Complex Ideas and Hume’s Separability Principle

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In this paper, I will argue that a number of Hume’s claims generate a putative inconsistency with regard to complex ideas and independent existence. I first provide a *prima facie* argument for the existence of this inconsistency. Then, I examine a number of attempts to rescue Hume from this problem, and argue that each of them fails, before proposing my own solution.

1. A Putative Inconsistency

The apparent inconsistency is straightforward:

1. Perceptions can exist independently of any other perception.
2. At least some complex ideas are complexes of simple ideas.
3. Complexes cannot exist independently of their constituents.
4. At least some complex ideas cannot exist independently of the simple ideas they comprise. (2, 3)
5. If these complex ideas exist, they are not perceptions. (1, 4)
6. These complex ideas exist.
7. These complex ideas are not perceptions. (5, 6)
8. These complex ideas are perceptions.

From (7) and (8), contradiction.

In support of (1):

… since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. (THN 1.4.5.5)[[1]](#footnote-1)

But farther, what must become of all our particular perceptions upon this hypothesis? All these are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately consider'd, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence. (THN 1.4.6.3)

In a similar vein:

Now as every perception is distinguishable from another, and may be consider'd as separately existent; it evidently follows, that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind; that is, in breaking off all its relations, with that connected mass of perceptions, which constitute a thinking being. (THN 1.4.2.39)

THN 1.4.2.39 argues that since every perception is separable from every other, it follows that any perception can exist independently from the bundle of perceptions that constitutes the mind.[[2]](#footnote-2) THN 1.4.5.5 and THN 1.4.6.3 explicitly state that ‘all our perceptions’ (‘all our particular perceptions’ in the latter) can exist independently of any other perception, and indeed, ‘from every thing else in the universe’, and ‘have no need of any thing to support their existence’.

Hume argues for the independent existence of perceptions from one another via the Separability Principle. We can start with the Mental Separability Principle, which is the thesis that two things are different iff distinguishable iff separable by the thought and the imagination:[[3]](#footnote-3)

…whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and…whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the inverse, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different. (THN 1.1.7.3).

Difference, distinguishability, and mental separability are *equivalent*, which is to say the three stand in biconditional relations. According to (Baxter, 2011, pp.161–164), to say that two things are different means that they are numerically distinct (c.f. THN 1.2.3.10), to say they are distinguishable means that we can tell them apart, and to say they are separable by the thought and the imagination means that it is possible to think of one without the other.

To delve a bit deeper into distinguishability, what does it mean to say that we can tell two things apart? First, by what means can we distinguish objects? We might tell two things apart qualitatively—two objects, as they are in themselves, might be distinguished by their presenting differently to our phenomenology (sensorily for external objects; introspectively for mental objects). However, this is not the only means by which we can distinguish objects. Consider two exactly resembling ideas of scarlet, one possessed by me, and one possessed by you. Clearly, the two can be distinguished despite being qualitatively identical. Similarly for two exactly resembling marbles, one on the table, and one in the box. This points to the second way we might tell two things apart: we can also distinguish objects by their relational qualities. Our exactly resembling ideas of scarlet are distinguished by their differing relations to other mental objects: my idea of scarlet and not yours is causally embedded in the bundle of perceptions that constitutes myself, for Hume. Similarly, the two exactly resembling marbles are distinguished by their differing spatial relations: one marble is above the table, another is inside a box. In short, two objects can be distinguished either qualitatively or relationally.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To cash this out in more detail, an account of distinguishability might be *subjective* or *objective*. Subjective distinguishability points to a *psychological* account, whereby distinguishability depends on the ability of a thinker to distinguish two things. Meanwhile, objective distinguishability turns on the in principle distinguishability of two things, abstracted from the limitations or peculiarities of any particular mind.

