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ARTICLE

HUME ON THE DISTINCTION OF REASON

Paul Hoffman

This paper concerns Hume's treatment of the distinction of reason in the *Treatise*, I.i.7. Many scholars have claimed that there is a tension between his account of the distinction of reason and his commitment to his so-called separability principle. I explain why Hume's account of the distinction of reason is fully consistent with the principle, and show how other discussions, both critical of and sympathetic to Hume, fail to appreciate the radicalness of his position. I evaluate Hume's bold position and compare it to earlier positions (Aquinas) and current positions (Donald Davidson).

KEYWORDS: Hume; distinction of reason; separability principle; abstract ideas

1. THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION

It is well known that Hume agrees with Berkeley that colour and visual figure cannot exist separately. Colour cannot exist without some figure or other and a figure detected by sight must have some colour. It is also well known that Hume is committed to what is referred to as the separability principle: the principle that objects or perceptions that are different are distinguishable, and if they are distinguishable they are separable. What is surprisingly overlooked is that Hume is fully aware that these two commitments entail that colour does not differ from figure. He is willing to bite the bullet and to accept this consequence as he explains in the following widely misunderstood passage at the end of his discussion of abstract ideas.

Before I leave this subject I shall employ the same principles to explain that *distinction of reason*, which is so much talk'd of, and is so little understood, in the schools. Of this kind is the distinction betwixt figure and the body figur'd; motion and the body mov'd. The difficulty of explaining this distinction arises from the principle above explain'd, *that all ideas, which are different, are separable*. For it follows from thence, that if the figure be different from the body, their ideas must be separable as well as distinguishable: if they be not different, their ideas can neither be separable nor distinguishable. What then is meant by a distinction of reason, since it implies neither a difference nor separation?

To remove this difficulty we must have recourse to the foregoing explication of abstract ideas. 'Tis certain that the mind wou'd never have dream'd of distinguishing a figure from the body figur'd, as being in reality neither distinguishable, nor different, nor separable; did it not observe, that even in this simplicity there might be contain'd many different resemblances and relations. Thus when a globe of white marble is presented, we receive only the impression of a white colour dispos'd in a certain form, nor are we able to separate and distinguish the colour from the form. But observing afterwards a globe of black marble and a cube of white, and comparing them with our former object, we find two separate resemblances, in what formerly seemed, and really is, perfectly inseparable. After a little more practice of this kind, we begin to distinguish the figure from the colour by a *distinction of reason*; that is, we consider the figure and colour together, since they are in effect the same and undistinguishable; but still view them in different aspects, according to the resemblances, of which they are susceptible. When we wou'd consider only the figure of the globe of white marble, we form in reality an idea both of the figure and colour, but tacitly carry our eye to its resemblance with the globe of black marble: And in the same manner, when we wou'd consider its colour only, we turn our view to its resemblance with the cube of white marble. By this means we accompany our ideas with a kind of reflection, of which custom renders us, in a great measure, insensible. A person, who desires us to consider the figure of a globe of white marble without thinking on its colour, desires an impossibility; but his meaning is, that we shou'd consider the figure and colour together, but still keep in our eye the resemblance to the globe of black marble, or that to any other globe of whatever colour or substance.

(*T I.i.vii SBN 24–5 – my emphasis*)¹

On Hume's view, colour and figure are distinguished by a distinction of reason. The distinction of reason, 'so much talked of . . . in the schools', was contrasted by Hume's predecessors with real distinction (and also by Duns Scotus with formal distinction and by Descartes with modal distinction).² Really distinct things can exist separately in reality. Things distinct by reason are distinguishable in thought, but are not separable in reality.³ This understanding of the distinction of reason runs afoul of Hume's separability

¹David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978). The text will be referred to by 'T' and by the book, section, and part; and the edition will be referred to by 'SBN'.

²Here I am indebted to Marilyn Adams's discussion in *William Ockham* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987), Chapters 2 and 21.

