

Hume's Psychological Theory

Hume's psychological theory has three parts: impressions, ideas, and principles of association.

1 Impressions and Ideas

Ideas are what we have when we think. When you reason, imagine, remember, calculate, speculate, conjecture, reflect, and so on, you use ideas.

Impressions are feelings. Most of the impressions that we will encounter are sensory. When you see, hear, smell, taste, or feel something, you're having an impression of it. But other feelings, such as emotions, desires, appetites, and aversions (Hume called these "passions") are also impressions.

To illustrate the difference between impressions and ideas, consider the difference between seeing a table and thinking about one. When I see a table in front of me, I usually believe that there is a table in front of me. When I think about a table, by contrast, this is not so. Maybe I'm remembering a table that was destroyed or imagining a table that I would like to build. That's part of what Hume means in describing impressions as "stronger" and "more vivid" than ideas. Impressions convey belief, ideas don't.

Another way of distinguishing impressions and ideas is more theoretical. Impressions cannot be explained in psychological terms whereas ideas can. What's the explanation of why I have an impression of a table? Presumably, a table caused me to have it when I turned my eyes in its direction. The explanation does not involve something else that I believed or thought. We can also ask about the other impressions. What explains the human desires for food, sex, and revenge? Hume thought they are just part of human nature. They can't be explained as products of other psychological items, like desires, sensory impressions, or ideas.

Hume asserted that every idea is a copy of an impression. In other words, there are no thoughts of things you haven't first felt, either with your senses

or as emotions. It's not clear exactly why he thought he was entitled to make this assertion. Perhaps he thought it was a factual discovery: it just happens that this is always true, just as it happens that force is the product of mass and acceleration. Perhaps he thought it followed from the definition of impressions as originals and ideas as copies.

Either way, he put this assertion to use in a way that appears illegitimate. As we will see, he tried to deny that we have any coherent idea of the necessary connection between cause and effect. His way of showing this was to say that we can't find the appropriate impression from which the idea could have been copied. (We'll see this in section 7).

But is this kind of argument a good one? Suppose someone said that we *do* have an idea of necessary connection that is *not* copied from any impression. How would Hume show that this person is wrong? Merely asserting that every idea is copied from an impression is not an answer, but it sometimes seems as though that's just what Hume did. That's what I mean in saying that he used his assertion in an illegitimate way.

To make matters worse, Hume himself conceded that there could be ideas that are not copied from a corresponding impression. For example he said that we can have an idea of a shade of blue that we have never seen but that falls between other shades that we have seen (§2, ¶8, pp. 12-13). But if we can have an idea of a shade of blue that is missing from our sensory experiences, why can't we also have an idea of causal necessity that is missing from our sensory experience? Why can't our idea of causal necessity be like the idea of the missing shade of blue?

Perhaps Hume could answer that question. For instance, there might be a difference between imagining a shade of blue that lies between two other shades that I *have* seen and imagining a whole category, causal necessity, that is completely beyond any experience I have ever had.

I also think that he has other, more interesting, ways of making his point in section 7. I just want to give you some advance warning. When he goes on

about looking for an impression to be the source of the idea, that's what he means.

2 Principles of association

According to Hume, human psychology has two building blocks: impressions and ideas. Hume will try to explain everything that happens in the mind using only three relations (in italics) among these building blocks:

1. *Resemblance*. I move from the idea of the table to ideas of other kinds of furniture because these ideas resemble one another.
2. *Contiguity*. I move from the idea of one thing to ideas of things near to it in time or space.
3. *Cause and effect*. I move from the idea of something to the idea of its effects: clouds to rain.

Principles of association concern how our minds move among ideas that are related in these three ways.

An analogy might help to explain what Hume was trying to do. He was trying to replicate Newton's laws of motion. Newton tried to explain what happens in the physical world with as few basic laws as possible. Hume was trying to explain everything that happens in the psychological world with as few basic relations as possible.

In other words, Hume's project was to explain all of our mental activity using these three things: impressions, ideas, and principles of association.