However, note that in taking distinguishability to entail numerical difference, Hume means by distinguishability *in principle* distinguishability. In light of this, it seems that no subjective psychological account is plausible, since there is always the possibility of a non-ideal mind failing to distinguish two actually distinct things (for instance, confusing two things that look alike).[[5]](#footnote-5) That leaves us with an objective account. But any qualitative or relational difference whatsoever between two things would entail distinctness. Since the Separability Principle takes distinguishability to be equivalent to distinctness, wherever there is distinctness, there must be distinguishability. The only objective account of distinguishability that respects this is one whereby *any* qualitative or relational difference whatsoever suffices for distinguishability. Thus, distinguishability is qualitative or relational difference: two things are distinguishable iff they differ with respect to either their qualitative or relational properties.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Meanwhile, numerical difference entails mental separability given the unbounded power of the imagination to separate ideas that are in fact different (THN App. 2; A 35). Putting these together, we have the Mental Separability Principle.

Having clarified the above, we can proceed from the Mental Separability Principle to the Separability Principle. Baxter points out that given the Conceivability Principle (anything conceivable is metaphysically possible, in THN 1.1.7.6 and elsewhere), two things that are separable by thought and imagination are also metaphysically separable. Since for two things to be mentally separable is for the mind to be able to imagine each without the other, for two things to be metaphysically separable is for each to be able to exist without the other. Importantly, note that metaphysical separability in the relevant sense is *mutual* separability. In taking separability to be equivalent to the symmetric relations of distinguishability (X is distinguishable from Y iff Y is distinguishable from X) and difference (X is different from Y iff Y is different from X), it seems clear that separability must also be a symmetric relation, on pain of violating these equivalence relations. Thus, metaphysical separability requires that X be able to exist without Y *and* Y be able to exist without Y. This is symmetric: X is metaphysically separable from Y iff Y is metaphysically separable from X. Henceforth, when I refer to metaphysical separability, I mean mutual separability in this sense.

Putting this together, we have the following. Two things are different iff distinguishable iff metaphysically separable, where these notions are cashed out as follows:

* Different = numerically distinct;
* Distinguishable = qualitatively or relationally different;
* Metaphysically separable = capable of existing without each other (mutual separability).

Call this the Separability Principle. Given that any two perceptions are distinguishable and numerically distinct, all perceptions are metaphysically separable, which is to say they can exist independently of any other.

Let us move on to (2). THN 1.1.4.1 makes the point that simple ideas are ‘united into a complex one’ by means of the principles of association. Similarly, THN 1.1.7.14 remarks that ‘complex ideas are compos’d’ of ‘simple ideas’.[[7]](#footnote-7) This suggests that complex ideas are merely complexes of simple ideas. However, Hume’s discussion of complex ideas of substances complicates this picture:[[8]](#footnote-8)

The idea of a substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination... But the difference betwixt these ideas consists in this, that the particular qualities, which form a substance, are commonly refer'd to an unknown *something*, in which they are supposed to inhere; or granting this fiction should not take place, are at least supposed to be closely and inseparably connected by the relations of contiguity and causation.

Given this difference between modes and substances, we can add simple ideas to a complex idea of a substance without destroying it:

The effect of this is, whatever new simple quality we discover to have the same connexion with the rest, we immediately comprehend it among them, even tho' it did not enter into the first conception of the substance... The principle of union being regarded as the chief part of the complex idea, gives entrance to whatever quality afterwards occurs, and is equally comprehended by it, as are the others, which first presented themselves. (THN 1.1.6.2)

Hume’s account of complex ideas of substances and modes in THN 1.1.6 is genuinely puzzling, and I lack the space required to delve properly into it here. Whether or not complex ideas of substances are mere complexes of simple ideas, for my purposes, it suffices to establish that at least some complex ideas are merely complexes of simple ideas. In particular, complex ideas of modes fit this description, since Hume is clear that any addition of a new idea to a complex idea of a mode would change this complex idea. He continues the above passage as follows:

That this cannot take place in modes, is evident from considering their nature. The simple ideas of which modes are formed, either represent qualities, which are not united by contiguity and causation, but are dispers'd in different subjects; or if they be all united together, the uniting principle is not regarded as the foundation of the complex idea. The idea of a dance is an instance of the first kind of modes; that of beauty of the second. The reason is obvious, why such complex ideas cannot receive any new idea, without changing the name, which distinguishes the mode. (THN 1.1.6.3)

For instance, the addition of a new simple idea to a complex idea of a particular dance would render a new complex idea of a different dance. Thus, at least some complex ideas—that is, complex ideas of modes—are such that they are merely complexes of the simple ideas that constitute them.

