

Hume's Enquiries sect. 2 - the text

Section 2: The origin of ideas

The distinction between impressions and ideas is introduced – the example of heat.

Everyone will freely admit that the perceptions of the mind when a man •feels the pain of excessive **heat** or the pleasure of moderate warmth are considerably unlike what he feels when he later •remembers this sensation or earlier •looks forward to it in his imagination. **Memory and imagination may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses, but they can't create a perception that has as much force and liveliness as the one they are copying.** Even when they operate with greatest vigour, the most we will say is that they represent their object so vividly that we could almost say we feel or see it. Except when the mind is out of order because of disease or madness, memory and imagination can never be so lively as to create perceptions that are indistinguishable from the ones we have in seeing or feeling. **The most lively thought is still dimmer than the dullest sensation.**

There are also **inward** impressions – the example of emotions.

A similar distinction runs through all the other perceptions of the mind. A real fit of •**anger** is very different from merely thinking of that emotion. If you tell me that someone is in •**love**, I understand your meaning and form a correct conception of the state he is in; but I would never mistake that conception for the turmoil of actually being in love! When we think back on our past sensations and feelings, our thought is a faithful mirror that copies its objects truly; but it does so in colours that are fainter and more washed-out than those in which our original perceptions were clothed. To tell one from the other you don't need careful thought or philosophical ability.

Impressions and ideas defined.

So we can divide the mind's perceptions into two classes, **on the basis of their different**

degrees of force and liveliness. The less forcible and lively are commonly called 'thoughts' or 'ideas'. The others have no name in our language or in most others, presumably because we don't need a general label for them except when we are doing philosophy. Let us, then, take the liberty of calling them 'impressions', using that word in a slightly unusual sense. **By the term 'impression', then, I mean all our more lively perceptions when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will. These are to be distinguished from ideas, which are the fainter perceptions of which we are conscious when we reflect on [= 'look inwards at'] our impressions.**

Despite what we might first think all ideas are based on impressions

It may seem at first sight that human thought is utterly unbounded: it not only escapes all human power and authority •as when a poor man thinks of becoming wealthy overnight, or when an ordinary citizen thinks of being a king•, but is not even confined within the limits of nature and reality. It is as easy for the imagination to form monsters and to join incongruous shapes and appearances as it is to conceive the most natural and familiar objects. And while •the body must creep laboriously over the surface of one planet, •thought can instantly transport us to the most distant regions of the universe - and even further. What never was seen or heard of may still be conceived; nothing is beyond the power of thought except what implies an absolute contradiction.

Complex ideas.

But although our thought seems to be so free, when we look more carefully we'll find that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts merely to the ability to **combine**, **transpose**, **enlarge**, or **shrink** the materials that the senses and experience provide us with.

This version of the text is from earlymoderntexts.com. The language has been updated to make it more accessible. It is copyright © Jonathan Bennett. First launched: July 2004 Amended: June 2006

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small •dots• enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought.

Additional headings in red and other explanatory notes are neither part of the original text nor part of Bennett's updated text.

In the original Hume says:

"all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of **compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing** the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.

One example from outward senses and one from inward feelings.

When we think of a **golden mountain**, we only join two consistent ideas - gold and mountain - with which we were already familiar. We can conceive a **virtuous horse** because our own feelings enable us to conceive virtue, and we can join this with the shape of a horse, which is an animal we know. In short, **all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward senses or from our inward feelings**: all that the mind and will do is to mix and combine these materials. Put in philosophical terminology: **all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.**

Here are two arguments that I hope will suffice to prove this.

First argument—an inductive argument and the example of God.

When we analyse our thoughts or ideas - however complex or elevated they are - we always find them to be made up of simple ideas that were copied from earlier feelings or sensations. Even ideas that at first glance seem to be the furthest removed from that origin are found on closer examination to be derived from it. **The idea of God** - meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being - comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds. However far we push this enquiry, we shall find that every idea that we examine is copied from a similar impression. Those who maintain that this isn't universally true and that there are exceptions to it have only one way of refuting it - but it should be easy for them, if they are right. They need merely to produce an idea that they think isn't derived from this source. It will then be up to me, if I am to maintain my doctrine, to point to

the impression or lively perception that corresponds to the idea they have produced.

Second argument—when the relevant impression has been denied.

a. malfunctioning senses.

If a man can't have some kind of sensation because there is something wrong with his eyes, ears etc., he will never be found to have corresponding ideas. A **blind** man can't form a notion of colours, or a **deaf** man a notion of sounds. If either is cured of his deafness or blindness, so that the sensations can get through to him, the ideas can then get through as well; and then he will find it easy to conceive these objects.

b. absence of relevant experience whether outward or inward.

