

HUME'S THEORY
OF THE
EXTERNAL WORLD

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTORY

HUME'S discussion of Causality and Induction is familiar to all students of Philosophy, some of whom seem almost to think that he never wrote about anything else. His theory of Personal Identity has also attracted a good deal of attention from subsequent philosophers and psychologists. But his theory of Perception and of the External World has been very little discussed, and seems to have had little or no influence upon his successors. Yet it is one of the most brilliant and most original parts of the *Treatise of Human Nature*, and the problems with which it is concerned have not lost their interest, or their importance. The theory is stated in *Treatise* Book I, Part iv, Section 2, the title of which is *Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses*; and some additional remarks are made about it in Part iv, Section 4, *Of the Modern Philosophy*, and in Section 5 of the same part, *Of the Immateriality of the Soul*. My aim in this book is to remedy the neglect into which these sections of the *Treatise* have fallen, particularly the section *Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses*.

Why have they been so neglected, even by those modern Empiricists who in other matters regard Hume as their master? It is partly Hume's own fault. When he came to write the *Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*, which professes to be the definitive reformulation of his theory of knowledge, he reduced these sections of the *Treatise* to a brief and sketchy summary, and omitted the most interesting passages altogether.¹ The result was that this part of his philosophy, unlike his examination of Necessary Connexion, made very little impression upon his own contemporaries. Accordingly Kant did not feel called upon to produce an answer to it; and the philosophers of the nine-

¹ *Inquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section 12, Part i.

teenth century, who mostly looked at Hume through Kant's eyes, assumed that since Kant did not discuss it, it could not be worth discussing. This ignorance or forgetfulness of Kant's was most unfortunate. If he had had this part of the *Treatise* before him when he was writing the *Transcendental Deduction of the Categories* he would have found that his own theory of the Phenomenal World, and of the part played by the imagination in our consciousness of Phenomenal Objects, was in many ways parallel to Hume's.

There is another and quite a different reason for the neglect from which this part of the *Treatise* has suffered. This is that the conclusion it reaches is to all appearance purely destructive. I will quote the passage in which Hume sums up his argument. He says: 'Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses; or, more properly speaking, betwixt those conclusions we form from cause and effect, and those that persuade us of the continued and independent existence of body.'¹ For this opposition he professes to see no theoretical solution. He can only suggest a practical cure—'carelessness and inattention'.² This desperate, or apparently desperate, conclusion has naturally led readers to infer that the discussion which leads to it cannot deserve serious and detailed examination. The impression of bankruptcy is strengthened by the very title of the section in which the greater part of that discussion is contained: '*Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses*'. (It is easy to forget Hume's own explanation of the rather peculiar meaning which he attaches to that shocking word.) Consequently it is not surprising that subsequent writers on the subject have tended to ignore Hume's contribution to it, and have preferred to make a fresh start.

Before going further, I should like to offer some general remarks about the spirit in which Hume's theory of know-

¹ *Treatise*, Part iv, Section 4 *Of the Modern Philosophy*, last paragraph: Everyman edition, p. 221; Selby-Bigge's edition, p. 231. In future these two editions will be referred to as 'E.' and 'S.B.' respectively.

² E. pp. 209-10; S.B. p. 218.

ledge ought to be studied. The purely historical treatment of it does not concern me, though I think that the traditional view which makes him a mere stepping-stone between Berkeley and Kant has begun to wear a little thin by now. My remarks are addressed to those who write about him as philosophers, not as mere historians of philosophical literature: to those who ask what his statements mean, and whether they are true or false, and what consequences they entail. I have nothing to say, here or elsewhere, to those who inquire into the historical genesis of his opinions.

I think that there was a time when almost all philosophical students of Hume believed that their main duty was to refute him. It was the fashion to approach his works in a spirit of Rhadamanthine inflexibility, pouncing on every error and every inconsistency—and of course there are plenty of both—and always taking him exactly at his word. There is much in Hume, as in other writers of his period, which naturally did not commend itself to the sentiments of a more high-minded age. He is never edifying; indeed he often goes out of his way to be shocking. He sometimes conveys his conclusions by irony and innuendo rather than by explicit statement. He writes in a light and bantering tone even when he is discussing the most profound problems: whereas Philosophy is supposed to be a very serious subject, no matter for jesting. Above all, his style is altogether too clear and elegant. A philosopher is expected to be obscure, technical, and prolix; if he is not, it is thought that his opinions are not worthy of the attention of earnest men.

This attitude of systematic hostility and quasi-moral disapprobation was a most unfortunate one. If we want to learn something from Hume's writings—and if not, why read him at all?—we must resolve to give him a fair run for his money, even when he appears most perverse and outrageous. When he makes mistakes, we must try to get him out of them, by suggesting other alternatives which he might consistently have adopted. We must try to go behind

his language, and when he is obscure (which he seldom is) we must try to make him clear. That is the spirit in which the works of Kant are commonly studied. 'What he really meant', we say, 'is perhaps not quite what he said'; 'such and such a passage does not express his mature thought, so we are free to correct it in the light of others which do'. We try to restate Kant's doctrines in modern terminology. We stretch them a little, so that they may be able to accommodate the subsequent developments of Physics or Psychology or Logic. Now it seems to me that this is the right way to treat the writings of a great philosopher. I suggest that we should extend to Hume a portion of that charity—indulgence if you like—which we have long been accustomed to practise towards Kant. I do not suggest that we should do it for Hume's sake, but for our own. Contrary to the precepts of Kantian ethics, we must use our illustrious predecessors as means, not as ends: as means to help us to understand the world, or to analyse our experience, or to clear up our linguistic muddles, or whatever the aim of philosophical inquiry is thought to be. (After all, if we use them so, it is really the highest compliment we can pay them.) But if we insist upon treating them as Aunt Sallies, we are not likely to learn much from them, and might as well leave their books unopened.

It must be confessed that Hume's theory of knowledge gives plenty of scope for our charity. I will mention some instances. In the first place, he states the Empiricist Principle in a very misleading way when he says that all ideas are derived from impressions, and tells us at the same time that by 'idea' he only means 'mental image'. (The Empiricist Principle, as his own subsequent use of it makes clear, is really concerned not with images at all, but with our consciousness of universals.) It says that every universal which we are aware of has *either* been directly abstracted from sense-given or introspectively given instances, *or* can be wholly defined in terms of universals thus abstracted.

Secondly, his whole theory of Universals is in any case seriously defective. In his attempt to amend it (in the brief but little-read section on *Abstract Ideas*¹) he says some very interesting things about the mental machinery by means of which universals are thought of, but almost nothing about universals themselves. He apparently thinks that a universal is reducible to a class of mutually resembling particulars. But he does not elaborate this view, nor does he make any attempt to defend it. Indeed, he does not even state it explicitly.