³There is a further question whether things distinct by reason are identical in reality or merely inseparable. These different ways of understanding the distinction of reason figure in interpretations of Descartes. Larry Nolan has argued in 'Descartes' Theory of Universals', *Philosophical Studies*, 89 (1998), and 'Reductionism and Nominalism in Descartes' Theory of Attributes', *Topoi*, 16 (1997) that Descartes holds that things distinct by reason are identical in reality. I have argued in 'Descartes's Theory of Distinction', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXIV (2002), reprinted in my *Essays on Descartes* (Oxford University Press, 2009), that Descartes holds, at least in most cases, that things distinct by reason are merely inseparable in reality.

principle. Hume's separability principle commits him to saying that if *x* and *y* are distinguishable by our thought, then they are separable by our thought, and since whatever is conceivable is possible (T I.iii.iii SBN 79–80; T I.iv.v SBN 233), they should also be separable in reality. So how can Hume allow that colour and figure are distinguished even by a distinction of reason? That is, doesn't Hume's commitment to the view that things that are different in thought are separable in reality imply that there can be no distinction of reason? This is perhaps why Hume says that the distinction of reason is so little understood in the schools and why he raises the question, 'What then is meant by a distinction of reason, since it implies neither a difference nor separation?' Thus the problem that Hume sets out to solve is this: how can there be a distinction of reason between things that differ neither in reality nor in thought?

Hume illustrates his solution with the example of the white globe (T I.i.vii SBN 24–5). If we are presented with a white globe, he says we do not distinguish the figure from the colour. The reason for this is that 'they are in effect the same and undistinguishable'. It is only when we compare the white globe with a black globe and a white cube that we notice that there are two different resemblances. So, Hume claims that even though the colour and figure are not different, 'we view them in different aspects' according to which resemblance we have in mind. To consider only the colour of the white globe is to consider the resemblance of the white globe with the white cube. To consider only the figure of the white globe is to consider the resemblance of the white globe with the black globe. So, Hume's answer to his question about the possibility of a distinction of reason is that 'even in this simplicity, there might be contained many different resemblances and relations'. Though the white globe is simple,⁴ it bears one resemblance to the white cube and another resemblance to the black globe.

When we think we are thinking of colour and figure separately, that is, when we think we are distinguishing between what is in fact indistinguishable, we are doing something more complex than one might have initially supposed. As Hume explains, 'When we wou'd consider only the figure of the globe of white marble, we form in reality an idea both of the figure and colour, but tacitly carry our eye to its resemblance with the globe of black marble: And in the same manner, when we wou'd consider its colour only, we turn our view to its resemblance with the cube of white marble' (T I.i.vii

⁴Hume's definition of what it is for a perception to be simple – that it admits of no distinction or separation (T I.i.i. SBN 2) – will therefore be satisfied by the white globe so long as figure and colour are simple and indistinguishable. As is well-known, later in the *Treatise* Hume commits himself to the view that figure is not a simple idea, because the idea of extension is a copy of 'colour'd points, and of their manner of appearance' (T I.ii.iii SBN 34). But as Donald Ainslie has pointed out to me, it is important to keep in mind that this complication is introduced later. At this stage of the *Treatise*, before having introduced that complication, Hume is in effect asking the reader to assume for the sake of argument that figure is a simple idea, and then raising the question of whether coloured figure is also a simple idea.

SBN 25). Hume could be read here as making the metaphysical point that colour just is one resemblance and figure another resemblance. But this would be a mistaken reading, because it would imply that colour and figure are not the same. Rather, I believe Hume is making an epistemological point. Hume is ruling out Berkeley's strategy of appealing to selective attention or partial consideration to explain the possibility of our ability to think of one thing by itself apart from something that is inseparable from it.⁵ Instead, Hume offers the ingenious strategy of postulating an additional thought to explain our experience: when we think we are considering colour alone and thus distinguishing it from figure, what we are really doing is thinking of both colour and figure, but having the further thought of the resemblance the globe has with the white cube.

This is part of the reason why the discussion of the distinction of reason is placed in the section entitled 'Of Abstract Ideas'. Understanding the distinction of reason does not help us understand how a particular perception can signify many things (something he has already explained early in that section); rather it explains what is really going on when people mistakenly believe they are considering colour apart from figure.

It is important to recognize that when Hume identifies the colour and figure of the globe, what he is identifying are particulars.⁶ It is *this* whiteness that is being identified with *this* globularity.⁷ The whiteness and globularity that are identified are also no more distinct from the particular marble globe than they are from each other. So, Hume also says that the distinction between figure and the body figured is a distinction of reason (T I.i.vii SBN 24).

One reader has made the following instructive objection: 'While the colour of the particular perception-token (the white globe) is identical with its figure, and so doesn't differ from it, it is not the case that its colour (*whiteness*), considered as an abstract idea, doesn't differ from its figure

⁵George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London, 1948–57) Vol. II, p. 193, and *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) Introduction 16, also in Vol. II, p. 35.

