HUME ON TEMPORAL EXPERIENCE

Lorne Falkenstein

It is one thing to give an empiricist account of temporal experience. It is another to give a sensationist account. An empiricist can see more than a sensationist, who reduces sensory experience to the experience of sensations. In book 1, part 2, section 3 of his Treatise of Human Nature, David Hume offered an empiricist account of time as a manner of appearance of sensations.

The Lockean background

Hume considered his views on space and time to comprise a two-part “system”. According to the first, our perceptions of space and time consist of unextended parts. According to the second, there must be something else to these parts to make them real. From this, Hume inferred that our ideas of space and time must be “those of the manner or order, in which objects exist”, and that it is impossible to conceive “a time, when there was no succession or change in any real existence”.1

Hume argued for the first part of this system over the first two sections of Treatise 1.2. However, when he turned to the second part in Treatise 1.3, he made a new beginning. He did not derive either the claim that time is a manner of existence or the claim that each part of time must be filled with a perceptibly different thing from the indivisibility of temporal parts. Instead, he appealed to phenomenalistic considerations cited on John Locke’s authority.

(Hume did appeal to indivisibility at a later point (T 1.2.3.12–17). But this passage focuses on space. It concludes with the remark that “the same reasoning” will apply to time. But Hume wanted to infer that the perception of an unchanging object cannot make us aware of the passage of time (T 1.2.3.7–8), whereas he thought that the parts of space may be qualitatively identical (T 1.2.3.5, T 1.2.5.8). What he said about space cannot justify the stronger thesis concerning time.)

Locke had maintained that while our idea of time is drawn from experience, it is not drawn from experience of the motions of bodies, as implied by the Aristotelian view that time is the measure of motion. It is instead drawn from experience of the succession of ideas in our minds.2 To establish that the latter can occur without the former and that the experience of time is dependent on the latter, Locke appealed to two examples: sitting on the deck of a ship on a becalmed sea out of sight of land on a cloudless day (E 2.14.6), and observing anything that moves in a circle so quickly as to seem a circle (E 2.14.8). In the first case, motion is too
Hume on temporal experience

slow, in the second, too fast to notice. In the first case, time is still perceived to pass as long as there is a succession of ideas in the observer’s mind; in the second, it is not because there is no such succession.

That there really are motions too slow or too fast to be experienced is demonstrated by appeal to what we do sense and to background commitments. Slowly moving objects do not produce different ideas before a number of other ideas have occurred, giving the impression that they are not moving at all for that period. When we eventually notice a change in their position, we are not tempted by the alternative that they moved by a sudden jump, but suppose that they must have moved too slowly to catch our notice (E 2.14.11). Locke addressed motions too fast to be perceived with the disturbing example of a “cannon bullet” that rips through the walls of a house, taking the occupant’s leg with it in the process. The occupant experiences the impact on the first wall, the leg and the second wall as occurring at the same moment. But metaphysics again intervenes to lead us to infer that the cannon ball cannot have occupied all of these places at once, but must have moved from one to the next (E 2.14.10). The case implies that time passes even when there is no succession in our ideas. It is just not experienced to pass.

Locke further maintained that, during waking hours, the speed with which ideas succeed in the mind “varies not very much” (E 2.14.9). Where external stimuli change too slowly, thought supplies a train of ideas at the normal rate (E 2.14.6 and 9); where they change too quickly their effects are assimilated (E 2.14.8).

Locke never explained exactly how “Reflection on these Appearances of several Ideas, one after another, in our Minds...” furnishes us with the Idea of Succession” (E 2.14.3). If the earlier ideas no longer exist, the later do not exist yet, and the act of reflection is confined to a present moment, then denoting any of them “earlier” or “later memories” of “past” ideas begs the question of the origin of temporal ideas. Locke may not have been aware of the problem. More charitably, he might have thought that since a succession of ideas does give rise to an idea of succession, the difficulties explaining how need not detain us. Thomas Reid charged him with taking reflection on the succession of our ideas to extend beyond the present moment and so confusing reflection with memory (Reid 1785: 325–326).

A further complication arises with the idea of duration. Succession is a relation, but Locke’s discussion of duration does not occur in the later part of Essay 2 devoted to the discussion of ideas of relation (E 2.25–28). It instead occurs in the earlier part devoted to ideas of “simple modes” (E 2.13—21). Locke did not reduce duration to succession. He maintained that reflection on the succession of our ideas reveals that there is a certain “distance” between the ideas. It is the experience of this “distance” that properly serves as the foundation for the idea of duration.

