

How I Got the Blue

Cognitive Complexity, Epistemic Simplicity, and the Missing Shade of Blue in Hume's Skeptical Empiricism

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I.

The history of philosophy is full of sad vignettes; this essay is no different, but it may turn out to have a happy ending after all. John, the hero of our tale, is the victim of unfortunate circumstance. From birth he has been held captive by a group of unscrupulous philosophers, intent on performing their thought-experiments on human subjects. He's spent his whole life locked in a carefully painted room—these are the same maniacs who imprisoned poor Mary—but where Mary's room was black and white, every tile in John's room is a different shade of color, and *every* shade the human eye can discern is on one tile or another—all except for *one*, and here we come to our story's theme. What John never knew is that there has been a tiny, intentional omission in his chromatic experience; even though one of his walls contains a vast spectrum of the shades of blue, one's missing—a shade of blue John's never encountered in 30 years of seeing color. It's a trifling omission amidst myriad similar colors; John never missed the shade of blue—that is, until one fine day, his eyes ran over his blue wall, looking more closely than he had ever looked before....

But by now, you may have noticed that my story is somewhat derivative: it's a version of a tale told by David Hume, in the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*, in order to raise the question: when John notices the *gap* between one shade and the next,¹ can he imagine the Missing Shade of Blue? One certainly wants to say that he *could*, but for Hume the answer isn't so simple. One remarkable fact about the story is where

¹ When he follows the spectrum from one end to the next, he should be able to notice that the difference in shade between these two tiles is greater than the difference between any other two adjacent tiles in his room.

Hume *places* it: *immediately* after formulating his famous *copy principle* (CP)—that “all our [simple] ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones”²--and providing two arguments for it. CP's not just an important *conclusion* for Hume; demanding the impression from which purported ideas were copied is *the characteristic method* of Humean philosophy³—most notoriously in his skeptical attacks on the idea of objective causal connexion and of external objects.⁴ But no sooner is the principle formulated and two arguments for it introduced, than Hume remarks that “one contradictory phaenomenon, ... may prove, that 'tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions”.⁵ The copy principle makes a *universal* claim about the origins of *all* of our ideas; if the Missing Shade flouts it, then how could Hume continue Book I after a breezy remark that “the instance is

² *Enquiry* § 13 ¶ 2. For Hume, the imagination has the power to *fabricate* new ideas out of pre-existing materials, but not to *create* ideas *ex nihilo*. “When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas, *gold*, and *mountain*, with which we were formerly acquainted. ... In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: the mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will” (§ 13 ¶ 2).

³ Cf. Hume, at the end of Section II of the first *Enquiry*:

Here, therefore, is a proposition, which not only seems, in itself, simple and intelligible; but, if a proper use were made of it, might render every dispute equally intelligible, and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings, and drawn disgrace upon them. ... When we entertain ... any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. By bringing ideas into so clear a light we may reasonably hope to remove all dispute, which may arise, concerning their nature and reality. (*Enquiry* § 17 ¶ 1)

⁴ The point here is not that these skeptical attacks form Hume's own view—this essay is blithely unconcerned with the hermeneutical conflict between the skeptical and naturalistic readings of Hume. (A proper discussion of *that* would be much more productively sought in Read and Richman [2000].) What is important here is not the controversial question of whether (and if so, how) Hume ultimately *endorsed* his case for radical skepticism, but rather the completely obvious fact that, based on the theory of experience he introduced, he found that case *tremendously compelling*. Since the latter part of this essay is mainly concerned with some of the reasons that the case seems so compelling, the name “Hume” is useful as a sort of short-hand for talking about the skeptical arguments without addressing the issue of whether this Hume is a historical or a merely fictional figure. (If the skeptical Hume does not exist, it will be necessary to invent him.)

⁵ *Treatise* SBN 5

so singular, that it is scarcely worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim”⁶ John's story raises urgent questions about both Hume's empiricism and his skepticism—and Hume's answers seem obscure.

II.

