David Hume's account of human thought and cognition is central to his philosophical project. But despite this and the general acknowledgement of Hume's importance as a philosopher, his account of cognition has often been viewed as limited and simplistic. While the worries about this account are diverse, one of the most persistent is that Hume's account of mental activity in terms of mere associations between perceptions cannot do justice to the broadly normative aspects of cognition or thought, or:

**The Objection from Normativity:** In focusing on mere associations between ideas and words, Hume's account of cognition fails to do justice to the broadly normative dimensions of thought and language.

This sort of concern can arise in a variety of contexts. For example, there is the familiar worry that Hume lacks the materials necessary to epistemically distinguish proper and improper forms of inference. Elsewhere, I’ve discussed my preferred response to this epistemological question—which involves a distinctively Humean form of virtue epistemology—so I will not focus on this here. Rather, my main concern will be something else: namely, whether Hume’s account gives

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him the materials necessary to distinguish proper or correct use of a concept or linguistic term from improper or incorrect use of the same. Or, in other words:

**The Objection from Correctness:** In focusing on mere associations between ideas and words, Hume's account of cognition fails to fully explain the distinction between correct and incorrect or proper and improper use of a concept or linguistic term.¹

The exact nature of this concern, as it arises in the context of Hume's views, will only become clear once we have done a fair amount of interpretative work. But by way of foreshadowing, let me begin by describing in broad outlines why one might worry about this aspect of Hume's account. In particular, as I'll discuss below, there are two features of Hume's philosophy that seem to make it difficult for him to develop a satisfactory account of what it is to use a concept or term correctly.

First, there is Hume's commitment to the project of developing a broadly naturalistic explanation of what it is for an idea to represent something.² Unlike many other early modern philosophers, Hume does not (at least in general) treat the representational features of ideas as primitive features of them. Rather, one of his goals in the *Treatise* is to offer an explanation of how our ideas represent what they do in terms of more basic features of those ideas—such as their resemblance to other ideas or things, their causal origins, and the manner in which they are associated with one another. Thus, in developing an account of what it is to use a concept or term correctly, Hume cannot rely on primitive or unexplained claims about what that concept or term represents.

How does Hume aim to meet this explanatory challenge? As I've argued elsewhere, Hume's response to this challenge is more complex than it might at first seem.³ In particular, Hume's account can be seen as operating in two basic stages. First, there is his account of what our ideas represent qua images of things. While it brings with it its own complexities, the basic elements of Hume's account of this sort of imagistic representation are relatively clear. In particular, insofar as this is our topic, Hume appears to think of the representational features of an idea as explained in terms of some combination of facts about what that idea resembles and what its causal origins are.⁴ But—and this is the second feature of Hume's account that is relevant here—it is also clear that this sort of purely imagistic representation is only the beginning of Hume's account of mental representation in general. For there are a wide range of cases in which Hume's explanation of what an idea represents also makes essential appeal to the associations in the mind between ideas and/or linguistic terms. And this appeal raises a series of further questions about Hume's account. For example, what, for Hume, distinguishes those associations in the mind that are relevant to what some idea represents from those that are mere psychological idiosyncrasies? And similarly, what distinguishes those associations that embody the correct use of an idea or term from those that represent mistakes in usage?⁵

Here, the first feature of Hume's account of representation becomes particularly relevant. Given the explanatory ambitions of his philosophy, Hume must explain what such ideas and terms represent in terms of other non-representational facts about them. And in cases

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¹ Whether this objection is, strictly speaking, a version of “The Objection from Normativity” will depend on whether these notions of “proper” or “correct” use are themselves “genuinely normative”. This, of course, is a hotly debated issue, but nothing in my discussion will presuppose either a positive or negative answer to it. Nonetheless, The Objection from Normativity and The Objection from Correctness are often raised together, and, as we will see, they involve related concerns about the explanatory resources available to Hume.


³ Although, as I discuss below, it is important to stress that there are relatively few interesting cases of mental representation where this simple, purely imagistic story exhausts Hume's account.

⁴ See my “Hume's Unified Theory of Mental Representation” (2013).

⁵ Compare Ginsborg's “Thinking the Particular as Contained Under the Universal” (2006).
like the ones just mentioned, this explanation will itself appeal to the manner in which some idea or term is associated with other ideas or terms in the human mind. Thus, in these cases, Hume’s account of the standards of correct or proper use of an idea or term cannot begin with a prior understanding of what that idea or term represents and then use this to explain how the idea or term ought to be used. Instead, in such cases, what an idea or term represents will be explained in terms of the manner in which the idea or term is properly associated with other ideas or terms.

This feature of Hume’s account is explicit in his discussion of how we come to “correct” the usage of linguistic terms and general ideas so as to arrive at a shared standard for the proper use of them. In such cases, the primary motive to engage in this “correction” is simply the discomfort we, given our capacity for sympathy, feel in cases of conflict between our views and the views of those around us. This felt discomfort motivates us to develop a shared standard for the usage of the terms or general ideas in question so as to (partially) relieve it. Only then do these shared standards determine the conditions under which judgments involving the general ideas in question are correct or incorrect, true or false. Thus, in these cases, Hume’s explanation of the ultimate “truth conditions” for a general idea or term runs through his explanation of the standards that govern that idea or term’s proper use. In short, as I discuss in more detail below, there are a range of cases in which the proper use of a term or concept is prior, for Hume, to a full specification of its truth-conditions or what it represents.

It is this structural feature of Hume’s account that makes worries like the Objection from Correctness so natural with respect to his work. Given the limited, broadly naturalistic resources available to Hume, it is not clear how he might explain the distinction between proper and improper use without appealing to a prior understanding of what an idea or term represents. It is this, I take, that gives the Objection from Correctness its initial bite.

My aim here is to develop what seems to me to be the best response to this concern available to Hume, given the resources at his disposal. I believe there is a good case to be made that this response is the one Hume himself would give. But at the same time, I should acknowledge that Hume does not explicitly address these issues in an extended fashion. Thus, while I will only be making use of materials that are plainly part of Hume’s views in developing an account of the broadly normative dimensions of our cognitive lives, in doing so I will have to piece together elements from his discussion of a variety
of different issues. This carries with it certain risks, of course, but I also think that exploring the connections between these texts can illuminate the systematic unity (at least in the Treatise) of Hume’s views about issues that are often seen as relatively unrelated. In this way, I think the present reflections can shed light on a variety of different questions in Hume interpretation, some of which I note below. Thus, while it is undeniable that I am extending Hume’s explicit discussion of these issues here, I believe that the manner in which I do so has a good claim to represent Hume’s own views about these subjects.

