Overview of Hume's *Treatise*, Book 1 Part 1

Book 1 Part 1 of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* is entitled "Of ideas, their origin, composition, connexion, abstraction, &c.", which accurately describes its contents. It outlines the central themes of Hume's "theory of ideas", introducing various terms and principles that provide a basis for much of what is to follow in the later parts of the *Treatise*.

Section 1.1.1 "Of the origin of our ideas" starts by drawing a distinction between *impressions* (roughly, sensations and feelings) and *ideas* (thoughts); Hume coins the umbrella term *perceptions* to cover both types of mental content. In general, the two can be distinguished by "the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind": impressions have more "force and vivacity" than ideas, although Hume allows that "in sleep, in a fever, in madness, … our ideas may approach to our impressions" while sometimes "our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas" (1.1.1.1). This suggests that the essential difference between impressions and ideas is not a matter of their force and vivacity, but more basic: "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 between feeling and thinking."

Both ideas and impressions can be either *simple*, which "admit of no distinction nor separation" (1.1.1.2), or *complex*, which "may be distinguish'd into parts". Many complex ideas (e.g. of the *New Jerusalem*) don't correspond to any single impression, but it seems that all *simple* ideas (including the individual simple components that make up complex ideas) do have corresponding impressions. Hume admits that this claim can't be proved by enumeration – there are just too many – but he challenges anyone to produce a counterexample (1.1.1.5). The correspondence is too complete to be a coincidence, and therefore suggests a causal link, whose direction is clear from our "constant experience, that the simple impressions always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas" (1.1.1.8). This establishes the "general proposition, *that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly resemble*" (1.1.1.7). Further confirmation comes from the experience of those lacking particular faculties, for example those "born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas" (1.1.1.9). Likewise, "We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pine-apple, without having actually tasted it".

Having established what is commonly known as his Copy Principle, Hume immediately, and notoriously, proposes a counterexample, his famous missing shade of blue (1.1.1.10). He suggests that someone presented with a gradation of shades of blue, from which one is omitted, would be able to form the idea of the missing shade, even without having been presented with the exactly corresponding impression. His puzzling response is "that the simple ideas are not always deriv'd from the correspondent impressions; tho' the instance is so particular and singular, that 'tis scarce worth our

observing, and does not merit that for it alone we shou'd alter our general maxim". Another "limitation" on "the principle of the priority of impressions to ideas" is indicated by our ability to form "secondary ideas, which are images of the primary; as appears from this very reasoning concerning them". That is to say, when we reason about ideas, we have to form ideas about ideas. But "as the first ideas are suppos'd to be deriv'd from impressions, it still remains true, that all our simple ideas proceed, either mediately or immediately, from their correspondent impressions" (1.1.1.11). This principle – which Hume calls "the first principle I establish in the science of human nature" (1.1.1.12) – is, in essence, a clarification of John Locke's denial of innate ideas.

Section 1.1.2 "Division of the subject" divides impressions "into two kinds, those of SENSATION and those of REFLECTION". Impressions of sensation "arise in the soul originally, from unknown causes", and their "examination … belongs more to anatomists and natural philosophers than to moral" (1.1.2.1). Impressions of reflection (i.e. "passions, desires, and emotions") are "deriv'd in a great measure from our ideas"; for example when we have an impression of a pineapple taste, then afterwards retain the idea of that flavour, which gives rise in turn to a desire for more. So Hume suggests that it makes sense to investigate our ideas first before moving on to impressions of reflection (which will be treated mainly in *Treatise* Book 2, "Of the Passions").

Section 1.1.3 "Of the ideas of the memory and imagination" describes ideas of the memory as "somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea", because "the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong" than those that are merely imagined (1.1.3.1). He points out in a footnote that he will be saying more about this difference in *T* 1.3.5 (discussed below). Another difference between remembered and merely imagined ideas is that the memory is "restain'd to the same order and form with the original impressions" (1.1.3.2) whereas the imagination has the freedom to mix ideas around in any order. Hume describes this as his "second principle, *of the liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas*" (1.1.3.4), but immediately goes on to develop it further, towards what is generally known as his Separability Principle:

> "Nor will this liberty of the fancy appear strange,[1] when we consider, that all our ideas are copy'd from our impressions, and that there are not any two impressions which are perfectly inseparable. Not to mention, that this is an evident consequence of the division of ideas into simple and complex. Wherever the imagination perceives a difference among ideas, it can easily produce a separation."