⁶Hume's understanding of identity needs to be treated with caution. He says that 'One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity' (T I.iv.ii SBN 200), that identity is an idea that is 'a medium betwixt unity and number', and that we 'cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that an object is the same with itself, unless we mean, that the object at one time is the same with itself existent at another' (T I.iv.ii SBN 201). These remarks might be taken to mean that he thinks that we can properly use the terms 'same' or 'identical' only if we are dealing with what we would refer to as identity over time. However, he does say in reference to colour and figure that 'they are in effect the same and undistinguishable' (T I.i.vii SBN 25) when it is clear that different times are not involved. Perhaps Hume is contradicting himself when it comes to proper use of the term 'same', but perhaps one can evade the attribution of a contradiction by supposing that he is only objecting to use of the expression 'same with itself' when we are not dealing with different times and is more liberal with use of the term 'same' when it is not coupled with the term 'itself'.

⁷I am indebted to Alan Nelson for this point.

(*globularity*), also considered as an abstract idea.' The response to this objection reveals the other part of Hume's reason for placing his discussion of the distinction of reason at the end of the section entitled 'Of Abstract Ideas'. The reason is to forestall objections of this sort. The objection depends on the assumption that Hume thinks that we can and should distinguish between particular perception-tokens and abstract ideas. But the main point of the preceding discussion of abstract ideas, the point Hume derives from Berkeley, is precisely that all so-called abstract ideas are particular perception-tokens and so cannot be distinguished from them (T I.i.vii SBN 17).

Since the resemblance that the white globe has with other objects or perceptions involves something extrinsic to the white globe, Hume is committing himself to the view that 'distinguishing' between colour and figure involves thinking about things extrinsic to the globe.⁸ We would never formulate the term 'white' if we just considered the globe itself; we can do so only by comparing it to the cube. For Hume, this is not just a psychological point about our cognitive abilities. His point is not that we need other objects to notice distinct aspects or features internal to the globe, but is instead that the globe has no internal structure to be noticed.⁹

On this interpretation, the terms 'colour' and 'figure' have an affinity with what are called extrinsic denominations. One useful way of characterizing an intrinsic denomination is that it is a term that refers to an intrinsic feature or property, that is, a property that a thing has in and of itself, where this is not meant to deny that something else might have caused it to have that property.¹⁰ An extrinsic denomination is a term that refers to an extrinsic property, that is, one that is not intrinsic. Extrinsic properties could be thought of as relations. On my reading of Hume, the colour of the globe and its figure are intrinsic properties of the globe, but they are the same property. The terms 'colour' and 'figure' are therefore intrinsic denominations, but they are similar to extrinsic denominations because reference to the colour and figure of the globe is not founded on internal differences and because 'distinguishing' between them involves the globe's relations to external objects.

It is useful to compare what Hume says about these cases with his account of the relation between existence and objects. He argues that there is no difference between the idea of an object and the idea of its existence. One might anticipate that he would then similarly claim that there is a distinction of reason between an object and its existence. However, Hume denies that there is a distinction of reason in this case by arguing that there can be no foundation for it. He asserts that the distinction of reason 'is founded on the

⁸I put this in scare quotes because Hume thinks they are not really distinguishable, we just confusedly think that they are.

⁹I am indebted to John Carriero for the wording of this point.

¹⁰I. L. Humberstone, 'Intrinsic/Extrinsic', *Synthese* 108 (1996): 229.

different resemblances, which the same simple idea may have to several different ideas,' and that no object can resemble some objects with respect to existence and not others, since every object that is presented must exist (T I.ii.vi SBN 67).¹¹ The significance of this claim for the argument of this article is that it reveals that Hume believes that mere lack of difference is not sufficient for a distinction of reason. There must be the additional phenomenon that the same simple object or idea can have different resemblances to different objects or ideas.

2. INCORRECT INTERPRETATIONS

I was surprised a few years ago upon reading Don Garrett's book *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* to discover that no one else, at least in print, has recognized that Hume is committing himself to the strong view that colour does not differ from figure.¹² Garrett notes that several leading philosophers have accused Hume of inconsistency:

Commentators who discuss Hume's account of distinctions of reason have found it to be inconsistent with his statement of the Separability Principle. [Norman] Kemp Smith¹³ . . . for example, says that Hume is 'quite evidently allowing, under a new title, what he has seemed to deny in the earlier parts of the section.' Maurice Mandelbaum¹⁴ . . . and John Bricke¹⁵ . . . each have suggested that admitting distinctions of reason constitutes an implicit and ex post facto restriction on the scope of the Separability Principle. Bricke does not specify what the revised scope of the principle might be. Mandelbaum, however, asserts that the principle must be restricted to apply only to ideas and not to impressions, on the grounds that Hume's account of the white marble globe constitutes an admission that 'there are cases in which simple impressions are inseparable.' He then adds that this restriction clearly vitiates

¹¹I would like to thank Steven Bayne for calling it to my attention that Hume denies that an object is distinct by reason from its existence.