As will become clear, my approach to these questions brings together two prominent ideas from recent Hume literature. First, there is the idea that there is an essentially discursive or linguistic element within Hume’s account of cognition. Second, there is the idea that Hume’s views about proper cognitive functioning are best understood in broadly virtue-theoretic terms. Both of these ideas have prominent supporters in the literature, but they have not generally been brought together in as systematic a fashion as I do here. Thus, one of my goals is to develop more fully the consequences of the combination of these two views. As we will see, the main upshot of this combination is that a virtue-theoretic reading of Hume’s account of the proper use of our cognitive faculties must involve, not merely a cognitive or epistemic analogue of Hume’s “natural virtues”, but also a cognitive or epistemic analogue of “artificial virtues” like justice. In one sense, this should not be a terribly surprising result, since Hume himself claims that, much like the rules of justice, “languages gradually establish’d by human conventions without any promise.” But while this quote is familiar, its placement towards the end of the Treatise has lead to its neglect in recent discussion of Hume’s theory of cognition. And yet, as I argue below, recognition of this fact significantly expands the resources available to Hume for responding to worries like the one above — as well as other objections to his account of cognition.

In developing this line of thought, I’ll begin by laying some groundwork about Hume’s account of cognition. In particular, I’ll discuss some reasons to think that there are essentially discursive or linguistic elements within that account. Then I will argue that, given these elements, Hume ought to respond to the Objection from Correctness by drawing on his account of the artificial virtues and thinking through their relevance to the linguistically informed aspects of cognition. In particular, I will argue that we can capture what it is to correctly use linguistics terms or related concepts by applying Hume’s account of artificial virtues to the conventions involved in possession of a shared

10. I leave to the side here James Harris’s important claim that Hume abandons his ambitions to systematic philosophy in the wake of the perceived failure of the Treatise. My main focus here will be the version of Hume’s views we find in the Treatise. I leave for the future the question of whether it is reasonable to attribute similar views to Hume later in life. For Harris’s discussion of these issues, see his Hume: An Intellectual Biography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).


13. Thus, it is important to stress that a full treatment of these issues will involve an appeal to both “natural” and “artificial” cognitive or epistemic virtues. My focus here on ‘artificial’ virtues is meant as a supplement to the existing discussion, which has tended to focus on the “natural” side of this divide. But both of these elements are essential here. For more discussion of the natural side of this divide, see my “Curious Virtues in Hume’s Epistemology” (2014).

14. T 3.2.2.10

15. More generally, although (as I discuss below) Hume’s account of language is crucial for his overall account of cognition, he does not generally foreground the role that language plays in this account. This does mark a difference between him and some of his predecessors such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. But, as I discuss below, this difference should not lead us to ignore the role that conventional languages play in Hume’s account.
public language. I hope the result will be a way of understanding the normative dimensions of cognition that is illuminating, both for thinking about Hume’s views and for thinking about the relevance of these views for contemporary debates. For example, by carefully examining these issues, I believe we can better understand the sense in which cognition is an essentially social phenomenon for Hume.

1. The Essentially Linguistic Elements of Humean Cognition

Again, my main focus here will be the Objection from Correctness. But before we can make this objection precise, we need to discuss some of the basic elements of Hume’s account of cognition. In doing so, for reasons that will become clearer, I will focus on the way in which there is a discursive or linguistic aspect to this account. Doing so will both help to make the Objection from Correctness precise and foreshadow my preferred response to it.

Hume is sometimes presented as consistently operating only with a straightforwardly “perceptual model” of cognition, on which he takes “the paradigm of cognition [to be] the immediate apprehension of a particular content that is before the mind, that is, as a kind of seeing with ‘the mind’s eye’”. But while Hume does build his understanding of human cognition around a range of cases that might be understood in such terms, his account goes well beyond the straightforward application of such a model in a variety of respects. For instance, as Hume’s discussion of general ideas, ideas of substance and mode, and geometrical ideas makes clear, Hume believes that it is only possible to account for many features of human cognition via an appeal to cognitive capacities that (roughly speaking) allow us to organize the “given data” provided by our impressions of sensation and reflection (and the ideas copied from them) via associating these ideas together with one another in certain systematic and cognitively significant ways.

As I will discuss further in a moment, some of these cognitively significant patterns of association arise simply in virtue of the natural associative tendencies of the human mind. We share these ways of organizing the ideas provided by our impressions with other, non-linguistic animals. But many of these patterns of association—such as those involved in general ideas, ideas of substance and mode, and many geometrical ideas—have a partially linguistic or discursive basis and so are only available to creatures capable of the use of language.

To understand this, let’s begin with Hume’s account of general ideas. In developing that account, Hume claims that particular ideas become “general in their representation” via being associated in a particular manner with what Don Garrett has dubbed a “revival set” of further ideas. This revival set consists in the ideas that are instances of the general class represented by the general idea. But this set of associative dispositions always involves a further association between the idea that thereby becomes “general in its representation” and a linguistic general term.

For example, in order to understand the associative dispositions at work in a Humean general idea, it is not enough to postulate that the ideas within its revival set are tightly associated with one another. After all, many ideas are tightly associated with one another in various ways without forming a general idea. Rather, the associations that constitute a Humean general idea must have a certain structure, which Hume describes (in part) as follows:

For this is one of the most extraordinary circumstances in the present affair, that after the mind has produc’d an individual idea, upon which we reason, the attendant custom, reviv’d by the general or abstract term, readily suggests any other individual, if by chance we form any reasoning, that agrees not with it. Thus shou’d we mention the word, triangle, and form the idea of a particular equilateral one to correspond to it, and shou’d we afterwards assert, that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other, the other individuals of a scalenum and isoceles, which we overlook’d at first, immediately crowd in upon us, and make us perceive the falshood of this proposition, tho’ it be true with relation to that idea, which we had form’d. 21

There is much to be said about this passage, but the important point for present purpose is that the “custom” of reasoning described in it seems only to be intelligible in the context of an association between

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21. T 1.1.7.8

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the idea(s) in question and a linguistic term, such as “triangle”. A full account of why this is true will have to wait until later on in this essay, but for present purposes we can simply note that this linguistic term plays an essential role in determining which associations between ideas are relevant to what a Humean general idea represents. For, of course, any such idea will be associated with different ideas in a wide variety of ways, only some of which are relevant to the ideas that fall within its “revival set”. Rather, for Hume, for such associations to be relevant to what a general idea represents, the associated ideas must also be associated with the relevant linguistic term in the right way. In this way, linguistic terms play a central role in specifying which associations determine a Humean idea’s revival set — and so, which associations are relevant to what a Humean general idea represents. Or, as Hume says, in such cases, “The word raises up an individual idea, along with a certain custom; and that custom produces any other individual one, for which we may have occasion.” 22

Against this, one might argue that we can pick out the set of associated ideas that is relevant to, say, the general idea of triangles simply by saying that this general idea will (ideally) involve a revival set that involves all and only triangles. 23 But this ignores the structure of Hume’s explanatory project. As noted above, Hume’s goal here is to offer an explanation of why certain ideas represent what they do — i.e., why they become “general in their representation” — in terms of the manner in which these ideas are associated together (along with other elements). So we cannot begin here with the fact that some idea serves as a general idea of triangles, and then use that fact to explain which associated ideas should be placed within the general idea’s revival set. Rather, we must begin with the idea in question and its various associations, and then provide an account of how those associations determine which general class that idea represents. In this context, any appeal to the fact that this idea represents, say, triangles in general

22. T 1.1.7.7

23. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me to say more about this issue.
would result in an explanatory circle. Thus, in determining which associations are relevant to a general idea’s revival set, we cannot appeal to facts about what this idea represents. Once again, it is the connection between a general idea and its associated linguistic term that helps fill this gap for Hume.

