

Background for Hume

1 Hume's psychological theory

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

1.1 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 touch 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. Ideas can be explained in psychological terms while impressions cannot. In the terms of Hume's theory, you can explain why someone has an idea by pointing to other impressions or ideas in that person's mind as the cause of the idea.

For example, Hume asserted that all ideas are ultimately copies of impressions: there are no thoughts of things you haven't first felt, either with your senses or as emotions. The explanation of why you have the ideas that you do refers to another psychological element, impressions. (Strictly speaking, you can have ideas of things you have no impressions of. I can imagine a golden mountain, for example.

But, according to Hume, those ideas must be composed of ideas that are derived from impressions of mountains and of gold. Here, the idea of a golden mountain is composed of two other ideas that are themselves copies of impressions: everything about the origin of the idea of a golden mountain involves either an impression or an idea.)

Impressions cannot be explained in psychological terms. 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.

1.2 Hume's use of the copy principle

Hume asserted without argument the principle that every idea is a copy of an impression (or derived from other copies). 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 used this assertion 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, ¶18, 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.

1.3 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.

2 The image of God

Hume's philosophy was designed to undermine a picture of human beings, namely, that they are made in the image of God with the powers of reasoning that are the same in kind, though vastly inferior, to God's. God understands why things must happen as they do and what the right thing to do is. If human beings could perfect their reasoning, the thought went, they might achieve the same kind of understanding. This picture often went together with an interpretation of Adam's fall from grace. Before the fall, Adam was in full possession of his rational abilities. The fallen Adam, by contrast, lost them. But human beings still have the latent ability to understand the world as God does. They just have to develop their powers of reasoning.

Hume denied this. He maintained that we could not understand the world using our powers of reason and that reason had little to do with moral virtue. He thought it was inaccurate and undesirable to understand ourselves as inferior versions of God.

In what follows, I'll give you a taste of the image of God idea in our own time and in the time a bit before Hume's

First, here's something that caught my eye in the *New York Times* on October 2, 2005.

As the debate over whether intelligent design should be taught in schools continues, *New Man*, a Christian magazine for "men on a mission," makes the case for a literal Adam in its September/October issue. The article, "The Search for Adam," says that while "many people regard the story of Adam and Eve as a myth," the scientific evidence is mounting that Adam existed, and the article quotes various creationists to support this case.

Fazale Rana, a biochemist and vice president of Reasons to Believe, a creation science group:

“Adam would have been a consummate hunter, an artist, an artisan and craftsman. He would have been the first Tim Taylor from the Tool Time TV program. There’s an obsession with tools and manufacturing. He was a man’s man, but also a Renaissance man capable of art and musical expression. You can imagine Adam conveying his love for Eve by giving her jewelry.”

John Morris, an executive at the Institute for Creation Research:

“Adam started out as what God intended man to be. ... Before the curse, Adam was a superman. Intellectually and in every sense he was probably vastly superior to us. After the curse, I suppose he was in our league, but still quite brilliant.”

On the next page, you’ll see a bit of a sermon published in 1692 on the topic “Man was created in God’s image” from Robert South.

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we were taught without the help of a Teacher.

Now it was *Adam's* happiness in the state of innocence to have these clear and unfulfilled. He came into the World a Philosopher, which sufficiently appeared by his writing the Nature of things upon their Names: he could view Essences in themselves, and read Forms without the comment of their respective Properties: he could see Consequents yet dormant in their principles, and effects yet unborn and in the Womb of their Causes: his understanding could almost pierce into future contingents; his conjectures improving even to Prophecy, or the certainties of Prediction; till his fall it was ignorant of nothing but of Sin; or at least it rested in the notion without the smart of the Experiment. Could any difficulty have been proposed, the resolution would have been as early as the proposal; it could not have had time to settle into Doubt. Like a better *Archimedes*, the issue of all his Enquiries

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up in the obscurities of a Cottage, to fancy in his mind the unseen splendours of a Court. But by rating Positives by their Privatives, and other Arts of Reason, by which discourse supplies the want of the Reports of sense, we may collect the Excellency of the Understanding then, by the glorious remainders of it now, and guesst at the stateliness of the building, by the magnificence of its ruins. All those arts, rarities, and inventions, which vulgar minds gaze at, the ingenious pursue, and all admire, are but the reliques of an Intellect defaced with Sin and Time. We admire it now, only as Antiquaries do a piece of old Coin, for the Stamp it once bore, and not for those vanishing lineaments, and disappearing draughts, that remain upon it at present. And certainly, that must needs have been very glorious, the decays of which are so admirable. He that is comely, when old and decrepit, surely was very beautiful, when he was young. An *Aristotle* was but the

rubbish

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quies was an *εργασια*, an *εργασια*, the offspring of his Brain without the sweat of his Brow. Study was not then a Duty, night-watchings were needless; the light of Reason wanted not the assistance of a Candle. This is the doom of fallen man to labour in the fire, to seek truth *in profundo*, to exhaust his time and impair his health, and perhaps to spin out his days, and himself into one pitiful, controverted Conclusion. There was then no poring; no struggling with memory, no straining for Invention. His faculties were quick and expedite; they answered without knocking, they were ready upon the first summons, there was freedom, and firmness in all their Operations. I confess 'tis difficult for us who date our ignorance from our first Being, and were still bred up with the same infirmities about us, with which we were born, to raise our thoughts, and imagination to those intellectual perfections that attended our Nature in the time of Innocence; as it is for a Peasant bred

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rubbish of an *Adam*, and *Athena* but the rudiments of Paradise.

2. The Image of God was no less resplendent in that, which we call man's Practical Understanding; namely, that store-house of the Soul, in which are treasured up the rules of Action, and the seeds of Morality. Where, we must observe, that many, who deny all Connate Notions in the Speculative Intellect, do yet admit them in this. Now of this sort are these Maxims, *That God is to be worshipped.* *That Parents are to be honoured.* *That a man's word is to be kept,* and the like; which, being of universal influence, as to the regulation of the behaviour, and converse of mankind, are the ground of all virtue, and civility, and the foundation of Religion.

It was the Privilege of *Adam* Innocent, to have these Notions also firm and untainted, to carry his Monitor in his bosom, his Law in his heart, and to have such a Conscience, as might be its own

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