

Hume on the structure of time

Through his arguments against the infinite divisibility of finite extensions and durations given in *Treatise* 1.2.1. and 1.2.2., Hume proposes his theory as to the structure of time and space whereby extensions and durations are composed of ultimate parts. These ultimate parts are simple, and so, for Hume, unextended and unenduring. Quickly, an old problem arises: how is it that any number of parts which themselves possess no extension or duration can compose something which possesses extension or duration? Hume was aware of this problem of composition and explicitly addressed it, albeit briefly. Dismissing the other options of mathematical points and physical points as “absurd”, Hume proposes his route as a middle way. Discussing only the spatial case, he forwards a picture of points which are unextended but nevertheless possess colour or solidity. In virtue of possessing these qualities, he argues they are able to compose in the way required.

Despite Hume’s attempt to solve this problem of composition, it still appears problematic for him. It is far from clear exactly how the possession of these qualities is meant to help. Or even how the solution is intended to work in the case of time. Historically, commentators have been largely unimpressed by the solution, judging it rather *ad hoc* and unconvincing; Kemp-Smith sums up this view nicely with his judgement that this is one of the “least satisfactory parts of [Hume’s] philosophy.” (*The Philosophy of David Hume*, 1941). More recently Allison (*Custom and Reason in Hume*, 2008) and Johnson (*The Mind of David Hume*, 1995) have criticised it as failing to solve the problem posed (though for more favourable discussion of these issues see Baxter (*Hume’s Difficulty: Time and Identity in the Treatise*, 2008), and Frasca-Spada (*Space and the Self in Hume’s Treatise*, 1998)).

In this paper my overarching aim is not so much to evaluate the strength of Hume’s position (though I will give some reasons to think that it is more successful and interesting than it has generally been given credit for). Instead I aim to address the puzzle of exactly how Hume’s proposal is meant to work, and why he thought it addressed the problem of composition. In doing this, I will suggest we must give full weight to the second part of his two-part system concerning time and space; the arguments given in *Treatise* 1.2.3. By considering these I suggest we can see that his solution, far from being *ad hoc*, is in fact an important consequence of his broader commitments regarding the nature of time and space. Although Hume does not spell out how his solution is intended to work in the case of time, I will extrapolate a reading of this from the evidence available, and argue that this presents us with a theory as to the structure and composition of time that offers a plausible resolution to the problem of composition.