The essential role of linguistic terms is even clearer in the case of Hume’s distinction between substance- and mode-ideas. Here, Hume famously writes:

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, and have a particular name assigned them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or others, that collection. But the difference between 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. The effect of this is, that 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 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 essential.

This circularity worry is related to, but not identical with, the circularity concerns associated with Norman Kemp Smith and Allison that I discuss below. For the worry here is not that there is a circularity in Hume’s account of how we come to form a general idea — rather, it is that there is a circularity in accounts that attempt to both (i) explain what a general idea represents in terms of the associations that form its revival set and (ii) explain which associations are relevant to its revival set in terms of what that general idea represents.

In this case, it is clear that Hume draws the distinction between substance-ideas and mode-ideas in terms of the interaction between one’s ideas and the term one uses as a “name” for the substance or the mode.

In particular, on this account, the primary difference between a substance-idea and a mode-idea lies in how the idea that is associated with the “name” in question changes when we make new discoveries about the qualities it refers. In the case of a substance-idea, we are willing to expand the idea that is associated with this name so that it includes these further qualities. Whereas in the case of a mode-idea, the idea that is associated with this name remains unchanged under these conditions. In this way, this distinction is explicitly drawn in terms of the associations between “names” and ideas — and the names that are at issue here are linguistic terms of some sort. Thus, the distinction Hume draws here is drawn in essentially linguistic terms.

As a result, these forms of representation are fundamentally discursive for Hume in two senses. First, the patterns of association they involve make essential reference to a linguistic term insofar as it is only possible to fully describe these patterns of association by making reference to such a term. Of course, Hume’s Copy Principle ensures that...

24. T 1.16.2–3
25. In Hume’s True Scepticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), Ainslie also notes the connections between the social and normative aspects of Hume’s account of cognition, although he does not develop a detailed account of the connection between these aspects as I do below. For earlier expressions of some version of this thought, see Páll Ardal’s “Convention and Value” in G. Morice (ed.) David Hume: Bicentenary Papers (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977): 51–68, Claudia Schmidt’s David Hume: Reason in History (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2003), and Fred Wilson’s The External World and our Knowledge of It: Hume’s Critical Realism, an Exposition and a Defence (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) — although, again, none of these authors develop it in the way I will do here.
these linguistic aspects of how we associate ideas are only meaningful insofar as they connect together ideas which have themselves been copied from preceding impressions. For the Copy Principle commits Hume to a form of “concept empiricism” on which every idea — and so, every element of a meaningful general idea’s revival set — must either be copied from a preceding impression or composed of simple ideas which can be traced to such a source. But while this constrains the basic elements available to us for the construction of general ideas, it remains the case that we will only be able to understand the resources available to Hume in developing this account if we attend to the further “discursive” elements within it.

In particular, and this is the second point I want to stress here, these patterns of association impose a further layer of structure on our representation of things — a layer of structure that has many of the distinctive characteristics of discursive thought — such as the subject-predicate structure that results from the combination of Hume’s distinction between particular and general ideas and his distinction between substances and modes. For example, suppose we want to account in Hume’s terms for our ability to predicate a general quality of a substance. For Hume, this will involve thinking of a “substance” (in Hume’s sense of the term) as an instance of some general category. In order to do this, we need to form an idea which has the appropriate imagistic features (whatever these may be), while also being associated in the proper fashion with two further linguistic terms: (i) a name that refers to the substance we are thinking about and (ii) a term that refers to the general category we are predicating of this thing.27 By doing so, we will form an idea of this object that is associated with other ideas in two crucial ways. First, when we discover further qualities of this object, we will regard these qualities as also belonging to the object that the substance-name in question refers to. And second, we will bring our idea of this object under a general idea of the relevant category, and thereby come to associate it with all the other instances of this category by thinking of them as members of a Humean revival set.

This points to an important benefit of this element of Hume’s discussion on the relationship between thought and language. Hume’s account of human cognition is often thought to be subject to the objection that it cannot properly account for the formal or logical features of thought. Whether or not this is ultimately the case, in considering this question we need to remember the general strategy that Hume employs in examples like those just discussed. In both these cases, Hume appeals to certain formal or syntactic features of public language to help him draw distinctions between different forms of thought. This is crucial here, because while Hume’s basic account of thought in terms of impressions and ideas does lack much of the formal structure of alternative accounts, he nowhere denies what seems to be obvious — namely, that public language does display a good deal of formal or syntactic complexity. Thus, cases like general ideas and the substance/mode distinction illustrate a general strategy that Hume can employ in order to account for formal differences between thoughts.

To do so, Hume needs only to define such thoughts in terms of the associations between ideas and some linguistic term. For by doing so, he can use the formal or syntactic features of public language to individuate thoughts which might be difficult to distinguish solely on the level of ideas and their associations with one another. And not only is this something Hume can do — it is exactly what Hume does do in the cases under discussion above. Thus, there is good reason to believe he would adopt a similar strategy with respect to many of the cases that have been thought problematic for his account.

2. Initial Circularity Worries

Given all this, the ability to appeal to essentially linguistic forms of thought is extremely important for the prospects of Hume’s account. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that many such general ideas emerge naturally out of the associative dispositions typical of Hume’s

27. Compare the discussion in Garrett’s Hume (2014).
natural relations. For example, we naturally tend to form the associations required by color concepts, spatial and geometrical concepts, and the concept of cause (in some form) in virtue of these natural relations. But while these basic associative dispositions already organize our perceptions in certain functionally significant ways—and while they make it extremely natural to form the relevant general ideas—it remains the case that we can only make sense of the dispositions that constitute these general ideas via an appeal to a linguistic term in the manner described above. Thus, while the existence of such natural relations explains why human languages “so nearly correspond to each other” with respect to general ideas of this sort, it does not render such ideas any less linguistic in character.\(^{28}\)

