuity* implies *distinctness* and vice-versa.)
- §§3-11 **The senses** – understood as sources of sense-impressions – obviously cannot represent objects as *continuing* in existence when unperceived. Nor can they represent objects as *distinct* from us (indeed, as will be seen later, our impressions are *not* distinct – §10).
- §§12-13 We have sensory impressions of primary qualities (e.g. shape, size, motion, solidity), secondary qualities (e.g. colours, tastes, smells, sounds), and of pains and pleasures. Philosophers take only primary qualities as being objective (i.e. having continued and distinct existence), whereas the vulgar take both primary and secondary qualities to be objective. But “as far as the senses are judges, all perceptions are the same in the manner of their existence”.
- §14 The vulgar “confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu’d existence to the very things they feel or see”. This is an unreasonable belief, so cannot derive from **reason** (or the understanding). If the objects just are the impressions, they cannot be inferred causally from them (and we’ll see in para. 47 that no such inference is possible even if the two are distinguished).  
*With the senses and reason now ruled out, the belief must arise from **the imagination** ...*
- §§15-19 We attribute continued existence to impressions that “have a peculiar *constancy*” (e.g. we turn our head away, turn it back and see an identical view). Also to patterns of impressions that exhibit “*coherence*”, in the sense of consistent patterns of change over time.
- §20 Supposing the continuity of objects helps to explain what we perceive:<sup>1</sup> “Here then I am naturally led to regard the world, as something real and durable, and as preserving its existence, even when it is no longer present to my perception.”
- §§21-2 Our imagination, once set in train – e.g. observing uniformity in our impressions – has a natural tendency to continue “like a galley put in motion by the oars” (§22), and this leads us to attribute more continuity in the impressions than we actually observe.
- §23 *But this alone is too weak to support our belief in external objects* – a deeper account is required, summarised as follows:
- §24 “When we have been accustom’d to observe a constancy in certain impressions, and have found, that the perception of the sun ..., for instance, returns ... after an absence or annihilation with like parts and in a like order, as at its first appearance, we are not apt to regard these interrupted perceptions as different, (which they really are) but on the contrary consider them as individually the same, upon account of their resemblance. But as this interruption of their existence is contrary to their perfect identity, and makes us regard the first impression as annihilated, and the second as newly created, we find ourselves somewhat at a loss, and are involv’d in a kind of contradiction. In order to free ourselves from this difficulty, we disguise, as much as possible, the interruption, or rather remove it entirely, by supposing that these interrupted perceptions are connected by a real existence, of which we are insensible. This supposition, or idea of continu’d existence, acquires a force and vivacity from the memory of these broken impressions,

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is where Hume gets closest to the idea that external objects could be postulated by “inference to the best explanation”. He does not follow this path, partly because he thinks that only inductive (causal) inference can take us to conclusions about the unobserved, and probably partly because his Copy Principle prohibits belief in anything of which we do not have an impression (hence our only way of conceiving of external objects is in terms of impressions).

and from that propensity, which they give us, to suppose them the same; and according to the precedent reasoning, the very essence of belief consists in the force and vivacity of the conception.”

§25 “In order to justify this system, there are four things requisite. *First*, To explain the *principium individuationis*, or principle of identity [§§26-30]. *Secondly*, Give a reason, why the resemblance of our broken and interrupted perceptions induces us to attribute an identity to them [§§31-5]. *Thirdly*, Account for that propensity, which this illusion gives, to unite these broken appearances by a continu’d existence [§§36-40]. *Fourthly* and lastly, Explain that force and vivacity of conception, which arises from the propensity [§§41-42].”

§§26-30 We think of an object as being identical over time by thinking of it as *invariable* and *uninterrupted*.

§31 As noted at §14, the vulgar draw no distinction between objects and sense perceptions. I am here accounting for their view, so I shall – until §46 – “conform myself to their manner of thinking” and “suppose ... that there is only a single existence, which I shall call indifferently *object* or *perception*.”<sup>2</sup>

§§32-5 We attribute identity to *resembling* but *interrupted* impressions owing to two similarities between: (a) the impressions themselves; (b) the ease with which our mind passes from one resembling impression to the next, and the ease with which our mind surveys a single constant object.