Reflection on these appearances of several Ideas one after another in our Minds, is that which Furnishes us with the Idea of Succession: And the Distance between any parts of that Succession, or between the Appearance of any two Ideas in our Minds, is that we call Duration.

(E 2.14.3)

Locke’s employment of words notwithstanding, he most likely did not mean to say that successive ideas are separated from one another by an intervening distance. His point was more likely that any idea takes up a distance between those on either side. While he maintained that a single idea “seems...to have no Distance” to someone capable of keeping it in mind “without Variation and the Succession of others” (E 2.14.4), this could not be because the idea in fact takes up no distance. Locke’s point may have been that we only become aware of this distance...
Lorne Falkenstein

through attending to the succession of three ideas necessary to mark its ends. When focusing just on one idea to the exclusion of the terminal ideas, the distance vanishes for lack of definition like the blackness between two stars that becomes blindness in their absence. Reid, citing Richard Price, missed this subtlety when he charged Locke with neglecting to consider that succession presupposes duration because a succession of durationless elements would vanish in an instant.4

Hume’s Lockean arguments

Like Locke, Hume claimed that our idea of time is based on experience of the succession of our perceptions (T 1.2.3.6). But whereas Locke had been concerned to establish that the idea of time need not arise from sensation of the motion of external objects, Hume was concerned to establish that we cannot experience time “either alone, or attended with a steady unchangeable object” (T 1.2.3.7). To this end, he appealed to two phenomena Locke had invoked at Essay 2.14.4. “A man in a sound sleep, or strongly occupy’d with one thought, is insensible of time; and according as his perceptions succeed each other with greater or less rapidity, the same duration appears longer or shorter to his imagination” (T 1.2.3.7). But the claim that we do not experience time in sound sleep only establishes that when we are unconscious we really are unconscious whereas the claim that “the same” duration appears longer or shorter depending on the rapidity of the succession of perceptions presupposes some other way of measuring the sameness of duration.

Hume also appealed to Locke’s example of rotating bodies, where “tis impossible for our perceptions to succeed each other with the same rapidity, that motion may be communicated to external objects” (T 1.2.3.7). Like the “cannon bullet” case, this case implies that bodies move, and so time passes even when there is no succession in our ideas. It further implies that perceptions endure relative to this background passage of time and “succeed each other with greater or less rapidity” because they have different durations. These implications could not have been welcome to Hume, but they had both been features of Locke’s account, and Hume did say that the “greater or less rapidity” with which our “perceptions succeed each other” has “certain bounds . . . beyond which no influence of external objects on the senses is ever able to hasten or retard our thought”. He also said that where there is no succession in perceptions, there is no perception of time “even tho’ there be a real succession in the objects” (T 1.2.3.7).

Despite all these problems, there is a profound point about the nature of our experience of time to be gathered from what Hume chose to take from Locke.

It has been remark’d by a [fn: Mr. Locke] great philosopher, that our perceptions have certain bounds in this particular, which are fix’d by the original nature and constitution of the mind, and beyond which no influence of external objects on the senses is ever able to hasten or retard our thought.

(T 1.2.3.7)

The bounds to the rapidity with which our perceptions succeed each other are not due to the “influence of external objects on the senses” but to “the original nature and constitution of the mind”. This is not something Locke said in so many words, though it might be read into what he did say (E 2.14.8–11). Hume would not have meant it in so many words, either. He would later make a number of sceptical observations about the existence of external objects as well as minds. But that does not detract from what is said here. The influence of external objects on the senses, should there be any, is to produce impressions. The mind is who knows what. A contrast between “the influence of external objects on the senses” and “the original nature and constitution of the mind” is still a contrast between what produces impressions and something
else. Something else prevents whatever causes our impressions from hastening or retarding our thought beyond certain bounds. The scepticism about minds that emerges over ensuing parts of the *Treatise* means that this factor will not turn out to be a feature of the mind. But neither is it due to the simple impressions themselves, which for Hume are not temporally extended and so capable of occurring in arbitrarily close succession. It is most austerely described as an empirically observed aspect of the experience of time itself. Experiences like those with the whirling coal reveal that it is not possible for further perceptions to be disposed between any two given perceptions, and so for there to be an arbitrarily numerous collection of perceptions succeeding upon one another between given limits. There is a perception immediately before and immediately after any given perception, and these perceptions are so disposed that a continual passage from one to the next is found to exceed any given bound. Since these features of temporal experience cannot be accounted for by unextended perceptions, they must be due to something else. Something makes it possible for some perceptions to endure, by consisting of otherwise identical, simple parts disposed immediately after one another, and so defines what it means for perceptions to succeed more rapidly or more slowly and for there to be bounds beyond which their succession cannot be hastened or retarded. This thing also sets limits to the divisibility of those that endure. There is therefore something more to the experience of time than the experience of a succession of durationless perceptions. There is experience of a structure that imposes constraints on the character of this succession.