This element of Hume’s account is particularly important with respect to the familiar charge that his account of general ideas is viciously circular.\(^{29}\) Against such concerns, it is crucial to stress that there is no need for Hume to appeal to some sort of problematic “pre-conceptual recognition of similarity” in characterizing the nature and formation of general ideas. For Hume, it is not that we come to develop the patterns of association at issue here via first recognizing ways in which our particular ideas resemble each other. Rather, these patterns of association—at least in these most basic cases—are the product of a natural process of habituation, functioning against the background of certain basic and innate associative dispositions corresponding to Hume’s natural relations. Thus, these pre-existing associative dispositions play something like the role of “rules for forming rules” that is often associated with the categories (qua rules for intuitive synthesis) in Immanuel Kant.\(^{30}\)

Of course, while some general ideas are straightforwardly rooted in Hume’s natural relations in this way, this is not true for most of the general ideas in our possession. But this is no great difficulty for Hume’s account, for we can develop the package of associations that constitutes such ideas as a result of many forms of habituation—including, most importantly, the sort of habituation and training that is characteristic of gaining mastery of a public language. In such cases, there may be no simple story to tell about how a given general idea is rooted in Hume’s three natural relations—for in order to explain how the relevant associative dispositions are established, we will have to appeal to a community’s linguistic conventions and their long and complicated history of development. But once again, this does not pose any deep problem for Hume so long as the relevant conventions can be understood as developing over time through social interactions that take place against the background of the basic innate associative dispositions noted above.\(^{31}\)

3. Correctness and Error in Humean Cognition

With this in mind, let’s turn to the Objection from Correctness—focusing for the moment on the case of general ideas. As we have seen, on Hume’s account, what makes it the case that one of my particular ideas functions as a general idea of some class of things is that this idea is associated with other ideas in certain systematic ways. These patterns of association correspond to the tendency to follow what Hume calls a “general rule.”\(^{32}\) In particular, every general idea is, for Hume,

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\(^{28}\) T 1.1.4.1


\(^{31}\) I return to concerns about circularity below.

\(^{32}\) T 1.3.13.8. Hume stresses the connections between general rules and communication when he introduces the notion of a “general rule”: “Whether a person openly abuses me, or slyly intimates his contempt, in neither case do I immediately perceive his sentiment or opinion; and ’tis only by signs, that is,
associated with a general rule (or rules) that specifies which particular ideas fall within the general idea’s revival set. Indeed, it is the specification of these sorts of rules that is the focus of Hume’s attempts to define general ideas and terms. For Hume takes the primary purpose of such definitions to be the specification of a rule that characterizes the set of particular ideas that fall within the scope of a particular general term and its associated general idea’s revival set. As Garrett has stressed, it is this feature of Hume’s account of definitions that allows us to understand why he provides us with a number of different, and apparently conflicting, definitions for general ideas like cause and effect. For while the definitions that Hume provides may conflict when understood as providing necessary and sufficient conditions, they do not conflict when considered as first-person specifications of the ideas that should be included within an idea’s revival set by someone who possesses this general idea or term.

Of course, an individual’s ideas will be associated with each other in a wide range of idiosyncratic ways, many of which are irrelevant to what their general ideas represent on any reasonable account. For example, Garrett reports (half in jest) having a strong association between the words “dog” and “war” due to the phrase “the dogs of war”. Such an association may often play an important role in explaining Garrett’s psychological reactions to thoughts of dogs, but it is plainly irrelevant to his understanding of the word “dog”. Thus, in order to make this account of general ideas plausible, Hume needs to find a way of distinguishing the aspects of an individual’s associative dispositions that are relevant to what a particular general idea represents from those that are not.

In fact, the difficulties here are greater than this suggests. For there

by its effects, I become sensible of it. The only difference, then, betwixt these two cases consists in this, that in the open discovery of his sentiments he makes use of signs, which are general and universal; and in the secret intimation employs such as are more singular and uncommon” (T 1.3.13.15).


34. See Ginsborg (2006) for an excellent discussion of this issue.

are in fact two different ways in which such an associative disposition can be irrelevant to what a general idea represents:

(1) The disposition might represent a failure by the individual to correctly understand or grasp the general idea in question.

(2) It might represent an idiosyncratic association in that person’s mind that is completely irrelevant to their understanding of the general idea in question — in which case, it would be misleading to describe this association as representing any failure on their part to fully understand this idea.

Thus, there are two distinctions that Hume needs to be able to draw here. First, he must distinguish those associative dispositions that are completely irrelevant to an individual’s understanding of a general idea or term from those that do constitute her understanding of it. Second, among the latter class, he must distinguish those associative dispositions that represent mistakes in her understanding of the idea or term from those that represent the correct use of the term or idea.

4. The Virtue of Linguistic Propriety

These two distinctions raise two basic concerns about whether Hume’s account of cognition can do justice to the normative dimensions of human thought. So how might we respond to these worries on Hume’s own terms?

My suggested solution is the following: We should look to a particular Humean virtue to capture the sort of normativity or correctness that is at issue here. To understand this response, I will first explain

35. For related discussions of the relevance of Hume’s account of moral virtue for his epistemology, see Owen’s Hume’s Reason (2000), Ridge’s “Epistemology Moralized: David Hume’s Practical Epistemology” (2003), Peter Kail’s “Hume’s Ethical Conclusions” (2005), and my “Curious Virtues in Hume’s Epistemology” (2014).
what this virtue involves, and then turn to how it can be used to reply to these worries.

The virtue I have in mind is the virtue of correctly using some shared linguistic term — or, more generally correcting using the terms in some shared public language. Following Hume’s own usage, we might call this the virtue of linguistic “propriety” with respect to some such term. To be clear, Hume never explicitly refers to “propriety in language” as a virtue. But it is very plausible that what Hume has in mind when he uses such phrases would be a virtue in his sense of the term.

This is clear, in part, because of Hume’s expansive conception of what counts as a virtue. Famously, Hume is committed to a broad view of the virtues on which any character trait that is useful or agreeable to the self and others (in the right way) counts as a virtue. Thus, while “linguistic propriety” — like the virtues Hume discusses in “Of Natural Abilities” — is not narrowly moral in the modern sense of the term, this does not make it inappropriate to treat it as a virtue in Hume’s sense. After all, as Hume argues in this section, there is not any deep difference in kind between the “narrowly moral virtues” and the broader class of useful or agreeable traits of character. Rather, our distinction between “narrowly moral virtues” and other approvable character traits merely represents a difference in the kind and degree of approval (and the causes thereof) that are associated with these character traits. Thus,

36. There is a delicate question here of how to individuate Humean virtues. For example, in the case of justice, Hume generally speaks of a general virtue that encompasses compliance with all of a society’s property conventions — as opposed to speaking of a variety of more particular virtues of complying with particular conventions taken one by one. If we follow this example, we would similarly think of the virtue of linguistic propriety as existing on something on a language-wide level — as opposed to thinking of it as existing on a term-by-term basis. But my sense is that Hume would have no objection to treating both of these as virtues in his expansive sense of the term. In any case, these issues won’t affect the arguments to follow in any substantive way.

