CHAPTER 2

AGAINST MIND-MEDIATED IDEAS OF INFINITE DIVISIBILITY

Simple and Complex Ideas

The thesis that the limitations of immediate sense impressions apply to the simple and complex ideas of which they are immediate faint replicas may well be true. But the principle by itself is insufficient for Hume’s argument, unless it can also be shown that the complex idea of extension in particular is immediate, a direct ideational copy of an impression of colored or tactile points that is not mediated by memory, imagination, or reason. If not, then the possibility remains open for an adequate idea of infinitely divisible extension to be concocted from *minima sensibilia* by these faculties of mind.

Hume’s heterodox rejection of infinite divisibility is an inevitable result of his uncompromising empiricism. Hume disallows putative ideas that are incompatible with his ‘attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects’, eliminating those for which a legitimating experiential origin is lacking. Yet Hume’s arguments go beyond merely asserting that we never actually experience an infinitely divided extension, or that our finite minds never actually take in an infinite spatial expanse. Hume knows that there are ideas of other things for which we do not have immediate sense impressions, but which the mind puts together from different sorts of experientially derived cognitive raw materials. Why not suppose that the same might be true for an idea of infinite divisibility? Hume anticipates and refutes several ways
of establishing an experiential origin for an adequate idea of the infinite divisibility of extension.

The copy principle for the experiential origin of ideas, as we have seen in the previous chapter, is explicitly limited to the causal derivation of simple ideas from simple impressions. Hume, in Part I, Section I, *Of the Origin of our Ideas*, distinguishes between simple and complex ideas in this way:

> There 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. 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.16

The idea of extension for Hume is nevertheless complex. The fact that the idea of extension or of an extended body as divisible into parts necessarily excludes it from the category of simple ideas, if these, as Hume explains, are supposed to be mentally indivisible, admitting of 'no distinction nor separation'. Hume might appear to offer a counterexample to this classification in his lengthy discussion of the white marble globe in Section VII, *Of Abstract Ideas*, to which we now turn. There he writes:

>'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 contained 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

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16 *Treatise*, p. 2.