

Later Wittgenstein on the Analysis of Experience: A Problem for Early Modern Empiricism?

PART I. Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophical Atomism

Philosophical Investigations (PI) 47: “But what are the simple constituent parts of which **reality** is composed?—What are the simple constituent parts of a **chair**?—The pieces of wood from which it is assembled? Or the molecules, or the atoms?—“Simple” means: not composite. And here the point is: in what sense ‘composite’? It makes no sense at all to speak **absolutely** of the ‘simple parts of a chair’.

[...] Does my **visual image** of this **tree**, of this **chair**, consist of parts? And what are its simple constituent parts? Multi-colouredness is one kind of compositeness; another is, for example, that of an open curve composed of straight bits. And a **continuous curve** may be said to be composed of an ascending and a descending segment.

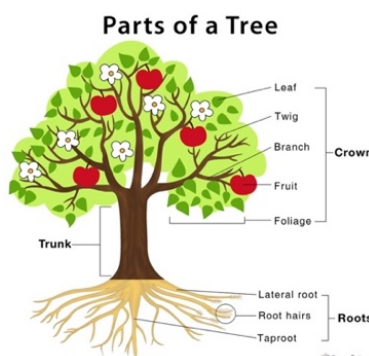
If I tell someone without any further explanation, “What I see before me now is composite”, he will legitimately ask, “What do you mean by ‘composite’? For there are all sorts of things it may mean!” – The question “Is what you see composite?” makes good sense if it is already established what kind of compositeness – that is, which particular use of this word – is in question. If it had been laid down that the visual image of a tree was to be called “composite” if one saw not just a trunk, but also branches, then the question ‘Is the visual image of this tree simple or composite?’ and the question ‘What are its simple constituent parts?’ would have a clear sense – a clear use. [...]

But isn't a **chessboard**, for instance, obviously, and **absolutely** composite? —You're probably thinking of its being composed of 32 white and 32 black squares. But couldn't we also say, for instance, that it was composed of the colours black and white and the schema of squares? And if there are quite different ways of looking at it, do you still want to say that the chessboard is **absolutely** ‘composite’? – [...] We use the word “composite” (and therefore the word “simple”) in an enormous number of different and differently related ways. [...]

To the **philosophical** question “Is the **visual image** of this **tree** composite, and what are its constituent parts?” the correct answer is: “That depends on what you understand by ‘composite’.” (And that, of course, is not an answer to, but a rejection of, the question.)” **(See also PI 46-64.)**

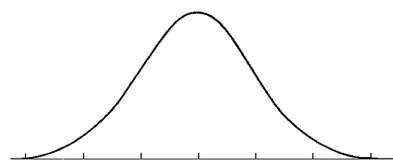
Major Takeaways from PI 47

- ‘Simple’/‘composite’ are interdefined and there is no **absolute** definition.
- A wide variety of language-games that include ‘simple’ and ‘composite’.
- “Is *this* simple or complex?”: appropriate answers determined by relevant **grammar**.
- Temptation to think something is ‘**absolutely** simple/complex’ is based on some grammar or other seeming natural to a particular example or context.
- The **philosophical** question(er) is confused because they seek an **absolute** standard; whereas there are a variety of standards suited to different purposes and contexts.



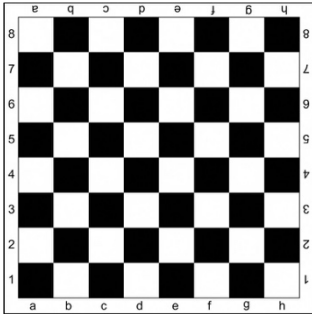
‘Simples’ of a tree:

- ‘Simples’ =_{def} Trunk, leaves, branches, fruit, twigs, roots, root-hairs, etc.
- ‘Simples’ =_{def} Colors (reds, greens, yellows, browns of varied shades)
- ‘Simples’ =_{def} Biological cells
- ‘Simples’ =_{def} Elementary particles



‘Simples’ of a curve:

- ‘Simples’ =_{def} Ascending, descending segments
- ‘Simples’ =_{def} Geometrical points



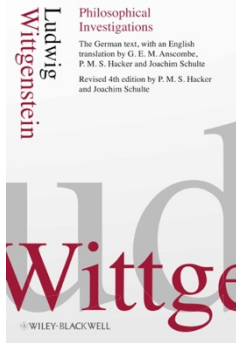
'Simples' of a chess board:

- 'Simples' =_{def} Squares; i.e., 32 black and 32 white (64 simples)
- 'Simples' =_{def} Dominoes (32 simples)
- 'Simples' =_{def} Grid pattern & colors (b&w) (3 simples)



'Simples' of a chair:

- 'Simples' =_{def} IKEA parts
- 'Simples' =_{def} Basic Materials: Wood, paint, metal
- 'Simples' =_{def} Molecules



'Simples' of Investigations:

- 'Simples' =_{def} Parts (I & II)
- 'Simples' =_{def} Pages
- 'Simples' =_{def} Section Numbers
- 'Simples' =_{def} Sentences
- 'Simples' =_{def} Words
- 'Simples' =_{def} Letters
- 'Simples' =_{def} Dots of ink

Etc.!