37. For references to this sort of “propriety”, see T 1.2.3.11, 1.3.8.15, 1.4.2.29, and 1.4.6.13.

38. T 3.3.4

provided that the proper use of linguistic terms is “useful or agreeable” in the sense of interest to Hume, it seems clear that the disposition to use linguistic terms in this way would count as a virtue for Hume. With this in mind, let’s consider what such a virtue would involve, and how attention to its role in Hume’s philosophy might help him deal with the objections above. To be clear, in doing so, we will have to fill in certain gaps in Hume’s explicit discussion of this issues, but we will rely only on materials Hume plainly has available to him, and we will use these materials only in ways that, given the above discussion, Hume is already committed to. So while we will sometimes go beyond the letter of Hume’s text, everything we say has a strong claim to be implicit in Hume’s discussion of these issues.

Like all Humean virtues, the virtue of linguistic propriety will consist in a character trait or traits that the moral sense approves of from the “steady and general point of view”. Just what this involves is, of course, a complicated question. But it is clear that, for Hume, proper moral approval or disapproval only arises when we survey a person’s character from “the steady and general point of view” and allow our sympathy with that person and those around him to determine our response to this character. The second of these elements (“generalness”) is crucial because it explains why the special sort of approval characteristic of the Humean “sense of virtue” is distinct from more self-interested forms of affection. And the first (“steadiness”) is crucial because it provides Hume with an account of how we come to “correct” our sentiments so as to arrive at a set of shared views about matters of virtue and vice that is sufficiently stable to support the meaningful

39. Indeed, while Hume does not explicitly mention “propriety in language” in T 3.3.4, he does discuss a number of related linguistic virtues such “wit” and “eloquence”.


41. For the distinctive character of moral approval, see T 3.1.2.4 / SBN 472. See also T 3.2.5.4 / SBN 517.
use of moral language.\textsuperscript{42} In this way, it is clear that both these elements play an essential role in Hume’s account. Unfortunately, their precise relationship is the subject of considerable dispute.\textsuperscript{43} But the details of Hume’s account of our “sense of virtue” will not matter for what follows. So for the most part, I will abstract from these questions in my discussion.

What I do want to discuss in detail are the distinctive features of the virtue of linguistic propriety that are my focus. Here, we can begin by noting that not all forms of moral approval seem directly relevant to the virtue of using a linguistic term properly in the sense of interest. After all, it seems possible that we may morally disapprove (all things considered) of patterns of use that manifest the “linguistically correct” use of some term. Thus, much as in the case of justice discussed below, the relevant question here is a particular sort of moral approval or disapproval, namely the following: Do we morally approve of an individual’s use of a general term (and the associated general idea) when we consider this question from the “steady and general point of view” because of the manner in which it fits with the conventions that are present in her linguistic community and thereby promotes the ends associated with those conventions?\textsuperscript{44}

42. T 3.3.1.14–8 / SBN 580–4. See also T 3.3.2.2 / SBN 603 and compare the notion of a “judicious spectator” as it appears in “Of the Standard of Taste”.

43. In particular, some authors see Hume’s account as involving two distinct stages — so that we first take a “general survey” of someone’s character by allowing sympathy to determine our responses to it and only then correct these responses via taking on the “steady and general point of view”. Other interpretations take these two elements to be more tightly integrated with one another. I take no stand on this issue here, since both views are compatible with my claims below. For a recent discussion of this, and related interpretative issues, see the exchange between Garrett and Charlotte Brown in the symposium on Garrett’s Cognition and Commitment in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 62:1 (2001): 185–9; 197–215.

44. The role of ends in Hume’s account of artificial virtue is crucial here, for it is only via their association with certain ends — and more precisely, certain forms of mutual benefit — that conventions (and the motives to comply with them) become “useful or agreeable” in the manner that Humean moral approval requires. Thus, whenever some set of conventions is associated with an artificial virtue, it will be possible to establish some shared end or purpose that establishes this connection. In saying this, it is important to stress that these ends need not be the explicit ends that motivated the establishment of the relevant conventions.

Here, it is important to stress that Hume himself is quite explicit that correct language use is a conventional matter in the same way as property and justice are. For example, he writes:

Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho’ they have never given promises to each other. Nor is the rule concerning the stability of possession the less deriv’d from human conventions, that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of the inconveniences of transgressing it. On the contrary, this experience assures us still more, that the sense of interest has become common to all our fellows, and gives us a confidence of the future regularity of their conduct: And ’tis only on the expectation of this, that our moderation and abstinence are founded. In like manner are languages gradually establish’d by human conventions without any promise. In like manner do gold and silver become the common measures of exchange, and are esteem’d sufficient payment for what is of a hundred times their value.\textsuperscript{46}

These aspects of human life are conventional for Hume because they rest on practices that arise insofar as the following three conditions hold: (i) each individual in society has a general interest in acting in a certain way, but only provided that the others in society act in the same fashion, (ii) this common interest is mutually expressed and recognized in some way, and (iii) this serves to produce a stable disposition or motive to behave in the manner in question.\textsuperscript{47} For Hume, this template applies equally to the patterns of behavior involved in a respect for property and those involved in the use of a common language.

Given all this, much of what Hume says about the nature and origins of the artificial virtues will apply to this case as well — something that is not recognized frequently enough in discussion of Hume’s philosophy of language and cognition. In particular, just as in the case of justice, it is impossible to understand either (i) the motives involved in correct language use or (ii) the distinctive manner in which we approve of these motives as virtuous, without consideration of the conventional context in which these motives exist.

But now, a natural worry about my focus on the virtue of linguistic propriety may arise. For once we have noticed that these essentially linguistic capacities are in part conventional for Hume, isn’t this on its own sufficient to provide us with the materials required to respond to the Objection from Correctness? After all, doesn’t the very idea of a convention carry with it a non-trivial notion of correctness? And if it does, isn’t that enough to respond to the Objection from Correctness without any mention of the artificial virtues that are associated with language use for Hume?

\textsuperscript{46} T 3.2.2.10. As this passage makes clear, money is also a prime example of the conventional for Hume, and Hume stresses that there is an analogy between the sense in which money “represents” what it can purchase and the sense in which linguistic terms represent what they do. Indeed, both money and language can be thought of as media of exchange, albeit in rather different senses: “Money is not, properly speaking, one of the subjects of commerce; but only the instrument which men have agreed upon to facilitate the exchange of one commodity for another” (“Of Money”).