The Separability Principle becomes more full-blooded in the section "Of abstract ideas" at *T* 1.1.7.3, then plays a major role in the discussions of space and time (*T* 1.2.3.10 and 1.2.5.3), and leads to paradoxical results in the discussions of scepticism (*T* 1.4.3.7, 1.4.5.5, 1.4.5.27, 1.4.6.16, App. 12).[2]

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[1] Hume uses "the fancy" as a synonym for "the imagination", often using the two together for elegant variation of terms, just as he uses "reason" as a synonym for "the understanding".

[2] The full-blooded principle is harmless when applied to the distinctness of ideas of causal relata (*T* 1.3.3.3, 1.3.6.1, 1.3.14.12), but seriously problematic when taken to imply that qualities and perceptions can exist independently of substances or minds. In the *Enquiry* of 1748, Hume more consistently treats *conceivability* alone as the criterion of possibility, and does not invoke separability in this paradoxical way.

Section 1.1.4 "Of the connexion or association of ideas" emphasises that despite the freedom of our imagination to combine simple ideas as it pleases, there are natural patterns in the way our ideas are organised, both simples into complexes (1.1.4.1), and their order of succession. "The qualities, from which this association [of ideas] arises, and by which the mind is after this manner convey'd from one idea to another, are three, *viz.* RESEMBLANCE, CONTIGUITY in time or place, and CAUSE and EFFECT." These three associative principles tend to lead our thoughts from one thing to another, and then again another, and so on, though "each remove considerably weakens the relation" (1.1.4.3). "Of the three relations … causation is the most extensive. Two objects may be consider'd as plac'd in this relation, as well when one is the cause of any of the actions or motions of the other, as when the former is the cause of the existence of the latter." (1.1.4.4) Likewise when one object "has a power of producing" such actions or motions, which is "the source of all the relations of interest and duty, by which men influence each other in society", e.g. the relations of master and servant (1.1.4.5).[3]

> "These are therefore the principles of union or cohesion among our simple ideas, and in the imagination supply the place of that inseparable connexion, by which they are united in our memory. Here is a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to show itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are every where conspicuous; but as to its causes, they are mostly unknown, and must be resolv'd into *original* qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain." (1.1.4.6)

Note here the comparison with Newton's principle of gravitation, and the suggestion that association of ideas is a fundamental law of human thinking.

Section 1.1.5 "Of relations" turns to the first of the three classes of complex ideas, "RELATIONS, MODES, and SUBSTANCES" (1.1.4.7) that are brought about through the association of ideas (a mode being a modification of a substance).[4] Hume starts by noting an important ambiguity:

> "The word *relation* is commonly us'd in two senses considerably different from each other. Either for that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and the one naturally introduces the other, after the manner above-explained; or for that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them. In common language the former is always the sense, in which we use the word, *relation*; and 'tis only in philosophy, that we extend it to mean any particular subject of comparison, without a connecting principle." (1.1.5.1)

Hume gives just one example here. Comparison of two things can reveal that they are very distant from each other – this is a *philosophical* relation between them. But it is not a *natural* relation, because distant things don't naturally lead the thought from one to the other. Contiguity, by contrast, is *both* a natural *and* a philosophical relation: it indicates a certain relationship that can hold between two objects, *but also*, this relationship is of a type that naturally leads to an association of ideas: if two objects are contiguous, then thought of one object will naturally lead to thought of the other.

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[3] This example aims to illustrate how Locke's category of "instituted relations" can be understood as *causal*.

