

# Notes on Hume on Ideas and Impressions

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## Descartes, Locke, and the “New Way of Ideas”

Descartes gave a new sense to the term “idea”, using it to refer to “everything which is in our mind when we conceive something, no matter how we conceive it.” (*Letter to Mersenne* 1641, AT III 393, CSMK 185). In the fifth paragraph of *Meditation* 3, he clarifies that a thought might combine an idea about an object with some other state of mind (e.g. desire):

“Some of my thoughts are as it were the images of things, and it is only in these cases that the word ‘idea’ is strictly appropriate – for example, when I think of a man, or a chimera, or the sky, or an angel, or God. Other thoughts have various additional forms: thus when I will, or am afraid, or affirm, or deny, there is always a particular thing which I take as the object of my thought, but my thought includes something more than the likeness of that thing. Some thoughts in this category are called volitions or emotions, while others are called judgements.” (*M3*, AT VII 37, CSM ii 25)

Ideas are *representations* of things in our mind or consciousness, including perceptions (whether genuine or dreamed) of physical objects, imagined objects, pure intellectual thoughts (which – since they do not involve the imagination – are non-imagistic, e.g. our idea of God), and also felt sensations. When we see something (e.g. a flash of lightning) and also think about it conceptually (e.g. as an electrical discharge), both of these kinds of thought are “ideas” (hence the common complaint that the term blurs the distinction between perceptions and concepts). Thought about anything involves ideas, which give meaning to our words.<sup>1</sup>

Locke took over Descartes’s usage, saying that “*Idea*” is “that term which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks” (*Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Introduction 8).<sup>2</sup> As a result, the usage became widespread in Britain also; “the new way of ideas” (a phrase coined by Locke’s critic Bishop Stillingfleet) refers to philosophy that starts from ideas thus conceived. Looking back in 1764, Thomas Reid’s *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* saw this starting point as inevitably leading to scepticism, a diagnosis that ultimately became quite widely accepted:

“[Hume’s] sceptical system ... leans with its whole weight upon a hypothesis which is ancient indeed, and hath been very generally received by philosophers, but of which I could find no solid proof. The hypothesis I mean is, That nothing is perceived but what is in the mind which perceives it: That we do not really perceive things that are external, but only certain images and pictures of them imprinted upon the mind, which are called *impressions* and *ideas*. If this be true; supposing certain impressions and ideas to exist in my mind, I cannot, from their existence, infer the existence of any thing else; my impressions and ideas are the only existences of which I can have any knowledge or conception ...” (*Inquiry*, Dedication, p. 4).

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<sup>1</sup> “we cannot express anything by our words, when we understand what we are saying, without its being certain thereby that we have in us the idea of the thing which is signified by our words” (*Letter to Mersenne* 1641, CSMK 185).

<sup>2</sup> The passage continues: “I have used [the term] to express whatever is meant by phantasm, notion, species, or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking”.

Reid targets Descartes and Malebranche in this critique (p. 3), as well as Locke, Berkeley and Hume, so his objection is to the entire “way of ideas” rather than just empiricism.

## Conceptual Empiricism versus Innatism

It seems obvious that a great deal of our capacity for thought is derived from experience: for example after seeing, hearing and feeling unfamiliar animals, or tasting and smelling unfamiliar foods, we acquire the new ability to think of these things and to conjure up “images” of them in our minds.<sup>3</sup> But as noted above, Descartes thought we have some purely *intellectual* ideas – e.g. of God – which are therefore non-imagistic and hence not derived from sensory input. These ideas can be called “innate” in the sense that they naturally arise from the internal powers of the mind independently of external input (but this does not imply that they are present in babies).