\textsuperscript{47} It is crucial that this process of “mutual recognition”, at least in the most basic cases, does not require any explicit conceptualization via the use of general ideas — although, of course, for creatures with the command of a public language, it will normally involve such ideas. For example, in cases like the establishment of a convention for “rowing together”, neither the expression nor the recognition of the shared interest in question requires the use of essentially linguistic capacities. Rather, at least according to Hume, all that is required is a “gradual” process by which “experience” comes to establish the relevant habits and dispositions. (Here, much as in the case of justice, the “natural appetite betwixt the sexes” and the “unions” it leads to will be of great significance, since they provide a context in which the first rude conventions can develop, even in the absence of linguistic resources.) For an elegant overview of this process, see Garrett’s Hume (2014).
These questions themselves raise more difficult questions, both about the proper interpretation of Hume’s views, and about the sort of “normativity” that is relevant to proper language or concept use. But in the end, I think Hume’s discussion of the artificial virtues makes it reasonably clear that the mere presence of a convention in Hume’s (quite minimal) sense of the term is insufficient to explain why we ought to comply with the conventional pattern of behavior or why a failure to do so would involve any sort of meaningful mistake. In other words, while any convention carries with it a minimal or “purely formal” notion of correctness or “normativity”, something more than this seems to be involved in the linguistic case. In particular, it seems clear that there is a non-trivial sense in which it is normally a “mistake” not to comply with the linguistic conventions operative in our community. And Hume’s view appears to be that, in order to explain this sort of mistakenness, we need to move beyond the “merely formal normativity” implicit in any convention. Rather, to capture a non-trivial sense in which we ought to think and talk in accordance with such conventions, we need to consider whether complying with them would satisfy the further elements in Hume’s account of artificial virtue. Thus, I believe we can only fully meet the Objection from Correctness by appealing to both the conventional nature of language for Hume and the artificial virtues this makes possible. In other words, in order to account fully for the sort of correctness at issue here, we will need something more than the standard of “correctness” that comes with any convention (good or bad) simply as such (at least as Hume understands such conventions).

Fortunately, as I’ve already indicated, the parallels between the case of property conventions and linguistic conventions also extend to the way in which these conventions ground further artificial virtues. Given the above discussion, we will tend to find compliance with the background linguistic conventions in our community “useful or agreeable” for reasons that parallel why we approve of compliance with background property conventions. In both cases, our moral approval of compliance with these conventions will depend upon the manner in which doing so is conducive to achieving certain ends that are generally shared within society.

Of course—and this is one reason a focus on artificial virtues is important here—the ends associated with the virtue of linguistic propriety will be different from those associated with the virtue of justice. In the case of justice, the usefulness of property conventions can be traced to the manner in which human nature, in the context of limited and unstable possession of resources, tends to lead to a violent struggle for those resources. But this is not, at least in the first instance, what is relevant to the virtuousness of linguistic propriety. Rather, in the most general terms, the ends associated with the establishment of linguistic conventions are the achievement of communication and agreement via speech. Importantly these ends cover both descriptive modes of speech, which express ideas and beliefs, and modes of speech that serve to express other elements of our state of mind, such as passions or “resolutions”. This is one reason why I have avoided describing the ends associated with these conventions in terms that make explicit reference to truth or accuracy; where a linguistic term serves to express passions as opposed to ideas, notions of truth or accuracy are not relevant in the same manner they would be with respect to descriptive speech.

There is an even more important reason not to spell out the basic ends associated with these conventions in terms of truth or accuracy—one that applies to descriptive speech as well. This is closely related to the aspect of Hume’s view that we discussed at the beginning.

49. Of course, these ends will have an indirect connection with the ends associated with property conventions.

50. I use “truth or accuracy” here to abstract from the question of whether there is an important distinction in Hume between representations that can be more or less accurate and representations that are capable of being true or false in a full sense of these terms. For more on this distinction, see my “Hume’s Unified Theory of Mental Representation” (2013). I return to this issue briefly below.
of this essay — namely, that it is often these linguistic conventions that help to fix the truth-conditions of the relevant linguistic terms and their associated ideas. For instance, if we want to understand the truth-conditions of some general idea, we can only do so via consideration of its associated general term and the conventions that partially determine the meaning of that term. In such essentially linguistic cases, there is no wholly determinate standard of truth that we can appeal to in developing the relevant conventions — so the ends associated with these conventions are not helpfully thought of in terms of such a standard.51

Of course, this does not mean we are indifferent to questions of truth or falsity in fixing the meaning of descriptive terms. It only means that solely a concern for truth does not wholly determine the linguistic conventions we accept, even in the descriptive case. Rather, we accept these conventions in order to secure the sort of inter-subjective agreement that makes communication possible, and then it is these conventions (and the associated virtues of correct use) that in part determine what it is to use a term correctly, and so when such uses are true or false.52 Of course, this is not to say that truth or accuracy in belief plays no role here — for there will be some possible conventions that would predictably lead us to form beliefs that are inconsistent or inaccurate given our other beliefs about the world. These conventions would

51. In saying this, I don’t mean to deny that Hume believes in objective relations of similarity between perceptions, which make some ways of grouping them more “natural” than others. In this way, Hume’s account of these issues has important similarities with the contemporary Lewisian understanding of meaning as determined by use plus naturalness. But as Lewis’s own example makes clear, this does not render conventional use irrelevant, it only means that there is more to the story than use alone. See David Lewis’s ”New Work for a Theory of Universals” Australasian Journal of Philosophy 61 (1983): 343–77.

52. Once again, the process of arriving at a set of linguistic conventions that plays this role is closely related to the process by which we come to “correct” our general ideas. Indeed, the “correction” of such general ideas can be seen as one case in which we develop more shared linguistic conventions in the service of arriving at a shared, and so durable and stable, view of some disputed subject matter. Thus, the way Hume understands this process of correction provides us with a further piece of evidence for the claim that the revival set of a Humean general idea is specified (in part) through the associations between that idea and some linguistic term.

hardly serve the ends at issue here. After all, conventions that produce beliefs that either clash with each other or with our established background views are poor candidates for achieving a stable and durable agreement of the sort we are interested in achieving here.

Similarly, the Copy Principle is also relevant here, since patterns of linguistic usage that do not have an appropriate connection to ideas (and ultimately impressions) will, for Hume, lack the sort of meaning that makes them so much as candidates for truth and falsity.53 But much as in the case of property conventions, these sorts of concerns under-determine the linguistic conventions we come to accept. So constraints like the Copy Principle can at most be the beginning of the story here.