[4] Hume's presentation is highly systematic, starting with the categories of perceptions and the origin of simple ideas, then association of ideas, and now the types of complex idea that association generates. This is somewhat reminiscent of Locke, whose *Essay* started with an attack on innate ideas (in Book I), followed by his empiricist account of the various categories of ideas (in Book II). Further Lockean echoes soon follow, in Hume's theory of relations.

Hume has already suggested in *T* 1.1.4 that there are only three natural associative relations (*resemblance*, *contiguity*, *cause and effect*). Now he attempts to provide a complete enumeration of the various types of quality – "which make objects admit of comparison, and by which the ideas of *philosophical* relation are produc'd" (1.1.5.2). They fall, he proposes, into just seven categories:[5]

1. ***Resemblance*** is involved in all relations since "no objects will admit of comparison, but what have some degree of resemblance" (1.1.5.3).[6] Resemblance can generate association of ideas, as we have seen (in which case it's also a natural relation), but it won't usually do so if the resembling quality is "common to a great many individuals". For example a thought of John won't naturally lead to a thought of George if their only significant resemblance is that both are men.
2. ***Identity*** "as apply'd in its strictest sense to constant and unchangeable objects" (1.1.5.4). "Of all relations the most universal is that of identity, being common to every being, whose existence has any duration". Note therefore that Hume is thinking here of *identity over time*.
3. Relations "of ***space*** and ***time***, which are the sources of an infinite number of comparisons, such as *distant*, *contiguous*, *above*, *below*, *before*, *after* &c." (1.1.5.5).
4. "All those objects, which admit of ***quantity***, or ***number***, may be compar'd in that particular; which is another very fertile source of relation." (1.1.5.6).
5. "When any two objects possess the same ***quality*** in common, the ***degrees***, in which they possess it, form a fifth species of relation." (1.1.5.7).
6. "The relation of ***contrariety*** may at first sight be regarded as an exception to the rule, *that no relation of any kind can subsist without some degree of resemblance*. But … no two ideas are in themselves contrary, except those of existence and non-existence, which are plainly resembling, as implying both of them an idea of the object" (1.1.5.8).[7]
7. ***Cause and effect*** "is a seventh philosophical relation, as well as a natural one. The resemblance imply'd in this relation, shall be explain'd afterwards". (1.1.5.9).

Hume's treatment of relations is highly influenced by Locke's (in *Essay* II xxv to xxviii), but Hume attempts to shoehorn Locke's plethora of relations into just these seven categories. His motive for doing so becomes clear later at *T* 1.3.1, where he attempts to derive a theory of demonstrability on the basis of identifying four types of relation (*resemblance*, *quantity and number*, *quality*, *contrariety*) that can ground "knowledge". Then in 1.3.2 he goes on to argue (by elimination) that only *causation* can ground "probable" inference to matters of fact beyond our perceptions.[8]

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[5] Hume explains at 1.1.5.10 that *difference* is not a relation but "a negation of relation". "Difference is of two kinds as oppos'd either to identity or resemblance. The first is call'd a difference of *number*; the other of *kind*."

[6] It's not clear why Hume puts such emphasis on this (see 6. below), though he does appeal to it later at *T* 1.4.5.11.

[7] Consideration of this apparently sophistical argument require discussion of Hume's treatment of the idea of existence in the section "Of the idea of existence, and of external existence": "The idea of existence … is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it." (*T* 1.2.6.4).

[8] Elsewhere in the *Treatise*, Hume refers specifically to the distinction between *natural* and *philosophical* relations only at 1.3.6.16 and 1.3.14.31, and in both cases his appeal to it is problematic. His main point at *T* 1.3.6.16, however, stands: that his theory of causal inference – the only kind of inference that can ground belief about unperceived things – crucially depends on the fact that *causation is a natural relation* (as well, of course, as a philosophical relation). Without our natural tendency to make inferences based on customary association, we would quite unable to draw any conclusions "beyond the immediate impressions of our memory and senses" (1.3.6.7). Hume's allusion to the natural/philosophical distinction at *T* 1.3.14.31 is far more dubious, since he there suggests that this accounts for his need of two definitions of the causal relation, when it seems instead that the need for two definitions arises from the distinction between an *impression* (of inference or necessary connexion) and the *circumstances* which standardly generate it (namely, constant conjunctions of objects). For comprehensive discussion of all this, see Peter Millican, "Hume's Fork, and His Theory of Relations", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95 2017, pp. 3-65, §1)

Section 1.1.6 "Of modes and substances" starts with a characteristic critique of the scholastic notions of *substance* and *accident*,[9] challenging their advocates to explain how the idea of substance can arise from any impression (either of sensation or reflection) in accordance with the Copy Principle. Clearly there is no such impression of substance.