Variety of examples
+ Variety *within* examples

Fogelin: “[O]nce we see that complex-simple contrasts are introduced for widely different purposes and on categorically different grounds, it seems altogether *unlikely* that there is a **single** complex-simple contrast upon which all the rest ultimately depend. This doesn’t show that an atomism of the kind developed in [say] the *Tractatus* is false, but it does destroy all presumption in its favor and thereby takes away **the motive** for making such a standpoint legislative for the organization of a theory” (1987, 126-7).

PART II. Simplicity/Complexity of Ideas in Early Modern Empiricism

Early Modern Empiricists tend to rely on a distinction between (absolutely) simple and complex ideas in experience. Let’s call it the **simple/complex distinction (SCD)**.

General Question: Does **PI 47** present a challenge to the **SCD** in **early modern empiricism**?



— Westphal (1984) & Rubenstein (1996) have *noted* the connection:
“Wittgenstein’s thesis/teachings of the relativity of simplicity”

Focused Question: Does **PI 47** present a challenge to **Hume’s SCD** in his theory of ideas?

Humean Impressions and Ideas: “Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name **impressions** [...] By **ideas** I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning” (THN 1.1.1).

Copies and Complexes: “all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are **copies** of our impressions or more lively ones” (EHU II); “all **simple** ideas and impressions

resemble each other; and as the **complex** are form'd from them, we may affirm in general, that these two species of perception are exactly correspondent" (THN 1.1.1).



Humean SCD and Separability Principle: “**Simple** perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of **no distinction nor separation**. The **complex** are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts. Tho’ a particular **colour, taste, and smell** are qualities all **united together** in this apple, ‘tis easy to perceive they are not the same, but are at least **distinguishable** from each other” (THN 1.1.1).

Limits of Thought: “But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within **very narrow limits**, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of **compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials** afforded to us by the senses and experience” (EHU II).

PART III. Readings of Hume’s SCD (Currently Available)

The bearing of **PI 47** on **Hume’s SCD** largely depends on how we understand Hume’s general project (including ‘**the motive**’ behind it). There are *at least* three possibilities to consider.

- (1) **Phenomenological Reading** (Russow 1980; Westphal 1984): The distinction between simple and complex perceptions is found in experience itself. Hume’s theory is intended to be a descriptive phenomenology (e.g., of *qualia*).
- (2) **SCD as Theoretical Stipulation** (Nelson & Landy 2011): Simple perceptions are theoretical posits and are never experienced ‘as such’.

Minimum Sensible: “Put a spot of ink upon paper, fix your eye upon that spot, and retire to such a distance, that at last you lose sight of it; ‘tis plain, that the moment before it vanish’d the image or impression was **perfectly indivisible**” (THN 1.2.1; c.f., Garrett 1997: 69ff).

- a. **Scientific-Explanatory Reading:** “What all of this amounts to is a *theoretical scientific account* of **experience**. Our experience, **the phenomena that a science of human nature must explain**, is of only complex ideas. The nature of experience is explained in terms of posited simple perceptions that are governed by general laws and principles such as the Copy Principle. This scientific theory of ideas **should be contrasted with a descriptive phenomenology**. [...] Hume’s commitment to simple ideas is grounded, not in direct experience of them, but in their explanatory utility” (N & L 2011, 227).

- b. **Pragmatic Reading:** Hume's SCD is a *useful stipulation*, say, for the flourishing of science (esp. by clearing away metaphysical controversy).

"We must submit to this fatigue, *in order to live at ease ever after*" (EHU, I.12).

PART IV. The Effects of Wittgenstein's Critique (According to Each ↑ Reading)

- (1) **Phenomenological Reading:** Mere introspection doesn't reveal an absolute carving of our experience into simple and complex components – different experiences might suggest different carvings, and any particular experience (of a tree, of a chess board, of a chair, etc.) can be carved in a variety of different ways.

"In the *Treatise* Hume cites the idea of an apple as an example of a complex idea [containing simple ideas of color, taste, and smell]. But the saturation, brightness and hue of a given colour patch also **seem** 'distinguishable from each other'" (Russow 1980, 344).

