

# David Hume: Epistemology

## Part 3: The Empirical Criterion of Meaning: Substance, Self, and Identity

# Applying the Criterion: Substance

- So we now take Hume's more rigorous version of the empirical criteria of meaning to the analysis of some traditional concepts in Philosophy
- Hume wants to know whether the ideas of **substance can be derived from impressions of sensation or reflection?**
- Remember, Hume thinks that sensation and reflection is all we really know or combinations of thoughts about them
- So he'll examine each as the possible ground for "substance"
- He wants to know if they (ideas of substance) come by the senses and by what manner?

# Applying the Criterion: Substance

- But senses bring us particular things: eyes—colors; ears—sound; tongue (palate)—taste; and so on.
- Hume thinks no one will claim substance comes from color, or sound or taste.
- So by process of elimination, it must come from a reflection about an impression

# Applying the Criterion: Substance

- But, Hume asserts, “the impressions of reflexion resolve themselves **into our passions and emotions**; none of which can possibly represent a substance”
  - This is a reductionist move: reflection reduces to something in the mind, not outside of it
  - It is based on his earlier analysis of abstract ideas
- Therefore we have 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**” (emphasis mine)



# Applying the Criterion: Substance

- So it follows that substance is not real—is not existent independent of the mind
- Now let's look at the “self” in light of Hume's distinctions

# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- Hume asserts that some philosophers “...imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity”

# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- He wants to know, do we have any idea of the self that is derived from some impression?
- Hume asserts that SELF is not just one impression, but “. . . that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos’ d to have a reference.”
  - If it was one impression that gave rise to the idea of self it would have to be invariably the same through the whole course of our lives—since, Hume reasons, the self is “suppos’ d to exist after that manner”



# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- But there are no constant and invariable impressions, Hume asserts
- “Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations **succeed** each other, and never all exist at the same time”
- So it (the idea of self) couldn't come from them and therefore there is “no such idea. . . .”
  - I think Hume means there is no such “impression” of the self (in his sense of the term) from which we could have an idea (or recollection) or combination of impressions to form a complex idea
  - The idea of self couldn't come from a succession of ideas because it would need to be constant and invariable



# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- Hume reflects that when he thinks about what he calls “myself”
  - It is always accompanied in terms of some particular perception or other
    - I’ m hot or cold; love or hate, pain or pleasure
    - Remove those perceptions (as when one sleeps) and we become “insensible of myself”
    - He feels he can’ t reason “any further” with those who disagree with him about this—who feel they can sense something simple and continued

# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- But setting aside those kinds of people he ventures to affirm “. . . Of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but **a bundle or collection of different perceptions**, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. . . .”

# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- And “. . .The mind is a **kind of theatre**, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in a infinite variety of posture and situations”
- As a result Hume thinks, “. . . .**there is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different. . . .**”