> "We have therefore no idea of substance, distinct from that of a collection of particular qualities, nor have we any other meaning when we either talk or reason concerning it.
>
> 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 assign'd them, by which we are able to recal, either to ourselves or others, that collection." (1.1.6.1-2)

The various properties of a substance are taken to be closely related by contiguity and causation (often with the fiction of "an unknown *something*, in which they are suppos'd to inhere"), enabling new properties to be added to the collection as they are discovered (e.g. when gold is found to be soluble in *aqua regia*) while continuing to think of the substance as a single thing. Our ideas of modes (i.e. properties or modifications of a substance) don't have this sort of close integration, so adding new ideas to them is seen as defining a new mode which therefore requires a new name.

Section 1.1.7 "Of abstract ideas" is important for the understanding of several aspects of Hume's thought (notably on space and time), though arguably of minor relevance to his thoughts on causation or induction. It begins with a clear endorsement of Berkeley's theory of abstraction as Hume understands it:

> "A great philosopher [note: Dr. *Berkeley*] … has asserted, that all general ideas are nothing but particular ones, annex'd to a certain term, which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recal upon occasion other individuals, which are similar to them. As I look upon this to be one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the Republic of Letters, I shall here endeavour to confirm it by some arguments …" (1.1.7.1)

The problem with general ideas – Hume instances the idea of a man – is that somehow it is supposed to be represent all (actual or possible) men, whatever their size or other qualities. The mind has only finite capacity, so it might seem that the only way the general idea can do this is to portray just those qualities that are common to all men, leaving qualities such as size indeterminate. This is the theory that Berkeley and Hume (wrongly) attribute to Locke, and Hume to sets out to refute it.

Hume starts with three arguments to prove "*that the mind cannot form any notion of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of degrees of each*", appealing in turn to three of his key principles. The first starts with an explicit statement of his Separability Principle and its converse:

> "First, we have observed, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the inverse, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different." (1.1.7.3)

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[9] According to the scholastic theory (deriving from medieval Aristotelianism), things consist of a *substance* whose *essence* determines what type of thing it is and what its essential properties are. Non-essential features are called *accidents* (or *qualities*, or *modes*), which *inhere* in the substance (i.e. the substance acts as a substratum to which the accidents are attached). Hume gives a more extensive critique of this theory in *Treatise* 1.4.3.

Suppose now that we attempt to form the abstract idea of a line, of indeterminate length. Hume says we cannot, because "the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself; nor the precise degree of any quality from the quality". The converse of the Separability Principle then implies that the line and its precise length cannot be separately conceived, and hence "the general idea of a line" must have "in its appearance in the mind, a precise degree of quantity and quality".

Hume's second argument appeals to his Copy Principle, which implies that ideas are just like impressions except in their "strength and vivacity" (1.1.7.5). But no sense impression "can become present to the mind, without being determined in its degrees both of quantity and quality" (1.1.7.4), and so the same must be true of ideas. Finally the third argument has a rather similar pattern, insisting that ideas cannot have properties that would be impossible for real objects. This is a variant of the Conceivability Principle, here combined also with an insistence on Berkeleian nominalism:[10]

> "it is a principle generally received in philosophy, that every thing in nature is individual, and that it is utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles. If this, therefore, be absurd in fact and reality, it must also be absurd in idea; since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. … Abstract ideas are, therefore, in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation. The image in the mind is only that of a particular object, though the application of it in our reasoning be the same as if it were universal." (1.1.7.6)