¹²Peter Millican has objected that Harold W. Noonan is one commentator who has not overlooked this consequence, noting that Noonan asserts that 'Another example [Hume] goes on to discuss is that between the colour and form of a body. . . . Hume cannot recognize these distinctions as genuine ones', *Hume on Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1999) 85–6. It remains far from clear to me, however, that Noonan does recognize how extreme Hume's position is. Noonan illustrates what he means by saying a distinction is not genuine by stating that 'the figure of a body cannot be a distinct object from the body'. One could hold that the figure of a body cannot be a distinct object from the body and at the same time hold that the figure of a body differs from the body, because it is one thing to assert that x and y are not distinct objects and another far stronger thing to assert that x does not differ from y. I am arguing that Hume is committing himself to the more extreme view that the figure of a body does not differ from the body.

¹³Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941) p. 266.

¹⁴Maurice Mandelbaum, 'The Distinguishable and the Separable: A Note on Hume on Causation', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 12 (1974): 242–7.

¹⁵John Bricke, *Hume's Philosophy of Mind* (Edinburgh, 1980) p. 71.

Hume's crucial attempt to show by means of the Separability Principle that we never perceive (i.e. have an impression of) a necessary connection between cause and effect.¹⁶

In defending Hume against these criticisms of Norman Kemp Smith, Maurice Mandelbaum, and John Bricke, Garrett has also argued that there is no conflict between Hume's separability principle and his account of the distinction of reason. According to Garrett's account of the reconciliation, Hume's strategy is to avoid 'construing every feature or aspect of a perception as itself a different or distinct perception.'¹⁷ Colour and figure, according to Garrett, are 'not distinct simple perceptions in their own right, but rather *aspects* of perceptions.'¹⁸ He says that in a distinction of reason what is distinguished are 'two aspects of the *one* perception-token.'¹⁹ Garrett also compares these Humean aspects to Spinoza's modes or modifications.²⁰

In comparing Humean aspects to Spinoza's modes or modifications, Garrett strongly suggests that he understands aspects to be intrinsic features or properties of perceptions. However, he suggests perhaps a different view when he says that aspects are "separate resemblances" – that is, two different ways in which [one perception-token] may resemble others.²¹ This claim is obscure in a few ways. It is not entirely clear to me that a resemblance between one perception-token and another is the same thing as a way in which one perception-token may resemble another. But more importantly, it would seem that a resemblance between one perception-token and another is not something intrinsic to either of them, but it is somewhat tempting to think of 'a way in which [one perception-token] may resemble' another as perhaps intrinsic to it.

The view that Hume thinks colour and figure are two separate resemblances is a view I have already considered and rejected. The fatal flaw with such an interpretation is that it implies that colour and figure are different, but Hume holds that colour and figure are not different. On Garrett's interpretation Hume is committing himself only to the weak view that colour and figure are not different perceptions, and not to the strong view that they are not different, period. By allowing that colour and figure are different aspects of a perception-token, whether these aspects are intrinsic or not, Garrett, like other commentators, has failed to recognize the boldness of Hume's position.

Hume does talk about aspects in analysing the white globe's colour and figure, but his use of the term is far different from Garrett's. What Hume

¹⁶Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York, 1997) p. 59.

¹⁷ibid., 70.

¹⁸ibid.

¹⁹ibid., 63.

²⁰ibid., 71.

²¹ibid., 63.

says is that ‘we view them in different aspects’ (T I.i.vii SBN 25). To say that we view *x* and *y* in different aspects is far different from saying that *x* and *y* are different aspects of something. Let me reiterate that I’m not denying that Hume thinks of colour and figure as intrinsic features or properties of perceptions, and if we think of aspects in such a way I’m not denying colour and figure are aspects. My point is that he denies that they are different, which implies that they are not different aspects.