There's a puzzle here because Hume seems to be committed to the following inconsistent triad:⁷

- (1) It's impossible to imagine the object of a simple idea without a prior impression of it.
- (2) Every distinct shade of color is the object of a distinct simple idea.
- (3) It's possible to imagine the Missing Shade of Blue without a prior impression of it.

Something's got to give; Hume, bafflingly, seems ready to toss (1)—despite his methodological presumption of its *universal truth*. John's story, then, raises pressing questions for empiricism. What's Hume's account of the Missing Shade? Is it the *right* account? What else might be available? How would

⁶ *Treatise* SBN 6

⁷ That the triad is inconsistent is easy enough to show. Since the Missing Shade is, *ex hypothesi*, one distinct shade of color, we have:

- (4) It's possible to imagine *at least one* distinct shade of color without a prior impression of it.

And from (4), conjoined with (2), follows:

- (5) It's possible to imagine the object of *at least one* simple idea without a prior impression of it.

Since *that's* just the denial of (1), it follows that:

- (6) Either (1) is false or (5) is.

And since (1) entails itself and (2) and (3) entail (5), a destructive dilemma gives us:

- (7) Either (1) is false or else either (2) or (3) is false.

Which is to say, *at least one* of (1), (2), and (3) must be false, and your problem is which one to toss out.

alternatives impact our picture of color experience?⁸ In approaching these questions, I want to consider the possibility of a *humble empiricism*—an empiricist account grounded not in theoretical dogma about the nature of experience, but in careful attention and a respectful approach to *what it's actually like*. It's a project that I think Hume endorsed, but did not follow to its completion. The Missing Shade of Blue casts these issues into relief, and by the end, imagining the Missing Shade may enrich more than John's mental palette; it casts light on the most essential yet least examined part of most empiricist accounts—the *picture of experience itself*, and how it fits experience as we actually live it.

III.

Denying (2) offers another way out of the triad: holding onto CP by giving up on Hume's account of colors. If the Missing Shade's idea is *complex*, rather than simple, then it doesn't violate CP; what John imagines is a compound of ideas with which he is already acquainted. But *calling* the idea complex isn't the end of the story. Of what parts are the ideas of shades built up, and what cognitive operations combine them? Locke's treatment of color in the *Essay* suggests one possibility:⁹ each *shade of blue* is a simple mode of an underlying simple idea—*blue*—not a simple idea unto itself. John's encountered blue already in all of its other shades; he can generate the Missing Shade by *darkening* or *lightening* familiar

⁸ It also raises *exegetical* questions. What on earth was Hume doing by introducing the Missing Shade of Blue just after the copy principle? Why does he concede the counterexample, and what does he take the upshot to be? How can he concede that his most important methodological principle is false, and yet go on to use it throughout Book I? A full answer to the exegetical question will have to be taken up elsewhere—and it already has, by John O. Nelson (1989), whose account I find extremely convincing in the broad outlines, though not in the details. It's worth taking one thing at a time, and a careful approach to the philosophical question reveals compelling possibilities that Hume's own solution does not countenance. Therefore, I dive into the philosophical question forthwith.

⁹ "Though, I say, these might be instances enough of simple Modes of simple *Ideas* of Sensation; and suffice to shew, how the mind comes by them: yet I shall, for Methods sake, though briefly, give an account of some few more, and then proceed to more complex *Ideas*. ... Those of Colours are also very various: Some we take notice of, as the different degrees, or as they are termed, *Shades of the same Colour*. ..." (*Essay* II.xviii §§1, 4)

shades until the Missing Shade is achieved.¹⁰ He is, then, only enlarging or diminishing ideas he's already got, without troubling CP.

That seems an attractive move, but it's one Hume anticipates and rejects. Imagine a spectrum passing, "by the continual gradation of shades", from blue, through turquoise and sea-green, to green. If we admit that John can imagine the Missing Shade of Blue, there doesn't seem to be any good reason not to accept the same conclusion for any shade in the blue-green spectrum—that John could imagine any shade from surrounding shades even if he'd never seen that particular shade in his life. But if we claim that he can do this because the shades are simple modes of the same color, then, if we repeat the thought experiment for each shade along the spectrum, we eventually find ourselves claiming that John can imagine *green* because it's a simple mode of the idea of blue—a conclusion no humble empiricist could accept.