Thirdly, his theory of Memory is most unsatisfactory as it stands (but so are many other people's). Remembering, he seems to hold, consists in the having of a series of images which are more than usually vivid and whose order we cannot alter. But if he is to know what he professes to know about the derivation of ideas from impressions—or for that matter about the abstraction of universals from sensed and introspected instances—he requires an immediate apprehension of past impressions themselves. The idea is present to the mind now; the impressions from which it is supposed to have been derived are past and gone. If he can no longer inspect the past impressions, how is he to tell whether the present idea was or was not derived from them? What can even lead him to suspect that it was derived from anything at all? (He ought to have made memory a third species of *acquaintance*, alongside of sensation and introspection.) Or at least he ought to have said that the word 'memory' covers several different states of mind, and that some memory is acquaintance with the past, even though most memory is only belief, and some is no other than sheer obstinacy.

Fourthly, it may be doubted whether his theory of the Self is consistent either with his theory of Inductive Inference or with his theory of the External World. For 'the imagination', which plays so prominent a part in the two

¹ *Treatise*, Book I, Part i, Section 7.

last, seems uncommonly like the permanent self which he has rejected; or at least it seems to be permanent in a sense in which a series of impressions and images is not. Indeed there is the same difficulty within the section on *Personal Identity* itself.¹ His account of the identity of continuants in general is not easily reconciled with his account of the identity of the self in particular. A continuant, he says, is a series of numerically and qualitatively diverse particulars along which the imagination makes a smooth transition. The identity of a continuant is therefore a 'fictitious', or as others might say, a 'constructed' identity. But if the imagination is to make this smooth transition from item to item, must not it itself have an identity which is *not* fictitious or constructed? If it is itself a series of particular imagings, what can we mean by saying that it makes a smooth transition along some other series of particulars? Perhaps there is some way of answering these questions without reintroducing the Pure Ego which Hume has officially rejected. But it is clear that the theory needs pretty drastic reformulation if his fundamental contentions are to be preserved.

Lastly, I will give an instance which comes still closer to the main subject of this book. Hume ought to have rewritten his theory of Causality and Induction in the light of his own theory of Perception and the External World. He holds, if I interpret him rightly, that a causal rule does two things: it *states* that a certain constant conjunction has been observed in the past; and it *gives expression to* a habit of confident expectation about its future constancy, in the same sort of way as the word 'hurrah!' gives expression to a feeling of approval. (If we wish to apply this account to Induction in general, not restricting it to causal inductions, we must substitute for the word 'expectation' some mere general term, such as '*extrapolation*'.) If we had the confident expectation without the observed constant conjunc-

¹ *Treatise*, Book I, Part iv, Section 6.

tion—as, of course, people often do—then we should be superstitious or silly or unscientific. The expectation is only sensible or justifiable or scientific if it is in accordance with observed constant conjunctions. (I use these queer adjectives to avoid using the word 'rational'. Hume's whole point, of course, is that induction is neither rational nor irrational: only we must remember that he uses the word 'reason' in a very narrow sense, covering only intuition of self-evident propositions and deductive inference.)

And now we come to the difficulty. What *are* these constant conjunctions? What is conjoined with what? If we judge from the bulk of Hume's instances in the section on *Necessary Connexion*, they are *events in the material world* or *states of material objects*. Thus he talks about the movement and impact of billiard balls, and about the conjunction of flame and heat, immersion in water and suffocation. These are certainly not just conjunctions of actually presented sense-impressions. And if he was only speaking in a popular way, for brevity's sake, and really intended his conjunctions to be conjunctions between sense-impressions (as one or two passages suggest that he did), then I think he was making a mistake. It is very doubtful whether there *are* any constant conjunctions of sense-impressions. If we try to formulate one, any drowsy nod or blink will refute us. We have only to shut our eyes or turn our head at the critical moment, when the alleged constant conjunct is due to occur, and it will not occur at all. It is not the case, for instance, that the complex impression of one billiard ball striking another is always followed by an impression of the second one's motion. If I blink or faint or die just as the first impression is ending, the second one will never come into being. So Hume was quite right to use the language he did use, the language of material objects and physical events. Only so can he secure the *constant conjunctions* which his theory of Induction requires. But in that case what can the *observing* of constant conjunctions be?

This is the point at which Hume ought to have turned to his own theory of the External World in the section on *Scepticism with regard to the Senses*. If we do so on his behalf, we find him saying there that what we commonly call our consciousness of material objects and events—and therefore of their conjunctions—consists largely of *imagination*. It is a combination of two factors, acquaintance with sense-impressions, and imagination. (How they are combined and what precisely the function of 'imagination' is, we must try to explain later.) It most certainly is not sense-acquaintance alone. Thus in the establishing of a causal rule the imagination really comes in *twice over*. It is already required for the so-called observation of constant conjunctions. And then, of course, the expectation, which our rule gives expression to, is itself according to Hume a habit of the imagination.)

We see, then, that the order in which Hume writes his book is liable to mislead both his readers and himself. (It is much as if Kant had put the *Analogies* before the *Transcendental Deduction* instead of after.) As the text stands, the reader does not notice that the section on *Necessary Connexion* requires to be reformulated in the light of the section on *Scepticism with regard to the Senses*. And if this reformulation were carried out, the theory of Necessary Connexion might look less plausible than it now does. At any rate it would look—if I may say so—much less empirical. For the ultimate data, from which induction must start, turn out to be much fewer in number than we thought they were, and display in themselves little if any regularity. The constant conjunctions from which Hume *says* it starts are not ultimate data at all. They are not something which we just find and there's an end of it. Or rather, what we call the 'finding' of them already includes a good deal of imaginative extrapolation. To say the same thing in another way, the imagination is even more fundamental in Hume's theory of knowledge than he himself admits. If you like,

his theory of the Empirically Real is even more Kantian than it looks. To do Hume justice, I do not think he would much mind admitting this. There are some very Kantian sentences in the Introduction to the *Treatise*, which I cannot forbear to quote, because very little attention seems to have been paid to them. 'There is no question of importance', he says, 'whose decision is not comprised in the science of man; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science. In pretending therefore to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a complete system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security.'¹ What is this but a Scottish version of Kant's Copernican Revolution?

I have now mentioned a number of weaknesses in Hume's theory of knowledge and in his exposition of it. They come out most clearly when we consider not the several parts of the theory but the whole, the manner in which the parts are interrelated. And I think they all arise from a common source. Hume has a native genius for *economy*, and sometimes he has allowed it to run away with him. Consequently he has to resort to a little quiet inflation now and then, by way of compensation. Thus in discussing Induction he writes as if his account of the Self or of Memory or of the External World had been a good deal less economical than in fact they are. But after all, over-economy is a good fault: it is at any rate much better than the contrary vice, the habit of multiplying ultimates and unanalysables *ad libitum*, to which some of his opponents have been addicted.

Moreover, why *must* Hume's theory of knowledge always be treated as a whole, like some 'indivisible' Peace Plan put forward by a continental statesman? If our aim is to show that he was wrong, no doubt we shall treat it so.

¹ E. p. 5; S.B. p. xx. Cf. the whole passage, E. pp. 4-5; S.B. pp. xix-xx.

But if our aim is to get what we can out of him, we might do better to consider the parts separately and on their own merits. For instance, his theory of the External World might be true, even if his theory of the Self or of Memory or of Universals is hopelessly mistaken; or, if not true, it might be illuminating, and assist others to produce a better one. So, too, his theory of Induction might prove illuminating to those who ignored or forgot his theory of the External World: as in fact it has.

