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Hume, *Enquiry* II-III, V.ii
Belief

Hume's account in *Enquiry* V.ii of how custom and habit produce belief in the unperceived existence of an object draws on material introduced in *Enquiry* II and III. *Enquiry* II divides all of our thoughts or perceptions into two groups, impressions, arising from sensation and passion, and ideas, arising from memory and imagination, and it argues that the only difference between the ideas in these groups arises from the greater vivacity of impressions and, to a lesser extent, memories. *Enquiry* III identifies three associative principles, resemblance, contiguity, and constant conjunction, that appear to govern the operations of the imagination and induce it to form one idea after another. (The third of these, constant conjunction, has of course already been considered in some detail in our examination of the argument of *Enquiry* V.i.) *Enquiry* V.ii then completes the account by noting that, in addition to leading the mind to pass from one idea to another, the associative principles can lead it to pass from impressions or memories to ideas. When this happens, Hume argued, the associative principles also transmit vivacity from the impressions or memories to the associated ideas, thereby enlivening them. Hume went on to claim that if the ideas are enlivened enough, they become beliefs. He justified this claim by arguing that belief just is a more lively idea.

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. What are impressions?
2. In what sense is the imagination confined within narrow limits?
3. Why does the idea of God not falsify Hume's claim that all of our ideas are composed of materials originally obtained from impressions?
4. What significance did Hume attach to the fact that a blind person can form no idea of colours?
5. How did Hume propose to eliminate jargon from metaphysics?
6. For each of the following identify the associative principle that leads the mind from thinking of the first idea to thinking of the second.
 - a. the idea of the book leads us to remember its author
 - b. The idea of fire leads us to think of the sun
 - c. the idea of fire leads us to think of melting wax
 - d. the idea of Texas leads us to think of Mexico
 - e. the idea of the ides of March leads us to think of Julius Caesar
7. What is the difference between fiction and belief?
8. Why does belief have nothing to do with the peculiar nature or order of ideas?
9. Identify the two factors responsible for getting a lively idea of an absent friend from a picture.
10. What significance did Hume attach to Roman Catholic claims that performing rituals before images and statues enlivens their faith?
11. Why do our ideas of home become more lively as we get closer to it?
12. Explain the analogy between the effects of causation and those of resemblance and contiguity on our beliefs.
13. What accounts for the fact that there is a pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas?



14. Why is it better that our abilities to infer causes from effects and effects from causes should be due to “some instinct or mechanical tendency” rather than to reason?

NOTES ON THE READING

Impressions and ideas. Hume opened *Enquiry II* by drawing a distinction between two kinds of thought or perception had by the mind, which he named impressions and ideas. The difference between the two can be easily illustrated with examples. Included in the class of impressions are our sensations and passions (like willing, desiring, refusing, loving, hating). Included in the class of ideas are all of our memories as well as all of our fantasies. But it is much harder to pick out the essential characteristic that allows us to tell whether any given perception is coming to us from the senses, from memory, or from the imagination, and the job is made all the more difficult by the fact that the most tempting way to draw the distinction was not available to Hume.

The tempting, but wrong way to draw the distinction is to say that impressions are those perceptions that are given in sensory experience (either outer sense through the external sense organs, or our inner sense of ourselves), whereas ideas are those perceptions that remember or imagine.

The problem with drawing Hume’s distinction between impressions and ideas in this way is that it is circular. How could I know, in any given instance, whether the perception I am having is an impression or not? If what makes a perception an impression is that it results from stimulation of the sense organs, then I would have to know my sense organs are being stimulated. But how would I know this? Only by having an idea or impression of the sense organ being stimulated by an object. But which would this perception be? Were I merely to have an idea that my sense organs are being stimulated, that would not mean that they are really being stimulated. But were I to have an impression that they are being stimulated, how could I know that this is an impression? There threatens to be an infinite regress here.

Instead of trying to distinguish impressions from ideas by appeal to what causes them, Hume looked at the various perceptions supplied to the mind and asked if there are any intrinsic differences between them. He did find such a difference. Some of the perceptions of the mind, he observed, are more lively and vivacious than others.

A lively perception is not one that is somehow bigger or brighter or sharper or clearer or more distinct. Some of the things that we imagine can be very bright and sharp and clear and distinct. And some of the things we sense (such as figures seen in the fog at twilight) can be very dim and vague and obscure and confused. Hume’s notions of vivacity and liveliness have rather to do with the manner in which this content is perceived. When a thought is imagined or remembered by the mind, its content alone is perceived. When it is sensed, however, there is something else as well. Not only is the content perceived by the mind; it is perceived in a certain way. The manner of the perception is different and Hume thought that this difference is evident from the way it feels to perceive the content. As Hume illustrated the point, the pain of a burn feels very different when it is sensed then when it is subsequently recalled in memory, even though the idea of what it feels like to be burned might be equally clear in both cases. It is this feeling that Hume was trying to draw to our attention when he talked about force, vivacity and liveliness.