That doesn't defeat every analysis of shades as complex ideas. Rather than analyzing turquoise and sea-green as simple modes of completely different colors—blue and green—one might analyze both as *mixtures*, in slightly different proportions, of blue *and* green.¹¹ Call this the *Primary Colors* response; it rejects (2) by postulating some set of fundamental colors, from which John can generate a shade in imagination as he would in paint: by mixing together other colors on his palette to get the right balance of primary color ideas.¹²

¹⁰ You might cash this out in terms of as decreasing or increasing the presence of that color in a given area of space

¹¹ Shades of colors, then, will be *mixed* modes, and imagining the Missing Shade more like imagining a centaur than a novel number: the mental operation is not enlargement of one underlying idea, but the combination of several different ideas.

¹² One might worry that the Primary Color thesis allows Hume to mount a slightly modified counter-example. Suppose that the missing shade of blue in question just is pure blue, the primary color. It seems no less likely that our subject could imagine this. But how could she, if she has never encountered pure blue? But this raises no problems for the Primary Color response. For in fact, the subject has encountered pure blue before. Since every shade of color with any blue in it is built up, in part, out of pure blue, she has the idea of pure blue from all the other shades of color she has encountered. Pure blue will be imagined simply by imaginatively isolating this aspect of her color experience.

I don't doubt that a devoted advocate could make the Primary Colors response *materially adequate* for preserving both CP and the Missing Shade.¹³ But the account succeeds only by getting the *phenomenology* of color all wrong. I can imagine turquoise by mixing together blue and green, but I do *not* imagine it *as mixed*; when I see turquoise I see a unique, *solid* color. John may come to imagine the Missing Shade by mixing together the resembling shades, but that mixture is only the *cause*, not the *content*, of John's idea. The Primary Colors response distorts the *qualitatively simple* experience that we have of colors; whatever benefits accrue, a humble empiricist could hardly justify the cost.

IV.

You might, instead, try keeping (1) and (2) while denying (3): simply digging in to defend CP by rejecting the alleged counterexample. Call that the *Ultra-Humean* response—with the qualification that it is not *Hume's* response.¹⁴ The Ultra-Humean must, in quintessentially Humean fashion, insist that John *cannot* imagine the missing shade of blue, and then show how (3)'s intuitive appeal derives from confusions engendered by natural operations of the imagination. When John *thinks* that he is imagining the Missing Shade, say, what he *actually* imagines is an unstable congerie of the several shades which he's already encountered. You might *show* John a patch of the Missing Shade later, and he might *say* that that is exactly the shade that he imagined; but then he has just confused the shade he actually imagined with the shade now before him because those two shades *closely resemble*, and closely resembling perceptions are easily confused for one another—particularly when the present shade has the clarity of an impression, and the imagined shade only the dim hold of a remembered idea.¹⁵

¹³ Indeed, since human color perception has been shown to depend anatomically on the combined efforts of nervous receptors for red, blue, and green, this solution might have a certain seductive appeal to those philosophers who indulge in a voyeuristic fascination with the microscope.

¹⁴ Just as the French ultra-Right was more Royalist than the King, the Ultra-Humean is more Humean than Hume.

¹⁵ The parallel between the Ultra-Humean's diagnosis and Hume's own diagnosis of the belief in a continued existence for unperceived objects is intentional; the two will be approached from exactly the

Again, the Ultra-Humean might manage keep the account consistent, but it's unclear how to make it particularly *plausible*. Colors just seem to be related in such a way that John *could* imagine the Missing Shade by lightening or darkening the resembling shades he's already seen—without flickering over the gap in his experience.¹⁶ Denying the possibility of the phenomenon protects the theory, but only by renouncing any claim to humility for our empiricism, and trampling our prephilosophical sense of what it's like to see colors.

V.

So Hume concedes the counterexample, and has to find some way to qualify (1). This seems embarrassing for Hume; but as John Nelson persuasively argues,¹⁷ worrying over the hypothetical

opposite direction below.