§§36 Most people “suppose their perceptions to be their only objects, and never think of a double existence internal and external, representing and represented. ... The smooth passage of the imagination along the ideas of the resembling perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect identity. The interrupted manner of their appearance makes us consider them as so many resembling, but still distinct beings, which appear after certain intervals. The perplexity arising from this contradiction produces a propension to unite these broken appearances by the fiction of a continu’d existence”. Thus *we suppose that our perceptions continue to exist unperceived*.

§37-8 Although this supposition might seem contradictory, it is not:

§39 “What we call a what we call a *mind*, is nothing but a heap ... of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, ...<sup>3</sup> Now as every perception is distinguishable from another, and may be consider’d as separately existent; it evidently follows, that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind; that is, in breaking off all its relations, with that connected mass of perceptions, which constitute a thinking being.”

§40 “External objects are seen, and felt, and become present to the mind; that is, they acquire such a relation to a connected heap of perceptions, ... The same continu’d and uninterrupted Being may, therefore, be sometimes present to the mind, and sometimes absent from it, without any real or essential change in the Being itself. An interrupted appearance to the senses implies not necessarily an interruption in the existence. The supposition of the continu’d existence of sensible objects or perceptions involves no contradiction. ... When the exact resemblance of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them an identity, we may remove the seeming interruption by feigning a continu’d being, which may fill those intervals, and preserve a perfect and entire identity to our perceptions.”

§41 This *fiction* becomes a belief through the force and vivacity that it acquires by association:

§42 “Our memory presents us with a vast number of instances of perceptions perfectly resembling each other, that return at different distances of time, and after considerable interruptions. This resemblance gives us a propension to consider these interrupted perceptions as the same; and also a propension to connect them by a continu’d existence, in order to justify this identity, and avoid the contradiction, in which the interrupted appearance of these perceptions seems necessarily to involve us. Here then we have a propensity to feign the continu’d existence of all sensible objects; and as this propensity arises from some

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<sup>2</sup> Notice that this is a very odd move. The fact that Hume is attempting to explain the vulgar view does not imply that he should use terms in the same way that the vulgar do. We don’t expect a psychologist of vision, for example, to explain a child’s visual illusions in terms that are easily comprehensible to the child.

<sup>3</sup> There is appropriately a footnote reference to *T* 1.4.6, “Of personal identity”, at the end of *T* 1.4.2.37.

lively impressions of the memory, it bestows a vivacity on that fiction; or in other words, makes us believe the continu'd existence of body."

§43 Summing up,

"... 'Tis indeed evident, that as the vulgar *suppose* their perceptions to be their only objects, and at the same time *believe* the continu'd existence of matter, we must account for the origin of the belief upon that supposition [cf. note 2 above]. Now upon that supposition, 'tis a false opinion that any of our objects, or perceptions, are identically the same after an interruption; and consequently the opinion of their identity can never arise from reason, but must arise from the imagination. The imagination is seduc'd into such an opinion only by means of the resemblance of certain perceptions; since we find they are only our resembling perceptions, which we have a propension to suppose the same. 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. In the last place this propension causes belief by means of the present impressions of the memory; since without the remembrance of former sensations, 'tis plain we never shou'd have any belief of the continu'd existence of body. ..."

### 3.2 From the vulgar to the philosophical view

§44 The vulgar first become convinced of the *continued existence* of their perceptions, which leads to the belief in their *distinct existence* also. But reflection quickly reveals the falsehood of the vulgar view, by showing that our perceptions are *dependent* on us and hence have no *distinct* existence – this then shows the error of supposing them to have *continued* existence.