(George (2006) has argued that Hume considered simple impressions to have a minimal size (30 seconds of arc in the case of vision), but no “extension”, because at the time only what has more than one part was called “extended”. But Hume invoked the claim that the parts of space and time must have some quality to make them real when inferring the second part of his system from the first (T 1.2.4.2). If the parts have size, then there is already something real to them and they do not also need quality. This scuttles the second part of the system so clearly that it is unlikely Hume would have countenanced it.)

(It may seem counterintuitive that a sound that has no duration should still be heard, but for Hume it will if it is loud enough. Its quality makes it real, and its being located in time makes it a real thing that exists in a certain manner. See T 1.2.3.15.)

Hume said something similar about space. “A blue and a red point may certainly lie contiguous without any penetration or annihilation” (T 1.2.4.6). This is proven by our ability to see a blue point lying contiguous to a red point. For the two points to be contiguous is for there to be no gap or intervening colour point between them. Yet, though contiguous, the two points do not touch in the sense of sharing a point in common. For point-entities to share a point in common is for one to penetrate or annihilate the other. Since both points are visible, neither point has annihilated the other. Yet, since nothing is visible between them, they are contiguous. This must mean that the one is immediately adjacent to the other, without touching the other at a point, and yet without leaving an intermediate gap. This is only possible in a space that does not contain further places between any two given places and so prevents there always being a gap between any two coloured points that do not touch at a point.

The absence of a further location between any two given locations is not the only empirically observable feature of the space and time in which perceptions are disposed. In an earlier passage, Hume observed that “repeating” an idea causes:

> [t]he compound idea of extension, arising from its repetition, always to augment, and become double, triple, quadruple, &c. till at last it swells up to a considerable bulk, greater or smaller, in proportion as I repeat more or less the same idea.

(*T 1.2.2*)
Were this augmentation due to the ideas themselves, they must have some minimal extension to be doubled and tripled. But then they would not be unextended, as Hume wished to claim that they are (T 1.2.3.12–14). The only way that “repeating” extensionless ideas can augment an extension is if something prevents denser manners of disposition or succession, even though the simple perceptions are unextended and so would allow it. (This is not to say that preventing a denser manner of disposition would produce a speckled or flickering compound. For the compound to be speckled or flickering, there would have to be unoccupied locations between the occupied ones and the thesis is that the space in which perceptions are disposed and the time over which they appear are discrete and so do not contain these further locations.)

Hume considered unboundedness to be a further, perceptually evident feature of space and by implication time: “and were I to carry on the addition in infinitum, I clearly perceive, that the idea of extension must also become infinite” (T 1.2.2.2). “I clearly perceive” is an exaggeration. But Hume would have at least wanted to claim it is perceptually evident that only a finite number of perceptions can be packed between the bounds set by birth and death, or the edges of the visual field.

At T 1.2.4.2, Hume described the ideas of space and time as those of “the manner or order in which objects exist”. This brings up further structural features. The idea of space is said at T 1.2.3.6 to be received “from the disposition of visible and tangible objects” whereas that of time is said to be formed “from the succession of ideas and impressions”. In vision and touch, simple sensations are discretely and unboundedly disposed over a precise number of dimensions – two for vision, three for touch (Hume 1997: 256). Dimensionality is not due to simple visual or tangible impressions, which have no sides or dimensions. It is instead a feature of their manner of disposition.