All this being said, there are of course important differences between descriptive and non-descriptive uses of language here — particularly when it comes to the question of when and why we approve of the sort of agreement these conventions make possible. When we are considering some non-descriptive term, we will approve of this agreement primarily because it is useful or agreeable to us in a purely practical sense of these terms. But in the case of descriptive terms, the approval at issue will have a distinctively epistemic flavor, for the agreement in question is an agreement between the ideas and beliefs of different individuals. And one of the main reasons we find this particular variety of inter-subjective agreement useful and agreeable is that such agreement is conducive to truth in particular, and epistemic virtue more generally. Exactly how Hume understands this sort of epistemic approval and whether it is distinct from more practical forms of approval is, of course, the subject of much recent debate.54 Since I’ve discussed these issues in detail elsewhere, I won’t belabor them here. Fortunately, the views I am developing in this essay are compatible with a wide range of interpretations of Hume’s views about “epis-

53. See my ”Hume’s Unified Theory of Mental Representation” (2013).

54. For practical readings of the relevant sort of approval see, for example, Owen’s Hume’s Reason (2000) and Ridge’s ”Epistemology Moralized: David Hume’s Practical Epistemology” (2003).
temic” approval or evaluation. What is important here is simply the manner in which this account of the artificial virtues of language use and thought serves to extend whatever we take to be Hume’s account of how we ought to form beliefs in a non-conventional context. In this way, the present account can be regarded as the “artificial” analogue to the more basic “natural virtues” of cognition, however we conceive of the latter.

More precisely, on this way of thinking of things, the natural virtues of cognition will consist in the non-conventional patterns of belief formation that we approve in an epistemically relevant fashion. The artificial virtues of cognition can be seen as extending these natural virtues through the use of conventions to solve certain problems of inter-subjective agreement that the natural virtues on their own are insufficient to resolve. Moreover, just as this extension in the moral case itself renders very basic forms of human social life possible, the extension here is a pre-condition of many very basic aspects of our cognitive lives. Indeed, insofar as this extension is required in order to so much as make use of general ideas, the role that “artificial virtues” play in the cognitive case may be even deeper than the role they play in a more practical context. Nonetheless, the similarity between this case and the narrowly moral virtues is illuminating.

55. Again, this might seem to raise circularity worries about this account, for one might wonder whether linguistic conventions could arise in the first place without some reliance on our capacities for the use of general ideas — capacities which (on this account) are only possible in the context of linguistic conventions. Whether Hume ultimately has a satisfactory response to these concerns is a complicated question. But, as noted above, it seems to me he is relatively well placed to respond to them by denying that the process by which conventions first emerge requires the use of general ideas or similar forms of thought. In particular, as noted above, even prior to the development of general ideas, our thoughts about matters of practical concern will be guided by various associative dispositions that lead us to associate resembling cases with one another. This will, I think, be sufficient to get the first stages of Hume’s story of how conventions “gradually” develop through experience (against the background of the natural “union” between the sexes) off the ground. Once again, consideration of very minimal conventions — like the conventions that govern “rowing together” — helps support the idea that conventions can arise even in the absence of any linguistic resources or essentially linguistic forms of thought.


be understood against the background of certain more basic natural virtues of thought in the manner outlined above.

Of course, as already mentioned several times, the connections I am drawing here with Hume's account of the virtue of justice may raise worries for some readers about this way of thinking about Hume's understanding of cognition. Most prominent among these concerns is the worry that this account of the "artificial virtues of thought" might be viciously circular in the same way Hume's account of justice is often thought to be.58 This is a complicated issue which I cannot address in anything like a complete fashion here. But fortunately, I believe that in both cases, these worries are less severe than they might seem. In particular, although this account of linguistic propriety relies on the presence of linguistic conventions in the sense of regularities in the behavior and mental associations of our community, it does not rely on any prior normative distinction between correct and incorrect usage in explaining our approval of a disposition to conform to these patterns of usage. Nor, as discussed above, does it rely on any such distinction in providing an account of the "first motive to virtue" that gains our approval in this way. Rather, much as in the case of justice itself, this motive can be thought of as a disposition to conform with the relevant shared patterns of usage so long as such conformity is mutually beneficial in the relevant way.59

Finally, this account does not rely on any normative distinction in explaining how we might have originally come to conform to conventions of this sort. Rather, much as in the case of justice, it is their beneficial character to oneself and (to a limited degree) others, together with our naturally tendency to form and comply with "general rules", that enables such dispositions to develop in the first place.60 It is only then that we are in a position to approve of them. And it is only in virtue of this approval (or the possibility thereof) that conforming with these patterns of usage ends up counting as correct in a normative sense of this word.61

58. Another general worry about Hume's account of artificial virtues is the following. Hume is explicit that a character trait can only count as virtue insofar as it is relatively exceptional. But, of course, Humean conventions can only exist insofar as people are at least generally disposed to comply with them. So it might seem as though Hume's account of the nature of conventions implies that complying with a convention can never, strictly speaking, be virtuous. The first thing to stress here is that this worry arises for all the artificial virtues, and not just those under discussion here. But in the end, I don't think they threaten Hume's basic account of these issues in either the case of justice or the case of present interest. In particular, what is really important to this account is less the idea that compliance with such conventions is especially virtuous and more the idea that a failure to comply with them is vicious. And a failure to comply with some convention will be relatively exceptional on Hume's account. Nonetheless, given this point, it is perhaps a bit misleading to speak of a virtue of linguistic propriety here — since linguistic propriety is the norm. Rather what is really at issue here is more the vice of linguistic impropriety. This may make talk of 'artificial virtues' in many ordinary cases strictly speaking misleading, but interestingly Hume does not seem very bothered by this point of "linguistic propriety" in his discussion of these issues, and I have followed him in this respect here.

59. Again, to avoid concerns about circularity, at least in some very simple cases, it must be possible to understand this motive without making any appeal to pre-existing linguistic terms or conventions or the general ideas that such terms make possible. Whether such a view is ultimately defensible is, again, a complicated question. But it is relatively clear, I think, that Hume does intend his account of the development of conventions to apply even to cases in which no pre-existing public language is present. Thus, any objection along these lines is best understood as a general objection to Hume's account of conventions — as opposed to an objection to the reading of Hume being developed here.

60. This, in short, forms our 'natural motive' to develop and comply with these conventions — something that Hume sometimes confusingly refers to as our 'natural obligation' to comply with them.

61. Again, it might be thought that the very idea of convention carries with it a sort of 'normativity'. There is a weak sense in which this is true, of course a convention can be thought of as involving a "standard" that one's actions can fail to meet. But prior to a consideration of the virtuousness of complying with some convention, this "standard" is not one we ought to comply with in an interesting sense. So while every convention may carry with it a sort of 'formal normativity', a meaningful notion of "correctness" (for Hume) only attaches to those conventions associated with artificial virtues. (Of course, there are cases in which it is "naturally virtuous" to comply with some convention. But, as Hume convincingly argues, this is insufficient to explain the "normativity" of conventional practices in the sense at interest here.) Of course, there are many other worries about Hume's general account of the artificial virtues. Unfortunately, there is no space to go into these issues in detail here, so I will content myself with the claim that the role of the artificial virtues in the linguistic case does not raise any special worries about circularity.
5. The Conclusion to these Difficulties

There is much more to be said about these connections. But for our purposes here, what is important is the manner in which they provide us with a general outline of what I believe to be Hume's best account of both the nature of “merely idiosyncratic” associations and the distinction between correct and incorrect usage.