At any rate, this is the principle upon which I shall proceed in the present book. I wish to examine Hume's theory of Perception and the External World upon its own merits, as it stands in the section on *Scepticism with regard to the Senses* (*Treatise*, Book I, Part iv, Section 2). It will be necessary to refer occasionally to two other sections of Part iv—Section 4, *Of the Modern Philosophy*, and Section 5, *Of the Immateriality of the Soul*—since these add some finishing touches without which the argument of Section 2 cannot be fully understood. But henceforth I shall say as little as possible about Hume's other epistemological doctrines; and nothing about the consistency, or inconsistency, of his theory of knowledge as a whole.

My aim is to bring out the positive and constructive side of Hume's teaching, rather than the destructive side, which he stressed himself (why he was led to do so, we shall see later). Naturally, I shall have to expound what he says in some detail. I shall not, however, scruple to simplify his argument when this appears possible. In this part of the *Treatise* Hume was breaking entirely new ground, and it is not surprising that he should have stated his views in a needlessly complicated and tortuous form. Moreover, as we shall see, he made a serious mistake at a critical point in his argument. I shall try to show that this mistake can be corrected, and that his constructive doctrine can then be developed a good deal further, without sacrificing any of the fundamental principles of his philosophy.

CHAPTER II

CONSTANCY AND COHERENCE

HUME introduces his discussion with a famous and intriguing remark. 'We may well ask', he says, '*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. The subject, then, of our present enquiry is concerning the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body.'¹

In what sense is it 'in vain' to ask whether there be body or not? The obvious interpretation is this: Whether we like it or not, we all do as a matter of fact believe that there is a material world, even though we can give no good reasons for our belief; and however hard we try, it is psychologically impossible for us to question whether the belief is true. This interpretation is supported by the remark which Hume makes immediately above. 'Nature', he says, 'has not left this to his [the sceptic's] choice and has doubtless esteemed it an affair of too great importance, to be trusted to our uncertain reasonings and speculations.'² But if this is what Hume holds, he lays himself open to three criticisms. The first, it is true, is merely *ad hominem*. At the end of the section he admits that in his philosophical moments he does doubt the existence of a material world, though 'carelessness and inattention' very quickly put a stop to his doubt and restore him to his usual credulity.³ If so, it is not after all psychologically impossible to enquire whether there be body or not; it is only difficult and unusual. And the asking of such difficult questions—questions which go so much against the grain of our natural tendencies—might very well be the main business

¹ E. p. 183; S.B. p. 187. The italics are Hume's own.

² E. pp. 182-3; S.B. p. 187. Compare Hutcheson's remarks about Reason and the Moral Sense in Selby-Bigge's *British Moralists*, vol. i, p. 156.

³ E. pp. 208 *fin.*—209; S.B. pp. 217-18.

of a philosopher. The second criticism is more serious. It concerns the nature of belief itself. If I believe *p*, the question 'is *p* true or false?' must make sense. It must be *logically* possible that this question should be asked, even if it be psychologically impossible for human beings to ask it, having the particular psychological constitution which human beings happen to have. For otherwise *p* would not be a *believable* at all. If anyone believed something which it was logically impossible to question, he simply would not be believing. Likewise, if it is psychologically impossible for human beings to ask a certain question, it follows from this very fact that the question itself makes sense. If it did not, the psychological weakness which prevents us from asking it would not be a genuine incapacity. To be unable to do something logically impossible is not an incapacity at all: just as it is not a physical weakness to be unable to jump from here to the middle of last week. The third criticism is similar to the one often made against those philosophers who seek to lay down limits to knowledge. In the very act of formulating the supposed psychological impossibility we contradict ourselves. For in saying that it is impossible for human beings to consider a certain question, we ourselves have to formulate that question; and thereby we tacitly assert that we at least *have* succeeded in considering it, even though ordinary unphilosophical persons are unable to do so. Finally, perhaps it might be suggested that we are capable of considering the question, but that we are incapable of considering the answer 'No'; and that this is the sense in which it is 'in vain' to inquire whether there be body or not—it is in vain because we can only give one answer, and we know beforehand which it will be. But here there is the same difficulty. In saying that it is psychologically impossible to consider the answer 'No', we tacitly assert that we ourselves *are* able to consider it.

For all these reasons, it is desirable to find some other

interpretation of Hume's dictum if we can. And it is easy to suggest another. Perhaps he is saying not that it is psychologically impossible for us to inquire 'whether there be body or not', but rather that the question is itself *meaningless*: that this interrogative formula, though grammatically correct, does not formulate a question at all. (Compare the interrogative formula 'how many miles is it from here to the middle of last week?') We can easily see how we might be led to think that the question made sense, even if it were in fact nonsensical. It is sense to ask about any particular sort of body whether it exists or not. For instance, it is sense to ask whether there are lions in the Antarctic, or even whether there are any lions anywhere; and it is sense to ask whether there is a chair in the bathroom, or even whether there are any chairs anywhere. The like is true of any *specific* material-object word or description we choose to take; we can always ask whether it has application or not. But perhaps when we try to generalize this process, and ask whether there are any material objects at all ('whether there be body or not'), we fall into nonsense, and our question becomes a pseudo-question. If this is what Hume means by 'tis in vain' to enquire he has at least said something which is philosophically interesting and important, whether it is true or not. Let us assume for the future that this is what he is trying to say, though as a matter of historical fact he probably failed to distinguish clearly between the psychologically impossible and the meaningless or nonsensical.

We may now turn to the question which Hume tells us we *can* ask, viz. what causes induce us to believe in the existence of body? His language suggests that this is just a straightforward question of Empirical Psychology, as if we asked what causes induce us to respect those who are richer and more powerful than ourselves, or to dislike those whom we have injured. Now this in turn suggests that the Empirical Self, the object of Empirical Psychology, has, so

to speak, a more secure status than the world of bodies. Hume speaks here as if the Empirical Self, and the causal processes which go on in it, were an object of *knowledge* or at any rate of rational opinion, whereas the material world is something less than this—an object of non-rational taking for granted, or perhaps even a fiction. But as we see from his later discussion of Personal Identity,¹ this is not really his considered view. If the material world is a fiction, the self is a fiction no less. If the material world is an imaginative construction (whatever that phrase may mean), the self is equally an imaginative construction.

Moreover, when we turn back to the section on *Necessary Connexion*,² we find that causal laws themselves merely express habits of the imagination; and this must apply to the laws of Psychology no less than to the laws of Physics. Thus the status of psychological laws, for instance laws concerning the genesis of beliefs, is really no less puzzling than the status of the material world itself. It is not as if psychological laws, or the self which they are laws about, could be discovered by pure introspection, by simply attending to the impressions of reflection, as Hume calls them; or if they could be, then equally the material world could be discovered by mere inspection of the impressions of sense. In both cases alike we do have indubitable data, at least in Hume's opinion; in the one, they are the data of introspection, in the other the data of sense. But in both cases alike we have to 'transcend' the data before we can talk either about minds or about bodies, either about causation in Psychology or about causation in Physics. And if the nature and justification of this transcendence are puzzling in the second case, they are equally puzzling in the first.

