

Hume on the relation between impressions and ideas

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

Hume's theory of the mind owes a great debt to John Locke's ideas. Hume names the basic contents of the mind, and what we are immediately and directly aware of, are 'perceptions', what Locke described as 'whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought or understanding' (*Essay on Human Understanding* II.viii.8). 'Perceptions' are divided by Hume into 'impressions' and 'ideas', the difference between the two being marked by a difference of 'forcefulness' and 'vivacity', so that impressions relate roughly to 'feeling' (or 'sensing') and ideas to 'thinking'. 'Feeling' here should be understood broadly, and Hume, again following Locke, divides impressions into those of 'sensation' and those of 'reflection'. Impressions of sensation derive from our senses, impressions of reflection derive from our experience of our mind, e.g. feeling emotions.

Ideas are 'faint copies' of impressions, 'less forcible and lively' (p. 96). Think what it is like to see a scene or hear a tune; now what it is like to imagine or remember that scene or tune. The latter is weaker, fainter. (Thinking, for Hume, works with ideas as images in the same way as imagination and memory.) However, Hume immediately qualifies his claim about liveliness – disease or madness can make ideas as lively as impressions. This suggests that the distinction in terms of liveliness is incomplete. So Hume's claim that ideas are also copies of impressions is important. So just as there are ideas of sensation (e.g. the idea of a colour) and ideas of reflection (e.g. the idea of an emotion).

Hume later provides a third distinction between ideas and impressions: we are liable to confuse and make mistakes about ideas, but this is more difficult with impressions (p. 99).

The basic building blocks of all thought and experience are simple impressions – single colours, single shapes, single smells and so on. And to each there is a corresponding idea. We can also have more complex impressions, such as the colour and shape of something, e.g. a dog. The corresponding idea we have of the dog can be made more complex by adding the idea of its smell or the sound it makes. To think of it as a 'dog' is still more complex, because it requires abstraction. The concept DOG doesn't correspond to any one particular set of impressions or any single dog. (When referring to the idea, rather than what the idea stands for, I capitalize the word.) When we abstract, we ignore certain specific features and concentrate on others; so to develop the concept DOG, we ignore the different colours and different sizes dogs are, picking out other features, like four legs, tail, bark, hairy.

ON COMPLEX IDEAS

The view that all ideas derive from sense experience is very appealing in many ways. However, there are complex ideas that seem to correspond to nothing in our sense experience, e.g. unicorns and God. (While many of us have seen a picture of a unicorn,

someone had to invent the idea without seeing a picture.) So is it true that all ideas derive from sense experience?

Hume does not claim that complex ideas must be copies of impressions. It is only simple ideas that are copies of impressions. But all complex ideas are composed of simple ideas. This is easy to see in the case of unicorns: we have experiences of horses and of horns and of whiteness; if we put them together, we get a unicorn.

Hume argues that in creating new complex ideas, we can only work with the materials that impressions provide. No idea, no matter how abstract or complex, is more than a combination, alteration or abstraction from impressions.

Hume believes this is an empirical discovery, rather than a necessary truth, and presents two arguments for thinking it is true. First, all ideas can be analysed into simple ideas which each correspond to an impression. For example, in direct opposition to Descartes, Hume claims that the idea of God, based on ideas of perfection and infinity, is extrapolated from ideas of imperfection and finitude: 'The idea of God, as meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom.' (pp. 97-8) We will challenge Hume's claim below.

Hume's second argument is that without having a particular type of experience, a person lacks the ability to form an idea of that experience. Thus, a blind man does not know what colour is and a mild man cannot comprehend the motive of revenge.

THE MISSING SHADE OF BLUE

Hume notes that there is an exception to his principle that all simple ideas are copies of impressions. If someone has seen all shades of blue except one, and you present them with a spectrum of blue with this one shade missing, using their imagination, they will be able to form an idea of that shade. This idea has not been copied from an impression.

Hume dismisses the example as unimportant, but it is not. If it is possible that we can form an idea of a shade of blue without deriving it from an impression, is it possible that we could form other ideas without preceding impressions? The reason the question is important is because Hume uses his 'Copy Principle' repeatedly in his philosophy, to reject ideas such as SUBSTANCE, the SELF and, in his discussion of causation, causal NECESSITY.

All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure: the mind has but a slender hold of them: they are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas; and when we have often employed any term, though without a distinct meaning, we are apt to imagine it has a determinate idea annexed to it. On the contrary, all impressions...are strong and vivid: the limits between them are more exactly determined: nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them. When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed with any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? (99)

It is because impressions are more reliable in this way that Hume makes impressions the test for ideas.

But if we don't need an impression for the missing shade of blue, perhaps we don't need impressions for our ideas of substance, self or necessity either. Unless we can secure some version of the Copy Principle against the example of the missing shade of blue, Hume's mode of argument here is unfounded.

