

Reply to Arthur Morton's

"Hume, Representation, Realism and Linguistic Cognition"

Stefanie Rocknak
Hartwick College

Although I am sympathetic to Arthur's project, I think that his critique of the skeptical realists, i.e. the "New Humeans" (c.f. Read and Richman, 2000) does not quite do the work it needs to. In Part I of this paper, I sketch the general structure of Arthur's argument. In Part II, I explain why I think his critique could be strengthened, primarily by taking a closer look at his opponents' positions, and the replies that have been launched against them.

Part I. Morton's Argument

Arthur claims that Hume is not engaged in the "project of natural philosophy" (Morton, 3), where such a project is concerned with giving a philosophical/scientific account of the nature of causation, substance, power, moral rightness, virtue, free-will, naturalistic theories of perceptions, etc. (Morton, 3) Nor does Hume's main project entail giving "an adequate theory of perception" (Morton, 8). Rather, what Hume *is* concerned with, is explaining "the cognitive conditions" (Morton, 4) which must obtain in order for any of these issues to make sense, to be *intelligible*. In particular, Arthur writes: "In holding that Hume was interested in providing an account of cognition I am maintaining that Hume is interested in the cognitive processes that underlie our various beliefs and ideas and that

he is decidedly not interested in the physical interactions constituting our impressions.”
(Morton, 10)

Meanwhile, according to those whom Arthur identifies as skeptical realists (Strawson, Wright, Garrett and Buckle), Hume is committed to a mind-independent reality. However, the skeptical realists explain, Hume thought that our impressions do not give us direct access to reality. Thus, we can never *know* the true nature of reality. Arthur highlights two approaches that these scholars generally take to support their interpretation. First, Hume uses “metaphysically invested language.” Arthur cites a passage from Hume’s essay, “The Sceptic” (217-218) and a passage from T 1.2.5 as presenting particularly strong *prima facie* evidence of such language. (Morton, 5). Second, Hume was interested in giving a “mechanistic” account of perception, and thus, he must have thought that real, mind independent objects are the ultimate (although unknowable) causes of our impressions; real things literally “impress” themselves upon us.

However, Arthur argues, both of these approaches are not appropriate, for the following reasons, respectively. First, in regard to Hume’s metaphysically invested language, Hume’s intelligibility criterion effectively eliminates “any tendentious metaphysical baggage from [his] theory” (Morton, 8). This criterion of intelligibility, Arthur explains, is nothing other than Hume’s theory of ideas, which amounts to the following: i.) According to Hume, terms signify ideas. ii) An idea is only intelligible (and not “feigned”) if it corresponds to some impression or impressions. Thus iii) “a term is intelligible if and only if it is associated with some feature of our experience (i.e. impression or set of impressions)” (Morton, 10) Consequently, when Hume speaks of

“objects,” as he does in the passage from the “The Skeptic,” he could only be talking about *impressions*, particularly, “we should take him to be asserting that a celestial mechanics of any sort is simply attempting to discern the coherence among impressions” (Morton, 10). For, Arthur’s reading seems to be, Hume asserts that we do not have impressions of objects. Thus, he could not be talking about mind-independent objects; according to Hume’s theory of ideas, such talk would be unintelligible.

As for the mechanistic account, Arthur claims that Hume is “decidedly not interested in the physical interactions of our impressions” (Morton, 10). Rather, Hume is concerned with intelligibility, and thus, since “cognitive content must terminate in impressions of one sort or another any talk of the antecedent powers which give rise to the impressions will be unintelligible insofar as it aims at signifying anything that outstrips our impressions. ‘Causal powers,’ in the realist manner of speaking lacks cognitive content.” (Morton, 10) In short, talk of “real things” impressing themselves upon us is unintelligible. We have no impressions of such things, and so, any term or terms that refers to them would be incoherent.

Part II. Some Problems

As I mentioned in the introduction to my response, I am sympathetic to Arthur’s general project. However, it seems to me that Arthur has not paid enough attention to his opponents’ actual position. Almost all of the New Humeans are well aware of Hume’s “intelligibility criterion” (Hume’s theory of ideas), and attempted to address it in various ways.¹ Here, for the sake of brevity, I will touch on just Strawson’s recent (2000) attempt

¹ Winkler gives a nice overview of how each New Humean tackles the intelligibility criterion in his paper, “The New Hume” (2000): “The scope of [Hume’s] theory [of ideas] seems to be universal, and its force

to handle the intelligibility criterion by appealing to “relative ideas” (note however, that relative ideas were initially discussed at length in Flage (1981, 1990; 42-51), and that Strawson also appeals to them in earlier work (1989)). Strawson devotes two sections of his paper, “David Hume: Objects and Power” (2000) to the intelligibility criterion, writing:

I will now approach the general issue of Hume’s attitude to questions of meaning and intelligibility by defending the view that he was committed to the intelligibility of the realist conception of objects...[some believe] that Hume is some sort of idealist about objects, and is forced to be so by a theory of meaning which entails that talk of external objects is unintelligible (2000, 35)