Thus Hume seems to be confused both about the question which he says we *can* ask ('what causes induce us to

believe . . .') and about the question which he says we *cannot* ask ('whether there be body or not'). And the source of both confusions is the same. It is his psychologistic attitude, his failure to distinguish philosophical problems from psychological ones. Can we disentangle the second confusion as we tried to disentangle the previous one? I believe that we can. I think we shall find that here as elsewhere his practice is better than his professions, and we may reformulate his question in the light of the procedure which he himself adopts in answering it. The question which he actually tries to answer a few pages farther on¹ would come to something like this: *given what characteristics of sense-impressions do we assert material-object propositions?* His answer is that we only assert them when sense-impressions are related to each other in certain special ways (what ways, we shall see later). Now this is not a psychological question at all, nor is it a causal question. It belongs to the inquiry which is now called 'philosophical analysis'. It is a question about the *meaning* of material-object words and material-object sentences, and about the rules of their use.

If this is the question which Hume actually answers, why does he not see clearly that he is asking it? Why does he pretend to be asking a question of Genetic Psychology? There seem to be two reasons. One is an imperfection of terminology. The word 'imagination' is the keyword of Hume's whole theory of knowledge. But he never quite succeeded in drawing the distinction which Kant drew later between the Transcendental Imagination and the Empirical Imagination.² The Transcendental Imagination, according to Kant, is something which makes experience possible, where 'experience' means our consciousness of Nature, or of the Phenomenal World, which includes both

¹ Part iv, Section 6.

² Part iii, Section 14. Cf. p. 6 above.

¹ In the discussion of Constancy and Coherence, E. pp. 189-99; S.B. pp. 194-206.

² *Critique of Pure Reason*, pp. A 115-A 125.

material objects and empirical selves. Without its synthetic and supplementative activities, we should be aware of nothing but a stream of sense-impressions; we should not even be aware that the stream *is* a stream and has a temporal order. (The Empirical Imagination, on the other hand, is something within the Empirical Self, whose workings (like those of any other 'power', mental or physical) can only be discovered inductively.) It is that which is manifested in the associative processes studied by Empirical Psychology—as when a man's name reminds us of his face or of another similar name. With regard to *this* sort of imagination it is right and proper to ask causal questions. What causes me to think of Smith's face when I hear his name mentioned? It is because I have frequently experienced them together in the past, and therefore have come to associate them. But it does not make sense to ask causal questions with regard to the Transcendental Imagination. For unless its activities are presupposed, we cannot be aware of a world of objects at all, whether material objects or selves, and so cannot inquire into the causal processes which go on in them.

Now Hume is in substantial agreement with Kant about the activity of the Transcendental Imagination. It is true that he lays more stress on its supplementative functions, whereas Kant lays more stress on its synthetic ones. But still, both hold that the phenomenal world, the world of material objects and empirical selves, is in some sense an imaginative construction. Hume even distinguishes in one place between those 'principles' in the imagination which are 'the foundations of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin' and other principles in it which are 'changeable, weak and irregular'.¹ (Here he comes very near to Kant's distinction between two radically different sorts of imagination, transcendental and empirical.) But if he did

see, or half see, the distinction which Kant was to make later, he certainly did not bear it in mind throughout the *Treatise*. And this is one main reason for the confusion between psychological and epistemological questions into which he frequently falls.

There is another reason for it, and that is the piecemeal way in which he wrote his book. We might have expected him to inquire into the status of the Phenomenal World as a whole, which includes the Empirical Self (the object of Empirical Psychology) as well as the world of bodies. To speak more fashionably, we might have expected him to give a *general* analysis of empirical propositions as such, or at least of all those which are more than merely 'inspective' or 'ostensive'. Now Hume himself is, of course, aware of this general problem; indeed he discovered it. It is precisely the problem of our knowledge of matters of fact, as he calls it. But unfortunately, although he often *states* the problem in this general form, he *discusses* it piecemeal, under the three separate heads of Causality, the External World, and Personal Identity. And while he is grappling with one of these subordinate problems in detail, he often forgets about the other two. Not only does he ignore the conclusions which he has reached, or is going to reach, in other parts of his book; he concentrates so much upon the particular problem he is dealing with that he forgets about the others altogether, and relapses so far as they are concerned into the realistic language of Common Sense, as if it needed neither analysis nor justification. We have already mentioned an instance from his discussion of Causality, where he seems to forget entirely the difficulties he is going to raise later about the External World, and speaks of billiard balls and other material objects like any plain man. And here likewise he asks what causes induce us to believe in the existence of body, as if common-sense views both of causality and of the empirical self were perfectly adequate and needed no analysis. One result of these lapses of

¹ E. pp. 215-16; S.B. p. 225 (first paragraph of Part iv, Section 4, *Of the Modern Philosophy*). Cf. pp. 57-8, below.

attention is the psychologistic attitude of which we have complained. Another, equally unfortunate, is that the full scope of his theory of knowledge is concealed from his readers, and probably from himself.

We must now return to our main task, the exposition of the section on *Scepticism with regard to the Senses*. Hume begins his detailed discussion by pointing out that the question 'what causes induce us to believe in the existence of body' divides into two sub-questions. The first concerns the *continued* existence of material objects: why do we attribute a continued existence to objects even when they are not present to the senses? (Why do we suppose, to take a celebrated instance, that the sycamore tree continues to be when there's no one about in the Quad?) The second concerns their *distinct* existence, as he calls it: 'why do we suppose them to have an existence distinct from the mind and perception?' He adds that this distinctness includes both their *external position* and the *independence* of their existence and operation.¹

Hume himself points out that these two questions are closely connected with each other. If bodies continue to exist when not present to the senses, it follows at once that they do not depend upon the sentient mind for their existence. He adds that the converse also holds: i.e. that if 'distinct' they must also be 'continuous'. This, however, does not strictly follow. It is conceivable that even so they might still have an interrupted being. Only, the interruptions in their being would not then be due to interruptions in our observations of them; just as in a thunderstorm the series of lightning-flashes is often discontinuous, but this discontinuity is not thought to be due to anything in the spectators. It *would*, however, follow that there were no epistemological reasons for believing that matter had a discontinuous existence; the reasons, if any, would have to be

¹ E. p. 183; S.B. p. 188.

physical ones, derived from a study of the material world itself.

We may also notice that Hume's elucidation of the phrase 'distinct existence' is rather curious. We can see roughly what he means by 'the independence of their existence and operation'. He is referring, for instance, to our common belief that the proposition 'there is a mixture of petrol and air in this cylinder and it is now being exploded by a spark' does not entail the proposition 'someone is now observing the petrol, the air, the spark and the explosion': i.e. that the first proposition can be true although the second is false. But he tells us that the 'distinct' existence of bodies also includes their *external position*. Yet in Part iv, Section 5, *Of the Immateriality of the Soul*, he himself admits and indeed vigorously insists that the mind is not in space. If so, there can be no sense in saying that a table, for instance, is external to the mind—or internal either. At the best, 'external' would be a metaphor, simply repeating 'independent of'.¹ Or does 'external position' mean 'position external to the *body* of the sentient being'? But then one's own body, as Hume points out a few pages later,² is after all itself a material object, no less problematical and puzzling than any other. Should we not be compelled to say, then, that it is external *to itself*? But this would plainly be nonsense.