In contrast, time has a special relation to existence. Because the idea of time arises from the experience of succession, and succession is coming to be and passing away, time is the order in which perceptions come to be and pass away. But just as simple impressions contain nothing that would prevent them from being disposed arbitrarily closely to one another, so they contain nothing to prevent their being disposed contemporaneously. And in fact they often are. Hume said that an unchangeable object produces “none but co-existent impressions” (T 1.2.3.8), implying that different impressions do coexist. But he was also insistent that the parts of time cannot coexist (T 1.2.4.1, 1.2.3.8). Moments in time cannot therefore be identified with simple perceptions, which are as capable of coexisting as of occurring in succession. Neither can they be identified with compound impressions, without begging the question of what distinguishes a spatial compound from a temporal one. Antisymmetry governs only the parts of time, not the perceptions in time.

Time is a discrete and unbounded successive series of moments, distinct from simple perceptions, at which collections of simple perceptions appear. Metaphysically, for the moments of time to be successive means they form a series, that only one member of the series is the present moment, and that each is present in turn. There is no rate at which the alteration of presence occurs (so, no meta-time over which time passes). But it does occur and so marks the rate at which all other changes occur. Phenomenologically, as musicians speak of themselves marking (not making) time by playing music, so the parts of time are marked (not made) by the coming to be and passing away of perceptions, with the present moment being marked whenever an impression comes to be or passes away.

**Compound impressions**

Locke accepted that ideas have duration and that time can pass and be thought to pass even when there is no succession in ideas, though it is not experienced to pass in that case. What has
just been said explains how Hume could employ Locke’s arguments without accepting Locke’s
views on the duration of simple ideas or imperiling his rejection of the infinite divisibility of
time. But it leaves the question of whether Hume could also sustain the tenets that “the indivis-
ible moments of time must be filled with some real object or existence” (T 1.2.3.17) and that
the idea of duration “can never in any propriety or exactness be apply’d to [objects, which are
perfectly unchangeable]”. The question comes to a head at Treatise 1.2.3.9–10, where Hume
asked whether time can be conceived apart from conceiving a succession of perceptions. He
answered this question in the negative, on the grounds that the original impressions from which
(according to Hume) all our ideas must be copied contain no distinct impression of time apart
from the impressions of successive objects. But the devil is in the details.

The idea of time is not deriv’d from a particular impression mix’d up with others, and
plainly distinguishable from them; but arises altogether from the manner, in which
impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number. Five notes play’d
on a flute give us the impression and idea of time; tho’ time be not a sixth impression,
which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses. Nor is it a sixth impres-
sion, which the mind by reflection finds in itself. These five sounds making their
appearance in this particular manner, excite no emotion in the mind, nor produce an
affection of any kind . . . nor can the mind, by revolving over a thousand times all its
ideas of sensation, ever extract from them any new original idea . . . But here it only
takes notice of the manner, in which the different sounds make their appearance,
(T 1.2.3.10)

Time is not a sixth impression in addition to the five flute note impressions. But neither is it
any one of the flute note impressions. Neither is it anything that can be subsequently derived
from the five flute note impressions by “reflection”, whether understood in Humean terms, as
an “impression of reflection” or passion, or in Lockean terms, as the product of a process per-
formed on ideas. Time is already experienced with the five flute note impressions. But it is not
experienced with any one of them, if we follow Hume in supposing that they have no duration
(T 1.2.3.14–17). It is only experienced in the compound impression of two or more.

This compound impression could just as well contain a number of simple ideas or a mixture
of simple impressions and simple ideas. (Even when the perceptions are ideas, they still appear
and disappear in turn, producing a compound impression of the temporal succession of perceptions.)
But it also presents those simple perceptions in a manner characterized by the structural features
discussed earlier. For both manner of appearance and content, all ideas are copied from impres-
sions, the simple ideas from prior simple impressions and the manner of appearance from prior
compound impressions.

Hume did deny that we have any experience of time on its own. The impression of time is
not separable from that of the notes. Since “Every thing, that is different, [is] distinguishable;
and every thing, that is distinguishable, may be separated”, as Hume had reiterated as a part of
this very discussion, it follows that the compound impression of time could not even be differ-
ent from the compound impression of five flute notes. But this compound impression still has
distinct aspects or “circumstances of resemblance” to other compounds that can be identified by
way of a “distinction of reason” (T 1.1.7.7n.5, T 1.1.7.18). As a distinct aspect of the compound
impression of the flute notes, time is neither one of the notes, nor something that only subse-
quently arises from them. It is their manner of occurrence. The flute notes appear and disappear
in succession. They cannot be without coming to be and passing away in this particular manner,
and this particular manner cannot be without them being there to mark it. Imagination can
separate the five notes from one another. It can also “afterwards consider [the manner of their disposition] without considering these particular sounds, but may conjoin it with other objects” (T 1.2.3.10). But any note or collection of notes must be imagined to appear and disappear in some manner, and any similar manner must be punctuated by some ideas.