In support of (3), the texts seem unambiguous:

’Tis evident, that existence in itself belongs only to unity, and is never applicable to number, but on account of the unites, of which the number is compos’d. Twenty men may be said to exist; but ’tis only because one, two, three, four, *&c.* are existent; and if you deny the existence of the latter, that of the former falls of course. (THN 1.2.2.3)

Thus, complexes cannot exist independently of the units that compose them; they only exist ‘on account of’, or in virtue of, their constituents. This seems to be a result of Hume’s position that identity is fragile: strictly speaking, identity is incompatible with change. As he says:[[9]](#footnote-9)

But supposing some very *small* or *inconsiderable* part to be added to the mass, or substracted from it; tho' this absolutely destroys the identity of the whole, strictly speaking; yet as we seldom think so accurately, we scruple not to pronounce a mass of matter the same, where we find so trivial an alteration. (THN 1.4.6.8)

Thus, the loss of any unit destroys the identity of the complex which comprises it, and the existence of the complex is derivative from the existence of its parts.

(4) straightforwardly follows from (2) and (3). If at least some complex ideas are complexes of simple ideas, and these complex ideas, like all complexes, cannot exist independently of that which composes them, it follows that at least some complex ideas cannot exist independently of the simple ideas that compose them.

(5) follows from (1) and (4): since all perceptions can exist independently of any other perception, and since at least some complex ideas cannot exist independently of the simple ideas that compose them, if these complex ideas exist, they are not perceptions.

There is good reason to think that complex ideas in general exist, and hence that (6) is correspondingly true. Hume notes that ‘every object, that is presented, must necessarily be existent’ (THN 1.2.6.6), and all complex ideas, including complex ideas of modes, as ideas that ‘strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness’ (THN 1.1.1.1), are certainly presented to us. More explicitly, Hume points out that the complex idea of extension exists (THN 1.2.3.16). Extension is a property of objects, rather than itself being a substance (THN 1.1.7.2), and thus an idea of extension is not a complex idea of a substance. Moreover, the idea of substance under discussion in THN 1.2.3.16 is particular rather than general, and thus is not an abstract idea or relation. Therefore, our complex idea of extension is a complex idea of a mode. Thus, (6) holds: complex ideas exist, and more specifically, complex ideas that are merely complexes of simple ideas exist.

From (5) and (6), it seems that these complex ideas cannot be perceptions. However, this claim borders on contradiction. THN 1.1.1.1 begins: ‘ALL the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS’. In the next paragraph: ‘[t]here is another division of our perceptions, which it will be convenient to observe, and which extends itself both to our impressions and ideas. This division is into Simple and Complex’ (THN 1.1.1.2). A complex idea is, trivially, an idea that is complex; what would it be, if not a perception? Correspondingly, a complex idea of a mode would have to be a perception. (8) follows. However, (7) and (8) are inconsistent as they stand.

1. Reconsidering Complex Ideas

How might we rescue Hume from this apparent inconsistency? In what follows, I will explore three possibilities. First, we could deny (6), that such complex ideas exist. Second, we could deny (8), that such complex ideas are perceptions. Third, we could deny (1), that *all* perceptions can exist independently of any other perception; perhaps complex ideas cannot exist independently of at least some ideas, in particular the simple ideas that constitute them. The first two options seek to reconsider our understanding of complex ideas, while the third looks to qualify or restrict the independent existence of perceptions.