Thus we seem to be left with only two questions: (1) as to the continuance of material objects through intervals of non-perception, (2) as to their independence of the perceiving mind. As we shall see, in the constructive part of his discussion Hume in fact devotes almost all his attention to the first question, treating the second as subordinate to it. In thus laying primary stress upon the problem of un-

¹ Perhaps we should say it means 'independent of the mind *and possessing spatial properties*'. At any rate this seems to be the meaning of 'external' in the phrase 'the External World', which (following common practice) we have constantly used, though Hume himself does not use it.

² E. p. 185 *ad fin.*; S.B. pp. 190-1.

perceived continuance, he makes perhaps his most original contribution to the theory of Perception and of the External World. (He is impressed, as no philosopher before him had been, by the *interrupted* and *fragmentary* character of human sense-experience.) We are always shutting our eyes, falling asleep, turning away from one thing to look at something else, withdrawing our hand from this in order to touch that. Our sense-experience, though, of course, there is some continuity in it, is full of holes and gaps. Every time we blink, there is a gap; and it will hardly do to plead that it is only a very little one. These fragmentary and interrupted sense-impressions are our only data, or so Hume assumes. And yet we all believe that despite their interruptedness they somehow manifest to us a world of continuously-existing bodies, which retain their identity through time and persist in their 'operations' both when we are sensing and when we are not. Locke had remarked that 'every drowsy nod shakes their opinion who say that the soul always thinks'. Why does it not equally shake the opinion of us all that matter has a continued existence? Why does not every blink shake it? Locke never asked this question. Hume does. He answers it in a most curious way, and few perhaps will be wholly satisfied with what he says. But he does deserve great credit for asking it.

I have said that Hume was impressed by the fragmentary and interrupted character of sense-experience, and made this the starting-point of his discussion. It may be objected, however, that as a matter of fact our sense-experience is *not* fragmentary nor interrupted, but is on the contrary continuous, throughout our waking hours at least. (Compare James Ward's phrase 'the presentation continuum', and the 'continuous sense-history' of which Professor Broad has spoken.) Now there is a sense in which this contention is obviously true. Interruptedness has to be defined by reference to continuity, and if there are several different ways in which sense-experience can be continuous, it might be

uninterrupted in one respect, but full of interruptions in another. When people say that the sense-experience of any one experient is continuous or uninterrupted throughout his waking hours, they are referring—I think—to merely *temporal* continuity. They mean that in our waking life there is no period, however short, during which we are not experiencing some sense-impression or other, whether attentively or inattentively. If visual impressions are lacking for a time, auditory or tactual ones will still be occurring; and even when all others are cut off, organic ones will still remain. In this respect, we may admit that sense-experience is *uninterrupted* so long as the experient remains awake. But when we said above that sense-experience is full of interruptions, it was not this purely temporal sort of continuity which we had in mind, but a more complex sort. To put it in a question-begging way first: it is that sort of continuity which our sense-impressions have when, as we say, we keep on observing the *same object* throughout a period; as when I keep on gazing at the sycamore tree throughout the whole of a certain minute, without blinking or falling asleep or turning my head. (The object might, of course, be changing in some way, as when we gaze uninterruptedly at a flame or a blushing face or a moving mouse.) Now this sort of continuity does occur in our sense-experience very frequently, but never for more than a short period in any one case. In visual experience, it is soon brought to an end by a blink if by nothing else. Again, we turn our head or stop up our ears or go to some other place or fall asleep. When we said that our sense-experience was frequently interrupted, full of holes and gaps, it was *this* sort of continuity which was our standard of reference, not the purely temporal sort. When I look at the sycamore tree for twenty seconds, and turn my head away, and later turn it back again, then in respect of *this* sort of continuity I experience a discontinuous or interrupted series of visual impressions, with a gap in the middle of it; though so far

as purely temporal continuity goes, there is no interruption at all—one impression follows another continuously, whichever way I turn my head.

We must now try to restate this in less question-begging language. The interruptedness which I am speaking of, and likewise the continuity with which it is contrasted, are characteristics of *sense-impressions*; it must be possible to describe them without using the material-object language, even if it is not easy. In any case, I think they are perfectly familiar to everyone. It is clear, then, that this sort of continuity does include temporal continuity, but it also includes something more, since it may be absent when temporal continuity is still present. This something more, I suggest, consists of two things: (a) continuity in respect of sensible quality, (b) continuity in respect of sense-given spatial characteristics, viz, shape, size, pattern, and sensible context. If either (a) or (b) is lacking, then the series of impressions will be said to be *interrupted*, though purely temporal continuity remains. When I look at the sycamore tree, for example, and then shut my eyes, the almost uniform greyish-red retinal field which I see is *not* in this sense continuous with the immediately preceding visual impressions, with their diversity of light greens and dark greens and their complex spatial pattern and their diverse bulgings and recessions. The series of highly variegated greenish impressions has been *interrupted*, though there is no temporal interval between their ending and the beginning of the almost uniform reddish-grey ones.

We must now return to Hume's argument. Despite these constant interruptions, we all do believe that sense-impressions somehow manifest a world of continuously existing material objects. We think that the interruptions are in our observations only, and not in the being of the objects observed. Hume's next task is to explain how this belief arises. He assumes that there are three, and only

three, possibilities: it might arise from the senses, or from reason, or from the imagination. He now proceeds to discuss these alternatives one by one.

That it does not arise from the senses is obvious. Sensation is indeed a form of knowledge, in Hume's opinion.¹ Or rather perhaps we should say that it contains two forms of knowledge: (1) *acquaintance with* certain particular existents, such as colour-expanse, sounds, and the like; (2) knowledge of *sensible facts about* these particulars, for instance knowledge that this colour-expanse is pink and of roundish shape and that it is sensibly larger than that one. Thus I could know by sensation that such and such an impression existing now, in this specious present, has such and such sensible qualities and relations. But this is also *all* that I could know about it by sensation alone. In particular, I can learn nothing from sensation as to the *continuance* of the sense-given entity before or after the time during which I sense it; nor yet, we may add, as to its non-continuance. To put it differently: I cannot tell from sensation alone whether the sense-datum is or is not a short slice of a continuing sensible; whether it was immediately preceded and will be immediately succeeded by a series of particulars resembling it, or, on the other hand, sprang into being *ex nihilo* at the moment of sensing, to vanish *in nihilum* when I cease to sense it. Sensation is simply silent on these points, and gives no answer one way or the other. Indeed, to expect it to give one is really self-contradictory. We should be demanding that we should sense an entity as it is at times when we are not sensing it. And this is incom-

¹ 'Since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear' (E. p. 185; S.B. p. 190). Here 'actions and sensations of the mind' includes impressions of every sort, both impressions of sense and impressions of reflection. Hume uses the word 'consciousness' (which in his time meant self-consciousness) because he here takes the current view that impressions of sense are mental events. But according to his developed theory of the self they are neither mental nor physical, but are the neutral elements out of which both selves and bodies are constructed. Cf. E. p. 200; S.B. p. 207.

patible with the nature of sensation, which is simply an acquaintance with what is here and now. 'They [the senses] give us no notion of a continued existence, because they cannot operate beyond the extent in which they really operate.'¹ Neither can sensation by itself throw any light upon our other question, concerning *independent* existence. Sensation has nothing to say upon causal questions. And even if it had, it could throw no light on this one, unless the mind were an object of sense, which plainly it is not; for independence is a relation, and to be aware of it one must be aware of both its terms.