¹⁶ If John doesn't see those relations—if he doesn't glimpse the possibility of the Missing Shade, as it were, in the surrounding shades—then he's failed, in an important way, to have the experience of colors that we ordinarily seem to have.

¹⁷ See Nelson (1989), especially p. 355ff. Although I am convinced of Nelson's main interpretive claim, there are several details on which I'm not at all sure that he has it right. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, Nelson makes a persuasive case for his solution as an answer to the *exegetical* questions about Hume's meaning and purpose in bringing up and dismissing the Missing Shade of Blue, but he does not convince me that Hume's solution is a fully adequate solution to the problem—only that it is the solution that Hume's broader project pushes him to. There are, in fact, many reasons to think that Hume leaps to his understanding of the matter, as Nelson presents it, prematurely; the *possibility* conveyed by the counterexample is not just the bare *logical* possibility for some counterfactual rational creature to have an idea without the corresponding impression. The plausibility of the thought-experiment depends on the fact that it is conveying, as it were, a *human* possibility: for Hume to have his cake, he needs John's situation to be a situation that *someone just like you or me* could be in under the right conditions. But that will make it hard for him to eat it: it seems, at the least, odd that Hume, having admitted the *conceivability* and this counterexample, and that it is a *potential* not just for *some* rational intelligence but for the sort of understanding he proposes to be offering a science of, he does not even pause to consider the possibility that, say, the substrate theory of substance, or traditional accounts of causation, *might* also be based on counterexamples to the copy principle.

The best solution to this puzzle, I think, is to understand Hume in terms of the dialectical position from which he was writing: the copy principle is the linchpin of Hume's empiricism, and its primary target is the rationalist doctrine of innate ideas. Hume uses the copy principle to argue that without original components encountered in sense-experience, there is nothing to be grasped, no clear and distinct idea for the words to mean. But within this debate, the *sorts* of possible counterexamples to the copy principle that the Missing Shade reveals have no real bone to pick with empiricism: whatever you might say about the status of the Missing Shade, you'd hardly be inclined to call it an *innate idea*, or claim

counterexample to (1) attributes an *epistemological status* to CP that Hume neither claims nor wants for it.

The Missing Shade, for Hume, is a way of showing that his science of human nature is an *empirical* science, true of how human minds *actually* work, *not* a demonstrative science of axioms with no *conceivable* exceptions. But while Hume's solution is *interesting*, it is also *premature* to give up on a *philosophical* solution to the problems with CP. What the antinomy shows us is that Hume's division of experience into simple and complex perceptions needs revision to capture our color experience.

Remember our remark that although the ideas of other shades may be *causes* of the idea of the Missing Shade, its *content* should be *qualitatively* simple. That distinction suggests Michael Watkins' similar distinction in his work on Hume and causality:¹⁸ Watkins distinguishes *cognitively* simple judgments from *epistemically* simple judgments; for the Missing Shade, we might draw an analogous distinction between cognitive and epistemic simplicity for *ideas*. *Cognitive* simplicity deals with *how I get* the idea: it's cognitively simple if the *act* of acquiring it does not depend on having any other ideas, cognitively complex if I need other ideas to get into a position to acquire it. *Epistemic* simplicity deals instead with *what I've got* when the idea is before my mind; an idea is epistemically simple if the *content* acquired is irreducible to the content of any other idea, epistemically complex if it can be analyzed into the content of other ideas.

that the idea did not arise from experience. The idea of the Missing Shade counterexamples Hume's copy principle, not by arising from *no* impressions, but by seeming to arise from the *wrong* impressions. *Simple* ideas are supposed to have their origin in exactly corresponding simple impressions, not from acquaintance with *different* simple impressions. If Hume's main goal is to provide a criterion of impression-dependence to rule out rationalist pseudo-defenses of the ideas of causality, material substance, self, and so on, then the sorts of possibilities imagined in stories like John's will indeed seem "so particular and singular [as to] not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim" (T. 6). But if this is the right understanding of Hume, then the considerations I argue for below will show that his aims would, in fact, have been better understood by a more precise version of the copy principle, and so again the reply that Nelson sketches for Hume seems premature.