What textual grounds might there be for the first two options? Either might be seen to be suggested by the following passage:

For by the same rule these twenty men may be consider'd as an unite. The whole globe of the earth, nay the whole universe may be consider'd as an unite. That term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination, which the mind may apply to any quantity of objects it collects together; nor can such an unity any more exist alone than number can, as being in reality a true number. (THN 1.2.2.3)

The claim that the term ‘unity’ is a fictitious denomination might be read in two ways. First, it might indicate that complexes simply do not exist; correspondingly, complex ideas that are merely complexes of the simple ideas that constitute them would not exist either. Alternatively, it might indicate that complexes exist, but only as Humean fictions—correspondingly, complex ideas would be fictions rather than perceptions. Above, we saw some putative considerations for complex ideas existing, and being perceptions. Nevertheless, perhaps the texts above are not decisive, and we should re-evaluate these claims in light of this passage.

Let us consider the first option of mereological nihilism. (Baxter, 2008, p.27) argues that ‘anything divisible does not really exist’ for Hume.[[10]](#footnote-10) For Baxter, to say that a complex exists is merely to say that the simples that compose it exist: ‘[a]nything that is many things can be said with some truth to exist only if those many things each exists’ (*ibid*.).[[11]](#footnote-11) Thus, complex ideas are not unities: they are many rather than one.

Mereological nihilism is not an attractive position. It is unintuitive, to say the least. And little in Hume beyond this passage points towards this view. And even this passage is compatible with a mereologically realist reading.[[12]](#footnote-12) As we have seen, Hume states that

existence in itself belongs only to unity, and is never applicable to number, but on account of the unites, of which the number is compos'd. Twenty men may be said to exist; but 'tis only because one, two, three, four, *&c.* are existent; and if you deny the existence of the latter, that of the former falls of course. (THN 1.2.2.3)

Hume need not be seen as denying that complexes exist, but only making the point that their existence supervenes on the existence on their parts, which is a much less controversial view. Given these weaknesses, some hesitation about ascribing mereological nihilism to Hume is understandable. But if it is the only way to save Hume from contradiction in this respect, and if it suffers no other problems, perhaps these costs can be overlooked. However, I argue that neither of these are true. Such a reading does suffer from other problems, and I will propose another means of rescuing Hume from the putative inconsistency of the paper. On the basis of the considerations of this paper, at least, we should refrain from attributing mereological nihilism to Hume.

Recently, (Hakkarainen, 2019) has levied strong arguments against the mereological nihilist reading of Hume, making the case that it is inconsistent with two passages concerning continguity (THN 1.3.1.1 and THN 1.3.2.2). Independently of this criticism, I will adduce a further problem with this view that I think sufficient to address the mereological nihilist reading of Hume, one which concerns the *psychology* rather than the *metaphysics* of this account. According to Baxter’s view, what is it to perceive a collection of simple ideas as a complex idea, given that complexes do not exist?[[13]](#footnote-13) This would involve mistakenly taking a concatenation of simple ideas to be a single and simple thing. In viewing a complex idea as a unity, we no longer regard its component ideas as distinct from it or each other. By contrast, if one denied mereological nihilism, there would be a much simpler account of perceiving a complex: since complexes exist, we perceive them in the same way we perceive any existing thing, for instance simples.

Hume recognises that such a psychological phenomenon, whereby we mistake a complex for a simple, does in fact occur with respect to the notion of substance:

We entertain a like notion with regard to the *simplicity* of substances, and from like causes. Suppose an object perfectly simple and indivisible to be presented, along with another object, whose *co-existent* parts are connected together by a strong relation, 'tis evident the actions of the mind, in considering these two objects, are not very different. The imagination conceives the simple object at once, with facility, by a single effort of thought, without change or variation. The connexion of parts in the compound object has almost the same effect, and so unites the object within itself, that the fancy feels not the transition in passing from one part to another. Hence the colour, taste, figure, solidity, and other qualities, combin'd in a peach or melon, are conceiv'd to form *one thing*; and that on account of their close relation, which makes them affect the thought in the same manner, as if perfectly uncompounded. (THN 1.4.3.5)