§45 "When we press one eye with a finger, we immediately perceive all the objects to become double, and one half of them to be remov'd from their common and natural position. But as we do not attribute a continu'd existence to both these perceptions, and as they are both of the same nature, we clearly perceive, that all our perceptions are dependent on our organs, and the disposition of our nerves and animal spirits. This opinion is confirm'd by the seeming encrease and diminution of objects, according to their distance; by the apparent alterations in their figure; by the changes in their colour and other qualities from our sickness and distempers; and by an infinite number of other experiments of the same kind; from all which we learn, that our sensible perceptions are not possess'd of any distinct or independent existence."

§46 The natural consequence of this should be to give up the belief in *both distinct and* continuous existence of our perceptions, but philosophers are so wedded to the belief in continuity (by the force of their imagination) that they invent a double-existence theory to maintain it:

"philosophers ... distinguish ... betwixt perceptions and objects, of which the former are suppos'd to be interrupted, and perishing, and different at every different return; the latter to be uninterrupted, and to preserve a continu'd existence and identity. But however philosophical this new system may be esteem'd, I assert that 'tis only a palliative remedy, and that it contains all the difficulties of the vulgar system, with some others, that are peculiar to itself. There are no principles either of the understanding or fancy, which lead us directly to embrace this opinion of the double existence of perceptions and objects, nor can we arrive at it but by passing thro' the common hypothesis of the identity and continuance of our interrupted perceptions. Were we not first perswaded, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue to exist even when they no longer make their appearance to the senses, we shou'd never be led to think, that our perceptions and objects are different, and that our objects alone preserve a continu'd existence. The latter hypothesis has no primary recommendation either to reason or the imagination, but acquires all its influence on the imagination from the former. This proposition contains two parts, which we shall endeavour to prove as distinctly and clearly, as such abstruse subjects will permit."

§47 "that this philosophical hypothesis has no primary recommendation ... to reason" is shown by our inability to draw any causal inference from impressions to objects, because – without any direct awareness of the latter – we are never able to experience a constant conjunction between the two:

“The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, ... immediately present to us by consciousness ... The only conclusion we can draw from the existence of one thing to that of another, is by means of the relation of cause and effect, which shews, that there is a connexion betwixt them, and that the existence of one is dependent on that of the other. The idea of this relation is deriv’d from past experience, by which we find, that two beings are constantly conjoin’d together, and are always present at once to the mind. But as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions; it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects. ’Tis impossible, therefore, that from the existence or any of the qualities of the former, we can ever form any conclusion concerning the existence of the latter, or ever satisfy our reason in this particular.”

This argument is prominent in the corresponding discussion in the *Enquiry*, at E 12.12.

§48 “that this philosophical system has no primary recommendation to the imagination” is hard to prove, but its abstraction compared to the naturalness of the vulgar system makes it plausible.

§§49-51 Since the philosophical system “has no primary recommendation to reason or the imagination”, it seems to follow that it “acquires all its influence on the imagination from the vulgar one”. Hume now reiterates the explanation given in §§44-6 above, and goes on to say that philosophical (e.g. sceptical) beliefs tend not to hold our attention: “the moment we relax our thoughts, nature will display herself, and draw us back to our former [vulgar] 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. That opinion has taken such deep root in the imagination, that ’tis impossible ever to eradicate it, ...”

§52 To evade this tension, we come up with the double existence hypothesis, involving a new *fiction*:

“we contrive a new hypothesis, which seems to comprehend both these principles of reason and imagination. This hypothesis is the philosophical one of the double existence of perceptions and objects; which pleases our reason, in allowing, that our dependent perceptions are interrupted and different; and at the same time is agreeable to the imagination, in attributing a continu’d existence to something else, which we call *objects*. This philosophical system, therefore, is the monstrous offspring of two principles, which are contrary to each other, which are both at once embrac’d by the mind, and which are unable mutually to destroy each other. The imagination tells us, that our resembling perceptions have a continu’d and uninterrupted existence, and are not annihilated by their absence. Reflection tells us, that even our resembling perceptions are interrupted in their existence, and different from each other. The contradiction betwixt these opinions we elude by a new fiction, which is conformable to the hypotheses both of reflection and fancy, by ascribing these contrary qualities to different existences; the *interruption* to perceptions, and the *continuance* to objects. Nature is obstinate, and will not quit the field, however strongly attack’d by reason; and at the same time reason is so clear in the point, that there is no possibility of disguising her. Not being able to reconcile these two enemies, we endeavour to set ourselves at ease as much as possible, by successively granting to each whatever it demands, and by feigning a double existence, where each may find something, that has all the conditions it desires.”