We must now ask whether our belief in a material world arises from reason, if it does not arise from the senses. Obviously, says Hume, it does not *arise* from reason, even if it can subsequently be *justified* by reason. His grounds for this are as follows:

First, if there *are* any valid arguments for the existence of matter and for its continuance and independence of the mind, it is clear that they are only known to a few philosophers. Therefore 'it is not by them that children, peasants, and the greatest part of mankind, are induced to attribute objects to some impressions and deny them to others'.² (We may compare with this Berkeley's remarks about Locke's abstract ideas. Berkeley points out that if abstraction is such a difficult and philosophical process, children and uneducated persons must somehow manage to get on without it.)

This conclusion is confirmed, according to Hume, by the fact that the Philosophers, who do know the arguments, and the Vulgar, who do not, have quite different conceptions of what matter is. The Philosophers conceive of matter as possessing only primary qualities and powers. What they regard as continuing and independent of the mind is something characterized by shape, size, location, duration, and causal properties. They certainly do not attribute such a

¹ E. p. 186; S.B. p. 191.

² E. p. 187; S.B. p. 193.

continuing and independent existence to sense-data (impressions, perceptions). On the contrary, they regard them as fleeting and mind-dependent *representations* of something else. The Vulgar, on the other hand, 'confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continued existence to the very things they feel or see'.¹ In other words, they regard sense-data themselves as persistent and independent of the mind. Or rather, they regard them as short temporal slices of continuing and mind-independent *sensibilia*; and a material object, according to them, is wholly composed of *sensibilia*. Thus what the Vulgar believe is utterly different from what the Philosophers believe; and their belief could not possibly have been either arrived at by the Philosopher's arguments or justified by them. Those arguments, if valid, establish an entirely different and even incompatible conclusion. (Hume is, of course, speaking of the Representationist philosophers of his own time, the Cartesians and the followers of Locke. Nowadays many philosophers would side with the Vulgar, as Berkeley had already professed to do. We must also remember that in Hume's time the term 'philosopher' would cover the scientists as well; and no doubt Hume, like Berkeley, has them also in mind.)²

But as a matter of fact, Hume holds, the arguments of the Philosophers are in any case invalid. Quite apart from their details, they are vicious in principle. For they are all *causal* arguments; and causal reasoning (if we can call it reasoning) is only permissible within the sphere of possible experience. We may conclude from experienced conjunctions to further conjunctions between experienced entities and experienceable ones, or even between entities both of

¹ E. p. 188; S.B. p. 193.

² It is curious that Berkeley, Hume, and Reid—different as they were in other ways—all take pleasure in backing the Vulgar against the Philosophers. Some may see in this the first faint beginning of the excesses of the Romantic Movement. Mr. A. D. Lindsay, in his introduction to vol. i of the Everyman edition of the *Treatise*, has already remarked on the distressing affinity between Hume's philosophy and Rousseau's (E. p. xi).

which are experienceable though not actually experienced: for instance, to conjunctions between sense-data and sensibilia (which might be sensed though they are not), or even between one sensible and another. It is in this way that the causal relation may be 'traced beyond our senses, and informs us of existences and objects which we do not see or feel'.¹ And it is thus that 'judgement peoples the world'.²

But we cannot draw any conclusion at all as to *unexperienceable* entities, i.e. entities which could not even in principle be sensed. We cannot even conceive of such entities. If we make up sentences which purport to refer to them, as when Locke speaks of objects having only primary qualities and powers, these sentences are not even false; they are meaningless. For the present, however, Hume does not elaborate this point; though, as we shall see shortly, he does incidentally and in passing provide an answer to one of the detailed arguments which the Philosophers had used.

Thus, to sum up: the belief in the continued and therefore independent existence of matter is neither reached by any kind of reasoning, nor can it be justified thereby. (We have already seen that it cannot be reached by sensation alone. Hume can think of only one other possibility. It must arise from the *imagination*.) We must now explain how. And for the present we are to concern ourselves only with matter as conceived of by the Vulgar. The beliefs, or utterances, of the Philosophers can be left till later.

Now it is noteworthy, Hume says, that we (that is, the Vulgar) attribute a continued and distinct existence to *some* impressions only, not to all. We do not, he thinks, attribute it to the impressions of reflection, i.e. the data of introspection, such as our passions and volitions. We do not

¹ Part III, Section ii, *Of Probability and of the Idea of Cause and Effect*, E. p. 78; S.B. p. 74.

² Part III, Section ix, *Of the Effects of Other Relations and Other Habits*, E. p. 110; S.B. p. 108. Hume adds that judgement 'brings us acquainted with such existences as, by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of the senses and memory'. His example is 'the idea of Rome, which I neither see nor remember' (*ibid.*).

even attribute it to *all* the impressions of sense; we do not believe that bodily pains such as toothaches continue in existence when we cease to feel them, nor even perhaps non-painful somatic data, such as tickles. Yet all impressions are alike in so far as they are *data*, immediately presented to the mind. Why do we thus distinguish among them, regarding colours, tactual pressures, sounds, smells (and tastes?) as persistent entities which continue in being beyond the moment of presentation, while we degrade the rest into 'internal and perishing existences'? There must be some characteristic in the favoured ones which as it were appeals to the imagination—'concurs with the qualities of it', as Hume says—and this characteristic must be absent from the rest. Our next task is to find out what it is.

Here we may question whether Hume is altogether right in his facts. In the first place, what would he say about mental images ('ideas' in his own terminology)? Curiously enough, he does not mention them here. But presumably he would class them alongside of the impressions of reflection as 'internal and perishing existences'; otherwise his omission of them would be most extraordinary. It is, however, at least arguable that the Vulgar *do* attribute a continued existence to some images at least, and do regard them as independent of the act of imaging, though not as independent of the mind altogether. The plain man seems to think that each of us possesses a kind of permanent *corpus* of images,¹ which is always being increased, partly by what we vaguely call the growth of our experience, and partly by occasional acts of deliberate image-formation. Sometimes they pop up into consciousness of themselves, and sometimes they have to be hunted for; but in some mysterious way they are supposed to be 'there' whether we contemplate them or not. It would follow that the verb 'to image' is ambiguous; it might mean 'to *form* an image which did not exist before', or it might mean 'to *contemplate*

¹ Cf. Plato's simile of the birds in the aviary (*Theaetetus*, 197 c, et seq.).

an image which exists already'. And even when an image is formed which did not exist before, it will go on existing for some time after it has once been formed. No doubt this is a very queer view, and I do not say that the plain man holds it explicitly: but something of the sort seems to be implied in the popular language about images 'stored up in the memory', and the like.