Importantly, however, when we mistakenly view a complex as simple, we are no longer able to think of its parts as something potentially distinct from it. To consider the parts of a complex is ‘destructive’ of the inclination to see them as unitary, and this tension engenders the postulation of a substance:

But the mind rests not here. Whenever it views the object in another light, it finds that all these qualities are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other; which view of things being destructive of its primary and more natural notions, obliges the imagination to feign an unknown something, or *original* substance and matter, as a principle of union or cohesion among these qualities, and as what may give the compound object a title to be call'd one thing, notwithstanding its diversity and composition. (THN 1.4.3.5)

The problem, then, is as follows. Hume argues that when we mistakenly take a complex to be simple and also consider its distinguishable parts, this creates a tension in the mind, which is only resolved by the postulation of an underlying substance (this tension ‘obliges the imagination’ in this respect). According to Baxter, *any* consideration of a complex as a unity is an instance whereby we mistakenly take a complex to be simple, as with the case of substance. But from this it would follow that, whenever we consider a complex as well as its parts, we would have to view it as a substance. This in turn would entail the impossibility of our considering complex ideas of *modes* while thinking of their parts. But this seems false: we can think of a dance (a complex idea of a mode, as per THN 1.1.6.3) as also its parts (a segment of a dance, a pirouette, a sweep). Yet we do not thusly consider a dance a substance. Similarly, we can think of a length of extension (again, a complex idea of a mode, as previously argued) and also parts of this extension, without considering it to be a substance—for instance, in considering the distance between myself and the table, and also half that distance.

This is not a decisive objection to Baxter’s reading, but it is a problem which requires explanation. Given the unattractiveness of the reading of Hume as a mereological nihilist, as well as the various problems it faces, if we can find an alternative solution to the puzzle of this paper, we should favour that solution instead. I hope to propose such a solution later in the paper.

What of the second option of claiming that such complex ideas are fictions rather than perceptions? The literature on Humean fictions is deep and involved, and entering into that debate here would take several times more words than has been afforded to the main argument of the paper.[[14]](#footnote-14) For my purposes, it suffices to say that whatever they are, fictions are ideas produced by the imagination, which is not a particularly controversial claim.[[15]](#footnote-15) This is not a full analysis; not every idea produced by the imagination will count as a fiction. But all fictions will count as ideas of the imagination. More generally, Hume notes that ‘[e]very thing that enters the mind’ is ‘in *reality* a perception’ (THN 1.4.2.7); fictions presumably ‘enter the mind’ and thus are perceptions. Thus, *even if* such complex ideas are fictions, they must be nevertheless be perceptions. But then the problem remains: complex ideas are perceptions, and thus have independent existence from other perceptions, including their constituents.

1. Qualifying the Separability Principle: First Pass

What then of the third option of denying that complex ideas can exist independently of any other perception? When Hume claims that all our perceptions can exist independently from any other perception, we might take him to be writing loosely. How might we best qualify this claim so as to avoid inconsistency? One option is to take this claim to apply only to simple perceptions: all simple perceptions can exist independently from any other perception.

This principle seems true, but unnecessarily weak for Hume’s purposes. Hume employs the thesis that perceptions have independent existence in a variety of arguments, and this overly qualified version seems insufficient to establish his desired conclusions. Consider his argument that the Causal Maxim—*whatever begins to exist, must have a cause of existence* (THN 1.3.3.1)—cannot be demonstrative or intuitive. In arguing for this claim, Hume makes the point that our ideas of cause and effect are metaphysically separable (THN 1.3.3.3). However, our ideas of cause and effect are often *complex*, for instance when I think of a billiard ball causing another to move, or when I think of a stone breaking a glass window. Limiting the independence existence of perceptions only to simple perceptions would compromise this argument. Likewise with Hume’s argument that any perception may exist independently of the mind, examined earlier (THN 1.4.2.39). He argues for this thesis on the basis that perceptions are metaphysically separable from one another, and thus separable from the bundle of perceptions that constitutes the mind. If only simple perceptions were metaphysically separable, then Hume’s argument could only establish that *simple perceptions* may exist independently of the mind, but his conclusion seems intended to have a wider scope than this.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In line with this, a better reformulation is as follows: all perceptions can exist independently of any other perception *except for their constituents*.We cannot stop here, however. Recall that Hume establishes the independent existence of perceptions on the basis of the Separability Principle. To qualify his claim regarding the independent existence of perceptions requires a similar qualification of the Separability Principle.