“The ideas of some objects it certainly must have”, Hume wrote, “nor is it possible for it without these ideas ever to arrive at any conception of time”, and that much can be granted to him. Where there are no ideas conceived to appear, there can be no conception of any manner of appearance. But Hume failed to explain why the ideas must be different from one another, or disposed at every available location, and so failed to explain why one note held for five beats, or two identical notes separated by three beats of silence, would not give us an impression of the same duration as five different notes.

At T 1.2.3.8, Hume claimed that “an unchangeable object, since it produces none but co-existent impressions, produces none that can give us an idea of time”. This begs the question. A reason needs to be given why an unchangeable object could not produce a succession of identical impressions, and none ever was.

T 1.2.3.8 gives a reason for rejecting its own premise: that no two parts of time are co-existent. The phenomenal temporal order is punctuated by the appearance of perceptions, so that what is earlier is what appeared, and what is present is what appears. Think of looking at a mountain while hearing music play. As one note, P, ceases to be perceived, so one part of time, TP, passes, to be followed by another, TQ. By definition, an “unchangeable object” would not be destroyed at TP, but would continue to exist at TQ, be it as a succession of identical impressions or an enduring impression divisible into successive parts (the distinction is moot), incidentally nullifying the contortions of T 1.2.5.29.

(The alternative that the unchangeable object might occupy its own, indivisible part, TU, of a different time line (Baxter 2008: 36–43) is not an option, given Hume’s claim that “each of [time’s] parts succeeds another, and that none of them, however contiguous, can ever be co-existent” (T 1.2.2.4). If TU were a different part of time from TP or TQ, it could not coexist with either of them, since only one part can ever exist.)

Succession of perceptions vs. perception of succession

Like Locke’s, Hume’s view that the idea of time arises from the experience of succession raises a difficult question about the nature of that experience. It is natural to think that there can be no knowledge of a relation, like succession, unless all its terms are apprehended and compared, and that this requires a “unity of consciousness”. A succession of impressions is not enough. An impression of succession is required.6

If this is what is needed, then it is hard to see how Hume could provide it.7 Hume thought that only one part of time ever exists and that this part is unextended. Of course, earlier parts might be remembered, but Hume’s account of memory is not particularly helpful. Hume was not Reid, whose position on this matter merits contrast with Hume’s.

Reid maintained that memory acquaints us with the past members of a succession. But his position on how it does so was highly idiosyncratic. Though he denied that sensation or consciousness can give us the idea of succession (1785: 325–326), he also denied that to remember is to presently perceive an image or copy of a past perception (1785: 338–356). For Reid, the act of remembering occurs in the present moment, but the direct object of this act is the past object. To remember is to directly apprehend the no longer existent object (this is not the block universe), not a presently existing image of that object.
Suppose that once, and only once, I smelled a tuberose in a certain room where it grew in a pot, and gave a very grateful perfume. Next day I relate what I saw and smelled. When I attend as carefully as I can to what passes in my mind in this case, it appears evident, that the very thing I saw yesterday, and the fragrance I smelled, are now the immediate objects of my mind when I remember it. . .

Philosophers indeed tell me, that the immediate object of my memory . . . in this case, is not the past sensation, but an idea of it, an image, phantasm, or species of the odour I smelled: that this idea presently exists in my mind or in my sensorium; and the mind contemplating this present idea, finds it a representation of what is past . . . Upon the strictest attention, memory appears to me to have things that are past, and not present ideas, for its object.