# Applying the Criterion: The Self

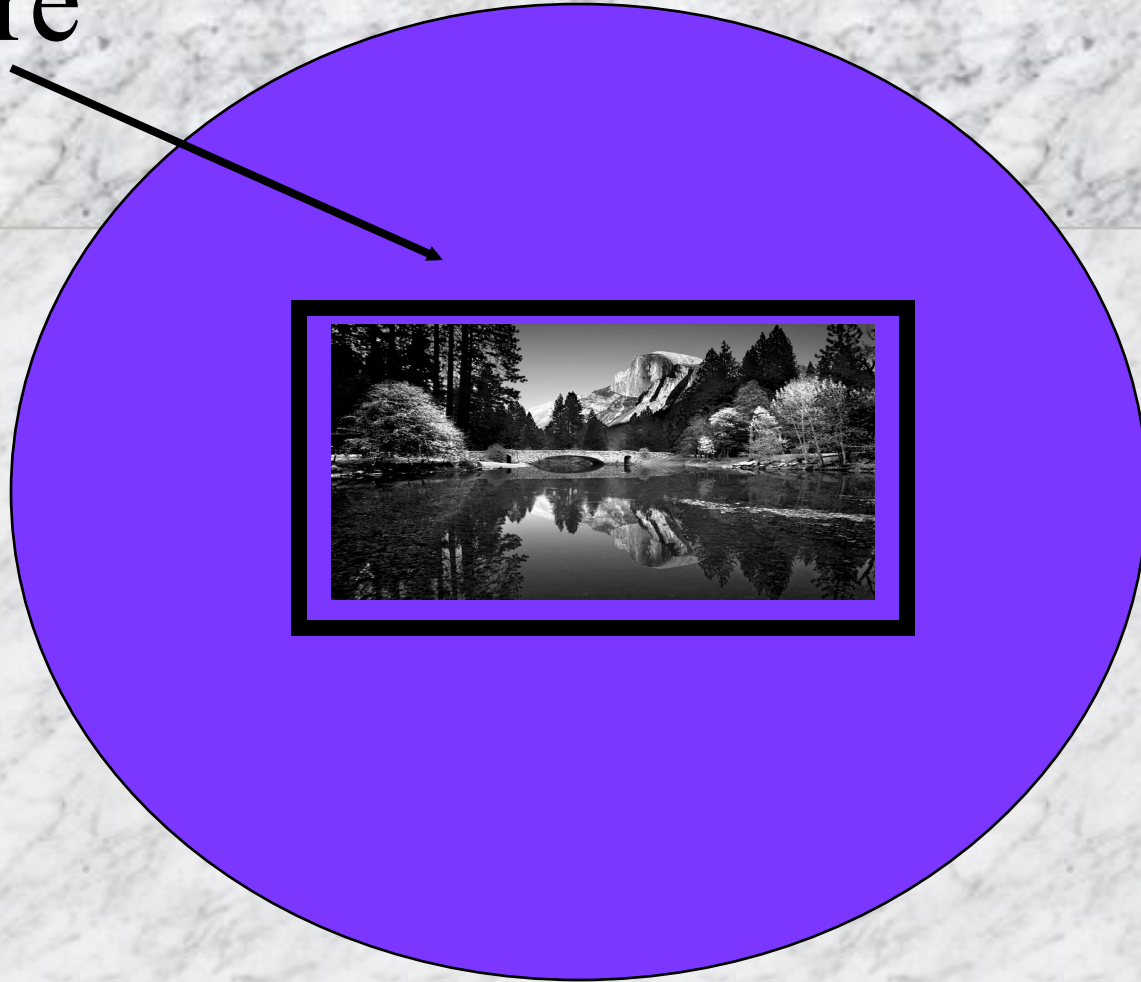
- This is despite “. . .whatever natural propension (or psychological propensity) we have to **imagine** that simplicity and identity”
- Hume goes on further to say, “. . .the comparison of the theater must not mislead us. **They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind**; not have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented or the materials, of which it is compos’ d.”



# Applying the Criterion: The Self

- So the picture of the mind here is a flow or **succession of ideas** whose cause or make-up we know not of and which **cannot** be the **basis for the concept of self**
- **Let me try to illustrate→**

Theatre



Mind is a succession of impressions & ideas and/or combinations of these. Eg. Impression #1