"The doctrine [that color is a simple idea] is notoriously not simple or clear in either Locke or Hume. [...] I regard it as a *dogma*, because it is based on the claim, unargued, that the concepts of colours cannot be 'unpacked', that there are no noticeable features or marks by which the *qualia* can be identified, or that **we can all just look and see** that they are not complex" (Westphal 1984, 457-458).

PI 59: "[E]xperience certainly does not show us these [simple] elements."

- (2) **SCD as Theoretical Stipulation:** ... even so, perhaps Hume's version of the SCD satisfies specific (a.) explanatory-theoretical or (b.) practical aims.

- a. **Scientific-Explanatory Reading:** How do we *describe* 'experience', i.e., the thing to be explained? Wittgenstein (in PI 47): Experience (e.g., visual experience) can be variously analyzed (into 'simples' and 'composites') and thus described in a variety of different ways.

If Wittgenstein is right, then Hume's theory will only explain 'experience' under descriptions *that favor Hume's theory* (e.g., descriptions that do not involve 'cause' or 'self' as an irreducible element of the experience); it will fail as an explanation under other descriptions.

In other words, Hume's very descriptions of experience are **theory-laden** in ways that put into question the theory's explanatory legitimacy or superiority – presupposing (in the explanandum) what it intends to explain.

Consider: if the correct description of my experience of billiard balls were (say) 'The cue-ball **caused** the eight-ball to go into a corner pocket', and the 'cause' correctly described is *part of* the experience, then Hume's SCD (because so

reductionistic) would *fail* as an explanation of experience (i.e., there is a *part* of experience that it fails to capture).

“If, then, it must be allowed that we ‘find’ bodies in motion, for example, then what theory of perception can justly disallow the perception of a lot of causality?” (Anscombe 1993, 92).

Locke, e.g., thinks that experience reveals a simple idea of (passive) ‘power’ in the billiard scenario. (*Essay*, 2.21.3-4)



‘Simples’ of billiard scenario:

‘Simples’ =_{def} Humean minimum sensibles (conjunction of simple impressions in temporal succession)

‘Simples’ =_{def} Medium-sized objects (cue, cue ball, 8-ball) and major events (the cue ‘hits’ cue ball, cue ball ‘knocks’ the 8-ball into corner, etc.)

Of course *Hume* would say our experience (rigorously described) reveals **no idea of cause** – aside from, say, the complex idea of frequent succession of A and B, and (in turn) our habit of inference from A’s to B’s (THN 1.3.14). The point is that Hume’s description of experience *itself* relies on his SCD (and other principles of analysis). Similar considerations apply to Hume’s argument against any alleged idea of ‘substance’ (THN 1.1.6) or of a ‘self’ (1.4.6).

Wittgenstein’s diagnosis (roughly): Hume merely **introduces a grammar** for describing and analyzing experience, though on reading (2a) treats it as a matter of scientific fact or substance.

Z 458: “Philosophical investigations: conceptual investigations. The essential thing about metaphysics: it obliterates the distinction between **factual** and **conceptual** investigations.”

- b. **Pragmatic Reading:** Even supposing Hume’s SCD simultaneously defines the structure of his theoretical posits and the ‘experience’ to be described, his theoretical scaffolding could be accepted for its usefulness in ending large swaths of metaphysical controversy or encouraging epistemic humility (c.f., THN 1.4.7). E.g., there’s no need for a (controversial) metaphysics of causation or a metaphysics of self *if we accept Hume’s descriptive conventions* – which are eminently parsimonious and rigorous.

Perhaps Wittgenstein would suggest that his therapeutic and anti-metaphysical *methods* are yet simpler and more effective: whether experience should be described as containing ‘causes’ or a ‘self’ is a **grammatical question** (not a metaphysical question). This would also sidestep the inevitable despair and self-undermining of skeptical methodology that Hume himself notes (THN 1.4.1/7).

PI 133: “The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions **which bring itself in question**. [...] Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a *single* problem.”

PART V. Conclusion

Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophical atomism highlights foundational – **and currently unresolved** – questions regarding Hume’s project in the *Treatise & Enquiry*.

The ultimate effect of Wittgenstein’s critique depends on *which* reading of Hume is correct.

If Hume’s project is **phenomenological**, then Wittgenstein’s critique is **devastating**.

If ... **scientific-explanatory**, then Wittgenstein’s critique suggests that Hume’s most (in)famous arguments are **question-begging**.

If ... **pragmatic**, then it should be **evaluated** (and compared with other philosophical systems) according to how well it achieves its **practical aims**.

Although my focus has been on Hume, a similar dialectic would carry over to other empiricists and highlight similar interpretive questions (esp. Locke and Berkeley).

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