(Reid 1764: 44–46)

Reid believed that the non-existence of an object is no impediment to directly conceiving it—it; not some mental image of it (1785: 362–365, 376–381, 390–395). The non-existence of a past object is therefore no impediment to directly conceiving it either. Reid was not a “common sense champion of phenomeno-temporal antirealism”. Though he thought that change, succession and persistence can only be apprehended with the aid of memory, he also maintained that they are directly apprehended. For Reid, from our vantage point in the present, we apprehend the past as it was and no longer is. We see it off in a distance in the past, just as we see what is off in the distance in space (Reid was a direct realist about this as well). We do not experience a “memory image” that is “far less vivid, far less detailed, than the corresponding perceptual experiences”. Perception is conception with belief in present existence, memory conception with belief in past existence. The only difference is in the belief that attends the conception, and the beliefs can be equally strong. The clarity, distinctness and other qualities of the conception of the past object, and the strength of the belief in its past existence, may change with circumstances such as the passing of time since the initial perception (1785: 305, 341–342, 361, 369–374). But it does so gradually and in different ways with different circumstances, so that there is no sharp dividing line between what is remembered with all the clarity and vivacity and certainty of a perception and what is only remembered with doubt, difficulty and lack of clarity. There need be no other difference between memory and perception than that the object of the one is, and is believed to be, past; the object of the other, present. The distinction between sensation and perception is merely verbal, not phenomenological (1785: 326–327).

But this was not Hume’s account. Hume’s account was the one Reid rejected, that to remember is to presently experience a copy of a past impression (T 1.1.3.1). Whatever might be said for or against this account, it is of no use in the present context, because to experience a present copy of a past impression simultaneously with some other present perception is not to experience a succession of perceptions. The status of the copy as a copy of what is past, and the nature of the experience of succession is left unexplained.

However, Hume had a way of accounting for access to information about the past that does not rely on memory. At T 1.3.8.13, he remarked that the past can have a non-cognitive influence on present thoughts, “the mind makes the transition [between perception of cause and belief in effect] without the assistance of the memory. The custom operates before we have time for reflection”.

This allows for an account that does not demand a unity of consciousness. Rather than grasp all the parts at once, compare them and find a relation of succession between them, we are changed by past experience, which endows us with the ability to subsequently review the events
in their original order as the occasion requires, and the ability to imagine other objects in that same sequence. These abilities to repeat the sequence are what distinguishes a being who has an apprehension of the sequence from one who does not.11

When I am asked, “how many notes did you hear?” or “for how many beats did it last?”, I am at first baffled. Time being a manner of appearance rather than a manner of disposition, I have no instantaneous memory that displays the answer, the way a memory of five dots on the face of a die displays five dots. Instead, I replay the sequence of notes in my mind, tapping a different finger after each one. Or I make marks on paper and then count them. Performing these processes puts me in a position to provide some number, which is not the same thing as grasping all the notes in a unity of consciousness. Something similar happens if I am asked to say which note or which word of a verse occurs between which others. I need to map the temporal relations onto space by reciting them in order as I draw symbols for the notes or words and then contemplate the spatial relations between the symbols. Such unity of consciousness as I achieve is of spatial relations between signs, not temporal relations of signata.

The most difficult cases for this account are posed by phenomena like the perception of motion or the hearing of the syllables of a word. As classically claimed by Broad (1923: 351), there is a difference between seeing a second hand moving and seeing that an hour hand has moved. Accounting for the former seems to demand some sort of unified consciousness of the very recent past and the present precluded by Hume’s insistence that the present is unextended, that the past no longer exists and that the past is not directly conceived in present memory. But as compelling as Broad’s distinction may be, Hume could make a respectable case for rejecting it. A bird soars past me against a featureless background. A person stands before me against the same background as I rotate my eyes and head to one side. Or I hold a magnifying glass at arm’s length and raise it, along with my eyes and head, while looking through it at the person’s inverted image. The bird is perceived to move across my visual field. But my visual field is perceived to turn past the motionless person. And the image seen through the magnifying glass is perceived to race in the direction the glass is moving at twice its speed while the glass appears stationary (Welsh 1986: 24.21). That such different experiences should result from such similar sequences of retinal excitation suggests that the experiences are not as direct as they seem to be. Some background operation is involved, opening the door to the kind of account Hume would need to provide – an account like Berkeley’s account of visual depth perception. Perhaps perceiving motion is just a more effortless, rapid or pre-cognitive form of perceiving that something has moved, drawing on proprioception or habituation.