Moreover, even in the case of the impressions of reflection Hume's position seems rather doubtful. The Vulgar seem to hold that at any rate some of our passions continue in being between the moments when we 'feel' them. Hume speaks picturesquely of 'the incessant revolutions which we are conscious of in ourselves'; these, he says, we contrast with the well-ordered stability which we attribute to the material world.¹ But the revolutions are not literally incessant, at least according to the opinion of the Vulgar; they are only frequent. I may be angry with my next-door neighbour for days or weeks on end; according to the language of common sense, this anger persists in being even when I am asleep, or attending to something entirely different. How else are we to account for the fact that my neighbour, meeting me after a long absence, may ask 'Are you *still* angry with me?'—thereby implying that my anger is the sort of thing which might persist for a very long period of time.

I do not, of course, say that such language can be defended (though it seems clear that thoroughgoing Phenomenalism is as difficult to believe in Psychology as anywhere else). I only say that the plain man does use it. And this suggests that the Naïve Realism of the Vulgar extends to some at any rate of the data of introspection, and is not confined to sense-data, or even to sense-data and images. That is why recent speculations about the Unconscious do not shock the plain man in the least, though they do shock some philosophers. For they only formulate in scientific or

¹ E. p. 186; S.B. p. 191.

would-be scientific language the sort of thing which he has always believed, with the addition of some lurid details discovered by modern research. The view that introspectible data continue in being (and therefore may still have effects) even when not introspected has always been congenial to the Vulgar.¹ Only we must admit, I think, that it is less firmly held than the belief in the continued existence of matter, and could perhaps be eradicated by a course of philosophical scepticism, which the belief in the continued existence of matter could not. Thus there is certainly a difference between their view about impressions of sensation and their view about impressions of reflection (likewise images); but the difference is one of degree, and not, as Hume thinks, one of kind. Indeed there is a difference of degree *within* their view about impressions of sensation. Their realistic beliefs are most firm with regard to the data of sight and touch, but considerably weaker with regard to sounds, smells, tastes, thermal data, and organic data. The reason for these differences of degree will appear later, and we shall see that it is completely in accordance with Hume's principles.

Fortunately, however, these considerations do nothing to weaken the force of Hume's main contention in the present passage. The attribution of continued and distinct existence may still depend upon certain discoverable characteristics of impressions, even though they are more widely shared than he supposed; and it may well be possible to distinguish these characteristics from others which do not arouse the imagination in the same way. Thus the *intrinsic qualities* of impressions (e.g. blueness, tickliness, achiness) may have nothing to do with it, nor yet those sensible or introspectible *relations* which can be given in one specious

¹ I hesitate to suggest that the Vulgar believe in the existence of unfelt toothaches. But I am by no means sure that they do not. What would they say about the effect of anaesthetics? Might they not say that the toothachy sensible continues in being, but the anaesthetic prevents me from sensing it and therefore from having an attitude of displeasure towards it?

present (e.g. simultaneity, to the right of). Indeed he has already shown this with regard to sense-data, in showing that the belief in matter does not arise from mere sensation; and the argument could easily be extended to images and introspectible data. It does, however, follow from our objections that Hume's theory has a wider scope than he claimed for it; if successful, it will explain the genesis of what we may call Introspective Naïve Realism as well, and not only of Sensational Naïve Realism as he himself supposed.

It also follows, we must confess, that a certain *negative* argument which he uses is mistaken. This occurs directly after the passage which we have just discussed. It may be suggested, he says, that the reason why some of our impressions acquire an external reference, while others do not, is that the former are *involuntary*, and further are superior in *force and violence*. (I take this to mean (1) that they have greater intensity, (2) that the presentation of them has more effect on our emotions.) To this Hume replies, quite truly, that 'our pains and pleasures, our passions and affections' are no less involuntary than the rest, and operate with even greater violence. And yet, he says, 'we never suppose [them] to have any existence beyond our perception' while we do attribute such a continued existence to the impressions of figure and extension, colour and sound. Involuntariness, and likewise force and violence, are therefore irrelevant.¹ But if we are right, the Vulgar attribute a continued existence to both classes alike, or at least to some members of either class; so that the argument fails.

However, we can easily find other grounds for the same conclusion. Our experience of *wild* sense-data will provide us with plenty. Thus we may point out that *after-images* are often quite forceful and violent, and perfectly involuntary. A visual after-image of the sun is much brighter and more intense than the visual sense-data presented to us

¹ E. p. 188; S.B. p. 194.

when we survey the inside of a dimly lit church. But we do not attribute a continued existence to it, and we do attribute such an existence to them. We might also use the instance of *hallucinatory* sense-data. These likewise are as forceful and violent as many normal sense-data, and as a rule they are perfectly involuntary. In some cases the percipient actually recognizes their hallucinatory character, which is the same as saying that he does not attribute to them a continued and distinct existence. And when he does not recognize it at the time, he often does later; that is, he eventually retracts his initial belief in their continued existence. Why does he do this? Is it because he has decided that after all they were not involuntary, or were less forceful and violent than he at first supposed? Clearly it is not. It is because he has discovered that they were defective in some other way, which we have still to determine.

We may notice that these same characteristics, of involuntariness and force and violence, had been used by the philosophers in their attempt to justify our belief in matter by 'reason', i.e. by causal arguments. They maintained that the impressions which have these characteristics must be caused by something external to ourselves, and they usually concluded that these causes must be material objects (though Berkeley from the same premisses concluded that the causes were volitions of God). Now the facts which Hume here refers to can be used to throw doubt on this argument. We can show that if it proves anything, it proves too much. It will prove that many of the impressions of reflection have external causes, as well as the impressions of sensation; for many impressions of reflection, as Hume says, are involuntary, and are actually *more* forceful and violent than impressions of sensation. And the same is true of many hallucinatory sense-impressions.

We have still to discover what characteristics of impressions do induce us to attribute to them a continued and distinct existence. Hume now proceeds to give his own

answer to the question. He says that there are *two* such characteristics, which he calls (not very felicitously) *Constancy* and *Coherence*. As his discussion of these is the most original and the most interesting part of his whole investigation of this subject, we must examine what he says in some detail.

We will begin with Constancy. The fact to which Hume is referring under this name may first be described in a rough and common-sense way. It is simply this: that when we observe a thing *again*, after an interval during which we have not observed it, we often find that it has the same sensible qualities and relations as it had before. For example, I look out of the window in my room. I see some grass, some small trees, the City Wall, and behind it the College Chapel. Now I shut my eyes for a few seconds. When I open them again, what I see is exactly like what I saw before. I go away for an hour, and on my return I look out of the window once more. There are the grass, the trees, the wall, and the chapel exactly as before. I go away for a year, or for half a lifetime; and when I return to Oxford everything, including the human inhabitants, looks just as it did when I left. This is a dull story, we must admit. But, of course, its dullness, its *customary* character, is one of the most important things about it.