Locke, by contrast, was a *conceptual empiricist*, denying that we have such purely intellectual ideas, and arguing to the contrary that all of our ideas are derived from experience. In advance of experience, the mind can be thought of as “white Paper, void of all Characters, without any *Ideas*” (*Essay II i 2*). It is “furnished” with ideas in two ways, either when we observe “*external, sensible Objects*” (which he calls “*SENSATION*”), or when we consider “*the internal Operations of our Minds*” (which he calls “*REFLECTION*”):

“First, *Our Senses*, conversant about particular, sensible Objects, do convey into the Mind, several distinct *Perceptions* of things, according to those various ways, wherein those Objects do affect them: And thus we come by those *Ideas*, we have of *Yellow, White, Heat, Cold, Soft, Hard, Bitter, Sweet*, and all those which we call sensible qualities.” (*Essay II i 3*)

“Secondly, The other Fountain, from which Experience furnisheth the Understanding with *Ideas*, is the *Perception of the Operations of our own Minds* within us ... which Operations, when the Soul comes to reflect on, ... do furnish the Understanding with another set of *Ideas*, which could not be had from things without: and such are, *Perception, Thinking, Doubting, Believing, Reasoning, Knowing, Willing*, and all the different actings of our own Minds ... [This] might properly enough be call’d internal Sense.” (*Essay II i 4*)

Notice that Lockean “reflection” apparently involves something like an internal *awareness* or *monitoring* of what our minds are doing (rather than internal *sensation* or *feeling*).

Hume essentially follows Locke’s empiricism, but proposes a terminological improvement in distinguishing Lockean “*Ideas*” into the two categories of “*ideas*” (i.e. components of our *thought*) and “*impressions*” (i.e. sensations or feelings).<sup>4</sup> He then expresses the empiricist claim in terms of our ideas being *copies* of our impressions – apparently simply *fainter* versions of those impressions with less “force and vivacity”, but otherwise identical. Like Locke, Hume recognises both *sensation* and *reflection* as sources of our ideas,<sup>5</sup> but unlike Locke, his conception of

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<sup>3</sup> “Images” here should be understood as embracing sensory representations in general, not just *visual* images.

<sup>4</sup> Hume coins the term “perceptions” for the broader category that Locke calls “ideas”, as in: “All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS.” (*T 1.1.1.1*).

<sup>5</sup> For example, “Impressions may be divided into two kinds, those of SENSATION and those of REFLECTION.” (*T 1.1.2.1*).

reflection focuses much less on mental *activities* such as *thinking* and *doubting* (etc.), and much more on *feelings* such as “passions, desires, and emotions” (T 1.1.2.1, cf. 1.1.6.1, 1.2.3.3, 2.1.1.1).<sup>6</sup>

## Conceptual Atomism and the Copy Principle

Hume sometimes talks as though *all* of our ideas are copies of impressions:

“It seems a proposition, which will not admit of much dispute, that all our ideas are nothing but copies of our impressions, or, in other words, that it is impossible for us to think of any thing, which we have not antecedently felt, either by our external or internal senses.” (E 7.4)

But when expressing himself more carefully, he wants to say rather that “all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment”, but that individual ideas, once acquired, can be mixed and compounded by the mind, for example to form the ideas of a golden mountain or a virtuous horse, even though we have never experienced such things (E 2.5).

So *complex* ideas can be built out of simpler components, and Hume seems to take the view that all ideas must ultimately resolve into *absolutely simple* components – a view that we might call “conceptual atomism”. This then enables him to give a more precise statement of his empiricist claim, with what is generally known as his Copy Principle:

“that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv’d from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.” (T 1.1.1.7)

For discussion of Hume’s arguments for the Copy Principle, and of the associated problem of “the missing shade of blue”, see the companion document “Some Notes on Hume’s Copy Principle”.

## Force and Vivacity, and Belief

In the first paragraph of the *Treatise* (quoted below under “Impressions and Ideas”), Hume explains that *impressions* differ from *ideas* in having greater “force and liveliness”, though his more usual term for this is *force and vivacity*. The meaning of this notion is not entirely clear (see again under “Impressions and Ideas” below), but it plays a key role in his theory of inductive inference and of belief, as follows. If I see lots of *As* repeatedly followed by *Bs*, this sets up an associational link between my idea of *A* and my idea of *B*, in such a way that when I next see – i.e. get an impression of – an *A*, the additional vivacity of that impression (relative to a mere idea) is transferred down the associational link, enlivening my associated idea of *B* and turning it into a belief. Thus Hume goes on to define a belief as an idea with a high degree of force and vivacity:

“An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin’d, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION.” (T 1.3.7.5)

Hume also foreshadows this result when he says that force and vivacity distinguishes ideas of the *memory* from those of the *imagination* (T 1.3.5.3) and connects this with the issue of belief:

“Thus it appears, that the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination. To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses,