He continues shortly thereafter:

When Hume says that something is unintelligible then, he means that we can understand it. In particular, he means that we cannot form an idea of it or term for it that has any positive descriptive content on the terms of the theory of ideas...Hume’s position on this matter is like Locke’s position with respect to the ‘real essence’ of gold. Locke takes it that the real essence of gold is completely unknown to us. This leads him to say that in so far as the word ‘gold’ carries a ‘tacit reference to the real essence’ of gold, as it does in common use, it has ‘*no signification at all*, being put for somewhat, whereof we have no idea at all.’ In other words, the word ‘gold’ is completely meaningless—it lacks any positive descriptive content on the terms of the theory of ideas—in so far as it taken to refer to the unknown essence of gold. (2000, 35).

Strawson writes just a page later:

unforgiving: it seems to say that any alleged thought or conception lacking an appropriate pedigree is unintelligible, or meaningless. But defenders of the New Hume dispute this reading. Some narrow the scope of the theory by suggesting there are thoughts or conceptions to which the theory does not apply. The theory of ideas was not meant to account for all thought, Edward Craig argues, but covers ‘only that area of thought which is susceptible of reasoning, experiment, clarity, [and] knowledge of truth and falsehood.’ (Craig 1987: 126). Broughton suggests that we can achieve ‘the bare thought ...of there being some feature of objects that underlies...constant conjunctions,’ even if our minds are too feeble to form the corresponding idea (Broughton 1987: 235). And Strawson claims that the theory applies not to every conception but only to ‘positively contentful’ ones (Strawson 1989: 122). Others dampen the theory’s force by suggesting that what is unintelligible, meaningless, or absurd in Hume’s sense is not unintelligible, meaningless or absurd in our case. Hume is not saying that talk of ultimate causes is meaningless, Livingston argues, only that it is empirically vacuous (1984: 165). Hume’s use of word ‘meaning’ is ‘special,’ suggests Wright (1983: 129). ‘Careful attention to Hume’s text,’ he explains, reveals that ‘meaningless’ terms can nonetheless ‘refer to something real’ (1983: 125). Costa likewise suggests that Hume uses ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ in a ‘special, technical sense’...(Costa 1989: 180).” (Winkler, 2000, 59-60).

Hume says that it is ‘impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of anything specifically different from ideas and impressions’ (T 67). By ‘specifically different’ he means ‘of a different species or kind’; so his claim is that we cannot form any idea of anything which is of an entirely different species or kind from ideas and (sensory) impressions. Why not? Because the content of our ideas is entirely derived or copied from our impressions, and such impression-copy content can never amount to a genuine representation of something entirely different from impressions. (2000, 36)

Ironically, in these three passages, we see the main idea driving Arthur’s paper, fully articulated and acknowledged in one of his primary opponents.

In fact, as mentioned above, Strawson attempts to handle it (and thus, it seems, Arthur) by focusing on relative ideas. Very basically, Strawson argues that certain (relative) ideas may pick out things like “Causation” (i.e. mind-independent capital-C causation) and objects “while having no descriptively contentful conception of its nature on the terms of the theory of ideas” (2000, 37). Thus, Strawson concludes that:

Hume has to grant that thought and language can reach beyond perceptions in such a way that the thought that something other than perception exists *can be allowed to be intelligible and possibly true*. For if he does not do this, then ... he is condemned to dogmatic metaphysics; to outright ontological idealism; to the statement that ‘All that exist are perceptions’ is *provably true*. (2000, 39; first emphasis is mine)

However, curiously enough, we see no mention of Strawson’s relative-idea solution to the intelligibility criterion in Arthur’s paper (nor any other New Humean solution to this problem, e.g. Craig (1987), Broughton (1987), Livingston (1984), Wright (1983), and Costa (1989)). Surely Arthur needs to address these solutions if are to take his dismissal of the New Humeans seriously. Moreover, Arthur needs to address the fact that Strawson’s relative-idea solution, and many others, have already been contested in the literature. See for instance, Winkler’s paper “The New Hume” (2000) and Flage’s “Relative ideas re-viewed” (2000).

In sum, I think that if Arthur is to effectively engage the problem that the New Humeans have put before us, he needs to explain why their various solutions (including Strawson's) to the intelligibility problem do not work. Moreover, he needs to explain how his critique would differ, or add to what (at least) Winkler and Flage have already given us. Granted, it may be the case that in virtue of claiming that Hume is only concerned with giving cognitive conditions of possibility for intelligibility, rather than giving a theory of perception, that Arthur's take on the theory of ideas is significantly different from the majority of the New Humeans. If this is the case, then it is possible that Arthur is, indeed, presenting a version of the intelligibility criterion that is *not* openly acknowledged and addressed by the New Humeans. But if so, Arthur needs to explain how and why this is the case in much greater detail.

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