To reiterate, the Separability Principle rules that two things are different iff distinguishable iff metaphysically separable. (Hakkarainen, 2012) proposes a distinction between ‘real distinctions’ and ‘partial distinctions’. Real distinctions are the distinctions corresponding to the notion of ‘difference’ in the Separability Principle. Partial distinctions do not fall under the scope of the Separability Principle. The idea is that complex ideas and their constituents are not really but only partially distinct, and thus the Separability Principle does not entail that they are metaphysically separable, allowing for their independent existence.

To my mind, this strategy seems the most promising one for resolving the putative inconsistency. How might we cash out the distinction between real and partial distinction? Hakkarainen appeals to Lewis’ account of partial distinctness: X and Y are partially distinct iff they overlap without being identical (Lewis, 1993). (Hakkarainen, 2012, p.71) takes the relevant notion of ‘overlap’ to correspond to the sharing of parts: two perceptions overlap if they share simple perceptions. A complex idea that is a complex of simple ideas will partially overlap with a simple idea that it comprises, since the two overlap without being identical. As (Hakkarainen, 2012, p.72) concedes, there is no direct textual grounds for making this move, but it does have the virtue of saving Hume from contradiction.

Such an account is, however, incomplete without an account of real distinction. Hakkarainen for the most part characterises two things as really distinct iff they are mutually separable (p.61).[[17]](#footnote-17) This, while correct, is insufficient for our purposes of clarifying the Separability Principle. For the Separability Principle states, among other things, that two things are mutually separable iff they are different. If ‘difference’ is cashed out as ‘mutual separability’, then this aspect of the Separability Principle is tautological: two things are mutually separable iff they are mutually separable. A second, more minor worry is that this renders real and partial distinctions non-exclusive, since two things might be both partially and really distinct, insofar as they might overlap and yet be metaphysically separable (more on this shortly). This might not be fatal, but it is unintuitive and compromises the explanatory power of partial distinctness, since showing that two things are partially distinct does not suffice to prove that they are not really distinct.

Indeed, at the end of the paper, Hakkarainen suggests a more substantive account of real distinction (p.75). In line with the Lewisian framework, Hakkarainen proposes that real distinction corresponds to Lewis’ ‘entire distinction’, whereby X and Y are entirely distinct iff they are disjoint—that is, they do not overlap whatsoever. This would preserve the intuitive exclusivity of partial and real distinctness, and remove the threat of rendering a significant portion of the Separability Principle tautological.

However, as far as this goes, there are two problems with Hakkarainen’s account. First, it wrongly rules as lacking independent existence overlapping perceptions that do not stand in a part-whole relation.[[18]](#footnote-18) A toy example that highlights this is as follows. Consider the complex ABC (comprising the simples A, B, and C) and the complex CDE (comprising the simples C, D, and E):

A B C D E

Hakkarainen’s account would entail that ABC and CDE are metaphysically inseparable, since they are only partially rather than entirely distinct. Yet surely the complex ABC could exist without the complex CDE, if D or E did not exist. The destruction of D or E would destroy the complex CDE but not the complex ABC. Likewise, the complex CDE could exist without the complex ABC, if A or B did not exist, for similar reasons: the destruction of A or B would destroy the complex ABC but not the complex CDE. Thus ABC and CDE are separable and have independent existence from one another.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The second problem with Hakkarainen’s account is that, as it stands, it does not address or discuss the third element of the Separability Principle, that is, distinguishability. It is true that anything entirely different and metaphysically separable will be distinguishable. But not everything distinguishable will be entirely different and metaphysically separable. For surely complex ideas that are complexes of simple ideas are perfectly distinguishable from the simples that constitute them: distinguishability means qualitative or relational difference, and such a complex idea is qualitatively and relationally different from the simples that constitute it. And intuitively, if distinguishability means anything, surely we can distinguish a thing and its simple parts.