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<sup>6</sup> The two philosophers thus exhibit complementary blind-spots regarding the scope of reflection – Locke says little about our ideas of emotions, and Hume says little about how we acquire our ideas of mental activities.

or a repetition of that impression in the memory. 'Tis merely the force and liveliness of the perception, which constitutes the first act of the judgment, and lays the foundation of that reasoning, which we build upon it, when we trace the relation of cause and effect." (T 1.3.5.7)

Here Hume identifies force and vivacity as the key factor which constitutes belief in our *senses*, in *memory*, and in *beliefs that are causally (i.e. inductively) inferred*. Whether *sense-impressions*, *memories*, *inductive beliefs*, and *mere ideas* can indeed be understood as lying along a single spectrum characterised by different degrees of "force and vivacity" is debatable. But in the *Treatise* they are intimately connected through an explicitly "hydraulic" theory whereby force and vivacity is communicated along associational channels "as by so many pipes or canals":<sup>7</sup>

"I wou'd willingly establish it as a general maxim in the science of human nature, *that when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity.*" (T 1.3.8.2)

He later applies this to the "probability of chances", as when I throw a six-sided die:

"When ... the thought is determin'd by the causes to consider the dye as falling and turning up one of its sides, the chances present all these sides as equal, and make us consider every one of them ... as alike probable ... The determination of the thought is common to all; but no more of its force falls to the share of any one, than what is suitable to its proportion with the rest. 'Tis after this manner the original impulse, and consequently the vivacity of thought, arising from the causes, is divided and split in pieces by the intermingled chances." (T 1.3.11.12)

The *Enquiry* account, however, is far less explicitly hydraulic, and instead of giving an account in which "vivacity of thought" is conveyed along associational channels, attributes probable belief to "an inexplicable contrivance of nature" (E 6.3). Relatedly, it evinces less confidence in the theory of belief, and no longer attempts to *define* it in terms of force and vivacity:

"Were we to attempt a *definition* of this sentiment, we should, perhaps, find it ... impossible ... BELIEF is the true and proper name of this feeling; ... It may not, however, be improper to attempt a *description* of this sentiment; ... I say then, that belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain." (E 5.12)

This echoes symptoms of unease shown in passages that were added in the 1740 *Appendix* to the *Treatise*.<sup>8</sup> Dauer (1999) discusses Hume's move away from the explicitly hydraulic interpretation of force and vivacity, while Broackes (2002) discusses the changes in Hume's theory of belief, highlighting some of the tensions and other considerations that could lie behind them.

## Impressions and Ideas

Here is the first paragraph of T 1.1.1, with the nine sentences numbered for reference:

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<sup>7</sup> Talking of the impact of poetry at T 1.3.10.7, Hume says: "The vividness of the first conception diffuses itself along the relations, and is convey'd, as by so many pipes or canals, to every idea that has any communication with the primary one."

<sup>8</sup> "An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea ... And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. ... 'tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is *belief*, which is a term than every one sufficiently understands ..." (T 1.3.7.7). See note 9 below for another significant passage added to the 1739 text in 1740.

“[1] All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. [2] The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. [3] Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. [4] By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning; such as, for instance, are all the perceptions excited by the present discourse, excepting only, those which arise from the sight and touch, and excepting the immediate pleasure or uneasiness it may occasion. [5] I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. [6] Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking. [7] The common degrees of these are easily distinguished; tho’ it is not impossible but in particular instances they may very nearly approach to each other. [8] Thus in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas. [9] But notwithstanding this near resemblance in a few instances, they are in general so very different, that no-one can make a scruple to rank them under distinct heads, and assign to each a peculiar name to mark the difference.” (T 1.1.1.1)

Despite the apparent clarity of the first two sentences, there has been considerable debate in the literature about how exactly the distinction between impressions and ideas is to be understood, and whether it should be drawn most fundamentally in terms of:

- (a) *Phenomenological* vivacity/liveliness (suggested by sentence [2]);
- (b) *Functional* or *causal* force (a more recent interpretation of “force and liveliness”);
- (c) Causal priority or copying (suggested by sentences [3] and [4]);
- (d) The difference between feeling and thinking (suggested by sentences [5] and [6]).