There is an important passage that Hume added in the Appendix cited by Garrett in which Hume speaks in terms of ‘a point or circumstance of resemblance’:²²

’Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou’d be distinct or separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho’ their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. ’Tis the same case with particular sounds, and tastes and smells. These admit of infinite resemblances upon general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. And of this we may be certain, even from the very abstract terms *simple idea*. They comprehend all simple ideas under them. These resemble each other in their simplicity. And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable or separable from the rest. ’Tis the same case with all the degrees in any quality. They are all resembling, and yet the quality, in any individual, is not distinct from the degree.

(*T App. SBN 637*)

Hume’s point in this passage is that the point or circumstance of resemblance between two different simple ideas is not ‘distinct or separable’ from the point or circumstance of difference between those two simple ideas, because simple ideas exclude all composition. Therefore, far from providing support for Garrett’s interpretation, this passage supports the opposite view that Hume thinks simple ideas do not have different aspects.

Without distinguishing it from his other suggestions, Garrett suggests still another interpretation of the distinction of reason when he says distinctions of reason are ‘distinctions among the different classes of resembling perceptions to which a given perception may belong – classes that are different, distinguishable and separable’.²³ Classes of resembling perceptions are one thing; aspects of perceptions, whether construed as intrinsic properties of perceptions or as resemblances between perception-tokens, are another. This interpretation has no foundation in the text. Hume thinks colour and figure are distinct by reason, but there is no evidence that he thinks colour and figure are classes of perceptions. This interpretation also

²²ibid.

²³ibid., 74.

suffers from the same fatal flaw as Garrett's other suggested interpretations. Hume's view is that the distinction of reason is between things that are not different; so it is not between different aspects, different classes or different resemblances. Rather, it is a distinction that arises when one simple thing can be regarded in different ways by relating it to different things.

One further important ambiguity in Garrett's interpretation concerns his stance toward the scope of the separability principle. In the quotation above where he asserts that the distinction of reason is between classes of perceptions, he emphasizes that such classes are separable. However, when he speaks of colour and figure as if they are different aspects of perceptions, he asserts that it is the perceptions of colour and of figure that are not different and hence inseparable.²⁴ This invites us to read Garrett as holding that different aspects of perceptions need not be separable. And indeed if Garrett's analysis of colour and figure is such that it implies that Hume thinks they are separable (as they are according to his identification of them with classes and resemblances), then he has completely missed the boat. But if different aspects of a perception need not be separable, then that has the implication that the scope of the separability principle is limited. It does not apply to aspects of perceptions. But all the textual evidence points in the opposite direction, that there is no limitation on the scope of the separability principle. Hume explicitly applies the principle to qualities (T I.iv.iii. SBN 222), and he formulates the principle in completely unrestricted form when he says that 'Whatever is distinct, is distinguishable; and whatever is distinguishable, is separable by the thought or imagination' (T App SBN 634).²⁵ Most significantly, he applies it to circumstances of resemblance (which Garrett assumes are aspects) in the passage quoted above when he says 'And yet from their very nature, which excludes all composition, this circumstance, in which they resemble, is not distinguishable or separable from the rest', thereby implying, given his claim earlier in the passage that simplicity excludes distinction, that the circumstance of resemblance does not differ from the rest. Thus, if aspects were different, then they would be distinguishable, and if they were distinguishable, then they would be separable, not only in thought but also in reality. So while Garrett tries to distance himself from Bricke and Mandelbaum, to the extent that his reconciliation also requires restricting the separability principle to a subclass of entities, he is really in their camp.

3. EVALUATION OF HUME'S ACCOUNT

Hume's bold account of colour and figure is counterintuitive and for this reason it does seem inferior to Berkeley's. Rather than following Hume to

²⁴ibid., 63.

²⁵His use of 'distinct' in these passages is clearly intended to be replaceable by 'different' and not by 'distinct by reason'.

the conclusion that colour does not differ from figure (indeed other commentators not only have failed to follow Hume in the sense of agreeing with his conclusion but they have also failed to follow Hume in the sense of seeing that that is his conclusion), it seems much more reasonable to deny that things that are different and distinguishable are therefore separable. However, given his commitment to the separability principle, one still does have to admire his forthrightness in following out its implications, however counterintuitive they may be.