§52 This hypothesis only appeals to us because we are not fully convinced either that our perceptions do have continued and distinct existence, nor that they lack it:

“Were we fully convinc’d, that our resembling perceptions are continu’d, and identical, and independent, we shou’d never run into this opinion of a double existence; since we shou’d find satisfaction in our first supposition, and wou’d not look beyond. Again, were we fully convinc’d, that our perceptions are dependent, and interrupted, and different, we shou’d be as little inclin’d to embrace the opinion of a double existence; since in that case we shou’d clearly perceive the error of our first supposition of a continu’d existence, and wou’d never regard it any farther. ’Tis therefore from the intermediate situation of the mind, that this opinion arises, and from such an adherence to these two contrary principles, as makes us seek some pretext to justify our receiving both; which happily at last is found in the system of a double existence.”

§53 The philosophical hypothesis also benefits from its similarity to the vulgar system, to which philosophers naturally revert “upon leaving their closets”, when they “mingle with the rest of mankind in those exploded opinions, that our perceptions are our only objects, and continue identically and uninterruptedly the same in all their interrupted appearances”.

§54-5 Our imagination influences the philosophical system in making us “suppose external objects to resemble internal perceptions” (and indeed to resemble the specific perceptions which they supposedly cause), even though – as shown in §47 – “the relation of cause and effect can never afford us any just conclusion from the existence or qualities of our perceptions to the existence of external continu’d objects”. Hume’s empiricism is also apparent here: “We never can conceive any thing but perceptions, and therefore must make every thing resemble them.”

### 3.3 Sceptical Despair, Carelessness and Inattention

§56 Hume started *T* 1.4.2.1 by voicing a complacent acceptance of the belief in body:

“We may well ask, *What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body?* but ’tis in vain to ask, *Whether there be body or not?* That is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.”

But having unearthed the dubious foundations of this belief, his tone is now entirely different:

“I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, ... But to be ingenuous, I feel myself *at present* of a quite contrary sentiment, and am more inclin’d to repose no faith at all in my senses, or rather imagination, than to place in it such an implicit confidence. I cannot conceive how such trivial qualities of the fancy, conducted by such false suppositions, can ever lead to any solid and rational system. ... ’Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and ’tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion, that these perceptions ... are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses. This is the case with our popular system. And as to our philosophical one, ’tis liable to the same difficulties; and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition. Philosophers deny our resembling perceptions to be identically the same, and uninterrupted; and yet have so great a propensity to believe them such, that they arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions, to which they attribute these qualities. I say, a new set of perceptions: For we may well suppose in general, but ’tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions. What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falshood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?”

Note in particular the empiricism of the underlined passage here: the only conception we can form of external objects is as “a new set of *perceptions*”.<sup>4</sup>

§57 The section ends by drawing a conclusion about *both* “scepticism with regard to reason” and “scepticism with regard to the senses”:

“This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur’d, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, ... ’Tis impossible upon any system to defend either our understanding or senses; and we but expose them farther when we endeavour to justify them in that manner. As the sceptical doubt arises naturally from a profound and intense reflection on those subjects, it always encreases, the farther we carry our reflections, whether in opposition or conformity to it. Carelessness and in-attention alone can afford us any remedy.”

As with *T* 1.4.1.10, it is lack of attention that enables us to escape from what would otherwise be a paralysing sceptical doubt.

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<sup>4</sup> This was anticipated back in the section “Of the idea of existence, and of external existence”: “The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos’d specifically different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects. Generally speaking we do not suppose them specifically different; but only attribute to them different relations, connections and durations. But of this more fully hereafter.” (*T* 1.2.6.9).