¹⁸ In Watkins (2003), and in conversation.

The Missing Shade, as we argued above, must be *epistemically* simple: it's *qualitatively unique* and doesn't involve the content of any *other* shade of color.¹⁹ Ordinarily, color ideas are also *cognitively* simple: we get the ideas of colors just by *seeing* them in colored things around us. But for John, the idea of the Missing Shade is epistemically simple but *cognitively complex*: he could, it seems, get the shade without having seen it by darkening or lightening other color ideas he already had. So we can reveal an ambiguity in (1) and thus resolve the triad without rejecting any statement outright. (2) also helps itself to the notion of simplicity, but there's no ambiguity here: Hume's arguments against Locke, and our remarks on the phenomenology of color depended on an understanding of the *content* of shades, and so (2) is charitably understood as:

(2') Every distinct shade of color is the object of a distinct *epistemically* simple idea.

But no such considerations affect (1), and two *different* copy principles could be distinguished:

Epistemic copy principle (ECP): It's impossible to imagine the object of an *epistemically* simple idea without a prior impression of it.

Cognitive copy principle (CCP): It's impossible to imagine the object of a *cognitively* simple idea without a prior impression of it.

The *cognitive* copy principle rules out the possibility of imagining a cognitively simple idea without having had the corresponding impression. Since a *cognitively* simple idea cannot have been acquired using any other ideas, the question here just is the question of whether the idea originated *empirically* or *innately*: either the idea was copied from an impression, or else it somehow came into the mind without experience. Thus, CCP is exactly as plausible as the traditional empiricist arguments against innate ideas (including Hume's); whatever support these arguments give to the conclusion that none of our ideas are innate, they also lend to CCP. But CCP creates no inconsistency: while both (2') and

¹⁹ It *does* include the *relation* of that shade to surrounding shades, such that we can compare the shades and see a gap where the Missing Shade should be.

common decency require us to regard the idea as epistemically simple, nothing prevents it from being *cognitively* complex. But then it causes no problems for CCP, and the apparent inconsistency rests on an equivocation between two senses of simplicity.

The *epistemic* copy principle, on the other hand, generates the inconsistent triad; but it's also unclear what a humble empiricist loses by rejecting it—ECP is not only falsified by the Missing Shade of Blue, but it *never was supported by Hume's arguments*. It's true, as Hume argues, that those born blind or deaf always lack not only the impressions but also the *ideas* of those senses, and that to teach a child about scarlet or orange, we show them the objects—convey the relevant impressions—on the presumption that impressions always precede ideas. These phenomena reflect *how we get* ideas (being situated to have the right impressions), and so support CCP; they demonstrate the *impression-dependence* of ideas, and undermine innatist pseudo-defenses of ideas such as causality or material substance. But they do nothing to show that ideas must depend on impressions with *identical content*, and lend no support to ECP. It's not that John's idea of the Missing Shade derives from *no* impressions; rather, it seems to derive from the *wrong* impressions.²⁰ John causes problems for *ECP*, but since ECP is unsupported by Hume's arguments, and unneeded to defeat innatism, why shouldn't a humble empiricism reject ECP and keep CCP? Once cognitive and epistemic simplicity are disentangled, it becomes clear that the Missing Shade is no counterexample to any copy principle worth saving.²¹

²⁰ If John can imagine the Missing Shade, it's because of his familiarity with other color-ideas; no-one would suggest that he could imagine it had he been blind from birth, or never been presented with blue objects.

²¹ You might call the doctrine that epistemic simplicity and cognitive simplicity must always go along together the 43rd Dogma of Empiricism (*thereby* proving that it must be false).

VI.

The distinction between epistemic and cognitive simplicity reveals intriguing possibilities for a humble empiricism, altering the very conception of *experience* upon which Hume builds his philosophical project, and opening new dimensions in which experience could ground our ideas.