1. Qualifying the Separability Principle: Second Pass

Although Hakkarainen’s account ran into problems in the details, I believe that we can fruitfully build on it in order to resolve the putative inconsistency. Let us begin with the first issue with Hakkarainen’s account. Hakkarainen’s fundamental insight is correct. Key to resolving the issue is distinguishing between two senses of difference: one which entails separability, and one which does not. However, the problem is that partial distinctness, cashed out in terms of overlap, does not entail inseparability, as seen above; the distinction he draws is in the wrong place.

In order to address this issue, let us first quickly define the notions of proper and improper parthood:

* X is a proper part of Y iff X is a part of Y, and X is not numerically identical to Y.
* X is an improper part of Y iff X is numerically identical to Y.

We can cash out the relevant distinction between two senses of difference in terms of these notions as follows:[[20]](#footnote-20)

* X and Y are *partially different* iff either is a proper part of the other.
* X and Y are *really different* iff neither is a proper or improper part of the other.

Real and partial difference are mutually exclusive. Real difference, partial difference, and numerical identity (improper parthood) are mutually exhaustive.

Transposing this to the Separability Principle, we have the following: two things are *really different* iff metaphysically separable, but they might be *partially different* and yet metaphysically inseparable. This formulation of the Separability Principle allows for overlapping complexes having independent existence: ABC and CDE are really different, because neither is either a proper or improper part of the other, and thus ABC and CDE are metaphysically separable (preserving the insight that each complex can exist without the other). Yet it correctly predicts that C is inseparable from both ABC and CDE because C is a proper part of both complexes.

Let us proceed to the second problem, that of accounting for distinguishability. The key to resolving this issue is to introduce a similar distinction between ‘real distinguishability’ and ‘partial distinguishability’ corresponding to the distinction between real difference and partial difference. To avoid any potential counterexamples, the distinction between real and partial distinguishability should correspond exactly to the distinction between real and partial difference:[[21]](#footnote-21)

* X and Y are *partially distinguishable* iff either is qualitatively and relationally identical to a proper part of the other.
* X and Y are *really distinguishable* iff neither is qualitatively and relationally identical to a proper or improper part of the other.

If we accept Hume’s position that two qualitatively and relationally identical things are numerically identical (and vice versa), as presented in the Separability Principle, then partial distinguishability maps exactly onto partial difference: two things are partially distinguishable iff they are partially different. If X is qualitatively and relationally identical to a proper part of Y (and thus X and Y are partially distinguishable), then X is numerically identical to this proper part (and thus X and Y are partially different). Likewise, real distinguishability maps perfectly onto real difference: two things are really distinguishable iff they are really different. If neither X nor Y is qualitatively and relationally identical to an either a proper or improper part of the other (and thus X and Y are really distinguishable), then neither is numerically identical to either a proper or improper part of the other (and thus X and Y are really different).

Thus, we have the following qualification of the Separability Principle: two things are really different iff really distinguishable iff metaphysically separable. This formulation allows for two things being partially different and partially distinguishable and yet being metaphysically inseparable, as in the case of simples and the complexes that comprise them.