In short, given the above, an associative disposition can be regarded as relevant to an individual’s understanding of the relevant general idea or term just in case it is part of the package of associations that she treats as constituting the correct use of the term in question. This, in turn, might involve simply being disposed to use the term in the manner in question; or it might involve a disposition to respond with sentimental moral approval to a tendency to use the term in this manner; or it might involve explicit judgments of correctness about these matters. All of these will, I think, be relevant to an individual’s understanding of some term — and so all of them can represent possible failures to understand a term correctly.

Similarly, the correct use of a general idea or term will consist in those associations that actually are constitutive of the relevant virtue. That is, they will consist in the dispositions that a normally constituted person would approve of (from “the steady and general point of view”) as characteristic of the use of this idea and its associated general term, taking the background conventions (and ends) associated with the relevant general term granted in the manner described above. Once again, the reasons for this approval will vary depending on one’s preferred account of Hume’s epistemology, but the basic structure at work here should be common to them all.

Thus on this picture, genuine mistakes in understanding result from a failure to properly embody the relevant virtue of correct usage. Mere idiosyncrasies result from associations that neither conflict this virtue nor are treated by the individual as part of the correct use of term or idea. As is true throughout Hume’s discussion of these issues, this means that our evaluations of a person’s habits for language use (both in general and on a term-by-term basis) as virtuous or vicious will in a sense take priority over our evaluations of their particular use of a term in this or that case, but this does not prevent us from seeing a particular use of a term as proper or improper.

We can see how this would work by considering some examples. First, consider Garrett’s tendency to associate “dogs” with “war”. This associative tendency is, of course, no part of the conventions governing correct use of these terms. But at the same time, it does not conflict with any of these conventions — nor does Garrett take it to be part of what correct use of these terms requires. Thus, the present account would correctly characterize this as a merely idiosyncratic association, as opposed to a mistake in usage.

On the other hand, suppose that Garrett does take the correct use of “dog” to involve the application of this term to both dogs and cats. Given the above account, this will be a mistake in Garrett’s usage of this term that is relevant to his understanding of it. In other words, given this account, it will be appropriate to treat Garrett as including both ideas of dogs and ideas of cats within the revival set of the general idea for “dog”. This does conflict with the proper use of this term. In this case, we can view Garrett as embodying the vice of linguistic impropriety with respect to his use of “dog” and its associated general idea.

Of course, there are more complicated cases than these. For example, consider empty linguistic terms. In many cases, such terms arise because we conflate a meaningful term with a normal revival set with

over and above those common to the artificial virtues in general. For more discussion of these issues, see Sayre-McCord’s “Hume on the Artificial Virtues” (forthcoming), which helpfully focuses on the motive to “to do one’s share (in a mutually advantageous enterprise)” — as opposed to a disposition to treat some rule or convention as simply inviolable (full stop) — as what is relevant here. That having been said, either of these readings of the “first motive to justice” is compatible with my application of this story to the linguistic case.

62. As is true throughout Hume’s discussion of these issues, this means that our evaluations of a person’s habits for language use (both in general and on a term-by-term basis) as virtuous or vicious will take priority over our evaluations of their particular use of a term in this or that case, but this does not prevent us from seeing a particular use of a term as proper or improper.
a term whose very definition makes it impossible to provide a (non-empty) revival set for it. In such cases, there will not be any vice in refusing to use the term in question, even if its use is part of the linguistic conventions within one’s community, for compliance with these conventions will not serve the ends that are normally responsible for the virtuosity of compliance with linguistic conventions. In other words, such cases provide us with an example of a sort of community-wide linguistic vice.

Similar considerations will apply to many other cases. As we complicate these cases, we will surely arrive at cases where our verdict on the case is much less clear. This is to be expected, for there is nothing surprising in the result that there are borderline cases in which it is difficult to reach a determinate verdict about whether some pattern of association represents an instance of linguistic impropriety of a vicious sort.

One important consequence of all this for Hume’s account is that the standards of correctness that apply to general terms and ideas, ideas of substance and mode, and other conventional terms and ideas are importantly different from the standards of correctness that apply to our ideas when these are considered in abstraction from the role of conventions in shaping our cognitive lives. In the former case, the relevant standards of correctness will be only intelligible in terms of the relationship between an individual’s ideas and the linguistic conventions within their community. Thus, in these cases, the relevant forms of correctness must be thought of in the “artificial” terms sketched above.

But insofar as we set such conventions aside, we can also isolate a “natural” standard of correctness or accuracy that is intelligible apart from such artificial virtues and the conventions that make them possible. On my preferred view of these issues, these natural standards of accuracy will be the product of two non-conventional features of our ideas — first, their capacity to serve as imagistic representations of particular things, and second, the natural patterns of association and combination that already structure our cognitive lives prior to the development of linguistic conventions. It is these “natural” standards of correctness that make it possible to view the representations of animals as accurate or inaccurate. Thus once again, the standards of correctness associated with the “artificial virtues” of thought should be understood as building upon a set of natural standards of correctness that inform the development of these “artificial” standards of correctness.

In saying this, I don’t mean to deny that the “penetration” of conventional associations into our experience of the world goes very deep for Hume. For example, it is very plausible that on Hume’s account, conventional associations already structure what we would today refer to as our “perceptual experience” of the world. Thus, the possibility of identifying such “natural” standards of correctness is important not because there is a clear subset of our perceptions whose accuracy can be evaluated purely in terms of these “natural” standards, but rather because the “natural” standards of correctness (and the associated natural virtues) play an important explanatory role in Hume’s account of the development and nature of the artificial virtues of thought I have been focusing on.63

As should be clear, this account also helps us understand why human cognition is a deeply social phenomenon for Hume. If what I have been saying here is correct, then much of what we think of as the “normative (or correctness-related) dimensions of human thought” can only be understood in terms of the manner in which such thought is embedded within a particular linguistic community. Interestingly, this supports the idea that human cognition, for Hume, arises out of two importantly different sources — one fundamentally sensible, the other essentially discursive or linguistic. This idea is often associated with Kant, but if I am right, we can find a version of it in Hume as well. Of course, as I have been discussing here, Hume’s version of this thought is very different from Kant’s — resting as it does on contingent, naturalistic facts about our psychology and our conventions. But this does not

63. Thanks to Anik Waldow for pressing me on this issue.
mean there are not important structural similarities between Kant and Hume’s respective treatments of the “sources” of cognition.  

64. For much helpful feedback on these ideas, thanks to the audience at the 42nd Hume Society Conference, where Anik Waldow provided an excellent commentary. Thanks also to Donald Ainslie, Jonny Cottrell, Remy Debes, Don Garrett, Jed Lewinsohn, Geoff Sayre-McCord, and Hsueh Qu, among others. Special thanks to several anonymous referees for an unusually helpful set of comments, which greatly improved the paper.