The same is true for someone who has never experienced an object that will give a certain kind of sensation: a Laplander or Negro has no notion of **the taste of wine** - because he has never had the sensation of tasting wine. Similarly with inward feelings. It seldom if ever happens that a person has never felt or is wholly incapable of some human feeling or emotion, but the phenomenon I am describing does occur with feelings as well, though in lesser degree. A gentle person can't form any idea of **determined revenge or cruelty**; nor can a selfish one easily conceive the heights of **friendship and generosity**.

c. absence due to species limitations.

Everyone agrees that non-human beings may have many senses of which we can have no conception, because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only way in which an idea can get into the mind, namely through actual feeling and sensation.

The missing shade of blue.

(There is, however, one counter-example that may prove that it is not absolutely impossible for an idea to occur without a corresponding impression. I think it will be granted that the various distinct ideas of colour that enter the mind through the eye (or those of sound, which come in through the ear) really are different from each other, though they resemble one another in certain respects. If that holds for different colours, it must hold equally for the

different shades of a single colour; so each shade produces a distinct idea, independent of the rest.

Reductio ad absurdum 'proof' that each shade produces a distinct idea.

(We can create a continuous gradation of shades, running from red at one end to green at the other, with each member of the series shading imperceptibly into its neighbour. If the immediate neighbours in the sequence are not different from one another, then red is not different from green, which is absurd.)

In the original Hume doesn't mention specific colours. He says:

"if this should be denied, it is possible, by the continual gradation of shades, to run a colour insensibly into what is most remote from it; and if you will not allow any of the means to be different, you cannot, without absurdity, deny the extremes to be the same.

The thought experiment described.

Now, suppose that a sighted person has become perfectly familiar with colours of all kinds, except for one particular shade of blue (for instance), which he happens never to have met with. Let all the other shades of blue be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest:

Claim 1.

it is obvious that he will notice a blank in the place where the missing shade should go. That is, he will be aware that there is a greater quality-distance between that pair of neighbouring shades than between any other neighbour-pair in the series.

Claim 2.

Can he fill the blank from his own imagination, calling up in his mind the idea of that particular shade, even though it has never been conveyed to him by his senses? Most people, I think, will agree that he can.

Conclusion

This seems to show that simple ideas are not always, in every instance, derived from corresponding impressions.

It fails to undermine the general claim.

Still, the example is so singular that it is hardly worth noticing, and on its own it isn't a good enough reason for us to alter our general maxim.)

Hume's microscope—the philosophical application of the copy principle.

So here is a proposition that not only seems to be simple and intelligible in itself, but could if properly used make every dispute equally intelligible by banishing all that nonsensical jargon that has so long dominated metaphysical reasonings. ·Those reasonings are beset by three troubles·. (1) All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure, so that the mind has only a weak hold on them. (2) Ideas are apt to be mixed up with other ideas that resemble them. (3) We tend to assume that a given word is associated with a determinate idea just because we have used it so often, even if in using it we have not had any distinct meaning for it. In contrast with this, (1) all our impressions - that is, all our outward or inward sensations - are strong and vivid. (2) The boundaries between them are more exactly placed, and (3) it is harder to make mistakes about them.

The empiricist criteria of meaning.

So when we come to suspect that a philosophical term is being used without any meaning or idea (as happens all too often), we need only to ask: From what impression is that supposed idea derived? If none can be pointed out, that will confirm our suspicion ·that the term is meaningless, that is, has no associated idea·. By bringing ideas into this clear light we may reasonably hope to settle any disputes that arise about whether they exist and what they are like.¹

¹Philosophers who have denied that there are any innate ideas probably meant only that all ideas were copies of our impressions; though I have to admit that the terms in which they expressed this were not chosen with enough care, or defined with enough precision, to prevent all mistakes about their doctrine. For what is meant by 'innate'? If 'innate' is equivalent to 'natural', then all the perceptions and ideas of the mind must be granted to be innate or natural, in whatever sense we take the latter word, whether in opposition to what is uncommon, what is artificial, or what is miraculous. If innate means 'contemporary with our birth', the dispute seems to be frivolous - there is no point in enquiring when thinking begins, whether before, at, or after our birth. Again, the word 'idea' seems commonly to be taken in a very loose sense by Locke and others, who use it to stand for any of our perceptions, sensations and passions, as well as thoughts. I would like to know what it can mean to assert that self-love, or resentment of injuries, or the passion between the sexes, is not innate!

But admitting the words 'impressions' and 'ideas' in the sense explained above, and understanding by 'innate' what is original or not copied from any previous perception, then we can assert that all our impressions are innate and none of our ideas are innate.

Frankly, I think that Mr. Locke was tricked into this question by the schoolmen [= mediaeval Aristotelians], who have used undefined terms to drag out their disputes to a tedious length without ever touching the point at issue. A similar ambiguity and circumlocution seem to run through all that great philosopher's reasonings on this as well as on most other subjects.