Someone struggling to learn a language appreciates how a succession of syllables or words can only be grasped after repetition has ingrained a habit, so that hearing the first syllable raises a limited number of expectations, further narrowed by hearing the next syllable, and ultimately only confirmed by the remainder. Hence the difficulty of understanding those with foreign accents, and the shock and confusion we experience when hearing those who do not respect the common idiom in the sequence of their words. The novelties force us to rewind and replay to figure out the meaning, and this opens the possibility that the meaning is never grasped by way of a unity of consciousness of the successive words or symbols, but only by having pre-conceptions narrowed and confirmed over the course of time. It is so long since we learned to see that we are no longer judges of whether something similar happens with moving bodies.

We think that having an impression or an idea of succession consists in grasping a relation between the successive elements. But it takes time to hear do, re, me, fa, so; and it also takes time to remember that I heard them that way because at no point am I able to recall all five notes at once. My memory instead takes the form of reciting these five notes in the order they were first apprehended. I am only ever conscious of them sequentially and of a potential to start myself on a course that will lead me to imagine the rest in sequence – a sequence that I can’t see in
advance, but can only grasp incrementally as I recite it yet again. The touted unity of consciousness of the five notes may not exist. The “impression of succession” that is something more than a “succession of impressions” may just be the feeling of confidence in the ability to recite the succession of ideas without balking.

Hume did not make the various observations I have just made. But he did appeal to the mechanisms I have appealed to – habituation, the formation of expectations and the projection of feelings – when accounting for such related phenomena as causal inference, the understanding of abstract terms and the attribution of necessitating power to causes. They can serve as a Humean way of defending Hume’s account of temporal experience as having experiences over time rather than having experiences of time.

Having developed this intriguing approach, Hume muddied it by going on to insist that the temporally disposed perceptions must all be different from one another and that no gaps could occur in the sequence. These are claims for which he had no good argument. Perhaps he thought that a succession of identical perceptions or a succession of gaps would be too hard to notice or measure when most of the members of the succession no longer exist. He is so far from having given any good reason for his position that even this is speculation. Aside from that extravagance, he offered a bold and plausible account of temporal awareness.12

Notes


2 Locke 1706: 2.14.6, 16, 22. E in subsequent references.

3 For further discussion, see Bardon 2007: 48–49 and Yaffe 2011: 399. Drawing on the closing sentences of Essay 2.14.3, Yaffe proposes an ingenious solution, which involves assimilating two different sorts of ideas and appealing to a Cartesian notion of self-consciousness. See also Chapter 2: 34 of this volume.


5 Baxter’s argument neglects antisymmetry, instead defining coexistence purely negatively, so that being coexistent has no more to do with being earlier or later in time than being red or blue. On Baxter’s account, a simple impression may “coexist” with a succession of others without detriment to its simplicity. This would mean that for any given simple impression, there will always be a possibility that a succession of arbitrarily many other impressions may “coexist” with that impression. A more robust notion of coexistence is needed to save Hume’s position on infinite divisibility from this consequence.

6 For expressions of this view, see Bardon 2007: 56; Dainton 2011: 389; Yaffe 2011: 399 and, classically, James 1890: 628. Hoerl 2013 provides further history and discussion.

7 For a particularly eloquent statement of this objection, see Bardon 2007: 56–58.

8 Dainton 2014: 2.3.


10 Reid resists classification on the spectrum of positions on temporal consciousness identified by Dainton 2014: 1.1–1.2. He was not an antirealist, because he believed the past is directly apprehended. He was not a retentionalist, because he denied that memory retains representations of past events. He was not an extensionalist, because he confined acts of consciousness to the present moment.

11 See Phillips 2010: 192–195 and 198 for a more recent ability-based account of temporal awareness that involves some of the elements presented here but that differs in taking the very recent past to have an equally important, constitutive (as opposed to a merely causal) role to play in determining the content of current experience.

12 Thanks to Ian Phillips and Maité Cruz-Tleugabulova for comments on earlier drafts.

References

Eighteenth-century texts are cited from original edition page photographs accessed through Eighteenth Century Collections Online compared to modern critical editions where the reproduction is poor.

Further reading

L. Falkenstein, “Hume on the idea of a vacuum”, Hume Studies 39 (2013): 131–168 argues that Hume’s rejection of ideas of empty space was likewise inconsistent with his account of space as a manner of disposition.
D. A. Larivière and T. M. Lennon, “The history and significance of Hume’s burning coal example”, Journal of Philosophical Research 27 (2002): 511–526, argues that Hume drew his example and his morals from Bayle rather than Locke, but does not explain why he would not have said so.