This feeling is a very peculiar thing that cannot, in the normal course of affairs, simply be induced by an act of will. Think of the difference between imagining biting into an apple and actually doing so. If a person has had plenty of experience doing this sort of thing, and a good imagination, they can probably imagine the taste very clearly and distinctly. But however clearly



and distinctly they might imagine it, they are aware that imagining it is not the same thing as actually tasting it (otherwise, dieters would have a very easy job of it). There is a peculiar feeling that goes along with actually tasting the apple that simply cannot be duplicated in imagination. When this feeling is present, the perception is an impression. When it is absent, or is not present in the same degree, the perception is an image or memory.

Memories copy the content of past impressions. In doing so they attempt to preserve as much as possible of the original sequence that the impressions occurred in, and as many of the surrounding impressions as possible. They also try to keep the impressions intact, and do not shift or rearrange their parts, or substitute parts of other impressions for the originals. Memories also preserve some of the vivacity that accompanied the original impressions. This is indicated by the fact that it feels very different to remember a proud or shameful incident from one's past and to merely imagine such an incident. The memory is somehow more "lively" in Hume's technical sense.

Ideas of imagination are opposite to those of memory in all these respects. They have no vivacity; and they are created through compounding and dividing different parts of originally given impressions at will, without any concern for the order of their original presentation.

Hume stressed that however refined, intricate and fantastic ideas of imagination may become, they must all be built up out of simple parts that were originally given in impressions. It is beyond the power of the imagination to create any wholly new simple ideas. There are two reasons to think this. One is that there appear to be no counterexamples. We find by introspection that we have no ideas that we cannot trace back to an origin in the copying of antecedent impressions. The other is that we have direct evidence for the incapacity of our imagination to produce simple ideas. This evidence comes from the experience of people who lack certain sense organs or who, even though their senses function, have never had those senses stimulated by the sort of objects that provide certain kinds of impressions. The blind, for example, can form no ideas of colours. But an adult with perfectly functioning eyesight who had never seen anything reflecting light from the red end of the spectrum would have no more idea of the colour red than a person who was blind since birth. This goes to show that the imagination cannot form simple ideas of colour in the absence of prior examples provided by the senses. But if the imagination cannot do this in the case of such basic ideas as those of colour, it is unlikely that it would be able to do it for any other ideas.

In discussing how ideas originate, Locke had claimed that no ideas arise innately, but all are acquired from experience. But then he himself had gone on to claim that at least some of our ideas (those of the sensible qualities) do not resemble any qualities actually inhering in objects as they exist outside of us, so that these ideas would necessarily have to be produced by something in us, though this thing would need to be affected in the right way in order to be awakened into activity. Thus, on Locke's account, experience does not deliver ideas to us; it merely induces us to form them ourselves. When matters are viewed in this way, it starts to look like ideas originate innately after all. Worse, the entire account rests on speculations about the nature of the external objects that cause our ideas that seem to be ultimately self-refuting. If we suppose that there are external objects that cause our ideas and that these objects do not possess any of the sensible qualities exhibited by our ideas, then why should we suppose that they resemble our ideas in any way whatsoever? Why not allow that all ideas might be innate? Hume hoped to avoid these infelicities in Locke's account with a neater and clearer exposition. He was willing to admit that our impressions may well all be innate. That is, they may arise spontaneously in us from unknown causes, rather than be conveyed into us from without. But it seems to be the case that all of our



ideas are copied from impressions. However fantastic our ideas may be, they are always made up of simple elements, like colours and shapes, that are things we first encountered in impressions, then remembered, and finally imaginatively separated from their surroundings and placed into new combinations.

Principles of association. Hume allowed that once ideas have been copied from impressions, they may be retained, called up at will, and rearranged as we fancy. But he observed that however free and arbitrary the operations of the imagination may at first seem, there are certain “gentle forces” pulling ideas after one another in the imagination in just the way that the force of gravitation pulls particles of matter together in Newtonian space, though without exerting so great a compulsion. These forces are resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect (or “constant conjunction,” as he elsewhere put it.

The principle of resemblance works by pulling resembling ideas after one another, or resembling ideas after impressions. Looking at a picture of someone we know may lead the imagination to form ideas of the person the picture resembles. Looking up at clouds in the sky may lead us to think of faces or castles.