· Impression #2



Impression #3





Impression #4



Impression #5

Notice the switch from impression  
to idea



Idea #6; note this would be less vivid  
than an impression

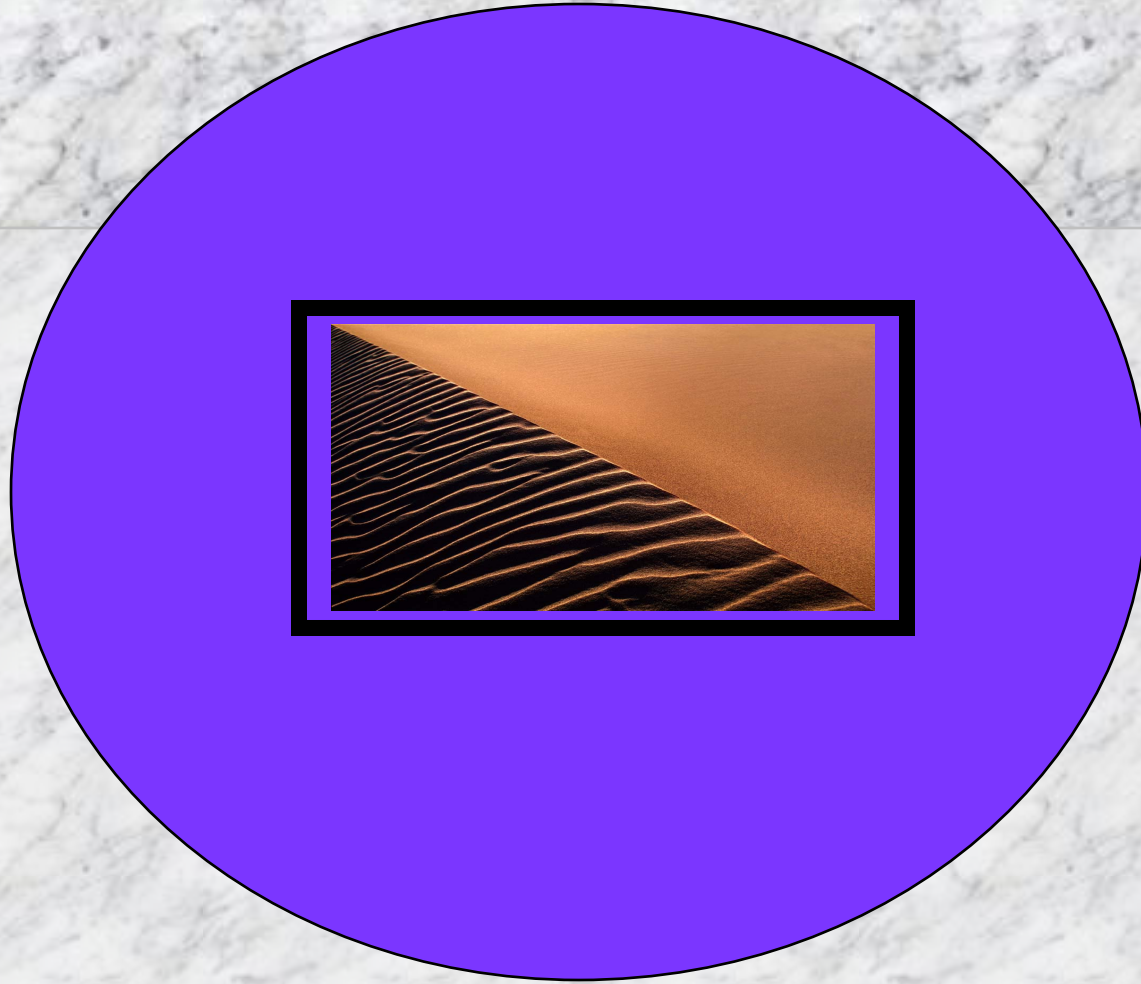


Idea #7





Idea #8



Idea #9

# The Point Being:

- We have a succession of ideas
- We have a sort of theatre of the mind
- We have reflections, like “I like that view” or “I would get warm in that desert”
  - But there is no direct perception of the self
  - Self is not real independently of the mind; the mind “constructs” the self

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Now to Hume's view of the concept of identity
- The paradox of identity
  - To say two things are identical is to say that the two things are the same and yet, because they are two, different.
    - E.g. the desk I see now is “identical with,” or “the same as,” the desk I saw last week
    - Identity is a relation involving at least a pair—but a pair are different and not identical
  - Hume thought **a single object** conveyed the idea of unity, not of identity



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Hume, on the other hand, thought that a **multiplicity of objects** can never “convey this idea., however resembling they may be suppos’ d.”
- He asserted that the mind “always pronounces the one not to be the other. . .”
- Each member’ s existence are entirely distinct and independent

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- The challenge is to find a “medium” between unity and number—that is between “same” and “different”
  - Despite that unity and number seem to be as mutually exclusive as existence and nonexistence
- Hume thought he found it

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- In the example of say a “mahogany” object we sense “now” and then “one minute later” Hume thought we **project** into what is actually a continuous, unchanged datum (unity) a **temporal difference** obtained from my experience of a succession of somatic data (difference)
- Somatic data: muscular relaxing and tensing, inhalings and exhalings of breath and so forth of which I am also aware
- Therefore, the supposedly “mere temporal difference (datum then, datum now) is **a fiction of my imagination**”
- **How could that happen?**