Hume now goes on to present his own theory of how we manage to think and reason in general, about classes of things having a wide range of properties, while being confined in our conception to particular and fully determinate ideas. This theory is based crucially on our customary use of language, whereby we form the habit of applying a single name (e.g. "dog") to things that we find resembling in some way:

> "After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances ... But as the same word [has] been frequently applied to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, … the word … revives that custom, which we have acquired by surveying them. They are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power; nor do we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. 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." (1.1.7.7)

He particularly notes how "the attendant custom, revived by the general or abstract term, readily suggests any other individual, if by chance we form any reasoning that agrees not with it" (1.1.7.8). Suppose that when I think of a dog initially, an idea of my pet dachshund comes to mind. But then, perhaps, a conversation is started about whether a dog can outrun a human sprinter, at which point, the custom associated with the word "dog" may revive in my mind an idea of a champion greyhound, replacing that of the dachshund. Our minds are naturally attuned to doing this, and we are able to reason very adequately in this way using general terms without being thrown off course by the continual change of the ideas associated with them. The consistency and generality of our thought are

[10] Compare *Three Dialogues* 1: 192 "it is a universally received maxim, that every thing which exists is particular". See also *Principles* Intro §12, where Berkeley gives the example of a line.

due to the persisting custom, rather than to the fleeting individual ideas. Hence the meaning of any general term is not determined by any individual idea, and "the very same idea may be annexed to several different words … the idea of an equilateral triangle of an inch perpendicular may serve us in talking of a figure, of a rectilineal figure, of a regular figure, of a triangle, and of an equilateral triangle" (1.1.7.9). Hume sums up his theory like this:

> "it is certain that we form the idea of individuals whenever we use any general term; that we seldom or never can exhaust these individuals; and that those which remain, are only represented by means of that habit by which we recall them, whenever any present occasion requires it. This then is the nature of our abstract ideas and general terms; and it is after this manner we account for the foregoing paradox, that some ideas are particular in their nature, but general in their representation. A particular idea becomes general by being annexed to a general term; that is, to a term which, from a customary conjunction, has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination." (1.1.7.10)

Despite this apparent certainty, Hume evinces some concern that his appeal to custom as playing such a fundamental role in mental representation might seem implausible. Because it is so fundamental in his theory – an "ultimate cause of our mental actions" (1.1.7.11) – it is impossible to give any more basic explanation of its operation. But he sets out instead to add to the plausibility of his theory by "producing other instances which are analogous to it, and other principles which facilitate its operation". First, we are able to reason adequately about a "great number, such as a thousand" without being able to form "an adequate idea of it" (1.1.7.12). Secondly, we have experience of single words reviving habits, as when the first word of a poem enables us to remember the rest of it (1.1.7.13). Thirdly, when we use terms such as "government, church, negotiation, conquest", we seldom think of all the simple ideas that compose these complex ideas, and yet we manage to reason adequately with them (1.1.7.14). Finally, we have plenty of experience in other contexts of the remarkable power of the imagination to be stimulated to think of appropriate ideas when the need arises in reflection or conversation (1.1.7.15). However Hume rounds off by emphasising that his main argument for his theory of abstract ideas is "what I have already prov'd concerning the impossibility of general ideas, according to the common method of explaining them" (1.1.7.16):

> "We must certainly seek some new system on this head, and there plainly is none beside what I have propos'd. If ideas be particular in their nature, and at the same time finite in their number, 'tis only by custom they can become general in their representation, and contain an infinite number of other ideas under them."

Section 1.1.7 ends with a brief discussion of what are called "distinctions of reason", which can be seen as Hume's way of trying to make sense of a kind of thought which otherwise would seem contrary to his Separability Principle. For example we seem able to distinguish between "motion and the body mov'd" even though the two are not separably conceivable. Hume's solution involves focusing on different similarities: for example, a moving ball can be similar in *shape* to a motionless ball, while being similar in *movement* to a moving cube. By this means we can become aware of different aspects of the moving ball, even though those aspects cannot be separately conceived.[11]

[11] It is controversial how successful this solution is, but in any case Hume's Separability Principle is highly problematic on its own account – see note 2 above.