The principle of contiguity pulls ideas that have been beside one another in space or time together. Hearing a musical tune can lead us to imagine events that happened when we heard that tune for the first time. Smells can sometimes be similarly evocative. And whenever we travel through familiar territory, our impressions of our current surroundings lead us to form ideas of the adjacent regions, the regions adjacent to those regions, and so on, until we find our way to where we want to go.

Finally, the principle of cause and effect works by pulling ideas of things that have in the past been regularly observed to happen first after ideas or impressions of things that have in the past been regularly observed to happen second, or ideas of things that have in the past been regularly observed to happen second after ideas or impressions of things that have been regularly observed to happen first. Seeing someone in our immediate vicinity put a finger over a full coke bottle and shake it, we form ideas of the effect of this activity. Hearing voices in the other room, we form ideas of the probable causes of these voices. This can happen just while remembering or imagining. Imagining that I might have left the house in the morning without having turned off the stove can lead to ideas of overheating, fire, and destruction. Remembering that a friend promised to call can lead me to form ideas of the phone ringing.

Hume’s account of belief. The notions of vivacity, of the distinctions between impressions, memories, and ideas, and of the associative principles of imagination are crucial for Hume’s account of the nature and origin of belief.

When Hume turned to define belief he did so in much the same terms he used to define vivacity. Belief is not some content that can be represented in an impression or idea. It is not, therefore, a component of impressions or ideas like their colour or the brightness of their colour that the imagination can separate and copy into various other ideas. Were that the case we would be able to bring ourselves to believe whatever we please, simply through an act of the imagination, and that is not possible. Try as I might, I cannot induce myself to believe that it is possible to leave the room by taking a run at the brick wall and passing through it as if it were mist. Or, if I could manage to do such a thing, that would be a good sign of insanity — that is, that something had gone wrong with my powers of imagination.



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Rather than be part of the content of impressions and ideas, belief is a feeling that accompanies ideas. In this respect it is just like vivacity. Indeed, it turns out that on Hume's account belief just is a lesser degree of vivacity.

Hume's thesis was that when an impression occurs, or when an idea occurs in memory, and that impression or memory is of a type of object that has been customarily conjoined with some other type of object in past experience, then:

- (i) we will tend to habitually imagine the other object, but
- (ii) we will do this so readily that a good deal of the vivacity attending the impression or memory will be transferred to the imagined object

(There is some suggestion that the second result may occur because the transfer of the imagination from the impression or memory to the associated idea occurs so quickly and easily that the idea is put in the place of or confused with the impression or memory, and so acquires a share of or a reflection of its vivacity.)

The consequence of this process is that the vivacity of the imagined idea is boosted because of its association with a present impression or memory. If the boost is great enough, this turns the idea into a belief.

This explains why we only get beliefs when some other object is currently being perceived or has been remembered. For belief to arise, it is not enough that the object of our belief be causally associated with some other object by the imagination, so that whenever an idea of the one occurs the imagination is inclined to form an idea of the other. Something that bears vivacity, (a current impression or memory) is required so that vivacity can be transferred from that thing to the associated idea of the object.

Evidence for Hume's theory. We need to ask what evidence there is to justify this theory of belief and its causes.

Over *Enquiry* V.ii, Hume appealed to two main pieces of evidence. First, he claimed that the influence of the two other associative principles, resemblance and contiguity, provides corroborating evidence for his theory. We discover by experience that resemblance and contiguity have an influence in transferring vivacity from resembling or contiguous impressions to associated ideas and so enlivening those ideas. Thus, seeing a picture of an old friend can enliven memories of past times with that friend (the current impression of the picture transmits vivacity to the associated memories), and hearing a tune or smelling a scent can enliven memories of special times when that tune or scent was heard or smelled in the past (the current impression of the tune or scent transmits vivacity to the associated memories).

In these cases the associated idea only acquires a small portion of the vivacity of the impression or memory, and so is merely enlivened, not converted into a belief (Hume has a theory about why this is that is outlined in an appendix to this section), but Hume supposed that the general principle that vivacity can be transferred from a present impression to an associated idea is nonetheless corroborated by this evidence.

Moreover, in cases where beliefs have already been formed, resemblance and contiguity can influence their strength. Hume instanced stories of pilgrims to the Holy Land who feel their antecedently formed beliefs strengthened by the imagined contiguity of their impressions of the countryside to the events recounted in their system of beliefs. He also spoke of people who genuflect and bow in church because this action, which resembles the obsequience commonly paid



to monarchs and rulers, enhances their antecedently formed beliefs in the presence of a divine being.