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Hume thought our mind “feigns” that the succession in the somatic data is (also) in the (for instance) mahogany-colored datum (**when apparently it is not**), we falsely conclude that I have experienced two temporally different but otherwise unchanged datum
- Note: were NOT talking about anything “out there”; just in the theater of our mind
  - Hume thinks we “**project into what is actually a continuous, unchanged datum (unity) a temporal difference obtained from my experience of succession of somatic data (difference)**”
- There is datum about the “object” and datum about ourselves as we perceive the “object” and we transfer some things (difference) from one to the other (unity)
- Thus the supposedly “**mere temporal difference (datum then, datum now) is a fiction of my imagination**”



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- This is not the end of the muddle, according to Hume
  - Once we get the idea of identity through this kind of confusion, or mixture, of one datum's sameness with another datum's difference, “we proceed to apply it, by a further exercise of imagination, to cases in which a datum is not even under continuous observation”

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- So take the same mahogany object and see it yesterday and then again the next day, but **not under continued observation**
  - The second observation really only resembles the first—our imagination “feigns” it is identical with it
  - Actually the light is quite different in the hours in which I observe, nevertheless I identify them

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- The reason I “see” these two datums as identical lies in another natural tendency of the mind

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- “Nothing is more apt to make us mistake one idea for another, than **any relation betwixt them**, which **associates them together** in the imagination and makes it pass with facility from one to the other.”
  - Interpretation: we mistake the two datums as identical because our imagination seeing any relation between the two datums naturally associates them together thereby making the mistake more easy to make



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Another way of saying this: I come to a desk
  - My desk is so familiar so much a part of my experience of this room, that instead of attending closely to the data before me, my mind takes them as the sign of the desk;
  - **At the same time**, a familiar disposition is evoked in me—the disposition to sit down and get to work

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Because the disposition to sit down and get to work has been evoked on separate occasions by different data is the same and because the data are not examined on their own account, but are taken as the sign of the desk, I assume that the data themselves are identical

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- In this manner a “succession of different objects. . .connected together by a close relation” comes to be “confounded” with an unchanging object felt against a background of temporal change
- If I had but attended more closely to the **succession of different objects** I would have seen them for the **different objects** (or sense data) that they are, but we almost never give them the attention this would require



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- In short, resemblance of one object to another, as an operation of the mind, facilitates this “mistake”
- The “mistake” is seeing a succession of different objects as a “continu’ d object”
- Hume asserts that our propensity to make this mistake is so great that we fall into before we are aware and then try to justify it by feigning new and unintelligible principles that connect the objects together



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- By doing this feigning where we move the interruptions we run into the notion of a “*soul*, and *self*, and *substance*, to disguise the variation”
- Hume held to confirm this account of the matter, all we need do is to pay careful attention to objects we commonly call identical—he held that these objects prove to be “variable or interrupted” and to consist of a succession of related parts

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Hume went on to give a number of examples—or what he calls (thought) “experiments” to begin to prepare the way for his attack on the idea of personal identity

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Experiment #1 A: suppose we take or add an infinitesimal part to an object; typically we think nothing of considering it to be the same object
- Experiment #1 B: though the change of any considerable part of the mass of matter destroys the identity of the whole, yet “we must measure the greatness of the part, **not absolutely**, but by its *proportion to* the whole
  - E.g. you could remove a mountain and still have a planet, but only a few inches for some bodies



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- The only account you can give for this is that “but by reflecting that objects operate upon the mind, and break or interrupt the continuity of its actions **not according to their real greatness,** but according to **their proportion to each other:** and therefore since this interruption makes an object cease to appear the same, **it must be** the uninterrupted progress of **the thought,** which constitutes the imperfect identity.”



# Applying the Criterion: Identity

- Experiment #2: a change in any considerable part of a body destroys its identity; but it is remarkable, that where the change “is produc’ d *gradually* and *insensibly* we are less apt to ascribe to it the same effect”
- Hume asserts that “the reason **can plainly be no other** than that the mind in following the successive changes of the body **feels an easy passage** from the surveying its condition in one moment to the viewing of it in another and at no particular time perceives **any interruption** in its actions. . . from which continu’ d perception, it ascribes a continu’ d existence and identity to the object”

# Applying the Criterion: Identity

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