It also needs to be pointed out, perhaps in his defence, that Hume is not the only philosopher to adopt such a bold strategy in confronting the philosophical problem of the nature of qualities. Hume's account of the distinction of reason does share an important element with the account of his scholastic predecessors, and it also has affinities with Donald Davidson's anomalous monism. What Hume's distinction of reason has in common with the account of his scholastic predecessors and with anomalous monism is that it avoids aspect or property dualism by a kind of reduction that makes use of something extrinsic. Whereas one might have thought that colour and figure can be distinguished as intrinsic aspects of objects or perceptions, according to Hume they can be 'distinguished' only by appeal to resemblances or relations those objects or perceptions have with other objects or perceptions. Similarly, Aquinas held that while God is simple, God can be similar to many concepts.²⁶ Thus 'goodness' and 'wisdom' are denominations whose application to God is well founded, but not founded on internal differences. Finally, whereas one might have thought that mental and physical properties are intrinsic features of events that influence their causal efficacy, Davidson strips properties of causal efficacy by reducing them to linguistic entities that are not part of the fundamental structure of those events.²⁷ This reading of Davidson is not uncontroversial. When Davidson says that to be mental is to be described as mental I interpret him to mean that there is nothing more to being mental than being described as mental, and when he says that to be physical is to be described as physical I interpret him to mean that there is nothing more to being physical than being described as physical. I think he has to mean this in order to defend his fundamental thesis that laws are linguistic. If physical properties were not merely linguistic, but had some ontological correlate in events, then laws would not be merely linguistic.²⁸

²⁶Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, Book I, Distinction II, article III; see Marilyn Adams, op. cit., Ch. 21: 921–2.

²⁷Donald Davidson, 'Mental Events' in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1986) p. 211. See also his 'Thinking Causes' in *Mental Causation*, edited by John Heil and Alfred Mele (Oxford, 1993) 8: 'the efficacy of an event cannot depend on how the event is described, while whether an event can be called mental, or can be said to fall under a law, depends entirely on how the event can be described.'

²⁸My interpretation of Davidson makes him more radical than Hume. On my interpretation of Hume, colour and figure are intrinsic properties of the globe, but they are identical. On my

The problem with such theories, powerful as they might be, is that it just seems false that there could be a difference in these sorts of extrinsic features – different resemblances on Hume’s account; similarity to different concepts on the scholastic account, different descriptions on Davidson’s account – that is not founded in a difference in intrinsic structure. While it seems plausible, contrary to the views of Leibniz, that something wholly simple could stand in two different relations without differing in its intrinsic denominations, for example, it could be next to *x* and next to *y*, it does not seem plausible that something wholly simple could resemble *x* in one way and *y* in another way.²⁹ Similarly, in opposition to the view held by some scholastics concerning God, it is hard to see how we could have two different concepts both resembling something that is wholly simple. Finally, it would seem, contrary to Davidson, that answering to a true description of an event as mental or physical there must be some feature intrinsic to that event which, in virtue of being intrinsic, can influence the causal efficacy of that event.³⁰

My aim in the last section has been primarily to indicate what I take to be a fundamental similarity in the views of philosophers as diverse as Hume, Aquinas and Davidson, and secondarily to explain why I find them intuitively implausible. I have not set out to present conclusive objections to them, and I expect others will find them more congenial.³¹

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interpretation of Davidson, mental properties and physical properties are not intrinsic properties of events, but instead are linguistic entities. A mental property is a description that uses mental vocabulary essentially; a physical property is a description that uses only physical vocabulary essentially.

²⁹This has to be qualified to exclude cases where the difference in resemblances is based solely on the things’ relational properties in order to block the following sort of counterexample that was put to me: ‘ABCDE – B resembles D in being next to C, but B does not resemble D in being next to E’.

³⁰This objection to Davidson contains two elements. First, parallel to the objection to Hume that the notions of colour and figure cannot be purely extrinsic because something wholly simple cannot stand in different resemblance relations, is the objection that the notions of the mental and the physical cannot be purely extrinsic. Second is the further claim that if a property or feature is indeed intrinsic to a thing, then it can influence the thing’s causal relations.

³¹Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Cartesian Circle, University of California, Irvine, 29 July 2005, and at the Mid-Atlantic Seminar in Early-Modern Philosophy meeting jointly with Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi su Descartes e il Seicento (Università di Lecce) and Centre d’Etudes Cartésiennes (Université de Paris IV), Princeton University, 30 March 2007. I would like to thank Alan Nelson, Larry Nolan, Kyle Stanford, John Carrero, Casey Hall, John Fischer, Pierre Keller, Sean Greenberg, Daniel Garber, Steven Bayne, Martha Bolton, Alan Gabbey, Donald Ainslee, Donald Baxter, Lorne Falkenstein, Jeff McDonough and especially Kenneth Winkler.