AMENDING THE COPY PRINCIPLE

There are two possible solutions that allow the exception in the case of the shade of blue, while maintaining a strong dependency Hume wants of ideas on impressions. The first solution weakens the Copy Principle: in the quote above, Hume argues that words get their meaning from ideas, and ideas get their meaning from impressions. The Copy Principle then becomes something like this: 'an idea only has meaning if it is derived from impressions of things that have been encountered in experience'. But the missing shade of blue shows that this is too strong. A weaker version claims that 'an idea only has meaning if it is derived from impressions of things that can be encountered in experience'. The missing shade of blue clearly meets this condition, whereas Hume argues that we have no impressions of self, substance or necessity.

The second solution keeps the Copy Principle, but explains how and why the missing shade of blue is an 'exception'. In such a case, the simple impressions of different shades of blue are not unrelated to each other, as they can be arranged in a sequence of resemblance. They are all determinate qualities (shades) of the same determinable quality (blue), and we have impressions of other determinates of this quality. From the arrangement, we can form the idea of the missing determinate, drawing on other similar impressions we already have. But this only works with this structure of relations between ideas. And substance, self and causal necessity are clearly not like this; they are not determinate qualities of some determinable. And so, as we have no relevantly similar impressions, we cannot form the idea meaningfully. This is the same reason that a blind man cannot form an idea of colour, and so it forms an integral part of Hume's theory.

COMPLEX IDEAS AGAIN

Hume argues that all complex ideas are constructed out of simple ideas, which are copies of impressions. We can therefore challenge him to give us his analysis of complex ideas, such as NECESSITY, SUBSTANCE, or SELF. If he cannot give us a satisfactory analysis of how we derive these concepts from experience, that is a reason to think that the concepts derive from elsewhere – either they are innate, or they are reached using a priori reasoning. If this is right, then Hume's theory of the mind is very seriously wrong.

In fact, Hume argues that these three particular examples cannot be derived from experience. His response, for each of these examples, is that the idea – as we usually think of it – has no genuine application. In their place, he suggests clearer ways of thinking, using ideas that can be derived from experience.

Self

According to our common sense idea of the self, the 'I' is something that exists over time, persisting from one thought to another. Hume argues that we have never had any experience of such a self:

when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain

or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. (*A Treatise on Human Nature*, I.iv.vi)

The idea of the 'self' as a thing distinct from thoughts and perceptions doesn't survive the attempt to find the 'corresponding impression' that is the test of meaning. Hume suggests that the self is nothing more than a 'bundle' of thoughts and perceptions, constantly and rapidly changing. This is all that we have experience of. To come up with the idea of SELF as one and the same thing over time, we've confused similarity – the similarity of our thoughts and feelings from one moment to the next – with identity – the identity of a 'thing' to which such mental states belong.

We can object that there can't be a thought unless something thinks it. So the 'I' must exist in order to think thoughts. Hume can ask how we know this. As he has just argued, our experience doesn't confirm it. So is it part of the definition of thought that thinkers exist to think thoughts? This is hard to show.

Substance

Hume makes a similar argument regarding (physical) substance. PHYSICAL SUBSTANCE is the idea of a physical object as something that exists independently of our experience, in its own right, and in 3-dimensional space. Hume asks how we could have had an impression of such a thing (*Treatise on Human Nature*, I.iv.ii). How can experience show us that something exists independently of experience? I see my desk; a few moments later, I see it again. If my two experiences are of one and the same desk, then the desk existed when I wasn't looking at it. But I can't know that my two experiences are of one and the same desk; I can only know that the two experiences are very similar. In coming up with the idea of physical substance that exists independently of my experiences, I have confused similarity with identity.

Objections

We can object that Hume's theory makes most of our commonsense idea of the world wrong. This is unacceptable. Our ideas are coherent. The fact that we cannot derive them from experience only shows that they are innate (or known through rational intuition). We should really take Hume's arguments to show, not that the ideas are wrong-headed, but that they have their origins elsewhere.

Second, is Hume's view that all ideas are derived from experience, or only that all meaningful, coherent ideas are derived from experience? He explicitly asserts the first claim, but then how can he account for 'incoherent' ideas? For instance, if we cannot have got the idea of something existing independently of experience from experience, where did the idea come from? – Because we most certainly have it!

Hume's answer regarding SELF and SUBSTANCE is that we have confused similarity with identity. How does this happen? Our perceptions of physical objects exhibit constancy: if I look at my desk and then shut my eyes and open them again, the desk looks exactly how it did before. On the basis of this similarity, the mind simply has a tendency, says Hume, to imagine that what I see after I open my eyes is not just similar but identical to what I saw before I close my eyes. The origin of the idea of identity – and with it, the idea of something that exists between and independent of perceptions – is the imagination. The ideas that the imagination works with in creating the idea of identity is similarity and unity (the idea of an individual thing, being 'one'), both of which we can derive from experience. We can distinguish between perceptions as different – so

each has identity; and we can tell when two perceptions are similar. (A similar story applies in the case of the self.)

A final objection is that there is good reason to think that Hume's attempts at analysis will not work for all complex ideas, even if they do work for SELF and SUBSTANCE. For example, attempts to analyse philosophical concepts like KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH, BEAUTY into their simple constituents have all failed to produce agreement. Perhaps this is because they don't have this structure.