However, this is by no means an adequate account of Constancy, though it may serve well enough to indicate what sort of fact Hume has in mind. For as it stands, it *assumes* the existence of various material objects—of my rooms, the grass, the chapel, &c. Or again, it assumes that what I see continues in being while I am not seeing it. Otherwise I could not speak of looking at it *again*, or of coming *back* to it; for there would be no 'it' to come back to. And these assumptions are, of course, the very things which we have to explain. If we are to be accurate and avoid begging questions, we must define Constancy entirely in terms of *impressions* (sense-data). This Hume himself

does not trouble to do; he speaks of mountains, houses, and trees, of his bed and table, books and papers, all of which are, of course, material objects.¹ However, we must try to do it for him.

Now as soon as we begin to re-write our story in terms of impressions only, it becomes plain that nothing is literally constant at all. First we have a continuous series of impressions, $A_1 A_2 A_3 A_4$, all resembling each other very closely indeed (while I remain gazing out of the window). Then we have what I am going to call a *gap*, filled with impressions of an entirely different sort, or sometimes with images (when I shut my eyes or dream or go away for a year). Lastly we have a *new* lot of impressions, say $A_{10} A_{11} A_{12}$, again continuous and resembling each other very closely: and they are very similar to the first lot, the ones which preceded the gap, though, of course, numerically different from them. In my example the series is composed of *complex* impressions, or even of entire visual fields. But this makes no difference in the present context.

Thus what happens is that we sense a series of closely similar impressions, with a *gap* or *break* in the middle of them. Constancy, then, is a characteristic of a certain sort of series, a series which is broken by an interval but is otherwise continuous, and whose members all resemble each other very closely. It is a combination of similarity, continuity, and interruptedness. 'Constancy', however, is not a very good name for it. 'Obstinacy in recurrence' or 'persistent reappearance' would perhaps be better.

We have defined Constancy in terms of *close* resemblance. Hume himself, however, seems to define it in terms of *exact* resemblance. He says 'when I lose sight of them [the mountains, houses, &c.] by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me *without the least alteration*'.² Now if I shut my eyes for more than

¹ E. p. 189; S.B. p. 194 *ad fin.*

² E. p. 189; S.B. p. 194 *ad fin.* (my italics).

a very short time, it is surely rash to say that there is no difference of character at all, not even the very smallest, between my new impressions and my old ones. Thus Constancy would not be nearly so frequent a phenomenon as Hume in his subsequent discussion wants it to be. We might even have to say that it is an ideal limit, which actual series of sense-impressions approximate to but never quite attain. It seems better, therefore, to mitigate the strictness of Hume's definition and to demand only *close* resemblance, not exact resemblance. We can then say that Constancy is a very frequent phenomenon indeed. At almost every moment of our conscious lives—every time we blink or turn our head to one side and back again—we shall have an instance of it.

We must now turn to *Coherence*, which is a more puzzling notion. Hume begins his account of it by pointing out that the Constancy just described 'is not so perfect as not to admit of very considerable exceptions'. As he says, again using the question-begging language of Common Sense, 'Bodies often change their position and qualities, and after a little absence or interruption may become hardly knowable.' 'But', he goes on, 'here it is observable, that even in these changes they preserve a *coherence*, and have a regular dependence on each other; which is the foundation of a kind of reasoning from causation, and produces the opinion of their continued existence.'¹ This is obscure, and perhaps even confused (the distinction between immanent and transeunt causation, or some equivalent distinction, should surely come in somewhere).² However, the example which he gives, of the fire in his room, makes his meaning somewhat clearer. He goes out for an hour, and on coming back 'I find not my fire in the same situation in which I left it'. 'But then', he goes on, 'I am accustomed in other instances to see a *like* alteration produced in a *like* time,

¹ E. p. 189; S.B. p. 195.

² Cf. p. 51, below.

whether I am absent or present, near or remote.'¹ Thus the two spectacles, the brightly burning coals which he saw an hour ago, the dull grey ashes which he sees now, may be said to be *coherent* with each other though they are not particularly similar.

Let us now try to state Hume's meaning more clearly. As before, we must describe the situation entirely in terms of impressions, without presupposing that belief in material objects which we profess to be explaining²—an error which he himself again falls into, verbally at any rate.

Now here again we find that there is an *interrupted series* of impressions, a series with a gap in it. First we have a bright red impression, then a gap, then a dull grey impression. Let us symbolize this series by A . . . E (which may be read 'A—blank—E'). So far there is nothing to connect these two impressions, which are not specially like each other; indeed we should usually call them *unlike*. But fortunately this is by no means the only occasion on which I have sensed an A followed later on by an E. And on many previous occasions I have sensed *intermediate* impressions coming between, intermediate both in respect of date and of quality: in such a way that the whole formed a continuous series, having in each case one and the same determinate order (from bright red through greyish-red to grey). On those past occasions, when I stayed in and looked at the fire—as Common Sense would say—instead of going out, I did not observe just A . . . E, as now; instead, I sensed ABCDE, a series resembling this present broken one as to its beginning and end, but differing from it in having a *continuous middle* by which beginning and end were joined together. Thanks to this resemblance which it has to those former continuous series, this present one A . . . E is said to be *coherent*, despite the gap in the middle of it.

¹ E. p. 189; S.B. p. 195.

² Nor must we speak of *seeing a like alteration produced*; for on Hume's own theory of causality this language is inadmissible. He ought to have said that *we see a like difference occur*.

We may therefore define Coherence as follows: two sense-impressions (or two sets of sense-impressions) having a temporal gap between them are said to be *coherent*, if they respectively resemble an earlier and a later part of a continuous series, which have approximately the same length of time between them: that continuous series being of a kind which has frequently been observed in the past, and always in the same order.

CHAPTER III

THE EFFECTS OF CONSTANCY AND COHERENCE

THUS both Constancy and Coherence turn out to be characteristics of *series* of impressions, not of single impressions in isolation; and here they differ from such characteristics as involuntariness, force, and violence, which we examined before—still more from ordinary sensible qualities like redness or hardness. Moreover, they both characterize *interrupted* or 'gappy' series.

We must now ask how exactly these two characteristics work upon the imagination, and so lead us into our belief in the continued and independent existence of matter. Hume's answer to this crucial question is somewhat difficult to follow. Indeed there seems to be a good deal of needless tortuosity about its details. For one thing, he holds that the two 'principles' (Constancy and Coherence) affect the imagination in quite different ways. This, as we shall try to show later, was unnecessary; he could very well have reduced the two principles to one. There is a second complication. On the one hand, he seems to think that neither principle is sufficient by itself. Coherence, he says, 'is too weak to support alone so vast an edifice, as is that of the continuance of all external bodies'.¹ And he has previously implied, though he has not explicitly said, that Constancy by itself is likewise unequal to the task. Constancy, as we have seen, is not always to be met with. 'Bodies often change their position and qualities and after a little absence or interruption may become hardly knowable';² and yet this does not necessarily prevent us from ascribing a continuous existence to them.

On the other hand, he also seems to think that Constancy

¹ E. p. 192; S.B. pp. 198-9.

² E. p. 189; S.B. p. 195. Cf. above, p. 34.