1. Conclusion

We have seen that it is possible to rescue Hume from the putative inconsistency by qualifying the scope of the Separability Principle. But perhaps there is a simpler resolution to this puzzle. In my (Qu, 2020b), I have argued that the Separability Principle is problematic for independent reasons. In this respect, it is striking that Hume entirely drops this principle from the first *Enquiry*, along with any arguments that depended on it.[[22]](#footnote-22) Perhaps the most straightforward solution to the inconsistency highlighted in this paper is not to qualify but simply to abandon the Separability Principle, along with any corresponding commitment to the unrestricted independent existence of perceptions. And perhaps this is precisely what Hume proceeded to do in his mature work.[[23]](#footnote-23)(Hume, 1739–1740/2007)

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1. In references to Hume’s texts, ‘THN’ refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature* and ‘A’ refers to *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published*; Arabic numerals refer to book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (THN), or paragraph numbers (A). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Rocknak, 2013, pp.173–174) takes Hume to be merely explaining the belief of the vulgar in THN 1.4.2.39, although she does not dispute that perceptions have independent existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Iff’ is used throughout the paper as the standard abbreviation for ‘if and only if’. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Thanks to an anonymous referee for this journal for helpful discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. If one stipulates that the distinguishing mind is an ideal distinguisher, such an account would be equivalent to taking distinguishability to be qualitative or relational difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Distinctions of reason (THN 1.1.7.17), such as those between the figure and body of a sphere, do not involve qualitative or relational difference, but neither are they genuine distinctions. See (Garrett, 1997, pp.62–64), (Cummins, 1996), (Hoffman, 2011), (Baxter, 2011), (Hakkarainen, 2012), (Qu, 2015, pp.109–111), and (Qu, 2020b) for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Cottrell, 2015, p.556) notes that ‘most other commentators pass over Hume’s views on composition’. Some discussion, besides Cottrell, includes (Baxter, 2008), (Hakkarainen, 2012), and (Hakkarainen, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Note that by substance Hume does not mean a featureless substratum (THN 1.1.6.1), which would violate his Copy Principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Of course, as Hume explains in THN 1.4.6, there is a looser sense of identity through time that we are happy to ascribe to changing objects. My discussion concerns the strict sense of numerical identity, which Hume is clear cannot survive change. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See also (Baxter, 1990, pp.107–112). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Compare with e.g. (van Inwagen, 1990, pp.104–105). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Hakkarainen, 2019, p.230) makes this point, and also reconstructs the wider argument in the surrounding passages that turns on this claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The following psychological account is indebted to correspondence with Baxter. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For some discussion, see (Traiger, 1987), (Traiger, 2010), (Butler, 2010) and (Cottrell, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See (Traiger, 1987, p.385–386), (Butler, 2010, p.248), and (Cottrell, 2016, p.50), for instance. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Similarly with any attempt to limit independent existence to simple ideas *and complex ideas of substances*. Besides being extremely gerrymandered, such a qualification faces similar issues. For complex ideas of modes, such as a dance, can be causes or effects, and can presumably exist independently of the mind. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hakkarainen also mentions that really distinct things should have mutual independent existence. But for Hume, to be mutually separable just is to have mutual independent existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Thanks to Peter Millican for helpful discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In response, it might be denied that Hume would allow for distinct complexes that share parts. This reply seems *ad hoc*, but more crucially, is unviable. Hume points out that there is an arbitrariness to how we individuate complexes: ‘That term of unity is merely a fictitious denomination, which the mind may apply to any quantity of objects it collects together’ (THN 1.2.2.3). Given this arbitrariness, Hume would find the possibility of distinct overlapping complexes perfectly acceptable: the mind might ‘collect together’ both ABC and CDE without contradiction, psychological or logical. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I prefer ‘different’ over ‘distinct’ to keep more closely to Hume’s formulation of the Separability Principle. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Thanks to Sukjae Lee and Cian Dorr for helpful discussion on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See for instance (Millican, 2002, pp. 50–1) and (Qu, 2020a, pp.18–19). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For very helpful comments of previous drafts of this paper, thanks are owed to Donald Baxter, Jonathan Cottrell, Cian Dorr, Don Garrett, David Landy, Sukjae Lee, Peter Millican, Stefanie Rocknak, and Karl Schafer. I am also very grateful for excellent comments from the National University of Singapore Philosophy Reading Group and audiences at the Australasian Seminar in Early Modern Philosophy in University of Queensland, University of California Irvine, San Francisco State University, and University of Southern California. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)