(a) is the most natural reading and the standard interpretation, taking *force and vivacity* as a *phenomenological* property of the perceptions – a matter of the internal psychological intensity of sensory states (e.g. as in Stroud 1977, pp. 70-73). The main problem with this is apparent in sentence [8], because it’s hard to see why a dream or fevered hallucination (e.g. of being attacked by spiders) couldn’t be just as phenomenologically vivid – or more so – than a dull sensory perception (e.g. the view of a grey wall, or sound of a quiet fan as one falls asleep). It’s also perhaps hard to believe that Hume himself would not have realised this.<sup>9</sup> But if he did, this casts doubt on treating the phenomenological “force and vivacity” reading as *definitive* of the impression/idea distinction, even if it is useful as a *general characterisation* of the distinction.

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<sup>9</sup> A related problem concerns Hume’s theory of belief as distinguished by *force and vivacity*. At T 1.3.7.8 (an original 1739 text), he says that “If one person sits down to read a book as a romance, and another as a true history, they plainly receive the same ideas, and in the same order; ... tho’ ... The latter has a more lively conception of all the incidents. He enters deeper into the concerns of the persons: represents to himself their actions, and characters, [etc.] ... While the former, who gives no credit to the testimony of the author, has a more faint and languid conception of all these particulars”. But in the *Appendix* of 1740, he recognises the familiar phenomenon that fiction can be more vivid to us than history: “A poetical description may have a more sensible effect on the fancy, than an historical narration. ... It may seem to set the object before us in more lively colours. But still the ideas it presents are different to the *feeling* from those, which arise from the memory and the judgment. There is something weak and imperfect amidst all that seeming vehemence of thought and sentiment, which attends the fictions of poetry.” (T 1.3.10.10). This objection might well have been suggested by his friend Lord Kames, who urged it in his essay on belief of 1751 (pp. 145-6). See also note 8 above.

(b) Some recent interpreters – notably Everson (1988) – have interpreted force and vivacity as a *functional* or *causal* notion, in terms of the perception's *effect* on the mind: so, for example, an actual sensation, feeling or belief will *motivate* us to act in a way that a mere thought will not. Marušić (2010) argues strongly against this, highlighting how Hume accounts for the causal impact of beliefs by appeal to their *phenomenological* character. She cites (pp. 170-1):

“The *effects* of belief, in influencing the passions and imagination, can all be explain'd from the firm conception; and there is no occasion to have recourse to any other principle. These arguments ... sufficiently prove, that belief only modifies the idea or conception; and renders it different to the feeling, without producing any distinct impression.” (T Appx 7)

In the next two paragraphs, Hume re-emphasises that there is not “*any thing to distinguish belief from the simple conception beside the feeling or sentiment*”, that “*this feeling [is] but a firmer conception, or a faster hold, that we take of the object*” (T Appx 8), and that the influence of belief on our action is precisely due to this stronger feeling: “‘Tis *felt*, rather than conceiv'd, and approaches the impression, from which it is deriv'd, in its force and influence.” (T Appx 9). The same “analogy” with impressions is stressed a few paragraphs earlier:

“This, therefore, being regarded as an undoubted truth, *that belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling, different from the simple conception*, the next question, that naturally occurs, is, *what is the nature of this feeling, or sentiment, and whether it be analogous to any other sentiment of the human mind?* ... Now ... the conceptions, which are the objects of conviction and assurance ... strike upon us with more force; they are more present to us; the mind has a firmer hold of them, and is more actuated and mov'd by them. It acquiesces in them; and, in a manner, fixes and reposes itself on them. In short, they approach nearer to the impressions, which are immediately present to us; and are therefore analogous to many other operations of the mind.” (T Appx 3)

These passages are all from the 1740 *Appendix*, so it is significant to find similar things being said in the 1739 text of the section “Of the influence of belief”:

“Tho' an idle fiction has no efficacy, yet we find by experience, that the ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree the same effect with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception. The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions. This effect it can only have by making an idea approach an impression in force and vivacity. For as the different degrees of force make all the original difference betwixt an impression and an idea, they must of consequence be the source of all the differences in the effects of these perceptions, and their removal, in whole or in part, the cause of every new resemblance they acquire. Wherever we can make an idea approach the impressions in force and vivacity, it will likewise imitate them in its influence on the mind; and *vice versa*, where it imitates them in that influence, as in the present case, this must proceed from its approaching them in force and vivacity. Belief, therefore, since it causes an idea to imitate the effects of the impressions, must make it resemble them in these qualities, and is nothing but *a more vivid and intense conception of any idea*. This, then, may both serve as an additional argument for the present system, and may give us a notion after what manner our reasonings from causation are able to operate on the will and passions.” (T 1.3.10.3)