Distinguishing CCP from ECP allowed us to recognize the internal relationships between shades on the color wheel, without the desperate move of analyzing shades as epistemically complex ideas. Cognitive complexity reveals more *ideas* than Hume allowed; and we might also consider its effects for *impressions*. Consider this reformulation of Watkins' reply to Hume on causation.²² In ordinary language we constantly claim to perceive causal events; you *see* me causing a mess when I knock books off the desk. But since Hume's picture of experience conflates cognitive and epistemic simplicity, he needs simple impressions to be both simple in *content* and independent of *any* previous cognition—something “the first Adam” could copy into his ideas from his first glimpse of the world. You couldn't be aware that the collision *caused* motion unless you'd *already* witnessed events like the cause and the effect constantly conjoined, so for Hume, the idea of causation couldn't be copied from any *simple* impression.

From there Hume launches his infamous arguments against analyzing causation as a complex idea derived from sensation or reason. But separating cognitive from epistemic complexity cuts him off at the beginning. We *do* have to witness a constant conjunction before recognizing the connexion, but that's no problem: although the impression is *epistemically* simple—we just *see* the collision causing motion—it's *cognitively* complex. Hume rightly denied that constant conjunctions provide the *content* of, or support an *inference* to, a causal connexion. Seeing collisions and motion constantly conjoined puts us in a position

²² Watkins, again, distinguishes cognitively from epistemically simple *judgments*. But his target here is the claim, allegedly “learned from Hume”, that we cannot *perceive* objective causal connexions. Since it deals directly with our ability to have a perception of one thing causing another, we can easily take the liberty of reformulating the argument in terms of a distinction between cognitively and epistemically simple *impressions*.

not to *infer*, but just to *look and see*—to have the *epistemically simple* impression of collisions causing motion.

There's also a remarkable parallel between the Missing Shade and Hume's argument that we have no clear idea of the "CONTINU'D existence [of] objects"²³ beyond our perception. Since the senses "cannot operate beyond the extent, in which they really operate",²⁴ and "A single perception can never produce the idea of a double existence",²⁵ Hume argues that, when our perceptions are interrupted, there are no perceptions to copy the idea of continued existence from.²⁶ Thus, our confused attempts to attribute mind-independent existence to objects must derive only from fallacious connexions in the imagination between resembling perceptions. But just as John can imagine the Missing Shade without ever encountering it in a single impression—by concocting an epistemically simple but cognitively complex idea from the surrounding shades—it seems plausible that without perceiving unperceived objects, we still could acquire the cognitively complex idea of a continued existence from the impressions preceding and succeeding the interruption. Even if this maneuver succeeds, the bare *idea* of a continued existence isn't enough to vindicate the external world; one must still produce *evidence* to show that what we've imagined applies. But once we have the *idea* of continued existence, the 'double existence' problem is solved, and we can use the canons of reason to infer continued existence from the constancy and coherency of impressions. For our humble empiricism, it turns out that whether the world still exists when we shut our eyes is settled by *empirical reasoning* rather than philosophical speculation—exactly, I think, the right status for the question to have.

²³ *Treatise* SBN 188

²⁴ *Treatise* SBN 191

²⁵ *Treatise* SBN 189

²⁶ Nor can we get the idea by some kind of *inference* from perceived objects; without sensibility, reason is no help, and "as no beings are ever present to the mind but perceptions; it follows that we may observe a conjunction or a relation of cause and effect between different perceptions, but can never observe it between perceptions and objects" (*Treatise* SBN 188).

VII.

I don't mean that these modification to Hume's theory of experience solve all of Hume's problems.²⁷ I think much more difficult philosophy has to be done before our empiricism becomes completely humble—let alone correct. Nevertheless, these observations allow substantial advances for a humble empiricism beyond skeptical puzzles that Hume thought only nature could break. The distinctions we've made will remain important in whatever theory of experience remains; empiricists and critics alike should track it carefully. They've got everything to gain, and nothing to lose, if they can only find out how John got the blues.

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²⁷ In particular, although we've greatly expanded on the *content* of impressions and empirical ideas, we haven't yet made the critical (or Critical) distinction between the *content* and the *form* of possible experience. So also it allows us to account for how we imagine a *continued* existence to objects, but the fundamental Humean assumption that the direct objects of experience are mental entities rather than *distinct* existences has gone unchallenged.

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