Hume's second piece of evidence involves a comparison of the efficiency of reasoning with automatic or instinctive operations of the mind. As we well know, it takes time to come up with good arguments, and we often make mistakes in our reasoning. Since reasoning is defective in these ways, Hume considered it unlikely that we would have been naturally so constituted as to need to rely on it for our beliefs about what objects will have what causes and effects. The necessities of survival often require that beliefs be formed instantly and without mistake. When the shadow of an approaching hawk crosses the ground towards a small animal, that animal had better not have to go through a process to infer what the likely result will be, and when a speeding truck bears down on a pedestrian, that pedestrian had better not have to first recall Kant's rationalist attempt at providing a proof of the causal principle in order to appreciate what to do next. Given that this is the case, it is most likely that nature would have made us so that our beliefs about what objects will have what causes or effects would be based on some instinct or mechanical principle, rather than on reasoning.

Of course, this does not prove that Hume's particular account of that instinct or mechanical principle is the correct one. But Hume at least offered a quasi-mechanical account of the operation of belief formation, all be it one that involves transmission of vivacity along chains of associated impressions and ideas rather than transmission of motion as a result of impact. His point was that even if his particular mechanical account is not correct in all its details the main rival account, the rationalist one, is just not as plausible.

Appendix. Resemblance and Contiguity. Why does belief only arise when ideas are causally associated with impressions, and not when they are associated by contiguity or by resemblance? One reason is that the relation of constant conjunction is made up of many contiguity and resemblance relations. Two objects are thought to be constantly conjoined only if i) one of them immediately precedes the other (so they are temporally contiguous), ii) one of them is immediately adjacent to another (so they are spatially contiguous), and iii) all objects closely resembling the first have been experienced to be spatially and temporally contiguous to all objects resembling the second. So constant conjunction involves spatial contiguity, temporal contiguity, and a frequent repetition of spatiotemporal contiguity across closely resembling instances. It compares to a single contiguity or resemblance relation in the way that a multi-lane expressway compares to a dirt track. It conveys a correspondingly greater quantity of vivacity from one point to another.

In another work, Hume offered a further answer. The resemblance and contiguity relations are diffuse in a way that the causal relation is not. Everything resembles everything else in some way or other, and everything is contiguous with everything else if you consider a large enough neighbourhood (there is a sense in which Paris is contiguous to Berlin because they are capitals of countries that are contiguous to one another). As a result, Hume considered that the associative impulse is split along a number of alternative streams, and we cannot help but be aware that we are somewhat arbitrarily choosing one among a number of possible associated ideas to fix upon. Hume took this to entail that only enough vivacity will be transmitted to the particular idea we choose to fix upon to produce an agreeable enlivening of the idea, without so great an enlivening as to boost it to the level of a belief.



With the relation of cause and effect, in contrast, particular types of objects are only associated with particular causes and effects. As a result, the vivacity of the impression or memory does not get split along different streams but is all available to be transmitted to the target idea.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. Was Hume right to claim that the difference between impressions and ideas (as well as the nature of belief) consists in the force and vivacity of the sentiment involved in having the experience? In considering this question, note that Hume himself expressed some ambivalence about this matter in both the Appendix and the Abstract to his earlier *Treatise of human nature*. Note also that Hume's view was sharply criticized by Reid, who maintained that the difference between a sensation of pain and a memory or idea of pain is one of kind and not one of degree of vivacity. On Reid's view, to remember or have an idea is to perform an act whereby one thinks *of* some past sensation (so that the past sensation is, as it were, the intentional object of the act of thought), whereas to actually have a pain is not to think *of* anything but to simply *be* a certain way (to be in pain). Hume's Abstract and Appendix to his *Treatise* are to be found in all good editions of the *Treatise*. Reid's views can be found in his *Inquiry into the human mind*, Chapter 2, sections 3-5 and Chapter 6, section 20, as well as in his *Essays on the intellectual powers*, Essay II, sections 1-5, 12, 16, Essay III, sections 1-2, and Essay IV, sections 1-3.
2. Hume's claim that all ideas are copies of impressions is constitutive of his particular brand of empiricism. His arguments for this claim have frequently been criticized as inadequate. A good survey of some of the problems that have been raised on this score has been provided by Don Garrett, *Cognition and commitment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Chapter 2. Starting from this source and consulting more recent literature, determine what can be said against and on behalf of Hume's empiricism.
3. As Tom Beauchamp has observed in the introduction to his edition of Hume's *Enquiry*, there are some who believe that Hume's remarks in *Enquiry* II concerning the missing shade of blue undermine his empiricism. Do a survey of the recent literature on the "missing shade of blue" and determine whether this charge is justified.