According to Marušić (2010, p. 174), “This clearly indicates that Hume thinks his account of the nature of belief helps explain the influence of belief. Yet, contrary to the functionalist interpretation, ... a perception’s degree of force and vivacity ... is not identical with, but rather *explains*, the perception’s causal role.”

(c) The idea that impressions and ideas are to be distinguished in terms of *causal priority* seems initially implausible given Hume’s argument for the Copy Principle in terms of our observation that impressions are always prior to ideas (T 1.1.1.8, cf. E 2.6). If the priority of impressions is thus established *by experience*, how can it be *definitive* of impressions that they are causally prior? Landy (2006), however, gives a more sophisticated version of interpretation (c) in terms of ideas as consisting of impression-copied content, which is less obviously subject to the same objection. For some critical discussion, see Rickless (2018) §4.

(d) Perhaps Hume is most fundamentally appealing to our intuitive grasp of the phenomenological difference between *feeling* and *thinking*, and treating *force and vivacity* as an attempt to capture this difference. This is supported by how Hume introduces the discussion in the *Enquiry*:

“Every one will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination. These faculties may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses; but they never can entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment. The utmost we say of them, even when they operate with greatest vigour, is, that they represent their object in so lively a manner, that we could *almost* say we feel or see it: But, except the mind be disordered by disease or madness, they never can arrive at such a pitch of vivacity, as to render these perceptions altogether undistinguishable. All the colours of poetry, however splendid, can never paint natural objects in such a manner as to make the description be taken for a real landscape. The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation.

... A man in a fit of anger, is actuated in a very different manner from one who only thinks of that emotion. ... When we reflect on our past sentiments and affections, our thought is a faithful mirror, and copies its objects truly; but the colours which it employs are faint and dull, in comparison of those in which our original perceptions were clothed. ...

Here therefore we may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated THOUGHTS or IDEAS. ... The other species ... IMPRESSIONS ... [are] all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned.”  
(E 2.1-3)

Some of what Hume says here might seem to be taking for granted that when we “hear, or see, or feel” something, we are genuinely in contact with external objects (such as in a landscape). Bennett accordingly suggests that Hume has a “tendency to equate ‘impressions’ with ‘perceptions of the objective realm’” (2002, p. 99, cf. 2001, p.214), which would indeed explain why Hume seems to treat hallucinations (when “the mind be disordered by disease or madness”) as extremely vivid ideas rather than impressions. But this seems inadequate as a general basis for drawing the impression/idea distinction, given that it cannot apply to impressions of *reflection*

(e.g. when we “love, or hate, or desire”). It is also in tension with Hume’s sceptical attitude towards the external world (especially in the *Treatise* sections 1.4.2 and 1.4.4). A more consistent position would be to classify hallucinations – at least those that arise from drugs or disease, rather than just normal exercise of the imagination – as *impressions* rather than *ideas*. This would fit with such “perceptions” being internally indistinguishable from objective sensations (and having the same “force and vivacity”), something that Hume appears to accept:

“By what argument can it be proved, that the perceptions of the mind must be caused by external objects, ...? It is acknowledged, that, in fact, many of these perceptions arise not from any thing external, as in dreams, madness, and other diseases.” (*E* 12.11)

Note that this move – which goes beyond Hume’s own text – would also bring interpretations (a) and (d) a bit closer together.

In a recent paper, Rickless (2018) critically discusses and rejects most of these accounts, proposing instead a new interpretation which he calls “the reflection view”. This is more theoretically sophisticated than the other accounts, and will not be considered here, though it is certainly deserving of study. Perhaps the most obvious objection is precisely its apparent implication that a rather deep “appreciation of Hume’s theory of mind” (p. 1230) is required if we are to understand the distinction between impressions and ideas, whereas as we have seen, Hume himself presents it as straightforward and intuitively obvious:

“I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking” (*T* 1.1.1.1)

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